

A PROPOSAL FOR A SYMBOLIC INTERPRETATION
OF PATRIARCHAL LIFESPANS

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ABSTRACT

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Many people accept the patriarchal lifespans in Genesis at face value. However, problems emerge both within the Bible and with the archaeological history when one digs a little deeper. Some scholars eliminate the conflict by claiming the patriarchal narratives are legendary. But those who believe Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph were real people must face the contradictions within the Bible, and the conflicts with evidence of human lifespans and the history of the Middle Bronze Age.

Two approaches have been used to reconcile these unusual lifespans with historical reality. The concordist approach attempts to show that the biblical text is actually in harmony with an unbiased reading of the scientific evidence. The accommodationist approach acknowledges the conflict and accepts that the divine author of Genesis may have allowed pre-scientific language and perhaps even erroneous concepts in portray truth to the original audience.

This dissertation is an attempt to understand the lifespans of the patriarchs within the cultural, linguistic, and historical milieu within which Genesis was written. To do this, we will survey a history of interpretation, examine other ancient Near East genealogies and king lists, and examine proposed solutions by other scholars. A new proposal for interpreting the patriarchal lifespans as schematic numbers is proposed and defended in chapter five. This new proposal is then applied to other extraordinary lifespans in the Scriptures.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Presentation of the Problem

The unusually long lifespans of the patriarchs present a problem for those who believe that Genesis records actual historical people and events. The Chicago Statement on Inerrancy states that “Scripture is without error or fault in all its teaching . . . *about the events of world history.*”¹ But these lifespans are outside the known extent of human longevity and seem to add a mythical or legendary quality to the narratives. In addition, a chronology of the patriarchal period based on those lifespans raises significant issues both within Genesis and with the archaeology of the period. Were it not for these long lifespans, the patriarchal narratives would read like biographical history. Gordon Wenham agrees with K. A. Kitchen² that the patriarchal narratives display more traits of ancient biographies than of historical legends. But then he notes, “Like the historical legends, the patriarchal stories are written centuries after the events recorded, but unlike them they lack the fantastic details, *apart from the great ages of the patriarchs.*”³

¹ Point four of the Short Statement, italics added. This doctrine is expanded and supported in Articles IX, XI and XII.

² K. A. Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 365-66. Kitchen also says, “high ages at death, etc., are the only unusual features [of the patriarchal narratives].” Ibid. 361.

³ Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, Word Biblical Commentary, ed. David A. Hubbard, Glenn W. Barker and John D. W. Watts, vol. 1 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987), xxii, italics added.

Responses to the Conflict

Of course this is not the first conflict between the Scripture and scientific or historical claims. Like earlier clashes over creation versus evolution, responses to this conflict between patriarchal lifespans and anthropological or archaeological evidence have gravitated toward two extremes. On one end, critical scholars accepted the conflict and chose the scientific evidence over the Scripture. They embraced a legendary explanation for the long lifespans, and dismissed any notion that Genesis contains genuine historical truth. Because they saw Genesis as a human composition, it seemed more logical or likely that the patriarchal stories were records of myths or legends, at best based on the oral transmission of ancient cultural memories. These scholars believed this confirmed their presupposition that Genesis was the result of multiple sources assembled in the fifth century BC. For them the scientific evidence trumped the biblical text.

At the other end, conservative scholars chose Scripture over scientific evidence, and accepted these ages at face value. Their presupposition was that the divine author ensured that the Bible was inerrant and infallible in what it asserted. So, if these lifespans contradicted the anthropological evidence discovered to date, then that evidence was either incomplete or misinterpreted. Similarly, if a chronology based on these lifespans seemed incompatible with archaeological data, then those data must be incomplete or misread. These scholars could hold to their belief that Moses wrote Genesis prior to entering the Promised Land,⁴ and they were confident that the biblical

⁴ Differing evangelical views on whether the Exodus and Conquest occurred in the fifteenth or the thirteenth century BC are not relevant to the current discussion and are not addressed.

record would be validated by future discoveries or by unbiased interpretation of the evidence. For them the biblical text trumped the scientific evidence.

But for many conservative or evangelical scholars—like the present author—these two views raise more questions than answers. First, if the Bible is inerrant in what it asserts then historical recollections in Genesis must have fidelity to actual historical events. The person of Abraham, and his lifespan of 175 years, cannot be mere inventions of a later editor. But second, if we dismiss the consensus of anthropological and archaeological knowledge, then we risk creating a version of the patriarchal narratives just as fictional as the critical position we are trying to avoid. Carol Hill says, “Ironically, by interpreting the numbers of Genesis ‘literally’ Christians have created a mythological world that does not fit with the historical or scientific record.”⁵ Either ignoring or cherry picking the archaeological and anthropological data to suit one interpretation does not safeguard the Bible—it exposes the Bible to the ridicule of any scholar acquainted with the evidence. Augustine made this same point a long time ago, when he said,

Usually, even a non-Christian knows something about the earth, the heavens, and other elements of this world, about the motion and orbit of the stars and even their size and relative positions, about the predictable eclipses of the sun and moon, the cycles of the years and the seasons, about the kinds of animals, shrubs, stones, and so forth, and this knowledge he holds as being certain from reason and experience. Now, it is a disgraceful and dangerous thing for an infidel to hear a Christian, presumably giving the meaning of Holy Scripture, talking nonsense on these topics; and we should take all means to prevent such an embarrassing situation, in which people show up vast ignorance in a Christian and laugh it to scorn.⁶

⁵ Carol A. Hill, “Making Sense of the Numbers in Genesis,” *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* 55, no. 4 (2003), 250.

⁶ “Plerumque enim accidit, ut aliquid de terra, de caelo, de ceteris mundi huius elementis, de motu et conuersione uel etiam magnitudine et interuallis siderum, de certis defectibus solis ac lunae, de circuitibus annorum et temporum, de naturis animalium, fruticum, lapidum atque huiusmodi ceteris etiam

If people were acquainted with the basic workings of the physical universe in Augustine’s day, there is a far greater awareness in our own day. However, there is a dearth of knowledge concerning the historical records of the Middle Bronze Age among believers and non-believers alike. Thus, Christians can sometimes make arguments that sound reasonable to a general audience, but which are embarrassingly simple to refute by a scholar.⁷ If we hold the Bible to be inerrant, we do not have the luxury of ignoring either the biblical text, or the scientific evidence. For the Scripture to be “true”⁸ then both the text and the external evidence must be in concord.

Concordism

In fact, concordism has been the primary response from evangelicals in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries to conflicts between science and the Bible. The concordist view does not reject science per se, but rather certain conclusions based on purely naturalistic assumptions. The belief is that apparent contradictions between

non christianus ita nouerit, ut certissima ratione uel experientia teneat. turpe est autem nimis et perniciosum ac maxime cauendum, ut christianum de his rebus quasi secundum christianas litteras loquentem ita delirare audiat, ut, quemadmodum dicitur, toto caelo errare conspiciens risum tenere uix possit. turpe est autem nimis et perniciosum ac maxime cauendum, ut christianum de his rebus quasi secundum christianas litteras loquentem ita delirare audiat, ut, quemadmodum dicitur, toto caelo errare conspiciens risum tenere uix possit. et non tam molestum est, quod errans homo deridetur, sed quod auctores nostri ab eis, qui foris sunt, talia sensisse creduntur et cum magno eorum exitio, de quorum salute satagimus, tamquam indocti reprehenduntur atque respuuntur.” Augustine. *De Genesi ad litteram libri duodecim*. Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum, vol. 28/1. New York: F. Tempusky, 1894. English translation is found in Augustine, *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*, trans. John Hammond Taylor, Ancient Christian Writers: The Works of the Fathers in Translation, ed. Johannes Quasten, Walter J. Burghardt and Thomas Comerford Lawler, vol. 41 (New York: Newman Press, 1982), 1:42-43.

⁷ We will examine some of these arguments—such as the patriarchs living prior to 1950 BC, a vapor canopy providing extended life, or miraculous extension of certain lifespans—in chapter four.

⁸ I am using the dictionary definition of “truth” as “fidelity to an original.” Merriam-Webster.com, “Truth,” <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/truth> (accessed June 9, 2014). In this case it means the historical record in Genesis presents with fidelity, or records faithfully, the original events as they actually occurred.

science and the Scriptures will be debunked by future scientific discoveries, unbiased examination of the evidence, or a more accurate understanding of the Scriptures.

Concordism has a long history of putting forth a series of hypotheses as to how scientific evidence and Scripture are in concord. As each of these theories turns out to be unsupported, a new theory inevitably arises.

For example, one concordist theory, popularized in the Scofield Reference Bible, was the theory of a gap between Genesis 1:1 and 1:3. This view allowed for an old earth, as a footnote explained, “The first creative act refers to the dateless past, and gives scope for all the geologic ages.”⁹ The next note expanded on this, “Relegate fossils to the primitive creation, and no conflict of science with the Genesis cosmogony remains.”¹⁰ Although the gap theory has been largely abandoned today, along with another concordist proposal—the day-age theory—these examples still illustrate the desire to argue that science and the Scripture are in agreement when both are interpreted correctly and all evidence is considered.

Regarding the long lifespans in Genesis, one commonly held concordist theory, especially among Young Earth Creation (YEC) advocates, is that of a vapor canopy existing in the troposphere prior to the global flood. This is thought to provide an ideal environment for extended lifespans before the flood, and to explain the decreasing lifespans after the flood. There is some variation among concordists concerning the lifespans in the genealogies in Genesis. Some still claim the Genesis lifespans are

⁹ C. I. Scofield, ed., *The Scofield Reference Bible. The Holy Bible Containing the Old and New Testaments*, new and improved ed. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1917), 3, n. 2.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 4, n. 3.

numerical values and the genealogies are factually true with no gaps.¹¹ Others readily accept gaps in the genealogies, and offer reasoned explanations for the plausibility of extended patriarchal lifespans.¹² These and other concordist proposals will be examined in depth in chapter four.

Accommodation

The other major response to the conflict between historical evidence and the biblical text is that of accommodation. This view argues that God “accommodated” his revelation to fit the ancient, pre-scientific worldview, culture, and language. This view holds some promise. It is clearly true that God had to communicate using the language and idioms of the culture in which Genesis was written. Even Fundamentalists admitted that, “The Bible . . . takes the world as it is, not as it is seen through the eyes of twentieth century specialists, but as it lies spread out before the eyes of original men, and uses the popular every-day language appropriate to this standpoint.”¹³ But other accommodationists go much further.

Some accommodationists are comfortable asserting that the Bible contains scientific or historical errors. Kenton Sparks says, “Accommodation is God’s adoption in inscripturation of the human audience’s finite and fallen perspective. Its underlying

¹¹ Andrew A. Snelling, *Earth’s Catastrophic Past: Geology, Creation & the Flood*, vol. I (Dallas: Institute for Creation Research, 2009), 63-64. Snelling misquotes Gordon Wenham as supporting his view that these lifespans are literally true with no gaps. Reading Wenham’s comments in context, however, reveals that although he believes the genealogies were written to be read as literal with no gaps, he does not believe these genealogies relate to history in any meaningful way.

¹² Eugene H. Merrill, “Chronology,” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 118-20.

¹³ James Orr, “The Early Narratives of Genesis,” in *The Fundamentals: A Testimony to the Truth*, vol VI (Chicago: Testimony Publishing Company, 1910), 94.

conceptual assumption is that in many cases God does not correct our mistaken human viewpoints but merely assumes them in order to communicate with us.”¹⁴ Peter Enns says, “The biblical writers assumed that the earth is flat, was made by God in relatively recent history (about 4,000 years before Jesus) just as it looks now, and that it is the fixed point in the cosmos over which the sun actually rises and sets.... It is clear that, from a *scientific* point of view, the Bible does not always describe physical reality accurately; it simply speaks in an ancient idiom, as one might expect ancient people to do. It is God’s Word, but it has an ancient view of the natural world, not a modern one.”¹⁵

Another Solution?

Is there another option for interpreting the long patriarchal lifespans? It seems that the assumption behind the conservative and concordist views—that the ages must be face-value numerical values—is unwarranted. And, while it is true that accommodation is an element in every form of communication, an acceptance of errors in the historicity of Genesis may undermine the authority of the text.

In a different context, K. A. Kitchen referred to interpreting ancient numbers at face-value as the “lazy man’s solution.”¹⁶ The assumption that the patriarchal ages are simple numerical values is the first response for a modern reader who holds a high view

¹⁴ Kenton L. Sparks, *God’s Word in Human Words: An Evangelical Appropriation of Critical Biblical Scholarship* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 243.

¹⁵ Peter Enns, *The Evolution of Adam: What the Bible Does and Doesn’t Say about Human Origins* (Grand Rapids: Brazos Press, 2012), xiii-xiv.

¹⁶ K. A. Kitchen, “The Exodus,” in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 2:702. I use this quote with some caution because I would never accuse those who hold the conservative position, such as Archbishop Ussher or my former professor—Dr. Eugene Merrill—as being lazy. Nothing could be further from the truth, and I hold Dr. Merrill in the highest regard.

of Scripture. However, despite the fact that Eugene Merrill decries resorting to “easy solutions,”¹⁷ this author believes that the conservative view he espouses does not adequately confront either the problems in the biblical text or the ancient context of Genesis. So this dissertation is an attempt to do the difficult task of examining the lifespans of the patriarchs within the literary, cultural, and theological background in which Genesis was originally written. It is hoped that doing so will reveal an interpretation that both accommodates the worldview of the original author and concords with the history of the patriarchal period.

Scope of the Study

This dissertation will focus on the lifespans of the patriarchs: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph, and other characters who appear in Genesis 12–50. Specifically I will critique the evangelical understanding that these lifespans are accurate numerical values. I have chosen to use the writings of my former professor, Eugene Merrill, as the classic expression of this face-value interpretation.¹⁸ Although I will refer to many other writers, my arguments will be responses to his position in many cases. It is my commitment to the inerrancy of Scripture which has led me to question the legitimacy of this interpretation of the patriarchal lifespans.

¹⁷ Eugene H. Merrill, “The Lifespans of the EB–MB Patriarchs: A Hermeneutical and Historical Conundrum,” *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 57, no. 2 (2015): 268.

¹⁸ Such as Eugene H. Merrill, “Fixed Dates in Patriarchal Chronology,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 137, no. 547 (1980): 241-51.

Much valuable study has already contributed to the interpretation of other large numbers in Scripture.¹⁹ And many other scholars have addressed the unusually long lifespans in Genesis 5 and 11.²⁰ Contributions in these areas will be noted as needed. In fact, since much previous research has focused on Genesis 5 and 11, and relatively little on the lifespans of the patriarchs, this dissertation will interact with the literature on the antediluvian and postdiluvian ancestors. It is assumed that a scholar's view on the lifespans of Methuselah et al. extends to his or her view on the lifespan of Abraham and his offspring, even if that writer did not specifically address the later patriarchs.

Although not the focus of this dissertation, other noteworthy individuals outside Genesis who also enjoyed a long lifespans will be addressed as needed.²¹ It is hoped that principles uncovered for understanding patriarchal lifespans may also apply to these later individuals, and to the ages in Genesis 5 and 11.

History of Interpretation

Eugene Merrill supports his face-value interpretation of lifespans by saying, “most of the ancients took the genealogies prima facie as chronological records by intent and function. The variation in their computations came about not so much because they

¹⁹ David M. Fouts, “The Use of Large Numbers in the Old Testament with Particular Emphasis on the Use of *'elep*” (ThD diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 1992). Ronald B. Allen, *Numbers*, Expositor's Bible Commentary, ed. Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland, vol. 2: Numbers–Ruth, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 53-69.

²⁰ R. K. Harrison, “From Adam to Noah: A Reconsideration of the Antediluvian Patriarchs' Ages,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 37, no. 2 (1994): 161-68. Hill, “Making Sense of the Numbers”. Other contributions will be noted later.

²¹ Job is said to have lived for 140 years after his affliction (Job 42:16-17). Other lifespans in Scripture are assigned as follows. Levi: 137 (Exod 6:16), Kohath: 133 (Exod 6:18), Amram: 137 (Exod 6:20), Aaron: 123 (Num 33:39), Moses: 120 (Deut 34:7), Joshua: 110 (Judg 2:8). Eli the priest: 98 (1 Sam 4:15, 18), and Jehoiada the priest: 130 (2 Chr 24:15). See Table 4 in Appendix E.

differed in their view of these tables as historical records but because of the particular text they used as a standard, namely, the MT or LXX.”²² While it is true that most of the ancients believed these lifespans, genealogies, and chronologies to be historically accurate, the reality is more complex than suggested in this statement.

There has been scant research done on how the lifespans of notable ancestors were understood and interpreted prior to approximately the third century BC. It is this lacuna that will be addressed in this dissertation. It is hoped that understanding the cultures, languages and worldviews closest in time to the original author and audience will yield a more accurate understanding of the author’s intention.

The earliest written records of how people interpreted the lifespans in Genesis do not appear until after ca. 300 BC. They occur hundreds of years after the original writing of Genesis, and in different languages and cultures. If one holds to an early Exodus then Moses could have written the Pentateuch ca. 1400 BC, leaving a gap of over a millennium until the Septuagint (LXX) translation appeared (1,150 years). If one holds to a late Exodus, there is still a gap of approximately 950 years from ca. 1200 BC to ca. 250 BC. The Hebrew language itself changed dramatically over these years, and then there are the differences between Greek and Hebrew. Lastly, the culture of Jews living in Egypt or Israel during the Second Temple period is vastly different from that of the mixed multitude of the Exodus living in tents on the Plains of Moab preparing to enter Canaan.

²² Merrill, “Chronology,” 118. Of course the ancients did not have access to the later Masoretic Text (MT). Presumably Merrill is referring to a Hebrew text with lifespan numbers that are preserved in the MT.

What we will find is that the evidence does not support the common notion that everyone interpreted these lifespans at face value until the critical attacks of the nineteenth century. There is no extant evidence of any chronological speculation or calculation until the translation of the LXX (ca. 300 BC) at the earliest. Even after that time most commentators were more concerned with producing a chronology that was in concord with the history of the world as they knew it, rather than being rigidly bound to the numerical accuracy of individual lifespans. This reflected the concordist belief that the Scriptures were really in agreement with world history, even if one were forced to adjust some of the figures to make it fit.

Early Translations (LXX and SP)

Of course, the earliest records are the Septuagint (beginning in ca. 250 BC), and the Samaritan Pentateuch (ca. 120 BC) translations. The ages listed in the LXX and the SP for the ancestors in Genesis 5 and 11 diverge significantly from the Masoretic Text (MT), and the scholarly consensus seems to be that these were alterations from the MT's original.²³ Jack Finegan found that, "the MT is original as compared with the Septuagint and that the differences in the LXX are rational alterations at points when the chronology in the MT is difficult to understand or appears to be self-contradictory; while the Samaritan system mainly follows the MT until the flood and then the LXX although with several modifications."²⁴

²³ Appendix D contains a detailed comparison of these three lists.

²⁴ Jack Finegan, *Handbook of Biblical Chronology: Principles of Time Reckoning in the Ancient World and Problems of Chronology in the Bible*, rev. ed. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1998), 195. See also Gerhard Larsson, "The Chronology of the Pentateuch: A Comparison of the MT and LXX,"

Jeremy Sexton has recently argued cogently for the priority of the LXX lifespans in Genesis 5 and 11.²⁵ His reason for preferring the LXX is that the higher begetting ages lead to a date for the flood that is prior to the first known Egyptian dynasty, if one accepts that Genesis 5 and 11 are gapless chronologies.²⁶ Sexton's argument for an older Hebrew *Vorlage* behind the LXX is certainly possible, and has some support among scholars.²⁷ He also proposed a viable motive to explain why the Jewish scribes may have reduced the LXX figures to those now found in the MT. Since a chronology based on a face-value reading of the lifespans in the LXX placed the birth of Christ over 5,000 years after creation, this aligned well with the Jewish belief that the Messiah would arrive in the sixth millennium and usher in the seventh millennium corresponding to the seventh day of creation (see later). Unfortunately for the Jewish scholars, this chronology favored the Christian claim that Jesus was the Messiah. So, "...the Palestinian Jews shortened the chronology in the Hebrew copies of Gen 5 and 11 to remove the life of Jesus far from the sixth millennium of the world."²⁸

However, there are several problems with his view. The assumption that Genesis 5 and 11 are gapless chronologies will be challenged throughout this dissertation.

Journal of Biblical Literature 102, no. 3 (1983): 401-9. Merrill, "Chronology," 114-16. Contra Klein who believes that "none of the three chronological systems is original, although that original system can be plausibly reconstructed." Ralph W. Klein, "Archaic Chronologies and the Textual History of the Old Testament," *Harvard Theological Review* 67 (1974): 255-63.

²⁵ Jeremy Sexton, "Who Was Born when Enoch Was 90?: A Semantic Reevaluation of William Henry Green's Chronological Gaps," *Westminster Theological Journal* 77 (2015), 212-18.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 218.

²⁷ Emanuel Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible*, 3rd rev. and exp. ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2012), 135-40. Klein, "Archaic Chronologies," 259. Karen H. Jobes and Moisés Silva, *Invitation to the Septuagint*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2015), 159.

²⁸ Sexton, "Who Was Born," 215. See also Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible*, 221.

To accept the priority of the LXX figures over those found in the MT goes against the principles of text criticism, where the shorter and more difficult reading is to be preferred as original. As explained below, the LXX readings can be explained as smoothing out difficulties in the MT's figures, while the converse does not hold.

It seems more likely that the rationale for the changes from the lifespan numbers preserved in the MT to those of the LXX was the need for the Hellenistic Jews to match their chronology with that of Egypt or Babylon. It seems reasonable to believe that the LXX translators, living in Alexandria and faced with the much longer chronologies of Manetho or Berossus,²⁹ extended the Hebrew chronology by adding 100 years (or 50 in the case of Nahor) to the age when the antediluvian ancestors fathered their first son.³⁰ The LXX translators also seemed to be striving to smooth out difficulties in the Hebrew chronology such as all of Abraham's post-flood ancestors being alive during his lifetime, and Shem, Shelah, and Eber outliving Abraham. The addition of 100 years before the birth of the first son results in a more rational order where each ancestor dies before his son.³¹ It is also worth noting that the LXX translators did not attempt to make these ages conform to normal human ages—in fact adding 100 years to the age of fathering a first son is moving in the opposite direction. Ben Zion Wacholder notes that for these translators, “the credibility of the biblical tradition was the inverse of what

²⁹ We will examine the longer Egyptian and Babylonian chronologies in chapter three.

³⁰ Larsson, “Chronology of the Pentateuch,” 403. Merrill, “Chronology,” 116.

³¹ Klein, “Archaic Chronologies,” 257-58. Larsson, “Chronology of the Pentateuch,” 404. This is illustrated with Chart 1 and Chart 2 in Appendix D.

confronts the modern reader.”³² The problem was not that ancient ancestors lived for hundreds or thousands of years; that was actually consistent with ancient beliefs.³³ The problem was that the Hebrew chronology seemed unrealistically short when compared to the Babylonian and Egyptian chronologies. The simplest solution was to add a hundred years to the age of the ancestors when their first son was born. This lengthened the time of pre-history while preserving other lifespan figures.

What this illustrates for our study is that the translators of the Septuagint and the Samaritan Pentateuch did not seem to regard the ages and lifespans in Genesis 5 and 11 as sacrosanct numerical values. Instead, they saw these numbers as part of a chronology of the world that could and should be updated or changed to accommodate new information or incorporate new purposes. This may seem tangential since the lifespan numbers for Abraham through Joseph are the same in the MT, the LXX, and the SP. However, if biblical scholars as early as the third century BC believed the ages listed in Genesis 5 and 11 were not face value numbers but literary conventions to denote the antiquity of their history, then perhaps modern Bible readers might be granted license to do the same. This also demonstrates a precedent for taking lifespans in Genesis in a non face-value manner. Although these translators did not seem to have any problem with ancient ancestors living hundreds of years, they did not regard these numbers as

³² Ben Zion Wacholder, “Biblical Chronology in the Hellenistic World Chronicles,” *Harvard Theological Review* 61 (1968), 457.

³³ Wacholder says, “For the ancients . . . the longevity of the Adamite and Noachite generations as recorded in Genesis was consistent with their outlook that early man was somehow a half-god or a superman.” *Ibid.*

representing accurate ages. But they did recognize the need to incorporate information that was now available to them—that the world was older than previously thought.³⁴

Early Jewish Interpretations

The earliest Jewish writer, for whom we have evidence, to address chronology was Demetrius the Chronographer (ca. 200 BC). He wrote after the completion of the Septuagint version of the Pentateuch and used it exclusively in his quest to deal with inconsistencies and obscurities in biblical chronology.³⁵ He used the biblical ages as face value numbers to calculate the age of Jacob when he fled to Haran and married Leah and Rachel.³⁶ Demetrius does go beyond the biblical text in assigning the month and year for the birth of Jacob's children, the length of time Jacob's family stayed in Shechem and Bethlehem, and the ages of Moses ancestors in Egypt. But his speculations are consistent with a face value reading of the biblical text and his goal seems to be to show that the biblical chronology is coherent and rational. However, he demonstrates a willingness to fabricate biblical lifespans, such as the ages of begetting for the four generations in Egypt from Levi to Moses (Exod 6:16-20), to fit a predetermined scheme.³⁷ Demetrius used the

³⁴ Ibid., 455-58.

³⁵ James H. Charlesworth, *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vol. 2 (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2009), 844-45.

³⁶ Five fragments of Demetrius's writing are preserved in Eusebius's *Praeparatio Evangelica*, Book 9. The most important fragment for his chronology is Fragment 2 (*PrEv* 9.21.1-19). Eusebius, *Eusebius Werke: Die Praeparatio Evangelica*, Die Griechischen Christlichen Schriftsteller der Ersten Jahrhunderte, ed. Karl Mras and Édouard Des Places, vol. 8, part 1, rev. ed. (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1982), 508-11. An English translation is found in Charlesworth, *Pseudepigrapha*, 848-52.

³⁷ Wacholder says, "There is little doubt that Demetrius had a preconceived total into which he fits his dates." Ben Zion Wacholder, "How Long did Abram Stay in Egypt? A Study in Hellenistic,

Hebrew version number of 187 instead of the LXX figure of 167 for the age of Methuselah's begetting. But it is not known whether he actually had access to an early precursor of the MT, or used a different LXX reading, or whether he quoted from an independent chronological tradition.³⁸

Eupolemus (ca. 160 BC) summarized the computations of Demetrius, and also based his chronological calculations on the LXX, although he used a Hebrew text as well.³⁹ He, too, seems to have simply added the lifespan numbers together in his calculation of the date of creation.⁴⁰ But his date for the flood is 1,000 years earlier than the LXX, although that may be due to a scribal error.⁴¹ However, his chronology from creation to the flood differed from the LXX chronology by 250 years. One suggestion for this discrepancy is that Eupolemus was utilizing a repeating scheme of 480-year intervals. There are 480 years from the Exodus to the founding of the first temple (1 Kgs 6:1); then the reigns of the kings added to the time of the exile makes 480 years between the founding of the first temple and the second temple; 480 years after that date is the Maccabean liberation of Jerusalem of Eupolemus's day.⁴²

Quran, and Rabbinic Chronology," *Hebrew Union College Annual* 35, (1964), 51 n. 42. See also Wacholder, "Biblical Chronology," 455-56.

³⁸ Jeremy Hughes, *Secrets of the Times: Myth and History in Biblical Chronology*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series, ed. David J. A. Clines and Philip R. Davies, vol. 66 (Sheffield: JOT Press, 1990), 241-42.

³⁹ Charlesworth, *Pseudepigrapha*, 862-63. Finegan, *Handbook of Biblical Chronology*, 145.

⁴⁰ Eupolemus's date of creation in Fragment 5 presupposed the lifespans and other Old Testament numbers be taken at face value. Fragment 5 is preserved in Clement of Alexandria *Stromata* 1.141.4. An English translation is found in Charlesworth, *Pseudepigrapha*, 871-72.

⁴¹ Hughes, *Secrets of the Times*, 243. Contra Charlesworth, *Pseudepigrapha*, 872, n. e.

⁴² Hughes, *Secrets of the Times*, 243-44.

It seems that Eupolemus's motive was to show that the antiquity of the Hebrew people was greater than that of other civilizations. He even asserted that, "Moses was the first wise man, that he first taught the alphabet (or grammar) to the Jews, and the Phoenicians received it from the Jews, and the Greeks received it from the Phoenicians."⁴³ Thus it seems Eupolemus felt the freedom to choose between the LXX and the MT chronology, and to change some of the numbers to fit a pattern.

The book of Jubilees (ca. 150 BC) attempted to fit Israel's history into a series of "weeks of years" and "jubilees of years" (i.e., seven years and forty-nine years). The writer of Jubilees takes the ages of the patriarchs at face value, and even provides an explanation for Abraham's extended lifespan.⁴⁴ But it seems that fitting Israel's history into a pattern of Jubilees was his priority, rather than strict numerical precision, which would presumably result in a random arrangement of ages. The writer of Jubilees freely condensed, purged, supplemented, or changed the biblical narratives, and that practice continued into his use of chronology. The postdiluvian chronology contains some internal contradictions and a large number of deviations from both the MT and the LXX.⁴⁵ The writer used a calendar of 364 days a year, i.e., exactly fifty-two weeks of seven days—a strategy that was never fully accepted, even in his own day.⁴⁶ In Jubilees Adam spent

⁴³ Eusebius, *PrEv* 9.26.1. Eusebius, *Die Praeparatio Evangelica*, 519. Also in Clement, *Stromata* 1.153.4. Charlesworth, *Pseudepigrapha*, 865.

⁴⁴ *Jubilees* 21:2, 23:8-10. *Ibid.*, 95, 100.

⁴⁵ Hughes, *Secrets of the Times*, 245.

⁴⁶ *Jubilees* 6:34-38, O. S. Wintermute, "Jubilees: A New Translation and Introduction," in *The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha*, vol. 2, ed. James H. Charlesworth (Garden City, NY: Doubleday & Company, 1985), 39, 48, 68.

seven years in the Garden of Eden before the Fall,⁴⁷ and the Exodus occurred exactly forty-nine jubilees (2401 years) later, a chronology that is significantly shorter than both the LXX and the MT.⁴⁸ The writer dates every event—including many that are not in the biblical text—by the number of jubilees, weeks of years, single years, and months. The lengthy title reveals the author’s theological purpose in his chronology: “The Account of the Division of Days of the Law and the Testimony for Annual Observance according to their Weeks (of years) and their Jubilees throughout all the Years of the World.”⁴⁹ So here we have an ancient author more concerned with demonstrating Yahweh’s order with an overall chronology rather than following a modernistic bent for a numerically accurate record of individual’s ages.

Philo (ca. 25 BC–AD 50) did admit to the unique and symbolic character of certain numbers, including the numbers seven, and one hundred and twenty. He did believe that people lived to a normal human lifespan of approximately seventy years, and used the number seven in some very creative symbolic ways to prove this.⁵⁰ He also used a lot of confusing and laborious symbolism to explain the 120 years given as the length of a human lifespan from his interpretation of Genesis 6:3. But then his concluding statement seems to indicate he believed that even this elevated lifespan was only possible in ancient times. He said, “But perhaps the number a hundred and twenty is not the

⁴⁷ *Jubilees* 3:15-17, *Ibid.*, 59.

⁴⁸ *Jubilees* 50:4-5, *Ibid.*, 142.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 52.

⁵⁰ Philo, *On the Creation* 1:91–128. Philo, *The Works of Philo: Complete and Unabridged*, trans. C. D. Yonge, new updated ed. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1993), 13-18.

general term of human life, but only of the life of those men who existed at that time, and who were to perish by the deluge after an interval of so many years, which their kind Benefactor prolonged, giving them space for repentance; when, after the aforesaid term, they lived a longer time in the subsequent ages.⁵¹ One wonders why Philo felt the need to defend the prolonged lifespan of 120 before the flood when the lifespans given in Genesis, both before and after the deluge, were much longer. Thus, although it seems Philo took the lifespans in Genesis at face value, he was clearly puzzled by some of them and was willing to adopt a symbolic interpretation of these ages if it helped him make sense of these numbers.

Josephus, in *Antiquities of the Jews* (ca. AD 94), used the LXX figures for the genealogies from Adam to Noah, and he continued using the LXX lifespans for individuals from Noah to Abraham. This approximately matches the total of 992 years from the flood to Abraham that is recorded in only two manuscripts of *Antiquities*. However, other manuscripts list the total length of time from Abraham to the flood as 292 years, a figure which agrees with the MT.⁵² Ben Zion Wacholder defends the 292 figure and believes it demonstrates that Josephus was aware of the different chronological schemes and felt free to choose the figures he wanted from either the LXX and the MT.⁵³ However, as explained by Thackeray (Loeb Classical Library), it seems more likely that

⁵¹ Philo, *Questions and Answers on Genesis* 1:91. Ibid., 13-18, 810-811.

⁵² *Antiquities* 1:82-88, 148-150. Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities, Books I-IV*, trans. H. St. J. Thackeray, Loeb Classical Library, vol. 242 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1930), 39-43, 73-75.

⁵³ Wacholder, "Biblical Chronology," 453, n. 3.

the 992 figure was the original one and Josephus was consistent in his use of the LXX.⁵⁴ This may indicate that Josephus was only aware of one chronology, or that he considered the LXX figures to be more accurate than the MT. There are several internal chronological contradictions within the writings of Josephus, but these may be simply due to the variety of sources with differing figures that he used, which Josephus incorporated into his accounts without checking his previous writings.⁵⁵

It does seem that Josephus regarded the ages in the LXX as accurate records of the lifespans of the ancients. He warned against assuming the long ages were false and even speculated several reasons why extended lifespans should have been granted to the patriarchs.⁵⁶ Undoubtedly Josephus believed the teaching of the Oral Torah that was recorded later in the Talmud, “The world is to exist six thousand years; the first two thousand years are to be void; the next two thousand years are the period of the Torah, and the following two thousand years are the period of the Messiah.”⁵⁷ This explains why Josephus gave round numbers for the history of the world (5,000 years) and the time when Moses lived (2,000 years earlier), which are approximations of the chronology given in the LXX.⁵⁸ This seems to be in line with his apologetic purpose to establish the

⁵⁴ Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, 72-73, n. h.

⁵⁵ Hughes, *Secrets of the Times*, 246-47.

⁵⁶ *Antiquities* 1:104-106, 191, 237, 256. Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, 1:51, 95, 117, 127.

⁵⁷ I. Epstein, ed., *The Babylonian Talmud: Abodah Zarah*, Hebrew-English ed. (London: Socino, 1988), 9a.

⁵⁸ *Antiquities* 1:13-17. Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities*, 6-11.

antiquity of the Jewish people over that of the Greeks, Babylonians, and Egyptians, which he explains in some detail at the beginning of *Against Apion*.⁵⁹

Later, the rabbinical chronology in *Seder 'Olam Rabbah* (ca. AD 160) also took a strictly face value interpretation of the Genesis lifespans.⁶⁰ In this work the author (likely Rabbi Yose ben H̄alaphta)⁶¹ used a system of chronology counting from the year of creation.⁶² He used the principle that “Scripture does not come to hide, but to explain” as a basis for assuming that exact dates were intended in Scripture, and these dates could be used to construct a consistent chronology.⁶³ He used the face value lifespans in Genesis, without allowing for any gaps in the genealogies, to try and resolve difficulties in the chronology of the Hebrew text, and to calculate the dates of certain events that are not listed in Scripture. For example, *Seder 'Olam* calculates the year of the language split at the Tower of Babel to the year of Peleg’s death (1996 AM) based on Genesis 10:25. This means that Noah survived the language split by ten years, and Abraham was forty-eight years old at the language split.⁶⁴ But this dating, while attempting to explain the biblical text, is clearly untenable historically. Abraham visited Egypt when he was eighty or ninety years old (Gen 12:10). That would imply that the massive Egyptian nation and

⁵⁹ *Against Apion* 1:1-45. Josephus, *The Life. Against Apion*, trans. H. St. J. Thackeray, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1926), 162-81.

⁶⁰ Heinrich W. Guggenheimer, *Seder Olam: The Rabbinic View of Biblical Chronology* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1998), 8-41.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, x.

⁶² The dates from creation are designated *Anno Mundi (AM)*, Latin for “in the year of the world.” This system, though not necessarily the same dates, is still used today by traditional Jews.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, xii, 5-8.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 3-8.

civilization, with its Pharaohs, social hierarchy, language and culture, arose from nothing in less than forty years. So, while we can agree that the *Seder 'Olam* did use the face value interpretation of the patriarchal lifespans, the results introduced more historical discrepancies than other interpretations, as even Merrill allows.⁶⁵

Early Christian Interpretations

Archbishop Ussher may be the most famous Christian exegete to take the lifespans as literal ages and add them together to create a chronology, but he certainly was not the first. Julius Africanus, dubbed “der Vater der christlichen Chronographie,”⁶⁶ wrote a chronology of biblical history in AD 221.⁶⁷ Like the Jewish chronographers before him, and Christian chronographers after him, Africanus based his system on the belief that there was 6,000 years of history corresponding to the six days of creation.⁶⁸ This explains why the Jewish and Christian writers, including Josephus and Africanus, used the LXX as the basis for their chronologies. Since the LXX could account for over 5,000 years of history (5,500 in Africanus’s chronology), it meant the 1,000-year reign of Messiah—corresponding to the Sabbath day of creation—was near.⁶⁹ The Hebrew numbers could only account for approximately 4,000 years of history, which lessened the

⁶⁵ Merrill, “Chronology,” 117-18.

⁶⁶ “The father of Christian chronography.” Heinrich Gelzer, *Sextus Julius Africanus und die Byzantinische Chronographie*, vol. 1 (Leipzig: B. G. Teubner, 1880), 1.

⁶⁷ Sextus Iulius Africanus, *Iulius Africanus Chronographiae: The Extant Fragments*, trans. William Adler, *Die Griechischen Christlichen Schriftsteller der Ersten Jahrhunderte*, ed. Martin Wallraff, Umberto Roberto and Karl Pingéra, vol. 15 (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2007), XVII-XVIII.

⁶⁸ Africanus, *Chronographiae*, XXIII. See also Psalm 90:4, II Peter 3:8.

⁶⁹ Wacholder, “Biblical Chronology,” 453.

importance and urgency of the chronological schemes since it left approximately 2,000 years until the Messianic age.⁷⁰

Africanus used the LXX lifespan figures in most cases, although he felt free to use the MT figures when they made more sense to him, such as not having Methuselah survive the flood, and disregarding the second Kenan in the LXX of Genesis 11.⁷¹

Although Africanus was amenable to discovering symbolic significance behind biblical numbers,⁷² he nonetheless constructed his chronology by taking biblical lifespans at face value.⁷³ He also sought to align biblical chronology with the known Greek history of his day.⁷⁴ However, once again, we have an ancient author who was not a disinterested observer. Africanus used 187 as the age when Methuselah begot Lamech. This is different than the 167 in most manuscripts of the LXX. It is not known whether Africanus took this figure from a Hebrew *Vorlage* to the MT or a different manuscript of the LXX. Either way, it solves the problem of Methuselah surviving the flood, and puts the death of Peleg (“division”) at exactly 3,000 years AM, i.e., exactly half of the supposed 6,000

⁷⁰ This reasoning was—and is—still used in many chronologies, including that of Archbishop Ussher, although he used the MT figures for the opposite reason that Africanus used the LXX figures. In Ussher’s day it was known that Jesus Christ was likely born in 4 BC, so his date of creation was exactly 4,000 years earlier at 4004 BC. This meant that by the mid seventeenth century AD the 6,000 years of history was approaching the end when the Messianic age would begin. James Barr, “Why the World Was Created in 4004 B.C.: Archbishop Ussher and Biblical Chronology,” *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester* 67 (1985), 581.

⁷¹ Africanus, *Chronographiae*, XXVII-XXVIII.

⁷² For example, the age of Methuselah. *Ibid.*, 46-47.

⁷³ A perfect illustration of this is the age of Jacob when he fled to Haran (77) and when he married Leah and Rachel (84). *Ibid.*, 62-65.

⁷⁴ Finegan, *Handbook of Biblical Chronology*, 155-56.

years of human history.⁷⁵ Africanus also places the Exodus during the reign of Amosis, first Egyptian king of the eighteenth dynasty, which in his system is equivalent to 1795 BC.⁷⁶ He was more concerned with constructing an overall chronology that fitted into a logical plan rather than recording history in the form of numerically accurate ages and lifespans.

Eusebius's *Chronicle* (ca. AD 325) was the first to display universal and comparative chronology in a table of parallel vertical columns. One could see a universal synchronism of both profane and biblical figures by reading across each page.⁷⁷ He quoted, summarized, and combined a large variety of sources—Babylonian, Assyrian, Jewish, Egyptian, Greek, Roman, and the Bible along with Africanus—to compose his work.⁷⁸ Like others before him, Eusebius's goal was an apologetic one—to demonstrate the antiquity of Moses was greater than that of other cultures, particularly Greece.⁷⁹ He chose the LXX version over the MT, and although he understood the patriarchal ages as numerical values, he saw his task—like others before and after him—to fit these numbers into a system. Thus his dates differ slightly from those of Africanus, and in turn his work

⁷⁵ Africanus, *Chronographiae*, 26-31.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 111. Finegan, *Handbook of Biblical Chronology*, 155-59.

⁷⁷ Alden A. Mosshammer, *The Chronicle of Eusebius and Greek Chronographic Tradition* (Lewisburg, PA: Bucknell University Press, 1979), 15, 37. Photographs of manuscripts showing this format are reproduced on pages 22-27.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 66. Eusebius, *Eusebius Werke: Die Chronik des Hieronymus*, Die Griechischen Christlichen Schriftsteller der Ersten Jahrhunderte, ed. Rudolf Helm, vol. 7, 2nd ed. (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1984), 7.

⁷⁹ Mosshammer, *Chronicle of Eusebius*, 33.

was then translated, adapted, epitomized, and extended by others.⁸⁰ Eusebius's work was replaced within a few centuries by the chronologies of others who used his dates as a starting point, but his foundational scheme was not seriously challenged until the time of the Reformation.

Later Christian Interpretations

Martin Luther and John Calvin depicted the consensus view of their day that the lifespans in the MT text of Genesis be taken at face value.⁸¹ Like others before them, the 6,000 year scheme of history featured prominently.⁸² But by this time it was clear that the LXX numbers made history too long to fit this scheme. So, the emphasis returned to the Hebrew numbers in the MT. Actually it was the Venerable Bede in AD 703 who had used the MT numbers from Jerome's Vulgate rather than the LXX numbers used by Eusebius, which was the standard up to that time. Bede was accused of heresy and defended himself by publishing his own chronology, where he dated the creation at 3952 BC.⁸³ The medieval writers found the approximate 4,000 years from creation to Christ in the MT to be significant, although they each computed the numbers slightly differently.

⁸⁰ Eusebius, *Die Chronik des Hieronymus*, 23-36. Mosshammer, *Chronicle of Eusebius*, 15.

⁸¹ Martin Luther, *The Creation: A Commentary on the First Five Chapters of the Book of Genesis*, trans. Henry Cole (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1858. Orig. Wittenberg: 1544), 450-51. John Calvin, *A Commentary on Genesis*, trans. John King, Geneva Series (London: Banner of Truth Trust, 1965. Orig. pub. Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1847. Latin edition, 1554), 1:336, 2:36, 404-405.

⁸² Karl H. Dannenfeldt, "Some Observations of Luther on Ancient Pre-Greek History," *Archiv für Reformationgeschichte* 42, no. 1-2 (1951), 52.

⁸³ Saint Bede the Venerable and Faith Wallis, *Bede: The Reckoning of Time. Translated, with Introduction, Notes and Commentary by Faith Wallis*, Translated Texts for Historians, ed. Gillian Clark and Mary Whitby, vol. 29 (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 1999), xxx-xxxii. Hughes, *Secrets of the Times*, 260.

Luther dated the birth of Christ at 3960 AM, which seems to be an odd number until we realize that he dated the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15 at AD 40, exactly 4,000 years after creation. Studying Paul’s Missionary Journeys in Acts reveals that the Jerusalem council did not occur until AD 49 or 50, but Luther does not seem to have taken this into account.⁸⁴ According to Luther, this event, not Christ’s birth, death or resurrection, was the turning point in history because at the Jerusalem Council, “the law [of Moses] was abrogated by public decree and liberty from the law was promulgated.”⁸⁵ He also found a way to fit Daniel’s seventy weeks into this scheme. Like all other chronographers, Luther had to wrestle with difficulties in the biblical text itself, and then fit everything into a cohesive system. For example he concluded that Abraham was born when Terah was seventy years old, with Genesis 11:26, rather than when Terah was 130 years old as in Acts 7:4. He also invented a twenty year co-regency of Joram and Ahaziah in Judah as a way to reconcile the different figures in 2 Kings 8:26 and 2 Chronicles 22:2. Both of these decisions—along with other questionable decisions—were necessary for Luther to match Daniel’s seventieth week with the 4000th year after creation.⁸⁶

Regarding the extended lifespans of the ancients, Luther was not at all “displeased” to offer an explanation that the antediluvian ancestors enjoyed bodies less tainted by sin, and more nourishing food grown in a better environment.⁸⁷ Thus, like

⁸⁴ James Barr, “Luther and Biblical Chronology,” *Bulletin of the John Rylands University Library of Manchester* 72 (1990), 61.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 52.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 54-61.

