

RAMBAM: A MAN OF LETTERS

אגרת תימן
(LETTER TO THE
YEMENITES) II



MILLENARIANISM AND MESSIANIC CALCULATIONS

תיפח עצמן של מחשבי קיצין

Blasted be the bones of those who calculate the end

תלמוד בבלי מסכת סנהדרין דף צז עמוד ב

תלמוד בבלי מסכת סנהדרין דף צז עמוד א

תנא דבי אליהו: ששת אלפים שנה הוי עלמא.
שני אלפים תוהו, שני אלפים תורה,
שני אלפים ימות המשיח.

The Tanna d'bei Eliyyahu teaches:

The world is to will exist six thousand years.

[The first] two thousand was desolate;

two thousand years the Torah [flourished];

and two thousand years is the Messianic era.



ספריה למתלמדים

ספר 1

אגרת תימן

מאת

רבינו משה בן מימון

ערוך על ידי

שלמה גולדמן

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הוצאת הסתדרות עברית באמריקה

ניו יורק, תש"י

In your letter you have adverted to the computations of the date of the Redemption and **R. Saadia's** opinion on the subject. First of all, it devolves upon you to know that no human being will ever be able to determine it precisely as Daniel has already intimated, "For the words are shut up and sealed." ([Daniel 12:9](#)). Indeed, many hypotheses were advanced by scholars, who fancied that they have discovered the date, as was anticipated in Scripture, "Many will run to and fro, and opinions shall be increased." ([Daniel 12:9](#)). That is, there shall be numerous views concerning it. Furthermore, we have a Divine communication through the medium of the prophets that many persons will calculate the time of the advent of the Messiah but will fail to ascertain its true date. We are cautioned against giving way to doubt and distrust because of these miscalculations. The longer the delay, the more fervently shall you hope, as it is written, "And it declareth of the end and doth not lie, though it tarry, wait for it, because it will surely come, it will not delay." ([Habakkuk 2:3](#)).



Remember that even the date of the termination of **the Egyptian Exile** was not precisely known and gave rise to differences of opinion, although its duration was fixed in Scripture, where we read, "and they shall serve them and afflict them **four hundred years**" ([Genesis 15:13](#)). Some reckoned the period of four hundred years from the time of Jacob's arrival in Egypt, others dated it from the beginning of Israel's bondage, which happened seventy years later, while still others computed it from the time of the Covenant of the Pieces when this matter was Divinely predicted to Abraham. At the expiration of four hundred years after this event, and thirty years before the appearance of Moses, a band of Israelites left Egypt because they believed that exile had ended for them. They were subdued and slain by the Egyptians. The lot of the Israelites who remained was consequently aggravated as we learn from our sages, the teachers of our national traditions. David already alluded to the vanquished Israelites who miscalculated the date of the redemption in the verse, "The children of **Ephraim** were as archers handling the bow that turned back in the day of battle" ([Psalms 78:9](#)).



In truth, the period of four hundred years commences with the birth of Isaac the seed of Abraham, par excellence, as may be gathered from the verse, "For in Isaac shall seed be called to thee" ([Genesis 21:12](#)), and the verse, "Thy seed shall be a stranger in a land that is not theirs, they shall serve them, and afflict them four hundred years" ([Genesis 15:13](#)). In exile, they would rule, enslave and maltreat them, this is the implication of this text. The four hundred years mentioned in this verse refer to the duration of the exile, and not [solely] to the Egyptian bondage. This fact was misunderstood until the great prophet (Moses) came, when it was realized that the four hundred years dates back precisely to the birth of Isaac.



“Know that your **descendants** will be strangers in a land not their own. They will enslave them and oppress them for **400 years.**” (15:)13

Isaac is **60** years old when Jacob is born

Jacob is **130** years old when he descends to Egypt

60+130=190 400-190=210

“Jacob saw that there was grain in Egypt, so he said to his sons why are you looking at each other? He said: I heard there is grain in Egypt; go down there (**רדו שמה**) and buy us some grain so we will live and not die.” (42:1-2)

רדו=210

“Now the time that the Children of Israel lived in Egypt was **430 years.**” (Exodus 12:40)

Abraham was **70** years old when he received the vision of the enslavement and oppression.

He was **100** when Isaac was born, which was **30** years later.

So, if we start counting at the ostensible time of the vision, rather than from Isaac’s birth, we reach the 400 mark 30 years earlier.

According to a Talmudic-Midrashic tradition, the **Ephraimites** mistakenly thought that the earlier mark signaled the redemption, whereupon they left Egypt to return to the Land of Canaan, only to be slain on their way by the Philistines.

