RECEPTION HISTORY OF BEREISHIT 15:13-14 FROM CLASSICAL MEPHORSIM: AVRAHAM’S NEVUAH: “FOR YOUR DESCENDANTS WILL BE STRANGERS IN A LAND WHICH IS NOT THEIRS, AND DURING THAT PERIOD THEY (THE OWNERS) WILL ENSLAVE THEM AND OPPRESS THEM FOR 400 YEARS: THE SIGNIFICANCE OF 400 AND THE SECRETS OF DIVINE PROVIDENCE”

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Nachmanides explains our verse as being truncated, the meaning being that while the offspring of Avraham would be strangers in a foreign land for 400 years, the nature and duration of their enslavement and oppression not having been defined.

Ibn Ezra understands our verse as a prophecy describing the length of the enslavement but not the length of the status as exiles.
That…. Aliens (ki…. Ger) The final letters of these two words, resh and yod come to a total of 210, the same as the gematria of “radu” go down! (42:2) below [which alludes to the actual number of years of the Egyptian exile [Bereishis Rabbah 91:2 speaks also of the radu as an allusion to the 210 years see Rashi ad. Loc.]

VeDor… and the generation. The Masoretic note bi means that this word appears twice in the Tanach: (1) here And the 4rth generation shall return here; and “a generation goes, and a generation comes (Eccl. 1:4) . This can be explained as follows: a generation goes, i.e. your descendants will yet leave this land, and a different generation will come to inherit the land [N.B. later commentators like Rabbi Chaim Vital in Safed interprets Eccel. Dor holekh ve dor ba to refer to gilgulim.]
Which will never be theirs i.e. land of Egypt. G-d describes the lands in which the Israelites will be exiled as countries which were not included among those of which G-d had said that Avram’s descendants would inherit them. They would remain strangers in a country or countries not theirs until the conclusion of the period of 400 years of which G-d speaks here. God speaks of 400 years and additional 30 years commencing now that G-d revealed this to him. [his descendants could not begin to be exiles until Yitzchok was born 30 years after the date of this vision. This prophecy was fulfilled, the Jewish people leaving Egypt at the conclusion of 400 years after the birth of Yitzchok of 430 years from the date of these revelations.

On the ace of it in light of Avram having been 75 years old when he migrated from Charan we can only account for 425 years from that time until the redemption of the Israelites from Egypt. We need to assume therefore that the vision involving 400 years was experienced by Avram while in Charan, five years before he moved to Canaan.

At any rate, G-d did not elaborate how many of these 400 years would be spent in Egypt, or even if any would be spent in Egypt. Our sages however (seder Olam ch.3) have said that 210 years of the 400 are accounted for by the stay in Egypt, basing themselves on an allusion contained in the numerical value of the word radu being 210 (Compare Gen. 42.2) The details of the 400 years are as follows: we start with Yitzchok’s birth. He was 60 years at the time of Yakov being born, and Yaakov by his own account was 130 years old when he answered Pharaoh’s question as to his age. We therefore have the first 190 years accounted for as predating the descent of the family to Egypt.
It is totally impossible to believe that the 400 years referred to by G-d’s announcement to Avram were all spent in Egypt, seeing that Kehot a grandson of Yaakov was among those who moved to Egypt with his family, and his age at death is given by the Torah as 133 years. We know that Moses was 80 years at the time when he made his first appearance before Pharaoh, about a year before the Exodus. If the Israelites had stayed in Egypt for 400 years, then Amram, Moses’ father, even if he had been born during the last year of the life of Kehat would have lived for 187 years assuming that Moses was born during the last year of Amram’s life. Both of these assumptions are highly unlikely, as is the likelihood of Amram living more than 187 years without the Torah mentioning any of this. In fact the Torah specifically states that Amram lived to the age of 137 (Ex. 6:20). It is most likely therefore, that the count of 400 years does indeed begin with the birth of Yitchok. As long as Avram’s descendants were so few in number, they most certainly deserved to be described as “strangers” even in the land of Canaan, seeing they did not own even a small part of it. If you add the fact that Yitzchok spent many years in the land of the Philistines and Yaakov spent 20 years with Lavan in Aram, a land which would never be part of the Eretz Yisrael, neither of them could truly be perceived as a resident of the land of Canaan.

