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The World Grown Old and Genesis in Middle English Historical Writings

By James Dean

Modern historians of literature have approached primitivism in medieval writings through conventional topics such as the Fall, the Golden Age, and the six world ages. George Boas in 1948 demonstrated the numerous links between classical and medieval primitivisms, "soft" and "hard," and he outlined various schemes of periodization by which medieval historians framed their chronicles.¹

Emerson, Kaske, and others have explored a special aspect of man's early history as interpreted by medieval writers — the relationship between Cain, antediluvian giants, and *Beowulf's* Grendel.² Recently, Ruth Mellinkoff has investigated the several legends surrounding Cain and his mysterious mark.³

Medieval primitivism based on Genesis essentially began with Augustine's exegetical history in *De civitate Dei*, book 15. In this work Augustine thoroughly rehearsed the Genesis events, and he labored to explain difficult narrative claims, such as the great age of antediluvian men like Methuselah (15.11), or obscure passages, such as the origin of giants from the "sons of God" (15.22–23). Augustine treated these and other issues as a scholar and historian, comparing the Vulgate with the Septuagint text and seeking the best, most reasonable interpretation. At the same time, he framed his historical exegesis generally in the context of six ages in decline and of the struggle between the earthly and heavenly cities. In Augustine's writings

¹ *Essays on Primitivism and Related Ideas in the Middle Ages* (Baltimore, 1948). Those writers who, like Juvenal, portray early man's life as harsh and rude are said to depict "hard" primitivism, while those who characterize the earliest age as pleasant and easy portray "soft" primitivism. Along with A. O. Lovejoy Boas formulated the distinction between primitivisms in *A Documentary History of Primitivism and Related Ideas*, 1: *Primitivism and Related Ideas in Antiquity* (Baltimore, 1935). Most poets who describe the Golden Age write in terms of "soft" primitivism. See, for example, the Christianized "aurea tempora" sequence from book 2 of Bernard of Morval's *De contemptu mundi*, ed. H. C. Hoskier (London, 1929), pp. 38 ff., and the discussions by Kimon Giocarinis, "Bernard of Cluny and the Antique," *Classica et mediaevalia* 27 (1966), 310–48; Louis J. Swift, "Lactantius and the Golden Age," *American Journal of Philology* 89 (1968), 144–56; and Boas, *Essays on Primitivism*, p. 37.

² Oliver F. Emerson, "Legends of Cain, Especially in Old and Middle English," *Publications of the Modern Language Association* 21 (1906), 831–929; R. E. Kaske, "The Eotenas in *Beowulf*," in *Old English Poetry*, ed. R. P. Creed (Providence, 1967), pp. 285–310; Stephen C. Bandy, "Cain, Grendel, and the Giants of *Beowulf*," *Papers on Language and Literature* 9 (1973), 235–49; and Ruth Mellinkoff, "Cain's Monstrous Progeny in *Beowulf*, Part I: Noachic Tradition," *Anglo-Saxon England* 8 (1979), 143–62.

³ *The Mark of Cain* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1981).

history became a vast and elegant *opus Dei* moving through six phases before the ultimate consummation.

In his explanation of Genesis in *De civitate Dei*, Augustine did not enforce his historiographical thesis that the world began to grow old at the moment of the Fall. Nonetheless, careful study of his history, together with histories and chronicles of later exegetical writers, reveals a distinct attitude toward early man and his deeds. That attitude, which I hope to document in the present essay, is based upon moral and physical decline. As the postlapsarian age advanced, Cain's posterity grew increasingly corrupt with every generation. With each stage of moral decay, the earth, too, deteriorated physically. To a certain extent, of course, this interpretation inheres in the biblical narrative. As George Boas has written of Genesis 4.17–22:

Taken in connection with the rest of the larger story, . . . this confused section could be read as implying a primitivistic moral: the original city-builder was also the original murderer, and the loss of the easy a-technic life of the first pair in Paradise was followed by a progressive development of the arts by their posterity.⁴

My point is that medieval theologians and historians regarded the first world age, Adam to Noah, in this way, except they made explicit what Boas identifies as implicit in Genesis. Specifically, I find in their writings five stages of antediluvian and one stage of postdiluvian decline: Original Sin, fratricide, development of the city, technocracy, illicit sexuality and giants, and empire. The last phase, the establishment of empire in Nimrod's generation, occurs after the Flood but continues the pattern instituted in the earlier age.

The context for this scenario of decline was the idea of the world grown old — what Curtius has termed “the *senectus-topos*.”⁵ From its beginnings, as Gerhart Ladner has demonstrated conclusively, this idea as manifested in the six-ages concept was intimately bound up with the idea of reform.⁶ And in the later Middle Ages, during the Investiture Controversy, for example, *mundus senescens* became a prominent topic for writers *de contemptu mundi* because the world's old age, its moral dissoluteness, helped to explain why the world should be held in contempt.⁷ These several traditions of the world

⁴ *Essays on Primitivism*, p. 186.

⁵ E. R. Curtius, *European Literature and the Latin Middle Ages*, trans. Willard R. Trask (1953; rpt. New York, 1963), index, s.v. “Rhetorical Topics.” Curtius discusses this topic on p. 28. There have been a number of studies of this conception. Among the most extensive: Roderich Schmidt, “Aetates mundi: Die Weltalter als Gliederungsprinzip der Geschichte,” *Zeitschrift für Kirchengeschichte* 67 (1955–56), 288–317; Auguste Luneau, *L'histoire du salut chez les pères de l'église: La doctrine des âges du monde* (Paris, 1964); and J. E. Cross, “Aspects of Microcosm and Macrocosm in Old English Literature,” *Comparative Literature* 14 (1962), 1–22. For the importance of this idea to the English cycle drama, see V. A. Kolve, *The Play Called Corpus Christi* (Stanford, 1966), esp. pp. 88–89. I have studied this idea in my unpublished doctoral thesis, “The World Grows Old” (The Johns Hopkins University, 1971).

⁶ *The Idea of Reform*, rev. ed. (New York, 1967), esp. pp. 222–38 (“The Ages of the World and of Man”).

⁷ Some political writers turned the rhetorical topic of the world grown old to their advantage.

grown old provided the climate of ideas within which medieval historians and theologians interpreted the early history of man.

Exegetical writers such as Isidore of Seville, the Venerable Bede, Hrabanus Maurus, the authors of the *Glossa ordinaria*, Peter Comestor, and many others, amplified the primitivistic thesis. But it received fullest expression in legendary histories written in England in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, particularly those influenced by Comestor's *Historia scholastica: Liber Genesis*. Those written in Middle English include the *Cursor mundi*, anonymously composed in the north of England in the first quarter of the fourteenth century; *The Middle English Genesis and Exodus*, an anonymous verse narrative written in the Southeast Midland dialect about 1250 and preserved in a single manuscript; and *Pe lyff of Adam and Eue*, a prose historical epitome of 1370–80. The most notable example, however, is a Latin work, the *Polychronicon* of Ranulf Higden, monk of St. Werburgh's Abbey, Chester. The *Polychronicon* is an encyclopedic history; it breaks off in the year 1327 but was continued by others until 1352. Between 1378 and 1387 the Cornishman and Oxford scholar John of Trevisa translated the *Polychronicon* into vigorous English prose. Largely faithful to Higden's Latin and convenient to English readers, Trevisa's translation proved especially influential, and in 1482 William Caxton published an edition of Trevisa's "Chronicle of Many Times" with the dialect normalized for a London readership. Higden, and after him Trevisa, acknowledged a considerable number of sources, including most of the well-known exegetical writers. But in that part of his chronicle under consideration here, the section on early man from his book 2, he relied on the commentary of Comestor and on the extrabiblical legends supplied by Flavius Josephus in *Antiquitates Judaicae* and the moralized account of primitive history in the so-called *Pseudo-Methodius*, a sibylline apocalyptic work of the seventh century. Drawing upon the biblical commentaries of the great encyclopedists, Higden and the anonymous Middle English writers sought to represent the life of earliest man. In so doing they also exposed their primitivistic viewpoint — that the earliest age constituted a history of increasing moral depravity and deteriorating physical conditions arrested temporarily by the Flood.

