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## *The Lifespans of the EB–MB Patriarchs: A Hermeneutical and Historical Conundrum<sup>1</sup>*

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### **A Personal Note**

No greater joy and satisfaction can a teacher accrue than to witness the successful accomplishments of his students and to benefit from them. Such is the case with my relationship with Professor Helmuth Pehlke. Many years ago he sat in my classes and eventually I had the privilege of working with him through the rigorous process of writing a doctoral dissertation on the exegesis, interpretation, and theological import of Genesis 49. Even then we formed a solid bond of personal friendship which has only grown and become more precious as the years have passed and our paths have gone their separate ways. Therefore, when I was asked to participate in a *Festschrift* in honor of Helmuth, I was the one who was honored by the request. Therefore, I dedicate this essay to my dear student and colleague.

### **Introduction**

One of the most intractable problems in the Hebrew Scriptures among many others has to do with the lifespans of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, the three together embracing the period from ca. 2150–1860 BC, the Early Bronze–Middle Bronze era in terms of archaeological description.<sup>2</sup> Taking the data seriously (and why not, for now at least?), Abraham's lifespan was from 2166 BC to 1991, Isaac's from 2066–1886, and Jacob's from 2006–1859. Again, in archaeological terms, Abraham flourished in the late EB IV period on into the late MB I. Isaac survived on into the MB IIA era, and Jacob's life extended into the MB II B. This is important in that interpretation of biblical texts must take into account the historical and cultural milieu in which

<sup>1</sup>This article is adapted from the author's essay in *HERR, was ist der Mensch, dass du dich seiner annimmst? Beiträge zum biblischen Menschenbild*, eds. Tina Arnold, Walter Hilbrands, Heiko Wenzel (Witten, Germany: SCM Brockhaus, 2013), 115–26.

<sup>2</sup>These dates derive from the data of the Masoretic texts, specifically from Genesis 12:4; 16:16; 17:1, 17; 21:5; 23:1; 25:7; 35:28; 47:9, 28; 50:22. For the bases of these dates and biblical chronology in general, see Eugene H. Merrill, "Chronology," in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*, eds. T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2003), 113–22. The EB IV–MB IIA period in the Middle East is dated by most scholars at ca. 2300–1800 BC. Amihai Mazar, *Archaeology of the Land of the Bible: 10,000–586 B. C. E.* (New York: Doubleday, 1990), vii.

they claim to be set.

The aforementioned conundrum is this: How must the lifespans of biblical figures be understood in light of those of their extra-biblical contemporaries which, as recorded in their own writings, are considerably at odds with those of the Bible? Can they be taken literally? Must or may they be manipulated in order to bring coherence to them? Do they have symbolical, mystical, kabbalistic, or other coded meaning that permits the texts as written to have meaning other than what appears on the surface of the text? This essay attempts to deal with these and related issues. It is important up front to know that the writer holds to a “high” view of Scripture, including the inerrancy of the original texts. However, this does not solve the difficulty we are addressing but only compounds it because the cynical or skeptical critic can simply write “error” or “text corruption” or “mythical language” or something else over it and be done with the matter. The present essay cannot resort to such easy “solutions” either way just because of its conviction regarding the supernatural character of the Bible that necessitates that its historical data be taken seriously as the Word of God; it must also take into account the questions and viewpoints raised by sincere and devout readers of Scripture who offer different and even contradictory ways of approaching the issue.

### The Text-Critical Evidence

Preliminary attention must turn first to the genealogies of Genesis 5:1-32 and 11:10-32 where variations from the MT are most abundant and which set the stage for consideration of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob.<sup>3</sup> Table 1 sets forth the data for Genesis 5.

**Table 1**  
**Genealogy of the Origin of Humankind (Genesis 5:1-32)<sup>4</sup>**

Reference	Name	Age at Birth of 1st Son	Total Years of Life
Gen 5:1-5	Adam	130	930
Gen 5:6-8	Seth	105	912

<sup>3</sup>The genealogy of Gen 5 has the purpose of tracing the history of humanity in general whereas Gen 11:10-32 focuses on the Noah>Abraham connection. It is included here for purposes of comparison of numbers. See Table 2.

