

# The Political Concept of Anarchy in the Hebrew Bible

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*Abstract: This paper considers the Genesis stories from the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden through the Tower of Babel as an impressive meditation on the concept of anarchy—the condition of individuals in an environment without government or law. Like political philosophers in the later Western tradition, the Bible postulates a state of anarchy in order to ground an argument in favor of government and law as essential components of a decent human life. The Bible’s analysis of how possibilities for cooperation break down due to strategic rivalry in a state of anarchy is as sophisticated as anything found in Hobbes, Locke, or Rousseau. Equally impressive is the Bible’s explanation for why government and law promise to overcome these problems, and why even with government and law in place, societies do not fully realize all the benefits that cooperation can create. Unlike the later Western tradition, the Bible does not present the condition of anarchy as a state of nature; its view—more satisfactory from a philosophical and anthropological perspective—is that the natural human condition is to be embedded in a society organized and managed by institutions of government and law.*

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The Bible’s account of life after the expulsion of Adam and Eve from Eden tells of a Dark Age in the history of the world—a time of strife and danger, of unthinkable crimes, of strange and violent boasts, of characters that appear from nowhere and vanish into the mists of history, of gigantic life spans, of wandering and loss, of escalating evil, and of a family miraculously free of taint who together find salvation from a world-destroying flood.

Commentators have not managed to make much sense of the Bible’s Dark Age. Why does the author tell us of events whose significance has been blotted out by the

flood?<sup>1</sup> Why recount these events and not others? Why does evil grow on the earth and why does it spread? Why does God destroy humanity? Why does he allow the human race to be reestablished? Why does he promise never to destroy the world again?

Political theory sheds light on these questions. In previous work I have argued that the Garden of Eden story specifies a model of human society and uses that model to develop a general theory of obligation.<sup>2</sup> But there is one important question that the Eden story does not and cannot address. Even if the case for political obligation were otherwise made, the argument would be weakened if human beings could do as well *without* government and law. Since government and law carry the unpleasantness of coercion, people might prefer to avoid that condition if they could do so with little cost. The setup of the Eden narrative does not permit an analysis of this question since it assumes a well-functioning system of government and law. Accordingly, before venturing further, the author needs to compare the human condition *with* government and law to its condition *without* government and law. This task is accomplished in the stories of the Dark Age.

### The Setup

After God discovers that Adam and Eve have eaten the forbidden fruit, he condemns Eve to suffer the pangs of childbirth and to be ruled by her husband (Gen 3:16), Adam to a life of toil (Gen 3:17–19), and the serpent to crawl on his belly and eat dust (Gen 3:14–15). Concerned that Adam and Eve, having knowledge of good and evil, might also gain immortality by eating of the tree of life, God banishes them from the garden and deploys cherubim and a flaming sword to prevent their return (Gen 3:24).

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<sup>1</sup> The term “author” is used in a purely conventional sense, without implying anything specific about who actually wrote these texts.

<sup>2</sup> Geoffrey Miller, *The Ways of a King: Legal and Political Ideas in the Bible* (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht 2011), pp. 28–49.

In setting out the conditions of life outside the garden, the author pursues the same intellectual strategy that he employed in the Eden narrative: specifying a model of society designed to frame a particular question for analysis and then exploring the implications of the model in order to obtain information about the question so framed. Like the model of the Eden narrative, this one is extraordinarily simple, containing at the outset only two characters and a few details of the setting. The simplicity sharpens analysis by excluding extraneous factors; it also enhances the generality of the results by framing the issues at an abstract level.

This new model is characterized by four specifications:

1. The inhabitants of this model behave in *self-interested* ways. They are not altruists. They look after themselves first and foremost and serve their own interests even at the expense of others. In this respect—the propensity toward self-interest—the model of the Dark Age is no different from that of the Garden of Eden. People are self-interested in both settings. The difference is that in the Garden of Eden, self-interested behavior does not matter because God provides all that is required. People do not need to cooperate or sacrifice for others. In the world of the Dark Age, in contrast, God is not available to meet people's needs. If people are to survive and flourish they must do so without his help. Self-interested behavior then becomes a problem because it threatens to interfere with value-enhancing cooperative behaviors.

Adam and Eve provide the template for human self-interest. Eve is created in order to be Adam's helpmate, but she provides precious little assistance. The only time she does purport to help, the result is disastrous: she serves Adam the forbidden fruit. Adam is hardly a model of chivalry either. He never does anything to help Eve. When

God accuses Adam and Eve of transgression, Adam blames his wife. Adam and Eve show no greater propensity for self-sacrifice after their exile. The two of them behave in self-serving ways throughout the entire narrative.

2. The inhabitants of the Dark Age behave *strategically*. Having eaten the forbidden fruit, they know good and evil: they understand what will and will not enhance their welfare. This knowledge gives them an ability to prioritize and plan—a capacity that was unnecessary in the garden, where God took care of everything. In the outside world, without God’s assistance, the ability to strategize in order to enhance one’s welfare is necessary if people are to survive.

3. The Dark Age is characterized by *scarcity*.<sup>3</sup> Unlike the Garden of Eden, where delicious fruit could be found on every tree, the outside world is full of inedible bushes. The inhabitants must struggle to raise crops and to keep the weeds from choking their fields. Water is in short supply; readers would have understood the reference to “thorns and thistles” as implying that the land to which Adam and Eve are banished is arid and unproductive.<sup>4</sup> There is little security: serpents bite the feet; thorns prick the skin; people kill one another; age and death take their toll. The greatest scarcity of all is the absence of the deity. God is a sporadic and perhaps unwilling visitor to this world, coming when summoned by sacrifice or blood but otherwise shunning the place.

4. The new setting has *no government or law*. Adam and Eve and their descendants live in a condition of nearly complete freedom. They can eat any food, go

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<sup>3</sup> See Robert S. Kawashima, “Homo Faber in J’s Primeval History,” *ZAW* 16 (2004): 483–501.

<sup>4</sup> See M. Ronel and S. Lev-Yadun, “Spiny Plants in the Archaeological Record of Israel,” *Journal of Arid Environments* 73 (2009): 754–61.

anywhere they want, and do whatever they like. God has abandoned them with no rules to guide them at all.

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The issue framed by this model is that of *anarchy*. Each and every one of the bases for obligation identified in the Garden of Eden narrative is absent here. There are no obligations because there is no government and no law. The model therefore frames a fundamental question: in a setting characterized by self-interest, strategic behavior, scarcity, and the absence of government and law, can human beings develop the institutions of a good and decent life?

#### Cain and Abel

The narrative of Cain and Abel begins the investigation of this question.<sup>5</sup> Eve gives birth to Cain and later to Abel.<sup>6</sup> Cain becomes a tiller of crops and Abel a keeper of sheep. Cain and Abel offer gifts to God. Cain brings an offering of grain while Abel brings the firstlings of his flock.

Following his usual practice, the author uses the setup to frame the question for investigation. On the one hand, the brothers' behavior is individualistic and non-cooperative. Each brings an offering produced by his own labor. We get no sense that Abel has helped Cain on his farm or that Cain has tended Abel's flocks. On the other hand, they do the same thing (bring an offering to God) at the same time (we know this

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<sup>5</sup> Many have associated the Cain of the primeval history with the Kenites of biblical times—a nomadic group known to the Israelites and recorded elsewhere in the Bible. See, e.g., James L. Kugel, “Cain and Abel in Fact and Fable: Genesis 4:1–16,” in *Hebrew Bible or Old Testament? Studying the Bible in Judaism and Christianity* (ed. R. Brooks and J. J. Collins; South Bend, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1990), 170.

