COUSIN MARRIAGE

Lucien Tuinstra

This topic, perhaps eyebrow-raising, is closely related to chapter 8 of CMI's *Creation Answers Book*: Who was Cain's wife?[1] Spoiler alert—the answer is later in this article, but this is about much more.

What's going on?

First cousin marriage

A 2025 BBC report discussed marriage between first cousins.[2] Your first cousins are the children of your aunts and uncles, who therefore have the same grandparents as you. In other words, they are not as close as siblings, but they are the next nearest of the same generation.

In many societies, first-cousin marriage is frowned upon, sometimes even illegal. In other cultures, it is regarded as both commonplace and normal.[3]

New data

In 2007, a study was started called 'Born in Bradford' (BiB); it included more than 11,300 babies. Bradford is a city in West Yorkshire (UK) with a high South Asian (predominantly Pakistani) population. In 2013 an interim report indicated that birth defects appeared in a greater number of babies from Pakistani parents (which were 45% of the babies studied) versus those of 'white' parents (40%).[4] Congenital (i.e., present at birth, most of which are inherited) problems—for example, certain heart defects—were nearly twice as prevalent in the babies in this Bradford study than in the general population in England and Wales.

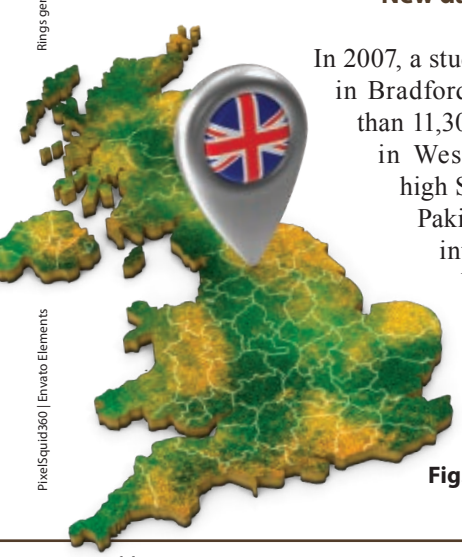

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Fig. 1. Bradford, in West Yorkshire

In the Pakistani group over a third (37%) of parents were first cousins, versus only 1% of the non-Pakistani group. This meant that one in six babies of the BiB project was born to first-cousin parents.[5]

In 2025, 12 years after that interim report, all BiB babies had been followed for 18 years since the study began.

First cousins have the same grandparents, so on average they will share ⅛ of their genes. However, in the BiB study the researchers didn't only look at genetic mishaps, but also at the children's development and frequency of doctor visits. Their statistical analysis also compensated for poverty, as this often implies poor nourishment and less than ideal living circumstances.

Results

The differences between children of closely related parents versus further-distanced parents were not huge, but there was a clear disadvantage to having consanguineous (closely blood-related) parents.

Probability of reaching developmental milestones by age five:

First cousins: 53.7%
Not related: 64%

Average number of primary care appointments per year:

First cousins: 4.1
Not related: 3.0

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Fig. 2. Queen Victoria (1819–1901) and Prince Albert (1819–1861) on their return from the marriage service at St James's Palace, London

A long-term UK study raises issues very relevant to biblical creation.

One would expect that closely related parents would give rise to more of the known disorders in their offspring caused by *recessive mutated genes* (see box p. 16). But when such sufferers are left aside, the figures seem to suggest there is also a non-genetic component. Or at least, not readily diagnosable. See 'Genetic burden' section below.

Lawmakers and royalty

Although marrying a sibling or half-sibling has been outlawed in virtually all countries for quite some time, a wedding ban between first cousins is not widespread (there are exceptions, notably parts of the USA and some Asian countries). This is about to change in Europe, starting with Norway (2024) and Sweden (2026). An opposition MP has put forward a bill to stop the practice in the UK, but the current government does not support a ban.

Charles Darwin married his first cousin, Emma Wedgwood, and he had some concerns about inbreeding.[6] Sir George Darwin, their son, estimated that almost 5% of aristocratic couples were cousins. Such intermarriage was quite common in royal circles too; for example, Queen Victoria married her first cousin Prince Albert.[7]

Who was Cain's wife?

Most readers likely know the answer to this question: it was a close relative. Indeed, if not Cain, then another son of Adam and Eve must have married his sister (note Genesis 5:4). Other siblings could have done the same or married a niece/nephew, themselves the product of a brother-sister marriage. Either way, since things were not yet far removed from the originally "very good" created world, close marriage was perfectly legitimate. Following the Fall, the DNA code became prone to random corruption (from mutation) at each generation. Mutations accumulate with time, as new ones are added to any inherited from the previous generation. But it would take a good number of generations for gene mutations to build up to a level at which close intermarriage was a significant genetic risk. It wasn't until much later in Moses' day—c. 1400 BC—that marrying certain close relatives was forbidden by God (Leviticus 18).