<sup>4</sup>The late Semitics and theology scholar and my mentor, Dr. Timothy Lin, suggested to me in an interview in 1960 the following translation and interpretation of the names of the pre-Flood patriarchs: אָרְצִי (“earthly man”), תַּשְׁ (“substitute”), אִשְׁ (“incurable man”), קִיִּן (“lamentable”), מִתְּלַלְלָא (“praise God”), יָרִד (“he will descend”), יִדְרֵן (“instructing”), מִתְּשַׁלַּח (“to send one who will die”), יִקְרָן (“a conqueror”), and יָנַח (“rest” or “resting place”). His translation is: “Mankind was substituted by a mortal man with a lamentable result. Praise God, the gracious God came down, dedicated himself to teach man, to send away death, and to send forth man to conquer in order to bring rest.” One may, of course, quibble about something like this but it does suggest that personal names themselves may be bearers of messages.

Reference	Name	Age at Birth of 1st Son	Total Years of Life
Gen 5:9-11	Enosh	90	905
Gen 5:12-14	Kenan	70	910
Gen 5:15-17	Mahalalel	65	895
Gen 5:18-20	Jared	162	962
Gen 5:21-24	Enoch	65	365
Gen 5:25-27	Methusaleh	187	969
Gen 5:28-31	Lamech	182	777
Gen 5:32	Noah	500	950 (Gen 9:29)

**Table 2**  
**Genealogy of the Post-Flood Biblical Patriarchs (Genesis 11:10-32)**

Reference	Masoretic Text (MT)	Septuagint (LXX)	Samaritan Pentateuch (SP)
Gen 11:10-13 Arpachshad	35+403 yrs*	135+430	135+303
(Cainan)	missing; cf. Lk 3:36	Kainan	missing
Gen 11:13-15 Shelah	30+403	130+403	130+403
Gen 11:14-17 Eber	34+430	134+370	134+270
Gen 11:16-19 Peleg	30+209	130+209	130+109
Gen 11:18-21 Reu	32+207	132+209	132+107
Gen 11:20-23 Serug	30+200	130+200	130+100
Gen 11:22-25 Nahor	29+119	79+129	79+69
Gen 11:24-26	70+205	70+205	70+145

\*The first figure in each case is the age of the patriarch when he fathered his first son and the second figure is the number of years he lived in all.

Comparisons between Tables 1 and 2:

1. Counting Seth and Abraham (Table 2), 10 generations followed the flood; Adam through Noah (Table 1) totals 10 generations prior to the Flood.
2. The average age of siring the first son is, respectively, 155 and 29; the average age at death is, respectively, 821 and 217, a reduction by 85%.
3. The same effect is noted in the reigning years in the secular Sumerian King List (Table 7), 72%.
4. In both cases, the Flood and its aftermath marked the line of demarcation between the extreme longevity of the earlier

era as compared to the much less (but still extraordinary) lifespans of human beings in later eras.

Several observations can be made regarding the data displayed in Table 1:

1. The age at the time of siring a son is generally greater in LXX than in MT, always by exactly 100 years except for Nahor and Terah, where the surplus is 50 years for Nahor and with agreement amongst the sources for Terah.
2. SP agrees exactly with LXX in this respect, not surprising in light of SP's heavy dependence on LXX.
3. The total years according to MT is 2176, with an average of 272 years; the figures for LXX are 2525 and 315; and for SP 1506 and 188. By comparison, the three great patriarchs lived for a total of 502 years, averaging 167, a noticeable reduction from the average of the Gen 11 lists.<sup>5</sup>
4. LXX is longer than MT by 349 in total years of life (2225 v. 2176), the major exceptions being in the cases of Eber and Nahor.
5. SP differs from the other two sources in its tendency to reduce the numbers of the lifespans, several times by 100 (Arpachshad [MT], Eber, Peleg, Reu, and Serug), once by 160 years (Eber [MT]), once by 60 (Terah), once by 127 (Arpachshad [LXX]), and twice by 50 (Nahor in both MT and LXX). On the other hand, LXX exceeds both MT and SP in one instance, namely, Nahor, where the figure is 10 greater than MT and 60 greater than SP. Conclusion thus far: No good reason exists to scuttle MT in favor of the two major versions. First, SP is heavily dependent on LXX in general, and is on balance closer to LXX than MT in our case. Both versions understandably had difficulties with the great ages of the patriarchs who had preceded even them by 1500-2000 years. Quite possibly, they (like we) observed the actuarial realities of their day and found it difficult to square their life expectancies with the biblical record. Thus, they reduced the figures, at least in some examples, thereby providing some relief to their perplexity.<sup>6</sup>

The principal passages in which the lifespans of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are in view are, respectively, Genesis 25:7; 35:28; and 47:28. The great manuscripts and versions agree with MT that Abraham lived to be 175, Isaac 180, and Jacob 147. Obviously one cannot attribute these numbers to

<sup>5</sup>The patriarchs' average lifespans are 39% less than MT; 47% less than LXX; and only 13% less than SP.

