

Perspectives on ancient chronology and the Old Testament—part 1

Murray R. Adamthwaite

A growing mood among secular scholars is to dismiss out of hand the biblical history of Genesis through 1 Kings, because, it is contended, there is a total mismatch between these accounts and the archaeological record. Since their verdict is that no such correlation exists, the Bible's stories of the patriarchs, Israel in Egypt, the Exodus and Conquest, and even David and Solomon, are to be dismissed as merely pious legends, without historical foundation. The answer to such a challenge is to seek another time location where these events can be found, even if that location is out of harmony with accepted chronological schemes, and thus construct a revised chronology. While this will involve a compression of the conventional secular schemes, it is essential in order to achieve a match of biblical history with records from Egypt and elsewhere. In this and a subsequent article I outline first the conventional schemes of ancient chronology for both Egypt and Mesopotamia, to serve as starting points for discussion and revision. Then I offer some preliminary observations in regard to correlations of scriptural clues with ancient history and chronology.

According to Genesis 11:10–12:4, a period of 367 years elapses between the Flood and Abraham's entry into Canaan. If we round this off to 400 (including the Septuagint's insertion of Cainan after Arpachshad) on any account this is much shorter than the long ages of 'cultural evolution' which modern archaeology demands. Furthermore, correlation of the biblical accounts of patriarchs, Exodus, Judges, and Kings of Israel with ancient history as proposed and accepted by secular historians has proved to be an intractable problem. Some correlations in the monarchy period are quite secure: Nebuchadnezzar and the capture of Jerusalem (586 BC), Sennacherib's invasion of Judah (701 BC), and the fall of Samaria to the Assyrians (722 BC) are examples that come to mind. However, when we go further back, to the early first millennium BC and before, problems arise: who was the Pharaoh whose daughter Solomon married (1 Kings 3:1)? Can we identify the Aramaean kingdoms which David conquered (2 Samuel 8)? Can the various oppressors during the Judges period be identified in extra-biblical texts? Then, of course, there is the old but persistent problem of the Pharaoh of the Exodus—and of Joseph for that matter.

In attempting to solve these problems there are two criteria I would lay down at the outset:

1. Leaving aside the conclusions of secularists who have no commitment to the Divine inspiration of Scripture, there are widely differing views among believing scholars. Consequently, there should be a willingness from all sides to consider sympathetically the views of others within the believing community. There is no room for dogmatism, of which there has been far too much over the past century or more. On one hand there is the dogmatism of those who accept the framework of ancient history according to the

secularists (e.g. the 30 dynasties of Manetho, albeit with variations) as a datum, and attempt to fit the biblical data into it. Examples of this are Kitchen,¹ Hoffmeier,² Currid,³ and Aling.⁴ This in my view has been an exercise of trying to fit the proverbial square peg into the round hole.

Another brand of dogmatism has been taking, for example, Velikovsky's revised scheme of ancient history as a definite starting point—at least as 'de-astralised' by Courville⁵—and building a scheme turned almost upside-down in comparison with the accepted scheme. Advocates of this approach—and similar types of drastic revision—can be just as hard-line in their adherence as their opponents on the more 'secular' side.

My own view is that we must patiently sift the data, and work from the known to the unknown in the light of biblical evidence (determined from proper exegesis), archaeology, and ancient texts. My own considered opinion is that the accepted Egyptian chronology is grossly inflated, but inflated not only in one but in several areas and periods: the Early Dynastic period; the Old Kingdom and First Intermediate; and certainly the Third Intermediate Period. Hence the scheme needs reduction, but by centuries overall, not merely by a few years here and there. However, any conclusions must be tentative if the evidence is inconclusive.

