

The Mark Of Cain—Revealed At Last?

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Then the LORD said to him, "Not so! Whoever kills Cain will suffer a sevenfold vengeance." And the LORD put a mark on Cain, so that no one who came upon him would kill him. (Gen 4:15)¹

"And the LORD put a mark on Cain." What exactly was this mark? The biblical text apparently does not say. Nonetheless, its purpose is clear: "so that no one who came upon him would kill him." Thus one natural question is: Can we infer what the mark was from the purpose it was meant to serve? But another question is whether there may be other indicators in the text that reveal the nature of the mark.

■ History of Interpretation

Down the ages all interpreters of this famous text, as far as I can tell from my perusal of the extensive literature,² have shared one all-important (although usually unspecified) assumption: that the text does not tell us what this mark was. Consequently, these famous words about the mark have teased the imagination of readers endlessly, and since one must make an intelligent inference, interpretative proposals are wide-ranging indeed.

Within Israel's scriptures an obvious prime resonance is the memorable visionary scenario in Ezekiel 9. When YHWH proposes to execute judgment upon the corrupt and idolatrous people of Jerusalem, he gives instructions that those who are grieved by what is happening should be spared the judgment. As a sign that they are to be spared they are to receive a mark upon their forehead—a sign designated as *taw*,

¹ The translations cited in this essay are all NRSV, except where I make clear that I am offering my own.

² For bibliography and survey of options see Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1-11* (ed. and trans. John Scullion; London: SPCK, 1984) 312-14.

the last letter of the Hebrew alphabet, which in the most ancient form known to us was depicted as a cross: X (Ezek 9:4, 6).³ Since the purpose of this mark is explicitly apotropaic (although for divine wrath rather than human aggression), it constitutes an obvious analogy to Cain's apotropaic mark, and the regular imaginative construal of the latter via the former is hardly surprising.

However, one may range more widely. There is already a list of seven options for the mark in *Genesis Rabbah* XXII.12. Ruth Mellinkoff, who wrote a little book on literary and artistic interpretations, classifies proposals for Cain's mark in three ways.⁴ First, a *mark on his body*, which, in the light of cultural analogies, could indicate such things as punishment, ownership, religious devotion or protection.⁵ Secondly, a *movement of his body*:⁶ moaning, and trembling in general or a specific trembling of his head. Thirdly, a *blemish associated with his body*: leprosy, beardlessness, hairiness, blackness of skin, a horn or horns. The fact that Rupert of Deutz in the early twelfth century rebutted then popular interpretations by saying that "the mark of Cain was not a trembling of the body, nor was it a horn that grew out of his forehead,"⁷ is a salutary reminder that the possibilities that seem most likely to us today may not have appealed equally to our forebears.

Although the history of this interpretative debate is rich and fascinating, its results, unsurprisingly, are inconclusive—although I think that most general biblical readers today think in terms of some kind of mark on Cain's forehead.⁸ Most scholars would say that we just do not, and cannot, know precisely what the text envisages. It may be more fruitful, therefore, to sidestep the age-old question, and focus on other dimensions of the text.

³ See the comparative table of Hebrew alphabets in Paul Joüon, S.J. and T. Muraoka, *A Grammar of Biblical Hebrew* (2 vols; Rome: Pontifical Biblical Institute, 1991) (hereafter, JM) 18.

⁴ Ruth Mellinkoff, *The Mark of Cain* (Berkeley, Calif.: University of California Press, 1981) esp. 22–80.

⁵ Circumcision as a mark of Jewish identity, in the patristic typology of Cain and the Jewish people, could also be included under this heading.

⁶ This was based on the LXX rendering of $\aleph \beth$ in Gen 4:12, 14 by $\sigma\tau\acute{\epsilon}\nu\omega\nu$ καὶ $\tau\rho\acute{\epsilon}\mu\omega\nu$.

⁷ *De sancta trinitate et operibus eius: in Genesim* IV.9.

⁸ When I mentioned to a friend that I was working on a new proposal for the mark of Cain, his response was "I thought it was a mark on his forehead." Bernhard Stade begins his noted essay with two anecdotes from 1892 Germany which relate popular assumptions that the mark of Cain is a mark on the forehead—to which Stade returns full circle with his own proposal that the mark should be construed by analogy with the $\aleph \beth$ on the Israelite's forehead (Exod 13:9, Deut 6:8) ("Das Kainszeichen," *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* [ZAW] 14 [1894] 250, 316–17). One significant recent Genesis commentator, Nahum M. Sarna, says, "Hebrew $\aleph \beth$ here probably involves some external physical mark, perhaps on the forehead, as in Ezekiel 9:4–6." (*Genesis = Be-reshit: The Traditional Hebrew Text with the New JPS Translation and Commentary* [JPS Torah Commentary; Philadelphia, Pa.: Jewish Publication Society, 1989] 35); or the recent English Standard Version [ESV] has the translation "And the LORD put a mark on Cain" with a marginal cross-reference to Ezek 9:4, 6, and Rev 14:9, 11.

This is the strategy well exemplified by Carl Keller, who deftly changes the agenda from historical hypothesis to constructive analysis in terms of prime theological categories, in a way indebted to Karl Barth:

Das Zeichen aber ist das Pfand für Kain und für alle Menschen, die Kain sehen, das Signal dafür, dass der Verfluchte und Ausgestossene eben doch noch unter der Gnade und dem Schutz Gottes bleiben darf. Verfluchung des Menschen und Annahme des verdamnten Sünders stehen ja immer nebeneinander. Hier blicken wir hinein in das Zentrum der Bibel.⁹

Or, not dissimilarly, Walter Brueggemann writes:

God's mark over Cain (v. 15) has evoked endless speculation. There is no consensus on its meaning. While it may originally have referred to a visible mark as a tattoo, it must now be understood in terms of its function in the narrative. That function is two-edged. On the one hand, it announces the guilt of Cain. On the other, it marks Cain as safe in God's protection. In such a simple way, the narrative articulates the two-sidedness of human life, in jeopardy for disobedience and yet kept safe. The acknowledgment of *guilt* and the reality of *grace* come together in this presentation.¹⁰

Although to shift the agenda in this way may well be to choose the better part, I would like, for better or worse, to revisit the time-honoured question: What was the mark?

