

BEGINNING WITH A RARE PROPOSAL

Jewish and Christian theologians have different approaches to Old Testament interpretation. The Jewish tradition of Midrash encourages exploring various interpretations, leading to a rich, centuries-long dialogue. Christian theology, influenced by early orthodox creeds and councils, has a more uniform doctrine, limiting divergent interpretations. This was reinforced during the Inquisitions, suppressing heresy and ensuring compliance with orthodoxy, limiting theological exploration. With this background, let's delve into the story of Cain, exploring his birthplace, birth time, and contemporaries, and take a more rare proposal than the standard view.

THE STANDARD VIEW

The standard Christian doctrine suggests that Adam and Eve had children, including Cain, after the Fall in Genesis 3, outside the Garden of Eden. This interpretation follows the chronological order of the Bible, particularly in English translations.

This interpretation supports the Christian doctrine of original sin. It posits that all descendants of Adam, starting with Cain, inherit his guilt and punishment, reflecting a "fallen" human nature that began after the Fall and outside the Garden of Eden.

Confirmation bias, the propensity to interpret evidence as support for existing beliefs, may have influenced this interpretation. Those firm in the belief of Christian doctrine of original sin might interpret the text to bolster this belief, despite possible alternative interpretations. This phenomenon is common in many fields, including biblical interpretation.

Although the prevailing Christian view of Genesis 4 is widely held, other interpretations also offer insight. As Bereans, we should consider alternative views that could deepen our understanding of the text.

THE ALTERNATIVE VIEW

A different interpretation, based on Hebrew grammar and structure, suggests Genesis 4:1-2 events might precede Genesis 3. It implies Cain and Abel might have been born in the Garden of Eden before Adam and Eve's expulsion. We'll explore this perspective and its implications.

Before delving into the Cain and Abel story, we should consider the precedent set within the first chapters of Genesis, specifically Genesis 1 and 2. These chapters provide a creation account that is not strictly chronological.

Genesis 1 provides a seven-day creation story, detailing the creation of everything from heavens to humans. Genesis 2 focuses on Adam and Eve's creation, with a seemingly different event order.

Genesis 2:7 details Adam's formation, followed by the creation of Eden (vv. 8-14). Adam is then placed in Eden (v. 15) and commanded (vv. 16-17). Finally, God forms all beasts and birds (v. 19), events preceding man's creation as per Genesis 1:24-25.

Genesis 2's discrepancy confirms it's a detailed retelling, not a sequel to Genesis 1. This non-chronological approach, established in Genesis' initial chapters, supports the interpretation that Genesis 4:1-2 events precede those in Genesis 3. ¹

¹ There are at least three passages in Genesis where a later chapter chronologically fits within or prior to the preceding chapter.

- Genesis 1 and Genesis 2: Genesis 1 provides an overview of the seven days of creation. Genesis 2 focuses on the sixth day of creation, providing more detail about the creation of man and woman and the Garden of Eden.
- Genesis 10 and Genesis 11:1-9: Genesis 10 lists the descendants of Noah's sons and the nations that came from them. Genesis 11:1-9 describes the Tower of Babel incident, which explains the dispersion of the nations mentioned in Genesis 10.
- Genesis 11:27-32 and Genesis 12:1-9: Genesis 11:27-32 introduces Abram (later called Abraham) and his family, including their journey from Ur to Haran.

Hebrew, especially in the Bible's narrative sections, uses a grammatical structure, the vav-consecutive (וַיִּקְטֹל), to denote event sequences. It's typically used for actions in chronological order. If the Genesis author intended a direct sequence from Genesis 3's end to Genesis 4:1, the vav-consecutive would be the conventional method.

The absence of the consecutive tense in "Adam knew his wife" implies the events may not be in chronological order, suggesting Genesis 4:1 might not have followed Genesis 3.

Let's take a look at Genesis 3:24 - 4:2:

"So he **drove** out the man; and he **placed** at the east of the garden of Eden Cherubims, and a flaming sword which turned every way, to keep the way of the tree of life. And Adam knew Eve his wife; and she **conceived**, and **bare** Cain, and said, I have gotten a man from the LORD. And she again **bare** his brother Abel. And Abel was a keeper of sheep, but Cain was a tiller of the ground."

In the above text, I have highlighted the vav-consecutive tense verbs in bold print. Notice the consecutive nature of the verbs in Genesis 3:24 - 4:2, up until we reach the phrase "Adam knew Eve," where this pattern breaks, only to pick up again.

The absence of vav-consecutive form might signify a topic shift within the narrative, or in historical narratives like Genesis, it could also indicate a break in chronological order.

In other words, if the author wanted to indicate that the events of Genesis 4:1 (the conception and birth of Cain and Abel) didn't necessarily follow the events of Genesis 3 (the expulsion from the Garden of Eden), the absence of the vav-consecutive form would be an effective way to do so. This suggests that the narrative is not strictly chronological, and the events described in Genesis 4:1 could have occurred before those in Genesis 3.

If the author intended to clearly show chronological order, they would have used the vav-consecutive form. Its absence suggests alternative interpretations, questioning whether Cain and Abel's birth happened after the expulsion from Eden.

Following the account of Cain and Abel's birth, Genesis 4:3 introduces a notable shift in time with the phrase: "And in the process of time it came to pass." This phrase indicates a significant passage of time between the events previously described and those that are about to unfold. This chronological marker also allows that verses 1-2 took place at a previous time, perhaps even in the garden.

