

Q Which “Bone” Was Eve Made From?

As famous as some Hollywood couples are, nobody can approach the fame of Adam and Eve, Earth’s original celebrity couple. Almost *everybody* knows about Adam and Eve, even if they know nothing else about the Bible.

But a lot of people, Bible readers included, don’t know that Eve’s origins may have been quite different from what many of us learned in Sunday school. In fact, the true explanation for where Eve came from may be as scandalous as a tabloid headline (“Eve’s Shocking Past!”). We’ll get to that, but first, let’s have a look at the traditional story most people know.

The biblical account of creation is told in the second chapter of the Book of Genesis, which describes how God made the earth and heavens and then planted an idyllic, tree-filled nature park—the Garden of Eden. This Garden apparently was the “it” place on planet Earth. Adam and Eve would hang out there, as would an assortment of amazing creatures, including a talking snake. God would even drop by in the evenings to liven up the party. In fact, Adam and Eve had a pretty good deal overall. They owned an entire planet (and paid no property taxes on it). The only requirements God placed on them were to (1)

have sex and (2) hold down fairly easy gardening and animal husbandry jobs. They blew it, of course, but that’s another story.

Let’s go back a little further, to Adam’s origins. God created the Garden of Eden, then formed the first man, Adam, from the ground, as a potter would form a vessel out of clay, and placed him in the Garden to take care of it. But at some point God appears to have decided that having one human being around, and nobody with whom that human could share his silly little observations, was a recipe for loneliness and depression. “It is not good for the man to be alone,” God said, according to Genesis, so God took some mud, as he had done with Adam, and created other dirt creatures to be the man’s companions. But these newbies were animals, not humans. God organized them into a pet parade, brought them before Adam, and invited him to name them. But as entertaining as this exotic animal collection no doubt was, none of the creatures suited Adam’s need for a soul mate, a colleague, or even a drinking buddy. He was stuck with his loneliness problem, and no MySpace, eHarmony, or Prozac to turn to. He had a dog (and a lion, and a giraffe . . .), but he still didn’t have a best friend.

So God administered the world’s first anesthesia and put Adam into a deep sleep so God could perform surgery. While Adam was under, God removed one of his ribs, as the traditional story goes. From that rib, God then made

the first woman, Eve, and brought her to the man. Adam's response upon seeing her, according to the Bible, was, "Bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh," which can also be translated from the Hebrew as, "Va-va-va-voom!" He called her "*Woman*," a play on words, because she was taken from *man* and was a lot like him except in some key, very attractive regards. The story adds a postscript, explaining that this is the reason why a man leaves his parents and is united with his wife so that they become one flesh. Keep that postscript and that word "flesh" in mind. They will help us to see what this passage really might be saying.

Problems with the Traditional Interpretation

The traditional version of the story is accurate to the text except for one important detail. Though for centuries the term "Adam's rib" has been used in sermons, commentaries, and film titles (see "Spencer Tracy and Katharine Hepburn, films of"), the original Genesis story does not necessarily mention a rib. The Hebrew word for the body part that God takes from Adam is *tsela*. But this word never means "rib" anywhere else in the Bible. It usually means "side," as in the side of a hill¹ or the side of a structure like the ark of the covenant,² the tabernacle,³ or an altar.⁴ In architecture, it refers to a side room or cell.⁵ It is also used for the planks or boards in a building wall⁶ and for rafters or ceiling beams.⁷ The common idea in all

these different meanings seems to be that of a tangent or branch extending out from a central structure or body. Given this basic sense, Adam's *tsela* would seem to refer to a "limb" or "appendage"—something that jutted out from his body.

So where did the "Adam's rib" interpretation come from? The answer is the Septuagint. The Septua-what? The Septuagint (sep-TOOa-jent) is the name of the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible that was done in the third century bce. The Septuagint translated the Hebrew word *tsela* with the Greek word *pleura*, which means "side" or "rib." (It's the word from which we get "pleurisy," an inflammation in the lining of the lung. Isn't that pleasant?) Another problem with the traditional translation of *tsela* as "rib" is that it doesn't serve the etiological agenda of the Genesis passage. Yes, we just used the word "etiological." We're not smarter than you, we just hang around words like this for a living because we're college professors. An etiology is simply a story that explains the origin of something. It may explain a biological fact, a geological formation, a social custom, or the like. The story of Adam and Eve is full of etiologies. The very name "Adam" means "man/human," and "Eve" means "life." The story explains where humans came from. It also explains such things as why snakes crawl, why people wear clothes, and why women have labor pains. The reference to a man leaving his parents to join with his wife

is an etiology for marriage.

(Now that you know what an etiology is, don't get superior about it. If it comes up in dinner conversation, politely explain the meaning, just as we have here, without making your listeners feel backward and uneducated. Remember, there was a time just, oh, two minutes ago, when you didn't know the meaning of "etiology" either.)