✻ Re-reading the Hebrew Text of Genesis 4:15

For many years now I have taught the early chapters of Genesis to Durham students in their second year of Hebrew study, and the exercise has, I think, been at least as educative for me as for them. For such teaching intensifies a familiar aspect of regular devotional Bible reading. When you return time and again to the well-known text in its original language, and feel ever more at home in it, it becomes possible to think about the possible implications of the text more searchingly than when one is initially seeking to master the Hebrew and the literature of commentary. Moreover, the need to explain difficulties to students, who almost invariably ask those questions which fix upon the uncertainty and muddle in the teacher's mind, can lead to felicitous moments when one sees the text with fresh eyes. One such moment came a few years ago, when I was in the process of offering a waffly answer to the question of why Noah sent out a raven as well as a dove,¹¹ and more recently a discussion of the mark of Cain has had similar consequences. Whether

⁹ Carl A. Keller, *Das Wort OTH als "Offenbarungszeichen Gottes". Eine philologisch-theologische Begriffsuntersuchung zum Alten Testament* (Basel: E. Hoener, 1946) 77.

¹⁰ Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching [IBC]; Atlanta, Ga.: John Knox Press, 1982) 60.

¹¹ I wrote up the insight (if such it is) in the next vacation, and the result was published as "Why did Noah Send out a Raven?", *Vetus Testamentum* [VT] 50 (2000) 345–56.

the outcome is a serendipitous insight or a “nice idea *but*” must be decided by the reader.

My strategy is simple. I wish to question the assumption that the text does not tell us what Cain’s mark was and to argue that the text does tell us, and that it has been there, undiscerned, before the eyes of readers down the ages.

There are, I suggest, two prime indicators within the Hebrew text as to the nature of Cain’s mark, with a third supplementary indicator.

First, there is the choice of preposition to indicate the relationship of the mark to Cain — לְ “to, for.” If one wanted to speak of a mark upon Cain himself, either on his forehead or elsewhere on his person, the natural Hebrew preposition would be עַל “upon” (see Exod 13:16, Deut 6:8, 11:18, and esp. Ezek 9:4).¹² The non-use of this preposition must make one ask whether the meaning of the text may in fact be that the mark was *not* any kind of sign upon Cain’s body. Rather the sign (whatever it is) is “for” Cain, in the sense that the text goes on to specify that it is *for his protection* so that no one should kill him.¹³ To be sure, this function does not rule out that it could be a mark upon the body that fulfils this role, and most scholars who notice that the force of לְ is “for Cain’s protection” still assume that it was probably a mark on his body that fulfilled this role.¹⁴ But why then use לְ at all? The use of the preposition עַל to specify that the mark was upon Cain’s body would still have been entirely compatible with what is going on to specify the particular protective function of the mark.

One counter to this argument was advanced by John Skinner, who appealed to Exod 4:11a, מַה לָּאֱלֹהִים עָשָׂה לִּי “who gives humans a mouth?” and contended that this use of לְ “proves that it [sc. מַה] may also be something attached to the person of Cain.”¹⁵ Nonetheless, Exod 4:11a surely proves less than Skinner supposes, since

¹² Although עַל (‘in/on’) would seem intrinsically suitable, the common idiomatic use of עַל אֶת is with a plurality of people *among whom/in the midst of whom* a sign is set (Josh 4:6; Isa 66:19; Exod 10:2; Ps 78:43).

¹³ This sense seems well rendered in the LXX with its dative and lack of a preposition: καὶ ἔθετο κούριος ὁ θεὸς σημεῖον τῷ Κάιν.

¹⁴ So, for example, S. R. Driver comments on the RV rendering “And the LORD appointed a sign for Cain” with “Viz. for his protection, which, to have the effect intended, must have been something attaching to his person” (*The Book of Genesis* [Westminster Commentaries; 4th ed.; London: Methuen, 1905] 67). Gunkel says, “The mark that Yahweh gives Cain was, naturally, on Cain’s body. It belongs to the realm of religious tattooing and stigmatization, which, widely dispersed, was also known to the Semitic peoples” (*Genesis* [ed. and trans. Mark Biddle; Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 1997] 46–47; the citation is of Wilhelm Heitmüller, *Im Namen Jesu. Eine sprach- und religionsgeschichtliche Untersuchung zum Neuen Testament, speziell zur altchristlichen Taufe* [Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1903] 174); or von Rad says, “Yahweh obviously placed the sign on Cain’s body; the narrator appears to be thinking of a tattoo or something similar” (*Genesis* [ed. and trans. John Marks; 3d ed.; London: SCM, 1972] 107). The use of “must have been,” “naturally” and “obviously” suggests that the issue did not receive much fresh thought from these distinguished scholars, whose attention was directed elsewhere.

¹⁵ John Skinner, *Genesis* (International Critical Commentary [ICC]; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1912) 110.

the divine gift of a mouth as constitutive of the human body is not the same as the divine attaching of a particular something to an already formed body. Or, in other words, the fact that the ל in this example could hardly be interchanged with על indicates that the idiom for depicting a mouth as part of the body is not the same as that for depicting a mark upon the body.

It may also be worth saying that if the Hebrew envisaged a mark upon the body to serve as a sign, then the most natural way of expressing this would be to specify first the mark (like the *taw* in Ezek 9:4, 6) and then its role as a sign. That is, one might expect the Hebrew to read (if, for example, one provides as object the *taw* of Ezek 9:4) וְקָם יְהוָה עַל־קַן תּוֹ לְאוֹת לְבַלְהִי. Admittedly such an argument is necessarily inconclusive, given the flexibility of idiomatic usage in practice; but it is still worth reminding ourselves how the commonly supposed understanding of the mark would be put into Hebrew in a standard prose composition exercise.