<sup>6</sup>For explanations for these reductions vis-à-vis MT, see Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1-15*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 1 (Waco: Word, 1987), 250-51.

text corruption or idiosyncratic interpolations or the like. They are fixed and grounded as far as text criticism is concerned.

### **Evidence from the Ancient Near East**

Granted that the three great patriarchs lived between 2200 and 1800 BC, it is important that their age lengths be compared to those of the contemporary world where such information exists. It is necessary to focus on only the two great civilizations that formed the cultural environment in which they lived, namely, Mesopotamia and Egypt. Abraham, of course, was the only one of the three to have dwelt in Mesopotamia except for Jacob's 20-year stay in Haran, in Upper Mesopotamia (Gen 29:4; 31:38). Abraham later visited Egypt and Jacob lived there the last 17 years of his life. Moreover, Moses, the author of our narratives, was intimately familiar with life expectancies in Egypt and doubtless on the broader horizon as well. More specifically, Abraham was a citizen of the ancient Sumerian city of Ur in the period known as Ur III (ca. 2100-1975 BC).<sup>7</sup> Isaac, though never having lived in Egypt, was nonetheless submerged in the traditions of that great Empire in the eras designated Dynasty XI (ca. 2040-1991) and XII (or Middle Kingdom, 1991-1783).<sup>8</sup> As for Jacob, he too lived for at least 17 years in the land of Egypt, all in Dynasty XII.

Chronological data are almost non-existent for the longevity of the masses in the ancient Near East so recourse must be made to the respective royalties of Mesopotamia and Egypt where the data in any case are almost always limited to the length of the reigns of the kings and not of their ages as a whole. The following tables list the kings of both empires in the years contemporary with those of the three great patriarchs.

**Table 3**  
**The Reign-Lengths of the Rulers of the Ur III Dynasty**  
**(Ca. 2100-1950 BC)**

Utuhegal	7 years	Amar-Sin	9 years
Shu-Sin	11 years	Ur-Nammu	18 years
Shulgi	48 years	Ibbi-Sin	23 years

**Table 4 (Canon of Turin)**  
**The Reign-Lengths of the Relevant Pharaohs of Dynasties 11 and 12**  
**(Ca. 2010-1730 BC)**

Nebhepetre Mentuhotep II	50 years	Ammenemes II	34 years
Ammenemes I	29 years	Sesostris II	19 years

<sup>7</sup>Amélie Kuhrt, *The Ancient Near East c. 3000-330 B. C.*, vol. 1 (London: Routledge, 1995), 56-73.

<sup>8</sup>Kuhrt, *The Ancient Near East*, 161-73.

Sesostris I	43 years	Sesostris III	35 years
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Quite clearly, the lifespans of these royal contemporaries of the patriarchs at best were on the average no more than 25% of those of the patriarchs. Nor does this change much in the several centuries of documentable king-lists prior to the periods of the patriarchs as the following lists attest.

**Table 5**  
**Mesopotamian Kings Immediately Prior to Abraham**

S a r g o n (2340-2284)	56 years	S h a r k a l i s - h a r r i	25 years
Rimush	9 years	Elulu	7 years
Manishtushu	15 years	Dudu	21 years
Naram-Sin	37 years	Shu-dural	15 years

**Table 6<sup>9</sup>**  
**Egyptian Pharaohs Immediately Prior to Abraham**  
**(Ca. 2117-1991 BC)**

Inyotef II	48 years	S a n k h a r e Mentuhotpe	50 years
Inyotef III	7 years	Nebtowyre Mantuhotpe IV	6 years
Nebhebetre Mentuhotpe II	50 years		

**Table 7**  
**The Sumerian King List<sup>10</sup>**  
**A. Before the Great Flood<sup>11</sup>**

Alulim	28,800 years	Dumuzi	36,000
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<sup>9</sup>The ideal life expectancy in Egypt was 110 years, exactly the same as Joseph's (Gen 50:22). See Geraldine Pinch, "Private Life in Ancient Egypt," *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*. Vol. 1, ed. Jack M. Sasson (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1995), 380. The expectation in Mesopotamia was similar to that in Egypt. A man who lived till 90 was said to have reached "extreme old age," and it was thought that the gods had allotted man 120 years at most. Marten Stol, "Private Life in Ancient Mesopotamia," Sasson, *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East*, 487.

