

# Curse and mark of Cain

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The **curse of Cain** and the **mark of Cain** are phrases that originated in the story of [Adam and Eve](#) in the [Hebrew Bible](#). In the stories, if someone did something to harm [Cain](#), the damage would come back sevenfold. Some interpretations view this as a physical mark, whereas other interpretations see the "mark" as a sign, and not as a physical mark on Cain himself. The [King James Version](#) of the [Bible](#) reads "set a mark upon Cain."

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## Origins

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*Main article:* [Cain and Abel](#)

There is no clear consensus as to what Cain's mark was.<sup>[1]</sup> The word translated as "mark" in [Genesis 4:15](#) is [תֹּאֵל](#) (*ʾōt*), which could mean a sign, omen, warning, remembrance, motion, gesture, agreement, miracle, wonder, or, most commonly, a letter. In the [Torah](#), the same word is used to describe the stars as signs or omens ([Genesis 1:14](#)), the rainbow as the sign of [God](#)'s promise to never again destroy his creation with a [flood](#) ([Genesis 9:12](#)), [circumcision](#) as a token of God's covenant with [Abraham](#) ([Genesis 17:11](#)), and the miracles performed by [Moses](#) before the [Pharaoh](#) ([Exodus 4:8,9,17,28](#); [7:3](#); [8:23](#); [10:1,2](#)).

## Curse of Cain

[Glasgow Botanic Gardens](#). Kibble Palace. Edwin Roscoe Mullins – *Cain or My Punishment is Greater than I can Bear* ([Genesis 4:13](#)), about 1899.

The narrative of the curse of Cain is found in the text of [Genesis 4:11–16](#). The curse was the result of Cain murdering his brother, Abel, and lying about the murder to God.<sup>[2]</sup> When Cain spilled his brother's blood, the earth became cursed as soon as the blood hit the ground. In a sense, the earth was left "drinking Abel's blood".<sup>[3]</sup> [Genesis 4:12](#) gives a two-part [sentencing](#) for Cain's curse. The first concerns the earth that was cursed by Abel's blood.<sup>[4]</sup> Should Cain attempt to farm the land, the earth would not yield produce for him. This may imply why he went on to build cities,<sup>[5]</sup> namely the City of Enoch. The second part of the curse marks Cain as a fugitive ([Hebrew](#): נֹעַ ) and a wanderer ([Hebrew](#): נָדַד ). The combination making up this Hebrew phrase נֹעַ וְנָדַד, "fugitive and wanderer", is unique in the Hebrew Bible. Modern interpretations of the Hebrew verse 12 suggest that Cain went on to live a nomadic lifestyle and that he was also excluded from the family unit.<sup>[6]</sup> In the [Septuagint](#), the emphasis on Cain's curse is dramatically increased by the combination of the Greek participles στείνων και τρέμων ("groaning and shaking upon the earth").<sup>[7]</sup> [Syriac Christianity](#)<sup>[8]</sup> interprets the Greek version to mean that Cain experienced a real physical affliction<sup>[9]</sup> that would enable others to know who he was when they saw him. [Philo](#) interprets the *Greek* verse 12 as an allegory for Cain's fear of being [soulless](#). The [Samaritan Pentateuch](#) and the [Targums](#) translate the same verse to mean that Cain feared being "an exile and an unstable man".<sup>[10]</sup>



## Mark of Cain

The [Hebrew](#) word for *mark* ('Oth, אֹת) could mean a sign, an omen, a warning, or a remembrance.<sup>[11]</sup> The *mark of Cain* is God's promise to offer Cain divine protection from premature death with the stated purpose of preventing anyone from killing him. It is not known what the mark was, but it is assumed that the mark was visible.<sup>[12]</sup> Some have speculated that the mark was a Hebrew letter placed on either the face or the arm.<sup>[13]</sup> The [Septuagint](#) translates the *mark* as a "sign". Thus, it is speculated that the mark served as a *sign* to others not to commit the same offense.<sup>[14] [15]</sup>

