

THE SOJOURN IN EGYPT: A DIFFERENT APPROACH TO THE CHRONOLOGICAL PROBLEM

DAVID J. MARWIL

There are three passages in the Bible regarding the length of the sojourn of the Israelites in Egypt. In Genesis 15, God tells Abram how long his descendants will be in Egypt: *And He said to Abram, "Know well that your offspring shall be strangers in a land not theirs, and they shall be enslaved and oppressed four hundred years" (Gen. 15:13)*. God continues, *"And they shall return here in the fourth generation, for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet complete" (Gen. 15:16)*. In Exodus 12:40-41 we are given a different figure for the length of time in Egypt: *The length of time that the Israelites lived in Egypt was four hundred and thirty years; at the end of the four hundred and thirtieth year, to the very day, all the ranks of the Lord departed from the land of Egypt.*

Genesis 15:13 and Exodus 12:40-41 speak about two different time spans. In Exodus we are given the total amount of time lived in Egypt, 430 years, while in Genesis we are told the amount of time oppressed while living there, 400 years. We may assume, then, that the Israelites lived in Egypt for the first thirty years undisturbed, and for the next four hundred years under the yoke of oppression.

This would indicate that already in Joseph's lifetime some form of oppression had begun, which is implied in Joseph's final words to his brothers. *Joseph said to his brothers, "I am about to die. God will surely take notice of you and bring you up from this land to the land that He promised on oath to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob" (Gen. 50:24)*. Already in Joseph's time there was something for God to *take notice of*.

This idea may also be reflected in the midrashic interpretation the word for hard labor, *parech* (Ex. 1:13), interpreted by R. Elazar in TB *Sotah* 11b as *peh rach*, soft words, meaning that the oppression started very slowly, and at first involved the Egyptians cajoling the Israelites into working, gradually

Dr. David Marwil is a family physician living in Lexington, KY. He enjoys independent Torah study and has written a number of essays on various Biblical topics comprising a body of work he is calling "Fresh Torah."

this evolved into full blown oppression. This initial stage seems to have already begun in Joseph's lifetime.

The chronological difficulty begins when we take into account the second statement, Genesis 15:16, about returning to Canaan in the fourth generation. This presents a complication, how can only four generations span 430 years?

The first step in solving this difficulty is to determine who were considered to be of the first generation and who of the fourth. First-generation inhabitants of a land are generally defined as the first generation to immigrate. Since Joseph was the first to come to Egypt, his generation, which includes Levi, was the first. The Bible gives us statistics regarding the family of Levi which can help us determine how long the Israelites were in Egypt. We know how long Joseph lived in Egypt, because he was seventeen when he arrived and 110 when he died (Gen. 50:26), for a total of 93 years. However, the Bible does not provide us with the precise amount of time Levi lived in Egypt. We know he died there at age 137 (Gen. 6:16), but we do not know how old he was when he arrived.

We can however estimate how long Levi lived in Egypt. We know that he arrived in Egypt when Joseph was 39, and we can assume he was four years older than Joseph, given that Jacob's sons were all born within a seven-year span, and that Levi was Leah's third son and Joseph Rachel's first. Since Leah produced six sons and one daughter during a seven-year span (one child per year), one can assume that Levi was born in the third year (Gen. 29:31-35). We know Rachel gave birth to Joseph in the seventh year because, at that point, Jacob had fulfilled his seven-year obligation to Laban and requested to return to his homeland (Gen. 30:25). That being the case, we can say with a fair amount of certainty that Levi was 43 when he arrived in Egypt and therefore spent 94 years living there (137 minus 43).

Levi's son Kohath, although born in Canaan, would have to be considered second-generation because his father was first-generation. Kohath lived 133 years, but not all of it in Egypt. Kohath's son Amram (Moses' father), was the only one to have lived all 137 years of his life in Egypt. Amram's sons, Aaron and Moses, lived in Egypt only a part of their lives. Moses was born in Egypt, but he spent much of his midlife in Midian, returning to Egypt at age 80, and exiting shortly thereafter. We are not told how much time Moses spent in Midian, so we cannot calculate the precise amount of time he spent

in Egypt. Aaron, on the other hand, was born in Egypt and lived there up until the Exodus, when he was 83 (Ex. 7:7). In the interest of precision, Aaron should represent the fourth generation, not Moses. Here, then, is a list of the four generations of Levi's line and the amount of time each lived in Egypt:

| <u>Generation</u> | <u>Time in Egypt</u> |
|-------------------|----------------------|
| 1. Levi | 94 |
| 2. Kohath | <133 |
| 3. Amram | 137 |
| 4. Aaron | <u>83</u> |
| | <447 |

