

THE MYSTERIOUS NUMBERS OF THE BOOK OF JUDGES

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The chronology of the book of Judges has always presented a challenge. Many have noted that simply adding up the various years of the judges and foreign oppressions as listed in the book yields 410 years, and this does not include the time for the deaths of Joshua and the elders who served with him (Judg 2:7-8).¹ Even if one assumes that the early date for the Exodus is correct (1446 BC, 479 years before Solomon began to build the Temple in the fourth year of his reign [967 BC]; 1 Kgs 6:1),² this would mean that between the end of Joshua's conquest (1400 BC; Josh 14:10) and the beginning of David's reign (1009 BC) there is only 389 years. This is not adequate time for the events in Judges to have taken place, much less to account for the deaths of Joshua and the elders, the judgeships of Eli and Samuel, and the reign of Saul.

For this reason some have posited that the judges may have simply been local authorities and their reigns may have overlapped, while others simply discount the narratives in Judges as not historically accurate.³ While some offer timelines or chronologies of the judges as rough guides,⁴ the opinion

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¹ Raymond B. Dillard and Tremper Longman, III, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1955) 123; Frank Ely Gaebelein, J. D. Douglas, and Dick Polcyn, *Expositor's Bible Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992) 3.376; Andrew E. Hill and John H. Walton, *A Survey of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1991); William Sanford LaSor, David Allen Hubbard, and Frederica William Bush, *Old Testament Survey: The Message, Form, and Background of the Old Testament* (2d ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996) 160; *The New Interpreter's Bible* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1998) 2.724.

² This date can be independently confirmed from information in the Talmud concerning two of the Jubilee years, both of which can be used to calculate the year Israel entered Canaan and, both of which yield 1446 BC as the year (*b. Meg.* 14b and *b. Arak.* 12 a). Roger C. Young, "When Did Solomon Die?" *JETS* 46 (2003) 600-603.

³ Dillard and Longman, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* 123; Gaebelein, Douglas, and Polcyn, *Expositor's Bible Commentary* 3.376; R. K. Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969) 330; Hill and Walton, *A Survey of the Old Testament*; LaSor, Hubbard, and Bush, *Old Testament Survey* 160; James D. Martin, *The Book of Judges* (Cambridge Bible Commentary; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975) 3; *The New Interpreter's Bible* 2.724. A common observation is that the periods of rest for the land are in multiples of forty. From this observation it is often argued that these are round numbers or inaccurate calculations based on the assumption that one generation equals about forty years. For example, see Daniel I. Block, *Judges, Ruth* (NAC 6; Nashville: Broadman and Holman, 1999) 63.

⁴ Dillard and Longman, *An Introduction to the Old Testament*; John H. Walton, *Chronological Charts of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1978) 48.

expressed by Harrison over thirty years ago still represents the consensus of scholars who do not discount the historicity of the judges altogether.⁵

. . . it is obvious that the historical period in question presents difficulties both of chronology and of historical detail, and these cannot be resolved completely without fuller information.

For those who believe that the book of Judges does present accurate historical information, the chronological quagmire is compounded by the book itself, which seems to treat many of the judges' reigns as consecutive rather than overlapping, as when it is said that one judge died and another arose "after him" (e.g. Tola and Jair, Judg 10:2-3 or Jephthah and Ibzan, Judg 12:7-8).

Can simply following the information in the book itself unravel the chronology of the book of Judges? I believe that it can and that one can establish a relative chronology of the judges. Furthermore, with the help of information from the books of Kings and Samuel as well as Josephus's *Antiquities*, one can establish an absolute chronology.

I. SIX CYCLES OF JUDGES

The book of Judges contains a prologue that sets the stage for the judges (Judg 1:1-3:6) and an epilogue that contains additional accounts of Israel's apostasy without any useful chronological notices (Judg 17:1-20:48). Between these are six cycles of judges. These cycles are in two groups of three cycles (1-3 and 4-6). At the end of the first three cycles we are told that the land had rest (שָׁקט; Judg 3:11, 30; 5:31), whereas no such notice is given at the end of the second set of three cycles. This grouping of cycles is evident in the introduction to the first and fourth cycles:

וַיַּעַשׂ בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל אֶת־הָרָע בְּעֵינֵי יְהוָה

The sons of Israel did evil in the eyes of Yahweh (Judg 2:11; 6:1).