## Judaism

[Abba Arika](#) ("Rav") said that God gave Cain a dog, making him an example to murderers. [Abba Jose ben Hanan](#) said that God made a horn grow out of Cain. [R. Hanin](#) said that God made Cain an example to [penitents](#) ([Gen. Rab.](#) 22:12).<sup>[14]</sup>

[Rashi](#) comments on Genesis 4:15 by saying that the mark was one of the Hebrew letters of the [Tetragrammaton](#): "He engraved a letter of His [God's] Name onto his [Cain's] forehead."<sup>[16]</sup>

In [Kabbalah](#), the [Zohar](#) states that the mark of Cain was one of the twenty-two [Hebrew letters](#) of the [Torah](#), although the Zohar's native [Aramaic](#) does not actually tell us which of the letters it was. Some commentators, such as [Rabbi Michael Berg](#) in his English commentary on the Zohar, suggest that the mark of Cain was the letter [vav](#).<sup>[17]</sup>

## Christianity

According to author Ruth Mellinkoff, commentators' interpretations of the nature of the "mark" depended on their views regarding the status of Cain, as either being given additional time to repent or as being further shamed.<sup>[18]</sup>

In [Syriac Christianity](#), early exegesis on the "curse" and the "mark", associated the curse of Cain with black skin, although not in a racial sense.<sup>[19]</sup>

In an Eastern Christian (Armenian) Adam-book (5th or 6th century), it is written: "And the Lord was wroth with Cain. . . He beat Cain's face with hail, which blackened like coal, and thus he remained with a black face".<sup>[20]</sup> Again, this indicated that his face, not his body, had been changed, and that this change had no bearing on any racial or ethnic group.

## American Protestant racial beliefs on the Mark of Cain

At some point after the start of the [slave trade in the United States](#), many<sup>[citation needed]</sup> [Protestant](#) denominations began teaching the belief that the mark of Cain was a dark skin tone, although early descriptions of [Romani](#) as "descendants of Cain" written by [Franciscan](#) friar [Symon Semeonis](#) suggest that this belief had existed for some time. Protestant preachers wrote exegetical analyses of the curse, with the assumption that it was dark skin.<sup>[21]</sup>

### Baptist segregation

The split between the Northern and Southern [Baptist](#) organizations arose over doctrinal issues pertaining to [slavery](#) and the education of slaves. At the time of the split, the [Southern Baptist](#) group used the curse of Cain as a justification for slavery. Some 19th- and 20th-century Baptist ministers in the [Southern United States](#) taught the belief that there were two separate heavens; one for [blacks](#), and one for [whites](#).<sup>[22]</sup> Southern Baptists have either taught or practiced various forms of [racial segregation](#) well into the mid-to-late-20th century, though members of all races were accepted at worship services.<sup>[23]</sup> In 1995, the [Southern Baptist Convention](#) officially denounced [racism](#) and apologized for its past defense of slavery.<sup>[24]</sup>

The curse of Cain was used to support a ban on ordaining blacks to most Protestant clergies until the 1960s in both the United States and Europe<sup>[citation needed]</sup>. The majority of Christian churches in the world, including the [Catholic Church](#), [Eastern Orthodox](#) churches, [Anglican](#) churches, and [Oriental Orthodox](#) churches, did not recognize these interpretations and did not participate in the religious movement to support them. Certain Catholic [dioceses](#) in the Southern United States adopted a policy of not ordaining blacks to oversee, administer the [sacraments](#) to, or accept confessions from white parishioners. This policy was not based on a "curse of Cain" teaching, but was justified by the widely held perception that slaves should not rule over their masters. However, this was not approved of by the [Pope](#) or by any papal teaching.<sup>[25]</sup>

## Curse of Ham

Further information: [Canaan § Black Africans as descendants of Canaan](#)

