

Primeval History Continues (Genesis 3:7 to 11:9)

Overview. In a masterful series of episodes, Genesis describes the terrible consequences of prideful man's feeble attempts to assert his independence from God. Man no longer trusted and obeyed his Creator, but misused the dominion God had given him and tried to *"be like God, knowing good and evil"* [Gen 3:5]. Beginning with our first parents, we encounter man's sinfulness, his loss of control, and the internal conflicts that arose within him, giving rise to shame. The gift of harmony between husband and wife was disrupted. Truth, contrition, and repentance were absent. The fall of man led to the loss of God's gift of dominion over the world. Death followed the fall, and is an image of the loss of immortality that God had offered man. But God, in His mercy, held out the promise of restoration through His plan of redemption. With the conclusion of Genesis 3, then, we have experienced creation, fall, and the promise of redemption.

As Genesis continues, sin followed sin in a repetition of that original sin committed in paradise. Even in the first family we find division. *"Sin is lurking at the door"* [Gen 4:7] and man was unable to master it. Brother murdered brother without contrition or repentance.

But through Seth some *"men began to call upon the name of the Lord"* [Gen 4:26]. And so we follow the generations from Seth to Noah, encountering some goodness along the way. For example, in a mysterious verse, it is revealed that, *"Enoch walked with God; and he was not, for God took him"* [Gen 5:24]. But *"the Lord saw that the wickedness of man was great in the earth"* [Gen 6:5] and *"determined to make an end of all flesh"* [Gen 6:13]. Noah, however, *"was a righteous man...[and] walked with God"* [Gen 6:9]. God sent the flood but preserved only Noah and his family in the ark. Afterwards, God made a covenant with Noah and his descendants.

Again we are presented with the generations, this time with the descendants of Noah's sons, Japheth, Ham, and Shem who form *"the nations spread abroad on the earth after the flood"* [Gen 10:32]. But sin still lurks in man's heart, and again it is the sin of pride, of self-love, a sin that leads to another vain attempt to be like God. The story of Babel is a story of ultimate confusion and division. It is followed by another listing of the descendants of Shem, a genealogy that takes us to Abram, whom God will rename, Abraham.

The Fall and Its Consequences. With the sin of Adam and Eve, they and all of humanity are presented with its consequences.

- † **Loss of control; shame.** Man sinned against God, lost the perfect control with which God had blessed him, and discovered a conflict of desires and emotions within himself. This gave rise to shame.

Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked, and they sewed fig leaves together and made themselves aprons [Gen 3:7].

And yet, despite this sin and its rejection of God's sovereignty, God blessed them with an act of "human" kindness:

"And the Lord God made for Adam and for his wife garments of skins, and clothed them" [Gen 3:21].

- † **Disrupted harmony between husband and wife.** The perfect harmony between Adam and Eve (husband and wife) was disrupted and turned into bickering and blame-shifting:

The man said, "The woman whom you gave to be with me, she gave me the fruit of the tree and I ate." Then the Lord God said to the woman, "What is this that you have done?" The woman said, "The serpent beguiled me, and I ate" [Gen 3:12-13].

Truth and repentance were absent. Each blamed others. Adam seemed to blame both God and the woman, while the woman blamed the serpent. The resulting discord shattered their relationship with each other as well as their relationship with God.

- † **Loss of effortless dominion.** Man lost his effortless dominion over the world God had created for him. Like the poet, he now finds "Nature red in tooth and claw." God told him his sin cursed the ground, and "*in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life*" [Gen 3:17].

But God showed He hasn't abandoned man, and in His words to the serpent, held out the promise of restoration.

I will put enmity between you and the woman, and between your seed and her seed; he shall bruise your head, and you shall bruise his heel [Gen 3:15].

This is the first mention of God's merciful plan of redemption that will come about through the Incarnation. Church tradition has long considered this the *protoevangelium*, or first Gospel, and applies to it a messianic interpretation with Christ being the woman's seed who crushes Satan underfoot. It is taught also in the New Testament:

Whoever sins belongs to the devil, because the devil has sinned from the beginning. Indeed, the Son of God was revealed to destroy the works of the devil [1 Jn 3:8].

