

The Clean Animal Count in Genesis 7:2: A Cultural, not Primarily Exegetical, Question

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Recently I was at a museum with a display of Noah's ark, and as part of the display there was a framed text on the wall with the following title: "Seven or Fourteen?" The text spelled out the interpretive and cultural question that I am addressing in this paper, which is whether in Genesis 7:2 God told Noah to bring seven clean animals or fourteen, that is, seven pairs of animals rather than seven animals alone. The framed text pointed out that the KJV, NKJV, and NASB have seven animals, and that the NLT, ESV, HCSB, and NRSV have seven pairs. Further, the 1984 NIV had seven animals, and the 2011 NIV has changed it to seven pairs.¹ This same issue is found in translations in other languages as well.

Is this an important question, or does it really matter? Does this become just one more Bible question about which we must say, "Well, we really don't know," or are there more decisive arguments that have not been explored or advanced? Apparently the NIV committee on translation thought it was so important that they changed the translation in this passage. Also, every new translation of Genesis in another language has to answer this question, but the answer to the question depends more on cultural information than on exegetical information. In fact, it can be demonstrated that exegetical considerations alone actually lead to the wrong answer.

Present State of the Question

Looking at articles and commentaries, very little is said in most of them. Wenham remarks that since God specified pairs in 6:19-20, then 7:2-3 must also be pairs.² An additional matter for consideration that favors the seven-pairs argument is what is said in Genesis 7:9 and 15. In both of these verses the statement is made that the animals came to Noah by twos. The other supporting argument to this is that 7:2 specifies "man and his wife" (instead of "male and female" (זָכָר וּנְקֵבָה) in all other places).³ Justification for seven pairs of clean animals is mentioned as being important for the fact that these animals would be used for food after the flood, so it was important to have a lot more of each clean animal.⁴ In regard to this last argument, since either seven or fourteen is more than two, this argument in and of itself doesn't require fourteen over seven animals. It just requires that there be more clean animals than unclean. But we will revisit this argument later.

A quote from Reyburn and Fry is fairly representative of how the argument in favor of seven pairs goes:

...the expression translated **seven pairs** is literally "seven seven" and has been taken by some to mean "by sevens," that is, "seven animals of all clean species" (KJV). The more likely sense is **seven pairs** as in RSV, TEV, and nearly all modern translations. NIV, which

¹ The Ark Encounter, Williamstown, KY.

² Wenham, G.J. 1987. *Genesis 1-15*, Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 176.

³ Reyburn, W.D. & Fry, E.M. 1998. *A Handbook on Genesis*, New York: United Bible Societies, 168.

⁴ Wenham, G.J., 1987. *Genesis 1-15*, Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 176

translates “seven” in its text, gives the alternative “seven pairs” in a note. **Pairs**, which in many English contexts refers to a collective of two like things, refers here to one of each sex.⁵

The footnote alternative is also the case for the following translations: the NET Bible has “seven” in the text and “seven pairs” in the footnote, and the ESV has the opposite. The KJV and the NASB both have a footnote that says “seven seven.”

The Reyburn and Fry comment is taken from the series of handbooks specifically prepared for Bible translators by the United Bible Societies, and a similar statement can be found in *Translator’s Notes on Genesis*: “This interpretation [of seven pairs] fits best with the following phrase, the male and his mate, which refers to pairs of animals.”⁶ This again confirms that the primary factor that seems to weigh in for the commentators and note makers is the relationship with the phrase **אִישׁ וְאִשְׁתּוֹ**, which is taken to mean “a male and his mate,” and therefore requires male/female pairs.

It is difficult to see that the decision for this question rests on very much research material. This paper intends to supply a greater degree of research material, in five areas:

1. Semantic and syntactical issues in Hebrew
2. Hebrew usage of distributive number sequences
3. Cultural animal husbandry practices and the distribution of males and females
4. Thematic and interpretive considerations suggested by the text
5. Ancient versions and commentaries that could shed light on the understanding of the passage and the ancient culture

It is hoped the above amount of research material will lead to a more thorough and defensible answer to the question and thus result in less flip-flopping of decisions concerning translations in this passage.

