

Principles for Dating Ancient Historical Events

Principles of dating:

1. Most ancient dates are imprecisely known. We know only their relative position in relation to other dates. For example, we know that one event happened after another, but we do not know the exact date when either of the events occurred.
2. Most ancient dates are based on the historical interpretation of the author or researcher, and this interpretation is based on the presuppositions about prehistory that the author or researcher accepted during his studies.
3. All the so-called “scientific” methods for obtaining dates are based on naturalistic and evolutionary presuppositions. (Therefore, if evolution is not true, then the dates obtained by these methods are all in great error.)
4. Every ancient date (whether billions, millions, or even hundreds of thousands of years) for human history is based on evolutionary presuppositions.
5. In most cases, dates are presented which are the conclusion of the researcher(s) without giving the basis for determining that date, thus making it difficult for the average person to further consider the validity of the date.

All this being true, the question we ask, is: Must we uncritically accept every date that scientists and historians propose? We think not.

The Difficulties of Trying to Set Exact Dates in Prehistory by Scientific and Historic Means

It is difficult enough to try to discover the exact date of ancient events for known history. To discover the exact date of prehistoric events by scientific means is even more difficult. It is not only Bible scholars who experience this problem, but researchers in every discipline involving prehistory.

Where we begin makes such a difference!

Ken Ham of ‘Answers in Genesis’ often speaks about the difference in the approach of those who begin with the Bible as God’s authoritative Word, and those who begin with observational science. When we begin with God’s Word as the basis, we seek to fit known facts into that framework, interpreting all we observe in the light of the Word.

When, however, we begin with observations in any field, we either ignore what the Bible says, or try to interpret it in the light of what we observe.

The result of these two approaches can, obviously, be quite different. We must ask ourselves, if we truly accept the Bible as God's perfect Revelation, is it not a proper base from which to begin our understanding in any field?

Dating used in this history:

In this history, we begin with God's Word and seek to understand history, archaeology, science, and every other field in light of that Revelation. We have rejected completely all very ancient dates, both because we believe they do not square with a literal understanding of the Biblical narrative, and also because we have not found evidence to support them except for methods based on evolutionary presuppositions. We have begun about 4,000 to 2350 B.C. based on the proclamations of Scripture and our understanding of the time required for known prehistory to occur.

The oldest known historical dates:

The oldest dates of which we can be reasonably certain which are historically verifiable by other than Biblical means begin about 1900 B.C. and following. They are Egyptian dates because the Egyptians based their observations of events on astronomical events the dates of which can be calculated mathematically. One of the oldest dates known is 3100 B.C. which is the traditional date for the founding of Egypt as a Unified Kingdom, based on the list of Egyptian kings compiled by the priest-historian Manetho (ca 2900 B.C.) Yet others have questioned even this date, since the kings listed may have ruled simultaneously and not consecutively. Some believe that Manetho's list was based on exaggerated claims of ancient kings.

The first Biblical character for whom we have an approximate date confirmed from extraBiblical sources is Abraham, ca. 2,000 B.C. The events before these dates are of course no less real, also being historical in the sense that they really happened. They are not mythological or imaginary. Except for events that can be dated by the chronologies of the Bible, the dates of other events are theoretical and approximate, subject to interpretation and sometimes to change as further evidence is discovered.

Understanding the Genealogies of Genesis:

Some have stated that the goal of the genealogies of Genesis 5 and 10 is not the determination of historical dates, not to show how many years passed between events, and not to answer every historical question. Some feel that they should not therefore be used as historical evidence or determiners, and that these genealogies should not be considered chronologies.

Others feel that even if historical dating is not the primary objective, since all Scripture is Godbreathed and true of every matter of which it speaks, the genealogies in fact should be used

to date early events. They point out that only in Genesis 5 and 10 are specific numbers of years given. Why did God give them to us if He did not intend us to use them?

Larry Pierce and Ken Ham of Answers in Genesis point out that the Hebrew verb for begat used in these chapters is yalad, and that this particular verb is never in the Scriptures used in any other way that to denote a single generation, father-son or mother-daughter, relationship. It is as if God was specifically emphasizing the one-generation aspect of each of the “begats” in these chapters.

Then also, the New Testament writer Jude says that Enoch was the seventh from Adam (Jude 14), which affirms the interpretation of only one generation between each name in the genealogies of Genesis 5 and 11.

