

The Biblical Chronologist

WHAT HAS BEEN IS REMOTE AND EXCEEDINGLY MYSTERIOUS. WHO CAN DISCOVER IT?
(Ecclesiastes 7:24)

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The Age of the Earth Doctrine in the Early Church

How old did Christians in the early centuries A.D. believe the earth was?

I only began to deliberately research this question about a year ago.¹ A passage from the recent book *The Fingerprint of God* by Hugh Ross prompted me to do so. It stated:²

Many of the early church fathers and other biblical scholars interpreted the creation days of Genesis 1 as long periods of time. The list includes the Jewish historian Josephus (1st century); Irenaeus, bishop of Lyons, apologist, and martyr (2nd century); Origen, who rebutted heathen attacks on Christian doctrine (3rd century); Basil (4th century); Augustine (5th century); and, later, Aquinas (13th century), to name a few.

I was quite surprised by this assertion; in the course of my studies I had come across many dates for Creation which had been calculated by numerous Christian scholars of past centuries. Without exception these dates had been in terms of thousands of years only. How could early Christians have believed the days of creation were long periods of time (and, in the context of the above quote, "long periods of time" means millions of years) and still have set dates for Creation which were invariably less than ten thousand years ago? I determined to get to the bottom of the matter.

¹Much of the research for this article was carried out while I was on the faculty of the Institute for Creation Research Graduate School. Their support of this research is gratefully acknowledged.

²Hugh Ross, *The Fingerprint of God*, 2nd ed. (Orange, California: Promise Publishing Co., 1991) 141.

I began by investigating the five bibliographic references which Hugh Ross, the author, had given in support of his claim. It soon became obvious that these references failed to do their job – they did not support the claim that these early church fathers believed the six days of creation were long periods of time. In fact, they tended to do the opposite! Here, briefly, is what I found.

Ross' first reference was to Joseph P. Free's well-known Biblical archaeology and history textbook of a generation ago entitled *Archaeology and Bible History*. This appears to be the fountainhead of Ross' claim. Free writes:³

It is said that this view was held by Josephus, the Jewish historian of the first century A.D., by many rabbis, and by some early Christian fathers, including Irenaeus (2nd century), Origen (3rd century), and Augustine (4th century).

I will return to this list by Free shortly.

Ross augments Free's list of four names with two additional names of his own: Basil and Aquinas. These are curious additions, however, for it is absolutely the case that Basil and Aquinas held to literal twenty-four hour days. Davis Young (who, like Ross, believes in a billions-of-years history for the earth) has written, "Many of the church fathers plainly regarded the six days as ordinary days. Basil explicitly spoke of the day as a twenty-four-hour period."⁴

³Joseph P. Free, *Archaeology and Bible History*, 8th ed. (Wheaton, IL: Scripture Press Publications, Inc., 1962). Note that this quote is on page 20 of Free; Ross' reference is to page 50, but this seems certain to be a typographical error as nothing on page 50 of the several editions of Free which I have surveyed pertains to the views of the early church fathers or the days of Genesis.

⁴Davis A. Young, *Christianity and the Age of the Earth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982), 22.

Ross does not give any reference to Basil, but he does reference Aquinas. Apparently Ross has completely misunderstood Aquinas, however, for the reference he gives asserts Aquinas' adherence to twenty-four hour days quite plainly.

In context, Aquinas (in *Summa Theologica*) is answering the question "Whether Scripture uses suitable words to express the work of the six days?". He advances the putative objection (objection 7) in reference to Genesis 1:5,

Further, *first*, not *one*, corresponds to *second* and *third*. It should therefore have been said that, *The evening and the morning were the first day*, rather than *one day*.⁵

and then answers this objection as follows in the section which Ross references:

The words *one day* are used when day is first established, to denote that one day is made up of twenty-four hours. Hence, by mentioning *one*, the measure of a natural day is fixed.⁶

In other words, Aquinas argues that Genesis 1:5 says "And there was evening and there was morning, one day" instead of "And there was evening and there was morning, a first day" as we might otherwise expect to read, specifically to inform us that these evening and morning combinations each constituted a single, normal, twenty-four hour day. Thus, Aquinas here advances the argument that the author of Genesis chose the word "one" specifically to exclude notions that the "days" of Genesis were anything but normal, literal, twenty-four hour days.

