How many Israelites left Egypt in the Exodus?

by Dan Bruce

In the Tanakh (Old Testament), Exodus 12:40 says “Now the sojourning of the children of Israel, who dwelt in Egypt, [was] four hundred and thirty years.” But, despite the clear statement in Exodus, Bible scholars have been debating the length of the sojourn of the Israelites in Egypt for almost as long as that sojourn lasted, with two views of its duration dominating the debate. In the first view, those who hold to an early date for the Exodus (i.e., for an Exodus occurring sometime around 1450 BCE) say that the sojourn was 430 years in duration, and that the oppression of the Children of Israel lasted for 400 years, as mentioned in Genesis 15:13. In the second view, those who hold to a late date for the Exodus (i.e., for an Exodus occurring sometime around 1250 BCE) say that the sojourn was for 215 years (some say 210 years), and that the 400 years of oppression included the time the Patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob aka Israel) spent in Canaan and Egypt.

There are two Scripture passages that together reveal the length of the sojourn. Genesis 15:13 says “And he said unto Abram, 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” (KJV). In that verse, God plainly says that the oppression of the Children of Israel would span a period of 400 years. Then there is Psalm 105:6-25a, which says “O ye seed of Abraham his servant, ye children of Jacob his chosen. He is the Lord our God: his judgments are in all the earth. He hath remembered his covenant forever, the word which he commanded to a thousand generations. Which covenant he made with Abraham, and his oath unto Isaac; And confirmed the same unto Jacob for a law, and to Israel for an everlasting covenant: Saying, Unto thee will I give the land of Canaan, the lot of your inheritance: When they were but a few men in number; yea, very few, and strangers in it. When they went from one nation to another, from one kingdom to another people; He suffered no man to do them wrong: yea, he reproved kings for their sakes Saying, Touch not mine anointed, and do my prophets no harm. Moreover he called for a famine upon the land: he brake the whole staff of bread. He sent a man before them, even Joseph, who was sold for a servant: Whose feet they hurt with fetters: he was laid in iron: Until the time that his word came: the word of the Lord tried him. The king sent and loosed him; even the ruler of the people, and let him go free. He made him lord of his house, and ruler of all his substance: To bind his princes at his pleasure; and teach his senators wisdom. Israel also came into Egypt; and Jacob sojourned in the land of Ham. And he increased his people greatly; and made them stronger than their enemies. He turned their heart to hate his people, ...” (KJV).

The verses shown in bold print in the verses from Psalm 105 quoted above would seem to indicate that there was no oppression of the Patriarchs, including Jacob, by anyone during their time in Canaan or Egypt, and that the oppression started only after the Children of Israel had been made large in number in Egypt, something that happened after Jacob’s death. In that case, the 400 years of oppression could not have included the Patriarchs, and thus the entire 400 years of oppression must be applied to the time the Children of Israel sojourned in Egypt. This would

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1 All Scripture quotations are from the King James (Authorized) Version.
mean that the 430 years specified in Exodus 12:40 would be the time between Jacob’s entrance into the land with his seed until the Exodus, and, as statisticians and population experts have shown,\(^2\) that span was more than enough time for the Children of Israel to have grown in number from the seventy souls who entered Egypt with Jacob to the assumed 603,550 souls who left Egypt with Moses in the Exodus after four generations.\(^3\)

But, a more pertinent question to most scholars is this: Were there really more than half-a-million Hebrews who left Egypt, as the Bible says, and, if so, why is there no mention of such a mass exit in the ancient Egyptian records and why is there no trace of such a large multitude of people spending 40 years in the wilderness of Sinai to be found in the archeological record? The logical answer to both questions is that the number of people who left in the Exodus was much smaller than has been traditionally assumed.

Your author believes the biblical account of the Exodus from Egypt that is recorded in the Book of Exodus and Book of Numbers to be true and totally accurate, but he also believes that Bible scholars through the ages have misinterpreted what that account is saying as it pertains to the number of Israelites involved in the Exodus. Let me explain.

Numbers 1:19 says “\textit{As the LORD commanded Moses, so he numbered them in the wilderness of Sinai}” and Numbers 2: 32 says “\textit{These are those which were numbered of the children of Israel by the house of their fathers: all those that were numbered of the camps throughout their hosts were six hundred thousand and three thousand and five hundred and fifty.}” Furthermore, Numbers 1:20-46 says that the number of men from each tribe who were 20 years old or older was as follows:

- 46, 500 men from Reuben.
- 59, 300 men from Simeon
- 45, 650 men from Gad
- 74, 600 men from Judah
- 54, 400 men from Issachar
- 57, 400 men from Zebulun
- 40, 500 men from Ephraim
- 32, 200 men from Manasseh
- 35, 400 men from Benjamin
- 62, 700 men from Dan
- 41, 500 men from Asher
- 53, 400 men from Naphtali

\[603,550 \text{ Total}\]

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\(^3\) The four generations mentioned in Genesis 15:16 were a reference to the four generations (stages) of the covenant that were given by God to the Children of Israel, as explained in Psalm 105:9-10, which says “\textit{Which covenant he made with Abraham, and his oath unto Isaac; And confirmed the same unto Jacob for a law, and to Israel for an everlasting covenant.}” Abraham was the first generation, Isaac the second, Jacob the third, and the Children of Israel the fourth.
Note that Numbers 2:32 includes all of the Children of Israel, whereas Numbers 1:20-46 is stated in terms of men over 20 years of age. Obviously, since the sums are identical, the figure 603,550 must be referring in both instances to the entire number Israelites, i.e., the men and those in their household, not just the men by themselves. Now, note that the figure for each tribe as recorded in Numbers, chapter 1, ends in a zero, which is the first hint that the term “number” is not a simple census (head count), but something else, since it is unlikely that each of the twelve tribes would all have a total number of people divisible by ten.

So, the term “number” must have a broader meaning in addition to “taking a census,” and it does. It is the redemption value of the Children of Israel, as revealed by Exodus 30:11-15, which says “And the LORD spake unto Moses, saying, When thou takest the sum of the children of Israel after their number, then shall they give every man a ransom for his soul unto the LORD, when thou numberest them; that there be no plague among them, when thou numberest them. This they shall give, every one that passeth among them that are numbered, half a shekel after the shekel of the sanctuary: (a shekel is twenty gerahs:) an half shekel shall be the offering of the LORD. Every one that passeth among them that are numbered, from twenty years old and above, shall give an offering unto the LORD. The rich shall not give more, and the poor shall not give less than half a shekel, when they give an offering unto the LORD, to make an atonement for your souls.”

Since the redemption value for each individual was half a shekel, and a shekel was defined as 20 gerahs, then every person would have had a redemption value of 10 gerahs. The redemption value (or “number”) of the Children of Israel was 603,550 gerahs, which indicates that there were 60,355 Israelites who came out of Egypt in the Exodus.