Why does etiology matter to us here? Because the reader of the Bible expects the creation of woman from some part of man to tell a story as well. We want to know what it means, or what it explains about life as we know it. The traditional interpretation of the "Adam's rib" story included an etiology, and perhaps you have heard it. It says that God created Eve from Adam's rib, which explains why girls have one more rib than boys. At least some of you readers have undoubtedly believed that for an embarrassingly long time. But we (and the American Medical Association) are here to tell you that it is not true. It is what highfalutin university types might call a "false etiology." If you don't believe us, count your ribs, if your figure and present location allow. Now count the ribs of someone nearby who is of the opposite gender (but only if this will not get you sued for sexual harassment—see our disclaimer*). Or simply consult a trusted medical book (okay, fine—the Internet) and you will find that men and women have exactly the same number of ribs. They always have, and people in biblical times would have known it.

(They could count ribs too, and back then nobody sued for sexual harassment.) If there is an etiology, or explanatory story, in the creation of Eve, it has nothing to do with rib numbers.

What makes the understanding of *tsela* as "rib" even more peculiar in the context of the Genesis story is that it does not relate to any of the obvious sexual features that distinguish men and women from one another. Yet this story is full of allusions to human sexuality. The first pair are naked and unashamed⁸ until they eat of the forbidden fruit. Then their eyes are opened, and they recognize that they are naked. They immediately cover their genitals with fig-leaf aprons.⁹ Given the sexually rich nature of this context, readers naturally expect that the creation of woman from man might involve some physical characteristic that is clearly different between the two.

There is another puzzling feature of the story that needs to be explained. It's not clear what it means when it says that God closed up with flesh the place where Adam's *tsela* had been. Again, considering the etiological (explanatory) nature of the story, this statement seems intended to explain the existence of some suture- or scar-like mark on the torsos of human males that is not found on females. But there is no such mark on males—at least not near their ribs.

*Don't count people's ribs without their permission.

Splitting the Adam and Other Alternative

Interpretations

Because of these difficulties, some interpreters through the ages have preferred to understand the word *tsela*—“side”— in different ways. Early rabbis in particular sought out alternative explanations.¹⁰ Some of them theorized that “side” means a face (front side) or a tail (back side), which God used as a starting point to make Eve.

Other rabbis, somewhat more creatively, took the statement that God created “male and female”¹¹ to mean that the first human was androgynous, that is, having both male and female characteristics. They believed that the creation of Eve was nothing more than splitting apart the male and female halves of the first human. God separated the two “sides” of this bizarre him-her being, giving each new person a separate back. Thus, the first distinct man and the first distinct woman were actually created at the same time. This interpretation is popular with some modern feminists, since the simultaneous creation of man and woman implies their equality.¹² One recent feminist scholar, for instance, has theorized that “side” may mean “belly” or “womb,” so that woman was created by separating the womb from the androgynous creature and using it as the beginning point for the formation of the woman.¹³

A New Solution

But these interpretations have their own problems and don't fully solve the questions we've raised. A more intriguing and satisfying new interpretation of the word *tsela* in this story comes from a Hebrew Bible scholar named Ziony Zevit, who teaches at the American Jewish University in Los Angeles, California.¹⁴ Zevit points out the problems with the traditional interpretation that we have just noted. Then he suggests that *tsela* might refer not to a rib but to the “baculum.” Those of you in the veterinary sciences already know what we are talking about, but the rest of you should brace yourselves because “baculum” is just a fancy way of saying “penis bone.” (Penis bone, penis bone, penis bone. Get used to it. The rest of the chapter is about it.) The penis bone is an actual, nonmetaphoric bone, like the bones found in your leg or hand, but it is located in the penis. Most mammals and almost all primates have a penis bone. But by some weird coincidence, only spider monkeys and human males lack one. That's right, if you are a human (or a highly literate spider monkey) male, you have no penis bone. You depend solely on hydraulics, and perhaps a prescription pharmaceutical, for your erections.

Ancient Israelites, Zevit observes, would have known that male animals possess a penis bone and that human males do not, because they would have commonly seen both

human and animal skeletons—animals in the field and humans after decomposition in cavelike tombs. This is another way that ancient people also would have been well aware that women have the same number of ribs as men. In fact, they were probably more aware of this than modern people. (When was the last time *you* saw an exposed human skeleton? *CSI* doesn't count.)

Suddenly, with the penis bone difference, we have the makings of a satisfactory etiology. If Adam is lacking one particular part that all other male mammals (aside from spider monkeys) possess, and if observation clearly shows that human males have no baculum, then, like Zevit, we may allow that the story in Genesis accounts for this difference by explaining that God removed Adam's penis bone in order to make Eve from it.