A common counterpoint is that Cain and Abel had jobs, implying they were born after the Fall, as per Genesis 3:17-19 where God curses the ground and mandates hard work for food. However, this argument does not align with Genesis 2:15. This verse reveals that Adam was given the Garden with the responsibility "to dress it and to keep it." The distinction after the Fall was that this work became burdensome and difficult due to the curse.

OTHER SIBLINGS

One of the most intriguing questions that arises from the narrative of Cain and Abel is the identity of Cain's wife. In Genesis 4:14 there are other people mentioned, and in Genesis 4:17 we learn that Cain had a wife and children, but the text does not provide any details about where this wife came from. This has led to much speculation and debate among scholars and readers of the Bible.

The Hebrew word **אֶת** [et] appears many times in Scripture. It is a non-translatable marker denoting direct object. We find it in Genesis 1-2 before Cain (**אֶת-קַיִן**), before "his brother" (**אֶת-אָחִיו**), and before Abel (**אֶת-הָאֵל**).

Below I have highlighted where **אֶת** is found.

And Adam knew Eve his wife; and she conceived, and bare **Cain**, and said, I have gotten a man from the LORD. And she again bare his **brother Abel**. (Gen. 4:1-2)

The repetition of **אֶת** across these two verses is significant because the repetition is not necessary.

Biblical Hebrew is notably precise. When elements like **אֶת** are used excessively, it prompts queries about the need for such detail. In Genesis 4:1-2, the repeated use of "et" (**אֶת**) is not grammatically incorrect, but unusual. This repetition could be an intentional author's signal for the readers to focus on this detail, inviting further analysis and interpretation.

Genesis 12:1-9 describes God's call to Abram to leave Haran and go to Canaan, which chronologically follows the events in Genesis 11:27-32.

Rashi, a noted medieval commentator, uses Midrashic tradition to suggest that the use of תָּא in the births of Cain and Abel indicates the birth of their sisters, each having a twin sister (Abel possibly having two). This interpretation is not explicitly stated in the text but derived from Midrashic reading.

Is this a far-fetched interpretation that each "et" (תָּא) signifies a sister? Perhaps so. However, Genesis 29:31-35 gives the account of the births of Leah's sons. The account of Leah giving birth to Reuben, Simeon, Levi, and Judah does use תָּא but not in an immediately repeated fashion as seen in Genesis 4. Each son's birth is recorded with distinct phrases.

In Leah's son's passages, תָּא introduces the direct object, the son's name, without repetition, aligning with typical Hebrew narratives. Any deviation from this, like the frequent use of תָּא in Genesis 4, is viewed by Rashi, guided by Midrashic interpretation, as significant and intentional.

Many Christian scholars reject the Midrashic interpretation due to its uncommon use in Christian theology. Despite this, they offer no explanation for the redundant grammar in the text or the origins of other individuals in Genesis 4:14 and 4:17, leaving room for alternate interpretations.

IMPLICATIONS

Suppose with me for a moment, even if you currently reject the idea, that Cain, Abel, and at least two sisters were born in the Garden of Eden.

This interpretation challenges Christian theology, especially the doctrines of original sin and total depravity. If Cain, Abel, and their sisters were born pre-Fall, it questions the universal fallen human nature and inherent sinfulness, fundamental to Christian theology.

Even though all but the line of Seth, who was clearly born after the Fall, would be eliminated in the coming flood, having somewhere around 1500 years from Adam to Noah with individuals who are not suffering from original sin gives us ample time to recognize free-will and choice both toward sin and against it by those who had Adam's pre-Fall nature. That is, if the entire line of Cain and his sister(s) and Abel's sister(s) (Abel himself dying presumably before offspring) were able to choose good and evil, then the selection of evil is not a result of depravity, but of free will.

It is important to note that the removal of original sin does not necessarily imply a form of universal salvation. Instead, the emphasis is on the nature of the separation between humanity and God after the Fall. If Cain, Abel, and their sisters were born in the Garden of Eden before the Fall, their expulsion along with Adam and Eve signifies a positional problem, rather than a problem of nature. Despite their potentially sinless state, they were removed from the Garden and thus distanced from God. Therefore, the separation from God is not inherently tied to a sinful nature, but to the consequences of Adam and Eve's choices.

One could argue that this "doctrine of separation" is not only less contrived but also has more biblical support than the doctrine of original sin.

I HAVE GOTTEN A MAN

When Eve gives birth to Cain, she proclaims, "I have gotten a man from the LORD." This phrase is intriguing, especially if we consider the possibility that Cain was born prior to the Fall. Traditional Christian interpretation often links this proclamation to Genesis 3:15, viewing it as an early celebration of the one who would crush the serpent. However, if Cain was born before the curse, this interpretation becomes less viable.

In this context, Eve's words could be seen as a juxtaposition between Adam, who was created directly by the LORD, and Cain, the second man, who came from the LORD but in a less direct manner, through Adam. The phrase "I have gotten a man from the LORD" could emphasize that although Cain was not formed directly by God's hand as Adam was, he was still a divine creation, a gift from the LORD. This interpretation allows for a deeper understanding of Eve's proclamation, seeing it as an acknowledgment of God's continued involvement and blessing in the process of procreation and life.

CONCLUSION

The Cain and Abel narrative is complex. A closer look at the Hebrew text suggests events may not be chronological, potentially placing Cain, Abel, and their sisters' births before the Fall. This challenges traditional interpretations of original sin and total depravity. These interpretations could change our understanding of humanity and its relationship with God. Next, we investigate Abel's murder by Cain, its causes, and its impact on human history.