

Genesis:

Hyperbole and History in the Flood, Lifespans, and Language of the Ancient World

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the Genesis flood narrative through the lenses of hyperbole, history, and theology, evaluating whether the flood was local or global in scope. Textual analysis of Genesis 6–9 highlights terms like “*all the earth*” (*kol ha'aretz*) and “*under heaven*” in their ancient Near Eastern contexts, emphasizing the use of hyperbolic language. Theological implications, including the covenant with Noah, the symbolism of human lifespans, and the reappearance of the Nephilim, are examined. Comparative insights from Mesopotamian texts, such as the *Epic of Gilgamesh* and the Sumerian King List, reveal shared motifs while underscoring Genesis’ unique theological stance. Scientific evidence, including geological findings and challenges to a global flood model, is critically assessed. This study integrates biblical, theological, and scientific perspectives, offering a nuanced interpretation that highlights Genesis’ theological relevance.

I. INTRODUCTION

The Genesis flood narrative, found in chapters 6 through 9 of the book of Genesis, remains one of the most enduring and debated accounts in biblical literature. Central to this narrative is the depiction of a catastrophic flood and its implications for humanity, divine judgment, and redemption. Over centuries, scholars and theologians have sought to determine whether the flood described in Genesis was global, encompassing all of creation, or local, affecting a specific region.¹ This question continues to hold theological, scientific, and cultural significance.

The challenges presented by a plain reading of the Genesis flood narrative, particularly concerning the reappearance of the Nephilim, have long been a source of theological and interpretive debate. Ancient traditions attempted to address these difficulties by suggesting mechanisms for the persistence of the Nephilim lineage post-flood. These efforts underscore the enduring struggle to reconcile textual claims with broader theological frameworks, particularly regarding divine justice and the preservation of humanity's purity.

For example, one of the Dead Sea Scrolls, the *Genesis Apocryphon* (1QapGen 1:1–5:27),² dramatizes this concern by recounting a scene where Noah's father, Lamech, confronts his wife, Bitenosh, about whether Noah's conception was the result of an illicit union with one of the Watchers. She vehemently denied the accusation, reminding

¹ Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, Word Biblical Commentary, vol. 1 (Waco, TX: Word Books, 1987), 154–156.

² Florentino García Martínez and Eibert J. C. Tigchelaar, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Study Edition (Translations)* (Leiden: Brill, 1997–1998), 29.

Lamech of the timing of their intimacy and the circumstances of the conception.³ This calmed his anger and alleviated his suspicions. The narrative suggests that even ancient Jewish interpreters grappled with the theological implications of angelic-human interbreeding, particularly its potential to corrupt the human lineage. Bitenosh's passionate denial in the text serves as a safeguard against the notion that Noah's bloodline—through which humanity would be preserved—was tainted by such unions.⁴

These ancient interpretations reveal a key theological concern: if the Nephilim, as offspring of the Watchers, had indeed persisted after the flood, this could imply a continued threat to the purity of humanity, including the lineage leading to Christ. Such concerns drive much of the historical debate surrounding the nature and origins of the Nephilim.⁵

This paper aligns with the approach advocated in my paper, *Contextual Reading vs. Plain Reading: An Apologetic Framework Rooted in Ancient Contexts and Prima Scriptura*,⁶ arguing for a contextual reading that prioritizes the cultural, literary, and theological dimensions of the text. Such a framework not only respects the text's ancient origins but also reinforces its relevance for contemporary faith.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Michael S. Heiser, *The Unseen Realm: Recovering the Supernatural Worldview of the Bible* (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press, 2015), 102–105.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ D. Gene Williams Jr., *Contextual Reading vs. Plain Reading: An Apologetic Framework Rooted in Ancient Contexts and Prima Scriptura*, accessed November 27, 2024, <https://triinitysem.academia.edu/GeneWilliamsJr>; <https://defendtheword.com/academic-papers.html>.

The methodology employed in this study prioritizes understanding the biblical text in its original context. As Craig Olson aptly notes, “*Proper biblical interpretation interprets the text as it was intended by the original author and understood by the original readers.*”⁷ This approach ensures that interpretations respect the theological intent and literary conventions of the ancient Near Eastern world, avoiding modern impositions that might distort the narrative’s meaning.⁸

This paper adopts a holistic methodology, integrating ancient literary analysis, theological reflection, and scientific inquiry to explore the Genesis flood narrative and its enduring implications. By examining these perspectives, it aims to provide a cohesive understanding of the flood’s scope and significance, emphasizing the theological truths conveyed through the narrative.⁹

II. THE BIBLICAL ACCOUNT

The Genesis flood narrative employs vivid and expansive language to describe the scope and impact of the event. Phrases such as “*all the earth*” (*kol ha’aretz*) and “*under heaven*” are often interpreted as signifying a global flood. However, a closer examination of similar phrases in other parts of the Old Testament suggests these terms are frequently used hyperbolically to emphasize the magnitude of an event within a localized or

⁷ Craig Olson, interview by Sean McDowell, “*Did the Patriarchs Live 900+ Years?*” *Sean McDowell Show*, YouTube video, 55:27, August 24, 2023, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ck4ZR9CsZn4>.