In this essay, then, I hope to show the coherence of the medieval attitude toward early man as presented in exegetical histories. I shall use as my chief source the compendious history of Higden, the *Polychronicon*, in the English translation by Trevisa, supplemented by various Middle English legendary histories and the Latin sources on which they and Higden drew, all of which,

The antipapal writer Benzo of Alba blames Gregory VII — whom he calls "Prandellus" and other names (from Hildebrandus) — for the world's decay: "Silicernius est mundus, finem clamat saeculi; / Ante tempus senectutis homines sunt vetuli" (tractate addressed to the German emperor, Henry IV, in MGH SS 11 [1854], 659). See also St. Peter Damian, *Apologeticum de contemptu saeculi* (PL 145:289); Bernard of Morval, *De contemptu mundi*, lines 1 ff., ed. Hoskier, p. 1; and Pope Innocent III, *De miseria humane conditionis* 1.26.2, ed. Michele Maccarrone (Lugano, 1955), p. 33.

taken together, offer a primitivistic drama of decline. The six stages of decay outlined above fall into four groups: Original Sin and its immediate consequences; Cain and his posterity; the Flood; and Nimrod.

If the world has grown old, it must once have been youthful and more innocent. Higden sets forth this thesis unequivocally at the beginning of his history in a passage drawn from Gregory the Great on "virtuous working." In Trevisa's translation:

þe world was at þe begynnyng þryuynge and strong for to brynge forþ children as it were in zowthe, and was ful of hele, and so fresche and grene, and by greet richesse it was fatte. But now it is abated, wipelde, and [as hit] were i-dryue toward þe deth wip ofte and meny disises. (2.1)⁸

Higden's chronicle narrative undertakes to explain how the world progressed from young and "þryuynge" to old and "abated." For historiographical purposes, Higden takes seriously the venerable medieval scheme of six world ages in decline — he details these and other temporal divisions in book 1 — and he sets the Genesis events in this context.

The world began to grow old at the moment of the Fall. Man's primeval estate, according to Higden and other medieval writers, was one of harmony with the elements and other creatures. Man's soul, his spiritual part, accorded perfectly with his body, his earthly part. Higden traces mankind's woes to the war between body and soul that began with Original Sin, when everything was thrown out of balance and proportion. When Adam disobeyed God's command and allowed his reasonable self to be seduced by his cupidinous aspect, he utterly destroyed the original contract between himself and nature that God ordained for him in paradise.

After Adam and Eve's disobedience, God imposed penalties on the transgressors in addition to their exile from paradise. For Eve he ordained sorrows in general, pain in childbearing, and the inferior position in marriage. Cardinal Lothario di Segni, afterwards Pope Innocent III, in his classic twelfth-century treatise on the contempt of the world, *De miseria humane conditionis*, writes of Eve's penalties:

Quid est igitur Eva nisi *heu-a*? Utrumque dolentis est interiectio, doloris exprimens magnitudinem. Hinc enim ante peccatum virago, post peccatum Eva meruit appellari, ex quo sibi dictum audivit: "In dolore paries."⁹

⁸ *Polychronicon . . . Together with the English Translations of John Trevisa and of an Unknown Writer of the Fifteenth Century*, ed. Churchill Babington, Rolls Series 41,2 (London, 1869). References in parentheses in the text are to book and chapter numbers of the Trevisa translation. John Taylor, *The Universal Chronicle of Ranulf Higden* (Oxford, 1966), has studied the *Polychronicon*, but he scarcely mentions the earliest portions of Higden's chronicle history. For a convenient discussion of Trevisa's translation of Higden's Latin original, see David C. Fowler, *The Bible in Early English Literature* (Seattle, 1976), pp. 208–9. On Trevisa's translation as literature, see *A Literary History of England*, ed. Albert C. Baugh, 2nd ed. (New York, 1967), p. 268.

⁹ 1.6.1, ed. Maccarrone, p. 13.

Mankind's domestic circumstances, the relationship between husband and wife, became a small-scale war. "Al bigan to strut and strijf," declares the *Cursor mundi*, "Agains adam and his wijf / Bituix þam tua to strut alsua" (829–31).¹⁰ God imposed the most significant punishment upon Adam, for the "penalty of Adam" transcends the relation of man to serpent, man to self, or even man to man: it involves the relation of man to world and the destiny of each. "Cursed is the earth in thy work," said God. "Thorns and thistles shall it bring forth to thee" (Gen. 3.17–18). These events just after the Fall mark the true beginning of the six ages, the first step in the terrestrial aging process.

Higden does not specifically treat the issue of the earth's physical mutation after the Fall, although he explains the general change in Adam's condition. For when the first pair sinned, they fell from a world of light and bliss to one of darkness — "out of hiȝe in to lowh," as Higden proclaims in an eloquent passage of Trevisa's translation, "out of liȝt in to derknesse and slym, out of his owne londe and contray in to outlawynge, out of hous in to maskynge and wayles contray and lond [*de incolatu ad exilium, de domo ad devium*], out of fruit into wepyng and woo, out of preisyng in to deel and sorwe, out of merþe in to stryf, oute of loue in to hate, out of joye and welþe in to peyne and tene, out of helþe and grace in to gilt and synne, out of pees in to peyne, out of homlynnesse into offence and wreþþe" (2.4).

Did the earth in fact change physically at the time of sin? Or was it only man's perception that altered? There were two medieval schools of thought on the matter, the tropological and literal. Higden seems to lean toward figurative change, although he makes clear that the transformation was drastic and thorough. The earliest commentators, influenced by the great allegorizer Philo Judaeus, understand the Fall in a largely metaphoric sense. In his interpretation of Genesis written to refute the Manichaeans, Augustine characterizes the earth's postlapsarian thorns and thistles as "prickings of painful questions on providing for this life."¹¹ Pseudo-Eucherius in the fifth century writes of mankind's punishments as "the incitements of vice, to a certain extent, which we would not have had at all if the first man had not

¹⁰ Ed. Richard Morris, EETS, OS 57 (London, 1874). Morris edits four versions of the *Cursor mundi*. I cite the first of these (edited from MS Cotton Vespasian A.iii, British Library) by line number in parentheses in the text. Certain Middle English writings preserve a tradition from Jewish sources that Adam and Eve, guilty after their disobedience, did penance by water, Adam in the river Jordan and Eve in the Tigris. Before they could complete their penance, the Devil beguiled Eve out of the water. Ashamed at her failure, Eve retired into the west, "in here dwellynge þat was wyld," where she bore Cain. See *Canticum de creatione*, line 370, ed. C. Horstmann, in *Sammlung altenglischer Legenden* (Heilbronn, 1878), p. 128. The same story appears in another version of the *Canticum*, lines 192 ff., ed. Horstmann, pp. 141–42; in *De byff of Adam and Eue*, ed. Horstmann, p. 223; and in *Life of Adam and Eve*, ed. Mabel Day, in *The Wheatley Manuscript*, EETS, OS 155 (London, 1921), pp. 81–82.

¹¹ *De Genesi contra Manichaeos* 20 (PL 34:211). For Philo's understanding of the Fall, see *Allegorical Interpretations of Genesis* 3.89, in *Works*, ed. F. H. Colson and G. H. Whitaker, Loeb Classical Library (New York, 1929), 1:469.

lost the bliss of paradise.”¹² The seminal encyclopedic writer, Isidore of Seville, who established the etymological and metaphysical links between so many words and things for the later Middle Ages, regards the world’s degeneration as a corruption by the fig tree, with a quibble on *ficus* (fig) and *inficere* (to infect, corrupt): “Ecce in hanc arborem, id est, ficum, maledictum delicti Adae, quae totam terram inficeret, priusquam sanguinis sui rore ipsam mundaret, Christus collegit.”¹³ The more important medieval tradition is the literal, which yet is usually intermingled with the tropological. Most medieval writers believe and make it clear that the entire earth changed radically, as did man’s experience and understanding of it. Hrabanus Maurus, ninth-century abbot of Fulda and archbishop of Mainz, argues that the world altered after man’s sin but also that the present condition of the earth serves a didactic, penitential function: the “cursed” world embodies signs and warnings, for a man is saved through the “fruits” of good works.¹⁴

