

WHERE DID CAIN GET HIS WIFE?

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One of the classic objections raised against the Genesis account of the beginnings of mankind from Adam & Eve has been to ask, "Well, if there was only one original man and wife, where did their oldest son Cain get his wife from?" Typical of the Christian response is the answer that [Henry Morris](#) gives;

"In order to get this process of multiplication started, of course at least one of Adam's sons had to marry one of Adam's daughters. Probably, in that first generation, all marriages were brother/sister marriages. In that early time, there were no mutant genes in the genetic systems of any of these children, so that no genetic harm could have resulted from close marriages. Many, many generations later, during the time of Moses, such mutations had accumulated to the point where such mutations were genetically dangerous, so that incest was thenceforth prohibited in the Mosaic laws. The ancient quibble about "Cain's wife" is thus seen to be trivial." ¹

Many Bible commentators before and since Morris, wishing to honour the Scriptural authority that God created Adam and Eve as the first human couple, have used this explanation. For instance, Evangelist [R. A. Torrey](#) confessed that in his evangelistic meetings around the world he would often invite questions from the audience. He wrote that he did not think he had ever held such a question time, when somebody did not ask, "But where did Cain get his wife?" Torrey's explanation was the forerunner to Morris,

"In Genesis 5:35 we learn that Adam in his long life of 930 years begat many sons and daughters. There can be little doubt that Cain married one of those numerous daughters as his wife ... If the whole Adamic race was to descend from a single pair, the sons and daughters had to intermarry." ²

Whilst I acknowledge the fine motives and the integrity of this explanation and once espoused it myself upon further reflection I am not convinced it takes into account all possibilities within the Biblical text itself.

All agree it is rather obvious there were other people outside Cain's immediate family, because after he had slaughtered his brother Abel, and was

¹ 1 Morris, Henry. M. The Genesis Record: A Scientific & Devotional Commentary on the Book of Beginnings. Baker Book House, Grand Rapids, Michigan, 1976. This quote from the 1992 edition, pp143-144

² Torrey, R. A. Difficulties in the Bible. Whitaker House, New Kensington, PA, 1996. p54

condemned by God to exile, Cain bitterly complained, “My punishment is too great to bear ... and it will come about that whoever finds me will kill me ...” (Gen. 4:17).

Who does Cain fear will kill him? Is he frightened of wild animals perhaps? Not likely for he is afraid of wilful revenge, not accident. Is he perhaps scared of vengeance from Adam or Eve or others of his younger siblings? I am not aware of any commentator proposing that. John Walton asserts that if Cain is driven away from the Lord’s presence “then he is also being driven away from his family. This suggests that there are people other than his family in the land.” Clearly, Cain knows there were other human beings around. ³

More puzzling is that after being banished “from the LORD’S Presence”, and settling “in the land of Nod east of Eden”, we read that Cain “had relations with his wife and she conceived ... and he built a city, and called the name of the city Enoch, after the name of his son” (Gen. 4:16-17). But surely a city requires more than just one’s own wife and children? A city indicates a large community network with a reasonable population and infrastructure to match. We must conclude that the text intimates there were many other people around besides Cain, his wife and son. But is there other supporting textual evidence from Genesis itself to support this? I think so.

WAS ADAM ONE OR MANY?

Even a casual reading of Genesis chapters one through five should make it obvious that Adam was in some instances a single individual, and in other contexts a plurality of people, or at least an individual representing and acting for many people. In fact, the Hebrew word adam is used in three different ways.

1. Adam can refer to the human species as a whole, that is, to human beings generically.

In the Hebrew language, the definite article is usually used to indicate this collective meaning; “the adam”.