"And Zabad his son, and Shuthelah his son — and Ezer, and Elead, whom the men of Gath that were born in the land slew (והרגום אנשי גת), because they came down to take away their cattle. And **Ephraim** their father mourned many days, and his brethren came to comfort him." (1 Chr. 7:21)



תלמוד בבלי מסכת סנהדרין דף צב עמוד ב

R. Eliezer the son of R. Jose the Galilean said: The dead whom Ezekiel revived went up to Palestine, married wives and begat sons and daughters. R. Judah b. Bathyra rose up and said: I am one of their descendants, and these are the tefillin which my grandfather left me [as an heirloom] from them. Now, who were they whom Ezekiel revived? — Rab said: They were the Ephraimites, who counted [the years] to the end [of the Egyptian bondage], but erred therein, as it is written, And the sons of Ephraim; Shuthelah, and Bared his son, and Tahath his son, and Eladah his son, and Tahath his son. And Zabad his son, and Shuthelah his son, and Ezzer, and Elead, whom the men of Gath that were born in that land slew. And it is written, And Ephraim their father mourned many days, and his brethren came to comfort him.

רבי אליעזר בנו של רבי יוסי הגלילי
אומר: מתים שהחיה יחזקאל עלו לארץ
ישראל, ונשאו נשים והולידו בנים
ובנות. עמד רבי יהודה בן בתירא על
רגליו ואמר: אני מבני בניהם, והללו
תפילין שהניח לי אבי אבא מהם. ומאן
נינהו מתים שהחיה יחזקאל? אמר רב:
אלו בני אפרים שמנו לקץ וטעו, שנאמר
הובני אפרים שותלח וברד בנו ותחת
בנו ואלעדה בנו ותחת בנו וזבד בנו
ושותלח בנו ועזר (ואלעזר) [ואלעד]
והרגום אנשי גת הנולדים בארץ וגו'
וכתיב וויתאבל אפרים אביהם ימים
רבים ויבאו אחיו לנחמו.

תלמוד בבלי מסכת סוכה דף נב עמוד א

What is the cause of the mourning [mentioned in the last cited verse]? — R. Dosa and the Rabbis differ on the point. One explained, The cause is the slaying of **Messiah the son of Joseph**, and the other explained, The cause is the slaying of the Evil Inclination.

הא הספידא מאי עבידתיה? פליגי בה רבי דוסא ורבנן. חד אמר: על משיח בן יוסף שנהרג, וחד אמר: על יצר הרע שנהרג.

בראשית רבתי פרשת ויחי

Moses said: [Let these blessings] “Come to the head of Joseph.” He was at the head [the first] to arrive in Egypt, and he will be at the head in the future. This refers to the **Messiah Son of Joseph**, who will precede Messiah the Son of David.

וכן משה אמר “תבאתה לראש יוסף” (דברים ל”ג ט”ז) הוא בא הראש למצרים והוא יבא בראש לעתיד לבא, זה משיח בן יוסף [שיבא] תחלה למשיח בן דוד.

Now, if so much uncertainty prevailed in regard to the date of the emancipation from Egyptian bondage, the term of which was fixed, how much more would it be the case in respect to the date of **the final redemption**, the prolonged and protracted duration of which appalled and dismayed our inspired seers, so that one of them was moved to exclaim, "Wilt Thou be angry with us forever? Wilt Thou draw out Thine anger to all generations?" ([Psalms 85:6](#)). **Isaiah**, too, alluding to the long drawn out exile, declared: "And they shall be gathered together as prisoners are gathered in the dungeon, and shall be shut up in prison, and after many days shall they be released" (24:22). Inasmuch as **Daniel** has proclaimed the matter a deep secret, **our sages** have interdicted the calculation of the time of the future redemption, or the reckoning of the period of the advent of the Messiah, because the masses might be mystified and bewildered should the Messiah fail to appear as forecast. **The rabbis** invoked God to frustrate and destroy those who seek to determine precisely the advent of the Messiah, because the masses might be mystified and bewildered should the Messiah fail to appear as forecast. **The rabbis** invoked God to frustrate and destroy those who seek to determine precisely the advent of the Messianic era, because they are a stumbling block to the people, and that is why they uttered the imprecation "May the calculators of the final redemption come to grief" ([Sanhedrin 97b](#)).



As for R. Saadia's Messianic calculations, there are extenuating circumstances for them though he knew they were disallowed. For the Jews of his time were perplexed and misguided. The Divine religion might well nigh have disappeared had he not encouraged the pusillanimous, and diffused, disseminated and propagated by word of mouth and pen a knowledge of its underlying principles.

He believed, in all earnestness, that by means of the Messianic calculations, he would inspire the masses with hope for the truth. Verily all his deeds were for the sake of heaven. Consequently, in view of the probity of his motives, which we have disclosed, one must not decry him for his Messianic computations.



(11) And from the time that the continual burnt-offering shall be taken away, and the detestable thing that causes appalment set up, there shall be a thousand two hundred and ninety days. (12) Happy is he that waiteth, and cometh to the thousand three hundred and five and thirty days. (13) But go thou thy way till the end be; and thou shalt rest, and shalt stand up to thy lot, at the end of the days.'