⁸⁷ Luther, *The Creation*, 448-49.

others before and after him, Luther took these lifespans at face value, but found ways to alter them when needed to fit an overall scheme, or to match what was known about world history at that time.

In AD 1650, at the dawn of the modern era, Archbishop James Ussher famously took the data in Genesis as literal ages to create his chronology.⁸⁸ He was strongly influenced by the 6000 year arrangement of history, as others before him had been, and his chronology deliberately incorporated schematic round numbers. For example, according to Ussher the first Temple was completed in the 3000th year after creation, and Christ—the anti-type of the temple—was born in the 4000th year after creation. The genius of Ussher was, as explained by James Barr, “that he succeeded in making it work out, and as a precise figure; and that without any tampering—at least as he thought—with the biblical text itself.”⁸⁹ However, Ussher did take some curious exegetical leaps in order to fit the biblical chronology into a 4000-year system. He shortened the Egyptian sojourn to 215 years rather than the 430 years in the MT of Exodus 12:40-41. His reason for this was that the New Testament indicates the 430 years covered the time in Egypt and in Canaan (Gal 3:17). It seems clear that Paul is quoting from the LXX version of Exodus—which has the shorter sojourn—in Galatians. By preferring this reading, Ussher was essentially choosing the LXX chronology over the MT in this one instance when the rest of his chronology was based solely on the MT

⁸⁸ James Ussher, *The Annals of the World*, ed. Larry Pierce and Marion Pierce, rev. and updated ed. (Green Forest, AR: Master Books, 2003. Orig. *Annales Veteris et Novi Testamenti: English*, London, J. Crook and G. Bedell, 1658).

⁸⁹ Barr, “Why the World Was Created in 4004 B.C.,” 578.

figures. In another example, Ussher calculated seven years of overlap in the kings of Israel and Judah. It seems he came to this figure from his study of the biblical text, not by speculation, but we know today that there were many more than seven years of coregencies. If Ussher had allowed for any more than seven years of overlapping reigns, his whole system would have collapsed.⁹⁰

In other areas, Ussher seems to have based his calculations on unfounded assumptions. He assumed the ancient Israelites reckoned a year as the same length as the calendar that was current in his day—the Julian calendar—and he used this to calculate the exact timing of biblical events that included a month and day. He also conjectured the date of creation (Sunday 23 October, 4004 BC), and that of other biblical events, such as the crucifixion.⁹¹

Although it is fashionable to lampoon Ussher, his methods involved much more than simply adding the ages together. Ussher was an erudite scholar who attempted—as much as possible—to take into account all of the external factors and secular history along with the biblical text in creating his chronology.⁹² Like other chronologists, Ussher tied biblical events to secular history. For him the key synchronism that tied biblical events with secular history was with the death of Nebuchadnezzar and the succession of his son, Evil-Merodach. His calculation of this date (563 BC) was

⁹⁰ Ibid., 587-90.

⁹¹ Ibid., 590-95.

⁹² Ibid., 579-81.

actually fairly accurate (Nebuchadnezzar died in 562 BC).⁹³ However, since he lacked any way to synchronize biblical individuals with historical figures prior to the kings of Israel, Ussher did take the patriarchal lifespans as numerical ages and add them together.⁹⁴ Hughes summarized how Ussher combined two elements of longstanding chronological tradition. “As a classical scholar, he followed Eusebius in seeking to incorporate Biblical and classical data in a universal chronicle of human history. He also continued the strong Jewish-Christian tradition of attempting to harmonize chronological discrepancies in the Biblical text.”⁹⁵

Ussher’s influence on the evangelical interpretation of biblical ages can hardly be overstated thanks to his chronology being included in many versions of the King James Bible. Though few would hold to the same dates as Ussher today, many evangelical scholars still use his assumptions and methodology by taking the lifespans at face value and adding them together to fit a chronological scheme.

Conclusions

There are a few common themes we find running through the work of these chronographers from the LXX and SP translators down to the modern era. We can say that these writers did view the ages in Scripture as genuine historical records, but there are at least three caveats to that statement.

⁹³ Ibid., 579-80.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 604-06.

⁹⁵ Hughes, *Secrets of the Times*, 262.

First, all of these scholars attempted to reconcile the biblical narrative with secular history as it was known to them. Of course, the knowledge of history increased dramatically over that long period of time (approximately 300 BC to AD 1800 or later). And the differing chronologies reflected that increased knowledge. Yet they all held a concordist presupposition; the scholars throughout this time period believed the biblical text could—and should—be reconciled with secular history. James Barr said

Thus Ussher's chronology was never a purely biblical calculation, as he himself well knew; and the use of links with secular history was nothing new, for the gospels themselves, in so far as they furnish chronological indications for the birth and life of Jesus, do so by reference to the years of the Roman emperors and other such data.⁹⁶

Second, while they did believe these figures should be taken literally, whether they thought they were actual human lifespans is not quite so clear. Several seemed to accept the likelihood that some numbers covered gaps in the genealogies, or that some had a symbolic or schematic aspect to them. We can say that these scholars did not question the idea of unusually long lifespans among ancient ancestors, so they had no resistance to accepting the extraordinary lifespans as factual. Yet, they all believed there was an overall scheme to demonstrate the superiority of their culture, or the glory of God. And the overall scheme took precedence over the age or lifespan numbers.

Third, they all felt the freedom to modify some of the lifespan numbers to fit their overall scheme—after all the numbers in Scripture are not always completely

⁹⁶ James Barr, "Biblical Chronology: Legend or Science?" in *Bible and Interpretation: The Collected Essays of James Barr*, vol. II: Biblical Studies, ed. John Barton (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 26

transparent. Some of them seem to contradict each other within the Bible (e.g., was Shem 100 years old at the time of the flood [Gen 5:32 and 7:11], or only ninety-eight years old [Gen 11:10]?). There were the different lists of figures in the MT, LXX, and the SP versions. And some numbers could be computed in different ways, so that the writers quoted above—and others not mentioned—all came up with differences in their chronologies. Thus, there has never been one “standard” chronology. Eusebius’s chronology was considered authoritative up until the Reformation,⁹⁷ and Ussher’s from the seventeenth to the nineteenth centuries. But it remains true that later commentators always thought they could improve on earlier chronologies.

The major finding of this survey, however, is that the emergence of chronological speculations only occurred ca. 300 BC. Finegan says, “Beginning in the late third, second and first centuries BC, Jewish (and Samaritan) scholars, living in the Hellenistic and Roman world (and in Palestine) undertook chronographical and chronical studies.”⁹⁸ Prior to that, there simply is no evidence of any ancient writings—including the Bible—calculating a chronology of the world. The biblical text records the reigns of the kings of Israel and Judah as face-value numbers,⁹⁹ as does the Assyrian Eponym

⁹⁷ Mosshammer, *Chronicle of Eusebius*, 15.

⁹⁸ Finegan, *Handbook of Biblical Chronology*, 140. See also Wacholder, “Biblical Chronology,” 251. Emanuel Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible, Qumran, Septuagint: Collected Essays*, vol. 3, Supplements to Vetus Testamentum, ed. Christl M. Maier, vol. 167 (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 238.

⁹⁹ Edwin R. Thiele, *The Mysterious Numbers of the Hebrew Kings*, new rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983).

Canon,¹⁰⁰ but symbolic numbers dominate Israel’s historical records prior to that, as they do with other ancient writings. We will examine the biblical evidence and other ancient king lists in chapter three.

Modern Critical Interpretation

The preceding summary of interpretations serves to highlight the dramatic shift that occurred in the nineteenth century. When the Documentary Hypothesis, popularized by Julius Wellhausen, became near consensus, it encouraged willingness and even obligation to reject face-value interpretations and critically to examine elements of the Genesis narratives. With the rise of critical scholarship, the Genesis lifespans were dismissed as mythical and lacking historical validity. The almost universal acceptance of the Documentary Hypothesis gave scholars the permission and the tools to compare a face-value reading of the ages in Genesis alongside what was known about human lifespans. The lack of any evidence of human lifespans ever reaching 175, never mind 969, along with other perceived anachronisms in the Pentateuch, seemed to undermine any historical value in these narratives. Alongside this influence was, of course, the influence of Darwinian evolution requiring an old earth and millions of years of evolution. But even among scholars who do not accept an old earth, few disagree with anthropological discoveries that showed human civilization began around 7000 BC, much earlier than the 4004 BC date of creation according to Archbishop Ussher.¹⁰¹

¹⁰⁰ Alan Millard, *The Eponyms of the Assyrian Empire 910–612 BC*, State Archives of Assyria Studies, ed. Robert M. Whiting, vol. 2 (Helsinki, Finland: Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 1994), 4-5.

¹⁰¹ Merrill, “Chronology,” 119. Amélie Kuhrt, *The Ancient Near East c. 3000–330 B.C.*, Routledge History of the Ancient World, ed. Fergus Millar, vol. 1 (London: Routledge, 1995), 21-22.

Illustrations of the critical view could be multiplied ad infinitum here, but one of the clearest comes from S. R. Driver writing in the early twentieth century. After explaining that only the P source provides a systematic chronology, Driver notes:

It is impossible now that these figures—or at least, the majority of them—can be historical. (1) As will be shewn [shown] in the following section, it is certain that man existed upon the earth long before either BC 4157 or [LXX] 5328. (2) The ages to which the several patriarchs, in the two lists of Gen 5 and Gen 11:10-26, lived, and at which, at least in the majority of cases in Gen 5, their eldest sons are stated to have been born, are incompatible with the constitution of the human body; and could only have been attained if that constitution had differed from what it now is, to an extent which we are entirely unwarranted in assuming to have been the case.¹⁰²

Driver does not address the ages of the patriarchs per se, but he does make it clear that the lifespans given in Genesis are P's reconstruction of the past for theological not historical purposes. In this vein Gerhard von Rad stated, "the old, naïve idea of the historicity of these narratives as being biologically reliable stories from the life of the patriarchs must be abandoned."¹⁰³ Thomas Thompson, writing in the latter half of the twentieth century also concludes that the patriarchal stories should be divorced from any relation to historical reality. He says, "It does not appear that we can use any of the extant chronological systems to arrive at an absolute date for the patriarchal period. They were

¹⁰² S. R. Driver, *The Book of Genesis: With Introduction and Notes*, Westminster Commentaries, 15th ed. (London: Methuen & Co., 1948), xxviii, 75.

¹⁰³ Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary*, trans. John H. Marks, Old Testament Library, ed. Peter Ackroyd et al., rev. ed. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1973. Orig. *Das erste Buch Mose, Genesis*, Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1972), 40.

not constructed from the point of view of the historical critical method, and it is methodologically unsound to treat them as if they were.”¹⁰⁴

This is the stance of many—perhaps most—biblical scholars today. They believe the Pentateuch is the product of multiple sources, edited together and supplemented after the Babylonian exile, some say even as late as the second or third centuries BC.¹⁰⁵ They believe the lifespans in Genesis reveal more about the era when the genealogies were constructed (post-exilic Judaism) than they do about any supposed patriarchal age. They see the unrealistic and unhistorical lifespans of the patriarchs, along with those in Genesis 5 and 11 are simply more anachronisms that demonstrate the late historical milieu of the final redaction of the Pentateuch.

Evangelical Response and Interpretation

In the twentieth century, evangelicals reacted against the critical scholars of the nineteenth century and defended the literal understanding of the biblical lifespans. This was tied to the push for adherence to the inerrancy and infallibility of the biblical text. As quoted earlier, inerrancy extends to biblical statements about creation, and historical events and people. One of the strongest voices among evangelical scholars

¹⁰⁴ Thomas L. Thompson, *The Historicity of the Patriarchal Narratives: The Quest for the Historical Abraham*, Beiheft zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft, vol. 133 (Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 1974), 15-16.

¹⁰⁵ Larsson, “Chronology of the Pentateuch,” 407-08. For the opposing view see Ronald S. Hendel, “A Hasmonean Edition of MT Genesis?: The Implications of the Editions of the Chronology in Genesis 5,” *Hebrew Bible and Ancient Israel* 1, no. 1 (2012): 448-64.

arguing for the literalness of these ages has been Eugene Merrill.¹⁰⁶ He has demonstrated that the patriarchal lifespans can be harmonized to provide an internally consistent chronology.¹⁰⁷ This, of course, does not constitute proof that this was the conception or intention of the original author(s). It is merely one possible reconstruction of what might have happened. Plus, as we will discover in chapter two, a closer look at Merrill's chronology reveals it is not completely consistent even within the Bible.

Other evangelical scholars have supported a concordist interpretation by offering what they consider to be reasonable explanations for the long lifespans of the patriarchs. One influential voice was that of William Henry Green, professor of Biblical and Oriental Literature at Princeton Theological Seminary, who published an article entitled "Primeval Chronology" in *Bibliotheca Sacra* in 1890. In this article Green responded to the scientific challenges to Ussher's chronology, by positing the eminently defensible notion that the genealogies in Genesis likely contain gaps. He said,

But if these recently discovered indications of the antiquity of man, over which scientific circles are now so excited, shall, when carefully inspected and thoroughly weighed, demonstrate all that any have imagined they might demonstrate, what then? They will simply show that a select and partial register of ante-Abrahamic names has been mistaken for a complete one.¹⁰⁸

Green gave several examples of what is now termed 'telescoping' in biblical genealogies from Exodus, Numbers, 1 Chronicles, Ezra, and of course, Matthew to show

¹⁰⁶ Eugene H. Merrill, *An Historical Survey of the Old Testament*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1991), 59-60.

¹⁰⁷ Merrill, "Fixed Dates," 241-51.

¹⁰⁸ William Henry Green, "Primeval Chronology," in *Classical Evangelical Essays in Old Testament Interpretation*, ed. Walter C. Kaiser Jr. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1972), 13.

that this was a typical literary device of the biblical writers from all time periods. He concludes by saying, “the Scriptures furnish no data for a chronological computation prior to the life of Abraham; and that the Mosaic records do not fix and were not intended to fix the precise date either of the flood or of the creation of the world.”¹⁰⁹

Although praised at the time by Charles Hodge, Green’s article languished in obscurity for many years, until it was rediscovered in the latter half of the twentieth century and used extensively to support an evangelical response to the question of evolution.¹¹⁰ Several other prominent evangelicals followed Green’s lead in holding to open rather than closed genealogies,¹¹¹ while others still hold to the view that the genealogies contain face-value numbers without any gaps.¹¹²

In the first half of the twentieth century, some findings by biblical archaeologists like W. F. Albright and Nelson Glueck seemed to counter the earlier critical view and renew confidence in a historical “patriarchal age.”¹¹³ However, other scholars soon pointed out flaws in some of the supposed connections between the Bible and the Nuzi or Mari documents, and argued strongly for a return to the legendary view

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 27.

¹¹⁰ Ronald L. Numbers, “‘The Most Important Biblical Discovery of Our Time’: William Henry Green and the Demise of Ussher’s Chronology,” *Church History* 69, no. 2 (2000), 266, 273-.

¹¹¹ Henry M. Morris and John C. Whitcomb, *The Genesis Flood: The Biblical Record and Its Scientific Implications* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1961), 474-89. Fred Kramer, “A Critical Evaluation of the Chronology of Ussher,” in *Rock Strata and the Bible Record*, ed. Paul A. Zimmerman (St. Louis: Concordia, 1970), 57-67. Davis A. Young, *Christianity and the Age of the Earth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 59. Ronald F. Youngblood, *How It All Began: Genesis 1–11*, Bible Commentary for Laymen (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1980), 89-91.

¹¹² Snelling, *Earth’s Catastrophic Past*, vol. I, 64. Sexton, “Who Was Born”.

¹¹³ W. F. Albright, “Abram the Hebrew: A New Archaeological Interpretation,” *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*, 163 (1961): 36-54; Nelson Glueck, *Rivers in the Desert: A History of the Negev* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1959).

of the patriarchs. Thomas Thompson objected to biblical scholars formulating a patriarchal chronology based on historical synchronisms from the late second millennium BC. He writes,

The major objection to all of these reconstructions is that they make no attempt to understand the biblical chronologies and genealogies. What they offer, rather, are alternatives to the biblical schemes, and their attempts to establish the ‘correct’ biblical chronology destroy the biblical perspective and worldview which gives their data meaning. That Abraham lived 175 years has to be taken seriously, but it is nonsense from a historical critical perspective.¹¹⁴

His point is well taken. Those who hold to the concordist view of Genesis attempt to find archaeological parallels that are, if not direct confirmation, at least compatible with the patriarchal narratives. But this dissertation will argue that evidence both internal and external to the Bible does not support the extended lifespans of the patriarchs nor does it validate a chronology based on those lifespans. Thus to believe in the literal historical validity of the Genesis narratives, one must take the patriarchal lifespans in a non-literal manner. And the vice versa is true also: to hold to a literal face-value view of the patriarchal lifespans creates a fictional Patriarchal Age that is not in concord with either history or with the biblical text.

It is worth noting that twentieth century concordist proposals are a continuation of the assumptions behind the chronological calculations from the third century BC to the nineteenth century AD. Scholars still attempt to reconcile biblical history with secular history because they believe this to be a worthwhile endeavor that will demonstrate the truthfulness of the Scriptural record. Merrill says, “The order of

¹¹⁴ Thompson, *Historicity of the Patriarchal Narratives*, 13.

events (internal context) and their relationship to their times (external context) have much to contribute to both a historical and a theological understanding of Scripture.”¹¹⁵

Second, they also accept the possibility of extraordinary lifespans and attempt to take the Genesis lifespans literally as much as possible. Another quote from Eugene Merrill illustrates this principle.

Does one not violate the standards of even-handedness and acceptable norms of historiography to believe that what these ancient texts have to say about the reality of the times they purport to describe ought not *prima facie* be given the benefit of the doubt as to their credibility? The fact that they are religious or theological in nature has nothing to do with the fundamental issue of their believability, or certainly should not. They should, of course, be subject to rigorous literary and cultural/historical scrutiny in terms of their intent, motivation, and use of literary and genre forms in an attempt to discover in them any oddities, inconcinnities, or other departures from what one would ordinarily expect. This is clearly true in the case of the great ages of the patriarchs.¹¹⁶

But third, evangelical scholars also feel the freedom to modify some numbers to deal with internal inconsistencies, to match external history, or to present a logical scheme that demonstrates the wisdom and glory of God. Merrill gives an example of this tendency in his article on the patriarchs.

Abram is mentioned first in the lists not because he was the eldest, but because he has historical and theological importance. The same might be (and likely is) true of Shem, Ham, and Japheth, for in this case Ham was actually the youngest. One must guard against assuming a chronologically sequential order in such instances for the controlling principle might be theological, climactic, or something else.¹¹⁷

These all illustrate the concordist position within evangelical scholarship on these issues. The problem arises, as we shall discover in chapter two, when this

¹¹⁵ Merrill, “Fixed Dates,” 241.

¹¹⁶ Merrill, “Lifespans of the EB–MB Patriarchs,” 275.

¹¹⁷ Merrill, “Fixed Dates,” 242-43.

concordist interpretation is irreconcilable with biblical, historical, anthropological and archaeological data.

However, despite its detractors, it is safe to say that the face-value interpretation is the simplest, most common, and most enduring view. For many evangelicals, that settles the issue. If one accepts the infallibility and inerrancy of Scripture—including the miracles that are clearly an integral part of the patriarchal narrative—then these ages should be taken literally even if they appear unusual or troubling. After all, the text of these verses is unambiguous, there are few text critical issues, and no scholar seriously disputes the translation of these numbers.

But as we will discover, the face-value interpretation contains several serious problems both internal and external to the Bible. Plus this view is based on assumptions that arose hundreds of years after the composition of Genesis. Surely it makes more sense to examine the worldviews and literary parallels from the period prior to the third century BC rather than those from later cultures, and different languages and locations.

Need for the Study

Clearly the problem is that the lifespans as recorded and preserved in the text are incompatible with the evidence of human lifespans in antiquity. Anthropological data from the analysis of skeletons and tooth wear corroborate with archaeological document evidence to reveal that the average lifespan in ancient times was around forty years.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁸ Jesper L. Boldsen and Richard R. Paine, “The Evolution of Human Longevity from the Mesolithic to the Middle Ages: An Analysis Based on Skeletal Data,” in *Exceptional Longevity: From Prehistory to the Present*, Odense Monographs on Population Aging, ed. James W. Vaupel and Bernard

Egyptian records reveal that the ages of the Pharaohs at this time ruled for a few months or several years, a few ruled for up to fifty years and very rarely even longer (Pepi II: ~ninety years, Rameses II: sixty-seven years). But these indicate the Pharaohs lived normal human lifespans, not hundreds of years.¹¹⁹ The data are identical for the Mesopotamian and Babylonian kings.¹²⁰ All of the archaeological evidence from the Bronze Age confirms that people in ancient cultures generally lived the same or shorter lifespans than we do today, not longer.

Second, anthropological evidence indicates that ancient peoples married and began procreation younger than we do today.¹²¹ Michael Rosenzweig notes that the only examples of delaying procreation that he has found are in cases of extreme poverty. He contrasts this with the wealth of the patriarchs and notes, “Surely they did not *need* to delay marriage and children. Moreover I know of no custom or tradition uncovered by archaeologists which would explain why they would have *elected* to delay.”¹²² We will discuss this issue, and the inconsistencies in the lifespan of Jacob, in chapter two.

Jeune (Odense: University Press of Southern Denmark, 1995), 25-36. Edwin M. Yamauchi, “Attitudes Toward the Aged in Antiquity,” *Near East Archaeological Society Bulletin* 45 (2000), 2.

¹¹⁹ Bimson and Merrill argue unsuccessfully that the reigns of the Egyptian Pharaohs prove that unusually long ages were possible during this era. Actually the data reveal the opposite. The longest ruling Pharaoh, Pepi II, began his rule when he was six years old, so even his age is not outside the maximum human lifespan. The other evidence Bimson cites is either speculation or undocumented. J. J. Bimson, “Archaeological Data and the Dating of the Patriarchs,” in *Essays on the Patriarchal Narratives*, ed. A. R. Millard and D. J. Wiseman (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 1980), 91-92, n. 143. Eugene H. Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests: A History of Old Testament Israel*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 45, n. 19.

¹²⁰ John H. Walton, *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary*, ed. John H. Walton, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 58.

¹²¹ Michael L. Rosenzweig, “Life History Data in the Bible, from Abraham to Joshua,” *Judaism* 29, no. 3 (1980), 354.

¹²² *Ibid.*, 355. Italics in the original.

However, the face-value interpretation of the patriarchal lifespans rests on certain presuppositions. A reader in the twentieth or twenty-first century is attuned to recognize the difference between fact and fiction. Historical information is expected to be factually accurate and verifiable. Fiction, even historical fiction, is a different category. The distinction between these two categories is rigid and unalterable. Thus when a reader is faced with elements in the text that appear fictional, there are only two options for interpretation. For critical scholars if the lifespans appear fictional, the whole account must be fictional. But conservative scholars have a commitment to Genesis as a factual account of history, so they will seek an interpretation that supports that commitment. However, the problem may not lie with the text or the anthropological evidence of human lifespans. The problem may be in the concordist presuppositions that the lifespans of the patriarchs must be read as accurate face value numerals and that they were intended to be used to create a chronology that will mesh with secular history.

Thesis of the Study

Several scholars have attempted to provide either concordist or accommodationist solutions to this dilemma, as will be outlined in chapter four. But without historical parallels these schemes seem to rest on unverifiable speculation. The discoveries of ancient lists of ages and reigns for kings and significant people from the ancient world seem to provide valuable insight into solving this problem. It is the thesis of this dissertation that understanding the lifespans of the patriarchs within the worldview, assumptions and cultures of the ancient audience, or audiences, will shed

light on the patriarchal lifespans, the era in which the patriarchs lived, and will convey with fidelity the truth the text is intended to express.

The Sumerian King List (SKL, ca. 2000 BC) provides valuable insight. It appears that the author or editor started with a list of kings either with normal reigns, or without the length of reigns given. But for the earliest kings, he vastly exaggerated their reigns to be tens of thousands of years, and then reduced the reigns of later kings to be in line with normal human possibility. Thorkild Jacobsen, the editor of the Sumerian King List says, “That the immense reigns are unhistorical is obvious. Their occurrence in our material must be ascribed to a tendency known also among other peoples of antiquity to form very exaggerated ideas of the length of human life in the earliest of times of which they were conscious.”¹²³ His conclusion is that there is no reason to doubt the historicity of the list of kings, but that the ‘legendary’ reigns should be replaced with a normal length for the reign of a king.¹²⁴

So, the SKL contained a historical record for a later generation, but it included information that was clearly fictitious. No one has suggested that an ancient—sometimes labeled “primitive”—culture ever believed people could live for tens of thousands of years. This is a category of literature that is unknown to the modern reader, but it seems to have been common in antiquity. The original readers were expected to recognize the length of the king’s reign as symbolic, hyperbolic, or schematic, yet they were also expected to accept the king as a real historical person who was especially significant to

¹²³ Thorkild Jacobsen, *The Sumerian King List*, Assyriological Studies, ed. John Albert Wilson and Thomas George Allen, vol. 11 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1939), 166.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 167-68.

their cultural history. Were there rules for interpreting such literature, and could they provide insight into the lifespans of the patriarchs in Genesis?

This dissertation will examine the SKL and other ancient documents recording ages or reigns of significant people in order to answer this question. It is hoped that insights from these documents will reveal that the conservative face-value interpretation is inconsistent and incorrect. The patriarchal narratives were not written as myths or legends; they do record real events involving real historical people. But reading the extraordinary length of the patriarch's lifespans as accurate numerical values is also not the intended meaning of the text. Interpreting the text as intended by the original author, and understood by the original audience, is the correct "literal" interpretation.

Overview of the Dissertation

After this introduction, chapter two details the problems inherent in a face-value interpretation. The incompatibility of the patriarchal lifespans with known archaeological and anthropological data has been surfaced. But there are two other issues with these long lifespans. First, taking the lifespans as numerical ages and using them to construct a chronology of the patriarchal age places the patriarchs in an era when they could not have lived. This can further undermine the historicity of the patriarchs—not only does this reading assign them implausibly long lives, it also mistakenly assigns Abraham and his descendants to a period in which none of the elements of the narrative could have taken place. Second, there are several inconsistencies within the text of Genesis itself if the lifespans are taken as numerical values. Rather than requiring

torturous explanations, it seems that these inconsistencies simply reveal that the patriarchal lifespans were never intended to be taken as actual numerical values.

Chapter three seeks to catalog some of the purposes and techniques used to record ages and reigns in antiquity. The SKL and other ancient documents will be examined to reveal clues for interpreting this formerly unrecognized form of literature. Were there indications to help the original readers identify clearly symbolic or figurative numbers in the reigns of kings or ages of ancestors yet still accept the account as historically accurate? If so, are these indications present in the text of Genesis also, and could they help us interpret the patriarchal lifespans as originally intended?

Following that analysis, chapter four reviews the previous interpretations of the patriarchal lifespans. Given the data preserved in the text, what interpretations are possible and which interpretations can be ruled out? What is the difference between the critical view of symbolic numbers in Genesis and that espoused in this dissertation? What about the much-vaunted parallels between oral tribal genealogies and the genealogies in Genesis? The chapter will then investigate the possible interpretations to discover which ones are more likely and which ones are less likely to be accurate.

Chapter five will present and defend the interpretation proposed in this dissertation as being most likely, and will investigate the ramifications. It will be examined whether these principles of interpretation can yield any insight to other extended lifespans in Scripture. The genealogical lists in Genesis 5 and 11 seem to be the result of different interpretational rules, but the principles of interpretation seem to be related. Perhaps more significantly the extended lifespans of other individuals in later Scriptures (Amram, Moses, Joshua et al.) may be understood in a clearer manner with

application of these principles of interpretation. Lastly, implications for the chronology of the patriarchs will be examined. It is hoped that the proposed interpretation will support the historical reliability of the patriarchal narratives by showing they live normal—non-miraculous—lifespans and by placing the patriarchs in an era compatible with the elements of the stories. Chapter six is a summary and conclusion to the dissertation.

Perhaps the most difficult barrier to interpretation of an ancient text is one's own presuppositions. All readers are captive to the cultural, religious, and personal prejudices that they bring to the task of interpretation. The conservative interpretation of the patriarchal ages is not immune to this influence. In fact, it is the argument of this dissertation that the face-value reading of patriarchal lifespans is not faithful to its own presuppositions. It may be impossible completely to remove one's modern worldview from the interpretational task. But it may be possible to identify and isolate the effects of one's worldview, and to recognize the worldview of the original readers. It makes more sense to let the text speak in the language and culture of its day rather than of our day. This would not only reveal the intended meaning of the original author, it would also support the historical reliability of Genesis.

CHAPTER 2

PROBLEMS WITH THE FACE-VALUE INTERPRETATION

While some evangelical scholars find no problems with a face-value understanding of the patriarchal lifespans, a closer examination reveals several problems and inconsistencies. Eugene Merrill says, “A basic rule of interpretation is to understand a text literally unless and until there are compelling reasons to do otherwise. Such a compulsion is demonstrably not the case with the Genesis narratives.”¹ But actually, there are many “compelling reasons” to question a face-value interpretation of the patriarchal lifespans. This chapter will itemize these reasons under four headings by examining two issues from two perspectives.

The first issue is the lifespans themselves, and the second is a chronology constructed using those lifespans. We will examine each issue first by using data from inside the Bible, and then, second, by using data from outside the Bible. For those who believe the patriarchal narratives are literally true—that they describe historical people and events accurately—one must wrestle with these issues.² Critical scholars are content to dismiss any historical reliability to the patriarchal stories. For them, internal and external inconsistencies with the patriarchal narratives support the case for different sources for Genesis (the J and E sources using a chronology different from that of the P

¹ Eugene H. Merrill, “The Lifespans of the EB–MB Patriarchs: A Hermeneutical and Historical Conundrum,” *Southwestern Journal of Theology* 57, no. 2 (Spring 2015): 278.

² As Merrill himself admits. *Ibid.*, 268.

source).³ But conservative scholars have no such option. If the patriarchs did live for almost 200 years, then those lifespans must be internally consistent within the Bible, and they should correspond with such external evidence as we have from that era.

Problems with Extended Lifespans and Chronology within the Bible

Within Genesis the patriarchal ages of between 100 and 200 years old seem to fit within the flow of the narrative, with much older people prior to this time and ages tapering down to “normal” after the death of Joseph. And, on the surface, a face-value reading of the patriarchal ages seems to be able to be harmonized into a consistent chronology.⁴ However, a closer reading of all the references in Genesis raises some troubling questions. A face-value reading for both the lifespans and the chronology produces inconsistencies and even contradictions within the biblical text.

Internal Problems with Extended Lifespans

The “Conservative Patriarchal Ages” chart in Appendix B contains a harmonization of the patriarchal ages taking the numbers at face value.⁵ Relatively few ages are given in Genesis (highlighted in gray); the other ages are obtained by interpolation using the information in the text. In some cases—such as the Keturah episode—it seems that a pericope is recorded out of chronological sequence and a

³ S. R. Driver, *The Book of Genesis: With Introduction and Notes*, Westminster Commentaries, 15th ed. (London: Methuen, 1948), xxv-xxvi.

⁴ Eugene H. Merrill, “Fixed Dates in Patriarchal Chronology,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 137, no. 547 (1980): 241-51.

⁵ This chart is based on Merrill, “Fixed Dates,” and John H. Walton, *Chronological and Background Charts of the Old Testament*, rev. and exp. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 15. A similar chart with the same ages is found in Richard Johnson and Tricia Johnson, *Discovering Genesis*, Crossway Bible Guide, ed. Ian Coffey, Stephen Gaukroger and Stephen Dray (Leicester: Crossway Books, 2001), 63.

reasonable reordering is needed. However, even taking this into account, a careful analysis of these ages reveals questions and inconsistencies with almost every age given.

First, these extended lifespans do contradict other Scripture. Moses himself tells us that these unusually high ages do not fit typical lifespans for people in that era (Psalm 90:10—a Mosaic psalm).⁶ Many scholars would dispute that Psalm 90 is a Mosaic psalm and would place its composition in a later time period. But the fact still remains that the authors, editors, and readers of Scripture were comfortable accepting the premise that a normal human lifespan was eighty to ninety years. Moses also seemed to limit the maximum human lifespan to one hundred and twenty years (Gen 6:3). Some have suggested that the one hundred twenty years in this verse refers to the time Noah took to build the ark (cf. 1 Pet 3:20).⁷ But this does not seem to be the most natural reading of this verse, and if the patriarchal ages are symbolic such an interpretation is unnecessary.

Second, the statement that “Abraham breathed his last and died at a good old age, an old man and full of years” (וַיָּגֹוַע וַיָּמָת אַבְרָהָם בְּשֵׂיבָה טוֹבָה זָקֵן וְשָׂבֵעַ), Gen 25:8) is clearly false if the ages of his ancestors are literal numerical values. This statement is presented as a direct fulfillment of an earlier prophecy (Gen 15:15). But it would be nonsense if Eber and Shem (Abraham’s great x4, and his great x7 grandfathers) were still alive.⁸ In fact, if the pre-Abrahamic ages are assumed to be a gapless chronology, then all of Abraham’s post-flood ancestors were his contemporaries and four

⁶ This assertion is based on taking the superscription seriously. See Gleason L. Archer, *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction*, rev. and exp. ed. (Chicago: Moody, 2007), 488-93.

⁷ John H. Walton, *Genesis*, NIV Application Commentary, ed. Terry Muck (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 296.

⁸ Eugene H. Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests: A History of Old Testament Israel*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 43.

of them—Shem, Arphaxad, Shelah, and Eber—were still alive when Abraham entered Canaan, with Eber and Shem outliving him (Gen 11:10-32). In fact, in this scheme, Noah himself lived right up until the birth of Abraham, if Terah is 130 at Abraham’s birth, or well into Abraham’s lifetime if he is born when Terah is seventy (Gen 5:32, 9:28-29). Yet the text treats these men as respected ancestors, not contemporaries. There is no hint that these men were living at the same time as Abraham, and the narrative would not make sense if they were. Why would God choose Abraham to be the father of the Hebrews if their namesake—Eber—were still alive? The tenor of Genesis 11 only seems consistent with the belief that the genealogy is honoring ancient ancestors.⁹

Similarly, Joshua 24:2, 14-15 speaks of Terah and his immediate ancestors as idol worshipers (וַיַּעֲבֹדוּ אֱלֹהִים אֲחֵרִים), who lived “in the distant past” (בְּיָמֵינוּ), which is also incompatible with Abraham being their contemporary. Morris and Whitcomb are certainly correct when they say

If all the postdiluvian patriarchs, including Noah and Shem, were still living in Abram’s day, this statement [that they were idol worshipers; Josh 24:2] implies that they had all fallen into idolatry by then. This conclusion is surely wrong, and therefore the premise on which it is based must be wrong. Consequently, it seems that the strict-chronology view must be set aside in order to allow for the death of these patriarchs long before the time of Abram.¹⁰

Long ago, Jerome noticed that Abraham is the only man who is called an old man and is said to live a full life. He said,

⁹ Carol A. Hill, “Making Sense of the Numbers in Genesis,” *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* 55, no. 4 (2003): 244.

¹⁰ Henry M. Morris and John C. Whitcomb, *The Genesis Flood: The Biblical Record and Its Scientific Implications* (Philadelphia: Presbyterian and Reformed, 1961), 477-78.

I am reviewing carefully the places in Scripture where I might find old age mentioned for the first time. Adam lived for 930 years, yet he is not called an old man. Mathusala's [sic] life was 969 years, and he is not called an old man. I am coming down all the way to the Flood, and after the Flood for almost three thousand years, and I find no one who has been called old. Abraham was the first one, and certainly he was much younger than Mathusala, but he is called an old man because his old age had been anointed with rich oil.¹¹

The concordist solution for this dilemma is to posit that the genealogies are “open” rather than “closed.”¹² In other words, there are gaps in the genealogies of both Genesis 5 and 11, thus Shem, Arphaxad, Shelah, Eber, and Noah were not coeval with Abraham. As discussed in the Introduction, the first evangelical scholar to propose this was William Henry Green in 1890,¹³ and his reasonable solution is still held by many evangelical scholars today.¹⁴ But this does not solve the problem. Abraham's paltry lifespan of 175 cannot be described as “a good old age ... an old man full of years.” It pales in comparison with Shem's 600 years, Eber's 464 years or the longer lifespans of Methuselah (969), Noah (950), and even the relative youngsters Enoch (365), or Terah (205). If those ages were intended as numerical values, whether there are gaps in the genealogies or not, Abraham did not die an old man, he was a mere youth.

¹¹ Jerome, *Homily 21 on Psalm 91 (92)*. Saint Jerome, *The Homilies of Saint Jerome*, vol. 1, The Fathers of the Church: A New Translation, ed. Roy Joseph Deferrari, trans. Marie Liguori Ewald, vol. 48 (Washington, DC: Catholic University of America, 1964), 172.

¹² Norman L. Geisler, *Baker Encyclopedia of Christian Apologetics*, Baker Reference Library (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 269-70. Morris and Whitcomb, *The Genesis Flood*, 474-89. Eugene H. Merrill, “Chronology,” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 118-20.

¹³ William Henry Green, “Primeval Chronology,” in *Classical Evangelical Essays in Old Testament Interpretation*, ed. Walter C. Kaiser Jr. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1972).

¹⁴ Merrill, “Chronology,” 119-20.

Third, Abraham's disbelieving laughter at the possibility of fathering a child at 100 years old (Gen 17:15-19) clearly indicates that he did not believe his ancestors fathered children at 130 (Adam and Terah), 187 (Methuselah), or in the most extreme case 500 years old (Noah).¹⁵ Similarly, Sarah laughed at the prospect of bearing a child when she was ninety (Gen 18:9-15). Jeremy Sexton claims, unconvincingly, that Abraham and Sarah's laughter was for reasons other than the fact that they were too old to bear children. He says, "Abraham's laughter, whatever it means, does not imply that 100 years old was an unusual age for a man to have children."¹⁶ However, that is exactly what the text not only implies but explicitly states. Abraham's incredulous questions are, "Can a son be born to a man who is a hundred years old? Can Sarah bear a child at the age of ninety?" (Gen 17:17). Similarly, the narrator spells it out by saying, "Now Abraham and Sarah were old, well advanced in years; (וְזָקְנִים בְּאַיִם בְּיָמֵם הָרַל) and Sarah had passed the age of childbearing" (Gen 18:11). Sarah's disbelief is reflected in her reference to herself as "worn out" (בְּלֹהִי) and to her husband old (זָקֵן Gen 18:12). Even Yahweh's response assuring Abraham of Isaac's birth assumes that it is impossible for someone so old to bear a child (Gen 18:13-14).

The major point in the passage is that Isaac's conception and birth was a miracle, not a normal occurrence. Yet the face-value reading of the patriarchal ages seems to remove the miraculous element from Isaac's birth. There are only three alternatives to understanding this dilemma. First, Abraham may have been unaware of his

¹⁵ Jeremy Hughes, *Secrets of the Times: Myth and History in Biblical Chronology*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series, ed. David J. A. Clines and Philip R. Davies, vol. 66 (Sheffield: JST Press, 1990), 11.

¹⁶ Jeremy Sexton, "Who Was Born when Enoch Was 90? A Semantic Reevaluation of William Henry Green's Chronological Gaps," *Westminster Theological Journal* 77 (2015): 217.

ancestors' extraordinary lifespans, which seems unlikely. Second, he understood lifespans in his day to be markedly different from those in the antediluvian past. However, this does not solve the problem for the face-value reading because the text states that Abraham's father bore him at age 130 (Gen 11:26, Acts 7:4), and his grandson, Jacob, fathered Benjamin at around 105 years old.¹⁷ The best alternative seems to be that Abraham understood that the lifespans listed before and just after the flood were symbolic or schematic numbers.

Internal Problems with Chronology

We have covered three problems with the extended lifespans themselves when compared with other biblical passages. But, a chronology based on those lifespans creates many more problems and inconsistencies—even when we limit our study to other passages within the Bible.

The first problem is a seeming contradiction for when Abraham was born—was it when Terah was seventy (Gen 11:26), or 130 (Gen 11:32, 12:4, Acts 7:4)? Conservatives usually take Terah's age at Abraham's birth as 130,¹⁸ but that would mean he was born fifty years after his oldest sibling. Although this may seem to be internally consistent with the long lifespans, multiple wives, and late procreation in these narratives, the question remains whether these numbers were ever meant to be taken as literal ages.

The questions continue when we look at the life of Sarah. Granting that Sarah was barren, why did she wait until she was seventy-five to give up hope of bearing a

¹⁷ Andrew Steinmann, *From Abraham to Paul: A Biblical Chronology* (St. Louis: Concordia, 2011), 75-78.

¹⁸ Merrill, "Fixed Dates," 242.

child (Gen 16:3, 17:17)? She was not counting on a miracle—in fact, she laughed when the miraculous birth of Isaac was promised—it seems she was still holding out hope of having her own child up to the age of seventy-four. It was only when she was seventy-five years old that Sarah proposed Hagar as a surrogate mother. Also, why does the text note that Sarah had ceased menstruating if she had reached the age of eighty-nine (Gen 17:24, 18:11)? Surely that fact had been established beyond doubt by that age and did not need to be restated. These two observations also lead us to question the face-value interpretation of these ages.

Third, why would Sarah be attractive as a wife to Abimelech at the age of eighty-nine or ninety (Gen 20:1-2)?¹⁹ To a lesser extent, why would Pharaoh have added Sarah to his harem when she was at least sixty-five years old (Gen 12:10-20)? The Rabbis believed that Sarah’s “flesh was rejuvenated, the wrinkles were smoothed out, and beauty returned to its place” in preparation for the childbirth of Isaac.²⁰ Or, perhaps the text is not in chronological order, as is claimed by those who hold Genesis is the work of a later redactor. The story of Keturah does not seem fit chronologically where it is placed in the text (Gen 25:1-6).²¹ However, the geographical note in Genesis 20:1, and the

¹⁹ Nahum M. Sarna, *Genesis: The Traditional Hebrew Text with New JPS Translation*, JPS Torah Commentary, ed. Nahum M. Sarna and Chaim Potok (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 141.

²⁰ Ibid. I. Epstein, ed., *The Babylonian Talmud: Baba Mezi'a*, Hebrew-English ed. (London: Socino, 1971), 87a.

²¹ There is nothing in Genesis 25:1-6 demanding a strict chronological reading. The phrase “Abraham again took a wife” (אֲבְרָהָם יָרָד וַיִּשְׂאֵת אִשָּׁה אַחֵרָה) can be translated “Abraham had taken another woman.” Keturah was a concubine, not an official wife (Gen 25:6, 1 Chr 1:32-33), so her sons did not have the same status as Isaac. Abraham could not have fathered six more sons after Isaac when he laughed at the thought of having a son at 100 years old. Plus, if Keturah’s son Midian was the father of the Midianites who kidnapped Joseph (Abraham’s great-grandson), it makes sense that Midian was born a long time before Isaac was. It is entirely plausible that Keturah had been with Abraham since his idolatrous days in

reoccurring themes with the chapters before and after, seem to indicate that Sarah was taken into Abimelech's harem between the destruction of Sodom and the birth of Isaac.²²

So Sarah really was eighty-nine or ninety years old in a face-value reading of the text.

Hardly a worthy contestant for the "Miss Abimelech" pageant!

Fourth, in a patriarchal society, the oldest male would be considered the patriarch of the family as long as he was alive. A perfect example is how Jacob was treated as the respected patriarch of the family by both Joseph and Pharaoh when the family moved to Egypt, even though Joseph actually held more power and authority at that time (Gen 45:18-19, 23, 46:1-47:12). Yet the text does not mention Abraham having any contact or influence in his family after Isaac's marriage (Gen 25:20).²³ If the ages were literal, then Abraham lived on for another thirty-five years. It seems unthinkable for the text to be silent about this if Abraham lived that long.

Similarly, Isaac seems to have no influence in the family after Jacob fled to Haran (Gen 28:1-5). The text presents Isaac as a blind, old man—almost on death's door—when he mistakenly blessed Jacob instead of Esau (Gen 27:1-2). In fact, Esau expected his father to die any day (Gen 27:41). If Isaac's age were a numerical value, then he astonished everyone by living for another forty-three years after being "old and blind" when Jacob stole Esau's blessing. But even if his lifespan of 180 is symbolic, it

Ur (Josh 24:2). And it makes sense for the author of Genesis to wait till to end of Abraham's story to add in this unrelated element in a summary of his life. Earl D. Radmacher, Ronald B. Allen and H. Wayne House, eds., *Nelson's New Illustrated Bible Commentary* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1999), 47-48.

²² K. A. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, New American Commentary, ed. E. Ray Clendenen and Kenneth A. Mathews, vol. 1B (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 2005), 248-49. J. P. Fokkeman, "Time and the Structure of the Abraham Cycle," in *New Avenues in the Study of the Old Testament: A Collection of Old Testament Studies Published on the Occasion of the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Oudtestamentisch Werkgezelschap and the Retirement of Prof. Dr. M. J. Mulder*, Oudtestamentische Studiën, ed. A. S. van der Woude (Leiden: Brill, 1989), 109.