A few sentences later Aquinas gives credit to Basil for this explanation of the significance of the word "one" in Genesis 1:5. This, evidently, is where Ross got Basil's name from. Yet I do not understand how Ross came to understand this section to support the notion that Aquinas and Basil "interpreted the creation days of Genesis 1 as long

⁵Thomas Aquinas. "The Summa Theologica," *Great Books of the Western World*, vol. 19 (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc., 1952) 375.

⁶Thomas Aquinas. "The Summa Theologica," *Great Books of the Western World*, vol. 19 (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc., 1952) 377.

periods of time." Their interpretation of Genesis 1:5 is, in fact, explicitly antithetical to that idea.

The remaining three of Ross' references (2-4) all deal exclusively with Augustine. These references entirely fail to make Ross' case, however, even for this single church father. It is true that Augustine did not hold the six days of Genesis 1 to be literal solar days, but this does not mean he supposed them to be long periods of time, by any means. Indeed, he appears to have regarded them as having no temporal duration at all! For example, from *The Literal Meaning of Genesis*:

But that day, which God has made, recurs in connection with his works *not by a material passage of time* but by spiritual knowledge, . . .⁷ [my emphasis]

and, again, from *The Confessions*

They have then their succession of morning and evening, part secretly, part apparently; for they were made of nothing, by Thee, not of Thee; not of any matter not Thine, or that was before, but of matter concreated (that is, at the same time created by Thee), because, to its state without form, Thou *without any interval of time* didst give form. For seeing the matter of heaven and earth is one thing, and the form another, Thou madest the matter of merely nothing, but the form of the world out of the matter without form; yet both together, so that the form should follow the matter *without any interval of delay*.⁸ [my emphasis]

In other places Augustine clearly shows he believed the earth was created only about six thousand years before his time. For example, he wrote: "reckoning by the sacred writings, we find that not 6000 years have yet passed."⁹ This statement appears in chapter 10 of Augustine's *The City of God*,

⁷Augustine, "The Literal Meaning of Genesis," *Ancient Christian Writers: The Works of the Father's in Translation*, vol. 1, no. 41 (New York: Newman Press, 1982) 134.

⁸Augustine, "The Confessions," *Great Books of the Western World*, vol. 18, (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc., 1952) 124.

⁹Augustine, "The City of God," *Great Books of the Western World*, vol. 18 (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc., 1952) 348.

which chapter bears the heading: *Of the falseness of the history which allots many thousand years to the world's past.* A careful reading of this chapter reveals that Augustine is here refuting contemporary pagan notions that the world was older than the few thousand years he understood the Scriptures to allow.

Augustine further defends the youthfulness of creation in the same book, chapter 12, which bears the heading: *How these persons are to be answered, who find fault with the creation of man on the score of its recent date.*¹⁰ Augustine repeatedly asserts the recent creation of man (less than six thousand years before his own time) in this chapter. Augustine clearly believed the Scriptures taught that Adam had been supernaturally created by God less than ten thousand years ago.

Augustine's view of the antiquity of creation is not prominent in his writings – this was not an issue in his day, as we have already observed. But neither is it hidden.

I suggest an accurate summary of Augustine's view of the physical history of the world would be that of an instantaneous, simultaneous, complete creation of all things by God less than six thousand years before his time. Though instantaneous, simultaneous creation of all things is not part of the usual patristic view of Genesis 1, this oddity cannot legitimately be called upon to support Ross' claim that "Many of the early church fathers and other biblical scholars interpreted the creation days of Genesis 1 as long periods of time." As with Aquinas and Basil, Augustine's view seems opposite to what Ross wishes to show.

