

The Duration of The Egyptian Bondage

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When one looks at the various passages of Scripture concerning the length of Israel's bondage in Egypt one immediately discovers that there are apparent disagreements in the biblical record. Various scholars have attempted to resolve the apparent discrepancies. The purpose of this article is to discuss and evaluate the various views and then attempt to present a solution to the problem.

I. THE SCRIPTURES INVOLVED

Before discussing the various theories, a review of the Scripture passages concerning the duration of the bondage is in order. The passages are the author's own translation.

PASSAGES MENTIONING 400 YEARS

Genesis 15:13. And he said to Abram: "Know with certainty that your descendents shall be strangers (sojourners) in a land that is not theirs and they shall serve them¹ and they shall oppress them for 400 years."

Genesis 15:16. And in the fourth generation they shall come back here again. . . .

Acts 7:6. And God spoke in this manner; that his [Abraham's] descendents shall be strangers in a land that is not theirs, and that they shall enslave them and maltreat (them,) for 400 years.

PASSAGES MENTIONING 430 YEARS

Exodus 12:40-41. Now the sojourning of the children of Israel,² who dwelt in Egypt,³ was 430 years and it came to pass at the end of the 430 years, on that very day it came to

¹ The LXX adds here "and shall maltreat them." When this verse is quoted in Acts 7:6 this phrase is retained.

² The Samaritan Pentateuch (hereafter designated as SP) as well as the Alexandrinus and Lagardiana codices of the LXX add "and their fathers." Since there is no other MS evidence for this additional reading, the Masoretic text (hereafter designated MT) should stand as is.

³ The SP has: "in the land of Canaan and in the land of Egypt." The LXX has the same words but in inverted order. Again because of weak support, the MT should stand as is.

pass, all the hosts of the Lord went out from the land of Egypt.

Galatians 3:17. Now this I say: "The law which came 430 years afterward does not make void a covenant previously ratified by God⁴ so as to invalidate the promise.

PASSAGE MENTIONING 450 YEARS

Acts 13:17-20. The God of this people Israel chose our fathers, and exalted the people when they sojourned in Egypt and with a high arm he led them out of it, and for approximately forty years as a nursing father he bore⁵ them in the wilderness. And when he destroyed seven nations in the land of Canaan he gave (them⁶) their land as an inheritance for approximately 450 years. And after that⁷ he gave them judges until Samuel the prophet.

II. THE PROBLEM STATED

One sees immediately that there are three figures for the length of Israel's sojourn in Egypt. Was it 400, 430, or 450 years? Can these differences be resolved in a way which will satisfy the given data in all these passages?

⁴ Some MSS add the words "in Christ." Although the weightiest MSS omit the words, their inclusion or exclusion is of no significance for this study. The textual variant "cared for" has about equal weight as the reading used in the above translation. The same two variants are found in the LXX of Deut. 1:31, the passage to which Paul is alluding, but the MT has simply נשׂו which means "to bear."

⁶ This word is inserted for clarity in English and is included in some MSS.

⁷ The Textus Receptus which the AV follows has the phrase "and after that" preceding the words "approximately 450 years." This would mean that there was an approximate 450-year span between Joshua's conquering of the land and Samuel the prophet. Thus the period of the judges was about 450 years. The reading of the Nestle text is better because: (1) it is favored by the more weighty MSS (p74, א ABC 33 81 181 it-ar c vg arm geo), and (2) it fits better with I Kings 6:1 where there is a 480-year period from the Exodus to the fourth year of Solomon—otherwise if one accepts the Textus Receptus reading, one would have to squeeze into the 480-year period the 450 years of the judges period, the reigns of Joshua, Saul, David, and the first three or four years of Solomon's reign, and forty years of wilderness wanderings. Accepting the reading of the Nestle text, viz., the placing of the approximate 450 years from the commencement of the Egyptian bondage until Joshua's conquest of the land, will be discussed in the text below.

III. THE PROBLEM DISCUSSED

There are two major views to be considered at this time after which the present writer's view will be given.