⁸ John H. Walton, *The Lost World of the Flood: Mythology, Theology, and the Deluge Debate* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2018), 43–48.

⁹ Tremper Longman III and John H. Walton, *The Lost World of Scripture: Ancient Literary Contexts for the Biblical Flood Narrative* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2013), 88–91.

culturally bounded context. For instance, Genesis 41:57¹⁰ describes a famine affecting “*all the earth*,” yet the passage clearly refers to the regions reliant on Egypt’s grain supply.

This pattern of hyperbolic language aligns with the ancient Near Eastern literary style, which often used expansive terminology to underscore significance rather than geographic or scientific precision. Understanding these terms in their cultural and literary context opens the door to interpreting the flood narrative as a localized event with universal theological implications.¹¹

Further textual tension arises within the narrative itself. Genesis 8:5 notes that Noah observed mountain tops as the floodwaters receded, yet earlier, Genesis 7:19–20 states that “*all the high mountains under the heavens were covered*.” This juxtaposition suggests that the language describing the floodwaters may be phenomenological, reflecting Noah’s limited perspective and experience, rather than providing a literal global description.

Similarly, Genesis 8:9 describes the dove’s return because “*the waters were still on the face of the whole earth*.” Here, “*whole earth*” could be understood as referring to Noah’s immediate environment rather than the entire planet, reinforcing the use of localized hyperbole within the narrative.

By addressing these textual features, the Genesis account invites readers to focus on the theological and moral lessons conveyed through the story, rather than its precise

¹⁰ *The Holy Bible: English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Bibles, 2016), Genesis 41:57.

¹¹ Tremper Longman III, *Genesis* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 146–48.

geographical scope. This emphasis preserves the narrative’s intent to highlight God’s justice, mercy, and the renewal of creation through the covenant with Noah.

III. THEOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS

Lifespans of Pre-Flood Figures

The extraordinary lifespans recorded in Genesis 5 and 11—such as Methuselah living 969 years, Adam 930 years, and Noah 950 years—have sparked significant debate among scholars. These numbers can be understood through three primary lenses: literal, symbolic, and cultural-historical interpretations.

Some view these lifespans as literal, reflecting a world closer to Eden and uncorrupted by sin. Proponents suggest that these figures experienced superior health and divine blessing, enabling them to live far longer than modern humans.¹² However, this view is challenged by the lack of archaeological evidence supporting lifespans beyond 120 years and by the declining lifespans post-flood, as recorded in Genesis 11.¹³

Others argue that the lifespans are symbolic, representing theological truths rather than historical realities. For instance, Methuselah’s extended life may symbolize God’s patience and long-suffering before the judgment of the flood.¹⁴ Craig Olson supports this view, stating, “*The Old Testament says it gives long life as evidence of God’s blessing on*

¹² John H. Walton, *Genesis: The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2001), 302–305.

¹³ Craig Olson, *How Old Was Father Abraham?: The Genesis Lifespans in Light of Archaeology* (Albuquerque, NM: Trowel Press, 2023), 67.

¹⁴ Tremper Longman III, *Genesis*, 139–142.

your life.”¹⁵ In this sense, the ages emphasize humanity’s early proximity to God, gradually declining as a result of sin’s pervasive influence.

Comparisons with the Sumerian King List reveal a shared tradition of attributing exaggerated lifespans to pre-flood figures. While the King List assigns reigns of tens of thousands of years to semi-divine rulers, Genesis stands apart in its theological focus on mortality and divine sovereignty.¹⁶ The repeated phrase “*and he died*” in Genesis 5 underscores humanity’s mortality, contrasting sharply with the glorification of rulers in Mesopotamian texts.

Even though ancient cultures, including the Israelites, maintained calendars, they were not particularly interested in tracking biological age. Age had little significance in daily life, as milestones such as marriage, work, and leadership roles were determined by observable maturity and capability rather than an exact number of years lived. A girl married when she was physically able to bear children, and a boy took on adult responsibilities when he demonstrated competence, regardless of his precise age.

Calendars, on the other hand, were used for essential communal purposes such as organizing agricultural cycles, tracking religious festivals, and coordinating societal activities. These functions required precision in timekeeping, but biological age was a secondary concern, relevant only insofar as it intersected with practical readiness and communal roles.

¹⁵ Olson, Craig. “*Did the Patriarchs Live 900+ Years?*” Interview by Sean McDowell. *Sean McDowell Show*. YouTube video, August 24, 2023. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ck4ZR9CsZn4>.

¹⁶ Andrew R. George, *The Epic of Gilgamesh: The Babylonian Epic Poem and Other Texts in Akkadian and Sumerian* (London: Penguin Classics, 2003), 79.