2. For the first millennium BC we have the combined evidence of the biblical data and the Assyrian Eponym lists (*limmu*-lists). Although the chronology of Edwin Thiele may need some refinement and adjustment (e.g. the latter half of the eighth century BC is still rather fuzzy—and too short—on Thiele's scheme), the basic outline cannot but be accepted. Taking the Assyrian data for starters, we have

an unbroken list of years back to 911/912 BC, but prior to that uncertainties begin, and the further back we go the more these uncertainties increase. Even among the secularists there are the long, middle, and short chronologies, albeit the ‘long’ is now largely abandoned.⁶ We must then look for correlations and synchronisms of kings and events, but this is not easy: from our perspective we might talk, for example, of Shalmaneser I and Hattushili III, but ancient texts do not have Roman numerals after a king’s name. Again, Muwatilli II fought Ramesses II at the Battle of Kadesh in the fifth year of the latter’s reign, but this synchronism leaves open the question of the chronological placement of Ramesses II.

On the Egyptian side it is all too easy to point to a similarity of a name in the Bible and on an Egyptian monument, then jump to the conclusion that these two names refer to the same king. An obvious example is the Shishaq of 1 Kings 14:25, and the Shoshenq of the Bubastite Portal. Yet as we compare the itinerary of this king’s conquests in Palestine as per the Bubastite Portal with the account in 1 Kings 14:25–26 they are quite different: Shoshenq never went near Jerusalem. Are then the two references to the same person after all?

A related problem in this connection concerns by what name an Egyptian pharaoh was known in foreign nations, and for that matter by the general populace. As is well known, the royal titulary had five names: the Horus, the *nebtj*, the golden Horus, the *nesu-bit* or prenomen, and the son-of-Re or birth name. We can gain some insight here from the letter of Ankh-hesen-amun, the widow of the teenage king Tutankhamun, to Šuppiluliuma of the Hittites. She refers to her dead husband as Niphururiya—a precise rendering in cuneiform of Tutankhamun’s prenomen Nebkheperure, but not by his birth name.⁷ This seems to have been usual for diplomacy of the time. As to popular versions of a pharaoh’s name, it is well known that, for example, Ramesses II was known as Sessi, apparently a hypocoristic of his birth name.⁸

Then there are the various Egyptian king lists: Abydos, Karnak, Turin Canon, Palermo Stone (for the early period), to name some, but we need to bear in mind the purpose of these lists. They were not composed, of course, to inform historians of the 20th and 21st centuries! They were rather political statements; propaganda to proclaim continuity with their ancestors and thus legitimacy for their own tenure of the throne. That said, however, their evidence is as it is and must be given its due weight.

So again, evidence must be sifted and evaluated, but my own view is that while the existing scheme of Egyptian history needs some ‘squeezing’—at times radical squeezing—at the same time the generally agreed scheme of the secularists cannot be dismissed out of hand, or drastically overturned in the way that radical



Figure 1. Sumerian king list, Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, UK

revisionists seek to do (such as those following Velikovsky and Courville). The Bible must be our bedrock position indeed, but at the same time we need to listen carefully to the secularists, without necessarily accepting their schemes wholesale.

Before proceeding further, in order to acquaint the non-specialists with ancient history, and enable them to understand better the drift of argument presented here, I will outline the conventional historical schemes of first, ancient Egypt, and then second, of ancient Mesopotamia and Anatolia.

Pharaonic Egypt according to conventional chronology⁹

Dynasties	Leading King	Dates (BC)
Early Dynastic		3150–2686
Early Egypt formed with two major kingdoms, Lower and Upper Egypt, which were often at war with each other. However, two kings are known for this pre-Dynastic period, ‘Scorpion’ and Nar’mer, the latter apparently being the king who united by force the two kingdoms. Nar’mer’s successor, Hor-Aha, who also bore the <i>nebtj</i> -name Men, seems to be the Menes of Manetho’s record, the founder of a united Egypt.		

Dynasty One	Nar'mer	}	3100–2890
	Hor-Aha / Men	}	for Dynasty One
	Djet [Uadj]	}	
Dynasty Two	Seth-Peribsen		2890–2686
	Khasekhemwy		for Dynasty Two

Old Kingdom 2686–2500

Although Dynasty Two had been plagued by civil war between Upper and Lower Egypt, by the end of the dynasty the kingdom was unified again, and now blossomed into the Old Kingdom, the so-called 'pyramid age'.