²³ Sarna, *Genesis: JPS Commentary*, 170.

seems he still lived on for at least twenty-eight more years. The earliest Dinah can be born is fourteen years after Jacob fled to Haran, and Dinah must be at least thirteen or fourteen when she was raped at Shechem, which happened before Isaac died (Gen 35:27). Perhaps the reason for Isaac's insignificance after Jacob's return to Canaan was that he was debilitated by sickness to the point of being unable to function.

Fifth, none of the patriarchs is ever recorded as relating to his grandchildren, except when Jacob blesses Joseph's sons (Gen 48). If Abraham were alive for fifteen years after the birth of Jacob, why does the text never mention them ever meeting? This may be an argument from silence, but the gap in the narrative seems inexplicable. Isaac was silent when his granddaughter, Dinah, was raped (Gen 34). But, as mentioned, he may have been incapacitated by that point. However, if his age is literal, then he was still alive when the favored grandson, Joseph, was purportedly killed (Gen 37:2, 31-35). We would expect at least some reaction from Isaac in the face of such a tragedy. Instead, the fact that the text is silent perhaps indicates that Isaac had died by that point.

During the life of Jacob there is a gap in the record of lifespans. So, to find the ages of Jacob, Judah, Joseph and Dinah, we have to work backward from the one datum that both Joseph and Jacob share. Jacob tells Pharaoh that he is one hundred and thirty years old when his family moves to Egypt (Gen 47:9). We know this is nine years after Joseph began serving Pharaoh at age thirty (Gen 41:46) because there have been seven years of plenty and two years of famine (Gen 45:6, 11). Thus Joseph was taken to Egypt

when he was seventeen and his father was one hundred and eight (Gen 37:2), and Joseph must have been born when Jacob was ninety-one.²⁴

But that surfaces the sixth, and perhaps the greatest, incongruence. How could Jacob be seventy-seven years old when he fell head over heels in love with Rachel and eagerly volunteered to work seven years for her hand (Gen 29:10-20)? That means he waited until the ripe old age of eighty-four to get married. Then, after eighty-four long years waiting in prolonged celibacy, Jacob fathered twelve children in seven years. In fact, if Jacob's age is taken at face value, then he fathered children from the ages of eighty-four to one hundred and five (Benjamin was born after the Dinah incident at Shechem, Gen 35:16-20). That seems to contradict to the fact that Abraham believed ninety-nine was laughably old for someone to father a child (Gen 17:17), and it lessens the miraculous element in the birth of Isaac.

In Genesis 30:25-28 Jacob asked to leave Laban, presumably because his seven extra years of working for his wives was completed. But by this time Leah had six sons and a daughter (Gen 30:20-21). Surprisingly, this period also included a time of infertility (Gen 29:35), so Leah's achievement of giving birth to seven children in seven years is truly remarkable. However, these were not the only children born to Jacob during this seven-year period. Rachel's maid, Bilhah, had two sons (Gen 30:1-8), and Leah's maid, Zilpah, also had two sons (Gen 30:9-13). Then, before the end of the seven years, Rachel bore a son and named him Joseph (Gen 30:22-24).

Jacob did end up staying six additional years, for a total of twenty, while he bred his flock of goats (Gen 31:38, 41). And even though the text does not record any

²⁴ Merrill, "Fixed Dates," 250, n. 13.

births of children during this time, it may be that these twelve children were born during the thirteen-year span instead of the seven-year span. However, if that were the case, we would only adjust Jacob's age for his Haran sojourn downward by six years. He would have fled to Haran at seventy-one instead of seventy-seven, married at seventy-eight instead of eighty-four, and returned to Canaan at ninety-one instead of ninety-seven. His ages before and after this time are unaffected. Most evangelical commentaries simply ignore this inconsistency.²⁵ None offer an explanation as to why or how Jacob could act like a love-struck teenager when he was seventy-seven, and then father twelve children after eighty-four candles overwhelmed his own birthday cake.

This surfaces another problem—that of Laban's age. He was older than Rebekah because he helped arrange her marriage (Gen 24:50), so according to the face-value chronology, he must have been approximately 120 years old at this point. Yet his daughters, Leah and Rachel, are still young enough to be unmarried (Gen 29:16-30), and it seems Laban's sons are born after Jacob's arrival (Gen 30:25, 31:1). Although tangential to the main narrative, this also illustrates the inconsistency in a face-value reading of the ages in Genesis.

²⁵ There is no comment in John H. Sailhamer, "Genesis," *Expositor's Bible Commentary*, ed. Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland, vol. 1: Genesis–Leviticus, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 241-42. Mathews is apparently unaware of Jacob's advanced age when he comments on Jacob's "amazing strength" in singlehandedly rolling the stone off the well. Mathews, *Genesis 11:27–50:26*, 463. Hamilton calls this feat "herculean" and "Samsonesque" but also does not address Jacob's age. Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis: Chapters 18–50*, New International Commentary on the Old Testament, ed. R. K. Harrison and Robert L. Hubbard Jr. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 255. Walton notes that almost a century has passed between Rebekah's marriage and her son, Jacob, beginning to court a bride. But he does not comment on how unusual that situation would be. Walton, *Genesis*, 586.

In the critical view, there is no conflict with Jacob's advanced age because the chronology is consistent only within the P source.²⁶ But, this writer is unaware of any evangelical commentator who has attempted to show concord with these ages and the normal ages of maturity and marriage in either the Intermediate Bronze Age or the Middle Bronze Age. If the ages are symbolic rather than numerical values, then Esau's age at marriage may merely signify he was a grown man, and Jacob could well have been the energetic youth the text portrays him as.

Plus, the text of Genesis 27 indicates that Jacob's flight to Haran occurred very soon after Esau's marriage to Canaanite women. Rebekah expressed concern to Isaac that Jacob might also marry Canaanite women (Gen 27:46). This seems to be an unlikely sentiment if Jacob had remained celibate for thirty-seven years after his brother's marriages. It also seems inconceivable that Esau only realized that his Canaanite wives displeased his father after thirty-six years (Gen 28:6-8).

Seventh, in stark contrast to the implausibly late marriages and onset of childbearing for the previous patriarchs, two characters must have married or been available to marry at an early age. Dinah's rape occurred when Jacob and his family are living in Shechem (Gen 34:1-2) before Joseph is taken to Egypt at seventeen (Gen 37:2). But Dinah was the same age as Joseph or perhaps a year older, so she must have been considered at a marriageable age very young—perhaps as young as thirteen or fourteen. Similarly, Judah must be at least three years older than Joseph. So, in order to have time for his sons to grow up, marry, and die before the family moved to Egypt, Judah must

²⁶ Driver acknowledges that Ussher's chronology would make Jacob seventy-seven years old. However, according to the critical view, the chronology of the P source puts Jacob's age as forty—just after his twin brother, Esau, married Canaanite women (Gen 26:34). Driver, *Book of Genesis*, 270, n. 1.

have married around age eighteen or nineteen.²⁷ That would mean Judah must have committed his sin with his daughter-in-law, Tamar, between the brothers' first and second trips to Egypt.²⁸

Finally, we need to examine whether Joseph's age when he is in Egypt should be taken literally. We often think of Joseph working for Potiphar as a teenager. But, if Joseph entered Pharaoh's service at thirty (Gen 41:46), and was in prison for two years prior to that (Gen 41:1), then he was 28 years old when Potiphar's wife accused him of raping her (Gen 39:11-20). Thus he had been working for Potiphar for eleven years (twenty-eight minus seventeen). Rosenzweig suggests that it is incongruent for a twenty-eight year old man to be so terrified he is afraid to retrieve his cloak from his master's wife.²⁹ However, the narrative explains that Potiphar's wife had propositioned Joseph many times (Gen 39:10). Thus Joseph had no reason to suspect that Potiphar's wife would falsely accuse him of rape this time since she had never done so previously. Or perhaps his age of thirty when he enters Pharaoh's service (Gen 41:46) is simply intended as a round number indicating he was a grown man.

So, even when we limit ourselves to the biblical text, a face-value reading of the patriarchal lifespans results in a few problems with the lifespans themselves, and many problems with the internal chronology of events. The concordist approach seeks to explain away some of these incompatibilities by proposing open rather than closed

²⁷ Umberto Cassuto, "The Story of Tamar and Judah," In *Biblical and Oriental Studies*, trans. Israel Abrahams, vol. 1: Bible (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1973), 29-40.

²⁸ Merrill, "Fixed Dates," 248.

²⁹ Michael L. Rosenzweig, "Life History Data in the Bible, from Abraham to Joshua," *Judaism* 29, no. 3 (1980): 357.

genealogies, but the problems still remain. Now we are ready to examine the problems that arise when we include extra-biblical information.

Problems with Extended Lifespans and Chronology outside the Bible

As with the biblical data, above, this examination of external data will address two issues. The first issue is the actual lifespans. Is there any archaeological or anthropological evidence of anyone living over 120 years old in antiquity? The second issue is the chronology based on these extended lifespans—does a face-value chronology line up with what we know about the ancient Near East?

External Problems with Extended Lifespans

Looking outside the Bible, these extended lifespans clearly contradict all known evidence. The evidence from skeletons and tooth wear shows that the average lifespan in antiquity was around forty years.³⁰ There has not been presented any credible archaeological and anthropological evidence of anyone in antiquity that lived longer than one hundred and twenty years. So, how can a serious biblical scholar explain these extended lifespans which have no external attestation?

One strategy is to claim the common aphorism, “absence of evidence is not evidence of absence.”³¹ However, as J. P. Moreland and William Lane Craig state,

³⁰ Jesper L. Boldsen and Richard R. Paine, “The Evolution of Human Longevity from the Mesolithic to the Middle Ages: An Analysis Based on Skeletal Data,” in *Exceptional Longevity: From Prehistory to the Present*, Odense Monographs on Population Aging, ed. James W. Vaupel and Bernard Jeune (Odense: University Press of Southern Denmark, 1995), 25-36. Edwin M. Yamauchi, “Attitudes Toward the Aged in Antiquity,” *Near East Archaeological Society Bulletin* 45 (2000): 2. See Introduction, p. 39-40.

³¹ Often misattributed to Carl Sagan, this phrase seems first to have been coined by Martin Rees. See Bernard M. Oliver and John Billingham, “Project Cyclops: A Design Study of a System for

“clearly there are cases in which the absence of evidence does constitute evidence of absence.”³² One could use the phrase, “absence of evidence is not evidence of absence” with the claim that there is a flea in the room, but not with the claim that there is an elephant in the room. The reason for this is simple. One expects to see evidence of an elephant in a room but does not expect to see evidence of a flea. More weight should be given to an absence of evidence in proportion to “the amount of evidence that we do have and the amount of evidence that we should expect to have.”³³ In this case, if lifespans of hundreds of years were the common experience for the entire population in antiquity, then we should expect to have found at least some evidence of this in the explosion of archaeological discovery over the last century or more. Since no such evidence has been found, it seems more and more likely that such lifespans did not, in fact, occur.

Another strategy—which dates back to Martin Luther, if not earlier—was to propose the existence an ideal environment before the flood, one that promoted better health and longer lifespans. Whether one supposes this was the result of a water vapor canopy, the lack of supernova rays, or a purer gene pool, the result is the same—people were able to live unusually long, healthy lives. However, despite claims of what the environment “could have been like,”³⁴ there simply is no evidence to support such a claim. If this were the case we would expect to see extended lifespans not just in humans,

Detecting Extraterrestrial Intelligent Life,” <http://ntrs.nasa.gov/archive/nasa/casi.ntrs.nasa.gov/19730010095.pdf> (accessed Feb 24, 2016), 3.

³² J. P. Moreland and William Lane Craig, *Philosophical Foundations for a Christian Worldview* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 156-57.

³³ *Ibid.*, 157.

³⁴ Andrew A. Snelling, *Earth’s Catastrophic Past: Geology, Creation & the Flood*, vol. 1 (Dallas: Institute for Creation Research, 2009), 265-66. Despite a myriad of studies conducted on the environment for early humanity, Snelling does not provide a single scientific source to support his suppositions of what the pre-flood environment “could have been like.”

but all life—plants, fish, animals, birds, and insects—which we do not find.³⁵ This writer is unaware of any scientific study from either a Christian or secular source that proposes or provides any proof that a time period of extended lifespans for plant life, marine life, or animal life—including human life—ever occurred. Despite a multitude of scientific studies into the prehistoric environment on earth, the concept is entirely without support.

A common evangelical theory, put forth in 1961 by Henry Morris Jr. and John Whitcomb, proposed a layer of water vapor in the upper atmosphere prior to the flood. They claimed this theory had biblical justification. “On the second day of Creation, the waters covering the earth’s surface were divided into two great reservoirs—one below the firmament and one above, the firmament being the ‘expanse’ above the earth now corresponding to the troposphere.”³⁶ Under this theory, the water vapor layer distributed the sun’s energy evenly and filtered out harmful UV radiation thus providing an ideal environment to foster human growth and minimize mortality. This was thought to explain the uniformly long pre-flood lifespans and—since the water vapor rained down during the flood—it could also explain the descending lifespans after the flood.³⁷

However, like Merrill’s chronology, this does not constitute proof that such a thing actually happened. It is merely one concordist speculation of what might have happened. Morris and Whitcomb admitted, “we can as yet point to no definite scientific

³⁵ I am grateful to Ronald B. Allen for pointing this out to me. Although Snelling does admit that an ideal pre-flood environment would have led to extended lifespans for animals as well as humans, he provides no examples and quotes no scientific study that proves such an occurrence ever happened. *Ibid.*, 266.

³⁶ Morris and Whitcomb, *The Genesis Flood*, 229.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 121, 240-58, 399.

verification of this pristine vapor protective envelope around the earth.”³⁸ Since then, despite abundant scientific research into the historic atmosphere of earth, not one drop of water vapor evidence has appeared for such a barrier ever existing. Instead, a growing chorus of evangelical scientists has argued that such a water vapor barrier could not have existed, and would not have provided a beneficial environment if it had. In fact, the idea of a water vapor canopy has even been abandoned by many Young Earth Creation (YEC) advocates, and for several valid reasons.³⁹

First, the concept is based on an erroneous interpretation of the Hebrew word *רָקִיעַ* usually translated as *firmament* or *expanse*.⁴⁰ Conservative scholars, like Morris and Whitcomb, claim that this word refers to the expanse of the atmosphere between earth and the stratosphere, i.e. the troposphere. However, such an interpretation is untenable. Paul Seely and others have ably demonstrated that all ancient cultures believed the sky or firmament was a solid dome.⁴¹ This is why the LXX translated *רָקִיעַ* as *στερέωμα* and the Vulgate translated it as *firmamentum*, from which the KJV got the translation *firmament*. But, it is not just these cultures that believed the sky was a solid dome. Every ancient culture ever studied, including the Mesopotamians, Egyptians, early

³⁸ Ibid., 241.

³⁹ Bodie Hodge, “The Collapse of the Canopy Model,” <https://answersingenesis.org/environmental-science/the-collapse-of-the-canopy-model/> (accessed Oct 19, 2016). Jonathan Sarfati, “Flood Models and Biblical Realism,” *Journal of Creation* 24, no. 3 (2010): 46-53.

⁴⁰ Ludwig Koehler and Walter Baumgartner, *Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament*, trans. M. E. J. Richardson (Leiden: Brill, 1994), 3:1290. J. Barton Payne, “*rāqīaʿ*, *רָקִיעַ*,” in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, ed. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer Jr. and Bruce K. Waltke (Chicago: Moody, 1980), 2:861-62.

⁴¹ Paul H. Seely, “The Firmament and the Water Above, Part I: The Meaning of *raqiaʿ* in Gen 1:6-8,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 53 (1991): 227-40. Walton, *Genesis*, 110-13. Denis O. Lamoureux, *Evolutionary Creation: A Christian Approach to Evolution* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2008), 134-35.

Jewish writers, early Christian writers, and reformation leaders like Luther and Calvin all held the same belief.⁴² And all of the biblical references to רָקִיעַ either confirm this understanding (Gen 1:14-17, 20, Gen 7:11, 8:2, Ps 148:4, Ezek 1:22-28) or are compatible with it (Isa 34:4, 40:22).⁴³

The only response to this argument seems to be to rely on the “utterly *equivocal nature* of the language”⁴⁴ in Genesis 1, so that רָקִיעַ can be interpreted as either a solid dome or as the expanse of the atmosphere depending on the reader’s level of scientific knowledge. James Patrick Holding says, “the inspired author of Genesis was allowed to use only the terms available to him in his language to describe natural phenomena thereby leaving nearly everything unsaid about their exact nature.” So that, “if one starts with the presumption of a solid sky, one will read into the text a solid sky. If one starts with a modern conception, the text, as we shall see, permits that as well.”⁴⁵ But this amounts to the same thing. In accommodating to his pre-scientific audience, the divine author seems content to let many generations of people believe that the firmament is a solid dome above the earth. And, even if one can force a definition of “atmosphere” from רָקִיעַ—which is far from proven—that still does not entitle one to assume the waters above the רָקִיעַ refer to a vapor canopy layer above the troposphere.

⁴² Seely, “The Firmament and the Water Above, Part I,” 228-36.

⁴³ Ibid., 237-40.

⁴⁴ James Patrick Holding, “Is the *raqiya* (‘firmament’) a solid dome? Equivocal Language in the Cosmology of Genesis 1 and the Old Testament: A Response to Paul H. Seely,” *Creation ex nihilo Technical Journal* 13, no. 2 (1999): 45. Italics in the original.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 45-46.

The second problem with the vapor canopy theory is that not only is it completely unsupported by any evidence, it goes against all known laws of physics. As creation scientist, Gary Johnson, noted, “A miracle would have been required to maintain the canopies above the earth, or some as yet undiscovered physical phenomenon.”⁴⁶ The heat released when such a large quantity of water vapor condensed to liquid water would have heated earth’s atmosphere to 2,100°C (3,812°F).⁴⁷ Even a small water vapor barrier would produce surface temperatures on the earth far too high to support life. Creation scientist, Larry Vardiman, studied models for different possible sizes for this proposed vapor layer and concluded, “except for the 10 mb (10 cm of precipitable water) canopy, all modeled canopies produced inhospitably high surface temperatures.”⁴⁸ His conclusion was that a necessary precondition for any water vapor canopy to have existed, the solar radiation from the sun would have had to be merely 25% of what it is today.⁴⁹

Plus, the atmospheric pressure generated from such a water vapor barrier would have extinguished all possible life forms. Carol Hill notes that “If only one-third of the water in modern oceans [much less than required for a worldwide flood] were part of

⁴⁶ Gary L. Johnson, “Global Heat Balance with a Liquid Water and Ice Canopy,” *Creation Research Science Quarterly* 23, no. 2 (1986): 61.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 55.

⁴⁸ Larry Vardiman, “Temperature Profiles for an Optimized Water Vapor Canopy,” *Proceedings of the Fifth International Conference on Creationism* (2003): 30.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 33. Despite these problems, Snelling continues to hold that a small vapor canopy may have existed even as he acknowledges that, “the amount of water that could have been held in a vapor canopy would not have been sufficient to contribute significantly to the rainfall, and thus the waters of the globe-encircling, mountain-covering Genesis Flood.” Andrew A. Snelling, *Earth’s Catastrophic Past: Geology, Creation & the Flood*, vol. 2 (Dallas: Institute for Creation Research, 2009), 667.

the Earth's atmosphere in the form of a vapor canopy, the atmospheric pressure at the Earth's surface would have been greater than that of Venus' ~90 atmospheres."⁵⁰

Hugh Ross ably refutes the vapor canopy theory, but his own concordist theory—that the reduction in human lifespans was due to the effects of cosmic rays from an exploding supernova—seems just as implausible.⁵¹ The only known supernova explosion that could have had any influence on human life occurred at least 10,000 years before the time when the patriarchs purportedly lived, as even Ross admits.⁵²

Narrowing our focus to human remains, there is no evidence of any human living past 120 years old.⁵³ This is true for all of the anthropological evidence of early human civilizations, including those much earlier in history than the patriarchal era, or even the antediluvian era.⁵⁴ And, as mentioned earlier, this scientific evidence is supported by all the historical documentation thus far discovered including that from both Egypt and Mesopotamia.⁵⁵

It would seem that the only recourse, for those who wish to interpret the Genesis lifespans as numerical values, is to propose that God miraculously extended the lives of certain chosen individuals. However, this writer can find no scholars who

⁵⁰ Carol A. Hill, "The Noachian Flood: Local or Universal," *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* 54, no. 3 (2002): 175.

⁵¹ Hugh Ross, *The Genesis Question: Scientific Advances and the Accuracy of Genesis* (Colorado Springs: NavPress, 1998), 117-22, 153.

⁵² Ross, *The Genesis Question*, 153; Hill, "Making Sense of the Numbers," 240.

⁵³ Max Planck Society for the Advancement of Science, *International Database on Longevity*, www.supercentenarians.org (accessed Sep 29, 2014).

⁵⁴ Boldsen and Paine, "Evolution of Human Longevity," There are, of course, different views on the timing and the location of the flood, which cannot be addressed here. Suffice it to say the Mesolithic era is prior to the flood, whichever date is chosen for it.

⁵⁵ See Introduction, 38-39. Contra Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests*, 45 n. 19.

embrace this solution.⁵⁶ The fact that no skeletons of 175-year-old men have been discovered could be explained in this scenario because we are dealing with only a few individuals. Perhaps the reason no one advocates for this position is that the text of Genesis does not portray the patriarchs as miraculously outliving their peers. The focus seems to be that the patriarchs “died at a good old age . . . full of years” (Gen 25:8). These were important individuals no doubt (and there is no reason to doubt they were real individuals),⁵⁷ and they lived full lives to a good old age. But their lifespans are portrayed as being the best one could normally expect rather than being astonishing and distinctive from their contemporaries. In order to hold this belief—that the patriarchs were miraculously blessed with lifespans of almost 200 years—one must hold to a doctrine that seems to oppose what Genesis 25:8 clearly affirms.

Instead, after the demise of the vapor canopy theory, the current concordist theory being proposed is that genetics played a role in the extraordinary lifespans in Genesis and the decrease in lifespans after the flood.⁵⁸ The most influential voice touting

⁵⁶ Calvin believed Moses’s lifespan of 120 was an exception to the general norm of 80-90 years. John Calvin, *Commentary on the Book of Psalms*, trans. James Anderson, vol. 3 (Edinburgh: Calvin Translation Society, 1847, repr., Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1949), 469-70, n. 2. Jim Stump acknowledges the possibility of a miraculous explanation for the Genesis 5 lifespans but ultimately opts for a symbolic or rhetorical interpretation. Jim Stump, “Long Life Spans in Genesis,” <http://biologos.org/blogs/jim-stump-faith-and-science-seeking-understanding/long-life-spans-in-genesis> (accessed Oct 20, 2016).

⁵⁷ Kitchen says, “the patriarchal narratives belong soberly to the realia of this world, not to a world peopled by golden mountains, lapis lazuli rocks, animals that come alive when their severed heads are rejoined and so on. There are very few “remarkable” features in the biblical narrations.... Very many real people in antiquity claim dealings with deity (nobody can dismiss the historicity of, e.g., a Ramesses II or a Sennacherib on such grounds).” K. A. Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 366-67.

⁵⁸ Carl Wieland, “Decreasing Lifespans: Have We Been Looking in the Right Place?” *Journal of Creation* 8, no. 2 (1994): 138-41. Brian Thomas, “Did Adam Really Live 930 Years?” <http://www.icr.org/article/did-adam-really-live-930-years/> (accessed Oct 21, 2016).

the genetic decline theory is that of plant geneticist, John Sanford.⁵⁹ His argument has two components. First, that the human genome shows degeneration over successive generations as it accumulates mostly negative mutations. This degeneration, he argues, shows “evolution going backwards,” and is responsible for decreasing lifespans.⁶⁰ Second, he argues that the decline of lifespans after the flood as listed in Genesis 11 fits a biological decay curve. He says,

The data is coherent and internally consistent in a way that could never happen by chance. This is in spite of the fact that the data was drawn from various books of the Bible which were written by different authors in different timeframes. Anyone who has studied biological data can see how very “tight” the data is—meaning the data points diverge very little from the trendline. The smooth curve is shaped according to the specific formula shown ($y = 1064.7x^{-0.766}$).... Another way to say this is that the lifespans are declining in a very mathematically precise manner.

He posits only two explanations for this mathematically precise trend in decreasing lifespans. Either, Genesis 11 was “fabricated by a sophisticated and scheming single author.... driven by the malevolent ambition of deceiving the world into believing that, since the time of Noah, human fitness has been undergoing a very dramatic and very specific exponential decay process.”⁶¹ This, of course, is similar to what critical scholars claim. They believe that the schematic use of numbers shows that there was an editor who either added or updated the numbers many years after the events in Genesis. They do not assign the malevolent intentions to this editor that Sanford does, nevertheless, their theory does rest on the assumption that the redactor presented as factual a chronology that

⁵⁹ John Sanford, Jim Pamplin, and Christopher Rupe, “Genetic Entropy Recorded in the Bible?” <http://www.logosra.org/genetic-entropy> (accessed Oct 21, 2016). John C. Sanford, *Genetic Entropy*, 4th ed. (n.c.: FMS Publications, 2014).

⁶⁰ Sanford, Pamplin, and Rupe, “Genetic Entropy,” n.p.

⁶¹ Ibid.

he knew was either created out of whole cloth or was a correction of an earlier chronology. We will examine the critical solution in chapter four, but for now, we should simply note that this idea is accepted by many scholars without the misgivings that Sanford has.

Sanford's second explanation is that the "mathematical nature of the declining lifespans arose because the Biblical accounts are true, and are actually faithfully recording the historical unfolding of some fundamental natural degenerative process."⁶² However, this explanation raises significant problems. The supposedly tight fit between the biblical numbers and a biological decay curve is undermined by Sanford's later statement that, "the extremely precipitous decline in lifespans recorded in the Bible, just after the Flood, is actually significantly steeper than our numerical simulations would have predicted."⁶³ He explains the disparity as being the result of a "genetic bottleneck" at the Flood when the world's population was reduced down to just eight people.

So, his explanation is dependent on a worldwide flood, which wiped out all humanity except for eight people, and on the absence of gaps or telescoping in the genealogy recorded in Genesis 11. Both of these propositions lack external support, and both rest on assumptions concerning the Bible that are not shared even among evangelicals.

Unfortunately, Sanford's hypothesis seems to be just another concordist speculation to posit that the biblical narrative matches scientific reality when it does not. Sanford presents no scientific evidence for his speculation and he ignores the scientific

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Ibid.

evidence against it. As discussed above, there is no evidence of any prehistoric humans living for hundreds of years. The science of analyzing the DNA in ancient skeletons is still in its infancy,⁶⁴ so there is no evidence to verify or refute Sanford's theory. However, the most reliable method for analyzing the age at death of an ancient skeleton seems to be dental wear.⁶⁵ And none of the human remains discovered thus far—stretching back to well before the date proposed for the Flood—show any signs of living for hundreds of years, or of reduced lifespans fitting a biological decay curve.

Even if we grant Sanford's major argument—that there is a tight fit between the ages in Genesis 11 and a biological decay curve—that does not prove anything. The numbers in the SKL fit the exact same profile and nobody believes they reflect accurate lifespans. The genetic explanation of the lifespans in Genesis fails on the same grounds as the earlier concordist theories.

External Problems with Chronology

The extended lifespans of the patriarchs are unsupported by any evidence from antiquity outside the Bible. When we turn our attention to a chronology of the patriarchs using these lifespans we find a similar problem. A chronology that places the patriarchs any time during the Intermediate Bronze Age (IBA) is at odds with the elements of the patriarchal narratives themselves. Simply put, these people could not have lived that long, and if we were to assume they did, we place the patriarchal age during a time when it appears from all known evidence that it could not have occurred.

⁶⁴ Simon Mays, *The Archaeology of Human Bones* (London: Routledge, 1998), 197-206.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 57-66.

A chronology based on a face-value reading of patriarchal lifespans places the patriarchs living from 2166 BC (Abram's birth) to 1806 BC (Joseph's death).⁶⁶ This covers the final two centuries of the Intermediate Bronze Age (2500–1950 BC), and the first two centuries of Middle Bronze Age (MB I, 1950–1800 BC).⁶⁷ However, as will be shown, a chronology of the Patriarchal age that places the lifetimes of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob at any time during the IBA (i.e. before 1950 BC) is at odds with current archaeological findings.⁶⁸ The events recorded in Genesis could not have occurred during the IBA, and are unlikely to have occurred during MB I. As will be demonstrated, a much better fit is the MB II (1800–1550 BC).⁶⁹

Kitchen has aptly summarized the methods available to locate the patriarchal age. “Three lines of approach can be used for dating the Patriarchs: mention of external events in their time, statements of time elapsed between their day and some later point in history, and the evidence of period discernible in the social conditions in which they

⁶⁶ Merrill, “Fixed Dates,” 248. J. J. Bimson, “Archaeological Data and the Dating of the Patriarchs,” in *Essays on the Patriarchal Narratives*, ed. A. R. Millard and D. J. Wiseman (Leicester: InterVarsity, 1980), 84.

⁶⁷ See Appendix A.

⁶⁸ Nelson Glueck, *Rivers in the Desert: A History of the Negev* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Cudahy, 1959), 68-69. Bimson, “Archaeological Data,” 84-85. Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests*, 42, 96. On these pages, Merrill argues strongly that Abraham lived before 2000 BC. But in his supporting footnotes, Merrill seems to agree with Bright, and Provan, Long, and Longman that Abraham lived after 2000 BC. Merrill does not seem to provide any support for his early dating of Abraham other than his presupposition that the patriarchal ages must be taken as numerical values. The sources Merrill quotes as supporting his view, but which actually oppose his view, are found in John Bright, *A History of Israel*, Westminster Aids to the Study of the Scriptures, 4th ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 2000), 85. Iain W. Provan, V. Philips Long, and Tremper III Longman, *A Biblical History of Israel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2003), 113.

⁶⁹ Kenneth A. Kitchen, “The Patriarchal Age: Myth or History?” *Biblical Archaeology Review* 21, no. 2 (1995): 48-57, 88, 90, 92, 94.

lived.”⁷⁰ We will examine each of these three methods, in turn, to determine whether the IBA is a likely or even a possible candidate for the patriarchal age, then we will apply the same criteria to the MBA.

External Events in the Patriarchal Age

Until recently there were scant references to external events that could synchronize with the events of the patriarchal narratives. And those possible external correspondences were problematic for biblical scholars since they seemed to rule out any of the patriarchal events occurring during the IBA—the era in which a face-value chronology would place Abraham.

Although the archaeological evidence can be interpreted in different ways, one consistent conclusion—shared by both biblical and secular archaeologists—is the lack of any walled cities or sedentary population in Canaan during the IBA (2500–1950 BC). Mazar summarized a number of studies by saying,

For about three hundred years following the collapse of the EB III urban culture, Palestine was sparsely populated, mainly by pastoralists and village dwellers. This period of decline parallels the First Intermediate Period in Egypt (Dynasties VII–XI), during which there was a decentralization of power and a break in the traditional connections between Egypt and Asia, particularly those with Byblos.... The revival of urbanization in Palestine at the beginning of the Middle Bronze Age II corresponds with the rise of the Middle Kingdoms in Egypt, ca. 2000 BCE.... Only at a few major *tells* did a scanty occupation level follow the end of EB III (Hazor, Megiddo, Beth-Shean, Jericho). Thus Megiddo Stratum XIV was an unfortified village with poor structures and large open spaces.⁷¹

⁷⁰ K. A. Kitchen and T. C. Mitchell, “Chronology of the Old Testament,” in *New Bible Dictionary*, ed. I. Howard Marshall and D. R. W. Wood (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996), 189.

⁷¹ Amihay Mazar, *Archaeology of the Land of the Bible: 10,000–586 B.C.E.*, Anchor Bible Reference Library (New York: Doubleday, 1990), 151–54.

This assessment reflects the consensus among archaeologists from all backgrounds working on this period.⁷² Even Merrill agrees that the central hill country was essentially unpopulated at this time, with such inhabitants as there were living a pastoral and agrarian lifestyle.⁷³ When discussing the published IBA sites in the central hill country Finkelstein says, “most [sites] were small (1-5 dunams); all were sites not previously occupied, i.e. all the main EB mounds had been abandoned.”⁷⁴ Thompson argues effectively against labeling the entire society of this era as semi-nomadic,⁷⁵ but he does say, “The description of this period as giving evidence of only limited settlements in contrast to a large number of tombs is in general accurate.”⁷⁶ Ram Gophna says,

The twenty-fourth and twenty-third centuries BCE. were a period of crisis of settlement, culture, and demography, chiefly in Canaan. . . . By the time the abandonment of the towns had run its course, the population of the Land of Israel had declined to such an extent that broad areas, especially west of the Jordan were almost entirely depopulated. From this time, and until the beginning of the second millennium BCE, the inhabitants of the country lived in unwalled settlements, where they practiced agriculture, herding, and hunting.⁷⁷

⁷² Israel Finkelstein, “Further Observations on the Socio-Demographic Structure of the Intermediate Bronze Age,” *Levant* 21 (1989): 136. Israel Finkelstein, “When and How Did the Israelites Emerge?” in *The Quest for the Historical Israel: Debating Archaeology and the History of Early Israel*, ed. Brian B. Schmidt, Archaeology and Biblical Studies, edited by Andrew G. Vaughn, vol. 17 (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007), 80. Johanna Regev et al., “Chronology of the Early Bronze Age in the Southern Levant: New Analysis for a High Chronology,” Proceedings of the 6th Annual International Radiocarbon and Archaeology Symposium, *Radiocarbon* 54, nos. 3-4 (2012): 527.

⁷³ Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests*, 49-51.

⁷⁴ Israel Finkelstein, “The Central Hill Country in the Intermediate Bronze Age,” *Israel Exploration Journal* 41, nos. 1-3 (1991): 23.

⁷⁵ See also Finkelstein, “Further Observations,” 130.

⁷⁶ Thomas L. Thompson, *The Historicity of the Patriarchal Narratives: The Quest for the Historical Abraham*, Beiheft zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft, vol. 133 (Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 1974), 165.

⁷⁷ Ram Gophna, “The Intermediate Bronze Age,” in *The Archaeology of Ancient Israel*, ed. Amnon Ben-Tor (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992), 126.

Mazar concluded his chapter by emphasizing the major upheaval that occurred at the end of the Early Bronze Age (EB III) leading to the IBA.

In most of western Palestine, the change in the way of life between the two periods was extreme: a thriving hierarchical urban culture with a city-state political system, surplus economy, and foreign trade relations was replaced by an egalitarian society based on pastoralism and agriculture, without any distinct political system. Although connections with Egypt were lacking, some trade relations with inner Syria were maintained. . . . [T]he discontinuity from the previous period is expressed in the essential modes of life. The complete desertion of many Early Bronze sites, the poor villages constructed on some of the ruined cities, the establishment of new encampments on previously unsettled hills, the occupation of the arid Negev highland . . . are all demonstrative of a radical cultural break. . . . [T]he extent of the crisis at the end of the Early Bronze Age—one of the greatest crises in the history of the land—and the subsequent cultural shift cannot be underestimated.⁷⁸

Several reasons have been suggested for this major cultural break.⁷⁹ The most likely scenario seems to be that prolonged drought conditions forced the EB III inhabitants to migrate elsewhere.⁸⁰ There is, however, a growing consensus that the earlier hypothesis that the urban EB III culture was decimated by an Amorite invasion goes beyond both biblical and archaeological evidence, and should be discounted.⁸¹

⁷⁸ Mazar, *Archaeology of the Land*, 170-71.

⁷⁹ Summarized well in Finkelstein, “Further Observations,” 129.

⁸⁰ Thomas L. Thompson, *Early History of the Israelite People: From the Written and Archaeological Sources*, Studies in the History of the Ancient Near East, ed. M. H. E. Weippert (Leiden: Brill, 1992), 181-83, 188-89.

⁸¹ Israel Finkelstein, “Patriarchs, Exodus, Conquest: Fact or Fiction?” in *The Quest for the Historical Israel: Debating Archaeology and the History of Early Israel*, SBL Archaeology and Biblical Studies, ed. Brian B. Schmidt (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007), 43-44. Mazar, *Archaeology of the Land*, 169-70. Bimson, “Archaeological Data,” 61-62, 64-65. K. A. Kitchen, *Ancient Orient and Old Testament* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1966), 49, n. 71. Thompson, *Early History of the Israelite People*, 186-87. Contra Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests*, 46-49. Merrill quotes de Vaux in support of the Amorite invasion theory. But de Vaux only offers lukewarm support and provides plenty of caveats. For example, he states, “Above all, however, it has to be borne in mind that this ‘Amorite’ theory is no more than an hypothesis.” Roland de Vaux, *The Early History of Israel*, trans. David Smith (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1978), trans. of *Histoire ancienne d’Israël* (Paris: J. Gabalda et Cie, 1973), 63-64.

There are four main reasons why this time period does not fit that of the biblical patriarchs. First, the lack of trade and travel between Canaan and Egypt militates against the IBA being the time of patriarchs. Travel to and from Egypt features prominently in Abraham's story (Gen 12:10-13:1). It was believed that contact between Canaan and Egypt had ceased during this period,⁸² although newer evidence suggests there may have been some continued contact between these two regions.⁸³ So, Abraham's sojourn in Egypt may have been possible if not probable during the IBA. However, the fact that there was no eastern royal residence in lower Egypt during this time—only the capital much further south in Memphis—would seem to make Abraham's visit to the “house of Pharaoh” unlikely (Gen 12:15).⁸⁴

Second, for at least a century prior to 2000 BC all of Mesopotamia, even as far west as Syria, was united under the Third Dynasty of Ur.⁸⁵ There could not have been a coalition of kings from the region of Babylonia and Elam who joined forces to subjugate the Cities of the Plain and attack them when they rebelled (Gen 14). However, after the fall of Ur III (ca. 2000 BC) and before the reign of Hammurapi (ca. 1800 BC) there exists a unique window of time when such an alliance could have formed.⁸⁶

Third, the lack of archaeological sites integral to the narratives from the IBA seems to present an insurmountable problem. Finkelstein summarizes the situation,

⁸² Mazar, *Archaeology of the Land*, 151, 171. Gophna, “The Intermediate Bronze Age,” 127.

⁸³ Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests*, 51. Gophna, “The Intermediate Bronze Age,” 127-28.

⁸⁴ Kitchen, *Reliability of the OT*, 319.

⁸⁵ William W. Hallo and William Kelly Simpson, *The Ancient Near East: A History*, 2nd ed. (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1998), 72-80.

⁸⁶ Kitchen, *Reliability of the OT*, 320. Hallo and Simpson, *The Ancient Near East*, 92-93.

“important biblical sites that are mentioned in the Abraham stories, such as Shechem, Beer-sheba, and Hebron, did not yield finds from the Intermediate Bronze Age (IBA). These sites were simply not inhabited at that time.”⁸⁷ In 1980 Bimson lamented the almost complete lack of archaeological data that could confirm the dating of the patriarchs in either IBA or MB I (his MB I and MB II). As he pointed out, the early optimism of William F. Albright and Nelson Glueck with the Amorite Hypothesis had been all but extinguished by the later analyses of Thomas L. Thompson and John Van Seters.⁸⁸ Thompson summarized his view with, “Not only has archaeology not proven a single event of the patriarchal traditions to be historical, it has not shown any of the traditions to be likely”⁸⁹ In presenting possible evidence for dating the patriarchal age William G. Dever and W. Malcolm Clark stated. “The MB I period (now called IBA) is ruled out simply because the urban sites against which the Genesis narratives are set are not occupied: the requisite urban element of the dimorphic society is missing.”⁹⁰

Merrill notes that Shechem is not described as a city when Abraham stopped there (Gen 12:6, cf. Gen 33:18), so that could be consistent with archaeological evidence that the city was abandoned between 3300 and 1900 BC⁹¹ But, more problematic are

⁸⁷ Finkelstein, “Patriarchs, Exodus, Conquest,” 44.

⁸⁸ Bimson, “Archaeological Data,” 60-65. See also John E. Huesman, “Archaeology and Early Israel: The Scene Today,” *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 37, no. 1 (1975): 1-16.

⁸⁹ Thompson, *Historicity of the Patriarchal Narratives*, 328.

⁹⁰ William G. Dever and W. Malcolm Clark, “The Patriarchal Traditions,” in *Israelite and Judean History*, ed. John H. Hayes and J. Maxwell Miller (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1977), 118.

⁹¹ Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests*, 49. Itzhak Magen, “Shechem,” in *The New Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavations in the Holy Land*, ed. Ephraim Stern (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society & Carta, 1993), 4:1347.

missing sites like Bethel/Luz and Ai (Gen 12:8, 13:3, 29:19),⁹² Gerar (Gen 20:1-2),⁹³ Dan/Laish (Gen 14:14),⁹⁴ Hebron (Gen 13:18, 14:13, 18:1, 23:1, 17-19, 25:9),⁹⁵ and Beersheba (Gen 21-22).⁹⁶ Merrill does acknowledge that Hebron was not a city until much later (in the MB II), and he labels the reference to Hebron in Genesis as a “Mosaic explanatory notation.”⁹⁷ Beersheba is a special case because it seems to have been unoccupied during the MBA as well. This will be addressed later.

Fourth, there was no city of Salem (Jerusalem) during the IBA, and thus no king/priest named Melchizedek (cf. Gen 14:18-20).⁹⁸ Archaeological excavations have revealed an Early Bronze settlement at Jerusalem. Kathleen Kenyon states, “One must in fact conclude that on the site of present Jerusalem there was a settlement in the third millennium [BC] but one of moderate importance.”⁹⁹ She also found evidence of a wall dating to the Middle Bronze Age. She summarized by saying, “Trench 1, therefore, takes

⁹² Dever and Clark, “The Patriarchal Traditions,” 99.

⁹³ Eliezer D. Oren, “Tel Haror,” in *The New Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavations in the Holy Land*, ed. Ephraim Stern (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993), 2:580.

⁹⁴ As with other cities, Dan/Laish was occupied during the EBA, and later the MBA, but has no evidence of occupation during the IBA. Avraham Biran, “Dan,” in *The New Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavations in the Holy Land*, ed. Ephraim Stern (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society & Carta, 1993), 1:324.

⁹⁵ Dever and Clark, “The Patriarchal Traditions,” 99-100. Avi Ofer, “Hebron,” in *The New Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavations in the Holy Land*, ed. Ephraim Stern (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993), 2:608.

⁹⁶ Hallo and Simpson, *The Ancient Near East*, 70. Thompson, *Historicity of the Patriarchal Narratives*, 183.

⁹⁷ Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests*, 53.

⁹⁸ Thompson, *Historicity of the Patriarchal Narratives*, 183. Yigal Shiloh, “Jerusalem: Excavation Results, Chalcolithic Period to Iron Age I,” in *The New Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavations in the Holy Land*, ed. Ephraim Stern (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993), 2:701. Notice the gap in occupation between EB III (first half of the third millennium BC) and MB II (eighteenth century BC).

⁹⁹ Kathleen M. Kenyon, *Digging up Jerusalem* (New York: Praeger, 1974), 79.

us back to ca. 1800 BC Our excavations suggest that a case can be made out that there was a walled town from this date."¹⁰⁰ However for the IBA, it is clear there was no walled city at Jerusalem. Kenyon found “almost no evidence” of any organized group around Jerusalem during this time, the only exception being the graves used by a semi-nomadic group some 15 miles north of Jerusalem. She states,

One is thus justified in taking it that there was a gap between a modest urban Early Bronze Age Jerusalem and an urban Jerusalem of the second millennium BC, a gap filled by the arrival of tribal nomads, who may have destroyed Early Bronze Age Jerusalem, or at least disrupted the economy upon which it was dependent. These invaders left no trace at all on the site of ancient Jerusalem."¹⁰¹

More recent excavations have confirmed these findings. There was an EBA population in Jerusalem, and a walled city during the MB II, but not in between these two periods, during the IBA.¹⁰²

Thus, our current knowledge of the external events and conditions during the IBA lead us to reject this era as the Patriarchal Age. No archaeological evidence discovered to date would support this assertion. However, we need to examine whether the same problems beset the Middle Bronze Age (MBA), or whether that era presents a possible or probable scenario for the patriarchal narratives.

First, the long-range travels of the patriarchs could very plausibly have occurred during the MBA, especially Abraham’s visit to Egypt.¹⁰³ Not only was there contact between Egyptians and visiting Asiatics, but the Egyptian Pharaohs of the twelfth

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 78.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 81.

¹⁰² Jane M. Cahill and David Tarler, “Excavations Directed by Yigal Shiloh at the City of David, 1978–1985,” in *Ancient Jerusalem Revealed*, ed. Hillel Geva (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1994), 32; Finkelstein, “The Central Hill Country,” 21-29.

