

HOW LONG WAS THE SOJURN IN EGYPT: 210 OR 430 YEARS?

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In Exodus 12:40 we read: *The dwellings of the children of Israel that they dwelt in Egypt were 430 years.* Verse 41 reiterates that after 430 years all the legions of God left Egypt. The verse seems to be stating a non-debatable historical fact. That is, that the Children of Israel were in Egypt for 430 years before their Exodus.

Yet, rabbinic tradition teaches us that the verse is not to be taken literally because of a seeming contradiction with Genesis 46:8-27 which lists the people who descended to Egypt together with Jacob. According to these verses, all of Jacob's grandchildren were extant and joined Jacob in his travel from Canaan to Egypt. However, this leads to a difficulty. For if Jacob descended together with Levi and Kehath to Egypt, the calculations of relative life spans would not allow for a 430 year sojourn in Egypt. To further elaborate, presuming that Kehath was even only one day old when entering Egypt, he is recorded as living 133 years (Ex. 6:18). Kehath's son is Amram who lives 137 years (Ex. 6:20) of which some presumably overlap with those of his father Kehath. Amram's son is Moses who is 80 when standing before Pharaoh (Ex. 7:7) – presumably some of those years overlap with his father Amram's years. Even without the issue of overlapping years, the total maximum number of years would only be $133 + 137 + 80 = 350$ years. This would mean that even if Kehath entered Egypt on the first day of his life, had Amram on the last day of his life, and who, in turn, had Moses on the last day of his life, the longest period of time that the nation could have been in Egypt is 350 years.

This difficulty led our rabbis to reinterpret Exodus 12:40. This traditional approach is presented in the Artscroll Chumash as follows: "Although the verse gives the duration of Israel's stay in Egypt as 430 years, it is clear that the nation could not have been in Egypt that long, for the lifetimes of Kehath who came with Jacob, and his son Amram total only 270 years, and Amram's son Moses was eighty at the time of the Exodus. Rather, the rabbin-

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ic tradition, as cited by Rashi, is as follows: The Covenant between the Parts (Gen. 15:7-21) took place 430 years before the Exodus, and that is the period referred to in our verse. At that time, God told Abraham that his offspring would endure 400 years, during which there would be exile, persecution, and servitude – but not necessarily all of them at the same time. Those 400 years began with the birth of Isaac, since the prophecy referred to Abraham's *offspring* (Gen. 15:13). The actual sojourn in Egypt lasted 210 years (Rashi). Accordingly, the verse's reference to 430 years as the time they *dwelled in Egypt* means that the Egyptian exile had been decreed 430 years before the Exodus."¹

The rabbis begin the count of the 400 years as recorded in Genesis 15:13 with the birth of Isaac. Isaac is 60 years old when he has Jacob (Gen. 25:26) and Jacob is 130 when standing before Pharaoh (Gen. 47:9). Therefore, when Jacob descended to Egypt at the age of 130, 190 years of the 400 years had already passed, thus leaving 210 years. This is the number of years that we are taught that the Israelites were in Egypt.

Regarding the 430 years recorded in Exodus 12:40 the rabbis explain that the prophecy recorded in Genesis 15 took place 30 years prior to the birth of Isaac and the 430 number in Exodus refers to the time period since The Covenant of the Parts. This makes Abraham 70 years old at that time as he was 100 years old at Isaac's birth (Gen. 21:5). Adopting this approach accounts for the 400 and 430 years recorded.

DIFFICULTIES

However, this approach raises new difficulties. Genesis 15:1 clearly states that the covenant of the parts and prophecy that went along with it took place *aḥar hadevarim ha'eleh* (after these things) after the events that were told from the beginning of the narrative until now. The narrative begins with Abraham being 75 years old (Gen. 12:4) when he arrived in Canaan. Yet, in order to make the rabbinic approach fit, Abraham would be 70 years old at the Covenant of the Parts. One cannot apply the idea that the Torah is sometimes out of chronological order in this instance for the text specifically states that it is proceeding chronologically. Furthermore, Exodus 12:40 clearly states that the Children of Israel were in Egypt for 430 years, and therefore

any reference to Isaac has no relevance here as Isaac is not a descendant of Israel *and* Isaac never entered Egypt.

PROPOSED SOLUTION

In attempting to find a solution to this problem, the rabbinic understanding preferred to view the passage in Genesis 46 regarding who descended together with Jacob to Egypt in a literal fashion while creatively adjusting our understanding of the passages in Genesis 15 and Exodus 12 that discuss the years of the servitude. I propose instead that we understand Genesis 15 and Exodus 12 literally and creatively adjust our understanding of Genesis 46. In this vein I would suggest that the verses in Genesis 46 were not giving an account of all the grandchildren of Jacob who actually came down to Egypt with him. Rather, some of these were born before descending to Egypt while others were born in Egypt.