A case in point would be Genesis 1:26-27 where our English versions make this definition obvious, “Then God said, ‘Let us make man (literal Hebrew reads “ the adam”) in our image, according to our likeness; and let them rule over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the sky and over the cattle and

³ Walton, John. *The Lost World of Adam And Eve: Genesis 23 and the Human Origins Debate*. IVP, Downer’s Grove, IL, 2015. p64

over all the earth, and over every creeping thing that creeps on the earth.’ And God created man (“ the adam ”) in His own image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. ”

Here ‘the adam’ covers the whole species of mankind, both men and women. Human beings who are referred to here as adam are to exercise stewardship over the world’s animals, plants and environment. Both men and women, indeed all men and women corporately, bear the image of God.

Another case where “the adam” stands for mankind as a whole genus would be Genesis 2:5, “Now no shrub of the field was yet in the earth, and no plant of the field had yet sprouted, for the LORD God had not sent rain upon the earth; and there was no man (adam) to cultivate the ground.”

This generic usage appears in other Old Testament passages such as Psalm 8: 34, “When I consider Thy heavens, the work of Thy fingers, the moon and the stars, which Thou hast ordained; what is man (the adam), that Thou dost take thought of him? And the son of man (the adam), that Thou dost take thought of him? Yet Thou hast made him a little lower than God (or as per LXX, the angels), and dost crown him with glory and majesty!”

Thus, in many contexts, Adam, or more literally, “the adam” has a corporate or collective nuance.

2. Adam can refer to just the male members of our human species, as differentiated from the females. This meaning does not so much concern us here, except to note that the word ‘adam’ is still not a person’s name.

3. Adam can be the personal name of one man who is an historically real individual.

In the Hebrew usage (unlike in Greek) when no definite article precedes the word adam, it usually is talking about a proper name for an individual. The only place where no definite article appears in Genesis chapters one through five is the title section (called a *toledot*) of Genesis 5:1 which introduces the genealogy of one individual man whose name is Adam; “This is the book of the generations of Adam.” The text then introduces his male sons by their names.

The observant reader however, will note the fluid use of adam when continuing on in these first few verses of Genesis 5 . After introducing a man with the personal name of Adam who is the father of named children, the text immediately goes on to use the definite article and to speak of ‘the adam’ (ha adam) in the very same verse 1 ...

“In the day when God created man (the adam), He made him in the likeness

of God, He created them male and female, and He blessed them and named them Man (the adam) in the day when they were created” (Gen. 5:12).

This indicates how the word adam can fluctuate between a personal name and a corporate usage even within the one passage. Tricky! (Oh, and by the way, there is only one other unambiguous place in the entire Old Testament where for sure there is no definite article and the word adam is used as an individual’s personal name, and that’s in another genealogy ... it’s in **1 Chron. 1:1.**)

So, after introducing the individual man whose personal name is Adam in **verse 1 of Genesis chapter 5, verse 3** goes on to make it quite clear that Adam as the personal name of that one man becomes the focus. We know this by the context, because Adam became a father at the age of 130 years when he sired another son, Seth. We are also told **“he had other sons and daughters”** and that this Adam went on to live to a ripe old age of 930 years before he died (**Gen. 5:45**). Thus, in the genealogy Adam is one man.

So what? Why carry on with all this technical stuff (and believe me, I have tried to make it as simple as possible!)? Well, if I may quote **John Walton** again, **“We can see that the profile of Adam is complex rather than straightforward. These chapters are not just giving biographical information on a man named Adam. Larger statements are being made. When the generic is used, the text is talking about human beings as a species. When the definite article is being used, the referent is an individual serving as a human representative. Such representation could be either as an archetype (all are embodied in the one and counted as having participated in the acts of that one) or as a federal representative (in which one is serving as an elect delegate on behalf of the rest). In either case the representational role is more important than the individual. Only in the cases where the word is indefinite and by context being used as a substitute for a personal name would the significance be tied to the individual as an individual, historical person.”** ⁴

What Walton is saying is that we need to recognize that Adam in the Hebrew text has a multilevel application. Context alone determines whether Adam stands alone as one individual by that personal name, or as a representative description for all humanity, or whether Adam stands as the prototype and model for all human beings, or possibly a combination of the above.