¹⁰³ Kitchen, *Reliability of the OT*, 316-18. Mazar, *Archaeology of the Land*, 185-88.

to fifteenth dynasties (ca. 1700–1540 BC) kept an East Delta residence near Avaris. This was significantly closer to Canaan and is thus a much more plausible “house of Pharaoh” for Abraham to visit.¹⁰⁴

Second, the MBA (and more specifically ca. 2000–1650 BC) represents the only period of time when four kings from the north and east (Babylonia and Elam) could have formed a coalition to subdue the five Cities of the Plain (Gen 14).¹⁰⁵ Although the name Chedorlaomer is clearly Elamite, possible links with any known Elamite kings have proven more tantalizing than substantial.¹⁰⁶ However, the names of the kings and an alliance of city/state kings attacking the Cities of the Plain fit well with the early to middle second millennium BC (MB I-II).¹⁰⁷

Third, for a long time it seemed that the MBA suffered the same paucity of the requisite archaeological sites as the IBA. In 1977 Dever stated, “To date, not a single MB IIA (now MB I, 1950–1800 BC) site has been found in all of the southern Transjordan or the Negeb—one of the principle arenas of patriarchal activities in Genesis.”¹⁰⁸ However, many archaeological discoveries have been made since 1977. But before we turn our attention to the problems Dever raised with the Transjordan and the Negev, we first need to examine the patriarchal sites located within Canaan itself.

¹⁰⁴ Kitchen, *Reliability of the OT*, 318-19.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 320-23.

¹⁰⁶ W. F Albright, “A Third Revision of the Early Chronology of Western Asia,” *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 88 (1942): 33-36; Michael C. Astour, “Chedorlaomer,” in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 1:893-94.

¹⁰⁷ Kitchen, “The Patriarchal Age”.

¹⁰⁸ Dever and Clark, “The Patriarchal Traditions,” 102.

As mentioned earlier, Shechem could be described as a city-state from around 1900 BC. It is mentioned in the Egyptian Execration texts and the Sebek-khu Stele, both from the nineteenth century BC.¹⁰⁹ Hebron was a fortified city in the MBA,¹¹⁰ as was Bethel/Luz.¹¹¹ Laish (Dan) is mentioned in the Egyptian Execration texts and Mari documents from ca. 1800 BC.¹¹² Gerar was one of the largest cities in southern Canaan during the MBA.¹¹³ In fact, Kitchen summarized the state of MBA sites by saying, “Most of the modest number of stopping places linked with the patriarchs were in business during the first half of the second millennium.”¹¹⁴

Jerusalem is mentioned as early as the Egyptian Execration texts (twentieth and nineteenth centuries BC), but it was first a fortified city with an encircling wall beginning around 1800 BC (beginning of MB II).¹¹⁵ Thus MB II presents a possible timeframe for the king/priest of Salem, Melchizedek (“King of Righteousness” cf. Heb 7:1-2), whereas the earlier IBA does not.

In the Negev, Beersheba still presents a problem because the fortified city located at Tel Beersheba (Tell es-Saba‘) was unoccupied from the Chalcolithic age to the

¹⁰⁹ Magen, “Shechem,” 1346.

¹¹⁰ Dever and Clark, “The Patriarchal Traditions,” 99. Ofer, “Hebron,” 608.

¹¹¹ James Leon Kelso, “Bethel,” in *The New Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavations in the Holy Land*, ed. Ephraim Stern (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society & Carta, 1993), 1:193.

¹¹² Biran, “Dan,” 324.

¹¹³ Oren, “Tel Haror,” 580.

¹¹⁴ Kitchen, *Reliability of the OT*, 335. See also Amihai Mazar, “The Patriarchs, Exodus, and Conquest Narratives in Light of Archaeology,” in *The Quest for the Historical Israel: Debating Archaeology and the History of Early Israel*, SBL Archaeology and Biblical Studies, ed. Brian B. Schmidt (Atlanta, GA: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007), 58. Bright, *A History of Israel*, 82.

¹¹⁵ Shiloh, “Jerusalem,” 698, 701-02.

Iron Age I (twelfth century BC).¹¹⁶ There are no ruins here from either the IBA or the MBA. However, the identification of this site with the Beersheba of the patriarchs is far from certain.¹¹⁷ There are a number of smaller sites on both sides of the Beersheba valley, but although some show evidence of occupation during the Chalcolithic era and the Iron Age, none so far indicate occupation during the IBA or the MBA.¹¹⁸ However, despite the protestations of some critical scholars,¹¹⁹ the patriarchal narrative describes Beersheba as a group of wells, not as a town (Gen 21:14, 19, 30-33, 22:19, 26:23-25, 32, 28:10, 46:1, 5). The only mention of Beersheba as a town is in Genesis 26:33, which is an obvious later update to the text (“... to this day”).¹²⁰ So, at this point there is no evidence to locate the Beersheba of the patriarchs in either the IBA or the MBA. But that does not mean that either age is ruled out by the lack of pre-Iron Age remains.

With respect to the Transjordan, Dever was correct to say in 1977 that there were no MBA archaeological sites in this region. However, a lot has happened since then. Steven Falconer surveyed a number of MBA sites recently discovered in the Trans-Jordan that “ranged from small cities of 10–20 ha (e.g., Pella, Tall Irbid, possibly the Amman Citadel), to towns with 1000–2000 inhabitants (e.g., Tall Dayr Alla, Tall Umayri, Sahab), to villages with a few hundred occupants at most (e.g., Tall Hayyat, Tall

¹¹⁶ Ze’ev Herzog, “Tel Beersheba,” in *The New Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavations in the Holy Land*, ed. Ephraim Stern (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society & Carta, 1993), 1:167, 173. Bimson, “Archaeological Data,” 75.

¹¹⁷ Herzog, “Tel Beersheba,” 168.

¹¹⁸ Kitchen, *Reliability of the OT*, 336. Dever and Clark, “The Patriarchal Traditions,” 100.

¹¹⁹ John Van Seters, *Abraham in History and Tradition* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1975), 111-12.

¹²⁰ Kitchen, *Reliability of the OT*, 336. Bimson, “Archaeological Data,” 75. See also Sarna’s response to Van Seters in Nahum M. Sarna, “Abraham in History,” *Biblical Archaeology Review* 3 (1977): 8-9.

Nimrin).¹²¹ These include biblical sites like Heshbon (Num 21), and Mount Nebo (Num 32:2, 38, Deut 34:1). He concluded by saying, “virtually all known settlements apparently were ringed by protective walls during MB IIB–C (with the exceptions of smaller sites like Tall Hayyat, Abu Snesleh, and Dahr Mudayna).”¹²² So, although more exploration needs to be done, the MBA cannot be ruled out as an option for the Patriarchal Age in the same way that the IBA can due to a lack of sites in the Transjordan.

So, we have discovered that any chronology that has Abraham living during the IBA is at odds with not only a few Bible verses but also all currently known archaeological findings in the region. Abraham could not have travelled to Egypt during this time, there could not have been an alliance of kings from the north to attack the Cities of the Plain, none of the important sites in the biblical narrative were occupied during the IBA, and—significantly—there was no city of Jerusalem at this time and thus no king Melchizedek.

However, there is a time period where external events do seem to correspond with the biblical narrative. During the MB II (1800–1550 BC) Abraham could have traveled to “Pharaoh’s house” in Egypt, there were coalitions of kings from the north that could have attacked the Cities of the Plain, almost all of the important patriarchal sites were occupied and many were fortified cities, and from ca. 1800 BC Jerusalem was a walled city that could have had a king named Melchizedek.

¹²¹ Steven Falconer, “The Middle Bronze Age,” in *Jordan: An Archaeological Reader*, ed. Russell B. Adams (London: Equinox, 2008), 275.

¹²² *Ibid.*

Statements of Time Between the Patriarchal Age and Later Events

The sole method used by Merrill and other conservative scholars to date the Patriarchal Age is the calculation of elapsed time recorded in Genesis as patriarchal lifespans and ages at the birth of their first son. However, the contention of this dissertation is that the lifespans given in Genesis cannot be used as numerical values to determine a date for the Patriarchal Age. This chapter has sought to demonstrate that using those lifespans in such a manner results in a chronology that is not only internally inconsistent within Genesis, but also externally inconsistent with known archaeological data. So, this method for determining the dating of the Patriarchal Age should be discounted in favor of other, externally verifiable, methods.

Unfortunately, scholars who insist on creating a chronology based on this method at the exclusion of all other methods have constructed a Patriarchal Age that seems to be as much at odds with historical reality as the mythical approach they were seeking to avoid.¹²³

Historical Synchronisms in the Social Conditions of the Patriarchal Age

The third method for locating an era when the patriarchs could have lived is by using historical synchronisms with the society and culture described in Genesis. The first half of the twentieth century was marked by discoveries at Nuzi (fifteenth century BC) and Mari (eighteenth or seventeenth century BC), which seemed to show remarkable parallels to some of the unusual customs in the patriarchal narratives. This led to an optimistic claim of consensus about the historicity of the Patriarchal Age. This consensus

¹²³ Hill, "Making Sense of the Numbers," 250.

was challenged severely in the latter half of the twentieth century and many supposed parallels were rightly discarded. However, not every parallel has been shown to be false, and to the extent these cultural parallels are valid, they do seem to confirm an early second-millennium milieu for the patriarchal narratives. Then there are other cultural parallels that have come to light, which may help us confirm this dating.

First, we will examine the early enthusiasm concerning cultural parallels. In 1940, C. H. Gordon listed correspondences between patriarchal customs and those in the ancient Near East including: Abraham adopting his servant Eliezer as an heir (Gen 15:2-4); Sarah, Rachel, and Leah offering handmaids as surrogates to provide an heir (Gen 16:1-4, 30:1-13); Esau selling his inheritance to Jacob (Gen 25:29-34); Isaac's irrevocable blessing (Gen 27:33-38); Laban "adopting" Jacob, and Rachel stealing her father's household gods to ensure Jacob retains an inheritance (Gen 29-31).¹²⁴ Speiser agreed with these parallels and added others such as Abraham and Isaac deceptively claiming their wives were their sisters (Gen 12:10-20, 20:1-18, 26:6-11).¹²⁵ Others pointed out that the patriarchal names fit perfectly in the second millennium BC.¹²⁶

Some of these practices conflicted with later Mosaic Law: Abraham married his half-sister (Gen 20:12, cf. Lev 18:9, 11, 20:17, Deut 27:22), Jacob married two sisters (Gen 29:15-30, cf. Lev 18:18), Abraham planted a sacred tree (Gen 21:33, cf. Deut 16:21), and Jacob set up a sacred pillar (Gen 28:18-22, 31:13, 35:14, cf. Lev 26:1, Deut

¹²⁴ C. H. Gordon, "Biblical Customs and the Nuzu Tablets," *Biblical Archaeologist* 3, no. 1 (1940): 1-12. See also Bright, *A History of Israel*, 79.

¹²⁵ E. A. Speiser, *Genesis: Introduction, Translation, and Notes*, Anchor Bible, vol. 1 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1964), 91-94.

¹²⁶ Bright, *A History of Israel*, 77. Kitchen, "The Patriarchal Age," 90-91. Abraham Malamat, *Mari and the Early Israelite Experience* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), 31-32.

7:5, 12:3, 16:22). The fact that these actions conflicted with later regulations indicates, at least, that the origin of these stories preceded the Mosaic Law. It is highly unlikely that stories with the potential for misunderstanding would have been invented at a later date.¹²⁷

However, like the archaeological evidence from Albright's era, these proposed parallels were severely challenged in the second half of the twentieth century. This effort was largely successful in reasserting the older view that the patriarchal narratives were a late composition with no historical validity.¹²⁸ The arguments of John Van Seters were particularly challenging. He believed that the use of a handmaid as a surrogate mother fit a first-millennium, not a second-millennium BC context. He rejected the Nuzi analogy of the wife-sister marriages of Abraham and Isaac and posited there was a better correspondence with a thirteenth century Egyptian marriage contract. He also rejected Nuzi parallels for Isaac's marriage to Rebecca, and Laban's "adoption" of Jacob to facilitate the marriage to his daughters, Leah and Rachel. He argued that the proposed parallel with Abraham's adoption of his slave Eliezer was based on a misunderstanding of the Nuzi adoption texts. He preferred a first-millennium BC parallel for Rachel stealing her father's gods over the Nuzi parallels. And lastly, he proposed Neo-Babylonian parallels for Jacob's contract with Laban, and for Abraham's purchase of the Cave at Machpelah.¹²⁹

¹²⁷ Bright, *A History of Israel*, 73-74.

¹²⁸ Mazar, "Patriarchs, Exodus, and Conquest Narratives," 58. Sean M. Warner, "The Patriarchs and Extra-Biblical Sources," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 2 (1977): 50. M. J. Selman, "Comparative Customs and the Patriarchal Age," in *Essays on the Patriarchal Narratives*, ed. A. R. Millard and D. J. Wiseman (Leicester: Inter-Varsity, 1980), 102.

¹²⁹ Van Seters, *Abraham in History and Tradition*, 68-103.

Similarly, Thompson spent a lot of time disputing these parallels with the Nuzi tablets, although his reasons for doing so differ at times from Van Seters.¹³⁰ He said,

The value that the Nuzi texts have for the study of Genesis is extremely limited. Our survey has shown the practices at Nuzi to be relatively different from those presupposed by Genesis. Certainly no historical connection can be drawn between Genesis and Nuzi. Nevertheless, the Nuzi texts are indirectly very valuable for an understanding of Genesis, and indeed the entire Old Testament treatment of family laws.¹³¹

While the resulting picture is not as rosy as that first proposed, news of the death of the Patriarchal Age might have been premature. The fact that some bricks have fallen from this “modern reconstructed edifice,” as Selman notes, does not necessarily negatively impact the historicity of the Old Testament. “On the contrary, it is some of the modern stones rather than the ancient ones which (it has been discovered) do not fit the work of reconstruction.”¹³² And while some proposed parallels have turned out to be spurious, there are others that still seem valid.¹³³ Even those skeptical of an early composition of Genesis realize these cultural parallels speak of the antiquity of the source material. Finkelstein says,

I continue to believe that some of the parallels between the second millennium BCE culture of the Levant and the cultural background portrayed in the Patriarchal stories as mentioned above are too close to be ignored, indicating that perhaps certain components in the biblical stories are recollections of memories rooted in the second millennium.¹³⁴

¹³⁰ Thompson, *Historicity of the Patriarchal Narratives*, 196-297.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 295.

¹³² Selman, “Comparative Customs,” 98.

¹³³ Kitchen, “The Patriarchal Age,” 92. Kitchen, *Reliability of the OT*, 324-28, 336-38. Provan, Long, and Longman, *Biblical History of Israel*, 116.

¹³⁴ Finkelstein, “Patriarchs, Exodus, Conquest,” 59.

It is true that these social customs were practiced over a wide area, in differing cultures, over a long time frame. Thus their ability to pinpoint a specific patriarchal age is minimal at best.¹³⁵ Yet, if there is no consensus arising from these cultural parallels, the most common view is that these customs best fit within the first half of the second millennium, i.e. the MBA.¹³⁶ In support of this fact, Bright says, “One’s conviction that the patriarchal narratives authentically reflect social customs at home in the second millennium is strengthened.”¹³⁷

Some scholars point to anachronisms—elements that seem to be out of place in an early second-millennium context. These would include mention of the Philistines (Gen 21:32, 34, 26:1, 8, 14-15, 18), the widespread use of camels (Gen 12:16, 24:10-64, 30:43, 31:17, 34, 32:7, 15, 37:25),¹³⁸ or place names such as Dan (Gen 14:14, cf. Judg 18:29), “Ur of the Chaldeans” (Gen 11:28, 31, 15:7), and the “land of Rameses” (Gen 47:11). But these are either the result of updating of the text by a later editor, or they can be explained on other grounds.¹³⁹

¹³⁵ Van Seters, *Abraham in History and Tradition*, 8-9.

¹³⁶ Mazar, “Patriarchs, Exodus, and Conquest Narratives,” 59. de Vaux, *The Early History of Israel*, 156. Abraham Malamat, *Mari and the Bible*, Studies in the History and Culture of the Ancient Near East, ed. Baruch Halpern and M. H. E. Weippert, vol. 12 (Leiden: Brill, 1998), 4. Bright, *A History of Israel*, 70, 77, 83, 85-86. Dever and Clark, “The Patriarchal Traditions,” 95. Gordon, “Biblical Customs,” 2. Kitchen, “The Patriarchal Age”. Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, Word Biblical Commentary, ed. David A. Hubbard, Glenn W. Barker and John D. W. Watts, vol. 2 (Dallas: Word Books, 1994), xxii.

¹³⁷ Bright, *A History of Israel*, 80.

¹³⁸ Finkelstein, “Patriarchs, Exodus, Conquest,” 46.

¹³⁹ Kitchen, *Reliability of the OT*, 338-41. Provan, Long and Longman, *Biblical History of Israel*, 116-17. Joseph P. Free, “Abraham’s Camels,” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 3, no. 3 (1944): 187-93.

But there is another group of cultural parallels that may help us narrow the possible window for the patriarchal age. Kitchen has identified elements such as a wide scope of travel, long-distance marriages, monotheistic worship, and the personal names in Genesis, which are very comfortable in the second millennium.¹⁴⁰ However, significantly, he also finds parallels that fit a narrower chronological window. First, changes in the structure and form of treaties can help pinpoint the time when they were enacted. The format used by the patriarchs in four treaties (Gen 21:23-24, 27-33, 26:28-31, 31:44-54) corresponds with treaties found in the Mari archives and at Tell Leilan for the early second millennium BC. Treaties prior to this, in the IBA, as well as those later on, in the Late Bronze Age (LBA) were appreciably different.¹⁴¹ Second, the price of slaves changed over time. The price of twenty shekels for Joseph (Gen 37:28) corresponds to the slave price in the Law of Hammurapi and the Mari document for the nineteenth and eighteenth centuries BC. Prior to this slaves sold for fifteen shekels, and afterwards the price rose to thirty shekels (cf. Exod 21:32).¹⁴² Selman also identified some parallels that seem to locate the patriarchal stories in the early second millennium. The use of the Hebrew term **בן** for eldest son in Genesis 25:23 finds its parallel only in mid-second century documents. And the adoption of Ephraim and Manasseh by their grandfather, Jacob, in Genesis 48:5 parallels a similar adoption at Ugarit.¹⁴³

¹⁴⁰ Kitchen, *Reliability of the OT*, 316-43.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 323-24. Kitchen, "The Patriarchal Age," 52-56.

¹⁴² *Ibid.* Kitchen, *Reliability of the OT*, 344-45.

¹⁴³ Selman, "Comparative Customs," 126-27.

These parallels have been challenged, of course. Ronald Hendel and Kyle McCarter cast doubt on details such as the price of slaves, the form of treaties, the geopolitical conditions, or the patriarchal names being able to provide any specific time frame for the patriarchs.¹⁴⁴ Dever also doubts Kitchen's statistical analysis of name-types, because he claims the data collected are dependent "entirely on the accidents of discovery," and is thus not a solid basis for a scientific claim.¹⁴⁵ However, Kitchen has stoutly defended his statements, calling the claims by McCarter "totally wrong," and charging Hendel with "perversely misconstrue[ing] ... the facts."¹⁴⁶

So when one considers synchronisms with social customs in the patriarchal narratives, it seems that the early second millennium BC (MBA) remains the best option for dating the patriarchs. The fact that some optimistic parallels have been later found to be invalid in no way invalidates the parallels that do exist. None of the social customs thus far discovered would nullify an MBA dating of the patriarchal age. In fact, the customs in Genesis seem genuinely to reflect this era, and a few synchronisms may narrow the timeframe further to the early MB II (nineteenth and eighteenth centuries BC). However, these parallels do not favor an earlier date (IBA) for the patriarchs. The form of the treaties and the price of slaves would also seem to rule out a late third-millennium context for the patriarchal narratives.

¹⁴⁴ Ronald S. Hendel, "Finding Historical Memories in the Patriarchal Narratives," *Biblical Archaeology Review* 21, no. 4 (1995): 56-57. P. Kyle McCarter Jr., "The Patriarchal Age: Abraham, Isaac and Jacob," in *Ancient Israel: From Abraham to the Roman Destruction of the Temple*, ed. Hershel Shanks (Washington, DC: Biblical Archaeology Society, 2011), 13-14.

¹⁴⁵ Hershel Shanks, "Is This Man a Biblical Archaeologist? BAR Interviews William Dever, part I," *Biblical Archaeology Review* 22, no. 4 (1996): 63.

¹⁴⁶ Kitchen, *Reliability of the OT*, 341-42, 574-75, n. 101.

This writer is unaware of any scholar who has proposed a third-millennium (IBA) setting for the patriarchal narratives based on cultural parallels. Merrill and Bimson posit a late third-millennium date for Abraham's life by adding up the patriarchal lifespans as numerical values, not on the basis of any cultural parallels between this time and the patriarchal narratives.¹⁴⁷ That is, they maintain a strict face-value numerical interpretation of the patriarchal lifespans as inerrant at the expense of both the external events and the parallel social customs revealed by archaeology. This approach seems unbalanced at best.

Conclusion

Despite protestations to the contrary, it seems demonstrably true that the face-value reading of the patriarchal ages raises many significant problems both within the Bible and with the external archaeological evidence. Within the Bible, the extended ages themselves seem to conflict with a few verses, but a chronology of events based on those ages raises numerous inconsistencies. Most telling seems to be the advanced age of Jacob when he flees to Haran and gets married. The chronological reckoning that places his age at eighty-four for his wedding stretches credulity to the breaking point.

Outside the Bible, the extended ages were found to have no supporting evidence, nor any realistic explanation for how they might have occurred. In addition, a chronology constructed using those ages places the lifetime of Abraham squarely in the IBA—a time it now appears that he could not have lived. The archaeological evidence discovered so far seems unanimous in rejecting an IBA context for the patriarchal

¹⁴⁷ Merrill, "Fixed Dates". Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests*, 47-48, 96, cf. 55-56. Bimson, "Archaeological Data," 83-84.

narratives. However, it was found that an MBA context for the lifetimes of the patriarchs is compatible with the known archaeology of the period and synchronizes with the cultural practices of that time.

CHAPTER 3

AGES AND REIGNS IN ANTIQUITY

This chapter seeks to answer three questions. First, how are the lifespan numbers in Genesis written? Was there a different method for recording numbers prior to the text as we have it today? What would that tell us about what could be, or could not be, a legitimate interpretation of the patriarchal lifespans? Second, what do we know about how ancient people used and understood numbers, counting and mathematics? Did they use numbers arithmetically, figuratively, or hyperbolically? What was their level of mathematical knowledge and how did that influence their understanding of human lifespans? Third, what were the accepted methods for using numbers in literary works? How were oral traditions transferred into written form? What were the functions and purposes of genealogies in ancient writings? With a clear understanding of these background issues, we should be able to read the lifespan data in Genesis with a closer empathy to the original audience.

How Were the Lifespan Numbers Recorded in Genesis?

All of the ages in Genesis are fully written out in words, not represented by symbols. Abraham's lifespan is written as, **מֵאֵת שָׁנָה וְשִׁבְעִים שָׁנָה וְחֲמִשׁ שָׁנִים** (Gen 25:7, see also the lifespans of Sarah, Ishmael, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph in Gen 23:1, 25:17, 35:28, 47:28, 50:22). None of these verses displays any text critical issues or variations in the different manuscripts and versions. These figures are as fixed as

anything can be in the Hebrew text as we have it today. But, the text we have today was not the original text that Genesis was written in.

The square Hebrew script was formed from the Aramaic script following the Babylonian exile. However the Paleo-Hebrew used during the Iron Age was a separate script from a common ancestor—the Phoenician script, which was a direct offshoot of the Proto-Canaanite script.¹ If Moses did indeed pen the Torah in the Late Bronze Age, then the script he would have used would have been vastly different from the Masoretic Text. And, although we have no written evidence, it seems likely that Moses used earlier sources—particularly for the Mesopotamian history portion of Genesis. These sources were likely recorded in a completely different script again, perhaps Cuneiform or Egyptian Hieratic. But, this is speculation at this point since the oldest versions we have, other than the Masoretic Text, are the Samaritan Pentateuch, the Septuagint, and of course the Dead Sea Scrolls.

Although there is no epigraphic evidence of the use of numerical symbols in Hebrew writings prior to the Iron Age, this does not mean that they were not used. In fact, it seems probable that a system of numerical symbols was used preceding or at least concurrent with written number words.² As discussed below, the use of symbols or numerals to record numbers actually predates writing, and such symbols are found in

¹ Joseph Naveh, *Early History of the Alphabet: An Introduction to West Semitic Epigraphy and Palaeography* (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1982), 9-10; Angel Sáenz-Badillos, *A History of the Hebrew Language*, trans. John Elwolde (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993. Orig. *Historia de la Lengua Hebraea*, Sabadell, Spain: Editorial AUSA, 1988), 16.

² Jöran Friberg, “Numbers and Counting,” in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 4:1139; John J. Davis, *Biblical Numerology: A Basic Study of the Use of Numbers in the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1968), 34-35.

Paleo-Hebrew in the Samaria Ostraca (ca. eighth century BC), and Lachish Letters (ca. sixth century BC).³ The Iron Age Hebrews used the same number symbols as hieratic Egyptian from the New Kingdom period.⁴ Later on, the Hebrew people adopted the writing system, and the numerical notations from the Arameans. They used a decimal system, but wrote out their numbers using groups of two (e.g., 70 = 20+20+20+10).⁵

How Did Early Civilizations Use Numbers?

Before there was writing, there was counting. In fact it was the symbols used to record numbers of object that led to the development of writing, not vice versa.⁶ This discovery has overturned more than two centuries of belief, which supposed that writing developed from pictographic symbols.⁷ These symbols, like Egyptian hieroglyphics or Chinese characters, were thought to have been simplified over hundreds of years to form an alphabet. Recorded numbers were thought to have evolved from this writing system. However, as Denise Schmandt-Besserat says, “The most important evidence uncovered is

³ Israel Abrahams, “Numbers, Typical and Important,” in *Encyclopedia Judaica*, ed. Fred Skolnik and Michael Berenbaum (Detroit: Macmillan Reference, 2007), 15:333-334.

⁴ Jöran Friberg, “Numbers and Counting.” In *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman, vol. 4 (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 1142-1143.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 1143.

⁶ Denise Schmandt-Besserat, *Before Writing*, vol. 1: From Counting to Cuneiform (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 1992), 7; Friberg, “Numbers and Counting,” 1140; Robert K. Englund, “Accounting in Proto-Cuneiform,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Cuneiform Culture*, ed. Karen Radner and Eleanor Robson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), 33.

⁷ See the chart in Ignace J. Gelb, *A Study of Writing*, rev. ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1963), x-xi; Albertine Gaur, *A History of Writing* (London: British Library, 1984), 15.

that counting was not, as formerly assumed, subservient to writing but, on the contrary, writing emerged from counting.”⁸

Initially small clay tokens were used to represent an item (like a sheep) or a measure of a product (like grain). These tokens, unlike the earlier use of pebbles or notches on bones, were man-made so each token could have one discrete meaning. A cone might represent a certain measure of grain, a cylinder a sheep, and a disk might represent a flock (possibly ten) sheep.⁹ These plain tokens were used for five thousand years in agricultural settings until the development of cities.¹⁰ The move from a primarily agricultural to a more settled urban society exacerbated the biggest problem with these simple tokens; they were useful in small numbers, but became unwieldy in larger numbers. So, beginning in the mid-fourth millennium BC was the development of complex tokens, which introduced a large increase in the number and complexity of token forms, and featured different kinds of markings on the surface of the tokens. These complex tokens partially alleviated the problem of handling larger numbers of the simple tokens. But they suffered—albeit to a lesser extent—the same problems inherent with handling physical objects. They could break, be lost, and were limited in their portability, which quickly led to the next development.

⁸ Schmandt-Besserat, *Before Writing*, 7.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 161-62.

¹⁰ See the timeline in Wayne M. Senner, “Theories and Myths on the Origins of Writing: A Historical Overview,” in *The Origins of Writing*, ed. Wayne M. Senner (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), 23.

In the mid-fourth millennium BC two systems were developed to store these tokens.¹¹ Complex tokens were perforated and strung together with the ends of the string encased in a clay bulla.¹² But simple tokens were stored inside spherical clay envelopes, which were then usually sealed. The problem with this method of storage was how to remember, or record, what tokens were inside the envelope. This led to markings on the outside of the envelopes corresponding to the tokens held within—initially just impressed marks of the tokens themselves.¹³ It soon became apparent, however, that the envelope and tokens system could be bypassed altogether. The number and type of different tokens could be recorded on a clay tablet.

What developed were two types of markings on clay tablets to record amounts of commodities. Impressed markings corresponded to the number of tokens, and inscribed pictographs represented the tokens being counted (which then represented the commodity itself). Thus there might be five impressed markings on a tablet next to a pictograph representing the token for a sheep.¹⁴ These two types of markings represented the first time that abstract numerals were expressed separately from the object being counted. This revolutionized accounting because same type of impressed markings could be used to record the number or amount of any kind of item. This then enabled the mathematical manipulation of these abstract numbers for the first time in human history.

¹¹ Friberg, “Numbers and Counting,” 1140.

¹² Schmandt-Besserat, *Before Writing*, 108-09.

¹³ See an example in *Ibid.*, 126.

¹⁴ Denise Schmandt-Besserat, “Two Precursors of Writing: Plain and Complex Tokens,” in *The Origins of Writing*, ed. Wayne M. Senner (Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), 37-38.

The pictographs that represented the object being counted (e.g., sheep, or jars of oil) evolved into the first alphabet. It is true that some letters and phonetic sounds associated with alphabets evolved from pictographs, but the intermediate step was the use of tokens. The initial pictographs were representations of tokens, which represented one discrete commodity (e.g., a sheep or a jar of oil). Both impressed markings and inscribed pictographs were an integral part of the first type of writing—cuneiform. Because there were different tokens for groups of items (e.g., for ten sheep or ten jars of oil), what developed (ca. 3000 BC and later) was a standardized system of numerical markings in a cuneiform script.¹⁵

The Sexagesimal (Base-60) System

The first method of counting did not use the decimal system based on the ten fingers on human hands, as sometimes assumed, but it seems to have been based on the sexagesimal system. This system was also used by the Babylonians and has survived to our day in the way we measure time, angles, and geographic coordinates. We know there are sixty seconds in a minute, sixty minutes in an hour, thirty days in a month, twelve months in a year. We also know there are 360 degrees in a circle, 180 degrees in half a circle, and ninety degrees in a quarter of a circle. We know that the time: 4:15:12 is equivalent to four hours (4×60^2) plus fifteen minutes (15×60) plus twelve seconds. And, because sixty is the lowest number that is divisible by the numbers one to six, and by ten, twelve, fifteen, twenty and thirty, one can easily divide an hour into five, ten, fifteen, twenty or thirty minute segments.

¹⁵ Schmandt-Besserat, *Before Writing*, 153; Friberg, “Numbers and Counting,” 1140.

The earliest numerical signs were based on the sexagesimal system, and—like Roman Numerals—they did not use the place notation system. So they had to use different symbols to represent the numbers: 1, 10, 60, 600, and 3600.¹⁶ Notice there was a decimal component to the sexagesimal system—their symbols increased by alternating factors of ten and six. The interpretation of these signs has led to an understanding of how the ancient Mesopotamian culture counted wet grain products (in the sexagesimal system), dry grain products (in a bi-sexagesimal system), and time (a 360-day year with twelve months of thirty days).¹⁷ A later development (ca. 2000 BC) was the place notation system of counting whereby the same symbol could mean six or sixty based on which column it was in.¹⁸ The decimal system seems to have been used by the Egyptians, and slowly it replaced the sexagesimal system of counting.

What this all means for biblical interpretation is that we should not assume the biblical numbers were a late invention or addition to the text. Rather, numbers and counting came before writing. And there is evidence that the first item that was counted by human beings was time.¹⁹ This cannot be proved or disproved, but it seems to make sense that an agricultural society would need to keep track of phases of the moon, or seasons of the year. So, the biblical writers were innately familiar with the use of numbers to record things like the number of years in a reign, or the lifespan of an

¹⁶ See the illustrations in Englund, “Accounting in Proto-Cuneiform,” 39-40.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 41-44.

¹⁸ Friberg, “Numbers and Counting,” 1140; O. Neugebauer, and A. Sachs, eds., *Mathematical Cuneiform Texts*, American Oriental Series, vol. 29 (New Haven, CT: American Schools of Oriental Research, 1945), 2.

¹⁹ Schmandt-Besserat, *Before Writing*, 160-61.

important person. We should not automatically assume that a biblical number was invented or chosen at random.

We should also bear in mind, when reading biblical lifespans, that the text is a symbolic representation of two elements: the number of items (e.g., 175), and the item being counted (e.g., years). Each one of these elements needs to be examined as to whether it held a deeper or a different meaning than that in it does in our modern society.

This is not to argue against the use of round numbers, hyperbolic numbers, and the symbolic use of numbers in various ways. The biblical writers clearly use numbers in these ways, which will be discussed later. Nor does this discount the possibility of textual corruption. That also seems to have happened to the biblical text (e.g., 1 Sam 13:1). But none of these uses of numbers negatively impacts the inerrancy of the text. What I am arguing is that it seems unlikely that the writer of Genesis would have inserted meaningless numbers into his text. His meaning may not have been the same as a modern writer, but we should initially assume there was a purpose behind the numbers used in the lifespans of the patriarchs.

Mathematical Knowledge and Use

The recording of numbers of items occurred around the middle to late fourth millennium BC and was followed by the earliest common writing system for both words and numbers around 3000 BC. Records of multiplication, division, and squares have been found dating to the mid-third millennium BC,²⁰ and the earliest record of the place

²⁰ Friberg, "Numbers and Counting," 1140.

notation system occurs ca. 2000 BC. However, more complex teaching of mathematical principles did not occur in Mesopotamia until well into the MB II (ca. 1700 BC).²¹

Egyptian mathematics was not quite so advanced. Evidence shows that the Egyptian hieroglyphic script developed after the development of writing in Mesopotamia, but it included symbols for large numbers. The Egyptians used the decimal rather than the sexagesimal system and had symbols for 1, 10, 100, 1,000, etc. In addition to the hieroglyphic script, Egypt used the cursive hieratic script for everyday business, which included symbols for 1-9, 10-90, 100-900, etc. However, the Egyptians never used the place value notation system, so each number had to be written out using unique symbols for large numbers (like Roman numerals, e.g., 1964 = MCMLXIV). The Egyptians did use simple fractions, in some cases represented by parts of the eye of Horus, the falcon god. And multiplication was achieved by the use of doubling and addition of factors of a number. This process could be reversed for division.²² Compared to later Babylonian mathematics, Egyptian mathematical calculations seem crude yet effective for their administrative needs.

The Ebla texts from the EB III (ca. 2500 BC) reveal a mathematical system that used a hybrid decimal/sexagesimal system in the Sumerian cuneiform script. The Mari texts (ca. 1800 BC) show a similar hybrid system of decimal and sexagesimal notation. The culture with records closest to the time when Moses wrote the Torah is from Ugarit. Records thus far discovered from Ugarit also demonstrate usage of the sexagesimal system borrowed from Mesopotamia. The Ugarit cuneiform script goes back

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., 1141.

as far as the fourteenth century BC, whereas the first known alphabetic script—the Phoenician alphabet, the precursor to Hebrew—only goes back as far as the twelfth century BC, although it appears that the Ugarit cuneiform script of thirty letters may have been an expansion of a Northwest Semitic alphabetic script of twenty-two letters dating to the fifteenth century BC.²³

Mathematical Knowledge and Use in the Torah

What does this mean for the Hebrew Bible? The approximate date that early records written by Mesopotamian scribes that may have been used in the composition of Genesis is between ~2500 BC and ~2000 BC (cf. the Gilgamesh Epic and the Sumerian King List). Evidence for the Mesopotamian origin of this material is seen in the use of geographical and tribal names (e.g., Harran, Nahor) with parallels in the Mari tablets.²⁴ Assuming this to be the case, Abraham and his family might have carried the antediluvian and postdiluvian genealogies (in either written or oral form) to Canaan. These ancient lists, along with the stories of the patriarchs in Canaan would likely have been the source material that Moses used when compiling the Torah in either the fifteenth or thirteenth century BC.²⁵

The fact that the numbers in the Genesis genealogies and the patriarchal lifespans are not normal face-value numbers actually argues for an ancient origin to the

²³ Ibid., 1142.

²⁴ Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis: Part II, From Noah to Abraham*. trans. Israel Abrahams, 1st English ed. (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1964), 252.

²⁵ See chapter five.

text.²⁶ We know that records from the monarchy and exile used face-value numbers in recording lifespans and the reigns of kings. There is no evidence that anyone used these numbers to construct a chronology as early as the monarchy, but they did use face-value numbers in their records.²⁷ Chronological speculation occurred much later than the monarchy—after the third century BC. So, the fact that the Genesis genealogies do not seem to use face-value numbers, and were not used to construct a chronology argues for an ancient origin for these genealogical lists. The marked tendency of ancient scribes was meticulously to copy texts word for word, even when they did not fully understand the content.²⁸ There does not seem to be any motive for a scribe during post-exilic period or later to invent such numbers out of whole cloth when that practice went against the use of numbers in own culture.

Assuming the Torah would have been written in the Late Bronze Age, Moses would have certainly had access to mathematical operations such as multiplication tables. But, the authors of the Hebrew Bible seem to show relative disinterest in using complex mathematical operations. There is the famous example of subtraction when Abraham intercedes for Sodom (Gen 18:28-33), and there is addition in the Genesis 5 genealogy of course. The Torah includes other examples of addition (Num 11:26), multiplication (Lev 25:8, Num 7:84-86), and division (Num 31:27). It is also clear the biblical writers

²⁶ Steven Collins, “Tall el-Hammam Is Still Sodom: Critical Data-Sets Cast Serious Doubt on E. H. Merrill’s Chronological Analysis,” *Biblical Research Bulletin* 8, no. 1 (2013), 12.

²⁷ Edwin R. Thiele, *The Mysterious Numbers of the Hebrew Kings*, new rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983).

²⁸ Hans Jörg Nissen, Peter Damerow, and Robert K. Englund, *Archaic Bookkeeping: Early Writing and Techniques of Economic Administration in the Ancient Near East* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 110.

understood simple fractions (Gen 47:24), and sometimes used parts of the human body to express fractions (e.g., $\frac{7}{4}$ in Gen 43:34). But their interest seemed to be limited to the practical results of these operations, not the mathematical calculations themselves. In a later example the writer of Kings seemed perfectly content to express the value of π simply as three (1 Kgs 7:23).²⁹

What About Gematria?

It also does not appear that any of the Old Testament authors used the later Greek-inspired system of assigning numbers to the letters of the alphabet—gematria. Despite the claims of Casper Labuschagne,³⁰ there is no evidence that the Hebrew language used letters as numerical values prior to the Maccabean era (ca. second century BC).³¹ It is true that the Masoretes counted verses and words in the manuscripts they copied,³² but this occurred hundreds of years after the text was composed and holds little relevance. It is also true that Rabbinic and Kabbalistic writings make use of gematria,³³ but again these efforts occurred several hundred years later and hardly seem pertinent.

Of course there are acrostic poems such as Psalm 37, Proverbs 31:10-31, Psalm 119, and the book of Lamentations. But these do not constitute evidence that the writers ever assigned numbers to letters to make certain numbers correspond to

²⁹ Abrahams, “Numbers, Typical and Important,” 333.

³⁰ C. J. Labuschagne, *Numerical Secrets of the Bible: Rediscovering the Bible Codes* (North Richland Hills, TX: BIBAL Press, 2000), 90, 93.

³¹ Davis, *Biblical Numerology*, 38-39; Abrahams, “Numbers, Typical and Important,” 334; Friberg, “Numbers and Counting,” 1143.

³² Labuschagne, *Numerical Secrets of the Bible*, 7-12.

³³ Gershom Scholem, *Kabbalah* (New York: New American Library, 1974), 337-43.

meaningful words or names. In the New Testament gematria seems to be behind the famous number 666 (Rev 13:18), and it Matthew’s arrangement of Jesus’ genealogy around David (Matt 1:17). The first documented use of gematria is from the eighth century BC reign of Sargon II of Assyria. The Sargon Inscription states, “the king built the wall of Khorsabad 16,283 cubits long to correspond with the numerical value of his name.”³⁴ This number is actually expressed in sexagesimal notation, and seems to correspond to a complex cryptogram of Sargon expressed in a hybrid sexagesimal/decimal system.³⁵ In the Old Testament some believe the 375 proverbs of Solomon (Prov 10:1-22:16) correspond to the letters of Solomon’s name (שְׁלֹמֹה), or that the phrase “sons of Israel” (בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל) adds up to 603—the approximate number in thousands of Israelites who left Egypt (Num 2:32).³⁶ But these examples are far from convincing, and even if accepted they seem to bear little relevance to the composition of Genesis.³⁷

This fact deals a serious blow to those scholars who use the numerical values of letters to find a “code” in the text. Even if one were to admit the possibility of gematria, there is no evidence of it being used in the Torah. One wonders how the author

³⁴ Daniel David Luckenbill, *Ancient Records of Assyria and Babylonia*, vol. 2 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1927), 43, 65.

³⁵ Friberg, “Numbers and Counting,” 1144.

³⁶ However, Labuschagne adds up this same phrase to a total of 153, which he believes corresponds to the number of fish caught in John 21:11, and the number of Hebrew words in the acrostic Psalms 111 and 112 added together. Labuschagne, *Numerical Secrets of the Bible*, 12-13.

³⁷ Ronald B. Allen, *Numbers*, Expositor’s Bible Commentary, ed. Tremper Longman III, and David E. Garland, vol. 2: Numbers–Ruth, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2012), 61.

of Genesis expected his readers to apply this esoteric technique only to the extended lifespans when such a technique is neither attested nor indicated elsewhere.³⁸

Perhaps a more fruitful avenue for investigation will be to examine the functions and procedures used in ancient genealogies.

Comparisons with Oral Genealogies,

Recent studies on Old Testament genealogies have focused on two comparisons. The first comparison is with the oral genealogies in tribal societies. Since oral genealogies, by definition, are not written down this means that the only tribal societies that can be studied are those still existing in the current era. The second comparison has been with other ancient Near East genealogies, particularly ancient King Lists. We will first examine the comparisons with oral genealogies, and then those with ancient Near East King Lists below.

Robert Wilson points out there have been three genealogical forms used throughout history to express kinship and descent.³⁹ All three forms are present in Genesis: there are linear genealogies (e.g., Gen 5), segmented genealogies (e.g., Gen 36), and genealogical narrative (e.g., Gen 29-31).

One early influence in the application of oral genealogies to the Old Testament is that of André Jolles in his book, published in 1929, *Einfache Formen*

³⁸ Of course, advocates of gematria claim to see many examples in the Torah. But these seem, to this writer, to rest on a foundation of speculated assumptions. Labuschagne, *Numerical Secrets of the Bible*, 89-91, 98-99; Claus Schedl, *History of the Old Testament*, vol. 1 (Staten Island, NY: Alba House, 1972. Orig. *Geschichte des Alten Testaments*, Innsbruck, Austria: Tyrolia-Verlag, 1964), 221.

³⁹ Robert R. Wilson, *Genealogy and History in the Biblical World*, Yale Near Eastern Researches, ed. William W. Hallo, Marvin H. Pope and William K. Simpson, vol. 7 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1977), 9.

(Simple Forms).⁴⁰ Of the nine forms Jolles identified in primitive societies, the most important for the study of the Pentateuch was that of Saga (German: *Sage*).⁴¹ He based his study on Norse family sagas from Iceland in the fourteenth century AD, which he believed arose from oral traditions going back to the tenth and eleventh centuries AD.⁴² Although not a biblical scholar, Jolles devoted two pages of his book to the patriarchal narratives in Genesis, which he likened to Norse family sagas.⁴³ His findings were influential in the writings of biblical scholars such as Gerhard von Rad, and Claus Westermann.⁴⁴ However, several tenuous assumptions behind these theories have led to them being regarded with suspicion. Jolles's hypothesis that the Icelandic family sagas arose from oral traditions has never been proven, or fully accepted; thus the application of the same model to the patriarchal narratives seems doomed from the start.⁴⁵

In fact, the attempt to compare oral genealogies of tribes living in modern times, even Middle Eastern tribes, with tribes in ancient Israel is beset with several methodological problems. The first question concerns the validity of comparing tribal genealogies in the modern era to those of any ancient culture. Even if the biblical

⁴⁰ André Jolles, and Peter J. Schwartz, *Simple Forms: Legend, Saga, Myth, Riddle, Saying, Case, Memorable, Fairytale, Joke*, English ed. (New York: Verso, 2017. Orig. *Einfache Formen*, 1929).

⁴¹ On the many problems that have arisen in translating the German word *Sage* see Patricia G. Kirkpatrick, *The Old Testament and Folklore Study*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament: Supplement series, vol. 62 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1988), 75-76.

⁴² R. N. Whybray, *The Making of the Pentateuch: A Methodological Study*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament, ed. David J. A. Clines and Philip R. Davies, vol. 53 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1989), 153.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 153-54.

⁴⁴ Claus Westermann, *Genesis 12-36: A Commentary*, trans. John J. Scullion (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1985), 50-56.

⁴⁵ Whybray, *The Making of the Pentateuch*, 156-58; Kirkpatrick, *The Old Testament and Folklore Study*, 83-84.

genealogies were tribal genealogies—which has not been established—what basis is there to assume all tribal genealogies are analogous? Second, unless one invests years of time studying a tribal culture first-hand, one is forced to rely on second-hand observations recorded by anthropologists. There is no guarantee an anthropologist has collected enough data, collected it systematically, or correctly understood the cultural forms. And there are few, if any, checks to prevent an anthropologist from forcing the data he does collect to fit his own hypothesis. Lastly, the linear evolutionary assumption that simple forms and oral traditions always precede and lead to complex forms and written records has not been shown to be valid.⁴⁶

Obviously the biblical scholar cannot observe the ancient Israelite society and see the function of genealogies within it. He must work from secondary material in the texts of the Bible and other contemporaneous cultures. So, speculation of an oral *Vorlage* behind a written genealogy must be stated very cautiously. There simply is no evidence other than the text itself.

