

From His Side:

Recovering the Meaning Behind Eve's Origin

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ABSTRACT

The traditional understanding of Genesis 2:21–22 as describing the removal of a literal rib from Adam has persisted for centuries in both scholarly and popular Christian thought. However, a closer linguistic and contextual analysis of the Hebrew term *šēlā* (שֵׁלָא) and its Greek counterpart *pleura* (πλευρά) suggests a broader and more theologically rich meaning—namely, that God took from Adam’s *side*, not merely a bone. This paper defends the “*side*” interpretation by examining lexical evidence from both the Hebrew Bible and the Septuagint, reinforced by intertextual parallels in the New Testament, particularly John 19:34.

Theologically, the act of forming Eve from Adam’s side rather than from dust, as with Adam himself, speaks to unity, shared nature, and the covenantal bond of marriage. Further support is drawn from ancient Near Eastern architecture and literary patterns, in which *šēlā* signifies sacred structural sides, adding a typological layer to the creation of woman. This study also integrates modern genetic insights regarding Adam’s XY composition to highlight the scientific plausibility of Eve’s formation from male genetic material. Ultimately, the text reveals a profound theology of human origin, gender, and divine intentionality that has often been obscured by oversimplified translations.

I. INTRODUCTION

The creation of Eve from Adam is one of the most iconic and often oversimplified narratives in the Hebrew Bible. For generations, the phrase “*God took one of his ribs*” has shaped Christian perceptions of gender, biology, and marital union. However, this common interpretation may rest more on translation tradition than on the actual semantics of the Hebrew text. The original word used in Genesis 2:21—*ṣēlā* ‘ (צֵלָה)—does not unambiguously refer to a rib bone, but more broadly to a *side, flank*, or even architectural components of sacred space. Likewise, the Septuagint’s rendering of *ṣēlā* ‘ with the Greek word *pleura* (πλευρά), which appears in both Old and New Testament contexts, supports a more spatial than anatomical reading of the term.

This distinction is not merely linguistic. Theologically, the interpretation of *side* over *rib* reveals a deeper message about shared essence, equality, and covenantal union. From a literary and symbolic standpoint, taking from Adam’s *side* rather than forming woman from the ground as with Adam himself underscores mutuality in human relationships and hints at typological patterns echoed in the New Testament. In John 19:34, the piercing of Christ’s *side (pleura)* and the outflow of blood and water further establish the symbolic weight of the *side* as the source of life and community.

Additionally, recent developments in genetics provide a modern apologetic for the text’s claims. A man with an XY chromosome pair contains all the genetic information needed to construct both male and female biological structures, lending plausibility to the formation of Eve from Adam’s body rather than a separate creation *ex nihilo*. This genetic insight enhances—not replaces—the theological richness of the narrative.

This paper argues that the term *šēlā* ‘ in Genesis 2:21 is best understood as “*side*,” not “*rib*,” and that this translation better aligns with the linguistic, theological, and typological dimensions of the biblical text. In recovering the original intent behind Eve’s formation, we rediscover a profound theological vision of human nature, marriage, and divine intentionality.

II. WORD STUDY: NOT JUST A RIB

The common English rendering of Genesis 2:21—“He took one of his ribs”—is based on a long-standing tradition, but it does not accurately reflect the semantic range of the Hebrew word *šēlā* ‘ (שֵׁלָא). The term appears approximately forty times in the Hebrew Bible, yet in no instance does it clearly and unambiguously refer to an anatomical rib. Instead, *šēlā* ‘ is used to describe the side of an ark (Exod. 25:12), the side chamber of the tabernacle or temple (1 Kgs. 6:5–6), and in one notable case, the side of a hill (2 Sam. 16:13). These uses strongly support a spatial meaning, not a skeletal one.¹ Importantly, if the author of Genesis had intended to convey that God took a *bone*, the more specific Hebrew word *’etsem* (עֵצֶם) would have been available. This word is used for bones throughout the Hebrew Bible, including just two verses later in Genesis 2:23—“bone of my bones.”²

The Septuagint (LXX) confirms this broader meaning. It translates *šēlā* ‘ in Genesis 2:21 with the Greek word *pleura* (πλευρά), meaning *side* or *flank*. This word

¹ Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, rev. Walter Baumgartner and Johann Jakob Stamm, trans. M. E. J. Richardson (Leiden: Brill, 2001), s.v. “שֵׁלָא.”