If the presence of noxious plants can be attributed to God’s curse on the earth, as Hrabanus points out, so can the presence of savage animals. The Bible makes no direct mention of beasts hostile to man, although God in his speech cursing the serpent indicated that women and snakes thenceforth will be at odds (Gen. 3.15). Yet the concept of the peaceable kingdom that turns vicious, together with the motif of the eternal spring that mutates into seasons, found its way into Christian exegesis from classical Golden Age sources. In his literal interpretation of Genesis Augustine contends that ferocious and poisonous animals are necessary for the perfection of virtue.¹⁵ In a passage attributed in the *Glossa* to Hrabanus Maurus, the animal and the vegetable worlds are linked: “Spinæ antea erant sed non ut laborem homini inferrent: cui post peccatum fuerunt ad laborem et afflictionem, sicut serpentes et quaecunque noxia, ante innoxia.”¹⁶ Peter Comestor claims that animals were created gentle (*mitia*) but that after the Fall they became hostile (*nociva*). There were, he reports, three reasons for this change: for the sake of man’s punishment, for the sake of corruption, and for the sake of instruction.¹⁷

¹² *Commentarius in Genesim* 1 (PL 50:915). Cf. Bede, *In Genesim* 1, ed. Charles W. Jones, CCSL 118A (Turnhout, 1967), p. 68: “Ante peccatum ergo hominis non est scriptum quod terra protulerit nisi herbam pabuli et ligna fructuosa; post peccatum autem uidemus multa horrida et infructuosa nasci, propter eam uidelicet quam diximus causam. Mystice uero terra quae in opere praeuaricationis Adae maledicta esse perhibetur, non alia melius quam caro accipitur. Namque spinas iam et tribulos germinat nobis quia, per carnis concupiscentiam propagati, punctiones et incentiua uitiorum de ipsa carne patimur.”

¹³ *De ordine creaturarum* 10 (PL 83:941). The notion that the forbidden fruit was the fig is rabbinic in origin. See J. M. Evans, *Paradise Lost and the Genesis Tradition* (Oxford, 1968), pp. 45–46, 58.

¹⁴ *Commentarius in Genesim* 1 (PL 107:497).

¹⁵ *De Genesi ad litteram* 3.15, ed. J. Zycha, CSEL 28,1 (Vienna, 1894), pp. 80–81. See also the catalogue of beasts in Innocent III’s *De miseria humane conditionis* 1.19.3, ed. Maccarrone, p. 28.

¹⁶ *Glossa* (PL 113:95–96).

¹⁷ *Historia scholastica* 8 (PL 198:1062–63). Augustine points out that God had no purpose in creating harmful beasts except to teach man: *De Genesi ad litteram* 3.16, ed. Zycha, pp. 81–82.

Man's expulsion from paradise and God's curse on the earth constitute the first stage in the world's degeneration. But the world continued to decline after the exile, and the Fall extended beyond the first moment of Original Sin. Evidence from medieval sources indicates that as man developed new modes of living and interacting with his fellows, and as he made technological advances, he brought about a deterioration of the earth beyond what Adam and Eve effected by their first disobedience. God's initial curse on the earth merely set the pattern for the earth's, and man's, later decline.

The patriarch of the city of man was, according to Augustine, Adam's firstborn, Cain, who was associated with earth and flesh, materiality, and separation from God and the human community. Cain embodies a state of mind, for he represents the man who, envying his brother's achievements, treacherously rises up against him. After the impulsive act he became the wanderer, *homo vagus*, *profugus*, *vagabundus* — not the archetype of the Christian wanderer, *homo viator* or *peregrinus*, who uses the world as a stranger, but the errant, deviant alien, a tragic figure, who wished to create permanence through the work of his hands.¹⁸

Cain's life and deeds divide into two parts, fratricide and exile. Both parts represent stages in the world grown old.

Medieval commentators view Cain as greedy and acquisitive and as a bad tither, hence spiritually disrespectful. His vocation, farming and tilling the soil, associates him with the earth and God's punishment of Adam (Gen. 3.19, 23). The play of *Cain and Abel* from the *Ludus Coventriae*, making explicit what the Genesis narrative merely suggests, depicts Cain as a bad tither who offered "þe werst," the poorest sheaf of corn ("þis unþende sheff"), and who did so begrudgingly, protesting that the Lord does not sweat for his living.¹⁹ God blessed Abel's tithe and turned away from Cain's, which provoked Cain to murder his brother. Abel's blood spilled on the earth, the same earth that God cursed with respect to Adam's labor. Then God cursed Cain and established an adversary relationship between him and the soil. The first brother-slayer and murderer caused further terrestrial deterioration, at least in those regions inhabited by his kin, as we may learn from an Old English poem of the twelfth century, *Genesis A*. God speaks to Cain:

	Ne seleð þe wæstmas eorðe
wlitige to woruldnytte,	ac heo wældreore swealh
halge of handum þinum;	forþon heo þe hroðra oftihð,
glæmes gene folde.	
(1015-18)	

¹⁸ This double-edged motif has been studied by Gerhart B. Ladner, "Homo Viator: Mediaeval Ideas of Alienation and Order," *Speculum* 42 (1967), 233-59.

¹⁹ *Ludus Coventriae, or The Plaie Called Corpus Christi*, ed. K. S. Block, EETS, ES 120 (London, 1922), pp. 32-33.

(Nor shall the earth give goodly fruits for use in this world, but she, holy, swallowed the blood of strife from thy hands; therefore she shall withdraw from thee her comforts, the green earth her beauty.)²⁰

Because of Cain's "mikel felunny," says the *Cursor mundi*, his wheat shall ever after come up "3i3anny" (or "darnel" or "cokul hye") — debilitating weeds — and the earth shall yield him only "thorne and wede" (1137–40). The echoes of the original curse here are unmistakable. While Hrabanus Maurus points out that God cursed Cain rather than the earth (as in Gen. 3.17) because Cain knew of Original Sin and its resultant penalties, the *Glossa* underscores the direct line between Adam's sin and Cain's outrage: "Because he added fratricide to Original Sin, Cain too is cursed when it is said: 'Now, therefore, cursed shalt thou be upon the earth' [Gen. 4.11]." ²¹ Original Sin, fratricide: like father, like son. Adam was the first sinner, his firstborn the original brother-slayer. Adam transgressed against God's express command, Cain against the natural law.

The third stage of terrestrial decay began with Cain's banishment from the fellowship of Adam and Eve to the land of Nod. In that unidentified location, "which is called *commotion*, or unstable and fluctuating, and of uncertain fixity" (Isidore), he lived to the east of Eden, "that is, not in delight but against [*versus*] the land of delight" (Comestor). ²² Some interpreters, such as Jerome, understand Nod or Naid, because it translates as *commotion*, to be not a place but a condition of mind, a restlessness brought about by God's judgment against Cain. ²³ In whatever location Cain settled, he built there the first city, which he called Enoch, or "dedication," after his son. It is ironic that this uneasy vagabond should try to put down roots. But his construction of that city represented not so much actual permanence as the yearning for order and stability. Indeed, because he finds no mention of other humans except for Adam's immediate kin when God exiled Cain, Philo presumes that the city of Enoch should be understood allegorically and not literally. Cain's "city," Philo believes, was actually his creed, his δόγμα. ²⁴ But most medieval commentators assume that Cain gathered around him folk who lived and died in the primitive world's wilderness, or who belonged to Adam's family and yet received no mention by the Genesis author.

Despised by Adam's fellowship, Cain set about acquiring possessions and treasure. As Pseudo-Bede wrote:

²⁰ Ed. G. P. Krapp, *ASPR* 1 (New York, 1931), p. 33; translation by Emerson, "Legends of Cain," p. 864. Emerson speculates that Cain's tithes may have something to do with the original curse on the earth (pp. 849–50).

²¹ Hrabanus, *Commentarius in Genesim* 2.1 (PL 107:504). *Glossa* (PL 113:95).

²² Isidore, *Quaestiones in Genesim* 6 (PL 83:226–27). Comestor, *Historia scholastica* 27 (PL 198:1078). See also Bede's "mystical interpretation" of Cain's wandering and the land of Nod: *In Genesim* 2, ed. Jones, p. 85.

²³ Mellinkoff, "Cain's Monstrous Progeny in *Beowulf*, Part I," p. 153, n. 1.

²⁴ *De posteritate Caini* 14–15, in *Works*, ed. Colson and Whitaker, 2:354–58.

