

## Four hundred years—Acts 7:6

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Almost all of chapter 7 is occupied with Stephen's trial and defense, although it closes with his death. The high priest knows it is all a farce, but he pretends astonishment. Stephen knows he is in a kangaroo court, so he wastes no time with the ridiculous charge; he delivers a prophetic, and condemnatory, sermon. His history lesson begins with Abraham's incomplete obedience, but what concerns us here is verse 6.

7:1 Then the high priest said, "Can these things be so?" 2 So he said: "Men, brothers and fathers, listen: The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in Mesopotamia, before he resided in Haran, 3 and said to him, 'Leave your country and your relatives, and come into a land that I will show you'. 4 Then he left the land of the Chaldeans and resided in Haran.<sup>1</sup> From there, after his father died,<sup>2</sup> God moved him to this land in which you now live; 5 yet He did not give him an inheritance in it, not even a footstep. He promised to give it to him for a possession, that is, to his seed after him, though he had no child.<sup>3</sup> 6 Further, God spoke like this: that his offspring would be aliens in a foreign land—and that they would be enslaved and oppressed—four hundred years.

To begin, it will be observed that my rendering of verse 6 differs from every version that I remember seeing. For example, the NKJV has: "But God spoke in this way: that his descendants would dwell in a foreign land, and that they would bring them into bondage and oppress them four hundred years." The NIV has: "God spoke to him in this way: 'Your descendants will be strangers in a country not their own, and they will be enslaved and mistreated four hundred years'." And so on—the impression that all these versions give is that the descendants would spend 400 years in a single country, namely Egypt. But such an impression lands us in a quandary: 400 years in Egypt does not fit with the clear chronological statements found elsewhere in the biblical Text.

Stephen cites Genesis 15:13, which should be understood as a chiasmus, a frequent structure in the Bible:

- a. his offspring would be aliens in a foreign land
- b. and they would be enslaved
- b. and oppressed
- a. four hundred years.

A careful comparison of the relevant texts shows that the 400 years includes from the weaning of Isaac to the Exodus (1891 to 1491 BC). Since Jacob moved to Egypt in 1706, Abraham's descendants were aliens in Canaan for 185 years; then they were aliens in Egypt, where they came to be enslaved, for 215 years. (The Exodus was 144 years after Joseph's death, so the period of slave labor was presumably somewhat less, perhaps around 100 years.)

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<sup>1</sup> But he took his father and a nephew along, and Haran was not that land. 'Our father Abraham'—the Jews began their history with Abraham, who started out with incomplete obedience.

<sup>2</sup> There went fifteen years of his life. And he took his nephew Lot along, who would be a **big** headache (he fathered the Moabites and the Ammonites—not good news—under circumstances that would not have happened had he been left in Haran).

<sup>3</sup> Abraham was 100 when he begot Isaac, who was 60 when he begot Jacob and Esau. Abraham died at 175, so lived to see his two grandsons. But before Isaac there was Ishmael . . .

For a detailed discussion and defense of the dates and time frames given above the interested reader is referred to a book that I consider to be one of a kind: *Chronology of the Old Testament: A Return to the Basics*, by Floyd Nolan Jones, ThD, PhD. The first edition appeared in 1993; I have in hand the 14<sup>th</sup> edition, published in 1999 by KingsWord Press, The Woodlands, Texas. The relevant discussion is on pages 58-61, but I venture to suggest that anyone who reads the whole book will consider that it was time well spent.