

Biblical chronology—our times are in His hands

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The Scriptures are trustworthy because God does not lie. The basic data in the books of Genesis and Exodus concerning times and dates are exactly what they say they are. Three Scriptures: Exodus 12:40–41, Galatians 3:16–17, and Genesis 15:13–14 are used as an introduction to a biblical view of chronology. Scripture is wholly the inspired Word of God and not to be limited merely to matters of ‘faith and practice’ as some Christians assert.

We live in days when little attention is paid to accuracy in biblical exposition. The creation ministries have done a tremendous job in recent years in reversing this trend by demanding that Genesis be taken as the author intended—historical narrative. However, in the matter of biblical chronology there appears to be variance in the ways in which times and dates recorded in Scripture are treated. Three pieces of evidence offering dates that are often confused as being identical in nature will be shown to yield precise information that will aid in the construction of a biblical timeline. The main event for our consideration is the Exodus of the children of Israel. The three main scriptures that have a bearing upon this event are Exodus 12:40–41, Galatians 3:16–17 and Genesis 15:13–14.

The 430 years of Exodus 12:40–41 & Galatians 3:16–17

In Exodus 12:40–41 we read:

‘Now the sojourning of the children of Israel, who dwelt in Egypt, was four hundred and thirty years. And it came to pass at the end of the four hundred and thirty years, even the selfsame day it came to pass, that all the hosts of the Lord went out from the land of Egypt’ (Exodus 12:40–41, KJV).

The words of verse 41 (‘even the selfsame day’) are highly significant and give the impression that God’s timing of events is exact. The Exodus is a very important event not only because of the following history of Israel as a nation, but also because of its significance with respect to the death of the Lord Jesus Christ. He, alone the Saviour of men, died the same day of the same month that the children of Israel left Egypt. The timing of God is exact, and I believe that His Word testifies to this accuracy, giving us detailed information of a precise nature. If we work hard in searching the Scriptures we will be blessed with fruitful results, but a flippant and cursory glance yields only confusion.

Now the first impression gathered from Exodus 12:40 is that the Israelites dwelt in Egypt for 430 years. Indeed most modern translations have interpreted the Hebrew text in this way:

‘Now the length of time the Israelites people lived in Egypt was 430 years’ (NIV).

‘Now the time that the sons of Israel lived in Egypt was four hundred and thirty years’ (NASB).

‘The time that the people of Israel dwelt in Egypt was four hundred and thirty years’ (RSV).

If this first impression is right, then this would fix the date of the Exodus in the year 2728 AM (*Anno Mundi*: year of the world) (i.e. 2298 AM + 430 years = 2728 AM). Since the Exodus occurred in the year 1446 BC¹ this would make the date of creation 4174 BC.² Unfortunately this first impression runs up against some serious biblical problems. The first of these occurs in Galatians 3:16, 17 where we read:

‘The promises were spoken to Abraham and to his seed. The scripture does not say “and to seeds” meaning many people but “and to your seed” meaning one person, who is Christ. What I mean is this: The law, introduced 430 years later, does not set aside the covenant previously established by God and thus do away with the promise’ (Galatians 3:16, 17, NIV).

Here Paul explains to the Galatians that God’s promise made to Abraham has not been abrogated or nullified by the law given to Moses just after the Exodus 430 years later. The 430 years of Exodus 12:40 are therefore interpreted by Paul as being the time span from the receiving of the promise by Abraham until the giving of the law to Moses, and not the period covering the descent of Jacob and his family into Egypt and their descendants’ subsequent return in the Exodus.

Stephen’s sermon (Acts 7)

Exactly when Abraham received the promise or the covenant that begins the 430-year countdown to the Exodus is not an easy thing to determine. Stephen answering his accusers in Acts chapter 7 tells us that Abraham received the promises while he was still in Mesopotamia:

‘... The God of glory appeared unto our father Abraham, when he was in Mesopotamia, before he dwelt in Charran, and said unto him, “Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and come into the land which I shall shew thee.” Then came he out of the land of the Chaldaeans, and dwelt in Charran: and from thence, when his father was dead, he removed him into this land, wherein ye now dwell’ (Acts 7:2b–4, KJV).

Stephen’s reporting of God’s words to Abraham seems to be very much like those found in Genesis 12:1b:

‘Get thee out of thy country, and from thy kindred, and from thy father’s house, unto a land that I will shew thee’ (Genesis 12:1b, KJV).