And so, as stated above, in the first three chapters of Genesis, humanity had already experienced creation, fall, and the promise of redemption.

- † **Death.** With sin came death, which was now man's fate. Death, then, became an image of the loss of the eternal life God had originally planned for humanity.

In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground, for out of it you were taken; you are dust, and to dust you shall return [Gen 3:19].

And yet, although material creation was cursed because of man's sinfulness, God does not curse humanity. Eve is, in fact, blessed. She received her name *after* the Fall [Gen 3:20], a name that means "mother of all living." It is a name that made her a type of another Mother, the Mother of the Redeemer, Mary, the Blessed Mother.

Sin Continues in the First Family. [Gen 4:1-16] The Fall brought sin into the world, and following close on the heels of the first sin was the second recorded sin, the fratricidal murder of Abel by Cain. In Cain's sin we encounter the fruit of pride, jealousy, envy, anger, and disobedience. These were the sins of Cain who rejected the counsel that God offered him:

The Lord said to Cain, "Why are you angry and why has your countenance fallen? If you do well, will you not be accepted, and if you do not do well, sin is lurking at the door, its desire is for you, but you must master it" [Gen 4:6-7].

God suggested Cain had only one reason to be crestfallen: the act of his offering. Was something not right with his offering? If so, we don't know exactly what. Or was it Cain's intention, the state of his heart and mind? At this point, Cain had not yet chosen sin. There is time. God gave Cain another chance to master the evil that was within him, to make his offering with love.

Yet Cain is unwilling to follow the Lord's counsel, and responded by saying to his brother: "*Let us go out to the field*" [Gen 4:8] – an innocent enough invitation, but one that led to the first bloodshed, the first murder of another human person, Abel.

Then the Lord said to Cain, "Where is Abel your brother?" [Gen 4:9]

God asked the question that drew out the lie and reminded Cain that Abel is his. Cain, seemingly unaware of God's omniscience, boldly lied, and then in a vain attempt to shed any guilt asked God a haunting question of his own:

"I do not know; am I my brother's keeper?" [Gen 4:9]

The Lord, of course, asks questions to which He knows the answers. He does so to make us aware of our own failings and sinfulness.

"What have you done? The voice of your brother's blood is crying to me from the ground, and now you are cursed from the ground" [Gen 4:10].

Like the sin of his parents, Cain's was a sin of pride, and led to envy and anger. Cain, then, became the prototypical sinner, a man focused solely on himself. In contrast, the Church sees Abel as a type of Christ, who is the perfectly innocent man whose blood is spilled on the Cross. We see this emphasized in the New Testament:

"...Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and the sprinkled blood that speaks more eloquently than that of Abel" [Heb 12:24].

Far more eloquently, indeed, since Abel's blood cried out for vengeance, but the Blood of Jesus cleanses and heals the world. The "type" always points to something far greater than itself.

Cain was banished, driven out to the land of Nod (meaning "a wanderer"), to a state of seemingly aimless exile. Lacking contrition and repentance, he believed God's

punishment is more than he can bear; and yet, given the weight of his crime, God is merciful to Cain. His only concern was for himself and he feared he would be slain (perhaps by others in the family of Adam and Eve). But God promises:

“If anyone who slays Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold’ And the Lord put a mark on Cain lest anyone who came upon him should kill him” [Gen 4:15].

This mark is not a sign of condemnation – like some ancient scarlet letter – but a sign of God’s protection.

Note: *From a cultural perspective Cain might be a more likely candidate for the “bad guy” of the story since he was “a tiller of the ground” and the early audience of Genesis was desert wanderers and herdsmen.*

From Cain to Lamech, from Seth to Noah. Here we are introduced to two strains, two groups of descendants from the first family. Eve gave birth to another son, Seth, whose name has an etymological connection with God, not with men. In contrast, the names of Cain’s descendants are all derived from human cities and skills.

Eve’s rehabilitation is seen here for she spoke of God first, not herself.

“And Adam knew his wife again, and she bore a son and called his name Seth, for she said, ‘God has appointed for me another child instead of Abel, for Cain slew him” [Gen 4:25].

Seth, too, had a son whose name was Enosh. After this we are told:

“At that time, men began to call upon the name of the Lord” [Gen 4:26].