<sup>6</sup> The author adds a third, later-born child, Seth, apparently to spare the human race the inconvenience of being descended from a murderer. On the secondary nature of the Seth genealogy, see Hyam Maccoby, *The Sacred Executioner: Human Sacrifice and the Legacy of Guilt* (Bath: Pittman, 1982).

because Cain observes that God accepts Abel's offering). While they are not yet cooperating, they are engaged in coordinated action. If things go well, such actions can evolve into more highly structured forms of shared behavior.<sup>7</sup> But if things do not go well, the steps they have taken toward mutuality may be lost. Envy, jealousy, and fear, the inevitable if unloved companions of cooperation, might ruin the experiment. As the author frames the issue, the outcome hangs in the balance. The story thus poses the basic question in dramatic fashion: will the human race move toward cooperation, or will it fall into mistrust and violence?<sup>8</sup>

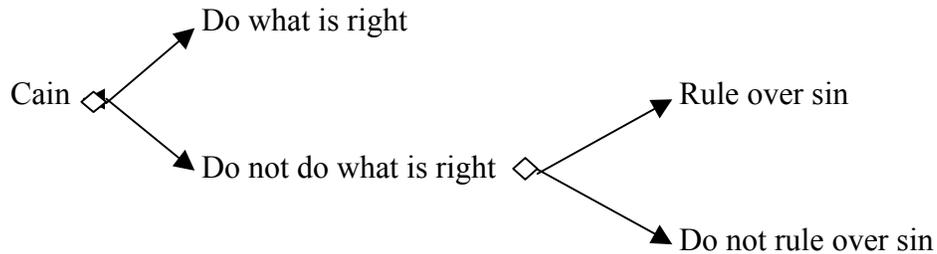
Things do not get off to a good start. God accepts Abel's offering but rejects Cain's (Gen 4:3–5). In consequence Cain becomes angry and jealous. God, observing Cain's emotions, advises him as follows: "If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must rule over it" (Gen 4:7). This text specifies a two-stage decision

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<sup>7</sup> The activity involved—offering a sacrifice—is important in this respect. The great religious festivals of ancient Israel were events where many people came together to offer sacrifices. These rituals were important for enhancing social solidarity in their own right and also provided opportunities for arranging marriages, making business deals, and so on. The detail of Cain and Abel's offerings refers forward to this social practice and thus serves as a good symbol of potential social cooperation.

<sup>8</sup> The pronounced parallels between the story of Cain and Abel and the narrative of the forbidden fruit suggest that the author is exploring an analogous question in both stories. The parallels include the following: God's remark to Cain about mastering sin ("sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must rule over it") evokes God's judgment against Eve ("your desire will be for your husband, and he will rule over you"). Eve's exclamation on the birth of Cain ("with the help of the Lord I have brought forth a man!") reminds the reader of Adam's cry on the creation of Eve ("she shall be called woman, for she was taken out of man!"). Adam and Eve steal and eat food belonging to God; Cain and Abel refrain from eating their own food and offer it to God. Eve is tempted by the serpent; Cain is tempted by sin portrayed as an animal. The tempters are both depicted in a low posture: the serpent crawls on its belly and sin crouches at the door. Both the first couple and Cain give in to temptation and do the thing that God has warned against. In both stories, God appears on the scene and detects evidence of bad behavior; God arraigns the suspects and conducts an inquisition; the suspects present a defense that God considers inadequate; God curses the offender from the ground and banishes him or her from the place where the wrongful act has occurred; and God tempers the harshness of the banishment with protective actions—making clothes for Adam and Eve and placing a protective mark on Cain. Cf. Pamela Barmash, *Homicide in the Biblical World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 17 (noting the "almost complete verbal parallel" between the two stories and inferring that the author's intention is to argue that "Cain's deed is as serious a transgression as Adam and Eve's violation of God's command").

process: Cain must either do what is right or not do what is right; and then, if he does not do what is right, must either rule over sin or not rule over sin.<sup>9</sup> Cain's options are as follows:



The two stages illustrate different types of defection from cooperative arrangements:

1. Cain's first decision is whether to do what is right. Doing what is right, in this context, means bringing an offering acceptable to God. Not doing what is right means not bringing an acceptable offering. The binary nature of Cain's choice is indicated by God's language, which presents the options as mutually exclusive, and also by God's response: God accepts Abel's offering and rejects Cain's. There is no middle ground. We also learn about the criteria God uses in evaluating an offering. God's decision is based on objective factors. It is not the product of hostility to Cain or favoritism toward Abel. All that matters is that the person making the offering must do what is right. God, moreover, does not demand the impossible. He indicates that Cain has the power to bring an acceptable offering. Unlike Abel, Cain cannot supply an animal from his own flock. But perhaps he could trade some grain for one of Abel's lambs. Or perhaps God would accept a grain offering if it were of better quality or there were more of it. By stressing the quality of Abel's offering (the "fat" portions of the flock) and saying nothing about

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<sup>9</sup> Cain has already failed to do what is right in this particular case, but God is here outlining rules of general application.

Cain's, the author suggests that Cain has not brought an impressive gift even of his own produce.

Given these conditions, why does Cain bring an inadequate offering? One answer is that he is mistaken about what God demands: he presents his offering in good faith, believing it to be sufficient, and is surprised when God turns it down. This interpretation suffers from the problem that God then appears to have set Cain up for rejection by failing to announce the criteria for an acceptable offering in advance. A better interpretation is that Cain is attempting to take advantage of Abel. Cain knows that Abel is going to bring an animal as his offering and, further, knows that this is the kind of offering that God prefers. This knowledge gives Cain an incentive to bring an inadequate offering. If God treats the two offerings as a unit—if he assesses their quality together—then perhaps he will accept them both because the virtues of Abel's offering outweigh the deficiencies of Cain's. This stage of Cain's decision process illustrates the danger of *free riding*—taking opportunistic advantage of the contributions of others.

2. After God rejects Cain's offering, he tells Cain that "sin is crouching at your door." Sin stands here for the wish for revenge that arises in Cain when his offering is rejected. But God also tells Cain that he can "rule over" sin. Cain, accordingly, has another decision to make. He can rule over sin or not rule over it. The binary nature of this choice is reinforced by the image of sin at the "door." Doors are classic symbols of binary outcomes. We also infer that Cain actually *has* a choice at this point—he has a realistic option either to rule over sin or not. God would not tell Cain that he must rule over sin if he were unable to do so. The metaphor of sin crouching at the door conveys the same message. Nothing can control sin, an animal spirit whose "desire" is for Cain. In

other words, Cain's feelings are his feelings. He cannot stop them from welling up. What he can do is prevent himself from *acting* on his feelings. The metaphor of the house symbolizes Cain, the door his self-control. Having dominion over his property (his self), Cain has the power either to open the door (allow himself to be ruled by his feelings) or leave it shut (exercise self-control).

This aspect of the story illustrates a second way in which people may defect from cooperative arrangements: engaging in *aggression* against their counterparties. In the specific case of Cain, the aggression takes the form of an act of violence; in more general form, it includes any act of misappropriation (Cain takes Abel's most precious asset—his life).

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Cain's defections from cooperation—first by bringing an inadequate offering, and second by killing Abel in a fit of rage—provide him with benefits in the short run. He gets to bring a cheap offering and thus spends fewer resources in seeking God's favor, and he discharges his emotions by lashing out at his brother. But these actions come with long-term costs. God is likely to be angry if he detects that Cain has brought an inadequate offering and angrier still if he finds out that Cain has murdered his brother. He is likely to punish Cain for his misdeeds.<sup>10</sup> Cain also experiences long-term costs from his behavior towards Abel: he no longer has a brother who might help out in hard times. Given that these long-term costs appear to outweigh the short-term benefits, why does Cain act as he does? The author suggests three reasons:

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<sup>10</sup> God's intervention with Cain does not break the frame of the narrative, which portrays a world without government or law. God's actions here are not based on law but rather represent strategic moves designed to protect God's own interests.

