

The Duration of Jacob's Stay in Haran

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Abstract

Jacob was the younger twin brother of Esau. Their father was Isaac, the son of Abraham. Their mother was Rebekah, a great-niece of Abraham. They lived in Canaan.

When Isaac was old, he prepared Esau to receive his blessing. However, through deception, Jacob received that blessing instead. Enraged, Esau planned to kill his brother.

On hearing about Esau's plan, Rebekah told Jacob to flee to Haran, to the house of her brother Laban. Haran was located in northern Mesopotamia.

The widely held view is that Jacob stayed in Haran with Laban for 20 years. This paper presents arguments in favor of Jacob staying in Haran for 40 years.

Posted May 2022

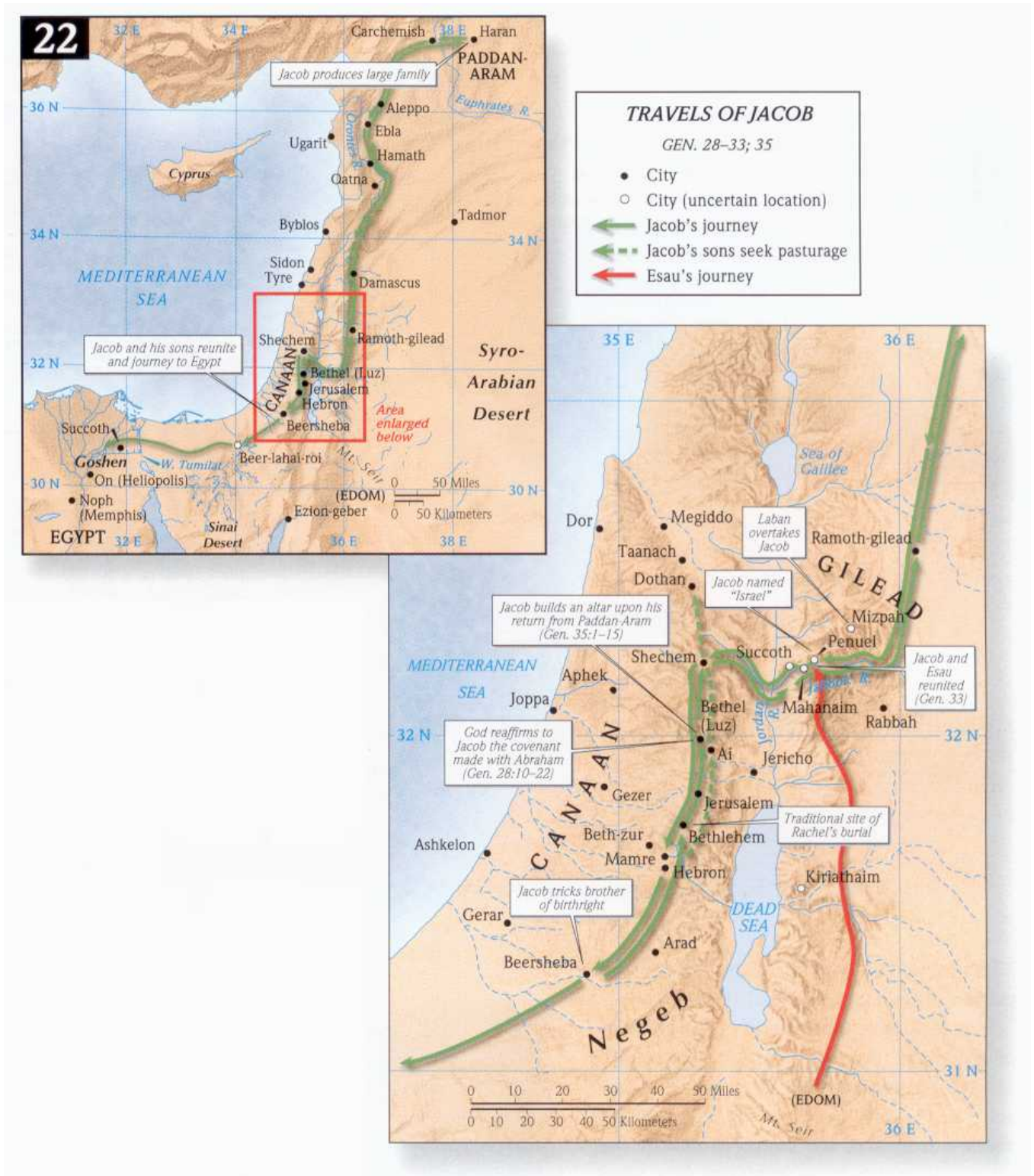
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Notes

- Unless otherwise indicated, Scripture is taken from the King James Version (KJV).
- In quotes from other sources, comments added in square brackets are mine, to aid understanding.
- This study does not use any absolute dates (i.e. “BC” dates). This is because different dating schemes result in different BC dates for Biblical events. Instead, the *ages* of people will be used. The reader can then apply their preferred dating scheme to arrive at absolute dates.
- This study assumes that a child was one year old at their first birthday (i.e. birth age was zero). The reality may have been different (e.g. birth age was one).
- In quotes from authors who wrote in “old English” (e.g. a lower case “s” that looks like an “f”), I have modernized the spelling and punctuation.
- For an illuminating discussion on whether Esau and Jacob were monozygotic or dizygotic twins, see Azila Talit Reisenberger “[What Kind of Twins Were Jacob and Esau?](#)” *South African Medical Journal* 87 (Nov 1997): 1548–49.

Map of the Travels of Jacob



This map is taken from “Bible Atlas” by Zaine Ridling (editor), published by the Access Foundation in Kansas. Accessed on 7 May 2022 from: <https://theologue.wordpress.com/2014/04/30/zaine-ridling-bible-atlas-e-book/>

Chapter 1 – The Traditional View: Jacob was in Haran for 20 Years

Jacob and Esau were twins, with Esau born first. In his old age, Isaac prepared Esau to receive his blessing (Gen 27:1–4). However, through deception, Jacob received that blessing instead (27:5–29). This angered Esau because Jacob had now gained both privileges granted to a firstborn son (27:36).

Earlier in Esau’s life, when in a hungry and weary condition after hunting (which suggests it was an unsuccessful hunt), he sold his *birthright* to Jacob in exchange for a meal of lentil stew (Gen 25:27–34). And now, Jacob had just received the *blessing* that was meant for the firstborn.¹ Incensed by this, Esau planned to kill Jacob after their father died (27:41).

On hearing about Esau’s plan, Rebekah told Jacob to flee to her brother Laban in Haran (Gen 27:42–45). Rebekah also spoke with Isaac to ensure that he would tell Jacob not to marry a Canaanite woman. Accordingly, Isaac told Jacob to take a wife from the daughters of Laban (27:46–28:5; cf. 26:34–35). Jacob then departed his parents’ home in Beersheba (28:10), and made his way to Haran in the northern Mesopotamian region of Padan-aram (28:2).

On arriving in Haran, the first relative that Jacob met was Laban’s daughter Rachel, with whom he fell in love (Gen 29:1–14). Wishing to marry her, Jacob agreed to work for Laban for seven years to earn Rachel as his wife (29:15–20). He did this instead of giving expensive gifts as a bride price (cf. 24:50–53) because he arrived in Haran empty-handed.

When the seven-year period ended, Laban organized a marriage feast (Gen 29:21–22), which probably involved the consumption of alcohol. The bride was evidently veiled when Laban brought her to Jacob in the evening (29:23). On awakening the next morning, Jacob saw that he had slept with Rachel’s older sister Leah. Laban had tricked him (29:25).

Laban then offered Rachel in marriage if Jacob worked another seven years for him, which he agreed to. After Jacob completed the bridal week for Leah (cf. Judg 14:12), Laban gave Rachel to him (Gen 29:26–28). Each wife had a handmaid given to them by Laban. They were Zilpah and Bilhah (29:24, 29). The handmaids bore children to Jacob during times when Leah or Rachel could not. Over the next seven years, eleven sons were born to Jacob through these four mothers (29:31–30:24). Leah’s daughter Dinah may have been born late in that seven-year period, or in Jacob’s final six years in Haran (Appendix A refers).

After Joseph was born, Jacob wanted to return to Canaan. Laban asked him to stay, and Jacob agreed. He would look after Laban’s flocks to earn his own livestock so he could return to Canaan with a degree of wealth (Gen 30:25–34). By the will of God, Jacob’s flocks increased, and he accrued stronger animals than Laban (30:35–43; 31:7–9).

¹ According to Victor Hamilton, the blessing was probably more crucial than the birthright. This is because “pronouncing the blessing was considered to be the act formally acknowledging the first-born as the principal heir” (1995: 185). It is not surprising, then, that Esau “cried with a great and exceeding bitter cry” when his father told him what had just happened (Gen 27:34).

As time progressed over the next six years, Jacob learned that Laban's sons resented his increase in prosperity at their father's expense. He also noted that Laban's attitude toward him had soured (Gen 31:1–2). On instruction from the Lord, Jacob left Haran with his family to return to Canaan (31:3–18). But they did so in secret, without farewelling their relatives (31:20–21).

