

# BIBLICAL RESEARCH BULLETIN

The Academic Journal of Trinity Southwest University

ISSN 1938-694X

Volume IV

Number 6

## The Length of the Israelite Sojourn in Egypt

Steven Collins

### Abstract:

If one adopts the short sojourn scenario (Jacob to Moses is approximately 215 years), then numerous conclusions about biblical chronology and its correspondence with ancient Near Eastern history and archaeology, which are based on a 430-year Israelite sojourn in Egypt, must be abandoned.



© Copyright 2004, Trinity Southwest University

**Special copyright, publication, and/or citation information:** *Biblical Research Bulletin* is copyrighted by Trinity Southwest University. All rights reserved. Article content remains the intellectual property of the author. This article may be reproduced, copied, and distributed, as long as the following conditions are met:

1. If transmitted electronically, this article must be in its original, complete PDF file form. The PDF file may not be edited in any way, including the file name.
2. If printed copies of all or a portion of this article are made for distribution, the copies must include complete and unmodified copies of the article's cover page (i.e., this page).
3. Copies of this article may not be charged for, except for nominal reproduction costs.
4. Copies of this article may not be combined or consolidated into a larger work in any format on any media, without the written permission of Trinity Southwest University.

Brief quotations appearing in reviews and other works may be made, so long as appropriate credit is given and/or source citation is made.

This article is adapted from a paper presented to the annual meeting of the Near East Archaeological Society in 2001. Some format irregularities may exist.

For submission requirements visit [www.BiblicalResearchBulletin.com](http://www.BiblicalResearchBulletin.com).

E-mail inquiries to [question@BiblicalResearchBulletin.com](mailto:question@BiblicalResearchBulletin.com), or send them to:

Trinity Southwest University (Attn: BRB)  
P.O. Box 91593, Albuquerque, NM 87199 USA

# The Length of the Israelite Sojourn in Egypt

**Steven Collins**

Dean, College of Archaeology,  
Trinity Southwest University

The length of the Israelite sojourn in Egypt significantly impacts a number of key chronological issues. Among these issues are: (a) the timeframe and cultural context for the life of the Hebrew patriarch, Abraham; (b) the proposed identification of the Early Bronze Age cities of Bab edh-Dhra and Numeira with biblical Sodom and Gomorrah; (c) the identification of the Egyptian Dynasty during which Joseph served as vizier; (d) the placement of the Exodus events in either the Eighteenth or Nineteenth Dynasty of Egypt.

## WITNESSES TO A SHORT SOJOURN

As much argumentation as I have examined relative to the length of the Israelite sojourn in Egypt,<sup>1</sup> I am convinced that there is only one fragment of evidence—and that highly questionable—in support of a long (430-year) sojourn in Egypt, i.e., Exodus 12:40 in the Masoretic Text: “Now the length of time the Israelite people lived in Egypt was 430 years.” Yet many conservative scholars, particularly evangelicals, cling to the 430 years of Exodus 12:40(MT) as if the evidence overwhelmingly favored it. But in fact, practically all other conceivable lines of evidence point to a short (215-year) sojourn in Egypt, clearly revealing that the reading of the Masoretic Text in Exodus 12:40 is the result of a scribal omission made sometime before or during the Middle Ages (ca. 1000 CE).

Other witnesses to the text of Exodus 12:40—namely, the Samaritan Pentateuch and the Septuagint (LXX)—attest to the following reading: “Now the length of time the Israelite people lived in Egypt and in Canaan was 430 years.” Both the Alexandrian-Jewish chronographer, Demetrius (before 200 BCE) and the Jewish-Roman historian, Josephus (1<sup>st</sup> century CE) clearly support this reading of Exodus 12:40.<sup>2</sup> Josephus writes that “[the Israelites] left Egypt...four hundred and thirty years after our forefather Abraham came into Canaan, but two hundred and

---

<sup>1</sup> It is worth noting that scholars seem to use either a short or long Israelite sojourn in Egypt depending upon the needs of their particular theories, with but little critical analysis as to which length of sojourn is best supported by the evidence. For example, while K.A. Kitchen postulates a much-abbreviated timespan (on the order of 280 years or so) for the (literal) 480 years of Exodus 12:40 in order to accommodate his preference for a mid-13<sup>th</sup> century BCE date for the Exodus, he readily adopts a long, 400-plus-year Egyptian sojourn to avoid placing Joseph in the middle of the Eighteenth Dynasty where he obviously does not belong. See K.A. Kitchen, *The Bible in Its World* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1978) 74-76.