² Francis Brown, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *The Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1996), s.v. “עֵצֶם.”

appears approximately twenty-five times in the LXX and five times in the New Testament, never explicitly referring to a rib bone. In 2 Samuel 16:13 (LXX), *pleura* refers to the side of a hill, not a body part.³ In 3 Kings 8:19 (1 Kgs. 8:19 in English Bibles), the term is used metaphorically for male loins or lineage, as in a descendant coming from a man's *side*, suggesting generative power or origin.⁴ In the New Testament, *pleura* appears in John 19:34 and 20:27, where Jesus' side is pierced. There is no indication of a rib bone being broken or removed—just that blood and water flowed from His *side*.

Even in potentially ambiguous texts like Job 40:13, where the “*sides*” or possibly “*ribs*” of a powerful beast are described as bronze, the context still favors a more general spatial reading.⁵ The absence of *’etsem* in Genesis 2:21—and the presence of *šēlā*’ and *pleura*—confirms that what God took from Adam was not merely a rib, but a portion of his side, rich with theological, structural, and symbolic meaning.

Although the Hebrew and Greek texts consistently support the meaning of *side*, the interpretation of *šēlā*’ as a “*rib*” became dominant in Western Christianity largely due to Jerome’s Latin Vulgate. In his fourth-century translation, Jerome rendered *šēlā*’ as “*costam*”, the Latin word for *rib*.⁶ This choice marked a significant shift in interpretation, diverging from the Septuagint’s *pleura* and the broader spatial connotation of the Hebrew. From the Vulgate onward, major Western theologians—such as Augustine—

³ Alfred Rahlfs, ed., *Septuaginta* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1935), 2 Sam. 16:13 LXX.

⁴ Ibid., 3 Kgs. 8:19 LXX.

⁵ Ibid., Job 40:13 LXX.

⁶ Robert Weber, ed., *Biblia Sacra Vulgata* (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelgesellschaft, 1994), Gen 2:21: “*Tulit unam de costis eius.*”

adopted the *rib* interpretation, which was later reinforced by early English translations including the King James Version. Thus, the popular idea that God took a single rib from Adam finds its roots not in the Hebrew or Greek texts, but in a Latin tradition that crystallized over a thousand years after the writing of Genesis.

III. CONTEXTUAL CLUES: WHY THE SIDE MATTERS

Beyond word choice, the narrative structure and surrounding context of Genesis 2 suggest that the creation of Eve from Adam's *side* is deeply symbolic and intentional. Unlike Adam, who was formed from the dust of the ground, Eve is not independently created but brought forth from within the man. This design choice conveys relational, theological, and covenantal meaning.

The narrative begins by stating that “*the LORD God caused a deep sleep to fall upon the man*” (Gen. 2:21). The Hebrew word used for “*deep sleep*,” *tardēmah* (תַּרְדֵּמָה), appears in key moments throughout Scripture and is often associated with divine encounters or revelatory visions. In Genesis 15:12, God puts Abram into a *tardēmah* to initiate a covenant. In Job 4:13, the same word is used to describe a prophetic vision received during a supernatural sleep.⁷ The use of *tardēmah* in Genesis 2:21 suggests that this is not mere anesthesia, but a holy, covenantal moment—a pattern that becomes clearer when Eve is presented to Adam, and he responds in poetic exclamation.

Adam's response—“This is now bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh” (Gen. 2:23)—is not a reference to the anatomical source per se but to their shared nature and

⁷ Bruce K. Waltke and M. O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 177; see also Genesis 15:12 and Job 4:13.

essential unity. He does not say, “*She is made from my rib,*” but instead uses relational language emphasizing identity, connection, and mutual origin. The narrative culminates in Genesis 2:24, where this shared nature becomes the theological foundation for marriage: “*Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and they shall become one flesh.*”

The contrast between Adam’s formation from dust and Eve’s formation from Adam further supports the interpretation of *side* over *rib*. Eve’s origin within Adam sets the precedent for the union of male and female as two halves of a whole, rather than independent entities. This design theology reinforces the sacredness of marriage, not as a sociological convenience, but as a divinely authored reunion of what was originally one.⁸

IV. THEOLOGICAL DEPTH: WHY THE SIDE, NOT THE HEAD OR FOOT

The choice to take from Adam’s side rather than his head or foot is not arbitrary; it is loaded with symbolic and theological meaning. Within the creation narrative, this detail serves to communicate the equal yet complementary relationship between man and woman. By forming Eve from Adam’s side, the narrative conveys a deliberate message of mutual dignity, partnership, and unity.

