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The Lord Gave Cain a Sign

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Kent P. Jackson

Abstract: *God didn't "set a mark" on Cain. Instead, he gave Cain a sign. The unfortunate translation of Genesis 4:15 in the King James Bible (KJV) has been the source of much misunderstanding over the years. This article is about the English words that the King James translators chose in Genesis 4:15 and the Hebrew words from which they are translated. It shows that the renderings of the words in that verse are inconsistent with how the KJV treats the same words and grammatical features in other passages. The result is a translation that cannot be justified from the Hebrew Bible.*

William Tyndale (1494–1536) did not advance the cause of biblical understanding when he translated the words below from Genesis 4:15 as follows: "And the LORde put a marke vpon Cain that no man that founde hym shulde kyll hym."[1]

וַיָּשֶׂם יְהֹוָה לְקַיִן אוֹת לְבִלְתִּי הַכּוֹת-אֹתוֹ כָּל-מֹצְאוֹ

In the succession of English Bibles that followed Tyndale's in the sixteenth century, the first half of this passage underwent only a minor change. The Great Bible of 1540 replaced "put" with "set," which remained in most of the subsequent early translations. In the second half of the phrase, the Great Bible revised the wording to read, "lest any man fyndynge him, shulde kyll hym," a reading that continued

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1. Tyndale published editions of the first five books of the Old Testament in 1530 and 1534, the first ever printings of those books in English translated from Hebrew. After Tyndale's death in 1536, his colleague John Rogers, under a pseudonym to protect Tyndale's identity as well as his own, republished Tyndale's Old and New Testament translations in 1537. That edition became the first in a succession of English Bibles that led up to the creation of the King James Version.

more or less intact to the King James Version (KJV) of 1611. The members of King James's translation committee followed their base text, the Bishops Bible, except in one word. With minor spelling and punctuation changes made since 1611, the phrase now reads: "And the Lord set a mark upon Cain, lest any finding him should kill him."[2]

My translation of Genesis 4:13–16 is as follows:

> Cain said to the Lord, "My punishment is too large to bear! You've driven me off the land today, and I'll be hidden from you. I'll be a roamer and a wanderer on the earth, and anyone who finds me will kill me." The Lord said to him, "Not so. Anyone who kills Cain will suffer sevenfold vengeance."
>
> So the Lord gave Cain a sign that no one finding him would kill him. Cain went out from the presence of the Lord and lived in the land of Nod, east of Eden.[3]

This article is about the words in the King James translation of Genesis 4:15 and the Hebrew words from which they are translated. My purpose in using only the KJV in the quotations is to show that its translation of Genesis 4:15 is inconsistent with how it treats the same words and grammatical features in other passages. The KJV misses the meaning of this verse and leads to an interpretation that cannot be defended on the basis of the words in the Hebrew Bible. I will discuss each of the pivotal words individually (*set*, *mark*, *upon*, *lest*) and also examine them in tandem with each other.[4] It will become apparent that God was not putting a mark on Cain at all. He was giving Cain a sign to accompany a promise. This correction is important, because

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2. The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints uses in its publications the 1769 Oxford edition of the KJV, lightly modernized. The 1611 KJV has, "And the LORD set a marke upon Cain, lest any finding him, should kill him."

3. Kent P. Jackson, *Genesis: A New English Translation with the Joseph Smith Translation and Commentary* (Provo, UT: Religious Studies Center, Brigham Young University [BYU]; Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2025), 15.

4. Readers can compare how Genesis 4:15 has been rendered in modern translations at biblegateway.com. Discussions of the words can be found in various commentaries and in works cited in them. See, for example, E. A. Speiser, *Genesis: Introduction, Translation and Notes* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1964), 31n15; Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15* (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987), 109–10; Nahum M. Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 35; Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1990), 234–35; Kenneth A. Mathews, *Genesis 1–11:26* (Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1996), 278; Bruce K. Waltke, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 99.

it allays the need to conjecture what the "mark" may have been, and it is particularly relevant in the context of speculations regarding race and skin color.