Semantic and Syntactic Issues in Hebrew

As we look closer at the semantic content of these verses, one fact comes immediately to light: there is no word for “pair” in any of these verses. Beyond that, there is no word for “pair” in biblical Hebrew at all. This is not surprising, since the dual number for nouns in Hebrew effectively functions to designate pairs.⁷ The closest word that could be understood as “pair” is the word **צֶמֶד**, which is usually translated as “yoke,” and refers often to two animals linked by a yoking device so they can work together in a pulling operation, but also at times to a “pair” of things.⁸ The term **צֶמֶד**, is also consistently used to describe animals and not people, so if “pairs” of animals were intended, Moses missed a good chance to use the word.

⁵ Reyburn, W.D. & Fry, E.M., 1998. *A Handbook on Genesis*, New York: United Bible Societies, 168.

⁶ Barnwell, K., Kuhn, H. & Neeley, L., 2014. *Translator’s Notes On Genesis*: Notes, Dallas: SIL International, p. Ge 7:2.

⁷ Amos 2:6; 8:6.

⁸ Jdg. 19:3, 10; 1 Sam. 11:7; 14:14; 2 Sam. 16:1; 1 Ki. 19:19, 21; 2 Ki. 5:17; 9:25; Job 1:3; 42:12; Isa. 5:10; 21:7, 9; Jer. 51:23.

On the syntactic end, Hebrew does not normally distribute over a syntactic gap. To express seven males and seven females, the שְׁבַעַה שְׁבַעַה should be repeated in the feminine, like this: שְׁבַעַה שְׁבַעַה אִישׁ וְאִשְׁתּוֹ שֶׁבַע שֶׁבַע. Granted this is not a rule from the grammar book, rather a likely tendency drawn from my observation of Hebrew syntax in general, reinforced by the fact that Hebrew is a paratactic rather than a hypotactic language.

A further consideration is that the syntax of the sentence places the שְׁבַעַה שְׁבַעַה with מְכַל הַבְּהֵמָה הַטְּהוֹרָה, and the phrase stands as a complete thought even without the אִישׁ וְאִשְׁתּוֹ. This is clearly based on the Masoretic accents, but is also based on the fact that the reduplicated number follows the entity it refers to both here and in the next verse. Furthermore, Hebrew is a head-initial language, and adjectives virtually always follow the thing they are modifying. If seven “couples” were intended, then we would expect the repeated number after the אִישׁ וְאִשְׁתּוֹ, not before it. So the best rendering based on the syntax is: “Take seven each of all the clean animals.” We will consider the term אִישׁ וְאִשְׁתּוֹ again later.

The argument concerning “by twos” found in 6:19, 7:9, and 7:15 is perhaps the most significant argument in favor of seven pairs. But if שְׁבַעַה שְׁבַעַה means “seven pairs,” the distributive construction found in these verses, then שְׁנַיִם שְׁנַיִם should mean “two pairs.” Yet it is clear from 6:19 that two pairs are not intended. The same logic that says there are only two animals in one context would say there are only seven animals in the other, not fourteen.

It is true that seven animals could not have gone into the ark in pairs, but this could be simply a summary statement of the vast majority of the unclean animals, which far outnumbered the clean animals. As we will see a little later, Josephus explained this seeming contradiction in that manner.

Hebrew Usage of Distributive Numbers

If Moses had intended to say fourteen animals, there is a more natural way to do so, which would be אִישׁ וְאִשְׁתּוֹ אַרְבָּעָה אַרְבָּעָה, which can be seen by looking at an example of this in 1 Kings 7:3. In all the instances of distributive numbers in the OT,⁹ which all follow the same pattern of an exact reduplication of the single number, the number of items is always the same as the reduplicated number, never twice the number, and the number always refers to like things, such as in this case clean animals. It is still hard to see how שְׁבַעַה שְׁבַעַה could mean fourteen.