Thus Augustine, Basil, and Aquinas do not testify in Ross' defense. What about the remaining three names in Ross' list – Josephus, Irenaeus, and Origen?

It appears that the total sum of evidence supporting Ross' claim about these remaining three is the single sentence by Free which I quoted on page 1. Notice, however, that Free makes it clear he is reciting only hearsay by his choice of words (specifically, "It is said . . .") and by the fact that he gives no references to support his statement.

Louis Lavalley gives us a glimpse into Origen's

¹⁰Augustine, "The City of God," *Great Books of the Western World*, vol. 18 (Chicago: Encyclopaedia Britannica, Inc., 1952) 349.

thinking about the age of the earth by quoting directly from his writings:

Origen (b. 185), the great theologian of the Greek churches, defended "the Mosaic account of the creation, which teaches that the world is not yet ten thousand years old, but very much under that."¹¹

It is, of course, impossible for Origen to have "interpreted the creation days of Genesis 1 as long periods of time" as Ross claims, and simultaneously to have believed that "the world is not yet ten thousand years old."

It seems unnecessary to pursue the cases of Irenaeus and Josephus. Free's hearsay was clearly not from a reliable source and should simply be disregarded.

I am not aware of any evidence supporting the notion that the early church fathers claimed millions or billions of years had passed since Creation. On the contrary, as we have seen with Augustine, these early Christians were sometimes at pains to refute such notions, which appear to have been prevalent among the pagans who surrounded them. Nowhere, that I know of, do we find them encouraging such ideas.

What does this mean to Biblical chronology research today? It shows, in a clear and objective fashion, that the text of Scripture evidently does not encourage an old-earth (billions-of-years) interpretation. If it did we should find many instances of such an interpretation, with suitable accompanying chronologies, in ancient Christian writings. In fact, if such instances do occur they must be exceedingly rare, for, as I have said, I have never seen even one.

In my study of the chronological works of early Christians I have observed the following:

1. They believed that the chronological data given in the Bible was meant to be taken literally.
2. They used this data in a straightforward manner to compute the dates of Biblical events such as the Flood of Noah and the Creation.

¹¹Louis Lavalley, "The Early Church Defended Creation Science," *Impact*, 160 (Institute for Creation Research, 10946 Woodside Ave. N., Santee, CA, 92071) October 1986, iii.

3. They used extra-Biblical data to augment Biblical chronological data as necessary and without apology.
4. They generally disagreed about the exact dates of Biblical events (sometimes by a thousand years or more – due primarily to differences in ancient Old Testament manuscripts) but were uniform in their view that Creation had taken place less than ten thousand years ago.

It seems legitimate to conclude that the Biblical text itself must possess very little, if any, inherent tendency toward an old-earth interpretation, for most of the early church fathers were competent scholars who knew the Bible well, and were not timid about proclaiming what they felt it taught. As far as I have been able to determine, Christian orthodoxy embraces only the idea of a supernatural creation of the world less than ten thousand years ago. ◊

Biblical Chronology 101

Quiz

1. The goal of true Biblical chronology research is:
 - (a) to haggle over “endless genealogies.”
 - (b) to discover what really took place in the past and when it took place.
 - (c) to discover number patterns in the Bible.
 - (d) to predict future events.
2. Historicity means:
 - (a) famous in history.
 - (b) tissue structure or organization.
 - (c) historical actuality.
 - (d) the writing of history.

[Correct answers can be found on page 8.]

The Importance of Biblical Chronology

Should Christians concern themselves with Biblical chronology? Is it important?

Yes, they should; yes, it is important. It is important because our ability to defend the truth of Christianity hinges upon it.

