

THE LENGTH OF THE RULE OF JOSHUA AND THE PERIODS OF SUBJUGATION IN THE BOOK OF JUDGES

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Presented here is a straightforward resolution of two chronological difficulties related to the biblical period of the Judges. Firstly, the length of Joshua's rule is not specified. Secondly, it is not clear from the text whether or not the periods of subjugation by other nations occurred simultaneously with the years of rulership by the judges.¹

The traditional interpretation assumes that Joshua ruled for 28 years (*Seder Olam Rabbah*, chap. 12),² which means that he was 83 when he began to rule, since he lived to be 110 years old (Josh. 24:29). Certain calculations led to this figure of 28 years,³ but it seems that the underlying reason was that, for lack of clear information, it was assumed that Joshua was approximately the same age as Caleb the son of Jephuneh. Caleb was 40 years old in the second year in the desert (Josh. 14:7), or 79 at the time of the entrance into the Land of Canaan. This assumption that Joshua was 83 when he led the Israelites into Canaan requires an additional 24 years to fit into the time-span of 300 years mentioned in Judges 11:26 as the one extending from Joshua to Jephthah. These additional years are obtained by assuming that two periods of subjugation (7 years to Midian, Judges 6:1; and 18 years to the Ammonites, Judges 10:7-8) occurred when no Judges were ruling, giving a total of 25 years,⁴ which is only one year different from the required 24 years.⁴ However, the assumption that two, and only these two, out of the seven periods of subjugation occurred when no Judges were ruling has led to an inconsistent interpretation, since all other periods of subjugation are placed within the time allotted for Judges.⁵ This has caused disbelief in the validity of the chronology given in the Book of Judges. Moreover, if Joshua was 83 years old when he began to rule, he was 89 years old in his seventh year when he led the army defeating the kings of the south (Josh. 10:1-43) and the kings of the north

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(Josh. 11:1-15). It is hard to believe that someone aged 89 would be capable of traveling long distances on foot, from place to place, and then fighting against the enemy. These battles clearly took place in the seventh year of his rule, since Hebron (Josh. 10:36-37) was one of the conquered cities, and we learn (from Josh. 14:10-14, 15:13-14) that Caleb fought in the battle against Hebron in the seventh year of Joshua. My approach to determining the length of Joshua's rule is presented below.

Although the length of Joshua's rule is not specified in the Bible, the number of years can be calculated on the basis of Joshua's age. As we will show, he started ruling when he was 59 and continued to rule until his death at the age of 110 (Josh. 24: 29). He thus ruled for 52 years. If Joshua was 59 when he began to rule, he would only have been 65 in his seventh year, during the battles against the kings of the south and the north. A person in good physical condition could still be strong enough to fight at that age.

How old he was when he started ruling can be derived from his age in the second year in the desert. At that time, Joshua, Caleb and ten other tribal leaders were sent as spies to investigate the nature of the land of Canaan and determine the fortifications therein (Num. 13:1-20). When the spies returned, the majority reported that the Israelites would not be able to overcome the inhabitants of the land (Num. 13:31). Only Joshua and Caleb thought it possible to conquer it (Num. 14:6-8). As a result, the Israelites were disheartened and rebelled (Num. 14:10). To punish them for their lack of faith, God decreed that all people who were mature (i.e., 20 or older, as defined in Num. 32:11) at the time of the Exodus would not live to see the land of Canaan (Num. 14:22-23). Nevertheless, the people continued murmuring against God (Num 14:27), and were consequently punished even more severely. Now, even those who reached the age of 20 in the second year in the desert (when the census was taken) would not enter the land of Canaan (Num 14:29-30; 1:1-3). Only Caleb was specifically excluded from the punishment meted out to those who were 20 at the time of the Exodus (Num. 14:24), while both Caleb and Joshua were excluded from the punishment inflicted on those who were 20 in the second year in the desert (Num. 14:30). This proves that Joshua was 19 years old at the time of the Exodus and 20 years old in the second year of the desert, when he was sent to "spy out the land." Supporting evidence in favor of this relatively young age can be found in Exodus 33:11,

where Joshua is called "a young man" (*na'ar*). Since he was 19 at the time of the Exodus, he must obviously have been 59 when he started to rule 40 years later.

We can thus verify the years when Joshua ruled. At the beginning of his reign, Jephthah claims that 300 years have passed since the Israelites vanquished Sihon, king of the Amorites (Judg. 11:26). Now from Numbers 21:23-26 we determine that the conquest of Sihon occurred after the death of Aaron (Num. 20:28), and from Numbers 33:38 we know that Aaron died in the fifth month of the fortieth year after the Exodus. There is accordingly a 300-year period from the beginning of Joshua's rule until the commencement of Jephthah's. This fits in perfectly with the 52-year rule of Joshua.⁶

NOTES

1. This solution is an update of earlier presentations by the author. See E. A. Schatz, *Proof of the Accuracy of the Bible* (Middle Village, NY: Jonathan David Publishers 1973) pp. 58-64; idem, *Accuracy of Biblical Chronology* (Tel Aviv, Alef Publishers, 1986) pp. 85-91 (Hebrew); idem, *Commentary by Elihu on the Book of Judges* (Hashmonaim: by the author, 2001) pp. 7, 14-18 (Hebrew).
2. This interpretation is followed by Rashi (Judg. 11:26) and other traditional exegetes such as Ralbag and Ha-Gra.
3. Heinrich W. Guggenheimer, trans., *Seder Olam: The Rabbinic View of Biblical Chronology* (Northvale, NJ: Jason Aronson, 1998) p. 121.
4. One way the Sages compensate for this extra year is by assuming that the last year of Tola's rule and the first year of Jair's overlapped; see Rashi on Judg. 11:26.
5. Although it is unclear from the text whether the periods of subjugation occurred simultaneously with, or subsequent to, the rulership of the Judges, it is logical to assume that there were no extended gaps of more than a few months during which the country was without a leader. The phrase reading *the land was quiet* (*va-tishkot ha-aretz*), used in connection with the judgeships of Othniel, Ehud, Deborah, and Gideon (Judg. 3:11, 30; 5:31; 8:28), is often explained as referring to a surcease of foreign domination and war. This explanation would, however, imply that the periods of subjugation did not occur during the rule of the Judges. It is therefore preferable to see *the land was quiet* as a reference to internal disputes among the Israelites about the choice of a leader. Hence, the years of foreign oppression are included in those given for the Judges.
6. Joshua 52 years, Othniel 40 years (Judg. 3:11), Ehud 80 years (Judg. 3:30), Deborah 40 years (Judg. 5:31), Gideon 40 years (Judg. 8:28), Abimelech 3 years (Judg. 9:22), Tola 23 years (Judg. 10:2), Jair 22 years (Judg. 10:3) = 300 years. In order for this chronology to fit with the 480 years mentioned in I Kings 6:1 as the time elapsing from the Exodus until Solomon's Temple was built in the fourth year of his reign, we must assume that Samuel, whose length of judgeship is not specified in the Bible, ruled independently for three years and for a long time previously during the 40-year judgeship of Eli.