



QUESTION – What was the ‘mark’ of Cain referred to in Genesis 4:15



From the way in which verse 15 reads in some popular translations, it is not surprising that Bible readers are led to hold the view that God placed on Cain a physical mark which was intended to be a sign to any who might want to harm him, that he was under the protection of God.

Indeed, the expression, ‘*The Mark of Cain*’, has become proverbial. It may even have influenced Nathaniel Hawthorne, the American author, in 1850, to produce a novel which became a classic of American literature. “*The Scarlet Letter*” tells the story of a young woman who, in the early days of New England, was found guilty of immorality and was sentenced to be branded with the letter ‘A’, to indicate the nature of her sin.

Was Cain marked in a similar way, with a visible, physical emblem of some kind?

The Theories

Let me list some of the theories that have been advanced.

1. Some scholars have thought that Cain’s appearance was changed, so that people *could not recognize him* as the murderer of his brother Abel.
2. At the other extreme, some of the older writers believed that he was marked in the forehead in a way that *openly identified him as his brother’s murderer*.
3. There was also support for a theory which said that Cain’s *forehead was marked with the letters YHVH*, to warn possible aggressors that he was under God’s protection.
4. The Septuagint version of the Old Testament - (the Greek version) - describes him as being destined to ‘*groan and tremble*, and this translation caused other early commentators to suppose that God inflicted *some sort of physical disability* on Cain. Perhaps they were led to this view by the fact that, after Jacob’s struggle at Peniel, (Gen. 32:23-24 and 31-320), he walked with a limp. He was left with a physical handicap that was intended to serve as a reminder of the amazing event that changed both his life and his name.
5. But, to descend from the sublime to the ridiculous, one Jewish Rabbi had a ludicrous notion that the ‘*mark of Cain*’ was a *horn*, which God caused to grow out of his forehead! Probably some folk were gullible enough to believe it!

The word ‘mark’.

The problem is that word ‘*mark*’, and, if we discover what the original word means, we may reach a clearer understanding of what happened to Cain.

The Hebrew word is the word ‘*oth*’. It occurs 79 times in the Old Testament and is mostly rendered ‘*sign*’. But, 14 times it is translated ‘*token*’, and, significantly I think, only once does it appear as ‘*mark*’, and this one time occurs here, in Gen. 4:15.

The Differing Versions.

You can understand, then, why the various English translations differ as widely as they do.

- The ‘Authorized Version’ says that ‘*YHVH, set a mark upon Cain*’, and this is the translation followed by a fairly large number of versions.

- For example, 'The Living Bible', tell us that God, 'put an identifying mark on Cain'.
- However, both the 'English Revised Version' and the 'American Standard Version' say that God 'appointed a sign for Cain', whilst the 'Revised Standard Version' of 1884, for some strange reason reverts to the rendering of the Authorised Version of 1611!
- 'Ellicott's Commentary' on Genesis, dismisses this view with the words, "This rendering suggests an utterly false idea'. Cain was not branded or marked in any way. What the Hebrew says is, 'And YHVH set – that is appointed - unto Cain a sign'".
- The Greek translation also, says that He 'gave to Cain a mark'. Notice; God did not 'put a mark on Cain', but 'gave to him a mark.'
- 'Young's Version' says that God 'set a token to Cain'.

The literal meaning of these phrases is that, to confirm a promise, God gave to Cain a sign, token or pledge, that no-one who met him would harm him.

A Similar Grammatical Construction.

The language is similar to that used in Gen. 9, where we read that God promised Noah that He would never again destroy mankind by a flood. As a permanent reminder of this promise God gave a token – a sign. **"I have set my bow in the clouds, and it shall be a sign of the covenant between Me and the earth"** (Gen.9:8-17, R.S.V.) In this passage the word 'sign' occurs three times.

The Sign of a Divine Promise.

We see, then, that the 'sign' which God gave to Noah served as a both a reminder and a confirmation of a promise made by God. In a similar fashion, the 'sign', or 'token', that was given to Cain, was intended to assure him of the faithfulness of God's gracious promise of safety. What that token was can only be a matter for speculation. We cannot know, because we are not told. What we can know with certainty is that it was a sign given to Cain and not a 'mark' on him.

I stress this fact. It was a sign or token, given to Cain and to no-one else. There is nothing in the chapter that suggests that anyone else even knew about this 'sign'. It was an act of God's compassion shown to a man who was obviously suffering the fear and anguish of a tortured conscience. Bear in mind that, in those days, Cain had little understanding of the truth of the omnipresence of God and therefore he was afraid that, being driven 'from the presence of God', that is, away from Eden, the place with which he associated God, he would be outside the protection of God. And therefore he felt very vulnerable – exposed to danger from any who might want to avenge the death of Abel.

If God had placed on Cain a physical mark that identified him as the murderer of his brother, it is reasonable to suppose that, instead of protecting him, it would have placed him in greater danger. But God acted in mercy, not in judgment, in giving him this assurance, and was granting him the opportunity to repent. We may learn that even in Genesis there are glimmers of the grace and tenderness of God that was later to emerge fully in the Gospel.

Whether Cain later gave evidence of repentance we are not told, and therefore we cannot know. Sadly, we do know, however, that, along with those of his parents, Adam and Eve, his name is absent from the list of those who, in Hebrews chapter 11, are honoured because they lived 'by faith'.

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