Clearly Stephen has interpreted Genesis 12:1–3 as an event that occurred not only prior to Abraham’s leaving Haran (called Charran in the KJV New Testament) when he was 75 years old (see Genesis 12:4) but also before he even reached Haran from Chaldea. This interpretation, which we must accept since Stephen was said to be ‘full of faith and the Holy Spirit’ (Acts 6:5) and therefore divinely inspired, is also one supported by the KJV rendering of the first few words of Genesis 12:1 which read:

‘Now the Lord *had* said unto Abram ...’ (Genesis 12:1a, KJV).

The use of the pluperfect tense here is not followed in modern translations such as the NASB and the RSV:

‘Now the Lord said to Abram ...’ (Genesis 12:1a, NASB and RSV).

but is followed by the NIV:

‘The Lord had said to Abram ...’ (Genesis 12:1a, NIV).

Thus the revelation to Abraham recorded in Genesis 12:1–3 probably occurred some time before his 75th birthday, while he was still in Mesopotamia. It is not possible to say exactly how much time passed by between Abraham’s reception of the promise of God in Mesopotamia and his reaching Canaan when he was 75 years old. Nothing in Genesis 11 or 12 give any indication of the time period, but it is doubtful it was many years since it is difficult to imagine Abraham’s reluctance to follow the Lord in obedience on this matter. So Abraham received the promise of God recorded in Genesis 12:1–3 some time before he was 75. Returning to the passage in Galatians mentioned earlier, the interesting thing to note here in this connection, is that Paul talks about the promise given to Abraham and his seed. The first mention of the word ‘seed’ in Genesis chapter 12 occurs at verse 7 at which point, Abraham has already entered Canaan. From the end of verse 5 we read:

‘... and into the land of Canaan they came. And Abram passed through the land unto the place of Sichem, unto the plain of Moreh. And the Canaanite was then in the land’ (Genesis 12:5b, 6, KJV).

Immediately after this the Lord appeared to Abraham and said:

‘Unto thy seed will I give this land’ (Genesis 12:7b, KJV).

Abraham worshipped God, and then continued on his journey. It is to these words of God that Paul refers to in his letter to the Galatians, (Galatians 3:16,17). Paul points out to the Galatian Christians that God’s promise to Abraham concerned his seed (in the singular) and not to his seeds (in the plural). The apostle then makes the point that the law, which was given 430 years later, does not nullify the promise given to Abraham. Paul, therefore, reckons the 430-year time period to begin at Genesis 12:7 when Abraham was 75 years old. If this is true, (and I believe that it is), then the real date for creation comes out as 3959 BC. The discrepancy with the figure accepted by others noted above (4174 BC) is simply

due to the matter of the 215 years for the stay in Egypt rather than 430 years.

The beginning of the 430 years

Now it may be thought that the 430-year time period could have begun either when Abraham first received the promise from God in Mesopotamia (as recorded in Genesis 12:1–3) or, when the covenant was formally sealed when Abraham was 85 years old in Genesis chapter 15 (Genesis 16:3,16). Concerning the first of these two options, this would be some time before Abraham was 75 years old. The main argument against this view is that the promise contained in Genesis 12:1–3 does not contain the word ‘seed’. Paul’s

argument in Galatians hinges particularly on this word, which occurs for the first time in Genesis 12:7, at a time when Abraham was 75 years old and travelling within Canaan. With regard to the second option, namely, dating the 430-year timespan from the formalising of the covenant in Genesis chapter 15, I would like to make just one point. It seems to me that the covenant of Genesis chapter 15 is not a new covenant, but a restatement of the covenant already given to the patriarch in chapter 12. The beginning of Genesis 15:18 gives the impression that God is making a new agreement:

‘In the same day the Lord made a covenant with Abram, saying ...’ (Genesis 15:18a, KJV).

Abraham was 85 years old at this time (Genesis 16:3, 16) but it is interesting to note that when God addresses Abraham in this verse, He does so in the past tense:

‘Unto thy seed have I given this land ...’ (Genesis 15:18b, KJV).

Compare this with Genesis 12:7:

‘Unto thy seed will I give this land’ (Genesis 12:7b, KJV).

