The purpose of this article is to reargue the case for understanding the story of Cain in Gen 4 as being an aetiology of the tribe of the Kenites. This was first argued in the 19th century by H. Ewald, J. Wellhausen and B. Stade and taken up by others,¹ but a glance at commentaries on the book of Genesis in recent decades indicates that this standpoint is now largely overlooked or even rejected,² though without good reason, as I shall argue.


² Commentators on the book of Genesis who fail even to mention the Kenite view include E. A. Speiser, *Genesis* (AB; Garden City, 1964); J. C. L. Gibson, *Genesis*, 1 (Daily Study Bible; Edinburgh, 1981); G. W. Coats, *Genesis with an Introduction to Narrative Literature* (FOTL; Grand Rapids, 1983); G. J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15* (WBC; Waco, 1987); V. P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 1–17* (NICOT; Grand Rapids,
The most obvious argument for seeing a connection between Cain and the Kenites is the very name, since the Hebrew word קַיִּנָּה is used for both. That קַיִּנָּה denotes the Kenites is clear from Num 24:22 and Judg 4:11. The latter passage states, “Now Heber the Kenite had separated from the Kenites (קַיִּנָּה), the descendants of Hobab the father-in-law of Moses…” In Num 24:21–22 we read of Balaam, “And he looked on the Kenite, and took up his discourse, and said, ‘Enduring is your dwelling place, and your nest is set in the rock; nevertheless Cain shall be wasted. How long shall Asshur take you away captive?’” In each case the context makes it indubitable that קַיִּנָּה is a collective singular name referring to the Kenites. Incidentally, in the latter passage אַשּׁוּר clearly refers to the Assyrians, not to the Arab tribe of the אַשּׁוּרִים, since in the Hebrew Bible אַשּׁוּר occurs numerous times in the singular and never in the plural with reference to Assyria (e.g. Gen 2:14; 10:11, 22; Isa 8:4; 10:5, 12; Hos 5:13; 7:11; 8:9; Nah 3:18), whereas the Arab tribe appears only in the plural as אַשּׁוּרִים (Gen 25:3).