Vavdoom…. The Egyptians will enslave them and will oppress them. It is not unusual to apply the prefix beth to people who have been enslaved, as we find a similar construction in Lev. 25:39 “do not make him perform the menial duties performed by a slave”. Or Jer. 34:10 “not to keep them enslaved”. The word avdam i.e. avodah is used to describe the status of the person described, whereas the word vanunu (oppress) refers to the manner in which such slaves would be treated.
That thy seed shall be a stranger. This is a verse that is to be transposed its purport being that they seed shall be a stranger for four hundred years in a land that is not theirs, and they shall enslave them, and they shall afflict them. HE has thus not specified the length of the period of servitude and affliction.

There are many cases in scripture where verses must be transposed if they are to be interpreted properly. Thus There came unto me the Hebrew servant who though has brought unto us, to mock me; and all countries came into Egypt to buy corn to Joseph. For whosoever eateth leavened bread that should shall be cut off from Israel from the first day until the seventh day; In that day a man shall cast away his idols of silver and his idols of gold which they made for themselves to worship to the moles and to the bats. Come and hearken and I will declare all ye that fear G-d what he hath done for my soul; They cry unto me, my god we Israel know thee; And they shall be Mine, sayeth the Eternal of hosts, in the day that I do make even Mine own treasure and I will spare them. There are many other such verses.

The sense of the verse is “even though I tell you that I have given this land to your children, you shall surely know that before I give it to them they shall be strangers for four hundred years in a land not belonging to them, and they shall also enslave them and afflict them.

Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra said that the verse should be interpreted as follows: You shall surely know that your children shall be strangers in servitude and affliction until the end of the 400 years period commencing from this day of the covenant. If so, G-d informed Abraham of the time of the redemption, but he did not inform him of the exact length of the exile. This too is correct.
According to the plain meaning of the text the verse means that Avram’s offspring would spend 400 years in a land which would not be theirs, that they would be enslaved and oppressed by the owners of that land. G-d deliberately refrained from telling Avram how many of these years would be spent in relative freedom and how many in oppressive slavery.

Rabbi Abraham ibn Ezra wrote that the four hundred years would commence on the day G-d spoke to him. If so, G-d would have predicted to the day when the Exodus would take place.

Four hundred years…. The reason for this number in connection with the exile in Egypt is complex. Not a single one of the commentators gives us any insight into this number. You will find that the number 400 is prominent in matters concerning the evil eye. The numerical value of the words ayin ha-rah is 400. That last letter of the Hebrew alphabet the letter tav is equal to 400. As such it embodies all the letters in the alphabet. Similarly the ayin ha-rah is an all inclusive destructive concept. Seeing that the letter hey was added to Abraham’s name a letter which represents the attribute of Justice, the evil eye gained power over him, and the attribute of Justice decreed exile on his descendants for 400 years, corresponding to the ayin ha-rah which is the eye of satan or those who are jealous of any particular Jew. We may now understand that the words “You must surely know that your descendants will be strangers (they will be subject to a hitherto unknown attribute of G-d in their Lives) i.e. the ones who will be born as the result of the two letters hey which will be added to both your and Sarai’s name respectively and which represent the attribute of Justice., will be subject to the evil eye. As a result of such a development they will be enslaved and oppressed for 400 years. The evil eye is responsible for all evil in the world (Baba Batra) You will encounter this number again in connection with Efron whose name equals 400 and who demanded 400 shekel from Abraham before he was allowed to bury Sarah in the cave of Machpelah. What we learn from this in connection with Esau, who based his success in life on that of his father Yitzchak who represented the attribute of Justice. He too possessed ayin ha-rah. Bereshit Rabbah 76:8 claims that the reason Yakov (Gen. 32:15) instructed the attendants of the herds and flocks he sent to his brother Esau as gifts to place a substantial distance between one flock and another was to satisfy Esau’s ayin ha-rah which could never get enough of anything corporeal . This may be the reason that Esau had taken precisely 400 men with him when he set out to meet and may be to kill Yaakov. According to Baba Batra all the deaths in the world come about because of the ayin ha-rah.
For your offspring shall be aliens in a land not their own.... Until the time that the iniquity of the Emorite will be full. (Abram) is being told the future events of servitude and affliction which will befall some of his offspring in their burdensome state. This will however not occur during the generation of the righteous for as long as one of the tribes (Jacob’s sons) was alive the servitude did not begin, until they (the Israelites) corrupted their ways, as the prophet testifies “But they rebelled against Me, and would not hearken to Me, they did not every man cast away the detestable things of their eyes, neither did they forsake the idols of Egypt, then I said I would pour out my fury upon them in the midst of the land of Egypt (Ezek. 20:8-9). All this He revealed to Abram so that the last generation should know through tradition that this is because of G-d’s word, and not attribute it to other causes as the prophet says, “I have already from the beginning told it to you, announced things to you before they happened; lest you say, “My idol has caused them (Isaiah 48.5).