The Curse of Cain was often conflated with the [Curse of Ham](#). According to the Bible, [Ham](#) discovered his father [Noah](#) drunk and naked in his tent, but instead of honoring his father by covering his nakedness, he ran and told his brothers about it. Because of this, Noah cursed Ham's son, [Canaan](#) by saying that he was to be "a servant of servants". ([Genesis 9:20–27](#)) One interpretation of this passage states that Ham married a descendant of Cain. While there is no indication in the Bible of Ham's wife descending from Cain, this interpretation was used to justify slavery and it was particularly popular in North America during the [Atlantic slave trade](#).<sup>[26][27]</sup>

Modern scholars now believe that the [Canaanites](#) are of [Semitic](#) origin, and therefore unrelated to black Africans.

## Latter-day Saints

Main articles: [Black people in Mormon doctrine](#), [Black people and early Mormonism](#), [Black people and Mormonism](#), and [Black Mormons](#)

[Mormonism](#) began during the height of Protestant acceptance of the curse of Cain doctrine in North America, as well as the even more popular [curse of Ham](#) doctrine. Like many North Americans,<sup>[26][27]</sup> [Mormons](#) of the 19th century commonly assumed that black Africans had Cain's "mark" of black skin,<sup>[28]</sup> and Ham's curse to be servants of servants.<sup>[29]</sup> [Joseph Smith](#) indicated his belief in the curse of Ham theory in a parenthetical reference as early as 1831.<sup>[30]</sup> In the [Pearl of Great Price](#), considered scripture in the LDS movement, [Enoch](#) talks about shunning the descendants of Cain and that they had black skin<sup>[31]</sup>: "And Enoch also beheld the residue of the people which were the sons of Adam; and they were a mixture of all the seed of Adam save it was the seed of Cain, for the seed of Cain were black, and had not place among them." ([Moses 7:22](#))

As related by [Abraham O. Smoot](#) after his death, [Apostle David W. Patten](#) said he encountered a black man in [Paris, Tennessee](#), who said that he was [Cain](#). The account states that Cain had earnestly sought death but was denied it, and that his mission was to destroy the souls of men.<sup>[32][33]:85</sup> The recollection of Patten's story is quoted in [Apostle Spencer W. Kimball](#)'s [The Miracle of Forgiveness](#).

Although not explicitly stated in [Latter-day Saint scripture](#) current official publications of the church teach that Ham's wife was a descendant of Cain. The Guide to the Scriptures, published as an explanatory companion to the scriptures, states "Ham's wife, [Egyptus](#), was a descendant of Cain".<sup>[34]</sup> The Old Testament student manual, which is published by the Church and is the manual currently used to teach the [Old Testament](#) in LDS Institutes, states:

Therefore, although Ham himself had the right to the priesthood, Canaan, his son, did not. Ham had married Egyptus, a descendant of Cain (Abraham 1:21–24), and so his sons were denied the priesthood.<sup>[35]</sup>

## Priesthood ban

Main article: [Black people and Mormon priesthood](#)

There is evidence that Joseph Smith did not consider the ban on black men to the [priesthood](#) to be relevant in modern times, since he himself (and other church leaders close to him) ordained black men into it,<sup>[36]</sup> notably [Elijah Abel](#) and [Walker Lewis](#).

After the [death of Joseph Smith](#), [Brigham Young](#) (the second [President of the Church](#)) accepted the idea that people of African ancestry were generally under the curse of Cain, and in 1852, he stated that people of black African descent were not eligible to hold the church's priesthood.<sup>[37]</sup> Young taught that in the [war in heaven](#), both Cain and Abel were leaders. The spirits of black people fought under Cain and were assigned to be Cain's descendants. Those that fought under Abel were assigned to be Abel's descendants. Cain hoped that by killing his brother, the spirits that were under him would have an advantage over the spirits under Abel. However, God cursed Cain and his descendants to not have the priesthood until all of Abel's descendants had the priesthood. The spirits of black people understood this and stood with Cain and accepted the punishment.<sup>[38][39]</sup>

The ban on the priesthood affected black members differently than it did in other churches because the LDS Church has a [lay](#) priesthood in which virtually all worthy male members become priesthood holders.