Impiorum progenies in ipsa mundi origine civitatem construxit, quia omnes impii in hac vita fundati sunt, ubi habent thesauros; sancti vero hospites sunt et peregrini. Unde et Abel tanquam peregrinus populus Christianus, in terra non condidit civitatem; superna est civitas justorum.²⁵

It was a self-assertive, prideful act; and Cain is often compared with the Jews “and all those who are contumacious in diverse errors by resisting truth.”²⁶ For Augustine, Cain foreshadows the eponymous founders of the great western city-state, Romulus and Remus, and he likens the first city, Enoch or “Dedication,” to the earthly Jerusalem, because “that city has both an earthly beginning and end wherein nothing is hoped for beyond what is seen.”²⁷

Josephus transmitted to the later Middle Ages several allegations about Cain that enhanced his already vicious reputation. According to the Jewish historian, Cain acquired treasure through violence, ordained a primitive bureaucracy of weights and measures, and marked off fields and boundaries.²⁸ Higden repeats these charges against Cain. “Caym gadered richesse violentliche by strengþe,” he asserts, “and made men lecchoures and þeues, and tornede symple lyuyng of men to fyndyng of mesures and of wyȝtes; he ordeyned merkes and boundes of fildes and of londes, and bulde a citee and walled hit, for he dredde ful sore hem þat he hadde i-greued” (2.5). Cain in this account was not only violent and greedy, building a city to protect his ill-gotten worldly possessions, but also the instigator of lechers and thieves and the first demarcator of weights, measures, and boundaries — a self-appointed Bureau of Standards. It is not clear how he caused men to be lecherous or thievish, though it is intimated that he introduced a complex and sophisticated, not to mention divisive, view of human affairs that inspired men to distinguish between mine and yours through his system of measurements.

To underscore the movement from the original condition of man to his later circumstances, Higden quotes a passage from Isidore on first-age primitivism:

Men were first naked and vnarmed, nouȝt siker aȝenst bestes, noþer aȝenst men, and hadde no place to fonge hem, and to kepe hem fro colde and for hete; þan by besynesse of kynde witte þey beþouȝt hem of buldynge, þefore þey bulde hem

²⁵ *In Pentateuchum commentarii: In Genesim* 4 (PL 91:219). Cf. Bede, *In Genesim* 2, ed. Jones, pp. 85–86, and Augustine, *De civitate Dei* 15.17, ed. E. Hoffmann, CSEL 40,2 (Vienna, 1900), p. 96. On the relationship between Roman political events, the *De civitate Dei*, and the world grown old, see Peter Brown, *Augustine of Hippo* (Berkeley, 1969), chapter 25 (“Senectus Mundi”).

²⁶ Isidore, *Quaestiones in Genesim* 6 (PL 83:227). Cf. Augustine, *De civitate Dei* 15.7, ed. Hoffmann, p. 71.

²⁷ *De civitate Dei* 15.5 and 15.17, ed. Hoffmann, pp. 64–65 and 97.

²⁸ *Antiquitates Judaicae* 1.1.2, in *Josephus*, 4, ed. H. St. J. Thackeray, Loeb Classical Library (London and New York, 1930), p. 29. For an expanded, recent treatment of moral degeneration in Josephus's history, see Harold W. Attridge, *The Interpretation of Biblical History in the Antiquitates Judaicae of Flavius Josephus* (Missoula, Mont., 1976), pp. 109–44.

smale cootes and cabans, and waf hem and heled hem wiþ smale twigges and wiþ reed, þat hire lyf myȝt be þe more saaf. (2.5)

For purposes of his own chronicle history, Higden fails to explain the identity of these early men. Cain, after all, has already built the city of Enoch.²⁹ The most reasonable explanation for Higden's inclusion of this passage, in my judgment, is that it highlights man's wretched early condition and his need for protection, which before had been unnecessary. Men may have been safer in their new huts — or in Cain's city — but they were not more fortunate. The world had grown older.

Cain established the pattern for his successors. The consensus among biblical commentators is that his posterity continued the secular work initiated by the patriarch, and that both mankind and world declined after Cain's generation.

The Genesis narrative offers no details concerning the generations between Cain and Lamech, seventh from Adam, but we may imagine that Cain's sons and grandsons — Enoch, Irad, Mahujael, Mathushael — instituted technological but not spiritual advances. This stage in the medieval primitivism based on Genesis was that of technocracy.

Lamech was an innovator with respect to marital relations and sexuality. He was the first bigamist or "spousebreche" (Higden), taking as wives both Ada and Zillah (Gen. 4.19). In his carnal interests Lamech may take after his Cainite ancestors, who "abused their brothers' wives in excessive fornications," according to the *Pseudo-Methodius*.³⁰ Perhaps because of Lamech's overactive libido, Comestor and Higden characterize him as "þe seuenþe from Adam and most schrewe" (Higden, *Polychronicon* 2.5).

It is more likely that commentators regard Lamech as the "worst" in the Cainite line because he killed two men (Gen. 4.23). The first bigamist was also the first "twin-manslagt."³¹ But whom did he kill? Higden reports a tradition from Peter Comestor that Lamech slew Cain, who was protected from retribution by God's mark, perhaps a "headshake" (Comestor) or a "shaking" and "trembling" of the head (Petrus Riga).³² As we learn from the

²⁹ Augustine, however, speculates that Cain may have built his city before he murdered Abel and that his pastoral brother declined to participate in the city. See *De civitate Dei* 15.5, ed. Hoffmann, p. 65.

³⁰ *Sibyllinische Texte und Forschungen*, ed. Ernst Sackur (Halle, 1898), p. 61. Bede interprets the generations from Cain tropologically as figures for the six world ages and for the seventh age, in which the wicked will be punished eternally. He concludes: "Sicut enim septimus ab Adam Enoch raptus est in paradisum, et non uidit eum homo quia uiuit in pace cum Deo, ita septimus a Cain Iabel, qui interpretatur 'mutatus,' cum suis fratribus et uniuersa progenie deletus est diluuio" (*In Genesim* 2, ed. Jones, p. 87).

³¹ *Middle English Genesis and Exodus*, line 485, ed. Olof Arngart (Lund, 1968), p. 65. Richard Morris edited this text for the Early English Text Society in 1873 (OS 7).

³² Comestor, *Historia scholastica* 28 (PL 198:1075). Petrus Riga, *Aurora*, line 418, ed. Paul E. Beichner (Notre Dame, 1965), 1:43. The history of Cain's mark has been fully studied by Ruth Mellinkoff, *The Mark of Cain*. Mellinkoff disentangles the various strands of commentary as follows: "a mark on Cain's body; a movement of Cain's body; and a blemish associated with

Polychronicon, Lamech was a somewhat blind archer. Because of his myopia he took with him on the hunt a young man, the “stripling” of Genesis 4, to act as his guide. Once, though, believing he was shooting at a wild beast lurking in the bushes, he slew Cain. Then he became so distraught that he killed the young man who misdirected his arrow (2.5). Lamech seems to have been impulsive and thoughtless: he married two wives out of lust, slew Cain unawares, and cut down his servant in distraction. For him, “twie-wifing” was not so much an institution as personal gratification.

On the other hand, Lamech’s sons, Jabal, Jubal, and Tubalcain, and his daughter, Noema, acted deliberately rather than impetuously. They were inventors, discoverers, innovators — and they were evil. The *Pseudo-Methodius* waxes indignant over the *ante legem* creators:

Anno autem CCCXL Jared secundo miliario surrexerunt viri malae artis, inventores iniqui et omne nefariae pleni ex filiis Cain, id est Jobeth et Tholucel, filii Lamech, qui fuit caecus, qui et Cain interfecit, quos et dominatus diabolus convertit eos post omnem speciem musicam componendi.³³

According to Scripture, Jabal was the first tent-dweller and herdsman, Jubal the first musician on the harp and the organs, and Tubalcain the first metalworker (Gen. 4.20–22). Noema, Tubalcain’s sister, was the first weaver: “Scho was þe formest webster / þat man findes o þat mister” (*Cursor mundi*, 1525–26). “Iabel,” says Higden, citing Josephus, “ordeynede first flokkes of bestes, and merkis to knowe oon from anoþer, and departide kydes from lambren, and ʒonge from olde” (2.5). Like Cain, that is, the first nomadic herdsman was a divider and delimiter, setting beasts aside into separate flocks, branding them as singly owned rather than communal property, and marking off kids from lambs. Again following Comestor, Higden relates the story of Jubal’s discovery of music by listening to his brother Tubalcain as the latter pounded on his anvil:

Tubalcain fonde first smythes craft and grauyng, and whan Tubalcain wrouȝte in his smeþes craft, Tubal [i.e., Jubal] hadde grete likyng to hire þe hameres sowne, and he fonde proporciouns and acorde of melodye by wyȝte in þe hameres, and so þey vsed hym moche in þe acorde of melodye, but he was nouȝt fyndere of þe

Cain’s body” (p. 21). She traces the “trembling” of Cain as God’s sign to Bede or “possibly some earlier source,” and she demonstrates how Bede brings together the Septuagint tradition of “groaning and trembling” with the Vulgate tradition of Cain as “vagus et profugus” (p. 46). See her citation of Bede’s *In Genesis* on pp. 46 and 117–18, n. 82; cf. the disavowals of Rupert of Deutz, *De sancta Trinitate*, who ascribes Cain’s alleged trembling and horn on the forehead to “iudaicis fabulis” (p. 125, n. 173).