However, we are aware that some people do in fact think that שְׁבַעַה שְׁבַעַה means fourteen. Chaffey makes this statement: “On a more technical point, understanding “seven seven” as just seven individuals does not line up with the grammatical use of distributives to express pairing.”¹⁰ He then cites Waltke-O’Connor as the support for his conclusion. The

⁹ Gen. 7:2-3, 9, 15; Exod. 26:2, 8, 24; 27:18; 28:25; 36:9-10, 12-13, 15, 22, 29-30; 39:18; Lev. 23:17; 25:8; 26:8; Num. 3:47; 7:15, 17, 21, 23, 27, 29, 33, 35, 39, 41, 45, 47, 51, 53, 57, 59, 63, 65, 69, 71, 75, 77, 81, 83, 86, 88; 13:2; 26:51; 29:2, 8, 36; 34:18; Jos. 3:12; 4:2, 4; 22:14; Jdg. 20:10; 1 Sam. 18:7; 21:12; 29:5; 2 Sam. 12:1; 17:12; 21:20; 23:8; 1 Ki. 4:7; 7:3, 37-38; 18:13; 19:4; 2 Ki. 1:9; 11:4, 9-10, 15; 17:16; 24:14; 1 Chr. 20:6; 26:17; 29:21; Neh. 5:18; 7:11; Job 41:8; Prov. 30:18; Eccl. 7:27; Cant. 4:9; Isa. 6:2; 27:12; 66:17; Ezek. 7:2; 10:21; 37:17; 40:6; 45:3, 12; 48:16; Dan. 8:22; Zech. 4:2; 8:21

¹⁰ Chaffey T 2019. “Did Noah Bring Seven or Fourteen Clean Animals onto the Ark?” *Answers in Depth*, February 1, 2019 (<https://answersingenesis.org/noahs-ark/did-noah-bring-fourteen-or-seven-animals/>, accessed August 14, 2021.)

problem with this is that the page he quotes does not support his conclusion. Instead, it matches with what I have already said above about distributive numbers:

A singular may be repeated for a distributive sense, whether asyndetically (## 1–2) or syndetically with *w* (## 3–5) or a preposition (## 6–8); in such a phrase the members composing the aggregate are singled out. Such constructions may be represented in English with 'each' or 'every'.¹¹

The hash marks and numbers in parentheses refer to examples listed below this paragraph in the volume. Note carefully the phrase: “in such a phrase the members composing the aggregate are singled out.” In the case of Genesis 7:2, the “members composing the aggregate” are the clean animals, and the aggregate is seven, not fourteen.

Chaffey apparently makes the Waltke-O'Connor statement apply by saying that the שְׁבַעַה שְׁבַעַה applies to the pairs, not the clean animals, and translates it thus: “seven each of a male and his female.” The problem with that translation, besides the fact that it ignores all I have already said about the accents, syntax order, head-initial phrases, and non-distribution of Hebrew over a syntactical gap, is that he inserts “of a” without any textual or grammatical warrant. The disjunctive accents on שְׁבַעַה and אִישׁ clearly indicate a separation of the next constituent, as well as the fact that adjectives do not precede what they modify.

On behalf of Mr. Chaffey,¹² I should say that Waltke-O'Connor has contradictory information on two different pages. The entry on p. 116 which deals with distributive numbers does indeed support the conclusion I have come to, but on p. 660 the translation that follows the example of clausal and item adverbs supports the pair idea. This contradiction is also true in Paul Joüon's grammar,¹³ where in section 142p (which is specifically on distributive numbers) he has “sept (de chaque espèce)” (“seven (of each kind)”), clearly supporting the seven only position, but in section 160b discussing the negative particle he says: “opposition des animaux impurs, dont on prend seulement deux couples, aux animaux purs dont on prend sept couples” (“as opposed to unclean animals, of which two couples are taken, whereas of clean animals seven couples are taken”). This latter statement takes an unusual position that there are four unclean animals and fourteen clean ones. Jan Lettinga's grammar¹⁴ also uses the phrase “sept (de chaque espèce)” in section 39r but does not contradict it elsewhere. Gesenius-Kautsch-Cowley¹⁵ in section 134q on distributive numbers supports the same conclusion I have already explained, and further cites 2 Samuel 21:20 with שֵׁשׁ וְשֵׁשׁ for the number of fingers and toes on “each” hand and foot. Interestingly, that passage goes on to give the total number of fingers and toes as 24. The sections in all four grammars that deal with distributive numbers are all in agreement, so my conclusion is that the two other sections dealing with other grammar questions were for one

¹¹ Waltke, B.K., and M. O'Connor, *An Introduction to Biblical Hebrew Syntax*. (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 115-16. Note 6 on p. 116 does refer to Gen. 7:2 for numbers (“For the distributive use of number words, see Gen 7:2...”), but nothing is said directly as to how that is applied. On p. 289 Gen. 7:2 is referred to, with the following ambiguous translation: “From the clean animals take seven by seven, a male and its female.”