Here's another brick in the wall. The Hebrew verb that describes God's creation of Eve literally means "to build." The image seems to be that of piecing together bones and other body parts to create Eve rather than forming her out of clay, as in the creation of the man and the animals. As Zevit further observes, there are no other stories or myths from the ancient world in which a rib serves a reproductive function. And of course, ribs do not exercise that function naturally. The penis, on the other hand, is obviously a generative organ in reality as well as in myth and story.

As strange as Zevit's proposal might sound initially, he

finds further support for it in other details of the Bible's story. The statement that God closed up with flesh the place from which he had taken Adam's *tsela* could be a way of explaining the "raphe" on the underside of the penis and scrotum in human males. A raphe is a seam joining two parts of a bodily organ. Everyone has a raphe on the roof of the mouth. You can feel it with your tongue and see it in a mirror. Men have an additional raphe on the penis. Again, ancient Israelites would have known about this seam, and the story in Genesis explains how it got there. After God removed Adam's penis bone to create Eve, he closed over the flesh again, leaving the raphe, or "surgery scar."

Another point Zevit makes in support of his new interpretation is Adam's own comment when he sees Eve that she is "bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh."¹⁵ This may simply be the man's way of recognizing the woman as his true kin, as opposed to the animals, who were a lot of fun but didn't possess Eve's particular *je ne sais quoi*. Indeed, later on in Genesis, when Laban discovers that he and Jacob are related, he tells Jacob, "You are my bone and my flesh."¹⁶ He means, "We are family." Or Adam's "bone of my bones" line may be a natural outburst of ecstasy at finally meeting someone with whom he can have sex, spend time, go to the movies, and do all the other things God made people to do together. This fits with the etiology (story meaning) for marriage, which explains that

a man leaves his parents and joins his wife to become “one flesh.” To reinforce this point, Adam even makes a pun on the Hebrew words for woman (*ishshah*) and man (*ish*), which is similar to the play between the English words “wo-man” and “man.” In other words, “We’re the same, and yet we’re different. How exciting! Let’s see if we can make the nine o’clock show.”

But the expression “bone of my bones, flesh of my flesh” fits particularly well with Zevit’s interpretation of this story. Zevit observes that there is no single word for “penis” in biblical Hebrew. Instead, the Bible uses several different words as euphemisms for the male organ; *tsela* may be one of these. “Bone” would be another one. Specifically, it would refer to the penis bone observed in other animals and once possessed by Adam but taken from him as the starting material for the creation of Eve.

The word “flesh” also sometimes refers to the penis in the Hebrew Bible. Many of these references pertain to the practice of circumcision.¹⁷ Ezekiel, for instance, speaks of non-Israelites as being uncircumcised in heart and “flesh.”¹⁸ In another book, priests are commanded to wear undergarments to cover their naked “flesh.”¹⁹ In yet another passage dealing with bodily discharges, the word “flesh” is translated as “member.”²⁰

A couple of references to “flesh” in Ezekiel are almost obscene— so of course we thought we’d share them with you. Both refer to the Egyptians as being well endowed

sexually. In one case, the Egyptians are said to be “great of flesh.”²¹ To match the crudeness of that remark, we would have to translate it as “well hung.” (One popular Bible translation, the New Revised Standard Version [nrsv], waters this down by translating it as “lustful.” Prudes.) The other Ezekiel reference compares the “flesh” of the Egyptians to donkey penises and adds that their “emission was like that of stallions.”²² Yes, we are still quoting from the Bible.

The Advantages and Appeal of Zevit’s Interpretation

Because people are so accustomed to the traditional interpretation, Zevit’s proposal may seem far-fetched at first. But on closer examination, it has some compelling advantages over other interpretations, especially the traditional one. Its suggestion about the meaning of *tsela* takes into consideration the basic meaning of the word as “side.” It is also based on an obvious difference between men and women and between human males and those of other species that would have been easily observable to ancient Israelites. Thus, it differs both from the traditional interpretation of *tsela* as “rib,” which assumes a difference between women and men that doesn’t really exist, and from the outlandish proposal of the rabbis and others that the story imagines the first human as

androgynous.

Zevit's interpretation therefore fits both the sexual content and the etiological nature of the story perfectly. Moreover, it explains the "place closed up with flesh," which other interpretations ignore. And it affords a fuller and more practical sense to the reference to the woman as "bone of my bones, flesh of my flesh."

Whether you find Zevit's proposal convincing or merely provocative, it is hard to deny its interpretive advantages, not to mention its sex appeal. His explanation is not bizarre, outrageous, or unreasonable. To the contrary, it solves long-standing problems with the text and its interpretations and fits the etiological context. It may not soon become the Sunday school standard, but for adults curious about what this Bible story means, it offers real possibilities.