

CHRONOLOGY

Past attempts to connect the Heptateuch—the first seven books of the Bible, which comprise Genesis through Judges—to what is known of ANE history have met with difficulty (see Breakout 2.04). This has made it easier for liberal critics of the Bible to class the Torah, Joshua, and Judges as “pious” fiction. But there is only one factor prohibiting the proper linkage between the first seven biblical books and the BA from which they claim to originate: unbending adherence to the Ussherian “biblical chronology.” For hundreds of years, sincere Bible readers have calculated that the Genesis patriarchs lived at the end of the IBA (c. 2200) into Middle Bronze Age 1 (MBA1; c. 2100–1900 BC). However, archaeological discoveries throughout the region disqualify this time frame because the cities visited by the patriarchs were not in existence during that time. If you take the Genesis life spans as base-10 arithmetic values with no possibility of some gaps in the genealogies or the possibility of honorific ages, dates are derived that cannot be synchronized with the well-documented flow of Mesopotamian, Anatolian, Levantine, and Mesopotamian history—that is, ANE history. But the discrepancies are effectively solved either by making a few reasonable adjustments to the Ussherstyle traditional chronologies (see Breakout 2.04), or by understanding the Genesis life spans as number formulas in their BA cultural contexts designed to attribute honor to important ancestors (see Breakouts 2.04, 2.05). Ancient Mesopotamians (as Abraham was) commonly used large numbers—even thousands of years!—as a way to honor their most ancient ancestors. Whether the Genesis numbers are understood as literal, base-10 numbers in the modern sense, or as numerical formulas often used by ancient Mesopotamians to attribute honor to ancestors, we find that the archaeology, social customs, and events in the patriarchal narratives all fit comfortably in MBA2 (c. 1900–1550 BC; see Timeline).

CHRONOLOGY AND THE PATRIARCHAL LIFESPANS

Breakout 2.04

The subject of the Genesis patriarchal life span numbers remains one that is often fraught with controversy. A more traditional view is that the numbers are “face-value” arithmetic values and can be used to build a chronology of the ancient patriarchal world. This is what Irish bishop James Ussher did in the seventeenth century, and some Bible scholars have continued this line of thinking. Using this approach puts the creation of the universe around 6,000 years ago, places the Noah flood around 2500 BC, and marks the birth of Abraham at c. 2166 BC. Taking the Genesis life spans in this manner (as base-10 literal numbers) is, however, not without its problems. Among the many lines of evidence that contradict the traditional biblical chronology is the ANE chronology worked out over the past 150 years by archaeologists and historians. These data reveal an uninterrupted sequence of ANE civilizations going back to at least 10,000 BC. In most traditional chronologies, the time of Noah’s flood is placed at the middle of the third millennium BC, but in ANE chronology that’s at the height of both the Old Kingdom in Egypt and the Akkadian Empire in Mesopotamia. As a result, many scholars have viewed the Genesis numbers simply as part of a mythological fabric and have dismissed the book as “pious fiction.” On the surface, harmonizing the traditional patriarchal chronology with the ANE chronology

seems difficult at best. But there are, in fact, three reasonable ways to resolve the issue, each of which preserves the divine inspiration and inerrancy of Scripture while being consistent with the flow of ANE history. The first approach makes three simple modifications: (1) adjust the date of the exodus to the fourteenth century BC (see Breakouts 3.04, 3.05); (2) adopt a short Israelite sojourn in Egypt (215 years instead of 430 years), which is consistent with the Septuagint, the apostle Paul in Galatians 3:16-17, Josephus, and several other lines of evidence (see Breakout 2.05); and (3) recognize that gaps may exist in the Genesis genealogies that could raise the dates of the creation and flood high enough to accommodate the archaeological chronology of the ANE. These alterations lower Abraham's career from the twenty-second and twenty-first centuries BC to the nineteenth and eighteenth centuries BC, and put the times of Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph in their proper cultural context (see Breakout 2.05)—all this while adhering to the face-value literal, longer Genesis life spans.

The second approach is similar to the first but uses a late date for the exodus (mid-thirteenth century BC) and a long (430-year) Israelite sojourn in Egypt. This also puts the Abraham–Joseph sequence in the proper cultural context of MBA 2 (c. 1900–1550 BC; see Breakout 2.05). The third approach for harmonizing patriarchal life spans and ANE chronology holds that a proper literal interpretation of Scripture is the one that makes the most sense within the culture of its origin. Because no ancient culture made a chronology of its history, it is anachronistic to assume that the writer of Genesis did so. Instead, it was common practice in the ANE Bronze Age—including during the times of Abraham and Moses—to use numerical formulas for life spans or reigns for the purpose of attributing honor to significant ancestors. We know that ancient Sumerian and Babylonian genealogies memorialized real people, and we also know that the life spans or regnal numbers of their most ancient ancestors were comprised of schematic or symbolic values that did not relate to actual ages or reigns. The Sumerian King List, for example, celebrates kings who reigned for tens of thousands of years, which readers, both then and now, recognize as honorific, and not actual reign spans. This view recognizes that the base-10 numbering system of later Iron Age Israel and Judah does not fit the Bronze Age cultural context of Abraham and his immediate Hebrew descendants. In this third view, the Genesis life spans cannot, then, be used to construct an “absolute” chronology. The original author(s) did not intend the life spans to be understood in this manner. Therefore, the chronological placement of the patriarchs in the ANE can be best accomplished by using historical and cultural synchronisms (see Breakouts 2.05, 2.07, 3.04, 3.05). The approach also unshackles the creation and the Noah flood narratives from the chains of “traditional” chronology, allowing them to be dated based on the best evidence of geology and paleontology.

All three approaches to the Genesis patriarchal life spans allow for the same conclusion: Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph belong to the second half of the Middle Bronze Age. This conclusion harmonizes all the relevant cultural and historical data from the Bible and the ANE, and affirms the Genesis text as actual history. This short explanation of the three approaches is not meant to resolve the controversy over the nature of the Genesis life span numbers, but hopefully, it offers expanded perspective and thinking on the subject. C. Olson, S. Collins