

WHY WAS LAMECH BLIND?

by

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The biblical story of Cain and Abel was one that was often retold and elaborated by the Bible's earliest interpreters—elaborated because, like so many of the early narratives in Genesis, the biblical account itself seemed here and there to cry out for further explanation and details. One such detail, missing in the Genesis account itself, is the manner in which Cain ultimately met his death; and the exegetical legend that came to fill in this blank—the legend by which Cain ends up being killed by his descendant Lamech—is one that has not suffered from inattention among modern students of the history of biblical exegesis. The tale of Lamech's killing of Cain was, for example, a favorite of Louis Ginzberg, who treated it at the beginning of his scholarly career, discussed its sources in detail in his *Legends of the Jews*, and turned to it again in a later essay on Jewish folklore;¹ it was also treated at length by V. Aptowitz's in his book-length study on the Cain and Abel tradition;² nor has the story been neglected in more recent times.³ Indeed, some of this interest among modern scholars was no doubt stirred up by the many depictions of the death of Cain that survive from the Middle Ages, for the legend in question was apparently prized by scholars and illustrators;⁴ no other such tale, observed one recent writer on the subject,

1. L. Ginzberg, "Die Haggada bei den Kirchenvätern und in der apokryphischen Litteratur" in *Monatsschrift für Geschichte und Wissenschaft des Judenthums* 43 (1899), 293–99; *The Legends of the Jews* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1913), I 116–17 and V 145–7; idem., "Jewish Folklore East and West" reprinted in his *On Jewish Law and Lore* (New York: Atheneum, 1977) 61–73.

2. V. Aptowitz, *Kain und Abel in der Agada* (Vienna: R. Löwit Verlag, 1922).

3. For some recent references see E. Reiss, "The Story of Lamech and its Place in Medieval Drama," in *Journal of Medieval and Renaissance Studies* vol. 2 (1972) 35–48; cf. below.

4. See on this R. Mellinkoff, *The Sign of Cain* (Berkeley: University of California, 1981).

“seems to have had such persistent appeal in the literature and art of West and East.”⁵

According to this legend, Lamech ends up killing his ancestor Cain quite by accident. Lamech, although blind, is nevertheless a proficient hunter. He manages this by having himself led through the woods by a guide—his son Tubal-Cain, or an unnamed boy, or a shepherd, depending upon one’s source—who both helps him along and points his hands in the direction of any potential prey. Lamech is an excellent shot, and, thus guided, is able to dispatch animals with arrow, stone, or other instrument. But on the day in question, Lamech’s guide mistakes Cain (in some versions, by seeing Cain’s horns, the “sign” that God granted him in Gen. 4:16, protruding from behind a bush or tree) for a wild animal. Lamech’s aim is true, and the “animal” falls, only to be discovered to be Lamech’s own ancestor, Cain. In his grief Lamech then blindly claps both hands together and inadvertently kills his guide as well. Although he is thus the author of two deaths, Lamech nonetheless protests that both killings were accidental and begs forgiveness, exclaiming, “Have I killed a man for my hurt—so that I be hurt on his account? Or a boy for a bruise—that I be bruised on his account?”⁶

As noted, this was a very popular legend, and one that followed its own career in diverse Jewish and Christian writings of late antiquity and the Middle Ages.⁷ The origins of this “legend” are not hard to discover:

5. Sh. Spiegel, “Introduction,” L. Ginzberg, *Legends of the Bible*, (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1956), p. xx.

6. א”ל כי איש הרגתי למצעי שיבואו עלי פצעים, וילד לחבורתי שיבואו עלי חבורות כשכילי? This particular wording of Lamech’s exclamation, cited in *Yalqut Shim‘oni* ed. D. Heiman, I. N. Lehrer and I. Shiloni [Jerusalem: Mosad ha-Rav Kook, 1973] vol. I p. 135) is somewhat similar to a version cited by Rashi in his biblical commentary ad loc. and attributed there to “R. Tanhuma” (see below); note, however, that that particular text is in fact not to be found in either the standard Tanhuma or in Buber’s edition. See also J. Theodor and Ch. Albeck *מדרש בראשית רבא*², vol. I (Jerusalem: Wahrman Books, (1965), 224–25 and notes for other (minor) variations on this exclamation of Lamech’s.