1. People may defect from cooperative arrangements because they plan to *avoid detection*. This is Cain's strategy toward God. He hopes that God will not realize that he is free-riding on his brother in the matter of the offering and then hopes that God will not discover Abel's body in the field. Cain is mistaken on both counts, of course, but this does not mean that he does not anticipate a favorable outcome. If he is successful at eluding detection, he will avoid the long-range consequences of God's displeasure.

2. People may defect from cooperative arrangements because they *do not anticipate future interactions*. This may be Cain's strategy toward Abel. If Cain does not anticipate or desire future interactions with his brother, he has no reason to be concerned about the long-term consequences. In such a situation the short-run benefits of defection become decisive.

3. People may defect from cooperative arrangements if they have a *high discount rate*. People who have a high discount rate are like the grasshopper in Aesop's fable: they think about the present and fail to take account of what the future might hold. Judged by this criterion, Cain has an exceptionally high discount rate: he acts impulsively and gives no thought to the future. Such people may defect from cooperative arrangements because they value the short-run benefits of defection more than they dislike the future costs, even if the future costs are much higher than the short-term benefits.

#### Cain the Wanderer

After discovering Cain's offense, God condemns him to be a wanderer on the earth. Cain complains that the penalty is too harsh because whoever finds him will kill him (Gen 4:13–14). God seems to recognize the force of Cain's argument because he places a mark on Cain and announces that anyone who kills Cain will suffer sevenfold

vengeance (Gen 4:15–16). This setup allows the author to identify second-order strategies people use to protect themselves against defectors. The author identifies three such strategies:

1. When Cain and Abel bring offerings to God, they are engaging in an exchange in which they present gifts to God and God reciprocates by conferring his favor. This is a cooperative arrangement between human beings and God. Cain defects from this arrangement by bringing an inadequate offering and then compounds the offense by killing his brother and lying about it. God’s response is to banish Cain from his presence—to make him a restless wanderer on the earth. God’s action illustrates one strategy for coping with free-riding or aggression: to *shun* (refuse to deal with) people who present an unacceptable risk of defection.

2. After receiving his sentence of banishment, Cain is fearful—apparently with good reason—that anyone who finds him will kill him. This narrative element illustrates how people sometimes engage in *preemptive aggression* against others whom they fear will otherwise engage in aggression against them.<sup>11</sup> The party in question protects himself by defecting first, even though he would not defect if he did not fear defection from the counterparty.

3. In response to Cain’s plea, God places a protective mark on Cain and announces that anyone who kills Cain will suffer sevenfold vengeance (Gen 4:15).<sup>12</sup> It

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<sup>11</sup> Similar concerns about preemptive aggression inform contemporary nuclear strategy. See generally Lawrence Freedman, *Deterrence* (New York: Polity Press, 2004).

<sup>12</sup> See Joel N. Lohr, “So YHWH Established a Sign for Cain: Rethinking Genesis 4:15,” *ZAW* 121 (2009): 101–3; D. Alan Aycock, “The Mark of Cain,” in *Structuralist Interpretations of Biblical Myth*, by Edmund Leach and D. Alan Aycock (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 120–27; Paula M. McNutt, “In the Shadow of Cain,” in “The Social World of the Hebrew Bible: Twenty-Five Years of the Social

seems strange that God would go to such lengths to save someone who has just brought an inadequate offering, murdered his own brother, and then insolently lied about the matter. The explanation is that this is God's way of making sure that the punishment is not excessive. God sentences Cain to be a wanderer on the earth, but not to death. If it turns out that anyone who finds Cain will kill him, then the sentence of being rendered homeless effectively becomes a death sentence. God's threat protects Cain against summary execution.<sup>13</sup>

Analyzed in light of political theory, the purpose of the mark of Cain is to *deter* aggression. To be effective, any deterrent must have (at least) three qualities.

(a) It must be formulated as a *policy*: it must be embodied in a definite plan of retaliation. The mark of Cain contains such a policy in the form of God's seven-to-one retaliation ratio.

(b) The policy must be *known* to the party one wants to deter—otherwise it has no influence. If God had privately decided to massacre the family of anyone who killed Cain, but did not make that fact known, then nothing would stop the killer from going forward. The mark of Cain—usually envisaged as some form of tattoo or scarification—makes God's threat known to people who meet Cain during his wanderings.

(c) The deterrent must be *credible*, in the sense that the party one wants to deter must believe that the sanction will actually be administered. The mark of Cain serves this purpose by lending veracity to God's threat. By publicly announcing his intentions, God exposes himself to the risk that he will not be taken seriously the next time around if he

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Sciences in the Academy," ed. Stephen L. Cook and Ronald A. Simkins, special issue, *Semeia* 87 (1999): 45–64.

<sup>13</sup> In this respect the Cain-Abel story parallels the Eden narrative, where God's decision to provide clothes to Adam and Eve can be understood as intended to prevent banishment from becoming a death sentence.

exercises forbearance. God is therefore likely to carry through with the threat even though he has a propensity to be merciful. Because people know that God has committed himself to administer the punishment, they take the threat seriously in the first place.

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Similar observations can be drawn from the story of Lamech, one of Cain's descendants. Lamech has two wives, Adah and Zillah. He tells them: "Adah and Zillah, listen to me; wives of Lamech, hear my words. I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for injuring me. If Cain is avenged seven times, then Lamech seventy-seven times" (Gen 4:23–24). Theological commentators have done little with this text, for obvious reasons: it reports a rather bloodcurdling vow and does not seem to have anything to do with God.<sup>14</sup> Political theory sheds more light. We observe here the same general structure of deterrence as in the mark of Cain. A definite policy is set forth—a seventy-seven-to-one retaliation ratio, in Lamech's case. The policy is announced publicly in an ostentatious boast (it is for this reason that the author supplies two wives to Lamech, since a boast made to only one would be easier to deny). And the person threatening retaliation achieves credibility by placing his prestige on the line. Lamech makes a vow in front of his wives—a posture that impeaches his honor in the event he does not carry out the vow, since it would expose him to ridicule by women.<sup>15</sup>

### A World in Chaos

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<sup>14</sup> Some have seen the story as a quotation from an old Kenite victory song. Some have claimed that the text disapproves the practice of polygamy, given that this is the first reported instance in the Bible of plural marriage—a theory that does not hold up well given that plural marriages are attested without reproof elsewhere (Jacob's marriages to Rachel and Leah being examples). Speiser suggests that this text was included in the Bible simply because it refers to Cain. Speiser, *Genesis*, 37.

<sup>15</sup> On the role of women in conveying honor and shame in ancient Israel, see Victor H. Matthews, "Honor and Shame in Gender-Related Legal Situations in the Hebrew Bible," in *Gender and Law in the Hebrew Bible and the Ancient Near East* (ed. Victor H. Matthews, Bernard M. Levinson, and Tikva Frymer-Kensky; JSOTSup 262; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998), 97–112.

The author's next task is to identify and analyze *feedback effects*—ways in which defections can reinforce one another in an accelerating cycle of distrust and retaliation. Genesis 4:17–22 describes Cain's offspring and their descendants as going into different lines of work. We learn that families stabilize to the point where trades are passed across the generations—something that could not happen if everyone was defecting. Yet overall, the texts that follow the Cain-Abel story describe an accelerating descent into chaos and violence. The author depicts this process in artistic form by supplying the reader with ever more fragmentary texts, as if the increasing speed of events is tearing apart the fabric of the narration itself. The feedback effects propagate in two ways:

1. One pathway is that the *percentage of defectors* increases. Knowing that they may be facing a defector, people begin to defect first even if they would otherwise cooperate. The result is that even more people become defectors.<sup>16</sup> Defection builds on defection, leading eventually to a situation where it is in no one's interest to cooperate.<sup>17</sup> The author models the dynamic process of accelerating defection by drawing on ideas about inheritance of behavioral traits:

(a) At the time of the Cain-Abel story, there is one cooperator (Abel) and one defector (Cain).<sup>18</sup> The equal number of defectors and cooperators exquisitely frames the issue because the result could go either way: defectors could crowd out cooperators, or cooperators could win out over defectors. When Cain kills Abel, however, the result is to

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<sup>16</sup> For studies indicating that the propensity to cooperate is a function of the perceived probability of encountering other cooperators, see, e.g., G. Charness and M. Dufwenberg, "Promises and Partnership," *Econometrica* 74 (2006): 1579–601; D. G. Pruitt and M. J. Kimmel, "Twenty Years of Experimental Gaming: Critique, Synthesis, and Suggestions for the Future," *Annual Review of Psychology* 28 (1977): 363–92.