If the total time the Israelites lived in Egypt was 430 years, then Kohath would have been seventeen (447 minus 430) when he immigrated. We can then revise the list as follows:

| <u>Generation</u> | <u>Time in Egypt</u> |
|-------------------|----------------------|
| 1. Levi | 94 |
| 2. Kohath | 116 |
| 3. Amram | 137 |
| 4. Aaron | <u>83</u> |
| | 430 |

The list gives the sum of how much time each person spent in Egypt, but not the amount of time the Children of Israel as a group lived there. Given the generational overlap, the time would have been much less. The standard traditional approach, in explaining the 400-year time span mentioned in Genesis 15:13, is to start with Isaac's birth (*your offspring*) and count 60 years until the birth of Jacob, then 130 years until Jacob moves to Egypt (60+130=190 years in Canaan). That leaves 210 years spent in Egypt, from Jacob's arrival until the Exodus (400-190=210).

Ramban suggests that this indicates the amount of time Abraham's offspring would be living as resident aliens, not that they would be physically enslaved for the entire 400-year period. He writes, "This is a verse that is to be transposed, its purport being that *'thy seed shall be a stranger for 400*

years in a land that is not theirs, and they shall enslave them, and they shall afflict them.' He has thus not specified the length of the period of servitude and affliction. There are many cases in Scripture where verses must be transposed if they are to be interpreted properly . . ." Ramban thought it implausible that four generations could last 430 years, so he moved around parts of the verse in order to separate the time of being strangers (in Canaan and Egypt) from the time of enslavement (in Egypt only).

However, the Hebrew clearly connects the oppression and enslavement into a single clause and single time frame (*v'avadum v'inu otam arbah mayot shana*). Additionally, Exodus 12:40 explicitly states, *The length of time that the Israelites lived in Egypt was 430 years*, whereas according to Ramban, the entire time period from the birth of Isaac to the Exodus was 400 years.

Nahum Sarna states in his JPS Commentary on Genesis 15:16 that "unless one posits the preposterous notion of a mindless narrator or editor, the two figures [400 years of Genesis 15:13, and four generations of Genesis 15:16] must be reconcilable." He goes on to say, "...it is best to take *dor* [generation] as a 'cycle of time' or a 'life span'... The 'four generations' in the present passage [Gen. 15:16] may thus be understood as the sum of four life spans, a figure in no way incompatible with the 400 years of the pre-Exodus period." Meaning that the period of slavery was in fact 400 years, and that this equals four lifetimes added one to the other, the total years of four generations with no overlap.

And yet, it is interesting that the sum of the time spent in Egypt by Levi and his descendants adds up to 430 years. Perhaps those numbers (94+116+137+83=430) are symbolic of the actual time spent in Egypt by the Israelites. Based on that, I propose that we understand the figures of 400 and 430 years not as denoting a length of time of oppression from beginning to end and the years spent in Egypt from beginning to end, but rather the sum total of years of oppression and living in Egypt as experienced by the four generations of Israelites who lived in Egypt. In this manner, the actual length of time of the oppression is shortened, as in the traditional solution, but the verses and the information contained within them may remain intact, albeit reinterpreted.



עשה תורתך קבע

THE TRIENNIAL BIBLE READING CALENDAR

DEDICATED TO THE MEMORY OF CHAIM ABRAMOWITZ

| | | |
|--------|---------------|---------|
| April | Song of Songs | 3 – 8 |
| | Ruth | 1 – 4 |
| | Lamentations | 1 – 5 |
| | Ecclesiastes | 1 – 12 |
| | Esther | 1 |
| May | Esther | 2 – 10 |
| | Daniel | 1 – 12 |
| | Ezra | 1 – 7 |
| June | Ezra | 8 – 10 |
| | Nehemiah | 1 – 13 |
| | I Chronicles | 1 – 12 |
| July | I Chronicles | 13 – 29 |
| | II Chronicles | 1 – 16 |
| August | II Chronicles | 17 – 36 |
| | Genesis | 1 – 8 |