The names in Genesis 10:

Some have suggested that all the names of Genesis 10 may not be the names of individuals, but of clans, tribes or nations (nations in the biblical sense of a people). They point out that because words ending in im are often plural (Ludim Anamim, etc.), Mizraim may also be plural in spite of the fact that it is presented as the name of an individual grandson of Noah. Others point out different meanings for the word Mizraim and insist it is not plural. The difficult part is, if the names of those of groups, how are we to understand the years given? They no longer seem to make sense under that construct. We conclude, then, that they are names of individuals, just as they appear to be.

Possible gaps in the Biblical genealogies:

Others point out that there are known gaps in Biblical genealogies, therefore it is reasonable to assume that there may be more that we don't know about. Here are some of the examples sometimes quoted by evangelicals: (From Francis Schaeffer in Genesis in Time and Space, with refutations from Larry Pierce and Ken Ham of Answers in Genesis in “Are There Gaps in the Genesis Genealogies?”)

1. 1 Chronicles 6A:8-12 and Ezra 7:2

1 Chronicles gives six generations between Achitub (vs 8) and Chadok (vs 12), which are omitted in Ezra. Ezra was a scribe, a specialist in genealogies. He certainly was aware of the existence of these omitted generations. He must have left them out because it was not the purpose of his genealogy to show the name of each person of each generation, but rather to show ultimate origins.

The phrase translated “son of” and “begat” can in Hebrew describe a father-son relationship, or a more distant relation of family origins. The expression “son of” can mean “descended from” whether the relation is of the first generation or of more distant generations.

However, in 1 Chronicles, the Hebrew *yalad*, the word for one generation, is not used, thus allowing for greater flexibility there, but not in any way suggesting that there are gaps in the genealogies of Genesis 5 and 11.

2. 1 Chronicles 26:24

We see this principle clearly in 1 Chronicles 26:24. Between Shebuel, who lived ca. 1,000 B.C. at the time of Solomon, and Gershom, who lived one generation after Moses, there is a gap of ca. 400 years. The goal of the genealogy is the family origin of Shebuel, who was given authority to become temple treasurer. To attain this goal, it was not important to list every person in the family history. However, again, in 1 Chronicles, the Hebrew *yalad*, the word for one generation, is not used, thus allowing for greater flexibility there, but not in any way suggesting that there are gaps in the genealogies of Genesis 5 and 11.

3. Matthew 1:8

The genealogy of Jesus according to Matthew gives us another example of how the Hebrews used some of their genealogies. Matthew 1:8 leaves out three generations of the lineage of Jesus, but Matthew must have known the entire lineage. Why did he leave out three generations? It could not be because he was ignorant or forgetful. He probably left these generations out because 1) they were not important to his goal in writing, which was to show the ultimate origin of the family of Jesus, and 2) possibly because he was thinking of an aid to memorization. Hence, he lists 14 generations from Abraham to David, 14 from David to the Exile, and 14 from the Exile to Christ. It is comparable to choosing a list of the greatest presidents of a country.

However, the word Matthew uses for *begat*, although it may look the same in translation to other languages, is not the same as the Hebrew word used in Genesis 5 & 11. Instead of the Hebrew *yalad*, Matthew uses the Greek word *gennaō*, which is much more flexible and allows for some generations to be omitted for literary purposes. The fact that generations are omitted in Matthew, then, does not mean that they are also omitted in Genesis 5 and 11.

4. Genesis 11:12

The Septuagint is the translation of the Old Testament done in Alexandria Egypt, from Hebrew to Greek. It was the Bible from which Jesus often quoted, probably because it was the version with which the people to whom He was speaking were most familiar. In the extant manuscripts of this Bible that we have today, we find an additional name—Kainan, in the genealogy of Shem in Genesis 11:12. The Septuagint declares that Kainan lived 130 years, exactly in the style in which the lives of the other ancestors are described.

It is possible that this name is the result of a corruption of the text, and Alexandria was known for such corruptions. Rabbis in Egypt at that time were highly influenced by the works of the Egyptian priest Manetho, so they arbitrarily added about 700 years to the biblical chronology for the period between Noah and Abraham. This kind of compromise—altering the Biblical text or its interpretation to fit into popularly accepted theories of the day—has gone on ever since.

If we begin with the Scripture and accept it at face value, we get a much different result. Cainan was not mentioned by Moses in Genesis 11:12 and the name has never appeared in any Hebrew copy of the Old Testament (remember the Septuagint is a Greek translation), not even in the Samaritan version. It is not given in Josephus, and it is not in the most ancient Greek copy of Luke. This seems then not to be an evidence that the genealogies of Genesis 5 and 11 contain gaps, but rather a question of the poor textual authority of the Septuagint translation.