<sup>17</sup> As anthropologist Joseph Henrich puts it, "even if nearly everyone is initially cooperative and contributes[, defectors] can profit and proliferate, leading to the eventual collapse of cooperation." Joseph Henrich, "Cooperation, Punishment, and the Evolution of Human Institutions," *Science* 132 (2006): 60–61.

<sup>18</sup> The author tells us nothing about Adam and Eve at this point, so they can be excluded.

cut off Abel's genetic line. The ratio of defectors to cooperators increases. The death of Abel does not eliminate all cooperators from the environment, however. Because of variability in inheritance, some of Cain's children will be more cooperative than he is. The author also introduces a third son of Adam and Eve, Seth, in order to provide an untainted line of descent for the human race. Seth's sons are likely to be more cooperative than Cain's.

(b) Even though the death of Abel does not eliminate all cooperators, the ratio of defectors to cooperators increases over time. Genesis 6:1–2, apparently a fragment of an old myth, relates that when men began to increase on the earth and daughters were born to them, the sons of God took any of them they wanted as wives.<sup>19</sup> This text describes how defectors expropriate rights of sexual access and thereby propagate their character types. Following on this story, Genesis 6:4 reports that beings known as *nephilim* spring from the unions between the daughters of men and the sons of God. As might be expected, these figures are fierce, proud, and violent—"heroes" and "men of renown." The *nephilim* are the sort of people who will flourish in the deteriorating environment of violence and mistrust that characterizes the Dark Age after the death of Abel.

(c) By the time of the flood, the dynamic process has reached its limit. Almost all cooperators have been driven out. Noah is the only righteous man of his entire generation. All other humans are "evil all the time" (Gen 6:5).

2. The other pathway for the propagation of feedback effects is that the *severity of retaliation* increases over time:

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<sup>19</sup> See Ronald S. Hendel, "When the Sons of God Cavorted with the Daughters of Men," *BR* 3, no. 2 (1987): 8–13. The odd use of the term "sons of God" is apparently a residue of the original myth, which probably contained an account of unions between gods and men.

(a) When Cain kills Abel, God’s principle of retaliation is forgiving. Just as in the Garden of Eden, God imposes a penalty of banishment even though capital punishment might have been warranted. The retaliation ratio is fractional—less than one-to-one.

(b) Later, God vows a sevenfold vengeance against anyone who kills Cain. This feature causes theological discomfort because it seems to portray God in a bloodthirsty light. Why wouldn’t the rule of the *lex talionis*—an eye for an eye, a life for a life—be sufficient? The answer is that tendencies to defect from cooperative arrangements have risen, so that an enhanced threat of retaliation is needed to induce people to act cooperatively.<sup>20</sup>

(c) By the time of Lamech, the retaliation ratio has risen to seventy-seven-to-one (Gen 4:23–24). Lamech’s strategy, moreover, is expressly tied to the prior story of the mark of Cain: “*If Cain is avenged seven times, then Lamech seventy-seven times*” (Gen 4:24). The connection is not accidental. The author is stating here that threats are mutually related. The behaviors create an echo effect in which threats of retaliation reinforce one another.<sup>21</sup>

(d) By the time of the flood, the author tells us that social conditions have completely deteriorated. Not only are the actions of men evil, but also their *thoughts*; not only some thoughts, but *every* thought; not only some of the time, but *continuously*; and not only one man, but *every* man (other than Noah). The retaliation ratio has essentially become infinite, leaving no room at all for cooperation.

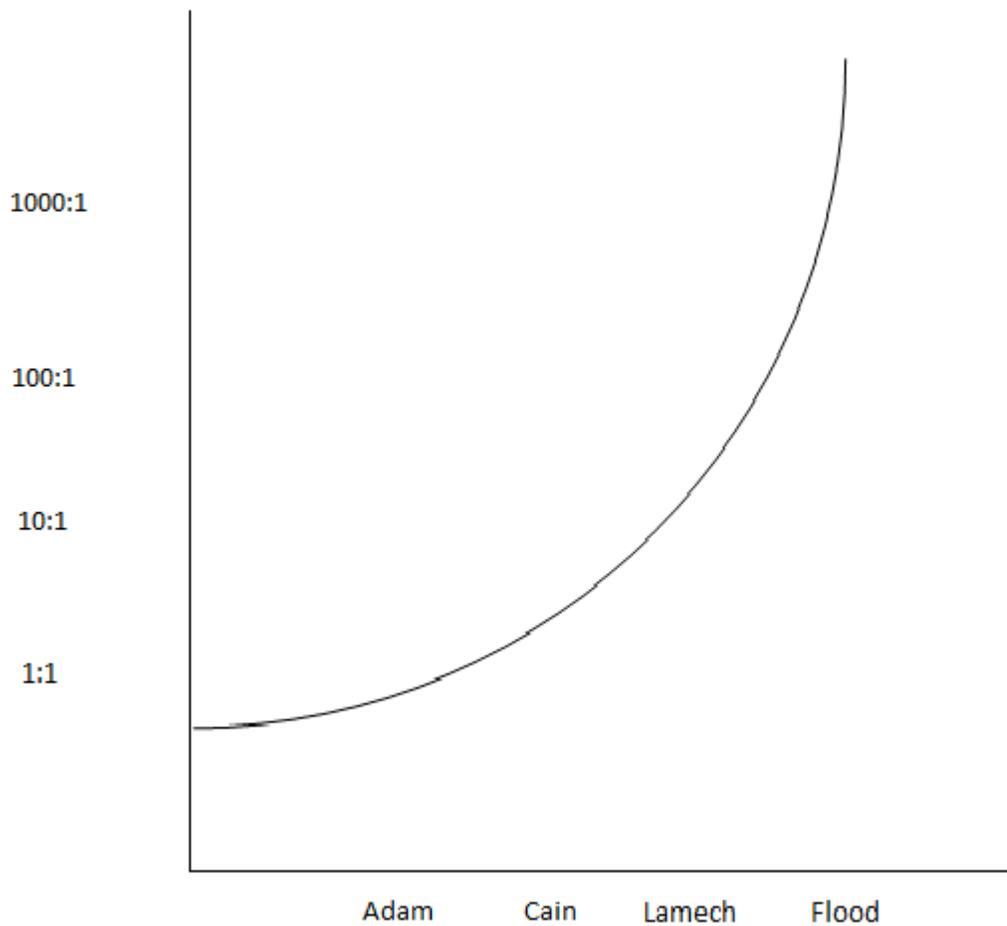
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<sup>20</sup> These issues are a focus of nuclear-weapons strategy today, which relies on deterrence in the form of a threat of massive retaliation to prevent acts of aggression from occurring in the first place. See Robert Powell, *Nuclear Deterrence Theory: The Search for Credibility* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

<sup>21</sup> As game theorist Robert Axelrod puts the idea, strategies calling for defection “can set off a long string of recriminations and counter-recriminations” with disastrous consequences for all concerned. Robert Axelrod, *The Evolution of Cooperation* (New York: Basic Books, 1984), 38.

