

Question: "How was it possible for men to live hundreds of years before the Flood?"

By Mike Burnham

In Genesis 5 appears a simple chronological and genealogical table, sketching the line of the antediluvian patriarchs from the first man, Adam, down to Noah. The age of each man at the birth of the next son in the patriarchal line given, and also the age of each man when he died. This would be very dull and uninteresting, were it not for the remarkable fact that the age of each at his death was many hundreds of years!

Adam lived 930 years, Methuselah lived 969 years, and the average age of the nine antediluvian patriarchs (excluding Enoch, who was-- also matter of factly--taken into heaven without dying, at age 365) was 912 years. The only logical explanation for reporting these amazing facts in such a mundane fashion is that, when the original writer recorded them they were not unusual at all, but common experience. As pointed out in Chapter 6, Question 3, these accounts in the early chapters of Genesis were probably eyewitness accounts, written. That these ages are given in terms of real years, and not months as some have suggested, is evident from the ages of the fathers at the birth of their sons, ranging from 65 years in the case of Mahalaleel and Enoch to 500 years in the case of Noah. Another proof of this is the fact that, after the Flood, the life-span began a slow and erratic decline from 950 years for Noah to 205 years for Terah (as recorded in Genesis 11), and eventually down to about 70 years at the time of Moses (note Psalm 90:10).

Evidently something happened at the time of the Flood that affected the human environment drastically, gradually accelerating the aging process

and the onset of death. Although we cannot be sure what this was, there are certain interesting intimations in both science and Scripture which provide at least a plausible hypothesis.

No one knows, of course, even today exactly what causes death. There seems to be no necessary, innate reason why man could not live hundreds of years. As a matter of fact, he was originally created as an immortal being, and death came only as a judgment of God upon sin. "Wherefore, as by one man, sin entered into the world, and death by sin; and so death passed upon all men, for that all have sinned" (Romans 5:12).

Now a remarkable fact brought to light by modern gerontology (the study of aging processes) is that probably no one actually dies simply of old age. Rather, aging so increases susceptibility to disease and so decreases the operational efficiency of bodily organs and functions that, finally, there is a complete breakdown of some particular aspect of the body's mechanism, and this causes death. This may happen earlier or later in various individuals, but eventually it happens to all.

The fundamental factor in longevity, therefore, is the rate of the aging process and the environmental influences which affect it. There are various theories of aging, but the one apparently supported by the best evidence is the somatic mutation theory. A somatic mutation is a sudden, random change in the structure of a cell of the body. Since almost all mutations are harmful, the gradual accumulation of mutations in the cells of various organs and tissues will inevitably lead to impaired bodily efficiency and eventually to complete breakdown of one or more bodily components.

Now various environmental factors may cause mutation, but probably the most important is radiation, both from the sun and from other radiational sources. Radiations also cause genetic mutations in the germ cells, although these are much better shielded than the somatic, or body, cells. Though much less frequent than somatic mutations for this reason, genetic mutations, which are also almost always harmful, are transmitted to

the children and thus affect not only the individual, but also all his descendants.

It seems reasonable to suggest, therefore, that somatic mutations lead to the aging and death of the individual, and genetic mutations to the aging and death of the species, with both primarily attributable to radiations in the environment. Other facts also are involved, of course, but this seems to be the most universally prevalent cause. Before the Flood, the "waters above the firmament" (Genesis 1:7) probably were in the form of a vast blanket of invisible water vapor in the upper atmosphere. Not only would this have produced a wonderful "greenhouse effect," maintaining a mild and calm climate over all the world, but also it would have provided a highly efficient filter for the lethal radiations bombarding the earth from outer space.

Thus the "background radiation" of the environment before the Flood was much less than it is at present, and this could certainly have contributed significantly to the long ages of men before the Flood. These upper waters later condensed and fell to the earth as one of the causes of the great Flood, and so are no longer available for this function in full. However, even the 1-1/2" of water vapor remaining in the present atmosphere maintains enough of a green house effect and radiation filter to sustain life at least in its present less efficient and durable form on the earth. The drastically changed climate and denuded earth after the Flood, together with the inbreeding necessitated for the very few survivors of the cataclysm, undoubtedly also contributed to the general decline in longevity and viability.

In any case, there is no good reason to doubt the reasonableness of the Biblical record of the antediluvian patriarchs and their great ages.