Cousins are not mentioned, but among the sexual relationships prohibited in Leviticus are parent-offspring, grandparent-offspring, siblings, half-siblings, and aunt/uncle with niece/nephew. Siblings share ½ of their DNA on average. Half-siblings, uncle/aunt to nephew/niece, and grandparent to grandchild share ¼.

Genetic burden

According to the BiB study, consanguineous marriage doubles the risk of birth defects from 3% to 6%.[8] Some might regard this a small risk overall, but that does not mean it should be ignored. For one thing, if consanguineous marriage practices persist over several generations, the risks compound. This is because the gene pool becomes progressively more

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Recessive mutated genes

Each position on any of our chromosomes (long stretches of coiled DNA) is occupied by a pair of genes; one inherited from father, one from mother. These can come in different versions (alleles). An inherited disorder caused by mutation (a random change in the DNA code) is often *recessive*. This means that to suffer the full-blown disease, one must inherit the mutated gene from *both* parents, thus having no copies of the normal gene for a particular trait. Take for example, a gene G with instructions for making an important protein P. And say the mutated recessive gene G_M serves to 'switch off' those instructions, so it no longer codes for anything. (Some mutations cause a faulty version of the normal protein to be produced.) Say someone were to inherit the mutated gene from both parents, i.e., the allele pair G_M–G_M. There will now be no functional G gene, therefore no genetic instructions to make P. So, without this important protein, this child will express the full-blown inherited disease which the lack of P causes.

But if G_M is only inherited from one parent, the normal gene G from the other parent is still present to instruct the body's machinery to make P. In such a case, the person inheriting the gene pair G–G_M suffers no ill effects but is a *carrier* of the disease/defect.

		Mother (carrier)	
		G	**GM**
Father (carrier)	**G**	G–G Cannot transmit GM	G– GM Carrier
	GM	GM–G Carrier	GM– GM Sufferer

Each of a carrier's children has a 50% chance of inheriting this mutated gene from the carrier parent. If a carrier were to marry another carrier, each of their children will have a 50% chance of inheriting G_M from mother and a 50% chance of inheriting it from father. So, the chance of a particular one of their children inheriting G_M from both mother and father is 50% of 50%, or 25%. That means that on average one in four of this couple's children will inherit the gene pair G_M–G_M and thus the disease this causes. The Punnet square diagram here shows this graphically. An example of a serious disease caused by a recessive mutated gene is Cystic Fibrosis.

limited, increasing the concentration of harmful recessive genes.

Creationists have long pointed out that genetic quality is heading downhill (not only in humans, but in animals and plants too). This makes sense in light of Scripture, which teaches that the originally perfect creation was cursed because of man's disobedience (Genesis 3, Romans 8:20–22).

But it does not sit well with evolutionary teaching where all genomes (people, animals, plants) allegedly arose from a supposed primordial soup, becoming progressively more complex and sophisticated as vast ages passed. The evidence indicates that the human genome, among others, is inexorably deteriorating, which speaks against the idea of millions of years.[9]

Catastrophic genetic errors may lead to death, and thousands are known which cause serious diseases. It is often argued that even if the individual survives such a disease, natural selection will tend to eliminate such a mutation. But this doesn't necessarily follow, even when the mutated gene is dominant, i.e., it only requires one copy to be inherited to suffer from the disease.

A downward path

Surprisingly, even if a disease invariably leads to death, it will not necessarily be eliminated if that fatal outcome is delayed until after sexual maturity. That way, there is still a chance for the gene to be passed on before the individual's death. The progressive and eventually fatal brain disease Huntington's Chorea[10] is one tragic example.

Many gene mutations are *recessive* (see box above) in which case they will tend to be maintained at some level in a population, even if sufferers of the disease itself are unable to reach the age of parenthood. This is because an individual who is a carrier, i.e., has a single copy of the disease-causing gene, generally suffers little or no effect from having it. The mutated gene in such carriers is thus 'invisible' to selection,[11] and can readily be passed on.

However, most mutations are what is known as 'near neutral'—their effect, though still slightly negative, is so small as to cause no readily noticeable impairment to the individual. But there is a slow, accumulating burden on the genome.[12]

Think of it like a tiny rust spot on a car. One or two are of no real consequence and can be ignored. But if thousands of them were allowed to gradually accumulate over time, it would become a major problem, eventually wrecking the car.[13] It's now known that in humans, every baby born has around 60–100 new near-neutral-effect mutations added to those accumulated from previous generations!

Noted evolutionary geneticist Alexey Kondrashov was puzzled by the fact that in the light of this, we should already be extinct long ago. This is because evolutionists claim that humanity has been

around for hundreds of thousands of years. The title of his 1995 article includes the question, "Why have we not died 100 times over?"[14] Clearly, the flaw is in the premise that we have been around for that long.