To see why this is so we need to take a brief look at the relationship between Biblical chronology and Christian apologetics. Since *apologetics* is not a household word, I have highlighted its definition in the box below.

apologetics: a branch of theology devoted to the defense of the divine origin and authority of Christianity.
(Webster’s Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary)

Biblical chronology lies very near the foundation of Christian apologetics. This comes about because apologetics is built upon a foundation of Biblical historicity, and Biblical historicity is, in turn, founded upon Biblical chronology.

Observe how the following three Christian scholars, from as long ago as the last century, to as recent as the current decade, emphasize the critical dependence of apologetics on historicity.

Reverend John H. Vincent, in the introduction to the 1884 Rand, McNally *Bible Atlas* wrote concerning “the book” (i.e., the Bible):

In the changes which have taken place through all these centuries, it would be an easy thing, under some circumstances, for men to deny that the people of the book ever lived, that the cities of the book were ever built, that the events of the book ever transpired. And, if its historic foundation were destroyed, the superstructure of truth, the doctrinal and ethical teachings resting upon it, might in like manner be swept away.

⋮

In an important sense the foundations of this book are laid in human history and geography. However high toward the heavens it may reach in doctrine and promise, its foundations lay hold of the earth. If the children of Israel did not live in Egypt and Canaan and the far East, if the statements of their history as recorded in the book be not *facts*, if the story of Jesus Christ be false, – everything fails us. With the sweeping away

of fact, we must also bid farewell to the words of doctrine and of promise here recorded; to the divine words of assurance which now give comfort to the penitent, hope to the despairing, strength to the feeble, and immortal life to the dying.¹²

Wheaton's Professor of Bible and Archaeology, Joseph P. Free, in the middle of this century, on the opening page of his textbook, *Archaeology and Bible History*, says it this way:

The Bible is a historical book, and the great truths of Christianity are founded upon the historic facts revealed therein. If the fact of the Virgin Birth, the fact of the Crucifixion, and the fact of the Resurrection be set aside, our faith is without foundation. Since the New Testament revelation stands upon the foundation of the Old Testament, the accuracy of the Old Testament is of great importance to us.¹³

Finally, in a recently released video series, theologian R. C. Sproul says:

Now just because a book claims to be the Word of God, doesn't make it the Word of God. Just because a book claims to be the unvarnished truth does not make it the unvarnished truth. Anybody can make a claim like that, and more than one book does make that claim. . . . We want to look beyond the simple claim, for evidences; what the scholars call the *indicia*. Is there any evidential basis for agreeing with the claim that Scripture makes?

Now, obviously, in this short period of time I can't give you a full-fledged apologetic for the integrity of sacred Scripture. But let me just give you a brief outline of how the church has proceeded historically to the conclusion that the Bible is not a myth, that it is not fable, that it is not legend, and that it is truth, and that it is *infallible* truth.

¹²John H. Vincent, *Bible Atlas*, rev. ed. (Chicago: Rand, McNally & Company, 1884) iii-iv.

¹³Joseph P. Free, *Archaeology and Bible History*, 8th ed. (Wheaton, IL: Scripture Press Publications, Inc., 1962), 1.

The starting point in the inquiry is this question: "Does the Bible communicate basically reliable information?" Is it a basically reliable historical document? Not, is it inspired; not, is it infallible; not, is it any of that; but just, is it a good historical source?

Now, obviously, if the answer to that question is, "No, it's not even basically reliable," there's no reason under the sun why we should spend five minutes in "recreation" attending its message.¹⁴

All three scholars make the same point: if the Bible can be convicted of any falsehood in regard to history, then there is no basis for the claim that Christianity is true. The defense of the truth of Christianity is entirely dependent upon the truth of Biblical history; Christian apologetics is rooted in Biblical historicity.

This explains why Biblical *historicity* is important. But why is Biblical *chronology* important?

It is evident that there is an intimate connection between history and chronology. As has often been stated: "chronology is the backbone of history." Because of this close relationship, it is, in fact, essentially impossible to defend Biblical historicity apart from a true and accurate Biblical chronology.