Secondly, there is another peculiarity in the text, less frequently commented on than the preposition: the reference to Cain by name. In the context of YHWH's words of direct address to Cain, one would naturally expect a second person object, "you", probably in the form of a pronominal suffix attached to the verb, כָּל־הַרְגֵינִי. The use of the proper name in this context makes the wording—"whoever kills Cain will suffer a sevenfold vengeance"—sound less like direct personal address (YHWH to Cain) and more like a saying of the sort that anyone might say not so much *to* Cain but rather *about* Cain (most likely in his absence). In narrative terms, this means that YHWH speaks to Cain with a form of words that indicates what other people will say about him; YHWH introduces a saying that will pass into general use.¹⁶

When one takes YHWH's words as a saying in their own right—somewhat like a *mashal*—then they can of course be construed with rather different emphasis according to the imagined context. Sarna, for example, says of the words in their narrative context: "The unusually emphatic language is directed first to Cain, in order to allay his mortal fear, and then to the world at large, as a kind of royal proclamation that has the force of law."¹⁷ However, on the lips of others, which is the envisaged context of use, it would sound not like a royal proclamation but rather like a cautionary warning "Don't mess with Cain, or else."

When one takes these two factors together—that the text implies a non-corporeal mark to protect Cain from being killed, and that YHWH is introducing a general saying about the perilous outcome of killing Cain—then my thesis about the nature of the mark of Cain should, I hope, become apparent. *It is the saying in the text, "Whoever kills Cain will suffer sevenfold vengeance," that is itself the non-corporeal sign, the warning, which serves to prevent Cain from being killed.* YHWH's words to Cain and the sign are not two different things, however closely

¹⁶ In compositional terms this may indicate that an antecedent general saying about Cain has been subsumed into this particular narrative context.

¹⁷ Sarna, *Genesis*, 35.

related,¹⁸ but one and the same thing; YHWH's words are first spoken to Cain and are then redescribed as a protective sign.

A third textual factor, inconclusive in itself, but in conjunction with the two preceding points heuristically supportive of my thesis, is the specific Hebrew idiom underlying the idiomatic English "whoever" in the NRSV "whoever kills Cain will suffer a sevenfold vengeance." Here the use of *קל-הורג* most likely implies a plurality of killers.

The use of *כל* with participle in a grammatically singular form to signify a plurality of people is a well-established Hebrew idiom.¹⁹ For example, cities of refuge are provided for all those who kill without intent, *כל-מסה-נפש בטעות* (Num 35:15, 30). Sometimes indeed the singular participle is followed by a plural verb: "everyone who knew Saul previously and saw him prophesying with the prophets," *והיו קל-יודעו באתמול שלשום ויראו* (1 Sam 10:11a).²⁰ Perhaps analogous as a way of expressing an indefinite subject that is grammatically singular yet regularly plural in sense is the use of *מי אִשֶּׁר* or *מי*.²¹

By contrast, there would be two ways of specifying a singular killer if the meaning were to be "whoever" with the sense "the particular person, whoever it is, who kills Cain." One would be to use the definite article with the participle, i.e., *ההורג*.²² A second formulation would be *האיש אשר יהרג קין*.²³ There is thus a good argument that the Hebrew idiom used envisages a plurality of people killing Cain.

There are, however, two counter-arguments. First, the words of David in 2 Sam 5:8, *כל-יבשה יבסי*, in themselves and in context appear to conform to the standard idiom and to envisage a plurality of soldiers killing a plurality of Jebusites; although the rest of the verse is difficult. However, the parallel passage in 1 Chronicles (11:6) uses the same phrase, *כל-יבשה יבסי*, and construes it in a singular sense in what follows, by specifying the particular position of commander as the reward for leading the attack, a reward won by Joab. The relationship between 1 Sam 5:8 and 1 Chr 11:6 is unclear; it may be that the Chronicler is preserving an unambiguous *כל-יבשה יבסי* from his *Vorlage* and giving it a better sense than was apparent in the Samuel context. But whatever the tradition-history and redaction, it seems clear

¹⁸ Thus, for example, Westermann: "The mark is linked indissolubly with the legal ordinance. . . . The statement and the sign then must be understood in the same way" (Westermann, *Genesis 1-11*, 312-13). So too, emphatically, Keller, *Das Wort OTH*, 16, 75-76, 78.

¹⁹ See e.g., E. Kautzsch and A. E. Cowley, *Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar* (2d ed.; Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1910) (hereafter GKC) §116w; also the observation that "with *kol* the participle is seldom in the plural" (JM §139i). Many examples of the idiom use the definite article before the participle; whether this makes any significant difference seems to me doubtful: good examples are Exod 19:12; Num 21:8b; 1 Sam 2:36a.

²⁰ Cf. 2 Sam 2:23.

²¹ See GKC §137c; JM §144fa.

²² Participle with definite article is extremely common in Hebrew as the equivalent of an English relative clause.

²³ Cf. 1 Sam 17:25b.

from the Chronicler's text that לִּפְנֵי with participle could be construed with a singular sense in post-exilic Hebrew.

Secondly, there are the words of Cain himself in Gen 4:14b when he expresses to YHWH his anxiety, $\text{וְהָיָה כָּל-מֹצֵאֵי וְהָרְגֵנִי}$. Although Cain no doubt envisages a plurality of people encountering him in his wanderings, the idiom seems to express the indefinite rather than the plural; that is, it more naturally is rendered "whoever/anyone who meets me may kill me" rather than "everyone who meets me may kill me."

The appropriate conclusion to draw from this survey of לִּפְנֵי with participle is that it is an idiom of the indefinite which generally implies, but does not absolutely require, a plurality of agents who enact whatever verb is expressed in participial form. We may thus reaffirm the point with which we began, that the use of לִּפְנֵי הָרַג most likely implies a plurality of killers.

Since killing is, by definition, a singular and final action for any particular recipient, the text's plurality of killings of Cain, if that is what is implied, must surely envisage a plurality of people being killed.²⁴ This means that Cain here represents a group of people, most likely a tribe of which he is the eponymous ancestor—again, a dimension of the text that is widely recognized.²⁵ At this point in the story the focus shifts from Cain as an individual figure, which is how it is natural to see him hitherto, to Cain as a representative figure. A clear analogy within Genesis would be the way in which the individual figures of Jacob and Esau, whose portrayal as distinct characters is clear and memorable, also explicitly represent peoples descended from them, as is made clear in poetic pronouncements that interpret the surrounding narrative (Gen 25:23, 27:27–29).²⁶ Thus the text's concern would be not just a one-off killing in the distant past, but rather the repeated phenomenon.