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When these texts are considered together, it becomes apparent that the author provides a mathematical description of the breakdown of cooperation under which retaliation rises at an increasing rate. The description can be modeled by a curve of increasing slope. This is shown in the following figure (the vertical or “y” axis is the retaliation ratio plotted on a log scale):



*Fig. 1: Escalation of retaliation in the Dark Age*

#### A Modern Parallel

Like many simplified models of human organization, the author’s description of social degeneration in the absence of government and law may sound unrealistic. In

defense of the author's analysis, however, it should be noted that he does not present the model as a depiction of actual human societies. The events in question are shielded from the author's time by the flood, which fundamentally changes the dynamics of human relationships. The history of the Dark Age is not a history of the current world but one of a universe whose conditions have long ago been superseded.

We may also observe, however, that actual human societies sometimes *do* present parallels to the horrifying conditions described in the Dark Age texts. When things get bad enough, people begin to behave in ways not too different from those described in the stories of Cain and Abel, Lamech, and the sons of God. A modern parallel to the Bible's account of the Dark Age—and one with a similar outcome—can be found in anthropologist Colin Turnbull's *The Mountain People*.<sup>22</sup> Turnbull reports on a tribe called the Ik, who live in West Africa between the Sudan, Kenya, and Uganda (some elements of Turnbull's account have been questioned, but his basic description has a ring of veracity). According to Turnbull, the Ik had once been a peaceful tribe of hunters but had experienced a devastating change in lifestyle after being ejected from their ancestral lands. Like Adam and Eve expelled from the garden, the Ik were cast out of a stable and fruitful life and left to fend for themselves. Deprived of their traditional means of livelihood, they also lost most of their social structure—a process that accelerated when their crops failed. By the time Turnbull encountered them, the Ik had no functioning social institutions, no government, and no rule of law. Famine and social disruption had led to a culture marked by a violence “deep and smoldering, scarring each man and woman, making life even more disagreeable and dividing man against his neighbor even

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<sup>22</sup> Colin Turnbull, *The Mountain People* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1972).

further. There is simply no community of interest, familial or economic, social or spiritual.”<sup>23</sup> Like the denizens of the biblical Dark Age, the Ik of Turnbull’s book “lack any sense of moral responsibility toward each other, . . . any sense of belonging to, needing or wanting each other.”<sup>24</sup>

In the end, after observing the Ik’s descent into violence, Turnbull, like the God of the Dark Age, decided that the culture had to be exterminated. He advised that the Ik should be rounded up in small groups and dispersed throughout the country so that their sickness would not infect others: “They were beyond saving as a society, the family clearly held no emotional value for them at all and virtually no economic value, they had cultivated individualism to its apex, so why not accept that and try to reintroduce them as individuals into a world where human beings are also social and care about each other, rather as other animals seem to do?”<sup>25</sup> Turnbull’s judgment of the Ik is not so different from the judgment God makes of the human race at the conclusion of the Dark Age.

### The Flood

We now turn to the story of the flood.<sup>26</sup> When God sees how great men’s wickedness on earth has become, how “every inclination of the thoughts of the human

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 156–60.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 218.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 284.

<sup>26</sup> The Bible’s flood story is modeled on deluge myths that were in widespread circulation in the ancient world. In the legend of Atrahasis (18<sup>th</sup> or 17<sup>th</sup> c B.C.E.), the lesser gods revolt against the labor and drudgery being forced on them by the higher gods. The solution is to create human beings to do the work. The lesser gods are happy to be relieved of the chores, but then the humans start to make too much noise. Enlil decides to eradicate humanity because the noise is disturbing his sleep. Eventually he decides to send a flood to wipe out the species. Another god alerts the hero, Atrahasis, and advises him to build a boat lined with pitch in order to ride out the deluge. The flood lasts seven days and seven nights. When it ends, Atrahasis offers sacrifices to the gods. The original problem is then resolved by measures to control the human population: death, stillbirth, infertility, and celibacy. See W. G Lambert and A. R. Millard, *Atrahasis: The Babylonian Story of the Flood* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1969); Tikva Frymer-Kensky, “The Atrahasis Epic and Its Significance for Our Understanding of Gen 1–9,” *BA* 40 (1977): 147–55; Tikva Frymer-Kensky, “What the Babylonian Flood Stories Can and Cannot Teach Us About the

heart was only evil all the time” (Gen 6:5), he vows to “wipe from the face of the earth the human race I have created—and with them the animals, the birds and the creatures that move along the ground—for I regret that I have made them” (Gen 6:7).<sup>27</sup> Noah, however, finds favor in God’s sight as the only one who is “blameless among the people of his time,” and therefore God exempts him and his family from the impending doom (Gen 6:9). On God’s instructions, Noah builds and provisions a boat, lines it with pitch, and brings onboard a male and a female of all the animals and birds. God sends a flood which covers the earth, but the ark and its passengers ride out the deluge and come to rest on Mount Ararat. Noah builds an altar and performs a burnt offering. God smells the soothing odor and vows never again to destroy the world, even though “every inclination

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Genesis Flood,” *BAR* 4, no. 4 (1978): 32–41; William L. Moran, “Atrahasis: The Babylonian Story of the Flood,” *Bib* 52 (1971): 51–61.

Tablet XI of the *Epic of Gilgamesh* (dated around the 11<sup>th</sup> c B.C.E.) describes how a god warns Ut-napishtim that the council of gods has decided to destroy his city, apparently because it has become overpopulated. The god tells Ut-napishtim to construct a wooden boat and to load onto it his family, relations, workers, animals, and the seed of all kinds of life. After a storm lasting seven days, the boat alights on Mount Nisir. Ut-napishtim sends out a dove, a swallow, and a raven. When the raven does not return, Ut-napishtim disembarks and offers a sacrifice. The gods smell the sweet odor of the sacrifice and gather around it like flies. Ut-napishtim and his wife are granted eternal life. See S. W. Holloway, “What Ship Goes There: The Flood Narrative in the Gilgamesh Epic and Genesis Considered in Light of Ancient Near Eastern Temple Ideology,” *ZAW* 103 (1991): 328–55.

<sup>27</sup> In this respect, the biblical account differs from its Mesopotamian predecessors. In the Mesopotamian accounts the problem is that humans are flourishing *too much*—they are growing too quickly in population or making too much noise. In the Bible’s account, in contrast, the problem for God is that they are flourishing *too little*: they are becoming ever more corrupted and violent in their behavior toward one another. Why does the biblical account differ from its predecessors? Political theory offers an answer. The purpose of the Dark Age stories was to demonstrate that human societies cannot flourish in an environment without government and law. The demonstration required that flourishing not occur in this setting. But if human beings are not flourishing, the motivation assigned to the gods in the Mesopotamian precursors cannot carry over, since the earlier stories assumed that human beings were flourishing too much. The author therefore needed a new motivation for the destruction of humanity. The obvious candidate—one that fits well into the structure of the argument—is that God becomes disgusted with the degraded condition into which the human race has fallen and vows to blot out the whole business. This left, of course, the problem that a key element of the Mesopotamian stories—divine intervention to control excessive flourishing—was missing from the biblical account. The author solves this problem by projecting this motivation forward into the immediately succeeding story of the tower of Babel, where God does act to control excessive human flourishing. This helps explain the connection between the story of the tower of Babel and the flood narratives, two stories that otherwise seem oddly juxtaposed.

of the human heart is evil from childhood” (Gen 8:21). God places the rainbow in the clouds as a sign and seal of his covenant.