B.G. Wood, who holds to an early, mid-15<sup>th</sup> century BCE Exodus date, assumes a long sojourn in Egypt because he needs to push the date of Abraham’s entrance into Canaan as far back as possible to preserve some hope of identifying Bab edh-Dhra and Numeira as Sodom and Gomorrah. See B.G. Wood, “The Discovery of the Sin Cities of Sodom and Gomorrah,” *BS* 12.3 (1999) 66-80. It is interesting to observe that this article includes a photograph of Dr. Wood standing next to an information sign placed at Bab edh-Dhra by the Jordanian Ministry of Tourism and Antiquities stating that the main (fortified) occupation of the town was destroyed about 2400 BCE toward the end of EB III, more than 300 years before the earliest possible date that Abraham and Lot could have entered Canaan.

In my opinion, the best treatment of the subject in support of the long Egyptian sojourn scenario is P.J. Ray, Jr., “The Duration of the Israelite Sojourn in Egypt,” *BS* 17.2 (2004) 33-44. This is the revised version of an article that originally appeared in *AUSS* 24 (1986) 231-248.

<sup>2</sup> J. Finegan, *Handbook of Biblical Chronology*, rev. ed. (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1998) 204-205.

fifteen years only after Jacob removed into Egypt.”<sup>3</sup> Translator Whiston’s footnote on this passage from Josephus is instructive:

Why our Masorete copy so groundlessly abridges this account in Exod. 12:40, as to ascribe 430 years to the sole peregrination of the Israelites in Egypt when it is clear even by that Masorete chronology elsewhere, as well as from the express text itself, in the Samaritan [Pentateuch], Septuagint and Josephus, that they sojourned in Egypt but half that time—and that by consequence, the other half of their peregrination was in the land of Canaan, before they came into Egypt—is hard to say.<sup>4</sup>

Even the apostle Paul in Galatians 3:17 supports a short Egyptian sojourn by affirming that from “the promises....spoken to Abraham” to the giving of the Mosaic Law, the total elapsed time was 430 years—again, 215 years in Canaan (Abraham to Jacob) and 215 years in Egypt (Jacob to Moses). From an historical point of view, Paul’s commentary provides evidence for the state of the text of Exodus 12:40 in the mid-1<sup>st</sup> century CE, which included both locatives, Egypt and Canaan, as components of the Israelite sojourn. Further, to imply that Paul was only familiar with the LXX reading as a backdrop for Galatians 3:17 is ludicrous; Paul’s extensive training as a “Hebrew of the Hebrews” (Philippians 3:4-6) would have certainly given him an intimate knowledge of the then-extant Hebrew text of Exodus.

Thus, from an evangelical point of view, only two distinct possibilities exist to account for Paul’s clear support of a 430-year period from Abraham to Moses (= short sojourn in Egypt):

- (a) At the time Paul wrote Galatians, both the Hebrew and LXX texts of Exodus 12:40 read “in Egypt and Canaan....430 years,” suggesting that the Hebrew textual tradition leading to the much later Masoretic Text suffered the omission of “Canaan” after the time of Paul (and probably much later).
- (b) If the variant readings of Exodus 12:40 existed in the 1<sup>st</sup> century CE, then the Holy Spirit obviously inspired Paul to select the correct one, i.e., “in Egypt and Canaan....430 years.”

When you add to these points the fact that the Masoretic genealogies from Abraham to Jacob and from Jacob to Moses fit best into two 215-year periods,<sup>5</sup> the best conclusion appears to discredit a long sojourn in Egypt. J. Finegan’s gentle rejection of a long sojourn in Egypt is more than kind,<sup>6</sup> for an application of even the most basic logic to the available data explodes the notion that the Israelites were in Egypt for 430 years.

## **OBJECTIONS TO A SHORT SOJOURN**

Just to be fair, though, I want to deal with a handful of issues brought up by J.P. Ray in his defense of the longer sojourn scenario (see the publication information in footnote 133). He certainly understands the points in favor of a short sojourn, but dismisses it in favor of the 430-year sojourn for several reasons. I will answer each in turn.

---

<sup>3</sup> Flavius Josephus, *The Antiquities of the Jews* (2.15.2) in *The Works of Josephus: New Updated Edition*, tr. by W. Whiston (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1987) 74-75.

<sup>4</sup> See translator Whiston’s footnote on Josephus, *Antiquities* (2.15.2) 75.