7. Among Jewish sources, this story is to be found in *Midrash Tanhuma* (Parash. Ber., 11) ed. H. Zundel (Jerusalem: Lewin-Epstein, 1980) p. 10 (on a similar *ילמדנו* fragment cf. Aptowitz, *Kain und Abel*, 159, n. 243; on the other version attributed to Tanhuma, see Rashi ad loc. and above, note 6); *Targum Ps.-Jonathan* (ad loc.); *Midrash Aggadah* ed., S. Buber (Vienna, 1895), 13–14; *Midrash ha-Gadol*, ed. M. Margoliouth (Jerusalem: Mosad ha-Rav Kook, 1975), 1 127; *Sefer ha-Yasher* ed. L. Goldschmidt (Berlin: Benjamin Harz, 1923) 7–8; *Leqah Tob*, ed. S. Buber (Vilna: Rom, 1880), 1 31. Among early Christian sources see: Jerome, Epistle 36 (to Damascus) in I. Hilberg, *S. Eusebii Hieronymi Opera Sect. I Pars I (Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum vol. 54)* (Leipzig: G. Freytag, 1910), 269–75; Ephraem Syrus, *Sancti Ephraem Syri in Genesis et Exodum Commentarii* ed. R. M. Tonneau (*Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium vol. 152*)

it seems to have been crafted specifically to explain the brief and somewhat puzzling utterance spoken by Lamech in Genesis:

. . . And Methushael engendered Lamech. And Lamech took two wives: the name of the first was Adah, and the name of the second was Zillah. . . . And Lamech said to his wives: "Adah and Zillah hear my voice, oh wives of Lamech listen to my words: For I have killed a man for my wound, and a boy for my bruise. If Cain is avenged sevenfold, then Lamech seventy-seven."

Who were the unnamed "man" and "boy" that Lamech confesses to killing here—and why is he saying these things in the first place? Today a biblicist would of course approach this text, and these questions, with the assumptions and methods of modern historical criticism. Lamech's "war-boast," as it is known to modern scholars, is simply that: a ferocious bit of chest-thumping, presumably promulgated by the Lamech clan or tribe, to the effect that any would-be attacker ought to beware, for Lamechite retribution will be even fiercer than the (apparently already proverbially fierce) retribution of the Kenites, descendants of Cain. Indeed, the verbs in this saying of Lamech's are, even in many Bible translations commonly used today, still slightly mistranslated; for their perfective form ought really not to be rendered (as above) as if past tense, "I have killed a man," but rather in the present, or even conditionally, "I *would* kill a man for [i.e. to avenge] a wound, indeed, I would kill a[n innocent] boy for [i.e. to avenge] a bruise; if Cain [whose unequal retribution is already proverbial] is avenged sevenfold, then Lamech seventy-seven!"⁸ In other words, the "man" and "boy" referred to are purely hypothetical, part of Lamech's (i.e., the Lamech-clan's) threatened retribution. Presumably, these words at some point constituted a well known tribal saying, not unlike the tribal sayings that presently appear as the "Blessings of Jacob" in Gen. 49 or the "Blessings of Moses" in Deut. 33—save that, in Lamech's case, they were apparently

(Louvain, 1955), 53 (Latin translation, pp. 41–42); C. Bezold, *Die Schatzhöhle* (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs'sche Buchhandlung, 1883), Syriac and Arabic 48–50, German 11–12; S. C. Malan, *The Book of Adam and Eve, also called the Conflict of Adam and Eve with Satan* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1882), 121–3—cf. A. Dillmann, *Das christliche Adam-buch des Moregenlandes* (Göttingen: Dieterichsche Buchhandlung, 1853), 85 and 140; and further sources mentioned below. There are other Christian historians and chroniclers who apparently were aware of a tradition linking Lamech with Cain's death, but they do not present the story in detail: See thus J. A. Fabricius, *Codex Pseudepigraphicus Veteris Testamenti* (Hamburg: Felsiner, N.D.) I 119–22. Cf. Aptowitzer, 59–68 and notes.

8. See the discussion in my *Idea of Biblical Poetry* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981) 31–32 and n. 83.

the only surviving bit of “information” about this eponym, and thus shaped his appearance in the antediluvian genealogy of Gen. 4.