Numerous commentators and theologians throughout church history have recognized this symbolism. Matthew Henry famously noted that the woman was “*not made out of his head to top him, nor out of his feet to be trampled upon by him, but out of*

⁸ Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 1 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987), 68–69.

*his side to be equal with him.*⁹ While this line has been quoted in popular circles, it reflects a theological truth present in the text: woman was made not to rule over man, nor to be ruled by him, but to stand beside him as a partner in the divine mandate of stewardship (Gen. 1:28).

Moreover, the word *ṣēlā'* is used elsewhere in Scripture to refer to sacred architecture—notably the side chambers of the tabernacle and temple (e.g., Exod. 25:12; 1 Kgs. 6:5–6). In this context, the *side* becomes associated with structure, design, and divine presence. By using the same word for Eve's formation, the text subtly links the woman to sacred space—a living sanctuary built from the man's side.

This theological resonance continues into the New Testament. Although used cautiously, some interpreters have drawn a typological connection between the creation of Eve and the piercing of Christ's side on the cross (John 19:34). From Christ's *pleura* flowed blood and water, elements often associated with new life, cleansing, and the birth of the Church. While this parallel should not be pressed into dogma, it echoes a pattern found in Scripture: life and covenantal union emerging from the side.¹⁰

The side, then, becomes more than a spatial designation—it becomes a sacramental image. It represents origin and union, the giving of self in the formation of the other, and the sacredness of relational design. The woman is not a derivative afterthought but a sacred counterpart, drawn from man's own being and returned to him in covenantal love.

⁹ Matthew Henry, *Commentary on the Whole Bible*, Vol. 1 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1991), 13.

¹⁰ Michael Heiser, *The Unseen Realm: Recovering the Supernatural Worldview of the Bible* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2015), 271.

V. SCIENTIFIC INTEGRATION: EVE FROM ADAM'S GENETIC SIDE

While Genesis is not a scientific manual, its description of Eve's creation from Adam's body invites examination from the standpoint of genetics and cellular biology. Theologically, the narrative emphasizes unity, shared essence, and covenantal partnership. Scientifically, the idea that Eve was formed from Adam's "*side*" rather than independently from dust—as Adam was—carries surprising plausibility when viewed through the lens of human genetics.

Adam, as the first man, would possess an XY chromosome pair, meaning he carried both the X and Y chromosomes needed to form male and female offspring. In contrast, Eve, as a woman, would be XX. Theoretically, creating a genetically viable female from a male body would involve extracting the X chromosome from the man and duplicating it to form the XX chromosomal pattern required for female biology. This is not only theoretically possible but mirrors certain experimental procedures already being explored in regenerative medicine and synthetic biology.¹¹

In this view, the "*side*" of Adam becomes an ideal metaphor for a biological source site, containing bone, blood, skin, and stem-cell-rich tissue—precisely the kinds of material from which both somatic and germline cells can be derived. Modern science has confirmed that induced pluripotent stem cells (iPSCs) can be developed from adult tissue and then guided to form reproductive cells, including egg-like cells. Although no human has ever been cloned in this way, studies in mice have already demonstrated the

¹¹ Shoukhrat Mitalipov and Don P. Wolf, "*Clinical and Ethical Implications of Mitochondrial Gene Transfer*," *New England Journal of Medicine* 368, no. 10 (2013): 951–953.

possibility of creating offspring from two male parents through stem cell manipulation and chromosomal engineering.¹²

Christian apologist Hugh Ross has proposed that God may have performed what we might call a biopsy on Adam’s side—removing a living, tissue-rich portion of his body to serve as the building material for Eve.¹³ While Ross does not go so far as to connect this to Adam’s XY chromosomal composition, such a step is a logical extension of his argument. If Eve was formed from Adam’s side, and Adam’s DNA was flawless and free of mutation (pre-Fall), then God could have simply duplicated Adam’s X chromosome to form an XX female—without the usual risks associated with chromosomal duplication in a fallen genetic environment.

This integration of biblical narrative and genetic plausibility does not attempt to reduce Eve’s creation to mere biology. Rather, it shows that God’s creative act aligns coherently with what modern science now confirms about human cellular structure and genetic inheritance. The side is not only a theologically rich image—it is also biologically sufficient for the formation of Eve in a pre-Fall world.