The setup of the flood narrative frames a new topic for discussion:

1. Noah is one of the Bible’s most appealing figures: he is good and wholehearted; he walks with God; he finds grace in God’s eyes. He is the only one righteous in his generation. The author here draws again on the notion of inheritance. Noah is a child of the Dark Age and accordingly shares an inheritance characterized by an increasingly violent character. By the time of Noah, almost no cooperators remain. But inheritance is also variable: good children can be born of bad parents. In the character of Noah, those good traits find expression in nearly perfect form—an unlikely but not impossible event. The author provides no reason why Noah should be good while everyone else is bad: it is just the way the cards fall. By presenting Noah in this fashion, the author resets the range of human character, drawing a progenitor from the cooperative tail of the distribution. Noah is likely to pass some of these traits of cooperation to his descendants, just as Cain, who was a reckless hothead, passed on traits of defection. The different selection of character types in the new dispensation creates possibilities for cooperation that were not present in the Dark Age.

2. The flood fundamentally changes the physical environment:

(a) The flood is a cleansing event. We learn that the deluge rose over the entire earth, covering even the tops of the mountains. The flood is thus a metaphor for a remedy

that is as extensive as the pollution it seeks to expunge. It washes the soil and thus symbolically wipes out the corruption of the earth introduced in the previous narratives.<sup>28</sup>

(b) The flood is also a hydrating event. During the Dark Age, God holds back the waters and parches the land. In the flood, the gates of the deep and of the heavens are opened and all of the pent-up water rushes onto the earth. Thereafter, God will no longer deprive the earth of hydration. The natural order of seasons will establish itself, lessening the aridity of the land and the labor that human beings must expend to wrest crops from the soil. God expresses this idea in a beautiful poem: “As long as the earth endures, seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night will never cease” (Gen 8:22).

3. The ark is a metaphor for interconnectedness and mutual reliance—the same idea that we employ, in contemporary English, when we say that we are in the “same boat.” It is a means of transportation that carries the narrative away from the world of the Dark Age, where people rely only on themselves, to the new world where people might be able to count on one another with an expectation of reciprocation.

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The author uses these elements to establish a new model of human society. The model continues to be extraordinarily simple: it consists of a single human family (plus assorted animals). But conditions have changed for the better. The author stresses the improvement by alluding to the happy state of Adam and Eve in the garden before their

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<sup>28</sup> Recall God’s judgment on Adam: “cursed is the ground because of you” (Gen 3:17). God’s judgment on Cain reinforces the concept of the earth being cursed (Gen 4:11–12). The motif suggests that the initial conditions of the Dark Age stories—the setup of the model—were such that failure of the experiment was inevitable: if the ground itself is corrupted, there is no chance that people will be able to surmount the difficulties. The flood cleanses the ground, washes away the corruption, and creates the potential for a viable life going forward.

transgression.<sup>29</sup> These references establish continuity between the garden, the crucible and symbol of a society ruled by a beneficent monarch under a rule of law, and the clean world in which Noah and his family find themselves after the subsidence of the waters.

This setup addresses an issue left unresolved in the Dark Age narrative. As we have seen, the stories of the Dark Age describe an experiment designed to test whether human beings can develop a good and decent life in a world without government and law. That experiment fails. Humans do not solve the problem of social organization but instead fall into an escalating cycle of violence and corruption. Before the author can conclude that government and law are essential for human flourishing, however, he must address the objection that the outcome of the experiment could have depended on contingent factors that would not be present in every case.

The author's model of the Dark Age created severe challenges for the development of cooperative arrangements because of the scarcity built into the setup. If the world had been better hydrated, if God had given it more attention, if the earth had been more forgiving, then perhaps the conflicts that began with the murder of Abel would not have arisen or would have been managed without resort to violence. There is also the question of character types. Cain turns out to have been a person with low self-control

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<sup>29</sup> The Garden of Eden starts off in an arid state but God causes a mist to rise from the earth and water it, and a great spring arises in Eden to part into four rivers. The world of the Dark Age is parched until God loosens the rains and opens the fountains of the deep (Gen 7:11), leaving behind a world newly hydrated after the subsidence of the flood. Eden is a peaceful place where birds, animals, and humans coexist in harmony; the ark is a small Eden containing exemplars of all the species living peaceably in the cramped quarters of the ship. Adam and Eve appear freshly minted and sinless in a newly created world; Noah and his family emerge from the darkness of the ark and enter a world washed free of sin. God cherishes Adam and Eve and acts to further their welfare; God blesses Noah and his family and promises for their sake never to destroy the world again. God gives Adam naming rights over the animals in the Garden of Eden; God gives Noah and his descendants dominion over the animals in the new world. God imposes a comprehensive food regulation on Adam and Eve, allowing them to eat of any fruit in the garden except for the fruit of the knowledge of good and evil; God imposes a comprehensive food regulation on Noah and his clan, allowing them to eat anything other than beasts with the blood in them.

and impulsive behaviors. After the murder of Abel, Cain's descendants were apt to inherit his reckless habits. But the next set of humans, born of a different progenitor, might not be so self-indulgent or prone to violence. If those people passed traits of cooperation on to their descendants, the world might not produce as many people like Lamech, whose skills at conflict resolution consist of bluster and threat. Cooperation might be possible in such a world even though it was not possible in the Dark Age. These considerations suggest that the failure of the Dark Age to evolve into a world where humans can flourish is not a conclusive answer to the question of whether this could *ever* happen in the absence of government and law.

The problem facing the author can usefully be illustrated by comparison with game theorist Robert Axelrod's classic, *The Evolution of Cooperation*.<sup>30</sup> Axelrod asks essentially the same question that the author addresses in the Dark Age texts: "under what conditions will cooperation emerge in a world of egoists without central authority."<sup>31</sup> Like the biblical author, Axelrod analyzed this question by means of an experiment. He created a contest consisting of a tournament in which players were given the choice of behaving cooperatively or defecting. The conditions of the game were essentially the same as those in the Dark Age: scarcity, self-interest, strategic behavior, and lack of government and law (other than the basic rules of the game itself). Axelrod invited his contestants to submit entries consisting of lines of computer code containing strategies for playing the game. He then matched all the entries against one another. Axelrod's winner was TIT FOR TAT, a strategy that cooperates on the first move and then does whatever the counterparty did on the previous move. TIT FOR TAT is "nice"—it always

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<sup>30</sup> Axelrod, *The Evolution of Cooperation*.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

cooperates on the first move—and (moderately) “forgiving”—if the counterparty defects in a previous move, TIT FOR TAT forgives the defection if the counterparty cooperates in a subsequent move. Axelrod’s tournament demonstrated that cooperative behavior can arise even when the parties seek only to maximize their self-interest in an environment characterized by the absence of government and law. His results contrast with those of the Dark Age narratives. The winner of the biblical tournament is not TIT FOR TAT but rather a much less cooperative strategy. Axelrod’s study illustrates the incompleteness of the argument in the Dark Age narrative: plausible initial conditions different from those set forth in the Dark Age stories, such as those found in Axelrod’s tournament, might generate stable strategies for cooperation even in the absence of government and law.<sup>32</sup>

The setup of the flood narrative allows the author to address this problem. After the flood, Noah and his family are in the same general situation as Adam and Eve after their expulsion from the garden. They are the only humans on earth, and they encounter a world as yet unformed. But the author changes the conditions of the experiment in important ways:

(a) Noah has been selected for the trait of being righteous. The human beings who will populate this new world are all descended from him. They may, accordingly, be expected to behave better than the offspring of Adam and Eve, and certainly better than the children of Cain.

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<sup>32</sup> The success of TIT FOR TAT in Axelrod’s tournament has been over-interpreted as suggesting that TIT FOR TAT will always achieve the best outcome. In fact, TIT FOR TAT does not do as well as other strategies in many specifications. For a summary and evaluation, see Joseph Henrich and Natalie Henrich, “Culture, Evolution and the Puzzle of Human Cooperation,” *Cognitive Systems Research* 7 (2006): 220–45, here 231.