Seth’s line, then, would be faithful to God; Cain’s line would not. In one sense, God made a truth out of Cain’s lie. Through Cain, many generations were born all the way to Lamech, who admitted,

“I have slain a man for wounding me, a young man for striking me” [Gen 4:23].

Here an act of vengeance was committed due to a personal insult, an inflated sense of self-importance. We are then told,

“If Cain is avenged sevenfold, truly Lamech seventy-seven fold” [Gen 4:24].

Jesus alludes to this same verse from Genesis to instruct Peter on the act of forgiveness:

Then Peter approaching asked him, “Lord, if my brother sins against me, how often must I forgive him? As many as seven times?” Jesus answered, “I say to you, not seven times but seventy-seven times” [Mt 18:21-22].

We can learn much from the story of Cain and Abel, but perhaps the most important is that there is no excuse for a lack of forgiveness.

“...and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us” [Mt 6:12].

Interestingly, between Lamech’s birth and Adam’s death, no one is born. But when Adam, the original father, dies, those remaining know that death will come for all.

Knowing death will come, they began to live in vanity, to conquer others, to seek beauty for themselves.

Accordingly, the sons of God (those in the line of Seth) began to marry the daughters of the sons of man (the line of Cain and those who sought to live according to their own accomplishment). This mingling and the sinfulness that resulted ultimately led to the destruction resulting from the great flood.

Noah, a Righteous Man. [Gen 5:32-7:6] As Genesis 5 concludes we are introduced to Noah, who had three sons: Shem, Ham, and Japheth.

Evil had spread throughout the earth and man's wickedness led God to decide on a catastrophic punishment:

"I will blot out man whom I have created from the face of the ground" [Gen 6:7]

God planned to destroy his corrupt creation but because of Noah's righteousness God will use Noah and his family to begin his creation anew. As Genesis describes Noah:

"But Noah found favor in the eyes of the Lord...Noah was a righteous man, blameless in his generation. Noah walked with God" [Gen 6:8-9].

He and his family would be saved because Noah was simple, had a pure heart, and did the will of God. Noah was not heroic in the human sense. He was not a man of great valor and courage; rather he was a man of obedience, purity, and simplicity. His virtue was that he did what God told him to do. He obeyed.

In the Letter to the Hebrews, Noah, the righteous one, is depicted as a man of faith and obedience:

"By faith Noah, warned about what was not yet seen, with reverence built an ark for the salvation of his household. Through this he condemned the world and inherited the righteousness that comes through faith" [Heb 11:12]

When Noah finished the ark and boarded his family and the animals, God shut them in. They were on the inside, really as passengers, for God steered them, protected them, and guided them from the outside. This image is significant and appears again in the basket (the same word used to describe the ark), which protected the infant Moses when he was placed upon the waters of the Nile.

This image, or type, also points to the Church, but now God no longer remains on the outside. Instead, He gets into the boat, Peter's boat. The ark of the Church, this traditional title, is Peter's boat in which Christ is ever present. From it Christ proclaims the Word; He calms the waters of chaos and uncertainty; and sometimes He sleeps. But He is always with us, steering us to our true homeland. Only our Lord Himself steers the boat from within. The Church's hierarchy does not steer, but simply follows the Lord's commands. Indeed, the Pope, who is Christ's vicar on earth, is more like Noah. The Lord steers the Church, while the Pope and the bishops struggle to obey.

St. Peter reminded us that, like Noah, we are saved through water [1 Pt 3:20-21]. But if water is a sign of destruction, how can this be? How can it also be a sign of salvation? St. Paul provides the answer:

Or are you unaware that we who were baptized into Christ Jesus were baptized into his death? We were indeed buried with him through baptism into death, so that, just as Christ was raised from the dead by the glory of the Father, we too might live in newness of life” [Rom 6:3-4].

Yes, we are baptized into the death of Christ. As Paul instructs us, we go down into the water and come up risen. Water is no longer a sign of chaos, but a sign of life. He who is baptized with water and the Spirit can enter into eternal life. If we have died with Christ, we shall surely live with him.

Divine intervention, through the flood, prevented sin from spiraling to its deadly conclusion and blocked the future promised by Satan’s covenant of lies.