²⁴ Cassuto offers an alternative construal: "Obviously, Cain can only be slain once. . . . Hence it is clear that *will slay me* means, *will wish to slay me, will seek to slay me.*" (*A Commentary on the Book of Genesis, Part I* [ed. and trans. Israel Abrahams; Jerusalem: Magnes, 1961] 225). Yet although a *yiqtol* form can indeed have volitional sense (JM §113n), in this context, I see no good reason to separate volition from action.

²⁵ Thus, for example, von Rad: "It has long been supposed that Cain cannot be separated from the tribe of Kenites often mentioned in the Old Testament. Cain is the embodiment or the ancestor of the Kenites, and therefore it is scarcely thinkable that the Yahwist, in whose time Kenites still existed, was not also thinking, in his story about Cain, of this tribe and its curious fate" (*Genesis*, 107). However the questions of whether, and how, one might synthesize the numerous canonical references to בְּנֵי קַיִן , relate them to בְּנֵי קַיִן (the two are related explicitly in Num 24:21, 22), and then construe the relationship of 'Kenites' to Israel are complex and controverted, and I do not wish to engage with them here. For simplicity, therefore, I will refer to the descendants of Cain as Cainites.

²⁶ It is important to give narrative integrity to the individual portrayals of Jacob and Esau in their own right and not see them as nothing more than ciphers for historic rivalries and conflicts between Israel and Edom—for otherwise Esau's astonishing and forgiving welcome of Jacob (Gen 33:4), which has no known correlate in the histories of Israel and Edom, would be inexplicable (this remains the case even if one reads the courtesies of Gen 33:5–17 as having mutually suspicious overtones).

perhaps continuing in the time of the narrator, that whoever kills a descendant of Cain, a Cainite, meets with sevenfold vengeance.

If one adds this third factor to the first two, then the logic of the text would appear to be that if a particular tribe has such a fearsome reputation that to kill one of their number leads to an excessive and disproportionate killing in response, then that is a powerful incentive to refrain from killing, or even attempting to kill, any member of that tribe. The rehearsal of that fearsome reputation in a short and pithy saying would make the saying a weighty factor in the protection of the tribe. The saying as the mark fulfils the purpose specified for the mark.

There are further small points of detail that need brief comment. First, the opening word of YHWH is לָכֵן (“therefore”) in MT, but לֹא כֵן (“not so”) in the Versions. I am marginally inclined, with NRSV, to prefer Versions to MT, since the emphatic denial of Cain’s fears is a good introduction to the saying that follows. But since לָכֵן is often used in prophetic oracles to introduce a pronouncement of judgment, it would make good sense in context; and its somewhat abrupt introduction can perhaps jolt the reader into attending more carefully to what is said. Nonetheless, nothing of substance depends on which reading is adopted.

Secondly, although it is customary to translate שִׁבְעָתַיִם at face value as “sevenfold”, its idiomatic meaning appears to be a non-specific “many times” (see Ps 79:12, Prov 6:31, 24:16); so the killing in recompense exceeds the original killing “many times over”; and Lamech’s subsequent “seventy-sevenfold” means “many, many times over” (Gen 4:24). Yet there is perhaps a certain flatness in such an English rendering, and so I prefer to retain the Hebrew idiom.

Thirdly, the precise force that should be given to the imperfect/*yiqtol* form, עָשֵׂה, is open to debate. Although in narrative context there is a natural case for rendering the verb as future, I think there is an equally good case, in line with my thesis, for rendering it as a present tense to depict an ongoing open-ended situation.

Fourthly, there is an ancient tradition that takes YHWH’s giving a sign as making Cain himself the sign, implicitly of warning to others. Although in Christian tradition this was based upon the ambiguity of the Vulgate—*posuitque Dominus Cain signum* (does an implied *in* govern *Cain*, as in the majority construal, or *signum*, thereby making Cain himself the sign?), it could also be justified from Hebrew usage of לָ: 1 Sam 22:7, וְשָׂרֵי אֲלָפִים, לְהַקְדֵם, “Will he make you all commanders of thousands?”. Nonetheless although (as will be argued) there is a clear sense in which a preserved Cain and his descendants serve to be cautionary, this is a construal of the story as a whole rather than a persuasive rendering of the likely meaning of the Hebrew idiom in Gen 4:15.

To conclude this part of the discussion, my proposed translation for Gen 4:15 is: Then YHWH said to him, “Not so! ‘Anyone who kills Cain suffers sevenfold vengeance’”; and thus YHWH set a sign for Cain’s protection so that no one who came upon him would kill him.

■ Testing the Thesis

If this thesis commends itself so far then two further steps are necessary: first, to test the thesis; and secondly to explore some of its possible implications.

In terms of various considerations of Hebrew idiom and usage I suggest three questions which may usefully test my thesis. First, if I am right, why is it that no one has seen it hitherto in many centuries of close reading? Since the question in that form has, I think, no useful answer, let me recast the issue: If my proposed sense were indeed the determinate sense of the text, would the text really take its present form, or might it rather have been otherwise formulated?

It must be admitted that the point could have been expressed unambiguously, if the text included a further object to the verb **נָתַתּוּ** “put; set” antecedent to, and in apposition with, the existing object **אוֹת** “sign.” Most simply this would be achieved by the inclusion of **זֶה** “this”—**וְנָתַתּוּ יְהוָה זֶה לְקֵיֵן אוֹת** (or perhaps **לְאוֹת**, see **לְחַק**, 1 Sam 30:25). Even more explicit would be the inclusion of **אוֹת** (**אוֹת**) **דְּבָרָיו** or **דְּבָרָיו** or **אוֹת** **דְּבָרָיו**—**וְנָתַתּוּ יְהוָה אוֹת דְּבָרָיו [אוֹת דְּבָרָיו]** “word/s”—**לְקֵיֵן אוֹת** (or perhaps **לְאוֹת**)—a text that would oblige the reader to understand the sign as the saying that precedes it. But although these possibilities would make the sense of the text unambiguous in a way that our familiar text is not, I cannot see that the familiar text is being manipulated to give a forced sense by my proposed rendering.