Mark

Tyndale translated the word *mark* from the Hebrew noun *ʾôt*. He had encountered that word before, in Genesis 1:14, where he translated *ʾôt* with a different word, *sign*. *Sign* is in fact the best translation of *ʾôt* in most cases. In some instances, *mark* has been used in English with the meaning "sign," but that is not among its primary meanings.[5] We cannot be certain why Tyndale chose it in Genesis 4:15, but he did so clearly knowing that it was an anomaly, because at every other occurrence he chose different words for *ʾôt* that were more in line with its actual meaning. In all, he translated *ʾôt* with *sign* twenty-five times,[6] with *token* eleven times,[7] and with *miracle* eleven times.[8] Those are all valid translations of the Hebrew word. Nowhere else, aside from Genesis 4:15, did he translate it with *mark*.

All the English translators from Tyndale to the KJV followed Tyndale in rendering *ʾôt* here as *mark*.[9] The word *ʾôt* appears seventy-nine times in the Hebrew Bible (Old Testament). Out of all those, in only this one instance, here in Genesis 4:15, does the King James translation render it as *mark*. It was not a good word choice for Tyndale, nor is it in

5. See Chaucer, "Holy ordre is chief of al the tresor of god and his especial signe and mark of chastitee" "The Parson's Tale*," Canterbury Tales*, 893, chaucer.fas .harvard.edu/pages/parsons-prologue-and-tale; Shakespeare, "Shees a faire lady, I doe spie some markes of loue in her," *Much Ado about Nothing,* 2.3.247-48, The Folger Shakespeare Library, folger.edu/explore/shakespeares-works /much-ado-about-nothing/read/2/3/; Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. "mark," III.9.a.

6. Genesis 1:14; 9:13, 17; Exodus 4:9; 10:1; 13:9, 31:13, 17; Numbers 14:11; 16:38; Deuteronomy 4:34; 6:8, 22; 7:19; 13:1, 2; 26:8; Joshua 4:6; Judges 6:17; 1 Samuel 2:34; 10:7; 14:10; 2 Kings 19:29; 20:8, 9.

7. Genesis 9:12; 17:11; Exodus 3:12; 4:8 [twice], 4:28; 12:13; 13:16; Numbers 17:10; Joshua 2:12; 1 Samuel 10:9.

8. Exodus 4:17, 30; 7:3; 8:23; 10:2; Numbers 14:22; Deuteronomy 11:3; 28:46; 29:3; 34:11; Joshua 24:17. In the only other occurrence, Numbers 2:2, Tyndale translated it as *arms*, as in "coat of arms," a banner or sign identifying the clan.

9. For the uses and semantic ranges of the Hebrew words cited, see, primarily, Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament,* 4 vols. (Leiden, NE: Brill, 1994–99) [hereafter *HALOT*], also Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1972). Online sources such as biblehub.com and biblegateway.com are also helpful.

the KJV. In a minority of places the KJV translates *ʾôt* as *token*, which is a more archaic word but also means "sign," and in two places the KJV translates it as *miracle*:

> all those men which have seen my glory, and my **miracles**, which I did in Egypt and in the wilderness. (Numbers 14:22)[10]

> and his **miracles**, and his acts, which he did in the midst of Egypt. (Deuteronomy 11:3)

The word *ʾôt* in the Hebrew Bible is used with reference to something out of the ordinary that God does to bless his people and that he invokes as evidence of his power and loving-kindness.[11] Often it is a sign by which God confirms a promise he makes, as in the case of the rainbow that he set in the cloud after the Flood:

> This is the **token** of the covenant which I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for perpetual generations: I do set my bow in the cloud, and it shall be for a **token** of a covenant between me and the earth. (Genesis 9:12–13)

The covenant promise precedes the sign, and the sign is then shown as evidence that God's promise will be fulfilled.

Moses instructed the Israelites what to say if their children asked them why they needed to follow all the "testimonies, and the statutes, and the judgments":

> The LORD brought us out of Egypt with a mighty hand: And the LORD shewed **signs** and wonders, great and sore, upon Egypt, upon Pharaoh, and upon all his household, before our eyes. (Deuteronomy 6:21–22)

The signs and "wonders" (a parallel and synonymous term) that the Israelites witnessed with their own eyes were evidence of God's miraculous goodness to them, goodness that called forth, in return, their obedience to those testimonies, statutes, and judgments.

Through Isaiah, God promised the Judahite king Ahaz that his enemies would be destroyed and that he and his people would be safe. The faithless Ahaz did not want to believe the message, so God promised to give him a sign as proof. Ahaz was invited to choose the sign:

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10. Emphasis added in all the passages quoted.
11. See F. J. Helfmeyer, "אות, *ʾôth*," in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren, trans. John T. Willis (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1974), 1:167–88; see also *HALOT*, 26.

