

THE FIRST BIBLICAL FAMILY: WHEN DID THEY LIVE?

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Technological advances of early humans occurred slowly over long periods of time. For the first humans, the transition from nomadic hunters and gatherers living in caves to a people who had learned the use of fire, of the wheel, who had developed language, who had learned to sew clothes and tents, who knew agriculture, livestock herding and the forging of bronze and iron tools took many thousands, if not millions, of years.¹ The Book of Genesis describes how God created the first human beings and gives an account of their offspring, describing the first biblical family that ever existed. In this article we will analyze the lifestyle, occupations and available technology of this first biblical family in the light of known information about primitive early humans.

From the biblical narrative we first learn that Adam, after his act of disobedience, was banished from the Garden of Eden *to toil the soil from which he was taken* (Gen. 3:23). Likewise, his eldest son Cain *became a tiller of the soil* (Gen. 4:2). His second son, Abel, *became a keeper of sheep* (Gen. 4:2). The first difficulty we encounter is the biblical description of Adam and Cain as tillers of the soil, which means they labored in agriculture. Archeologists, paleontologists and anthropologists are in agreement that early humans were not farmers but nomadic scavengers, hunters and gatherers.

Being a tiller of the soil implies plowing land for the raising of crops. It means that Adam and Cain had already abandoned the nomadic lifestyle and had settled on a piece of land to live and cultivate. It also means that they were farmers and lived in an agricultural society.

At the time when Genesis was written this assertion would have been acceptable to readers because people had no knowledge of what humanity's distant past had been like. However, during the past 100-300 years, since the history of early humans has come to be known, we find that the biblical statement regarding the description of Adam and Cain as farmers is anachronistic, sharply contrasting with our present knowledge of what the first humans were capable of doing.

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For many years, at least 90% of human history, humans subsisted as hunters and gatherers, combining those activities with a nomadic life style.² They had to constantly move in search of edible plants, fruits and game to hunt. Once a temporary location was depleted, they had to move to new sites to renew their gathering and hunting. They lived in caves or on open fields, and slowly learned to use fire, the wheel and to develop language. Although they were able to use wood, their more advanced tools were made of stone, for which their age was called the Paleolithic or Stone Age.

The transition from a hunter-gatherer to an agricultural society began approximately 10 to 12,000 years ago (8000-10,000 BCE). With the invention of agriculture “people were able to settle down [in a fixed tract of land] and increase the amount and reliability of their food supply, thus allowing the same land to support more people than by hunting and gathering, allowing our species to multiply throughout the world.”³ We can assume that if Cain was a tiller of the land, a farmer, he must have lived after the hunter-gatherer societies had given way to the agriculturalists.

Abel, on the other hand, was a sheep herder. The herding of animals required one other development, animal domestication. Humans began domesticating animals approximately 12,000 years ago; basically at the same time agriculture began,⁴ during the Neolithic Age. Although animals were domesticated much earlier (the first appears to have been the dog), the domestication of sheep as such (which constituted Abel’s herd) is believed to have begun approximately 10,500 years ago (c 8500 BCE). This being the case, the two brothers must have lived no earlier than the Neolithic age which was characterized by the Agricultural Revolution, which ended nomadism and gave humanity farming, domestication and herding of livestock.⁵

However, the Bible provides additional information which implies that the first biblical family, as described in the narrative, must have lived even later than the Neolithic age.

When Cain was banished from the presence of the Lord and was cursed to wander in the world, he settled in the land of Nod and married. Genesis continues to tell us that *Cain knew his wife, and she conceived and bore Enoch. He [Cain] then founded a city, and named the city after his son Enoch. To Enoch was born Irad, and Irad begot Mehujael, and Mehujael begot Methusael, and Methusael begot Lamech. Lamech took to himself two wives: the*

name of the one was Adah, and the name of the other was Zillah. Adah bore Jabal; he was the ancestor of those who dwell in tents and amidst herds. And the name of his brother was Jubal; he was the ancestor of all who play the lyre and the pipe. As for Zillah, she bore Tubal-cain, who forged all implements of copper and iron (Gen. 4:17-22).

Cain founded a city and after only seven generations from Adam, Tubal-cain was already able to forge copper and iron implements; that is, to work in the field of metallurgy. It has been said that “no substance has been as important as metal in the story of man’s control of his environment. Advances in agriculture, warfare, transport, even cookery are impossible without metal.”⁶ But the work with metals was extremely difficult and required the preexistence of technological advances which took many years to develop.

