

Were The Sons Of Noah Triplets?

1. Early patterns and challenges in Genesis

In the early chapters of the book of Genesis, a pattern emerges regarding the births of the patriarchs' sons. This pattern changes slightly after around chapter eleven. The way in which births are noted is significant when it comes to establishing an idea of how much time elapsed between the creation of Adam and Eve and the flood during the time of Noah. Examining this pattern, and the births recorded, creates a reliable timeline of events, but it also raises some questions. One of those has to do with the relationship between Noah's sons, Shem, Ham and Japheth. This question isn't a doctrinal issue, but, like determining how much time Noah had to build the Ark, is one that makes us dig in and really think about what God's recorded for us.

2. Genealogies, bloodlines and lineage

There are chapters in the Bible we have a tendency to avoid or don't look forward to reading. The opening chapters of **First Chronicles** as well as genealogical lists in the books of **Nehemiah** and **Ezra** are a few of these. We may fail to recognize the importance of these lists. The only genealogical lists we usually study to some degree are those in the accounts of Matthew and Luke tracing Jesus earthly ancestors. We can understand the importance of the accounts by Ezra and Nehemiah, or the Chronicles, as the Jewish nation is returning from seventy years of Babylonian exile. It was critical to know who the Levites were, descendants of Aaron, familial connections for land ownership and inheritance. But as we recede into the far past in the book of Genesis we see the lists, make a note of the table of nations and settlements after the flood and the rise of the family of Abraham and that's about as far as it goes. But, there's a lot of information embedded in these accounts that's easily overlooked.

Genesis provides the account of creation in specific and finite terms. Each day of creation is marked by the phrase "*the evening and the morning*" for each of the six days during which God made the world and physical universe. Other details, such as the geographical location of Eden are specified with concrete markers such as the rivers issuing from the garden. As the narrative develops we see the first comprehensive list of patriarchs and their offspring, usually marked by the birth of probably the oldest son who would become the family leader in each successive generation.

The family trees of the patriarchs given in Genesis are specific. We can start with Adam and trace the timeline of human families with precision until we come to the time of Abraham. At that point the births of the sons who will figure prominently in the development of God's plan are noted, but we no longer have some of the previous metrics. For instance, we're told that Adam was 130 years old when Seth was born. Seth, while not being the eldest, is a focal point, since Abel is dead and Cain's cut off and wandering due to his sin. From that point we can trace the births of successive generations following a specific pattern. The patriarch is named, we're told his age at the time his son is born, then we're given a summary of the number of years the Patriarch lives. The ages given are specific, and while some might argue with the overall timeline, we can trace the number of years right up to the flood.

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A term that's important is "**begat**" and I'll talk about that shortly. A problem that arises in discussions of the book of Genesis is the idea that in these early genealogies, generations are skipped, or, there are generations that aren't included. A careful examination of the Genesis text shows that there are no missing generations, no estimated times, no figurative intervals. The age of the patriarchs and the birth of their sons, is concrete and leaves no room to insert the passage of hundreds or thousands of years. Those who don't accept the early genealogies as given reject the idea that the Earth is much younger than many would like to view it. In our day and time it's almost incomprehensible that the world may be dramatically younger and historical events far more condensed than they're generally thought to be. The Bible confirms in other places that God made the world in six days, describes those days as having an evening and morning, rested on the seventh day and these ordinances of heaven haven't changed.

Some Bible believers subscribe to the concept of Theistic Evolution to expand certain ideas. At the heart of the controversy is that humans were believed to be primitive, hunter - gatherers, loosely bound familial groups who eventually adopted more complex social structures and grew into nations. Evolution needs a lot of time for that to happen. Humans had to develop more brain capacity, learn to use tools, overcome the natural world they lived in and adapt to environmental changes before more advanced societies emerged. If we stop for a minute and take a quick look at a snapshot of history we can see how rapidly the world and the abilities of humans develop.

We can understand that by reviewing developments in our time. In the late 18th century, tools were less advanced than what we have now, industry was still in it's infancy. There were no technologies to make communication instantaneous or transportation to cover hundreds of miles in a single day. But, from the time that the United States was established and declared it's independence from England in 1776 until now, 250 years later, we have computers, the internet, space travel, mass transit and technologies that no one from two centuries ago would comprehend. Looking at the lives of the patriarchs we have no idea what they achieved or were able to create in the time from Adam and Eve's exile from Eden until the day God brought the flood. In our time we suffer from a chronological arrogance that sees early humans as being no more intelligent than some animals and lacking any ability to accomplish much at all. A view that I believe is completely wrong but we'll save that discussion for another time.