So, sit back and take a big breath and realise that when we open the Bible, a child may understand it, and at the same time the brightest mind is challenged. But isn’t that just like the ways of God even in nature? When God put His precious metals into the earth he left enough on the surface to encourage the weekend prospector, and He put the richest deposits below the

⁴ Ibid, p 61

surface where some digging is required. Yep, it sure takes a lot of groundwork to find Cain's wife!

ARE GENESIS 1 AND GENESIS 2 CONTRADICTORY ACCOUNTS OF CREATION?

As well as sorting out which meaning to give to Adam, our difficulties only seem to intensify when we step back and try to get the bigger picture of the creation account. Countless scholars have been struck by apparent contradictions between Genesis chapters one and two. For instance, chapter 1 describes the creation of plants before humans, whereas chapter 2 seems to say humans came before the plants. And in chapter 1 God creates animals before mankind, whereas in chapter 2 it is the reverse.

These difficulties have been explained by some scholars by proposing that there were different authors for each chapter. The end result is that of diminished authority for the Bible with many even abandoning the Bible as having anything serious to say to modern society about our origins so they consign the book to the category of benign myth. This need not be and there is a fairly simple solution.

Let's not forget that the chapter divisions in our modern Bibles were not in the original text and are manmade for convenience of reference. They are helpful but not inspired. In this case it would have been more helpful if the chapter division came after Genesis 2:3. This would have made a neater subject break with God "resting" on the seventh day and blessing His cosmos at the end of the creation week. As it stands we have a separation of Day 6 from Day 7.

Furthermore, **Genesis 2: 4** would then introduce one of the author's oft repeated "accounts" that occurs throughout Genesis --- the familiar expression --- "**This is the account of ...**" This formal expression, "**This is the account of ...**", occurs here and ten other times in Genesis, and serves as a way the Hebrew reader would know a new section is being introduced. ⁵

Observing this literary device (*toledot*) means that from **Genesis 2:4 5** onwards a new emphasis is introduced, as is the pattern through the rest of the book of Genesis. Up till this point, the creation account has been primarily chronological ... Day 1, a second Day, a third Day, etc.

This is to say, **Genesis 1 to Genesis 2:13** is mainly concerned to give us the sweep of God's creation up to its goal of the creation of human beings. But from Genesis 2:4 onwards, the literary goal moves on so as to draw out the

⁵ The other instances are in Genesis 5:1; 6:9; 10:1; 11:10; 11:27; 25:12; 25:19; 36:1; 36:9; and 37:2.

consequences of man's place in that creation. In modern terms we would say the writer's aim now becomes philosophical. He is now going to make this our story. So from **Genesis 2:4** onwards the main aim is to set out what it means to be human in God's world.

When we zoom in onto the subject matter of each of these first two chapters, we are further entitled to the view that they are treating slightly different but complementary themes.

In **chapter 1** the emphasis is on an unformed cosmos being gradually brought to order for mankind. In **chapter 2** it is an inchoate earth described, with man put in a garden to manage it and eventually by good stewardship to bring the entire planet to harmony through his godly management.

Chapter 1 describes the creation of all humanity as a whole species in God's image, whereas in **chapter 2** we are informed how human beings are meant to function in the earth.

In **Genesis 1** the emphasis is on the cosmos as mankind's house, but in **chapter 2** man is given the task of making it his home.

This pattern of **couplet chapters** occurs in other parts of Scripture, so I am not proposing a novel idea. There are a number of examples where one chapter records an historical event with the very next chapter explaining by way or poem, hymn or commentary, the theological significance of that history. For example, **Exodus 14** speaks of the Red Sea crossing and **Exodus 15** records Deborah's song of praise in poetic and metaphoric explanation. In **Judges 4** we have Israel's battle against the Canaanites followed in **chapter 5** by Deborah's Song of highly descriptive metaphor giving theological explanation for their victory.

