

Excursus: The Ages of the Antediluvians

[Gen 5](#) presents two very intractable problems. First, and more obviously, these patriarchs age extraordinarily slowly. All are at least sixty-five years old when their first child is born, and most are approaching a thousand when they die! How are these very long life-spans to be explained? Second, the three oldest textual witnesses, the Masoretic (MT), the Samaritan Pentateuch (SamPent) and the Greek Septuagint LXX) disagree at many points about the ages of these antediluvian patriarchs. This makes it difficult to determine the earliest reading.

These questions would be hard to unravel on their own: unfortunately the longevity question is intertwined with the text-critical, and the date of the flood is also a factor complicating the issue. Insofar as it is possible, these problems will be looked at separately. First the textual evidence will be discussed, then the ages of the men themselves.

Each patriarch's life is summarized in [Gen 5](#) according to the following formula:

A lived x years and then fathered B

A lived y years after he had fathered B

A's whole life lasted $x + y$ years.

x = patriarch's age when his first child was born

y = number of years from birth of first child to patriarch's death

$x + y$ = patriarch's age at death

The different figures for x , y , and $x + y$ in the MT, SamPent, and LXX are summarized in the table on the following page.

Using the figures from this table, we can calculate how many years after the creation of Adam a patriarch died. The patriarchs' dates of death are given in the fourth box. The year of

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the flood can also be calculated by adding up all the figures in the first column (x) and adding 100 (Noah was 500 years old when his children were born and 600 when the flood came).

It then appears that according to the MT the flood came in the year 1656. It also appears that all Noah's ancestors died before 1656, except Methuselah, who died that year. Did he die in the flood?

According to the Samaritan Pentateuch, the flood occurred in 1307. This lower figure is reached by the SamPent's having made the patriarchs Yared, Methuselah, and Lamek much younger when their first child was born. Accordingly all three, Yared, Methuselah and Lamek died in 1307, the year of the flood.

According to the best MSS of LXX, the flood occurred in 2242. This figure is arrived at by LXX's making most of the patriarchs father their first child 100 years later than the MT does. None of Noah's ancestors die in 2242, the year of the flood, but Methuselah lives to 2256, 14 years afterward! Not surprisingly, many texts of the LXX follow the MT figures and make Methuselah die before the flood.

Which of these chronologies is closest to the original? There is no consensus on this issue, except that the LXX looks secondary. The regular lengthening, usually by 100 years, of the period till the birth of the patriarch's first son and the corresponding contraction of his subsequent years of life looks artificial. When the LXX was being translated in Egypt, there was great interest among Egyptian Jews in chronological issues, and it seems likely that these patriarchal ages were adjusted by translators to compete with Egyptian claims about the antiquity of mankind.

Where MT and SamPent agree against LXX, they are to be followed. But with three patriarchs—Yared, Methuselah, and Lamek—MT disagrees with SamPent, and it is not clear which readings are to be preferred. Chronological schematization has been detected behind both sets of figures. If this can be demonstrated, it might imply that neither set is original.

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	MT			SamPent			LXX			Patriarch's date of death		
	First child born	Other years	Age at death	x	y	x+y	x	y	x+y	MT	SamPent	LXX
	x	y	x+y	x	y	x+y	x	y	x+y	MT	SamPent	LXX
Adam	130	800	930	130	800	930	230	700	930	930	930	930
Seth	105	807	912	105	807	912	205	707	912	1042	1042	1142
Enosh	90	815	905	90	815	905	190	715	905	1140	1140	1340
Qenan	70	840	910	70	840	910	170	740	910	1235	1235	1535
Mahalalel	65	830	895	65	830	895	165	730	895	1290	1290	1690
Yared	162	800	962	62	785	847	162	800	962	1422	1307	1922
Enoch	65	300	365	65	300	365	165	200	365	987	887	1487
Methuselah	187	782	969	67	653	720	167	802	969	1656	1307	2256
Lamek	182	595	777	53	600	653	188	565	753	1651	1307	2207
Noah	500	—	—	500	—	—	500	—	—	—	—	—
Till the flood	100	—	—	100	—	—	100	—	—	—	—	—
Year of flood	1656	—	—	1307	—	—	2242	—	—	—	—	—

x = patriarch's age when his first child was born

y = number of years from birth of first child to patriarch's death

x + y = patriarch's age at death

Cassuto (1:255–65) believed in the originality of the MT. He pointed out that all the MT figures are multiples of 5 with occasionally the addition of 7 or 14 (e.g., 182 = 175 [35 × 5] + 7). He did not observe, though, that all the SamPent figures are multiples of 5 with occasionally the addition or *subtraction* of 7 (e.g., 53 = 12 × 5–7).