Numerical Patterns in Genealogies: A Theological Perspective

Further exploration reveals interesting numerical patterns in the genealogies. For instance, the structured timelines in Genesis, where ages from Adam to Moses add to 12,600 years,¹⁷ echo the apocalyptic sequences found in Revelation, such as the 12,600 days (Revelation 11:3; 12:6) and the symbolic 1,000 years of peace (Revelation 20:4–6). These periods emphasize divine judgment and restoration, creating a thematic bridge between the Flood narrative and the eschatological visions in Revelation. Such numerical parallels suggest an intentional design that links the themes of creation, judgment, and redemption throughout Scripture, underscoring the cyclical patterns of human rebellion, divine intervention, and ultimate renewal.

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To further illuminate the use of symbolic numbers, we can consider the meaning behind the age of Moses, which is stated as 120 years in Deuteronomy 34:7. Scholars

¹⁷ See Appendix A for a detailed list of ages from Adam to Moses, totaling 12,600 years, with a correlation to days referenced in Revelation 11:3 and 12:6.

have noted that the number 120 likely carries symbolic significance beyond a literal lifespan. Meir Bar-Ilan, for example, suggests that the number 120 denotes a sense of perfection, symbolizing the completeness of Moses' life and the perfection of his corporeal talents until his death. He explains that the number 12 denotes a complete cycle, representing the fullness of time, while the number 10 is associated with corporeal abilities, as each human has ten fingers. The number 120, thus, can be seen as a symbol of completeness and divine favor, echoing the broader theme of numerical symbolism that runs throughout Scripture. This further connects the patterns of numerical significance to theological and prophetic meanings found in the Bible, particularly in genealogies like those in Matthew and Revelation.

The biblical authors often used genealogies not merely for historical records but to convey theological truths. For instance, Matthew's genealogy of Jesus (Matthew 1:1–17) is structured into three sets of 14 generations, emphasizing Jesus' Davidic lineage and his fulfillment of messianic prophecy. The deliberate use of 14 corresponds to the numerical value of "*David*" in Hebrew (D=4, V=6, D=4), reinforcing Jesus' role as the promised King. For more details, refer to Appendix B for a detailed list of the generations found in Matthew 1:1–17.

However, Matthew's genealogy is telescoped, meaning it intentionally omits certain names to fit its symmetrical structure. Telescoping was a common practice in ancient genealogies, where authors could highlight theological or symbolic significance rather than provide exhaustive lists. This approach does not undermine the genealogical reliability but instead underscores the narrative's purpose—to present Jesus as the culmination of Israel's history and the fulfillment of God's covenantal promises.

When we compare the ages of the antediluvians, as detailed in Appendix C, there is a 99.4% probability that ages ending in 0, 1, 3, 5, 7, or 9 would not occur by chance alone. This statistical improbability strongly suggests that these ages are not coincidental, further supporting the argument that the lifespans of the antediluvians may carry symbolic significance rather than being strictly literal. This deliberate telescoping mirrors the numerical symbolism found in Genesis, where genealogies and ages reflect theological intent rather than simple chronology. The comparison of genealogical ages and timelines across the Masoretic Text (MT), Samaritan Pentateuch (SP), and Septuagint (LXX) underscores this point, demonstrating how differing numerical values in various textual traditions still maintain a unified theological message. Such patterns in both the Old and New Testaments highlight the interconnected themes of creation, judgment, and redemption, underscoring the unity of Scripture.

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¹⁸ Bar-Ilan, Meir. *When Being Numerate Used to Mean Something Else: The Case of Number Symbolism in the Hebrew Bible*. Academia.edu. Accessed November 28, 2024. https://www.academia.edu/23717555/When_Being_Numerate_Used_to_Mean_Something_Else_The_Case_of_Number_Symbolism_in_the_Hebrew_Bible.

of completeness and divine favor, echoing the broader theme of numerical symbolism that runs throughout Scripture. This further connects the patterns of numerical significance to theological and prophetic meanings found in the Bible, particularly in genealogies like those in Matthew and Revelation.

Numerical Symbolism in Ancient and Modern Contexts

The ancient Mesopotamians assigned numerical values to signs and names, imbuing them with deeper cultural and symbolic meaning. As Karen Rhea Nemet-Nejat notes, “*The Mesopotamians assigned a numerical value to each sign. Thus, every name had a corresponding numerical value.*”¹⁹ This practice illustrates how numbers functioned not only as tools for counting but also as conveyors of significance within their worldview.