Hearing that Jacob had left, Laban set out in pursuit. On catching up with him, Laban chided Jacob for leaving without giving him the opportunity to arrange a proper send-off (Gen 31:26–29). During Jacob's angry reply, he summarized his time with Laban as follows:

This twenty years have I been with thee; thy ewes and thy she goats have not cast their young, and the rams of thy flock have I not eaten. That which was torn of beasts I brought not unto thee; I bare the loss of it; of my hand didst thou require it, whether stolen by day, or stolen by night. Thus I was; in the day the drought consumed me, and the frost by night; and my sleep departed from mine eyes.

Thus have I been twenty years in thy house; I served thee fourteen years for thy two daughters, and six years for thy cattle: and thou hast changed my wages ten times. Except the God of my father, the God of Abraham, and the fear of Isaac, had been with me, surely thou hadst sent me away now empty. (Gen 31:38–42a)

This passage mentions two intervals of 20 years. The traditional view is that they refer to the same period. In other words, Jacob stayed in Haran for 20 years, which divides into three stages:

1. Jacob worked seven years for the hand of Rachel in marriage.
2. Jacob was tricked into marrying Leah. But still desiring Rachel, he agreed to work another seven years for Laban. Eleven or twelve children were born to Jacob during those seven years.
3. After Joseph was born, Jacob worked six years for his flocks. He and his family then left Haran in secret.

Most 20-year advocates conclude that Jacob's flight to Haran occurred at the age of 77. They calculate this age as follows:

- Joseph was 30 when he spoke to Pharaoh and interpreted his dream about the coming seven years of plenty followed by seven years of famine (Gen 41:1–46). Thus, Joseph was 37 at the start of the first year of famine.
- Jacob and his family entered Egypt in the spring of the third year of famine (Gen 45:6; cf. Exod 12:1–41). Jacob was 130 (Gen 47:9) and Joseph was 39. Therefore, Joseph was born when Jacob was 91.
- Genesis 30:25 implies that Jacob's final six years in Haran began soon after Joseph's birth. So, in the 20-year view, Joseph was born in the 14th year of Jacob's stay. If Jacob was 91 when Joseph was born, he was 97 at the end of his 20th year in Haran. He therefore fled from Canaan 20 years earlier at the age of 77.

As discussed in the next chapter, there are a number of difficulties with Jacob staying in Haran for only 20 years.

Chapter 2 – Problems With the 20-Year View

There are seven problems with this view:

1. too short a time for the births of Jacob's sons
2. Joseph was the youngest brother by several years
3. the ages of Jacob's children after 14 years in Haran
4. Reuben's young age when he gathered mandrakes
5. the excessive time spent in Succoth and/or Shechem
6. the "elderly" ages of Jacob and Laban
7. the marriage of Esau to Ishmael's daughter Mahalath

A further issue, which involves the translation of the first few Hebrew words in Genesis 31:38 and 31:41, is discussed in Appendix B.

1. Too Short a Time for the Births of Jacob's Sons

As discussed in Appendix A, there are two options for the placement of births in the 20-year scheme:

1. Jacob's twelve children—eleven sons and Dinah—were all born during his second seven-year period in Haran. See Table 5 on p. 28.
2. All eleven sons were born during the second seven-year period. See Table 6 on p. 29. Dinah was born during Jacob's final six years in Haran.

For the consecutive children of Leah and Zilpah in Table 5, the gap between pregnancies is one month. The gap is two months for Dan and Naphtali, the sons of Bilhah. A gap of one or two months between pregnancies is unlikely. Studies have shown that mothers who exclusively breastfeed their babies have good protection against pregnancy in the first six months after childbirth (e.g. Lewis et al. 1991).

Table 6 is based on the second option. It has the maximum spacing achievable between consecutive pregnancies in the seven-year timeframe, which is three months. While this may have been the case for a few consecutive sons, the odds are biologically against it for all of them unless the mothers were exceptionally fertile.

Some may sidestep this problem by saying the mothers had a wet nurse. Even if they did, I believe that the next six arguments combined make this a moot point.

2. Joseph was the Youngest Brother by Several Years

There is another problem with so many children being born in seven years: Leah's son Zebulun and Rachel's son Joseph were born in the same year.

Genesis 37:3 states that Jacob “loved Joseph more than all his children, because he was the son of his old age.” To be the son of Jacob’s *old age*, Joseph must have been born a number of years after Zebulun (cf. 44:20). Other verses confirm an age gap between Joseph and his older brothers. In 37:2, Joseph is called a “lad.” In 37:30, the oldest brother Reuben calls him a “child.” In my 40-year timeline (see Table 4 in Chapter 6), Joseph was born eight years after Zebulun.

3. The Ages of Jacob’s Children After 14 Years in Haran

In the 20-year view, Jacob wanted to leave Haran at the end of his second seven-year period of service to Laban:

and he loved also Rachel more than Leah, and served with him yet seven other years . . . And it came to pass, when Rachel had born Joseph, that Jacob said unto Laban, Send me away, that I may go unto mine own place, and to my country. Give me my wives and my children, for whom I have served thee, and let me go: for thou knowest my service which I have done thee. And Laban said unto him, I pray thee, if I have found favour in thine eyes, tarry: for I have learned by experience that the LORD hath blessed me for thy sake. And he said, Appoint me thy wages, and I will give it. (Gen 29:30; 30:25–28)

Although Jacob stayed with Laban for another six years, he was ready to leave Haran after Joseph was born. Based on the order of births in Table 5, the ages of Jacob’s children when he asked Laban to “let me go” are shown in Table 1.

Table 1 – 20 Year View: The Ages of Jacob’s Children When He Wanted to Leave Haran

Reuben.....	6
Simeon.....	5
Levi.....	4
Dan	4
Judah.....	3
Naphtali	3
Gad	c. 3
Asher.....	c. 2
Issachar	c. 2
Zebulun.....	c. 1
Dinah	< 1
Joseph	< ½

It is unlikely that Jacob would ask to leave with so many toddlers at hand, little accrued wealth, and Esau still on his mind. On this, Harold Browne writes (1873: 178):

. . . it is not necessary to conclude that Jacob should have wished to leave Laban immediately on the conclusion of his 14 years’ servitude. On the contrary, with his children too young to carry on so long a journey, with but little independent substance, and with the fear of Esau before his eyes, it is far more likely that he should have been willing to remain longer in the service of Laban. But, if this be so, we have then an indefinite time left us for this additional

sojourn, limited only by the words “when Rachel had born Joseph” (ch. xxx. 25). Jacob may have lived and worked for twenty years longer with Laban, and not have asked for his dismissal, till Joseph was old enough to travel, or at all events till he was born.

Significantly, the Bible does not specify the exact year when Jacob wanted to leave. Genesis 30:25 simply states, “**And it came to pass**, when Rachel had born Joseph.” It does not say “after those seven years, when Rachel had born Joseph.” In the 40-year view, “it came to pass” coincides with the end of Jacob’s 34th year in Haran, not his 14th year.

4. Reuben’s Young Age When He Gathered Mandrakes

Genesis 30:14–18 tells the story of the birth of Leah’s son Issachar. It began with Leah’s son Reuben going into the fields during the time of wheat harvest (in May or June). There, he found mandrakes.

In ancient folklore, mandrakes were linked to fertility. Reuben brought them to Leah, but Rachel asked if she could have them instead. This is understandable given that Rachel had been childless ever since her marriage to Jacob. Rachel offered Leah a night with Jacob in exchange for Leah’s mandrakes. (Rachel was Jacob’s favored wife.) Leah’s night with Jacob resulted in the birth of Issachar. Interestingly, Leah became pregnant despite giving her mandrakes to Rachel, who remained childless until Joseph was born.

In the 20-year scheme, Reuben was around four years of age when he found the mandrakes. It is doubtful that Leah would have allowed a four-year old to wander in the fields. In my 40-year timeline, Reuben was 14 when he found the mandrakes.

5. The Excessive Time Spent in Succoth and/or Shechem

On leaving Haran, Jacob journeyed to the hill country of Gilead, where Laban finally caught up to him (Gen 31:22–23). After some heated words between them, Laban and Jacob made a covenant (31:24–55). Soon after this, Jacob met his brother Esau, who came as a friend (32:1–33:16).

Jacob then went to Succoth. There, he built himself a house, and shelters for his livestock (Gen 33:17). After spending an undisclosed amount of time in Succoth, Jacob went to Shechem and bought some land (33:18–20).

In Shechem, the son of Hamor lay with Leah’s daughter Dinah (Gen 34:1–2). Because he then wanted to marry her (34:3–4), Dinah must have been of a marriageable age, at least around 13. This creates a problem in the 20-year view. Let us assume that two years elapsed from Jacob leaving Haran to arriving in Shechem. If Dinah was born in the same year as Joseph (see Table 5 in Appendix 1), she was around eight years old when Hamor’s son dishonored her, which is too young. Also, Simeon and Levi, who killed the men of Shechem in a revenge attack (34:24–25), were around 13 and 12, respectively.