Dynasty Three	Djoser		2688–2649
Four	Khufu		2589–2566
	Khafre		2558–2532
	Menkaure		2532–2504

Late Old Kingdom 2498–2181

Dynasty Five	Userkaf		2498–2491
	Unas		2375–2345
Dynasty Six	Pepi I		2332–2283
	Pepi II		2278–2184 (!)

First Intermediate Period 2181–2040

A combination of famine, the long reign of Pepi II, and seizure of control by the various provincial nomarchs led to a loss of control by the royal authority.

Dynasties Seven to Ten Egypt in chaos

Middle Kingdom 2040–1663

Theban rulers in the south (Intef I, II, and III) gradually pushed their boundaries north, until Mentuhotep I finally re-unified Egypt with victory over Lower Egypt in the Heracleopolitan War.

Dynasty Eleven	Intef III		2069–2060
	Mentuhotep I		2060–2010
Dynasty Twelve	Amenemhet I		1991–1962
	Senusret III		1878–1841
	Amenemhet III		1842–1797
Dynasty Thirteen	Sobekhotep III		c.1745
	Neferhotep I		1741–1730
	Sobekhotep IV		1730–1720

Second Intermediate Period 1663–1570

Dynasties Fourteen to Seventeen With a decline under Dynasty Thirteen Egypt now fell to foreign invasion.

- Hyksos Rule	Sheshi		
	Apepi I & II		
- Expulsion of Hyksos	Kamose		1573–1570

New Kingdom 1570–1070

Having expelled the Hyksos rulers, this period saw Egyptian expansion into a major empire from Nubia to the Orontes River in North Syria under such warrior kings as Thutmose III, Amenhotep II, and Ramesses II.

Dynasty Eighteen	Ahmose		1570–1546
	Hatshepsut		1498–1483

Dynasty Nineteen	Thutmose III		1504–1450
	Amenhotep III		1386–1349
	Akhenaten		1350–1334
Dynasty Twenty	Seti I		1291–1278
	Ramesses II		1279–1212
	Merenptah		1212–1202
	Ramesses III		1182–1151
	Ramesses XI		1098–1070

With the death of the last Ramesses the glory days of the New Kingdom were now well and truly gone, the country's economy was in ruins, foreign invaders were again making their presence felt (this time by the 'Sea Peoples'), and Dynasty Twenty gave way to the Third Intermediate Period.

So far this shows the conventional scheme of Egyptian history, and its accompanying chronology, but, as noted above, where in this scheme do we place Abraham, Joseph, the Exodus, early Israel, and for that matter David and Solomon? Despite massive efforts and endless discussions by Christian scholars over the years there has been no solution, other than to highlight the 'local Egyptian colour' in the Joseph and Exodus narratives in particular. This sort of discussion may be all well and good, but it does not yield the Pharaohs of either the Joseph period, or the Exodus event. The only way forward is to revise the conventional scheme of Egyptian history, and reduce the associated chronology. This way a match between the Bible and the ancient Egyptian records can be achieved.

However, at the other end of the Fertile Crescent there are also the Mesopotamian records, which are just as important for this whole attempted revision as any investigation of Egypt, since Abraham came from Ur in Lower Mesopotamia, and Israel in later history had contacts with both Upper and Lower Mesopotamia, facing invasion from both. So again, I present here the conventional scheme of Mesopotamian history as a prelude to highlighting major problems therein.