Interestingly, this tradition of assigning symbolic meaning to numbers persists in modern times, albeit in different ways. For example, when someone describes another as a “10,” it conveys a sense of perfection or high regard. Similarly, “*Catch-22*,” popularized by Joseph Heller’s novel,²⁰ has become shorthand for an impossible situation, symbolizing frustration rather than a literal count. “24/7” implies constant availability or activity, using numbers to symbolize unending time rather than its precise meaning. Among Millennials and Gen Z, the use of “100” has become a popular way to express sincerity or seriousness, often accompanied by the “100” emoji to emphasize the sentiment. These parallels between ancient and modern use of numerical symbolism

¹⁹ Karen Rhea Nemet-Nejat, *Daily Life in Ancient Mesopotamia* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1998), 83.

²⁰ Joseph Heller, *Catch-22* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1961).

demonstrate the enduring human tendency to use numbers not just for precision but also for expressive and symbolic purposes.

Post-Flood Lifespans

Genesis 6:3 states, “*My Spirit shall not abide in man forever, for he is flesh: his days shall be 120 years.*” This verse has sparked significant debate regarding its meaning. Some interpret the 120 years as a limitation on human lifespans, reflecting humanity’s increasing separation from God. However, this view faces challenges, as several post-flood figures, including Noah (Genesis 9:29) and Abraham (Genesis 25:7), lived well beyond 120 years.

Another interpretation sees the 120 years as a countdown to the flood, emphasizing God’s patience and mercy in giving humanity time to repent before judgment (Genesis 6:5–7). This reading aligns with the immediate context of divine judgment and parallels other instances of God providing warnings before catastrophic events (e.g., Jonah and Nineveh, Jeremiah’s warnings to Judah).

While both interpretations offer theological insights, the latter better fits the narrative’s focus on human corruption and impending judgment. It also highlights God’s longsuffering nature, as echoed in 2 Peter 3:9: “*The Lord is patient... not wishing that any should perish, but that all should reach repentance.*”

These dual possibilities—representing both divine judgment and humanity’s mortality—reveal the depth of the Genesis narrative, inviting reflection on both the immediacy of God’s justice and the enduring consequences of human sin.

By integrating these perspectives, the genealogies in Genesis serve not as strict chronological records but as theological reflections on human mortality, divine justice, and the ongoing need for redemption.

IV. COMPARATIVE ANCIENT FLOOD NARRATIVES

The Sumerian King List and Exaggerated Reigns

The Sumerian King List offers a notable parallel to the genealogical records in Genesis, particularly in its pre-flood section, which attributes reigns of tens of thousands of years to early rulers. These exaggerated numbers served as symbolic honorifics, emphasizing the semi-divine status and legendary significance of these figures within Mesopotamian culture. As Craig Olson explains, *“These were symbolic numbers assigned to memorialize significant ancestors.”*²¹

In contrast, the Genesis genealogies present a distinct theological perspective. While lifespans such as Methuselah’s 969 years may appear hyperbolic, their purpose diverges sharply from Mesopotamian texts. The repeated phrase *“and he died”* in Genesis 5 highlights the inevitability of death and humanity’s mortality, underscoring a theological focus on divine sovereignty and the consequences of sin.²² This contrast reflects Genesis’ intent to critique and subvert the cultural narratives of its time, presenting a Yahweh-centered worldview instead of glorifying semi-divine rulers.

²¹ Olson, Craig. *“Did the Patriarchs Live 900+ Years?”* Interview by Sean McDowell. *Sean McDowell Show*. YouTube video, August 24, 2023. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ck4ZR9CsZn4>.

²² Tremper Longman III, *Genesis*, 133.

Flood Narratives in Mesopotamia

Similarities between Genesis and Mesopotamian flood narratives, such as those found in the *Epic of Gilgamesh* and the *Atrahasis Epic*, suggest a shared cultural milieu. These texts describe a catastrophic flood sent by the gods, often as a response to humanity's actions. However, the differences are striking and theologically significant.

Nature of the Divine: Mesopotamian texts depict deities as capricious and self-serving, bringing the flood out of frustration or annoyance.²³ In Genesis, Yahweh's actions are purposeful and moral, reflecting divine justice in response to widespread human wickedness (Genesis 6:5–7).

Role of Humanity: While Mesopotamian narratives glorify the flood survivor as a heroic figure, Genesis portrays Noah as righteous and obedient, chosen by God not for heroism but for his faithfulness.²⁴ This shift emphasizes God's initiative in providing salvation and underscores the covenantal relationship between Yahweh and humanity.

Symbolic Numbers and Structure: Mesopotamian texts often feature symbolic numbers in describing the flood's duration and aftermath. For example, the flood in *Gilgamesh* lasts seven days, reflecting sacred numerical symbolism. Similarly, Genesis incorporates symbolic timeframes (e.g., 40 days and nights) to convey theological truths.²⁵

²³ Andrew R. George, *The Epic of Gilgamesh* 48.

²⁴ John H. Walton, *Genesis*, 295.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 302.

The Biblical Account and Cross-Cultural Flood Narratives

The Genesis flood narrative employs vivid and expansive language to describe the scope and impact of the event. Phrases such as “*all the earth*” (kol ha’arets) and “*under heaven*” are often interpreted as signifying a global flood. However, similar flood accounts from other cultures reveal that such language was often employed to emphasize theological or cultural significance rather than literal geographic scope.

