Thou livest—and must live for ever. Think not
The Earth, which is thine outward cov’ring, is
Existence—it will cease—and thou wilt be—No less
than thou art now.
(Lord Byron, Cain 1.1)

The closing scene in this story of firsts describes Cain’s life following
his murder of Abel and the confrontation with God. The impious
fratricide leaves the presence of the Lord, takes a wife, begets children
and builds a city. But as we noted in the previous chapter, Cain’s
subsequent life hardly seems just in light of his violent crime. The
institutor of murder is allowed not only to escape capital punishment;
his goes on to live a prosperous life that is marked by a monumental
building project and a line of progeny that extends into the future. The
innocent Abel, on the other hand, has had his life prematurely cutoff
and along with it the possibility of living on through his descendants.
Adding insult to injury is the observation that we are never told when
or how Cain died. Surely the first murderer would have received some
comeuppance if not the appropriate ghastly death! While it is possible
to understand this peculiar oversight as a shift in the narrative’s focus
from Cain to Seth, this missing detail struck ancient interpreters as yet
another problem to be solved. The result was a set of traditions that
explain the meaning of Cain’s building projects, the time and type of
death he suffered and the ongoing effect of his sin as it was multiplied
through his progeny.

Why did Cain build a city?

In Gen 4:17 we read: “Cain knew his wife, and she conceived and bore
Enoch; and he built a city, and named it Enoch after his son Enoch.”
This verse presents the interpreter with at least three challenges. The
first is the introduction of the unnamed woman who becomes Cain’s
wife and bears his children. The traditions surrounding the source and identification of Cain’s wife have already been discussed in chapter one.

The second problem focuses on the identity of Cain’s descendants and their various occupations. This will be dealt with in a subsequent section of this chapter.

The third problem centers on Cain’s activity as a builder. Readers of the story will frequently notice that the origins of the city are connected to the one who introduced violence into the world and conclude that this is a commentary on the negative aspects of urban dwelling. Furthermore, Cain’s activity as builder sits rather uncomfortably with his previous occupation as a farmer and contradicts his sentence of wandering exile. Modern commentators usually are attracted to the ambiguity of the Hebrew. While it is commonly understood that Cain was the one who built the first city and named it after Enoch, some have suggested that it was Enoch who was the city builder rather than Cain. The challenge lies in the phrase “and he was a city builder” (ﬠיר תִּבַּנה). The subject of the phrase is by no means clear. Usually the subject would be expected to come from the nearest noun or pronoun, which in the case of Gen 4:17 is the name Enoch not Cain. But the appearance of Enoch’s name for a second time at the end of the verse makes it clear that Cain is the builder and the city was named after Enoch. Nonetheless, some modern commentators have suggested that the second occurrence of Enoch’s name is a scribal gloss intended to correct the ambiguity, even though no support can be offered in favor of this conjecture.1 They note that in the parallel verse of Gen 4:2 Abel’s occupation is mentioned immediately after his birth and name and that the same pattern is being followed in Gen 4:17.2 The name of the city, then, is not “Enoch” but “Irad,” which sounds very similar to “Eridu.” Eridu is held by Mesopotamian tradition to be the oldest city in the world.3 These commentators then read Gen 4:17 as: “and he (Enoch) was a builder of a city and he named the city after his son

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3 Wilson, 140.