Past and future

Returning from the very large number of near-neutral (aka 'slightly deleterious') mutations to those that cause overt disease (Mendelian diseases), over 6,000 have been identified to date. This number, too, will continue to grow. It was zero at the time of creation.

Going forward in time, the future of humanity—and many other species—looks grim, genetically speaking. In the secular framework, we would have genetic meltdown and extinction to look forward to. The sure and certain hope of the believer is that Jesus will return before that, to claim His bride, the church—the redeemed of every nation.

References and notes

1. Batten, D. *et al.*, *The Creation Answers Book*, 11th Edn, CBP, 2025; creation.com/s/10-2-505.
2. Mintz, L. and Mitchell, S., Cousin marriage: What new evidence tells us about children's ill health, bbc.co.uk, 27 Feb 2025.
3. Catchpoole, D., 'You shouldn't marry your cousin!', *Creation* **30**(1):54–55, 2017; creation.com/marriage-cousin.
4. The adjective 'white' (without scare quotes) is taken from the 2013 BBC report, ref. 8.
5. 37% of 45%.
6. Of their 10 children, two died during infancy and Anne (Annie) at age 10.
7. Royal intermarriage, wikipedia.org, acc. 19 Mar 2025. Note that the 'royal disease' of hemophilia—impaired blood-clotting ability—in some male descendants had nothing to do with first-cousin marriage. Rather, this was likely a mutation in Queen Victoria herself, in one of the X chromosomes that she carried. Daughters who inherit a faulty X usually have a backup X to make XX, while sons have XY, so no backup X.
8. Bradford study finds higher birth defect risk in married cousins, bbc.co.uk, 4 Jul 2013.
9. Truman, R., From ape to man via genetic meltdown: a theory in crisis (A review of *Genetic Entropy & The Mystery of the Genome* by John C. Sanford), *J. Creation* **21**(1):43–47, 2007; creation.com/sanfordreview.
10. Aka Huntington's Disease.
11. The recessive mutation causing Sickle Cell Anemia is an exception. The carrier state is favoured by selection in malaria-prone areas; carriers are resistant to dying in childhood from the cerebral form of malaria. This maintains the mutation at higher levels than would otherwise be expected.
12. Sanford, J., *Genetic Entropy*, FMS Publications, Waterloo, NY, 2005; creation.com/s/10-3-513.
13. Wieland, C., *World Winding Down*, CBP, 2012; creation.com/s/10-2-602.
14. Kondrashov, A., Contamination of the genome by very slightly deleterious mutations: why have we not died 100 times over? *J. Theoretical Biology* **175**:583–594, 1995.

LUCIEN TUINSTRA B.Sc., M.C.Ed.

After graduating in applied physics in his native Netherlands, Lucien worked in Spain and then the UK in technology/engineering in the gas industry. A long-time biblical creationist, he has a Masters in Christian Education from ICR in the US, and is a fulltime speaker/writer for CMI-UK/Europe. For more, see creation.com/lucien-tuinstra.

GOOD NEWS

Creation Ministries International seeks to give glory and honour to the triune God of the Bible as Creator. In particular, we affirm the truth of the biblical record of the real origin and history of the world and mankind.

Part of this real history is the bad news that the rebellion of the first man, Adam, against God's command, brought death, suffering, and separation from God into this world. We see the results all around us. All of Adam's descendants are sinful from conception (Psalm 51:5) and have themselves entered into this rebellion (sin). They therefore cannot live with a holy God but are condemned to separation from God. The Bible says that "all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God" (Romans 3:23). The consequence: all are therefore subject to "the punishment of eternal destruction, away from the presence of the Lord and from the glory of His might" (2 Thessalonians 1:9).

But the good news is that God has done something about it. "For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, that whoever believes in Him should not perish but have eternal life" (John 3:16).

Jesus Christ the Creator, God the Son, though totally sinless, took on human nature, so He could become our Redeemer. Then He suffered, on behalf of mankind, the penalty of mankind's sin, which is death and separation from God. He did this to satisfy the righteous demands of the holiness and justice of God, His Father. Jesus was the perfect sacrifice; He died on a cross, but on the third day, He rose again, conquering death, so that all who truly believe in Him, repent of their sin (repentance = a change of mind), and trust in Him (rather than their own merit), can come back to God and live for eternity with their Creator.

Therefore: "Whoever believes in Him is not condemned, but whoever does not believe is condemned already, because he has not believed in the name of the only Son of God" (John 3:18).

What a wonderful Saviour—and what a wonderful salvation in Christ our Creator!

If you want to know more of what the Bible says about how you can receive eternal life, please email, write, or call the office near you … see p. 2.

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