The second, third, fifth, and sixth cycles are introduced by the clause:

וַיַּסְפּוּ בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל לַעֲשׂוֹת אֶת־הָרָע בְּעֵינֵי יְהוָה

The sons of Israel *continued* to do evil in the eyes of Yahweh (Judg 3:12; 4:1; 10:6; 13:1).⁶

Each of these cycles recounts the exploits of one major judge who may be followed by one or more minor judges, whose acts are only briefly summarized. The cycles are:

⁵ Harrison, *Introduction to the Old Testament* 331.

⁶ "Continued" for וַיַּסְפּוּ is better than the English versions "again" (see the entries in BDB and HALOT for the Hiphil use of יָסַף followed by an infinitive).

Table 1

<i>Cycle</i>	<i>Oppressor</i>	<i>Judges</i>
1. 3:7-11	Cushan-Rishathaim	Othniel
2. 3:12-31	Eglon	Ehud Shamgar
3. 4:1-5:31	Jabin	Deborah
4. 6:1-10:6	Midianites	Gideon Tola Jair
5. 10:7-12:15	Ammonites and Philistines	Jephthah Ibzan Elon Abdon
6. 13:1-16:31	Philistines	Samson

This raises the possibility that two types of chronological overlap may be present in Judges. There may be overlap among judges, especially within a cycle. Alternatively, two or more cycles may overlap.

Before we begin to construct a chronology, we should note the manner in which chronological data were recorded in ancient Judah.⁷ As is evident from the book of Kings, the partial years of a king's reign in Judah at the beginning or end of his reign were counted in the tally of total years.⁸ Thus two kings who reigned in succession and were said each to reign ten years

⁷ The earliest possible date for the composition of Judges is under David's reign. Not only do the several notices that in the days of the judges Israel had no king (Judg 18:1; 19:1; 25:21) point to a time after the establishment of the monarchy, but several other indications point to David's day as one possible date for the composition of the book. The Jebusites are said to "live in Jerusalem to this day" (Judg 1:21), indicating a time before David's conquest of the city. The continued presence of Canaanites in Gezer may indicate a time before the Egyptian Pharaoh captured it and gave it to Solomon as a dowry. However, even if the composition of Judges is much later (say, in the captivity with the final editing of Kings), the observations here about the recording of chronological data in ancient Judah are still valid.

⁸ Following Edwin R. Thiele, *The Mysterious Numbers of the Hebrew Kings* (3d ed.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1983), who notes that in Judah, the reigns of kings were recorded using the accession year method during most of its history (except from Jehoram through Joash). Israel used the accession year method except from Jeroboam through Jehoahaz. Similarly, concerning the years recorded for the judges who, unlike kings, were not publicly installed into office, it is unlikely that the non-accession year system would have been employed for recording the reigns of individual judges.

reigned a combined total of nineteen (not twenty) years on the throne, since the last year of the first king was the same as the first year of the second king. Since this appears to be the method consistently used in Judah, it is reasonable to assume that the time spans recorded in Judges are similar. Thus, if we are told that Judge A judged Israel ten years and Judge B seven years and then there was rest for twenty years, the total time is at most thirty-five years (10+6+19), not thirty-seven years (10+7+20).

II. CONSTRUCTING A RELATIVE CHRONOLOGY OF THE JUDGES

1. *Prologue: The Death of Joshua and the Elders.* Before the first cycle begins, the prologue indicates a period of time elapsed between the wars conducted by Joshua and the rise of the first judge, Othniel. We are told that the people served Yahweh during the lifetime of Joshua and the elders who outlived him and that Joshua died before Israel's apostasy and Othniel's reign as judge (Judg 2:7-8). Depending on the ages of the leaders relative to Joshua this period requires at least a decade or two.

2. *Cycle 1: Othniel.* The chronological information in the first cycle appears to allow no overlap of the reigns of judges or other time periods. We are simply told that Cushan-Rishathaim subjugated Israel for eight years and that Othniel judged and brought rest to the land for forty years before he died (Judg 3:8, 11).

3. *Cycle 2: Ehud and Shamgar.* Since the second cycle begins after the death of Othniel, and a new oppressor was stirred up by Yahweh, it appears that this cycle does not overlap with the previous one. Otherwise, the land did not have rest from oppressors. The chronological information given in this cycle is that Eglon oppressed Israel for eighteen years, and then Ehud established rest for the land for eighty years.

The first indication in Judges that one judge may have been active during the lifetime of another is found at 3:31. Here, after we are told that the land had eighty years' rest as a result of Ehud's activity, the author tells us about Shamgar's exploits. No chronological data is given to us concerning Shamgar. We are simply told that he slew 600 Philistines, who are *not* said to be oppressors that Yahweh had raised up.⁹ Only after Shamgar's judgeship is treated are we told that Ehud died. Thus, it is reasonable to assume that Shamgar was active during the eighty years of Ehud's peace.