Notably, ancient Chinese traditions contain references to a flood narrative. For instance, the early dynastic mythologies of China describe catastrophic floods that required divine intervention and human ingenuity to mitigate. The tale of Yu the Great, who is credited with controlling the floodwaters, parallels the role of Noah as a divinely chosen figure tasked with preserving life. According to *Records of the Grand Historian* by Sima Qian, the story of Yu emphasizes themes of moral order and the divine mandate for humanity to restore balance following judgment by water. This motif resonates with the theological thrust of Genesis, where Noah’s obedience is pivotal in preserving creation and initiating a covenant with God.²⁶

Chinese concepts like Shang Di (the Supreme God) or Tian (Heaven) offer intriguing cross-cultural parallels. Herrlee G. Creel’s work highlights how these ideas, particularly Shang Di’s moral authority, reflect ancient beliefs about divine sovereignty over creation and humanity.²⁷ Such cross-cultural accounts suggest that ancient peoples perceived a shared human experience of catastrophic floods, which they attributed to

²⁶ Sima Qian, *Records of the Grand Historian*, vol. 28, book 6, 624.

²⁷ Herrlee G. Creel, *The Origins of Statecraft in China, Volume One: The Western Chou Empire* (University of Chicago Press, 1970), 193.

divine purposes. This recognition broadens our understanding of the flood narrative as part of a larger theological dialogue in the ancient world, rather than an isolated account.

Genesis as Cultural Critique

While the Genesis flood narrative adopts familiar literary forms, it uses these motifs to critique and reinterpret the cultural narratives of its time. By emphasizing themes of divine justice, covenant, and humanity's moral accountability, Genesis reframes the flood as a theological story rather than a mythological one. Its distinct Yahweh-centered worldview sets it apart from Mesopotamian accounts, which focus on divine rivalry and human glorification.

V. SCIENTIFIC CONSIDERATIONS

Evidence for a Local Flood

The Genesis flood narrative has prompted ongoing dialogue between biblical scholarship and modern science. Key questions include whether the flood was global or local in scope, the feasibility of Noah's ark accommodating all biodiversity, and how the narrative interacts with the ancient Near Eastern context.

Geological Evidence: Local vs. Global Floods

Geological studies support the possibility of significant regional floods in the ancient Near East, particularly in Mesopotamia, where the Tigris and Euphrates rivers frequently overflowed. Evidence of sedimentary layers and flood deposits from cities like Ur suggest catastrophic flooding events during the third millennium BC.²⁸ However,

²⁸ Leonard Woolley, *Excavations at Ur* (London: British Museum, 1934), 27–29.

these findings do not support the occurrence of a global flood, as described in a literalist reading of Genesis.²⁹

In contrast, a global flood would leave unmistakable geological markers, such as sedimentary layers distributed consistently across continents, which have not been observed. This aligns with the accommodationist framework, which allows the flood narrative to be interpreted within its localized historical and cultural context.³⁰

Archaeological and Biological Feasibility

Biodiversity on the Ark:

The narrative's claim that Noah's ark housed representatives of all animal species poses logistical and biological challenges. Modern biodiversity studies estimate the existence of millions of terrestrial species, raising questions about the feasibility of such an endeavor, even with miraculous intervention.³¹ Regional floods, however, could necessitate the preservation of only local fauna, aligning more closely with the archaeological and biological evidence.

Lifespans Exceeding 120 Years:

Archaeological data from ancient Mesopotamia and Canaan consistently point to shorter lifespans, with average life expectancy around 30–40 years. Even among elites, individuals rarely lived beyond 70 years.³² The lack of skeletal remains or inscriptions

²⁹ Andrew Snelling, *Earth's Catastrophic Past* (Dallas, TX: Institute for Creation Research, 2009), 42.

³⁰ Tremper Longman III, *Genesis*, 159–162.

³¹ John H. Walton, *Genesis*, 297–301.

³² Craig Olson, *How Old Was Father Abraham*, 85.

attesting to significantly longer lifespans further challenges literal interpretations of the Genesis genealogies.

Interaction with Ancient Near Eastern Contexts

The Genesis flood narrative shares similarities with other ancient Near Eastern flood accounts, such as the *Epic of Gilgamesh* and the *Atrahasis Epic*, which also describe catastrophic floods. These texts reflect localized events that were mythologized within their respective cultures.³³ Genesis, however, adapts these motifs to convey theological truths, presenting the flood as an act of divine justice and covenantal renewal. While these parallels do not diminish the historical plausibility of a regional flood, they highlight the theological emphasis of the biblical narrative.

Modern science, therefore, interacts with Genesis in a way that underscores the cultural and theological framework of the text. Rather than expecting empirical precision, the narrative invites readers to reflect on its spiritual and moral implications within its historical context.