The Copper Age began after the Agricultural Revolution and is defined as the period of transition between the Neolithic and the Bronze Age. A few Neolithic communities began hammering copper into crude knives and sickles, which worked as well as their stone equivalents but lasted far longer. During this period, humans worked the copper metal before they discovered that adding tin to copper (or other alloys such as arsenic, aluminum, phosphorus, manganese or silicon) formed the harder bronze material ushering in the Bronze Age.⁷ The earliest tin-alloy bronze, found in what now is known as Serbia, dates to approximately 7000 years ago.⁸

However, in the Near East the Copper Age began approximately 6500 years ago (c. 4500 BCE) and the Bronze Age as early as 5500 years ago (c. 3500 BCE). This being the case, Tubal-cain could not have been forging copper tools earlier than 4500 BCE.⁹

The report of Tubal-cain as actually engaging in the metallurgy of iron is even more problematic, as it required furnaces capable of reaching very high temperatures, and only developed approximately 3300 years ago (1300 BCE).¹⁰ We must emphasize that the metallurgy of iron was a very complicated endeavor impossible for the first human beings on earth. It is interesting that, even after being settled in the Promised Land, the Israelites lagged behind other Canaanites in the production of iron products. This placed them at a disadvantage in warfare. Several biblical passages allude to this problem. For example: *And the LORD was with Judah; and he drove out the inhabitants of the hill-country; for he could not drive out the inhabitants of the val-*

ley, because they had chariots of iron (Judg. 1:19). The Book of Judges asks: . . . ‘was there a shield or spear seen among forty thousand in Israel?’ (Judg. 5:8). This lack of iron weapons placed them at a disadvantage in Canaan . . . the children of Israel cried unto the LORD; for he [Sisera] had nine hundred chariots of iron; and [for] twenty years he mightily oppressed the children of Israel (Judg. 4:3).

In summary, the first biblical family is described as living in a civilized world and possessing technological advances unthinkable for the earliest human beings. Within seven generations from the time the first humans were created, they already had language, knew how to use fire (necessary in metallurgy), had already settled to live in a relatively permanent location abandoning nomadism, had built a city, had experienced the Neolithic Agricultural Revolution, had mastered the domestication of animals, had developed metallurgical skills and could forge tools from metals such as copper and iron. We must conclude that the Genesis 4 narrative is really describing an extended family who lived around or after the year 1300 BCE, most likely after the Israelites had already arrived in Canaan and possibly during the time of the Judges.

The oldest stories of Genesis were written in an era in which there was very little, if any, knowledge of how primitive human beings lived during prehistoric times. They could not even begin to know how and when the different technological advances of humanity had occurred. We have acquired this knowledge only during the last few hundred years with the flourishing of modern archeology, anthropology and paleontology.

Changes and progress in those times were so slow in coming that a person, a family and even several generations, could live without seeing or experiencing any significant change in their way of life. What they saw as children was still there, virtually unchanged, in their old age. As things didn’t change much in their lifetime, they must have thought that their ancestors lived in ways very similar to theirs.

The first biblical family described in Genesis fits the characteristics of the families living at the time the story was created; probably during a time after the Israelites had arrived or had already settled in Canaan.

NOTES

1. J.C. Davis, *The Human History: Our History from the Stone Age to Today* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1st Ed., 1989) pp. 1-2.
2. *The World Book Encyclopedia* Vol. 1 (Chicago: World Book Inc., 2005) pp. 414 – 415.
3. G. Parker (Ed.), *Compact History of the World; A History of the World from the Stone Age to the Space Age* (London: Barnes and Noble Books, 3rd Ed., 2002) pp. 16-17.
4. M.A. Zeder, “Domestication and early agriculture in the Mediterranean Basin: Origins, diffusion, and impact”. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 105 (2008) pp. 11,597 – 11,604.
5. M. Mazoyer, L.A. Roudart, *History of World Agriculture: From the Neolithic age to the Current Crisis* (Translated by J.H. Membrez), (London: Earthscan, 2006) p.71.
6. P.N. Stearns, *World History in Brief: Major Patterns of Change and Continuity* (New York: Addison Wesley Longman, Inc., 3rd Ed., 1999) p. 13.
7. J. Pearsall, *The New Oxford Dictionary of English* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1st Ed., 1998) p.301.
8. M. Radivojevic, T. Rehren, T. et. al. “Tainted ores and the rise of tin bronzes in Eurasia, c. 6500-years ago”. *Antiquity Publications* 87, No. 338, (2013) p. 1030 – 1045.
9. G. Weisberger, A. Hauptmann, *Early Copper Mining and Smelting in Palestine. In The Beginning of the use of Metals and Alloys*. Ed. R. Maddin (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988) pp. 52, 61.
10. J.C. Waldbaum, “From Bronze to Iron: The transition from the Bronze Age to the Iron Age in the Eastern Mediterranean”. *Studies in Mediterranean Archeology* 54 (1978) p. 106.

Note from the Editorial Committee:

In line with JBQ’s editorial policy to make available to our readers different views on important issues, we note the following. Dr. Sostre’s thesis is based on the assumption that Genesis 4 is presented as history with the events and chronology thereof to be interpreted literally. There are alternative readings in which Genesis 2 and 3 are seen as mythic metaphors of the origin and nature of Homo sapiens. Genesis 4 can be viewed as a continuation of the metaphor, detailing man’s moral development set within the context of a tradition which attributed the important developments of human civilization such as agriculture, domestic herding, urbanization, metallurgy, and the invention of musical instruments to the Kenites (a nomadic tribe claiming to be descendants of Cain). In this view, the proper names are not to be seen as representing actual individuals nor does the text commit itself to any particular chronology. However, according to the classic Jewish tradition that Moses wrote the Book of Genesis, it had to be intelligible to a 1300 BCE audience, a date which in some respects corresponds to the research of Dr. Sostre.