The past several centuries of church history seem to me to have clearly demonstrated this fact. It is surely no coincidence that the rise of theological liberalism (which is conceived in a rejection of Biblical historicity) followed on the heels of the attack on the historic Christian doctrine regarding the date of Creation. I suggest that the existence of the phenomenon of liberalism within the church is very largely a result of a failure in Biblical chronology – a failure to correlate Biblical history, including the Creation and the Flood, with extra-Biblical data in a fashion which was intellectually satisfying and, at the same time, true to both the text of Scripture and the data of science.

But we are out of space. Perhaps we will have opportunity to explore this further next issue.

The take-home lesson for today is that Biblical chronology is foundational to Christian apologet-

¹⁴R. C. Sproul, "His Word is Truth", in the *Ultimate Issues* video series. Ligonier Ministries, P.O. Box 547500, Orlando, FL 32854.

ics. This means that Christians who keep themselves properly informed and current in this field will find that they are uniquely able to carry out the mandate of 1 Peter 3:15 to be “ready to make a defense to every one who asks you to give an account for the hope that is in you.” And, as an added bonus, they will find that their comprehension and appreciation of the Bible has grown enormously. ◊

Research in Progress

There have been several exciting developments since last issue. Recall that I had proposed:

Flood Hypothesis 1 *The Chalcolithic in Palestine was catastrophically terminated by the Biblical/historical event known as Noah’s Flood.*

I had advanced two questions which I felt needed to be answered in attempting to evaluate whether this hypothesis was true or not:

1. What physical/archaeological evidence can be found bearing on the question of whether the Chalcolithic was terminated by a *flood*?
2. How widespread was the cultural hiatus which is seen in Palestine at the end of the Chalcolithic?

I will report on these two questions separately below. While my investigation is far from complete, what I have found, thus far, tends to confirm the hypothesis.

Was the Chalcolithic terminated by a flood?

I quickly learned that Tell Ghassul is regarded as the principal Chalcolithic site in Palestine. It is situated in the Jordan Valley about three miles northeast of the Dead Sea. It is a large site, covering roughly fifty acres. While I have not yet located comprehensive chronological data for the site, it must have been occupied over a fairly long period of time; the remains are over fifteen feet deep in places, and over one hundred successive floor levels of mud-brick houses with stone foundations have been excavated.

Does Tell Ghassul show any signs of having been flooded at the end of its history? The following observation seems significant in this regard.

Because the site is composed of a number of small hillocks, its previous excavators thought it represented a group of small, closely tied settlements. Recent work has shown that these hillocks are in fact the result of erosion and represent the remains of a single large settlement.¹⁵

We would expect flood waters to erode some areas and deposit sediments in others. The overall degree of erosion and deposition would depend on the intensity of the flood – the speed of the water flowing across the surface, its depth, etc. The effect of a flood at any particular site would depend on several factors as well – local topography and surface material, for example. I am not in a position to quantitatively assess any of these factors at the present time. I only note that floods normally erode at least some areas, and Tell Ghassul, the largest pre-Flood settlement in Palestine according to our hypothesis, is found to be carved up into a number of small hillocks by erosion.

The fact that this site is 295 meters (968 feet) below sea level and fairly arid today seems to add additional significance to this observation. It does not seem likely to me that this sort of erosion could result from normal processes active in the area today. The fact that the originally continuous tell has been carved into separate hillocks suggests the removal of substantial quantities of material, including sizable stones used as foundations for the houses. This seems possible only through the action of significant volumes of moving water.

However, Noah’s Flood is not the only imaginable source of significant volumes of water in the area. For example, the site seems to have been much wetter when it was founded than it is today.