Both Onkelos and Targum Yonatan translate the words “your sons will be sojourners” as i.e. live as temporary residents a foreshadowing of getting out of Egypt.
The formulation of “you shall surely know” is in order to tell Abraham that the dark future of oppression in Egypt he envisions need not necessarily occur, seeing that possibly on being strangers in a land not their own but under tolerable conditions, may suffice. Just as Yaakov himself was a stranger for a considerable part of his life in a country not his own without suffering physical oppression or torture, so his descendants might only have to be strangers. It would all be up to them, depending on their conduct at the time in question.

God’s in His predictions must present the FUTURE as open ended otherwise HE would encroach upon FREEDOM OF CHOICE of those who read the Torah.

The use of the singular “your seed will be a stranger” refers to the period when there would be only a Yitzchok and a Yaakov not a multitude.

Even sojourn in the land of Israel will be considered a state of being an alien, seeing the land had not yet been conquered by the Jews.

Once the Jews would multiply and succeed economically such status as aliens would become reinforced by oppression and torture. This is why the Torah says, “they will serve them and oppress them.” The 400 years mentioned by the Torah comprise a combination of being aliens and being slaves.
He said to Abram, etc. Why did G-d say yadah taidah? Instead of simply taidah?, know! Why did the Torah stress the word ger in strangers you will be your seed instead of the more customary zerekkah yiyeh ger? The Torah does usually mention what happens before having stated to whom it is going to happen! Why does the Torah not make it clear when and to whom the various stages of being a stranger, being enslaved, and being afflicted apply? Will Abraham’s descendants experience all these stages of unpleasantness for the whole of the 400 years, or will some experience some of the afflictions and others only being strangers such as history has taught us?

I believe the Torah repeated the words yadah taidah for three separate reasons (1) Our sages said: “Our forefathers descended to Egypt on account of a relatively minor sin i.e. Abraham having asked “How will I know that I will inherit” (Gen. 15:8)? God answered him yadah, know! That because you asked taidah you should be aware that your descendants will first be strangers etc. (2) Seeing that G-d’s response to Abraham’s question contained both a pleasant and unpleasant message i.e. enslavement and subsequent redemption God told Abraham that just as surely as there would first be enslavement this would be followed by redemption. (3) our sages Berachot 18) commented on Deut. 34:4 that gold told Moses Lamor to tell the Avot that He had fulfilled the oath Head had sworn to all of them regarding the land of Israel. In view of this the repeated use o the expression yadah taidah refers to both the present and eventual status of the land.
The reason for the word ger is stressed by being placed ahead of what is going to happen, is to inform us that the status of being an alien commenced already at this time. Abraham’s life from here on in was part of the decree. Abraham should not think that his descendant’s history would parallel his own experience to the extent that they would be aliens only part of these 400 years. Abraham was not to misunderstand the meaning of the words ki ger yiyeh zerekhah as applying only at some time in the future. That period would commence the day he would have descendants i.e. with the birth of Isaac. This was also a pleasant aspect of the decree that all the years of Isaac and Jacob lived either in the land of Canaan or at Laban’s were counted as part of the 400 years.