One way to solve this problem is to assume that Jacob lived in Shechem for several years. For example, Charles Zimmerman (1972: 11) upholds an earlier view that Jacob lived in Shechem for eight years. In his scheme, Dinah was around 16 when she was dishonored, and Simeon and Levi were around 21 and 20 when they carried out their attack. However, the story suggests that Jacob and his family were *newcomers* to Shechem. On this, Robert Smith explains (1882: 126–27):

Dinah's visit [to see the daughters of the land] was one of curiosity . . . to see what the native women were like, and how they dressed themselves . . . But she would feel no such curiosity after being a year or two at Shechem, so that it is probable that her dishonour took place within a few weeks after Jacob's arrival there. So, too, Hamor's words in verses 21 and 22 plainly show that Jacob was a new comer; for he proposes that the people should "let them dwell in the land," and therefore consent to the condition required by them that the Hivites should be circumcised. It would have been absurd thus to speak if Jacob had already dwelt there eight years with no apparent intention of going away.

Not only were Jacob's family newcomers, but they evidently left Shechem not long after the attack by Simeon and Levi. This was due to Jacob's concern about retaliatory attacks from people in the region (Gen 34:30). So, he probably stayed in Shechem for less than a year.

The only option left to increase Dinah's age is to assume that Jacob stayed in Succoth for at least eight years. In my opinion, this is too long for two reasons. First, the Lord directed Jacob to return to his kindred (Gen 31:3; cf. 18, 30). Second, Jacob would have felt more at home staying in locations west of the Jordan River (Succoth was east of the Jordan).

6. The "Elderly" Ages of Jacob and Laban

In the 20-year view, Jacob fled to Haran at the age of 77 (Chapter 1 refers). Thus, he was 84 in the eighth year of his stay. This seems old for a man in those days to marry. By contrast, Jacob's father Isaac married Rebekah at the age of 40 (Gen 25:20). Esau also married at the age of 40 (26:34). In the 20-year view, Jacob's son Judah married around the age of 20 (so Steinmann 2011: 78–79). In the 40-year timeline in Chapter 6, Judah married around the age of 34. Jacob's son Joseph married Asenath when he was 30 (41:45–46).

The age profile of Laban is also of interest. He was Rebekah's brother, and their father was Bethuel. Laban was evidently older than Rebekah given that both Laban and Bethuel consented to Rebekah's marriage to Isaac (Gen 24:29–51).

Isaac was 40 when he married Rebekah (Gen 25:20). Let us assume that Rebekah was 14 when she married Isaac, and Laban was 21. Twenty years later, when Isaac was 60, Rebekah gave birth to Esau and Jacob (25:24–26). Rebekah was 34 then, and Laban was 41. If Jacob fled to Haran at the age of 77, Rebekah was 111 and Laban was 118. Even if Rachel (Laban's younger daughter) was as old as 25 when Jacob arrived in Haran, Laban did not father her until he was 93. Recall from Chapter 1 that Joseph, the son of Jacob's "old age" (37:3), was born when Jacob was 91.

Laban also had sons, but their number is undisclosed. Presumably, they were all adults when Jacob's final six-year period in Haran began (cf. Gen 30:35; 31:1).

7. The Marriage of Esau to Ishmael's Daughter Mahalath

Abraham was 86 when Hagar gave birth to his first son, Ishmael (Gen 16:16). Since Abraham was 100 when Sarah gave birth to Isaac (21:5), Ishmael was 14 years older than his brother. Thus, when Isaac fathered Esau and Jacob at the age of 60 (25:26), Ishmael was 74.

When Ishmael died at 137 (25:17), Esau and Jacob were 63. In the 20-year view, Jacob was 77 when he went to Haran. This was 14 years after the death of Ishmael. This contradicts the story of Esau's marriage to Ishmael's daughter Mahalath, which occurred after Jacob left for Haran. The following passage indicates that Ishmael was still alive then:

*When Esau saw that Isaac had blessed Jacob, and sent him away to Padan-aram, to take him a wife from thence; and that as he blessed him he gave him a charge, saying, Thou shalt not take a wife of the daughters of Canaan; And that Jacob obeyed his father and his mother, and was gone to Padan-aram; And Esau seeing that the daughters of Canaan pleased not Isaac his father; **Then went Esau unto Ishmael**, and took unto the wives which he had Mahalath the daughter of Ishmael Abraham's son, the sister of Nebajoth, to be his wife. (Gen 28:6-9)*

How could Ishmael be alive if he died 14 years before Jacob went to Haran? Gordon Wenham is one of many scholars who accept the following solution (1994: 214):

If the chronological data of Genesis are supposed to be taken literally, Ishmael must already have been dead, in which case "Esau went to Ishmael" must mean he went to the Ishmaelites.

In Wenham's opinion, if the chronological data mentioning 20 years (Gen 31:38-41) refers to a single 20-year period, Ishmael must already be dead. Therefore, Esau did not go to Ishmael but to his descendants.

However, Genesis 28:9 says that Esau went to Ishmael. This is a straightforward statement. The unclear passage is 31:38-41. There, Jacob mentions 20 years *twice*. Each occasion describes a different working relationship with Laban:

These twenty years I have been with you. Your ewes and your female goats have not miscarried, and I have not eaten the rams of your flocks . . . These twenty years I have been in your house. I served you fourteen years for your two daughters, and six years for your flock, and you have changed my wages ten times. (Gen 31:38, 41 ESV)

It is therefore possible that Genesis 31:38-41 refers to two different periods of 20 years for Jacob, as follows:

- GEN 31:38: Twenty years looking after Laban's livestock in exchange for his lodging.
- GEN 31:41: Twenty years working to earn something for himself, being his wives (for the first 14 years) and livestock (in the final six years).

Thus, 40 years in Haran = Jacob's first 14 years + 20 years + Jacob's final six years.

* * *

Before examining the 40-year view (in Chapter 4), I will discuss the options for Jacob's age when Joseph was born. This affects Jacob's age when he fled from Canaan.

Chapter 3 – Correlating the Ages of Joseph and Jacob

Joseph became second only to Pharaoh in power after he interpreted Pharaoh’s dream. The dream foretold of seven years of plenty followed by seven years of famine (Gen 41:1–46).

There were three agricultural seasons in ancient Egypt. They were based on the cycle of the Nile River, as shown in Table 2.²

Table 2 – Agricultural Seasons in Ancient Egypt

SEASON	TIME OF YEAR
Flooding	June to September
Planting and growing	October to February
Harvesting	March to May

When Joseph revealed himself to his brothers, they were in the second year of famine, with five years still to go:

So Joseph said to his brothers, “Come near to me, please.” And they came near. And he said, “I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. And now do not be distressed or angry with yourselves because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life. For the famine has been in the land these two years, and there are yet five years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvest. (Gen 45:4–6 ESV)

Joseph said that there will be “neither plowing nor harvest” for five more years. This suggests that he revealed himself to his brothers late in the unsuccessful growing season of the second year of famine.

After Joseph’s brothers returned to Canaan, Jacob moved all his family to Egypt (Gen 45:26–46:7). They arrived in springtime, around April, at the start of the third year of famine. It was on the “selfsame day” as their exodus from Egypt 430 years later (Exod 12:41).

To calculate Jacob’s age when Joseph was born, one must work back from events in Egypt. The calculation is done in two steps, as follows:

- Joseph was 30 when he interpreted Pharaoh’s dream (Gen 41:46). Therefore, he was 37 at the start of the first year of famine, and 39 at the start of the third year of famine.

² The yearly flooding of the Nile River caused it to deposit a layer of mineral-rich silt that was ideal for growing crops. After the flood receded, farmers plowed their fields and planted seeds. The Nile irrigated the fields through ditches and canals. Because Egypt received little rainfall during the year, the inundation of the Nile was vital to agriculture. If the river did not flood, the fields could not be irrigated and crops would not grow. Thus, planting would be futile.

- Jacob and his family entered Egypt at the start of the third year of famine. Jacob was 130 (Gen 47:9) and, as noted above, Joseph was 39. Therefore, Joseph was born when Jacob was 91.

This commonly quoted calculation does not account for two variables that affect Jacob's age when Joseph was born.

The first variable is Joseph's age when the first year of plenty began. We know from the Bible that Joseph was 30 when he interpreted Pharaoh's dream. However, after he spoke to Pharaoh, Joseph traveled "throughout all the land of Egypt" (Gen 41:46). He did so to appoint officers, and to instruct them on food storage for the seven years of plenty (41:34–36). Depending on how many months it took for Joseph to travel around Egypt, he was either 30 or 31 when the first year of plenty began. Therefore, he was either 39 or 40 when Jacob entered Egypt.

The second variable is birthdates. We do not know them for Jacob or Joseph. Nevertheless, their relative positions in the year can affect Jacob's age at Joseph's birth. For example, assume that Jacob was born on 1 December, and Joseph on 1 March. Thus, if Joseph was 39 when Jacob entered Egypt around April at the age of 130, he was born when Jacob was 91. If we swap their birthdates, Joseph was born when Jacob was 90.

As noted above, Joseph may have been 40 when Jacob entered Egypt. Once again, assume that Jacob was born on 1 December, and Joseph on 1 March. If Joseph was 40 when Jacob entered Egypt around April at the age of 130, he was born when Jacob was 90. If we swap the birthdates, Joseph was born when Jacob was 89.

Thus, there are three possible ages for Jacob at Joseph's birth: 89, 90, and 91.