Noah: Relief through Condemnation. Noah is in the ark for an entire solar year (365 days). Occasionally there must have been a temptation to jump ship, just as some leave the Church today in the face of its problems and the sinfulness of its members. But to jump ship is to die, to abandon the Lord, and to lose direction; for God is the Church’s guide.

Note: *Scriptural scholars tell us that the way in which the authors depict this disaster doesn’t necessarily mean that it was worldwide. But the letter of the text is certainly satisfied if it involved the extensive flooding of the Tigris and Euphrates valley, which was certainly the “whole world” to this ancient Semitic people.*

Finally, “*God remembered Noah*” [Gen 8:1]. In other words, God is always faithful. He sends a wind to blow upon the waters, an image we saw at the beginning of creation. This “*wind*” is the Holy Spirit forming a new creation.

The water recedes and the ark comes to rest on the mountains of Ararat. But Noah waits for 40 days, which reflects a period of purgation and purification. Like Jesus, who is led into the wilderness by the Holy Spirit in preparation for His ministry, Noah in the ark must patiently endure suffering for the sake of righteousness.

Noah then sends out birds – first a raven that returns with nothing, and then the dove, that returns with an olive branch. A second dove doesn’t return; yet Noah, he obedient servant, remains in the ark until God tells him to leave.

Men and women had entered the ark separately [Gen 6:18] and remained so while in the ark. Some Church Fathers believe they remained celibate while the rest of humanity suffered. Without the possibility of reproduction the ark floats through time outside human history. Only after exiting are they instructed to “*be fruitful and multiply*” [Gen 9:7; 1:28]. This command emphasizes the future orientation of the blessing. But it cannot return to the pristine garden since sin has entered the world and human history.

Noah’s first act – one pleasing to God since it shows Noah’s faith – was to erect an altar for a burnt offering of sacrifice. But with this came something new from God. Just as in the beginning, God gave Adam and Eve permission to eat of all the plants except one, God gave permission to eat all clean animals, except for their blood. This was the first time animals were killed for the purpose of eating them – a satisfaction for a type of bloodlust.

The Covenant of God's Patience [Gen 9:1-17]. After the flood, God made a covenant with Noah and all His descendants. Interestingly, God included all living creatures in this covenant:

"Behold I establish my covenant with you and your descendants after you, and with every living creature that is with you, the birds, the cattle, and every beast of the earth with you, as many as came out of the ark. I establish my covenant with you, that never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of a flood, and never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth" [Gen 9:9-11].

This covenant is important because it shows that the God of the Jews is the Father of all humanity, and that the entire human race has a role to play and will eventually share in the benefits of God's plan.

The sign of the covenant shall be a "bow in the clouds," a rainbow and an important image. After a rainfall, the rainbow shall be seen as nature's most splendid sign, telling us that God has remembered His promise, remembered the covenant He made with all the earth's living creatures.

The blessing that changed our relationship with animals and the duty to punish transgression became a foundation for human survival. The family tribe – held together by rough justice – entered history.

God cleansed the world, but not those in the ark. Dominion changed [Gen 9:3] and it carried a price. Animals now feared man, and the work of sustaining the human community became more complicated. And there were restrictions:

"You shall not eat flesh with its life, that is, its blood" [Gen 9:4]

The ordinances stilled the chaotic hearts of those in bondage to sin. This command was a bridge to the commandment to punish murder with the death of the murderer [Gen 9:6]. Every human being is made in the image and likeness of God. To kill a human being, then, is to kill one made in God's image. God prohibits murder, the spilling of human blood, which is a sacred image, a sign of God's life infused within man. If you spill the blood of man, your blood must be spilled to satisfy the demands of justice.

This form of justice, carried out by men, was designed to stop self-inflated revenge, where man thinks more of himself than he should and then inflicts a disproportionate form of justice. It is a form of the "eye for an eye" type of justice that turned the ancients away from the kinds of tribal revenge that often led to vengeful mass murders.

Here we have the first instance of a law instituted to curb the effects of our fallen nature. God took justice into His own hands with the flood, but now puts justice into human hands for this worst of crimes. Why? Because we are in God's image and possess the capacity for dominion and authority. The flood doesn't provide a new human history, but simply provides stability. We are deputized to police our own transgressions.