But of course such an approach to understanding this text would have been quite incompatible with the assumptions and methods of those Jews and Christians who sought to expound biblical texts in the closing centuries before and just after the start of the common era. For them, to begin with, this text was part of the great and harmonious sacred history, one which could hardly be read in isolation or analyzed atomistically. If Scripture had Lamech refer to his killing of a “man” and a “boy” (i.e. as past events, for so the verbs were now understood), were not these references, however cryptic, significant bits of information, *facts* to be fitted into an overall understanding of this primeval period and its various inhabitants? And indeed, Lamech’s very mention of Cain in the next line of this saying certainly suggested that there was some relationship between the whole story of Cain and Abel and the “man” and/or “boy” being referred to here. And so this saying of Lamech’s was doubtless scrutinized from an early period by exegetes bent on discovering what information it might contain about the later fate of Cain.

It certainly would be convenient if the “man” in Lamech’s saying were to be identified as Cain—i.e. to interpret Lamech’s saying as a confession that he killed his ancestor—for the very absence in the Bible of an account of Cain’s demise was in itself an exegetical problem. True, there are many early figures whose death is not mentioned in the Bible, but in Cain’s case, the Scriptural silence might be taken to imply that Cain died a natural death, which in turn might suggest that the intentional murder of Abel went unpunished, or underpunished, by God, with exile as Cain’s final sentence. Now this is in fact virtually stated in the biblical account, but was obviously unsatisfactory to exegetes: it was necessary for Cain to die for his crime—indeed, if possible, to die by the hand of a man, in keeping with the principle of Gen. 9:6 “Who sheds man’s blood, by man shall his blood be shed.”

All this might make of Lamech, via his reference to having killed a man, a welcome possible instrument of divine justice. There is a further factor in the connection of this saying of Lamech’s with Cain: it lies in the actual wording of Lamech’s apparently innocent formulation, “For I have killed a man.” Now אִישׁ, “man,” was hardly as pale a word to early exegetes as its translation might suggest. For although it generally means “man,” it sometimes appeared to early exegetes to refer specifically to angelic or quasi-divine men as well: Jacob wrestles with a divine creature, an angel, who is identified in Genesis 32:25 as an אִישׁ; Abraham is visited in Gen. 18:2 by three “men” (אֲנָשִׁים) who were commonly

reckoned by Jewish exegetes to be angels;⁹ Daniel similarly is addressed by a quasi-divine **שׂא** in Daniel 12:7. Now, thus far in the book of Genesis, there is one person in the world who has been specifically called by this (therefore evocative) title **שׂא**, and that is Cain: for upon his birth his mother has exclaimed, “I have acquired an **שׂא** with the Lord” (Gen. 4:1). So if Lamech somewhat later on says: “I have killed an **שׂא**”—placing the word, in fact, before the verb, in what might appear to exegetes to be emphatic position—he is virtually identifying the victim as Cain. And the mention of Cain in the next line could only have been seen as confirmation that this was indeed the case.

From this basic set of assumptions most of the other details of the legend follow. Thus we can easily understand why Tubal-Cain or “the boy” is present in so many versions of this story. Lamech will kill both a man, Cain, and a boy, his guide, and so his words in Gen. 4:23 will become more comprehensible. (The identification of the “boy” in this saying as Tubal-Cain seems to have been encouraged by the fact that Tubal-Cain’s birth is in fact mentioned in the verse just preceding the saying). But there is still one question which to my knowledge has never been answered with regard to this widely diffused exegetical legend, one that is, the more we consider it, striking, namely: Why is Lamech blind? Or, to state things a bit more pointedly: Why should an exegete have gone to all the trouble of dreaming up the improbable circumstances whereby Lamech is both blind and yet also a hunter, so that he can end up killing Cain in a blind hunting accident? Surely there is no mention in the Genesis text of Lamech being blind, and no necessity for him to be blind in order to kill Cain and Tubal-Cain.