However, oral genealogies do possess several defining characteristics that may help us to understand the genealogical material in Genesis. Oral genealogies are usually segmented genealogies, with significant breadth, but limited depth—perhaps only a few generations.⁴⁷ The reason for this is clear. An oral genealogy helps a member of a tribe to know where he fits within the tribe at the present time. Thus he will want to know his siblings, cousins, parents, and grandparents, but will be less interested in the preceding generations. Tribes do occasionally keep linear genealogies of ancient ancestors, usually

⁴⁶ Ibid., 73.

⁴⁷ Wilson, *Genealogy and History*, 19-20.

tracing back to a significant ancestor or tribal founder. But these too are limited in depth, usually no more than ten generations. Again, the reason for this is self-explanatory. Oral genealogies, by definition, are limited by human memory.⁴⁸ A list of ten names can be remembered somewhat easily, but past that limit accuracy will deteriorate. Depth is the limiting characteristic of linear genealogies, and breadth is the limiting characteristic of segmented genealogies.

Oral genealogies, especially segmented genealogies, are also marked by what Wilson terms “fluidity.”⁴⁹ Lineages may change based on changing family or power structures, or based on a different function for the genealogy. Capricious changes cannot be made to a genealogy without the agreement of the group, and thus invented connections are rare and are usually resisted by the group.⁵⁰ Even when there seems to be evidence of manipulation, it seems to be due to poor memory and not deliberate falsification.⁵¹ Wilson states that oral genealogies “are frequently reliable statements of the domestic, political, and religious relationships recognized by the people who use the genealogies.”⁵²

However, he recognizes three types of fluidity in genealogies. The most common change is telescoping; the shortening of a lineage by removing names that serve no function. People may be forgotten because they were childless, not significant, or were perhaps an embarrassment to the tribe. Usually the first and last names in a series will be

⁴⁸ Ibid., 21.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 27.

⁵⁰ Ibid., 27-28.

⁵¹ Ibid., 200.

⁵² Ibid., 55.

remembered, but names in the middle can be lost easily.⁵³ For example, people today can remember President Washington and President Obama, but cannot name all the Presidents in between. Sometimes a descendant may be named after an important ancestor, and then the names can get confused. Another change can be the addition of names because of natural means (birth or adoption), or to reflect a new family or power structure.⁵⁴ Lastly, the order of names, or the relationships described, may change based on the function of the genealogy. For example a father may be listed as a brother to reflect his relative unimportance compared with that of his children.⁵⁵

The Bible itself shows how some of these changes can occur. 1 Chronicles 1:1 condenses all of Genesis 5 down to a bare list of names. (Also compare 1 Chronicles 1:24-27 with Genesis 11.) Of course the author of Chronicles is presuming his readers know and have access to the Torah.⁵⁶ But it is easy to see that if a reader only had access to Chronicles, the actual relationships between the actors could be lost or confused.

Both oral and written genealogies seem to function in only three spheres or domains.⁵⁷ In the domestic or familial domain a genealogy may support family relationships and social order, establish privileges, responsibilities, or roles, and settle inheritance or intermarriage issues. In the politico-jural domain a genealogy can ensure political stability, or establish legal authority and provide law enforcement mechanisms.

⁵³ Ibid., 33. The most obvious Old Testament example of telescoping is in the comparison between the genealogies of Moses (four generations, Exod 6:16-20) and his successor Joshua (eleven generations, 1 Chr 7:22-27).

⁵⁴ Ibid., 31-32.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 30-31.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 180.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 37-45.

Lastly, in the religious or cultic domain a genealogy may regulate an ancestor cult, establish divine kingship, or sanction priestly offices (e.g., the Levites). Of course there is often overlap of these functions, and a genealogy may change when it is used for a new function. For example, a portion of a genealogy may be quoted or remembered in family disputes, but a different portion of the same genealogy may be used for political or religious uses. Wilson even notes examples of conflicting oral genealogies existing at the same time with each one considered accurate within its domain.⁵⁸

However once a genealogy is written down, any genealogical change is almost impossible, and the genealogy remains fixed to the function it was recorded for.⁵⁹ When a King List is written down, it becomes the de facto standard for that royal lineage. Other genealogies may be added to it, but it ceases to function, for example, in the domestic sphere. Although genealogies are not recorded specifically for historiographical purposes, they are “considered to be accurate statements of past domestic, political, and religious relationships.”⁶⁰ In fact, it is this historical accuracy which gives a genealogy the power to function in the society. “Only the fact that genealogies are considered to be accurate historical records permits them to be used as charters.”⁶¹

Comparisons with Ancient King Lists

If the author of Genesis may have compiled his account by using oral or written sources, which we have no access to; and if he did not use gematria or a mystical

⁵⁸ Ibid., 46-47.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 47, 55.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 54, 200.

⁶¹ Ibid., 55.

intertwining of names and numbers; and if he could have used accurate numbers and mathematical formulae, neither of which he seems inclined to do; then what were the common ancient rules and regulations for the numerical recording of lifespans of important historical people?

To find that out, we must look at other ancient King Lists.

Sumerian King List

There are several extant versions or fragments of the Sumerian King List (SKL); one of the earliest and most complete is the Weld-Blundell Prism (WB 444, ca. 1817 BC) along with an associated small clay tablet (WB 62, ca. 2000 BC).⁶² Thorkild Jacobsen originally dated the composition of the SKL to one compiler who used both historical and legendary accounts during the reign of Utu-heĝal, just prior to the beginning of the Ur III dynasty (ca. 2100–2000 BC).⁶³ More recent discoveries have led to the suggestion that there may have been an even earlier version of the SKL written during Sargon's reign (ca. 2300 BC).⁶⁴ Either way, it appears that the composition of the SKL precedes the writing of Genesis by 500–800 years at least, and it purports to cover historical kingships that extend back to the beginning of their society.

⁶² The original critical text was published in Thorkild Jacobsen, *The Sumerian King List*, Assyriological Studies, ed. John Albert Wilson and Thomas George Allen, vol. 11 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1939). An updated critical text is available online as both a translation (t.21.1) and a transliteration (c.2.1.1) at “The Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature,” <http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk> (accessed April 28, 2016).

⁶³ Jacobsen, *Sumerian King List*, 140-141, 202-204.

⁶⁴ Jöran Friberg, *A Remarkable Collection of Babylonian Mathematical Texts: Manuscripts in the Schøyen Collection, Cuneiform Texts I*, Sources and Studies in the History of Mathematics and Physical Sciences, ed. J. Z. Buchwald, J. Lützen, and J. Hogendijk (New York: Springer, 2007), 232-33.

The Antediluvian Section of the SKL and Genesis Five

There are three sections of the SKL that relate to the current discussion. The antediluvian section seems to have been a later addition to the text, probably an incorporation of much earlier, well known, possibly oral traditions,⁶⁵ and features ancestors with lifespans that range somewhere around 36,000 years.⁶⁶ Thorkild Jacobsen says, “That the immense reigns are unhistorical is obvious. Their occurrence in our material must be ascribed to a tendency known also among other peoples of antiquity to form very exaggerated ideas of the length of human life in the earliest of times of which they were conscious.”⁶⁷ His conclusion is that there is no reason to doubt the historicity of the list of kings, but that the “legendary” reigns should be replaced with a normal length for the reign of a king.⁶⁸

Accordingly, some attempt to find a common factor that would yield accurate, or at least reasonable, lengths for the reigns of these ancient kings. Gerd Steiner was able to formulate a table of reasonable antediluvian reigns for all the different versions of the SKL by using the factors of 1600 (40x40), then forty, and then twelve.⁶⁹ However, his rationale seems somewhat arbitrary. He stated, “Als ein derartiger konstituierender Faktor beitet sich die Zahl 40 an. Sie entspricht dem Zeitraum von 40 Jahren, der sich, wenn auch nur durch vereinzelte Indizien, für den Bereich des Alten Orients als abstrakte

⁶⁵ Jacobsen, *Sumerian King List*, 61-64.

⁶⁶ See Table 1 in Appendix C.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 166.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 167-68.

⁶⁹ Gerd Steiner, “Der ‘reale Kern’ in den ‘legendären’ Zahlen von Regierungsjahren der ältesten Herrscher Mesopotamiens,” *Acta Sumerologica* 10 (1988): 139-44.

Dauer einer 'Generation' nachweisen läßt.⁷⁰ One wonders whether he started with the calculation that produced the desired numbers before finding a rationale that fit.

Similarly, K. A. Kitchen applied the sexagesimal system to the SKL to show that the extremely long reigns are all divisible by 600 (10x60) or 60 (1x60). The resulting calculations reveal perfectly reasonable lengths for the reigns of these ancient kings. His conclusion was that the author or editor of the SKL vastly increased the length of the ancient king's reigns by multiplying known reigns by either 600, or 60.⁷¹

However, both of these attempts perform calculations on the decimal equivalents of numbers that were originally recorded as factors of 3600 (60x60), or 60.⁷² The SKL was written using the Sumerian symbols (numerals) that increased in multiples of 6, 10, or 60, as summarized below.⁷³

$$1 = diš$$

$$10 = (1 \times 10) = u$$

$$60 = (10 \times 6) = geš$$

$$600 = (60 \times 10) = gešu$$

$$3,600 = (600 \times 6) = šar$$

$$36,000 = (3,600 \times 10) = šaru$$

⁷⁰ “The number 40 can be used as a constituent factor. It corresponds to the period of 40 years, which can be shown to be the abstract duration of a ‘generation’ by occasional evidence from the region of the ancient Near East.” Ibid., 131.

⁷¹ K. A. Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 445-46.

⁷² Friberg, *Remarkable Collection*, 236-38.

⁷³ Christine Proust, “Numerical and Metrological Graphemes: From Cuneiform to Transliteration,” *Cuneiform Digital Library Journal*, http://cdli.ucla.edu/pubs/cdlj/2009/cdlj2009_001.html (accessed Apr 28, 2016), 12.

Thus the reign of the first king, Alulim, was recorded on WB 444 as 8 *šar*.

The reign of the last king in this section, Ubara-Tutu, was listed on WB 444 as 5 *šar* and 10 *geš*. Ignorance of this point has led to some problems. R. K. Harrison began with the decimal equivalents of the sexagesimal numbers recorded on the SKL, which he then divided by 3,600 (1 *šar*) to find the “rational numbers depicting the length of royal reigns in those ancient chronological tables.” In fact he had simply reversed the conversion of the original cuneiform numerals to decimals equivalents. His conclusions for the “actual reigns” were simply the original numbers inscribed on the Weld-Blundell Prism.⁷⁴

Although the original readers of this list knew to multiply the numeral by 3600, since the word *šar* was inscribed on the tablet, there is no indication that they would then assume they should divide by 1600 (40x40 according to Steiner) or 600 (10x60 according to Kitchen), or reverse the process and divide by 3600 (according to Harrison) to find the “real” length of the king’s reign. Nor is there any evidence that they were interested in doing so, which leads us to another complicating factor.

The factor that is often overlooked in these mathematical calculations is the existence of several different versions with significant variations in the numbers—and names—listed.⁷⁵ Using form-critical methods to attempt a reconstruction of a hypothetical original autograph do not seem to yield helpful results. Rather, this seems to demonstrate that the original readers were not as interested in accurate historical recording as much as they were committed to remembering and honoring their ancient ancestors. Jöran Friberg

⁷⁴ R. K. Harrison, “Reinvestigating the Antediluvian Sumerian King List,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 36, no. 1 (1993): 3-8.

⁷⁵ The figures in Table 1 in Appendix C are a simplification of the table in Friberg, *Remarkable Collection*, 240.

sees these different versions as part of “a popular and long lived oral tradition, with the lengths of the reigns imperfectly remembered, but always in the range of the *sar* because of a natural fascination with big numbers.”⁷⁶

We have discussed the fact that numbers, counting, and mathematics were known and used in ancient cultures. People in Sumeria from all stations in life would have been very comfortable using accurate calculations in their livelihood and their family, if nothing else. In certain cases—like trade or the numbering of a flock of sheep—accuracy was paramount.⁷⁷ In other cases—like the days in a cycle of the moon, the size of a village, or the length of a season—round numbers would have been preferable. In religious settings there were certain sacred numbers—like three, or seven. In other cases—propaganda about one’s kingdom to an enemy—hyperbole was expected. This idea is expressed well by Olmstead,

The Assyrians, as their business documents show, could be exceedingly exact with numbers. But this exactness did not extend to their historical inscriptions. We could forgive them for giving us in round numbers the total of enemies slain or of booty carried off and even a slight exaggeration would be pardonable. But what shall we say as to the accuracy of numbers in our documents when one edition gives the total slain in battle as 14,000, another as 20,500, the next as 25,000, and the last as 29,000!⁷⁸

Ancient people were just as familiar as we are with a normal human lifespan; they knew people did not live for 36,000 years. They knew how to interpret these

⁷⁶ Ibid., 242.

⁷⁷ See, for example, these tablets recording the receipt of donkeys, sheep and goats from a Central Livestock Bureau in a twenty-first century BC Mesopotamia town. The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, “Clay Tablets from the Central Livestock Bureau,” http://mesopotamia.lib.uchicago.edu/learningcollection/search.php?lcid=56&&a_theme=Mathematics%20and%20Measurement (accessed Oct 26, 2016).

⁷⁸ A. T. Olmstead, *Assyrian Historiography: A Source Study*, Social Science Series, vol. 3, no. 1 (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri, 1916), 7-8.

numbers without the need for a lesson in mathematics. They also knew there had been a lot more people living—and more kings reigning—before the flood. So this genealogy seems to have been a way to remember and honor important ancient ancestors, and to communicate the long time frame they knew existed before the flood.

The clearest biblical parallel to this is, of course, the antediluvian list of ten ancestors in Genesis 5, all with lifespans close to 1000 years.⁷⁹ Umberto Cassuto points out that these excessively high ages would actually would have appeared excessively low when contrasted with the mythical epics recorded in the Babylonian traditions. Thus, Cassuto believes the writer of Genesis was seeking to bring an element of reality to these figures. Yes, there were men living before the flood, but they were not kings, they did not live thousands of years, and the years they did live demonstrate the symmetry and harmony the original readers would have expected from the God who created the world.⁸⁰ He also seems to have been the first to demonstrate that all the ages in Genesis 5 (and indeed throughout the book of Genesis, as we shall study later), “can be grouped under two heads: (a) multiples of *five*, ... (b) multiples of *five* with the addition of *seven*. Now a lustrum [five years] is part of the sexagesimal system, since it comprises *sixty months*.”⁸¹

Kitchen reversed Cassuto’s formula for the ages in Genesis 5. He subtracted seven where appropriate (or 7+7 in the case of Methuselah’s lifespan) and divided each number by five. This resulted in reasonable ages for procreation, but still unreasonably high ages at death. Kitchen is quick to point out that this is mere speculation, and should

⁷⁹ Enoch’s lifespan of 365 is a noted exception, explained in the text (Gen 5:24).

⁸⁰ Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis: Part I, From Adam to Noah*, trans. Israel Abrahams. 1st English ed. (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1961), 260-264.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 257-260. Italics in the original.

be treated as such.⁸² But there is another way to see the scheme in the antediluvian ages. Since five years are sixty months, each age can be expressed as a factor of sixty years and sixty months, with the occasional addition of seven. Table 1 in Appendix E shows how this scheme can account for all the ages in Genesis 5. The same scheme can also account for the patriarchal ages (see Table 3, Appendix E) and other extraordinary lifespans in the Bible (Table 4, Appendix E).

John Walton attempted to show that the SKL and the list of ten distant ancestors in Genesis 5 could have both come from the same source. He postulated an original list using numerical units that later scribes did not understand. Thus each unit was thought to be 3,600 in the sexagesimal system used by the Sumerians, and 100 in the decimal system used by the writer of Genesis.⁸³ Although this theory seems to account for the difference between the two lists, it relies too much on round numbers and does not seem to provide useful information. It does not answer why these two lists should be related to one source, nor does it help us reconstruct what the original list of ages was. However, it seems interesting that the SKL antediluvian lifespans are associated with 3,600 (60x60), and the Hebrew antediluvian lifespans are associated with 1000 (10x10).

Although there are significant differences between the SKL and Genesis 5, there are similarities as well, including the existence of variant readings of the ages

⁸² Kitchen, *Reliability of the OT*, 445-47. Noah does not fit this scheme—he would have fathered his first child at 100 and lived to 190.

⁸³ John H. Walton, “The Antediluvian Section of the Sumerian King List and Genesis 5,” *Biblical Archaeologist* 44, no. 4 (1981): 207-08.

listed.⁸⁴ Could the same principles apply here? Could it be that this was an oral tradition of the pre-flood ancestors designed to remember their names and give them honor rather than to record their actual ages? In such a case, a memory aid such as lifespans that are a combination of sixty years and sixty months, and the use of the sacred number seven, might serve worthwhile functions.

Like the SKL, the genealogy in Genesis 5 may have been used to express the extremely long timeframe that people knew there was before the flood. Ancient authors did not have the ability to talk about millennia, or refer to absolute dates as we do. They could not relate the life of an ancestor to the “Early Bronze Age.” Instead they used the only measuring system they knew—relative lifespans of people. How could they show what they knew was an excessively long time between the flood, their ancestors, and their present day, other than assigning vast lifespans to the ancestors they knew about?⁸⁵

As discussed above, biblical writers do not demonstrate a marked interest in mathematical computations. Certainly Hebrews in the Late Bronze Age, like the earlier Sumerians, would have known when to use arithmetic numbers, when to use round numbers, when to use sacred numbers, and when to use hyperbole. But, as evidenced by assigning π the value of three, one cannot argue that numerical accuracy was a major concern in the Old Testament.

⁸⁴ Eugene H. Merrill, “Chronology,” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 115.

⁸⁵ Kitchen, *Reliability of the OT*, 444-45.

The Postdiluvian Section of the SKL and Genesis 11

In the sections of the SKL following the flood there seems to be a different dynamic at work in the recording of the king's reigns. Several dynasties are listed, with the earliest reigns numbering in the hundreds of years—longer than normal human longevity, but not nearly as exaggerated as the antediluvian list. Then the length of reigns reduces over time until it reaches normal reasonable number of years. This occurs for the dynasties of Kish I, Uruk I, Ur I, Awan, Kish II, Hamazi, Uruk II, Ur II, and Adab.⁸⁶ The usual explanation is that the compiler of this section of the SKL invented these numbers to bridge two gaps—from the hyperbolic lifespans of the ancestors to mortal humans, and the many years from the flood to his present day.

However, Dwight Young has applied the mathematical exercises from the Old Babylonian period (late IBA and MBA)⁸⁷ to the lifespans in the First Dynasty of Kish. He believes he can account for most, if not all of the numbers used in this section of the SKL.⁸⁸ Young is also comfortable with the use of these Babylonian mathematical exercises by the author of Genesis because he believes Genesis was compiled during the sixth century BC in Babylonia. His proposal is that, “A writer working with early genealogies or dynastic lists which are deficient in numerical data might incorporate numbers learned from basic mathematical problems. In this way he could attribute

⁸⁶ Jacobsen, *Sumerian King List*, 77-103.

⁸⁷ Neugebauer and Sachs, eds., “Mathematical Cuneiform Texts,” 1, n. 4.

⁸⁸ Dwight W. Young, “The Sexagesimal Basis for the Total Years of the Antediluvian and Postdiluvian Epochs,” *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 116, no. 4 (2004): 502-527.

fantastic longevity to the ancients named in his sources and set the length of longer periods of time.”⁸⁹

The genealogy in Genesis 11 exhibits a very similar structure. It is assumed by many that the author of the P source simply invented these numbers for similar reasons that the author of the postdiluvian section of the SKL did.⁹⁰ The author seems to be highlighting the downward spiral of humanity from its lofty beginning until hope arrives in the person of Abraham. Speiser calls these lifespan numbers “transparently schematic,” but he says, “If any particular system of computation was employed in arriving at these figures, its nature is no longer apparent.”⁹¹

Dwight Young would disagree. As with the SKL, he believes the author of Genesis 11 used common Babylonian mathematical exercises to fashion these lifespan numbers.⁹² But we are faced with the same problems here as with both the antediluvian list, and the later patriarchs. The lifespans are too high to be factual, and the presence of round numbers and special numbers suggests a pattern. But complex mathematical calculations as Young suggests seem out of place in the narrative of Genesis. Surely the author of Genesis would have given some examples of such mathematical genius at some other point in the book if he intended for his readers to recognize it here. We should also note that our proposed scheme of sixty years and sixty months can account for over half, but not all of the ages in Genesis 11. It seems clear there is another dynamic at work.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 23.

⁹⁰ Donald V. Etz, “The Numbers of Genesis 5:3–31: A Suggested Conversion and Its Implications,” *Vetus Testamentum* 43, no. 2 (1993): 182, 185.

⁹¹ E. A. Speiser, *Genesis: Introduction, Translation, and Notes*, Anchor Bible, vol. 1 (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1964), 80.

⁹² Young, “Sexagesimal Basis,” 515-22.

The Assyrian King List and the Genealogy of Hammurapi Dynasty

The Assyrian King List (AKL) is supported by two cuneiform tablets⁹³ and two fragments and seems to have been compiled in the MB II (ca. seventeenth century BC), although the extant copies date from the eleventh and the eighth centuries BC⁹⁴ The AKL does not mention any pre-flood or post-flood ancestors, but traces its lineage back to an ancient group of “Seventeen Kings who lived in tents.”

No lifespans or reigns are given in the first section of the AKL, however some of the names are the same as tribal names, and these same names appear in the first section of the Genealogy of the Hammurapi Dynasty (GHD),⁹⁵ usually appearing as two names combined.⁹⁶ The next section contains “ten kings who are ancestors,” which appears in reverse order and seems to be the lineage of Šamšhi-Adad I, suggesting the initial motivation behind the AKL was to support his right to rule.⁹⁷ After the next short section of “six kings whose eponyms are not known,” the AKL continues with a long list of kings from the beginning of the second millennium BC down to the reign of Shalmaneser V (eighth century BC).

⁹³ Ignace J. Gelb, “Two Assyrian King Lists,” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 13, no. 4 (1954): 209-230.

⁹⁴ Jean-Jacques Glassner, *Mesopotamian Chronicles*, trans. Jean-Jacques Glassner, ed. Benjamin R. Foster, *Writings from the Ancient World*, ed. Theodore J. Lewis, vol. 19 (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2004. Orig. *Chroniques Mésopotamiennes*, Paris: Les Belles Lettres, 1993), 136.

⁹⁵ Jacob J. Finkelstein, “The Genealogy of the Hammurapi Dynasty,” *Journal of Cuneiform Studies* 20, no. 3-4 (1966): 95-118.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 97-99.

⁹⁷ Robert R. Wilson, “The Old Testament Genealogies in Recent Research,” in *I Studied Inscriptions from Before the Flood: Ancient Near Eastern, Literary, and Linguistic Approaches to Genesis 1–11*, Sources for Biblical and Theological Study, ed. Richard S. Hess and David Toshio Tsumura (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1994), 217.

In this section, the lengths of the king's reigns are recorded and they all appear to be normal and acceptable numbers. However, there are several "fictions"⁹⁸ or examples of "fluidity"⁹⁹ in this section, just as there seems to be some "dislocation"¹⁰⁰ evident in the second section detailing the line of Šamšhi-Adad I. Robert Wilson explains that the form of a genealogy followed its function. Just as the function of legitimizing the reign of Šamšhi-Adad I required some creative genealogy editing, so the function of tracing the lineage of kings in the last section meant that the compiler "sometimes imposed the father-son relationship on names to which it did not actually apply, but seen in the context of the function of the AKL, the genealogy is accurate."¹⁰¹ It also seems that later scribes created different versions of the AKL, or made additions to the genealogy in order to fulfill other functions.¹⁰²

Both the AKL and the GHD antedate the biblical genealogies by hundreds of years with their composition being dated to the eighteenth (AKL) and seventeenth (GHD) centuries BC.¹⁰³ This shows that the biblical genealogies used a preexisting archetypal form in their construction.¹⁰⁴ The format seems to favor the hypothesis that these

⁹⁸ Kenton L. Sparks, *Ancient Texts for the Study of the Hebrew Bible: A Guide to the Background Literature* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2005), 349.

⁹⁹ Wilson, "Old Testament Genealogies," 216.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 217.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 216.

¹⁰² Sparks, *Ancient Texts*, 350.

¹⁰³ Abraham Malamat, "King Lists of the Old Babylonian Period and Biblical Genealogies," in *I Studied Inscriptions from Before the Flood: Ancient Near Eastern, Literary, and Linguistic Approaches to Genesis 1–11*, Sources for Biblical and Theological Study, ed. Richard S. Hess and David Toshio Tsumura (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1994), 185.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

genealogies were designed for easy memorization as a way to honor ancient ancestors and explain a tribe's relationship to its neighbors. Finkelstein suggested that these names were part of an orally transmitted "desert chant" that was later incorporated into the GHD to provide an ostensibly historical basis for tribal traditions.¹⁰⁵

Abraham Malamat proposed that ancient genealogies, including the AKL, the GHD, and the biblical genealogies, were built upon a structure of four successive groups.¹⁰⁶ The first groups he labels the "Genealogical Stock" which is a vertical genealogy of approximately ten names corresponding to eponyms of tribes or regions. This group he sees as analogous to the genealogy of Shem in Genesis 11.¹⁰⁷ His second group is called the "Determinative Line" and serves as a bridge from the Genealogical Stock to the third group—the "Table of Ancestors". He believes the genealogy of the patriarchs from Abraham to Judah and Benjamin corresponds to this group.¹⁰⁸

Malamat's third group, the "Table of Ancestors," is comprised of an incomplete selection of notable historical ancestors leading to the King whose legitimacy is being promoted by the genealogy. He sees the genealogies of David (from Judah) and Saul (from Benjamin) fulfilling this role in the biblical genealogies.¹⁰⁹ Malamat labels his fourth group as the "Historical Line" of descendants from the central figure in the genealogy, which would correspond with the descendants of King David.

¹⁰⁵ Finkelstein, "Genealogy of Hammurapi Dynasty," 112, 116-117; Malamat, "King Lists and Biblical Genealogies," 187.

¹⁰⁶ See the summary of the names in the four groups for all three genealogies in Malamat, "King Lists and Biblical Genealogies," 199.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 186-92.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 192-93.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 193-99.

There are several reasons to question Malamat's proposed structure, and it has not found acceptance by other scholars. His assumption that the biblical genealogies were composed and designed to legitimize the reign of David seems especially problematic. However, the suggestion of a common format to ancient genealogies seems valid and merits further investigation as to the reasons behind this format.

Robert Wilson sees a parallel between the genealogies of the AKL and GHD and those in Genesis, concluding that, "the patriarchal genealogies in the Pentateuch are all manifestations of an Amorite custom of using genealogies for political and social purposes."¹¹⁰ Although Wilson rejected Malamat's proposed four-fold structure of Babylonian, Assyrian and Hebrew royal genealogies, he does state, "Although we have seen no anthropological evidence indicating that genealogies are created for the purpose of making a historical record, genealogies may be considered historically accurate in the sense that they frequently express actual domestic, political, and religious relationships."¹¹¹ In other words, Wilson sees the function of ancient genealogies as a way to explain tribal and social conditions contemporary with the audience rather than to be an objective historical record.

While the AKL and the GHD do not directly parallel the patriarchal narratives in Genesis, they raise a relevant question. What was the function, or purpose, of recording the lifespans for the patriarchs in Genesis? If the function was not to record a modernistic, impartial and precise historical record, as seems to be the case, then what was the function? And did the purpose change from the antediluvian ancestors in Genesis

¹¹⁰ Wilson, "Old Testament Genealogies," 207.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 222-23.

five, to the postdiluvian ancestors in Genesis 11, to the patriarchs in Genesis 12-50? The different use of lifespan numbers would seem to suggest that there were indeed different functions for each of these three genealogies. And, it would seem that only as we understand these records in line with their intended purpose can we understand the author's intention accurately.

Egyptian Records: The Turin Canon

The most useful Egyptian record pertaining to our subject is the Turin Canon,¹¹² which has unfortunately been badly damaged and has significant lacunae. Other Egyptian king lists do not contain information on lifespans or reigns, although they do appear to list kings in chronological order.¹¹³ They also exhibit the common tendency in ancient writings to exclude, or skip over generations or even dynasties to either for stylistic reasons or to ignore embarrassing individuals.¹¹⁴

The Turin Canon is similar to the SKL in that it begins with two sections of mythological characters, but in this case they are clearly Egyptian deities, not revered ancestors. These deities are given extremely long lifespans (e.g., 7726, or 7718 years), but once the reigns for historical kings are introduced, the figures become realistic and

¹¹² William W. Hallo and K. Lawson Younger Jr., eds., *Context of Scripture: Canonical Compositions, Monumental Inscriptions, and Archival Documents from the Biblical World*, vol. 1 (Leiden: Brill, 2003), 71-73.

¹¹³ Sparks, *Ancient Texts*, 352.

¹¹⁴ Hallo and Younger, *Context of Scripture*, 68.

seem accurate.¹¹⁵ This remains true for the Pharaohs who ruled from the eleventh to the thirteenth dynasty, the time of the biblical patriarchs.¹¹⁶

So the Egyptian king lists show us that the ancient writers were capable of recording accurate reigns (or lifespans) if they had access to such information. However, they did share a tradition of using extraordinarily long lifespans as a way to bestow honor on their deities. But there is one significant use of lifespan number in Egypt—the symbolic use in the wish for someone to live an ideal lifespan of 110 years.

J. M. A. Janssen has translated twenty-seven instances where the age of 110 is used symbolically of the ideal Egyptian lifespan.¹¹⁷ Examples of this occur over 2000 years of Egyptian history and are found throughout the land of Egypt.¹¹⁸ But, it is worth noting that this lifespan could only be wished upon, and experienced by, a mortal human. The lifespan of a king was expressed with a much higher number, by using hyperbole. Janssen gives three examples. In the first a king is granted the lifetime of a god (Re). In the second the king is wished, “an eternity of jubilees, an everlasting life and 100,000 happy years.” And in the third example, Ramses III asks for a reign of 200 years for his successor.¹¹⁹ So in Egypt the people knew what a normal lifespan would be, yet they consistently spoke of 110 as an ideal age, and greatly exaggerated the lifespan of kings. The application to the lifespan of Joseph (Gen 50:22, 26) seems obvious.

¹¹⁵ Ibid.

¹¹⁶ K. A. Kitchen, “Egypt, History of (Chronology),” in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 2:328-329.

¹¹⁷ J. M. A. Janssen, “On the Ideal Lifetime of the Egyptians,” in *Oudheidkundige Mededelingen*, ed. W. D. Van Wijngaarden (Leiden: Rijksmuseum van Oudheden, 1950), 34-36.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 39.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 39, n. 6.

Conclusions from Ancient Near East King Lists

As discussed above, whereas almost all oral genealogies are segmented, written genealogies tend to be linear. This includes most of the ancient Near East genealogies, like the SKL, AKL, and GHD. The majority of Mesopotamian genealogies are royal lineages designed to legitimize the background of the current ruler. Like oral genealogies, these tend to be limited in depth to three or four generations, occasionally six or eight generations.¹²⁰ Longer genealogical records, like the SKL, are constructed by joining together several genealogies.¹²¹ The fact that historiography and chronology were not the concern of ancient scribes is revealed by the way sequences in the SKL record dynasties that were contemporary with each other, despite the appearance as a record of successive reigns.¹²² It is impossible to discern whether the SKL was based on earlier oral records.¹²³ But, the most common fluidity found in written Mesopotamian genealogies—both royal and non-royal—is telescoping.¹²⁴ This holds true for Babylonian genealogies,¹²⁵ and for Egyptian genealogies.¹²⁶

The fluidity in the GHD, in which some names in common with the AKL have been joined together in pairs, perhaps indicates that the GHD existed as an oral genealogy prior to its inscription, as described by Finkelstein above. The pairing of

¹²⁰ Wilson, *Genealogy and History*, 64.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 80.

¹²² Jacobsen, *Sumerian King List*, 183-186, 205-208. Also see Table II facing p. 208.

¹²³ Wilson, *Genealogy and History*, 72.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, 65-68, 92-93, 115-116.

¹²⁵ W. G. Lambert, "Ancestors, Authors, and Canonicity," *Journal of Cuneiform Studies* 11, no. 1 (1957): 1-2.

¹²⁶ K. A. Kitchen, *Ancient Orient and Old Testament* (Chicago: InterVarsity Press, 1966), 55.

names may have been a memory device.¹²⁷ The existence of two lists with the same names seems to imply that both groups used their genealogies as a political tool to legitimize their rule.¹²⁸

Like oral genealogies, it seems that the written genealogies in the ancient Near East were not specifically written to record history.¹²⁹ But those who viewed them regarded them as historical records. And there is no evidence that genealogies were purposely created as fiction. Rather it seems that later scribes or editors were careful to transmit earlier genealogical content without changes. Ancient written genealogies, like oral ones, are limited to ten generations, with most being only three generations deep. The most common form of fluidity observed is telescoping.

Conclusions for the Study of Lifespans in Genesis

After our survey of how the numbers are written in Genesis, ancient writing and recording of numbers, comparisons with oral genealogies and with ancient King Lists, there are a few conclusions that tentatively can be drawn.

First, the material in the patriarchal narratives seems to have come from an older written source or an oral memorized history. However, there does not seem to be a way to reconstruct such a source with any degree of certainty. The only access we have to such a source is the written text of Genesis itself. Similarly, the lifespan numbers in Genesis may have originally been notated with numerical symbols, rather than written out in words. However, it seems unlikely that the final text included a misreading of

¹²⁷ Wilson, *Genealogy and History*, 110.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 113.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 132-33.

those numbers, as the author would have had to make the same mistake on all the lifespans of the patriarchs.

The ancients knew how to use arithmetical numbers. Many of the written archaeological records that have been recovered are from administrative lists or economic transactions. In these cases they did not exaggerate numbers—accuracy was paramount. And they were familiar with calculations using very large numbers, so the size of the number was not necessarily an impediment to accuracy. Mathematical knowledge was available, but seems to have been focused on the practical applications needed for livelihood and trade, rather than purely theoretical exercises.

There was an understanding for how to count time in years, months, weeks, days and hours. The ancient societies knew the four seasons of each year, and the four weeks in a “moon,” and they used an administrative year of 360 days with twelve months of thirty days each based on the sexagesimal (base-60) system. Important numbers in the sexagesimal system were: 1, 10, 60, 600, 3600, 36,000.

There is evidence of mathematical exercises being used as a teaching tool in the Old Babylonian period, which implies that mathematical knowledge was well known when Moses composed the Torah. So, we should proceed on the assumption that the numbers in Genesis were not simply random inventions of the author. However, there is little evidence that the author of Genesis was interested in complex mathematical equations. He does not use them in places where he might have, and when numbers and calculations are used they seem simple if effective. There is also no evidence that gematria played any part in the construction or the original reading of the patriarchal

narratives. Thus, any solution to understanding the patriarchal lifespans that uses complex mathematical equations or gematria must be regarded with skepticism.

Comparisons with the oral genealogies in tribal societies are of limited use and value. They help us understand the importance of segmented genealogies, like that of Jacob and his twelve sons, but any speculation about an oral *Vorlage* behind the written text rests on unverifiable assumptions.

Ancient texts, like the Sumerian King List, the Gilgamesh Epic, the Assyrian King List, and Egyptian writings use numbers for rhetorical effect. They do exhibit use of multiplication and fractions—not for accurate record keeping—but hyperbolically to exaggerate and glorify their gods, kings or ancestors. They also use round numbers (10, 20, 60, 100, 200), sacred numbers (e.g., repeated use of the number seven), and graded numbers. All of these are also common biblical rhetorical devices (e.g., Gen 4:24, Gen 41:49, Deut 32:30).¹³⁰ It would seem that a scheme similar to this is at work in the genealogies in Genesis.

The antediluvian ancestors in Genesis 5 all have three numbers attached to their name: the begetting age, the remaining years, and the total lifespan. All of these numbers can be explained as a combination of sixty years and sixty months, with the addition of the sacred number seven. The same system can account for the patriarchal ages, and the lifespans of notable individuals later in the Old Testament. However, the ages of the postdiluvian ancestors do not all fit this pattern, so there seems to be another step to the scheme in Genesis 11.

¹³⁰ Friberg, “Numbers and Counting,” 1143-1145.

CHAPTER 4

REVIEW OF PREVIOUS EXPLANATIONS

This chapter will examine the various non face value interpretations that have been previously proposed for understanding the patriarchal lifespans. Most scholarship has been focused on the antediluvian list in Genesis 5 and the postdiluvian list in Genesis 11 because their larger lifespans are clearly more problematic. Unless one holds to a face-value reading of these lifespans, it seems clear that there are different numerical schemes at work in the three groups of ancestors. However, a review of the literature relating to Genesis 5 and 11 will help us to filter the interpretational possibilities for understanding the lifespans of the patriarchs.

Two Types of Solutions and the Difference between Them

The diverse proposals for understanding the Genesis genealogies and patriarchal lifespans stem from essentially just two opposing worldviews. The traditional view is that Genesis was penned, or edited together by one author (Moses) in the LBA. The presupposition associated with this view is that a divine author superintended the recording of these Scriptures, so that they are inerrant. The hermeneutical approach, then, is to accept Genesis as factually accurate unless there are reasons to prefer an alternate interpretation. In some cases the text makes clear that a non-literal hermeneutic is called for, such as the description of a talking serpent (Gen 3:1-5). However, within this camp there is still significant latitude for disagreement on literal versus non-literal

interpretations within Genesis. Evangelicals can disagree about topics such as the age of the earth, a historical Adam, a worldwide flood, open or closed genealogies, and the dating of the patriarchal era while still holding to the inerrancy of the text. There is also room to acknowledge that Moses utilized sources in composing Genesis, and to recognize later updating of the text. This latter can be seen in some clear anachronisms within the book (Gen 11:28, 31, 14:14, 47:11).

This is the position of the current author. I believe that Genesis is a divine book, but that the divine author used human means of communication. Although many evangelicals accept the patriarchal lifespans at face value, this dissertation is attempting to show that such an interpretation is not compatible with an evangelical point of view. It is the position of this dissertation that the patriarchal ages in Genesis are recorded using idioms that would make sense in their day, but are different from today.

The doctrine of inerrancy implies that the text must be internally consistent, and that descriptions of external events must accord with historical reality. This is the point of contention. Lifespans of hundreds of years are not compatible with the historical reality of the patriarchal age. But, the patriarchal lifespan numbers can still be truthful descriptions, even if they use idioms unfamiliar to modern readers.

However, the traditional view is not the most common view of Genesis in academic circles. Many scholars see Genesis as a purely human creation. For these scholars there was no divine author supervising Genesis, any more than there was a divine author for any other ancient document. Thus they look for parallels in other ancient Near East documents, or in oral traditions of tribal genealogies to explain the genealogical information in Genesis. Even though the current author does not share the

presuppositions of this camp, we will examine their proposals to see whether any portion or variation of these theories hold any merit for our study.

Next, we will examine the solutions that are compatible with a high view of Scripture—the view that Genesis is the product of a divine author. It should be noted, however, that the solutions presented in this section are not all from evangelicals who hold a high view of Scripture. Rather, these are solutions that are compatible with a high view of Scripture, irrespective of the actual worldview of the author proposing the solution. As with the proposals in the first section, some elements or variations of these proposals may hold a key to an interpretation of the patriarchal lifespans that is more consonant with the understanding of the original readers of Genesis.

What is the difference between a symbolic understanding of the patriarchal lifespans from an evangelical point of view and a symbolic understanding of the lifespans from a critical viewpoint? If evangelicals abandon the face-value interpretation of the patriarchal lifespans are we not simply appropriating the findings and assumptions of the critical scholars? The answer to the second question is “no” because of the answer to the first question. As we will discover, the critical interpretations of the lifespan numbers in Genesis rest on the acceptance of the Documentary Hypothesis with a redactor assembling the final form of the Pentateuch very late in the process. Critical scholars hold the lifespan numbers in Genesis to be an obvious scheme clearly devised—or revised—to fit a certain pattern after the exile at the earliest, or possibly during the Maccabean period. These assumptions are not part of an evangelical understanding of the use of symbolic numbers in Genesis.

A symbolic interpretation of the patriarchal lifespans from an evangelical point of view holds that these numbers were part of the original composition of Genesis by Moses after the Exodus. Even though we accept the work of a divine author supervising the composition of the Torah, there is acknowledgement that Moses likely used sources. There is also acknowledgement that Moses would have used the language, idioms, worldviews, and presuppositions of his day, not of our day. Chapters two and three attempted to show that a face-value interpretation of the patriarchal lifespans is not compatible with an inerrant text, and is not consonant with the idioms of the MBA and LBA. An evangelical interpretation that sees these lifespans as symbolic acknowledges that Moses likely used schematic, hyperbolic, sacred, or symbolic numbers to communicate God's truth to the audience of his day because those were the idioms with which his audience would have been familiar.

But before we can propose an evangelical symbolic interpretation of the patriarchal lifespans, we need to examine the solutions proposed from the critical view.

Solutions From a Naturalistic Perspective

In the nineteenth century, questions were presented from three perspectives on the traditional view that Genesis contained factual history. First, the Wellhausen hypothesis became accepted dogma, and under this schema the genealogical material in Genesis—particularly the detailed information in the supposed P source—was regarded as recorded late in Israel's history. Second, increases in ancient Near East discoveries revealed parallels to the Genesis stories, which lent credibility to suggestions that the

biblical stories were borrowed from earlier myths or legends.¹ Third, anthropological studies revealed that oral traditions in tribal genealogies were often etiological explanations of current social and political relationships rather than accurate records of history.²

The combination of these three influences produced the general consensus among critical scholars that the later lineages in P were artificial genealogies projected into the past to provide a historical foundation for their contemporary tribal and national relationships. These genealogies may contain snippets of earlier material, but it would be impossible to identify such material and thus the genealogies could not provide any valid historical information about the foundation of early Israel. Wellhausen even concluded that the earliest (J) genealogies were no earlier than the monarchy, and thus were also created to express Israel's social and political relations with the surrounding nations.³

The Four Source Theory of the Pentateuch

The first attack that weakened the traditional view was, of course, the Wellhausen theory of four sources for the Pentateuch. Wellhausen agreed with Philipp Buttman, who said, “genauen chronologischen Angaben, die das sichere Gepräg späterer

¹ There was some initial optimism that the author(s) of Genesis borrowed the genealogies from the SKL. However, Westermann has convincingly demonstrated, using later discoveries, that this speculation was unfounded. Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1–11: A Commentary*, trans. John J. Scullion (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984), 350-51.

² Robert R. Wilson, *Genealogy and History in the Biblical World*, Yale Near Eastern Researches, ed. William W. Hallo, Marvin H. Pope and William K. Simpson, vol. 7 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1977), 2-3.

³ Julius Wellhausen, *Prolegomena to the History of Ancient Israel*, trans. J. Sutherland Black, Allan Menzies, and W. Robertson Smith (New York: Meridian Books, 1957. Orig. *Prolegomena zur Geschichte Israels*, Berlin: G. Reimer, 1899), 316.

Ausführung alter poetischer Sagen sind.”⁴ Thus he proposed the original mythological narratives in Genesis 5 and 11 were repurposed by later editors to construct a systematic chronology to suit their own needs. The result is that the contributions of the J, E, or the P source purportedly reflect the context of its composition rather than the time of the events it claims to record. These sources are supposedly tailored to address the situation in Israel and Judah in the Iron Age (tenth to the sixth century BC), not a legendary patriarchal age. They were combined into their present form after the exile (perhaps ca. 400 BC), or during the exile at the very earliest (586-538 BC).⁵ The two sources that contain genealogical and chronological data are the earliest (J) and the latest (P) traditions. The chronology recorded in these two sources is supposedly contradictory because they were written at different times by different authors for different purposes. Then, we are told, a final redactor combined and edited this sometimes contradictory material together, including material he did not fully understand, into the final form we have today.

Purpose of Genealogies in the J Source

The J source was purportedly interested in recording or creating an ethnocentric history of the tribes surrounding Israel. The tribes, nations, or places around Israel are recorded in the J source as names of ancestors who are either related to, or descendants of, Abraham. Thus we have an early record of how the ancient Israelites

⁴ “Exact chronological dates are a sure sign of later working up of old poetic legends.” Philipp Buttmann, *Mythologus oder gesammelte Abhandlungen über die Sagen des Alterthums*, vol. 1 (Berlin: Mylius’schen Buchhandlung, 1828), 183.