¹² Mr. Chaffey has actually been very helpful and responsive concerning this subject, through e-mail correspondence we had before the final draft of this paper.

¹³ Joüon P 1996. *Grammaire de l'hébreu biblique*. (Roma : Editrice Pontificio Istituto Biblico).

¹⁴ Lettinga JP 1980. *Grammaire de l'hébreu biblique*. (Leiden : E. J. Brill)

¹⁵ Gesenius W., & Kautsch E. 1910. *Gesenius's Hebrew Grammar*. (tr. from German by A. E. Cowley). Oxford: Clarendon Press.

reason or another not checked against the distributive number section for consistency, and possibly simply quoted an existing translation.

Cultural Animal Husbandry Practices and the Distribution of Males and Females

A critical factor that seems to have been largely ignored by translators and commentators is the practice of animal husbandry, embedded deeply in the ancient biblical culture. Again referring to the Chaffey article, he says: “If there were just seven of each kind of clean animal, then each male would not have a mate.”¹⁶ This in spite of the fact that he earlier said: “...most animals do not breed in monogamous pairs...”¹⁷ That earlier statement is in fact correct. Domestic animals do not have husband/wife pairs. A herd of cows is all females except for a small number of males, usually only one for breeding purposes, and is the same for sheep and goats. Notice that in Genesis 32:14 (15), referring to the herds that Jacob sent as gifts to Esau, the ratio is ten females to one male. There is a good reason for this. Seven rams and seven ewes together would be a nightmare for a shepherd. The rams are aggressive and territorial, and besides that, more than one is unnecessary. Can you imagine what it would be like in an enclosed ship with seven bulls together?

The argument has been advanced that there were seven pairs of clean animals to insure the propagation of a good supply of clean animals for food. But seven male/female pairs have only one more female than one male and six females, so the extra males are both unnecessary and a liability as far as space and food, since they don't give birth to offspring themselves.¹⁸ Farmers, cattle herders, shepherders, and animal husbandry people in general are completely aware of this, and would find the idea of husband/wife pairs of domestic animals ludicrous.¹⁹ It is true that some animals mate for life, such as eagles and wolves, but eagles are unclean birds, and wolves are not domestic.

So as to be sure to “plow both sides of the fence,” there is evidence that some birds that would be classified as “clean” do in fact seem to have monogamous relationships. This does not therefore demand that the other animals that do not have such pairings had to be paired up as couples, especially since the basic Hebrew text does not allow that there be seven pairs of each kind of clean animal. The actual constituency of each group of seven could be tailored to the habits of each kind of animal. If the birds were best in monogamous pairs, then three pairs and one extra for later sacrifice would fill the command of God to Noah. But we should assume that the natural cultural understanding of herdspeople concerning the larger animals is the natural way of understanding the text, unless there is strong reason not to. So far in the discussion there is strong reason to assume that normal animal husbandry practices would have governed the selection of numbers of males to females, with a total of seven in each case. Culture should

¹⁶ Chaffey T 2019. “Did Noah Bring Seven or Fourteen Clean Animals onto the Ark?” *Answers in Depth*, February 1, 2019 (<https://answersingenesis.org/noahs-ark/did-noah-bring-fourteen-or-seven-animals/>, accessed August 14, 2021.)

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ It is true that the other six males could have been used for food after the flood, but while that is possible, it doesn't prove what has already been disproved, which is that there were not seven pairs.

¹⁹ One dairy farmer the author visited did not even have a bull. He had a frozen quantity of sperm supplied by the breeding service that he thawed and used to mechanically inseminate the cows whenever necessary.

normally trump grammatical exegesis, and in this case, the proper exegesis and the culture are in agreement.