³³ *Pseudo-Methodius* 2, ed. Sackur, p. 62. Origen thought the arts were a good thing. See the discussions by Boas in *Essays on Primitivism*, p. 193. Bede thought it appropriate that Cain’s line terminated with a woman, Noema, whose name means *uoluptas*, since the carnal life of the city of man declined from Eden (*uoluptas* [or *delectatio*] *in bono*) through human moral depravity and self-indulgence (*uoluptas in malo*), which led directly to the Flood (*In Genesis* 2, ed. Jones, pp. 88–89).

instrumentis of musik, ffor þey were i-founde longe afterward. R. Here wise men telleþ þat þey Tubal vsede first musyk for to releue hym self while he was an herde, and kepte bestes, ffor all þat he was nouȝt þe firste þat fonde þe resoun of acorde in musyk by wizes, but Pittagoras fonde þat. . . . (2.5)³⁴

Lamech's sons and daughter were hard at work building the city of man, and they took pride in their inventions. Higden reports a legend, which harks back to Josephus via Hrabanus Maurus and Comestor, that Jubal or his siblings erected twin columns, of brick and stone, with their discoveries engraved on them. They constructed these pillars, Higden adds, because Adam had predicted that the earth would be destroyed by water or fire (2.5). The pillar of stone survived the Flood and preserved the innovations for postdiluvian generations.³⁵

Medieval biblical interpreters condemn the discoveries of Jubal and Tubalcain. Bede in his *In Genesim* points out that these inventions pertain to the attractions and luxuries of this life. He contrasts the life of technology with Abel's pastoralism and with the generally unencumbered existence of Seth's descendants, the *peregrini*. Bede concedes that, yes, even the good servants of God lived in tents, played on musical instruments, and worked in

³⁴ The letter *R* (for "Ranulphus") signifies Higden's commentary. Here and elsewhere Trevisa, following the method in Higden's text, identifies Higden's sources with brief allusions such as "Petrus" (i.e., Comestor), "Methodius," or "Isidorus, libro 15°, capitulo 2°." Occasionally Trevisa offers his own comments, preceded in the text by "Trevisa," as when he explains the twelve zodiacal signs, reports on a child born with two heads, or analyzes the window in Noah's ark (2.2, 2.6). See also Fowler, *The Bible in Early English Literature*, pp. 209, 212, 219. Higden's mistake of crediting Tubal rather than Jubal with the discovery of music was common among medieval commentators. The same error occurs in Vincent of Beauvais, Comestor, Petrus Riga's *Aurora*, and Chaucer's *Book of the Duchess* (line 1161). Paul E. Beichner, *The Medieval Representative of Music: Jubal or Tubalcain?* (Notre Dame, 1954), p. 7, has explained that three important manuscripts of the Vulgate substituted *tubal* for *iubal* and that the legend of Pythagoras's discovery of music from the sound of hammers was transferred to the first blacksmith, Tubalcain.

³⁵ See also Josephus, *Antiquitates Judaicae* 1.2.3, who attributes the columns to the offspring of Seth (ed. Thackeray, 4:33), and Hrabanus, *Commentarius in Genesim* 2.2 (PL 107:508). The *Polychronicon* relates a similar story regarding Zoroastres, who set down "the seuene science," perhaps witchcraft lore, on fourteen pillars, seven of brass and seven of tile, to preserve the knowledge "aȝenst eiþer flood," that is, according to Caxton, flood or fire (2.9). Because of Noah's age at the time of the Flood (600 years), the parallels between Flood (water) and Apocalypse (fire), Christ's statement in Matthew 24.37, and 2 Peter 3.5–7, medieval exegetes often interpreted the Flood as, in effect, a "little apocalypse." See, for example, Irenaeus, *Adversus haereses* 5.29.2 (PG 7:1202–3), the allegorical interpretation of Genesis in the *Glossa* (PL 113:107), *Polychronicon* 2.6 ("tweye domes"), and *Cursor mundi* ("The State of the World after Domesday"):

It sal be brint sa depe and drei
 Als noe flod rais quillum hei,
 And þa sal haue a scape al neu,
 Euer mar to stand in treu.

(23,653–56)

metals, but, he says, it is all a matter of use or degree. Wicked men take delight in technical improvements as if they were the principal good, but the chosen people (*electi*) either denounce the innovations or use them while remaining wanderers. The patriarchs lived in tents, Bede observes, yet their life should be distinguished from that of city-dwellers; and when the psalmists sang with lute and organum, it was in God's praise.³⁶ Bede regards the invention of comforts, ornaments, and musical instruments as acts of retrogression, not of progress. Such things might be put to good use, but they tend toward evil in and of themselves. Bede's primitivism may be characterized as Christian pastoralism — the retirement from urban, technological society in favor of the passive nomadic existence of Abel.

The final stage of pre-Flood degeneration saw the sexual union of two previously segregated peoples, the lines from Seth and Cain, and the birth of giants and monsters as a result. Genesis reads: "The sons of God seeing the daughters of men, that they were fair, took to themselves wives of all which they chose" (6.22).

The exegesis on this passage has a venerable history that revolves around the meaning of the phrase "sons of God." The stages of this history may be summarized as follows. (a) There is the pre-Christian phase (or "*Enoch thesis*"), in which the sons of God are interpreted as angels sent from heaven, the Watchers, who went astray and taught mankind forbidden knowledge (notably, herbalism), united with mortal women, and spawned giants more than two miles high — monsters who ate both clean and unclean animals, who devoured all human supplies, and who finally cannibalized their mothers' generation.³⁷ (b) Then occurs the earliest Christian phase, directly influenced by Jewish commentary, in which the sons of God are interpreted as fallen angels who became the Devil's henchmen ("satellites ac ministros") and who produced the world's evil spirits and demons.³⁸ Finally (c) there is the orthodox phase (or "*Augustine thesis*") in which the sons of God are interpreted not as fallen angels — Augustine has difficulty believing that spiritual intelligences could so far forget themselves — but as favored mortal creatures.³⁹

Augustine may have an unstated reason for rejecting the "*Enoch thesis*." The author of *Enoch* places responsibility for earthly corruption on the

³⁶ In *Genesis* 2, ed. Jones, pp. 87–88. Cf. Pseudo-Bede, *In Pentateuchum commentarii* 4 (PL 91:219–20).

³⁷ *Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha of the Old Testament*, ed. R. H. Charles (Oxford, 1913), 2:191. The *Book of Jubilees* is related to *Enoch* and follows the same tradition of the Watchers, who taught mankind "charms and enchantments, and the cutting of roots, and made them acquainted with plants" (*Enoch* 7.3). Cf. *Jubilees* 4.22 and 5.1–9 in *Apocrypha and Pseudepigrapha*, 2:8–9. See also Mellinkoff, "Cain's Monstrous Progeny," pp. 146–52.

³⁸ Tertullian, *Apologeticus adversus gentes* 22 (PL 1:405). Lactantius, *Divinae institutiones* 2.15 (PL 6:330 ff.). See also Julius Africanus, *Ex quinque libris chronographia* 2 (PG 10:65), and Sulpicius Severus, *Historia sacra* 1.2 (PL 20:95–96).

³⁹ *De civitate Dei* 15.22–23, ed. Hoffmann, pp. 108–14.