(b) The initial condition of scarcity has also been mitigated. The deluge has washed God's curses from the ground. The waters have rehydrated the world and blotted out the thorns and thistles that made life burdensome for Adam and Eve. It appears that the rains will come more often and the crops will be less likely to fail. And God himself will be more available, since his attention will be drawn to the world every time a rainbow appears in the sky.

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Under these new and optimal conditions, will humanity fall into the same degraded cycle of violence and retaliation as it experienced during the Dark Age? If so, then the conclusion that anarchy results in a destructive spiral of violence holds for all reasonable specifications of human society. If not, then the author's argument against anarchy is incomplete because circumstances exist in which people can achieve a good and decent life in the absence of government and law.

The author's answer is that even under optimal conditions, human society will fail to develop stable systems of cooperation in the absence of government and law. He codes this argument in God's vow never to destroy the world again. Once Noah and his family have landed on Ararat, God has a decision to make. Should he send Noah and his family off to try again—to test whether under these new conditions human beings can develop a good and decent life in the absence of government and law? Or should he give up on further experimentation? The answer depends on whether the conditions of the model (more cooperativeness, less scarcity)—or any other set of reasonably plausible conditions—can yield a better result.

God concludes that no reasonably plausible set of parameters will generate a different outcome. The reason is human nature. God can supply more water to the world and can manipulate human inheritance, but he cannot change human nature: “every inclination of man’s heart is evil from childhood” (Gen 8:21). God’s reference to the evil of the human heart should not be understood to refer to particular people. Some are better than others, and a few, like Noah, are very good indeed. God’s conclusion, however, is that even a line of humans descended from a person as good as Noah will not remain good forever. The principle of regression toward the mean, which people of biblical times must have understood in an intuitive way, suggests that the perfection achieved by Noah will not last. Some of Noah’s children may be good, but sooner or later the bad tendencies of the human race will reemerge—as indeed happens when Ham proves such a disappointment. Bad behavior cannot be extirpated because it is part of what human beings are. And when bad people arise in the population, even those who are not bad will be forced to protect themselves by behaving badly themselves. Sooner or later, in a form of behavioral Gresham’s Law, bad conduct will drive out good conduct and humanity will wind up in the same vicious cycle of violence and retaliation that doomed the Dark Age. Because in every reasonable specification of the experiment human beings will wind up in the same corrupted condition, God decides that there is no point to re-running the test with new conditions. This conclusion provides a reason why God vows never to destroy the world again: because he is not going to renew the experiment, it will not fail again and require another flood.

## Noah's Covenant

After the ark lands on Mount Ararat and the passengers disembark, Noah builds an altar and offers a sacrifice (Gen 8:20). God blesses Noah and his sons, telling them to replenish the earth (Gen 9:1). He gives them dominion over land animals, birds, and fish (Gen 9:2). He announces a new dietary law: "Everything that lives and moves about will be food for you. Just as I gave you the green plants, I now give you everything. But you must not eat meat that has its lifeblood still in it" (Gen 9:3–4). Finally, God announces a new rule on retribution: "Whoever sheds human blood, by humans shall their blood be shed; for in the image of God has God made mankind" (Gen 9:5–6). God refers to his promise not to destroy the earth as a "covenant" and sets a rainbow in the sky as a symbol and reminder of the event (Gen 9:9–17).

The author uses this setting to place one of the final touches on the argument against anarchy. The Dark Age narratives establish that human beings cannot achieve a good and decent life in the absence of government and law. It remains for the author to show that *with* government and law people *do* have the ability to achieve a decent life. The narrative of God's covenant with Noah and his family begins the analysis of that problem by describing how God establishes government and law for all human beings and regulates the conditions under which people may act violently toward one another:

1. God imposes a new dietary regulation, allowing people to eat anything other than the flesh of an animal with the blood still in it. This detail alludes to the rule of the forbidden fruit, which also took the form of a dietary restriction, and has a similar meaning. All people must eat—frequently—and when they are not eating they are often thinking about food. The dietary rule established on Mount Ararat is therefore universally relevant to

human beings. Recall also that the rule in the Eden narrative took the form of a specific prohibition (do not eat the forbidden fruit), embedded in a general permission (in general, you can eat the fruit of any tree in the garden). This structure recurs in the Noah narrative, where we also find a specific prohibition (do not eat meat with the blood in it) embedded in a general permission (in general, you can eat anything you like):

<i>Setting</i>	<i>General rule</i>	<i>Exception</i>
Eden	Eat the fruit of any tree in the garden	Do not eat the fruit of the tree of knowledge
Ararat	Eat anything	Do not eat meat with the blood in it

As in the Eden narrative, the dietary rule provides a symbolic representation of an environment in which government and law are present. The specific prohibition against eating meat with the blood in it codes the fact that government and law are inherently coercive: they involve, at some point, the application of force. The general permission codes the fact that the rule—and by implication government and law—is comprehensive: it extends not only to the specific thing that is prohibited, but also to all food, which in other respects is specifically permitted. The contrast between the specific prohibition and the general permission argues that government and law, although they are crucial to a good and decent life, are not in fact overly intrusive on human freedom: people give up little by submitting to a prohibition against eating meat with the blood still in it.

The food law of the Noahide covenant, of course, is not the same as the corresponding law in the Garden of Eden. It has been adjusted in two important respects. The forbidden item is no longer a specific tree in the garden but rather a category applicable everywhere in the world. And the set of generally permitted foodstuffs has been expanded to include all edible things.<sup>33</sup> Human beings are thereby converted into omnivores. This expansion is needed to universalize the rule by making it applicable to human beings in a real world where people do eat meat; it also helps explain how the human race spreads out over the world by exploiting a variety of ecological niches.

2. In addition to announcing a general dietary law that codes the presence of government and law in human societies, God establishes a limitation on retaliation. Blood is shed for blood, but in reasonable proportion. The superficial connection between this rule and the one that precedes it is the concept of blood: the prohibition against eating meat with the blood in it segues into the rule that blood will be shed for blood. But the connection is deeper than this. Just as the dietary rule of the Noahide covenant refers back to the Eden narrative, the rule on shedding blood alludes to the Dark Age narratives. Human society failed in the Dark Age because people fell into an accelerating spiral of violence and retribution. The new world facing Noah and his family is better in many ways than the environment of the Dark Age, but the basic conditions have not changed: life is still characterized by scarcity, self-interest, and strategic action. Without some form of intervention, people will eventually fall back into the same degraded condition. God therefore institutes a specific regulation, supplemental to the general institution of

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<sup>33</sup> This should not be taken to indicate the presence of another, unspoken prohibition in the garden, namely that Adam and Eve are forbidden to eat meat. Because animals had a different status there, meat was simply not in the human diet at the time of the garden: it did not fall within the category of “food.”

government and law, designed to prevent violence from spiraling out of control. That regulation is the rule that blood shall be spilled for blood.

<i>Setting</i>	<i>Rule</i>
Dark Age	None
Ararat	Blood must be shed for blood

The rule has two elements, both necessary to effectuate its purpose. First, the rule is mandatory: “whoever sheds human blood, by humans *shall their blood be shed.*” God therefore requires that aggressors be punished. This rule protects people like Abel who are unable to defend themselves and who have no family or allies to protect them. It implies the presence of government as the party that will exact the required punishment when no one else will do so. The second part of the rule limits the extent of retaliation (and, by implication, the severity of retaliatory threats). Blood must be shed for blood; but the equivalence of the payback suggests that the retaliation must be reasonable in scope. This rule deals with people such as Lamech who vow gruesome retribution against those who aggress against them. The rule on shedding of blood is thus a form of the *lex talionis*. It requires that the degree of punishment must not be excessive in light of the harm inflicted.