AN EGYPTIAN BONDAGE OF 215 YEARS

Statement of the position. Anstey,⁸ Mauro,⁹ Cooper,¹⁰ Thiele,¹¹ and The New Scofield Reference Bible¹² favor the position of a 215-year Egyptian bondage. The adherents of this view take the 430 years mentioned in Galatians 3:17 as beginning with the call of Abraham (Gen. 12:1-3) and ending with the Exodus. The 400 years has reference to the period from the weaning of Isaac and the casting out of Ishmael (Gen. 21:10.) until the Exodus. Therefore, one would have a 215-year sojourn in the land of Canaan and another period of 215 years in Egypt,¹³ hence making a total of 430 years for the sojourn.¹⁴ It may be outlined as follows:

The call of Abraham who was 75 years old (Gen. 12:4)	0
Isaac born when Abraham was 100 years old (Gen. 21 :5)	25
Isaac was weaned and Ishmael was cast out when Isaac was 5 (this begins the 400-year period)	5
Jacob and Esau born when Isaac was 60 (Gen. 25.26)	55

⁸ Martin Anstey, *The Romance of Bible Chronology*, I, 116-18.

⁹ Philip Mauro, *The Chronology of the Bible*, pp. 37-40 "

¹⁰ David L. Cooper, *Messiah: His First Coming Scheduled*, pp. 129-34.

¹¹ Edwin R. Thiele, "Chronology, Old Testament," *The Zondervan pictorial Bible Dictionary*, ed. Merrill C. Tenney, pp. 166-67. This is in agreement with *The Seventh-Day Adventist Bible Commentary*, I, 184-, 192. Thiele is one of its contributors and it may be that he wrote the section "The Chronology of Early Bible History" (*ibid.*, I, 174-96).

¹² E. Schuyler English, et al (eds.), *The New Scofield Reference Bible*, p. 86 n. 2.

¹³ Rowley has gathered material of those in the Jewish tradition that hold to this position (H. H. Rowley, *From Joseph to Joshua*, pp. 67-69).

¹⁴ Dewey M. Beegle (*The Inspiration of Scripture*, pp. 56-58) has another view which will not be considered separately. He thinks that there was a sojourn of 215 years in Palestine and one of 430 years in Egypt, thus making a total of 64-5 years. Hence he concludes that Paul's statement in Gal. 3:17 is inaccurate for he states: "Evidently it seemed good to the Holy Spirit to let Paul use the traditional 430 years without informing him that he was technically wrong and should be using 64-5 years as found in Hebrew" (*ibid.*, p. 58). However, it is obvious that Beegle does not try to find a solution, rather he attempts to demonstrate inaccuracies within Scripture and yet be inspired (cf., *ibid.*, pp. 189-93). But the present writer believes that one can plausibly resolve the problem and consequently the Scripture being inspired must be accurate in its details.

Jacob was 130 years old when he went to Egypt (Gen. 47 :9, 28)	<u>130</u>
	Sub total 215
Remaining 215 years were in Egypt	<u>215</u>
	Total 430

Those who hold this position make a distinction between 430 years and 400 years. The 400-year period begins not with Isaac's birth but when he was acknowledged as the seed and heir and consequently Abraham cast out Hagar and Ishmael (Gen. 21:8-10). This 400-year sojourn is deduced from Genesis 15:13 and Acts 7:6 which states that the 400-year sojourn in a land that is not theirs is made by Abraham's seed which would have reference to Isaac at the time he was weaned.¹⁵

The proponents of this view also mention the fact that in Genesis 15:16 it was prophesied that they would return to Palestine in the fourth generation which they did according to Exodus 6:16-20; Numbers 3:17-19; 26:57-59; I Chronicles 6:1-3; 23:6, 12, 13 (Jacob-Levi-Kohath-Amram-Moses).¹⁶ To fit four generations into a 215-year period is much more reasonable than a 430-year span.

In conclusion, the 430 years went from Abraham's call to the Exodus. The first 215 years was their sojourn in Palestine and the last 215 years in Egypt. The 400 years was from the weaning of Isaac to the time of the Exodus.