Let's illustrate this. When we move to a new city and look for a new place to live, some members of the family, particularly dad, might examine the physical structure of the house ... roof, foundation, plumbing, wiring, heating and general condition of all facilities. At the same time, other members in the family will be assessing how the house will function as a home ... which room will be used in which way, how the furniture will fit. The kids will be running around seeing which bedroom will be theirs, the wife will be looking at kitchen layout and ambiance. In this way, some are considering the house; others are considering the home.⁶

Given these considerations we are in a better position to determine whether

⁶ John Walton alerted me to this fine illustration, Ibid, p44-45

the account in **Genesis 2** is just a repeat about the house albeit an expansion (ie. an elaboration) of what happens on Day 6 in **Genesis 1**, or whether it is giving us new details about the home of events that come after the creation week of Genesis 1. **John Walton** proposes it is possible to read the two chapters as sequels, and that,

“If they are sequels, we do not have to worry about fitting Genesis 2 into day six. But if they are sequels, it means that the people in Genesis 1 may not be Adam and Eve, or at least not only Adam and Eve. The question would then be why we have a forming account like Genesis 2 sometime after the creation of people as reported in Genesis 1. Furthermore, if Genesis 2 is a sequel, it would mean that there may be other people (in the image of god) in Genesis 24, not just Adam and Eve and their family.” ⁷

Thus Walton concludes that “though Adam and Eve may well be included among the people created in Genesis 1, to think of them as the first couple or the only people in their time is not the only textual option.” ⁸

I have no doubt that for many this will be a stunning conclusion. But it eliminates any thought of there being contradictory accounts of creation between the two chapters. It means that if Genesis 2 is a sequel then Adam & Eve and their offspring are living in community with other human beings already mentioned in chapter 1.

So the preliminary finding is that Cain may well have married one of the other people reported as having been made in the image of God in Genesis 1. But there are a few other factors in our investigation to also consider.

THE NEW TESTAMENT EXPLANATION

It will be countered that the New Testament definitely says Adam was “**one man**”. The apostle Paul says that “**through one man sin entered into the world**” (**Rom. 5:12**). And Paul definitely says of Eve’s deception by Satan that “**the woman [singular] being quite deceived, fell into transgression**” (**1 Tim. 2:14**).

The New Testament also considers Adam to be the ancestor of the line through which Jesus the Messiah was descended (**Luke 3:23f**). And Jude states that Enoch was “**the seventh from Adam**” (**Jude 14**). Thus, the genealogies and the theology (sin and salvation) strongly favour an historical pair. Two historical and very real individuals are in mind.

So can this information still be squared with the multilayered nuance we have proposed so far from the Genesis account? Does this multitiered exegesis jeopardise the common idea that makes Adam & Eve the very first human

⁷ Ibid, p 64 (My underlining). ⁸ Ibid, p66

⁸ Ibid, p 66

couple to be formed, the first pair to sin and so to have children from which our entire 'fallen' human race descends and the first man and wife to receive God's promise of salvation through the Christ?

Isn't Scriptural authority compromised if we don't believe our physical descent and the experience of our 'fallen' nature in this less than perfect world are directly bequeathed to us from that original first couple? After all, Genesis chapter 2 indicates God took just one man and one woman into the Garden, surely?

Ah, but that is the key. Genesis 2 says that the LORD God “**took the man and put him into the garden of Eden**” and that He “**placed the man whom He had formed**” in that paradise (vs. 8 & 15). Note that the Adam whether one individual or mankind had been formed outside the garden.

Is it just possible that Adam was an individual man chosen by God from amongst many human beings and that he was assigned a representative role on their collective behalf? Adam was a “taken” (i.e. chosen?) and a “placed” (i.e. assigned?) man. The text leaves open the very real possibility that God elected one man from the world outside for a sacred calling inside the garden.

Before either accepting or rejecting this possibility, it's good to recall that this is the way God has operated throughout all of human history. Just a few chapters further on in **Genesis 12** after Adam had failed his God given call the LORD God chose another man from among the heathen peoples for a sacred duty. Abram is taken away from his country and relatives so that God might 'plant' him and his descendants in the Promised Land. God took Abram and chose him in order to bless the world.

