

# THE AGES OF THE PATRIARCHS/MATRIARCHS: A PRELIMINARY STUDY

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Where the Patriarchs and Matriarchs are concerned in Genesis, both at significant points in their lives and at the time of their deaths, the specific age credited to each appears to be exaggerated. Abraham leaving Haran for what will be the Promised Land at the age of 75 (Gen. 12:4), accompanied by Sarah at 65, may just be possible, but seems unlikely. Abraham siring a child at 86 and again, later, at 100 (Gen. 16:16; 21:5), as well as Sarah giving birth at the age of 90 (Gen. 17:17), defy and belie the experience of ordinary mortals. Likewise, Abraham's reported death at 175 (Gen. 25:7); Sarah's at 127 (Gen. 23:1-2); Ishmael's at 137 (Gen. 25:17); Isaac's death at 180 (Gen. 35:28); Jacob's at 147 (Gen. 47:28); and Joseph's at 110 (Gen. 50:26) are more than extraordinary. While some of these remarkable ages are noted in the Bible as miraculous (such as Abraham at Sarah's old age when Isaac is conceived), most are recorded without comment. This article proposes an alternative way of calculating the ages of the Patriarchs and Matriarchs that recasts them into numbers more reflective of the common human experience.

The present study does not seek to address the extended lifespan of several figures in the antediluvian generations, for which there are already at least two competing explanations, one based on the "Metonic Cycle" and one based on the "sexagesimal system augmented by seven."<sup>1</sup> Likewise, this study does not consider why or when this particular system ended and another began. Furthermore, in terms of the schema proposed here, there may be other possible explanations or different reasons that would support this concept.

Stated briefly, the premise for making the ages of these biblical figures more congruent with natural expectations is that in early Israel, or early in the Torah experience, the time frame of what would later be calculated as a full year, a *shannah* with twelve separate months, *at least in terms of calculating*

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*people's ages*, was at one point seen as a double year made up of two six-month periods.<sup>2</sup> This would mean that the noun *shanah* had multiple definitions.<sup>3</sup> In some situations it meant a twelve-month period, in other situations it meant a six-month time frame. *Shanah* can mean "year" or else "repeat, do again" or "change." It is also connected to the words *sheni*, *shenayim* ("second", "two"). What we today refer to as a year was once composed of two periods, each called a *shanah*.

This proposed schema therefore suggests that when it came to people's ages, the word *shanah* meant a sixth-month period. Consequently, one's "years" were calculated at twice the rate they would be on later occasions in biblical history. According to this system, spring-summer constituted a single and full season/year while autumn-winter constituted a single and full season/year. In agrarian/agricultural thinking, planting-growing was one continuous and contiguous event, and harvesting-fallow time was likewise one continuous and contiguous event. The idea of a six month or "equinox year" was known in ancient Mesopotamia.<sup>4</sup>

This kind of either/or thinking regarding the two divisions of the twelve-month agricultural year (it was either the planting-growing season or the harvesting-fallow season) may be reflected in the competing claims for the month that was the start of the year. The Bible knows of two systems, one beginning in autumn (which continues to be reflected in the date of Rosh Ha-Shanah, the "new year" commencing in the autumn) and one that begins in the spring. Exodus suggests a festival calendar where the "turn of the year" is in the autumn (Ex. 34:18-24, and especially v. 22). At the same time, there is a tradition that the first month, certainly in terms of counting (first month, seventh month), is the spring month Nisan (Ex. 12:2, Lev. 23:4-44, see vss. 5, 23, 26, etc.; Num. 29:1,7, etc.) Further support for counting the year from the beginning of spring is found in Jeremiah (36:9, 22), where it is stated that the ninth month occurs in winter. Isaiah (29:1) states, *add a shanah [year] to a shanah until your holidays will be terminated*, implying that it would take two periods called a *shanah* to complete a full holiday cycle, a full year.<sup>5</sup>

A familiar example of such usage in terms of timekeeping is the word *yom*, which has multiple meanings. BDB lists "day" (as opposed to night); day as a division of time, such as a working day; a day's journey; the days of someone's life; a reference to a time, i.e., that of harvest, etc.<sup>6</sup> The same word

means a full day composed of both daytime and night, as well as the daylight portion only.

This duality, a kind of either/or criterion, replicated the world around the ancients. In terms of the time that they literally experienced, it was either daytime (*yom*) or nighttime (*laylah*). At the same moment, they lived with a kind of "both/and" phenomenon. It was the combination of that daytime (*yom*) or nighttime (*laylah*) that made up the other understanding of the word *yom*, i.e., a 24-hour day. The greater light dominated the day, the lesser light dominated the night (Gen. 1:16). These markers of light/darkness were the major boundaries, the primary divisions of a given day (*yom*). They were also divisions of the still wider definition of the word *yom* used as a 24-hour day.

It is fairly clear that at least in terms of the cultic practices, a complete day was made up of a period that began at eventide, went through the night into daylight hours, and ended with dusk the next afternoon. This is the plain sense of the criteria in Genesis 1 and the festival calendars in Exodus 23 (and 34), Leviticus 23, and Deuteronomy 16. On the other hand, there are a few biblical references where it appears from statements that people made in the nighttime hours that the next morning is a different day (I Sam. 19:11; 28:19).<sup>7</sup> Thus, the term *yom* was understood as both a full 24-hour period and as the daylight portion of a day.