Objections to the position. Firstly, the tenor of Scripture for their sojourn in Egypt is more than 215 years. Both Genesis 15:13 and Acts 7:6 state that they will be in a land that is not theirs and be oppressed for 400 years.

Secondly, Galatians 3:17 does not state that the 430 years was from the time of Abraham's call to the time of the Mosaic covenant. Rather it is to be measured from the confirmation (not its institution) of the Abrahamic covenant until the Sinaitic covenant.

Thirdly, to say that Isaac was weaned and Ishmael was cast out when Isaac was five years old is mere guesswork. There is no statement in Scripture stating that Isaac became heir at five years of age. This is deduced from the need of

¹⁵ Cf. Mauro, *op. cit.*, pp. 39-39; Cooper, *op. cit.*, pp. 164-65.

¹⁶ Cf. Cooper, *op. cit.*, pp. 132, .164-65.

an extra five years after Isaac was born so as to make a total of thirty from the time of Abraham's call to Isaac's being weaned which would account for the 430 and 400-year periods. If one would carry this out logically then Isaac, Abraham's seed, would be the one in bondage for 400 years. All Genesis 15:13 and Acts 7:6 are saying is that Abraham's progeny would be sojourners and be afflicted for 400 years. This does not compel one to think it has reference to Isaac personally but that the descendents of Abraham sometime in the future will be in bondage for 400 years.

Fourthly, with regard to their return to Palestine in the fourth generation (Gen. 15:16), it seems evident that this would have reference to the 400 years mentioned in the same context (15:13). Thus each generation was thought of as 100 years (Abraham was 100 when he bore Isaac)¹⁷ and consequently the bondage would be four centuries. Furthermore, although the ancestry of Moses from Jacob through Levi, Kohath, and Amram is repeatedly given (Ex. 6:16-20; Num. 3:17-19; 26:57-59; I Chron. 6:1-3; 23:6, 12, 13), there are in Joshua 17:3 six generations from Joseph to Zelophehad, a Manassite who died in the wilderness wanderings; in Ruth 4:18-20 and I Chronicles 2:4-10 there are six generations from Judah to Nahshan, a tribe in the time of Moses; in I Chronicles 2:18 there are seven generations from Judah to Bezaleel, the builder of the tabernacle; and in I Chronicles 2:2; 7:20-27, 29 there are at least ten generations between Jacob and Joshua (Jacob-Joseph-Ephraim-Rephah-Resheph-Telah-Tahan-Ladan-Ammihud-Elishama-Nun-Joshua).¹⁸ Also Thiele succinctly states: "that some considerable period [between Jacob and the Exodus] was involved is clear from the fact that Joseph before his death saw the children of the third

¹⁷ The word דור is translated *generation* but it may have the idea of a lifetime which of course would be longer than a generation, cf. W. F. Albright, "Abram the Hebrew: A New Archaeological Interpretation," *Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research*, No. 163 (October, 1961), 50-51. This would mean that oppression in Egypt will last three full lifetimes and part of another, or 400 years.

¹⁸ Cf. C. F. Keil, *The Pentateuch*, II, 30. Beegle states: "While the genealogies indicate only four generations from Levi through Moses, the preponderance of evidence which archaeology offers at the present time favors the 430-year stay in Egypt as noted in the Hebrew text" (*op. cit.*, p. 57). However, Beegle did not check the Hebrew text! As mentioned above, the Hebrew text does indicate more than four generations. Thus there is no discrepancy between the biblical text and archaeological evidence.

generation of both his sons (Gen. 50:23), and that at the time of the Exodus Amram and his brothers were already regarded as founders of clans."¹⁹ It is a well recognized fact that there are gaps in genealogies and thus the passages cited above which mention only three or four links account for only the most prominent figures in the line. Therefore, since there are at least ten generations during the Egyptian bondage, they "can hardly be reconciled with a mere 215 years (especially considering the longer life span of pre-Exodus Israelites), but it fits in very plausibly with an interval of 430 years."²⁰

