

Adam's Rib

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all scripture quoted from ESV

Before we look at “Adam’s rib,” we need to understand why God created Eve. Genesis chapter two, verses 7-20, provide the account of Adam’s creation and life in the Garden of Eden. After God created Adam, he brought the animals to see what names Adam would give them. Adam discovered that every creature had a mate except himself during the naming process. Genesis 2:20 notes that there was no suitable helper for Adam. Through the process of naming the animals, Adam realized that he was alone. There was no other human in the garden for Adam to interact with. It wasn’t until Adam realized that he was alone, that God stepped in to fill the need.

1. What is a helper?

“I will make him a helper (עֹזֵר / ezer) fit (כְּנֶגְדּוֹ / kenegdo) for him.” (Genesis 2:18b)

The Hebrew term “ezer” is generally defined as “help or support,” but in Genesis 2:18, it denotes mutual assistance.¹ The Old Testament tends to use this word in military terms. For example, in Isaiah 30:5, Ezekiel 12:14, and Daniel 11:34, *ezer* is used to show military support by other nations to “help” or defend Israel from other countries. In Exodus 18:4, Deut 33:7, Psalm 20:2 (and 13 other verses), the term *ezer* demonstrates God as Israel’s helper. The “helper” is in a position of strength coming to “help” or aid the one in need. Nothing in the term *ezer* suggests a subservient status of the helper. Our English word “helper” does not adequately render the richness of *ezer*. It would be better to use the word “sustainer” – one who strengthens and supports physically or mentally – than “helper.”

The Hebrew term *kenegdo* (translated as “fit” in the ESV) comes from the root word “*neged*,” which is defined as “in the presence of.”² However, the word used isn’t simply “*neged*,” the word has a prefix at the beginning and a suffix at the end. The term *neged* has attached to it the prefix *ke* (כִּ) (this preposition connotes “having the same

¹ Allan M. Harman, “עֹזֵר” in the *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, ed. Willem A. VanGemeren (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Pub. House, 1997), 3:379.

² R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, and Bruce K. Waltke, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 1980), 704.

nature as," or "consisting of"³) and the suffix *o* (ו) (a third person singular pronoun typically is translated as "of him"). Putting them together gives you the word *kenegdo* (כנגדו). *Kenegdo* means "similar to him," or "corresponding to him," or "equal to him."⁴ I think that combining the terms presents an accurate description of Eve. The English word "equivalent" (equal in value, measure, force, effect, significance, etc. :) sums up the term *kenegdo* nicely. The wording places the woman in a relationship with the man of equality and mutuality.

It is important to remember that even though Eve was equal to Adam, she was still very different. God made Eve to be Adam's counterpart, to complete him. The differences between men and women, males and females, have been well documented by many scientific studies. You can quickly look up studies on the physiological differences, and I don't want to get into all of the differences and nuances between men and women in this article. However, it is interesting to note the differences, and similarities God designed into men and women.

The two words together, *ezer kenegdo*, could be translated as "a helper/sustainer equivalent to him." Verse 2:18b could therefore read as "I will make him a helper/sustainer who is equivalent (or equal) to him." From Adam's side, God built the female counterpart of/to Adam. She was not inferior or lesser to him in any way. As a helper/sustainer, Eve was not just similar to, corresponding to, or equal to Adam; she was the perfect counterpart to Adam.

So the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept took one of his ribs and closed up its place with flesh. (Genesis 2:21)

The story of God creating Eve (Eve's name is Chava in Hebrew - pronounced Ha-va) from one of Adam's ribs is well-known. You'll hear it in Sunday School classes and church sermons. However, there's a significant problem with this story. The problem is that God did not create Eve from one of Adam's ribs. It is difficult to pin down where

³ Bill T. Arnold and John H. Choi, *A Guide to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2019), 119.

