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Number Manipulation for Profit, or Just for Fun?

When the writer of the Gospel of Matthew listed the genealogy of Christ, he divided it into three sections, each containing 14 generations, to wit, Abraham to David, David to the Exile, and the Exile to Christ (Matthew 1:17; also 1–17). In order to do this he had to manipulate the names by leaving out several ancestors mentioned in the Old Testament.¹ The reason Matthew thought it necessary to create this mathematical/genealogical fiction has never been explained adequately.²

Today the significance of such numbers is rarely understood. What is known is that in manipulating the numbers, Matthew was only following an ancient Near Eastern tradition. For example, the Sumerian King List was produced about four thousand years ago and forgotten. It was unearthed in Mesopotamia a little over a hundred years ago and was published in various European language versions between 1906 and 1923. It records the years that early Mesopotamian kings reigned. (As an aside, the Sumerian King List assigns much longer reigns to the kings who served before the flood than those who served after the flood. In one case an antediluvian king was listed as reigning for 36,000 years,³ which makes the numbers in Genesis for the antediluvians seem extremely conservative.) The number of years each king reigned, as Dwight Young has pointed out, is often a square number or the sum of squares. For example, reigns of 900 years (30^2); 324 (18^2); 136 ($10^2 + 6^2$); and 116 ($10^2 + 4^2$) are recorded.⁴

This ancient tradition of manipulating numbers can also be found in the ages the Old Testament assigns to the patriarchs. At first glance, the numbers may seem a bit large but otherwise unremarkable. Abraham is reported to have lived, according to the Hebrew Bible (Leningrad Codex), to the ripe old age of 175. His son, Isaac, lived to be 180. Abraham's grandson, Jacob, lived only to the age of 147. And Joseph, Jacob's son, lived the shortest life of all—110. Not too much extraordinary about 175, 180, 147, and 110, at least on the surface.⁵

However, like the reigns of some of the kings in the Sumerian King List, the ages of the patriarchs are products of a multiplier and a square and in one case the sum of squares. What is even

more remarkable, there is an elegant mathematical progression in the ages of the patriarchs. Before reading on, you might want to try your hand at enciphering the mathematical progression between 175, 180, 147, and 110.

After a lot of dead ends, you might have been successful at figuring out that Abraham's age is 7×5^2 , Isaac's age 5×6^2 , and Jacob's age 3×7^2 . Based on this progression, Joseph would have lived to be 1×8^2 . But 64 does not equal 110. The mathematical progression has to be altered slightly to arrive at Joseph's age. He actually lived to be $1 \times (5^2 + 6^2 + 7^2)$, which equals 110. Neatly stated:

Abraham	$175 = 7 \times 5^2$
Isaac	$180 = 5 \times 6^2$
Jacob/Israel	$147 = 3 \times 7^2$
Joseph	$110 = 1 \times (5^2 + 6^2 + 7^2)$

It seems to me that this striking mathematical progression can hardly have been produced by chance. Not only does it employ squares, similar to some of the numbers in the Sumerian King List, but the mathematical progression is too perfect to have happened by accident. It is obvious that someone has manipulated the numbers to produce the symmetry, either God or a mortal author or a subsequent redactor. The question of who manipulated the text is beyond the scope of this short note. But regardless of who produced the progression, perhaps we can speculate about what it may signify. And, I must emphasize, speculation is all that I can offer.

The first thing that stands out is that the sequence links Abraham to Joseph. The biblical view is that the rightful biological succession of the chosen people passes from Abraham to Isaac to Jacob and finally to Joseph, even though Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph were not the eldest sons. Whoever manipulated the numbers in order to reinforce the biological chain may have been trying to covertly reinforce the overt succession line.

If the Hebrew Bible denies that Abraham's firstborn son, Ishmael, became his legitimate heir, then it is also possible that the age the Bible assigns to Ishmael might reflect this view. In fact, Ishmael lived to be 137 (Genesis 25:17). But 137 is a prime number and not the product of a multiplier and a square.⁶ Even the age of his circumcision at thirteen (Genesis 17:25) represents a prime number.⁷ I need to point out, however, that the Qur'an

does not record a similar number game with the ages of Abraham and Ishmael.

It is also possible that the manipulation of the number sequences in the age of the patriarchs may point to a tendentious view that Joseph represents the sum of the patriarchs. As tempting to Latter-day Saints as this view may be, namely, that Joseph and not some other son of Jacob should be considered the sum of the patriarchs, I must doubt that God imparts important doctrine through mathematical games or arcane manipulations. I must question the presence of any authentic secret information encoded in holy writ.

Nevertheless, someone must have enjoyed manipulating the numbers. We too, as the recipients of such manipulations, can have fun discovering the formulas, as long as we don't take them too seriously. The warning of President Harold B. Lee is always appropriate, that some ideas "are not handicapped by having any authentic information" in them.⁸ ♦

By Paul Y. Hoskisson

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Notes

Most of the concepts in this article have been mentioned previously in a wide range of scholarly journals and commentaries.

1. For example, between Ozias and Joatham in verses 8 and 9, Matthew left out Joash, Amaziah, and Azariah (Joash was the son of Ozias [Ahaziah in 2 Kings 11:2] and the father of Amaziah, grandfather of Azariah and great grandfather of Joatham [Jotham in 2 Kings 15:7]). Luke more realistically has 56 ancestors from Abraham to Christ.

2. Some people have suggested that the gematria of King David's name may have something to do with Matthew's choice of the number "fourteen." The Hebrew letters in David's name, דוד, given their numerical value, add up to the number fourteen.

3. See Thorkild Jacobsen, *The Sumerian King List* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1939), 70–71, for the 36,000-year reign of á-lál-gar.

4. Dwight Young, "A Mathematical Approach to Certain Dynastic Spans in the Sumerian King List," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 47/2 (1988): 123–24. See the entire article, 123–29, for a convenient summary of some of the mathematical manipulations of the numbers in the Sumerian King List.

5. The age of 110 seems to be an ideal in ancient Egypt. See Rosalind M. and Jac. J. Janssen, *Growing Up and Getting Old in Ancient Egypt* (London: Golden House Publications, 2007), 197, 201–2.

6. It is however the sum of $9^2 + (8 \times 7)$.

7. It is though the sum of $2^2 + 3^2$.

8. Harold B. Lee, in Conference Report, October 1972, 128. I have placed his words in a different context than he spoke them, but have remained true to the point he made.

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