IV. CHALLENGES OF CONCORDISM

The interpretation of Genesis often confronts the tension between concordism and accommodation, two frameworks for reconciling biblical narratives with historical and scientific evidence. Concordism assumes that the Bible's descriptions align with observable historical and scientific realities when properly understood. Accommodation, by contrast, holds that God communicated through the cultural and intellectual

³³ Andrew R. George, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, 61-63.

frameworks of the original audience, allowing for symbolic and phenomenological language to convey theological truths.

Concordism vs. Accommodation

One area where accommodation provides clarity is in the use of symbolic numbers and hyperbolic language within genealogies and flood narratives. Craig Olson observes, “*Numbers could be used differently at different times by different cultures, and proper biblical interpretation interprets the text as it was intended by the original author.*”³⁴ This perspective supports the view that the genealogies in Genesis were not intended as precise historical records but as symbolic tools for memorializing significant ancestors.³⁵

For example, the patriarchal lifespans in Genesis 5 and 11—such as Methuselah’s 969 years—fit patterns of hyperbolic exaggeration common in ancient Near Eastern texts. These numbers align with cultural conventions, emphasizing honor and theological themes rather than chronological precision. By understanding these elements through an accommodationist lens, modern readers can respect the text’s theological intent without requiring it to conform to modern scientific frameworks.

Challenges in Reconciling Scientific Evidence

The concordist approach faces significant challenges in reconciling Genesis with scientific evidence. For example:

³⁴ Olson, Craig. “*Did the Patriarchs Live 900+ Years?*” Interview by Sean McDowell. *Sean McDowell Show*. YouTube video, August 24, 2023. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ck4ZR9CsZn4>.

³⁵ Tremper Longman III, *Genesis*, 148.

- **Lack of Archaeological Evidence for Long Lifespans:**

Archaeological discoveries from regions mentioned in Genesis, such as Mesopotamia and Canaan, have not uncovered skeletal remains or artifacts supporting lifespans exceeding 120 years.³⁶ As Olson notes, “*We would have expected to find at least some skeletons with evidence of living for hundreds of years, and we just haven’t—not a single one.*”³⁷

- **Phenomenological Language:**

The flood narrative’s descriptions, such as “*all the high mountains under the heavens were covered*” (Genesis 7:19–20), are better understood as phenomenological—describing events as perceived by the human observer, Noah—rather than literal geographic statements. This aligns with an accommodationist view, which allows for non-literal language to convey theological truths.

- **Modern Scientific Consensus:**

Geological evidence supports the occurrence of significant regional floods in the ancient Near East but does not corroborate the idea of a global flood. The accommodationist framework permits the flood narrative to be interpreted as a theological account of divine judgment and salvation rather than a scientifically verifiable global event.³⁸

³⁶ John H. Walton, *Genesis*, 295–97.

³⁷ Craig Olson, *How Old Was Father Abraham*, 52.

³⁸ Andrew R. George, *The Epic of Gilgamesh*, 33.

Implications for Interpretation

An accommodationist approach enables readers to engage with Genesis as a theological text that communicates profound truths about God, humanity, and creation. By acknowledging the symbolic and hyperbolic nature of its language, this framework preserves the integrity of Scripture while engaging critically with historical and scientific findings. Concordism, though valuable in certain contexts, often imposes modern expectations of scientific precision on ancient texts, leading to unnecessary conflicts between faith and reason.

VI. ADDRESSING COMMON QUESTIONS

How Did the Nephilim Reappear After the Flood?

Genesis 6:4 states that the Nephilim were present “*on the earth in those days, and also afterward.*” This raises questions about how they reappeared after the flood, given that the narrative suggests the flood eradicated all life outside Noah’s ark. One possibility is that the Nephilim were descendants of beings who survived a localized flood by remaining outside its geographical reach. Alternatively, if the flood was global, their reappearance could be explained by a subsequent incursion of the “*sons of God*” intermingling with human women, as described earlier in Genesis 6:1–4.³⁹ Both views reflect theological challenges about the persistence of evil and rebellion in post-flood humanity.⁴⁰

³⁹ Michael S. Heiser, *The Unseen Realm*, 123.

⁴⁰ Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 1–15*, 155–157.

How Does Each Model Handle Hyperbolic Language?

The use of hyperbolic language in the flood narrative significantly impacts the interpretation of its scope. In a global model, terms like “*all the earth*” (*kol ha’arets*) and “*under heaven*” are taken literally, reflecting a universal catastrophe. However, this raises difficulties when comparing the flood’s description to other instances of similar phrases in Scripture that clearly refer to localized events, such as the famine in Genesis 41:57.⁴¹

In a localized model, hyperbolic language is seen as a rhetorical device to emphasize the event’s significance within the cultural and theological context of its original audience. This interpretation aligns with ancient Near Eastern literary practices, where exaggeration was often used to convey the magnitude of divine actions.⁴²

How Do Local and Global Views Affect Our Understanding of Ancient Peoples’ Worldview?

