

How Long Were the Israelites in Egypt?

by David Wright on July 5, 2010¹

Were the Israelites in Egypt for only 215 years? If so, what about the passages that have 400 or 430 years?

In books and articles it is often claimed that the Israelites were only in Egypt for 215 years. Jacob and his family moved to Egypt, during the famine, 215 years after God's promise to Abraham. So the descendants of Jacob were there for 215 years, before the exodus of the Israelites from Egypt.

Some may say, "But according to Scripture the Israelites were slaves in Egypt for 400 years. Wait! Or was it 430 years?"

Is there a discrepancy? A copyist error? Were the ancients just not very good at math? These are usually the questions that pop into our minds when we come across a passage of Scripture that we don't understand or maybe disagree with. However, this sort of thinking reveals our beliefs about Scripture: is it really inerrant? So what's the problem—the Bible or the way we approach it?

Passages in Question

We must remember that Scripture is never in error. But because we are plagued by minds that are broken due to living in a sin-cursed world, we can never perfectly understand everything. So we must let Scripture shed light on itself. Let's look at the passages in question.

Then the Lord said to Abram, "Know for certain that your offspring will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs and will be servants there, and they will be afflicted for 400 years." (Genesis 15:13)

The time that the people of Israel lived in Egypt was 430 years. At the end of 430 years, on that very day, all the hosts of the Lord went out from the land of Egypt. (Exodus 12:40–41)

And God spoke to this effect—that his offspring would be sojourners in a land belonging to others, who would enslave them and afflict them 400 years. (Acts 7:6)

Now the promises were made to Abraham and to his offspring. It does not say, "And to offsprings," referring to many, but referring to one, "And to your offspring," who is Christ. This is what I mean: the

¹ <https://answersingenesis.org/bible-questions/how-long-were-the-israelites-in-egypt/>

law, which came 430 years afterward, does not annul a covenant previously ratified by God, so as to make the promise void (Galatians 3:16–17)

Many commentators over the years have tried to explain these differences with various ideas. One is that the biblical authors said 400 years because they were simply rounding to a convenient number,¹ because this was the tradition in ancient times. However, this explanation doesn't make any sense, especially since the Bible is exact in giving ages (Genesis 5; Numbers; 1 and 2 Kings; etc.). There are a number of other explanations that begin outside of Scripture. However, any extra-biblical explanation is really unnecessary. A closer look into Scripture, itself, will reveal a simple and definitive answer.

It is clear, from Scripture, that Moses was the author/collator of the first five books of the Bible, the Pentateuch. Not only did he record God's eyewitness account of what happened (*Exodus 24:18*), but he would have been educated well in Pharaoh's house in the history of Egypt as well as in the History of his people (*Exodus 2:7–11*). So, Moses rounding off dates seems meaningless considering his knowledge, not to mention his attention to detail when it came to chronologies.

The Simple Solution

So what's the deal? How long were the Israelites enslaved? The answer is given by Henry Ainsworth, a British theologian from the early 1600s:

Ver. 13. ... **Not Theirs,] Meaning Egypt, Mesopotamia, and Canaan itself;** wherein they were but strangers, Gen. xvii. 8. Psal. cv. 11, 12. and therein afflicted. Gen. xxi. 9. xxvi. 7, 14, 15, &c. but chiefly in Egypt. **Four Hundred Years,] Which began when Ishmael, son of Hagar the Egyptian, mocked and persecuted Isaac,** Gen. xxi. 9. Gal. iv. 29. which fell out thirty years after the promise, Gen. xii. 3. which promise was four hundred and thirty years before the law, Gal. iii. 17. and four hundred and thirty years after that promise, came Israel out of bondage, Exod. xii. 41. **2** (emphasis added)

When you think about it, this is an incredibly straightforward explanation that is provided by Scripture, but is ingeniously simplified by Henry Ainsworth: Israel's (the nation) "affliction" (*Genesis 15:13; Acts 7:6*) started when Isaac was five years old and Ishmael mocked him (*Genesis 21:9; Galatians 4:29*).

Another Difficulty?

However, another difficulty might seem to arise from *Exodus 12:40* where it says, "The time that the people of Israel lived in Egypt was 430 years." Is this a contradiction, error, or difficulty?