In order to anchor this understanding in the text, one notes that Genesis 46:8 introduces the list by using the word *haba'im* for Jacob and his children, *These are the names of the Israelites, Jacob and his descendents, who came [haba'im] to Egypt*. However, the next and subsequent verses, giving an accounting of who the grandchildren were, need not all be included in the list of *haba'im*, those who came along with, and can be viewed as a narrative gloss informing us of the names of all the grandchildren regardless of whether they were amongst those descending or not.

Verse 27 which reference Joseph's children and their being in Egypt is not meant to contrast these with the other grandchildren but rather are simply informing us that, at the time of the descent, Joseph and his two sons were already in Egypt.

Note that when the text summarizes the section, the Torah uses the word *ha'ba'ah*, *All the persons belonging to Jacob who came to [ha'ba'ah] Egypt* (Gen. 46:26), *The total of Jacob's household who came to [ha'ba'ah] Egypt* (Gen. 46:27), which functions in the progressive tense, not the past tense used in the JPS translation. According to this the word *haba'ah* in verse 27 should also be pronounced as *mil'ra*, stressing the last syllable. This would allow for understanding the list as representing a list of people that was still in the making when descending to Egypt.

Furthermore, the number given for the offspring of Jacob, seventy, “was a distinctive number in the ancient Near East, a symbolic convention adopted by the Torah for certain purposes.”² It is “understood here to be a typological rather than a literal number...to express the idea of totality.”³ This list includes those born later into the current count in order to arrive at this conceptually significant number.

I prefer to creatively adjust our understanding of these verses because there was no need for the Torah to state who was born where and when. The Torah is simply giving an accounting of the third generation of Jacob and then moves on in order not to have to return to this subject in bits and pieces. We find this in other circumstances as well. For example, the deaths of Abraham and Isaac are mentioned in the Torah before they actually took place because the narrative dealing with their persona had ended. Similarly here, the Torah will be focusing on Moses, so the list is simply a means of documenting the next generation without significance as to their place of birth.

In summary, traditionally, we have been taught that Exodus 12:40 cannot be taken literally and the Israelites were not actually in Egypt for 430 years because of the passages in Genesis 46 which may imply that all those listed were actually born at the time. This being so, Kehath was born before the descent to Egypt. This results in not enough years available to reach the count of 430 (or 400) and is susceptible to the difficulties outlined above. However, these problems dissolve with a new understanding of the genealogical list in Genesis 46. The passages in Genesis 46 were a listing of Jacob’s grandchildren in order to establish the names of the prime families of the Israelites, not an accounting of who was born where.

THE NEW CALCULATION

Exodus 12:40 states as a fact that the Jews were in Egypt for 430 years. Levi, at age 43, comes down to Egypt with his brothers and Jacob.⁴ Levi lives his final 94 years in Egypt (Ex. 6:16). When Jacob and Levi descend to Egypt the clock has already started 22 years earlier with the arrival of Joseph in Egypt when he was seventeen. According to this calculation, Levi lives 94 years in Egypt (his 137 years of life as recorded in Exodus 6:16 less 43 years as calculated above, leaving 94 years).

Therefore, if the Israelites were in Egypt 430 years and Moses was born 80 years earlier, then Moses was born in year 350 of the Israelite stay in Egypt. Given that 22 years of the time clock were actualized from the moment Joseph descended to Egypt and until Levi arrived, we are left with 328 years between the time Levi arrives and the birth of Moses that must be accounted for. The combined years of Levi in Egypt with the life spans of Kehath and Amram total 364 years (94 Levi + 133 Kehath + 137 Amram = 364 years). As calculated above, the bare minimum number of years needed (presuming no overlapping years) come out to 328 years. We now have 36 years of flexibility allowing for Amram and Moses to be born to their respective fathers Kehath and Amram when each were over 120 years old. The Torah informs us of the miraculous longevity and progeny at an old age by providing us the timelines. It provides more of a miraculous backdrop to the birth of Moses, especially taking into account that Amram married his aunt Jocheved (Ex. 6:20) who was probably older than he was.

Once this approach is adopted, not only is it possible that the children of Israel were in Egypt for 430 years but given the precise recording in Exodus 12:40 this must be the case. The recording of 430 years is purposeful because it represents historical fact.

