The Mysterious Numbers of the Ages of the Patriarchs

Duane L. Christensen

Any reader of the book of Genesis is immediately struck with the extraordinary ages reported, particularly in chapters 5 and 11. In the ten generations from Adam to Noah the reported ages are as follows:[1]

	Firstborn	Remainder	Total
Adam	130	800	930
Seth	105	807	912
Enosh	90	815	905
Kenan	70	840	910
Mahalalel	65	830	895
Jared	162	800	962
Enoch	65	300	365
Methuselah	187	782	969
Lamech	182	595	777
Noah	500	450	950

These numbers are not only excessively large but also seem to fall into a discernible pattern, as U. Cassuto has shown: All of the numbers in Genesis 5, along with those for Noah that appear in Genesis 7:11; 9:28-29, are either exact multiples of five, or else multiples of five with the addition of seven (one number, the years of Methuselah's life, was twice augmented by seven, one septenni-um having been added to his age when his eldest son was born, and another to the remainIng years of his life). And since there are five such additions (one for Seth, one for Jared, two for Methuselah, one for Lamech), it follows that the sum of the last column is also a multiple of five.[2]

The question emerges as to whether these numbers may have theological meaning rather than simple historical reference.

A tabulation of the succeeding ten generations between Noah and Abram presents a somewhat similar picture:[3]

	Firstborn	Remainder	Total
Shem	100	500	600
Arphaxad	35	403	438
Shelah	30	403	433
Eber	34	430	464
Peleg	30	209	239
Reu	32	207	239
Serug	30	200	230
Nabor	29	119	148
Terah	70	135	205
Abram	100	75	175

Here a different pattern seems to be present in that the sum of each of the above columns is divisible by seven. After Shem the patriarchs live more than four hundred

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[1] U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis: Part I, From Adam to Noah* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1961) 260. Cassuto discussed In detail various parallels within Mesopotamian literature where antediluvian and postdiluvian heroes are arranged In similar patterns and achieve amazing longevity. As he put it, "the Babylonian figures far exceed those of the Torah, an average of myriads of years being allotted to each monarch prior to the Deluge" (254).

[2] Ibid., 260.

[3] U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Genesis: Part II, From Noah to Abraham* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1964) 253.

years for three generations. The next three live some-what over two hundred years. Both Eber and Terah exceed the limits of their Immediate predecessors. They also have special Importance, as noted by Cassuto, in that "Eber is the eponym of the Hebrews and marks the fourteenth generation from Adam, the seventh after the seventh:[4] And Terah is the father of Abram.

In spite of significant research in recent years on the matter of genealogies, "a satisfactory key to the theological meaning of (the) assumed system has not yet been found."[5] Marshall D. Johnson has shown rather convincingly that the present condition of the biblical dating probably points to a revision during the Maccabean period with particular focus on the rededication of the temple In Jerusalem in 164 B.C. by the Maccabees, which was calculated to have taken place in the year 4000 A.M.[6] After careful study of five different systems as preserved In the Masoretic Text, the Samaritan Pentateuch, the Septuagint, the Book of Jubilees, and Josephus, Johnson concluded that "all [these] systems are somehow related, that is, dependent on the same basic tradition."[7]

In his study "On the Chronology of the Old Testament " A. Murtonen has noted that "all of the chronological data given In the Old Testament bear an eschatological character— at least in a certain sense of the word."[8] This paper is an attempt to explore that particular aspect of the theological system of dating within the Old Testament that lies behind the rather confused picture of competing traditions discussed by Johnson. In short, it is an attempt to recover part of that "basic tradition" behind the separate textual witnesses that may well have emerged as early as the sixth century lax. within the developing canonical process.

Any explanation of the chronological data within Genesis 1–11 must take Into account the larger picture of the Pentateuch as a whole, and perhaps of the entire Old Testament as well. In another paper I have already discussed the ages of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob according to a single mathematical formula that was noted some years ago by Nahum Sarna.[9] Such a sequence suggests the presence of a fourth person, one who lived 64 years:

	Age at Death	Sum of Digits
Abraham	175 = 7 x 5 x 5	(7 + 5 + 5 = 17)
Isaac	180 = 5 x 6 x 6	(5 + 6 + 6 = 17)
Jacob	147 = 3 x 7 x 7	(3 + 7 + 7 = 17)
???	64 = 1 x 8 x 8	(1 + 8 + 8 = 17)

A first guess as to the identity of this fourth person would be Jacob's son Joseph; but he lived 110 years. Another possibility is to be found in a closer look at the figure of Jacob/Israel within the Genesis narrative.

