

Who Did Cain Marry?

By [Mary Joan Winn Leith](#) [Biblical Archaeology Review](#) 39:6, November/December 2013

Who was Cain's wife? The Bible reports only that after killing Abel, "Cain went away from the presence of the Lord, and settled in the land of Nod, east of Eden. Cain knew his wife, and she conceived and bore Enoch" ([Genesis 4:16–17](#)). Since the Enlightenment this question has repeatedly come up in rhetoric against Biblical inerrancy.¹ It is a good question. After all, Cain and Abel are apparently the only children of creation's first couple, so where did this unnamed woman whom Cain marries in the land of Nod come from? And for that matter, if Adam, Eve and Cain are the only people yet living on the earth, why is Cain afraid that in his wanderings "anyone who meets me may kill me" ([Genesis 4:14](#))? Who is out there at the moment to threaten him? Taking the Biblical text at face value, the first couple had no children prior to their expulsion from Eden, even if John Milton's *Paradise Lost* (influenced by the Christian theologian Augustine) extols the perfection of Adam and Eve's sexual relations in Eden before the fall.²

The question in fact predates the Enlightenment by centuries. The early rabbis had to wrestle with it, as did Christians who needed credible responses to questions like this one from pagans who thought the Bible laughably crude. And there are venerable Jewish and Christian answers. In both cases, based on the principle that all humans on earth necessarily descended solely from Adam and Eve, the first humans God created, Cain's wife had to be his sister.

Thus, in the *Genesis Rabbah* (a *midrash*³ collection of the fifth century C.E.): "Cain was a twin, for with him was born a girl, and Abel was one of three, for with him came two girls" (22:2). The *Genesis Rabbah* says that Cain married one of Abel's twin sisters (in fact, Cain killed Abel in a fight over this sister). Early Christians similarly explained that Cain married his sister, pointing simply to [Genesis 5:3–4](#): "When Adam had lived one hundred thirty years, he became the father of a son in his likeness, according to his image, and named him Seth ...and he had other sons and daughters." After years of wandering, Cain married one of Adam's many other daughters.⁴

However, when my students ask about Cain's wife, I offer a different explanation. I warn them that modern scholarship is not as diverting as the traditional Jewish and Christian ones. I tell them about how in recent years sociologists and anthropologists have called attention to the fact that traditionally as humans we have tended to give ourselves group identities in opposition to the "other": "We" are who "we" are because we don't do what "they" do. A Biblical example is the Israelite use of "uncircumcised" to identify the Philistines.⁵ The implication is that a "proper" human being (i.e., an Israelite) would be circumcised, and that it is humanly abnormal—repulsive—to be otherwise. In essence, "we" are fully and "normally" human, and anyone who is "not us" is at best less human and, at worst, not human at all. Egyptologist Gerald Moers has observed that in ancient Egypt, the word for "Egyptian" was also the word for "human." Foreigners/outsideers were inhuman or subhuman and represented injustice and chaos: Non-Egyptians were "barbaric ...[with] monstrous bodies ...animal-like," and a proper pharaoh kept them firmly under his foot.⁶

A similar mind-set explains where Cain's wife came from. There were, no doubt, other people "out there" when God created Adam and Eve, but they didn't count, as far as the Israelite storyteller was concerned. They weren't fully human in the sense that Adam and Eve were. It was, in fact, appropriate that Cain married one of these "other" foreign people because his sin had literally diminished his full humanity and separated him not only from God but also from his properly human mother and father.

Geography is relevant here, too. In the premodern world, to paraphrase former Speaker of the House, Tip O'Neill, "all religion was local." People seldom traveled far from home, and people who lived outside their own geographical purview did not figure in their thinking. This was the operational factor in ancient Israel's thinking

about God and the world. In the oldest strata of the Biblical text, Israel was assigned to Yahweh and other nations to other gods:

When the Most High apportioned the nations, when he divided humankind,
he fixed the boundaries of the peoples according to the number of the gods;^b
the Lord's own portion was his people, Jacob his allotted share.

Deuteronomy 32:8–9 (NRSV)

This changed with the exile to Babylon in 586 B.C.E. The exiles' experience of living far from their Judean homeland expanded their awareness of the wider world and their perception of God's domain.^c The anonymous prophet in Babylon known as Second Isaiah portrays Yahweh not as the national deity of a single ancient Near Eastern people but as lord of the universe. In Isaiah 45:5–6, Yahweh informs King Cyrus of Persia:

I arm you, though you do not know me,
so that they may know, from the rising of the sun
and from the west, that there is no one besides me;
I am the Lord, and there is no other.

Even more to the point, the Priestly authors of the creation story in Genesis 1–2:4 were likely writing in Babylon, and their systematic account of creation in six days arises out of their widened perception of God's power. The placement of this more modern "creation of the universe" story before that of the Adam and Eve story (attributed to the earlier Yahwist source, usually abbreviated J) reset the context of the older story so that questions like "Who was Cain's wife?" now seemed logical.