> Ask thee a **sign** of the Lord thy God. (Isaiah 7:11)

Ahaz refused the offer, so the Lord decided to give him a sign anyway:

> Therefore the Lord himself shall give you a **sign**. (Isaiah 7:13–14)

That sign would be the birth of a child.

All these are examples of the noun *ôt* as it appears in the Old Testament, and they are consistent with the use of the word in Genesis 4:15 in the story of Cain. In the narrative, the Lord curses Cain, who was a farmer, that the ground would no longer produce for him. As a result, he would become a roamer and wanderer on the earth. Cain protests that his punishment is too great for him to bear: "Behold, thou hast driven me out this day from the face of the earth; and from thy face shall I be hid; and I shall be a fugitive and a vagabond in the earth; and it shall come to pass, that every one that findeth me shall slay me." The Lord's response was clear: no one was going to kill Cain. In the King James Bible, the response begins with a weak "therefore," but the Hebrew is better translated with an emphatic "Not so!"[12] "Whosoever slayeth Cain, vengeance shall be taken on him sevenfold." To confirm this forceful promise that no one would kill Cain, the Lord gives him a sign (Genesis 4:11–16). The sign, unspecified in the narrative, provides assurance to Cain that God will honor his promise. The text gives no indication that anyone else saw the sign, and indeed it suggests that Cain was the only one to view it.

Tyndale was not the inventor of the idea that the sign was something on the person of Cain, because some ancient and medieval commentators had already done the same. John Chrysostom (c. 347–407) identified Cain's sign as tremors, paralysis, and continuing grief.[13] Rabbis in the Talmudic-era *Bereshit Rabba* identified Cain himself as the sign—a sign for murderers or for penitents.[14] The late first-millennium *Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer*[15] and Rashi (1040–1105) believed a letter of the alphabet was inscribed on Cain's arm or forehead.[16] Ibn

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12. As in the Septuagint and in many modern translations, for example "Not so," English Standard Version, New International Version, New Revised Standard Version; "No," Revised English Bible.

13. *Against Judaizing Christians* 8.2.10, ccjr.us/dialogika-resources/primary-texts-from-the-history-of-the-relationship/chrysostom#homily8.

14. *Bereshit Rabba* 22, sefaria.org/Bereshit_Rabbah.22.13?lang=bi.

15. *Pirkei DeRabbi Eliezer* 21, sefaria.org/Pirkei_DeRabbi_Eliezer.21.10?lang=bi.

16. *Commentary on the Tanakh*, sefaria.org/Genesis.4.15?lang=bi&with=Rash

Ezra (1092–1167) wrote, "Some say that the sign the Lord set for Cain was a horn. Others say God removed fear from Cain's heart and gave him courage to face the world."[17] It is likely that traditions like these, still alive in the cultures of later centuries, are the reason why Tyndale selected *mark* in the verse and why the King James translators retained it.

The earliest known translation of the Hebrew Bible is the Greek Septuagint, translated in the third and second centuries BC so that Greek-speaking Jews could have access to their scriptures. In virtually every case, the Septuagint renders the word *ʾôt* with *sēmeion,* which means "sign" or "miracle."[18] It is found in several passages in the New Testament with those meanings, as in the following passage where it serves the same function that *ʾôt* serves in the Old Testament verses above:

> And many other **signs** truly did Jesus in the presence of his disciples, which are not written in this book: But these are written, that ye might believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God. (John 20:30–31)

The sign (*ʾôt*, *sēmeion*) is given so those who see it will believe. The Lord promises Cain that he will continue to live, despite his murder of his brother, and gives him a sign to confirm the promise.

The Sabbath is a sign (*ʾôt*) of a relationship between God and his children, people set up objects to serve as reminders, prophets engage in metaphorical actions to teach others, and worshipers engage in symbolic activities to show their devotion to God.[19] And, more than anything else, God does amazing things to show his love and power, particularly in delivering Israel from Egypt and from other

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i&lang2=en.

17. *Ibn Ezra's Commentary on the Pentateuch,* trans. H. Norman Strickman and Arthur M. Silver (New York: Menorah, 1988), 86.