Several of Young's successors defended the priesthood ban as being a result of the curse of Cain, though some disagreed. [Sterling M. McMurrin](#) reported that, in 1954, church president [David O. McKay](#) said: "There is not now, and there never has been a doctrine in this church that the negroes are under a divine curse. There is no doctrine in the church of any kind pertaining to the negro. We believe that we have a scriptural precedent for withholding the priesthood from the negro. It is a practice, not a doctrine, and the practice someday will be changed. And that's all there is to it."<sup>[40]</sup>

In 1978, LDS Church president [Spencer W. Kimball](#) reported receiving [a revelation](#) from God allowing all worthy male members of the church to receive the priesthood without regard to race or color.<sup>[41][42]</sup> Although the church had previously been criticized for its policy during the [civil rights movement](#), the change seems to have been prompted by problems facing mixed-race converts in [Brazil](#).<sup>[43]</sup>

There has neither been an official or an explicit church repudiation of its policy, nor has there been an admission that it was a mistake. Many black church members think that giving an apology would be a "detriment" to church work and a catalyst for further racial misunderstanding. [African-American](#) church member Bryan E. Powell says: "There is no pleasure in old news, and this news is old." Gladys Newkirk agrees, stating: "I've never experienced any problems in this church. I don't need an apology .... We're the result of an apology."<sup>[44]</sup> Many black Mormons say that they are willing to look beyond the former teachings and cleave to the doctrines of the church, in part because of its powerful, detailed teachings on life after death.<sup>[45]</sup>

The LDS Church has issued an official statement about past practices and theories regarding skin color, stating: "[t]oday, the Church disavows the theories advanced in the past that black skin is a sign of divine disfavor or curse, ... Church leaders today unequivocally condemn all racism, past and present, in any form."<sup>[46]</sup>

### **Civil rights**

See also: [Mormonism and slavery](#) and [Civil rights and Mormonism](#)

When Utah was considering slavery, Brigham Young told the Utah Territorial Legislature that the curse of Cain required slavery. He argued that until all of the descendants of Abel have access to the priesthood, all of the descendants of Cain should remain in servitude.<sup>[47]:28</sup> He argued that because they did not have the right to govern the affairs of the Church due to the priesthood ban, they also shouldn't have the right to govern the affairs of the state, including the right to vote.<sup>[47]:47</sup> He warned that if they made the children of Cain equal to them, they would be cursed.<sup>[47]:48</sup> He also argued that if someone married a descendant of Cain, that they would also have the same curse.<sup>[47]:48</sup> The church has since repudiated all of these teachings.<sup>[48]</sup>

## See also

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- [Afrikaner Calvinism](#)
- [Badge of shame](#)
- [Curse of Ham](#)
- [Cain tradition](#)
- [Ashwatthama](#)
- [Pre-Adamite](#)

