

---

# Chronological Questions

---

## PROBLEM TEXTS (3)

---

F. F. BRUCE

---

'Chronology,' said one of the Puritans, 'is a surly cur, that hath bit many a man's fingers.' Why meddle with it, then? Because the chronology of scriptures is a fascinating subject for some, and because the student of the subject will take no harm from it

---

'Chronology is a surly cur, that hath bit many a man's fingers.'

---

provided he does not think himself obliged to harmonize all apparently conflicting texts, and provided he does not imagine that his interpretation is right and every one that disagrees with it is wrong. When I was in my teens I read with interest Philip Mauro's book *The Chronology of the Bible*; at the outset he emphasized that it was deliberately entitled *The (not A) Chronology of the Bible*, because the scheme set forth in it, that scheme and no other, was the chronology presented by the Bible. He did not sufficiently consider that his scheme depended very largely on a doubtful, and at best unprovable, understanding of Daniel's seventy weeks.

Well, here we have a clutch of texts dealing with the early history of the chosen people. They are quoted in the RSV, which represents the Hebrew of the Old Testament, or the Greek of the New Testament, faithfully enough for our purpose.

'Then the LORD said to Abram, "Know of a surety that your descendants will be sojourners in a land that is not theirs, and will be slaves there, and they will be oppressed for four hundred years. . . . And they shall come back in the fourth generation"' (*Gen. 15:13, 16*).

'The time that the people of Israel dwelt in Egypt was four hundred and thirty years' (*Exod. 12:40*).

'In the four hundred and eightieth year after the people of Israel came out of the land of Egypt, in the fourth year of Solomon's reign over Israel, . . . he

began to build the house of the Lord' (*1 Kgs. 6:1*).

'And when he had destroyed seven nations in the land of Canaan, he gave them their land as an inheritance, for about four hundred and fifty years. And after that he gave them judges until Samuel the prophet' (*Acts 13:19, 20*).

'The law, which came four hundred and thirty years afterward, does not annul a covenant previously ratified by God' (*Gal. 3:17*).

In *Gen. 15:13, 16*, do 'four hundred years' and 'the fourth generation' denote the same length of time? If so, is 'generation' (Heb. *dor*) used here in the more extended sense of 'century'? This is unlikely, because in the genealogies of Levi (*1 Chron. 6:1-3*) and Judah (*Gen. 46:12; Ruth 4:18-21; 1 Chron. 2:3-11*) the Exodus does appear to have taken place in the fourth generation after the descent into Egypt. 'But', someone may point out, 'generations are sometimes omitted.' True, and that may warn us not to be over-confident about the conclusions we draw.

Did the oppression of the Israelites in Egypt, then, last for 400 years? That would seem to be the sense of *Gen. 15:13*. If we take that figure along with the 430 years given by *Exod. 12:40* for their sojourning in Egypt, it might be inferred that they lived in Egypt for about 30 years before the oppression began.

Why then, in *Gal. 3:17*, does Paul appear to reckon the 430 years as beginning not with the descent into Egypt but with God's promise to Abraham (*Gen. 15:15; 17:7f.; 22:18*)? Probably because Paul read *Exod. 12:40* in the Septuagint version, according to which the 430 years covered the Israelites' dwelling 'in the land of Egypt and in the land of Canaan'. The interpretation implied by this version was maintained also in rabbinical tradition, according to which the 430 years began with Abraham's departure from Haran and the 400 years with the birth of Isaac, in fulfilment of the promise. (Could one refer to Abraham and his family as 'children of Israel' before Jacob himself was born, not to speak

of his offspring?) Paul's argument in *Gal. 3:17* would be equally valid if he had followed the Masoretic text of the Hebrew Bible and reckoned the interval as 645 years.

As for the 450 years of *Acts 13:19*, since they precede the giving of judges to the people, they most probably include the 400 years of oppression (cf. *Acts 7:6*) and the 40 years in the wilderness (*Acts 13:18*), plus the time that elapsed between the entry into Canaan and the allotment of the land among the tribes.

---

While Bible chronology is an interesting subject for study and discussion, it is not one about which it is wise to dogmatize.

---

The 'Western' text of Acts, followed by the Byzantine text, takes the 450 years as covering the period of the Judges (in which case one would have expected the word 'years' to be in the accusative case, not the dative which is actually used here). But this would imply that the interval between the Exodus and the foundation of Solomon's temple was 574 years rather than the 480 (=12 generations?) of *1 Kings 6:1*. The theory, once popular, that the years of oppression during the period of the judges are included in the larger of these two numbers, but left out of the smaller, is singularly unconvincing. The issue is further complicated by the Septuagint reading of 440 years in *1 Kings 6:1*, but that is quite unlikely to be the true text.

The uncertainties involved in the interpretation of these texts suggest that, while Bible chronology is an interesting subject for study and discussion, it is not one about which it is wise to dogmatize.