Fifthly, to have an increase from a family of seventy or seventy-five²¹ to a nation of more than two million (on the basis that there were 603,550 men of arms mentioned in Num. 1:46; 2 :32) would need more than 215 years. Archer states that if one were able to cram seven generations into the 215-year period "there would have had to be an average of four surviving sons per father."²² This is high especially in the light of the severe bondage, at least in the last years, which would discourage having large families. However, assuming that from each married couple an average of three sons and three daughters were born for the first six generations and two sons and two daughters in the last four generations, Keil calculated that by the tenth generation there would be 478,224 sons over twenty years of age and 125,326 men of the ninth generation still living, hence making a total of 603,550 men by the 400th year of the sojourn who were more than twenty years old." This calculation is based on the ordinary number of births and is far more reasonable than trying to fit it into a 215-year span requiring an astronomical growth in such a short period.

¹⁹ Thiele, *Zondervan Pictorial*, p. 167.

²⁰ Gleason L. Archer, *A Survey of Old Testament Introduction*, p. 212.

²¹ The MT of Gen. 56 :27 and Ex. 1:5 states that there were seventy persons of the house of Jacob who went into Egypt. In both of these passages the LXX states that there were seventy-five persons. In quoting from the Old Testament, Stephen follows the LXX of seventy-five persons (Acts 7:14). The difference can be resolved by the fact that the LXX adds in Gen. 46:27 three grandsons (Machir, Sutaalam, and Taam) and two great-grandsons (Galaad and Edom) which were probably taken from Num. 26:28-37 and/or I Chron. 7 :14-22 (cf. Anstey, *op. cit.*, I, 122; W. Arndt, *Does the Bible Contradict Itself?* pp.12-14).

²² Archer, *op. cit.*, p. 212.

²³ Keil, *op. cit.*, II, 29. His calculation begins with the forty-one grandsons of Jacob and figures ten generations of forty years each making a total of 400 years.

In conclusion, from biblical and other lines of evidence an Egyptian bondage of 215 years is highly improbable and unlikely.

AN EGYPTIAN BONDAGE OF 430 YEARS

Statement of the position. The second most prevalent view is that the 430 years of Exodus 12:40-41 refers to the length of the Egyptian bondage and the 400 years of Genesis 15:13 and Acts 7:6 is only a round number is advocated by scholars such as Jack,²⁴ Unger,²⁵ Archer,²⁶ Whitcomb,²⁷ and Kitchen.²⁸ Whitcomb thinks that the 400-year period as a round number is analogous to Paul's figure of "about 450 years" in Acts 13:19-20.²⁹

Objections to the position. Firstly, this view does not adequately explain the difference between the 430 years and the 400 years. To pass the 400 years off as only a round number seems to do an injustice to the text. The proponents of this view do not cite any other examples of such a phenomenon. Most of the authors cited above take other figures such as the 480 years in I Kings 6:1 and the 300 years in Judges 11:26 literally. Whitcomb's attempt to prove the use of a round number by using the analogy is untenable since Acts 13:19-20 specifically states it as being "about 450 years" which is not the case for the 400 years in Genesis 15:13 and Acts 7:6. This is especially noteworthy since Luke seems to be very interested in chronology.

Secondly, the advocates of this view usually have little or no discussion on the 430 years mentioned in Galatians 3:17. Kitchen states: "Paul in Gal. 3:17 is concerned to establish one single point: that the Law came long after God's covenant with Abraham. He therefore makes his point, not by laboriously calculating the actual interval between these events but simply and incisively by citing the well-known figure-the 430 years-included within that interval."³⁰ However, can one really think this of Paul who was so well schooled in the

²⁴ J. W. Jack, *The Date of the Exodus*, p. 218.

²⁵ Merrill F. Unger, *Archeology and the Old Testament*, pp. 106, 150.

²⁶ Archer, *op. cit.*, pp. 205, 211-12.

²⁷ John C. Whitcomb, *Chart of Old Testament Patriarchs and Judges*, 3rd ed., explanatory sheet.

²⁸ K. A. Kitchen, *Ancient Orient and Old Testament*, pp. S3-S6.

²⁹ Whitcomb, *op. dt.*, explanatory sheet.