There are other examples of this kind of either/or language in Genesis. Chapter 8 concludes with a series of words that are meant to highlight opposites, either it is this or it is that: *Seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, day and night* (Gen. 8:22). These words link up "seedtime/summer" and clearly refer to the season of planting-growing, just as "harvest/winter" refers to the season of harvesting-fallow time. Psalm 74:17 reflects a similar idea: *You set all the boundaries of the earth; summer and winter; You made them.*

Note also that when referring to events that will occur in a full year's time, the Bible uses the phrase *ka-et hayyah* (Gen. 18:10, 14), translated as "next year", implying that *shannah* would not have been a completely appropriate word to describe a full year.

Taking the either/or quality of these words and applying them to two major seasons within a given twelvemonth year, it is possible that they were

likewise applied to a person's age: one year per major season, two years within a twelvemonth period.

When halving stated ages for certain biblical figures, as reported in Genesis, their ages become credible. Abraham's departure from Mesopotamia would then take place in his late thirties, his age at siring children as 43 and 50; Sarah's "post-menopausal" delivery at 45, still noteworthy; and the respective deaths of Sarah in her mid-sixties and Abraham when in his mid-eighties. Applied to Moses, Aaron, and Miriam, this idea would have them start leading the people of Israel when they were in their forties and fifties, and dying at about 60 (Moses) or slightly older than that (Aaron and Miriam). Likewise, Joshua would die at 55. It might also apply to the time spent in the wilderness, making it a 20-year sojourn instead of 40 years; and given ancient life-expectancy, those 20 years would easily conform with the length of a generation.

This two-years-for-one-twelvemonth-period theory does not attempt to explain the ages of the antediluvians, nor does it address regnal years in Samuel-Kings-Chronicles, but it does offer a more reasonable explanation for the ages of the Patriarchs and Matriarchs, and possibly some other important leaders or events in succeeding generations.

#### NOTES

My thanks to Rabbi Dr. Raymond Zwerin for noting the connected meanings of *shannah* and *sheni/shenayim*, and to Rabbi Dr. Zvi Ron for suggesting additional sources.

1. Considering the ages of a number of the antediluvian lives, see the "Metonic Cycle" which is based on 19 years. "Methuselah, is said to have lived for 51 cycles of 19, or 969 years . . . Noah . . . lived 50 cycles or 950 years": W. Gunther Plaut, ed., David E. S. Stein, revising ed., *The Torah: A Modern Commentary Revised Edition* (New York: Union of Reform Judaism, 2005-2006) p. 42. See also pages 29-32, 166, 321. For the "sexagesimal system augmented by seven": Umberto Cassuto, *From Adam to Noah, Part One*, Israel Abrahams, trans. (Jerusalem: Hebrew University/Magnes Press, 1961) pp. 260-261; Brian Abrahamson, "The Life-Spans of the Antediluvian Patriarchs," *Menorah (Australian Journal of Jewish Studies)* 2.1 (1991), pp. 42-54.

2. Various theories suggesting an abbreviated year have been raised in the past, only to be rejected by traditional Bible exegetes, both Jewish and Christian. See Abrabanel, Genesis 5:3; David Zvi Hoffmann, *Sefer Bereshit* (Bnei Brak: Netzah, 1969) p. 123, note 14; Aryeh Kaplan, *Immortality, Resurrection, and the Age of the Universe: A Kabbalistic View* (Hoboken, NJ: Ktav/AJOS, 1993) p. 19; Gerald Walsh and Grace Monahan, trans., *The Fathers of the Church: St. Augustine, The City of God, Books VII-XVI* (New York: Catholic University of America Press, 1952) pp. 438-9. Their fundamental problem is that shortening the year goes against the

simple meaning of the word *shanah*, the meaning of which I address in this article. See also note 3 below.

3. It is well attested that some Hebrew words, though spelled exactly the same, have different meanings. To quote several examples: the term *elohim* is usually translated as "God" or "gods." On some occasions, an alternative proper translation is "judges," as in the legislation found in Exodus 21:6; 22:6-8. See Brown-Driver-Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, "elohim," p. 43; *Mekhilta, Nezikin* 15.38-40 (on Ex. 22:6-8): "I can therefore interpret it to mean only judges who can condemn"; *Mekhilta, Nezikin* 15.73-89, where the text speaks of three judges; Ibn Ezra on Ex. 21:6; Sforno on Ex. 22:8: "The cause of both parties shall come before the judges," *Sforno: Commentary on the Torah*, Raphael Pelcovitz, trans. (New York: Mesorah, 2001) p. 400. Likewise, the Hebrew word *elef* often means "a thousand", but on other occasions it means "contingent" or "group": G. E. Mendelhall, "The Census Lists of Numbers 1 and 26," *Journal of Biblical Literature*, 77 (1958) pp. 52-66; Martin Noth, *Numbers* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1968) p. 204; W. Gunther Plaut, ed., David E. S. Stein, revising ed., *The Torah: A Modern Commentary Revised Edition*, p. 912; Jacob Milgrom, *The JPS Torah Commentary – Numbers* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1990) p. 7.

4. Daniel Fleming, *Time at Emar: The Cultic Calendar and the Rituals from the Diviner's Archive* (Warsaw, Indiana: Eisenbrauns, 2000) p. 130; Mark Cohen, *The Cultic Calendars of the Ancient Near East* (Bethesda, Maryland: University Press of Maryland, 1993) p. 7.

5. See also Umberto Cassuto, *Biblical and Canaanite Literatures*, vol. 1 (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1972) p. 50. He notes a parallel structure to Isaiah 29:1 in Ugaritic poetry, where the term for "a period of time" is paralleled with the term *shanah*, indicating that *shanah* was not strictly defined as a full solar year.

6. Brown-Driver-Briggs, *Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, pp. 398-401.

7. "If there ever was an official, secular position regarding the inception of the day, the sources do not divulge it" (James VanderKam, "Calendars: Ancient Israelite and Early Jewish," *Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary*, 1.814).