4. *Cycle 3: Deborah.* The third cycle begins with a notice of Ehud's death, eliminating any possibility that the third cycle overlaps the second. In this

⁹ Note that we are not told that Yahweh gave Israel into the hand of the Philistines at this time (as we are later, Judg 10:7-8; 13:1).

cycle we are told that Jabin oppressed Israel for twenty years and that as a result of the work of Deborah and Barak the land had rest for forty years.

5. *Cycle 4: Gideon, Tola, and Jair.* Since the fourth cycle, like the second cycle, begins after a period of rest as Yahweh stirred up a new oppressor, it appears that this cycle does not overlap with the previous one. We are told that the Midianites oppressed Israel for seven years (Judg 6:1). Then Gideon brought peace for forty years before he died (Judg 8:23, 34). Abimelech's rule is said to have been three years after the death of his father. Then we are told that after Abimelech a new judge, Tola, reigned for twenty-three years (Judg 10:1–2). After Tola's death we are told that Jair arose to judge Israel for twenty-two years (Judg 10:3–5). There appears to be no overlap among these periods. While this cycle includes rest for the land during Gideon's lifetime, it does not end on a note of rest. This connects it to the next two cycles that also do not end with a notice of rest for the land.

6. *Cycles 5 and 6: Oppression by the Ammonites and Philistines.*

a. *Cycle 5: Jephthah, Ibzan, Elon, and Abdon.* After the usual notice of Israel's continued apostasy, the fifth cycle notes a new oppression by the Philistines and the Ammonites.

ויחראף יהוה בישראל וימכרם ביד־פלשתים וכיד בני עמון: וירעצו וירצצו
את־בני ישראל בשנה ההיא שמנה עשרה שנה את־כל־בני ישראל אשר בעבר
הידן בארץ האמרי אשר בגלעד: ויעברו בני־עמון את־הירדן להלחם
גם־ב־יהודה ובבנימין ובבית אפרים ותצר לישראל מאד:

And Yahweh became angry with Israel and sold them into the hand of the Philistines and into the hand of the sons of Ammon. They crushed and shattered the sons of Israel that year. (For eighteen years all the sons of Israel who were across the Jordan River in the land of the Amorites who were in Gilead [were crushed and shattered]).¹⁰ And the sons of Ammon crossed the Jordan River to attack even those in Judah and Benjamin and in the house of Ephraim. Israel was severely distressed (Judg 10:7–9).

Two important pieces of information are given to us here. First, the notice to a particular year is intriguing ("that year" [בשנה ההיא]). It could be a reference to the year that Yahweh sold Israel into the hands of the Philistines and Ammonites (Judg 10:7). However, this would be a rather strange notice. Since readers would have no special insight into God's deliberations, they would have no idea when that year was. More likely, it is a reference to the year of Jair's death (Judg 10:5).

¹⁰ The parenthetical nature of 10:8b is evident not only from its abruptness in this context, but also by its rather unusual construction that requires the reader to supply verbs to make it a complete thought. The resumption of the narrative relating to "that year" is signaled by the resumption of the *waw-consecutive* chain at the beginning of 10:9.

This would mean that the Philistine and Ammonite oppressions were simultaneous.¹¹ Moreover, starting in 10:8b this cycle is exclusively about the Ammonites. The Philistines are not mentioned again as oppressors until the sixth cycle. Thus, it appears that the fifth and sixth cycles overlap. The fifth cycle is mainly about affairs east of the Jordan River, whereas the sixth cycle is mainly about affairs west of the Jordan River. East of the Jordan River the oppression lasted eighteen years. West of the Jordan it lasted forty years (cf. 13:1).

Chronological data in the fifth cycle includes the time of the oppression by the Ammonites (eighteen years; Judg 10:8) and a report that, apparently in the first year (Judg 10:9), the Ammonites crossed the Jordan River to spread the oppression beyond the Israelites living in Gilead to those in Judah, Benjamin, and Ephraim. This led to the judgeship of Jephthah, which lasted six years until his death (Judg 12:7). Ibzan's reign as judge was seven years after Jephthah's death (Judg 12:8–10). Elon was judge for ten years after Ibzan's death (Judg 12:11–12). Finally, Abdon's reign lasted eight years after Elon's death (Judg 12:13–15). Although we are told that the Ammonite threat lasted eighteen years, nowhere in this cycle are we told that the land had rest. This is because the Ammonites remained a force to be reckoned with in the reigns of Saul (1 Sam 11:1–11) and David (2 Sam 10:1–12:31) despite Jephthah's victories.

b. *Cycle 6: Samson.* The last cycle opens with the notice that the Philistines oppressed Israel for forty years (Judg 13:1). Apparently the first eighteen of these years coincided with the Ammonite oppression.

