



The Twenty-fourth Century of His-Story: The Church Grows In Egypt

The twenty-fourth century of history begins with Jacob, the weary pilgrim, coming to live in Egypt. By now his family had grown considerably because his twelve sons had families of their own, and the total count of people had reached 70 souls. This move into Egypt marks a significant change of life for the church, which had been very small and wandering in the promised land as pilgrims; now the church moves into the heart of a powerful foreign nation, settling down in the land of Goshen (Gen. 47:1), in the area of the city Rameses (v. 11), and there multiplying in numbers. The hundred year period we consider in this installment is described in Exodus 1:6–7 as follows: “And Joseph died, and all his brethren, and all that generation. And the children of Israel were fruitful, and increased abundantly, and multiplied, and waxed exceeding mighty; and the land was filled with them.” In some respects we as Protestant Reformed people have experienced a similar pattern—our founding fathers dying, and then the generation following growing old and dying, and now an increase in numerical growth.

Concerning the time spent in Egypt, there is some disagreement, and I will briefly describe the two options. Some say they were in Egypt for 430 or roughly 400 years, and others say Egypt was the final stage of 430 years of oppression. Having read through the argument of Henry Ainsworth, a British theologian from the 1600’s, I am inclined to think that the latter is a very straightforward and biblical explanation: the four hundred years of affliction came to its greatest depth in Egypt, but the persecution began when Ishmael mocked Isaac (Galatians 4:29). Using the chronology in the Bible from Abraham to Moses, it can be calculated that Israel was delivered from Egypt exactly four hundred years after Ishmael mocked Isaac, the child of the promise. This mocking took place thirty years after the promise of Genesis 12:2 which is why we read in Galatians 3:17 that the law was given four hundred and thirty years after the promise. Abraham himself as the father of the nation was, for a time right after this promise in Egypt, and

we read in Exodus 12:40 that the four hundred thirty years of the sojourning of the children of Israel had come to an end when they were delivered from Egypt.

With this understanding, Jacob's coming into Egypt took place right in the middle of this period of affliction. The beginning of the four hundred years of affliction had begun shortly after God had revealed it two hundred fifteen years earlier to Abraham when God said, "Know of a surety that thy seed shall be a stranger in a land that is not theirs, and shall serve them; and they shall afflict them four hundred years; And also that nation, whom they shall serve, will I judge: and afterward shall they come out with great substance. And thou shalt go to thy fathers in peace; thou shalt be buried in a good old age. But in the fourth generation they shall come hither again: for the iniquity of the Amorites is not yet full." Genesis 15:13–16 Both Isaac and Jacob had lived under the growing pressure of affliction all their lives as strangers moving from land to land from the time of the promise until the oppression culminated as slavery in Egypt (Psalm 105:10 ff). It would be about a hundred years yet before there arose a king over Egypt who knew not Joseph.

So Jacob and his sons left Canaan and settled in the land that Pharaoh had appointed to them. From an earthly and financial perspective, this move opened up some very good opportunities. Not only was this prime land for raising their own cattle, but Pharaoh had also instructed Joseph to select the best cattlemen of the family to supervise the management of Pharaoh's cattle (Genesis 47:6). While the famine wore on for another few years, and the whole land of Egypt came under the control of Pharaoh through the management of Joseph, all the needs of Jacob's family were provided for by Joseph. In fewer than twenty years, we read in connection with Jacob's death, "they had possessions therein, and grew, and multiplied exceedingly" (47:27). Jacob, however, did not express any interest in this material growth in numbers and wealth, but was only concerned about their return to the promised land of Canaan, and the promise of salvation (chapters 48–49). Joseph as well died with the words, "God will surely visit you, and bring you out of this land unto the land which he sware to Abraham, to Isaac, and to Jacob" (50:24), and made his sons swear that they would take his bones with them.

We might wonder how it was that after such slow growth in the one hundred years prior, that the church now experiences exponential growth. The world points to the natural factors mentioned in the previous paragraph: the abundance of resources, good health, and safety; and there is some truth to that. But at the heart of this growth is the sovereign purpose of God. We read in Psalm 105:23–25, "Israel also came into Egypt; and Jacob sojourned in the land of Ham. And he increased his people greatly; and

made them stronger than their enemies. He turned their heart to hate his people, to deal subtilly with his servants.” God himself increased his people. This great increase was the work of God as he prepared to demonstrate his power to save and deliver the church from the power and bondage of sin.

When we stop to think about the pattern of church growth that we noticed in previous articles, this exponential growth in the middle of a period of affliction and persecution for his people is quite remarkable. At the time of Enoch we saw a church that was gradually being crushed by the power of the world. After the flood the church experienced some growth, but again was gradually reduced to scattered remnants such as Job, Melchizedec, and Abraham. Abraham and Isaac lived long, lonely years with no children and only one child after they were old. From an earthly perspective, it would seem as though sending the wandering family of Jacob into Egypt would quench this smoking flax, but instead, God breathed new life into his church and increased his people greatly. God’s ways are not our ways. Living by faith as pilgrims in this earth, the people of God “out of weakness were made strong” (Heb. 11:34).

Secular historians speak of changes in Egypt about this time, as waves of immigrants called the Hyksos moved into Egypt from the east, and for a time took control of parts of Egypt. They are said to have introduced horses and chariots as well as new food crops to Egypt. Perhaps these are the foods and horses that impressed the Israelites and tempted them after they left Egypt. God sovereignly directed all these events also for the purpose of his church in Egypt.

Though the word of God places great emphasis on Israel’s living in Egypt and then being delivered with a mighty and glorious deliverance, the records in Egypt show nothing of it and secular historians dismiss the stories as myth. The world has never paid much attention to the true church, and we would not expect Egypt to pay much attention either, even though they felt the heavy hand of God.

Secular history gives much more attention to the Babylonian king Hammurabi, who had conquered much of Mesopotamia to create the first Babylonian empire and unify it with a single law code. This is also the time when the descendents of Japheth were beginning to form the nations of Greece and Persia. In what is now Britain, the last set of stones had been set to build what is now known as Stonehenge. In China the Shang dynasty of rulers had begun, and they set down the first historical written record of their rule. The Assyrian kingdom had gained considerable power, but at this time was being overrun by the Harrian people from Armenia. These nations too are under the

sovereign rule of God as he prepares them to display his glory in the future as they interact with the church.

The only other historical information that God's word gives us about this period concerns the genealogy of Moses. The genealogies in Exodus 6:16–20 reveal that Levi's son Kohath lived during this time, and Kohath had a son Amram who was the father of Moses. According to the numbers given, Levi lived through most of this century, and Moses was born 41 years after his great-great grandfather, Levi died, and 33 years after the beginning the century we will cover next, the Lord willing. We can be sure that this was a very busy period of time for the families of Israel as they raised large families and sought to instruct them in the ways of God and to provide for them in the land of Egypt. Oppression for this brief period did not seem to entail very much outward hardship until the new Pharaoh began to implement his policy of hard labor and killing male children, but the spiritual oppression by Satan was heavy as the people began to enjoy the goods and food of Egypt.

In many ways the time we now live in is similar, as God has blessed many in our churches with large families. We also live in an increasingly materialistic world which emphasizes more than ever the pursuit of wealth and pleasure. We experience the temptations to cling to earthly treasures and feel tremendous pressure to reduce family size and join with the world in its pursuit of the pleasures of this earthly life. Just as God's church in Egypt, we can expect only physical and material persecution in addition to the spiritual oppression we face now as the day comes closer when God will reveal great deliverance for his church and judgment on the wicked world.