The available evidence indicates that Tuleilat el-Ghassul was initially settled on a sandbar surrounded by slow-moving water, perhaps in a swampy

¹⁵Thomas E. Levy, “Ghassul, Tuleilat el-,” *The New Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavations in the Holy Land*, vol. 2, ed. Ephraim Stern (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993), 508.

environment.¹⁶

Note, however, that the site existed in this initial environment without being eroded; it was eroded into separate hillocks subsequent to its use as a settlement area, not during it.

As usual, much more research is required before definitive conclusions can be reached. I simply note, at this stage, that readily available evidence from the most significant Chalcolithic site in Palestine seems sympathetic to the hypothesis under investigation.

How widespread was this event?

Did the cultural hiatus which is seen at the end of the Chalcolithic in Palestine occur in Egypt as well? I began to investigate this question while visiting the British Museum late last summer. The British Museum has a number of excellent displays tracing the history of Egypt from its earliest prehistoric beginnings through the predynastic and into the dynastic. I spent a number of hours studying these displays trying to determine if there was any apparent discontinuity in culture at any point in time. My tentative conclusion was that the only possibility was during the predynastic, between what are termed the Nagada II and Nagada III periods. (*Nagada* is sometimes spelled *Naqada* or *Naquada*.) I am still of this persuasion.

To keep the discussion (and my research) focused, I advance the following new hypothesis:

Flood Hypothesis 2 *The Nagada II period in Egypt was terminated by Noah's Flood.*

This hypothesis faces several immediate hurdles. These do not seem insurmountable to me (else I would not advance the hypothesis) but some serious readjustment of current scholarly opinion regarding the nature and timing of the prehistory of Egypt will be required if this hypothesis is true.

The first hurdle is obvious from the terminology. We would expect the Flood to be at the end of a period (such as the Chalcolithic in Palestine), not between two phases of the same period, as in this instance: Nagada II and Nagada III. The fact

¹⁶Thomas E. Levy, "Ghassul, Tuleilat el-," *The New Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavations in the Holy Land*, vol. 2, ed. Ephraim Stern (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1993), 508.

that these two phases have the same period name suggests basic continuity, not the discontinuity we would expect from Noah's Flood.

Yet, so far, I have been unable to find any compelling evidence to support the notion that Nagada II and Nagada III were continuous. For example, while I am no pottery expert, the pottery of these two periods seems to show a great deal more disparity than similarity. As Figure 1 clearly shows, there is basic continuity of pottery forms from Nagada I, into Early Nagada II, and through Late Nagada II – but not into Nagada III. Most obvious is the absence of black-topped pottery in Nagada III.

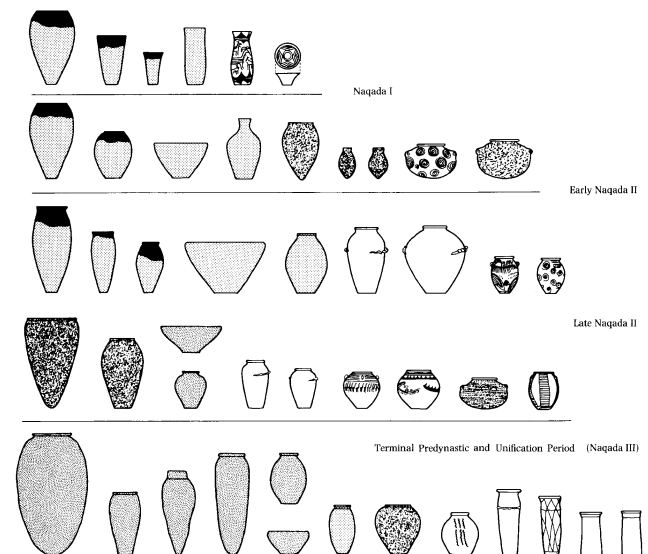


Figure 1: Pottery from Nagada I, II, and III in Egypt. [From A. J. Spencer, *Early Egypt: The Rise of Civilization in the Nile Valley* (London: British Museum Press, 1993), 11.]

