

The sojourn in Egypt

Exactly how long were the Israelites in Egypt?

Introduction

There is a problem when we look at certain Biblical texts regarding the period that Israel was in Egypt. We will see later that this period lasted 215 years but some verses seem, at first glance, to imply that it was 430 years.

This paper analyses the facts regarding this apparent discrepancy.

The texts in view

Then He said to Abram: 'Know certainly that your descendants will be strangers in a land *that is* not theirs, and will serve them, and they will afflict them four hundred years'. **Gen 15:13**

Now the sojourn of the children of Israel who lived in Egypt *was* four hundred and thirty years. And it came to pass at the end of the four hundred and thirty years -- on that very same day -- it came to pass that all the armies of the LORD went out from the land of Egypt. **Ex 12:40-41**

Now the sojourning of the children of Israel, and of their fathers, which they sojourned in the land of Canaan and in the land of Egypt, was 430 years. **Ex 12:40 in the Samaritan Pentateuch.**

And the sojourning of the children of Israel, while they sojourned in the land of Egypt and the land of Chanaan, *was* four hundred and thirty years. **Ex 12:40 in the English translation of the LXX.**

But God spoke in this way: that his descendants would dwell in a foreign land, and that they would bring them into bondage and oppress *them* four hundred years. **Acts 7:6**

Now to Abraham and his Seed were the promises made. He does not say, 'And to seeds', as of many, but as of one, 'And to your Seed', who is Christ. And this I say, *that* the law, which was four hundred and thirty years later, cannot annul the covenant that was confirmed before by God in Christ, that it should make the promise of no effect. **Gal 3:16-17**

The time frame involved

Event	Time involved	Reference
From Abraham's entry into Canaan, and the promise given by God, to the birth of Isaac.	25 years	Gen 12:3-4, 17:1-21, 21:5; Abraham was 75 when he received the promise and 100 at the birth of Isaac.
Isaac was 60 years old at the birth of Jacob.	60 years	Gen 25:26
Jacob was 130 at his going down into Egypt.	130 years	Gen 47:9
Total	215 years	
Jacob and his children dwelled in Egypt	215 years	
Grand total	430 years	

Explanations of discrepancies

400 years

Stephen (Acts 7) and Genesis affirm that the period is only 400 years.

This is easily explained. It is merely the rounding up to the nearest hundred that was commonly used amongst Middle Eastern people in those days (and even today in many places).

400 years agrees with Moses' prophecy in Gen 15:13.

Jews of Paul's time commonly used both 400 years and 430 years in a relaxed manner. See Josephus for example:

ISRAELITES IN EGYPT AND CANAAN 430 YEARS

They left Egypt in the month 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.¹

ISRAELITES IN EGYPT 400 YEARS

Concerning the afflictions that befell the Hebrews in Egypt, during four hundred years.²

What about Moses' statement?

Your descendants will be strangers in a land *that is* not theirs, and will serve them, and they will afflict them four hundred years'. Gen 15:13

Does this not imply that the Israelites were in bondage in Egypt for 400 years?

¹ Josephus; Antiq. Book 2, 15:1.

² Josephus; Antiq. Book 2, 9:1.

No; the reference is to ‘a land that is not theirs’, that is, both Canaan and Egypt. It is the period that Israel and the fathers were without their proper homeland. The patriarchs and the children of Israel (Jacob) experienced all sorts of trials, afflictions, wars, persecutions and slavery during 430 years in both Canaan and Egypt.

‘Afflicted’ means: to afflict, oppress, humble, be afflicted, be bowed down, to be put down.

The afflictions include:

- Kidnapping of Lot.
- Abraham’s war against the four invading kings.
- Jacob’s servitude under Laban.
- Joseph sold into slavery to Ishmaelites.
- Joseph’s imprisonment on false charges in Egypt.
- Famine in Canaan.
- The bondage in Egypt.

Thus ‘400 years’ is merely a rounding up of the period of sojourning in Canaan and Egypt when God’s people were afflicted. Anyone complaining about this is merely being pedantic.

Why 430 years?

Paul in Galatians, following Exodus, specifically affirms that a period including the dwelling in Egypt was 430 years.