⁵ P. Kyle McCarter Jr., “The Patriarchal Age: Abraham, Isaac and Jacob,” in *Ancient Israel: From Abraham to the Roman Destruction of the Temple*, ed. Hershel Shanks (Washington, DC: Biblical Archaeology Society, 2011), 5-6.

perceived themselves and their relationships with the tribes that surrounded them.⁶ Kyle McCarter says, “There is no question that the patriarchal genealogies contain names of many individuals who originated as fictitious eponyms.”⁷ He lists examples such as: Shechem (Gen 34:2), Ishmael (Gen 16:10-12, 17:20, 25:12-16), Eliphaz (Gen 36:4, 10-12, 15-16, cf. Job 2:11), and Teman (Gen 36:11-12).⁸ The Moabites and Ammonites are descended from Lot, Abraham’s nephew (Gen 19:36-38). Aramean tribes are descendants of Nahor, Abraham’s brother (Gen 22:20-24), although, curiously, Aram himself is a grandson—not a son—of Nahor (Gen 22:21). The Edomites, of course, are descendants of Esau, Abraham’s grandson (Gen 28:9), as are the Amalekites (Gen 36:12). The descendants of Abraham and Keturah formed the Arab tribes that lived south and east of Canaan, including the Midianites (Gen 25:1-4).⁹ According to this view, these names and relationships were all fabricated at a later date for the perceived purpose of relating together tribes both inside and outside Israel by means of a blood relationship. As Johnson explains, “A feeling of blood brotherhood which actually existed between two or more tribes or clans was thus traced back by means of genealogies to a common eponym as an expression of existing community.”¹⁰

⁶ Marshall D. Johnson, *The Purpose of the Biblical Genealogies: With Special Reference to the Setting of the Genealogies of Jesus*, Society for the New Testament Studies Monograph Series, ed. G. N. Stanton, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 5.

⁷ McCarter, “The Patriarchal Age,” 24.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 24-25.

⁹ Claus Westermann, *Genesis 12–36: A Commentary*, trans. John J. Scullion (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1985), 396-97.

¹⁰ Johnson, *Purpose of the Biblical Genealogies*, 6.

This worldview makes no attempt to resolve inconsistencies and contradictions within the Genesis genealogies. The differences are seen as proof of the multiple sources of Genesis, and of even earlier sources behind the work of J or P. The genealogies in Genesis 4 and 5 are seen to be different versions (by J and P) of one earlier tradition. In the Table of Nations (P) Aram is a son of Shem (Gen 10:22) who lived hundreds of years before J placed his grandfather Nahor (Gen 22:21). Similarly, Uz is a grandson of Shem in P (Gen 10:23), but a son of Nahor in J (Gen 22:21). Jokshan, son of Keturah in J (Gen 25:3), is thought to be the same person as Joktan, son of Shem in P (Gen 10:25-30). And Dedan and Sheba are listed as both grandsons of Cush (Gen 10:7) and grandsons of Abraham (Gen 25:3). These occurrences of the same name in both P and J traditions point to earlier traditions (perhaps oral) that have supposedly been rearranged to suit the purposes of J and, later, the P editor.¹¹

Purpose of Genealogies in the P Source

The reason for P's use of genealogies is thought to be similar to that of J, but the detailed chronological information found in P is thought to provide some additional emphases. Marshall Johnson believed P's two-fold motive was to bridge the huge gaps between creation, the flood, and the patriarchs; and to weave the patriarchal figures into the narrative of family relationships.¹² Westermann sees the lifespans in Genesis 5 as a projection into unknowable antiquity to show the power and the history of God's blessing

¹¹ Ibid., 5-14.

¹² Ibid., 26-27.

on his people.¹³ He proposed three stages in the origin of P's genealogies: from oral tradition, to association with primeval history, to inclusion in P's version of history.¹⁴ The post-flood genealogy in Genesis 11, then, is the "transition to history." The reduced lifespans are P's way of transitioning from the ancestors of all mankind to focus on the one branch of humanity that is the center of the narrative.¹⁵

This view acknowledges inconsistencies or contradictions within the P source, just as it does with the J source. Johnson cites Arphaxad's birth order (Gen 10:22, cf. Gen 11:10), and Esau's wives (Gen 26:34, 28:9, and 36:2), which he believes presents evidence for at least two different editors, and an earlier source.¹⁶ Westermann comments on the inconsistent reporting of Isaac's lifespan, "According to Gen 35:28 Isaac lived to 180 years, that is, for a long time after Jacob's return; this stands in contradiction to ch 27 where he is spoken of as one who is dying [Gen 27:1-2]. The only explanation is that there are two different conceptions of the patriarchal story."¹⁷

As with the J source, these inconsistencies supposedly point to earlier sources used by the P editor. But what were those sources?

¹³ Westermann, *Genesis 1–11*, 353-54.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 354.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 561.

¹⁶ Johnson, *Purpose of the Biblical Genealogies*, 16-17, 22.

¹⁷ Westermann, *Genesis 12–36*, 557.

The Sources Used by the P Editor

It was von Rad who originally proposed an earlier source behind the genealogies in P, which he called it “Das Toledotbuch.”¹⁸ His thesis that the original heading for this book is retained in Genesis 5:1 (זֶה סֵפֶר תּוֹלְדֹת אָדָם) may be overreaching since Genesis 5 seems to record the genealogy of the person (אָדָם), not mankind (אָדָם).¹⁹ But this concept of a *toledot book* behind the genealogies is still accepted by many.²⁰ In fact, the idea of a *toledot book* may also have merit for the traditional view because it seems to offer support for the contention that Israel kept written genealogical records.²¹ At issue is the presupposition behind the composition of these genealogies. Were they later literary creations? Or were they based on older records and thus possibly an accurate record?

Parallels with Tribal and Ancient Genealogies

As discussed in chapter three, recent studies have focused on parallels between biblical genealogies and oral genealogies in tribal societies. The work of Robert Wilson has been the most accepted. When Wilson explains the genealogies in the Hebrew Bible his views are based on acceptance of the Wellhausen view of the Pentateuch. Thus, he sees his findings as supporting that theory. However, several of his conclusions are not as supportive of his original presuppositions as he would like, or at least they introduce important caveats.

¹⁸ “The Toledot Book.” Gerhard von Rad, *Die Priesterschrift im Hexateuch Literarisch untersucht und theologisch gewertet*, Beiträge zur Wissenschaft vom Alten und Neuen Testament, vol. 4(13) (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1934), 33-40.

¹⁹ Westermann, *Genesis 1–11*, 355.

²⁰ Ibid. Johnson, *Purpose of the Biblical Genealogies*, 14-28.

²¹ William Foxwell Albright, *Yahweh and the Gods of Canaan: A Historical Analysis of Two Contrasting Faiths* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1968), 53-109; Wilson, *Genealogy and History*, 200.

Parallels with Oral Genealogies

When looking at Genesis 4 as an example of the J source, Wilson holds the same view that there are independent sources behind the genealogy. But, he believes this source was originally a list rather than a narrative. He based this conclusion on the inclusion of names that are unexplained in the narrative and do not contribute to it (e.g., Irad, Mehujael, Methuselah).²² Also like others, Wilson notes that the form but not the content of the Genesis 4 genealogy was influenced by extra-biblical material.²³ Other scholars have proposed the theory that Genesis 4 was originally an oral genealogy explaining the origin of the Kenite tribe.²⁴ However, Wilson shows that due to the standardized introductions and the linear form, “the [Genesis 4] genealogy in its current form could not have circulated orally or functioned as a tribal genealogy.”²⁵ The clear implication is that the genealogical material in the J source was taken from a written, rather than an oral, source. These written genealogies seem to have been the foundation into which narrative material was added. Note the narrative material in between the two halves of the standard genealogical description of Noah’s life (cf. Gen 5:32, 9:28-29).²⁶ We will comment more on these findings in chapter five.

Wilson uses the genealogies of Esau in Genesis 36 as an example of genealogies in the supposed P source. He believes the genealogies preserved in Genesis

²² Wilson, *Genealogy and History*, 147-48. cf. Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis: Part I, From Adam to Noah*, trans. Israel Abrahams, 1st English ed. (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1961), 231.

²³ Wilson, *Genealogy and History*, 154. Cassuto, *Commentary on Genesis, Part I*, 188.

²⁴ Johnson, *Purpose of the Biblical Genealogies*, 9-14.

²⁵ Wilson, *Genealogy and History*, 156-57.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 161. Cassuto, *Commentary on Genesis, Part I*, 290.

36 did originally function as oral or tribal genealogies based on their segmented form.²⁷ Like other scholars he sees a contradiction in the different lists of Esau's wives (Gen 26:34, 28:9, 36:2-3).²⁸ But again, because of the seeming unnecessary complexity of these genealogies, and the use of the *toledot* formula, Wilson believes these too existed and functioned outside the biblical context before they were included into the Genesis narrative.²⁹ He believes the same holds true for the lists of the twelve tribes of Israel.³⁰ Thus it seems probably, perhaps even likely, that the material in Esau's and Jacob's genealogies circulated in written form at an early stage.

This conclusion seems confirmed when Wilson finds the consistency of the various lists of the twelve tribes of Israel puzzling. He cannot understand why the lists, purportedly written at different times by different authors would be the same—particularly when the J source was supposedly composed at a time when the tribal structures were very different.³¹ Wilson expects to find contradictions and “fluidity,” and he is surprised when he does not. Based on the inclusion of seeming unnecessary genealogical information in Genesis 36, Wilson says, “The only hypothesis that might explain their presence is to assume they were included for historiographic purposes. If this assumption is correct, then the writer who placed the genealogies in Gen 36 was

²⁷ Wilson, *Genealogy and History*, 179.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 174-77.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 182.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 193.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 193-95.

interested in supplying what he considered to be historical information.”³² He also remarks, belatedly, on Wellhausen’s theory, “The anthropological data indicates that it is not safe to assume that contradictory genealogies are from different literary sources or even from different oral traditions.”³³

Evaluation of Wilson’s Findings

Based on his presuppositions, Wilson expects to find fluidity and contradictions in the Genesis genealogies, and so he does. One example that we saw in other writers in the belief that Genesis 4 and 5 are two corrupted lists from the same original.³⁴ He explains the supposed contradictions between these two genealogies as being due to the different functions of each, and the different contexts in which each genealogy was supposedly used.³⁵ He offers this same explanation for the supposed contradictions in Esau’s genealogies (Gen 36).³⁶ But, these findings may be an example of a self-fulfilling prophecy, and these differences may have a simpler explanation or may not be contradictions at all.

Undoubtedly there are connections between biblical genealogies and those of the ancient Near East (e.g., the SKL), and it is clear the author of Genesis used sources (Gen 5:1). But that in no way implies the uncritical acceptance of Wellhausen’s theory and his view that the genealogies are late and cannot contain any valid historical

³² Ibid., 199.

³³ Ibid., 203-04.

³⁴ Ibid., 161-62. William W. Hallo and William Kelly Simpson, *The Ancient Near East: A History*, 2nd ed. (Fort Worth: Harcourt Brace College Publishers, 1998), 28.

³⁵ Wilson, *Genealogy and History*, 166.

³⁶ Ibid., 180-82.

knowledge. In fact, it appears that the genealogical information in Genesis did exist as written material prior to its inclusion in Scripture, and that the author used this material as the skeleton upon which to weave his narrative. There is no reason to assume *a priori* that oral traditions must have been transmitted inaccurately.³⁷ But, there is also no reason to postulate a long period of oral transmission before the records were reduced to writing. Wilson has demonstrated there is remarkable consistency in the biblical genealogies—even when he would expect to see fluidity. He has also pointed out that the fact that these genealogies were written down indicates the author believed he was recording historically accurate information, and the content of the genealogies seems to confirm this (Gen 36). They were certainly understood as historically accurate by later readers, and evidence of deliberately falsified or capriciously changed genealogies is non-existent.

The supposed contradictions between the different J and P sources are fairly simply explained by other means (and the different source theory cannot explain why P, or a later editor, left so many glaring contradictions). So, other than an initial presupposition to assume the genealogies are inaccurate, there seems to be a lack of evidence that they are. In fact there does not seem to be any reason why we should not, at least initially, accept the biblical genealogies as they are presented.

However, that does not preclude the biblical authors from using accepted genealogical techniques of their day—the most common one being telescoping. There are examples of this in both the Old and New Testaments. There also seems to be evidence

³⁷ William Foxwell Albright, *From the Stone Age to Christianity: Monotheism and the Historical Process*, 2nd ed. (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1957), 72-76; John Bright, *A History of Israel*, Westminster Aids to the Study of the Scriptures, 4th ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 70-71.

that the biblical authors could and did sometimes only select that portion of a genealogy that suited their purposes. These elements could certainly be at work in the lifespans in Genesis. The antediluvian and postdiluvian ancestor lists seem to show evidence of editorial activity to reduce them to lists of ten. And the lifespan numbers seem to have been influenced by other ancient Near East genealogical lists. That does not mean they are ahistorical. Rather, their form has been determined by their function. These functions need further study, of course, which we will look at in the next chapter.

Evaluation of the Critical View of Sources

The foundations of the critical view of the Pentateuch are not as sturdy as they seem or as they once were. First, the validity of comparing tribal genealogies from relatively modern times with those of ancient Israel seems to have no foundation.³⁸ R. N. Whybray says, “Attempts to establish the originally oral nature of the Pentateuchal material and its oral transmission over a long period of time on the basis of analogies drawn from the practice of oral traditions among other peoples and in different periods have, despite their acceptance by a large number of Old Testament scholars, been shown to lack cogency in several respects.”³⁹ And there is no evidence that requires an extended period of time before oral traditions could have been written down.⁴⁰

³⁸ Duane A. Garrett, *Rethinking Genesis: The Sources and Authorship of the First Book of the Pentateuch* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1991), 35-37.

³⁹ R. N. Whybray, *The Making of the Pentateuch: A Methodological Study*, *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, ed. David J. A. Clines and Philip R. Davies, vol. 53 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1989), 216.

⁴⁰ Garrett, *Rethinking Genesis*, 37. K. A. Kitchen, *Ancient Orient and Old Testament* (Chicago: InterVarsity Press, 1966), 135-38.

Second, the evidence shows that although the biblical genealogies may have used the same literary form as their contemporaries, the content was never borrowed.⁴¹ The fact that the Genesis narratives and genealogies conform to ancient literary forms is actually an argument against the Documentary Hypothesis. It argues for an ancient origin of Genesis, or at least portions of it, and its arrangement according to other ancient Near Eastern—not nineteenth century European—literary forms.

When we turn to Wellhausen's view of four sources, the situation is similarly bleak. There have always been scholars who did not accept the Documentary Hypothesis.⁴² But now several notable critical scholars have also questioned the four source theory.⁴³ Although Whybray holds to a sixth century BC date of composition for the Pentateuch, he summarized the current situation by saying,

For a long time, since the work of Julius Wellhausen, there was a general consensus about the identity of these sources ... But now the consensus has broken down; and the complete lack of agreement at the present time about the composition of the Pentateuch should warn the student that theories about the dates of different parts of it are extremely subjective.⁷⁴⁴

⁴¹ Wellhausen, *Prolegomena*, 308-312, 322; Isaac M. Kikawada and Arthur Quinn, *Before Abraham Was: The Unity of Genesis 1-11* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985), 39-40, 47-52; Garrett, *Rethinking Genesis*, 106.

⁴² Umberto Cassuto, *The Documentary Hypothesis and the Composition of the Pentateuch*, trans. Israel Abrahams, 1st English ed. (Jerusalem: Shalem Press, 1961. Orig: *Torat ha-te'udot ve-siduram shel sifre ha-Torah*. Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1941). Kenneth A. Kitchen, "The Patriarchal Age: Myth or History?" *Biblical Archaeology Review* 21, no. 2 (1995): 94.

⁴³ Kikawada and Quinn, *Before Abraham Was*, 13-14, 107-108; Rolf Rendtorff, *The Problem of the Process of Transmission in the Pentateuch*, trans. John J. Scullion, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series, ed. David J. A. Clines and Philip R. Davies, vol. 89 (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1990. Orig. *Das überlieferungsgeschichtliche Problem des Pentateuch*. Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 1977), 101-206; Thomas L. Thompson, *The Origin Tradition of Ancient Israel, I: The Literary Formation of Genesis and Exodus 1-23*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series, ed. David J. A. Clines and Philip R. Davies, vol. 55 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1987), 59, 66-68; Whybray, *The Making of the Pentateuch*, 129-31.

⁴⁴ R. N. Whybray, *Introduction to the Pentateuch* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995), 135.

Moreover, the supposed contradictions—a large part of the *raison d’etre* for the Documentary Hypothesis seem to be more easily resolved by other methods than postulating layers of sources. Many of the supposed contradictions seem, to this writer, to find problems where none exist. A perfect example is the occurrences of the same name in the supposed J and P source. A much simpler and more consistent explanation is that more than one person could have the same name. Apparently Marshall Johnson believes there cannot be two people with the same name, even if they lived hundreds of years apart in different families and locations. In this view, the two names must refer to the same person, a fact which the author of Genesis—and Bible readers over thousands of years—somehow failed to recognize. Or does Johnson believe that the original readers instinctively recognized and accepted multiple occurrences of the same name as evidence for two or more different sources?

If we rule out the possibility of people ever sharing a name, and the only possible solution is ever increasing sources, then there are only two options. Either the redactors of Genesis were inept in their attempt to convince their readers that Genesis was a unified authoritative corpus penned by Moses. (This also implies that all Jewish and Christian readers prior to the rise of critical scholarship in the nineteenth century were similarly inept at recognizing these obvious sources.) Or, as Dever states, the redactors of the Pentateuch “included in their account other versions. And they expected us to use our heads, to read the Bible critically, to engage in a dialogue with the text.”⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Herschel Shanks, “Is The Bible Right After All? BAR Interviews William Dever, part II,” *Biblical Archaeology Review* 22, no. 5 (1996): 35.

However, this seems, to this writer, to want to have your cake and eat it too. If Genesis is the human product of multiple sources, then either these late editors of Genesis were fraudulently representing the Pentateuch as a unified, authoritative Torah from Moses, or they expected their readers to “read the Bible critically” and recognize contradictions as evidence of multiple sources. You cannot have it both ways. In the first case the editors are perpetuating a known falsehood. And if the second case were true, why was it so hidden? If the editors wanted their readers to detect different sources in the composition of Genesis, why not just label them? Why would the later redactors not simply separate Genesis into three sections (J, E, and P) instead of ten *toledot* sections? Were they comfortable knowing that readers for thousands of years would falsely assume Genesis was from the pen of Moses (see Josh 1:7, 2 Chr 25:4, Ezra 6:18, Neh 13:1, Matt 19:7, 22:24, Mark 7:10, 12:26, John 1:17, 5:46, 7:23)?

For thousands of years, Jewish and Christian theologians and Bible readers have accepted Genesis as the work of a single author. With apologies to C.S. Lewis, one might say, “it is quite incredible that we should have had to wait more than 3,000 years to be told by nineteenth century critical theologians that what the Church has always regarded as one book was, in fact, a collection of contradictory sources!”⁴⁶

⁴⁶ C. S. Lewis was expressing his frustration at modern critical theologians who attempt to remove the miraculous from Scripture. The specific article that caught his attention while at dinner with a Bishop was “The Sign at Cana” in Alec Vidler’s *Windsor Sermons* (S.C.M. Press, 1958). The Bishop recalls that when he asked him what he thought about it, Lewis “expressed himself very freely about the sermon and said that he thought that it was quite incredible that we should have had to wait nearly 2,000 years to be told by a theologian called Vidler that what the Church has always regarded as a miracle was, in fact, a parable!” C. S. Lewis and Walter Hooper, *Christian Reflections* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1967), 152.

Eschatological Manipulation of Earlier Source Material

Wellhausen believed the P editor(s) used older mythological records to construct a systematic chronology based on a generation of 100 years, and a world cycle of 4,000 years (or 80 Jubilees), so that the Exodus falls 2,666 years after creation i.e. two thirds of a world cycle.⁴⁷ This is in line with a Jewish tradition that 4,000 years would pass between the creation and the appearance of Messiah.⁴⁸ That the 4,000 years ends at exactly 164 B.C. is seen as no coincidence.⁴⁹ That is the time of the rededication of the Temple in Jerusalem by the Maccabees.⁵⁰ Based on this foundation, the natural conclusion among critical scholars is that the chronology was an artifice added toward the end of the redaction of the Pentateuch—some even suggest as late as the Maccabean period.⁵¹ Of course there are still remnants of J's chronology, and that of the P source, but both were edited later into an artificial arrangement that suited the eschatological purposes of the later editors.

Marshall Johnson agrees, saying, “The Priestly author used the framework of the king list (or a similar tradition) as the structure of his first genealogy, imposing upon it the Priestly chronological calculations which aimed at determining the year *Anno Mundi* of several pivotal events, including the flood, Abraham’s migration, the exodus,

⁴⁷ Wellhausen, *Prolegomena*, 308-09.

⁴⁸ E. L. Curtis, “Chronology of the Old Testament,” in *A Dictionary of the Bible: Dealing with its Language, Literature, and Contents, including the Biblical Theology*, ed. James Hastings et al. (New York: Charles Scribner’s Sons, 1902), 398.

⁴⁹ A. Murtonen, “On the Chronology of the Old Testament,” *Studia Theologica* 8, no. 2 (1955): 137.

⁵⁰ Johnson, *Purpose of the Biblical Genealogies*, 32.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 32-33.

and the founding of the sacrificial cultus in Solomon's temple."⁵² Thomas Thompson summarizes this position well,

That all of the chronological data used in the Masoretic text for the P chronology is original in this system cannot be claimed. The ages of the pre-Abrahamic patriarchs, as well as the dates given for the lives of the patriarchs from Abraham to Joseph seem to be adjusted rather than created.... the date of the birth of Abraham in 1946 A.M. seem[s] best explained within the Maccabean or post-Maccabean theological framework of the Great Year.⁵³

Evolution of the Numerical Scheme

Jeremy Northcote builds on the earlier work of Alfred Jepsen,⁵⁴ Aimo Murtonen⁵⁵ and others to propose an evolutionary development of the chronological schemes found in the MT, the LXX, the Samaritan Pentateuch, and the Book of Jubilees.⁵⁶ His presentation is a detailed and consistent application of his hypothesis as he provides reasonable motives and progressive steps for the development of each of the different chronological schemes. However, his foundational premise is explicitly to discount any possibility of predictive prophesy, believing instead that the "Old Testament chronology was, from its very beginnings, largely schematic in form."⁵⁷

⁵² Ibid., 31.

⁵³ Thomas L. Thompson, *The Historicity of the Patriarchal Narratives: The Quest for the Historical Abraham*, Beiheft zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft, vol. 133 (Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 1974), 15.

⁵⁴ Alfred Jepsen, "Zur Chronologie des Priesterkodex," *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 47 (1929): 252-55.

⁵⁵ Murtonen, "On the Chronology of the OT".

⁵⁶ Jeremy Northcote, "The Schematic Development of Old Testament Chronography: Towards an Integrated Model," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 29, no. 1 (2004): 3-36.

⁵⁷ Ibid., 3, 7.

The overall chronology in the Old Testament is based the ages of birth for the first child, since this is when the next generation begins. The rest of a person's life, and his final lifespan figures, are essentially irrelevant to the overall chronological scheme. Northcote believes he can trace the creation and redaction of this chronology, including the different chronologies presented in the MT, the LXX, and the SP.⁵⁸ But Northcote also has a proposal for the lifespan figures as well. He posits that the total number found by adding the lifespan ages together relates to the eschatologically significant number 12,600. He also suggests that these numbers are a code designed to be understood by only a few priests and embedded in the text for future theologians to find.⁵⁹

This position does have several problems other than its non-supernatural presuppositions. First, it fails to account for all the figures—usually only finding around half the chronological dates that have any significance.⁶⁰ Second, these views need to allow some latitude in dates for the proposed schemes to work.⁶¹ Third, there is no consensus on the significant dates, even among the proponents of this position.⁶² And, as discussed above, this implies motives and practices that seem at odds with the rest of the

⁵⁸ See the chart in *Ibid.*, 5.

⁵⁹ Jeremy Northcote, "The Lifespans of the Patriarchs: Schematic Orderings in the Chrono-Genealogy," *Vetus Testamentum* 57, no. 2 (2007): 243-57.

⁶⁰ Wellhausen, *Prolegomena*, 308-09; Curtis, "Chronology of the OT," 397-403; Johnson, *Purpose of the Biblical Genealogies*, 32.

⁶¹ Northcote, "Schematic Development," 7-8.

⁶² See Ludwig Köhler, *Old Testament Theology*, trans. A.S. Todd (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1957. Orig. *Theologie des Alten Testaments*. Tübingen, J. C. B. Mohr, 1935), 87-88, 244, n. 72; Murtonen, "On the Chronology of the OT," 135-37.

Pentateuch. The scheme only makes sense if it was—as assumed by this view—inserted or revised by redactors during the Maccabean period.⁶³

Babylonian Mathematical Exercises

If the preceding suggestions were somewhat general, Dwight Young's solution is very detailed. He sought to demonstrate that the author of Genesis had access to, and familiarity with, "certain basic sexagesimal exercises in Babylonian mathematics."⁶⁴ Young demonstrated that he could account for every age in both the antediluvian and postdiluvian patriarchal lists including all the variations present in the Samaritan Pentateuch and the LXX.⁶⁵ As he said elsewhere, "it is of interest to note that through Babylonian sexagesimal mathematics one may account for all but three of the [biblical] figures. The exceptional lifespans are 365 (Enoch), 777 (Lamech), and 110 (Joseph). It is these very numbers which scholars have been able to grasp on other grounds."⁶⁶ Based on his calculations, Young believed these numbers prove that Genesis could not have been written prior to the conquest (although he admits the possibility of only one author). Instead, he believed the LXX version of the biblical ages derived from the lists preserved in both the SP and the MT. He said, "Regardless of whether the

⁶³ Northcote, "Schematic Development," 7-9.

⁶⁴ Dwight W. Young, "The Sexagesimal Basis for the Total Years of the Antediluvian and Postdiluvian Epochs," *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 116, no. 4 (2004): 503. The Babylonian mathematical exercises he refers to can be found in, for example, O. Neugebauer and A. Sachs, eds., *Mathematical Cuneiform Texts*, American Oriental Series, vol. 29 (New Haven, CT: American Schools of Oriental Research, 1945).

⁶⁵ Young, "Sexagesimal Basis," 505, 518.

⁶⁶ Dwight W. Young, "On the Application of Numbers from Babylonian Mathematics to Biblical Life Spans and Epochs," *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 100, no. 3 (1988): 360. As is noted by a number of scholars, Enoch's age corresponds to the number of days in a solar year, Lamech's age is constructed from the biblically significant number seven, and Joseph's age is the ideal Egyptian lifespan.

priority lies with SP's devise [sic] or that of MT, it is almost certainly the case that both arrangements originated in Babylonia during the sixth century [BC] when influential scholars in the Priestly circle had a first-hand acquaintance with sexagesimal reckoning and the tradition was still fluid."⁶⁷

While Young's calculations are certainly impressive, the motive of the author seems absent. The use of such complex equations does not seem to achieve the ends of either connecting with the readers, or of demonstrating the glory of Yahweh. It may amuse mathematicians to demonstrate their prowess with arcane numbers and equations, but why the author of Genesis would chose to do so is a mystery.

A Secret System

Another complex mathematical solution is the "Secret System" of Gerhard Larsson.⁶⁸ Larsson is quick to point out that this system was actually devised by Knut Stenring.⁶⁹ However, Stenring's book consists mainly of tables and charts—most of them hand drawn—which make it difficult to read and understand, much less reach any conclusions. Larsson sought to publicize Stenring's solution by writing prolifically, often lamenting that this secret system "seems to have been neglected or anyhow never discussed by OT scholars."⁷⁰ But once one attempts to understand the system, such neglect becomes understandable, as we shall see below. S. R. Driver did review

⁶⁷ Young, "Sexagesimal Basis," 526.

⁶⁸ Gerhard Larsson, *The Secret System: A Study in the Chronology of the Old Testament* (Leiden: Brill, 1973).

⁶⁹ Knut Stenring, *The Enclosed Garden* (Uppsala, Sweden: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1966).

⁷⁰ Gerhard Larsson, "A System of Biblical Dates," *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament* 16, no. 2 (2002): 184, 205-206. See similar complaints in Gerhard Larsson, "Chronology as a Structural Element in the Old Testament," *Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament* 14, no. 2 (2000): 211, 217.

Stenring's book, but he noted, "doubts whether the author of the work under review has actually found the key to the unraveling of the problem creep in when one reflects that he allows himself a considerable latitude in alternative reckonings, e.g., nine for the date of Arphaxad's birth, that he takes no account of regnal accession- and non-accession-years, and that he disregards all possibility of fortuitous coincidence."⁷¹

The Larsson/Stenring proposal is founded on several presuppositions. First, concerning the dates given in the Old Testament, Larsson says, "It is not probable that all these detailed dates are based in any ancient oral or written tradition. It is more likely that they were invented at some time for some purpose."⁷² Second, that the chronological data in the MT are the complete and accurate figures, while the LXX and SP versions contain "corrections" of confusing information in the MT.⁷³ Third, that the chronological data in the Old Testament were, "taken from three calendars, whose origin was fixed at the beginning of the first day of Creation and which thereafter ran parallel.... One of these calendars is the ancient lunar year of 354 days, one the Egyptian solar year of 365 days and one the improved solar year with an intercalary day every fourth year."⁷⁴ Fourth, since this system provides specific dates for some Old Testament events, all references to years must refer to exact years; accurate to the same date. "Thus, if a period of 5 years is

⁷¹ S. R. Driver, "Book Review: The Enclosed Garden by Knut Stenring," *Journal of Theological Studies* 18, no. 1 (1967): 187.

⁷² Larsson, "A System of Biblical Dates," 184.

⁷³ Larsson, *The Secret System*, 56-64; Gerhard Larsson, "Septuagint versus Massoretic Chronology," *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 114, no. 4 (2002): 520-21.

⁷⁴ Larsson, "A System of Biblical Dates," 185; Larsson, *The Secret System*, 8.

mentioned, this means 5 years to the day.”⁷⁵ Fifth, this secret system was designed and added to a “canon” of twelve Old Testament books⁷⁶ by a “Chronicler” (designated C by Larsson) around 230 B.C. because, “the improved solar calendar, the so-called Tanitic calendar, was introduced in Egypt by resolution in 238 B.C.”⁷⁷

Larsson does admit that, “The recording of exact calendar dates—without telling in which calendar—for events ... is peculiar in itself and different from other ancient historians.”⁷⁸ But that a major understatement. Such a complicated system is indicated nowhere else in ancient literature, and it remains incomprehensible to many modern mathematicians. The system can only be read as several parallel columns of specific dates—in day, month, year format—counting from the first day of creation.⁷⁹ Larsson claims this system adequately explains certain “contradictions”⁸⁰ in biblical chronology, but these problems can be solved with much simpler explanations. And finally, this system does not help explain why the author or chronologist gave extended lifespans to ancient ancestors. According to Larsson, these figures were, “decided rather

⁷⁵ Larsson, “A System of Biblical Dates,” 185; Larsson, *The Secret System*, 9.

⁷⁶ These twelve books are: The Pentateuch, Joshua, Judges, Samuel, Kings, Chronicles (including Ezra 1:1–3:7), Jeremiah, and Ezekiel. Gerhard Larsson, “Ancient Calendars Indicated in the OT,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 54 (1992): 63.

⁷⁷ Larsson, “A System of Biblical Dates,” 192; Larsson, *The Secret System*, 8, n. 12, 55.

⁷⁸ Larsson, “A System of Biblical Dates,” 189-90.

⁷⁹ See Appendix II in Larsson, *The Secret System*, 103-19.

⁸⁰ Some of the supposed contradictions in the Torah include: (1) Gen 2:2 states that God finished his work on the seventh day, but his last task—creating Adam and Eve—was completed on the sixth day. (2) Shem was born when Noah was 500 years old (Gen 5:32), which would make him 100 years old when the flood came (Gen 7:6, 11). But Shem was still only 100 years old when he became the father of Arphaxad, two years after the flood (Gen 11:10). Larsson, *The Secret System*, 10, 20. See also Gerhard Larsson, “The Chronology of the Pentateuch: A Comparison of the MT and LXX,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 102, no. 3 (1983): 405-06.

freely,⁷⁸¹ and had no “credible connections to the reality.”⁷⁸² The result is the same as that of the other mathematical solutions—these lifespan numbers were simply invented by an author at a later time and have no relation to the actual events of the patriarchal age.

Mathematical Calculations Based on Actual Ages

Robert Best proposed a unique solution to the large ages in Genesis 5. Noting that the ages in the Septuagint end only in the digits zero, two, five, and seven, he suggested that these last numerals actually represented fractions of years, not full years. So, much like the odometer in a car, the last digit represents tenths of a year, and every age should be divided by ten. The reason zero, two, five, and seven are used exclusively is because the writer was using these numbers as approximations for zero, one-quarter, one-half, and three-quarters. Best says, “Only two simple assumptions are needed for the Genesis 5 numbers to conform to ages of people living today, i.e. that the Septuagint has the original numbers and each of the numbers has one decimal place in modern notation.”⁷⁸³ But, while this speculation seemed to provide reasonable ages for the birth of the first son (except for Noah, whose first son would have been born when he was fifty), the ages at death were still too high. So, Best is forced to propose a mistranslation of the original numerals hundreds of years after they were written. He proposed a similar

⁸¹ Larsson, “A System of Biblical Dates,” 192.

⁸² Ibid., 189.

⁸³ Robert M. Best, *Noah’s Ark and the Ziusudra Epic: Sumerian Origins of the Flood Myth* (Fort Myers, FL: Enlil Press, 1999), 111.

mistranslation for antediluvian lifespans in the SKL as well, but such a consistently repeated mistranslation seems unlikely.⁸⁴

Although he attempts to relate the extended lifespan numbers in Genesis 5 to normal lifespans, Best still does not see any accurate historical information in Genesis. He believes the “impossibly large ages” in Genesis actually reveal its “mythical quality.”⁸⁵ Like the proposals of Young or Larsson, the complexity of this system makes it unlikely to be correct. If just one part were incorrect—say the assumption that the LXX recorded the original numbers—the whole system would collapse. Plus this speculation only applies to the antediluvian lifespans—it does not help us with the postdiluvian ancestors or the patriarchs.

Evaluation

Essentially all of these proposals suffer from the same flaw. The late date of redaction under the Wellhausen theory provides no room for an accurate record of any patriarchal history. Rather the lifespan figures and chronology were invented or modified by the P editor(s) and projected back into antiquity to meet the needs of his contemporary audience(s). Now we can turn to proposals from an evangelical point of view.

Solutions From a Supernatural Perspective

Conservative or evangelical scholars believe Genesis conveys factual and historically accurate information about people and events in the patriarchal age. In this view, the divine author oversaw the contribution of the human author in such a way as to

⁸⁴ Ibid., 116, 129.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 103.

ensure an accurate portrayal of the events in antiquity. Of course, much of the content in the Pentateuch is theological in nature and not verifiable. But for readers to be able to trust the Bible where it presents information about God, sin, good and evil, angels, the human condition, or future prophecy, those same readers must be able to trust the Bible's record of verifiable human events in the past. Any incompatibility of the Bible's historical record casts a shadow of doubt on the Bible's theological assertions.

The solutions presented below are not all from evangelical scholars who hold to a high view of Scripture. Rather, these are solutions that are compatible with a high view of Scripture, irrespective of the actual worldview of the author proposing the solution. As with the proposals above, some elements or variations of these proposals may hold a key to an interpretation of the patriarchal lifespans that is more consonant with the understanding of the original readers of Genesis.

Umberto Cassuto proposed certain requirements for a solution to the problems of extreme biblical lifespans, which seem to be relevant here. The solution should satisfy these requirements: (1) It must not depend on complicated calculations, but should be quite simple. (2) It must be based on a numerical system commonly used by the Torah, and consequently one that is known to its readers. (3) The requisite information should all be found in the text itself. (4) It must explain not only the interval of time between the Creation and the Deluge, but also ... the life-span of the ten patriarchs. (5) It should be able to elucidate the chronology of the Babylonians.⁸⁶

As discussed earlier, not everyone in the evangelical camp holds to a face-value interpretation of the unusual patriarchal lifespans. As chapter two demonstrated, it

⁸⁶ Cassuto, *Commentary on Genesis, Part I*, 258.

is very difficult to maintain a face-value understanding of the patriarchal lifespans when the ages themselves, and the chronology based on those ages conflicts with both the Bible and with archaeological evidence from that time period. So, this chapter will examine the proposed solutions that are compatible with the evangelical belief in a divine author to see whether there might be legitimate and plausible elements that could provide a likely option to interpreting the patriarchal lifespans.

Lifespans Represent Dynasties not Individuals

Franz Delitzsch proposed a theory that each of the lifespans in Genesis 5 actually refers to an epoch of history that is assigned to the most significant person in that epoch.⁸⁷ This theory has merit, and has been shared and modified by several other scholars.⁸⁸ This theory seems reasonable and has some biblical precedent. There are only four generations listed as the ancestors of Moses in Egypt (Exod 6:16-20), compared to eleven generations for his successor Joshua (1 Chron 7:22-27). So it seems that the ancestry of Moses only highlighted the key individuals and assigned extended lifespans to them, while the ancestry of Joshua represents the actual number of generations in Egypt. The ages listed for Moses's ancestors can be added up to the years of the Egyptian sojourn. The 430 years of Exodus 12:40-41 can be reached by adding Moses's age at the Exodus (eighty) with Amram's age (137), Kohath's age (133) and eighty years left in

⁸⁷ Franz Delitzsch, *A New Commentary on Genesis*, trans. Sophia Taylor, vol. 1 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1899), 212-13.

⁸⁸ John D. Davis, "Chronology," in *Illustrated Davis Dictionary of the Bible*, ed. John D. Davis (Nashville: Royal Publishers, 1973), 138-39; James A. Borland, "Did People Live to be Hundreds of Years Old Before the Flood? Yes," in *The Genesis Debate: Persistent Questions about Creation and the Flood*, ed. Ronald F. Youngblood (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1990), 174-75; W. Ault, "Antediluvians," in *Zondervan Encyclopedia of the Bible*, ed. Merrill C. Tenney and Moisés Silva, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 201-2.

Levi's life. This would mean Levi was fifty-seven years old when he entered Egypt, which contradicts Genesis 30 where Levi was only four or five years older than Joseph's age of thirty-nine. But there is a bigger problem with adding these lifespans to construct the 430 years of the Egyptian sojourn. Sons are not born in the same year that their father died—that would be so unlikely as to be impossible. Instead, the point of Exodus 6:16-20 is to name a few key individuals and add lifespan numbers in a chiasmic arrangement (137, 133, 137) to fit the 430-year scheme.⁸⁹ The fact that they cannot be added arithmetically shows that they were never intended to be taken as actual ages.

However, there are other problems with the dynasty view, which seem to make it unlikely. It seems clear genealogies used telescoping since there is evidence of names being skipped for various reasons, but there is no explicit mention that certain names were chosen to represent a dynasty or an epoch. To make that assumption involves reading into the text something that is not stated. Additionally, this view places the priority on the face-value reading of the lifespans. This view is postulating several unknown and unmentioned people who lived, for example, in the 130 years between Adam and Seth, or the 187 years between Methuselah and Lamech. But the clearly schematic numbers used, and the ancient Near Eastern parallels indicate that these lifespan numbers were never intended to be taken at face value. Instead, the priority should be on the historical accuracy of the people listed rather than on the numbers. In other words, to adhere to a rigid reading of the lifespans, one must accept that the list of

⁸⁹ Wellhausen noted that the listed numbers from the founding of the first temple to the founding of the second temple also add up to 430 years, which then makes a total of 480 years, once the exile is added in. This—he believed—corresponded to the 430 years of the Egyptian sojourn and the 480 years from the Exodus to the founding of the first temple (1 Kgs 6:1). Such a pattern was, to Wellhausen, further proof that these numbers were added after the dedication of the second temple at the earliest. Wellhausen, *Prolegomena*, 229-230, 272-274.

names is incomplete. But an acceptance of the schematic use of numbers allows one to accept the historical accuracy of the people listed.

A Different Calendar

Some proposals suggest the use of a different calendar, but these have generally failed to provide a satisfying solution. One of the earliest suggestions was to reckon years as months. Manetho seems to have been the earliest to record this belief. When interpreting the long reigns of Egyptian gods and demigods, he took one year to equal one month of thirty days, which he claimed perfectly harmonized with the chronology in the Hebrew Bible. However, in contrast to the Egyptian years, he seems to have counted the biblical years as actual years, and his totals differ from those recorded in the MT.⁹⁰ It is important to note that there is no evidence that Egyptians ever calculated a year as one month. This was simply Manetho's attempt to deal with the extremely long reigns of the Egyptian deities.⁹¹

Diodorus believed that some Greeks understood each season (four months) as a year.⁹² He also held it was the belief of some Egyptians that, "in early times, before the movement of the sun had as yet been recognized, it was customary to reckon the year by

⁹⁰ *Manetho*, trans. W. G. Waddell, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1940), 5-9.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 4, n. 2.

⁹² Diodorus of Sicily, *Book I*, trans. C. H. Oldfather, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1933), 83-85.

the lunar cycle. Consequently, since the year consisted of thirty days, it was not impossible that some men lived twelve thousand years.”⁹³

Plutarch, similarly, records what seems to have been a common belief that some other cultures counted years as only a few months. He talks about Numa Pompilius adding two months to a standard 10-month year and then gives other examples.

... as there are barbarians who count only three; the Arcadians, in Greece, had but four; the Arcanians, six. The Egyptian year at first, they say, was of one month; afterwards, of four; and so, though they live in the newest of all countries, they have the credit of being a more ancient nation than any, and reckon, in their genealogies, a prodigious number of years, counting months, that is, as years.⁹⁴

Pliny the Elder was unconvinced by those who reckoned a year as one month (the Egyptians), or three months (the Arcadians), or four months (a season), or even six months, but he did acknowledge that some people—who were “ignorant of chronology”—held to these beliefs.⁹⁵ Augustine also noted the belief of some in a shorter year of four months, or one month, and even quoted Pliny on the subject. However, Augustine ably refuted this theory and clearly expounded his belief in the face-value reading of the longevity of the biblical ancestors.⁹⁶

In fact one cannot find anyone seriously supporting this theory other than Manetho, and his calculations seem suspect. Indeed this theory is easily proved false

⁹³ Actually, this lifespan is still impossible since it would total approximately 1,000 years (12,000/12). *Ibid.*, 83.

⁹⁴ Plutarch, *Numa Pompilius*. Plutarch, *Plutarch's Lives of Illustrious Men*, trans. A. H. Clough (Boston: Little, Brown, and Company, 1914), 51.

⁹⁵ Pliny the Elder, *Natural History*, trans. H. Rackham, Loeb Classical Library, vol. 352 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967), 611.

⁹⁶ Augustine, *City of God*, Book XII, 11; Book XV, 12. Augustine, *The City of God*, trans. William Babcock, *The Works of Saint Augustine: A Translation for the 21st Century*, ed. Boniface Ramsey, vol. 7 (New York: New City Press, 2012), 47-48, 153-155.

because the calculations on biblical ages do not work. If one year was only a month then Kenan would have fathered Mahalalel at age seven, and Enoch would have been six and a half when he fathered Methuselah (Gen 5:12, 15). Reckoning a year as one season brings similar problems. Enoch could possibly have fathered Methuselah at sixteen ($65/4$), but Noah could not have begun his parenthood at 125 ($500/4$).⁹⁷ The same problems occur when we consider the lives of the patriarchs. Dividing the ages by twelve yields results far too young, and dividing them by four cannot be consistently applied. Abraham could have fathered Ishmael at twenty-one and a half ($86/4$) and Isaac at twenty-five ($100/4$), but then Isaac's birth is certainly not a miracle. Isaac and Esau would not have married at age ten ($40/4$, Gen 25:20, 26:34), and Joseph would not have been sold into slavery at four years old ($17/4$, Gen 37:2) nor given a high position in Egypt at age seven and a half ($30/4$, Gen 41:46).

Michael Rosenzweig has a unique suggestion. He tries to harmonize the figures by simply cutting them in half. He proposes that the Hebrew word translated as "year" (שָׁנָה) should be read as "half-year."⁹⁸ This approach is demonstrated with the patriarchal ages in Appendix B, Table 2. At first glance this seems to solve a number of problems. The ages are all within the normal range (though Isaac lives to ninety and Terah to 103), and the age of marriage and childbearing are all normal (Terah is a standout, having children from thirty-five to sixty-five). Sarah is five years younger than Abraham (Gen 17:17). She gives up on childbearing at thirty-seven instead of seventy-

⁹⁷ Carol A. Hill, "Making Sense of the Numbers in Genesis," *Perspectives on Science and Christian Faith* 55, no. 4 (2003): 239.

⁹⁸ Michael L. Rosenzweig, "Life History Data in the Bible, from Abraham to Joshua," *Judaism* 29, no. 3 (1980): 355.

five, and she miraculously gives birth to Isaac at forty-five—past childbearing age in that culture. It makes more sense of the note that Sarah has stopped menstruating (Gen 18:11). Rebekah is barren for ten years instead of twenty, and the twins are born when she is thirty (Gen 25:21-26). One might also add that the life of Moses makes more sense if he kills the Egyptian at twenty, leads the Exodus at forty, and dies at sixty.