In St. Matthew's Gospel, Jesus refines the Law of the Old Testament when He instructs us:

"...whatever you did for one of these least brothers of mine, you did for me" [Mt 25:40]

Christ now establishes that this early form of justice, all that the ancients could handle, must be transformed because it is an attack upon God since every person bears His image and likeness. To attack that image is to attack Christ. To serve that image is to begin to love Christ.

The covenant with Noah was also a foundation for the sanctifying covenant with Abraham, formed more fully on Sinai with Moses, in Jerusalem with David, and completed on the Cross.

Noah's sons: Shem, Ham, and Japheth. When Noah left the ark, the earth brought forth a new blessing. Noah was a tiller of soil and planted a vineyard, and man discovers viticulture, the production of wine from grapes – “to gladden their hearts” [Ps 104:15]. With Noah, then, comes the possibility of bread and wine. Ultimately, wine becomes a sign of the new kingdom (e.g., wedding feast of Cana) and the noble substance that becomes Christ's blood. Here in pre-history we encounter a type of the Eucharist.

But like the abuse of all noble things, the abuse of alcohol, becomes destructive because it suppresses reason. It shows that you and I, who are endowed with the gift of reason, allow ourselves to be led instead by our natural passions and become animal like. Noah's over consumption of wine led to a stripping of his reason and therefore a stripping of himself. He was on the ground, naked and inebriated in his tent.

We are told that Ham “saw his father's nakedness” [Gen 9:22]. This phrase in Leviticus 18 refers to prohibitions of conjugal relations with certain persons. Some say this suggests that Ham perhaps had relations with his mother, having Canaan by her, and thus Canaan's line is cursed. Others say he castrated his father. Both are unlikely and unnecessarily harsh interpretations.

More likely: Ham was grossly indiscreet. Seeing what will surely embarrass his father, he ran to tell his brothers. He should have remained silent, but instead publicly broadcasted embarrassing facts about his father – an early example of sins of the tongue. And Ham also saw – sins of the eyes – unlike his brothers who covered their father with eyes averted. They indeed walked by faith, not by sight. Ham's sin was then one of both sight and speech.

Today the world calls for all to be revealed. Nothing should be covered. Truths shrouded in mystery are unacceptable. We must see everything immediately and in its nakedness. The world forgets that truth is powerful and judges us. Seeing it completely will consume us. We can never experience self-knowledge – the full truth that only God sees – without deep pain.

Too often, like Ham, we are crude and cruel creatures. We think complete knowledge of good and evil will give us power, but ignore the obedience truth demands. Knowledge and wisdom are rarely possessed today.

But why then are Shem and Japheth so praiseworthy by contrast? Perhaps there is another explanation. The text ultimately explains something about the nature of fatherhood. A father is the father of life as well as the father of a “way of life,” a relationship with God, which a father must pass on to his children. Therefore, fatherhood commands a sense of reverence and respect. So when Ham saw Noah

drunk and naked, in his abasement, Ham rejected the fatherhood of his father. He exploited it, “uncovered it,” and exposed him to shame.

Shem and Japheth, on the other hand, displayed an extraordinary act of reverence by walking backwards and covering their father’s nakedness. Truth is often perceived as a matter of exposure, of seeing everything; however, sometimes when we see something uncovered, we see less, not more. Once you have seen, you cannot un-see. This is why the Church has strict prohibitions against pornography or immodesty. Images are powerful and can objectify a person. Ham could not see his father for who he really was, as he lay on the ground in a drunken stupor. Again, we see the contrast between appearance and reality.

After rising, Noah spoke, and his first words are a curse upon Ham – a way of saying, “Because you have un-fathered me, I un-father you. I curse your son, Canaan. A wedge will be driven between you and your son. He will not receive the blessings of the covenant.” Later we see how Nimrod, a descendant of Canaan, tried to make a name for himself by his own prowess and independence; he was not in communion with God.

When we attempt to “see through” authority or see past those things that require our respect, we ultimately end up as orphans, as branches unattached to a tree. We try to make a name for ourselves, but this is beyond our power. God creates a name in his people (e.g., Shem). We receive a name from the father to the son – the nature of tradition, of respect, of fatherhood, of receiving in this one genealogical line of grace God’s own bestowal of blessings. Reverence for one’s father is reverence for God because it is the receiving of a blessing that is passed down.