The only other chronological information we are given is that Samson judged Israel for twenty years. This is stated twice (Judg 15:20; 16:31). The first notice is the most helpful, since there we are told that he judged Israel twenty years *during the days of the Philistines*. Thus, Samson's judgeship happened sometime during the forty years of the Philistine oppression. This means that his judgeship may have overlapped with any of the judges in the fifth cycle, but at the very least must have overlapped with the judgeships of Elon and Abdon, as we will see.

Like the previous cycle, this last cycle did not end with rest for the land. As the book of Samuel records, the Philistines continued to be a menace to Israel throughout the reign of Saul and into the reign of David.

7. *A relative chronology of the Judges.* Now that we have examined the chronological data from Judges and noted periods of overlap, a relative chronology can be constructed:

¹¹ Block also notes that this notice in Judges implies that the Ammonite and Philistine oppressions overlaps, but he dismisses its value for establishing an accurate chronology of the Judges. (He gives the reference as Judg 10:6, but presumably is referring to Judg 10:7.) Block, *Judges*, *Ruth* 35–36.

Table 2

	<i>Event</i>	<i>Duration</i>	<i>Total Years</i>
Cycle 1	Cushan-Rishathaim	8 years	8 years
	Othniel	40 years	47 years
Cycle 2	Eglon	18 years	64 years
	Ehud	80 years	143 years
	Shamgar		
Cycle 3	Jabin	20 years	162 years
	Deborah	40 years	201 years
Cycle 4	Midianites	7 years	207 years
	Gideon	40 years	246 years
	Abimelech	3 years	248 years
	Tola	23 years	270 years
	Jair	22 years	291 years
Cycles 5 & 6	Philistines	40 years	330 years

The chronology of Cycles 5 and 6 is as follows:

Table 3

Philistines 40 years	Ammonites 18 years	Jephthah 6 years	Samson 20 years
		Ibzan 7 years	
		Elon 10 years	
		Abdon 8 years	

Since the combined reign of the judgeships of Jephthah, Ibzan, and Elon lasted twenty-one years, Samson’s judgeship had to at least overlap the last year of Elon and the entire judgeship of Abdon if he was active during the last twenty years of the Philistine oppression. However, he could have begun his activity earlier and could have overlapped any three of the four judges in the fifth cycle.

The 330 years needed for the judges is more than adequate to accommodate the time between the biblically indicated date of the conquest (1406 BC; forty years after the Exodus) and the beginning of the reign of Solomon

(which has been firmly established as 970 BC).¹² This leaves 136 years to accommodate the conquest (seven years; Josh 14:10),¹³ the deaths of Joshua and the elders before the oppression of Chusan-Rishathaim, and the reigns of Saul and David after the “days of the Philistines.”

III. ESTABLISHING AN ABSOLUTE CHRONOLOGY

In order to establish an absolute chronology for the Judges, a starting point is needed to fix the date of one of the events. The most obvious are the beginning of the period of the Judges or the end. The beginning of Judges, however, cannot be established, since after the end of the conquest in 1400 BC there is an undefined time for the death of Joshua and the elders before the oppression by Cushan-Rishathaim.

If we determine the end of the “days of the Philistines” (i.e. the beginning of the reign of Saul), we could work backwards. It is relatively easy to determine the beginning of David’s reign, since we know the date of Solomon’s assuming the throne (970 BC) and are told that David reigned forty years, making the first year of his reign 1009 BC. However, we run into a difficulty in attempting to work backwards from David’s reign to the beginning of Saul’s reign. As is well known, the text of 1 Sam 13:1 which reports the length of Saul’s reign is defective:

בן־שנה שאול במלכו ושחי שנים מלך על־ישראל:

Saul was . . . years old when he began to reign. He reigned over Israel . . . and two years.

Fortunately, Josephus’s *Antiquities* helps us restore the text that is missing. Josephus reports:

ἔβασίλευσε δὲ Σαμουήλου ζῶντος ἔτη ὀκτὼ πρὸς τοῖς δέκα τελευτήσαντος δὲ δύο καὶ εἴκοσι καὶ Σαούλος μὲν οὕτω κατέστρεψε τὸν βίον.