Clearly the formal covenant of Genesis chapter 15 is a restatement of the promise made in Genesis 12:7. This idea is strengthened and enlarged when it is realised that God formalised the covenant with Abraham, (Genesis 15:9–10) in response to Abraham’s question recorded in Genesis 15:8,

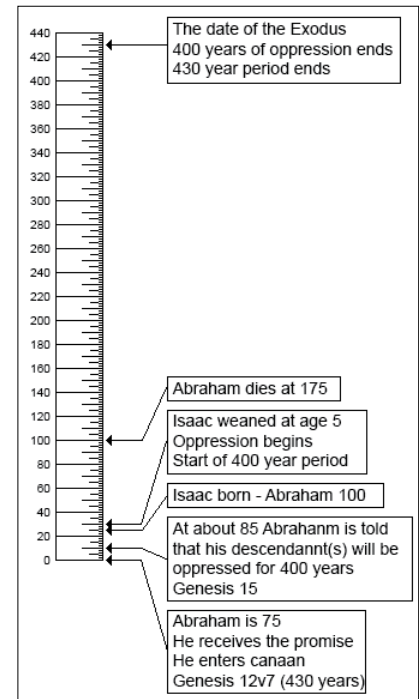


Figure 1. The 400 and 430 years understood.

which was really a request for a sign or a token from the Lord. Chapter 15 opens with an encouragement to Abraham, almost as though the patriarch was afraid and at a low point in his life (Genesis 15:1–3). The covenant of Genesis 15:9–10 was made by God alone as a sign to Abraham to encourage him, but it was no new agreement. It is for this reason that Genesis 15 cannot be used as the starting point for the 430-year period to the Exodus. Even though the word ‘seed’ is used throughout Genesis chapter 15, it makes much more sense to assume that Paul was referring to the first occurrence of this word, which, as we have seen, can be found at Genesis 12:7. We can confidently conclude, therefore, that the 430-year time period mentioned in Galatians chapter 3:17 must begin from Genesis 12:7 when Abraham was 75 years old. That this 430 years is identical to the 430 years mentioned in Exodus 12:40 cannot be a matter of dispute. It is certain that Paul’s use of the figure 430 is derived from Exodus 12:40, since there is no other mention of the same time span.

430 years in Egypt?

As we have already said, the words of Exodus 12:40 seem to give the distinct impression that the Israelites lived in Egypt for 430 years. That this cannot be so, however, we have shown from Paul’s understanding in Galatians chapter 3, since this time period began when Abraham was 75 years old, 215 years before Jacob descended into Egypt. How then, we may ask, are we to understand the words recorded in Exodus 12:40? Matthew Henry’s comments on this verse are helpful:

‘... it was just 430 years from the promise made to Abraham (as the apostle explains it, Galatians 3:17) at his first coming into Canaan, during all which time the children of Israel, that is, the Hebrews, the distinguished chosen seed, were sojourners in a land that was not theirs, either Canaan or Egypt.’³

Here, Matthew Henry has interpreted the phrase ‘the children of Israel’ to mean the descendants of the line of promise, or, as he puts it, ‘the distinguished chosen seed’, rather than the literal children of Israel, (i.e. Jacob), that went down with him into Egypt in Genesis chapter 46. The Samaritan Pentateuch and the Alexandrine copy of the LXX have a slightly different reading at Exodus 12:40 that favour the view taken by Paul in Galatians.⁴ According to Torrey, the Samaritan Pentateuch, for example, reads:

‘Now the sojourning of the children of Israel, and of their fathers in the land of Canaan and in the land of Egypt, was 430 years.’⁴

Of course it could be cogently argued that the Samaritan Pentateuch and the LXX are inferior versions of the Scriptures compared to the Masoretic text. The words underlined in the quote above may have been an addition made by the writers of the Samaritan Pentateuch and LXX versions to put the record straight, as it were. However, since we believe that Paul wrote his epistle to the Galatians under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, we must take what is written

there as truth. If we take the Masoretic text as the original record, it still poses no real threat to the above idea based on Paul’s words in Galatians. This is because Exodus 12:40 does not necessarily imply that the children of Israel had lived in Egypt for 430 years. The phrase ‘who dwelt in Egypt’ in the KJV rendering has been separated from the main sentence by commas. It appears almost as a parenthetical statement, as though it were simply a reminder that ‘the children of Israel’ had lately been living in Egypt. The most important part of the verse seems to be the timing: ‘Now the sojourning of the Children of Israel ... was 430 years’. Indeed the word ‘sojourning’ really means ‘the time of residing’ according to Davidson’s Lexicon, so that we could render the verse, (as in the NASB margin):

‘Now the time of the children of Israel (who were living in Egypt at that time) was 430 years.’⁵

The Holy Spirit is signifying that the time is up. The time of the ‘sojourning’ of the children of Israel (chosen seed) is now completed, and God is going to deliver them as He had promised.

Slapdash with numbers?