³⁰ Kitchen, *op. cit.*, p. 53 n. 97. Cf. Edward J. Young, *Thy Word Is Truth*, pp. 179-83.

Scriptures and the Jewish traditions?

Thirdly, it seems strange for Paul to give the duration of the Egyptian bondage as being, on the one hand, 430 years in Galatians 3:17 and, on the other hand, 400 years in Acts 13:16-20 (the actual figure is 450 years, but this would include the 400 years for bondage, 40 years for the wilderness journeys, and about 7 years for conquest--thus *about* 450 years). One would think that Paul would have been at least consistent.

Fourthly, those who hold to the 430-year period of Egyptian bondage make little, if any, attempt in trying to reconcile the "about 450 years" of Acts 13:19-20 and the 430 years of Exodus 12:40-41 and Galatians 3:17. An Egyptian bondage of 430 years plus a 40 year wilderness journey and about 7 years for the conquest of the land (all of which are included in Acts 13:16-20) would make a total of 477 years. Certainly the "about 450 years" cannot be stretched to 477 years!

Fifthly, if one holds to any sort of doctrine of inspiration it seems difficult to pass off the 400 years as a round number. Would not this allow great liberty in interpreting other numbers in the Scriptures? One must be careful and see if there is a reason for the differences in these two figures before relegating either figure as a "round number."

In conclusion, it seems that this view does not adequately explain all the biblical data.

AN EGYPTIAN BONDAGE OF 400 YEARS

Statement of the position. The Egyptian bondage refers to the 400-year period stated in Genesis 15:13, 16 and Acts 7:6. The 430 years expressed in Exodus 12:40-41 and Galatians 3:17 is that period of time from the confirmation of the Abrahamic covenant to the Mosaic covenant (which is only two months after the Exodus). There are several reasons for the tenability of this position.

First, Galatians 3:17 specifically states that the 430-year period began with the confirmation, not the institution, of the Abrahamic covenant. The last recorded confirmation of the Abrahamic covenant before going into Egypt was given to Jacob in Genesis 35:9-15. Jacob's name was confirmed as Israel at that time. It is interesting to note that Exodus

12:40-41 mentions that it was the children of Israel--not the children of Jacob--who sojourned for 430 years. Thus if one accepts Thiele's³¹ and Whitcomb's³² date of 1445 B.C. for the Exodus, the confirmation or the covenant would have been in 1875 B.C.

Second, it gives credence to the 400 years of Egyptian sojourn (mentioned in Gen. 15:13, 16; Acts 7:6) as being one of bondage. Thus if one accepts the above Exodus date, It would mean that Jacob and his family went to Egypt (Gen. 47:9, cf. 47:28) in 1845 B.C.

Third, this view does full justice to Acts 13:19-20 which states that it was about 450 years from the commencement of the Egyptian bondage until after the conquest of Palestine. This would mean 400 years for the Egyptian bondage, (40 years for the wilderness journey, and 7 years³³ for the conquest of the land, making a total of 447 years or "about" 450 years" as the text states.

In conclusion, this view reconciles the 400, 430 and 450 years mentioned in the Scriptures for the duration of Israel's sojourn.

Objection to the position. One objection to this view which may be rightly raised is the fact that Exodus 12:40-41 states that their Egyptian bondage was 430 years.

Several observations must be made. First, both Exodus 12:40-41 and Galatians 3:17 speak nothing of a bondage lasting 430 years but only of a sojourn lasting that long. On the other hand Genesis 15:13, 16 and Acts 7:6 speak specifically of a 400-year bondage in a land that is not theirs, namely Egypt. Hence, the 430-year sojourn would include the 400-year bondage in Egypt plus another 30 years of sojourning outside of Egypt.

Second, there is a need for a review of the various translations of the relative pronoun אשר of Exodus 12:40. The ASV and RSV translated it that, its antecedent being "time"

³¹ Thiele, *Zondervan Pictorial*, p. 167. To arrive at this date one should consult Edwin R. Thiele, *The Mysterious Numbers of the Hebrew Kings*, 2d ed.)

³² Whitcomb, *op. cit.*, chart and explanatory sheet. Of course this is based on Thiele's work.