In seeking the answer to this question we must begin with a word about the overall exegetical framework in which Lamech’s saying was viewed. To modern biblicists, as noted, his words appear essentially as a tribal boast, but to early exegetes they would have seemed quite the opposite: a Jewish or Christian exegete living in late antiquity surely would wish to find Lamech’s “confession” of murder to be just that; a confession, and one tinged with some contrition and regret. For if not, why should Scripture have recorded his saying these terrible things, and in an apparently pointless and inconsequential fashion? And why, if he were really boasting, was he not immediately struck down for his violence and arrogance? It might therefore seem only natural to early

9. See thus Targum Pseudo-Jonathan and Genesis Rabba ad loc., also b. Baba Metzi’a 86b. Later Christian interpreters sometimes understood this passage in terms of the doctrine of the trinity; see Augustine, *On the Trinity* II 10–12.

exegetes that, far from boasting, Lamech was in fact seeking to exculpate himself in this saying, indeed, seeking to distinguish himself from his ancestor Cain, the world's first murderer. And so, via various strategies, Lamech's words were turned by early exegetes into a kind of *a fortiori* argument for divine forgiveness: if Cain, who deliberately murdered his own brother in cold blood, nevertheless found some measure of divine mercy and had his just execution put off (for so Gen. 4:15 was understood),¹⁰ then I, Blind Lamech, who have killed quite by accident, should be all the more entitled to forgiveness. Thus, as we have seen in the words cited above, Lamech's "boast" in Gen. 4:23 is turned into a question: "Have I killed a man for my hurt—so that I be hurt on his account? Or [have I killed] a boy for a bruise—that I be bruised [on his account]?"¹¹

But then, do we not have here the explanation for Lamech's blindness? That is, did not exegetes make Lamech out to be blind in order to make

10. See Targum Onkelos ad loc., and the sources cited above, n. 7; note also the discussion in Aptowitz, *Kain und Abel*, 82–93.

11. Perhaps this transition was abetted by reading the sentence's initial word, כִּי ("for," "indeed," etc. in biblical Hebrew), as if it were Mishnaic Hebrew's interrogative particle כִּי. Note that Targum Onkelos does not even translate Lamech's words as a question, but a negation: "I have not killed a man, that I should suffer punishment for his sake; nor have I even injured a child, so that my offspring should be destroyed for his sake." Such a reading, as Aptowitz pointed out (*Kain und Abel*, 69), appears to carry the rhetorical question one step further: the expected "No" answer turns the question into a negative assertion. It is also to be noted that Onkelos apparently takes no account of our legend in his translation: Lamech has nothing to do with the death of Cain. Indeed, underlying his words may be only the midrashic motif (see thus Theodor-Albeck, *בראשית רבא* I 224–25) of Lamech's wives' refusal to bear more children since they will in any case only be swept away in the coming Flood. Lamech's protest, à la Onkelos, is thus that since he is innocent of even so much as injuring a child, his own children ("seed") should not be swept away. (The only problem that exegetes might find with this understanding is that, if Lamech has indeed killed no one, even by accident, then why is he urging that his "punishment" be put off for seventy-seven generations? What punishment?) *Genesis Rabba* still more explicitly eschews the Lamech legend in explaining Gen. 4:23 ("Cain killed and had [his punishment] suspended seven generations; I, *who have not killed*—does it not follow that mine be suspended seventy and seven?"), but it is to be observed nevertheless that its rewording of Gen. 4:23 itself is almost identical with that of *Yalqut Shim'oni* etc. cited above, and would be entirely compatible with our legend. It seems possible, then, that the *Genesis Rabba* version has taken what was already a traditional rewording of Gen. 4:23—one originally connected to the Lamech legend—and fitted it to an interpretation which, in keeping with Onkelos, no longer makes use of it. Somewhat conversely, later Jewish sources, while intent on incorporating the Lamech legend into their understanding of Gen. 4:23, had then to struggle in order to accommodate the Onkelos translation to fit the legend. See, most awkwardly, Rashi ad loc., and cf. *Midrash Tanhuma* (above, n. 7) and sources cited below.