⁴ Francis Brown, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Hendrickson, 2007), 1494.

the “tradition” of Adam’s rib originated. The Hebrew word translated as “rib” (צֵלַע / *tsela*) does not mean “rib” and therefore should not be construed as a human rib. The tradition of mistranslating the Hebrew word *tsela* goes back to the Catholic Vulgate (Latin) version of the Bible. All the English versions of the Bible written during the Protestant Reformation took their cues from the Catholic Vulgate and translated the Latin word rather than the Hebrew word (this includes the King James Version). Even the Greek Septuagint version of the Old Testament (written between 200-300 years before Christ) translated the word *tsela* correctly, which means that Bible translators did not reference that document either.

2. Definitions and background of rib (צֵלַע / *tsela*)

So what exactly does *tsela* mean, and what does that mean in the making of Eve? First, we must investigate the Hebrew term צֵלַע/*tsela* including its basic definitions and background. Secondly, we need to analyze its general use in the Old Testament and its particular meaning in Genesis 2:21. These two steps will assist us in both defining *tsela* and understanding its importance.

The term *tsela* primarily relates to architectural descriptions as in the Ark of the Covenant, tabernacle, altar, and side chambers of the temple.⁵ The Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament (TWOT) uses the term *sēlā'* rather than *tsela*. It defines it with three possible definitions: 1) it is used once for a man's side, 2) and once for the side of a hill, 3) elsewhere, it is an architectural term.⁶ Concerning the first possible definition, TWOT explains that *sēlā'* can mean that God took a good portion of Adam's side since the man considers the woman to be "bone of his bones and flesh of his flesh."⁷ Concerning the second possible definition, TWOT explains that *sēlā'* can mean “a side of a hill or perhaps a ridge or terrace.”⁸ Concerning the third possible definition, TWOT explains that *sēlā'* as an architectural term can “refer to the sides of an object, e.g., the sides of the ark of the covenant.”⁹

⁵ Temper Longman III, Gordon H. Matties, “צֵלַע” in the *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, ed. Willem A. VanGemeren (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Pub. House, 1997), 3:811.

⁶ R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, and Bruce K. Waltke, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 1980), 768.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

Gesenius' Hebrew Chaldee Lexicon to the Old Testament (first published in 1857) defines *tsela* with three possible definitions: 1) a rib, 2) a side, and 3) a side chamber of the temple.¹⁰ Gesenius did not explain why “rib” was a possible definition and did not provide any lexiconic evidence to back it up. Concerning the Old Testament background, The Complete Word Study Dictionary: Old Testament gives all three interpretations that the term can refer to a side or rib from a side of a human body, the side of an object, or the side of a hill.¹¹ The context of the text determines the interpretation. For example, from a Jewish perspective, Rabbi Rosenfeld wrote that *tsela* should never be interpreted as a human rib in the Old Testament since its primary use refers to the side of a building, structure, or object.¹²

3. Old Testament Usage

Concerning the use of *tsela* in the Old Testament, The Complete Word Study Dictionary: Old Testament notes that it occurs 28 times. Only twice (Genesis 2:21,22) is it (questionably) translated as a human rib.¹³ Once (Job 18:12), *tsela* refers to a particular side of Job's body (not a rib or ribs). Three times to refer to the side of the Ark of the Covenant. Eleven times it relates to a side of the tabernacle, and eleven times to refer to a side chamber of the temple.¹⁴ The three times *tsela* is used in conjunction with the Ark of the Covenant indicates an entire side. For example, Exodus 25:12 (NASB) states, "You shall cast four gold rings for it and fasten them on its four feet, and two rings shall be on one side (*tsela*) of it and two rings on the other side (*tsela*) of it."

The Ark of the Covenant had four sides (*tsela*'s), a bottom, and a top cover. *Tsela* was also used to refer to a side of the tabernacle. For example, in the construction of the tabernacle, Exodus 36:25 (NASB) states, "For the second side (*tsela*) of the tabernacle, on the north side, he made twenty frames." In all of these cases, *tsela* is referring to an entire side. Unfortunately, tradition is difficult to overcome. Since the early versions of

¹⁰ H.W.F. Gesenius, *Gesenius' Hebrew-Chaldee Lexicon to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1979), 711.

