

Chronology of Noah and the Flood

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As I explain on the [Bible chronology main page](#) and in [The Genealogies in the Bible: Are they Complete?](#), it is not possible to use the figures provided in Genesis 5 and Genesis 11 to determine a chronology of the patriarchs prior to Terah, so they cannot tell us when exactly Noah lived.¹

However, the internal or relative chronology of Noah and the Flood is surprisingly detailed, especially during the two Flood years.

1. What Kind of Calendar was Noah Using?

Throughout Genesis 7 and 8 various months in a 12-month year are mentioned, but it is not entirely clear what kind of months these were. As I mentioned in footnote 6 in my discussion of [The Hebrew Calendar](#) at the end of my Exodus article, ~~the calendar of these numbered months used in Genesis 7 and 8 does~~ not seem to ~~follow~~ a lunar / lunisolar calendar as is the later Hebrew Calendar, since ~~every month seems to have~~ we find a 5-month period in which each month has 30 days, based on the figure of 150 days from the 17th day of the 2nd month to the 17th day of the 7th month stated in Genesis 8:3-4. In a lunar / lunisolar calendar this could not happen, in fact the months normally alternated between 29 and 30 days, though about once every 3 years two 30-day months would occur together.

If we assume that this string of five 30-day months implies that all the months had 30 days, ~~this~~ This still would not bring the year up to 365 days, only to 360, but without additional information it is impossible to determine exactly what kind of a calendar was being used. It is also impossible to determine at what time of year the calendar year was considered to begin, whether it was the same as the later Hebrew calendar or not. Actually, the months may not refer to a calendar year at all, but to Noah's years based on his birthdate. ~~Read the Hebrew calendar discussion at the link above for details on some of the issues involved.~~

There were several ancient calendars in which all the months had 30 days and thus did not follow the actual lunar cycle, including the [Avestan calendar](#) and the [ancient Egyptian calendar](#), and it is possible that Noah might have used some such calendar. ~~These both added 5 extra days at the end of the year to bring the year up to 365 days.~~

However, it would really be more natural for Noah to have used a lunar / lunisolar calendar, since these seem to have been the original calendars around the world, as I mention in footnote 6 in my discussion of [The Hebrew Calendar](#). There were no complications to this kind of calendar: the beginning of each month was determined by simply observing when the new moon occurred. But this would mean that there could not be five 30-day months in a row.

~~This article~~ [this article](#) suggests ~~another~~ a possible solution to this dilemma. It assumes that Noah was using a lunar (~~or~~ / lunisolar) calendar just as the Israelites did later, ~~which is actually more likely, since these seem to have been the original calendars around the world, as I mention in footnote 6 in my discussion of The Hebrew Calendar, and the beginning of each month was determined by observing when the new moon occurred. This would mean that there could not be five 30-day months in a row.~~ However, the article suggests that during those 150 days Noah was "allowing exactly 30 days to a month because, at first, the rain and fog prevented him from seeing the moon. Finally, he was able to rectify his running account of time elapsed through an actual sighting of the moon after the rain stopped and the mountain tops appeared".

That article also points out that, if Noah were using a lunar calendar, each year would come out to around 354 days instead of 365. In the long term there was a mechanism for dealing with this issue to keep the months in synch with the years (see my discussion on the [The Hebrew Calendar](#)), but in the short run 12 months would only run to 354 days. Because of this it is not clear if they were in the ark

375 days following some sort of solar calendar or 364 days following a lunar calendar (see chart below). This is rather an academic question, since either way it was a long time, but to be precise I need to mention it.

I have found a number of Young Earth Creationist (YEC) websites that claim that before the Flood the lunar month really was exactly 30 days, but that the cataclysm of a global flood changed it to what it is now, on the average 29.53 days. The article cited above discusses this theory. ~~However, and not very positively, even though the author is also a YEC. In any case,~~ this is simply not ~~the case~~ true: in fact both the length of the day and the length of the lunar month have been slowly *increasing* over time, as [this article](#) demonstrates: «Ancient “tidalites” (tidal sediment layers) and coral, mollusk, and stromatolite growth layers record the lunar and solar tidal cycles, giving us unique data on the length of terrestrial days and lunar months in ancient times. Such data tell us that 500 million years ago, a day was about 20 hours long and a month was about 27.5 (present-epoch) days.»

1.2. A Local Flood

I am an Old Earth Creationist (OEC), and I believe that the Flood was a local flood, not a global flood, probably in the Tigris-Euphrates valley, ~~though its effects were global in terms of wiping out all of mankind except Noah’s family.~~ The scientific evidence requires ~~this a local flood,~~ and a proper reading of Genesis 6-9 is perfectly compatible with this view. See my article [The Natural Reading of Noah’s Flood as a Local Flood](#) for more on this.

