

How Long Were the Israelites in Egypt?

By Michael H. Exton

We are told in both Exodus 12:40-41 and in Galatians 3:17 that the Israelites left Egypt after 430 years. But then we are told in both Genesis 15:13 and in Acts 7:6 that they would leave Egypt after only 400 years (NOT 430 years)! Is this a contradiction? It certainly appears so. But it is NOT!

To solve the mystery of this supposed contradiction we must first go to the 15th chapter of Genesis. In this particular chapter God confirms the covenant that He had previously made with Abraham while he was still living in Ur. Then God tells Abraham, “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).

For many years I thought the above verse meant that the Israelites would be slaves in the land of Egypt for 400 years. But that is NOT what this verse is saying at all! The whole point of this Scripture is not to tell Abraham how long his descendants would be slaves in Egypt, but to tell him how long it would be before they finally left Egypt (to begin making their way back to the land of Canaan). In other words, this verse should read: “...and they will afflict them *until* four hundred years.” In even plainer terms, what this Scripture is saying is that the Israelites would leave Egypt in 400 years—that’s 400 years from the time that God made this statement to Abraham! So why does the Bible say 430 years in Exodus 12:40-41 and Galatians 3:17? Because 30 years had passed since God first made the promises to Abraham— while he was still living in the land of Ur—that’s why!

In Galatians 3:17-18 we are told that the law (the ten commandments—which were given just a few weeks after the Israelites left Egypt) came 430 years after the promises were made to Abraham! Please note—it does NOT say that the law was given 430 years after the Israelites arrived in Egypt. It says that the law came 430 years after the promises were made to Abraham! That’s 430 years after the promises were FIRST made to Abraham—while he was still living in Ur of the Chaldeans! It all fits.

Next, let's go to Exodus 12:40. Here we read: "And the sojourn [journey] of the children of Israel who lived in Egypt was 430 years." Just like Genesis 15:13, this verse is NOT saying how long the Israelites lived in Egypt, but how many years they had sojourned—traveled! They had traveled for 430 years since the promises were first made to Abraham. From the time that God first made the promises to Abraham (in Ur)—until the day that they had left Egypt—430 years had elapsed. If we just insert parenthesis in Ex. 12:40, then the intended meaning of this particular Scripture comes out loud and clear. "And the sojourn [journey] of the children of Israel (who lived in Egypt) was 430 years"! And this fits perfectly with Galatians 3:17-18—that the law—which was given the same year that the Israelites came out of Egypt—came 430 years after the promises were first made to Abraham.

So, what have we learned so far? We know that the promises were first made to Abraham while he was still living in Ur of the Chaldeans. And from the time these promises were first made to Abraham in Ur, until the time that the Israelites left Egypt, 430 years had passed. Then when we arrive at Genesis 15:13, 30 years have elapsed. Therefore, when God confirms the promises to Abraham in chapter 15 of Genesis, He says it would be 400 years instead of 430 years (since 30 years had already gone by). Contradictions? None whatsoever!

If we can figure out how old Abraham was when these promises were made to him, then we can eventually figure out the exact year that the Israelites left Egypt, thereby figuring out just how long they were in Egypt. But, do we know how old Abraham was when these promises were made to him? Does the Bible give any clues? It certainly does!

To find out how old Abraham was when he received the promises we must first read from Gen. 12:4 to Gen. 16:4 (as well as Gen. 16:16) very carefully. This is what we are told in this section of the Bible: Abraham departs from Haran when he is *75 years old* and then arrives in Canaan shortly thereafter. After living in Canaan for some time he then moves to Egypt. Then after living in Egypt for some time he moves back to Canaan. Then after living in Canaan with his nephew Lot—he and Lot separate and live in different areas of the country. Then some time later Lot is taken captive by a raiding army. Then Abraham goes and rescues his nephew Lot. Next we are told that

Abraham meets with Melchizedek and gives him 10% of all the goods that he received as a result of rescuing Lot. Finally, we come to chapter 15 of Genesis where God talks with Abraham and confirms the covenant that He had previously made with him, explaining to him that it would still be 400 years before his descendants would inherit the land of Canaan. But how old is Abraham when this statement is made to him? Well, we know that he is much older than 75 since many things have transpired since he turned 75: he lived in Canaan, then he lived in Egypt, then he moved back to Canaan and lived there once again, then he and Lot separate, then he rescues Lot after Lot is taken captive, and so on. But how much older? Well, if we read Gen. 15:13-21, 16:1-5, and 16:16 carefully we will notice that soon after God makes this statement to Abraham that 10 years had gone by since Abraham first arrived in Canaan. Therefore, Abraham must have been 85 years old when God restates the promises to him (since he was 75 when he first came to Canaan).

Now we are getting somewhere! Since Abraham was born in 1998 A.A.—After Adam (see article: “6,000 year Timetable”)—the confirming of the promises were made to him in the year 2083 A.A. (approximately 1890 B.C.). And the original promises were therefore made in the year 2053 A.A. (1920 B.C.)—30 years earlier—when Abraham was 55 years old.

Putting all the facts together we can draw up the following scenario: In the year 2053 A.A., when Abraham is 55 years old and living in Ur of the Chaldeans (in the land of Mesopotamia) God first appears to him. After making certain promises to him, God tells him to leave and go to the land of Canaan. Abraham then leaves Ur with his father (Terah), wife (Sarah), and nephew (Lot). But instead of going directly to Canaan they stop off at Haran in Syria. (From reading other sections of the Bible we find out that this is where many of their relatives are living.) So, instead of leaving right away—they get delayed—and wind up dwelling there for 20 years—until Abraham is 75 years old and his father is 205. Then, when his father dies in Haran at 205 years old, Abraham heads for Canaan with his wife Sarah and his nephew Lot. Then after living in Canaan for some time they move to Egypt. Then after living in Egypt for some time they move back to Canaan. Then after becoming involved in various adventures—Abraham is now 85 years old. God then visits him once again, reminding him of the promises that He had made to him 30 years earlier. God then confirms the promises, but tells him that his

descendants would not leave Egypt for another 400 years—after they had suffered in bondage in the land of Egypt.

Now we can conclude. Since the Israelites left Egypt 430 years after God first made the promises to Abraham (and since this occurred in the year 2053 A.A.) the Israelites therefore must have left Egypt in the year 2483 A.A. (approximately 1490 B.C.). But we know even more. We know Isaac was born in 2098 A.A. (Gen. 21:5) and Jacob was born in 2157 A.A. (Gen. 25:26). And we also know that since Jacob was 130 years old when he and the rest of his family left for Egypt (Gen. 47:28), that this must have occurred in the year 2288 A.A. (approximately 1685 B.C.). This means that the Israelites were NOT in Egypt for either 400 or 430 years—as many believe—but were instead there for only 195 years!

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For more detailed information, please read my article: “6,000-Year Timetable.”