<sup>10</sup>The *editio princeps* is Thorkild Jacobsen, *The Sumerian King List*. AS 11 (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1939), especially 71-77. Table 7 greatly adumbrates the text by listing only the kings' names and their length of reign. For a more recent edition, see ANET<sup>2</sup>, 265-66.

<sup>11</sup>The first two kings listed were from the city-state of Eridu, considered in Sumerian mythology to be the first place in the world to be occupied; the next three were kings of

Alalgar	36,000	Ensipazianna	28,000
Enmenluanna	21,000	Enmenduranna	21,000
Enmengalanna	28,800	Ubartutu	18,6000

The total of the reigns is 241,200 years with an average of the eight kings of 30,150 years.

### B. After the Great Flood<sup>12</sup>

Ga . . . ur	1,200 years		
XXX	960	Mesannepada	80
Palakinatim	900	Meskiagnanna	36
Na(i)ngishlishma	xxx	Elulu	25
Bahina	840	Balulu	36

The first four kings after the flood (a lacuna exists for Ningishlishma's years) and the last five are listed here with a total for the first four of 4740 years and an average of 975. The last four reigned a total of 177 years with an average of 44.25 years. By comparison, the three great patriarchs lived for a total of 502 years with an average lifespan of 167. One should consider, of course, that reigning years and longevity are quite different matters but the differences between the Sumerian lifespans and those of the patriarchs would still be heavily weighted in favor of the patriarchs. The fact that Sargon of Agade, who succeeded the last five Sumerian kings, reigned for 56 years underscores the problematic lifespans of the patriarchs who lived 200 years later.<sup>13</sup> The Turin Canon provides the lengths of reigns for a minority of the kings, but the most years are attributed to Pepi II (90) of Dynasty VI and Nebhepetre (51) of Dynasty XI. The rest are either lost or are 30 years or lower.

What, then, can account for the apparently inflated figures of the longevity of the patriarchs compared to kings' reigns hundreds of years before Abraham? The tables of those ancient texts of Mesopotamia include names of pre-Deluge and post-Deluge kings whose reigns far exceed the lifespans of the patriarchs. However, the data of corresponding Egyptian lists of pharaohs, such as those of Karnak, Abydos, and Sakkara and the Turin Canon, contain figures that are much below those of the patriarchs.<sup>14</sup> Either way, then, the puzzle of the ages of the patriarchs is helped little or none by the

Badtibira; the sixth was from Larak; the seventh from Sippar; and the last from Shuruppak.

<sup>12</sup>Because of the great number of kings, only the first five and last five before Sargon are listed.

<sup>13</sup>These are the kings of the important city-state of Uruk only. See Table 4 above where the average reigns of the first eight kings of Akkad is 23 years! Furthermore, the reigns of the kings of Gutu, which overthrew Akkad in the very days of Abraham, were very brief; the first five of them reigned for a total of 27 years and an average of 5.2.

<sup>14</sup>See COS, 1: 69-73.



available ancient Near Eastern literature. This leads to a number of suggested solutions across the broad spectrum of biblical scholarship.

