

The Years of Egyptian Bondage

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Ask most students of Scripture how long Israel was in Egyptian bondage, and they will confidently tell you, about 400 years. Support for their answer will be provided with the following Scripture:

Now the time that the sons of Israel lived in Egypt was four hundred and thirty years. And at the end of four hundred and thirty years, to the very day, all the hosts of the Lord went out from the land of Egypt.

Exodus 12:40-41

Perhaps these words of God to Abram will be also be offered as a proof text:

God said to Abram, "Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs, where they will be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years.

Genesis 15:13 (cf. Acts 7:6).

Based on these two passages, it seems clear that Israel spent 400-430 years in Egypt. However, if one takes the time to do a little math, it will be revealed that Israel did not spend 400 years in Egypt. Is this a contradiction in the Bible? No. We just need to better understand how this number is calculated, and what it actually includes.

Abram was told Israel would come out of Egypt in the fourth generation (Gen. 15:16). This is exactly when the exodus occurred (Exodus 6:16-20).

First Generation: Levi

Second Generation: Kohath

Third Generation: Amram

Fourth Generation: Moses

One key to calculating the time of their stay in Egypt is understanding that Kohath, the son of Levi, entered Egypt at the same time as his father (Gen. 46:8-11). Suppose Kohath was born on the very day Levi entered Egypt. For purposes of illustration, let us also suppose that his son Amram was conceived on the day of Kohath's death. Kohath lived 133 years (Ex. 6:18). Adding the period of pregnancy following conception, we would have 134 years in Egypt when Amram was born ($133 + 1 = 134$). Amram lived 137 years (Ex. 6:20). If he, like his father, conceived Moses on the day of his death, we would have $134 + 137 + 1 = 272$. Moses was 80 years old when he led Israel out of Egypt. This would give us $272 + 80 = 352$ as the total number of years Israel was in Egypt. Since it is impossible that the conditions of conception and birth, such as we have illustrated, could actually take place, it is easy to see that one cannot possibly reach the number of 400 or 430 years of Egyptian bondage.

How then can we reconcile the math we have just seen with the inspired text? As stated earlier, it is a matter of understanding how the 400 - 430 years are calculated, and what they include. In that regard, from a historical perspective, consider what Josephus writes of Israel leaving Egypt.

They left Egypt in the month of Xanthicus, on the fifteenth day of the lunar month; four hundred and thirty years after our forefather Abraham came into Canaan, but two hundred and fifteen years only after Jacob removed into Egypt. It was the eightieth year of the age of Moses, and of that of Aaron three more. They also carried out the bones of Joseph with them, as he had charged his sons to do.

Antiquities.2.15.2

According to Josephus, Israel was in Egypt a total of 215 years. Based on what we saw earlier, with the ages of Kohath and Amram, this is a much more workable number. He also states that the 430 years include the time when Abraham first came into the land of Canaan. This is consistent with the Septuagint, and its rendering of Exodus 12:40, which states:

"And the sojourning of the children of Israel, while they sojourned in the land of Egypt and the land of Canaan, was four hundred and thirty years."

This text from the Septuagint gives us an important addition which seems to be consistent with the historical record of Josephus, our numbers, and other inspired texts. Here the 430 years are said to include the years Israel spent in the land of Canaan and the their time in Egypt. This would confirm what the apostle Paul wrote in the New Testament. Writing to the churches of Galatia, the apostle said this:

What I am saying is this: the Law, which came four hundred and thirty years later, does not invalidate a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to nullify the promise.

Galatians 3:17

According to Paul, the Law of Moses came 430 years after the promises were spoken to Abraham. Adam Clark, referencing Paul's number, while commenting on Exodus 12:40 and its 430 years, wrote:

"This same sum is given by St. Paul, Galatians 3:17, who reckons from the promise made to Abraham, when God commanded him to go to Canaan, to the giving of the law, which soon followed the departure from Egypt; and this chronology of the apostle is concordant with the Samaritan Pentateuch, which, by preserving the two passages, they and their fathers, and in the land of Canaan, which are lost out of the present copies of the Hebrew text, has rescued this passage from all obscurity and contradiction. It may be necessary to observe that the Alexandrian copy of the Septuagint has the same reading as that in the Samaritan. The Samaritan Pentateuch is allowed by many learned men to exhibit the most correct copy of the five books of Moses; and the Alexandrian copy of the Septuagint must also be allowed to be one of the most authentic as well as most ancient copies of this version which we possess. As to St. Paul, no man will dispute the authenticity of his statement; and thus in the mouth of these three most respectable witnesses the whole account is indubitably established. That these three witnesses have the truth, the chronology itself proves: for from Abraham's entry into Canaan to the birth of Isaac was 25 years, Genesis 12:4; 17:1-21; Isaac was 60 years old at the birth of Jacob, Genesis 25:26; and Jacob was 130 at his going down into Egypt, Genesis 47:9; which three sums make 215 years. And then Jacob and his children

having continued in Egypt 215 years more, the whole sum of 430 years is regularly completed." (Adam Clark, Commentary on Exodus 12:40)

What we see in all of this is the possibility of an omission by a scribe in the text in Exodus, or a general (non-specific) application of the 430 years.