To be sure, if one retrojected my proposed translation into Hebrew one would not come up with the MT, for one would add in an extra word, **כֵּן** “thus”. But of course I have added that in to my translation simply to make explicit what I take to be the sense, for without some additional word it will always be possible not to construe the saying as the sign. The fact that the text could have conveyed the proposed sense without ambiguity does not mean that it cannot be conveying this sense anyway.

A second issue concerns the important term not yet discussed—**אוֹת**, traditionally construed as a “mark”, but better understood, in line with its more common translation, as a “sign.” Is the notion of a saying as a sign in keeping with attested Hebrew usage? I offer three observations.

a) It must be admitted that there is no really good biblical example of a saying as a sign. However, there is some usage that merits attention. Most obviously, Deut 6:8 envisages the words of the *Shema* being bound upon the “hand” (i.e., most likely the wrist) as a sign (**אוֹת**). Although this could serve various functions, one would be as a reminder to the Israelite of Israel’s defining primary allegiance, by keeping the all-important words in the forefront of awareness.²⁷ Since this envisages the saying in written form it is only a partial analogy to the orally circulating saying of Gen 4:15;²⁸ nonetheless it does show that a memorable saying could serve as a sign.

²⁷ Compare the mnemonic role of fringes (Num 15:37–41). In a contemporary context the “WWJD” (“What Would Jesus Do?”) wristbands are perhaps also comparable.

²⁸ Of course, the saying in Gen 4:15 in its textual form might conceivably serve a comparable function to that envisaged in Deut 6:8. But by the time that the Genesis text was widely available,

Alternatively, Job rhetorically suggests that his comforters should consider how travellers will confirm that the wicked regularly come to a peaceful and honored end:

הלא שאלתם עובדי דרך ואתתם לא תנכרו

“Have you not asked those who travel the roads, and do you not accept their testimony?” (Job 21:29)

The slightly unusual use of *אֵימָן* in the plural seems here to mean “typical illustrations drawn by those travellers from their experience of men and life that wicked men do not come to ruin.”²⁹ Although these illustrations could in principle be envisaged as oral testimony, Dhorme makes the case that written testimony is envisaged: “Their [sc. travellers’] custom was to write their names and their thoughts somewhere at the main cross-roads. The main roads of Sinai are dotted with these scribblings made by such passers of a day”; and he further argues that a concrete rather than an abstract sense for *אֵימָן* is indicated by the verb *נָכַר* “recognize.”³⁰ If, as seems likely, Dhorme is correct, then Job 21:29 is not more pertinent to my thesis than is the better-known Deut 6:8.

b) It may be worth mentioning that the traditional construal of *אֵימָן* as a visible “mark” does not fare much better in terms of comparable usage to support it. Helfmeyer, for example, classifies Gen 4:15 under “Signs of Protection” and additionally under that same heading only mentions Exod 12:13, the blood upon the houses of Israelites in Egypt which will be a sign for YHWH that the coming destruction should “pass over” those houses.³¹ This latter is an apotropaic sign, but it is neither upon a human nor does it function to deter human action.

One should note also how highly context-specific is a sign such as the blood upon the houses. Blood upon a building does not intrinsically have apotropaic meaning, but only in the particular frame of reference constructed by the wider Exodus narrative and the continuing rituals it envisages. So too is the mark upon Cain, as in most traditional accounts, context-specific. That is, no conventional mark can serve the purpose of preventing people from killing the person upon whom it is displayed unless there is a frame of reference within which such a mark means, in one way or other, “Do not kill.” Yet most suggestions that the mark of Cain was some kind of tattoo (or other corporeally-based mark) tend not to give much

it is. I think, doubtful whether Cain in the person of his descendants was still known to be around—except in an analogous sense, such as in Ambrose’s and Augustine’s dire construal of Cain as a prototype of the Jewish people.

²⁹ Samuel R. Driver & George B. Gray, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Book of Job* (International Critical Commentary [ICC]; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1921) 189.

³⁰ Edouard Dhorme, *A Commentary on the Book of Job* (ed. and trans. Harold Knight; London: Nelson, 1967) 322.

³¹ F. J. Helfmeyer, “אֵימָן” in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament [TDOT]* (Vol. 1; ed. G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren; trans. John T. Willis; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1974) 167–88, at 176.

attention to specifying conditions under which the mark would have its particular intended significance. Arguably one of the strengths of my proposal is that if the saying is the sign then it would serve its specified purpose more straightforwardly than any non-verbal alternative.

c) What is a “sign” anyway? Helfmeyer quotes Gunkel with approval: אִיִּת, “sign,” is an object, an occurrence, an event through which a person is to recognize, learn, remember, or perceive the credibility of something”; and Helfmeyer continues in his own voice: “that which is crucial in a sign is not the sign itself or its execution, but its function and its meaning. The substances of signs are as protean as the world in which they occur. . . . The . . . intention of a sign is not to terrify the onlooker, but to mediate an understanding or to motivate a kind of behavior.”³² If this is correct, then it is less important for my argument to be able to show other sayings that also function as signs, than it is that the saying should genuinely serve the purpose of conveying a particular understanding and motivating a corresponding behaviour. If the saying קָל־הָרֵג כִּן־שֶׁבַע־חַיִּים יָקָם conveyed the understanding that the descendants of Cain were extremely dangerous and motivated the behavior of not trying to kill any of them but rather of leaving them well alone, then it would entirely fulfil the role of a sign, אִיִּת.

A third question for my proposal is: Does it have any general parallels within Israel’s scriptures? Although my proposal in no way depends upon these analogies, I can think of two passages where there is an analogous difficulty that I would be happy to resolve in an analogous way. One is Isaiah’s famous saying of יהוה about the foundation stone that he is laying in Zion (Isa 28:16). On the assumption that the text is alluding to something not specified numerous suggestions as to the identity and nature of the stone have been offered. Yet it is perfectly intelligible to construe the stone as the pithy axiom with which the verse concludes—הַבֹּטֵחַ לֹא יִחַשׁ—“One who trusts will not panic”—which is how RSV and NRSV take it, as is shown by their punctuation. The other is the vision with which יהוה answers Habakkuk’s complaint, and which Habakkuk is instructed to write down (Hab 2:2). Again, although the content of the vision has been variously identified, I think it plausible that it is specified in the immediate context and so includes at least the famous words—וְצַדִּיק בְּאַמְנוֹתָיו יִחַי—(Hab 2:4b). Interestingly, each of these two contexts offers a pithy saying about the crucial nature of אֱמוּנָה in life-situations that are hard both to endure and to comprehend. I do not think that one has to be a Protestant wedded to the importance of faith and verbal formulations to recognize that a scriptural collection which contains, and prioritizes, the *Shema* may also contain other succinct formulations appropriate to Israel’s maintaining its loyalty to יהוה. These two prophetic passages show that it may be possible that other famous *crucis* in Israel’s scriptures could be resolved by finding that to which the text directs attention as present in the text itself.