Should you argue that this could have been expressed equally well by use of the normal syntax ki zerkah ger yiyeh know that God wisely phrased it differently in order to reveal that He had not decreed slavery and oppression for all of Abraham’s descendants. God wanted that Abraham should have the satisfaction of knowing that some of his descendants would only have to suffer being aliens, nothing worse. It is as if God had said to Abraham, “you will have a share in your descendants” i.e. they will only suffering being strangers without suffering anything worse. Had God used the world zerekhah first, this would have created the wrong impression. By inserting the word yiyeh between the words ger and zerekhah the Torah makes clear that some of Abraham’s descendants would experience only gerut. The descendants referred to were Isaac, Yakov, and all of Jacob’s sons. As a result what sounded like 400 years of enslavement and oppression actually was reduced to 210 years, the years remaining before the Exodus after the last of Joseph’s brothers had died. Even the tribe of Levy who according to our sages never performed slave labor, did not completely escape the aspects of enslavement and oppression seeing that its babies too were subject to drowning. Moses’ own experience when his basket stood in the bulrushes at the banks of the Nile is the best proof for the anxieties suffered by even the most prominent, elevated, pure, and noble families of the Levites.
We deal here with allusions to future exiles of people not yet in existence i.e. Israel the vulture swooping down on the carcasses of the slaughtered animals represent the nations trying to devour the Jewish nation. In contrast, Abraham tried to chase them away using his own merits as a defensive shield. Abraham understandably was greatly shaken by these future prospects, i.e. that his descendants would have to endure not only the exile of Egypt but several additional ones, and it is not surprising that he felt as if the sun had set in midday. He was overcome by a sense of dread symbolized by the words: to fell upon him, nation, to forget, “great” each represent one of the four exiles after that in Egypt.

In view of the fact that whatever had been revealed to Abraham at this stage had been hinted at rather than spelled out, and considering that in the Torah, in the dream of the chief butler when the word cup of Pharaoh is mentioned four times (Gen. 40:5) these 4 exiles are alluded to once more (verses 11-13) we should not be surprised that they are also alluded to in psalms 107, 4-27 the hymn know as the “hymn about Passover”. The author proceeds with an exegesis of that psalm.
Your descendants will be a stranger.” The decrees described a period totaling 400 years. During the course of these 400 years Avram’s descendants would be either (1) aliens within the land of Canaan, (2) aliens in some other country, (3) slave in bondage, (4) slaves subject to cruel suppression. If that were not the true meaning of the prophecy all the Torah had to write was that during the period of these 400 years Avram’s descendant’s would be in a land which was not theirs and that they would be enslaved. This would have told us that they would be strangers. Clearly the additional information “they will be strangers” indicates something additional i.e. that also Yitzchok’s entire lifetime would be considered part of these 400 years. Concerning Yaakov and his sons, however our verse says “in a land which is not theirs” as Yaakov’s sons were born outside the land of Canaan (Rosh). Our verse then makes plain that the period of enslavement of Avram’s descendants would not commence until some considerable time in the future. Indeed we find that as long as either the patriarchs or their children had been alive the Israelites were not subject to the harsher part of this decree i.e. to bondage and maltreatment. Seeing that both the patriarchs and their sons were righteous people we find that enslavement was the direct result of Yaakov’s descendants becoming disloyal to the spiritual heritage of their ancestors. This is confirmed by the prophet Yehezkel 20:8 where we are told ““they rebelled against Me and did not want to listen to Me. No man! The idols of their eyes they did not cast out and the idols of Egypt they did not forsake. And I intended to pour my fury upon them, to spend My anger on them, in the midst of the land of Egypt. But I acted for the sake of My NAME, etc. G-d told Avram of what would happen in advance so that subsequent generation would be aware that their fate had been decreed by G-d and that they should not attribute their troubles to extraneous forces. We find a parallel to this in Isa. 48:5 “Therefore I told you long beforehand announced things to you before they happened, so that you might not say “my idol caused them, my carved and molten imaged ordained them”. 
“and they will work as slaves for these nations.” We must not translate this word as the nations will enslave them. If the meaning had been that the nations will enslave the Israelites the Torah should have written “the actions will enslave them and oppress them.”

“for 400 years….” Actually the period of the gerot being temporary residents that Avram’s descendants endured amounted to 430 years as we know from the Torah’s own testimony in Ex. 12:40 “and the period during which the children of Israel dwelled in Egypt was 430 years.” Nachmanides has written a great deal about that verse in parashat BO explaining what accounts for the additional thirty years. As far as I am concerned there was no need at all for such a lengthy commentary as the plain text (peshat) provides us with the answer to the problem.
Rabbi Shimshon Raphael Hirsch (1808-1888)

I will judge the nation that oppresses you.... I will judge it now. The nation that I have appointed for a refining glowing furnace a melting pot for your descendants receives herewith the declaration of the fat that will overtake it when its mission to oppress you is over. It (Egypt) will receive the punishment it so richly deserves.