The combination זָכָר וּנְקֵבָה is used in the following: Gen. 1:27; 5:2; 6:19; 7:3, 9, 16. The only verse with אִישׁ וְאִשְׁתּוֹ is 7:2. The combination זָכָר וּנְקֵבָה is what we would expect in animal husbandry terms, so the meaning of the אִישׁ וְאִשְׁתּוֹ combination in v. 2 must be sought elsewhere. The translations that render this combination as “couples” or “a male and his mate” are in contradiction to the accumulated effect of the above data. It is also true that every other sequence of אִישׁ and אִשָּׁה in the Bible refers to “men and women” indiscriminately, not as couples.²⁰ Gen. 7:2 is the only place these terms are applied to animals. The specific sequence אִישׁ וְאִשְׁתּוֹ with the third person singular suffix on the second word only appears in this verse in the entire Hebrew Bible. We could therefore say the expression אִישׁ וְאִשְׁתּוֹ is simply to be understood as the equivalent to זָכָר וּנְקֵבָה, or that the phrase means “a male and his mates,” looking on the second singular as a collective.²¹ But there are other explanations, as we advance to the next set of data.

Thematic and Interpretive Considerations

The first thing to note is that the number seven is very prominent throughout the entire flood narrative as a thematic word,²² whereas fourteen is not. Further there are two unique things about the phrase אִישׁ וְאִשְׁתּוֹ in Genesis 7:2, already mentioned above. The phrase itself with the pronominal suffix as a unique combination was just noted, but the fact that this phrase is only here used of animals suggests a thematic idea. These animals might be referred to as “a male and its mate(s)” because they would be the ones to “recreate” the animal world, just as Adam and Eve had created the human world. The redemptive nature of the ark and its passengers is certainly a prominent theme here and throughout the Bible.

Ancient Versions and Commentaries

Every one of the ancient versions below cited is simply a word-for-word rendition of the Hebrew text אִישׁ וְאִשְׁתּוֹ at that point, but the next phrase is the critical one. For the sake of clarity and discussion, this next phrase will be given for the various versions and MSS separately:

Samaritan Pentateuch: זָכָר וּנְקֵבָה²³

Targum Onqelos: דָּכָר וְנוֹקְבָא

Targum Pseudo Jonathan: דָּכָר וְנוֹקְבָא

Targum Neofiti: דָּכָר וְנוֹקְבָא

Genizah Targum Fragment E: דָּכָר וְנוֹקְבָא

²⁰ Gen. 7:2; Exo. 21:29; 35:29; 36:6; Lev. 13:29, 38; 20:27; Num. 5:6; 6:2; Deut. 17:2; 29:17; Jdg. 9:49; 16:27; 1 Sam. 27:9, 11; Est. 4:11; Jer. 44:7; 51:22

²¹ Hebrew in general is not very precise by our standards for singular and plural distinctions!

²² Gen. 5:31; 7:2-4, 10-11; 8:4, 10, 12, 14.

²³ SMP database from BibleWorks: Der Hebräische Pentateuch der Samaritaner, Herausgegeben von August Freiherrn von Gall, Verlag von Alfred Töpelmann (Vormals J. Ricker) Giessen 1918.

Syriac: ܠܚܝܬܐ ܠܡܬܐ²⁴

Septuagint: ἄρσεν καὶ θήλυ

Vulgate: masculum et feminam²⁵

Looking at these, we see that all the Aramaic and Samaritan readings are some form of “male and female” except for the Cairo Genizah Fragment E, which has “male and mate.” The Syriac has “the males and the females.” These two, the Cairo Genizah fragment and the Syriac, are the closest to supporting the “seven pairs” interpretation. But neither of these is an exact equivalent to ܐܢܫܐ ܫܒܥܐ. The Syriac’s striking use of definite plural for both words is interesting, but as in the case of the Genizah fragment, there is no pronominal suffix on “females.” Since the immediately previous phrase is “all clean animals,” the Syriac translators could have been referring to the entire aggregate of clean animals. What the Syriac does not say is “the males and their mates.”

Looking further, neither the Septuagint nor the Vulgate translate the pronominal suffix, and both use more generic terms for male and female rather than words that could be translated as “a man and his wife.” This suggests strongly that the translators of all these versions, all of them closer culturally to the biblical culture than modern versions, regarded the phrase as meaning “male and female” rather than “a male and its mate,” as we have already suggested above.