Now many people have assumed that because the Israelites never achieved great projects like the Egyptians in their pyramid building and so on, they were therefore not interested in the accurate recording of dates or times, and were never really interested in numbers. The Egyptians (and many other ancient civilisations for that matter) were very competent mathematicians, surveyors, craftsmen and astronomers, capable of achievements comparable to, if not better than, modern standards. They were not brute ignorant savages that had recently emerged from caves. But since the Hebrews never achieved the same things that other nations did, it is always assumed that they were slapdash in recording numbers. Morris, commenting on Genesis chapter 15, where God formalises the covenant with Abraham, seems to give this impression:

‘God said they would be in an alien land 400 years, a round number which was later seen to be exactly 430 years (Exodus 12:40). This was indicated to be equivalent to ‘four generations’, perhaps since men were still living to be one hundred years of age and older as a general rule at that time.’⁶

Alan Cole in his Tyndale commentary on Exodus also suggests that the three expressions: ‘430 years’, ‘400 years’, and ‘four generations’ were rough estimates of the same time period. Commenting on Exodus 12:41 Cole says:

‘The length of Israel’s stay in Egypt has already been discussed; possibilities range from 430 years (as here) through 400 years (Genesis 15:13) to 215 years (LXX and Syriac, which make the 430 years cover the patriarchal as well as the Egyptian period). The “four generations” of Genesis 15:16 is probably only a rough equivalent of 400 years. Again, the exact length of the stay is immaterial: what is important is that God delivered Israel at the end of

it. That the above figures all remain open possibilities shows how little stress Israel laid on the actual number.’⁷

Yet throughout Scripture the Holy Spirit has taken great care in recording dates and times of events. One wonders why He bothered to do this if none of these numbers have any real meaning. I believe that the three phrases of time noted above all refer to different things. I have shown how the 430-year period covers the time between Abraham’s entrance into Canaan and the nation of Israel’s departure from Egypt. As the Holy Spirit records:

‘And it came to pass at the end of the four hundred and thirty years, even the selfsame day it came to pass, that all the hosts of the Lord went out from the land of Egypt’ (Exodus 12:41, KJV).

There seems to be nothing slapdash here. In the NASB and NIV translations the words emphasised in the above quote read: ‘to the very day’. God’s timing is exact, and He has given us the information to check it out. I hope now to show that the 400 year period and the four generations mentioned in Genesis 15 mean just exactly what they say.

The 400 years of oppression (Genesis 15)

All of these events were controlled by God and happened in His perfect timing, just as He had planned. Now after Abraham had prepared the animals for the covenant, God caused him to fall into a deep sleep attended by horror and darkness (Genesis 15:12). While he was in this sleep God spoke to him saying:

‘Know of a surety that thy seed shall be a stranger in a land that is not theirs, and shall serve them; and they shall afflict them four hundred years; and also that nation whom they shall serve, will I judge: and afterward shall they come out with great substance’ (Genesis 15:13–14, KJV).

This is not all that the Lord said to Abraham at this time, but we shall look at those comments later. For now we need to determine how the 400-year period mentioned above fits into our chronology.

Now the first thing that strikes me in verse 13 quoted

from the KJV is the switch from singular (thy seed, a stranger) to plural (theirs, them etc.). A literal rendering of the Hebrew reads thus:

‘... a stranger (גר (*ger*)), he will be, your seed (זרע (*zerah*)) in a land not to them and they shall work them and utterly afflict them for 400 years.’

Although the KJV version is faithful to the original translation, modern versions ignore the fact that the word ‘stranger’, the verb ‘to be’, and the word ‘seed’ are all in the singular, supplying them as plurals instead:

‘Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own ...’ (Genesis 15:13, NIV).

‘Know of a surety that your descendants will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs ...’ (Genesis 15:13, RSV).

‘Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a land that is not theirs ...’ (Genesis 15:13, NASB).

I believe that with the use of the singular and plural in verse 13, a double statement is intended here. Modern translations give the impression that only Abraham’s later descendants are meant here, referring exclusively to those in Egypt. I suggest, however, that the Lord intends us to understand that the 400-year period began with the oppression experienced by Abraham’s *seed* Isaac. Thus the Lord is speaking not only about what will happen to Abraham’s seed (his descendant Isaac) but also about what will befall the many descendants that would come later through Isaac and his son Jacob. Abraham’s seed (his descendants) will be strangers and will be oppressed for 400 years. This will start from Isaac (his first descendant) and will continue right on through until 400 years have passed. Thus both Abraham’s ‘seed’ (Isaac) and his ‘seeds’ (later descendants through Isaac and Jacob) will be strangers and will be oppressed for a total time of 400 years. At the end of this time period Abraham’s descendants would no longer be strangers or oppressed. This would obviously coincide with the end of the 430 years mentioned in Exodus 12:40–41.

When did the 400-year period begin?