1. Scholars who understand the Old Testament to be folklore or legend, at least in the patriarchal period, dismiss the large numbers as pure fantasy or creative imagination and therefore have no problem and thus no solution that they hold as historically valid.<sup>15</sup>
1. Those who find some kernel of historicity in the early texts assume the numbers to be exaggerations of the true figures.<sup>16</sup>
2. Those who claim adherence to at least a moderately conservative position apply to the numbers a literary or genre solution. They propose that the accounts, though basically historical, employ literary devices such as hyperbole to demonstrate the greatness of God and his people.<sup>17</sup>
3. Those who suppose that the biblical genealogies were “borrowed” from earlier secular prototypes such as the Sumerian King List (or vice-versa) but were divested of their polytheism in favor of Israel’s monotheistic God, Yahweh.<sup>18</sup>
4. Those who engage in Kabbalism<sup>19</sup> or some other form of numerology or who resort to a factoring of the numbers in the genealogy and are therefore obliged to view the numbers as a coding system that has to be “cracked” in order for the true figures to emerge.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>15</sup>Hermann Gunkel, *Genesis*, 30. With regard to the genealogy of Cain, Gunkel writes, “The legend originally existed as an independent narrative in which a few imaginative figures appear.”

<sup>16</sup>K. A. Kitchen, *The Authority of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 359: “[The patriarchs’] 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.”

<sup>17</sup>Claus Westermann, *Genesis I-II*. Trans. John J. Scullian (Minneapolis: Augsburg: 1984), 354: “The genealogy sets in motion and puts into the length and breadth of human history the power of the blessing which God bestowed on his people.”

<sup>18</sup>Gerhard von Rad, *Genesis*. OTL, 1961, 66-71; for a summary of this view and a rebuttal to the ANE>Israel sequence, see John H. Walton, *Ancient Israelite Literature in Its Cultural Context* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1989), 127-31.

<sup>19</sup>The term refers to a system of mystical hermeneutics in Medieval Judaism that, among other things, assigned numerical values to the Hebrew letters of a word or even series of words. See Frank Talmage, “Apples of Gold: The Inner Meaning of Sacred Texts in Medieval Judaism,” in Arthur Green, ed. *Jewish Spirituality* (New York: Crossroad, 1986), 328-29, 337-40; Daniel C. Matt, “The Mystic and the *Mizwot*,” Green, *Jewish Spirituality*, 372-89.

<sup>20</sup>Umberto Cassuto, *Commentary on Genesis I* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1989), 249-72. “A detailed study of the chronology of the entire Book of Genesis makes it apparent that all the numbers of years listed therein . . . can be grouped under two heads: (a) multiples of five, that is, numbers divisible by five, whose last digit is 5 or 0; (b) multiples of five with the addition of seven. . . . It clearly follows that the chronology of the Book of Genesis as a whole is also founded on the dual principle of the sexagesimal system and the addition of seven” (259). An interesting example of yielding a symmetrical sum by factoring the ages stated in the texts has been offered by Nahum Sarna, *Understanding Genesis* (New York: Schocken,

### The Present Approach

**Presuppositions.** The loaded term “presupposition” already predisposes most scholars to the supposition that one who uses it has made up his mind before he begins his investigation into any given matter of interest. In fact, as it turns out, nearly every scientific enterprise engages in presuppositionism. The investigator must suppose the reality of his own existence, his environment, his cognitive faculties, and the nature of the issue at hand. Otherwise, it is a foolish delusion that makes impossible the exercise of empiricism and creative thinking. For example, one presupposes that certain physical laws are true because it is in the nature of observation, experience, and basic common sense that they exist and work. Even when observation and experience fail, certain results presuppose actions and causes that exist outside the sensory world. No one has yet seen the fundamental elements of the Higgs Boson but nuclear physicists who deny or even doubt its existence would soon find themselves outside the laboratory looking in. The so-called “God particle” is a given in the world of physical science, a presupposition as it were.

The same is true in the humanities, particularly in the study of history, and most especially in the study of biblical history as recorded in the Hebrew Scriptures. 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.