³² Helfmeyer, “אִיִּת”, 170–71; citing Gunkel’s discussion of Gen 9:12–17 in his *Genesis*, 150.

■ Exploring Implications of the Thesis in Narrative Context

It remains to try to tease out something of the significance of the sign for Cain both in its immediate and in its wider biblical context. I offer five proposals.

a) The tone of YHWH's words, and correspondingly their precise meaning and significance, is hard to pin down—or, to put it differently, the words can be taken in more than one way.

Exactly how should one take the pronouncement of sevenfold vengeance upon the lips of YHWH? The issue can be presented as illustrative of one of the classic dilemmas of biblical criticism. Should one imagine an archaic context, prior to the moral and spiritual refinements of later ages and of the canonizers of Israel's scriptures, in which violent vengeance might unblushingly be ascribed to Israel's God? This not uncommon modern approach is well expressed by Hermann Gunkel (with evident debts to romanticism):

Of course, according to the most ancient Israelite religion, long effective in Israel, YHWH, himself, is a powerful hero, who, zealously concerned for his honor, allows nothing to befall him, "gives his honor to no other," and takes horrible vengeance on his enemies.³³

Alternatively, in keeping with classic Jewish and Christian reverential approaches to the biblical text, should one seek a construal less open to moral objection?³⁴ This approach is well expressed by Gordon Wenham, who comments on "sevenfold":

This could mean that Cain's killer and six of his relatives will die, but this seems unlikely with God as its agent. . . . Most probably it is a poetic turn of speech meaning full divine retribution; cf. Ps 12:7[6]; 79:12; Prov 6:31.³⁵

But I do not think we have to choose between putative historical fidelity and putative religious fidelity. For if YHWH is speaking to Cain with words that express what those who encounter Cain are envisaged as saying about him, then insofar as the implied usage of the words is in regular human discourse there is no implication that the impersonal construction of עָשָׂה envisages divine agency.³⁶ The agency is

³³ *Genesis*, 52. Gunkel is commenting on Lamech's boast (Gen 4:24), but his words would apply also to 4:15.

³⁴ Compare James Kugel's observation about ancient interpreters: "The idea of God threatening a sevenfold revenge on Cain's murderer bothered a number of interpreters. They therefore sought to find in God's words some further elaboration of Cain's punishment (although they disagreed on the particulars)" (*The Bible As It Was* [Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1997] 94–95).

³⁵ Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15* (Word Biblical Commentary [WBC] 1; Waco, Tex.: Word, 1987) 109; see also Cassuto, *Genesis*, 225–26. Both Wenham and Cassuto appeal to Ps 12:7 [English Translation (ET) 6], where YHWH's promises are like fully purified silver, and so suggest that the idiom "sevenfold" means "thoroughly/perfectly"; but Ps 12:7 has this sense only because the action of purifying is repeated so often that it comes to signify thoroughness/fullness.

³⁶ Comparably Israel's case laws generally envisage human agency in the enactment of punishment.

still non-specific, but would implicitly be other descendants of Cain avenging one of their own many times over.

b) Even if the words with which YHWH addresses Cain do not imply YHWH as the agent of the vicious vengeance that will protect Cain in the person of his descendants, there are still other questions to ask. Does the text give Cain's descendants the *right* to be murderous? As James Kugel puts it:

This sentence [sc. Gen 4:15], uttered by God to Cain, amounts to a divine exception to the *lex talionis*: the Kenite practice of killing seven of yours to avenge one of theirs is “grandfathered” (as it were) to them in the story of their ancestor Cain, who, protesting the eternal wandering which the Deity decrees for him as punishment for murdering Abel, is then granted by God this right of taking exceptional vengeance, seven for one instead of one for one, as a means of warding off would-be marauders.³⁷

It is indeed possible to read the text as bestowing a right to be murderous, despite the obvious tension with concerns elsewhere. But it is not, I think, far-fetched to read the words in their narrative context as more descriptive than prescriptive, and ironic in tone.

When Cain expresses his fear that as a restless wanderer he will be liable to be picked off by those who encounter him—implicitly because he will lack the appropriate support-systems of kin to defend him, that settled communities have—YHWH replies that this will not be so: his and his descendants' fearsome reputation will be their defence. In terms of the narrative context as a whole, the implicit point now made explicit is that Cain embodies over-reaction, based on a failure to “do well” when something unwelcome happens. At the outset YHWH favoured Abel and his offering over Cain and his offering. This differential favouring, being “unfair,” was a cause of distress to Cain—his face fell. Yet, in a difficult³⁸ but all-important address (4:6–7),³⁹ YHWH explains to Cain something of the dynamics of the situation, and the overall tenor of the warning is well expressed by Jon Levenson:

The resentment that this inequality [sc. of YHWH's favoring] provokes need not prove fatal; sin, crouching beast-like at the door, need not overwhelm; the brother whose offering has not been regarded can still live in dignity—if only he masters the urge to even the score, that is, to pursue equality where

³⁷ James Kugel, “Cain and Abel in Fact and Fable: Genesis 4:1–16” in *Hebrew Bible or Old Testament? Studying the Bible in Judaism and Christianity* (ed. Roger Brooks and John J. Collins; Indiana: Notre Dame University Press, 1990) 167–90, esp. 169–70.

³⁸ It is possible that there is damage at a textual level; although the difference in the LXX could be, in part or in whole, because of a rationalizing desire to explain Cain's non-acceptance as the result of a fault in sacrificial procedure. It remains possible to make sense of MT without undue straining.