18. See Walter Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature,* ed. Frederick William Danker, ed. and trans. William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich, 3rd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000) [hereafter *BDAG*], "σημειον," "*sign* or *distinguishing mark* by which someth. is known, *sign, token, indication,*" 920. The examples provided are best translated as "sign" or "miracle."

19. Relationship, as in Exodus 31:13, 17; Ezekiel 20:12, 20. Reminders, e.g., Joshua 4:6; Isaiah 8:18. Metaphorical actions, e.g., Isaiah 20:2–5; Ezekiel 4:3. Devotion to God, e.g., Genesis 17:11; Exodus 13:14–16; Deuteronomy 6:6–9; 11:18.

woes.[20] The Bible uses *'ôt* in each of these cases. But none of the seventy-nine occurrences of *'ôt* in the Hebrew Bible show God placing a curse on someone, and not a single passage uses *'ôt* to refer to anything that God sets on the person of a recipient.[21] The translation *mark* in the King James Bible is not justified.

Upon

The Hebrew prepositional prefix *lə-*, translated with *upon* in the KJV of Genesis 4:15, does not mean "upon." It almost always means "to" or "for."[22] It is one of the most common features in Hebrew, and it appears about 1,300 times in Genesis alone. Of all those 1,300 Genesis occurrences, the KJV translates it as *upon* only here and in one other place.[23] *Upon* is an inaccurate and unnecessary translation in Genesis 4:15.

Set

The Hebrew verb *śîm* appears over five hundred times in the Old Testament. Its primary meaning is "put" or "set," and that is how the early English translators rendered it in Genesis 4:15: "And the LORde put . . ." (Tyndale), "And the LORD set . . ." (KJV). *Put* and *set* are words that usually connote what we do with tangible objects that can be relocated. In the examples that follow, notice the different word choices that the King James translators made, all translating from *śîm*.

> and [Abraham] bound Isaac his son, and **laid** him on the altar upon the wood. (Genesis 22:9)

> [Jacob] took the stone that he had **put** for his pillows, and **set** it **up** for a pillar. (Genesis 28:18)

Words with these meanings are the most common uses of the

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20. There are many examples, such as Exodus 7:3; 10:1–2; 12:13; Numbers 14:11, 22; Deuteronomy 4:34–35; 6:20–23; 11:1–3; 26:8; 29:3; 34:11–12; Joshua 24:16–18; Judges 6:17–22; Nehemiah 9:9–10; Psalms 78:43; 105:26–27; 135:9; Isaiah 7:11, 14; Jeremiah 32:20–21.

21. In 1 Samuel 2:34–35, the death of two men is called a sign of God's rejection of them and their family.

22. Hebrew prepositions can be used in a variety of ways. *HALOT*, 507–11, lists several nuanced applications of *lə-* that are found in the Bible. None of the meanings provide support for the wording in the KJV.

23. In Genesis 31:35, the translators used *upon* in an effort to provide idiomatic English. The KJV's use of the word there follows the English translations back to Tyndale.

verb *śîm.*[24] With less tangible objects, however, other English words are usually required for rendering it, depending on the English idiom.

> I will **make** thy seed as the dust of the earth. (Genesis 13:16)

> he hath **made** my mouth like a sharp sword. (Isaiah 49:2)

The Greek Septuagint renders *śîm* with the verb *títhēmi* in Genesis 4:15. Like *śîm* its primary meaning is "put" or "set," and it also includes meanings such as "establish" and "appoint."[25] As we look at how the Greek translators rendered the *śîm* along with *lə-*, the preposition that follows it in the Hebrew of Genesis 4:15, it is clear that even translated from the Septuagint the reading "set a mark upon Cain" is not to be desired. In place of a preposition, the Septuagint uses *tō,* which is the Greek definite article in the dative case. It serves to identify the indirect object in the clause, the one to/for whom the Lord established the sign.

The following examples use *śîm* and *'ôt* together. In them *'ôt, sign,* is the direct object of *śîm,* just as in Genesis 4:15. They are analogous to that verse because in them God provides a sign and invokes it as evidence for the truth of his promise.

> and my **signs** which I have **done** among them. (Exodus 10:2)

> How he had **wrought** his **signs** in Egypt. (Psalms 78:43)

> They **shewed** his **signs** among them, and wonders. (Psalms 105:27)

Done, *wrought*, and *shewed* in these verses are all translated from the verb *śîm,* each followed by an *'ôt*, and each parallel to what is happening in Genesis 4:15 — to establish the validity of God's promises. There is nothing like a mark in any of these, let alone a mark placed onto a person.