A global interpretation of the flood suggests that the ancient audience saw their world as geographically expansive, encompassing all of creation. This view aligns with a theological emphasis on God’s universal sovereignty.⁴³

On the other hand, a localized flood reflects an ancient worldview in which “*all the earth*” referred to the region of human habitation known to the biblical audience. This perspective does not diminish the theological significance of the flood but instead

⁴¹ Walton, *The Lost World of the Flood*, 53.

⁴² Kenneth A. Mathews, *Genesis 1–11:26*, New American Commentary, vol. 1A (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996), 429.

⁴³ Tremper Longman III, *Genesis*, 165.

contextualizes it as a profound judgment within the limits of their understanding. Such a view preserves the narrative's theological intent while accommodating historical and scientific evidence for a regional event.⁴⁴

VII. CONCLUSION

The Genesis flood narrative and genealogies present a rich tapestry of theological, cultural, and historical significance. This study has demonstrated that the symbolic and theological intent of these texts aligns with ancient Near Eastern literary practices while maintaining a distinct focus on divine sovereignty, human morality, and covenantal relationship. Through its use of hyperbolic language, symbolic numbers, and localized contexts, Genesis communicates profound truths about God's justice, mercy, and redemptive plan.

A key interpretive framework guiding this analysis has been the recognition that biblical texts must be understood within their original cultural and literary contexts. As Craig Olson emphasizes, "*Proper biblical interpretation interprets the text as it was intended by the original author and understood by the original readers.*"⁴⁵ This approach ensures that modern readers engage with the theological intent of the text rather than imposing anachronistic expectations of historical or scientific precision.

The comparisons with Mesopotamian texts, such as the *Sumerian King List* and the *Epic of Gilgamesh*, reveal both shared motifs and critical distinctions. While Genesis adopts familiar literary forms, it subverts the cultural narratives of its time to present a

⁴⁴ Walton, *The Lost World of the Flood*, 66–68.

⁴⁵ Olson, Craig. "Did the Patriarchs Live 900+ Years?" Interview by Sean McDowell. *Sean McDowell Show*. YouTube video, August 24, 2023. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ck4ZR9CsZn4>.

Yahweh-centered worldview. Similarly, the accommodationist framework allows for a faithful reading of Genesis that respects its divine inspiration while acknowledging the symbolic nature of its genealogies and the phenomenological language of its flood narrative.

Future Directions:

Despite these insights, questions remain for further exploration. **For example:**

- **Symbolic Numbers:** What additional patterns or theological meanings might be uncovered through further study of the numerical schemes in Genesis?⁴⁶
- **Archaeological Evidence:** How might ongoing discoveries in the ancient Near East shed light on the historical context of the flood narrative and patriarchal lifespans?⁴⁷
- **Integration of Science and Faith:** What additional frameworks could reconcile the theological significance of Genesis with modern scientific understandings?⁴⁸

These areas invite continued dialogue between biblical scholarship, archaeology, and science, fostering a deeper appreciation of Genesis' theological richness and historical relevance.

In conclusion, the Genesis flood narrative and genealogies invite readers to reflect on God's relationship with humanity and creation. By interpreting these texts through their intended literary and cultural lenses, we preserve their theological distinctiveness

⁴⁶ Tremper Longman III, *Genesis*, 162.

⁴⁷ Leonard Woolley, *Excavations at Ur*, 27–29.

⁴⁸ John H. Walton, *Genesis*, 302.

while engaging thoughtfully with modern questions. This approach not only honors the integrity of Scripture but also deepens its relevance for contemporary faith.

APPENDIX A: LIFESPANS FROM ADAM TO MOSES AND THEIR SYMBOLIC SIGNIFICANCE

From Adam to Moses	
1. Adam - 930 years	14. Eber - 464 years
2. Seth - 912 years	15. Peleg - 239 years
3. Enosh - 905 years	16. Reu - 239 years
4. Kenan - 910 years	17. Serug - 230 years
5. Mahalalel - 895 years	18. Nahor - 148 years
6. Jared - 962 years	19. Terah - 205 years
7. Enoch - 365 years (taken by God, not physical death)	20. Abraham - 175 years
8. Methuselah - 969 years	21. Isaac - 180 years
9. Lamech - 777 years	22. Jacob - 147 years
10. Noah - 950 years	23. Levi - 137 years
11. Shem - 600 years	24. Kohath - 133 years
12. Arphaxad - 438 years	25. Amram - 137 years
13. Shelah - 433 years	26. Moses - 120 years
Total Years: 12,600 (Referenced in Days in Revelation 11:3, 12:6)	

This chart lists the lifespans of key figures from Adam to Moses, totaling 12,600 years. The total connects with the symbolic 12,600 days referenced in Revelation 11:3 and 12:6, linking themes of divine judgment and redemption from Genesis to Revelation. The declining lifespans reflect humanity's increasing distance from Eden and its consequences.