Considering the beginning of the 400-year period this is not so easy to determine. It could not have begun at the time of Isaac’s birth (when Abraham was 100 years old – Genesis 21:5) since this would only be 25 years after Abraham received the promise of Genesis 12:7 that Paul refers to in Galatians 3:16,17. If this were the case then the 400-year period would finish five years before the Exodus. This is obviously wrong because Abraham’s descendants were still strangers and being brutally treated right up to their departure from Egypt which is recorded in Exodus chapter 12. The 400-year period must, therefore, begin 30 years after the events recorded in Genesis 12:4–9. This means that the 400 years of oppression began when Isaac was five years old. Is there any justification for this in Scripture? A look at Genesis 21:8–9, I believe will provide some support for our ideas here. In Genesis 21:8 we are told that on the day that Isaac was weaned, Abraham



Image by Gustave Doré

The Exodus marks the end of the 430 years of sojourning for the Israelites.

threw him a great party. Now usually a child is weaned when he (or she) is 2 or 3 years old. There is nothing sacrosanct about the ages 2 or 3 and it is not uncommon for children to be weaned at much later ages. I suspect that Isaac was weaned when he was five years old and that is why Abraham made such a great feast. At last his only son was growing independent of his mother. Now there is nothing within Scripture that tells us that Isaac was five years old when he was weaned. I am just suggesting this so that the 400 and 430-year periods can fit together. If we assume that Isaac was actually two years old when he was weaned (a more usual age for weaning perhaps) then our chronology would require that the 430-year period should begin when Abraham was 72 years old. He would still have been in Mesopotamia at this time, so that the 430-year period would begin when Abraham first received his call (acts 7:2; Genesis 12:1–3). This seems plausible, but does not square exactly with Galatians 3:16,17 which seems to require the 430-year period to have begun from Genesis 12:7 when Abraham was 75 years old. Now if my supposition concerning Isaac's age when he was weaned is accepted then the chronology as shown in figure 1 would be the result.

Opposition

I must stress, however, that fixing on the weaning of Isaac as the beginning of the 400 years of oppression is not an arbitrary choice of mine. For while Abraham's great feast was in progress we read in Genesis 21:9 that:

‘And Sarah saw the son of Hagar the Egyptian, which she had born unto Abraham, mocking’ (Genesis 21:9, KJV).

It was at this time, then, that Ishmael (the son of Hagar the Egyptian by Abraham) began to mock Abraham's seed. This event recorded in Genesis 21:9 begins the 400 years of oppression for Abraham's descendants. It is usually assumed that only the Israelites in Egypt (i.e. the descendants of Jacob) suffered the oppression prophesied in Genesis 15. But that this oppression also extended to the immediate descendants of Abraham (i.e. Isaac and Jacob) while they were in Canaan will become clear a little later.

It is interesting to note here that Ishmael's name is not actually mentioned in the verse. Instead the Holy Spirit calls him ‘the son of Hagar the Egyptian’ emphasising the nation that would later enslave the offspring of Jacob. Furthermore, the Hebrew word (צַהֲקָה (*tsakhaq*)), translated ‘mocking’ which is related to the meaning of Isaac's name (יִצְחָק (*yitskhaq*)) uses the intensive active form of the verb. It suggests that Ishmael was openly and utterly mocking Isaac, not just laughing to himself like Sarah did and was exposed by the Lord (Genesis 18:12–15). Indeed Paul in the New Testament interprets this mocking of Isaac by Ishmael as a persecution of Abraham's seed:

‘Now we, brethren, as Isaac was, are the children of promise. But as then he that was born after the flesh persecuted him that was born after the Spirit, even so it is now’ (Galatians 4:28, 29, KJV).

Thus the oppression of Abraham's seed had begun

at the time of Isaac's weaning when he was five years old. Four hundred years later, exactly 430 years after Abraham had entered the land of Canaan and was given the promise concerning his seed, (Genesis 12:7) the oppression would end as the Lord set about his deliverance of Israel from Egypt.

Conclusion

The Scriptures are the revealed will of God and cannot be broken. If God is so concerned about sparrows and the hairs on our heads, He is surely concerned about times too. We must not be tempted to capitulate to a secular view of the ‘supposed’ development or status of time reckoning in Old Testament history. He who made the worlds and instructed Adam knew how to reveal His perfect will in a perfect way. When God tells us about the times promised to Abraham which are then written of by the apostle Paul, what right do we have of explaining them away? Further analysis of the term ‘fourth generation’ and a consideration of the word ‘sojourning’ will provide more evidence that the Scriptures are fully trustworthy.

References

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