

Wives for Cain and Abel, and other Bible mysteries

Sermon for Sunday, June 27, 2010
by Bruce Fraser

Scripture: Genesis 4:14 – 5:4

From time to time, people make a request: “I’ve always wondered about ...;” I’d like to hear a sermon on this passage in the Bible....” So today and the next two Sundays, these are “sermons by request.”

Today’s question is about the children of Adam and Eve: where did they find spouses? And the cities they settled in, where did they come from?

1) Three ways to interpret Genesis 1-11

There are many ways to approach questions about the early chapters of the book of Genesis in the Bible. They mainly fall into three categories:

Literal approach: this is an exact record of what happened in history.

Symbolic approach: this part of the Bible is more about theology than history. It tells us where we came from, how the human race developed, why is there evil in the world, and so on.

Humanist approach: there is no God, and the Bible is just some nice ideas which people came up with (and some not-so-nice ideas). Pick and choose the ones you like.

As a preacher, and even more as a follower of Jesus, I do not accept that third approach, the humanist one. So I’m going to focus on the first two approaches.

2) Literal approach: they married their siblings

The Bible tells us that Adam and Eve had three sons: Cain, Abel and Seth. Cain murdered Abel and then moved far away. Seth was born later, and the story continues with his descendants.

But the Bible doesn’t tell us that Adam and Eve had *only* three sons. In fact, it sounds like they have quite a few:

Genesis 5:4, New Living Translation:
After the birth of Seth, Adam lived another 800 years, and he had other sons and daughters.

So the literal approach concludes that Cain and Seth married the only females available, their sisters (or nieces perhaps).

Yes, there is an Old Testament law which forbids someone to marry their brother or sister [Leviticus 18:9]. But that law was not given until many years later, so they are not breaking any law.

The laws of incest are to prevent disease caused by genetic inbreeding. But here at the start of the human race, we have parents with perfect DNA. Over time, people would develop errors in their DNA — mutations, we call it — and that would result in disease. But that would not be a problem here.

Since the entire human race would have come from the same genetic source, that explains why an Inuit from Canada’s Arctic and an Aborigine from Australia can marry each other and have children. You can do that only when you have two creatures from the same species. You can mate a horse and a donkey together, and they will have a child — a mule — but a male mule will be infertile. The genes don’t match up properly, and the line stops there.

Let’s leave aside for the moment the matter of Adam living to be over 900 years old. The point here is that Adam and Eve could have raised up many, *many* children, all the while Cain and Abel were growing up. After all, in Genesis 1:28, God said to Adam and Eve, “Be fruitful and multiply.” That would explain why Cain was afraid when God punished him by sending him away from the land where he grew up.

Genesis 4:14, New Living Translation:

“You have banished me from the land and from your presence; you have made me a homeless wanderer. Anyone who finds me will kill me!”

There is nothing in the text which suggests that Cain and Abel were just young men when the murder happened. This may have happened when they were decades old. By then, the surrounding area would be populated with all kinds of siblings and nieces and nephews and so on. They may have even started building cities. No wonder he would be afraid of one of them taking vengeance on his life.

So the literal approach to reading the Bible does make a lot of sense, and it answers a lot of questions. But there are some difficulties, which is why some people take the symbolic approach.

3) Symbolic approach: It’s not about history, but about theology

The stories in the first eleven chapters of Genesis raise many questions:

- Did God really make the world in six days? Science says it took billions of years.
- Did God create all the different species of plants and animals directly? Can the theory of evolution fit in with this?
- The sin of Adam and Eve: did God change their DNA to transmit a sinful nature through all

generations? [Followup: could engineers remove that particular gene, and “fix” our sinful nature?]

- How could people — even healthy people with perfect DNA — live to be 900 years old?
- Noah and the flood:
 - Enough water to cover all the mountains of the earth: where did it come from; where did it go?
 - Would need a much larger vessel to contain *all* the species of land animals and birds, plus their food.
- Tower of Babel: God felt threatened by people erecting a tall building?!

As a result of this, many people conclude that the real purpose of this part of Genesis is not history, but theology. The people are characters in a story, rather than historical persons. It tells us:

- Where we came: from God; in fact, we are made in the image of God, and are called to be holy, to be like God.
- Why there is evil in the world: because we have the ability to choose right or wrong. We need to learn how to deal with temptation, with God’s help.
- Even though tragedies and disasters can and will happen, that is not the end of the world; God is still with us, and promises to help us.

In this approach, then, it doesn’t make sense to ask, “Where did Cain and Seth find wives?” That’s not the point of the story. It would be like asking, “What colour were their eyes?” It’s just a detail that is left out as not important.

The point of the story is to show the effect of Adam and Eve’s sin in the Garden of Eden. It begins even in their own family, with their own children. Can you imagine the heartbreak they felt, with one of their very own flesh and blood killing another of their very own?

But sin is not inevitable. God pleaded with Cain, advising him to get his anger under control, lest it take control of him.

Genesis 4:6-7, New International Version:

Then the Lord said to Cain, “Why are you angry? Why is your face downcast? If you do what is right, will you not be accepted? But if you do not do what is right, sin is crouching at your door; it desires to have you, but you must master it.”

That message still holds true for all of us today, whenever we feel angry.

4) The Bible is trustworthy

I think at the heart of that question about where did Cain find a wife is the deeper question, “Can I believe what the Bible says? Is it a reliable source of truth, upon which I can build my life?”

To that I would answer yes. Jesus said more than thirty times, “I tell you the truth.” Over and over again he quoted from the Old Testament, including Genesis, considering it to be God’s truth for us. Millions of people over the centuries have tried it and found it to be a faithful guide to God’s ways. You can, too.

Theme for today: Wanted: a hardy, drought resistant plant which thickly fills in the ground where it is planted, which grows to about 4 inches high and stops, is soft to walk on, but is not injured by people or even vehicles going over it. In other words: like grass, but never needs mowing. This is the answer to the question which people have been asking for generations, but no one has found it.

There are parts in the Bible which make us wonder, about which people have been asking questions for generations... but still no answer. Does that make us throw out the whole book?