1970), 84. He notes that  $5 \times 5 \times 7 = 175$  (Abraham);  $6 \times 6 \times 5 = 180$  (Isaac);  $7 \times 7 \times 3 = 147$  (Jacob). The pattern thus is 5, 6, 7; 5, 6, 7; 7, 5, 3. Is this kind of numerical puzzle something devised by the author of the texts or is it merely coincidental? The answer is most obvious. But why resort to this device and what does it reveal about the actual ages of the patriarchs? Sarna does demonstrate convincingly that the text evinces symmetry and symbolism, and especially in the area of numbers: “Abraham lived seventy-five years in the home of his father and seventy-five years in the lifetime of his son. He was one hundred years of age at the birth of Isaac and lived one hundred years in Canaan. Jacob lived seventeen years with Joseph in Canaan and a like number with him in Egypt. Joseph’s one hundred and ten years happen to coincide with the ideal Egyptian life span, while the one hundred and twenty years of Moses correspond to the maximum term of life imposed on the human race” (84). While all this is manifestly true, it has nothing to do with the actual figures embedded in the text. That certain numbers in the Old Testament (e.g. 1, 3, 7, 10, 12, 40) have symbolical significance is nearly universally accepted. See E. W. Bullinger, *Number in Scripture: Its Supernatural Design and Spiritual Significance*, 4th ed. (London: Eyre & Spottiswoode, Ltd., 1921); John J. Davis, *Biblical Numerology* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1968); Robert D. Johnston, *Numbers in the Bible: God’s Unique Design in Biblical Numbers* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1990); C. J. Labuschagne *Numerical Secrets of the Bible* (North Richland Hills, TX: BIBAL Press, 2000).

**Methodology.** The complexity of the problem, and perhaps its solution, most likely lies in comparing texts to texts of the same kind to see where they best match. That is, there is nothing to be gained by comparing the biblical genealogical lists with those of Mesopotamia that reflect either much greater or much shorter lifespans or, more accurately, lengths of reign.<sup>21</sup> However, they should be included here to underscore lack of correspondence between them and the Genesis facts and figures. The Mesopotamian data for the Sumerian kings who reigned after the Deluge until the rise of the Akkadian Empire (ca. 2350 BC) are found in Table 6 B. The pre-Flood rulers are listed here in Table 8 side-by-side with the pre-Flood patriarchs of Hebrew tradition.

**Table 9**  
**The Pre-Flood Sumerian Kings and Biblical Patriarchs**

Biblical Reference	Patriarchs	Lifespans	Sumerian Kings	Royal Tenure
Gen 5:1-5	Adam	930	Alulim	28,8000
Gen 5:6-8	Seth	912	Alalgar	36,000
Gen 5:9-11	Enosh	905	Enmenluanna	43,200
Gen 5:12-14	Kenan	910	Enmengalana	28,800
Gen 5:15-17	Mahalalel	895	Dumuzi	36,600
Gen 5:18-20	Jared	962	Ensipazianna	28,800
Gen 5:21-24	Enoch	365*	Enmenduranna	21,000
Gen 5:25-27	Methusaleh	969	Ubartutu	18,600
Gen 5:28-31	Lamech			
Gen 5:32	Noah			
		Total Years		Total Years
		8575		241,000
		Average Lifespan		Average Reign-Years
		857.5		30,125

\*Enoch's life was "cut short" by his assumption to heaven.

Three observations readily come to mind: (1) The reigns of the Sumerian kings are many times longer than the lifespans of the biblical patri-

<sup>21</sup>Egyptian king lists of the Old Kingdom and First Intermediate Periods (Dynasties I-XI) are of limited value at this point because they either provide no chronological figures (the Karnak, Abydos, and Sakkara Lists) or they are fragmentary (Turin Canon). The years that are attested to in the Turin Canon are as follows: Dynasty XI (49, 8, 51, and 12 years with a recorded total of 143 years for seven kings; Dynasty XII (45, 10, 19, 30, 40, 27, 14, and 8 years with a total 213 years for eight kings). Dynasty XI thus averaged reign-lengths of 20.4 years and Dynasty XII 26.6 years. These are obviously far short of the average age of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (167 years!) who were contemporary with these two dynasties.

archs; (2) the numbers of individuals in each list are the same were Noah and Enoch to be left out of the count; and (3) in both cases, the lengths of life far exceed those of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. In fact, the average age of the pre-Flood patriarchs would be over five times as long as the average of these three. As for the Sumerian kings, their reigns would average 180 times as much as the lifespans of the biblical characters.

Careful scrutiny of the available king lists and other royal inscriptions of the EB-MB period of the biblical patriarchs yields only one that presents comparable sets of figures, namely, the Sumerian King List and its record of the rulers of the Uruk Dynasty in its latter years (ca. 2700 BC?)<sup>22</sup> The following table shows these correspondences.