him into an *inadvertant* murderer, thus supporting his apparent plea for forgiveness in Gen. 4:23? No doubt this may appear to be the case after the fact,¹² but if one puts oneself for a moment in the original exegete's position, there seems to be no compelling necessity for creating the unlikely figure of a blind Lamech in order to have his words here be understood as a plea for mercy. For, to repeat: if the whole point of this legend is to explain Lamech's words "I have killed a man," as a reference to Cain, and so have Abel's murder punished by Cain's own progeny—then why have him just kill Cain plain and simple? Now if, in order for the troubling verse 4:23 ("I have killed a man" etc.) to make sense in Lamech's mouth, it is necessary to believe that he killed Cain by accident and is now begging to have that fact taken into account on his behalf, well then have him kill Cain by accident—a hunting accident, by all means! But what need is there to make the hunter *blind*? Certainly hunting accidents have frequently occurred in the past (and are no doubt still occurring) without the hunters in question being blind: and if Cain's "sign" is interpreted (as it was in various traditions) as a set of horns or some other animal-like mark of fierceness, one capable of warding off potential attackers, then the chances of Cain's being mistaken for a beast certainly increase, and the likelihood of just such an accident occurring seems all the greater. Indeed, as we have seen above, many versions of this legend do indeed have Tubal-Cain caught sight of Cain and mistake him for an animal. So why not have the mistake be entirely Lamech's, i.e. have a seeing Lamech catch sight of the animal-like Cain, kill him by accident (along with, perhaps, a boy conveniently accompanying him), and then exclaim, "For I have killed a man . . ."?

Indeed, there is such a version of our legend. An Armenian account, published by J. Issaverdens at the turn of the century, says simply this:

"And Lamech, having mounted a horse and gone hunting, Cain came in sight from afar with his horns and skin; Lamech, on seeing him thought it was a stag, and letting an arrow fly from his bow, he killed Cain."¹³

12. I suspect that this is why Ginzberg et al. never turned to consider the cause of Lamech's blindness specifically.

13. J. Issaverdens, *The Uncanonical Writings of the Old Testament* (Venice: Armenian Monastery of St. Lazarus, 1901), 39. Cf. the Armenian version published by E. Preuschen, "Die Apokryphen Gnostischen Adamschriften" in W. Diehl et al., *Festgruss Bernhard Stade*, 197–98, where Lamech sees Cain but fails to recognize him. Nor was this the only way to have Cain killed by accident: the account of Eutychius says that Lamech, "shooting an arrow in play, hit his ancestor Cain through the heart and killed him" (Aptowitzer, *Kain und Abel*, 65; cf. Malan, *Book of Adam and Eve*, 228 n. 18).

Is it possible that this Armenian version is actually the oldest form of our legend, and that the detail of a blind Lamech was only created later on? I do not think so. Not only is Lamech's blindness an integral part of so many other attested versions of this story (including versions undoubtedly older than the above-cited Armenian text), but there is little possibility of explaining how an originally simple and workable story, one in which a seeing Lamech kills Cain by mistake, might then be turned into a complicated and unlikely one involving a blind hunter who is nonetheless a good shot and so on and so forth. On the other hand, precisely because the blind hunter is so improbable, the reverse process—whereby the original detail of Lamech's blindness was dropped, because apparently unnecessary, from the Armenian version—is all too understandable.¹⁴ And let no one argue that Lamech was made blind in order to account for his killing of Tubal-Cain by clapping him between his hands! If a seeing Lamech could accidentally kill Cain, he might just as easily do away with Tubal Cain without having to be blind: the same arrow shot by Lamech might do in both Cain and Tubal-Cain, or the two might be jointly killed in some other fashion. But what this Armenian text does show is that a Lamech legend that has Lamech kill Cain by accident was certainly possible without Lamech being blind; and this only further highlights our question—why *was* Lamech blind?

In considering this question, it is interesting to observe that, while virtually all of our other extant versions of this legend are unanimous in making Lamech blind, *how* he came to be blind is almost never stated—and this also seems, on reflection, somewhat odd. The exceptions of which I am aware are two. The first comes in a somewhat neglected source of early traditions, the so-called *Palaea Historica*;¹⁵ it begins its version of the Lamech legend by stating that “Lamech was born blind from the belly of his mother.” Quite the opposite is the account contained in the medieval aggadic collection *Sefer ha-yashar*: in typical fashion it assimilates Lamech's case to that of Isaac in the Bible, stating: וְלִמְךָ זָקֵן בָּא בְיָמִים, וְתַכְהִין עֵינָיו—“And Lamech, advanced in years, became faint of sight . . .”¹⁶

14. Indeed this is quite clearly what happened in the *Book of the Bee* (above, n. 7), which dropped the detail of Lamech's blindness although its source, *The Cave of Treasures*, had included it.