Still later, God chose a little shepherd boy from among his father's tribe and from the many brothers in his family, so that he might become king and the head of the royal dynasty through whom Messiah would come. Thus it has always been. God takes and plants certain individuals for a high and sacred call so that His purpose in the world might move forward.

So why would it be thought a thing incredible that God might have “**taken**” and “**planted**” one man out from amongst an already existing humanity [“the adam”]? It is clear that God assigned Adam with the help of Eve the role of acting for and on behalf of all humans yet unborn inside the garden. But could Adam have also known he was representing all humans already living outside the garden in the world? He was like a king or a priest charged with the solemn task of bringing the conditions of Paradise to humanity. If Adam obeyed the LORD God he and all people would be granted access to the Tree of

Life and granted immortality.

Supporting this possibility, [Walton](#) proposes that the tasks God gave Adam in Eden were priestly in nature. The terms “cultivate” and “keep” ([Gen.2:15](#)) are frequently encountered in Semitic usage in a context of service and sacred duty to God, rather than as purely agricultural descriptions (see for example, [Ex. 4:23; 23:33 and Num. 3:7-10](#)). The verb translated “keep” is used later in the Levitical responsibility of guarding sacred space in religious context.⁹

If we grant the text allows for these possible (probable?) nuances, it is not a stretch to extrapolate that the man Adam and his wife Eve were not the only human beings on planet earth. But they certainly were the most significant because of the high calling God assigned to them when He “took” and “planted” them in Eden. Thus Adam’s election by grace (where else do we encounter that thought?) carried enormous present and far reaching consequences contingent on his faithful exercise of that duty.

When viewed this way, Adam does not have to be the genetic fountainhead of all humanity. Certainly the New Testament does attach significance to a certain Adam in a biological sense by naming him as the original progenitor of the line through which Messiah came ([Luke 3:38](#)). The rest of the New Testament however, teaches that Adam’s major significance for us is his spiritual legacy ... for through him sin and death entered human experience.

Jesus’ comment also leaves this question open. When referring to what God did “in the beginning” Jesus says that He “made them male and female” ([Matt. 19:4](#)). Observe that, according to Jesus, God made “them”, which is a plural pronoun. “Them” could mean one man and one woman together, with two being “them”, or it could mean mankind, created as the male and female sexes. We have already encountered “them” as referring to mankind in [Genesis 1:26-27](#).¹⁰

WHAT ABOUT ACTS 17: 26?

You may say, “But Greg, what about when Paul preaches in Athens that God “who made the world and all things in it”, and is said to have “made from one, every nation of mankind to live on the face of the earth ...” ([Acts 17:24, 26](#))? Isn’t Paul claiming here that all humans descended from the “one” man, Adam?

⁹ Ibid, pp 105-106

¹⁰ Also observe that Jesus defines the Creator of mankind as a Single Individual Deity (“He who created”). Jesus definitely does not include himself as being the Creator God there in the beginning, for he does not say, “We who created”!

No, I think not! All we need do is read what the verse and context says. Observe that the subject concerns nations and geopolitical boundaries and times for the rise and fall of empires, kingdoms, territories. God is the One who determines national limits of both duration and border:

“And he made from one, every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined their appointed times, and the boundaries of their habitation” (Acts 17:26).

So Paul is not talking about material or physical human origins. Rather, he is talking about societal structures and politics. And in Genesis the nations don't begin until chapter 10 with the so-called **Table of Nations** after the Flood. And there the nations are traced from Noah's three sons,

“These are the families of the sons of Noah, according to their genealogies, by their nations; and out of these the nations were separated on the earth after the flood” (Gen. 10: 32).

So if anything, when Paul says the nations come from “one” he is not talking about biological descent from one man named Adam, but about ethnic descent from one man after the flood called Noah!

WHAT ABOUT EVE, “THE MOTHER OF ALL LIVING”?