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2. <sup>^</sup> [Byron 2011](#), p. 93.
3. <sup>^</sup> [Byron 2011](#), p. 95: [Genesis 4:11](#)
4. <sup>^</sup> [Byron 2011](#), p. 97: Kugel, 163
5. <sup>^</sup> [Byron 2011](#), p. 97: Wenham, 108
6. <sup>^</sup> [Byron 2011](#), p. 97.
7. <sup>^</sup> [Byron 2011](#), p. 98: Brayford, 254
8. <sup>^</sup> [Byron 2011](#), p. 100.
9. <sup>^</sup> [Byron 2011](#), p. 98: See footnote 14
10. <sup>^</sup> [Byron 2011](#), pp. 98–100.
11. <sup>^</sup> [BDB, Francis Brown; Samuel Rolles Driver; Charles Augustus Briggs \(1996\). The Brown Driver Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon: with an appendix containing the Biblical Aramaic; coded with the numbering system from "Strong's Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible" \(7. print. 1997 ed.\). Peabody: Hendrickson. p. 16f. ISBN 9781565632066.](#)
12. <sup>^</sup> [Byron 2011](#), p. 119: Mellinkoff, 1942, p.210; Moberley, 2007, p.11-28
13. <sup>^</sup> [Byron 2011](#), p. 120: (*Tg. Ps.-J. Gen 4:15, Pirqe R. El. 21*)
14. <sup>^</sup> [Jump up to:<sup>a</sup> <sup>b</sup> Byron 2011](#), p. 120: *Gen. Rab. 22:12*
15. <sup>^</sup> [Byron 2011](#), p. 106.
16. <sup>^</sup> ["Genesis - Chapter 4 \(Parshah Bereishit\) - Tanakh Online - Torah - Bible". Chabad.org. Retrieved 2012-09-21.](#)
17. <sup>^</sup> ["Bereshit A: Chapter 48". Zohar.com. Retrieved 2020-09-01.\]](#)
18. <sup>^</sup> [Mellinkoff, Ruth \(1981\). The Mark of Cain. University of California Press. p. 13. ISBN 9780520906372.](#)
19. <sup>^</sup> [Goldenberg 2003](#), p. 180.
20. <sup>^</sup> [The History of Abel and Cain, 10, in Lipscomb, The Armenian Apocryphal Adam Literature, pp. 145, 250 \(text\) and 160, 271 \(translation\)](#)