15. On this source see D. Flusser, “Palaea Historica: An Unknown Source of Biblical Legends” in *Scripta Hierosolymitana* 22 (1971), 48–79; S. Lieberman, “Zeniḥin” *Tarbiz* 42 (1972–3) 42–54; and E. Turdeanu, *Apocryphes slaves et roumains de l'Ancien Testament* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1981), 392–403.

16. Goldschmidt, *Sefer ha-Yashar*, 8. A similar assumption may underly Malan's *Book of Adam and Eve* (above, n. 7), which has Lamech on the fateful day take up “a bow he had kept ever since he was a youth, ere he became blind . . .”

The latter surely is a literary flourish, one of those bits of re-biblicizing that *Sefer ha-yashar* loves to perform on midrashic motifs. But it is perhaps worthy of our attention that both explanations, blindness from birth and blindness in old age, are eminently sensible—for these are indeed two of the commonest causes of blindness. Why then, one might ask, were they not part of our legend from the beginning? Yet it is a fact that one finds these explanations not only in two relatively late sources, but sources which—it is true of both of them—are usually highly expansive and enjoy adding new details and explanatory matter to traditions received in far sparser form. Is there some reason for the earlier sources not telling us how Lamech came to be blind?

The answer to all of these questions, it seems to me, is to be found—as with so much in this tale—in the very words of Gen. 4:23, כִּי אִישׁ הִרְגַנְתִּי לַפְעֻעֵי וְיֶלֶד לַחֲבוּרְתִּי. Now the meaning of most of this sentence, in the context of the legend that we have been tracing, is fairly clear: the אִישׁ in question is the only אִישׁ known so far, Cain, and Lamech, far from boasting, is here seeking to exculpate himself, claiming that, unlike Cain, he is an accidental murderer and thus deserving of forgiveness. Now in turning Lamech's boast into an apology, the makers of our legend found themselves obligated to alter somewhat the significance of the words לַפְעֻעֵי, “for my hurt,” and לַחֲבוּרְתִּי, “for my bruise,” as well. For if the original sense of the boast hinged on the idea of revenge—“I would kill a man *for* [i.e. to avenge] a hurt [lit., “wound”] to me, and a boy *for* my bruise”—it was now necessary to account in some other fashion for these same words. And so we saw above that various sources turned the whole into a question, “Have I killed a man for my hurt—so that I be hurt on his account? Or a boy for my bruise—that I be bruised on his account?”

It is interesting to observe that while this is the tactic adopted in most of the rabbinic texts cited, it was far from the only one available. Another version of the story, also found in *Yalqut Shim'oni* and, in slightly different form, the version attributed by Rashi to Midrash Tanhuma,¹⁷ reads as follows:

[Lamech protested:] “The man whom I killed, did I hurt him intentionally, so that the hurt might be called by name [i.e. attributed to me]? And the boy whom I killed, by *my* bruise was he killed, and was I not an accidental killer?”

In this reading, the possessive elements in “my hurt” and “my bruise” are being turned from what classical grammarians used to call “objective” to

17. See *Yalqut Shim'oni*, 136 and n. 44.

“subjective” genitives, that is, “my hurt” is no longer being understood as “a hurt inflicted upon me” but as “a hurt I have inflicted.” What is more, the preposition—ל (rendered above as “for”) is here being understood more as “by.” Lamech’s argument thus becomes: True, the man was hurt, but was it really by *my* hurt[ing], i.e. did I do it “intentionally, so that the hurt [lit., “wound”] might be called by my name”?¹⁸

The collection *Midrash Aggadah*, edited by S. Buber, adopts a somewhat similar, yet still distinct, tactic:

[Adah and Zillah, Lamech’s wives] said to him: You have killed Cain our forebear, and you have likewise killed Tubal-Cain our son; so we will not heed you. Whereupon he said: Have I killed a man for my hurt, and a boy for my bruise? This refers to Cain, whom I did not kill intentionally as Cain himself had done, who killed his brother Abel with wounds and bruises (כפצעים וחבורות), intentionally.