³⁹ Westermann (*Genesis 1–11*, 298–300) argues that the verses are a secondary addition. Even if one grants this in historical-critical terms (which I am not inclined to do, although the issue is hardly capable of resolution), it does not diminish the narrative-critical need to understand the story with these verses as integral. Indeed, it makes it all the more important to pay attention to these verses as representing that meaning which has been given to the story in the form in which it has been considered fit for inclusion within Israel's scriptures.

God has acted according to the opposite principle, with divine inequality. The warning locates the source of the crime in the criminal himself: it is not God's favoring Abel that will bring about the murder, but rather Cain's inability to accept a God who authors these mysterious and inequitable acts of choosing.⁴⁰

There is thus a positive, albeit demanding, way out from distress. Yet Cain rejects this possibility and instead inflicts on Abel something far worse (death) than had happened to him (a rejected sacrifice). Consequently the logic of YHWH's words in 4:15 in relation to what precedes would appear to be that if Cain requites preferential treatment by killing, then he requites killing by multiple killing. Cain archetypally prefers violent over-reaction to constructive and demanding engagement with an inequitable situation. Ironically, Cain's fears about the vulnerability of his consequent unrooted pattern of life are groundless, for the behaviour of Cain, and of his descendants, is their best defence, if it is known about in advance and so can serve to deter. Thus YHWH makes a saying that epitomizes Cain's violent over-reaction into that sign which protects him and his descendants. YHWH is not giving Cain the right to over-react, but is recognizing this already-existing trait and constituting it as that which protects him from being killed.

c) The extent to which such protection constitutes "grace" depends on how one reads Cain's situation, which will likely vary according to who is reading it and from which context. Insofar as Cain lives, and does not die (like Abel), and is protected, then in general terms there can be said to be grace. Numerous Jewish and Christian interpreters, naturally open to find adumbrations of divine mercy even in unpromising contexts, have construed YHWH's response to Cain as gracious; and the recurrence of such a reading shows it to be meaningful and plausible.⁴¹ Within the world of the narrative, Cain himself no doubt would be grateful. Yet insofar as Cain's remaining alive ensures the continuation of his banishment, with its distancing of Cain from the fruit of the earth and the context where YHWH is specially present (v. 14a)—and, in terms of the preceding narrative, with Cain consumed by that sin and resentment about which he was warned but which he failed to master—then those who are not of Cain's descendants may view the situation differently from Cain. It

⁴⁰ Jon Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son: The Transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1993) 74–75.

⁴¹ In addition to Brueggemann's reading, noted above, one might note Levenson's succinct formulation: "The irony is pungent: The man who could not tolerate God's inscrutable grace now benefits from it" ("Genesis" in *The Jewish Study Bible* [ed. Adele Berlin and Marc Zvi Brettler; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004] 8–101, esp. 19). It is also possible to read the story overall in such a way that grace is not an issue—so Friedemann Golka, "Keine Gnade für Kain. Genesis 4,1–16" in *Werden und Wirken des Alten Testaments. Festschrift für Claus Westermann* (ed. Rainer Albertz et al.; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1980) 58–73. I find, however, that the religious-historical thesis, which underlies Golka's denial of grace in Genesis 4, depends upon too many arguable assumptions to be persuasive in its own terms. I also think that Golka passes too lightly over 4:7.

is at least possible that they could regard his situation as pitiable; they might even wonder whether his situation may not be a fate worse than death.⁴²

d) We should also briefly note the “Song of Lamech” (Gen 4:23–24), which within Israel’s scriptures is the sole explicit citation of the saying about Cain:

Lamech said to his wives:
 “Adah and Zillah, hear my voice;
 you wives of Lamech, listen to what I say:
 I have killed a man for wounding me,
 a young man for striking me.
 If Cain is avenged sevenfold (כִּי שִׁבְעָתַיִם יִקָּדֵם קַיִן),
 truly Lamech seventy-sevenfold.”

Lamech is presented as a descendant of Cain, and so one of those to whom YHWH’s dictum would apply. Lamech’s boastful concern is to increase the terrifying, deterrent reputation: vengeance is not just many times over, but many many times over. Indeed, in line with our overall thesis, we should note that it is precisely reputation as expressed in the formula of vengeance that is Lamech’s concern. As so often happens, however, there appears to be a gap between rhetoric and practice. For according to the text, although Lamech has indeed over-reacted in true family style by responding to a blow with a killing, he has in fact only killed *one* person,⁴³ and a young person (נָעִר) at that, not seven, never mind seventy-seven. Moreover, whatever the social conventions implied in Lamech’s addressing his boast to his two wives, one may at least note that this is not the kind of audience that would be likely to challenge his boasting or put it to the test. The boast does not reveal Lamech to be actually more dangerous than Cain, but only wanting the reputation of being more dangerous.

What should one make of this? Again, all depends upon one’s frame of reference. Boasting of murderous revenge could make Lamech appear admirable, if one thinks in the categories of Gunkel’s “oldest period” of history — in which Lamech might perhaps be like a Homeric hero — when one “did not feel horror at the wild ferocity, but delight over the majestic strength of the hero;”⁴⁴ alternatively, to think in terms of a Nietzschean *Übermensch* could lead to much the same outcome. If, however, one thinks in the terms set out by YHWH in Gen 4:7, and the mainstream moral and spiritual tradition of Israel’s scriptures which YHWH’s words represent, then if Lamech is even more mastered by sin and resentment than Cain, one might consider him to be correspondingly more pitiable.

⁴² One might perhaps adduce examples of God “giving up” people to their sinful desires (e.g., Ps 106:14–15; see also Rom 1:24–25).

⁴³ Or perhaps two, if one distinguishes the נָעִר from the אִישׁ. It may be that the awkward parallelism is a reason for construing the verbs as present conditional, “I *would* kill a man.” (See James Kugel, *The Idea of Biblical Poetry* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 1981) 31–32 and n. 83).