Jacob's Age When He Fled from Canaan

In the 20-year view, Joseph was born in Jacob's 14th year in Haran. Since Jacob was either 89, 90, or 91 when Joseph was born, he left Haran six years later at the age of 95, 96, or 97. He therefore fled from Canaan 20 years earlier at the age of 75, 76, or 77.

In the 40-year view, Joseph was born in Jacob's 34th year in Haran. Since Jacob was either 89, 90, or 91 when Joseph was born, he left Haran six years later at the age of 95, 96, or 97. He therefore fled from Canaan 40 years earlier at the age of 55, 56, or 57.

Chapter 4 – The 40-Year View

To my knowledge, the earliest published work critiquing the 20-year view, and offering the 40-year view, was the dissertation by William Skinner (1765). Later authors cited him approvingly. They include Benjamin Kennicott (1787) and Adam Clarke (1850). Others cited Kennicott's abstract of Skinner's arguments. They include: Samuel Horsley (1820), Thomas Horne (1825), Harold Browne (1873), Robert Payne Smith (1882), and Smith B. Goodenow (1896).

Although I was unable to access Skinner's dissertation, Kennicott's 1787 work is publicly available. He summarized Skinner's arguments against the 20-year view. They include the following four problems discussed in Chapter 2:

- Jacob's elderly age (in his mid-eighties) when he married
- Reuben's young age (around four) when he gathered mandrakes
- Ishmael being alive when Esau married his daughter Mahalath
- too short a time for the births of Jacob's children

Having listed the difficulties with the 20-year view, Kennicott concludes that they are all solved when using Skinner's 40-year approach (1787: 28):

But upon the single principle of Mr Skinner, that Jacob went to Laban at 57 (instead of 77) these difficulties are solved . . . This number [of years that Jacob stayed in Haran], Mr Skinner thinks was originally 40. And I think that the Heb. Text, *as it now stands*, confirms the Conjecture, and furnishes the very Authority which is so much wanted.

The 40-year view also solves the other three problems discussed in Chapter 2:

- Joseph was the youngest brother by several years
- the ages of Jacob's children after 14 years in Haran
- the excessive time spent in Succoth and/or Shechem

Two Distinct Periods of 20 Years

When Laban caught up with Jacob after his family's departure from Haran, he expressed his displeasure at Jacob's stealthy exit (Gen 31:25–29). Laban even accused Jacob of stealing his "gods" (31:30), which were probably miniature household idols. They indeed had been stolen. However, Jacob was unaware that Rachel was the culprit (31:19, 32). Jacob allowed Laban to search all their tents, but he did not find anything. This is because Rachel had hidden the idols and was sitting on them (31:33–35). After Laban returned from his empty search, Jacob confronted him. In an angry address, Jacob contrasted his own conscientious service with Laban's trickery and cheating:

*And Jacob was wrath, and chode with Laban: and Jacob answered and said to Laban, What is my trespass? what is my sin, that thou hast so hotly pursued after me? Whereas thou hast searched all my stuff, what hast thou found of all thy household stuff? set it here before my brethren and thy brethren, that they may judge betwixt us both. **This twenty years have I been***

with thee; thy ewes and thy she goats have not cast their young, and the rams of thy flock have I not eaten. That which was torn of beasts I brought not unto thee; I bare the loss of it; of my hand didst thou require it, whether stolen by day, or stolen by night. Thus I was; in the day the drought consumed me, and the frost by night; and my sleep departed from mine eyes.

Thus have I been twenty years in thy house; I served thee fourteen years for thy two daughters, and six years for thy cattle: and thou hast changed my wages ten times. Except the God of my father, the God of Abraham, and the fear of Isaac, had been with me, surely thou hadst sent me away now empty. (Gen 31:36–42a)

Jacob viewed his 40 years in Haran as being divided into two distinct periods of 20 years. During the 20 years that began after his first 14 years,³ Jacob tended Laban's livestock. Evidently, this was in exchange for his lodging while his family grew in number. (Jacob was not wealthy enough to buy land.) Jacob was a diligent worker. He took the brunt of any losses to Laban's flocks and was tireless in his labor. He toiled in the heat of the day and the cold of the night to ensure that Laban prospered. Jacob mentions this 20-year period first, to underscore how hard he worked to increase Laban's wealth (cf. Gen 30:30), even at his own expense.

Jacob then contrasted his 20 years of conscientious service with Laban's dishonesty during the 14 + 6 years that Jacob worked for him to acquire something for himself. It began with Laban's trickery in giving him Leah instead of Rachel. Because of that, Jacob tended Laban's livestock for 14 years instead of seven. Jacob tended Laban's livestock again during his final six years in Haran. He did so because he wanted to build his own wealth of livestock before returning home. Since fortune was always favoring Jacob, Laban resorted to cheating. He tried limiting Jacob's success during those six years by changing the type of livestock—speckled or ringstraked, etc.—that Jacob was allowed to keep (“thou hast changed my wages ten times”). Had God not been with Jacob to favor him (Gen 31:6–9), he would have left Haran empty-handed.

Those 20 years working for Laban are defined as the time that Jacob was “in thy house.” In my view, this does not mean that Jacob lived under the same roof as Laban for 20 years. Rather, Jacob was *subject to Laban's authority* during the 14 + 6 years that he worked to earn something from him (i.e. his wives and livestock). On the wages deal struck between Jacob and Laban for the hand of Rachel, Victor Hamilton comments (1995: 258):

Jacob's nephew-uncle relationship with Laban will be subordinated to that of an employee-employer relationship, giving Laban (so he hopes) the upper hand in this relationship.

By contrast, the 20-year period of Genesis 31:38 is defined as the time that Jacob was “with thee” (Laban). It is a more equitable relationship where Jacob was working for his lodging while his family expanded. The difference between these two 20-year periods is discussed further in Appendix B.

³ According to Kennicott (1787: 29), Jacob's fear of Esau (cf. Gen 27:41; 32:6–11) was the main reason for Jacob extending his stay in Haran after his first 14 years there:

But let us also remember that *Isaac* was still alive, and that Esau had determined to kill Jacob whenever their father should die. It would therefore be no wonder if Jacob should have desired to continue longer in Haran. And, to carry this point the more effectually, he might offer to take care of Laban's Cattle, and to live in his neighbourhood upon such terms of advantage to Laban, as could not easily be withstood.

In summary, the two totals of 20 years in Genesis 31 correspond to the two phases of Jacob's working relationship with Laban, as follows:

- 20 years (7 + 7 + 6) as Laban's servant working to earn something for himself
- 20 years working for his family's lodging while he kept his distance from Esau

On these two periods, Robert Smith writes (1882: 183–84):

Thus, then, there were two periods of service [each of 20 years] . . . of which one was for settled wages, and the other for no stipulated hire. They would not necessarily be continuous, and Dr. Kennicott arranges them as follows: First, Jacob served Laban fourteen years for his two daughters; next, there was a long period of twenty years, during which he took care of Laban's flocks, receiving from them maintenance for himself and family, but acquiring no separate wealth; finally, after Joseph's birth, Jacob rebelled at this treatment, and determined to go back to his father, but was prevailed upon to remain, on the promise of receiving for himself all the speckled sheep and goats [which took six years to accrue].

Although Skinner's 1765 paper was influential for well over a century, it is hardly recalled today. In my opinion, Skinner's arguments against the 20-year view remain compelling. On them, *The Critical Review* wrote (1765: 318):

To avoid these improbabilities [in the 20-year view], our author supposes that Jacob might flee into Mesopotamia when he was only fifty-seven; that there might be an interval of twenty years between Jacob's fourteen years' service, and the six years in which he *again* undertook the care of Laban's flocks . . .

The world is obliged to Mr. Skinner for this ingenious and useful dissertation, which is, perhaps, the best attempt that has been made to solve the chronological difficulties in which this part of sacred history has been involved.

On the arguments as summarized by Kennicott (1787), Samuel Horsley considered them "unanswerable" (1820: 74). On the Ishmael problem (see Chapter 2), Adam Clarke wrote (1850: 173–74) :

If we follow the common computation [i.e. the 20-year view] . . . then Ishmael must have been dead about *fourteen* years. But if we allow the ingenious reasoning of Mr. *Skinner* and Dr. *Kennicott*, that Jacob was at this time only *fifty-seven* years of age, and Isaac consequently only *one hundred and seventeen*, it will appear that Ishmael did not die till *six* years after this period; and hence with propriety it might be said, Esau went unto *Ishmael*, and took Mahalath the daughter of Ishmael to be his wife.

Before proposing a timeline for Jacob's life based on the 40-year view, the following topics associated with his children will be discussed:

- the order of births
- the time between consecutive births for the same mother
- the young children who stood before Esau
- the daughters of Jacob

Chapter 5 – Jacob’s Children: Some Observations

The Order of Births

Genesis 29:32–30:24 narrates the births of Jacob’s children in Haran. They are grouped according to their mothers in the following order:

- LEAH.....Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah (Leah was childless for a time after Judah)
- BILHAH.....Dan, Naphtali
- ZILPAH.....Gad, Asher
- LEAH.....Issachar, Zebulun, Dinah
- RACHEL.....Joseph

If this is viewed as the true birth order, Rachel’s surrogate Bilhah gave birth to Dan (Gen 30:6) after Leah’s fourth son Judah (29:35). However, it is likely that Dan was born before Judah. Genesis 30:1 states:

And when Rachel saw that she bare Jacob no children, Rachel envied her sister; and said unto Jacob, Give me children, or else I die.