However, the ages for Jacob fleeing to Haran (thirty-eight and a half) and marrying (forty-two) still seem unusually high. And reducing Jacob's twenty years in Haran to ten—and his fourteen years of labor for his wives to seven—creates unsolvable problems. Leah must give birth to four sons in two years, and seven children in three and a half years (Gen 30:19-25). Even allowing these children to be born in six and a half years (from Jacob's marriage until he leaves Haran) instead of three and a half (from Jacob's marriage to the end of his labor for Rachel) is impossible since Leah experienced a period of childlessness (Gen 29:35). Rosenzweig acknowledges these problems and suggests that Genesis 30:25, which links the birth of Jacob's twelfth child to the end of his seven years of labor for Rachel, is a later addition to the text.⁹⁹ However, there is no evidence for such a suggestion, and the evidence Rosenzweig cites for his new meaning of שָׁנָה seems flimsy.

But, even more problematic for this theory, Judah's two older sons have to grow up, marry, and die before Judah himself turns twenty-one! And Joseph becomes a high official in Pharaoh's court at age fifteen (Gen 41:46), and lives to see his great grandchildren at age fifty-five (Gen 50:22). However, Rosenzweig's suggestion does

⁹⁹ Ibid., 357, n. 15.

demonstrate that it is possible to reimagine the patriarchs living normal human lifespans within the parameters of the narrative.

Mathematical Calculations using Symbolic Numbers

Nahum Sarna noticed that the patriarchal lifespans are the result of fairly simple equations in a numerical pattern.¹⁰⁰ The pattern is outlined below:

$$\text{Abraham: } 175 = 7 \times 5^2$$

$$\text{Isaac: } 180 = 5 \times 6^2$$

$$\text{Jacob: } 147 = 3 \times 7^2$$

Stanley Gervitz used this same series, but added his suggestion of the author's motive. He does not believe there is anything profound or mysterious behind these numbers, they were meant as a "play of wits ... a kind of ancient 'brain-twister.'"¹⁰¹

C. J. Labuschagne also used the same sequence, but disagreed with Gervitz as to the motive of the author. He theorized that the descending order of the first number (7-5-3) signifies the descending hierarchy from Abraham to Isaac to Jacob. And he argued that the age of Joseph (110) brings the sequence to completion because it finishes the pattern (7-5-3-1) and is the sum of the preceding numbers ($110 = 5^2 + 6^2 + 7^2$). Perhaps most significantly, Labuschagne notes that the number seventeen can be used as the starting point for all of these calculations (i.e. $7+5+5 = 17$, $5+6+6 = 17$, $3+7+7 = 17$). He believes the significance of the numerical value of seventeen is that it represents both the

¹⁰⁰ Nahum M. Sarna, *Understanding Genesis*, Heritage of Biblical Israel, vol. 1 (New York: Schocken Books, 1966), 83-85.

¹⁰¹ Stanley Gervitz, "The Life Spans of Joseph and Enoch and the Parallelism *šibāṭayim—šibīm wēšibāh*," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 96, no. 4 (1977): 570.

divine name, and the Hebrew word **כְּבוֹד** (glory). Thus, he says, “The symbolic meaning of 17 is most probably that it signifies YHWH’s presence. If so, then the intention of the author of Genesis in choosing this number could have been to express YHWH’s presence in the lives of the four Israelite patriarchs.”¹⁰² However, this argument must be ruled out based on the complete lack of other examples of gematria within Genesis (see chapter three, pages 98-100).

Duane Christensen agrees with Labuschagne’s theory that the number seventeen serves as the origin of these patriarchal ages, including the age of Joseph and Joshua (110, Gen 50:22, 26, Judg 2:8). He then includes the years Job lived after his trials (140, Job 42:16-17), and attempts to demonstrate a pattern using this figure.¹⁰³ However, the patterns he finds using the number 140 seem forced and unconvincing, as does his novel suggestion that the number seventeen represents an earlier form of the Old Testament canon.

Steven Collins believes the ages are symbolic, but he suggests there may be an honorific element as well. He says, “I take the patriarchal lifespan numbers as honorific and/or symbolic formulas. Put simply, I postulate that the 175 years of Abr(ah)am may be a combination of his actual age (perhaps 55? or 95?) plus two or three 40-year honorific

¹⁰² C. J. Labuschagne, “The Life Spans of the Patriarchs,” in *New Avenues in the Study of the Old Testament: A Collection of Old Testament Studies Published on the Occasion of the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Oudtestamentisch Werkgezelschap and the Retirement of Prof. Dr. M. J. Mulder*, Oudtestamentische Studiën, ed. A. S. van der Woude (Leiden: Brill, 1989), 124-27.

¹⁰³ Duane L. Christensen, “Job and the Age of the Patriarchs in Old Testament Narrative,” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 13, no. 3 (1986).

supplements as a result of status-raising accomplishments within his tribal society.”¹⁰⁴

There may be something to this suggestion. It does seem that the author of Genesis used ages to indicate relative importance. One might claim Isaac is an exception since he lived longer than both of the famous generations on either side (Abraham and Jacob).

However, perhaps Isaac was deemed important as the connector between Abraham and Jacob, or because he was the child of the promise around whom the story revolves.

Collins’ addition of forty-year honorific blocks can work for the life of Abraham (with forty years added before he enters Canaan, and after Isaac is born), and Isaac (he dies at 100 instead of 180), and perhaps even Jacob (he enters Egypt at ninety and dies at 107). However, as Collins allows, other ages seem to be clearly symbolic (Joseph dies at 110, Sarah at 120, Ishmael at 137, Esau gets married at 40).

Although K. A. Kitchen believes the patriarchal lifespan numbers are symbolic, and related to a mathematical system, he also allows for the possibility that the figures may have increased over time. He says, “Their [the patriarch’s] life spans and birth dates are high; a minimal chronology would allow for possible inflation of these figures in tradition, while keeping the overall profile.”¹⁰⁵ He does not necessarily believe that this happened, but he seems comfortable allowing for the possibility. His main point is that even if these numbers are symbolic, and even if the narrative records supernatural elements, it in no way detracts from the historicity of Genesis. He says, “Very many real people in antiquity claim dealings with deity (nobody can dismiss the historicity of, e.g.,

¹⁰⁴ Steven Collins, “Tall el-Hammam Is Still Sodom: Critical Data-Sets Cast Serious Doubt on E. H. Merrill’s Chronological Analysis,” *Biblical Research Bulletin* 8, no. 1 (2013): 23.

¹⁰⁵ K. A. Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 359.

a Ramesses II or a Sennacherib on such grounds). Visions (night or day, Gen 15) are not unknown; and high ages at death and prior events are a separate question of the transmission of numbers, and have no bearing on historicity.”¹⁰⁶

We can happily grant Kitchen’s main point—that if these numbers are not face-value ages it does not detract from the historicity of the episodes in Genesis. However, there does not seem to be any evidence that these figures changed over time. It is true that the SP and the LXX have divergent numbers, but these seem to be alterations from the MT’s original figures.¹⁰⁷

Evaluation of these Solutions

Each of these speculations is possible given the mathematical knowledge available in the Late Bronze Age. However, in light of the lack of mathematical precision in Genesis, few of these systems seem probable. If the author of Genesis did not use a simple multiplication table even when it would have enhanced the narrative—such as the multiplication of Jacob’s goat herd compared with that of Laban’s (Gen 30-31)—it is difficult to see why he would have embedded a secret mathematical code into the patriarchal ages. Conversely, how did the author develop and embed a mathematical code so complex that it has eluded the best biblical scholars for millennia, including the computer analysis of our own time?

Each of the above solutions brings a new perspective to the problem of unusually high patriarchal ages. But none of them provides the final solution, and each of

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 366.

¹⁰⁷ Jack Finegan, *Handbook of Biblical Chronology: Principles of Time Reckoning in the Ancient World and Problems of Chronology in the Bible*, rev. ed. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1998), 195.

these proposals misses something—the motive of the author. The face value approach of Merrill and mathematical calculation of Rosenzweig both assume that Moses intended to record objective history for future generations. Sarna, Gevirtz, and Labuschagne seem to believe that Moses wanted to communicate the relative importance of each patriarch via mathematical calculations on symbolic numbers that his audience would presumably comprehend. Northcote believes the author wanted to embed an eschatologically significant number in code for future theologians to find. Kitchen seems to believe that Moses communicated the importance of the patriarchal figures using symbolic numbers, but he allows for those numbers to have changed over time.

But, surely the author's motive is clear—to glorify Yahweh, the God of Israel. How could Moses do that in the context of remembering the birth of the nation, and the characters that founded it? Abraham came from Mesopotamia, so the nation was related to—but distinct from—the Mesopotamians. Thus their numbering system seems related to—but different from—that of the Mesopotamians. It is instructive to note that in relation to the SKL, with reigns of tens of thousands of years, the ages in Genesis seem more realistic. We could infer that Moses wanted to communicate that his forebears were truly significant people. They were set apart from the common people by God, but they were not gods or kings. He also wanted to communicate that these figures were real people, and the events he related really occurred. This was necessary to bind the society together as they contemplated entering the Promised Land. He also needed to use a method that was easily remembered and passed down. So, perhaps he used a numerical system that was easily memorized as a way to memorialize and honor these ancestors.

Perhaps a good comparison might be the lifespan numbers of the later Israelite and Judean kings. The lifespans and reigns recorded in Scripture conform to normal human lifespans, and can be shown to fit the history of the first millennium BC.¹⁰⁸ However, it is also true that to synchronize the reigns of the kings of Israel, with the kings of Judah and to tie those reigns to absolute dates required taking those figures in a non-modernistic, non-literal sense. Instead, the ancient authors used a combination of accession year and non-accession year reckoning, co-regencies and rival reigns, different months in the calendar year for the start of a king's reign, and different methods to record the reigns of neighboring states.¹⁰⁹ Thus, it seems highly likely that Moses could have used a combination of different schemes, not just one scheme, in the same way that the later genealogies of the kings do.¹¹⁰

¹⁰⁸ Both Saul and David lived to 70 (1 Sam 13:1, 2 Sam 5:4-5, Acts 13:21), the typical lifespan of a king (Isa 23:15). Barzillai was very old at 80 (2 Sam 19:32-35). These ages fit well with Moses's statement in Psalm 90:10. We do not know the lifespan of every king, but those listed reveal these kings lived normal human lifespans: Rehoboam: 59 (2 Chr 12:13), Jehoshaphat: 59 (1 Kgs 22:42), Jehoram: 44 (2 Kgs 8:17), Ahaziah: 22 (2 Kgs 8:26), Jehoash: 46 (2 Kgs 11:21-12:1), Amaziah: 54 (2 Kgs 14:1-2), Azariah: 68 (2 Kings 15:1-2), Jotham: 44 (2 Kings 15:32-33), Ahaz: 40 (2 Kgs 16:2), Hezekiah: 54 (2 Kgs 18:1-2), Manasseh: 66 (2 Kgs 21:1), Amon: 24 (2 Kgs 21:19), Josiah: 39 (2 Kgs 22:1), Jehoiakim: 36 (2 Kgs 23:36). Edwin R. Thiele, *The Mysterious Numbers of the Hebrew Kings*, new rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), 218 Appendix C.

¹⁰⁹ Ibid., 43-65.

¹¹⁰ In fact Judah began using the accession-year system, then switched to the non-accession years system used by Israel for four reigns before switching back to their original system. At that time Israel, too, switched to the accession-year system. Ibid., 21.

CHAPTER 5

PROPOSED SOLUTION

This dissertation has revealed that to support the inerrancy of the patriarchal narrative we need to correct three common misconceptions. The face-value interpretation of the patriarchal ages undermines the inerrancy of the text because it is internally inconsistent within the Bible, it proposes a chronology at variance with all known evidence of human history, and it champions an interpretation that arose hundreds of years after the text was written without allowing the narrative to speak in the language and idiom of the world in which it was composed.

The first misconception—that a face-value reading of the Genesis lifespans is internally consistent was examined and challenged in chapter two, as was the second fallacy that the face-value interpretation is in concordance with scientific evidence from the ancient world. Suffice it to say the face-value interpretation violates the principle of inerrancy because it posits a view of ancient history that is neither consistent within the Bible nor supported by any evidence outside the Bible. But we need to say more about the third misunderstanding.

The Myth of the Uniform Interpretation

The idea that prior to the modern era all peoples and cultures read the lifespan numbers as arithmetically accurate is a myth. After tracing the history of interpretation since the Jewish chronologist, Demetrius (ca. 200 BC), Merrill states, “This brief account of the history of chronography, relative especially to the genealogical tables, makes clear

that most of the ancients took the genealogies prima facie as chronological records by intent and function.”¹ Jeremy Sexton and Henry Smith state,

Until the latter part of the 19th century, both Jewish and Christian theologians and historiographers interpreted the genealogies of Genesis 5:3-32 and Genesis 11:10-32 as yielding a continuous chronology of human history from the creation of Adam to the birth of Abraham. Biblical chronologists had been interpreting the genealogies in Genesis as intact chronologies since before Christ (e.g. see the histories of Demetrius and Eupolemus). This ultra-majority understanding of these biblical texts held sway for millennia.²

Unfortunately both of these statements neglect to examine any of the literature prior to ca. 300 BC, which leaves hundreds of years—perhaps a millennium, depending on one’s view on the composition of the Torah—unaccounted for. The first recorded interest in creating a chronology of the world did not arise until the Greek culture, ca. 300 BC. Wacholder says, “Chronography became a discipline of its own during the Alexandrian age.... from 300 B.C. onward learned men of Alexandria attempted to assign more or less precise dates for notable events.”³

Our examination of extra-biblical literature prior to the translation of the LXX (beginning ca. 250 BC) has revealed that assigning extraordinary lifespans to ancient ancestors was the common practice. In fact, we can say that every ancient Near Eastern culture that recorded reigns or lifespans assigned unusually long numbers to their ancient ancestors. The only other practice we find in ancient Near East documents, whether annals, or king lists, is to not record any numerical data at all. Harry Hoffner says,

¹ Eugene H. Merrill, “Chronology,” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 118.

² Jeremy Sexton and Henry B. Jr. Smith, “Primeval Chronology Restored: Revisiting the Genealogies of Genesis 5 and 11,” *Bible and Spade* 29, no. 2 (2016): 42.

³ Ben Zion Wacholder, “Biblical Chronology in the Hellenistic World Chronicles,” *Harvard Theological Review* 61 (1968): 451.

concerning the Hittites, “The Hittites had no chronographic literature. The closest approximation to a king list does not record dates or lengths of reigns.”⁴

There is no example of an ancient Near Eastern witness that records objective history as a modern historian would. Wilson says, “As a rule, ancient Near Eastern genealogies seem not to have been created specifically for the purpose of writing history.”⁵ This includes the Mesopotamian (SKL), the Egyptian (TC), Akkadian (AKL), and Babylonian (GHD) records. Westermann says, “The practice of attributing extraordinarily long life-spans to primeval ancestors (or primeval kings) was widespread and had long been known.”⁶ Josephus gives illustrations of Egyptian (Manetho), Chaldean (Berosos), Phoenician (Mochus), several Greek and other ancient witnesses who all recorded extended lifespans for their antediluvian ancestors.

The fact that Josephus himself did not view these as schematic numbers, but used the LXX lifespans to construct a chronology merely illustrates the vast cultural divide between the originating culture and that of Josephus’s day. He believed that the extended lifespans were due to better nutrition, and that God had granted these ancestors long lives because of their virtue, and the astronomical and geometrical discoveries they

⁴ Harry A. Hoffner Jr., “Hittites,” in *Peoples of the Old Testament World*, ed. Alfred J. Hoerth, Gerald L. Mattingly, and Edwin M. Yamauchi (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 127.

⁵ Robert R. Wilson, *Genealogy and History in the Biblical World*, Yale Near Eastern Researches, ed. William W. Hallo, Marvin H. Pope, and William K. Simpson, vol. 7 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1977), 132.

⁶ Claus Westermann, *Genesis 1–11: A Commentary*, trans. John J. Scullion (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984), 351.

were making.⁷ However, even Josephus concluded with a conciliatory note, saying, “as to these matters let everyone look upon them as he thinks fit.”⁸

Future discoveries may add nuances to this blanket assertion, but it will not be overturned without an exceptionally large amount of discoveries that decisively demonstrate the opposite tendencies. Instead of recording an objective chronology of history, it seems that ancient genealogies were recorded either to support the legitimacy of a dynasty, to explain the place of a family or tribe in relation to its neighbors, or to validate the purity of a priestly line (e.g., the Levites). Concerning the SKL, Walter Bodine says,

In addition to the inflated reigns of earlier kings, the king list pictures a unified Sumer and Akkad with one ruler following another, a picture that is not historical.... It is a literary text and not a historical one—but then, neither is any Sumerian text, at least not in any sense in which we would use the term. Yet none of these qualifications amounts to saying that the individuals named in the text were not historical persons who did, in fact, occupy a position of authority in their given cities. The opposite can be demonstrated in some cases.⁹

What are the ramifications of this correction? The first corollary is that the burden of proof is upon the face-value interpretation of the Genesis lifespans since that goes against all known ancient traditions. Some scholars argue that the Bible is an exception—that the detailed numbers in Genesis are evidence that these genealogies were expressly intended to construct chronologies. Gerhard Hasel concluded,

... the comparative material relating to genealogies within and outside Scripture renders Genesis 5 and 11 unique in the Bible and the ancient Near East, because

⁷ *Antiquities*, 1.104-108. Josephus, *Jewish Antiquities, Books I–IV*, trans. H. St. J. Thackeray, Loeb Classical Library, vol. 242 (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1930), 51-53.

⁸ Wilson, *Genealogy and History*, 132.

⁹ Walter R. Bodine, “Sumerians,” in *Peoples of the Old Testament World*, ed. Alfred J. Hoerth, Gerald L. Mattingly, and Edwin M. Yamauchi (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 27-28.

in no other case is the literary form “genealogy” joined with chronological information as it is in these two chapters.... In recognition of this unique literary form with time specifications, these genealogies in Genesis 5 and 11 are designated as “chrono-genealogies.”¹⁰

Jeremy Sexton agrees, and clarifies this position.

The biblical author did not need to include begetting ages for *genealogical* purposes; every ancient genealogy outside of Gen 5 and 11 communicates lineage without using begetting ages.... I have been unable to find a published interpretation that posits a reason why the author of Gen 5 and 11 included the begetting ages if not for a chronological purpose.¹¹

However, that interpretation arises from seeing these genealogies with modern eyes. If we were writing a genealogy, we would include the begetting ages for the purposes of a chronology. But the ancient writers did not think like that. The begetting ages are included for the same reason the other ages are included—to bestow honor using schematic numbers. The writer of Genesis nowhere adds up the ages to form totals, even though he uses addition for each ancestor’s life in Genesis 5. If these genealogies were intended to form the basis of a chronology of human history, it is remarkable indeed that the writer of Genesis does not total the numbers for his readers. Those who claim that the Pentateuch does provide totals—for example the years of the Egyptian sojourn (Exod 12:40-41)—are mistaking another symbolic number for an arithmetic total. The ages of the four generations in Exodus 16 seem to have been deliberately constructed to add up to 430, but the fact that they do not quite fit alerts the readers—and us—that these were

¹⁰ Gerhard F. Hasel, “The Meaning of the Chronogenealogies of Genesis 5 and 11,” *Origins* 7, no. 2 (1980): 53.

¹¹ Jeremy Sexton, “Who was Born when Enoch was 90? A Semantic Reevaluation of William Henry Green’s Chronological Gaps,” *Westminster Theological Journal* 77 (2015): 202.

merely schematic numbers. The genealogy in Exodus 16 is clearly telescoped, and the writers have inserted schematic numbers to fit a pattern.

The fact that the numbers are not the random sampling we might expect for a factual distribution of historic lifespans is another clue. All the lifespans in Genesis fit the definition of schematic numbers—albeit with different schemes at work. The Genesis 5 numbers all fit the pattern as multiples of five with the occasional addition of seven. Alternatively, this scheme might better be represented as units of sixty years and sixty months, with the addition of the sacred number seven at times.¹² The lifespans in Genesis 11—like the postdiluvian ages in the SKL—seem to be intended as a link from the primordial past to the known history of the more recent ancestors, although the scheme does seem to differ from that in Genesis 5.¹³ The patriarchal lifespans also fit the pattern of sixty years and sixty months, with the occasional addition of seven. Similarly, the long lifespans of notable people after the patriarchs also fit this pattern.¹⁴ There are exceptions in each of these schemes, but these occur exactly where we might expect them and seem to have reasonable explanations.

There are two possible interpretations for the common practice of assigning extraordinarily long lifespans to ancient ancestors. The first option is to posit that the ancients actually believed these lifespans to be factually accurate. This does not seem likely, but even if it were true, it does not prove the lifespan numbers were face value arithmetic numbers. This would simply be a case of the divine author accommodating the

¹² See Table 1 in Appendix E.

¹³ See Table 2 in Appendix E.

¹⁴ See Tables 3 and 4 in Appendix E.

worldview of the human author and his audience. Just as the divine author accommodated the pre-scientific belief that the firmament over the sky was a solid dome, so he accommodated the pre-scientific belief that all ancient ancestors lived hundreds, if not thousands of years.

However, the lifespans in the SKL militate against such an interpretation. Those lifespans were obvious hyperbole that every reader—both ancient and modern—understood to be symbolic. Nobody lives for 43,200 years, or 36,000 years, and no scholar has suggested that the Sumerians did not know that.

This leads to the second option: that the ancient audiences all understood these to be schematic, not arithmetic numbers. These extraordinary lifespans were a literary signal that they were talking about primeval events. This seems to be the only possible solution from the ages in the SKL. Since the most ancient sections in all these ancient writings—including Genesis 5 and 11—covered timeframes prior to the invention of writing, there were no records available from the writer(s) to consult. In several cases the ancestors are described as gods, or semi-gods. The SKL begins with the phrase, “When kingship had descended from heaven . . .” The ancient readers all knew what a normal human lifespan was, these ages were not normal, thus they were describing super-human or super-natural beings. In this environment, actually, the biblical genealogies provide a much needed realism. Genesis 5 and 11 describe ancestors who were human and died (note the repeated refrain in Gen 5). And the descent of the lifespans, like the same descents in the other ancient lists, demonstrates a fall from the purity and nobility of the earliest people and their close relationship to God.

One suggestion is to see the large lifespans in Genesis 5 and 11 as an interpretive cipher from the writer to his audience indicating that they did not possess accurate detailed data. For example, although Hittite writings do not contain lengths of reigns, they do share the same features as other ancient Near East records. Hoffner says, “Of central importance is the indisputable fact that the author has used a semi-legendary account to introduce and explain the non-legendary historical narrative which followed. In essence this format is the same as we find in later historiography.”¹⁵ So, the message for the readers was: “We know our history stretches back a long time before us, and we know there were kings and men of renown who lived back then. But we do not know much else about them. We may not even know all of their names, although some of these men founded tribes and nations that continue into our day. But we do want to honor them, and to show the long timeframe that we know existed before our time.”¹⁶

We can understand the biblical author using the literary forms and conventions of his day, while providing his own content. We see this in the lifespans in Genesis 5 and 11. But what was the author’s intended message with the long lifespans of the patriarchs? By this point in the narrative he is referring to individuals and families within the national history, not the cosmic universal ancestry of all humankind. So, why would he continue to use symbolic lifespans?

¹⁵ Harry A. Hoffner Jr., “Histories and Historians of the Ancient Near East: The Hittites,” *Orientalia* 49 (1980): 291.

¹⁶ I am indebted to Gordon H. Johnston for pointing this out to me and advising me on the Hittite historiography.

Literary Use of Exaggerated Lifespans to Bestow Honor

When we turn to the patriarchal lifespans, there is biblical evidence that they were intended to bestow honor. The Torah explicitly links long life with Yahweh's blessing and obedience to his commands, as do other passages in the Old Testament (Psalm 91:16, Prov 3:1-2, 4:10, 9:10-11). The most well known example is probably the commandment to honor one's parents (Exod 20:12, Deut 5:16), but there are less well-known admonitions as well, like the one to spare a mother bird (Deut 22:6-7).¹⁷ Some commands are general exhortations given to the community as a whole (Deut 4:1, 40, 5:29, 6:2, 11:9, 11:20-21, 30:17-20, 32:46-47), some enjoin honesty in trade (Deut 25:15, Prov 28:16), and this principle even applies to the reign of future kings (Deut 17:19-20).

The first individual honored with a written evaluation of a full, long life was Abraham (Gen 15:15, 25:8). This is truly striking when we consider the large number of individuals who lived prior to him with much longer face-value lifespans. After Abraham, there are only seven other individuals who are likewise honored. Job died “old and full of days” (וְשָׂבַע יָמָיו, Job 42:17), as did Abraham's son Isaac (וְשָׂבַע יָמָיו, Gen 35:29). Joshua was “old and coming to [the end of] his days” before he died at 110 (בְּיָמָיו בָּא, Josh 13:1, 23:1-2, 24:29, Judg 2:8). Gideon died “at a good old age” (בְּשִׂיבָה טוֹבָה, Judg 8:32). Samuel was “old and gray” when he appointed his sons as judges (וְשִׁבְתָּי וְשִׁבְתָּי, 1 Sam 8:1, 12:2). David was “old and full of days” when he chose Solomon as his successor (וְשָׂבַע יָמָיו, 1 Chr 23:1) and he “died at a good old

¹⁷ Some commentators suggest this command is linked to the fifth commandment—to honor one's parents. Abraham Malamat, “Longevity: Biblical Concepts and Some Ancient Near Eastern Parallels,” *Vorträge gehalten auf der 28. Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale in Wien, 6.-10. Juli 1981* Archiv für Orientforschung, Beiheft 19 (1982), 219, 223.

age, full of years, riches and glory” (וַיָּמָת בְּשִׁיבָה טוֹבָה שְׁבַע יָמִים עֶשְׂרִי וְכַבֹּד), 1 Chr 29:28, see also 1 Kgs 1:1), Lastly, Jehoiada was “old and full of days” when he died at 130 (וַיִּזְקֶן יְהוֹיָדָע וַיִּשְׁבַּע יָמָיו), 2 Chr 24:15). All of these people were good examples that the writers of Scripture would want their readers to respect and emulate.

We could extend the examples to include other notable figures who were assigned long lifespans: Levi (137, Exod 6:16), Kohath (133, Exod 6:18), Amram (137, Exod 6:20), Aaron (123, Num 33:39), Moses (120, Deut 34:7), Caleb (older than 85, Josh 14:7-11, Judg 1), and the not so great example of Eli (98, 1 Sam 4:15, 18). Actually, perhaps surprisingly, Eli is a good example of this principle. He seems to have been assigned a long life because of his service as a priest, but he was ineffective in his later life, and his sons were wicked and disobedient. An unnamed prophet of Yahweh reminded Eli, “I promised that members of your family would minister before me forever.” But then pronounced the judgment: “no one in your family line will ever reach old age.... and all your descendants will die in the prime of life.” (1 Sam 2:30-33). Plus, Eli’s own lifespan falls short of the round number of 100 (1 Sam 4:15, 18).

Later on, Yahweh expected the young king Solomon to ask for long life among the list of things that a King would normally petition his deity for (wealth, honor, longevity, 1 Kgs 3:13-14). Pleasantly surprised by Solomon’s request for only wisdom, Yahweh granted longevity to him on the condition—as already spelled out in the Torah—that he walked in God’s ways and kept his statutes and commandments (1 Kgs 3:14). This was mirrored in the people’s cry of: “Long live King Solomon,” (1 Kgs 1:39).

Unfortunately, because Solomon did not always walk in God’s ways (1 Kgs 11:1-13), he was not honored with long life as his father, David, had been (1 Kgs 11:43,

2 Chr 9:31 cf. 1 Chr 29:28). Solomon may have ruled for forty years (1 Kgs 11:42, 2 Chr 9:30), but as one of David's later sons, he assumed the throne at a young age, so his life does not seem to have exceeded an average length (1 Chr 29:1).¹⁸

The Scripture gives other means to measure longevity, so we can correlate these with the lifespan numbers. The stages in an individual's life are mentioned when Moses lays out the relative value of a person offered to the Lord in Leviticus 27. The three stages are: from 1 month to five years old (infancy), from five to twenty years old (childhood), and then from twenty to sixty years old (adulthood). These stages are mirrored, with minor differences, in other ancient literature.¹⁹ While this may indicate that the average person lived to around sixty years of age or perhaps later, it does not help us measure the lifespan of those blessed with long life. For that, we turn to another indication of blessing in the Torah—that of seeing one's descendants.

The biblical ideal of long life seems to have been envisioned as living to see the fourth generation of one's descendants, i.e. one's great grandchildren. Joseph achieved this (Gen 50:22-23), as did Job after his trials (Job 42:16-17). In our culture, this is fairly commonplace but in ancient societies, as we have discussed, this was a rare occurrence when the average lifespan was only around forty to sixty years old.²⁰ The maximum length of a blessed life as epitomized by seeing one's descendants to the fourth

¹⁸ The later Jewish sages speculated that Solomon succeeded to the throne at age 12. Heinrich W. Guggenheimer, *Seder Olam: The Rabbinic View of Biblical Chronology* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1998), 138-40.

¹⁹ Malamat, "Longevity," 215-216.

²⁰ This is true even for the mummified Egyptian kings, who presumably enjoyed the best food and health care. John H. Walton, *Genesis*, NIV Application Commentary, ed. Terry Muck (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 721.

generation is paralleled in Aramaic and neo-Babylonian inscriptions, although admittedly these occur later than the text of Genesis.²¹ But, it may also underlie the curses pronounced in the Torah for disobedience (Exod 20:5-6, Exod 34:6-7, Num. 14:18, Deut. 5:9-10). These curses seem unjust if they are regarded as punishing later generations for sins they did not commit (cf. Ezek 18, Jer 16:10-13, 31:29-30). However, it makes more sense when we realize that these are the generations that a person might conceivably see in his lifetime. In this case the blessing of a long life becomes a curse for the disobedient person who will witness the consequences of his own sin visited upon his children, grandchildren, and great grandchildren.²² We should also note here that Yahweh's promised blessing for obedience upon thousands of generations far outweighs his predicted cursing on the third and fourth generations.

How does this concept inform us as to the lifespans of the patriarchs? Jacob only interacts with his grandchildren—not great-grandchildren—in the text (Gen 48:1-20), although undoubtedly Joseph's older brothers would have had grandchildren by the time of Jacob's death (cf. Gen 38). Isaac does not interact with any of his grandchildren, much less his great-grandchildren, and neither does Abraham. We should also note that the text of Genesis 5 and 11 does not present any of the ancient ancestors meeting their grandchildren, except Terah who travels with his grandson, Lot (Gen 11:31). So, this should again caution us against assuming the lifespans in the text are face-value numbers.

If one sign of a long and blessed life is seeing one's great grandchildren, it seems inconceivable that the author would have ignored this aspect of the lives of

²¹ Malamat, "Longevity," 216-17.

²² Ibid.

individuals he desired to honor, such as Abraham. The most likely explanation seems to be that neither Abraham nor Isaac ever did interact with their grandchildren or great grandchildren. Thus, the only method available to the author to bestow honor on them was through their symbolic and schematic lifespan numbers.

The Sources of Genesis Reexamined

The face-value interpretation of the Genesis genealogies violates a principle of biblical interpretation because it does not allow the text to speak in the language and idioms of its day. In doing so, this interpretation actually supports the Documentary Hypothesis because it insists that the lifespans are arithmetic numbers—a practice we do not see until the monarchy—and it insists the genealogies were intended to form a chronology—a practice we do not see until the third century BC.

The view that the lifespans in Genesis are symbolic or schematic numbers actually supports the antiquity of the text. This interpretation acknowledges that the genealogies in Genesis 5 and 11 correspond to forms from the late third or early second millennium BC, and not to the forms used in the first millennium BC. It also makes sense that the different schemes apparent in the genealogies indicate that these genealogies originated in different time periods. These records from different time periods need not have been the result of long periods of oral transmission, but may have been written down reasonably close to the time of the generations they record. But what were these sources, where did they originate from, and how were they included in our Bible?

Since Moses lived hundreds of years after the events recorded in Genesis, it seems inescapable that he used sources. But traditional scholars have generally not

addressed this question, perhaps because it seems too speculative.²³ But Genesis itself seems to indicate by the *toledot* formula that sources were used, especially in Genesis 5:1 (זֶה סֵפֶר תּוֹלְדֹת אָדָם).²⁴ If we are willing to recognize that the Wellhausen theory was “an appalling bungle,”²⁵ we have the freedom to recognize sources based not on speculation, but on actual scribal practices used in the Late Bronze Age. Can these sources—which undoubtedly included the genealogies—bring some clarity to the question of the patriarchal ages?

Rather than referring to the hypothetical J or P source, it seems to be more consistent to investigate the sources as they are labeled in Genesis itself—as the *toledot* sources, consisting mainly of genealogies. Since the term *toledot* means “generations,” it seems inescapable that the genealogies form the bedrock of each *toledot* section. Of course, other material of a narrative nature was added or interwoven with these genealogies.²⁶ Since genealogies are an important part of all of Bible history (see examples in Numbers, Ezra, Nehemiah, 1 Chronicles, Matthew and Luke), it is likely that these genealogies would have been the first things reduced to writing. Because they could be recorded on small clay tablets, they were portable within a nomadic lifestyle.

²³ John H. Sailhamer, *Genesis*, Expositor’s Bible Commentary, ed. Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland, vol. 1: Genesis–Leviticus, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2008), 26-27.

²⁴ Numbers 21:14 also mentions a book (סֵפֶר) used as a source.

²⁵ Kenneth A. Kitchen, “The Patriarchal Age: Myth or History?,” *Biblical Archaeology Review* 21, no. 2 (1995): 94. Garrett says, “the ghost of Wellhausen hovers over Old Testament studies and symposiums like a thick fog, adding nothing of substance but effectively obscuring vision.” Duane A. Garrett, *Rethinking Genesis: The Sources and Authorship of the First Book of the Pentateuch* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1991), 11.

²⁶ Garrett, *Rethinking Genesis*, 92-98.

We should note in passing that a long period of oral tradition before the records were reduced to writing is neither required by ancient practice, nor is it indicated in the text.²⁷ Patricia Kirkpatrick notes that oral traditions do not retain historical accuracy after a period of approximately 150 years. Thus, “If we accept the possibility that the earliest date for these written patriarchal narratives was during the Davidic/Solomonic period, then the only possible history they could substantiate would be the 150 years prior to their being written.”²⁸ However, she also notes that, “the most striking difference between oral and written history is the effect it produces. Obviously, a written text is more difficult to alter, modify and change than its oral equivalent. It preserves once and for all a particular argument or point of view.”²⁹ Since the genealogies in Genesis preserve three different numerical schemes (Gen 5, Gen 11, and the patriarchal accounts), the likely conclusion is that these three different schemes are the result of written, not oral, transmission. The fact that they do not conform to the same set of rules, never mind conforming to the arithmetic rules of the tenth century BC, seems clearly to indicate they preserve written, not oral, records from three earlier time periods.

There may have been one written, authoritative, copy for the family or tribe with the dissemination or retelling of the stories conducted orally. It also makes sense that the author of Genesis would use the structures of his day in recording his nation’s history. These were the literary forms available to him, what other forms could he have

²⁷ K. A. Kitchen, *Ancient Orient and Old Testament* (Chicago: InterVarsity Press, 1966), 135-138.

²⁸ Patricia G. Kirkpatrick, *The Old Testament and Folklore Study*, *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament: Supplement series*, vol. 62 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1988), 113-14.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 110.

used? We would not expect anything like a modern historical book any more than we expect Genesis 1 to be written in scientific language (“In the beginning God created the Big Bang ...”). This does not mean the content was false, nor was borrowed from other cultures. We have seen that the parallels between Genesis 5 and 11 and the SKL are in structure and form, not in content. Genesis 1–11 simply used the same structure: Creation—genealogy with extremely long ages—Flood—genealogy with reducing ages.

Having the structure of Genesis correspond to the physical limitations of using clay tablets, as other ancient documents did, makes much more sense than the Documentary Hypothesis that dissected the Genesis into pieces according to nineteenth century European literary guidelines, sometime cutting across narratives or genealogies.

Toledot Sources

Many scholars have observed that Genesis is divided up into ten sections under what may be called “headings” with the term *תּוֹלְדוֹת* (*toledot*, generations, descendants, or results/proceedings).³⁰ We could translate *תּוֹלְדוֹת* in this context as: *This is what became of...*³¹ The person named after *toledot* is the point of origin for that story, though he may not be the main character. This seems to be confirmed by the instances of the phrase “according to their toledot” (*לְתוֹלְדוֹתָם*, Gen 10:32, 25:13). Since the person named is also listed in the genealogy, it seems that the phrase means “according to their family genealogy” rather than “according to their direct descendants.”³² Thus *toledot*

³⁰ Paul R. Gilchrist, “*tōlēdōt תּוֹלְדוֹת*,” in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, ed. R. Laird Harris, Gleason L. Archer Jr., and Bruce K. Waltke (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), 378-80.

³¹ Allen P. Ross, *Creation and Blessing: A Guide to the Study and Exposition of Genesis*, 1st paperback ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1996), 69-74.

³² Garrett, *Rethinking Genesis*, 89.

conforms to a family genealogy rather than a list of descendants. We have already discussed von Rad's proposal of a *toledot book* used as a source, which actually seems to support our contention that the author of Genesis used written rather than oral sources.

P. J. Wiseman originally proposed the idea that these *toledot* were markers for original source tablets used in Genesis.³³ This suggestion, unlike the Documentary Hypothesis, can be supported by known practices in the ancient Near East. However, his contention that they marked the end of each tablet, and thus the end of the family genealogy, cannot be maintained.³⁴

It seems far better to see the term *toledot* as a title used at the beginning of a tablet. Due to the constraints of the size of tablets, it seems likely that these tablets contained almost exclusively genealogical records.³⁵ An obvious exception is the use of the term *toledot* to describe the beginnings of the physical universe (Gen 2:4). In this case it seems that the author/compiler of Genesis has consciously copied the *toledot* formula to bring symmetry to the contents of the book.³⁶ This *toledot tablet* theory may also explain the double use of the term in Genesis 36:1 and 36:9. A comparison with other genealogical lists reveals that this list is significantly longer and may have required two tablets. In other cases, it seems that the *toledot* lists have been interspersed with narrative

³³ P. J. Wiseman, *Clues to Creation in Genesis*, ed. D. J. Wiseman (London: Marshall, Morgan & Scott, 1977. Orig. two volumes: *New Discoveries in Babylonia about Genesis* (1936) and *Creation Revealed in Six Days* (1948)), 31-45.

³⁴ Garrett, *Rethinking Genesis*, 90-92.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 92-94.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 94-95.

material from another source (e.g., *toledot* of Noah: Gen 6:9-9:29, *toledot* of Isaac: Gen 25:19-35:29, *toledot* of Jacob: Gen 37:1-46:27).³⁷

This suggestion seems to have merit for our study of the genealogical material in Genesis. A reasonable proposal for the construction of Genesis is that some of the material existed in oral form, but the genealogical records could have been reduced to writing on small and portable tablets at a fairly early stage. The third step would have been the weaving together of these records with narrative material by Moses. And a fourth step would have been the later updating of the text that seems evident.³⁸ If such a scenario is plausible it may help explain why the lifespan data vary so widely throughout the book. We have seen that once a genealogy is reduced to writing, all changes to that genealogy cease. The genealogies in the *toledot* tablets cover a large time frame and it is reasonable to assume they were reduced to writing at different stages over a long period of time. Thus, the earliest tablet (Genesis 5) records genealogical data using the contemporary form of its day. Similarly the later tablets used literary structures and forms common to their day.

There have been significant studies demonstrating chiastic structures within Genesis, which argue for a unity of composition.³⁹ Gary Rendsburg also discovered noteworthy chiastic and parallel structures throughout Genesis, which argues for a

³⁷ Ibid., 95-96.

³⁸ Ibid., 91.

³⁹ In addition to the sources below, see Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis: Part I, From Adam to Noah*, trans. Israel Abrahams, 1st English ed. (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1961); Thomas W. Mann, “‘All the Families of the Earth’: The Theological Unity of Genesis,” *Interpretation* 45, no. 4 (1991): 341-53; David J. A. Clines, *The Theme of the Pentateuch*, *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament Supplement Series*, ed. David J. A. Clines and Philip R. Davies, vol. 10, 2nd ed. (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997).

cohesive whole rather than a cut and paste composite.⁴⁰ Of course the presence of a chiasmic structure by itself does not negate the Documentary Hypothesis, nor does it argue against the use of sources.⁴¹ However, the chiasmi do argue strongly for the work of one skilled narrator who wove the structure together, and they argue against the JEDP sources which often radically cut through this structure.

Kikawada and Quinn were the first to see the parallel structure between Genesis 1–11 and the ancestor epic pattern found in the Myth of Atrahasis.⁴² Duane Garrett then applied the Atrahasis model to the entire book and demonstrated a plausible structure that attempts to use attested ancient Near East forms and incorporates the *toledot* markers that are clearly an integral part of the structure.⁴³

As discussed earlier, it seems likely that Moses used the literary structures common in his day to compose Genesis. The use of *toledot* tablets fits the known practice of recording genealogical data, and the arrangement in Genesis seems to fit the literary structure in the Myth of Atrahasis. This does not imply that Moses incorporated all the information from his *toledot* sources. In fact it seems likely that the genealogies were selectively edited when Moses included them into the structure of Genesis. Some of the genealogies only list one son (e.g., Gen 10:22 cf. 11:10-11), and others seem to have

⁴⁰ Gary A. Rendsburg, *The Redaction of Genesis* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1986), 99-106.

⁴¹ Wenham has shown how the Noah story displays a chiasmic structure, which does not align with the JEDP theory of sources. Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, Word Biblical Commentary, ed. David A. Hubbard, Glenn W. Barker and John D. W. Watts, vol. 1 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987), 155-169.

⁴² Isaac M. Kikawada and Arthur Quinn, *Before Abraham Was: The Unity of Genesis 1–11* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1985), 46-48, 62-74.

⁴³ Garrett, *Rethinking Genesis*, 120-24.

gaps.⁴⁴ However, this does not imply the genealogies are in error. There is ample evidence that oral tradition was reduced to writing—at least for an official version of events—within a short period of time and accurately (2 Chr 17:9).⁴⁵ The narrative sources used in Genesis, although not the focus of this dissertation, also bear the marks of an early transition from oral to written records.⁴⁶

Why were these Lifespan Numbers Chosen?

If, as we have proposed, the lifespans of the patriarchs are schematic numbers intended to bestow honor on the nation's founders, where did these numbers come from and why did the author choose these specific numbers?

Lifespans were Not Chosen to Fit the Narrative

Before we examine why these specific lifespans were chosen, we can explain one reason why they were not chosen. The extraordinarily long lifespans were not selected because they were required by the narrative. In other words, the patriarchal story in Genesis—including the miraculous birth of Isaac—still makes perfect sense if the patriarchs lived normal human lifespans. There is no reason in the text to prefer a face-value interpretation over a schematic interpretation of these lifespans. Below, and in Table 3 in Appendix B, is a reasonable reconstruction of the patriarchal stories using normal human lifespans.

⁴⁴ Kitchen, *Ancient Orient*, 36-39.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 135-38.

⁴⁶ Garrett, *Rethinking Genesis*, 100-03.

Abraham was born when Terah was thirty, not 130. He entered Canaan at thirty-five, not seventy-five. After ten years in Canaan, Sarah gave up on having a child at age thirty-five—past childbearing age in her culture. But Ishmael was not the son of the promise and Isaac was miraculously born when Abraham was sixty and Sarah was fifty! Abraham died at eighty-five, before Isaac married Rebekah at age thirty. This age is lower than forty, but still later than most people married in that culture. After ten years of infertility, Esau and Jacob were born when Isaac was forty (Rebekah was probably significantly younger than Isaac). Esau married at age fifteen, assuming the age forty simply signified he had reached adulthood. That means Jacob could flee to Haran at seventeen, where he was smitten with Rachel and recklessly offered to work seven years for her hand. Isaac would have been considered an old man, and could easily have been blind, by the age of fifty-seven. Although Isaac lived another thirty years, it appears he was incapacitated by the time Jacob returned from Haran since Jacob acted as the family patriarch.

After twenty years in Haran, Jacob returned at age thirty-seven when Joseph and Dinah were six years old. Dinah was raped at age fourteen, when Jacob was forty-five. By this time her brothers, Reuben and Simeon, would have been about nineteen or twenty—old enough to attack the Shechemites. Isaac died soon after that, perhaps at eighty-seven, certainly before Joseph was taken to Egypt at age seventeen. Judah would have been twenty when he advised his brothers to sell Joseph instead of killing him. He must have been married by then, or very soon thereafter. That would have allowed enough time for Judah's sons to grow up, marry, and die, and for Judah to have committed incest with Tamar, before the family moved to Egypt when Judah was forty-

two. There seems no reason to question Joseph's ages as written other than his age at death, which is clearly symbolic. Jacob, then, entered Egypt at age seventy—an age when he could boast to Pharaoh of having a long life, but not as long as his ancestors. Jacob died at seventy-seven instead of 147. Joseph died at seventy—an age where he could have seen his great-grandchildren if he was married at thirty.