<sup>5</sup> Finegan, *Chronology* 203-206.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*

First, he suggests that possibly since the time of the LXX (3<sup>rd</sup> century BCE) “there has been a tradition that the 430 years in Exodus 12:40...represent only 215 years of actual years of Israelite sojourn in Egypt, with the other 215 years representing the sojourn in Canaan.” But such a take is slanted toward his view, as if the short sojourn idea were simply an “alternate” tradition to the longer one. Realistically, the long sojourn tradition seems to be purely a late idea spawned by a scribal error leading to the reading of Exodus 12:40 in the MT. Who held to a long sojourn before that? Not many, as far as I can tell.

Second, Ray suggests that Josephus “provides a divided testimony.” In spite of the fact that Josephus is so adamant about the short sojourn in his *Antiquities* (2.15.2), with his *Contra Apion* (1.14) giving full support to this, Ray cites another passage in *Antiquities* (2.9.1) that, in his opinion, seems to support the MT: “And four hundred years did they spend under these afflictions...” Clearly this reflects the 400 years of Genesis 15:13 and might seem to suggest a 400-year sojourn, but not necessarily; Josephus may merely be skimming over the issue with the precision of the Genesis passage oversimplified or ignored (see the next paragraph). But just as Genesis 15:13 must be understood in the light of other biblical texts, such as Exodus 12:40 (LXX) and Galatians 3:17, so the *Antiquities* 2.9.1 passage should be understood in the light of the *Antiquities* 2.15.2 passage which, for Josephus, is definitive on the issue. In the same paragraph, Ray points out that even Rabbinic tradition supports a short Egyptian sojourn, citing *Seder ‘Ôlām* (2<sup>nd</sup> century) and Rashi (11<sup>th</sup> century), suggesting also that the Midrash is vague on the issue. So, nothing here really favors the long sojourn.

Third, Ray attempts to sell the idea that the “NT also appears to be divided on the subject.” But I would respond, Appears divided to whom? He cites Acts 7:6-7 and 13:17-20. But the Acts 7 passage deals with Genesis 15:13, not Exodus 12:40. Genesis 15:13 says, “Then Yahweh said to him, ‘Know for certain that your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be enslaved and mistreated four hundred years.’” The meaning is not vague here. The descendants of Abraham would have two things happen during a period of 400 years: (a) they would be strangers in a country not their own (Canaan!), and (b) they would be enslaved and mistreated (in Egypt!). Where is the long Egyptian sojourn? The Acts 13 passage says, “The God of the people of Israel chose our fathers; he made the people prosper during their stay in Egypt, with mighty power he led them out of that country, he endured their conduct for about forty years in the desert, he overthrew seven nations in Canaan and gave their land to his people as their inheritance. All this took about 450 years. After this, God gave them judges until the time of Samuel the prophet.”

Let us analyze this...Over a period of 450 years God did several things: (a) he chose our fathers (the Hebrew Patriarchs), (b) he made them prosper in Egypt, (c) he led them out of Egypt, (d) he put up with them in the wilderness, and (e) he overthrew the nations in Canaan and gave that land to the Israelites. There is absolutely nothing here demanding a long sojourn in Egypt, especially if the “fathers” included Abraham. The Apostle Paul’s statement in Galatians 3:17 is *the* definitive New Testament passage on the issue. And Ray agrees that Paul follows the LXX rendering of Exodus 12:40! The New Testament is not divided on the issue at all—it is a short (215-year) Israelite sojourn in Egypt all the way.

Fourth, he attempts to show a division on the issue among the Ante-Nicene Fathers, namely Tertullian (short sojourn) and Hippolytus (long sojourn). But the argument for a long sojourn here is not compelling and derives no final conclusion.

Fifth, Ray states that “the majority of ancient texts lend support to the long chronology (for the sojourn in Egypt alone). While this fact does not, of course, provide conclusive support for that chronology, it does indicate a direction of probability as to the original.” However, Ray’s use of the term “conclusive support” is terribly misleading. There is no line of reasoning that justifies the use of the term “conclusive” as a description of the evidence for a long sojourn chronology, even if tempered by a carefully placed negative disclaimer. To jump from that to the conclusion “it does indicate a direction of probability as to the original” is simply unwarranted.

The balance of Ray’s argumentation is, frankly, insignificant. He simply attempts to rationalize what more clearly fits a short sojourn scenario. To be willing to argue in favor of this position, long sojourn supporters like Ray must have something else at stake that they desire to preserve at the expense of better logic and evidence. Indeed the following four ideas are what they generally want to hang onto, but these four ideas must be dismissed if one adopts a short Egyptian sojourn.