**Table 10**  
**The Post-Flood Dynasty of Uruk**

Name	Years of Reign	Comments
Keskiaggasher	324	Reigned at Eanna, a part of Uruk
Enmekar	420	(Re)builder of Uruk
Lugalbanda	1,200	Designated as a god
Dumuzi	100	Designated as a god (later known in Babyon as Tammuz)
Gilgamesh	126	A leading figure in the "Gilgamesh Epic," the flood narrative
Urnungal	30	
Utulkallama	15	
Laba[h. . .]ir	9	
Ennundara-anna	8	
Mes(?)khe	36	
Melamanna	6	
Lugalkitum	36	

The most relevant names in comparison to the longevity of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are the two most problematic, namely, Dumuzi and Gilgamesh, both of whom are sometimes (as here) labeled as demi-gods or at least not "normal" human beings. Dumuzi ("son of life") was the hero of the Sumerian epic "The Descent of Inanna" which was better known in the Babylonian version as "The Descent of Ishtar."<sup>23</sup> In both cases, Dumuzi/Tammuz was in the netherworld and was rescued by the goddess Inanna/Ishtar. Gilgamesh, of course, was the seeker of the secret of immortality who found the answer in Ziusudra/Utnapishtim (=biblical Noah), the survivor of the Great Flood.<sup>24</sup> Whether Dumuzi and Gilgamesh were human or divine does not

<sup>22</sup>Thus CAD I/2, pp. 110-11, 998.

<sup>23</sup>For these epics, see ANET, 52-57, 106-09. See also COS 1:381-84.

<sup>24</sup>ANET, "The Epic of Gilgamesh," Tablet XI, 93-97; COS 1:458-60. Especially

affect the argument being made here regarding the lengths of their tenure.<sup>25</sup>

If the ages of the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob best fit the reigning periods of this part of the Sumerian King List, then they must be dated as early as 2700 BC, 550 years before Abraham's birth according to the Old Testament evidence. This, of course, renders moot the whole project of Old Testament chronology.<sup>26</sup>

### Conclusions

Of all the options available to students of the Old Testament narratives who take them seriously as the Word of God—revealed, inspired, and inerrant—the one elaborated in this essay is proposed as the most acceptable, the one that best comports with the literary, historical, hermeneutical, and theological evidence of the text. That is, the narratives of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are true and literal accounts of their lives and times and the figures employed relative to their life-spans should likewise be taken at face value.

The arguments for this position are as follows:

1. No text or version evidence exists for any reading of the age figures but that of the Masoretic Text.
2. Neither the Old Testament nor the New provides any other figures or any attempt to argue for a symbolic or numerical interpretation (Rom 4:19). Abraham and Sarah are viewed as miracle parents because of their ability to bear a son (Acts 7:5; Heb 11:11).
3. 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. First of all, factoring or reconfiguring the numbers to fit a given scheme is a classic, unnecessary, and wrong-headed example of *petitio princeps*. For instance, on what grounds can a serious scholar find in the figure 480, which speaks of the period between the exodus and Solomon's laying of the Temple foundations (1 Kgs 6:1), a multiple of 40x12 in which 40 really means 25, a more realistic length of a generation? Why should 12 also not be broken down, perhaps as 2x6 or 3x4? Or in the case of the patriarchs one might consider the formula mentioned earlier: 175 for Abraham works

significant is the edition by Alexander Heidel, *The Gilgamesh Epic and Old Testament Parallels* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1965).

<sup>25</sup>No doubt remains as to the historical identity of Gilgamesh. See CAH I/2, 211. For abundant attestation to his historicity, see Jacobsen, *The Sumerian King List*, 88-89, n. 128.

<sup>26</sup>The reason for this is that all subsequent events of Old Testament history must be moved back accordingly if the chronological data there are to be taken seriously at all. Thus, for example, the Egyptian sojourn would take place ca. 2426-1996, the conquest of Canaan by Joshua in 1956, and the reign of David from 1556 to 1516. No one is prepared to undertake this kind of historical revisionism.

out to  $5 \times 5 \times 7$ , 180 for Isaac is perhaps  $6 \times 6 \times 5$ , and Jacob's 147 is  $7 \times 7 \times 3$ . Having found this structure, the question is, so what? What does this say about the actual ages and chronologies of the biblical characters?