APPENDIX B: MATTHEW’S GENEALOGY OF JESUS – THE THREE SETS OF FOURTEEN GENERATIONS

First Row: Abraham to David	Second Row: David to the Exile	Third Row: Exile to Christ
1. Abraham	1. David (the king)	1. Jeconiah
2. Isaac	2. Solomon (by the wife of Uriah)	2. Shealtiel
3. Jacob	3. Rehoboam	3. Zerubbabel
4. Judah and his brothers	4. Abijah	4. Abiud
5. Perez and Zerah (by Tamar)	5. Asa	5. Eliakim
6. Hezron	6. Jehoshaphat	6. Azor
7. Ram	7. Joram	7. Zadok
8. Amminadab	8. Uzziah	8. Akim
9. Nahshon	9. Jotham	9. Eliud
10. Salmon	10. Ahaz	10. Eleazar
11. Boaz (by Rahab)	11. Hezekiah	11. Matthan
12. Obed (by Ruth)	12. Manasseh	12. Jacob
13. Jesse	13. Amon	13. Joseph (the husband of Mary)
14. David (the king)	14. Josiah	14. Jesus (called the Messiah)
This layout highlights the deliberate division into three sets of 14, emphasizing the theological and numerical symbolism		

This chart illustrates Matthew’s deliberate structuring of Jesus’ genealogy into three groups of fourteen generations: from Abraham to David, from David to the exile, and from the exile to Jesus. This organization emphasizes Jesus’ Davidic lineage, messianic fulfillment, and covenantal role as the promised King. The use of 14, corresponding to the numerical value of “*David*” in Hebrew, highlights the theological message of Jesus’ identity as the Messiah. Notably, Matthew uses the name “David” twice, showing that he is less concerned with strict numerical value and more focused on the symbolic meaning of the number 14, which underscores Jesus’ fulfillment of God’s promises and His role in the messianic lineage.

APPENDIX C: COMPARISON OF GENEALOGICAL AGES AND TIMELINES IN THE MASORETIC TEXT (MT), SAMARIAN PENTATEUCH (SP), AND SEPTUAGINT (LXX) ⁴⁹

TEXTUAL VERSIONS										Birth and Death From Year of Creation					
	Masoretic Text (MT)			Samaritan Pentateuch (SP)			Septuagint (LXX)			MT		SP		LXX	
	Age at Firstborn	Remaining Years	Age at Death	Age at Firstborn	Remaining Years	Age at Death	Age at Firstborn	Remaining Years	Age at Death	Birth	Death	Birth	Death	Birth	Death
Adam	130	800	930	130	800	930	230	700	930	0	930	0	930	0	930
Seth	105	807	912	105	807	912	205	707	912	130	1042	130	1042	230	1142
Enosh	90	815	905	90	815	905	190	715	905	235	1140	235	1140	435	1340
Kenan	70	840	910	70	840	910	170	740	910	325	1235	325	1235	625	1535
Mahalalel	65	830	895	65	830	895	165	730	895	395	1290	395	1290	795	1690
Jared	162	800	962	62	785	847	162	800	962	460	1422	460	1307	960	1922
Enoch	65	782	365	65	300	365	165	200	365	622	987	522	887	1122	1487
Methuselah	187	595	969	67	653	720	617 (187)	802 (782)	969	687	1656	587	1307	1287	2256
Lamech	182	450	777	53	600	653	188	565	753	874	1651	654	1307	1454 (1474)	2207 (2227)
Noah	500		950	500	450	950	500	450	950	1056	2006	707	1657	1642 (1662)	2592 (2612)
To Flood	100			100			100								
Flood	1656			1307			2242 (2262)								

This chart compares the ages and timelines of key biblical figures from Adam to the Flood as presented in three major textual traditions: the Masoretic Text (MT), the Samaritan Pentateuch (SP), and the Septuagint (LXX). The table outlines the age at which each patriarch had their firstborn child, the remaining years of their life, and their age at death according to each tradition. The final columns show the birth and death years calculated from the year of creation, illustrating the variances in chronological data between the MT, SP, and LXX versions of the Hebrew Bible.

In the LXX column, note that the ages provided are based on different manuscript traditions within the Septuagint family. The numbers in parentheses represent variations found in certain LXX manuscript families, where certain ages differ, indicating the diversity of textual traditions in the Septuagint and the significance of manuscript variation in biblical chronology.

This comparative analysis highlights not only the differences in the genealogical data across the MT, SP, and LXX, but also the impact of manuscript variations on our understanding of the early biblical timeline. It provides valuable insight into how different ancient communities preserved and transmitted their sacred texts.

⁴⁹ Kenneth A. Mathews, *Genesis 1–11:26*, New American Commentary, vol. 1A (Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996), 300.

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