Rashi, the great medieval Jewish commentator, worked through the numbers In Genesis with meticulous detail and reached a number of significant conclusions. According to his calculations, Jacob left home when he was 63 years of age. But he did not go Immediately to Haran. As Rashi put it: "After he had received the blessings he concealed himself in Eber's school for fourteen years:"[10] This is a rather typical rabbinic means of pointing out a problem or tension within the received tradition, a bit like the observation in Targum Jonathan on Genesis 22:19 where there is no mention of Isaac in the text when Abraham "returned to his young men" following the events at Moriah. ConcernIng that occasion the rabbis offered the explanation that "the angels on high led Isaac and brought him to the school of Shem the great, and he was there three years."[11]

Jacob was 63 years of age when he left home, and he served fourteen years In Laban's house before the birth of Joseph (Gen 30-25); Joseph was 30 years of age when he became ruler in Egypt, and nine years passed before Jacob came to Egypt. This would make Jacob 116 years of age when he came to Egypt if one assumes "that the fifty-three years he spent with Laban etc. began Immediately after he had left his father:"[12] But Jacob himself said to Pharaoh: "[I am] 130 years [old]" (47:9)— and thus

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4 Ibid., 254.

5 J. J. Finkelstein, "Genealogy of the Hammurapi Dynasty." *Journal of Cuneiform Studies* 20 (1966) 95-118; A. Malamat, "King Lists of the Old Babylonian Period and Biblical Genealogies," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 88 (1968) 163-73; "Tribal Societies: Biblical Genealogies and African Lineage Systems," *Archives europeennes de sociologie* 14 (1973) 126-36; M. D. Johnson, *The Purpose of the Biblical Genealogies: With Special Reference to the Setting of the Genealogies of Jesus* (Cambridge: University Press, 1969). K. R. Andriolo, "A Structural Analysis of Genealogy and Worldview in the OldTestament." *American Anthropologist* 75 (1973) 1657-69; J. M. Miller, *The Descendants of Cain: Notes on Genesis 4.7 Zeitschrift fur die alttestamentliche Wlssenschaft* 86 (1974) 164-74; R. R. Wilson, *Genealogy and History In the Biblical World* (New Haven: Yale University, 1977). The quotation is from Johnson, *Purpose*, 261.

6 Anno Mundi.

7 Johnson, *Purpose*, 33.

8 A. Murtonen, "On the Chronology of the OT,* *Studia Theologica* 8 (1955) 133-37.

9 D. L. Christensen, "Job and the Age of the Patriarchs In Old Testament Narrative," *Perspectives In Religious Studies* 13 (1986). Cf. N. M. Sarna, *Understanding Genesis* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1966) 84.

10 *Pentateuch with Rashl's Commentary* (ed. A. M. Silberman; London: Shapiro, Vallentine, 1946) 130.

11 J. Bowker, *The Targums and Rabbinic Literature: An Introduction to Jewish Interpretations of Scripture* (Cambridge: University Press, 1969) 226.

12 *Pentateuch* (ed. Silberman), 130.

fourteen years are missing. If we follow Rashi's calculations, Jacob left Laban when he was 97 years of age and spent two years en route back to Canaan. At age 99 he wrestled with the angel at the Jabbok, when his name was changed to Israel.

The total of the years Jacob lived with his father Isaac and his uncle Laban was 63+20=83 years. And since he died at 147, he lived 64 years in another "home"— fourteen in "the school of Eber," two years en route to Palestine, and forty-eight years as Israel in Canaan. The fourth person In the list of patriarchs accordIng to the above mathematical formula would appear to be "Israel" as distinct from Jacob, who lived sixty four years outside of his father Abraham's and his uncle Laban's house:

	Age at Death	Sum of Digits
"Israel"	64 = 1 x 8 x 8	(1 + 8 + 8 = 17)

C. J. Labuschagne has pointed out that in all cases the sum of the digits used In this mathematical formula add up to the number seventeen.[13] It is possible that an early form of the canon itself was structured in seventeen books— in four groups of four with Deuteronomy as a bridge between the books of the Torah, Former Prophets, Latter Prophets, and Hagiographa, as follows:[14]