Now Saul reigned eighteen years while Samuel was alive and twenty-two years [after Samuel’s] death. Then Saul took [his] life (*Ant.* 6.378).¹⁴

According to Josephus, the reign of Saul lasted forty years, a tally that is confirmed in Stephen’s speech in Acts (Acts 13:21). Thus, we can reasonably reconstruct 1 Sam 13:1b as:

He reigned over Israel *eighteen years while Samuel was alive and after his death twenty-two years.*

Since Saul died in 1009 BC, he began to reign in 1048 BC. This, in turn, allows us to establish an absolute chronology from the entrance of Israel into Canaan through the end of the “days of the Philistines.”

¹² Young, “When Did Solomon Die?” 601.

¹³ At Josh 14:7–10 Caleb states that he was forty years old when he was sent out from Kadesh as a spy. He was eighty-five when he spoke these words. Israel arrived at Kadesh in the spring of 1445 BC (Num 20:1). Therefore, Caleb was eighty-five years old in 1400 BC when Joshua’s conquest ended. (Thus, also, Caleb was born in 1485 BC.)

¹⁴ *Ant.* 6.294 confirms that Saul ruled during the last eighteen years of Samuel’s life.

Table 4

1406–1400 Joshua's conquest	
1399–1379 Period for the deaths of Joshua and the elders	
1378–1371 Oppression by Cushan-Rishathaim	
1371–1332 Othniel/Rest for the land	
1332–1315 Oppression by Eglon	
1315–1236 Ehud/Rest for the land/Shamgar	
1236–1217 Oppression by Jabin	
1217–1178 Deborah	
1178–1172 Oppression by the Midianites	
1172–1133 Gideon/Rest for the land	
1133–1131 Abimelech	
1131–1109 Tola	
1109–1088 Jair	
	1088–1083 Jephthah
1088–1071 Oppression by the Midianites	1083–1077 Ibzan
1088–1049 Oppression by the Philistines	1077–1068 Elon
1049–1030 Samson (?)	1068–1061 Abdon

It should be noted that the twenty-one year period for the death of Joshua and the elders is consistent with what one might expect. Moreover, it is well known that at Judg 11:26 Jephthah claims that Israel had occupied cities in the Trans-Jordan for 300 years. Since Jephthah was engaged in conversation and not writing a precise history, the 300 years may be a round number. But how close is it? We should keep in mind that the Trans-Jordan tribes were not allowed to occupy their land until after they had helped their fellow Israelites subdue the land of Canaan west of the Jordan River. So, the earliest they could have occupied cities like Aroer or Heshbon was 1400 BC at the end of Joshua's campaigns. Since Jephthah appears to have spoken his words in 1088 BC, the actual time was 312 years, making Jephthah's 300 years a reasonable approximation.

In addition to the chronology of the judges, we can determine a few other dates using Josephus's *Antiquities*.

προέστη τοῦ λαοῦ μετὰ τὴν Ἥλαι τοῦ ἀρχιερέως τελευτὴν μόνος μὲν ἔτη δώδεκα μετὰ δὲ Σαούλου τοῦ βασιλέως δέκα πρὸς τοῖς ὀκτώ.

He [Samuel] presided over the people alone twelve years after the death of the high priest Eli, and with King Saul eighteen years (*Ant.* 6.294).

Thus Samuel's career can be outlined as follows:

Table 5

1060–1049 Sole judgeship
1048–1031 Life under Saul's reign
1031 Samuel's death

Note that Samuel's judgeship closely follows the death of Abdon in 1061. Therefore, the indication that Samuel was a judge (1 Sam 7:6, 15, 16, 17) seems to fit with the chronology of the judges and provides for nearly uninterrupted leadership from Othniel until the institution of the monarchy, or nearly uninterrupted leadership from Moses to Joshua and the elders through the judges ending in Samuel.

Finally, given other information from 1 Samuel, we can reconstruct Eli's life.

Table 6

1157 Eli born (1 Sam 4:15)
1099–1060 Eli's priesthood/judgeship (1 Sam 4:18)
1060 Eli's death (1 Sam 4:15)

Since Eli died when the Ark was captured, we can also date the Ark's time in Philistine territory to seven months during 1060 BC (1 Sam 6:1).

IV. CONCLUSION

The chronology of the period of the judges is not simple, but pessimism about obtaining a reasonable chronology from the notices in the book of Judges is unwarranted. It would appear that a careful examination of the book and its structure and a knowledge of ancient Judean practices regarding the recording of chronological data make it possible to construct a chronology of this period of Israel's history that is consonant with the rest of the Old Testament.