FAQ

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Genesis 5, 11 Genealogies

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I have heard that there is some kind of controversy concerning the genealogical lists of Genesis 5 and 11. Can you explain this?

Whether one realizes it or not, the genealogical lists of the anti-diluvians of Genesis 5, and the post-diluvians of Genesis 11, are two of the most debated chapters in the entire Bible. People engaged in Biblical Studies cannot often agree on who these people were and what the numbers of their ages represent. The Rabbinic tradition is largely convinced that each list simply represents a line of precisely ten people who lived from Adam to Noah, and precisely ten people who lived from Noah to Abraham (m.*Avot* 5:2). Advocates of either a 6,000 year chronology for human history, or even 6,000 year old universe, go a step further and add up the numbers provided in Genesis 5 and 11, believing that these lists strongly support their case. But those wishing to examine the genealogical lists from an Ancient Near Eastern perspective have often opposed this.

First to be considered is the strong likelihood of Genesis 5 and 11 having employed a process known as **telescoping**. While we would expect a precise correlation between fathers, sons, grandsons, great-grandsons, etc., today in the Twenty-First Century, genealogies seen throughout Scripture are often given to make an important point with the people that are listed, **and may not be as exact as the modern person would want them to be.** Our modern expectations regarding genealogy are much different from what is seen in the Tanach. It is common in the Tanach to see telescoped genealogies that purposefully *skip generations* in order for a Biblical author to make an important theological point, or to draw one's attention to the people actually listed (i.e., the genealogy of Ezra the Priest: 1 Chronicles 6:3-15 compared to Ezra 7:1-15, the latter excludes six people).

Both the genealogies of Genesis 5 from Adam to Noah, and of Genesis 11 from Noah to Abraham, list "ten" generations. K.A. Kitchen describes, "there is…symmetry of ten generations before the Flood and ten generations after the Flood. With this, one may compare the three series of fourteen generations in Matthew's genealogy of Christ…which is *known* to be selective, and not wholly continuous."[1] The common formula A begot B need not always imply direct parenthood, as it could indicate the genealogical link between a great-great-great grandfather and a great-great-great grandson, or even some more separated link. Yeshua the Messiah as the Son of David is the Son of David because He is David's *distant* descendant, not his immediate descendant, and there is definite telescoping in His genealogies seen in Matthew 1 and Luke 3.

Jewish scholar Nahum M. Sarna concurs, "There is reason to believe that the ten-generation pattern for genealogies was favored by Western Semites in general and that the convention left its mark on the historiography of Israel."[2] Thus, the number "ten" in the Ancient Near East brought with it an aura of distinction (perhaps royal distinction), designed in Genesis

[1] K.A. Kitchen, *Ancient Orient and Old Testament* (Madison, WI: InterVarsity, 1966), 37.

[2] Nahum M. Sarna, *JPS Torah Commentary: Genesis* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 40.

5 and 11 to give some "high points" of individuals who lived between Adam and Noah, and then Noah and Abraham—but by no means are all of the generations of people between Adam and Noah, and then Noah and Abraham, recorded on these lists.

It is not uncommon at all in certain circles, largely uninformed from ANE data, to see people actually add up the numbers of the Genesis 5 and 11 genealogies. This includes a great deal of today's Messianic community. Walter C. Kasier, though, issues an important warning:

"[D]o not add up the years of these patriarchs in Genesis 5 and 11 and expect to come up with the Bible's date for the birth of the human race. The reason for this warning is clear: the Bible never adds up these numbers…[I]n Genesis 5 and 11 the writer does not employ his numbers for this purpose; neither should we."[3]

Kitchen likewise says, "one cannot use these genealogies to fix the date of the Flood or of earliest Man."[4]

Even if one decides to add up the numbers of Genesis 5 and 11, trying to determine a chronology for human history, what numbers are to be added up? When examining the witnesses of the Hebrew Masoretic Text (MT), Greek Septuagint (LXX), and Samaritan Pentateuch—there is variance among the numbers that appear. R.K. Harrison summarizes the differences in three distinct charts, from his *Introduction to the Old Testament*:[5]

TABLE 1: EARLY PATRIARCHAL GENEALOGIES

Name	*Age at birth of successor*			*Balance of life*			*Total years*		
	MT	LXX	Sam. P.	MT	LXX	Sam. P.	MT	LXX	Sam. P.
Adam	130	230	130	800	700	800	930	930	930
Seth	105	205	105	807	707	807	912	912	912
Enosh	90	190	90	815	715	815	905	905	905
Kenan	70	170	70	840	740	840	910	910	910
Mahalalel	65	165	65	830	730	830	895	895	895
Jared	162	162	62	800	800	785	962	962	847
Enoch	65	165	65	300	200	300	365	365	365
Methuselah	187	167	67	782	802	653	868	969	720
Lamech	182	188	53	595	565	600	777	753	653
Noah	500	500	500	450	450	450	950	950	950
Shem	100	100	100	500	500	500			600
Arpachshad	35	135	135	403	430	303			438
Kainan		130			330				
Shelah	30	130	130	403	330	303			433
Eber	34	134	134	430	370	270			404
Peleg	30	130	130	209	209	109			239
Reu	32	132	132	207	207	107			239
Serug	30	130	130	200	200	100			230
Nahor	29	79	79	119	129	69			148
Terah	70	70	70				205	205	145

It is obvious that there are differences between the Genesis 5 and 11 numbers as seen in the MT, LXX, and the Sam. P. Adding up the numbers is by no means something easy when these variants are considered.

Many continue to appeal to the work of Seventeenth Century Archbishop James Ussher, who determined that the Earth was actually created in 4004 B.C.E. Yet as Harrison aptly notes, "The system devised by Usher depended inferentially upon the supposition that the Old Testament genealogies did not omit any names, and that the periods of time mentioned in the text were consecutive, assumptions that have been proved to be entirely gratuitous."[6] The Rabbinic tradition has often made the similar mistake. Now armed with the proper ANE background,[7] we should not assume that the genealogical lists of Genesis 5 and 11 intend to give us a chronology of early man.

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[3] Walter C. Kaiser, Peter H. Davids, F.F. Bruce, and Manfred T. Branch, *Hard Sayings of the Bible* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996), 103.

[4] Kitchen, *Ancient Orient and Old Testament*, 39.

[5] R.K. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969), 150.

[6] Ibid., 148.

[7] Cf. the Sumerian Kings list in Ibid., pp 150-151; Duane A. Garrett, ed., et. al., *NIV Archaeological Study Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 12.

What the Genesis 5 and 11 genealogies do give us is a snapshot of some of the people who lived before, and then after, the Flood. It indicates that these people lived a very long time, and they were so important that their names appear in the Biblical text. They were *real people* and not figments of someone's imagination—but their ages are not given to us to try to determine when Adam was created or to fix the date of the Flood. The lists of Genesis 5 and 11 are also **not given to us to try to calculate the day of Yeshua's Second Coming.** The Genesis 5 and 11 genealogies simply give a testament to the consistency of God's command "Be fruitful and multiply" (Genesis 1:28). And we are reminded once again, the Biblical text itself makes no attempt to calculate the sum of their ages, whatever those ages may actually be.

(For a further discussion of some related issues, consult the FAQ entries "**6,000 Year Teaching**" and "**Creationism**.")