

## The Land Was Tranquil for *Forty* Years: How Scripture Deals with Time

**Teaser:** Exploring the symbolic use of the number ‘forty’ in biblical narratives, this article delves into the artful expression of time and its deeper meanings in scripture.

### R. Yehuda Hausman

The elemental purpose of a chronicler is to record events in a trustworthy and linear manner: to mark the length of wars, famines, or a sovereign’s reign by referral to dates and durations.<sup>iii</sup> Accuracy is a paramount value. But if the narrative before us is not a chronicle, and more closely resembles literature than history, then recollection of the past serves different purposes. Adjustments are made to emphasize certain lessons, words are selected and patterned in keeping with artistic modes. Consider the gist of Pharaoh’s dreams: ‘that seven years of feast shall be followed by seven years of famine.’ (Gen. 41) When is history ever so neat?<sup>iiii</sup>

In Genesis and elsewhere, numbers are part and parcel to the craft; thus, sums and sizes, dates and ages, are all tools of literary art as prominent as assonance and alliteration. After 7, about which a great many have written a great deal, we find that 40 is the most common figurative numeral in Scripture. One might think that expressions such as “40 days” or “40 years” are simply proverbial, akin to “Once upon a time...”. However, the number 40 almost universally indicates a *maximum*, an *outermost limit*, or the *full measure* of that which is being numbered. Occasionally, multiples of 40 (i.e. 400 or 40,000) and 4 itself advance a similar meaning. We recite examples below.

- a) **40 Days** is the *outermost limit* of human endurance or capacity:
  - i) Elijah went without food for 40 days when he journeyed to Mt. Horeb. (I Kings 19.8)
  - ii) Moses went without food on Mt. Sinai/Horeb for 40 days. He remained for the *full measure of time* necessary to receive God’s instruction. (Ex. 24.18.)
  - iii) 40 days is the *outer limit* of Jonah’s patience or, alternatively, God’s mercy. Jonah informs the Ninevites if they do not repent within 40 days, their city would be destroyed. (Jonah 3.4)
  - iv) It is the *maximum duration* that Moses (a mortal human) was intimately close to God. (Deut. 9.11)
  - v) As far as the Golden Calf incident, from the perspective of Aaron and the Children of Israel, it is the *maximum* length of time that the people could manage without Moses. (*Id.*)
  - vi) 40 days is the *measure of days necessary* for Moses’ prayer to gain God’s forgiveness for the People’s worship of the Golden Calf. (Deut. 9.25, 10.10)
  - vii) Goliath taunts Israel for 40 days, meaning the extent of time till the taunting became intolerable. (I Samuel 17.16)
  
- b) **40 Years** can represent a *full measure of suffering* or a *full measure of punishment*.

- i) Israel's punishment was to wander the wilderness for 40 years. (Numbers 32:13; cf. Joshua 5.6.)
  - ii) Israel was oppressed by the Philistines for 40 years. (Judges 13.1)
  - iii) Ezekiel prophesizes 40 years of desolation for Egypt. (Ezekiel 29.10-13)
  - iv) The Babylonian Exile is 40 years in Ezekiel 4.6. [Other figures for the Babylonian exile also appear representational instead of exact. The exile is 70 years in Jeremiah. (Jer. 25.12, 29.10) and (seemingly) 70 weeks in Daniel (Daniel 9.24).]
- c) **In Law:**
- i) **40 Lashes** The number 40 is used to represent a *maximum tolerable punishment*. Thus, a corporal sentence was not to exceed "40 lashes [...] lest your brother be of no account in your eyes" (Deut. 25.3-4). The rabbinic tradition strongly emphasizes that the number 40 was used here only to convey a principle. Hence, the court "would evaluate the strength of each person to determine what the individual might tolerate, whether it was 30 lashes or 20 [etc...] but no person could be allotted 40 or more." In practice, this meant the limit was 39. (*Torah Temimah* on Deut. 25.3; Cf. Talmud B. Makkot 22a)
  - ii) It is possible that **40 days** or **80 days** was thought a *sufficient amount* necessary for the (spiritual or physical) danger of post-partum bleeding to pass, whereupon, the child's mother was welcomed and reintegrated into Temple life. (Lev. 12.2-5)<sup>iv</sup>
  - iii) The principle of a *full measure of punishment* may be conveyed by **Fourfold Restitution**. After hearing Nathan's parable of a rich man who took a poor shepherd's only sheep, David thought the guilty party deserved death, but in practice David's ruling was that "he shall restore the lamb *fourfold*" (2 Sam. 12.6; Cf. Ex. 22.1).
- d) **40 years represents a full generation:**
- i) "And the Lord's anger was kindled against Israel, and He made them wander in the wilderness *forty years*, until *all the generation* that had done evil in the sight of the Lord was consumed." (Numbers 32:13; cf. Joshua 5.6)