I am currently wondering whether the notion of continuity may be coming from evolutionary theories of the origin of civilization in Egypt rather than from the material data? The evolutionary paradigm is one of gradual change and advancement toward higher levels of achievement. Those who work within its framework are inherently ill-equipped to discern or appreciate discontinuity and sudden change.

The sense I have at the present time is that the database from which the prehistory of Egypt is currently being extracted is inadequate to clearly

reveal the nature of the prehistory of Egypt subsequent to Nagada II. At the current rate of archaeological research, however, I would not expect this to be the case for very long. Perhaps we will see new interpretations and new nomenclature by scholars in this field before very long.

The second hurdle is purely chronological. Biblical chronology leads to a date of *ca.* 3520 B.C. for Noah's Flood. The currently accepted date for the end of Nagada II is, apparently, around 3200 B.C., about 300 years later.

However, this date (3200 B.C.) is part of an overall sequence of dates leading up to the beginning of the dynastic period and the Old Kingdom in Egypt. (That is, it is in some sense tied to the Old Kingdom dates.) We now know that the presently accepted dates for the Old Kingdom are about three hundred years too young.¹⁷ It seems likely, therefore, that the presently accepted date for the end of Nagada II is also about three hundred years too young. My preliminary investigation of radiocarbon dates from Nagada II is supportive of this possibility. Perhaps we will have room to look at this in greater detail next issue.

Summary

The relationship of the chronologies of Scripture, Palestine, and Egypt near 3500 B.C. which I am proposing by the two hypotheses advanced above is shown in Figure 2. The following four statements seem to me to accurately summarize the data we have discussed so far in relation to these hypotheses:

1. The Chalcolithic in Palestine appears to have been abruptly terminated by a disaster of some sort.
2. The principal Chalcolithic site in Palestine has been significantly eroded, apparently by water, subsequent to its long history as a settlement.
3. It seems possible that a cultural hiatus may exist in Egypt between Nagada II and Nagada III.

¹⁷Gerald E. Aardsma, *A New Approach to the Chronology of Biblical History from Abraham to Samuel* (San Diego: Institute for Creation Research, 1995), 46.

4. It seems possible that Nagada II terminated around 3500 B.C.

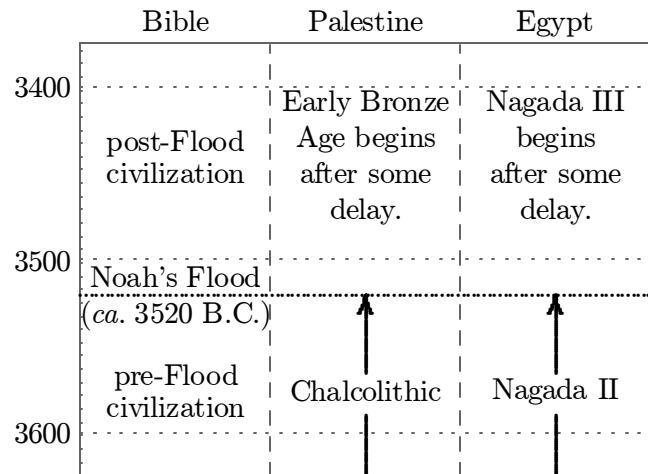


Figure 2: Proposed relationship of the chronologies of Scripture, Palestine, and Egypt near 3500 B.C.

The quest continues! ◇

Quiz answers: 1b, 2c.

The Biblical Chronologist is a bimonthly subscription newsletter about Biblical chronology. It is written and edited by Gerald E. Aardsma, a Ph.D. scientist (nuclear physics) with special background in radioisotopic dating methods such as radiocarbon. *The Biblical Chronologist* has a threefold purpose:

1. to encourage, enrich, and strengthen the faith of conservative Christians through instruction in Biblical chronology,
2. to foster informed, up-to-date, scholarly research in this vital field within the conservative Christian community, and
3. to communicate current developments and discoveries in Biblical Chronology in an easily understood manner.

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