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How Many Israelites Migrated to Egypt?

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Genesis 46:8-25 gives a name-by-name list of the descendants of Jacob who migrated from Canaan to Egypt. Following this precise list there are two different figures given to identify the number of Israelites who entered Egypt—sixty-six and seventy. In addition, Acts 7:14 states that seventy-five Israelites migrated to Egypt. Do these numbers conflict or do they, upon closer examination, mesh harmoniously?

The Seventy of Genesis 46:27

Genesis 46:27 states, “With the two sons who had been born to Joseph in Egypt, the members of Jacob’s family, which went to Egypt, were seventy in all.” The number “seventy” seems straightforward enough, given the enumeration in Genesis 46:8-25. These verses identify thirty-three descendants of Jacob through Leah (Genesis 46:15), sixteen through Zilpah (Genesis 46:18), fourteen through Rachel (Genesis 46:22), and seven through Bilhah (Genesis 46:25), totaling seventy individuals excluding Jacob himself.

However, Jacob’s daughter Dinah is mentioned by name in Genesis 46:15 but does not appear to be included in the total, even though that same verse refers to both sons and daughters, Dinah being the only daughter identified among the descendants of Leah in Genesis 46:8-15.¹ By contrast, a daughter of Jacob through Zilpah by the name of Serah is included in the numbering (Genesis 46:17).

The simplest solution to this problem is to take the phrase “sons and daughters” in Genesis 46:15 to be a generic phrase that might or might not include daughters. In this way, the “thirty-three” in Genesis 46:15 are easily identified as only the male descendants of Jacob through Leah, and only these are included in the “seventy.” In fact, Dinah’s name seems to be separated from the list as a sort of addendum in Genesis 46:15.

However, some scholars prefer to include Dinah in the “seventy.” In order to do so, Jacob must also be included (based on Genesis 46:8), while Er and Onan are excluded because they had died in Canaan (Genesis 46:12).² “This number either excluded Er and Onan (who had died in Canaan) and included Jacob and Dinah, or vice versa. The former is more likely.”³ While this approach garners wide support, the more straightforward approach that includes Er and Onan and excludes Jacob and Dinah to reach the number “seventy” seems to better fit the intention of the text.

The Sixty-Six of Genesis 46:26

According to Genesis 46:26, “All those who went to Egypt with Jacob—those who were his direct descendants, not counting his sons’ wives—numbered sixty-six persons.” Clearly this verse intends to omit Joseph and his two sons, Manasseh and Ephraim, who were already in Egypt, reducing the “seventy” to sixty-seven.

Those who exclude Er and Onan from the “seventy” and include Jacob and Dinah must at this point reduce the seventy by one more in order to reach the “sixty-six” of Genesis 46:26. It’s common

at this point to remove Jacob from the list, identifying the “sixty-six” only as Jacob’s descendants who migrated from Canaan to Egypt—excluding Jacob, Joseph, Manasseh, and Ephraim from the “seventy.”⁴

However, those who include Er and Onan but exclude Jacob and Dinah from the “seventy” must, in addition to Joseph and his two sons, likewise reduce the number by one to achieve the number “sixty-six.” The most likely interpretation according to this scheme is to remove Er and Onan, who had died prior to the migration to Egypt, and include Dinah, thereby arriving at the number of Jacob’s descendants who migrated to Egypt as “sixty-six.”⁵ By either approach, sixty-six of Jacob’s descendants traveled to Egypt, and the total number of Jacob’s descendants who settled in Egypt was seventy (compare Exodus 1:5 and Deuteronomy 10:22).

The Seventy-Five of Acts 7:14

In his message defending Jesus as the Messiah, an early church leader by the name of Stephen recited segments of Israel’s history. In Acts 7:14 he stated, “After this, Joseph sent for his father Jacob and his whole family, seventy-five in all.” How did Stephen arrive at the number seventy-five when Genesis 46:27 clearly states that seventy descendants migrated to Egypt?

The Greek translation of the Old Testament commonly used in the first century, the Septuagint, actually uses the number seventy-five in Genesis 46:27 (and in Exodus 1:5, though not in Deuteronomy 10:22). However, that same translation includes the names of three grandsons and two great-grandsons of Joseph in Genesis 46:20, presumably born after Jacob’s migration to Egypt: “*These were the sons of Manasseh whom his Syrian concubine bore unto him: Machir; and Machir begat Galaad. The sons of Ephraim, Manasseh’s brother, were Sutalaam and Taam; and the sons of Sutalaam, Edem.*”⁶ These names reflect the later genealogical record

preserved in Numbers 26:29-36. “Recently, Hebrew copies of Exod. 1:5 have been found that also contain the number seventy-five This was apparently the tradition followed by Stephen in Acts 7:14b.”⁷ Stephen’s use of “seventy-five,” therefore, does not contradict Genesis 46:27 but simply provides a different, albeit accurate numbering of Jacob’s descendants.

The first century historian Josephus, in contrast to the Greek Septuagint, numbered Jacob’s descendants who migrated to Egypt at seventy, excluding Jacob.⁸ So even in the first century, both “seventy” and “seventy-five” were recognized as accurate numbers for the migration of Jacob’s family.

The Bible does not contradict itself, but actually fills out the history of ancient Israel in precise detail. Significant to this study is the fact that God had grown his chosen people from a barren couple—Abraham and Sarah—to a family of seventy, a family that would become a great nation in fulfillment of God’s grand covenant.

¹ Ross, Allen P. “Genesis,” in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary*, Vol. 1. John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck, Editors. Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985, p. 95.

² Wood, Leon. *A Survey of Israel’s History*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1970, p. 80, footnote 46.

³ Davis, John J. *Paradise to Prison*. Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1975, p. 288.

⁴ Wood, p. 80, footnote 46.

⁵ Ross, p. 95.

⁶ Clarke, Adam. *Clarke’s Commentary*, Vol. 1. New York: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, n.d., p. 254.

⁷ Sailhamer, John H. “Genesis,” in *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary*, Vol. 1. Frank E. Gaebelin, Editor. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1990, p. 262.

⁸ Josephus. *Antiquities of the Jews*, 2.7.4 (176, 183).