If the sojourn in Egypt was indeed only 210 years, the text would have added incentive to expressly relate that the amount of time they were in Egypt was in fact less than the originally decreed 400 years because such a scenario would have furthered praise of God as being merciful and ending the decree before its time.

But, even according to the approach I propose, how does one reconcile the 400 years prophesized in the covenant of the parts in Geneses 15:13 and the 430 years in Exodus 12:40? Ramban explains that the Covenant of the Parts was a prophecy that could have come true at the exact number of 400 years or could have been extended. Exodus 12:40, which states 430 years, records the actual number of historical years the Israelites were in Egypt. Ramban (to Ex. 12:40) notes that the prophecy did not state that Israelites would come out immediately after the 400 years, it was the minimum amount of time. Furthermore, Ramban (to Exodus 12:42) cites Joshua 24:14 where Joshua tells the people to get rid of the idolatry that they worshipped on the other side of the Jordan and that our forefathers worshipped in Egypt, and Ezekiel

20:8 which refers to the idol worship the Israelites engaged in while in Egypt. In his view, these sources prove that while the Israelites could have been taken out after 400 years of slavery, they were undeserving of such, and the Exodus was thus postponed for an additional 30 years. Ramban further states that the Israelites would not have been freed even then were it not for their having cried out and God having mercy on them.

COLLATERAL EVIDENCE

By accepting Exodus 12:40 as historical fact and adjusting our understanding of Genesis 46:8-27 as a complete list of Jacob's grandchildren even if not necessarily born before the descent, other problems are solved as well.

In Numbers 26, the Torah lists all the family names of the grandsons of Jacob. Notice that no son of Jacob has a single extra son listed in Numbers 26. Is it plausible to posit that all the sons of Jacob came to Egypt with all their sons having been born? Not one had even one son in Egypt? These men came to Egypt in their 30's and 40's, and lived an additional 80 plus years and had no additional sons? This is extremely unlikely. Take Benjamin as an example. He comes to Egypt with all 10 sons born to him at age 31 and has not a single extra son all his years in Egypt. The same is true for all the sons of Jacob. Clearly the list of Jacob's grandchildren includes some who were born in Egypt.

Furthermore, if one is to believe that Gershon (meaning, a stranger there) and Merari (meaning, my bitterness) were already born in Canaan and not in Egypt, one should wonder why Levi would choose such names for his children (stranger and bitterness)? These names are highly fitting for being in Egyptian exile and not names for when he is still living in his homeland.

Another piece of evidence comes from the narrative of Judah and Tamar in the beginning of Genesis 38. The chapter begins with the words, *about that time*, the time Joseph was sold as a slave. This episode begins 22 years before Judah moved with his father and brothers to Egypt. Judah takes a wife when he is around the age of 21 years old (as this occurs after the sale of Joseph, and Joseph was seventeen making Judah approximately 20-21 yrs old). He then has three children, Er, Onan, and Shelah. He takes a wife for Er; the Torah calls her a woman – *ishah* (Genesis 38:6). We can presume that Er had to be at least 13 years old at the time to warrant marrying a *woman*. God

causes him to die and Judah has Onan take Tamar. If Onan is only a year younger than Er, at least 15 years had to pass since the beginning of these events. Onan too is killed for his evil and Judah tells Tamar to return to her father's house until Shelah grows up. The oldest Shelah could have been at this point was about 12.

Much time passes (*vayirbu hayamim*, Gen. 38:12) and Tamar sees that she is not marrying Shelah. If only a year passes from this point until the point of Tamar's birthing of Peretz and Zerah, 16 years will have passed since Joseph's going down to Egypt. That means that when Peretz descends to Egypt, the oldest he can be is six years old. Yet Genesis 46:12 mentions his two sons, Hezron and Hamul. Did Peretz begin having children at 5 years old? And, as above, Peretz's sons in Numbers 26 are listed as the same two sons in Genesis 46. Is it logical that Peretz came down to Egypt as a child with two children of his own and had no more sons even though he lived his entire adult life in Egypt? Clearly, the Torah mentions Jacob's grandsons that were born before the descent and while in Egypt.

NOTES

1. Nosson Scherman, *The Stone Edition: The Chumash* (Brooklyn, New York: Mesorah Publications, 1998) p. 359.
2. Moshe Shammah, *Recalling the Covenant* (Jersey City, New Jersey: Ktav Publishing, 2011) p. 221.
3. Nahum Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary – Genesis* (Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society, 1989) p. 317.
4. See Genesis 29:26-30:30: Levi is about 4 years older than Joseph; Genesis 41:46: Joseph is 30 when standing before Pharaoh; and Genesis 45:6: nine years have passed since the beginning of the seven good years.