21. <sup>^</sup> [Priest, Josiah](#) *Slavery as it Relates to the Negro or African Race*(1843)
22. <sup>^</sup> ["Land of the Till Murder".](#) *Ebony*. April 1956. Archived from [the original](#) on 2005-03-11.
23. <sup>^</sup> [Miller, Randall M.; Smith, John David](#) (1988). *Dictionary of Afro-American Slavery*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press. p. 78. ISBN 0-313-23814-6. Slaves were accepted for membership in the same manner as whites. After expressing a desire to join a church, one was required to relate his or her religious experience. If the congregation was favorably impressed by one's testimony, the applicant was accepted into the fellowship and was baptized. When black church members moved from one community to another, they were given letters of dismissal which they might place with another Baptist church. Black church members worshiped in the sanctuary with whites, participated in the service of [Holy Communion](#), and contributed to help support the various programs of the denomination. Still blacks and females in antebellum Baptist churches held a membership status subordinate to that of white adult males, since that group determined denominational policies and procedures.
24. <sup>^</sup> [Kunnerth, Jeff](#) (21 June 1995). *"Baptists Renounce Racist Past"*. Orlando Sentinel.
25. <sup>^</sup> [Dictionary of Afro-American Slavery](#).
26. <sup>^</sup> [Jump up to:](#) <sup>^</sup> Benjamin Braude, "The Sons of Noah and the Construction of Ethnic and Geographical Identities in the Medieval and Early Modern Periods," *William and Mary Quarterly* LIV (January 1997): 103–42. See also [William McKee Evans](#), "From the Land of Canaan to the Land of Guinea: The Strange Odyssey of the Sons of Ham," *American Historical Review* 85 (February 1980): 15–43
27. <sup>^</sup> [Jump up to:](#) <sup>^</sup> John N. Swift and Gigen Mammoser, "Out of the Realm of Superstition: Chesnutt's 'Dave's Neckliss' and the Curse of Ham", *American Literary Realism*, vol. 42 no. 1, Fall 2009, 3
28. <sup>^</sup> [Brigham Young's Speech on Slavery, Blacks, and the Priesthood](#), Feb 5, 1852. Reprint by [Utah Lighthouse Ministry](#)
29. <sup>^</sup> [Smith, Joseph](#) (1836). *Latter Day Saints Messenger and Advocate/Volume 2/Number 7/Letter to Oliver Cowdery from Joseph Smith, Jr. (Apr. 1836)* . p. 290 – via [Wikisource](#).
30. <sup>^</sup> [Manuscript History](#) 19 June 1831<sup>[full citation needed]</sup>
31. <sup>^</sup> [Kidd, Colin](#) (2006). *The Forging of Races: Race and Scripture in the Protestant Atlantic World, 1600–2000*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. ISBN 978-0521793247.
32. <sup>^</sup> [Wilson 1904](#)
33. <sup>^</sup> [Whiting 2003](#)
34. <sup>^</sup> ["Guide to the Scriptures - Ham"](#).
35. <sup>^</sup> [Old Testament Student Manual Genesis-2 Samuel](#).
36. <sup>^</sup> ["Black History Timeline"](#). BlackLDS.org. Retrieved 17 January 2013.
37. <sup>^</sup> [Wilford Woodruff](#), Diary of Wilford Woodruff, January 16, 1852. "[A]ny man having one drop of the seed of [Cain] ... in him cannot hold the priesthood and if no other Prophet ever spake it before I will say it now in the name of Jesus Christ".
38. <sup>^</sup> [Bush, Lester E., Jr.; Mauss, Armand L.](#), eds. (1984). *Neither White Nor Black: Mormon Scholars Confront the Race Issue in a Universal Church*. Salt Lake City, Utah: Signature Books. ISBN 0-941214-22-2. Cain, in murdering Abel, had "deprived his brother of the privilege of pursuing his journey through life, and of extending his kingdom by multiplying upon the earth." Cain had reportedly hoped thereby to gain an advantage over Abel—the number of one's posterity somehow being important in the overall scheme of things. Brigham Young further explained that those who were to have been Abel's descendants had already been assigned to his lineage, and if they were ever to come "into the world in the regular way, they would have to come through him." In order that Cain's posterity not gain an advantage the Lord denied them the priesthood until such time as "the class of spirits presided over by Abel should have the privilege of coming into the world." Those spirits formerly under Cain's leadership were reportedly aware of the implications of this decision, yet "still looked up to him, and rather than forsake him they were willing to bear his burdens and share the penalty imposed upon him."
39. <sup>^</sup> [Dialogue](#) (PDF). Dialogue Foundation. 2001. p. 253.
40. <sup>^</sup> Sterling M. McMurrin affidavit, March 6, 1979. See [David O. McKay and the Rise of Modern Mormonism](#) by [Greg Prince](#) and [William Robert Wright](#), p.<sup>[page needed]</sup>. Quoted by [Genesis Group](#)Archived 2011-07-13 at the [Wayback Machine](#)
41. <sup>^</sup> ["Spencer W. Kimball – Significant Events"](#). churchofjesuschrist.org. Archived from [the original](#) on 2004-08-28. Retrieved 2012-09-21.
42. <sup>^</sup> [Official Declaration 2](#) (LDS [standard works](#)); see also: [Official Declaration 2](#)

43. <sup>^</sup> [Bushman, Richard](#) (2008). *Mormonism: a very short introduction*. Oxford University Press. pp. 111–12. [ISBN 978-0-19-531030-6](#).
44. <sup>^</sup> [Broadway, Bill](#) (1998-05-30). "[Black Mormons Resist Apology Talk](#)". [Washington Post](#).
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46. <sup>^</sup> "[Race and the Priesthood](#)", [churchofjesuschrist.org](#), LDS Church
47. <sup>^</sup> [Jump up to:¶](#) [Young, Brigham](#) (1987), [Collier, Fred C.](#) (ed.), *The Teachings of President Brigham Young: Vol. 3 1852–1854*, Salt Lake City, Utah: Colliers Publishing Company, [ISBN 0934964017](#), [OCLC 18192348](#)
48. <sup>^</sup> "[Race and the Priesthood](#)".

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## Further reading

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## External links

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- [Catholic Encyclopedia entry on Cain](#)
- [Encarta article that discusses race and religion in 1969](#)
- [Biblical racism](#)