Watchers, the guardian angels. Hence mankind's moral culpability becomes, in *Enoch*, inextricably bound up with that of the second wave of fallen angels, and the perspective on the world's decline from Adam's sin becomes obscured. Augustine, who formulated the dialectical history of the city of God versus the city of man, interprets the sons of God as the race from Seth, which unites with the previously segregated "daughters of men," or the race from Cain. "Hoc itaque libero uoluntatis arbitrio genere humano progrediente atque crescente," says Augustine, "facta est permixtio, et iniquitate participata quaedam utriusque confusio ciuitatis."⁴⁰

Peter Comestor, after Pseudo-Methodius, explains the cause of the Flood as follows. When Adam died, Seth separated his kinsmen from those of Cain and returned to his birthplace. While Adam was alive, he had forbidden the two lines to intermarry. So Seth dwelt on a mountain near paradise while Cain lived on the plain, where he killed his brother Abel. In the seven-hundredth year of the second millennium, the sons of Seth lusted after the daughters of Cain. They came down off the mountain, united with the daughters, and sired giants and other prodigies.⁴¹ *De byff of Adam and Eue*, in a passage based on Comestor, explains that Cain went into exile after the slaying of his brother. "And," continues the anonymous work,

Adam comaunded to Seth þat non of his kuynde schulde felauschepe wiþ Caymes kuynde ne wedde non wyues in Caymes kuynde — for þo þat coomen of Seþes kuynde ben cleped godes sones, and Caymes kuynde to . . . men sones. And þenne at þe fiftene hondred winteres ende heo bigunnen to don heore lecherie priueliche, & afturward openliche. And þo afturward heo weddeden þe to kuynde in to þat oþur, & geeten geauns.⁴²

Higden, citing Comestor, suggests that Seth's kin after the seventh generation turned to homosexuality (2.5). And though, again adducing Comestor, he provides a late entry into the fallen-angel-or-human controversy, he only

⁴⁰ *De civitate Dei* 15.22, ed. Hoffmann, p. 108. See also Prosper of Aquitaine, *Chronicum integrum* (PL 51:536). In his several writings on the significance of Cain and Abel, the posterity, and the giants, Philo provides the moral and allegorical framework — the struggle between love of self and love of God — that Augustine eventually adopted for his exegetical history. On the definition of Cain as love of self, see *De sacrificiis Abelis et Caimi* 1, ed. Colson and Whitaker, 2:94–96, and *De posteritate Caini* 4, 2:334–40.

⁴¹ Comestor, *Historia scholastica* 31 (PL 198:1081). Cf. Pseudo-Clement of Rome, *Recognitiones* 1.29 (PG 1:1223); and *Pseudo-Methodius* 2, ed. Sackur, pp. 62–63. R. E. Kaske has conjectured that the author of *Beowulf* might have known the *Book of Enoch* because of the juxtaposition of "giant" and "evil spirit" in both works; see "Beowulf and the Book of Enoch," *Speculum* 46 (1971), 421–31. The fifteenth-century treatise against witchcraft, *Malleus maleficarum* 1.3 (Speier, 1487), argues that the sons of Seth were actually demonic incubi.

⁴² *De byff of Adam and Eue*, ed. Horstmann, p. 225. Although most medieval commentators regard the vocations of Cain and Abel — farming and animal husbandry respectively — as expressions of their personalities, several Middle English writings, including *De byff of Adam and Eue* (p. 224), allege that the first parents, fearing Cain's nature, segregated him from his brother and ordained their work. They set up Cain in the fields whereas they placed Abel on the mountains. See *Canticum de creatione*, lines 469–79, ed. Horstmann, p. 130; and *Life of Adam and Eve*, in *The Wheatley Manuscript*, ed. Day, pp. 86–87.

raises the possibility that demonic incubi coupled with the “daughters of men”: And hit mighte be,” says Higden cautiously, “þat Incubus [or Incubi], suche fendes as lieþ by wommen in liknesse of men, made geantes be i-gete, in þe whiche geantes gretnesse of herte answereth and acordeþ to þe hugeness of body” (2.5).⁴³ The *Cursor mundi* deplores those pre-Flood generations, saying that it was bad enough in Adam’s time but much worse after Cain. Cain’s descendants “lited [i.e., delighted] þam noght bot in sin. / Al thought þam well þat was þair wil” (1560–61). Women coupled with women, men with men, a man with his brother’s wife: the natural law was abandoned, and the Devil thought he could ensnare all humanity (1569–84).

All of this human wickedness — the intermarrying of the lines from Seth and Cain, the sexual dissoluteness, the birth of giants — has a direct bearing on the Flood, for God sent the Flood in response to the increase of man’s evil. An important point for the idea of the world grown old is that God destroyed virtually the entire earth, the animal and vegetable kingdoms — “from man even to beasts, from the creeping thing even to the fowls of the air” (Gen. 6.7) — because man had corrupted everything around him. Pseudo-Bede and Hrabanus Maurus intermingle moral and physical terms to explain the world’s decline immediately before the Flood. Pseudo-Bede says laconically, “The earth is corrupt, that is, its fruits were corrupted in wickedness.” Hrabanus Maurus is at once more expansive and more specific: “The earth is said to be corrupt since all flesh, that is, every man, had corrupted his way, his life, by sinning, because he spent his whole time in sin.”⁴⁴

The Flood is a major dividing point in medieval world history. It closed out the first world age and ushered in the second. And it divided one era, which ran its course from primeval innocence to technological sophistication to profligacy to destruction, from a later epoch, which marked a new beginning. Higden mentions that Alexander the Mythographer claimed that men

⁴³ Philo interprets the giants as those men of earth who take pleasure in carnal matters: *De gigantibus* 13, trans. Colson and Whitaker, 2:474. See also Ambrose’s interpretation of the giants as those who have no concern for their souls: *De Noe* 4.8, ed. C. Schenkl, CSEL 32,1 (Vienna, 1897), p. 418. Pseudo-Methodius believes that Seth was a giant and that the “sons of Seth” united with the “daughters of Cain” (2, ed. Sackur, p. 62). Comestor gives the familiar story and then mentions the incubus, or demon, theory, which he ascribes to “Methodius” (i.e., Pseudo-Methodius): “Potuit etiam esse, ut incubi daemones genuissent gigantes, a magnitudine corporum denominatos, sic dicti a geos, quod est terra, quia incubi vel daemones solent in nocte opprimere mulieres; sed etiam immanitati corporum respondebat immanitas animorum” (*Historia scholastica* 31 [PL 198:1081]. Pseudo-Bede regards the giants not so much as very large people as great sinners: “Gigantes qui hic dicuntur indicant magna peccata, etenim magnitudine peccati nati sunt.” They were conceived by the union of “bonae cogitationes” with “malae cogitationes” (*In Pentateuchum commentarii* 8 [PL 91:224]). See also Bede’s *In Genesis* 2, ed. Jones, pp. 100–101, and contrast the judicious statements in *Glossa* (PL 113:104) that giants existed after the Flood — even female giants.

⁴⁴ Pseudo-Bede, *In Pentateuchum commentarii* 8 (PL 91:225). Hrabanus Maurus, *Commentarius in Genesim* 2.6 (PL 107:513).

arose from stones and trees after the Flood (the classical Deluge story of Deucalion). Higden refutes Alexander, saying that in the early days of the world's postdiluvian recovery men lived in caves and trees, "and som wente aboute as it were bestes" (2.18), but they did not originate from those rocks and trees. Medieval commentators agree that, after the Deluge, the world never recovered its pre-Flood vitality. "Tradunt enim doctores," says Hrabanus Maurus,

terrae vigorem et fecunditatem longe inferiorem esse post diluvium quam ante; et idcirco hominibus carnes edere licentiam esse datam, et ante diluvium fructibus terrae solummodo vicitasse.⁴⁵

The *Cursor mundi* makes the point that no rain fell in the first world age though everything was green nonetheless, that food was plentiful so men ate no flesh, and that pride brought about the earth's destruction:

Now es, for sin and pride o man
þe erth waiker þan it was þan,
Thorū þe watur þat it sua wex [wesshe?]
þer-for behoues now man ete flesse.
(1995–98)