Dillmann favored the originality of the SamPent figures. He pointed out that according to the SamPent the age at which the patriarchs fathered their first child and their total life spans drop steadily from generation to generation, whereas there are several hiccups in the ages according to MT. He also thought it was easier to explain the origin of the MT and LXX figures on the assumption of the SamPent's originality than on the basis of the MT's originality.

R. W. Klein (*HTR* 67 [1974] 255–63) has adopted an eclectic approach to these figures. On Yared he argues that MT and LXX's agreement about his total life span of 962 years is to be preferred to SamPent's 847. The latter figure has been adjusted to make Yared die before the Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15* (vol. 1; Word Biblical Commentary; Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998).

flood. However, Klein thinks that it seems more likely that Enoch was born when Yared was 62 SamPent than when he was 162 (MT, LXX), because LXX consistently raises these figures by 100. Similarly, 100 years should be deducted from the LXX ages of Methuselah and Lamek at the birth of their firstborn to arrive at the original readings (67 [= SamPent] and 88).

Klein thinks SamPent has reduced Methuselah's age at death (969 per MT, LXX) to 720 to make him die before the flood. The total life span of Lamek is most likely to be 753 (so LXX), as SamPent's 653 is again reduced to ensure Lamek's death before the flood, and MT's 777 seems to be related to his 77-fold vengeance; cf. [4:24](#).

Klein therefore reconstructs the table as follows:

	<i>x</i>	<i>y</i>	<i>x+y</i>	<i>Date of Death</i>
Adam	130	800	930	930
Seth	105	807	912	1042
Enosh	90	815	905	1140
Qenan	70	840	910	1235
Mahalalel	65	830	895	1290
Yared	62	900	962	1422
Enoch	65	300	365	887
Methuselah	67	903	969	1556
Lamek	88	665	753	1407
Noah	500			
Flood	1342			

On this reconstruction, Yared, Methuselah and Lamek survived the flood, as well as Noah. When this was noted, the different versions adopted different methods of eliminating the problem. SamPent reduced the age at which the offending patriarchs died. MT increased the age at which the offending patriarchs fathered their first child, and LXX was adjusted by increasing the age at which all the patriarchs fathered their first child.

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Klein's reconstruction is interesting, but not compelling. Would the editor of Genesis have overlooked the fact that three ancestors of Noah survived the flood as well as Noah and his sons? Admittedly, [4:17–22](#) might be taken to imply that the sons of Lamek who founded the techniques of civilization somehow survived the flood. But it is precarious to argue that the “fathers” of these arts must have a continuous line of successors right through the period of the flood. The Sumerian king list envisaged kingship's being cut off in the flood and “lowered again from heaven” afterward. Maybe the Sumerian flood story thinks in similar terms about the skills of the pre-flood city-builders. Their skills have been revived in the post-flood era. Klein's reconstructed chronology also makes Yared and Methuselah live much longer after the birth of their firstborn than the other patriarchs.

It may therefore be concluded that there is no obvious answer to the text-critical problems posed by these chapters. The LXX appears to have least in its favor, but whether the SamPent, MT or some other scheme is the most primitive is hard to tell.

Whichever figures are correct, the problems posed by this chapter are formidable for anyone who wishes to relate them to history. The longevity of these patriarchs is unparalleled in modern times, while the date for the creation of Adam (ca. 4004 B.C.) implied by their genealogy and the subsequent data (e.g., [11:10–26](#)) in Genesis is hard to correlate with archeological discoveries about the origins of mankind and his civilization.

Much ingenuity has been devoted to these problems but without conspicuous success. It is often suggested that the years of [Gen 5](#) may have been much shorter than ours, perhaps equivalent to a month or two. But the flood story makes it quite clear that the years of Genesis were about 360 days. Furthermore, if the ages of the patriarchs are reduced, then the creation of Adam must be more recent than 4004.

Another suggestion (W. H. Green, *BSac* [1890] [285–303](#)) is that the genealogy is not intended to be complete, that generations have been omitted, and therefore it should not be used for chronological purposes. However, the Hebrew gives no hint that there were large gaps between father and son in this genealogy. [4:25](#) makes it clear that Seth was Adam and Eve's

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third son. At the other end of the genealogy, Lamek comments on Noah's birth, and Ham, Shem, and Japhet were contemporaries of their father. It therefore requires special pleading to postulate long gaps elsewhere in the genealogy.

