

Genesis: Chronology of the Patriarchal Period

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Abstract

Dr. Robert Vannoy discusses the chronology and historicity of the patriarchal period, examining how archaeological discoveries support the general reliability of the biblical narratives. He outlines the biblical data used to calculate the dates of the patriarchs, working backward from Solomon's Temple using key texts like 1 Kings 6:1 and Exodus 12:40. Vannoy addresses major chronological difficulties, specifically the debate between the early (1446 B.C.) and late (1260 B.C.) dates of the Exodus, and the textual divergence between the Masoretic Text and the Septuagint regarding the length of the Egyptian sojourn. Ultimately, he evaluates the evidence for both a 430-year and a 215-year sojourn in Egypt, focusing on factors like genealogies, semantic definitions of 'generation' (d'or), and the feasibility of Hebrew population growth.

Outline

I. Authenticity of the Patriarchal Accounts

A. Archaeological contributions to patriarchal history

1. Increased modern tendency to accept narratives as historical compared to fifty years ago
2. Authenticity of ancient nomenclature: fits the specific early period precisely and is of a type that could not be invented by later writers
3. Methodological limitations of archaeology: supports general historicity but cannot prove every specific narrative detail

II. Chronology of the Patriarchs

A. Overview of varying scholarly views

1. Chronology remains a moot point with Abraham's birth dating from the 21st to the 15th century B.C.
2. Samuel J. Schultz's chronological shift: previously favored early 19th century B.C., but third edition advocates for 2091 B.C.

B. The Biblical Data

1. Methodology for establishing patriarchal chronology
 - a. Must work backward from the kingdom period

b. Linking the kingdom period with synchronized Assyrian or Egyptian chronology to establish fixed points

c. Standard fixed point: Fourth year of Solomon's reign is dated to 966 B.C.

2. Key biblical passages and time anchors:

a. 1 Kings 6:1 – Solomon's Temple was begun 480 years after the Exodus (fixes Exodus to 1446 B.C.)

b. Exodus 12:40 – Sojourn of Israel in Egypt lasted 430 years (fixes Jacob's entry into Egypt to 1876 B.C.)

c. Genesis 47:9 – Jacob was 130 years old when he went down to Egypt and stood before Pharaoh

d. Genesis 25:26 – Isaac was 60 years old when Esau and Jacob were born

e. Genesis 21:5 – Abraham was 100 years old when Isaac was born

f. Genesis 12:4 – Abraham departed from Haran at age 75 (25 years prior to the birth of Isaac)

3. Cumulative chronological calculations:

a. Total of 1,200 years between Abraham's birth and the fourth year of Solomon's reign (fixes Abraham's birth to 2166 B.C.)

b. Abraham's departure from Haran (beginning of patriarchal period in Canaan) dated to 2091 B.C.

c. Duration of the patriarchs' stay in Canaan is 215 years (25 years of Abraham, 60 years of Isaac, 130 years of Jacob)

d. Summary timeline: Canaan sojourn (2091–1876 B.C.), Egypt sojourn (1876–1446 B.C.)

C. The Difficulties

1. Ancient chronological keeping and recording methods:

a. Uncertainty regarding original methodology for keeping records

b. Use of round numbers or schematics (e.g., repeating periods of 40, 20, or 80 years in the Book of Judges)

c. Ancient systems of years, co-regencies, and reigns differ significantly from modern systems

2. Specific difficulty 1: The date of the Exodus

a. Tension between the early date (1446 B.C.) and late date (1260 B.C.) views

b. Late date view treats the 480 years in 1 Kings 6:1 as a schematic representation of 12 generations of 40 years each

c. Biblical silence regarding the specific name of the Pharaoh of oppression complicates synchronization

3. Specific difficulty 2: Textual variation in Exodus 12:40

a. Masoretic Text (MT): Sojourn in Egypt was 430 years

- b. Septuagint (LXX): Sojourn in Egypt and Canaan was 430 years
- c. Septuagint reading implies only a 215-year sojourn in Egypt (after subtracting 215 years in Canaan)

4. Evidence and arguments for a 430-year Egyptian sojourn (Masoretic Text):

- a. Textual authority: Masoretic Text represents the primary Hebrew text, generally preferred over the Septuagint
- b. Genesis 15:13 prophecy: God foretells that Abraham's descendants will be sojourners and afflicted for 400 years (reiterated in Acts 7:6-7)
- c. Meaning of 'generation' (Hebrew: d'or) in Genesis 15:16:
 - i. The four d'or correspond to the 400 years predicted in Genesis 15:13
 - ii. Semantic evidence from Ugaritic and early Assyrian sources shows that d'or can denote a cycle of time of 80 years or more, rather than a modern 25-year generation
- d. Demographic population growth:
 - i. Bible reports 600,000 fighting men over age 20, extrapolating to a total population of 2 to 3 million
 - ii. Plausibility of growth: A population increase from Jacob's household (82 individuals, or up to 2,000 including servants) to 2 million is highly possible over 430 years but mathematically virtually impossible over 215 years
 - iii. Franz Delitzsch's demographic model: Based on 1 Chronicles 7:20 (10-11 generations between Ephraim and Joshua), a 430-year sojourn accommodates the necessary birth and death rates
- e. Interpretation of census numbers in Numbers 1: Potential text-critical modifications to the absolute total still require the longer 430-year period

5. Evidence and arguments for a 215-year Egyptian sojourn (Septuagint):

- a. Galatians 3:17: Paul states that the Law was introduced 430 years after the covenant was established with Abraham
 - i. Implies that the entire duration from the Abrahamic covenant to the Exodus (Canaan sojourn + Egypt sojourn) was 430 years
 - ii. Suggests Paul followed the Septuagint text
- b. New Scofield Bible note at Exodus 12:41: Proposes the 430 years began with Abraham's first descent into Egypt
- c. Response from proponents of the 430-year view:
 - i. The Abrahamic covenant was repeatedly renewed with Isaac and Jacob
 - ii. Reaffirmation occurred in Genesis 35:9-15 (at Padan Aram) and Genesis 46:3 (right before Jacob went down to Egypt)
 - iii. The 430 years in Galatians could calculate from Jacob's descent, using this final reaffirmation of the covenant