Higden relates how the Flood waters surpassed the highest mountaintops by fifteen cubits and adds that God was obliged to extend the waters so high because man had polluted even the regions of air through fire worship: "For the workes of mankynde defouled þe ayer so hize, as me troweþ, by worschippyng of fuyre þat smokede and spranclede" (2.5). Then Higden tells how the earth declined after the Flood. Holy saints explain, he says, "þat it roon neuere from Adam to Noes flood. Also noon reynbowe was i-seie at þat tyme, noþer flesche ne fische i-ete, noþer wyn i-dronke. For þat tyme was as hit were springing tyme, and þoo was i-now and plente of al heful þinges, þat was afterward i-chaunged þorw synne. Bot after þe flood man-

⁴⁵ *Commentarius in Genesim* 2.6 (PL 107:513). Cf. *Glossa* (PL 113:105); Comestor, *Historia scholastica* 32 (PL 198:1082); and D. C. Allen, *The Legend of Noah* (Urbana, Ill., 1949), p. 95. The process of decline is continuous, as we can learn from Thomas of Walsingham in his remarks on the great plague of 1349; see *Historia Anglicana*, ed. Henry Thomas Riley, Rolls Series 28,1 (London, 1863), p. 273. Unlike the earthly elements, which were cleansed by the Flood, the water and its denizens retained something of the antediluvian innocence. See the passage attributed to Augustine in the *Glossa ordinaria*, on Gen. 3.17 (PL 113:95): "Terrae maledixit, non aquis quia homo de fructu terrae contra vetitum manducavit, non de aquis bibit, et in aquis erat peccatum abluendum de fructu terrae contractum. Animalia quoque terrestria plus maledictionis habent quam aquatilia, quia plus vivunt de maledicta terra. Inde Christus post resurrectionem de pisce manducavit [Luke 24.42–43] non de terrestri animali." In the same place, see the comment attributed to Strabo. Cf. Pseudo-Augustine, *De mirabilibus sacrae Scripturae* 4 (PL 35:2155): "De eo quod terrena tantum animalia in diluvio mortificata sunt." See also Alain de Lille, *Distinctiones dictionum theologicarum*, s.v. *Diluvium*: "Dicitur baptismus, unde secundum aliam litteram: Dominus diluvium inhabitare facit, id est aquas baptismi; per gratiam quae crimina mundi purgant, sicut per diluvium mundatus est mundus" (PL 210:771).

kynde hadde leue forto ete fische and flesche, þat raþer ete herbes and rootes" (2.6). The combination of the all-devouring pre-Flood giants and the destructive Flood waters after them caused a great deterioration in the earth's vegetable abundance.

The Flood thus accomplished several things. It did away with the inter-mixed families of Seth and Cain, sparing only Noah and his immediate kin; and it eroded the earth's great regenerative powers, causing man to become a carnivore when before he had been a vegetarian. To be sure, Lamech in the seventh generation hunted game, but he did so for sport or for the animal skins because, as Higden reminds us, "men ete no flesche to fore Noes flood" (2.5).

If the environment changed for the worse after the Flood — if the world began to grow old physically — man altered along with it. Mankind in his physical composition shares with the world the four elements; and as the microcosm he is a version, *in parvo*, of the world at large, the macrocosm. When the earth lost its fecundity, man began to lose his robustness. "And waiker now es mans state," proclaims the *Cursor mundi*, referring to post-Flood conditions, "þan it was þan, wil 3ee it wate" (1999–2000). One theory concerning man's physical decline, a theory derived from Josephus (1.9), maintains that man's change of diet after the Flood caused a loss of vigor and size. "No man schal trowe," says Higden, "þat it is false, þat is i-rad of so longe lyuyng of men þat were somtyme, for þey lyuede faire lyf [*essent religiosi*], and hadde couenable and clene mete and drynke, and also for blisful vertues þat þey vsede, and made hem besy aboute astrologie and gemetrie, þat þey myȝte neuere lerne but ȝif þey lyuede sixe hondred ȝere at þe leste; for in so longe tyme is þe grete ȝere of þe sterres fulfilled" (2.5). Men of the first age were more pious, more circumspect in their diets, and more virtuous in their actions than their descendants. Hence they lived longer. Longevity was necessary, in any case, since they lacked a body of knowledge on which to build, and they had much to learn, such as astrology and geometry. Because of his life expectancy, an antediluvian man could observe, in his lifetime, the hundred-year circuit of the planets (*Cursor mundi* 1539–52).

The Flood dramatically sealed off the first world age from the second. But the new beginning turned very quickly into the same old pattern, the pattern of decline. There was a recrudescence of the evil impulse in man just after the Flood. True, the chief practitioners of outrages against God had perished in the Flood. But the seeds of Original Sin, which brought about the outrages, persisted in mankind like a genetic code.

We can see the continuity of evil most strikingly in Ham's grandson, Nimrod, who was accused of being a wicked hunter, a giant, the first ruler in Babylon (beginning of empire), builder of the Tower of Babel, and a religious tyrant. The offspring of Shem and Japheth at first followed the pattern of Abel and Seth, according to medieval commentators. In his *In Genesim*,

Bede contrasts the lines from Shem and Japheth with that of Ham in a way that recalls the dichotomy of city of man versus city of God in pre-Flood days. "Progenie Sem et Iafeth in uitae simplicitatis innocentia permanentibus," he says,

nascitur de stirpe Cham maledicta, qui statum humanae conuersationis nouo uiuendi genere peruerteret. Dum singulari potentia elatus, primum uenatu uiueret; dein, collecto exercitu, insolitam in populos tyrannidem studuit exercere. Denique in sequentibus regnum habuisse et ciuitates maximas aedificasse legitur.⁴⁶

Bede glosses the laconic verses in Genesis on Nimrod: "He began to be mighty on the earth" (Gen. 10.8), and "He was a stout hunter before the Lord" (Gen. 10.9). Augustine suggests that the phrase "hunter before the Lord" (*uenator ante Dominum*) should read "hunter against the Lord" (*uenator contra Dominum*). "And what is signified in this name *hunter* except deceiver, oppressor, and murderer of the earth's animals?" asks Augustine.⁴⁷ Comestor hints that more is meant by the word "hunter" than animal slayer. "Nimrod," he declares, ". . . began to be a mighty one on the earth, and he was a mighty hunter of *men* before the Lord, that is, a killer and oppressor in the love of domination."⁴⁸ Higden cites this passage in his *Polychronicon*, but he changes the wording somewhat with the result that Nimrod may be either a killer or a general tyrant. The ambiguity is preserved in Trevisa's translation: "Panne Nemprot, a stronge huntere of men, þat is, a tyraunt vppon men, he putte Assur out of þat londe, and byganne to reigne among Cham his children in þe citee of Babiloyne þat he bulde" (2.6). The *Cursor mundi* calls Nimrod a "great warrior" (alternatively, "wrongful emperour"), a "robber," and a "man-queller," who showed mercy to no man and who spread evil and "rage" wherever he went (lines 2204–9).

Medieval commentators tend to cast Nimrod as the darkest of villains, for any hope that the world could be renewed was frustrated by Ham's descendants. They merely recapitulated and added to the iniquities of the first fratricide and city builder, Cain. Nimrod's chief offense in the eyes of medieval commentators is that he was the first ruler of the world's most wicked city, Babylon. "Primus post diluvium inter homines," notes Isidore of Seville, "Nemrod filius Chus nova imperii cupiditate tyrannidem arripuit, regnavitque in Babylonia, quae ab eo, quod ibi confusae sunt linguae, *Babel* appellata est, quod interpretatur *confusio*."⁴⁹

Just as there is ambiguity about Nimrod's being a hunter (of animals or of men?) and a hunter with respect to the Lord (before the Lord or against the

⁴⁶ *In Genesim* 3, ed. Jones, p. 144.

⁴⁷ *De civitate Dei* 16.4, ed. Hoffmann, p. 134. See the discussion by Rudolph Willard, "Chaucer's 'Text that seith that hunters ben nat hooly men,'" *Texas Studies in English* 26 (1947), 211.

⁴⁸ *Historia scholastica* 37 (PL 198:1088).

⁴⁹ *Quaestiones in Genesim* 9 (PL 83:237). Cf. Bede, *In Genesim* 3, ed. Jones, p. 145.

Lord?), so there is a problem with the phrase “He began to be mighty on the earth.” Working from the Septuagint text, Augustine understands Nimrod to be a giant, a reading that is preserved in a very early anonymous chronicle, *Pseudo-Methodius*, Hrabanus Maurus, and Peter Comestor, who claims that Nimrod was a giant of ten cubits.⁵⁰ Morally and physically Nimrod was a throwback to the pre-Flood generation.