Rachel “saw that she bare Jacob no children” probably after twelve months or so. She therefore gave Bilhah to Jacob then.⁴ If so, Bilhah gave birth to Dan in Rachel’s second year of marriage. But when was her next son born? Given the terse language of Genesis 30:6–8, most authors accept that Bilhah gave birth to Naphtali not long after Dan:

And Rachel said, God hath judged me, and hath also heard my voice, and hath given me a son: therefore called she his name Dan. And Bilhah Rachel’s maid conceived again, and bare Jacob a second son. And Rachel said, With great wrestlings have I wrestled with my sister, and I have prevailed: and she called his name Naphtali.

However, based on three passages in the Bible, Naphtali may have been born many years after Dan. The first passage is Genesis 49:1–28. It recounts the blessings that Jacob gave to his sons. They occur in the following order by mother:

- LEAH.....Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Zebulun, Issachar
- BILHAH.....Dan
- ZILPAH.....Gad, Asher
- BILHAH.....Naphtali
- RACHEL.....Joseph, Benjamin

Compared to the Genesis 29–30 listing, Naphtali appears in a later position separated from Dan. The same occurs in the list of Moses’ assistants in Numbers 1:5–15, and in the order

⁴ On the order of births in Genesis 29–30, Kiel and Delitzsch note (1885: 291): “the intention to arrange them according to the mothers prevails over the chronological order.” Thus, “not necessarily after the birth of Leah’s fourth child, Rachel, having discovered her own barrenness, had given her maid to Jacob.” Kiel and Delitzsch therefore conclude that “Dan [may] have been born *before* Judah.”

of tribes in the census that followed (1:19–47). It also occurs in the genealogy of Israel's sons (i.e. Jacob's sons) recorded in 1 Chronicles 2:1–2.

Given Naphtali's detachment from Dan in these different lists, I propose that he was born well after Dan. Further, his birth was related to the mandrake story in Genesis 30:14–21:

And Reuben went in the days of wheat harvest, and found mandrakes in the field, and brought them unto his mother Leah. Then Rachel said to Leah, Give me, I pray thee, of thy son's mandrakes. And she said unto her, Is it a small matter that thou hast taken my husband? and wouldest thou take away my son's mandrakes also? And Rachel said, Therefore he shall lie with thee to night for thy son's mandrakes. And Jacob came out of the field in the evening, and Leah went out to meet him, and said, Thou must come in unto me; for surely I have hired thee with my son's mandrakes. And he lay with her that night. And God hearkened unto Leah, and she conceived, and bare Jacob the fifth son. And Leah said, God hath given me my hire, because I have given my maiden to my husband: and she called his name Issachar. And Leah conceived again, and bare Jacob the sixth son . . . and she called his name Zebulun. And afterwards she bare a daughter, and called her name Dinah.

Ironically, Leah bore three children after giving her mandrakes away. By contrast, Rachel—who evidently controlled the marriage bed at the time—remained childless until Joseph's birth.

According to the order of names in Genesis 30, Bilhah's second son Naphtali was born before the mandrake episode. However, if Naphtali was born after the mandrake episode as I propose, the following scenario is possible:

- After Leah gave birth to Jacob's firstborn son Reuben, Rachel was concerned about her fertility. Also, as John Byron observes (2010: 53), she was worried about her future standing in the family should Jacob die:

If Jacob should die, Rachel has no son to protect her well-being . . . The sisters would now be co-widows and the balance of power would tip in favor of Leah . . . Rachel would recognize that her position within the household was only secure so long as her husband was still living. Once Jacob died, however, Leah would be free to assert her status as first primary wife and to fully benefit from it.

With these concerns in mind, Rachel gave Bilhah to Jacob, which resulted in the birth of Dan. Rachel's future standing in the family was now secure. So, Rachel did not offer Bilhah to Jacob again. She had the luxury of time to try having her own children.

- Despite trying for many years, Rachel was unsuccessful in falling pregnant. Also, Leah had been childless since the birth of Judah. When Rachel saw that Leah had mandrakes, it raised her hopes that she might fall pregnant if she could get them (which would also prevent Leah from using them). She therefore allowed Leah to spend a night with Jacob in exchange for her mandrakes.
- After being childless for some years, Leah became pregnant with Issachar. Envious of Leah's resumption of child-bearing, and knowing that the mandrakes had not worked, Rachel gave Bilhah to Jacob so she could gain another son. The result was Naphtali.
- Although Naphtali's birth helped to quench Rachel's envy, she did not give Bilhah to Jacob again.

More on Genesis 49. The first six sons blessed by Jacob were those of his first wife Leah: Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah, Zebulun, and Issachar. Interestingly, Zebulun was blessed *before* Issachar, which is the reverse of the birth order (Gen 30:17–20). Since these prophetic blessings were divinely inspired, Zebulun may have been elevated in status due to the crucial role that the tribe of Zebulun played in Deborah and Barak’s defeat of the powerful armies of Sisera (Judg 4:6–7; 5:18–19). This was a key event in Israel’s history, and two chapters in Judges are devoted to it. Sisera’s defeat allowed Israel to dominate the region.

After Issachar, Jacob blessed the rest of his sons in the following order: Dan, Gad, Asher, Naphtali, Joseph, and Benjamin. Given the above discussion on Naphtali’s detachment from Dan in different lists in the Bible, I submit that Jacob blessed these sons in their correct order of birth.

The Time Between Consecutive Births for the Same Mother

In the 20-year view, all eleven sons of Jacob were born in seven years (Dinah may have been born later). By contrast, the 40-year view allows 27 years for Jacob’s twelve children to be born. This allows time to consider breastfeeding duration, and the realistic interval between births for consecutive children born to the same mother.

The following excerpts discuss the attention to breastfeeding in antiquity:

PAPASTAVROU ET AL. 2015: 3

In ancient Palestine, since 2000 BC, children were considered a blessing, and breastfeeding a religious obligation. Breastfeeding used to last long enough, almost up to two to three years and provided the infant with protection from various diseases, and above all from dysentery which was common and often fatal. The moment of weaning was celebrated with a joyous meal originating from a sacrifice; all that ritual was in commemoration of the great banquet that was given the day that Isaac, Abraham’s son, had ceased to [be nursed by] Sarah.

THOMPSON 1993: 35–36

There is abundant evidence for the fact that in ancient times a child was not weaned until he was several years old . . . The Talmud mentions an 18–24 month weaning period (*Ketubot* 60a); the Koran fixes a two year minimum; in Hellenistic times there is Jewish evidence of three years of nursing (2 Maccabees 7:27). A period of three years is also mentioned in the story of Samuel (1 Sam. 1:24). Isaiah 28:9 implies a child’s education begins immediately after weaning, thus suggesting an age of at least three years, whereas 2 Chronicles 31:16 suggests that boys of priestly families began to learn and perform their service in the temple at the age of three . . . In 1976 J. J. Finkelstein published several wet-nurse contracts from 18th-century B.C. Babylon. Three of the four cited are contracts for a period of three years. Hellenistic Egyptian wet-nurse contracts often extended for two years or longer.

Guided by the above information, I have spaced the births of consecutive children in Table 4 (Chapter 6) at three years. During that time, breastfeeding then weaning occurred. Intimacy with Jacob resumed during the third year, such that the child was born a full three years after the previous birth for that mother. This spacing is used between the following children:

- LEAH.....Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah
- ZILPAH.....Gad, Asher
- LEAH.....Issachar, Zebulun, Dinah

The Children Who Stood Before Esau

Genesis 33:1–16 recounts the story of Esau’s meeting with Jacob. Contrary to Jacob’s fears, Esau came from Seir to greet him as a friend. Note in the following passage how all of Jacob’s offspring are called “children”:

And Jacob lifted up his eyes, and looked, and, behold, Esau came, and with him four hundred men. And he divided the children unto Leah, and unto Rachel, and unto the two handmaids. And he put the handmaids and their children foremost, and Leah and her children after, and Rachel and Joseph hindermost. And he passed over before them, and bowed himself to the ground seven times, until he came near to his brother. And Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck, and kissed him: and they wept. And he lifted up his eyes, and saw the women and the children; and said, Who are those with thee? And he said, The children which God hath graciously given thy servant. (Gen 33:1–5)

Advocates of the 20-year view cite this passage as proof that *all* eleven sons of Jacob were children, with the oldest son Reuben being about twelve years old. This is not a compelling argument. The word translated “children” in Genesis 33 derives from *yeled* (יָלֵד), a noun from the Hebrew root *yld* (יָלַד). The plural is *yēlādīm* (יְלָדִים). The following Hebraists uphold that *yeled* covers a range of ages:

PAUL R. GILCHRIST, “yeled,” IN *TWOT* 1.379

yeled. *Child, young man, son, boy, fruit* (RSV similar; adds youths. **yaldâ.** *Girl, damsel* (RSV “girl,” “maiden”).