Conventional scheme of Mesopotamian history¹⁰

The earliest phase of Mesopotamian history manifests a network of city-states across Lower Mesopotamia, known collectively as Sumer, but each with its own government, and often at war with each other. According to the Sumerian king list these city-states date from the end of the Great Deluge, beginning with Kish. Sometimes one city (e.g. Uruk) dominated, while at other times other cities (e.g. Lagash or Ur) had the hegemony, until Sargon of Agade (Akkad) conquered the entire region and then expanded further north. Sumer was also subject to incursions from Elam and peoples from the mountain regions between the two. This table traces the conventional chronology from the Early Dynastic I (2900) through to the early second millennium, while the dates, even for the secularists, are uncertain.

Lower Mesopotamia

Kish	Ur	Uruk	Lagash	Dates
Kish I		Uruk I		c. 2900
↓	Royal Enmebaragesi Cemetery	↓		c. 2700
Mes-īlim (c. 2550)	Ur I	Gilgamesh	Lugal-šag-engur	c. 2560–2525
Kish II	Meskiagnunna	Uruk II	Ur-Nanše	c. 2500
↓		↓	Eannatum I	c. 2485–2450
Enbi-Ištar	Ur II			c. 2455–2425
Kish III	4 kings-names unkn.	Lugal-kiniše-dudu		c. 2430
↓			Uru-inimgina	c. 2400
Kish IV		Uruk III		
Ur-Zababa	Lugalzagesi			c. 2340
Agade Dynasty				
Sargon				2334–2279
Naram-Sin				2217–2193
Anarchy				
Dynasty of Gutium				
		Uruk IV		2193–2120
The Gutians invade Sumer and Akkad, ending the Akkad Dynasty				
Uruk V				
Ur III	Ur-Nammu	Utu-hegal	Governors of Lagash-vassals of Ur	2112–2095
	Shulgi			
	Ibbi-Sîn			
	Fall of Ur III			2004
Dynasty of Isin and Larsa				
				2023ff

Points to note regarding the table

1. The dates above are those of Roux (1993), but more recently Kuhrt has revised downward many of these more conventional dates. For example, Sargon of Akkad is redated to 2296–2240 and Naram-Sîn to 2213–2176. On this chronology, she notes, “kings are still ruling in Agade at the time when Ur-Nammu, founder of Ur-III, establishes himself in power”.¹¹ Thus the dates for this early period are very uncertain and obscure, as also are synchronisms between the various city-states. These early dynasties certainly overlapped, as is now known, and from

a biblical standpoint they can—and should—be reduced even further to fit a biblical framework.

2. The two tables do not really cohere with each other. On inspection it is evident that the Egyptian state begins at c. 3100 BC, whereas Mesopotamian history begins at c. 2900 BC. Yet even the secularists will proclaim that “history begins with Sumer”.¹² The way around this is appeal to various pre-literate cultures at each end of the Fertile Crescent: Naqada I and II at the Egyptian end; Halaf, Ubaid, and Uruk periods at the Mesopotamian end, with periods stretching back through Chalcolithic, Neolithic, Mesolithic, and Palaeolithic over many millennia. However, all these periods are based on dubious dating methods and correlations, and evolutionary assumptions, which I will not discuss here.
3. According to the Sumerian king list, kingship after the Deluge was first established at Kish. According to Gen. 10:8 Cush was the father (ancestor?) of Nimrod, but he is not the same Cush as in 10:7, whose descendants inhabited North Africa and Egypt. Now with the mere difference of a vowel Cush (or Kush) becomes Kish, the ancestor of the peoples of Mesopotamia, who gives his name to the founding city, and thus the Sumerian king list seems to preserve this tradition, albeit in somewhat garbled form.¹³
4. Another issue concerns where in the above timeline of Mesopotamia we are to place the Tower of Babel event. Since much of the early history of Mesopotamia is—from cuneiform sources—obscure, and immersed in myth and legend, it is from the present perspective almost impossible to posit a firm time location. As I argued in an earlier article on ancient languages,¹⁴ Sumerian is but one of a plethora of languages which appear on the Near Eastern scene at the same general time—all unrelated to each other, and all exceedingly complex. Hence a tentative proposal would be a time when Sumerian first appears (unless, of course, one wants to posit Sumerian as the original language), i.e. the time of Enmebaragesi of Kish. Accordingly, it goes without saying that this would be in the context of a reduced chronology.
5. Nimrod is given special mention as the founder of the first Mesopotamian empire encompassing both Lower Mesopotamia, i.e. Sumer, and even as far north as Assyria (Nineveh and Kalah). From the cuneiform records there are two possible candidates: (i) Gilgamesh, and (ii) Sargon of Akkad.
 - (i) From certain building inscriptions, the Tummal inscription, and the epic poem “Gilgamesh and Agga” we know that Gilgamesh was (a) a historical king, and (b) a contemporary of Agga of Kish and Mesannepadda of Ur. He was the supreme hero of Sumerian legend for his exploits and adventures, but in that literature he has morphed into a mythical god-man, principally as a seeker for immortality in the famous *Gilgamesh*