#### **FOUR IDEAS THAT EVAPORATE WITH A SHORT EGYPTIAN SOJOURN**

If one adopts the short sojourn scenario (Jacob to Moses is approximately 215 years), then numerous conclusions about biblical chronology and its correspondence with ancient Near Eastern history and archaeology, which are based on a 430-year Israelite sojourn in Egypt, must be abandoned. Four significant ones are as follows:

1. *The placement of Abraham in the Intermediate Bronze Age (2350-2000 BCE; formerly Early Bronze IV and Middle Bronze I).*<sup>7</sup> If the Exodus occurred about 1446 BCE (based on the Masoretic Text of 1 Kings 6:1) or 1406 BCE (based on the LXX rendering of 1 Kings 6:1), then the earliest possible date for the entrance of Abraham into Canaan 430 years earlier would be the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> nineteenth century BCE, which, by any stretch of the imagination, was well into Middle Bronze Age. Thus, the idea so popular with evangelical scholars—that Abraham lived in the Intermediate Bronze Age—should be abandoned. Abraham was a resident of Canaan during the prosperous Middle Bronze Age [Middle Bronze I (2000-1800 BCE) or II (1800-1600 BCE)].
2. *The identification of Bab edh-Dhra and Numeira as Sodom and Gomorrah.*<sup>8</sup> There have been numerous recent attempts to equate the Jordanian sites of Bab edh-Dhra and Numeira with the Sodom and Gomorrah of Genesis 13ff. The biblical stories involving the “cities of the plain,” including these two infamous locations, occurred in the days of Abraham and Lot. Since Sodom and Gomorrah were contemporaneous with these two patriarchs, then those sites must have been occupied and thriving during Middle Bronze Age, the correct chronological placement of Abraham in Canaan. But since both Bab edh-Dhra and Numeira were destroyed toward the end of Early Bronze Age, no later than

---

<sup>7</sup> The problem is not that most scholars try to place Abraham earlier than the Middle Bronze Age; they generally do not. It is simply that the long Israelite sojourn in Egypt assumed by some scholars forces the patriarch into the latter half of the Intermediate Bronze Age which is a considerably different cultural picture than the more stable and prosperous MB IIA (now MB I in many chronologies). Projecting an accurate historical/cultural context for Abraham depends on a more precise chronological placement. If the Egyptian sojourn of the Israelites is actually on the order of 215 years as the bulk of the evidence suggests, then there is no point in discussing Abraham in the light of Mesopotamian, Syrian, and Canaanite socio-cultural contexts earlier than MB IIA.

<sup>8</sup> Attempts to identify Bab edh-Dhra and Numeira as Sodom and Gomorrah abound in the recent literature. See B.G. Wood’s recent *BS* article titled “The Discovery of the Sin Cities of Sodom and Gomorrah” for a good range of bibliographical references.

2200 BCE (probably earlier),<sup>9</sup> they cannot remotely be associated with the careers of Abraham and Lot.<sup>10</sup> Furthermore, the biblical text tells us that Sodom was a walled town, for “Lot was sitting in the gateway of the city [Sodom]” (Genesis 19:1). Excavations at Bab edh-Dhra—the site most often identified as Sodom—reveal that its final walled phase was destroyed about 2400 BCE, toward the end of Early Bronze III.<sup>11</sup> The subsequent phase was an open settlement destroyed about 2200 BCE. After that, the site was abandoned. Thus, because both Bab edh-Dhra and Numeira were destroyed from three to five hundred years before Abraham entered Canaan, there is no hope of associating him with those Early Bronze Age towns. (Even if you assign to Abraham the earliest possible date for entering Canaan, say, about 2100 BCE, he would still arrive in the land three hundred years after the walled town of Bab edh-Dhra was destroyed.) Obviously, Sodom and Gomorrah remain unidentified (but would likely be located north of the Dead Sea according to the biblical geography<sup>12</sup>).

3. *Joseph served as vizier of Egypt during the latter part of the Middle Kingdom (2000-1786 BCE).*<sup>13</sup> If Jacob’s entrance into Egypt occurred approximately 215 years before the Exodus—as the bulk of the evidence suggests—then, given a mid-15<sup>th</sup> century BCE date for the Exodus events, Joseph served as Egyptian vizier no earlier than the early- to mid-17<sup>th</sup> century BCE, squarely in the middle of Egypt’s Second Intermediate Period (ca. 1786-1570 BCE). Thus, Joseph’s Egyptian career did not take place during the Middle Kingdom, as some scholars insist, but during the Hyksos Period when Semitic Asiatics from Canaan ruled Lower Egypt. While many scholars are convinced that the Hyksos Period is indeed the best context for Joseph based on socio-cultural data,<sup>14</sup> the fact of a short Egyptian sojourn for the Israelites rules out, on very solid chronological grounds, any earlier placement.
4. *The Exodus occurred during the reign of Rameses II around 1270-1250 BCE.*<sup>15</sup> Advocates of a late (13<sup>th</sup> century BCE) date for the Exodus traditionally opt for a long (430-year) Israelite sojourn in Egypt. But they do so in violation of their own “logic,” which treats the 480 (MT)/440 (LXX) years of 1 Kings 6:1 as a hyperbolic figure signifying twelve generations,<sup>16</sup> allowing them to shorten that time period enough to place the Exodus in the 13<sup>th</sup> century BCE. If, as they say, the 480-year figure of 1 Kings