The word begat, as seen in the earliest part of the narrative, refers to the point at which a live birth takes place. Some have the idea that the term refers to fathering a child but that explanation doesn't guarantee inclusion of a live birth. In the book of Genesis, the genealogical tables that are given set a precedent for the use of the word. A patriarch is identified, a son is begotten, and the age of the patriarch is noted. Specifically, we see a patriarch identified and at a definite age we see the statement that he "**begat**" his son. The term begat means "**to bring forth**" and in that definition we have verification of a live birth. The genealogies of early Genesis are definite and as we construct a timeline we see an uninterrupted, unbroken chain of births we can trace forward to the flood and afterward. Let's take a look at this chain up to the time of Noah.

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Genesis 5 provides a genealogy from which we can construct a timeline.

1. At the age of 130 Adam begat Seth - **Gen 5.3**
2. At the age of 105 Seth begat Enos - **Gen 5.6**
3. At the age of 90 Enos begat Cainan - **Gen 5.9**
4. At the age of 70 Cainan begat Mahalaleel - **Gen 5.12**
5. At the age of 65 Mahalaleel begat Jared - **Gen 5.15**
6. At the age of 162 Jared begat Enoch - **Gen 5.18**
7. At the age of 65 Enoch begat Methuselah - **Gen 5.21**
8. At the age of 187 Methuselah begat Lamech - **Gen 5.25**
9. At the age of 182 Lamech begat Noah - **Gen 5.28-29**

I want to stop here and highlight something critical to this particular discussion. In each of the generations listed, the son born is a single child. In most instances in the narrative the term “*begat*” and the record, refers to a single birth. When we come to Noah and his offspring, there’s a difference.

3. Noah’s sons and the providence of God

In the genealogy in **Genesis 5**, we have the patriarch identified, his age and the fact that a son is begotten, or brought forth. As I noted earlier these are single births and the way the narrative is constructed forms a pattern. Until we get to Noah. “*And Noah was five hundred years old: and Noah begat Shem, Ham, and Japheth.*” (**Gen 5.32**). On the surface this statement seems to indicate that at his age of 500, Noah had brought forth three sons who are listed. The usual interpretation of this is that at the stated age, Noah already had three sons and Noah’s exact age at the time of their births isn’t given. But that violates and breaks the established pattern. It also contradicts information we reviewed in the discussion on how long Noah had to build the ark concerning the age of his sons after the flood.

If we consider the information about the births of Noah’s sons to be consistent with the preceding genealogical pattern, then we can conclude that they were all born during Noah’s 500th year, and the only way that could take place is if Noah either had multiple wives, or, his sons were triplets, and therefore born at the same time. That would be consistent with the pattern of births listed for the patriarchs. Multiple wives on Noah’s part would imply he had violated God’s pattern for marriage, which is inconsistent with the information we have about him. The record states, “*Noah was a just man and perfect in his generations, and Noah walked with God.*” (**Gen 6.9**).

Let’s rule out the possibility that the births of Noah’s sons is a summary describing the patriarchs status at the age of 500. In the list of patriarchs, and their sons births, the age of the patriarch is specific and paired with the birth of a son that’s identified. A phrase that accompanies the summary of the patriarchs lives after this point is a statement of their lifespan and the fact that they “*begat sons and daughters*”. If the record of Noah’s sons follows the

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pattern in the narrative then all three sons are born in Noah's 500th year at the same time.

In the Bible there are instances of multiple births, most notably Jacob & Esau, as well as Pharez and Zarah, sons of Judah by his daughter-in-law Tamar. Later genealogies don't follow the Genesis pattern. We can see this in **Matthew 1.2** where we read that Isaac "*begat*" Jacob. The omission of Esau in this genealogy appears to have spiritual significance as Esau, later Edom, departed from serving God, didn't inherit the promises made to Abraham and wasn't in the direct bloodline of Jesus. Matthew's genealogy of Christ also includes both Phares and Zara, twin sons of Judah, obviously born at the same time (**Matt 1.3**). In the early Genesis record, however, the pattern is consistent. Single births are noted as sons are born to the patriarchs - until we come to the generation of Noah and his offspring. The births of Shem, Ham and Japheth, consistent with the pattern, would have been simultaneous, and I believe there's a reason for this.

