8. Seth
Gen 4:25-5:32

He was briefly substituted for Cain as the ancestor of humankind, but was himself soon replaced.

It was awkward to have human life begin with a murderer, and Gen 4:25 goes back to Eve. She bears Seth, who becomes the father of later generations – until he in his turn is replaced by Noah (§9).

Why the shift to Noah? Because Seth had his own problems as an ancestor. It is probably significant that Seth is never mentioned again, in any later text.[1] Some have suggested Numbers 24:17, Balaam's curse against Moab:

> There shall come forth a star out of Jacob,
> and a sceptre shall rise out of Israel,
> and shall smite through the corners of Moab,
> and break down all the sons of tumult.

The final phrase, bene Sheth (above translated "sons of tumult") can be read[2] as "all the people of Seth," or humanity in general, regarded as children of Seth. That reading is intrinsically problematic, and we need not linger over it.

Substituting Seth takes us back to Eve, and thus to the Tree of Knowledge of Good and Evil: knowledge leading to godlike immortality. Was Seth himself a god? Perhaps; he was known as a god in Egypt.[3] In later centuries, we hear of Gnostics, both Jewish and Christian, who sought immortality through knowledge of their inner selves, which remembered their heavenly origin, *and could thus return to it.* Several of the 4c Nag Hammadi texts embody Sethian gnostic ideas.[4] Still later appears the Quest of Seth for the Oil of Life,[5] based on tree and plant mysticism, again expressing the search for immortal life.

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Then the invention of Seth, to correct a genealogical embarrassment, and to restore the Tree of Knowledge to its original place in Canaanite ideology, had led to something even more wayward: a solution (whatever be its origin) that did not permanently solve the problem to which it had been addressed.

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[1]The shortened list in 1Chr 1:1 (Adam, Seth, Enosh,[2] Kenan, Mahalalel, Jared, [3] Enoch, Methuselah, Lamech, [4] Noah, Shem, Ham, and Japheth) *entirely omits Cain*.

[2]Levine **Numbers** 201f.

[3]In Egypt, Set was at first a monster – a rival, but later the replacement, of Horus. See Redford **Egypt** 14, 24, 36f, 47, 117f/.

[4]Robinson **Nag** 7-10. Return to the child state as leading to knowledge of one's origins is also a recurring theme in the classical Chinese text Dàu/Dv́ Jīng.

[5]See Quinn **Quest**.