---

<sup>9</sup> R.T. Schaub, “Bab edh-Dhra’,” *NEAEHL*, vol. 1, E. Stern, ed. (Jerusalem and New York: Israel Exploration Society and Carta; Simon and Schuster, 1993) 130-136. See also M.D. Coogan, “Numeira 1981,” *BASOR* 255 (1984) 75-81.

<sup>10</sup> Using a long, 430-year Israelite sojourn in Egypt, the earliest possible date for the birth of Abraham is about 2166 BCE, placing him in Canaan about a century later. See Finegan, *Chronology* 202.

<sup>11</sup> Schaub, “Bab edh-Dhra” 130-136.

<sup>12</sup> See S. Collins, “The Geography of the Cities of the Plain,” *Biblical Research Bulletin* II.1 (2002).

<sup>13</sup> Since most advocates of an early, 15<sup>th</sup>-century BCE date for the Exodus seem uncritically to assume a long, 430-year sojourn in Egypt, Joseph invariably winds up in the latter part of Egypt’s Middle Kingdom, usually in the Twelfth Dynasty. See C.F. Aling, *Egypt and Bible History* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981).

<sup>14</sup> See discussions in Kitchen, *Bible in Its World* 74; J.K. Hoffmeier, *Israel in Egypt: The Evidence for the Authenticity of the Exodus Tradition* (New York/Oxford: Oxford U., 1996) 77-106; and Finegan, *Chronology* 213-224.

<sup>15</sup> See discussions in Kitchen, *Bible in Its World* 75-91; K.A. Kitchen, *Pharaoh Triumphant: The Life and Times of Ramesses II* (Warminster: Aris and Phillips, 1982) 70-71; and Hoffmeier, *Israel in Egypt* 107-163.

<sup>16</sup> See the discussions in Hoffmeier, *Israel in Egypt* 122-126, and Finegan, *Chronology* 224-245.

6:1 must be reduced to only 300 years or fewer, then why do they insist that the 430 (MT) years of Exodus 12:40 is generally accurate? They must adopt the Masoretic figure of 430 years in Egypt because that is the only way they can keep Joseph out of the (very anti-Asiatic/Semitic) Eighteenth Dynasty, where he absolutely does not belong. Adding 430 years to 1270/1250 BCE puts Joseph in Egypt during the Second Intermediate Period under the reign of the Hyksos, where he fits perfectly. However, since the evidence does not at all support a long sojourn in Egypt, but one of only 215 years, the placement of Joseph based on a 13<sup>th</sup> century BCE Exodus would be in the Eighteenth Dynasty during the reign of the great warrior-king, Tuthmosis III—an historical context entirely foreign to the Joseph story. Thus, the fact of a 215-year Israelite sojourn in Egypt militates against an Exodus during the reign of Rameses II and argues strongly in favor of a 15<sup>th</sup> century BCE Exodus.

In summary, computing a biblical chronology based on a 430-year Israelite sojourn in Egypt is erroneous. Virtually every line of reasoning and evidence points to the factuality of a short, 215-year sojourn. The reality of the 215-year sojourn, in turn, categorically eliminates at least four widely held theories: (a) Abraham in the Intermediate Bronze Age; (b) Bab edh-Dhra and Numeira as Sodom and Gomorrah; (c) Joseph as vizier during the Egypt's Middle Kingdom; and (d) Rameses II as Pharaoh of the Exodus. Contrariwise, a 215-year Israelite sojourn in Egypt lends substantial support to the following; (a) the Middle Bronze Age as the correct socio-cultural context for the life of Abraham; (b) Sodom and Gomorrah as yet unidentified (and likely in a different location than the traditional southern Dead Sea area); (c) Joseph as vizier of Egypt during the Hyksos Period; and (d) the Exodus in the 15<sup>th</sup> century BCE during the Eighteenth Dynasty.