5. Luke 3:35-36 and Genesis 11:12

Luke also gives the name of Kainan in the genealogy of Jesus between Shelah and Arphaxad. Some have felt that Luke followed the text of the Septuagint for his history, but again we point out that the oldest manuscript of Luke, called P75, does not include Cainan in the genealogy.

Time from the Flood to Abraham

What does all this mean? If we interpret the genealogies strictly as chronologies, it would appear that all the postdiluvians, Noah included, were living when Abraham was 50 years of age. This is so different from our modern concepts that some have doubted the chronologies. After all, it appears that God called Abraham to begin a new people of faith exactly because everyone else had left their God and entered the night of paganism. But, we must remember that Melchisedek (Genesis 14:18) was a contemporary of Abraham, and he was also a man of God, so how complete this turning from idols was is a matter of question.

In any case, even if a generation were added to the genealogies or even three, they still fall far short of the extremely long ages being postulated by modern evolutionary hypothesis. To date Adam back even to 100,000 years would require 2,500 generations to be missing from the genealogies. In that case, far more would be missing than would be extant, to the point that one might wonder why the author bothered writing the genealogies in the first place.

Some, even so eminent and faithful a Bible scholar as Dr. Francis Schaeffer, have suggested that God never invited us to add up the years given in Genesis 5 and 11.ⁱ But no one to my knowledge has ever satisfactorily answered the question, “If God did not intend that, why did He give those years in such a precise manner in those chapters, in contrast to the way

genealogies are commonly given at other places in the Scripture? I therefore propose that we take the genealogies of Genesis 5 and 11 at face value.

Dr. Henry Morris, in “The Biblical Basis of Modern Science”, discusses this subject in depth. He points out that the Biblical chronology is a million times shorter than the evolutionary chronology, thus, there is a serious discrepancy between the two.ⁱⁱ He says that the short chronology with the Flood occurring the year 2350 B.C. is both reasonable and possible, but that one or two small gaps might be possible, perhaps adding 1500 years at the outer limits to the genealogies. He rejects totally the possibility that the gaps could amount to millions of years or even more than 10,000 years.ⁱⁱⁱ

Ken Ham points out that according to the Hebrew text, there were 1,656 years between Creation and the Flood.

Indeed, only if we consider the characters and events of Genesis as mythological and imaginary can we accept a great age such as millions of years, or even hundreds of thousands of years, for early history. We reject absolutely the supposition that the Bible is not a record of true history. We affirm absolutely the idea that the Bible is a record of real history.

The Scientific and Historic Difficulties in Fixing Early Dates:

It is also difficult for historians to fix non-biblical historical dates even when one considers only facts historically known. To fix dates by theoretical “scientific” methods is more difficult yet. Thus, it is not only Bible scholars who have challenges in dating. Archaeologists also hesitate to fix dates for African history (or for any other) before the beginning of the united Ancient Kingdom of Egypt (3100 or earlier). Maurice Reygasse, a very industrious and conscientious archaeologist, abstains from trying to fix exact dates due to many years of experience.^{iv} Today, scientists are beginning to doubt more and more the precision and the total validity of their methods of dating. Therefore, even methods called “scientific” (C-14, etc.) do not provide a solution to the problem—a way of fixing dates for prehistoric civilizations.

Conflicts and Contradictions in Dating are Common

Even though evolutionary scientists and historians often speak and write as if their methods for fixing dates were certain, in reality there are several methods of dating artifacts of ancient cultures, but there are often conflicts between the dates obtained by different methods. Which date is the true one?

For example, scientists dated a young tree near to an airport. The result by C-14 dating was 10,000 years! But it was known to be a young tree of only two or three years of age. The exhaust from the airplanes gave the old age date!^v Conclusion: Several factors can influence the result of C-14 dating.

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Another example: Scientists dated a hunk of lava from a volcano in Hawaii which was known to have been formed in 1801. They dated it by radioactive potassium argon dating with a result of 3 million years of age!^{vi}

But, consider the pretentious way that evolutionists present their methods: “The extremely difficult cases by the aid of Carbon 14 permit us, in specialized laboratories, to fix the age of a piece of wood, of carbon, of human bone, or animal remains. The date is precise to within a century. This method has given the most remarkable results for the prehistoric period, for which there existed no chronological records.”^{vii} This shows remarkable confidence in such dating methods, considering the fact that they have often been proven to be wrong.