Galatians

Now to Abraham and his Seed were the promises made. He does not say, ‘And to seeds’, as of many, but as of one, ‘And to your Seed’, who is Christ. And this I say, *that* the law, which was four hundred and thirty years later, cannot annul the covenant that was confirmed before by God in Christ, that it should make the promise of no effect. **Gal 3:16-17**

This is easily explained.

Paul states that it was 430 years from the promise to Abraham to the giving of the law. Thus Paul follows our timetable exactly. There is no discrepancy here.

Exodus

Now the sojourn of the children of Israel who lived in Egypt *was* four hundred and thirty years. And it came to pass at the end of the four hundred and thirty years -- on that very same day -- it came to pass that all the armies of the LORD went out from the land of Egypt. **Ex 12:40-41**

Now the sojourning of the children of Israel, and of their fathers, which they sojourned in the land of Canaan and in the land of Egypt, was 430 years. **Ex 12:40 in the Samaritan Pentateuch.**

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This gives us an apparent problem.

The Samaritan and Alexandrian (Greek Septuagint) versions resolve this by adding words to the text, ‘and of their fathers’, or ‘and the land of Canaan’ extending the period from just residing in Egypt to also residing in Canaan. This is the 430 years from Abraham entering Canaan, as in our timetable. The sojourning of the Israelites (children of Jacob) and the fathers (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob) is 430 years.

The translators were adding an interpolation³ that is actually implicit in the Hebrew text but not immediately obvious.

The English translation of the Hebrew is,

The sojourn of the children of Israel who lived in Egypt *was* four hundred and thirty years

None of the English translations fully explain this.

Here we have two events:

- First, the sojourn of the children of Israel; (Jacob) – which was in Canaan. ‘Sojourn’ is *mowshab* = Strong’s 4186, meaning ‘seat, assembly, dwelling-place, dwelling, dwellers’.
- Second, the dwelling of the Israelites in Egypt. ‘Lived’ is *yashab* = Strong’s 3427, meaning ‘to dwell, remain, sit, abide, stay, to be inhabited’.

The sojourn of Jacob’s family was their temporary stay in Canaan, which was living in tents. Abraham never put down foundations in this world but lived in tents.⁴ It appears that Isaac and Jacob also lived in tents.⁵ This was not their land at this time, so they were sojourners.

Upon relocating to Egypt where Joseph was second in command to the Pharaoh, the Israelites settled in the prime part of Egypt and probably built houses; Josephus says that they built cities.⁶ Here they settled and lived in opulence compared to living in the wilderness. Here, at first, they were not considered as aliens but part of the family of the Vizier of Egypt, and settled in an urban area. However, this was not the Hebrew’s homeland of promise and so was a temporary situation.

There is a difference between the sojourning of Jacob’s family and the settling down of the Israelites in Egypt.

The sojourning was 215 years and the residence in Egypt was 215 years – thus we have the 430 years.

Both of these time periods reflect the time that the Israelites were without a homeland of their own. The Hebrews only gained their own land during the conquests of Joshua.

³ To make such insertions in a book or text.

⁴ Heb 11:9-10, ‘By faith he dwelt in the land of promise as in a foreign country, dwelling in tents with Isaac and Jacob, the heirs with him of the same promise; for he waited for the city which has foundations, whose builder and maker is God’.

⁵ Gen 25:27, ‘Jacob was a mild man, dwelling in tents’. Gen 26:17, ‘Then Isaac departed from there and pitched his tent in the Valley of Gerar, and dwelt there’. Gen 33:18-19, ‘Then Jacob came safely to the city of Shechem, which is in the land of Canaan, when he came from Padan Aram; and he pitched his tent before the city. And he bought the parcel of land, where he had pitched his tent, from the children of Hamor’. Where it mentions a ‘house’ regarding Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, it may not imply a fixed building made of stone or wood. Sometimes ‘house’ refers to the family or ancestral tribe. The word *bayith* may mean a normal house but it can also refer to a shelter, a stable, a household, a temporary dwelling, a receptacle, household affairs, and can therefore include a large tent. Even if Jacob built a stronger construction of some sort, the tribe was still sojourning. ‘House’ is mentioned in connection with Abraham yet we are specifically told that he dwelt in tents.

⁶ Antiq. Book 1, 10. 3.

Conclusion

There is no discrepancy when analysed properly. Israel was 215 years in Canaan and then 215 years in Egypt, totalling 430 years.

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