According to this understanding of the text, Lamech’s rhetorical question is really: Did I, like Cain, kill a man with wounds and bruises? In this reading, similar to the one immediately preceding, the phrase “for my hurt” is understood as “by my hurting [lit. “wounding”] him”—but it is understood to mean: Did I kill him in such a manner, with wounds and bruises, so that my intention to kill was unmistakable—as was the case with Cain’s killing of Abel?¹⁹ The expected answer is “Of course not”; Lamech thus hopes to gain exoneration by the absence of signs of beating on Cain’s body.²⁰

These quite divergent explanations should, if nothing else, return us to the two mysterious words they seek to gloss, לפצעי and לחבורתי, “for my hurt [=wound]” and “for my bruise”; for the very variety of explanations suggests that, at least with regard to the significance of these two

18. The same understanding seems to underly the version found in the aforementioned *Sefer ha-Yashar*, which restates Lamech’s words thus: ויאמר למך לנשיו ערה וצלה שמען קולי, נשי למך האינינה אמרתי: אך עתה הנה חשבתם ואמרתם כי איש הרגתי לפצעי וילד לחבורתי על לא חמס: הלא אתם ידעתם כי אני זקנתי ושכתי ועיני כברו מזוקן ואעש את הרבר הזה כלא דעת.

19. Note in this connection the explanation of the anomalous plural “bloods” in Gen. 4:10 that is found in Mishna *Sanhedrin* 4:5.

20. This version is in turn somewhat reminiscent of one cited in the Genesis commentary of Ephraem Syrus. There, Lamech’s wives, descendants of the (good) Seth, urge their husband to right conduct, whereupon he exclaims, “And do you see anything hateful in me, similar to that which my father Cain did? Indeed, have I killed a man for my wounds, as Cain did? Or, have I—in the same way that he rained down blows upon Abel, as upon a boy, and then killed him—have I so killed a boy with my blows? If I had done as Cain, and Cain received retribution sevenfold, I truly pass sentence upon myself that I shall receive seventy and seven” (Tonneau, *Ephraem Syri in Genesim* . . . , 53).

words, there was no single, clear tradition in the hands of our exegetes.²¹ Is it possible that the various readings, which in one way or another all seek to turn Lamech's sentence into a rhetorical question—"And should my [accidental] killing of a man turn to my detriment, my wound? Did he die by my wounding?" etc.—conceal a still older reading, one which saw in this no rhetorical question at all, but the simple assertion that Lamech had indeed killed both a man and boy by accident, an accident due to his blindness? In this case, *לפצעי* and *לחבורתי* would both be references to one and the same circumstance, Lamech's blindness, and the ambiguous preposition—*ל* would thus be understood as meaning "because of," "on account of."²² "I have killed a man because of my wound," says Lamech, "indeed, a boy because of my bruise," in other words, it is not my fault, these things happened because I am blind. If so, then behind this understanding of *פצע* and *חבורה* as references to the fact of Lamech's blindness might lie an original tale that had Lamech blind not—as the *Sefer ha-Yashar* has it—in his old age, nor yet—as the *Palaea* has it—from birth, but as the result of some wound inflicted upon him.

There is no direct evidence of such a story. But there is one version of our tale which, it seems to me, might support such an interpretation. It appears in a version of *Combat of Adam and Eve with Satan*, published by Dillmann as *Das Christliche Adambuch*:

Lamech drew his bow and let fly an arrow and prepared . . . and the slingshot. And now, as Cain was coming out of the field, the shepherd said to Lamech: Shoot, here he comes! And he shot him with an arrow that struck him in the side, and then he shot at him from the slingshot, and struck him in the face and knocked out both his eyes, and he fell straight down and died. Then Lamech went off toward him, and the youth said to him, "O my lord, it is indeed Cain whom you have slain."²³

21. The Septuagint translation renders *לפצעי* as εἰς τραῦμα ἔμοι. Apart from rendering the particle—*ל* with what is its frequent Greek equivalent, this translation may incorporate the understanding seen above, "for the purpose of my being wounded," i.e., *שיבואו עלי*, *פצעים* (for this use of εἰς see W. Bauer, *A Greek-English Lexicon*² [revised by F. W. Gingrich and F. W. Danker] [Chicago: University of Chicago, 1979] p. 229, 4 d and e); or possibly in the instrumental sense, "by my wound" or "by my wound[ing]" (Bauer, p. 230, 9 b). The Vulgate's *in vulnus meum* may reflect the same sense of purpose, although Jerome's letter to Damascus (above, n. 7) has *in vulnere meo* which, while far from unequivocal, would seem to favor the instrumental approach.