These words are generally used for very young children but may refer to adolescents and sometimes even young adults (e.g. 1 Kgs 12:18–14; 11 Kgs 2:24; II Chr 10:8–14). Once *yeled* refers to a fetus (Ex 21:22). In Job 38:41; 39:3 and Isa 11:7 the plural is used for the young of animals. In one instance the word is used to mean descendants (Isa 29:23). It is used in a figurative sense to represent the Israelites as either “children of transgression” (Isa 57:4) or “a child of delights” (Jer 31:20).

VICTOR P. HAMILTON, “יָלֵד,” IN *NIDOTTE* 2.457

9. (a) The nuances of the word *yeled* range from (i) newborns (Exod 1:17, 18; 3:6, 7, 8, 9, 10; 2 Sam 12:15), (ii) to children who have been weaned (Gen 21:8), (iii) to teenagers (Gen 21:14, 15, 16; 37:50; 42:22), (iv) to youths (2 Kgs 2:24), (v) to young men (Dan 1:4, 10, 15, 17) old enough to serve in foreign courts, (vi) to descendants (Isa 29:23). . . .

(b) In family relationships the word *yeled* is used by a mother about her son (Gen 21:16), by a father about his son(s) (30:26; 32:22[23], and by brothers about a brother (37:30; 42:22). On every occasion *yeled* refers to male children. The one exception to this is Exod 21:4, a law stating that if a male servant receives his wife from his master and then has sons and daughters by her, the wife and “her children” are to belong to the master, even if the husband leaves.

(c) On every occasion *yeled* refers to unmarried children, with but one exception. Mahlon and Kilion, married to Moabite women, are referred to as Naomi’s two “sons,” of whom she was bereft (Ruth 1:5). . . .

(d) Rehoboam rejected the advice of the elders and instead listened to the advice of “the young men” i.e., military advisors (1 Kgs 12:8, 10, 14), to make his reign even more oppressive for his subjects than was his father’s. Here is a derogatory use of *yēlādīm*. The “young men” may denote a regular council whom the king consulted in addition to the assembly of elders. Or it may designate an assembly of those of military age. . . .

(e) In Gen 4:23b Lamech boasted: “I have killed a man for wounding me, a young man for injuring me.” This is the only place in the OT where *’iš*, man, and *yeled* form a word pair, but this would mean that *yeled* here means “young man, young warrior” (which is not impossible {see 1 Kgs 12:8 discussed above}). If *’iš* and *yeled* are not a word pair and the two lines are not synonymous, then Lamech is stating that, if provoked, he would not hesitate to kill even a child, let alone an adult. His capacity for retaliation knows no limits.

JOSEF SCHREINER, “יָלָד, *yālad*,” IN *TDOT* 6.81

The *yēlādīm* whose counsel Rehoboam follows (1 K. 12:1–19) are not children but—as the LXX (*syntrophoi*) shows—friends who have grown up with him or possibly an institution contrasting with the “elders (of Israel),” comprising the royal princes. The reference in Gen. 4:23 may also be to young men or warriors. It is theologically significant that Jer. 31:20 refers to Ephraim as Yahweh’s favorite child, and that Ezr. 10:1; Neh. 12:43 include women and children in the congregation of Yahweh.

The above references show that *yeled* is not limited to children. On this, Hamilton states (1990: 240–41):

The Heb. *yeled* covers a wide range of ages. That *yeled* encompasses people other than children is substantiated by the use of this word to describe the young military advisors with whom Rehoboam surrounded himself (1 K. 12:8). Here *yēlādīm* means “young men, young warriors.”

In the 40-year timeline proposed in Chapter 6, the ages of Jacob’s children when he met Esau agree with the “wide range” supported by Hamilton. Table 3 shows those ages:

Table 3 – The Ages of Jacob’s Children When He Met Esau

Joseph	6
Dinah	11
Zebulun.....	14
Naphtali	17
Issachar	17
Asher.....	18
Gad	21
Judah.....	23
Levi.....	26
Simeon.....	29
Dan	31
Reuben.....	32

When Esau invited Jacob to follow him to Seir (to rest and refresh himself and his family), Jacob pointed out that the children and young animals would slow his rate of progress:

And he [Esau] said, Let us take our journey, and let us go, and I will go before thee. And he [Jacob] said unto him, My lord knoweth that the children are tender, and the flocks and herds with young are with me: and if men should overdrive them one day, all the flock will die. Let my lord, I pray thee, pass over before his servant: and I will lead on softly, according as the cattle that goeth before me and the children be able to endure, until I come unto my lord unto Seir. And Esau said, Let me now leave with thee some of the folk that are with me. And he said, What needeth it? let me find grace in the sight of my lord. So Esau returned that day on his way unto Seir. (Gen 33:12–16)

While supporters of the 20-year view might say that Jacob was referring to *all* his children slowing him down, it is possible that Jacob was referring only to the *youngest* of his children. In the 40-year scheme, those “tender” children would be Joseph (age 6), Dinah (11), and possibly Zebulun (14).

Note that *yeled* can include females (cf. Exod 21:4; Ezra 10:1; Neh 12:43). Although Dinah is not named in the list of children present at Jacob’s meeting with Esau (32:22ff), it is likely that she was there. Her name is not mentioned owing to the higher status of Jacob’s sons in the book of Genesis (e.g. 35:22b–26).

The Daughters of Jacob

Three chapters in Genesis mention Jacob’s daughters: Chs. 34, 37, and 46. This is surprising because Dinah is the only daughter of Jacob named in the Bible. Who were the others?

Genesis 34

This chapter recounts the Shechem episode and the humiliation of Dinah by Shechem, the son of Hamor. Shechem then wanted to marry Dinah, so Hamor spoke to Jacob’s sons about the matter. He suggested that they intermarry. Three statements in their exchange mention Hebrew daughters:

*And Hamor communed with them, saying, The soul of my son Shechem longeth for your daughter [Dinah]: I pray you give her him to wife. And make ye marriages with us, **and give your daughters unto us**, and take our daughters unto you . . . And the sons of Jacob answered Shechem and Hamor his father deceitfully . . . If ye will be as we be, that every male of you be circumcised; **Then will we give our daughters unto you**, and we will take your daughters to us, and we will dwell with you, and we will become one people . . . And Hamor and Shechem his son came unto the gate of their city, and communed with the men of their city, saying, These men are peaceable with us; therefore let them dwell in the land, and trade therein; for the land, behold, it is large enough for them; **let us take their daughters to us for wives**, and let us give them our daughters. (Gen 34:8–21)*

I propose that the daughters mentioned here are *granddaughters* of Jacob. Further, people in Shechem had seen them. This is an important point. The requirement by Jacob’s sons to be circumcised involved pain, so it is more likely that the Shechemites would agree to it if they knew that other Hebrew daughters were present. This is feasible. Consider the following

scenario. In the 40-year scheme in Chapter 6, the three oldest sons are Reuben, Dan, and Simeon. Let us assume that they all married relatives from Haran or surrounding regions at the age of 19, then each had a daughter one year later. In Shechem, those daughters would be 15, 14, and 12. This would have attracted male attention there.

The “tender” children before Esau. The previous section identified the young children who stood before Esau. They were Joseph (age 6), Dinah (11), and possibly Zebulun (14). One may add the granddaughters of Jacob to their number. Assuming the above scenario of granddaughters who were 15, 14, and 12 in Shechem, they were 12, 11, and 9 when they met Esau.

Genesis 37

Around six years after the Shechem episode, Joseph’s brothers conspired to kill him. Through Reuben’s intervention, he was not killed but sold to traders. The brothers then made it appear as if a wild animal had attacked Joseph. They killed a young goat and dipped Joseph’s coat in its blood (the brothers had removed Joseph’s coat earlier). They brought the coat to their father, who recognized it as Joseph’s. Convinced that a fierce animal had taken his life, Jacob mourned inconsolably for his son:

*And Jacob rent his clothes, and put sackcloth upon his loins, and mourned for his son many days. **And all his sons and all his daughters rose up to comfort him;** but he refused to be comforted; and he said, *For I will go down into the grave unto my son mourning. Thus his father wept for him.* (Gen 37:34–35)*

It is possible that the “daughters” here include not only the granddaughters of Jacob but also his *daughters-in-law*.

Genesis 46

Genesis 46:5–7 recounts Jacob’s departure for Egypt:

*And Jacob rose up from Beer-sheba: and the sons of Israel carried Jacob their father, and their little ones, and their wives, in the wagons which Pharaoh had sent to carry him. And they took their cattle, and their goods, which they had gotten in the land of Canaan, and came into Egypt, Jacob, and all his seed with him: His sons, and his sons’ sons with him, **his daughters, and his sons’ daughters,** and all his seed brought he with him into Egypt.*

Included in the register of those who came to Egypt with Jacob were his daughters and his son’s daughters. Jacob’s daughters include his daughter Dinah, and evidently his *daughters-in-law* who are referred to in Genesis 46:26:

*All the souls that came with Jacob into Egypt, which came out of his loins, **besides Jacob’s sons’ wives,** all the souls were threescore and six.*

On the number of children born to Leah, Genesis 46:15 states:

These be the sons of Leah, which she bare unto Jacob in Padan-aram, with his daughter Dinah: all the souls of his sons and his daughters were thirty and three.

Leah had only one daughter, yet the plural “daughters” is used. This has a precedent in the chapter. The plural is used for a single son in Genesis 46:23:

And the sons of Dan; Hushim.