However, ~~my chronology shown below is independent of any view on the extent of the flood or the age of the earth or the age of mankind, but simply shows how all the figures in Genesis 6-9 fit together in an internal chronology.~~

2.3. Chart of the Chronology of the Flood

For ~~the~~ colors used in the chart below, see [Format](#).

Noah's age	Month Number	Day of the Month	Supporting Verses in Genesis	Passages in Genesis	Events
480??			6:3??	6:13-21	God commands Noah to build the ark.?? (Interpretation 1 of Genesis 6:3; see below.)
500			5:32, 11:10, 9:24 ^c		Japheth born.
502			"		Shem born.
??					Ham born.
??				6:13-21	God commands Noah to build the ark.?? (Interpretation 2 of Genesis 6:3; see below.)
				6:32	Noah builds the ark.
600	1				
	2	10 17	7:4,6,10 7:11,13	7:1-9 7:10-16	At God's command Noah and his family make final preparations to enter the ark. ^d After 7 days they enter the ark to stay, the rain and the floods begin.
	3				
	4	7	7:17	7:17	Rain ends after 40 days.
	5				
	6				

The Flood lasts 150 days. (Gen. 7:24,8:3)

	7	17	8:4	8:4	The ark comes to rest on the hills/mountains of Ararat. _____
	8				
	9				
	10	1	8:5	8:5	The tops of the hills/mountains are seen.
	11	11 18 25	8:6 8:10 8:12	8:6-9 8:10-11 8:12	After 40 days Noah sends forth a raven, which doesn't return, and a dove, which does. ⁴ After 7 days Noah sends the dove again, which returns with an olive leaf, waters have subsided. After 7 days Noah sends the dove again, which doesn't return.
	12				
601	1	1	8:13	8:13	The waters are dried off the earth. Noah removes the covering of the ark, sees that the ground is dry.
	2				
	3	27	8:14	8:14-9:17	The earth has dried out, they leave the ark, Noah builds an altar, covenant. (In ark 1 year 12 months, 10 days , for a solar year 375 days, but for a lunar year 364 days. See discussion of this above.)
	4				
	5				
	6				
	7				
	8				
	9				
	10				
	11				
	12				
602			11:10		Sometime during this year Arpachshad is born.

3.4. The Two Interpretations of Genesis 6:3

In the chart above I have listed “God commands Noah to build the ark” in two different places. This depends on the interpretation of Genesis 6:3. This verse is ambiguous, as can be seen in these two translations:

NIV: Then the LORD said, “My Spirit will not contend with* humans forever, for they are mortal†; their days will be a hundred and twenty years.”

* Or *My spirit will not remain in*

† Or *corrupt*

ESV: Then the LORD said, “My Spirit shall not abide in* man forever, for he is flesh: his days shall be 120 years.”

* Or *My Spirit shall not contend with*

The NIV gives one interpretation in its main text, and the ESV gives another, though each also gives the other interpretation in a footnote.

Interpretation 1: Most commentators⁵ interpret Genesis 6:3 as specifying the year of God’s command to Noah and the beginning of the construction of the ark. They thus interpret the verse as giving the people living at that time 120 years before the Flood would wipe them out. This is the interpretation suggested by the NIV, the King James, and many other Bibles. Many give 1 Peter 3:20 as evidence of this interpretation: “...when God’s patience waited in the days of Noah, while the ark was being prepared”, though since no time period is mentioned there, this is not conclusive. However, those of this opinion must assume that the command in Genesis 6:13-21 was given some 20 years before the birth of his sons, and several commentators explicitly state this. How many years would it take to build such an ark? A lot, many, many years. So a period of 120 years is not excluded simply for being too long.

Interpretation 2: A few commentators⁶ interpret this verse as referring to the maximum lifespan that people will attain to after the Flood, unlike the very long lifespans they had before the Flood. This is the interpretation suggested by the ESV, the International Standard Version, and some other Bibles. One reason that favors this interpretation is that the general structure of Genesis 6 gives the impression that Noah’s sons had already been born at the time God gave his command, and even that they were already married.

Which interpretation do I prefer? I simply don’t know, but it must be one or the other, it cannot mean both at the same time.⁷ I probably lean a bit toward the first, since it seems to make more sense in the context of the events, since lifespans are never discussed, but the destruction of mankind is.