The state of the world during the lifetime of Noah was different. The ground had been cursed by God so it didn't yield it's strength (**Gen 3.17**). The climate was different than what we now have and violence was reaching critical levels. A key to the significance of Noah and his three sons can be found in a statement Lamech makes when Noah was born. "*And he called his name Noah, saying, This same shall comfort us concerning our work and toil of our hands, because of the ground which the LORD hath cursed.*" (**Gen 5.29**). Based on the events that take place later, this statement is more than a father's wishful thinking. It's a prophetic declaration revealed by God as the Lord views the direction of humanity.

The possibility of Shem, Ham and Japheth being triplets, can be seen as a manifestation of God's providence. The Lord knew what he was going to do. He knew he would preserve the world through Noah and therefore provided the means to do that. It's noteworthy that the number three is a figure pointing to God and his identity that appears throughout the scriptures. It wouldn't be out of place to draw this conclusion since the judgment of God, the flood and salvation of the race has a primarily spiritual aspect. God would wipe out evil, do so using an agent, water, that will later be an integral part of being saved, and preserve humanity in a drastically altered world unlike the environment prior to the cleansing. Peter makes a comparison between the two eras speaking of unbelief that will arise when he states, "*For this they willingly are ignorant of, that by the word of God the heavens were of old, and the earth standing out of the water and in the water: Whereby the world that then was, being overflowed with water, perished: But the heavens and the earth, which are now, by the same word are kept in store, reserved unto fire against the day of judgment and perdition of ungodly men.*" (**2 Pet 3.5-7**). Studying the Genesis record there are significant differences that appear in the world after the flood and changes made by God.

Some might also argue that there's an implied difference in ages between the brothers in the account, but, we find that in other cases involving multiple births as well. Esau was the oldest of the twins when he and Jacob were born (**Gen 25.24-26**). When the twin sons of Judah were born, one of the babies, Zarah, began to emerge first, so the midwife tied a scarlet thread around his wrist but he withdrew, and his brother Phares was born first (**Gen 38.27-30**). In the

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case of Noah's sons we usually think of Shem, Ham and Japheth, which sounds like the birth order but there's additional information that will help shed a little light on this.

In the genealogies of the sons of Noah following the flood, Shem is referred to as "*the brother of Japheth the elder*" (**Gen 10.21**). From that statement we know that the oldest of the brothers is Japheth. There's not enough information to establish the exact birth order beyond this but the possibility is that Shem is the youngest of the three with Ham being the middle child and Japheth the senior sibling. The genealogy in **Genesis 10** suggests this is the case as the record begins with the descendants of *Japheth* (**Gen 10.1-5**), *Ham* (**Gen 10.6-20**) and *Shem* (**Gen 10.21-31**). This listing I believe reflects the birth order of the sons of Noah as their offspring is catalogued.

4. Objections and conclusions

The Genesis account is so familiar to most of us that we have a tendency to read it through without giving a lot of thought to certain items. We read that Noah had three sons and their names are Shem, Ham and Japheth. We don't analyze the statement of Noah's age when the sons are identified. Because of that it sounds off the wall to suggest that the sons are triplets. And rejection of this idea is usually pretty quick. Some commentators dismiss the possibility and interpret the word "**begat**" as a general statement that Noah had three sons but deny a concrete connection with their births and the patriarch's stated age.

Henry Morris, in his commentary, **The Genesis Record**, applies this reasoning to dismiss the idea of the sons being triplets. Morris writes, "**There is no need to suppose, of course, that Shem, Ham, and Japheth were triplets, but only that Noah was five hundred years old before any of them were born.**" (**The Genesis Record, page 161, Henry M. Morris, Baker Book House, copyright 1976, Thirteenth Edition October, 1989**). Morris also assumes that Noah had other children who aren't recorded since his given age of 500 is much later than the ages at which other patriarchs begat their children. If we trust the Genesis record as recorded, and keep the facts in context, then interpretations like this are an effort to make the biblical facts fit long-held and traditionalized ideas about what's recorded. Our ideas about the world, the lives of the patriarchs and the providence of God might fall far short of the depth of the revelation. We have to challenge ourselves to stop assuming that things work the way we think they should because the reality is, they might not.

Keeping things in context and preserving the pattern of how the births of sons are recorded lends more credibility to thinking the brothers are triplets. That does no harm to the narrative. Doesn't deny the power of God. Affirms the judgment and actions of the Lord in such a way that humanity is preserved, and is consistent with Peter's description of the world before the flood as very different from the one we live in. In my opinion, there's a strong possibility that Shem, Ham and Japheth are triplets, born to Noah a little later in life than other patriarchs children were, and are a manifestation of God's providence and commitment to bringing the Messiah into the world at the proper time.