Some may raise the point that Adam himself calls his wife Eve, **“the mother of all living” (Gen. 3:20)**. Perhaps this is a claim to biological descent from one woman? Not necessarily so, for it must be observed that the context for Adam's comment is immediately after the fall and God's judgment. Adam's joy comes after God announced the hope of a coming redeemer from Eve's **“seed”**.

¹¹So Adam's exuberance, in context, is more likely to mean he is expressing faith in God's promise of new life and hope to come through Eve.

Walton observes that the expression **“mother of all”** does not necessarily pertain to biology for elsewhere in Scripture we have similar expressions that militate against this view. For instance, **Jabal “was the father of those who live in tents and raise livestock” (Gen. 4:20)**. Also, **Jubal “was the father of all who play stringed instruments and pipes” (Gen. 4:21)**. **“These usages show that this sort of expression has larger associations in mind than just biological descent.” ^{12 13}**

¹¹ Some English translations add the word “blood” at verse 26 ... “He made from one blood, every nation, etc.” However, the consensus is this is a later scribal addition and not in the original text. The NASB for instance states this in its marginal notes.

¹² Ibid, p 187-188

¹³ The NIV translation takes liberties when it says Eve “ would become the mother of all living”. To say this a different Hebrew construction would be needed.

CONCLUSION.

The traditional Christian contention that Adam & Eve had to be the first human couple and that all humans must be biologically descended from this pair is not exegetically certain.

The Genesis account allows for a multilayered reading of the Hebrew word Adam. Sometimes adam refers to human beings generically and includes men and women, i.e. mankind. Sometimes Adam is used archetypically, where one represents the many, and is considered to act as their representative and on their behalf. Other times when there is no definite article before Adam, as in the genealogies and where the context indicates it, one man by that personal name is in mind, and there the meaning is genetic.

In addition we noted that the difficulties of apparent contradictions between the creation accounts of Genesis chapters 1 and 2 are eliminated when we read them as sequential, not repetitive. Perhaps Genesis chapter 2 is better understood to teach that God “took” one man from a wider population and then “planted” him in the Garden of Eden to represent and act on behalf of a humanity already present in the world as well as on behalf of future generations yet unborn? Thus if Genesis 2 is a sequel to chapter 1, the text allows for the possibility that other people created in Genesis 1 form the group from which God elected Adam & Eve for their sacred duty.

Lastly, whilst the New Testament does not doubt that Adam and Eve were real historical individuals and through whom Jesus was lineally descended, the primary interest of the New Testament in them is theological. It is the implications of how the behaviour of Adam & Eve have affected our destinies, our natures, our environment and our experience of fallenness away from fellowship with God in the world that are seminal. Even Jesus refers to the beginning of male and female sexuality with the plural pronoun “them”, and not by the personal names Adam & Eve, thus leaving the door open for latitude of interpretation.

The bottom line as to where Cain got his wife may remain a moot point. Did he marry one of his sisters? Maybe. Did he find a wife from a population of human beings outside the Garden of Eden? Possibly. Either interpretation is not without its difficulties and objections. Neither possible interpretation is necessarily infallible.

And at the end of the day, is this merely a mental exercise? Does it really matter to the point of changing our daily lives and making us better people? Probably not. But what does matter is whether we hold these conscience

views with good grace before others. Tying ourselves dogmatically to one view or the other runs the risk of discrediting our witness. There is always the strong possibility that new scientific evidence will come to light. There is always the possibility that new studies in Biblical grammar, linguistics, textual criticism will force retractions and apologies.

In the meantime, if we hold an open mind and a gracious attitude, our witness will be “seasoned with salt” and skeptics who reject the Bible may be able to at least see our faith is reasonable and gracious.

Ah, what an amazing Bible we hold in our hands, hearts, and heads. In spite of the messy legacy Adam & Eve left on our world, God has not abandoned us or His world. For if death came through one man’s disobedience, life has also come through the obedience of one of his descendants, Jesus Christ our Lord and Saviour. The Kingdom of God that Adam lost will become Paradise regained. Thanks and glory be to God our Father, through Jesus Christ our Lord.