Accordingly, when Israel's most prominent leaders are said to govern Israel for 40 years, what is meant is a *full generation*:

- ii) Moses stewardship of Israel began when he was 80, and he died at 120. (Ex. 7.7; Deut. 34.7)
- iii) Under Othniel, "the land was tranquil for 40 years"; e.g. a *full generation* or *full measure of peace* (Judges 3.11)
- iv) Under Deborah, "the land was tranquil for 40 years" (Judges 5.31)

- v) Uniquely, Ehud's reign is recorded as lasting two generations: "the land was tranquil for 80 years"; e.g. *two full generations or measures of peace*. (Judges 3.31)
  - vi) Gideon judged Israel for 40 years. (Judges 8.28)
  - vii) Eli the High Priest judged Israel for 40 years. (1 Samuel 4.18)
  - viii) King David reigned for 40 years. (2 Sam. 5.4)
  - ix) King Solomon reigned for 40 years. (I Kings 11.42)
  - x) \*\*Remarkably, Samson judged Israel for 20 years (half of 40), perhaps this expresses the idea that the flawed hero lived up to only half of his potential. Otherwise, it simply indicates that the length of his rule was but half a generation. (Judges 15:20)
- e) **40 days signifies the time necessary to complete a matter *in totality*** (leaving nothing undone).
- i) The *measure of time required* to flood the entire earth. God informs Noah: "I will make it rain 40 days and 40 nights, thus I will wipe away *all* that I have made to exist from upon the face of the earth." (Gen. 7.4)
  - ii) Despite the reappearance of dry land ("the tops of the mountains"), Noah waits 40 days before opening an exterior window and sending forth the raven. (Gen. 8.5-7) The idea may be that a prudent wait time is counted before risking the bird.
  - iii) *Full measure of time required* to spy out the land of Canaan. (Numbers 13.2,25)
- f) **40 years as a *full measure of maturity***.
- i) Isaac is 40 when he marries Rebecca. (Gen. 25.20)
  - ii) Similarly, his son Esau is 40 when he weds. (Gen. 26.34)
- g) **40 as a *full measure of gifts or goodness***.
- i) 40 camels burdened with gifts are sent to Elisha. (II Kings 8.9)
  - ii) Jacob gifts Esau 440 sheep and goats, and an assortment of 140 other animals, including "40 cows." (Gen. 32.15-16) The hope is to dissuade Esau – who brings a *full military* compliment of "400 men" (32.7) – from annihilating Jacob and his family.
  - iii) "All the people dwelt in safety...Solomon had 40,000 stalls for his horses." (I Kings 5.4-7) One interpretation is that Solomon's possessions were of the *fullest measure*, e.g. he lacked for nothing. Alternatively, Solomon had the means to provide a mount to every soldier in his military. There are two instances where Israel fields 40,000 troops, indicating a *full national army* or a *full tribal army*. (Joshua 4.13; Judges 5.8)
  - iv) Similarly, a *full measure of peace*: "The land was tranquil for 40 years." (See quotes in section d) above, e.g. Judges 3.11, 5.31, 8.28.)
- h) The **Temple of Solomon** is 40 cubits long, perhaps representing the *fullest measure* of

dedication to God or the *fullest measure* of beauty. (I Kings 6.17; cf. Ezekiel 41.2, 46.2) In fact, several times in the account of Solomon's building of the Temple employs multiples of 4 and 40. (I Kings 6.1, 1, 17, 37) The chapter opens with the statement that 480 years elapsed between the Exodus and the construction of Temple. This number is entirely inconsistent with dates given in earlier Prophets (Joshua, Judges et.), where the number is closer to 325 years. However, as 40 years represents a *full generation*, the figure 480 signifies the passage of 12 generations ( $480 / 40 = 12$ ), most certainly an allusion to the 12 tribes, and the united monarchy under Solomon.

- i) **400 Shekels** (=40x10) – Abraham expresses his willingness to pay Ephron the “full silver-price” to acquire the cave of Machpelah. (Gen 23.9) The final agreed price is 400 silver Shekels. (23.16)
- j) The force of **400 Men** led by Esau should be regarded as a *full military compliment*, fully capable of eliminating Jacob and his family (32.7...).
- k) **400 Years** is a *Full Measure of Servitude* in God's vision to Abraham that his descendants will labor in Egypt. (15.13)<sup>v</sup>