In the earlier discussion on Genesis 34, it was proposed that Jacob had granddaughters whom the men of Shechem had seen. However, the only granddaughter named in Genesis 46 is Serah the daughter of Asher (46:17). Presumably, Jacob’s other granddaughters either passed away before Jacob left for Egypt or they married outside the family before Jacob’s departure.

Chapter 6 – Proposed Timeline of Events

Table 4 shows key events in Jacob’s life based on the 40-year view. His age at many of those events is governed by the assumed factors below. The aim of these factors is to generate consistent results by using fixed dates where possible. While I have made educated guesses in the selection of some dates (e.g. Jacob entered Haran probably in late spring or early summer), the true chronology remains unknown. Table 4 hopefully approximates it.

- The start of Jacob’s 40 years in Haran was 1 June. Years are based on a solar calendar.
- Joseph was 40 when Jacob entered Egypt in springtime at the age of 130. (Chapter 3 discusses the two options for Joseph’s age then: 39 or 40.) Jacob was born on 1 December, and Joseph on 1 March. Therefore, Jacob was 90 when Joseph was born, and 96 when he left Haran. Thus, he fled from Canaan 40 years earlier at the age of 56.

- The births of consecutive children by the same mother are spaced exactly three years apart (Chapter 5 refers). Those children are:

LEAH..... Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah

ZILPAH..... Gad, Asher

LEAH..... Issachar, Zebulun, Dinah

During those three years, breastfeeding then weaning occurred. Intimacy with Jacob resumed in the third year, such that the child was born a full three years after the previous birth for that mother.

- After her marriage to Jacob, Rachel tried for twelve months to become pregnant before giving Bilhah to Jacob (Bilhah gave birth to Dan). Similarly, after Judah was born, Leah waited twelve months before giving Zilpah to Jacob (Zilpah gave birth to Gad).
- The births of Dan and Naphtali occurred many years apart (Chapter 5 refers). Bilhah gave birth to Dan in Jacob’s 9th year in Haran. Fourteen years later, in Jacob’s 23rd year, Bilhah became pregnant with Naphtali when Leah was in her fifth month of pregnancy with Issachar following the mandrake episode (Gen 30:14–18). Because that episode occurred “in the days of wheat harvest,” it was possibly in May.
- After mending relations with Laban (Gen 31:20–55) then Esau (32:1–33:16), Jacob built a house and made booths for his cattle in Succoth (33:17). Given that he was not living in a tent (cf. 33:19; 35:21), Jacob evidently stayed in Succoth for a while. I assume it was just under three years. It was a well-earned break. He could rest from his toils with Laban, and recuperate from his hip injury (32:24–32). While in Succoth, it is likely that Jacob visited Esau in Seir (cf. 33:12–14).
- After leaving Succoth, Jacob crossed the Jordan River and pitched his tent near the city of Shechem (Gen 33:18–20). He probably stayed there for less than a year (34:1–31). Immediately after the Shechem episode, God directed Jacob to live in Bethel (35:1). In my timeline, he stayed there for almost two years. In Bethel, Jacob built an altar (35:7), he buried his mother’s nurse (35:8), and God renewed his name change to Israel (35:9–10; cf. 32:27–28).

- While they were traveling south after leaving Bethel, Rachel died giving birth to Benjamin (Gen 35:16–20). Following those two impactful events, Jacob “spread his tent beyond the tower of Edar” (35:21). I assume he stayed there for less than a year, which included the winter period (to shelter his livestock). During that time, Jacob undoubtedly mourned for Rachel and took steps to ensure the well-being of his new-born son (e.g. employing a wet nurse).

Table 4 – Events in Jacob’s Life Based on the 40-Year View

JACOB’S AGE	EVENT
0	Esau and Jacob born (Isaac is 60)
15	Abraham dies at 175 (Isaac is 75)
40	Esau marries two Canaanite wives

JACOB’S FIRST 14 YEARS IN HARAN (AGES 56–70)	
56	Jacob flees to Haran (Isaac is 116)
63	Ishmael dies at 137 (Isaac is 123)
63	Jacob marries Leah then Rachel
64	Reuben born to Leah
65	Dan born to Bilhah
67	Simeon born to Leah
70	Levi born to Leah

JACOB’S NEXT 20 YEARS IN HARAN (AGES 70–90)	
73	Judah born to Leah
74	Gad born to Zilpah
78	Asher born to Zilpah
78	Reuben, aged 14, finds mandrakes
79	Issachar born to Leah
79	Naphtali born to Bilhah
82	Zebulun born to Leah
85	Dinah born to Leah
90	Joseph born to Rachel

JACOB’S FINAL 6 YEARS IN HARAN (AGES 90–96)	
96	Jacob and his family leave Haran

JACOB’S LIFE AFTER HARAN (AGES 96–147)	
96	Jacob meets Esau
96–99	Jacob in Succoth
99	Jacob in Shechem / Dinah defiled (age 14)
99–101	Jacob in Bethel

101	Benjamin born to Rachel, who dies ⁵
101–102	Jacob in Migdal-Edar
102	Jacob arrives at Isaac’s home in Hebron
c. 107	Judah marries Shuah’s daughter
107	Joseph sold as a slave at 17
120	Isaac dies at 180
120	Joseph, aged 30, interprets Pharaoh’s dream
121	The first year of plenty begins in Egypt
130	The third year of famine begins in Egypt
130	Jacob goes to Egypt – Joseph is 40
147	Jacob dies – Joseph is 57

The Number 40

This study upholds that Jacob spent 40 years in Haran. In the Bible, the number 40 is often associated with testing, trial, or probation. Examples include:

- After leaving Egypt at the age of 40 (Acts 7:23–29), Moses spent 40 years in Midian before God selected him to lead His people out of slavery (Acts 7:30–35).
- In the second year after the Exodus, Moses sent out spies to explore Canaan. They returned after 40 days with a largely negative report (Num 13:25–33). God punished the Israelites by keeping them in the wilderness for 40 years, one year for each day they explored the land (Num 14:33–34). It was a time of humbling and trial (Deut 8:2).
- Goliath taunted Israel twice a day for 40 days before David defeated him (1 Sam 17:16).
- Jonah told the Ninevites that their city would be destroyed (by God) in 40 days. The Ninevites repented, and were spared (Jonah 3:4, 9–10).
- Just before Jesus’ ministry began, the devil tempted Him for 40 days in the wilderness (Luke 4:2).

⁵ Jacob was 56 when he came to Haran, and he was 101 when Benjamin was born to Rachel. This is an interval of around 45 years. If Rachel was 14 when Jacob arrived in Haran (the marriage age for girls in those days was at least 12 or 13), she was around 59 when Benjamin was born. This older age for motherhood may have been a factor in Rachel’s “hard labour” with Benjamin (Gen 35:16).

The age difference between Rachel and Laban is also of interest. In the 20-year view, Rachel was born late in Laban’s life. In Chapter 2 (see “The ‘Elderly’ Ages of Jacob and Laban”), it was assumed that Laban was around 118 when Jacob arrived in Haran at the age of 77. If Rachel was 14 then, Laban fathered her around the age of 104 (= 118–14). In my 40-year view, Jacob was 56 when he came to Haran, so Laban was around 97. In that case, Laban fathered Rachel around the age of 83 (= 97–14), which is more plausible than 104.

The age difference between Laban and Jacob also merits comment. By my assumed figures in Chapter 2, Laban was 41 years older. Undoubtedly, Laban relied on the etiquette of *esteeming elders* to maintain his authority over Jacob.

Trials and struggles characterized Jacob's life. When Pharaoh asked how old he was, Jacob replied:

The days of the years of my pilgrimage are an hundred and thirty years: few and evil have the days of the years of my life been. (Gen 47:9a)

Jacob's days were "evil" because of the many afflictions he endured. It is fitting, therefore, that his time in Haran was 40 years.

Appendix A – Two Options for the Number of Births in Seven Years

The 20-year view requires many children to be born to Jacob in a short time. The mothers are Leah and her handmaid Zilpah, and Rachel and her handmaid Bilhah.

Leah and Zilpah are the key mothers in framing a chronology of births. There are different views on that chronology. For example, James Ussher (2003: 29) places Leah’s first four births in Jacob’s 2nd to 5th years in Haran. Charles Zimmermann (1972: 11) places all twelve births in the second seven-year period (i.e. 8th to 14th years). Keil and Delitzsch (1864: 292) uphold that all eleven sons were born in the second seven-year period, but Dinah was probably born in the final six years. Most likely, it was early in those final six years (so Steinmann 2011: 75–78).

A straightforward reading of Genesis 29:16–30 tells us that Jacob was unmarried in his first seven years in Haran. Ussher’s solution is therefore incorrect. This leaves two options:

1. All twelve children were born during Jacob’s second seven-year period in Haran.
2. All eleven sons were born during the second seven-year period. Dinah was born during Jacob’s final six years in Haran, most likely early in that time.

Table 5 shows an example of the first option from Zimmerman 1972 (11). “Year 1” is the first year of Jacob’s marriage. It corresponds to his eighth year in Haran. The years are based on a solar calendar. Births occur at the end of the indicated month.

