

they should bring them into bondage, and entreat them evil four hundred years' (Acts 7:6).

Hebrew scholars say to read the above verses like this: the passage first lists items of seed, stranger, serve, afflict; then it adds the information that all this happened within 400 years. The 400 years applies to all the preceding items, not just the to last one of 'afflict'. In other words, do not connect the last phrase too closely with the next to last; it refers to the whole time.

When does the 400 years begin? It begins with Isaac thirty years after Abram entered the land. Abraham was 75 years old when he entered the land and was 100 years old when Isaac was born. That's twenty-five years. And five more years of Isaac's life would make a total of thirty. In Genesis 21 we find an event that could qualify as changing the count from Abraham to Isaac. It is the weaning of Isaac, upon which they had a great feast, and upon which Abraham cast out Hagar and her son. Weaning children at age five is common in some cultures.

The 215 years comes from adding the years the patriarchs were in Canaan (Genesis 12:4, 21:5, 25:26, 47:9) and subtracting that 215 years from the total sojourn of 430 years.

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#### Pete Williams replies:

Ruth Beechick gives an interesting exposition of the classical view of Ussher and others that the sojourn of the Israelites in Egypt was but 215 years. I would be the last to encourage any to lightly reject this view. Most Hebrew scholars, however, find her preferred translation of Exodus 12:40 (the KJV's 'who dwelt') less plausible, and prefer 'which they dwelt'. The translation 'which they dwelt', which was also adopted by the earliest translations of Exodus namely the Greek Septuagint and the Syriac Peshitta, does not fit her interpretation, since it specifically ties the time to residence in Egypt. Nor does she deal with the objection that she is interpreting the phrase 'children of Israel' in Exodus 12:40 to include Isaac, who was father, not child, of Israel.

She conjectures that the 400 years of Genesis 15:13 began with Isaac's weaning, aged five. But 2 Maccabees 7:27 suggests that (at least in the second century BC) weaning to solids took place after three years of a child's life. I would be interested in details of cultures where weaning takes place aged five. At any rate, the speculation that the 400 years of Genesis 15:13 began with Isaac's weaning, seems to me no more compelling than the speculation that the 430 years of Exodus 12:40 began with the renewal of the promise about residence in a foreign land given to Jacob before he went down into Egypt (Genesis 46:1-4).

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#### Reference

1. Williams, P.J., Some remarks preliminary to a Biblical chronology, *CEN Tech. J.* 12(1):98-105, 1998.

#### Core issue

Is the world, I mean all the galaxies that there are, the totality of everything, is the world fact or is it a creature? Is it just there or is it created? Now somebody who knows that that question makes all the difference in the world to everything is somebody who either genuinely believes in God or who genuinely doesn't because most people are either very lazy theists or very lazy atheists who don't see what's at issue.

[John Henry] Newman, like Nietzsche, knew that it makes all the difference in the world whether or not we are creatures, and therefore what Martin Buber used to call the eclipse of God going on, like the dark shadow coming over the moon, going on in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, greatly disturbed the great believers like Newman and the great unbelievers like Nietzsche. They had in common that they know that this matters. The disturbing thing for some of us about the present condition of our culture is that so many people, even so many religious believers, think that it really doesn't matter at all.

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ABC Radio National, Australia  
Encounter program with Margaret Coffey  
Sunday 4<sup>th</sup> February/02/01  
<<http://www.abc.net.au/rn/relig/enc/stories/s240534.htm>>