⁴⁴ This is taken from Gunkel’s depiction of “the oldest period” in relation to an evaluation of Lamech’s bloodthirsty boast in Gen 4:24 (*Genesis*, 52).

e) Finally, we should note that within Genesis there is one other figure whose destiny is analogous to that of Cain—Ishmael. Cain and Ishmael are alike “unfavoured,” “non-chosen” by YHWH in relation to their brothers, respectively Abel and Isaac. Yet, despite this, each is given space and attention in the Genesis text, and the destiny of each is pronounced by YHWH (or the angel of YHWH who speaks to Hagar). For Ishmael, as for Cain, we find a violent tribal lifestyle set upon YHWH’s lips in a way that appears to imply some kind of mandate. When the angel of YHWH tells Hagar to return to servitude, hope for freedom in the future is offered with reference to the son she is to bear (Gen 16:12):

וְהָיָא יִשְׁמָאֵל כְּחֵמֶל אֲדָמָה
 יָדוֹ בְּכֹל יָד כָּל בּוֹ
 וְשָׂרְפָה קָל־אָחִיו יִשְׁכֵּן

He shall be a wild ass of a man,
 with his hand against everyone,
 and everyone’s hand against him;
 and he shall live at odds with his kin.

Ishmael, who like Cain is envisaged as the eponymous and representative ancestor of his descendants, is to be the human embodiment⁴⁵ of a well-known animal—the ass which is a wild and heedless inhabitant of the Jordan valley and hilly Judaeac desert (Job 39:5–8). Thus, like Cain, Ishmael lives as a desert tribe away from the fertile soil. His destiny is to be fierce and aggressive, in constant conflict with those with whom he comes in contact, the nomadic feuding with the sedentary; this too is comparable to Cain—only with the accent on combativeness and not on vengeful killing.

Herein lies the difference. Ishmael’s roaming and aggressive desert life is depicted as a gift of YHWH to a son of Abraham—a lesser gift, to be sure, than the gift of the land of Canaan to Abraham through Isaac and his descendants, but a gift nonetheless; and because less is given to Ishmael and his descendants, less is expected of them than is expected of Isaac and his descendants. By contrast, Cain’s wandering desert life is not a gift but a punishment from YHWH for Cain’s murder of Abel. Cain’s sevenfold vengefulness for any killing of his descendants is not a right bestowed by YHWH but a confirming recognition of the resentful and over-reactive disposition which caused Cain to murder his brother in the first place. This recognition is articulated in a pithy formulation as a sign that defends him. Implicitly, however, the sign preserves Cain and his descendants as embodiments of the failure to heed YHWH’s moral counsel and warning, a failure which leads to a lifestyle characterized by being mastered by sin and the outworking of sin in

⁴⁵ Parallel to *וְהָיָא יִשְׁמָאֵל כְּחֵמֶל אֲדָמָה* is *וְהָיָא כְּחֵמֶל אֲדָמָה* “fool of a man” (Prov 15:20, 21:20), *וְהָיָא כְּחֵמֶל אֲדָמָה* “poor people” (Isa 29:19). Standard grammars, GKC §128k, l and JM §129f, see the genitive in formula terms as a definition of genus and do not find possible further idiomatic significance, for example that the nature of the person is strongly focussed in the specified quality.

murderous vendetta—a picture of the degradation of human life, appropriate to its structurally weighty context at the outset of Israel's scriptures.

■ Epilogue

The image of wandering and murderous Cain can be potent. It is a tragedy that for centuries many Christians, following the lead of Ambrose and Augustine,⁴⁶ applied it to Jews, as though the misguided desire on the part of some to have Jesus crucified could appropriately characterize all, as though the crucifixion of Jesus were closely comparable to the murder of Abel, and as though continuing devotion to the God of their fathers should count for nothing. If the image is to be of value today it would surely better be applied to those restless and ever-discontented people who, resentful of the hand they have been dealt in life, allow themselves to become enslaved to urges that are expressed in behaviour that is destructive towards others, and often also towards themselves; a type of person sadly as common today, *mutatis mutandis*, as in antiquity.

Within such application there would be no direct counterpart to the particular saying that warned people to beware of Cain. The descendants of Cain and Lamech in brutalized households, gangs and organized crime today can make comparable boastful warnings and act with corresponding brutality, to deter people from tackling them; and YHWH's words to Cain give no mandate to avoid such people and let them continue in their ways—among many other reasons because they generally do not occupy separate, less desirable space but make rival claims upon desirable public space. Indeed, pity as much as justice requires that the violent and murderous be confronted, and pity may place a higher value than justice upon the struggle to reclaim such people.

At least from a Christian perspective the only form, I think, in which YHWH's words to Cain can be appropriated is when they are intensified by Lamech and then inverted by Jesus (Matt 18:21–22):

Then Peter came and said to [Jesus], "Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive? As many as seven times?" Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy-seven times."

The intertextual resonance with Cain and Lamech is both clear and illuminating.⁴⁷ A defining characteristic of Christian community must be the replacement of vengeance without limit by forgiveness without limit. Just as a reputation for

⁴⁶ The crucial passages are Ambrose, *De Cain et Abel* II:5 and Augustine, *Contra Faustum Manichaeum* XII.9–13. Key sentences from this material are conveniently set out in Mellinkoff, *Dark of Cain*, 93–94.

⁴⁷ The Greek of Matt 18:22, ἐβδομηκοντάκις ἑπτὰ, is identical to the LXX of Gen 4:24. It may also be that Peter's unusual suggestion of sevenfold forgiveness—rabbinic sages tended to express the need to forgive more than once in terms of forgiving three times (*b. Yoma* 86b–87a)—already has in view an inversion of Cain's famous sevenfold vengeance. In general, "in exegetical history Gen 4:24 has often been associated with Matt 18:22, and rightly" (William D. Davies and Dale C.

unlimited vengeance serves to deter and repel people, so a reputation for unlimited forgiveness should, among other things, serve to attract. The only problem is so to live as to acquire such a reputation.⁴⁸

Allison, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Gospel According to Saint Matthew* [vol. 2, ICC; T & T Clark: Edinburgh, 1991] 793).

⁴⁸ I am grateful to Tony Gelston for helping to clarify some points of Hebrew grammar, and also to my colleagues in the Society for Old Testament Study whose good-humoured grilling of aspects of my argument as it then stood in an earlier form (the presentation was in Birmingham on 5 January 2006) has enabled me to make real improvements both overall and in detail.