דניאל י"ב
(יא) וּמַעַת הוֹסֵר הַתְּמִיד וְלָתֵת
שְׂקוּץ שָׁמַם יָמִים אֶלֶף מָאתַיִם
וְתִשְׁעִים. (יב) אֲשֶׁר־י הַמַּחֲכָה וַיִּגִּיעַ
לְיָמִים אֶלֶף שָׁלֹשׁ מֵאוֹת שְׁלֹשִׁים
וְחַמְשָׁה. (יג) וְאַתָּה לֵךְ לְקֶץ וְתִנּוּחַ
וְתַעֲמַד לְגִרְלֶךָ לְקֶץ הַיָּמִין.

Saadia entitled his commentary to the Book of Daniel: "The Book of Kingdoms and Visions [concerning] what will Come to Pass after 1386 Years."

- It now devolves upon us to endeavor to find out by which interpretation the words in question will mean **1335 years**. I have therefore investigated the matter and found that if we take the word "times" (**זמנים**) to mean the periods of Israel's independence it will fitly result that the time which is to pass before our final redemption will equal one and a half the amount of these periods. For we know that Israel's independence lasted altogether 890 years, 480 of which elapsed prior to the erection of the (first) Temple and 410 during its existence after the erection. Half of this total is 445 and added to the whole will give exactly 1335!

The precise date of the messianic advent cannot be known. But I am in possession of **an extraordinary tradition** which I received from my father, who in turn received it from his father, going back to our early ancestors who were exiled from Jerusalem, and who were mentioned by the prophet in the verse, "And the exiles of Jerusalem that are in Spain" (Obadiah 20). According to this tradition there is a covert indication in the prediction of Balaam to the future restoration of prophecy in Israel. Incidentally it may be stated that there are other verses in the Torah which contain cryptic allusions in addition to their simple meaning. For example, the word "**r'du**" in the remark of Jacob to his sons, "r'du Shamah," "Get you down thither" ([Genesis 42:2](#)), has the numerical value of **210**, and contains a hint to the length of Israel's stay in Egypt. Likewise, the statement of Moses our Teacher, "When thou shalt beget children, and children's children and ye shall have been long in the land," ([Deuteronomy 4:25](#)), embodies a reference to the duration of Israel's stay in Palestine, from the date of their arrival to the exile in the time of Jehoiakim, which was eight hundred and forty years, corresponding to the numerical value of the word NoSHaNTeM (**ונושנתם**). Similarly, many other verses could be cited.



To come back to Balaam's prophecy, the verse "After the lapse of time, one will tell Jacob and Israel what God hath wrought," ([Numbers 23:23](#)), contains a veiled allusion to the date of the restoration of prophecy to Israel. The statement means that after the lapse of an interval equal to the time that passed from the Six Days of Creation to Balaam's day, seers will again tell Israel what God hath wrought. Now Balaam uttered his prediction in the thirty-eighth year after the Exodus which corresponds to the year **2485** after the Creation of the World, for the Exodus took place in the beginning of the year 2448. According to the interpretation of this chronology, prophecy would be restored to Israel in the year **4976** after the creation of the world. It is doubtless true that the reappearance of prophecy in Israel is one of the signs betokening the approach of the Messianic era as is intimated in Scripture "And your sons and your daughters shall prophecy ... And I will show wonders in the heavens and in the earth ... Before the great and terrible day of the Lord come" ([Joel 3:1](#), 3, 4).



במדבר כ"ג

(כג) כִּי לֹא־נִחַשׁ בְּיַעֲקֹב וְלֹא־קָסַם בְּיִשְׂרָאֵל כְּעֵת יֵאמַר לְיַעֲקֹב וְלְיִשְׂרָאֵל מִה־פָּעַל אֱלֹהִים:

Surely there is no enchantment with Jacob; there is no divination with Israel. At that time it shall be said of Jacob and of Israel, what has God done!

Abraham was born in 1948 AM

Isaac was born in 2048 AM

The exodus occurred in 2448 AM

Balaam's prophecy was uttered in 2486 AM

"At that time" would be 4976 AM

$(4)976+240= (1)216$ CE

Maimonides died in 1204



This is the most genuine tradition concerning the Messianic advent. We were admonished against, and strictly prohibited from blazening it abroad, lest some folk deem it unduly postponed. We have already apprised you concerning it, but God knows best what is true.

Your statement that Jeremiah alludes to the advent of the Messiah in the verse "It is a time of trouble unto Jacob" (30:7) is incorrect, for it needs must refer to the war of Gog and Magog which will take place some time after the arrival of the Messiah. Neither the fall of Giron Gate nor similar omens portend the oncoming of the Messiah. Some of the supposed prophetic signs are mistakenly ascribed to the sages, while others owe their origin to figures of speech and enigmatic sayings of the rabbis, which should not be taken literally.





5. Rembrandt, Statue of Nebuchadnezzar, 1655. Etching,