Although the Bible attributes the Tower of Babel to the “children of Adam” and to no specific architect (Gen. 11.3–6), medieval commentators — perhaps associating “Babel” with “Babylon” and giant with high tower — establish Nimrod as the builder. Inspiration for the tower constructed of baked brick and slime constitutes, we are assured, the fulfillment of Nimrod’s haughty character. “He wished to penetrate heaven unnaturally [*ultra naturam*],” states the *Glossa ordinaria*. “He signifies the Devil, who says: ‘I shall rise above the stars of heaven.’”⁵¹ The *Cursor mundi* portrays Nimrod as a pugnacious organizer of men, who incited a “felauscap” or “euyl pak” from the East to scale heaven’s heights, wage war on the sun and moon, and risk hand-to-hand combat with God (lines 2212–83), while the earlier *Middle English Genesis and Exodus* offers the interpretation that Nimrod suffered from hydrophobia and that he erected the Tower of Babel to escape from deluges such as Noah’s Flood:

Nembrot gat hise feres red,
for ðat he hadde of water dred,
To maken a tur wel heg & strong
Of tigel and ter for water-gong.
Twelwe and sexti men woren ðor-to
Meister-men, for to maken it so.
Al was on speche ðor-bi-foren:
Ðor woren sundri speches boren.
Ðo wurþen he frigti and a-grisen,
For dor was sundri speches risen;
Sexti lond-speches and .xii. mo
Weren dalt ðane in werlde ðo.
Babel ðat tur bi-lef un-mad,
Ðat folc is wide on lon sad.
Nembrot nam wið strengþe ðat lond,
And held ðe tur o babel in his hond.⁵²

⁵⁰ Augustine, *De civitate Dei* 16.3, ed. Hoffmann, pp. 128–29. This reading is preserved in the *Glossa* (PL 113:113). Cf. *Chronicon anonymi* of A.D. 236 (PL 3:660); *Pseudo-Methodius* 3, ed. Sackur, pp. 64–65; Hrabanus, *Commentarius in Genesim* 2.11 (PL 107:529); and Comestor, *Historia scholastica* 37 (PL 198:1088).

⁵¹ PL 113:113.

⁵² Lines 659–74, ed. Arngart, pp. 70–71. There is a significant tradition of giants and monsters in Anglo-Norman and Middle English writings as well as in Old English writings. *Des grantz geanz*, an Anglo-Norman poem of about 1333, provides throwbacks to the first world age. According to this anonymous work, a group of women came to Britain when it was wild and uninhabited; led by the eldest, Albine (whence Albion), they learned to get along on the island,

For his part, Higden suggests that Nimrod misled his fellows into believing that good fortune comes not from God but from man's own powers and that God, through envy, wanted to keep men alienated from one another in order more easily to subjugate them. Fearing that this God might send another Flood, they built the Tower of Babel high and with "glewe" [*bitumine*] as proof against the Flood waters. They did this in the same place where Babylon was later constructed, at least according to the *Polychronicon* (2.6).

Chaucer in his short lyric poem, *The Former Age*, mentions that Nimrod was "desirous to regne" and links his name with Jupiter's, the god who overthrew his monarch father and thus brought about the downfall of the Saturnian Golden Age.⁵³ Cain had built the first city and ordained standards, and Lamech had a passion for two wives. But Nimrod's lust was something new in the world, a lust for political dominance over his fellow humans — an appetite that later Babylonians would satisfy by enslaving the Jews in the "Babylonian Captivity" (fifth world age). Nimrod's name in medieval writings is synonymous with perversion, that is, with a turning away from old paths toward something novel, with a change for the worse. Bede calls him "the architect of impious works." The *Glossa* claims that his construction of the Tower of Babel went beyond what is natural (*ultra naturam*), while Isidore and Hrabanus Maurus say rather that it went beyond his nature (*ultra naturam suam*).⁵⁴ Peter Comestor, who says that Nimrod was a hunter of men as well as of animals, also states that "he compelled men to worship fire" as part of his political oppression.⁵⁵ According to Higden,

prospered, grew large and fat, and united with incubi. These incubi may have been the Devil incarnate or perhaps "bad fairies." They created a race of giants, which Brutus (or in some versions Corineus) eventually conquered. See the edition by G. E. Brereton (Oxford, 1937). See also *An Anonymous Short English Metrical Chronicle*, lines 23 ff., ed. Ewald Zettl, EETS, OS 16 (London, 1935), p. 2 (and pp. xlvii–xlix); *The Brut*, Prologue, ed. F. W. D. Brie, EETS, OS 131 (London, 1906), 1:1–4; *Robert of Gloucester's Chronicle*, ed. Thomas Hearne (Oxford, 1724), p. 21; *The Metrical Chronicle*, ed. Aldis W. Wright, Rolls Series 86,1 (London, 1887), p. 36. Mandeville in his *Travels* seems to confuse two traditions — that of the "sons of God" uniting with the "daughters of men" and producing giants, and that of the folk of Nimrod's era. See *Mandeville's Travels*, ed. M. C. Seymour (Oxford, 1967), pp. 160–61. The question of giants and their relation to history and worldly decay in Middle English literature deserves further study.

⁵³ *Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, ed. F. N. Robinson, 2nd ed. (Boston, 1957), p. 534. As to Nimrod's appearance in Chaucer's otherwise classical, and Boethian, short poem, see A. V. C. Schmidt, "Chaucer's Nembrot: A Note on *The Former Age*," *Medium Ævum* 47 (1978), 304–7. Cf. also Bernard Witlieb, "Jupiter and Nimrod in *The Former Age*," *Chaucer Newsletter* 2 (1980), 12–13.

⁵⁴ Bede, *In Genesim* 3, ed. Jones, p. 155; *Glossa* (PL 113:113); Isidore, *Quaestiones in Genesim* 9 (PL 83:237); and Hrabanus, *Commentarius in Genesim* 2 (PL 107:528).

⁵⁵ *Historia scholastica* 37 (PL 198:1088). In his section on the forms of religion before Christ, John Gower adds a marginal note to his discussion of the worship of elements by the Chaldeans: "Et nota quod Membroth quartus a Noe ignem tanquam deum in Chaldea primus adorari decreuit." According to Gower, Nimrod's descendant Ninus first instituted idol worship when he made the Assyrians bow down to the image of his father, Belus; from Belus came Bel and

Nimrod expelled Assur from Babylon and began to rule Ham's children there. "Afterward Nemprot," reads the *Polychronicon*, "wente to þe men of Pers and tauȝte hem to worschippe þe fuyre, and foundede þere þe citee of Nyneue" (2.6; cf. 2.9). Some say that Nimrod was an Ethiopian ("whose color signifies the shadows of the soul, and squalor"), others that he spread the passion for empire from Babylon to Persia.⁵⁶ Every aspect of Nimrod's life — his might, his hunting prowess, his gigantic size, his lust for domination, his pride, his construction of the Tower of Babel, and his state religion — supports the notion that his character was twisted.

From this examination of medieval primitivism based on Genesis, it is, I hope, clear that medieval exegetes and those who sought to understand the historical forces at work in the first age regarded mankind's early development as a gradual but steady decline from Adam's original, fortunate condition. Terrible as was Adam's initial disobedience, his actual offense against mankind was slight in comparison with the atrocities committed by his successors in later generations. Still, Adam's sin established the archetypal pattern: man's moral failure was followed by a worsening of his relationship with the earth. Later attempts to alter or improve mankind's estate created new misfortunes for the race. When Adam ate the forbidden fruit in hopes of deriving some benefit, he succeeded only in bringing down God's curse on himself and the earth. And when Nimrod erected the Tower of Babel, he invited God's wrath and brought about the confusion of languages. The first age, Adam to Noah — called the world's "infancy" by historians after Augustine — was not so much an epoch of innocence as of ever deepening experience.

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afterwards Belzebub. See *Confessio amantis* 5, lines 747 ff. and lines 1541–58, ed. G. C. Macaulay, EETS, OS 81 (London, 1900), 1:423, 444.

⁵⁶ See Ambrose, *De Noe* 34.128, ed. Schenkl, p. 496: "Nembroth autem per interpretationem Aethiops dicitur. Color Aethiopsis tenebras animae squaloremque significat, qui adversus lumini est, claritatis exsors, tenebris inuolutus, nocti similior quam diei."