

Discussion of Genesis 4:24

**"If Cain shall be avenged sevenfold,
then Lamech seventy-sevenfold."**

by

Samuel Shuckford

After Cain had been so wicked as to kill his brother, GOD was pleased to pass a very just sentence upon him. His [Cain's] aim was to have made himself great and flourishing, in favor with GOD and credit with men, without anyone to stand in competition with him. But he was disappointed in every particular he aimed at for his attempting to compass his designs so wickedly: [1] the ground was sentenced not *to yield him her strength*¹, that is, he was to be unprosperous in his husbandry and tillage; [2] and instead of being in GOD's favor without rival, he was henceforwards² *to be hid from his face*; that is, he was not to have any longer that happy converse with the Deity, which these first ages of the world were blessed with; and [3] he was to be³ *a fugitive and a vagabond*, so far from being able to live among his friends with credit and satisfaction, that the sense of what he had done should so⁴ hurry him as to force him to retire from them to a distant part of the world, as a mischievous person not fit to live and be endured among them.

Cain had, in a little time, a full conviction of his folly and wickedness. He repeats over⁵ GOD's sentence against himself, as acknowledging the justice of it, and withal, thought so ill of himself and had so true a sense of his crime as to imagine⁶ *that everyone that happened on him would kill him*, and that mankind would rise against him as a person not fit to be suffered to live, and in their own defense destroy him. A sense of these things moved him to a great compunction: *Is my sin, cried he, too great to be forgiven?*--for this is the true sense of ver. 13. We translate the words *my punishment is greater than I can bear*. But the Hebrew word אָוֵן⁷ *aven*, signifies iniquity rather than punishment; and the verb נָשָׂא *nasha* signifies to be forgiven as well as to bear; and the verse may be rendered either positively, *my iniquity is too great to be forgiven*, or the⁸ Hebrew expositors

1 Gen. 4:11,12.

2 Ver. 14.

3 Ver. 12.

4 The Hebrew words express an unsettledness of mind, which probably induced the LXX. to translate them *ζενων και τρεμων*.

5 Gen. 4:14.

6 Ibid.

7 See the word so used [in] 1 Sam. 20:8; and in other places of Scripture so used very often, particularly [in] Job 11:6.

8 See Fagius in loco.

take it by way of interrogation, *is my iniquity too great to be forgiven?*

And this last sense is the best, for upon Cain's being brought to a sorrow for his sin, GOD was pleased, in some measure, to pardon his transgression. There was as yet no express law against murder, and GOD⁹ gave a strict charge that no one should for this fact destroy Cain. Some writers¹⁰ make this an addition to his punishment, but I see no reason for their opinion. As Moses has represented this affair, it appears that Cain was very sorry for what he had done, and acknowledged the just sentence of GOD against, but represented that he should be in continual danger of a still further evil, namely, that it should come to pass that everyone that should find him, or happen on him, should kill him.

Hereupon he bewailed the wretched state he had brought himself into and cried, *Is my sin too great to be forgiven?* Can I find no mercy, no mitigation of the punishment I have brought upon myself? Hereupon GOD was pleased so far to favor him as to give orders that no one should kill him, and to make him [feel] easy by giving him assurance of it. For so the words, verse 15, which we render *God set a mark upon Cain*, should be interpreted. The Hebrew word אֹת *aoth* is a sign or token. The bow (Gen. 9) was to be לְאוֹת *leaoth*, for a sign or token, that the world should be no more destroyed by water. So here the expression, וַיִּשֶׂם יְהוָה לְקֵין אֹת , *vejashem Jehovah lecaïn Aoth*, is not as we render it--*And God set a mark upon Cain*--but GOD gave or appointed a sign or token, that is, to assure him that no one should kill him. And here I might observe that there is no foundation in the original for the guesses and conjectures about the mark set upon Cain, about which so many writers have egregiously trifled.

After this Cain removed with his wife and children from the place where he had before lived and traveled into¹¹ the land of Nod. Here he settled, and as his family increased, took care to have their dwellings built near to one another, and so made a little town or city which he called Enoch¹² (from a son he had of that name). Here his descendants flourished till the Flood. They were the mechanics and tradesmen of the age they lived in. The sons of Lamech, who was the fifth in descent from Cain, were of the chief artificers of their time. Lamech¹³ had two wives, Adah and Zillah. By Adah he had two sons, Jabal and Jubal.¹⁴ Jabal invented tents and gathered together herds of cattle¹⁵. Jubal found out music. By Zillah he [Lamech] had a son named Tubal Cain¹⁶, who invented the working of brass and iron, and a daughter called Naamah. Moses only mentions her name. The

9 Gen. 4:15.

10 Fagius, Menochius, Tirnius, and other expositors give the place this sense.

11 Gen. 4:16.

12 Ver. 17.

13 Ver. 19.

14 Ver. 20.

15 Ver. 21.

16 Ver. 22.

Rabbins¹⁷ say she was the inventor of spinning.

The descendants of Cain lived a long time in some fear of the family of Adam, lest they should attempt to revenge upon them Abel's death. It is supposed¹⁸ that it was for this reason that Cain built a city--[in order] that his children might live near together and be able more easily to join and unite for the common safety. Lamech endeavored to reason them out of these fears, and therefore calling his family together, he argued with them to this purpose: "Why should we make our lives uneasy with these groundless suspicions? What have we done that we should be afraid of? We have not killed a man nor offered any injury to our brethren of the other family. And surely reason must teach them that they can have no right to hurt us. Cain indeed, our ancestor, killed Abel. But GOD was so far pleased to forgive his sin as to threaten to take seven-fold vengeance on anyone that should kill him. If so, surely they must expect a much greater punishment who shall presume to kill any of us. If Cain shall be avenged seven-fold, surely Lamech, or any of his innocent family, seventy-seven fold."

This I take to be the meaning of the speech of Lamech to his wives [in] Gen. 4:23. Moses has introduced it without any connection with what went before or follows after, so that at first sight it is not easy to know what to apply it to. The expression itself is but dark, and the expositors have attempted to explain it very imperfectly. . . . The most probable sense of the words is, I think, that which I have given them in the paraphrase above. *I have slain a man* should be read interrogatively, *Have I slain a man?* That is, "I have not slain a man *to my wounding*"--in other words, that I should be wounded for it--"nor a young man *to my hurt*." [Simply put], "Nor have I killed a young man that I should be hurt or punished for it."

And this is the sense which the Targum of Onkelos most excellently gives the place. "I have not killed a man," says Onkelos, "that I should bear the sin of it, nor have I destroyed a young man, that my offspring should be cut off for it." And the words of the next verse agree to this sense so exactly--*there will be a seven-fold vengeance paid for killing Cain, surely then a seventy times seven for killing Lamech*--that I wonder how Onkelos should mistake the true meaning of them [these latter two] when he had so justly expressed the sense of the other [aforementioned].

Excerpt from Book I in *The Sacred and Profane History of the World Connected* by Samuel Shuckford, vol. I, fifth ed. (London: Printed for William Baynes, Paternoster Row, 1819). **Note:** The text has not been modified, except that punctuation has been modernized and long paragraphs have been divided.

17 See Genebrard in Chron. & Lyra.

18 Menochius in loc.