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Mitteilungen

»So YHWH established a sign for Cain«: Rethinking Genesis 4,15

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Of the single verses in the Old Testament that have perplexed interpreters over the years, Gen 4,15, and the so-called mark of Cain, is certainly high on the list. What is the sign? How does it protect Cain? Is this some form of mark upon Cain's body or something else?

The text itself is quite cryptic, yet not entirely silent. As Moberly has recently argued,¹ the stated *purpose* of the sign should point us to an answer: »so that no one who came upon him would kill him« (NRSV).² Moberly also notes a particularity of the Hebrew in the same verse which – when compared with biblical parallels and read contextually – points to a plurality of would-be killers, heightening the term's complexity: כל הרג קין שבעתים יקרא (»anyone who kills/all who kill Cain will receive a sevenfold vengeance ...«).³ Why is there a plurality of killers implied here? How many times can Cain be killed and how does this relate to the sign?

The statement outlining the sevenfold vengeance to »all who kill Cain« is given by God directly before mention of the sign and the sense here is that what follows is directly related, or given to remedy the problem; that is, the *waw* is probably best translated as: »so the LORD established a sign ...«. Accordingly, the establishment of the sign is to ensure that Cain's potential retaliatory killers would not succeed in their plan; neither would they thus receive the forewarned sevenfold (or great) vengeance. But again we are faced with the question of the specific nature of the sign. If, as mentioned above, the sign is to protect Cain from a plurality of killers, and it appears that Cain himself represents a plurality of which he is the eponym – Cain can only be killed once though the sign is concerned with multiple retaliations, i.e. upon the Kenites – then perhaps we can proceed to understand the sign in a new light.⁴ My suggestion is as follows.

¹ R. W. L. Moberly, *The Mark of Cain – Revealed at Last?*, HTR 100 (2007), 11–28. Although I draw from Moberly's insightful article here, my conclusions lead in a different direction.

² I suggest a slightly more literal translation than the NRSV below.

³ Moberly provides an extensive examination on why a plurality is implied in the idiom here; consult also J. L. Kugel, *Cain and Abel in Fact and Fable: Genesis 4:1–16*, in R. Brooks and J. J. Collins [eds.], *Hebrew Bible or Old Testament? Studying the Bible in Judaism and Christianity*, 1990, 170. Kugel's resultant translation is significant: »Anyone who kills a Kenite ...«

⁴ Again, consult Kugel, *Cain*, 170, for more on why Cain should be understood as Kenite (or Cainite) here. Although a link to the later Kenites cannot here be explored, it may

It is often overlooked that immediately following the story there is a textual difficulty that might well relate to the sign. Who builds the city? If one begins reading Gen 4,17 straightforwardly, one would assume that Enoch is the subject of בְּנֵה, and it is not until the last word of the sentence, the name Enoch (הֲנוֹךְ), that the reader is forced to reread the sentence with Cain as subject. In other words, *Cain* is now the one building the city (or is a builder of one),⁵ and he is said to name it after his son, Enoch. But the initial reading that Enoch is the builder of the city seems confirmed in the next verse as the name of Enoch's son, and thus the city itself, is Irad (עִירָד), a wordplay on the Hebrew word for city (עִיר). Others have noted the problem of the insertion of הֲנוֹךְ here and although there are no known variants as such, the issue is probably best viewed as a text-critical one.⁶ It is possible that a very early editor or scribe wanted to specify that it was Cain who built the city and therefore added the name Enoch to the end of the sentence. But why? It could be that without this detail, the city is in no way connected to Cain. As it stands, however, the city is connected to Cain and potentially to God's protection of Cain and his descendants, i.e. the sign. Such a reading supposes that the sign (אוֹת) is not a corporeal mark but is something established, or appointed (שִׁים – set, establish, appoint, or arrange), for Cain's protection (לְקִיּוֹן).⁷ The city should be seen as a place of protection for Cain and his people from would-be avengers, those present and future who wished to redeem Abel's blood (i.e. those later called גְּאֵל הַדָּם in the HB).⁸

Part of the potential confusion here may be related to contemporary conceptions of what a city is, that is, something usually determined by *size*. In antiquity, however, a city was not determined by size, but by its *protective walls and gates*.⁹ Thus, the city should not be seen so much as a populated settlement but as a place of protection. Cities have long been viewed as a human, not divine, institution,¹⁰ but perhaps they, or at least this one, might be viewed as something God establishes as places of protection or refuge from would-be avengers of blood. The idea of a city of refuge, divinely established for this purpose, is certainly familiar to later parts of the OT. It also makes good sense with the purpose of the sign (4,15): לְבַלְחֵי הַכּוֹת אֹתוֹ כָּל מִצְאוֹ, literally: ›to exclude the act of striking him, all finding him‹.