Genesis	Leviticus	Joshua	Samuel
Exodus	Numbers	Judges	Kings

Deuteronomy

Isaiah	Ezekiel	Job	Proverbs
Jeremiah	The Twelve	Psalms	"Meg"

The designation "Meg" refers to an early form of what eventually became the Megilloth, the five festal scrolls of Masoretic tradition. Esther apparently did not become an official part of the Megilloth before Talmudic times.[15]

I have argued elsewhere for the significance of the number 140 In relation to the patriarchs In both Genesis and Job, the number being the sum of the squares of the digits one through seven.[16] Isaac and Rebekah married In Abraham's 140th year, and their marriage lasted 140 years. Jacob was 120 years old at the time of Isaac's death and spent twenty years in Haran with his uncle Laban before his return to Canaan. By one calculation he would thus have been 140 years old at the time he wres-

tled with the angel at the Jabbok. And, of course, his twin brother Esau would have been 140 years of age as well at that time, which also marked their reunion In Canaan.

Orientation toward time is rather different in modern western civilization compared to that of the ancient Near East. We face the future whereas, as Isaac Kikawada has recently argued, people In that ancient world faced the past.[17] If one wished to know the future, one simply read the events of the past and projected them, as it were, behind him or her Into the future. If the future In ancient Israel was thus projected as a "rerun" of the past, perhaps in reverse, which would begin with the appearance of a "new Moses," the picture might be as follows:

Joshua/Joseph > New Israel > Fathers > New Creation

Both Joseph and Joshua lived 110 years, which is curiously the sum of the squares of the digits five through seven.[18] Israel is made up of twelve tribes, and the sum of the squares of the digits one through twelve is 650. The number associated with the fathers is 140 (the sum of the squares of the digits one through seven), and 110 + 650 + 140 = 900, which is 30^2 or the square of the sum of the squares of the digits one through four. Within the narrative tradition In Genesis, Abraham was 160 years of age at the birth of his grandson Jacob. Isaac was 60 years old when Jacob was born, and Jacob lived with Isaac for sixty-three years and with Laban for twenty years. It is possible that Joseph's descent into Egypt at age 17 took place In Isaac's 160th year, at least according to one calculation, namely 60 + 63 + 20 + 17 = 160.

Moreover, the number of years between the birth of Shem and Terah is 320, which is two times 160. At any rate, it is interesting to note that 160 x 900 = 144,000. Is it possible that this curious number, which becomes the community of the elect within apocalyptic speculation (cf. Rev. 14:1), began in ancient Israel as simply the symbolic lapse of time from the promulgation of the Torah of Moses to the eschaton, conceived In terms of a grand reversal of past events in ancient Israel according to the following formula?

Joshua/Joseph > New Israel > Fathers > New Creation

(110 + 650 + 140) x 160 = 144,000

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[13] C. J. Labuschagne, "The Literary and Theological Function of Divine Speech in the Pentateuch," *Vetus Testamenturn Supplements* 36 (1985) 171.

[14] Discussed briefly in "Job and the Age of the Patriarchs" (see n. 9 above).

[15] Ibid., and "Josephus and the Twenty-Two-Book Canon of Sacred Scripture," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 29 (March 1986)39-48.

[16] See n. 9 above.

[17] This particular point was stressed In his presidential address, "The Old Testament in Twenty Minutes," which was presented to the Society of Bibilical Literature during its Pacific Coast Region annual meetings on March 29, 1985.

[18] The number 110 for the age of Joseph is sometimes related to a presumed ideal age in Egyptian literary tradition. See N. Sarna, *Understanding Genesis* (New York: McGraw-Hill. 1966) 226, 231 (nn. 107-108), who mentions twenty-seven such references in Egyptian literature. Even so, it seems preferable to explain the number on the basis of a mathematical schema within the biblical material itself.

The advent of a new Moses figure would thus lead to the establishment of a future kingdom of Israel. This epoch would be succeeded by an ideal age, corresponding to that of the "fathers" in ancient tradition, which would culminate in a new creation where the people of God would eventually become what God Intended them to be in the beginning of time.

It is probably not possible to recover the key to the theological meaning of the numbers and ages In Genesis 5 and 11, at least in detail. Nonetheless, it seems likely that the numbers are not to be taken as simply historical report. The mysterious numbers are theological state-ments that contain within them a look Into the future as well as the distant past.