3. In contrast to the rules of the Garden of Eden, which are enforced by God, the rules of the Noahide covenant are enforced by human beings. In the case of the rule on shedding blood, the delegation of responsibility is explicit: “whoever sheds human blood, *by humans* shall their blood be shed.” In the case of the general dietary rule, the

delegation is present but implicit: God sets no punishment for the offense of eating meat with the blood in it and assumes no responsibility for sanctioning transgressions. These narratives recognize that after the flood it is human beings, not God, who must bear the responsibility for administering the institutions of government and law.

4. The narrative of Noah's covenant includes the remark that God created man in his own image (echoing Gen 1:27). This famous statement is pregnant with theological significance: since we can observe human beings but cannot observe God, knowing that human beings are created in God's image provides a valuable, if indirect, means for obtaining knowledge about God. We can look at human beings and infer that something about them must resemble God. However, the theological message is not entirely clear. It would be obtuse to posit a physical resemblance as the defining similarity between man and God. Then again, human character cannot be a perfect reflection of God either, since people often act badly (God has just concluded that the thoughts of men are evil all the time!). What specific attribute of human beings is made in God's image?

Political theory sheds light on this question. The author has just argued that human beings, not God, are responsible for enforcing systems of government and law in the real world. This argument raises a question: why does God delegate this important responsibility rather than keeping it for himself, as he did in the Garden of Eden? The author's answer is that God can delegate the task because God created man in his own image. The "image" of God referenced here is simply the one set forth in the Eden narrative: God as an ideal ruler of that miniature society. In saying that God created man in his own image, the author asserts that human beings have the capacity to rule themselves—a talent that they did not need in the Garden of Eden and that they failed to

deploy in the Dark Age, but that will become crucial in the new age of the world.

Because people have this capacity, God can entrust them with the responsibility for administering systems of government and law.

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The establishment of government and law has consequences for the future of the human race. These institutions provide the framework within which stable systems of cooperation can evolve. Because the severity of retaliation is limited, the vicious cycle of violence is avoided. As a result of this new dispensation, man is finally able to achieve the benefits of social organization that could not be obtained in a state of anarchy. And because under government and law the world will never again fall into a state of total degradation, God's vow not to destroy the world again makes sense. He will not have a reason to destroy the world because conditions will never degenerate to a point where such an extreme measure is needed.

At this point, of course, the author has only *asserted* that government and law can prevent the world from returning to the chaos of the Dark Age. He has not proved this proposition. But this is the best he can do given the setting at the beginning of the new dispensation. A full proof of the proposition requires an evaluation of the performance of human beings under the new regime—something that the author does provide in his account of the later history of the human race, which, for all its flaws, wars, and conflicts, never again falls into a condition as bad as the one reported at the end of the Dark Age.

#### God Disperses the Nations

The tower of Babel episode of Gen 11 relates that human beings originally speak only one language. As people spread over the world, they come to the land of Shinar.

They decide to build a city and a tower that “reaches to the heavens” in order to make themselves a name. Otherwise, they say, “we will be scattered over the face of the whole earth” (Gen 11:4). God scopes out the city and tower while it is still under construction. He says to himself: “If as one people speaking the same language they have begun to do this, then nothing they plan to do will be impossible for them” (Gen 11:6). Apparently threatened by this information, God confounds the people’s language and scatters them across the face of the earth, so that they never complete the construction project.

The setup of the Babel story frames a new question for investigation.<sup>34</sup> God has instituted government and law in human societies, dispatched the descendants of Noah to settle an earth newly cleansed by the flood, and conferred on them the blessings of fertility. Unlike the period of the Dark Age, when human efforts at cooperation were defeated by distrust, violence, and retaliation, people now have the ability to cooperate

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<sup>34</sup> The Babel story displays conspicuous parallels with the Mesopotamian flood narratives. One such parallel is the motivation attributed to the deity. God does not show up at Babel, as in the Garden of Eden, because he wishes to take a stroll and adventitiously happens on disturbing evidence. Nor does he appear pursuant to a call, as in the stories of Cain and Abel and Noah. He comes rather to “see the city and the tower.” Something has alerted him to this project. Most probably it is the noise of the construction. People today associate construction projects with noise—the roar of backhoes, the drumming of jackhammers, the whine of skill saws, and the curses of workers. But even in ancient times, construction projects would have been noisy: workers and supervisors would be shouting; people would be hammering; wagons would be creaking; stones and bricks would be crashing against one another, and so on. The level of noise may not have rivaled that of today’s construction projects, but neither did the background level of ambient noise. The ancient world was a pretty quiet place, so that even levels of noise that would seem moderate by today’s standards would have seemed loud to the peoples of ancient times. The implication that God has been attracted down to Babel by the construction noise connects the Babel story with Mesopotamian flood narratives in which the gods become unhappy with human beings because of the noise they are making in their labors. See Lambert and Millard, *Atrahasis*.

God’s motivation for taking action against the human race is also a factor connecting the Babel story with prior Mesopotamian flood accounts. In the biblical account, as in the *Atrahasis Epic*, it appears that God hears the noise of public works projects and is unhappy. His concern that the people are having too much success mirrors Enlil’s displeasure, in the *Atrahasis Epic*, at the rapid growth of the human population. God’s response, just as in the *Atrahasis Epic*, is to institute measures that place brakes on the capacity of human beings to succeed without limit—measures for population control, in the *Atrahasis Epic*, and the division of the nations, in the Bible’s account. In both cases, the response of the deity provides an etiology for important facts about the human condition—mortality, in the *Atrahasis Epic*, and ethnic and political divisions, in the Bible.

and to capture the surplus that cooperation can yield. Conditions in this new world are like those in a version of Axelrod's tournament in which TIT FOR TAT has crowded out all the competing strategies. If all the competitors are playing TIT FOR TAT, then defection disappears. Everyone cooperates on the first move, and since TIT FOR TAT calls for a player to do what his counterparty has done on the previous move, everyone cooperates all the time.

The Babel narrative establishes almost exactly this condition. Unlike earlier biblical narratives, which involve a small number of identified individuals, many people are involved in the Babel story, and they are all anonymous. They move like a school of fish, with no leader but with remarkable coordination of action. Because everyone speaks the same language, they communicate clearly and easily. They deliberate communally and make decisions by consensus. Fault lines of political or ethnic differences do not arise. The task the people agree on is also emblematic of cooperation. A city cannot be built by a single person; group effort and coordination are required. Their objectives for building the city are also communal. The people want to make a name for themselves *together*—not as individuals—and they want to avoid being scattered across the earth, thereby remaining in an undifferentiated state of social solidarity (Gen 11:4). At all points the text contrasts with the Dark Age stories, which emphasize individualism and defection from community norms. In the Babel narrative, the focus is on community and cooperation.

Why, then, does God put the brakes on human expansion and success? The concept is theologically problematic. God appears insecure, small-minded, and jealous—hardly the characteristics one would attribute to an all-powerful deity. Standard accounts

emphasize the story's role in providing an etiology for linguistic and ethnic differences or as a polemic against Babylon. Political theory adds another dimension. The story responds to an objection that might be raised to the author's argument as it has progressed so far. The objection is this: if the new dispensation of government and law is so wonderful, if it is capable of conquering the problems that troubled humanity in the Dark Age, why then do human societies so often and so conspicuously fail to realize their potential? The answer given by the Babel story is that human societies fall short not because of any inherent defect in government or law, but rather because people are divided into groups with differing cultures and interests.<sup>35</sup> The message is that while government and law are unequivocally better than anarchy, other factors such as ethnic differences prevent human beings from achieving all the benefits that government and law might otherwise provide.

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<sup>35</sup> Contemporary work in political science and economics tends to confirm the empirical basis of the biblical account: ethnic fractionalization correlates with bad public policies and low provision of public goods. See William Easterly and Ross Levine, "Africa's Growth Tragedy," *QJE* 112 (1997): 1203–50; Alberto Alesina, Reza Baqir, and William Easterly, "Public Goods and Ethnic Divisions," *QJE* 114 (1998): 1243–84.