22. Cf. Onkelos' translation of it here as *בדיל*.

23. Dillmann, *Das Christliche Adambuch*, 85. Cf. Malan, *Book of Adam and Eve*, 122-

23. Cf. two recent joint studies by A. Battista and B. Bagatti, *La Caverna dei Tesori*

What this account seems to be at pains to tell us is that Lamech, in killing Cain, also blinded him in the process. In fact such an intention could not be more obviously, or awkwardly, stated: for in this version Lamech first shoots Cain with an arrow, then takes a stone—apparently this text wishes Cain to be finished off with the same murder weapon with which he killed Abel—and strikes him with it, knocking out both Cain’s eyes. But why the *eyes*, that is, why have Lamech both kill Cain and blind him at the same time? Apparently the reason for this otherwise gratuitous detail is to provide some justification for the difficult words that Lamech speaks just after the deed is done, *בִּי אִישׁ הִרְנֹתִי לַפְּצָעִי*. For according to this scenario, what Lamech is saying is “I have killed a man *by means of* my wound,” that is I knocked out his eyes and so inflicted upon him the same wound from which I myself suffer, save that he has died from it. But if so, then this story presupposes that Lamech himself had indeed suffered a wound which deprived him of his sight. For this whole story has been devised to explain *בִּי אִישׁ הִרְנֹתִי לַפְּצָעִי* as “I killed *by* my wound,” that is, I killed him in exactly the same manner that I myself had been wounded, in the eyes.²⁴

Let us retrace our steps. The whole legend of Lamech’s killing of Cain was generated by the mysterious words, “For I have killed a man . . .” etc. in Gen. 4:23. Early exegetes identified the “man” in question as Cain—thereby arranging for Cain to be “executed” and duly punished by divine justice—and identified the boy as Lamech’s own son Tubal-Cain. Lamech would kill the two “for my hurt and . . . for my bruise.”

(Studium Biblicum Franciscanum Collectio Minor 26) (Jerusalem: Franciscan Printing Press, 1979), and idem., *Il Combattimento di Adamo* (SBF, Col. Min. 29) (Jerusalem: Franciscan Printing Press, 1982).

24. As noted, this version of the story is found in Dillmann’s *Christliche Adambuch*. The text shows signs of its author having harmonized two separate versions (perhaps one of them found in the Syriac *Cave of Treasures*)—this would explain the somewhat awkward fact that, in his retelling, Lamech uses two separate weapons, bow and slingshot, to kill Cain. It is nonetheless interesting that in the Syriac version of the *Cave*, Lamech’s arrow is said to strike Cain *byt’ yny*. The phrase can mean “between the eyes” (so it is translated by Bezold, *Der Schatzhöhle*, p. 50, Budge, *The Book of the Cave of Treasures* [London: Religious Tract Society, 1927] p. 78; cf. Battista-Bagatti, *Caverna*, p. 54 “tra gli occhi”) or else “forehead” (=“place of the eyes”). This is an odd place for a fatal arrow to strike! Perhaps it stands the same sort of attempt to understand *לַפְּצָעִי* as “by means of my wound.” (That it is also connected with the place of Cain’s “sign”—which, according to one midrashic tradition, was a letter of the divine name placed on Cain’s forehead—certainly seems possible, but such would run quite counter to the “sign’s” purpose, namely, to ward off would-be murderers; what is more, in many of the versions cited Cain’s sign is explicitly *not* a letter or mark on the forehead, but a set of horns.)

But these words, if understood in terms of revenge, might in themselves still pose a problem, implying an intentional murder and presumably thus requiring that Lamech, too, be punished. Could not the words be understood in some other fashion? And so it was that the particle— λ came to be read at some point as “on account of,” “because of”; Lamech’s boast was turned into an apology—“I killed a man on account of my wound.” If the wound in question were such as to prevent Lamech from functioning properly—from, in fact, *seeing*—then Lamech could both finish off Cain and yet be free of any charge of revenge; and what is more, the words “for my wound” etc. in Gen. 4:23 would be turned from an exegetical liability into an exegetical asset.