Figure 2. Ancient Sumerian city of Ur. In the foreground, residential dwellings; in the background, the famous tower-temple (ziggurat) of Nanna/Sin, the moon deity.

Epic.¹⁵ That Gilgamesh was a mighty hero, whose exploits became proverbial throughout Mesopotamia, is undoubted, but no empire as outlined in Gen. 10:10–12 has been or can be attributed to him.¹⁶

- (ii) Sargon of Akkad is the other, much more likely candidate for Nimrod. First, Sargon (Šarru-kin: “the king is legitimate”) is a throne name, not a personal name, so it is futile to try to link this phonetically with Nimrod.¹⁷ If we see Cush in Gen. 10:8 as the ancestor of Nimrod (which would be necessary even on the Gilgamesh identification), then it is quite plausible to identify Sargon as Nimrod. He certainly conquered the entire Lower Mesopotamian region (“the land of Shin’ar”), and then proceeded to Assyria, and even as far as the northern Levant and the Mediterranean, thus building the first known empire in human history. Furthermore, he too became a legendary hero in his own

right, and a fearsome and ruthless warrior, as a proper understanding of the Hebrew *gibbōr šayid* (Gen. 10:9) would indicate.¹⁸ Hence Assyria became known as “the land of Nimrod” in later lore (cf. Micah 5:6), and even today the site of ancient Calah (Akkadian Kalhu) is known as “Nimrud”.

Patriarchal period: proposed correlations

Two clues arise in regard to the patriarchal period: one specific regarding Abraham; the other general in regard to the period as a whole.

1. We begin with Abraham. He should be placed at Ur in Lower Mesopotamia, a major cultural centre for ancient Sumer, known in Scripture as “the land of Shin’ar”. Some have tried to place him in Northern Mesopotamia, e.g. Cyrus Gordon,¹⁹ but his reasons are not cogent. As to

where to place Abraham in the chronological scheme above, given that his dating is approximately 1950 BC, he can plausibly be placed in the Third Dynasty of Ur, provided that the chronology can be reduced such that Ur III belongs in the period 2000 to 1900 BC. Such a placement would fit admirably, as this period was the last—and greatest—of Sumerian civilization, when its culture, social organization, and political power reached their zenith, and humanly speaking it would have been a hard place to leave. Only a man of faith in God, who sought “a city which has foundations” (Heb. 11:10) and “a better country” (Heb. 11:16) would have seen Ur as a sinking ship, as indeed it was, since it collapsed within Abraham’s lifetime on the synchronism proposed here. Thereafter Sumerian civilization passed into history, while Ur became a virtual non-entity, reviving only briefly in the time of the late Neo-Babylonian Empire, c. 550 BC.

2. Furthermore, there is a consideration of the patriarchal period in more general terms, where a little-noticed passage in the book of Job gives some important evidence. The Book of Job, by general consent of conservative scholars, is the oldest book in the Old Testament canon. Bearing that in mind, we seem to have a reference to the pyramid tombs of kings and nobility in Job 3:14–15. The text reads in NKJV: “With kings and counsellors of the earth, who built ruins for themselves,
Or with princes who had gold, who filled their houses with silver.”