Ancient dates are often based on naturalistic and atheistic presuppositions.

Most of the methods of fixing prehistoric dates (those before written records) are based on presuppositions which are non-proven or incapable of being proven. These presuppositions are not in harmony with biblical teaching.

The great presupposition is that natural processes have continued uniformly over eons of time so that we can measure what is taking place now and extrapolate mathematically into the past. The second great presupposition is that every change took place very, very slowly.

If a catastrophe ever changed the processes that we observe today, the dates given by the methods based on uniformitarianism will not be valid. The Bible records several catastrophic interventions in the natural processes of the earth, the worldwide Flood being the foremost example.

The speed of change within a culture is subject to interpretation.

When one reads many textbooks on ancient civilizations, it is evident that the author supposes that civilization must have grown very slowly, and that people discovered purely by chance every bit of knowledge that advanced them, knowing nearly nothing at the beginning. These authors suppose that ancient humanity was not very intelligent and did not understand much about their environment. The evolutionary presuppositions must influence the interpretation of the author, especially when exact dates are not known.

The Bible stands against these suppositions. Civilizations of a high order existed even before the Flood (cf. Genesis 4:17, 20-22, 6:4). Therefore, it is not surprising that such civilizations were also found soon after that event. Humanity was very intelligent and very ingenious from the beginning, displaying remarkable ability and good understanding in several fields of endeavor. This observation of ancient civilization squares nicely with the Biblical position that God created humanity in His own image.

In reality, the speed with which different ancient cultures developed is only a conjecture. It is evident that before the beginning of modern methods of transportation and communication, knowledge must have spread more slowly than today. Changes in cultures, on the other hand, are extremely variable. Some cultures have changed rapidly and grown, but at the same time, others have not changed much for thousands of years. Today some cultures are very technological and developed in that sense, while at the same time others still use stones as tools.

For example, some modern archaeologists explored a camp called “Stone Age.” They estimated the age of the camp at 2300 B.C. They could not identify the tools or the remains of food found there, but a bushman (a member of a “stone age” culture today) identified each piece instantly, and explained the use of each tool in great detail. Where is the verification for the projected date of 2300 B.C. for the camp?

The fallacy of “Ages”

The very expression “Age” (for example, Stone Age, Bronze Age, etc.) is often used in textbooks as if it was describing a historic period of time of certain duration. Consider the textbook for sixth grade adopted by the Conference of African and Madagascar Ministry of Education in 1967: “The old stone age is divided into four periods...the old stone age proper covering 3,600,000 years.”^{viii} “The New Stone Agee (between 8,000 and 1,000 B.D. according to various regions of the word...^{ix} This way of speaking is very popular with evolutionists. It may even be said to be the standard way of speaking in the academic world, but it is not at all true or accurate, and is quite misleading.

There are cultures that remain in the Stone “Age” even today! Examples are the Bushmen of the Kalahari in South Africa.

Terms like “Age” cannot describe specific periods of history, but describe rather levels of development of specific cultures, which are unrelated to the time period of world history. That is, different cultures experienced their “Ages” at different times, and they lasted for different lengths of time. Some cultures were using stone during what many historians call the “Age of Metals”. Others remain in the “Stone Age” even today. For example, bronze was known in North Africa from the time of the early pharaohs, but South Africa was not acquainted with it until the European explorations!

Some African cultures have changed rapidly—for example, Egyptian culture. One historian has written that the rapidity of change at Fayum was rapid—the improvement in pottery making, in sculpture, in leatherworking and in weaving were surprising, and especially the improvement in architecture. Only a hundred years after the first Pharaoh ascended his throne, Egyptian architecture had stopped using mud bricks and begun very sophisticated and complicated stone construction.

- i Schaeffer, Francis A., Genesis in Time and Space, (Downer's Grove, IL:InterVarsity Press, 1972), pp 122-124.
- ii Henry M. Morris, The Biblical Basis of Modern Science, (Grand Rapids:Baker Book House, 1984) p. 115.
- iii Morris, The Biblical Origins of Modern Science, p. 456.
- iv REFERENCE NEEDED
- v REFERENCE NEEDED
- vi REFERENCE NEEDED
- vii Des Origenes au VI Siècle, p. 13. Translated from French by Lorella Rouster
- viii Des Origenes au VI Siècle, p. 20. Translated from French by Lorella Rouster
- ix Des Origenes, p. 20.