Another ancient commentary not to be overlooked is Josephus’s statement in Antiquities 1:77:

...ζῷά τε παντοῖα πρὸς διατήρησιν τοῦ γένους αὐτῶν ἄρρενάς τε καὶ θηλείας συνεισβαλόμενος ἄλλα τε τούτων ἑπταπλασίονα τὸν ἀριθμόν.

...creatures of all sorts for the preservation of their kind were put in together, males and females, but others of these were sevenfold by number.

Josephus has simply an ancient understanding of the passage from a culture not greatly different from the culture of Noah and Moses. It reflects an understanding of the text in complete harmony with everything we have said so far and with everything found in our research. In fact, nothing in our research gives any credence to seven pairs, including the phrase ܐܢܫܐ ܫܒܥܐ, which we have demonstrated is to be understood basically as the equivalent to “male and female.”

Though it is not an “ancient” commentary, John Calvin’s comments on this passage are interesting in that he sees it as referring to only seven animals, yet also sees it as meaning pairs of male and female: “Moreover, the expression, ‘by sevens,’ is to be understood not of seven pairs of each kind, but of three pairs, to which one animal is added for the sake of sacrifice.”²⁶

²⁴ Targums and Syriac from Genesis 7:2: Comprehensive Aramaic Lexicon: <http://cal.huc.edu/showtargum.php> (accessed August 29, 2021)

²⁵ BibleWorks databases BGT and VUC.

²⁶ Calvin J 1554 (Latin). *Genesis*. (translated and edited by John King, 1847). Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth Trust, 2000. p, 267.

This particular interpretation was common in my younger days, before the appearance and widespread use of other English translations.

Conclusion

Drawing a conclusion from the research and data is not difficult. What is difficult is to understand why so many modern translations would conclude that the text means “seven pairs” based on virtually no evidence for it, and failing also to take the cultural background into account.

Before concluding this paper with a summary of the evidence, it would be wise to address one possible objection that we anticipate might be raised to having only one male for the clean animals. If there is only one male clean animal, what happens if he dies on board the ark?

First let me say that my argument is not that there were six females and one male. As previously mentioned, my argument is that there were not seven pairs. There could have been any possible combination of males and females for a total number of seven, but the most likely combination based on the data is one male and six females. The next most likely combination would have been two males and five females, but that reduces the number of productive females. I also mention again that the combination of three females and four males was a common one I recall from the time of my youth, but that supplies the fewest number of productive females, and also has at least one more unnecessary male whose fate is only to die. However, that combination could easily have been used for clean birds that pair monogamously, as already mentioned.

Second, the argument about the possible death of the single male applies to all the unclean animals as well. Since the ark itself represents and even carries out the concept of redemption, we must assume that just as God had providentially provided for the migration and arrival of these animals, so also he provided for the individual survival of the animals as well as the humans during the span of the flood and the sailing of the ark. This leaves the combination of one male and six females as still the most likely and best scenario for reproduction after the flood.

We have grouped our research under five topics:

1. Semantic and syntactical issues in Hebrew
2. Hebrew usage of distributive number sequences
3. Cultural animal husbandry practices and the distribution of males and females
4. Thematic and interpretive considerations suggested by the text
5. Ancient versions and commentaries that could shed light on the understanding of the passage and the ancient culture

In each of these, the preponderance of the data does not suggest that seven pairs is even a possibility, the strongest argument being the cultural reality of the practices of animal husbandry. However, it should be pointed out that the other data we have examined covers a wide spectrum of pertinent areas: linguistics in general, including grammar, syntax, and semantics; thematic, cultural, and interpretive issues; and historical translations and commentaries.

My conclusion is that any translation that states or suggests that there were fourteen clean animals of each kind, seven pairs of males and females—that is, seven males and seven

females—is a translation based on minimal arguments. We as translators and exegetes have an obligation to thoroughly examine the pertinent linguistic aspects of Hebrew, thematic and interpretive matters related to the Hebrew text and to ancient versions, as well as a cultural understanding of ancient and even modern practices of animal husbandry. We must be aware of and submit to the linguistic and cultural background of the ancient text, even if it is foreign to us, and not accept an interpretation based on minimal research and what appears to be a dependence on the consensus of other translations rather than a careful reading of the text.

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