Tower of Babel. [Gen 11:1-9] In Genesis 10 we find that the descendants of Japheth, Ham, and Shem have spread throughout the world bringing God’s blessing – “Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth” [Gen 9:1] – to reality. Looking forward it also shows us that God’s selection of His Chosen People from among all the many nations and peoples of the world was completely gratuitous.

But once again man cannot escape his sinful ways and tries to exercise dominion apart from God. “Let us make a name for ourselves” [Gen 11:4] and build a tower reaching up to the heavens. They build, assuming this would make them god-like, but God responds and confuses them through language, “that they may not understand one another’s speech” [Gen 11:7].

There are types here as well. The city of Babel – confusion, disunity, and dispersion – is the opposite of the city of Jerusalem, which is “the Lord’s house...the Lord’s mountain” and to which “all nations shall stream” [Is 2:2-3]. But it will be in the New Jerusalem, the Church, that all nations, all tongues, all races will come together in faith and love. We get our first glimpse of this at the first Pentecost when the Holy Spirit fills the hearts of the disciples and thousands of pilgrims from throughout the world [Acts 2:1-13].

The covenant with Noah also signaled the beginning of divinely mandated political authority, which foreshadowed the events surrounding Babel. God’s command served a divine purpose, but man’s unwillingness to obey led him to serve purely human goals.

Many today reject the idea of a sacred order, accepting instead our modern secular society. We don’t ask leaders to accept divine law or confess their faith, but most accept

that political authority derives from some higher principle: a Constitution, or a popular vote, or even polls. Such secular principles often take on quasi-religious status.

To fully secularize authority undermines its claim to be just, and ultimately leads us to view human life as mere survival and satisfaction. Yes, in some of our better moments we define and strive for such concepts as human rights, democracy, and freedom, but in truth their application changes with the political winds. They are poor substitutes for that which is given to us by Jesus Christ Himself: the Way, the Truth, and the Life.

Some Closing Thoughts on Creation and Primeval History in Genesis

The New Adam. The New Testament writers saw our Lord as the “New Adam.” Read Romans 5:12-21 for St. Paul’s description of this comparison, something also echoed in the liturgy, especially in the liturgies of Christmas Day and Easter Vigil.

The New Creation. St. Peter tells us:

In fulfillment of His promise we expect a new heaven and a new earth, where uprightness will prevail [2 Pet 3:13].

This “new heaven and new earth” is the restoration of all men to God through Christ and His Church. God carries forward this new work of creation, which will not reach its completion until the last day. A major part is already completed in Christ’s life and work [Rom 8:18-25]. And it is Jesus Christ who unites both Jews and Gentiles in His death, making them a single “new man” and making the Church a new humanity:

For in one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, slaves or free persons, and we were all given to drink of one Spirit [1 Cor 12:13].

The Old fulfilled in the New. For Christians the Old Testament represents an advance toward Christ, its fulfillment. Only when it attains Him does its real meaning, which was gradually hinted at, become clear. Every individual part derives its meaning from the whole, and the whole derives its meaning from the end, from Jesus Christ.

To see how deeply the Gospel writers appreciated Christ and the work of redemption as a new creation in grace, just read the prologue of John’s Gospel and note the deliberate parallel with the words of Genesis 1. And even before John, St. Paul had said, “All things were created through Him and for Him” [See Colossians 1:15-23]. God created the universe, then, so He could become a human being, pour out His love upon us, and to invite us to love Him in return. As Christians, therefore, we do not read the Old Testament for its own sake but always with Christ and through Christ.

The Early Church and the Church of the Middle Ages knew this, that the Bible is a whole and that we understand its truth only when we understand it with Christ in mind. But in more modern times, this understanding has been neglected by many scriptural scholars, who, under the influence of the new historical thinking, read each text in itself, interested only in the explanation of particulars viewed in their historical context. They study the texts going backward, not forward, focused more on the probable origins of the texts than on their relationship and fulfillment in Christ. Thankfully, many scholars are today correcting this approach – an approach that contradicts the entire inner nature of the Bible – and are once again examining the Bible as a whole.