¹¹ Warren Baker and Eugene E. Carpenter, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: Old Testament* (Chattanooga, Tenn.: AMG Publishers, 2003), 954.

¹² David Rosenfeld, "Eve's Creation: Rib or Side?: Ask the Rabbi Response," *Aish.com*, accessed June 28, 2021, <https://www.aish.com/atr/Eve-Creation-Rib-or-Side.html>.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

the English Bible erroneously mistranslated *tsela* as “rib” (and still do), it is difficult to get people to accept the correct translation.

4. Interpreting the term in Genesis 2:21

Genesis 2:21 reads, “So the Lord God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man, and while he slept took one of his ribs and closed (sagar - סגר) up its place with flesh (basar - בשר).” Adam Clark, in his commentary, states, “And he took one of his ribs - It is immaterial whether we render צלע *tsela* a rib, or a part of his side, for it may mean either: some part of man was to be used for the occasion, whether bone or flesh it matters not; though it is likely, from verse 23 that a part of both was taken; for Adam, knowing how the woman was formed, said, This is flesh of my flesh, and bone of my bone.”¹⁵ I disagree with Clark that it doesn’t matter if God used a rib or a whole side. In my opinion, it makes a big difference. Had Eve been created from the rib alone, Adam would only have been able to say that she was “bone of his bone.”¹⁶ Modern commentators such as Warren Wiersbe also agree that God made Eve from Adam’s side.¹⁷ Adam quickly observed (when he looked at Eve for the first time) that God had used one of his sides to create (or build) Eve. The Bible doesn’t explain how Adam recognized this fact, simply that he did. Adam's flesh and bone were so evident in Eve that he quickly identified himself in her. In this sense, Eve is Adam’s other half. Therefore, God refers to the two of them in Genesis 2:24 as being “one flesh,” not “one bone,” or “one rib.”

Ellicott’s commentary (written in the late 1800s, but is well known for its critical and grammatical explanations) also disagrees with interpreting *tsela* as a rib. He notes that “the word is never translated as rib except in this verse, but always as “side.” The woman was not formed out of one of man’s many ribs, of which he would not feel the loss; rather, she is one side of man.”¹⁸ TWOT continues this “side” line of thought by stating that this describes the intimacy between man and woman as they stand equal

¹⁵ Adam Clarke, *Commentary On the Bible by Adam Clarke* (Original publisher unk., 1832), BibleHub, (accessed 11 December 2019). <https://biblehub.com/commentaries/clarke/genesis/2.htm>.

¹⁶ Nicholas J. Schaser, “Did Eve Come from Adam’s ‘Rib?’” *Israel Bible Weekly*, last modified May 11, 2021, <https://weekly.israelbiblecenter.com/eve-come-adams-rib/>.

¹⁷ Warren W. Wiersbe, *The Wiersbe Bible Commentary: the Complete Old Testament in One Volume* (Colorado Springs, CO: David C. Cook, 2007), 21.

¹⁸ Charles John Ellicott. *Ellicott's Commentary for English Readers* (1905), BibleHub, (accessed 11Dec2019) <https://biblehub.com/commentaries/ellicott/genesis/2.htm>.

before God.¹⁹ Since God built Eve's body from Adam's side, their similarity was enough that Adam immediately knew how God made Eve.

God took one of Adam's sides and closed (sagar - סגר) it with flesh. The Hebrew word *sagar* means to shut, deliver, or to enclose.²⁰ The Hebrew word for "flesh," *basar*, refers to the entire soft-tissue husk of the body as it stands or functions, in other words, the body.²¹ The image presented by these two words is that after Gook used one of Adam's sides to make Eve, he created another side and fitted it into place. Adam would not survive if one side, or 25% of his torso, was gone. So God miraculously replaced what he used.

