

A Four Hundred Year Delay

God had previously promised the land of the Canaanites to Abraham's descendants (Gen 15:17). If the Lord had made this promise to Abraham, why is it not fulfilled until over 400 years later? We have a few hints in the scriptures to clarify the purpose of this perceived delay. It all boils down to God's sovereign timing. Notice first that God promises to make Abraham's descendants as numerous as the stars in the sky (Gen 15:5). When God first made this promise to Abraham, he was an old man with an old wife and no children. No descendants to defend the land that would be their inheritance. Even once Isaac (and Ishmael) is born, they are a small family tribe, even including distant relations. If they were going to attempt to take over the land God promised to them, they would have been easily defeated by the Canaanites already living in the land and not willing to give it up to a band of foreigners. Abraham and his family had migrated from the land of the Chaldeans, from Ur (also known as Babylon and before that Babel). The Canaanites would have easily overpowered Abraham and his family. Even by the time of Jacob, the family only numbered approximately 70. The sojourn in Egypt allowed their numbers to increase.

The first years in Egypt were pleasant and good. They were separate from the pagan practices of the Egyptians by both distance and segregation. They were able to keep their own Semitic culture and monotheistic religion intact. The Israelites were very settled and comfortable in this land and over time came to feel it was where they belonged. They would live in Goshen for generations. This is where their parents, grandparents, great-grandparents had lived and died. It was a lovely and prosperous land, providing a good life for those who farmed or kept livestock. Exodus 1:7 tells us, *"the Israelites were fruitful and multiplied greatly and became exceedingly numerous, so that the land was filled with them."* They had roots in this land. The idea of leaving Egypt was probably not even a consideration. An analogy can be seen in the history of the United States. The United States was founded and settled by Europeans some four hundred years ago. If your family line dated back to this period of time, or even only one or two hundred years, wouldn't you feel some claim to the land or nation? My own family came to the United States in the Revolutionary era from Great Britain. I consider myself American, not British, and the idea of relocating permanently to Great Britain solely based on ethnic heritage is absurd. Surely the Israelites would have had similar sentiments.

It wasn't until the end of the sojourn in Egypt that life for the Israelites became difficult. God used the acute oppression of the Egyptians to make the Israelites want to leave. Egypt was a flourishing and prosperous place to live. Without the oppression of the

Egyptians, why would they ever desire to leave? It is not clear exactly how long the Israelites endured Egyptian oppression and slavery. Scripture tells us their numbers continued to grow even under the harsh treatment, incurring even harsher treatment as a result (Exodus 1:12). Knowing that Moses is born during Pharaoh's ruthless edict that all Hebrew baby boys must be thrown into the river Nile tells us that he is born at the height of this intense oppression. In Exodus 2:11 we see that Moses is a grown man when he comes to see his brethren at their hard labor. Acts 7:23 tells us he is about forty years old at this time. The Egyptian oppression has been going on for at least one generation, likely longer. It seems to require extreme measures to generate a desire to relocate from Egypt in the hearts of the Israelites, and will take even longer as Moses will spend another forty years in Midian before returning to Egypt to lead the Israelites (Exodus 7:7) at the age of 80. The Israelites will have been living in Egypt under severe oppression for at least three or four generations before they will embrace Moses' leadership and follow him out of the land they know into a barren desert.

The second clue as to why God delayed giving the land of Canaan to Israel can be found in Genesis 15:16. *"In the fourth generation your descendants will come back here, for the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure."* God had told Abraham that his descendants would return in the fourth generation, and not sooner because "the sins of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure." What does that mean? And who are the Amorites? The Amorites lived in Canaan, and are listed in Genesis 15:21 as one of the tribes occupying the land that will lose the right to dwell there. Canaan itself is a very old term for the land of Palestine and encompassed a territory far larger than what would become Israel, even at its height. Canaanite is a general term for all tribes living in the land of Canaan. Geographically speaking the Amorites lived in the Judean hill country on either side of the Jordan River. The term Amorite is also a generic name that includes many of the various tribes throughout Canaan, but mainly in the hill country.

God says that, (in the time of Abraham) *"the sin of the Amorites has not yet reached its full measure."* We can take this to mean the practices of the Canaanites are sinful and abhorrent to God. Their cult practices routinely included sexual immorality with temple prostitutes and human sacrifice. God took Abraham's descendants out of Canaan and placed them in the relatively less immoral Egypt so as not to be corrupted by the practices of the Canaanite population as the infant nation began to grow. We see that when God fulfills his promise to Abraham by bring the Israelites into Canaan to take possession of the land, he will bring judgment against the Amorites for their sinful and abhorrent behavior. But the time for judgment has not yet arrived.

In Exodus 34:6-7 The Lord passes before Moses and makes the following proclamation about himself: *"The LORD, the LORD, compassionate and gracious God, slow to anger, abounding in love and faithfulness maintaining love to thousands, and forgiving wickedness,*

rebellion and sin. Yet he does not leave the guilty unpunished...” This proclamation reveals his compassion and gracious attitude towards all of his creation. He says he is slow to anger, forgives wickedness, rebellion and sin, but only when his creation is repentant. Pay particular attention to this “slow to anger”, out of mercy he gives all people time to repent and turn back to him. He shows this same mercy to even the Amorites. He knows the evil deeds of the Canaanite pagan cult worship, yet he holds back judgment against them giving them time to repent. God does not force his morality on anyone, but he does reveal it to the hearts of all mankind. Romans 1:19-20 tells us, *“what may be known about God is plain to [mankind], because God has made it plain to them. For since the creation of the world God's invisible qualities--his eternal power and divine nature--have been clearly seen, being understood from what has been made, so that men are without excuse.”* God has revealed himself through creation, and even placed a sense of morality - a sense of right from wrong into the hearts of mankind. Yet mankind will deliberately choose to ignore the God of the Universe in favor of creating their own morality or idolatry that reflects their selfish desires. God revealed himself to the Amorites, but they rejected him. In his mercy he gives them time to repent but also knowing full well they will not. In their rejection, God gave them over to their own selfish and depraved ways. Romans 1:29-32 describes where their depravity will lead:

“They have become filled with every kind of wickedness, evil, greed and depravity. They are full of envy, murder, strife, deceit and malice. They are gossips, slanderers, God-haters, insolent, arrogant and boastful; they invent ways of doing evil; they disobey their parents; they are senseless, faithless, heartless, ruthless. Although they know God's righteous decree that those who do such things deserve death, they not only continue to do these very things but also approve of those who practice them.”

God, in his sovereignty and mercy is giving the Amorites time to either change their ways, which he seems to know will not happen, or to so immerse themselves in their idolatry and immorality that they cannot change their ways. Either way, when Moses leads the Israelites out of Egypt and they eventually arrive in Canaan they will be a military force that is capable, with God's help, to defeat the existing Canaanite population. The wrath of God's judgment on Canaan will become an object lesson for Israel that God does not tolerate their evil ways. God clearly warns the Israelites to completely destroy the Amorites and other Canaanite peoples when they reach the land of Canaan because *“Otherwise, they will teach you to follow all the detestable things they do in worshiping their gods, and you will sin against the LORD your God”* (Deut 20:18). The complete and utter annihilation of the Amorites was to be God's wrathful judgment meted out by the hand of the Israelites for their sin against him. Unfortunately, the Israelites do not completely follow God's instructions regarding the Canaanites, and the Canaanites greatly influence and induce Israel to

sin repeatedly. And repeatedly the Lord brings judgment against Israel for embracing the sinful ways of the Canaanites.