4:1 **Cain** The meaning of this name is disputed. It likely relates to smithing or metalworking, as in the name Tubal-Cain, forefather of metalworkers (see v. 22).

   Cain DOT: P

**I have given birth to** The Hebrew verb here, *qanah*, often translated as “gotten,” is a wordplay on the sound of Cain’s name (*qayin*). The verb *qanah* means “to acquire,” “to create,” or “to produce.” Eve’s statement here reflects her pride and joy in the birth of her firstborn (compare Jer 20:15).

**Yahweh** The Hebrew here uses the divine name *yhw* (Yahweh).

Names of God in the Old Testament Table

4:2 **she bore his brother** The text subtly indicates that this story is really about Cain. Instead of stating that Eve bore Abel, the narrator says Eve bore Cain’s brother.

The account of Abel’s birth is also more succinct. For Cain’s birth, all the steps are described: Adam and Eve have intercourse, she conceives, she gives birth, and she celebrates the birth. With Abel, the text is matter-of-fact: Eve gives birth to Cain’s brother, Abel.

Abel Abel’s name in Hebrew, *hevel*, means “breath.” Since the chapter does not tie the name to Abel’s early death, it may refer generally to brevity of life. Alternatively, the name *hevel* could refer to Abel’s occupation, as the related Syriac word *habla* means “herdsman.”

4:3 **an offering from the fruit of the ground** The Hebrew word order here may hint that Cain brought whatever was close at hand while Abel brought the best of what he had (Gen 4:4). Cain’s offering could also be of poor quality, but there is no direct statement about this in the text.

4:4 **the choicest firstlings of his flock** Abel’s offering seems to demonstrate great care and attention to his relationship with Yahweh. He offers exactly what later texts indicate Yahweh requests of his people (Exod 13:12; Num 18:17). By offering the firstborn and best portions, Abel makes the greater sacrifice and reflects a righteous attitude (Prov 3:9).

**Yahweh looked with favor** The reason for God’s positive response to Abel’s offering and rejection of Cain’s is unclear.

Since God commanded that humans subsist by virtue of working the soil, there is nothing inherently wrong with Cain’s offering. Abel’s offering is described as being from the best of his flock, whereas this comment is absent when describing Cain’s, thus it could be that Abel’s offering was of finer quality.

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4:5 **he did not look with favor** Later laws in Leviticus ask for both animal and plant offerings, so it is highly unlikely that Abel’s offering was more highly regarded because it was an animal sacrifice (e.g., Lev 2). Rather, Yahweh’s favor of Abel’s offering may have been related to something about both Cain and Abel as people—such as their intentions. Cain could have been insincere in his devotion to Yahweh, whereas Abel was not (compare Heb 11:4). Compare note on Gen 4:3.
4:6 Why are you angry God’s rhetorical questions to Cain offer counsel, not rebuke. God understands Cain’s disappointment and encourages him to overcome his sinful heart.

4:7 will I not accept you The Hebrew phrase used here literally reads, “lifting up?” Since the phrase “lift up the face” is very common in the OT as an idiom for “showing favor” or “accepting” someone, this may be the intended meaning (although the word “face” is not present). If this meaning is chosen, the phrase implies that Cain did not do well and that his offering is deficient in some manner (see vv. 4–5). Alternatively, the word translated “lifting up” can also be used idiomatically to describe forgiveness, but this would not seem to fit the present context.

is crouching The Hebrew verb used here, ravats, normally indicates lying down, as in resting (29:2; Isa 11:6); it can also refer to lying in wait like a predator does when waiting for prey (Gen 49:9).

The Hebrew word ravats is also associated with the Akkadian word rabitsu, which in Mesopotamian religion is used in reference to demons that were believed to guard entrances to buildings. Thus, it is possible that sin is being personified here as a demonic force, waiting to pounce on Cain. This fits with the curse of the serpent who God says will strike at the heel of people (3:15).

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its desire is for you The Hebrew word used here, teshuqah, also occurs in 3:16 in relation to Eve’s desire for her husband. Both here and in the curse of 3:16, the context is negative: The desire represents something to be resisted, as it is connected to sin.

4:8 Cain said to his brother Abel The traditional Hebrew text (the Masoretic Text) does not include what Cain says before he murders Abel. This omission may come from a scribal error in the transmission of the text. Another Hebrew text, the Septuagint (the ancient Greek translation of the OT), and later translations into Syriac preserve a brief statement: “Let’s go out to the field.”

The Formation of the Old Testament

4:9 I do not know When God confronted Adam and Eve with their sin, they readily confessed (3:11–13). Here, Cain lies to God outright, denying any knowledge of his brother’s whereabouts.

my brother’s keeper Cain not only denies knowing anything about Abel’s fate, but also defiantly objects to the implication that he should be responsible for his brother in any way.

4:10 your brother’s blood God reveals to Cain that He knows what he did. Abel’s blood provides the witness to Cain’s guilt.

4:11 are cursed from the ground Because Cain spilled Abel’s blood on the ground, Yahweh makes Cain’s efforts as a farmer futile (compare v. 14).

4:12 a fugitive on the earth Cain’s punishment means he can no longer practice his livelihood of farming. He is now a vagrant and an outcast.
4:13 punishment The Hebrew word used here, *awon*, is commonly translated as “sin” or “iniquity” (15:16; 2 Sam 22:24). It can refer to both the offense and its punishment (1 Sam 28:10; see note on Psa 130:3). The idea is that Cain’s sin is greater than he can bear. The consequences will overtake him.

4:14 from your face I must hide Part of Cain’s anguish is that he fears being cut off from Yahweh.

whoever finds me will kill me By the time of Abel’s murder, there were others living nearby. As with Cain’s wife (see Gen 4:17 and note), the narrator has no interest in providing a chronology and description of circumstances that would explain where the people living outside Eden came from. Statements of this nature imply that the Biblical genealogies are selective.

4:15 whoever kills Cain will be avenged God’s intent in punishing Cain is not to cause him harm.

sevenfold This idiomatic phrase indicates severity.

Yahweh put a sign on Cain While the precise nature of this mark is unclear, it is visible and it is for Cain’s protection. Since the Hebrew preposition here, usually translated “on,” may be translated “for,” the phrase could be translated: “Yahweh put (or placed) a mark for Cain.” This would indicate that Yahweh marked something for Cain’s protection, not necessarily him.

4:16 went out from the presence of This phrase refers to the fact that the conversation with God was over—it is not a denial of omnipresence.

the land of Nod This city or region is unknown. It may be symbolic—the Hebrew word *nod* means “wandering” which fits with Yahweh’s earlier description of Cain’s fate (see vv. 12, 14).¹