There was so much Adam in Eve that it was visually apparent. Adam knew how God formed her, as he stated in Genesis 2:23, "bone of my bone, flesh of my flesh." Adam was essentially saying, "God made you from my body." The woman's origin from the man's side makes it possible for a man and a woman to establish a dynamic relationship in which they become one flesh.²² The term *tsela* provides an image of reworking 'one of his sides' reshaping the whole into two complementary halves.²³

5. The construction` of Eve

And the rib (צלע / *tsela*) that the LORD God had taken from the man he made (ויבן / *banah*) into a woman and brought her to the man. (Genesis 2:22)

The Hebrew term "וַיִּבְנֶה / *banah*" means: to build or fashion. The term *banah* is only used with Eve and not with Adam. Genesis 2:7 states, "Then the LORD God formed (יצר / *ysr*) the man of dust from the ground and breathed into his nostrils the breath of life, and the man became a living creature." The Hebrew term *ysr* means to shape or form. It is particularly significant in the creation of Adam both in terms of his unique relation to God and God's purpose for him.²⁴ God is depicted as a master

¹⁹ R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer, and Bruce K. Waltke, *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 1980), 768.

²⁰ Warren Baker and Eugene E. Carpenter, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: Old Testament* (Chattanooga, Tenn.: AMG Publishers, 2003), 769.

²¹ Warren Baker and Eugene E. Carpenter, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: Old Testament* (Chattanooga, Tenn.: AMG Publishers, 2003), 170.

²² *Ibid.*

²³ Robert S. Kawashima, "A revisionist reading revisited: on the creation of Adam and then Eve," *Vetus Testamentum* 56, no. 1 (January 2006): 52.

²⁴ A.H. Konkel, "יָצַר" in the *New International Dictionary of Old Testament Theology and Exegesis*, ed. Willem A. VanGemeren (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan Pub. House, 1997), 2:504.

craftsman, shaping and forming dirt into a human being, much like a potter shaping and forming clay into a bowl.

On the other hand, Eve was not shaped or formed from dirt but built or fashioned from Adam's side. Construction materials are required to build a house, so also Adam's side contained the construction materials that God used to make Eve. Every time Adam looked at Eve, he would see God's provision for the one thing he lacked in his life, a suitable companion. Both Adam and Eve were "formed" from existing material. God formed Adam from the dust of the earth and built Eve from Adam's side. Unlike the humanity spoken into existence in Genesis 1:26, Adam and Eve were hand-made by God, giving them a personal touch.

How God made Eve from Adam's side is a mystery. How God gave Adam a new side to replace the one he used is a mystery. God seldom tells us how he does things. All we know is that the Bible says God made Eve from Adam's side; therefore, that is what happened. I don't think we would have the ability to understand it even if he did explain how he did it. Ultimately it comes down to trust and faith. Do we trust that God did what he said he did? Do we have the faith to believe what he tells us?

6. Conclusion

This word study has demonstrated that *tsela*, as used in Genesis 2:21, refers to Adam's side rather than one of his ribs. *Tsela's* primary usage in the Old Testament is as an architectural reference and should be utilized in that manner in Genesis 2:21. Old Testament translators do not refer to the sides of the tabernacle or the Ark as "ribs" and therefore should not refer to Adam's side as a rib. The imagery of *tsela* is that God used a side of Adam's torso to make Eve. Interestingly, God used more than enough of Adam's side for Adam to recognize himself in Eve. She was bone of his bone, flesh of his flesh, and might I add, body of his body. The only way Adam could be whole was with Eve. Eve was "built from Adam" to solve the problem of Adam's aloneness. Adam's relationship with Eve was a type and shadow of the relationship God wants with us. The only way Adam could be whole was with Eve. The only way we can be whole is in a relationship with God.

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