¹ In his book [Navigating Genesis](#) Hugh Ross proposes that the period before the flood, from Adam to Noah, occurred during the [last glacial period](#), when the Persian Gulf was dry because of lowered sea levels, and that all of humanity remained in this area and the Tigris-Euphrates valley. I think this theory is quite probable. He further proposes that “Noah would have been alive roughly 40,000 years ago and Adam and Eve anywhere from 60,000 to 100,000 years ago.” (Ross, Hugh. *Navigating Genesis: A Scientist’s Journey through Genesis 1–11* (Kindle Locations 1265-1266). RTB Press. Kindle Edition.) Dr. Ross ~~has~~ personally clarified to me [on January 1, 2018](#), that his current estimate for Noah’s range is 40,000±30,000 years ago, and further stated: “The scientific dates for the origin of human beings have very large error bars, typically ±150,000 years. Genesis 2 implies that Adam and Eve were created during the last ice age. The last ice age lasted from 130,000 years ago to 15,000 years ago. Reliable carbon-14 dates place humans on Earth at 44,000 years ago. Therefore, Adam was created between 45,000 to 130,000 years ago.”

² These three verses allow us to determine the birth order of Noah’s three sons: 1. Japheth, 2. Shem, 3. Ham. It is clear from Genesis 11:10 that Shem must have been born when Noah was 502, since Noah was 600 years old when the Flood came, according to Genesis 7:11, but at least one son must have been born when Noah was 600, according to Genesis 5:32, and that son must have been Japheth, since Ham is clearly the youngest son, according to Genesis 9:24. (The year 502 for Shem is assuming that Genesis 11:10 is referring to 2 years from the *start* of the Flood, not its end.) The one verse that might seem to tell us who was the oldest is Genesis 10:21, but unfortunately it is ambiguous, as these two translations show:

ESV: To Shem also, the father of all the children of Eber, the elder brother of Japheth, children were born.

NIV: Sons were also born to Shem, whose older brother was* Japheth; Shem was the ancestor of all the sons of Eber.

*Or *Shem, the older brother of*

Various English translations take one or the other of these positions, though most seem to prefer the former. Those that prefer the latter include the *King James* and its successors, the *NIV*, *Darby*, *Webster’s*, and *Young’s Literal Translation*. I have not found a single Spanish translation that takes the second position, though the *Biblia de las Américas* does have it as a footnote.

Different commentators take one or the other of these positions, as shown at [biblehub.com/commentaries/genesis/10-21.htm](#). Here Ellicott says that Shem is the oldest, and says, “the rules of Hebrew grammar will admit of no other rendering”, but this is not true, instead it is unclear which person the adjective “older” applies to, as shown in [this book](#) (it says that all English versions except the *King James* make Shem the oldest; this may have been true in 1953, but now quite a few take this position, as I mentioned above). According to [this page](#), “first century Jewish historian Josephus (*Antiquities of the Jews*, Book 1, Chapter 6) says that Japheth (Japhet) was Noah’s first male child, followed by Ham and then Shem.” Josephus certainly knew Hebrew and the Old Testament, so he must not have agreed with Ellicott. Presumably he interpreted Genesis 9:24 as saying that Ham was a “younger” son, not the youngest, though that is not the most natural interpretation. Most English translations have “youngest”, though the *King James* and its successors do have “younger”.

The three brothers are always listed as “Shem, Ham, and Japheth”, which might seem to suggest that Shem was the oldest, but there are other cases where the reverse is the case, as in Genesis 11:26, as discussed at 2166 B.C. on my [Bible chronology main page](#).

³ It is a bit difficult to determine whether Noah and his family entered the ark at the beginning of the seven days mentioned in Genesis 7:4 and 7:11, or at the end. Verses 7 and 10 give the impression that it was at the beginning of the seven days, but verse 13 gives the impression that it was at the end, and it uses the phrase “On the very same day”, so apparently they didn’t go in to stay until the last day, and were making final preparations and going in and out during the whole week.

⁴ It is not totally clear if the dove was sent out on the same day as the raven, but this only affects the next two events, not the rest of the chronology.

⁵ E.g. T. C. Mitchell in the “Noah” article in the *New Bible Dictionary*, [John Calvin](#), and all commentators at [biblehub.com/commentaries/genesis/6-3.htm](#) except Ellicott and the Cambridge Bible, and Matthew Henry who does not address the issue.

⁶ E.g. Ellicott and the Cambridge Bible at [biblehub.com/commentaries/genesis/6-3.htm](#), and Hugh Ross repeatedly in *Navigating Genesis*.

⁷ This is a basic principle of biblical interpretation for those who consider the Bible God’s inspired Word and inerrant, called the [historical-grammatical method](#), which assumes that “each bible passage ha[s] one basic meaning”. It aims to [“discover the meaning of the passage as the original author would have intended and what the original hearers would have understood”](#). This may not always be evident to us today, but we must try to determine what it would have been in each case.