Table 5 – Twelve Children in Seven Years

YEAR	MONTH	CHILD BORN	MOTHER
1	9	Reuben	Leah
2	7	Simeon	Leah
3	5	Levi	Leah
3	6	Dan	Bilhah
4	3	Judah	Leah
4	5	Naphtali	Bilhah
5	3	Gad	Zilpah
6	1	Asher	Zilpah
6	3	Issachar	Leah
7	1	Zebulun	Leah
7	11	Dinah	Leah
7	12	Joseph	Rachel

In Zimmerman’s scheme, the duration of pregnancy is nine calendar months. For the consecutive children of Leah (Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah), then Zilpah (Gad, Asher), then Leah again (Issachar, Zebulun, Dinah), there is a gap of one month between birth and the

start of the next pregnancy. For Bilhah’s consecutive sons Dan and Naphtali, that gap is two months. After Judah was born, Leah waited only three months before giving Zilpah to Jacob as a surrogate.

A gap of one or two months between pregnancies is unlikely because of the link between exclusive breastfeeding and the suppression of a mother’s fertility in the immediate months after birth. On this, Lewis et al. write in the abstract to their paper (1991: 529):

We have studied a large group of Australian women breastfeeding for an extended period of time to determine the duration of lactational anovulation (n = 89) and amenorrhea (n = 101). Salivary progesterone assays were used to determine ovulation. These women had a mean of 322 days of anovulation and 289 days amenorrhea . . . our results clearly show that lactational amenorrhea can provide good protection against pregnancy in the 1st 6 months postpartum, even in well-nourished women who are giving their babies supplemental feeds.

On the attention to breastfeeding in antiquity, see Chapter 5, “The Time Between Consecutive Births for the Same Mother” (p. 18).

A chronology of births for the second option (eleven sons born in seven years) is shown in Table 6. I have designed it to give the maximum possible spacing between consecutive pregnancies for Leah, Zilpah, and Bilhah. That spacing is three months. The chronology is based on the following arrangement:

- Dan was born within two years of Rachel’s marriage.
- Leah waited five months before giving Zilpah to Jacob as a surrogate.
- Leah’s son Issachar was conceived a few weeks after Zilpah’s son Asher.
- Zebulun was born before Joseph in the last month of Jacob’s 14th year in Haran.

Table 6 – Eleven Sons in Seven Years

YEAR	MONTH	CHILD BORN	MOTHER
1	9	Reuben	Leah
2	9	Dan	Bilhah
2	9	Simeon	Leah
3	9	Naphtali	Bilhah
3	9	Levi	Leah
4	9	Judah	Leah
5	11	Gad	Zilpah
6	11	Asher	Zilpah
6	12	Issachar	Leah
7	12	Zebulun	Leah
7	12	Joseph	Rachel

There are two problems with this chronology. First, a gap of three months between pregnancies is better than one or two months, as in Table 5. Although three months cannot be ruled

out biologically for a few consecutive sons, the odds are against it for all of them unless the mothers were exceptionally fertile.

Second, even if Dinah was born in the first year of Jacob's final six years in Haran, she would still be too young when she arrived in Shechem. As discussed in Chapter 2, to raise Dinah's age to a marriageable figure of around 13, Jacob has to spend at least eight years in Succoth during his return home from Haran. Given that the Lord specifically directed Jacob to return to his kindred (Gen 31:3; cf. 18, 30), it is unlikely that he stayed at an intermediate location for longer than three or four years.

Appendix B – The Words that Begin Genesis 31:38 and 31:41

In both the Masoretic Text (MT) and Samaritan Pentateuch (SP) there is a small but consequential difference between the first few words in Genesis 31:38 and 31:41. (The Septuagint rendering of those words is discussed in the next section.)

The verse introductions below are from the Masoretic Text, together with a literal English translation from the [Interlinear Scripture Analyzer](#). Note that Hebrew is read from right to left.

Gen 31:38 MT

זֶה עֲשָׂרִים שָׁנָה this twenty year (or “these twenty years”)
shanâh ‘esrîm zêh

Gen 31:41 MT

זֶה-לִּי עֲשָׂרִים שָׁנָה this to me twenty year
shanâh ‘esrîm lî-zêh

The difference between the opening words is the placement of *lî* (לִּי) after *zêh* (זֶה) in Genesis 31:41. *Zêh* translates as “this” or “these,” and *lî* translates as “to me” or “for me.” *Zêh-lî* therefore tells us that the 20-year period it introduces *was for Jacob’s benefit* (i.e. “these twenty years for me”). It establishes the context of the verse, which is Jacob’s 14 + 6 years in Haran working for Laban to earn something for himself:

Thus have I been twenty years in thy house; I served thee fourteen years for thy two daughters, and six years for thy cattle: and thou hast changed my wages ten times. (Gen 31:41)

By contrast, the 20 years of Genesis 31:38 was not “for me.” It was when Jacob was “with thee” (with Laban) tending his flocks, but not for stipulated wages:

This twenty years have I been with thee; thy ewes and thy she goats have not cast their young, and the rams of thy flock have I not eaten. That which was torn of beasts I brought not unto thee; I bare the loss of it; of my hand didst thou require it, whether stolen by day, or stolen by night. Thus I was; in the day the drought consumed me, and the frost by night; and my sleep departed from mine eyes. (Gen 31:38–40)

Presumably, Jacob worked for Laban in exchange for food and shelter during those 20 years. This is because he had no wealth of his own to buy land in Haran. Recall that he arrived empty-handed, which is why he worked 14 consecutive years to earn his wives.

Most Bible translations disregard the difference caused by לִּי (*lî* = *for me*) in Genesis 31:41. Also, many translations assume the 20-year view. Consider the following examples:

ENGLISH STANDARD VERSION (ESV)

38. *These twenty years I have been with you*

41. *These twenty years I have been in your house*

NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION (NIV)

38. *I have been with you for twenty years now*

41. *It was like this for the twenty years I was in your household*

ORTHODOX JEWISH BIBLE (OJB)

38. *These esrim shanah have I been with thee*

41. *Thus have I been esrim shanah in thy bais*

CONTEMPORARY ENGLISH VERSION (CEV)

38. *In all the 20 years that I've worked for you*

41. *I had to work 14 of these 20 long years*

TREE OF LIFE VERSION (TLV)

38. *These past twenty years I've been with you*

41. *This is how it's been for me twenty years in your house*

INTERNATIONAL STANDARD VERSION (ISV)

38. *Meanwhile, these past 20 years that I've been with you*

41. *I've lived in your house these 20 years*

A Bible version that shows the difference in opening words is Young's Literal Translation (YLT):

38. *These twenty years I [am] with thee*

41. *This [is] to me twenty years in thy house*

In my opinion, this difference is crucial to understanding Jacob's thinking in his exchange with Laban. Benjamin Kennicott was of the same opinion. Observe his attention to לִי (*lî* = *for me*) in the following excerpt (1787: 30):

So here, in Gen. 31 at ver. 38, Jacob says to Laban *זה עשרים שנה אנכי עמך* – *During the ONE set of 20 years, I was with thee* &c. meaning the time in which he lived not in Laban's house, but in his neighbourhood; not as a Servant, but a Friend . . . as to the other 20, he tells Laban at verse 41, varying the phrase very remarkably *זה לי עשרים שנה בביתך עבדתיך* – *During the other 20 years (לי) FOR MYSELF (for my own benefit) IN THY HOUSE, I served thee 14 years — and 6 years &c.*

In Kennicott's view, Jacob's 20 years of labor in Genesis 31:41 were for his own benefit. Those 20 years in the MT and SP therefore stand apart from the 20 years in 31:38.

As noted above, many Bible translations assume the 20-year view. The Septuagint, which is the Greek translation of the Hebrew Old Testament, undoubtedly played a part in this.

The Septuagint

While the MT and SP have “to me” only in Genesis 31:41, the Septuagint (LXX) includes it in both verses, as follows:

Gen 31:38 LXX

ταῦτά μοι εἴκοσι ἔτη
these to me twenty years

Gen 31:41 LXX

ταῦτά μοι εἴκοσι ἔτη
these to me twenty years

The two long-standing English translations of the Septuagint are by Charles Thomson (first published in 1808) and Lancelot Charles Lee Brenton (first published in 1844). Both translate the opening words of the two verses without considering “to me” (μοι):

LXX: THOMSON

38. *These twenty years that I have been with thee*
41. *I have been in thy family these twenty years*

LXX: BRENTON

38. *These twenty years have I been with thee*
41. *These twenty years have I been in thy house*

Of the two translations, Brenton’s was more influential, and it is only in this century that another translation has become available. It is the [*New English Translation of the Septuagint*](#) (NETS), first published in 2007. This translation does consider “to me” (μοι). However, as in the original Greek, it appears in both verses:

LXX: NETS

38. *These twenty years **of mine** I was with you*
41. *These twenty years **of mine** I was in your household*

In all three LXX translations above, the only real difference between the opening statements in v. 38 and v. 41 is “with you” and “in your household (or house or family).” Because these are commonly viewed as equivalent phrases, the LXX supports the 20-year view. By contrast, the MT and SP have *lî* (“for me”) in v. 41 but not in v. 38. This difference supports two distinct periods of 20 years.

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