Attempts to explain the great ages of the patriarchs by reference to ancient Near Eastern parallels are also disappointing. J. Walton (*BA* 44 [1981] 207–8) suggested that the sum total of the Genesis patriarchs' ages from Seth to Lamek, 6,700 years, can be derived from the Sumerian king list. According to one text of this list, eight antediluvian kings reigned for 241,200 years. Walton postulates that these Sumerian figures were written in sexagesimal notation and were misinterpreted by Hebrew scribes working on a decimal system. But Walton's hypothesis explains only the totals (even here his mathematics seems dubious), not the individual ages of the patriarchs or the age at which they fathered their first-born.

Whereas Walton suggested that the Hebrew chronologist was working to the base ten, Cassuto in his commentary suggested that the Hebrew figures are in fact related to the sexagesimal system. The ages of the patriarchs tend either to be exact multiples of 5 years (60 months) or multiples of 5 + 7 (in the case of Methuselah + 14). Furthermore, he calculated that the period of the first world from creation to the end of the flood is 60 myriad (600,000) days less 14 years. Though Cassuto's arithmetical observations, are interesting they do nothing to explain the ages of particular patriarchs.

Barnouin (*RB* 77 [1970] 347–65)¹ has made the bravest attempt to confront this issue. He believes that the ages of the antediluvians can be related to various astronomical periods such as the number of days or weeks in the year or the synodic periods of the planets (i.e., the time it takes for a planet to return to the same point in the sky). These astronomical periods were known to the Babylonians, and a sexagesimal arithmetic, he maintains, would have made the calculations quite easy.

¹ **Barnouin, M.** "Recherches numeériques sur la généalogie de Gen 5." *RB* 77 (1970) 347–65 (French only).

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Barnouin notes the obvious point that Enoch lived 365 years, which he supposes represents the perfect span of life.

Furthermore, if the figures in column 1 (x Adam \rightarrow x Lamek) and the figures in column 2 (y Adam \rightarrow y Lamek) are each divided by 60, and the remainders added together, the sum of the remainders is 365! As for the patriarchs' ages at death, these can be related to synodic periods: e.g., Lamek's 777 = synodic period of Jupiter + synodic period of Saturn; Yared's 962 = synodic period of Venus + synodic period of Saturn. He shows how other patriarchal ages can be generated similarly.

Barnouin's mathematics is impressive and the coincidences he finds are striking, even if he sometimes resorts to approximations. However, he offers no explanation of why the writer of Genesis should want to relate the ages of the patriarchs to synodic periods and the like, merely suggesting that they express the orderliness of life before the flood and convey the passage of time in those distant years.

To date, then, no writer has offered an adequate explanation of these figures. If they are symbolic, it is not clear what they symbolize. If they are to be taken literally, we are left with the historical problems with which we began. The majority of commentators therefore just offer some general observations of a more theological nature. This genealogy is designed to show how the divine image in which Adam was created was passed on from generation to generation, and that the divine command to be fruitful and multiply ([1:28](#)) was fulfilled. Many ancient peoples have held that in primitive antiquity men lived much longer than at present: the Sumerians believed the pre-flood kings reigned for thousands of years, and according to the Lagash king list, babies were kept in diapers for a hundred years! (Jacobsen, *JBL* 100 [1981] [520–21](#)). It may be that [Gen 5](#) is reflecting such ideas and suggesting that the history of mankind stretches back into an inconceivably distant past. Cassuto, though, sees in the ages of the patriarchs, relatively low when contrasted with the enormous reigns of Sumerian kings, another aspect of anti-Mesopotamian polemic. The Hebrew writer was intent on scaling down the alleged ages of man's earliest forebears. Though they lived a long time, none reached a thousand years, which in God's sight is but an evening gone (cf. [Ps 90:4](#)). Gispén suggests that Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15* (vol. 1; Word Biblical Commentary; Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1998).

these figures are designed to show that though the narrative is dealing with very distant times, it is a sort of history, and that however long men lived, they were mortal.

These seem better approaches to these great ages than the attempts to find symbolic or historical truths in the precise ages of the patriarchs. Could it be that the precision of the figures conveys the notion that these patriarchs were real people, while their magnitude represents their remoteness from the author of Genesis? Even if we know that twenty centuries is really too short for the period from the creation of man to the call of Abraham, it still feels a very long time to anyone who tries to think himself back through such a period, as anyone who tries to do this for the years from the present to the time of Christ will quickly discover.

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