Figure 3. Inscribed brick of Ur-Nammu, founding king of the Third Dynasty of Ur

The interesting phrase here is the latter half of v.14, in the Hebrew, *habbōnīm hʿrābōt lāmō*, which is better translated, “who built tombs for themselves”. Hartley comments as follows:

“In support of taking ‘ruins’ as tombs is the parallel term ‘house’ in v. 15b (cf. 17:13; 30:23; Eccl 12:5, where ‘house’ stands for Sheol), and the use of this word in association with ‘the pit’, the realm of the dead in Ezek. 26:20. In that case Job is alluding particularly to the motivation that inspired the building of them, i.e. it was believed that the inhabitants of these monuments ... had a more peaceful existence in death than the masses who were living.”²⁰

If Hartley is correct in his analysis, and especially if the *hʿrm / hʿrābōt* equation is correct, then the Egyptian pyramids, with all their treasures for the afterlife (in their belief) are contemporary with Job. In the Old Kingdom the afterlife was indeed something for royalty and nobility, as the text here clearly implies, i.e. before the ‘democratisation’ of the afterlife in later periods.²¹ Note also the participles in Job 3:14–15: the kings are building tombs, and the nobles are filling their houses with silver. These constructions seem to indicate a practice contemporary with Job, not something in the distant past.

But what is the relation of Job to Israel? Many conservative scholars believe that the story of Job belongs approximately to patriarchal times, even if the composition comes later, as we find argued, for example, in Gibson’s commentary.²² He cites the lack of any reference to the Mosaic Law or the covenant with Israel; then to the constant use of the general name for God, *ʾloah*, in the speeches (although *Shaddai*, “Almighty” occurs frequently), as opposed to Yahweh, which occurs only in the Prologue and Epilogue.²³ Archer echoes the same arguments, and believes further that both the historical Job and the book’s composition belong to the pre-Mosaic age, either the patriarchal age or during the Egyptian sojourn.²⁴ If this reasoning is at all correct, then the pre-Mosaic or patriarchal age, the age of Job, is contemporary with the pyramids of at least the Late Old Kingdom.

If the above reasoning seems somewhat tenuous, it is simply following clues where they turn up, and to follow where they might lead, which is the task and procedure of the historian.

As to Abraham in Egypt (Gen. 12: 10–20), when he passed off his wife Sarai as his sister (partly true), it is not possible to say who that pharaoh was, and any attempt to identify him is speculation.

Conclusion

To sum up thus far:

1. The schemes of third millennium BC chronology adopted by the secularists do not cohere with the short timescale of Gen. 11 for the same period; still less do the vast archaeological ages of pre-literate cultures proposed for the period prior to the emergence of the Sumerian city-states. Since it is known that several of the ostensibly sequential dynasties of the Sumerian king list were in fact contemporaneous, biblical historians should be looking for evidence that these supposedly sequential ‘cultures’ were likewise contemporary with each other. A reduced timeline is essential for correlation of ancient Mesopotamia with Scripture.
2. The scheme of Egyptian chronology requires compression, and not only in one particular area, in order to correlate it with a reduced time period for Mesopotamia, and with scriptural chronology. The Early Dynastic period, the Old Kingdom, and the three Intermediate periods all need to be reduced, but this will require serious work by a team of ancient historians and archaeologists working from a biblical framework.
3. Already there are hints and indications of correlations and synchronisms in the Scripture, which not only require a reduced timeline, but also provide some relatively fixed points for a reconstruction of ancient chronology. A subsequent article will explore this aspect further.

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Murray R. Adamthwaite graduated from Melbourne University in 1997 with a Ph.D. in Near Eastern History and Languages, and serves as sessional lecturer for the Centre for Classics and Archaeology. He also is Tutor in Old Testament with Tyndale College, Hunters Hill, NSW