In summary, though we mention several examples of 40 relating to legal punishments or the exchange of goods and property, the vast majority of instances deal with the passage of time. On the one hand, numerous Torah commandments demand that Israelites count precisely. Merchants must have equal weights and measures. (Deut. 25.13-15) Nazirites must track the length of their vows. (Num. 6) Tithes required careful factoring and calculation. (Num. 18.26; Deut. 14.22) Lunar and solar months had to be tracked so that Passover would fall in the spring. (Deut. 16.1) Yet the frequency with which ‘40 days’ or ‘40 years’ is found in scriptural narratives relating to the past, makes it clear that ancient Israel did not expect factual recitations. Instead, figurative numerism reigns. This feature eliminates literary waste. If the Torah merely reported that Moses' duration on Mt. Sinai was 37, 41, or 45 days, no additional meaning is gained beyond recording the actual length of the event. The biblical genre abounds with artful speech, poetic justice, symbolism, subtext, and a boundless assortment of stylistic devices, all with the grand purpose of enhancing and beautifying Israel's ancestral tradition. Likewise, time itself is a part of style, more than this, it is used to express ideas beyond the mere recording of the past.

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<sup>i</sup> This article was excerpted from the author's book: *Against History: Essays and Literary Commentary on Genesis*, 1-7. 2023. (Available on [Amazon](#))

<sup>ii</sup> In so far as recording the reigns of Israel's leaders, we find a shift from artistry toward accuracy after the division of kingdoms. The regnal periods of David and Solomon are each “40 years”, representing two full generations under each monarch (see next section in body of article), but afterward, the book of Kings relies on the annals of the northern and southern courts, faithfully and fastidiously preserving the regnal periods for posterity. For an online review and comparison of the two chronologies, see McFall, Leslie. “Has the Chronology of the Hebrew Kings

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Been Finally Settled?" *Themelios* 17, no. 1. <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/themelios/article/has-the-chronology-of-the-hebrew-kings-been-finally-settled/>.

<sup>iii</sup> Our point is not to dispute the occurrence of a seven-year famine in Egypt. The *Famine Stela* at Sehel Island in Aswan, Egypt, dated to 250 BCE, describes a seven-year drought in the time of King Djoser (2,700 BCE). The famine is accounted to the Nile's failure to swell and flood the surrounding farmland as was customary during the season of Inundation. While scholars debate the veracity of the Stela's account, our point is that the biblical story of Joseph is enhanced by artistry. 'Seven years of surfeit followed by seven years of dearth' is but one of many literary doubles in the Joseph narrative. The more conspicuous include: Joseph's doubled dreams regarding his brothers; Pharaoh's doubled dreams; Joseph twice loses his coat; Joseph interprets a pair of dreams of that the butler and baker, etc.

<sup>iv</sup> After 40 days a mother of an infant boy travelled to the Sanctuary to offer sacrifices. (Lev. 12.2-4) After 80 days, the mother of an infant girl travelled to the Sanctuary so she might offer sacrifices. (Lev. 12.5) A 40-day period of seclusion was common across different societies and cultures, and is still observed in rural Nepal and Zaire. For an online review, see Sharma, S., van Teijlingen, E., Hundley, V., Angell, C., & Simkhada, P. "Dirty and 40 Days in the Wilderness: Eliciting Childbirth and Postnatal Cultural Practices and Beliefs in Nepal." *BMC Pregnancy and Childbirth* 16, no. 1 (2016): 147. <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12884-016-0938-4>.

\*\*As a matter of sensitivity, teachers might wish to stress that the above discrepancy relates directly to a belief that the birth of different genders had a divergent impact on the mother's spiritual state ("her days of purity"). It does *not* express a preference for males over female children. Leviticus is so emphatic on this point, it *twice* repeats that a mother's sacrifices were *identical* for a son or a daughter. (Lev. 12.6-7) Tangentially, these laws likely served as a polemic against common Egyptian practices and other surrounding cultures, where women were compelled to leave their homes to give birth. There is some evidence that post-partum, they lived in special "houses" likely attached to certain temples. Biblical evidence for this is seen from Ex. 2.21, where the midwives were given "houses." The practice of sending women to birth temples continued even in the Ptolemaic period, referred to as "*mammisi*". In contrast, Leviticus 12 encourages the renewal of family life after a brief week or two, and reintegration of the mother in Temple life within a few months of birth.

<sup>v</sup> \*In view of the fact that Isaac is born when Abraham is 100 years old, a "generation" (apropos Abraham) may very well have been expressed as 100 years. Alternatively, W.F. Albright suggests that the Hebrew *dor* sometimes meant "lifetime." (William F. Albright, *The Biblical Period from Abraham to Ezra* (New York: Harper & Row, 1963), 9. Either way, this harmonizes with God's telling Abraham that Egypt would afflict his descendants for "400 years," yet they would be rescued in the fourth generation or lifetime "*dor*". (15.13,16). However, if we use the usual biblical standard, the enslavement would last 10 generations.