VI. REFUTING POPULAR MYTHS

Despite the clarity of the biblical text when read in its original languages and cultural context, several enduring myths persist in popular Christianity regarding the

¹² Katsuhiko Hayashi et al., “*Generation of Functional Oocytes from Male Mice in Vitro*,” *Nature* 615 (2023): 347–353.

¹³ Hugh Ross, *The Genesis Question: Scientific Advances and the Accuracy of Genesis* (Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress, 2001), 48–49.

formation of Eve. These misconceptions, while often well-intentioned, obscure the theological and textual richness of Genesis 2 and hinder a fuller understanding of the narrative.

Myth 1: Men Have One Fewer Rib Than Women

One of the most persistent misconceptions is the belief that men have one fewer rib than women because God took a rib from Adam to make Eve. This claim is demonstrably false. Both males and females have twelve pairs of ribs, totaling twenty-four ribs in nearly all humans. This anatomical fact is rooted in genetics, not in individual surgical history. The removal of a rib from one man would have no impact on the genetic structure passed down to his descendants.¹⁴ This myth likely originated from a hyper-literal reading of Genesis 2:21 in English translations that use “*rib*,” combined with pre-scientific anatomical assumptions. The perpetuation of this error has unfortunately contributed to skepticism toward the Bible by giving critics an easy target.

Myth 2: God Used a Rib Because Ribs Grow Back

Another frequently stated idea is that God took a rib from Adam because ribs are the only bones that can grow back, making it a perfect surgical source. While rib cartilage and the surrounding periosteum do possess some regenerative capacity, this regeneration depends on specific conditions and is not unique to ribs. Moreover, such medical knowledge would not have been known to the biblical author or early readers.¹⁵ This

¹⁴ Elaine N. Marieb and Katja N. Hoehn, *Human Anatomy & Physiology*, 10th ed. (New York: Pearson, 2015), 216–217.

¹⁵ Samuel Homsy and Paul B. Leber, “*Regeneration of Bone: A Review of Experimental Work*,” *The Journal of Bone and Joint Surgery* 40-A, no. 1 (1958): 153–172.

explanation is a modern apologetic addition rather than a textual or theological insight. It inadvertently reduces the sacred act of Eve’s creation to a clever biological workaround.

Myth 3: God Took a Rib—Not a Side—Because That’s What the Bible Says

This assertion is the result of translation tradition, not lexical accuracy. As shown earlier, the Hebrew word used in Genesis 2:21 is *šēlā’*, and the Greek LXX uses *pleura*—both of which mean side, not “rib” in the anatomical sense. The idea of “rib” as the default likely became entrenched through Jerome’s Latin Vulgate, which rendered *šēlā’* as “*costam*” (rib).¹⁶ From this Latin tradition, the rib interpretation passed into early English Bibles, including the King James Version, and became fixed in Christian imagination. However, this reading misrepresents the original text and obscures the relational and theological significance of Eve being taken from Adam’s side—a term rich in symbolic meaning throughout Scripture.

VII. CONCLUSION

The common interpretation of Genesis 2:21–22 as a literal removal of a rib from Adam is not supported by the original Hebrew, the Greek Septuagint, or the wider canonical and theological context. The Hebrew term *šēlā’* and its Greek counterpart *pleura* are best understood as “side,” not “rib,” a meaning that aligns more closely with the symbolic, relational, and covenantal themes embedded in the creation narrative.

Reading “side” instead of “rib” restores a richer theological vision of Eve’s origin: one that emphasizes unity, equality, and shared nature between man and woman.

¹⁶ Robert Weber, ed., *Biblia Sacra Vulgata*, Gen 2:21: “*Tulit unam de costis eius.*”

The literary structure and context of Genesis 2 reinforce this interpretation, portraying the formation of woman not as an afterthought, but as the climactic completion of humanity. The use of *tardēmah* (deep sleep) and Adam’s poetic exclamation underscore the sacredness and relational intent behind Eve’s creation.

Scientific understanding further affirms the coherence of the biblical claim. Adam’s XY genetic makeup contains the building blocks necessary for creating a genetically complete female. The concept of extracting and duplicating an X chromosome from Adam’s side is consistent with what is known today about stem cells, cellular reprogramming, and chromosomal design—especially within a pre-Fall, mutation-free genome.

Ultimately, recovering the correct reading of “*side*” reclaims a theologically and biologically credible account of human origins that honors the integrity of the biblical text. It corrects centuries of misunderstanding introduced through Latin tradition and modern myth, and in doing so, enriches our appreciation of the creation of woman, the institution of marriage, and the unity of the human race.

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