If we were to consider the dialogue between God and Cain in Gen 4:9–10 as the “trial” scene, then 4:11–16 represents the sentencing phase. It is here that God declares Cain’s fate. But it can hardly be claimed that the sentence fits the crime. Abel was treacherously murdered, Cain lied to God about the murder, and still the resulting punishment seems less than just. Cain is not required to surrender his own life and, in spite of the curse, is allowed to marry, raise a family and establish a city. None of this suggests justice for innocent Abel’s blood. As the ancients began to grapple with Cain’s punishment they also were dissatisfied with Cain’s seeming impunity and began to find different ways to interpret the story. For some, the result was an interpretation that created a punishment more severe than what the canonical version envisioned.

Who was cursed more?

In Gen 4:11, God declares that Cain has been cursed as a result of his murderous act. While this may seem like an appropriate beginning to the “sentencing phase” of Cain’s judgment by God, there is an aspect of this that should be noted. The fact that Cain has been cursed represents an important development in the Genesis story. In spite of Adam’s act of disobedience and subsequent exile from the garden, he was not cursed. In Gen 3:14–19, Adam and Eve are told of the particular hardships that they will each have to endure as a result of eating the forbidden fruit, but it is the serpent (3:14) and the ground (3:17) that is cursed by God not humanity.¹ But Cain’s crime of fratricide alters

the state of affairs. A comparison of God’s words in 3:14 with 4:11 reveals an important parallel. Language similar to that used to curse the serpent is used to curse Cain.

Cursed are you more than (from) all beasts (Gen 3:14).

Cursed are you from (more than) the ground (Gen 4:11).

Cain, it seems, has surpassed his father. His transgression is greater and he brings down the curse on himself.² Not only is he the first human to be associated with the notion of sin (4:7), he is also the first murderer and the first human being to fall under a curse. Chrysostom observed the parallelism and concludes that Cain, in many ways, represented the serpent in Gen 4.

You see, since Cain perpetrated practically the same evil as the serpent, which like an instrument served the devil’s purposes, and as the serpent introduced mortality by means of deceit, in like manner Cain deceived his brother led him out into the open country, raised his hand in armed assault against him and committed murder. Hence, as God said to the serpent, “Cursed are you beyond all the wild animals of the earth,” so to Cain when he committed the same evil as the serpent. (Chrysostom, Hom. Gen. 19.11 [Hill])

Other interpreters noticed the parallelism between 3:14 and 4:11, but found that God’s words in 4:11 were not entirely clear. One problem is that in Hebrew, Greek and English the notion of being cursed “from the earth” is a peculiar concept. Either Cain was cursed or the earth was cursed in regard to Cain, as it was for Adam in 3:17. Modern commentators usually suggest that Cain was cursed away from the land, i.e., banished from his home where he had originally cultivated the soil.³

The second problem with what God says to Cain is that many of the words in the dialogue have direct reference to the earth rather than Cain (Abel’s blood on the earth, the earth not yielding to Cain, etc). If