4. The figures given for the tenures of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob are problematic only in the sense they do not conform to modern expectations and realities of lifespans nor do they seem to match those of the various individuals in ancient Near Eastern texts contemporary with the patriarchs that have been examined. Interestingly enough, the ages of non-Hebrews or non-Israelites are rarely given in the Old Testament, thus making inner-biblical comparisons impossible. Nonetheless, clues do exist here and there that suggest something about the ages of patriarchal persons that give others pause. The following examples may be indicative of this.
  - In Gen 12:11 Abraham calls his aged wife Sarah a “pretty woman” (אִשָּׁה יְפֹת־מַרְאֵה), an evaluation repeated of Isaac's wife Rebekah when he was nearly 80 years old and she surely not much less (Gen 26:7). It is inconceivable that either Pharaoh or Abimelech would be attracted to Sarah if her appearance were that of an old woman. Very likely, Abraham and Sarah aged more gradually than normal so that an 80-year old, for example, might appear to be no more than 40.
  - When Abraham was told by Yahweh that he would sire a son at 100 years of age by Sarah who was then 90, he was astounded at the thought and could only laugh at the very idea (Gen 17:17) as did Sarah when she heard the news later (Gen 18:12). Their reaction was understandable: They were both well beyond the years when they could expect to bear a child (Gen 18:11-12). The narrator observes that “Abraham and Sarah were already old and well advanced in years, and Sarah was past the years of childbearing. So Sarah laughed to herself as she thought, ‘After I am worn out<sup>27</sup> and my master is old, will I now have this pleasure?’” The reaction speaks for itself. Both are indeed very old, well past the time to have offspring.
  - Sarah was 76 when Ishmael was born (Gen 16:16; cf. 17:17) and several years more than that when Abraham dealt with the Philistines and his wife again became a sexual attraction (Gen 20:2).
  - Finally, at 90 years of age, Sarah bore Isaac (Gen 21:1-5). All this was absolutely unexpected and remarkable, suggesting

<sup>27</sup>The term here (בָּלֵתָ) means fundamentally “non-existent” (HALOT, 136). Here Sarah is saying that she may as well be dead as to expect to conceive at her age. And she adds that she no longer has a sex drive (הָיָה). Cf. HALOT, 793.

that their great age at the time of child birth was nothing short of miraculous, well out of keeping with the norm.

- The final example is Pharaoh's interrogation of Jacob when the latter appeared in the royal palace (Gen 47:7-9). The king has put two and two together by then and seems amazed that Jacob could be as old as he thought he must be given his lines of progeny. "How old are you?" he brazenly inquired. "The years of my pilgrimage are a hundred and thirty. My years have been few and difficult, and they do not equal the years of the pilgrimage of my fathers." However, he lived for 17 more years, dying at 147 (Gen 47:28). To think of himself as young at 130 is possible only if his ancestors lived much longer, which was, in fact, the case.
- Comparisons of the various passages in Genesis to which reference has been made leads to the ambivalence of "real age" and "apparent age." The narratives imply that Sarah must have looked young and sexually attractive, but in fact she was too old to bear children.

The conclusion is that in instances where age is a factor, the narrator and characters in the stories seem puzzled at the longevity of the patriarchs as compared to what was normal to them. Only if the ages are to be taken at face value can one account for these reactions of amazement and disbelief. But the question yet remains, why would God grant such long lives to the founders of the nation? A reasonable and theologically sound and sensible answer, we propose, is precisely the fact that they were the founders of the chosen people yet to come, and they were allowed to display in concrete form what the Lord meant when he promised the nation that it too would enjoy length of days and prosperity unlike any of the other peoples of the earth would could ever know apart from him. This promise is embedded in the Abrahamic Covenant (Gen 12:2; 13:15; 17:8; Exod 20:12; Deut 4:40; Jer 35:7) but it pertained also to individual lives. Faithfulness to Yahweh would result in the kind of longevity enjoyed by the fathers of the nation (Deut 6:2; 11:9; 17:20; 22:7; 30:20; Psa 91:16; 21:4; 102:27; Prov 4:10; 9:11; 10:27; Zech 8:4).

Speaking of the millennial age yet to come, Isaiah predicted that "Never again will there be in it [the new Jerusalem] an infant who lives but a few days, or an old man who does not live out his years; he who dies at a hundred will be thought a mere youth; he who fails to reach a hundred will be considered accursed" (Isa 65:20). Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob foreshadowed what will be the norm when the debilitating and aging effects of sin and the Fall are forever eradicated. Even so, come Lord Jesus.