The verb *śîm* is also used to express meanings such a "appoint," "establish," or "assign."

> And the Lᴏʀᴅ **appointed** a set time, saying, To morrow the Lᴏʀᴅ shall do this thing. (Exodus 9:5)

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24. *HALOT*, 1321–26.

25. *BDAG*, s. v. τίθημι, 1003–4. The semantic range of *títhēmi* is shown to be narrower than that of *śîm*, as in some cases, the Septuagint translators chose verbs other than *títhēmi* to express what Hebrew expresses adequately with *śîm.* See Genesis 13:16; Exodus 9:5; 10:2; Isaiah 42:12.

> And the priest **appointed** officers over the house of the Lᴏʀᴅ. (2 Kings 11:18)

> **unto** whom the prince of the eunuchs **gave** names: for he **gave unto** Daniel the name of Belteshazzar. (Daniel 1:7)

The example from Daniel is particularly relevant to Genesis 4:15, because it includes both *śîm* and the preposition *lə-* (translated here as "unto"). The *lə-* precedes the recipient. Just as the Babylonian official gave names to Daniel and his friends, the Lord gave a sign to Cain. Likewise, both *śîm* and *lə-* are used together in the following phrases:

> The Lᴏʀᴅ lift up his countenance upon thee, and **give thee** [give to thee] peace. (Numbers 6:26)

> My son, **give**, I pray thee, glory **to** the Lᴏʀᴅ God of Israel. (Joshua 7:19)

> he hath **made with** me an everlasting covenant. (2 Samuel 23:5)

> Let them **give** glory **unto** the Lᴏʀᴅ. (Isaiah 42:12)[26]

In these phrases, the *lə-* precedes and identifies the intended recipient of the action of the verb *śîm*, just as it does in Genesis 4:15.

In the KJV translations above, it will be noted that *śîm* (in present or past tense) is translated with a variety of English words, including *make*, *give*, *wrought*, and *shewed*. These are not ideal translations of *śîm*, but word choices like these are often required in order to create idiomatic English sentences, as can be seen in these verses in responsible translations like the English Standard Version and the New Revised Standard Version.

To Not

The last word is the least important of the words to consider, but in some ways it drives the modern translations of the words discussed above. In Hebrew the formation *ləbiltî* negates the action of the verb that follows it, usually an infinitive.[27] Preceding a verb, *ləbiltî* has the meaning "to not." In Genesis 4:15, the King James translators used for it "lest," resulting in "lest any finding him should kill him." But the Hebrew says, literally, "to not kill him anyone who finds him." Those

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26. Other examples include 1 Kings 20:34 and 1 Chronicles 17:21.
27. The word *ləbiltî* is a preposition-noun combination that acts as a preposition or conjunction.

words restate the Lord's promise to Cain, and they express in words the message of the visual sign that God gave him.

The word *ləbiltî* is found seventy-eight times in the Hebrew Bible. King James's translation committee rendered it as "lest" only here and in one other place, so "lest" is not a common or desirable way to express it.[28]

The question about the meaning of *ləbiltî* in Genesis 4:15 concerns how best to translate it in the context of the other words in the clause. Should the meaning be "a sign *that* no one finding him would kill him," or "a sign *so* no one finding him would kill him"? The first of these translations is to be preferred, because it is consistent with the meaning of the previous words in the sentence, that the Lord established a sign for Cain. This interpretation suggests that the sign was something shown to Cain; it was a sign *to* Cain.

The second option suggests that the sign was to be shown to others who would see Cain, but that interpretation requires bending the meaning of the previous words. The King James wording, with the anomalous use of "lest," adopts that meaning. Translators may have been influenced by the Greek Septuagint, which suggests "so that" here, as does the Latin Vulgate. That interpretation would have the sign be visible to others.

There are numerous examples that show that, in Genesis 4:15, "a sign *that* no one finding him" is the desired option. Notice that all the following examples of *ləbiltî* come after a command or a promise:

> Hast thou eaten of the tree, whereof I commanded thee **that** thou shouldest **not** eat? (Genesis 3:11)

> commanded him concerning this thing, **that** he should **not** go after other gods. (1 Kings 11:10)

> he commanded his sons **not to** drink wine. (Jeremiah 35:14)

> I lifted up my hand [I swore] unto them in the wilderness, **that** I would **not** bring them into the land which I had given them. (Ezekiel 20:15)[29]

Our example of *ləbiltî* in Genesis 4:15 comes after a promise — a

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28. Genesis 38:9. *Lest* usually comes from a completely different Hebrew word, *pen*.