We might also remember that when God curses Cain after he kills his brother (4,11–12), Cain complains that his punishment is more than he can bear and that he will be a vagrant and wanderer upon the earth (4,14). God's response answers this directly, and the

not be coincidental that there is a general ambivalence towards the Kenites in the Hebrew canon; see e.g. Num 24,21–22; Jud 1,16; 4,11; I Sam 15,6.

⁵ The MT pointing and the LXX suggest that that *an action* is in view (i.e. ›was building‹), though a construct relationship is otherwise possible (i.e. ›was a builder of a city‹).

⁶ See e.g. G. J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 1987, 111, who states: »Why ›Enoch‹ should have been added remains unclear.«

⁷ For more on understanding לְקִיּוֹן as ›for Cain‹ (as opposed to ›upon Cain‹ – something better communicated in Hebrew by use of the preposition עַל), see Moberly, Mark, 14–15. Further, Moberly explores and helpfully shows how אוֹת can function as ›sign‹ (in an abstract sense) rather than a corporeal ›mark‹ (see pp. 19–21).

⁸ See e.g. Num 35,19; consult also R. L. Hubbard Jr., גְּאֵל, NIDOTTE 1, 789–794.

⁹ See e.g. E. Fry, *Cities, Towns and Villages in the Old Testament*, BT 30 (1979), 434–438.

¹⁰ This idea is examined by N. E. Andreasen, *Town and Country in the Old Testament*, Enc 42 (1981), 259–275, who concludes that antiurbanism is not entirely an OT concept.

LXX supports our idea: »Not so« οὐχ οὕτως, reading לֹא כֵן rather than MT לֹא כֵן »therefore«. Cain does not wander as he expects but Gen 4,16 tells us that Cain *settles* (יָשַׁב), ironically in the metaphorical ›land of wandering‹ (נוֹד). In building the city and settling, the city would provide protection for Cain and his family and would exclude the possibility of seven-fold vengeance for avengers; the killing and subsequent vengeance would, through its protective walls and gates, be prevented – something unambiguously promised by YHWH in establishing the sign.

While it might initially seem implausible to suggest that the sign is Cain's city of protection (or refuge), it is certainly no less fanciful than the idea that Cain received a tattoo, horns, or was given a dog to ward off killers.¹¹ To be sure, the idea is not entirely novel; however, it deserves to be revisited and brought to a wider readership.¹² Further, to my knowledge, no one has yet to make sense of the textual difficulty in 4,17 as it relates to the sign, a difficulty that could point to an early understanding of the city as related to the sign, now embedded in the text itself. We cannot be certain, but the above seeks to take the narrative that follows the Cain and Abel story into account while it endeavours to make sense of the Hebrew difficulties related to plurality of killers, Cain representing a people, and the name of the city. It also makes good sense regarding the purpose of the sign and God's promise that Cain would not wander. It may be the best answer we have based upon the text.

The so-called mark of Cain has long been thought to be something God puts upon Cain's body or a trait Cain would possess to deter would-be avengers. Often overlooked, however, are details immediately following the story Gen 4,17 – dealing with the building of a city – which may well indicate the sign. In this short note I argue that the sign might best be understood not as a mark upon the body, but as something God established for Cain's protection – perhaps a city of refuge.

Ledit »signe de Caïn« a longtemps été considéré comme quelque chose que Dieu a placé sur le corps de Caïn ou un trait que Caïn possédait pour dissuader les vengeurs potentiels. On a cependant souvent omis les détails qui suivent immédiatement ce récit, Gen 4,17, traitant de la construction d'une ville, est susceptible d'expliciter le sens de ce signe. Cette étude vise à montrer que ce signe peut être mieux compris, non comme une marque corporelle, mais comme un élément que Dieu avait établi pour la protection de Caïn, peut-être une ville-refuge.

Seit langem wird angenommen, dass das so genannte »Kainsmal« etwas von Gott auf Kains Körper Angebrachtes darstellt oder dass es sich um ein Merkmal handelt, welches Kains potentielle Rächer abhalten soll. Oft werden jedoch Einzelheiten in der unmittelbar folgenden Erzählung übersehen. Die Frage des Stadtbaus in Gen 4,17 weist möglicherweise auf die Bedeutung des Zeichens hin. In dem Beitrag wird dargelegt, dass das Zeichen nicht als ein Merkmal auf Kains Körper verstanden werden kann, sondern als etwas, das Gott zu seinem Schutz erstellt hatte – vielleicht eine Freistadt.

¹¹ For more on possibilities suggested over the years, consult C. Westermann, *Genesis 1–11: A Commentary*, 1984, 312–14; and R. Mellinkoff, *The Mark of Cain*, 1981.

¹² It was brought to my attention, late in composing this piece, that the ›city of refuge as sign‹ idea was put forward by J. Sailhamer in his commentary on Genesis (F. Gaebelin [ed.], *The Expositor's Bible Commentary* 2, 1990, 66–67). His work is important though too brief and does not address the textual difficulties of Genesis 4,17 or adequately deal with the problem of the plurality of avengers/Cain representing a people.

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