³³ This is calculated from Josh. 14:7, 19 where Caleb states that from the division of the land back to the time when Moses sent him as one of the spies from Kadesh-barnea was a period of 45 years. Since he was sent as a spy in the second year of their wilderness journey one would subtract 38 remaining years which would leave 7 years for the conquest of the land.

whereas the AV translates it who which refers back to "the children of Israel." Since **אשר** is indeclinable and its antecedent may be singular or plural and may be of either gender, it allows for great latitude in translation. However, here it seems best to have "the children of Israel" as its antecedent rather than the word "time." The reasons are twofold. Firstly, the phrase "the children of Israel" would be closer in position to **אשר**. Secondly the noun **מושב** which comes from **ישב** has the primary meaning to *sit, rest, dwell* and hence the noun is translated *dwelling-place, dwelling, dwellers, assembly, or seat*.³⁴ The ASV and RSV translation time is a derived and secondary meaning. In fact **מושב** which occurs forty-four times in the Old Testament is never so rendered by the ASV and RSV translators in any other place except in Exodus 12:40. Even in Exodus 12:20 they translate it habitations and dwellings respectively. Thus the AV translation sojourning is an acceptable rendering. This would mean that the clause ("who dwelt in Egypt") would be nonrestrictive and only gives additional information concerning the sojourners.³⁵ The commencement of their sojourning would have been the last confirmation of the Abrahamic covenant as given in Genesis 35:9-15, if one notices that from Genesis 35 onwards the children of Israel never remained in one place in Canaan but were always travelling (cf. Gen. 35:16, 21, 27; in 37:1 they dwelt in the land of Canaan with no specific location mentioned).

Thirdly, it is interesting to notice that whereas in Exodus 12:40 the MT has "now the sojourning of the children of Israel, who dwelt in Egypt, was 430 years. . . ." the SP and LXX has "now the sojourning of the children of Israel, who dwelt in the land of Canaan and in the land of Egypt (the LXX has it in inverted order), was 430 years. . . ." This indicates that the sojourning would include Canaan and Egypt. Although the present writer does not put much stock in the SP and the LXX as far as chronological matters, this inclusion may point back to some early tradition in the text. It is somewhat diffi-

³⁴ Francis Brown, s. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*, p. 444.

³⁵ Cf. Cooper *op. cit.*, pp. 129-30. Notice in the first part of this article when translating Exodus 12:40-41, the clause "who dwelt in Egypt" is set off by commas. For clarity it could be rendered: Now the sojourning of the children of Israel (who dwelt in Egypt) was 430 years. . . ."

cult to explain its inclusion except that there was some sort of early tradition for this reading.

Therefore, it seems that if one will take the 430 years as the period from the last recorded confirmation of the Abrahamic covenant to Israel (Jacob) before going into Egypt (Gen. 35:9-15) until the time of the Exodus, the 400 years would be that period of time when the nation Israel was in Egypt, that is, from the time when Jacob and his family entered Egypt (Gen. 46) until the Exodus. The phrase "about 450 years" (Acts 13:19-20) would consist of the 400 years of bondage plus the 40 years of wilderness wanderings plus the 7 years for conquering the land of Palestine which makes a total of 447 years or "about 450 years."

IV. *THE CONCLUSION AND SUMMARY*

After considering the two more well-known theories in the attempt to resolve the apparent discrepancies concerning the length of the Egyptian bondage, a third view was presented which takes into account and better explains all the biblical data. Assuming the 1445 B.C. date for the Exodus, it could be charted as follows:

Confirmation of Abrahamic Covenant (Gen. 35:9-15) 1875	Joseph goes to Egypt (Gen. 37) 1867	Jacob and family enter Egypt (Gen. 40) 1845	Exodus and Mosaic Covenant 1445	Arrive at Canaan 1405	Conquest Completed (Josh. 14:7,10) 1398
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«430 years sojourn (Ex. 12 :40-41; Gal. 3 :17) »
 « 400 years bondage »
 (Gen 15:13,16; Acts 7:6)

« 447 years =Ca. 450 years (Acts 13 :19-20) »

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