

A Question of Translation?

DR CHARLES V. TAYLOR

Or is it a question of the integrity of the translator?

Bible-lovers have problems with the length of time Israel was in Egypt. If you read Genesis 15:13, Exodus 12:40, Acts 7:6 and Acts 13:19–20 superficially, it seems obvious that they were there for some 400 years, and even that they were mistreated for such a long period. Some have argued that this time-span is reasonable in terms of the 'fourth generation' of Genesis 15:16. Others argue that by the time of Abraham, 100 years is much too long for a generation, Isaac's delayed birth being regarded as exceptional and miraculous.

However, when Galatians 3:17 is consulted, the impression is that the whole period from the promise to Abraham to the law-giving at Mount Sinai was no more than 430 years, which would mean that Abraham, Isaac and Jacob's time in Canaan is included. This period works out from Genesis as about 215 years. From Abram's first receipt of a promise at age 75 to Isaac's birth is 25 years. Isaac's birth to Jacob's covers 60 years, and Jacob entered Egypt at age 130.¹ These periods total 215 years, leaving another 215 years only for the stay in Egypt.

As for the period of oppression, this would be considerably less than 215 years. Joseph was vizier from age 30 onwards and died at age 110. He seems to have been about 39 when Jacob arrived. After Joseph's death 'there arose a new king of Egypt who did not know Joseph',² which makes the maximum time of oppression 144 years.³ But it is unlikely that this pharaoh would 'arise' in the year of Joseph's death. However, the oppression time has to be longer than 80 years, the age of Moses when he led the Israelites out. The actual oppression could have lasted some 120 years on this basis.

So far it has all been mathematics. But the real problems in Scriptures other than Galatians 3:17, which appears to contradict them, are linguistic.

The form of sentence in Hebrew in the Old Testament and in the often Hebraized Greek of Stephen's and Paul's recorded speeches preserves a construction in which a time-phrase without preposition normally applies to a longer textual area than the immediately preceding clause. Hence, to translate in Genesis 15:13 and Acts 7:6 as if the Israelites were enslaved and ill-treated for 400 to 415 years is not only unrealistic. It is poor translation. In such constructions in Semitic languages, the time-phrase applies to the whole of a prior complex of sentences. Thus this period goes right back to the giving of the promise.

The problem in Acts 13:20 is different. Does this

time-phrase belong to the events following it (times of the judges), or to those preceding it (God's call to Abraham to the Conquest)? The natural linguistic interpretation makes it belong to the latter, despite the New King James Version translation.⁴

But the most complex problem resides in clashes between leading translations of Exodus 12:40. The Hebrew form is:

וַיָּשֻׁבוּ בְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל מִמִּצְרָיִם
וַיֵּשְׁבוּ בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם
וַיִּהְיֶה יוֹם אֶרְבָּעַת אַלְפֵּי שָׁנָה
וַיֵּשְׁבוּ בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם

The Samaritan Pentateuch and the Septuagint both add 'and in Canaan' to the place-clause. Romanized, the Hebrew of the Masoretic text goes:

U moshabh b'ney Yisra'el 'asher yash'bhu
b'Mitsrayim sh'loshiyim shanah w' 'arba' me'oth
shanah.

Here are some translations:—

New American Standard Bible:

Now the time that the sons of Israel lived in Egypt was four hundred and thirty years.

New International Version:

Now the length of time the Israelite people lived in Egypt was 430 years.

New King James Version:

Now the sojourn of the children of Israel who lived in Egypt was four hundred and thirty years.

King James Version:

Now the sojourning of the children of Israel, who dwelt in Egypt, was four hundred and thirty years.

Quite clearly, the King James Version and the New King James Version are open to the idea that the 'sojourn' in Egypt may only represent part of the 430-year period, whereas New American Standard Bible and the New International Version are not.

What does the Masoretic text actually say? The answer is not found on the surface, because it may be literally translated in two ways:—

- (a) And dwelling-of sons-of Israel who (they) dwelt in Egypt 30 year and four hundred year.
- (b) And dwelling-of sons-of Israel which they dwelt in Egypt 30 year and four hundred year.

In other words, what does 'asher' mean: 'who' or 'which'? Does it refer to the people or to the 'dwelling'? Unfortunately it can mean either. There is no absolute

indication which translation should be adopted apart from contextual considerations. Gesenius^s says a great deal about *’asher* in his **Grammar**, but fails to deal with antecedents. Since both ‘dwelling’ and ‘sons’ are in the construct state,⁶ we cannot choose between them for an appropriate antecedent.

Gesenius states that *’asher* is not strictly a relative pronoun, but is to be regarded as a demonstrative, but this is of no assistance to our problem, as we cannot tell which noun the demonstrative refers to. However, it’s possible to take the word as implying a preposition. With expressions of time, it’s usual to omit prepositions, and we could read: ‘The peregrinations of the Israelites, during which (time) they lived in Egypt, (were for) 430 years. This allows us to take ‘sojourning’ as the subject. It is also significant that Gesenius gives ‘where’ and ‘when’ as common translations for *’asher*.⁷

With all these possibilities, and given the looseness of Hebrew syntax, there’s really no reason why Exodus 12:40 should contradict Galatians 3:17. Of the two, Galatians is clearly the more specific, hence if we really believe the Holy Spirit wrote absolute truth in both cases, we must take Galatians as the key, since Exodus has two possibilities and Galatians is clear.

Here we come up against translator choice. One who is deeply committed to an inerrant Word of God will know that God does not contradict Himself, and will translate Exodus in line with Galatians, given the choice. One who sees Scripture as the words of men will not be concerned if passages contradict each other in translation. They will either say Paul made a mistake, or Moses did.

As far as I am concerned, neither Moses nor Paul have the last word. The Holy Spirit caused both accounts to be written, so as a translator I try to follow that which brings out the harmony of Scripture. Thus I accept the King James Version and the New King James Version translations of Exodus 12:40.

REFERENCES

1. Genesis 41:46.
2. Exodus 1:8.
3. Joseph was alive and well-known in Egypt from age 39 to 110, that is, 71 years. 215 years less 71 leaves 144 years.
4. The New International Version and the New American Standard Bible make the time-phrase apply from God’s call to the Conquest.
5. Kautsch, E., 1909. Gesenius’ Hebrew Grammar, A. E. Cowley, (ed.) *ad. loc.*
6. That is, acting on a following noun as if that noun were in the genitive case.
7. Brown, E., Driver, S. R., and Briggs, C. A., 1979. Gesenius’ Hebrew and English Lexicon, under *’asher*, *ad. loc.*

applied linguistics courses in The University of Sydney. The author of five books, Dr Taylor now lives in semi-retirement in Gosford, New South Wales, having recently served on the staff of Garden City School of Ministries and on the Board of the Creation Science Foundation.

Dr Charles V. Taylor has B.A.’s in languages, music and theology, an M.A. in applied linguistics and a Ph.D. in a central African language. He is a Fellow of the Institute of Linguists, and for eight years served as Co-ordinator of