As can be seen, the narratives still work perfectly with these ages, and such a record would fit in with our culture where we see numbers as arithmetic values, and desire our historical records to be objectively verifiable. But, such a record would not have communicated well in the culture of the original author and audience. It reduces the prestige of these significant ancestors to that of every other person. They do not stand out as being chosen by Yahweh, and blessed by him as they followed his leading—albeit with a few detours of disobedience along the way.

The Patriarchal Lifespans Fit a Numeric Scheme

If the patriarchal lifespans are schematic numbers, then we only need to examine the numbers explicit in the text. There was never any intention that the other ages should be interpolated or extrapolated, as they would be with face value ages. Only the numbers revealed in the narrative are significant for the author's purpose.

When we limit ourselves to the numbers in the text we find that, like the earlier numbers in Genesis 5, the lifespans in patriarchal narratives are all divisible by five, with the sacred number seven sometimes being added. However, since five years equals sixty months, an alternative—and perhaps more likely—explanation is that each number is made up of units of sixty years and sixty months, with the addition of the

sacred number seven in certain cases.⁴⁷ Like the ages in Genesis 5, this matches the form in the SKL where each lifespan is composed of a number of *šar* (3,600 or 60x60) and a number of *geš* (60).⁴⁸ In fact, we may go one step further. Since the sexagesimal system used a unique sign for the number sixty (*geš* in the SKL), it seems reasonable to assume they had a unique symbol for a unit of sixty years and for a unit of sixty months. In their system this might be equivalent to our term “decade” for ten years, or “century” for a hundred years. If this is the case, then their notation for the lifespans would have been recorded in a much simpler fashion, for example as: 5 “*geš*-years,” and 6 “*geš*-months.” Of course we do not have any records of a symbol for “*geš*-years” or “*geš*-months,” but this seems like a reasonable supposition. Examples for how this may have looked for the unusual lifespans in the Old Testament are in Appendix E.

The only exceptions to this rule occur exactly where we might expect them. Ishmael’s birth is a jarring note in the otherwise symmetrical and harmonious narrative of Abraham and Sarah. His birth when Abraham was eighty-six and Sarah was seventy-six does not fit any pattern, and this seems intentional on the part of the author. This serves to reinforce the message that although Ishmael was blessed by God, he was not *the* son of *the* promise. However, by the time his death is recorded Ishmael’s age fits into the usual pattern (Gen 25:17). This is perhaps to reinforce the point that Yahweh would bless his life and offspring even though he was not *the* son of *the* promise. Another consideration is the need to show that Ishmael had passed puberty by the time Isaac was born. Since Ishmael was fourteen years old (seven plus seven), Abraham was no longer personally

⁴⁷ See Table 1 in Appendix E

⁴⁸ See Appendix C.

responsible for his upbringing when he sent Hagar and Ishmael away (Gen 21:8-21). Yahweh promises to “be with the boy” (Gen 21:20) as he grew up, but he disappears from the narrative until his own *toledot* summarizes his life and death (Gen 25:12-18).

Another question that has vexed scholars is why Isaac’s lifespan of 180 is longer than that of his father, Abraham, and his son, Jacob, who both feature much more prominently in the nation’s history. If these ages are intended to bestow honor, this does not seem to fit the pattern. However, within the narrative of Genesis it makes perfect sense. Isaac is *the* son of *the* promise—his miraculous birth is the center point around which the narrative revolves. Although his story does not take as much space as that of either Abraham or Jacob, and his achievements pale in comparison to theirs, his claim to fame is his very existence. Without his miraculous birth—which the text emphasizes and celebrates—Yahweh’s promise to Abraham would have failed.

Joseph’s lifespan also does not fit the Mesopotamian pattern of sixties, but it clearly corresponds to the ideal Egyptian lifespan of 110. This, again, is exactly what we would expect as the Mesopotamian influence—so clear in the Abraham narrative—gives way to the Egyptian influence that is evident in the rest of the Torah. We should also note that Joshua’s lifespan of 110 matches that of Joseph (Josh 24:29, Judg 2:8 cf. Gen 50:22-23, 26). In effect these two ages mark the bookends of the Egyptian sojourn. Joseph represents the first generation in Egypt, and Joshua represents the last generation.

When we examine the long lifespans of notable individuals recorded in Old Testament after the patriarchal era, we find these numbers continue to fit this pattern of

sixty years and sixty months with the occasional addition of seven.⁴⁹ There are some exceptions, but again they seem to fit where we might expect them. It is easy to see the pattern we have hypothesized as most of the ages end in zero, two, five, or seven.

However, two of the lifespans end in a three. One of these—Kohath—seems to have been chosen to fit a chiastic pattern in Exodus 6 for the generations living in Egypt (Levi, 137; Kohath, 133; Amram, 137). Kohath's age (133) is required for the schematic ages of four generations to add up to 430 (Levi, 80 + Kohath, 133 + Amram, 137 + Moses, 80 = 430).

The other number that ends in a three is Aaron's lifespan of 123 (Num 33:29), which seems to simply be intended to be higher than the lifespan of his more famous younger brother. Moses's lifespan of 120 is schematic, but it is not only constructed as a multiple of sixty, like the lifespans in Mesopotamian literature. Moses is also a son of Egypt, where the decimal system was in use. His lifespan is also constructed of three periods of forty years each, as explained in the text (Exod 2:11-15, Acts 7:23, Exod 7:7, Deut 34:7). In fact, the symbolic number forty is featured throughout the Mosaic narrative (e.g., Exod 25:18, 26:19-21, 34:28, 36:24-26, Num 13:25, 14:30-35, Deut 9:9-11, 25:3). Moses's ideal lifespan of 120 (60x2 and 40x3) singles him out as the most honored person in the Exodus narrative. And his brother, Aaron, was known to be older than him. So Aaron is given the numerically insignificant lifespan of 123 years.

The lifespan of Eli also does not fit the schematic pattern. His ninety-eight years are long by normal standards, but they fail to reach the numerically significant number of 100. The author's intent here seems to be to focus on the failings of Eli, rather than honor his successes.

⁴⁹ See Table 2 in Appendix E.

Last, Jehoiada's lifespan of 130 (2 Chr 24:15) does fit the scheme we have been exploring; yet he lived so long after the patriarchal era. In fact the general rule for the lifespans and lengths of reigns during the monarchy and later seems to be to record historically factual numbers. In this setting Jehoiada's lifespan stands out. Of course this lifespan does not make sense if we actually try to apply it as a face-value number.

Jehoiada was the chief priest in Jerusalem during the reigns of Ahaziah, Athaliah and Joash (ca. 841-796 BC). He died during the forty-two year reign of Joash, but there was a significant time after his death during which Joash again led Judah into apostasy. So if we conservatively estimate Jehoiada's death to ca. 810 BC, he would have to have been born ca. 940 BC, during the reign of Solomon! Plus Jehoiada's wife was Jehosheba, sister of king Ahaziah, and daughter of king Jehoram of Judah (2 Kgs 11:2, 2 Chr 22:11). Jehoram succeeded to the throne at age thirty-two in ca. 855 BC (2 Chr 21:5), so his daughter could have been born ca. 867 BC, when Jehoram would have been twenty years old. That would mean that Jehoiada was seventy-three years old when his wife was born, and maybe ninety or older when he got married! So, rather than seeing his lifespan of 130 years as a face-value number, it seems more likely that this was a symbolic number to portray the honor he deserved for his godly influence on the young king Joash. It seems like 2 Chronicles 24:15-16 contains two parallel assessments of his life. The evaluation, "Jehoiada was old and full of years, and he died at the age of a hundred and thirty," conveys the same message as, "He was buried with the kings in the City of David, because of the good he had done in Israel for God and his temple."

Summary

We have dispelled the misconception that everybody prior to the nineteenth century AD read the lifespan numbers in Genesis at face value. We have seen that a symbolic or schematic understanding on the patriarchal lifespans supports the antiquity of their origin because it allows them to speak in the idioms of their day. We have proposed a viable method for the composition of Genesis, which is compatible with the methods of information gathering and recording in the ancient Near East. And we have proposed a valid reason for the inclusion of schematically long lifespans—to bestow honor on ancestors who were blessed by Yahweh and obedient to him in the formation of the nation of Israel.

We have also seen that the long lifespans were not necessary to support the narrative, but we have proposed an explanation for the scheme used by the author of Genesis. This scheme is not only applicable to the lifespans of the patriarchs; it also explains all the ages in Genesis 5 and those individuals with extraordinarily long lifespans after the patriarchal era. The ages given in Genesis 11 almost fit the same pattern, but it seems there may be another factor at work there as the author connects the ancient past with the historical line of Abraham.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

The patriarchal lifespans in Genesis 12–50 have long been a significant problem for those who hold to the inerrancy of the Bible. At issue is whether the text of Genesis records the true history of real people and factual events. Abraham’s 175 years, Isaac’s 180 years, and Jacob’s 147 years are all significantly longer than known human lifespans both now and in the ancient past. Studies in anthropology and archaeology are unanimous in their rejection of extraordinary lifespans in antiquity. Plus, a chronology based on the face-value interpretation does not align with the accepted history of the ancient Near East in the Intermediate Bronze and Middle Bronze ages.

This dissertation has attempted to show that these patriarchal lifespans were originally written as schematic numbers intended to memorialize and convey honor to the lives of real ancestors who played a significant role in the founding of the nation Israel. The thesis of this dissertation is that a better understanding of how and why these cultures recorded lifespans will not only lead to a more accurate biblical interpretation, but also align the patriarchal narrative with the chronology of the patriarchal age and known archaeology from the Middle Bronze Age. My contention is that the symbolic interpretation of these numbers is in accord with common literary forms from the era when Genesis was penned. This interpretation can also restore faith in the historicity of the patriarchal narrative by removing the conflict between the face-value interpretation and the historical evidence.

In chapter one we surfaced the problem, and the most common responses to a conflict between scientific evidence and Scripture. The history of interpretation of these lifespan numbers revealed a misconception behind the common belief that everyone accepted these ages as factual until the critical scholars of the nineteenth century. From ca. 300 BC onward the face-value interpretation was held by many and was used to construct chronologies of the world. However, to focus only on this period ignores the hundreds of years of history prior to the third century BC. Our study revealed that it was common practice in ancient Near East cultures to assign exaggerated lifespans to the earliest ancestors as a way to bestow honor. The practices from this time—closer to the time when Genesis was composed—seem to provide superior parallels than those from the later time period.

Chapter two detailed the problems inherent, but usually unrecognized, in the face-value interpretation. This interpretation, although common in evangelical circles, actually conflicts with the belief in an inerrant text. First, the ages themselves contradict other Bible passages. Abraham and Sarah would not have thought themselves too old to conceive Isaac if the lifespans before and after them are to be taken at face value. Plus the statement that Abraham “died an old man” (Gen 25:8) is clearly false when compared with other, much longer, lifespans in Genesis. Second, a chronology derived from a face-value reading of these ages disagrees with other Bible passages, and introduces irresolvable conflicts.

When we look outside the Bible we find, as mentioned, that the ages and face-value chronology disagree with all known anthropological and archaeological knowledge from the Bronze Age. There are no records of people living for hundreds of years at any

time in human history. Concordist hypotheses of a water vapor layer, rays from a supernova, or genetic degradation cannot be maintained. None of these theories has any scientific support, and they do not interact with conflicting scientific evidence.

There is a time period that offers several synchronisms with the patriarchal narrative—the MBA and more specifically MB II (ca. 1800–1550 BC)—but to insist on a face-value reading of these lifespans places the patriarchs in a different era, the Intermediate Bronze Age (ca. 2450–1950 BC), when the narratives simply could not have taken place. These problems seem to confirm that the patriarchal lifespans were never intended to be read as face-value numbers.

In chapter three we learned that although the numbers in Genesis were written as words, it seems likely that they were originally number symbols. However, a misreading of these numbers in transferring them to writing is unlikely. Second, there is no reason to believe the ancient authors could not have used arithmetic numbers if they chose to do so. Counting and recording numbers predates writing, and ancient people knew how to count accurately, use simple mathematical operations, and notate a system of years and months. We have abundant records of calendars, receipts, and rationing documents to demonstrate this. So there is every reason to believe the lifespan numbers were deliberately, not randomly, chosen. However, there is no record of gematria prior to the eighth century BC, and little interest is displayed in the Torah for complex mathematical formulae or hidden secrets. Any solution that requires these elements should be regarded with skepticism. However, the fact that the unrealistic reigns listed in the Sumerian King List fit a scheme based on the sexagesimal system offers the best parallel for understanding the original scheme behind the lifespans in Genesis.

Egyptian and Mesopotamian records from the Middle Bronze Age did record seemingly accurate ages and reigns when they had access to such information. Yet, these same cultures also exaggerated their ancestor's lifespans or reigns for rhetorical effect rather than historiographical purposes. The goal does not seem to have been to preserve objectively accurate historical ages, but rather to display an accurate picture of the blessings of God, and of their historical connections with tribes and nations around them. Thus to read the Genesis lifespan numbers as arithmetic values is to do an injustice to the original author by not honoring his intentions when he wrote those figures. Ancient people knew how long people lived, thus there is no reason to assume the original writers and readers of Genesis, or any of the ancient king lists, thought those ages were factually accurate.

In chapter four we looked at several proposals that have been advanced as method for understanding the numbers in Genesis. These solutions fall into two broad categories based on their view of the possible sources for Genesis and the Torah. Those theories based on the Wellhausen hypothesis believe that Genesis was cut and pasted together, after the exile or during the Maccabean period, from three sources—J, E, and P—although for our study the most significant are J and P. This view holds that the lifespan figures were inserted, or heavily revised at this time to reflect a late Jewish belief in the Great Year that led to the rededication of the Temple in 165/164 BC. Some see a broad overall system while others proposed detailed hidden systems. But none of these options seems to fit the evidence in the text, and none conforms to ancient literary practices. Proposed support for this view from parallels with oral traditions or tribal genealogies is more circumstantial than substantial. Comparisons with other ancient Near

East king lists and genealogies show that Israel used their literary structures—as we might expect—but not their content. We can happily grant that the numbers are symbolic. But we cannot agree that the schemes were invented or revised by redactors so late in history for their own reasons. The numerical schemes in Genesis bear the hallmarks of ancient number lists, not those from the later royal records of the Israelite monarchy, nor the chronological speculations that are prevalent following the Hellenistic period.

The evangelical approach assumes that Genesis is the product of both human and divine authors. Several solutions have been proposed to resolve the conflict between the lifespans and known human history. However, many of these—such as the dynasty view, the use of a different calendar, or mathematical calculations using symbolic numbers—also fail to provide satisfying solutions.

In chapter five we investigated the most promising solution—the common ancient practice of bestowing honor on ancient ancestors by assigning them extended lifespans. Although there are examples of this practice outside the Bible, most of our evidence was found inside the Torah. If the ancient practice was to assign unusually long lifespans to ancient ancestors, and if Yahweh repeatedly promised to honor obedience with long life, it would be inconceivable for an early writer to record Abraham’s lifespan as a cold objective numeral. That would not have fulfilled his purpose of elevating Abraham as an example of Yahweh’s blessing, nor would it have demonstrated the fruits of an obedient life. However, if these exaggerated lifespans were part of the original records used by Moses when he composed Genesis, from where did these sources come?

Once we jettison the JEDP theory, we are free to investigate possible sources used in Genesis based on ancient Near East literary practices. A likely hypothesis seems

to involve the written chronicling of patriarchal genealogies on *toledot tablets* within a relatively short timeframe after the lives of the patriarchs themselves. These tablets would have been small and portable for the nomads in the second millennium B.C. Thus the transmission of information over the hundreds of years before the time of Moses need not have introduced errors. What does seem likely is that Moses used something like these *toledot tablets* as the skeleton around which he interwove the narrative material.

The different numerical systems in Genesis provide support for the antiquity of each source. The most likely scenario entails each genealogy being recorded on clay tablets at different times separated by many years. The first two stages (Genesis 5 and 11) seem to correspond to stages in the SKL, AKL, and the Turin Canon. Of course the names and ages are different. Thus it seems likely that biblical history was recorded using contemporary literary techniques. The extended ages in all of these ancient sources seem to have been their method of bestowing honor to these ancient ancestors, and recording an evaluation of their obedience to Yahweh and his commands.

We can never know with certainty, of course, what the original scheme was given our current state of knowledge regarding ancient Near East history and historiography. However, I have made an educated proposal as to what the original scheme may have been. This remains speculation and should be treated as such, but it is hoped that this pattern has demonstrated the transparently schematic nature of the numbers employed in Genesis.

So we have returned to the question of the best response when there is a conflict between science and Scripture. The concordist view fails because the patriarchal lifespans are not in concord with the historical evidence, and they were never intended to

be. These lifespans are incorrect when viewed through the principles of modern historiographical reporting. But so is Jesus' prediction that he would spend three days and nights in the tomb (Matt 12:40), or Matthew's assertion that there are, "fourteen generations in all from Abraham to David, fourteen from David to the exile to Babylon, and fourteen from the exile to the Messiah" (Matt 1:17).

The accommodationist view accepts that the divine author accommodated a pre-scientific worldview of the biblical authors when Scripture was written. Some accommodationists are comfortable with God tolerating error in the Scriptures. However, the patriarchal lifespans are in error only if the original author intended them to be accurate historical records, and the original audience accepted them as such. Our study has found that premise to be unsustainable. The writings from the third and second millenniums BC contain exaggerated lifespans that everybody understood were there to honor their ancestors. There was no intention to deceive.

The fact that millions of genuine believers have been deceived by chronologies based on a flawed interpretation of the patriarchal lifespans is not the fault of Scripture. It was the result of finite people interpreting Genesis through their own culture, idioms, and scientific understanding. The more we discover about the lifestyles, language and culture of the Bible, the more we are able to interpret the Scripture within its own context and not ours.

APPENDICIES

Appendix A: Bronze Age Chronology

There is abundant confusion in the terminology used to describe the Middle Bronze Age (MBA) and the era between the Early Bronze Age (EBA) and the MBA.¹ Some scholars still use the designations of William F. Albright, which were popular in the first half of the twentieth century.² However, it has become clear that what Albright termed the Middle Bronze I (MB I) bears little evolutionary relation to the Middle Bronze Age which follows, so this period was renamed Early Bronze IV (EB IV).³ Kathleen Kenyon's designation of "Intermediate EB–MB," was never fully accepted in the literature.⁴ EB IV remains the designation for this era by archaeologists outside of Israel, however within Israel this era is now called the Intermediate Bronze Age (IBA).⁵

¹ Amihay Mazar, *Archaeology of the Land of the Bible: 10,000–586 B.C.E.*, Anchor Bible Reference Library (New York: Doubleday, 1990), 152.

² See for example Mazar, *Archaeology of the Land*, 30; Jack Finegan, *Handbook of Biblical Chronology: Principles of Time Reckoning in the Ancient World and Problems of Chronology in the Bible*, rev. ed. (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1998), xxxv.

³ William G. Dever, "The Middle Bronze Age: The Zenith of the Urban Canaanite Era," *Biblical Archaeologist* 50, no. 3 (1987): 149-50; Gaetano Palumbo, "The Early Bronze Age IV," in *Jordan: An Archaeological Reader*, ed. Russell B. Adams (London: Equinox, 2008), 227.

⁴ Israel Finkelstein, "Toward a New Periodization and Nomenclature of the Archaeology of the Southern Levant," in *The Study of the Ancient Near East in the Twenty-First Century: The William Foxwell Albright Centennial Conference*, ed. Jerrold S. Cooper and Glenn M. Schwartz (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1996).

⁵ Anson F. Rainey and R. Steven Notley, *The Sacred Bridge: Carta's Atlas of the Biblical World* (Jerusalem: Carta, 2006), 46-47, 50; Ram Gophna, "The Intermediate Bronze Age," in *The Archaeology of Ancient Israel*, ed. Amnon Ben-Tor (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1992), 127.

In addition, recent analysis of archaeological data has revealed that the end of the Early Bronze Age (EB III) occurred earlier than previously thought.⁶ This has expanded the dates for this transitional period (IBA). This dissertation will focus on the possible eras when the patriarchs could have lived, and will use the most recent dates and nomenclature relating to the Southern Levant.⁷ This chart summarizes the terms used.⁸

Dates (BC)	Current Terminology	Acronym	Former Terminology
3600–2500	Early Bronze Age	EB I–III	
2500–2200	Intermediate Bronze I	IB I	EB IV
2200–1950	Intermediate Bronze II	IB II	MB I or EB–MB
1950–1800	Middle Bronze I	MB I	MB II A
1800–1550	Middle Bronze II	MB II	MB II B–C or MB II–III
1550–1200	Late Bronze Age	LB I–II	
1200–586	Iron Age	IA I–III	

⁶ Steven E. Falconer and Patricia L. Fall, “A Radiocarbon Sequence from Tell Abu en-Ni’aj, Jordan and its Implications for Early Bronze IV Chronology in the Southern Levant,” *Radiocarbon* 58, no. 3 (2016), 641-42.

⁷ Johanna Regev et al., “Chronology of the Early Bronze Age in the Southern Levant: New Analysis for a High Chronology,” Proceedings of the 6th Annual International Radiocarbon and Archaeology Symposium, *Radiocarbon* 54, no. 3-4 (2012): 525-66; Walter Kutschera et al., “The Chronology of Tell el-Daba: A Crucial Meeting Point of ¹⁴C Dating, Archaeology, and Egyptology in the 2nd Millennium BC,” *Radiocarbon* 54, no. 3-4 (2012): 407-22; Felix Höflmayer et al., “New Evidence for Middle Bronze Age Chronology and Synchronisms in the Levant: Radiocarbon Dates from Tell el-Burak, Tell el-Dab’a, and Tel Ifshar Compared,” *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research* 375 (2016): 53-76.

⁸ See also Norman L. Geisler and Joseph M. Holden, *The Popular Handbook of Archaeology and the Bible* (Eugene, OR: Harvest House, 2013), 191; Eugene H. Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests: A History of Old Testament Israel*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 46; John Bright, *A History of Israel*, Westminster Aids to the Study of the Scriptures, 4th ed. (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), 488-89.

Unfortunately, this imprecise terminology has hidden a serious divide among conservative biblical scholars. On the surface there seems to be a consensus that the patriarchs lived during the Middle Bronze Age. But those scholars who create a chronology using face value patriarchal ages place Abraham's lifespan before 1950 BC, which they label with the older designation of MB I. However that designation is not only out of date, it ignores the major differences between the IBA and the MB (i.e. before and after 1950 BC). As discussed in chapter one, the archaeological evidence does not support the events of Abraham's life occurring prior to 1950 BC, during the IBA. Instead, the evidence leans much more favorably toward the first half of the second millennium BC, with the preponderance of evidence favoring the MB II (1800–1550 BC).

Table 1: Face Value Patriarchal Ages

Conservative Patriarchal Ages

Event	Terah's Age	Abraham's Age	Sarah's Age	Ishmael's Age	Isaac's Age	Esau's Age	Jacob's Age	Judah's Age	Joseph & Dinah	Genesis Reference
Terah's first child	70									11:26
Abraham born	130	0								11:32, 12:4
Abraham enters Canaan	205	75	65							12:4, Acts 7:4
Sarah gives up on childbearing		85	75							16:3
Ishmael is born		86	76	0						16:16
Abraham "marries" Keturah		?	?	?						25:1-6
Names changed/Circumcision		99	89	13						17:1, 17, 24-25
Sodom & Gomorrah Destroyed		99	89	13						18-19
Abimelech takes Sarah as his wife		99	89	13						20
Isaac is born		100	90	14	0					18:11, 21:5
Abraham & Isaac on Mt Moriah		115	105	29	15					22
Sarah dies		137	127	51	37					23:1
Isaac marries Rebekah		140		54	40					25:20
Jacob & Esau born		160		74	60	0	0			25:26
Abraham dies		175		89	75	15	15			25:7, 11
Esau marries				114	100	40	40			26:34
Ishmael dies				137	123	63	63			25:17
Jacob flees to Haran					137	77	77			27:1, 28:2-5
Jacob marries Rachel & Leah					144	84	84			29:18-30
Judah is born					148	88	88	0		29:35
Joseph is born					151	91	91	3	0	30:22-25
Jacob & family leave Laban					157	97	97	9	6	31:38, 41
Rape of Dinah at Shechem					165	105	105	17	14	34:1-2
Judah marries					167	107	107	19	16	38:1-2
Joseph sold into slavery					168	108	108	20	17	37:2, 28, 36
Joseph imprisoned					179	119	119	31	28	39:20, 41:1
Isaac dies					180	120	120	32	29	35:28-29
Joseph given high position & wife							121	33	30	41:46
Famine begins							128	40	37	41:53-54
Judah's incest with Tamar							129	41	38	38
Jacob & family move to Egypt							130	42	39	45:6, 11, 47:9
Jacob blesses Joseph's sons							147	59	56	48
Jacob dies							147	59	56	47:28
Joseph dies									110	50:22-23, 26

Rosenzweig's Alternative: Divide the Ages in Half

Event	Terah's Age	Abraham's Age	Sarah's Age	Ishmael's Age	Isaac's Age	Esau's Age	Jacob's Age	Judah's Age	Joseph & Dinah	Genesis Reference
Terah's first child	35									11:26, 32, 12:4
Abraham born	65	0								12:4, Acts7:4
Abraham enters Canaan	103	37	32							16:3
Sarah gives up on childbearing		42	37							16:16
Ishmael is born		43	38	0						25:1-6
Abraham "marries" Keturah		?	?	?						17:1, 17, 24-25
Names changed/Circumcision		49	44	6						18-19
Sodom & Gomorrah Destroyed		49	44	6						20
Abimelech takes Sarah as wife		50	45	7						18:11, 21:5
Isaac is born		50	45	7	0					22
Abraham & Isaac on Mt Moriah		57	52	14	3					23:1
Sarah dies		68	63	25	18					25:7, 11
Isaac marries Rebekah		70		27	20					25:20
Jacob & Esau born		80		37	30	0	0			25:26
Abraham dies		87		44	37	7	7			25:17
Esau marries				57	50	20	20			26:34
Ishmael dies				68	61	31	31			27:1, 28:2-5
Jacob flees to Haran					68	38	38			29:18-30
Jacob marries Rachel & Leah					72	42	42			29:35
Judah is born					74	44	44	0		30:22-25
Joseph is born					75	45	45	1	0	31:38, 41
Jacob & family leave Laban					78	48	48	3	2	34:1-2
Rape of Dinah at Shechem					82	52	52	8	7	35:28-29
Judah marries					83	53	53	9	8	38:1-2
Joseph sold into slavery					84	54	54	10	9	37:2, 28, 36
Joseph imprisoned					89	59	59	15	14	39:20, 41:1
Isaac dies					90	60	60	16	15	41:46
Joseph given a high position							60	16	15	41:53-54
Famine begins							64	20	19	38
Judah's incest with Tamar							64	21	19	45:6, 11, 47:9
Jacob & family move to Egypt							65	21	20	48
Jacob blesses Joseph's sons							73	29	28	47:28
Jacob dies							73	29	28	50:22-23, 26
Joseph dies									55	50:22-23, 26

Table 2: Rosenzweig's Alternative

Possible Reconstruction Using Normal Lifespans

Event	Terah's Age	Abraham's Age	Sarah's Age	Ishmael's Age	Isaac's Age	Esau's Age	Jacob's Age	Judah's Age	Joseph & Dinah	Genesis Reference
Terah's first child: Abraham	30	0								11:26, 32, 12:4
Abraham enters Canaan	65	35	25							12:4, Acts7:4
Sarah gives up on childbearing		45	35							16:3
Ishmael is born		46	36	0						16:16
Abraham "marries" Keturah		?	?	?						25:1-6
Names changed/Circumcision		59	49	13						17:1, 17, 24-25
Sodom & Gomorrah Destroyed		59	49	13						18-19
Abimelech takes Sarah as his wife		59	49	13						20
Isaac is born		60	50	14	0					18:11, 21:5
Abraham & Isaac on Mt Moriah		75	65	29	15					22
Sarah dies		77	67	31	17					23:1
Abraham dies		85		39	25					25:7, 11
Isaac marries Rebekah				44	30					25:20
Jacob & Esau born				54	40	0	0			25:26
Ishmael dies				67	53	13	13			25:17
Esau marries					55	15	15			26:34
Jacob flees to Haran					57	17	17			27:1, 28:2-5
Jacob marries Rachel & Leah					64	24	24			29:18-30
Judah is born					68	28	28	0		29:35
Joseph is born					71	31	31	3	0	30:22-25
Jacob & family leave Laban					77	37	37	9	6	31:38, 41
Rape of Dinah at Shechem					85	45	45	17	14	34:1-2
Isaac dies					87	47	47	19	14	35:28-29
Judah marries							47	19	16	38:1-2
Joseph sold into slavery							48	20	17	37:2, 28, 36
Joseph imprisoned							59	31	28	39:20, 41:1
Joseph given high position & wife							61	33	30	41:46
Famine begins							68	40	37	41:53-54
Judah's incest with Tamar							69	41	38	38
Jacob & family move to Egypt							70	42	39	45:6, 11, 47:9
Jacob blesses Joseph's sons							75	47	44	48
Jacob dies							77	49	46	47:28
Joseph dies									70	50:22-23, 26

Table 3: Possible Reconstruction Using Normal Lifespans

Appendix C: The Sumerian King List

Many scholars use only the numbers from the Weld-Blundell Prism, or their decimal equivalent. However, there are several versions of the antediluvian section of the SKL, with differing values for the length of reigns, and in some cases different names.⁹

Versions of the Antediluvian Section of the SKL

Ruler	WB 444	Years (WB 444)	MS 2855	UCBC 9-1819	WB 62	K 11261	Berosos
Alulim	8 sar	28800	8 sar	10 sar	18 sar, 40 ges	-	10 sar
Alalngar	10 sar	36000	12 sar	3 sar	20 sar	-	3 sar
En-men-lu-ana	12 sar	43200	10 sar	10 sar	6 sar	-	13 sar
En-men-gal-ana	8 sar	28800	8 sar	12 sar	-	-	12 sar
Dumuzid, the Shepherd	10 sar	36000	10 sar	10 sar	8 sar	-	10 sar
En-sipad-zid-ana	8 sar	28800	3 sar, 50 ges	-	10 sar	15 sar	18 sar
En-men-dur-ana	8 sar, 50 ges	21000	2 sar	1 sar 40 ges	20 sar	10 sar 20 ges	10 sar
Ubara-Tutu	5 sar, 10 ges	18600	10 sar	-	8 sar	-	8 sar
Ziusudra	-	-	-	5 sar	10 sar	-	18 sar

⁹ Jöran Friberg, *A Remarkable Collection of Babylonian Mathematical Texts: Manuscripts in the Schøyen Collection, Cuneiform Texts I*, Sources and Studies in the History of Mathematics and Physical Sciences, ed. J. Z. Buchwald, J. Lützen, and J. Hogendijk (New York: Springer, 2007), 240.

Comparison of MT, LXX, and SP Lists

	Name	Age at the Birth of the First Son			Gen Ref.	Remaining Years of Life			Gen Ref.	Age at Death			Gen Ref.
		MT	LXX	SP		MT	LXX	SP		MT	LXX	SP	
1	Adam	130	230	130	5:3	800	700	800	5:4	930	930	930	5:5
2	Seth	105	205	105	5:6	807	707	807	5:7	912	912	912	5:8
3	Enosh	90	190	90	5:9	815	715	815	5:10	905	905	905	5:11
4	Kenan	70	170	70	5:12	840	740	840	5:13	910	910	910	5:14
5	Mahalalel	65	165	65	5:15	830	730	830	5:16	895	895	895	5:17
6	Jared	162	162	62	5:18	800	800	785	5:19	962	962	847	5:20
7	Enoch	65	165	65	5:21	300	200	300	5:22	365	365	365	5:23
8	Methuselah	187	167	67	5:25	782	802	653	5:26	969	969	720	5:27
9	Lamech	182	188	53	5:28	595	565	600	5:30	777	753	653	5:31
10	Noah	500	500	500	5:32	450	450	450	7:6, 9:28	950	950	950	9:29
Totals		1,556	2,142	1,207		7,019	6,409	6,880		8,575	8,551	8,087	
1	Shem	100	100	100	11:10	500	500	500	11:11	600	600	600	
2	Arpachshad	35	135	135	11:12	403	430	403	11:13	438	565	438	
3	Kenan		130				330		11:13		460		
4	Shelah	30	130	130	11:14	403	330	303	4:15	433	460	433	
5	Eber	34	134	134	11:16	430	370	270	11:17	464	504	404	
6	Peleg	30	130	130	11:18	209	209	109	11:19	239	339	239	
7	Reu	32	132	132	11:20	207	207	107	11:21	239	339	239	
8	Serug	30	130	130	11:22	200	200	100	11:23	230	330	230	
9	Nahor	29	79	79	11:24	119	129	69	11:25	148	208	148	
10	Terah	70	70	70	11:26	135	135	75		205	205	145	11:32
Totals		390	1,170	1,040		2,606	2,840	1,936		2,996	4,010	2,876	
Grand Totals		1,946	3,312	2,247		9,625	9,249	8,816		11,571	12,561	10,963	

Table 1

Chart 1 : Begetting Ages and Lifespans in the MT

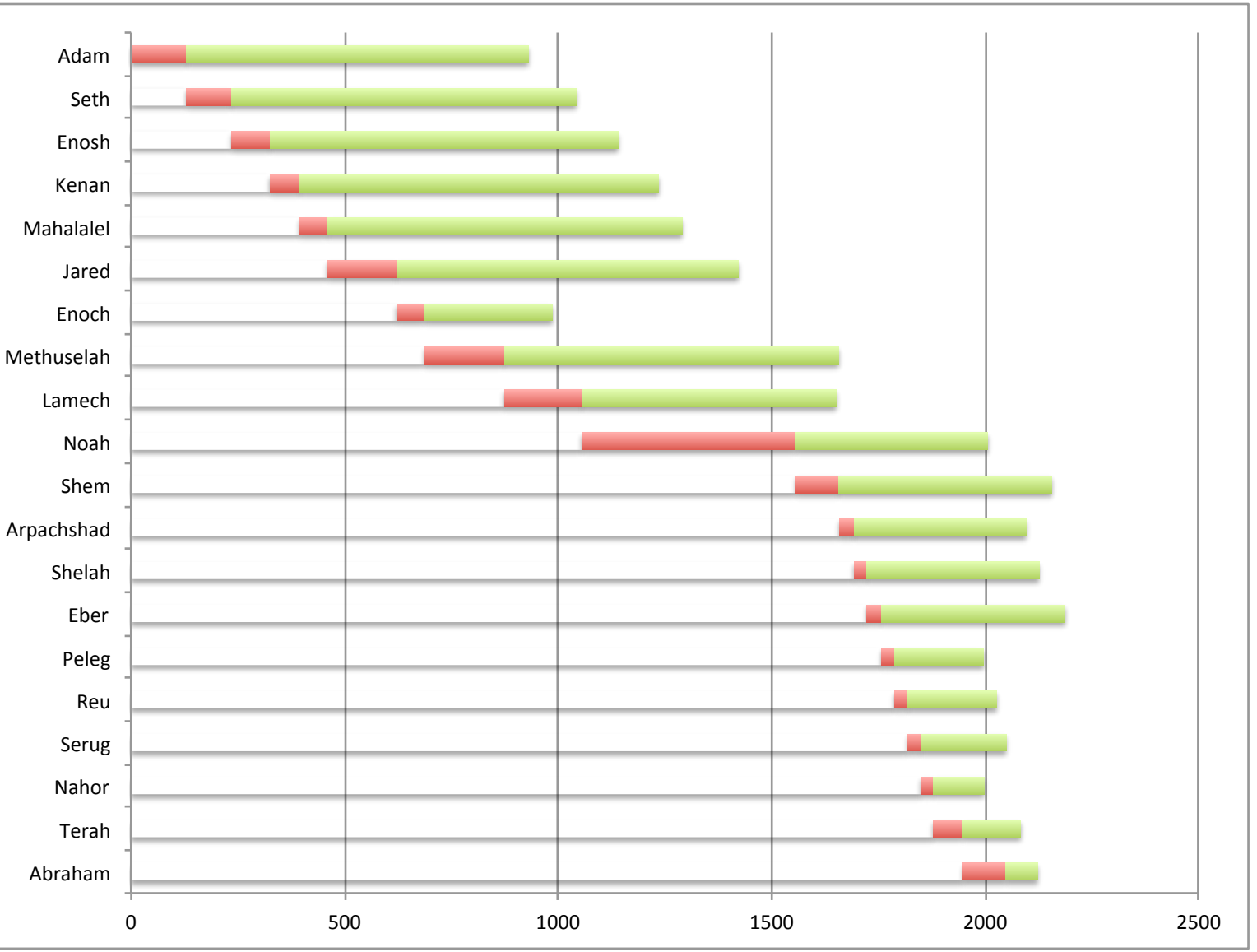
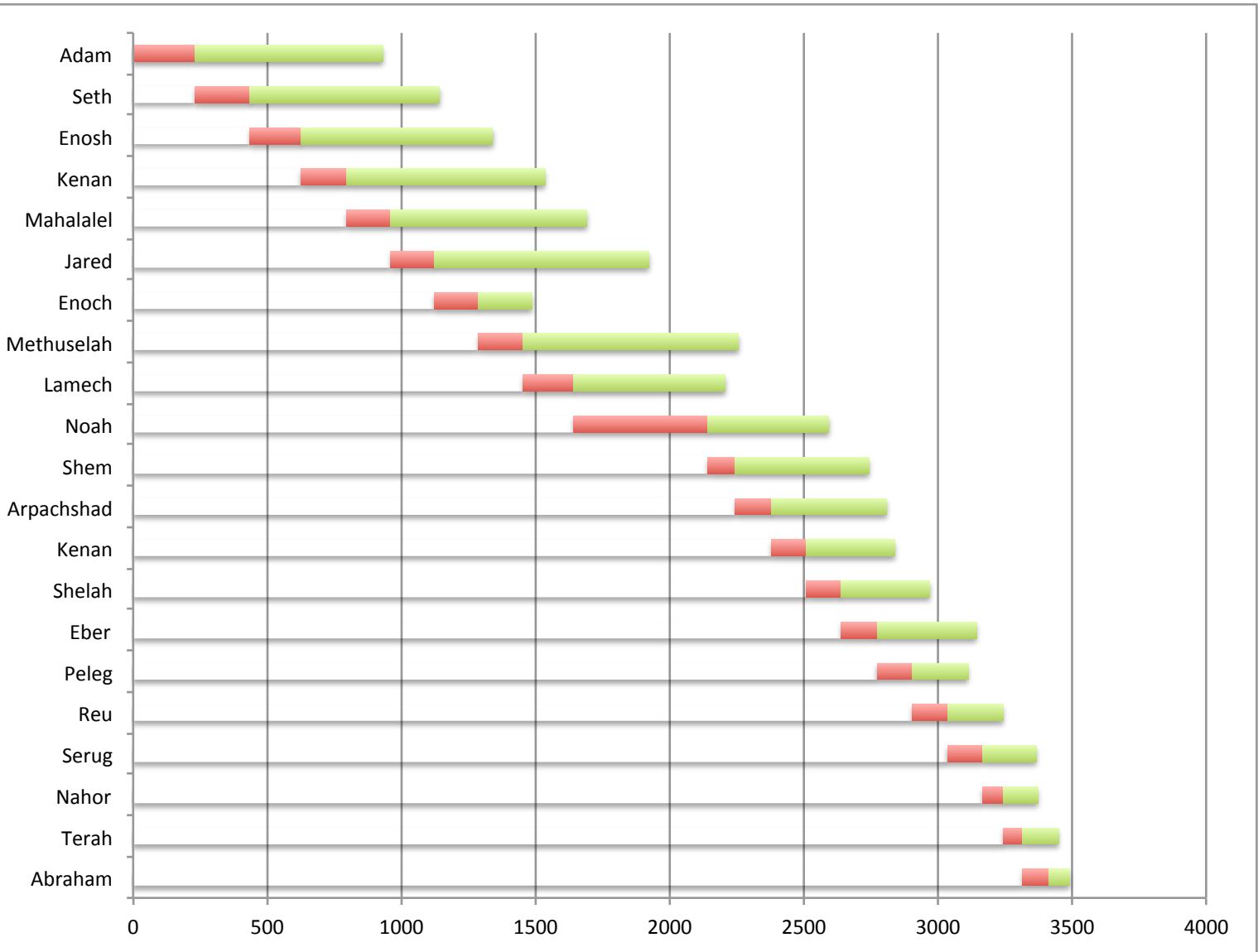


Chart 2: Begetting Ages and Lifespans in the LXX



Appendix E: Numeric Schemes in the Old Testament

Table 1: Numeric Scheme in Genesis 5

Ages Given		Mult. of 5	Years	Months	Plus	ges-years	ges-months	Plus
Adam	130	5x26	60x2	60x2		2	2	
	800	5x160	60x13	60x4		13	4	
	930	5x186	60x15	60x6		15	6	
Seth	105	5x21	60x1	60x9		1	9	
	807	5x160 + 7	60x13	60x4	7	13	4	7
	912	5x35 + 7	60x14	60x11	7	14	11	7
Enosh	90	5x18	60x1	60x6		1	6	
	815	5x163	60x13	60x7		13	7	
	905	5x181	60x15	60x1		15	1	
Kenan	70	5x14	60x1	60x2		1	2	
	840	5x168	60x14			14		
	910	5x182	60x15	60x2		15	2	
Mahalalel	65	5x13	60x1	60x1		1	1	
	830	5x166	60x13	60x10		13	10	
	895	5x179	60x14	60x11		14	11	
Jared	162	5x31 + 7	60x2	60x7	7	2	7	7
	800	5x160	60x13	60x4		13	4	
	962	5x191 + 7	60x15	60x11	7	15	11	7
Enoch	65	5x13	60x1	60x1		1	1	
	300	5x60	60x5			5		
	365	Symbolic	Days in a solar year			Days in a solar year		
Methuselah	187	5x36 + 7	60x3		7	3		7
	782	5x155 + 7	60x12	60x11	7	12	11	7
	969	5x191 + 7 + 7	60x15	60x11	7+7	15	11	7+7
Lamech	182	5x35 + 7	60x2	60x11	7	2	11	7
	595	5x119	60x9	60x11		9	11	
	777	Symbolic	Repeated use of seven			Repeated use of seven		
Noah	500	5x100	60x8	60x4		8	4	
	450	5x90	60x7	60x6		7	6	
	950	5x190	60x15	60x10		15	10	

Table 2: Numeric Scheme in Genesis 11

Ages Given		Mult. of 5	Years	Months	Plus	ges-years	ges-months	Plus
Shem	100	5x20	60x1	60x8		1	8	
	500	5x100	60x8	60x4		8	4	
Arpachshad	35	5x7		60x7			7	
	403	5x80 + 3	60x6	60x8	3	6	8	3
Shelah	30	5x6		60x6			6	
	403	5x80 + 3	60x6	60x7	3	6	7	3
Eber	34	5x4 + 7+7		60x4	7+7		4	7+7
	430	5x86	60x7	60x4		7	4	
Peleg	30	5x6		60x6			6	
	209	5x39 + 7+7	60x3	60x3	7+7	3	3	7+7
Reu	32	5x5 + 7		60x5	7		5	7
	207	5x40 + 7	60x3	60x4	7	3	4	7
Serug	30	5x6		60x6			6	
	200	5x40	60x3	60x4		3	4	
Nahor	29	5x3 + 7+7		60x3	7+7		3	7+7
	119	5x21 + 7+7	60x1	60x9	7+7	1	9	7+7
Terah	70	5x14	60x1	60x2		1	2	
	205	5x41	60x3	60x5		3	5	

Table 3: Numeric Schemes in the Patriarchal Ages

Ages Given		Mult. of 5	Years	Months	Plus	ges-years	ges-months	Plus
Abraham	75	5x15	60x1	60x3		1	3	
	86	5x20 - (7+7)	Intentional break			Intentional break		
	100	5x20	60x1	60x8		1	8	
	175	5x35	60x2	60x11		2	11	
Sarah	90	5x18	60x1	60x6		1	6	
	127	5x24 + 7	60x2		7	2		7
Ishmael	14	7+7	Ishmael is a young man			Ishmael young man		
	137	5x26 + 7	60x2	60x2	7	2	2	7
Isaac	40	5x8		60x8			8	
	60	5x12	60x1			1		
Esau	40	5x8		60x8			8	
Jacob	130	5x26	60x2	60x2		2	2	
	147	5x28 + 7	60x2	60x4	7	2	4	
Joseph	17	5x2 + 7		60x2	7		2	
	30	5x6		60x6			6	
	110	Symbolic	Ideal Egyptian lifespan			Ideal Egyptian lifespan		

Table 4: Numeric Schemes in Other Extended Ages

Ages Given		Mult. of 5	Years	Months	Plus	ges-years	ges-months	Plus
Job	140	5x28	60x2	60x4		2	4	
Levi	137	5x26 + 7	60x2	60x2	7	2	2	7
Kohath	133	5x26 + 3	60x2	60x2	3	2	2	3
Amram	137	5x26 + 7	60x2	60x2	7	2	2	7
Aaron	123	5x24 + 3	60x2		3	2		3
Moses	120	5x24	60x2			2		
Joshua	110	Symbolic	Ideal Egyptian lifespan			Ideal Egyptian lifespan		
Eli	98	Symbolic	Less than 100			Less than 100		
Jehoiada	130	5x26	60x2	60x2		2	2	

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