29. Other examples include Deuteronomy 4:21; Judges 21:7; Ruth 2:9; 2 Kings 17:15.

promise that God would protect Cain, accompanied by a sign to confirm the promise.

Translating Genesis 4:15

Although this article is about the King James translation and Hebrew words, it is worth noting that translators have dealt with the passage in a variety of ways, as can be seen in these examples: Tyndale's contemporary Martin Luther (1534) has "Und der HERRE macht ein zeichen an Kain," which suggests that the sign was on Cain's person.[30] The modern German Einheitsübersetzung, in contrast, has, "Darauf machte der Herr dem Kain ein Zeichen," which states that the Lord made the sign "for Cain." The New Revised Standard Version, the English Standard Version, and the New International Version follow in the KJV tradition, as do Hamilton[31] and Speiser.[32] The New American Standard Bible (1995) has, "The Lord appointed a sign for Cain," with similar wordings in the Evangelical Heritage Version and in Friedman's translation.[33] Wenham's "The Lord placed a sign for Cain" is inelegant but linguistically accurate.[34] Sarna writes that it was a sign showing that Cain "is under divine protection." He prefers the traditional translation but gives as an alternative, "The Lord gave Cain a [confirmatory] sign that no one who met him would kill him," the interpretation argued in this article.[35]

Despite the continuance of the customary wording in several modern translation, the Hebrew words in Genesis 4:15 do not support the idea in the King James translation that God put a mark on Cain. Instead, it shows that God established a sign for him as evidence that no one would kill him, despite his crime. Whatever the sign was, it was apparently sufficient to give Cain the assurance he needed. That is what the sign was for. As the Medieval Rabbi Ibn Ezra wrote, it was "a sign that no harm would befall him," and "Cain finally believed God because of

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30. Huldrych Zwingli's 1531 Züricher Bibel translates the words the same way Luther did. Both use *Zeichen*, which means "sign."

31. Hamilton, *Genesis: Chapters 1–17*, 229.

32. Speiser, *Genesis*, 30.

33. Richard Elliot Friedman, *The Bible with Sources Revealed: A New View into the Five Books of Moses* (New York: HarperCollins, 2003), 39.

34. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 93.

35. Sarna, *JPS Commentary*, 35, brackets in original.

the sign."[36] Perhaps, as Rabbi Radak wrote in the thirteenth century, God "gave him a sign in his heart."[37]

When Cain left God's presence, he moved to another land, had a child, built a city, but presumably spent the rest of his days as a roamer and a wanderer (Genesis 4:16–17). We are not told why God chose to preserve Cain's life and provide the promise to him. But the biblical narrative is stronger because of this story, because ever since his own time, Cain himself has been a sign, a sign that we live in a fallen world in which evil exists, and a sign that evil actions are not always recompensed by God in this life, or in the way that we would prefer. Whatever the nature of the sign, Cain's story continues to be a sign for us.

A lesson we can learn from all this is that we must be careful how we deal with received traditions and how we interpret the words of received translations. Reading the scriptures cautiously and humbly protects us from indefensible conclusions, and reading the Bible with a deep dive into the meanings and uses of its ancient Hebrew and Greek words is often a necessity. As for the translation of Genesis 4:15, here are some options that attempt to put the phrase into idiomatic modern English:

> The LORD set in place a sign for Cain that no one finding him would kill him.

> The LORD made a sign for Cain that no one finding him would kill him.

> The LORD showed a sign to Cain that no one finding him would kill him.

> The LORD gave Cain a sign that no one finding him would kill him.

Perhaps in the case of the story of Cain, a better understanding of the Bible's words can even help change attitudes that are a legacy of the past.

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36. *Ibn Ezra's Commentary on the Pentateuch*, 86.

37. "He gave him a sign in his heart, i.e., He fortified his self-confidence which had been shattered," Radak (Rabbi David Kimchi, 1160–235), *Commentary on the Tanakh*, sefaria.org/Genesis.4.15?lang=bi&with=Radak&lang2=en.

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