Once again, this type of question actually reveals a very important, yet subtle way of thinking. It reveals how one approaches Scripture. If I am to come to Scripture and read a passage and ask, “Is that wrong?” I am revealing that I do not truly believe Scripture is without error. The proper approach, *since it is God’s infallible Word*, is to ask, “Since this cannot be in error, how is my understanding in error?”

Once we realize this, we can then look at the passage and realize that this statement made by Moses actually adds clarity. When we think of the children or people of Israel we typically think of Jacob, his 12 sons, and their descendants. Remember though, the promise was not made to Jacob, but to Abraham. What Moses is subtly pointing out is that the nation of Israel did not start with Jacob, but with Abraham (*Genesis 12:2* reveals that the nation of Israel began with him). Therefore, this passage is including Isaac and Abraham *in* the nation of Israel. **Also, 430 years prior to the exodus is when Abraham first lived in Egypt.** There is no contradiction or difficulty. Simply put, the nation was named after Jacob/Israel, but it started with Abraham.

Dr. Floyd Nolen Jones also concludes in his *The Chronology of the Old Testament* that not only was Abraham a member of the nation of Israel, but that the 400 years of sojourning and affliction started with Isaac’s weaning at five years old when Ishmael mocked him.³ This point about Isaac’s weaning and Ishmael’s mocking 30 years after the promise is also concluded by James Ussher in his *The Annals of the World*:

Based on these verses (*Ga 4:29, Ge 15:13, Ac 7:6*), we conclude that this persecution started at this time when Isaac was five years old and Abraham made this feast. This was thirty years after Abraham left Haran. ⁴

For a more detailed look at when and in what order these events took place, and to learn a few other interesting facts, see the timeline below. One interesting fact, for example, is that Isaac was still alive (he was 168) when Joseph was sold into slavery.

(See next page for a detailed timeline)

Table 1: Timeline showing dates from God’s promise to Abraham to the exodus from Egypt.

Patriarch: Age	Event	Passage	Years from Promise	Years to Exodus
Abraham: 75	God makes the promise to Abraham and he leaves Haran.	Genesis 12:1-4	0	430
Abraham: 75-85	God tells Abraham his descendants “will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs and will be servants there and they will be afflicted for 400 years.”	Genesis 15:13 ; Acts 7:6	0-10	420-430
Abraham: 85	Abraham has lived in Canaan for 10 years and takes Hagar as his wife and she conceives Ishmael.	Genesis 16:3-4	10	420
Abraham: 86	Ishmael is born.	Genesis 16:15-16	11	419
Abraham: 100 Ishmael: 14	Isaac is born.	Genesis 21:5	25	405
Abraham: 105 Isaac: 5 Ishmael: 19	Isaac is weaned and Ishmael mocks/persecutes Isaac.	Genesis 21:8-9 ; Galatians 4:29	30	400
Abraham: 140 Isaac: 40	Isaac marries Rebekah.	Genesis 24:1-67 ; 25:20	65	365
Abraham: 160 Isaac: 60	Esau and Jacob are born.	Genesis 25:26	85	345
Abraham: 175 Isaac: 75 Jacob: 15	Abraham dies.	Genesis 25:7	100	330
Isaac: 151 Jacob: 91	Joseph is born.		176	254
Isaac: 168 Jacob: 108 Joseph: 17	Joseph is sold by his brothers and taken to Egypt.	Genesis 37	193	237
Isaac: 180 Jacob: 120 Joseph: 29	Isaac dies.	Genesis 35:28-29	205	225
Jacob: 121 Joseph: 30	Joseph is made second in command by Pharaoh.	Genesis 41:46	206	224

Jacob: 130 Joseph: 39	Joseph reveals himself to his brothers two years into the famine with five years left. Jacob meets Pharaoh.	Genesis 45:4-6 Genesis 47:9	215	215
Jacob: 147 Joseph: 56	Jacob dies.	Genesis 47:28-49:33	232	198
Joseph: 110	Joseph dies.	Genesis 50:26	286	144
	Only 64 years pass from the time Joseph dies to when Moses is born..	Exodus 6:16-20		
Moses: 3 months	Moses is placed in a basket and adopted by Pharaoh's daughter.	Exodus 2	350	80
Moses: 80	Moses and Aaron speak to Pharaoh beginning the exodus from Egypt.	Exodus 7:7 ; Exodus 12:40-41 ; Galatians 3:16-17	430	0