

The Cycle of the Judges (c. 1365 BC)

Judges 2:7, 10–23

7 The people served the LORD all the days of Joshua, and all the days of the elders who survived Joshua, who had seen all the great work of the LORD which He had done for Israel.

10 All that generation also were gathered to their fathers; and there arose another generation after them who did not know the LORD, nor yet the work which He had done for Israel.

11 Then the sons of Israel did evil in the sight of the LORD and served the Baals,

12 and they forsook the LORD, the God of their fathers, who had brought them out of the land of Egypt, and followed other gods from *among* the gods of the peoples who were around them, and bowed themselves down to them; thus they provoked the LORD to anger.

13 So they forsook the LORD and served Baal and the Ashtaroth.

14 The anger of the LORD burned against Israel, and He gave them into the hands of plunderers who plundered them; and He sold them into the hands of their enemies around *them*, so that they could no longer stand before their enemies.

15 Wherever they went, the hand of the LORD was against them for evil, as the LORD had spoken and as the LORD had sworn to them, so that they were severely distressed.

16 Then the LORD raised up judges who delivered them from the hands of those who plundered them.

17 Yet they did not listen to their judges, for they played the harlot after other gods and bowed themselves down to them. They turned aside quickly from the way in which their fathers had walked in obeying the commandments of the LORD; they did not do as *their fathers*.

18 When the LORD raised up judges for them, the LORD was with the judge and delivered them from the hand of their enemies all the days of the judge; for the LORD was moved to pity by their groaning because of those who oppressed and afflicted them.

19 But it came about when the judge died, that they would turn back and act more corruptly than their fathers, in following other gods to serve them and bow down to them; they did not abandon their practices or their stubborn ways.

20 So the anger of the LORD burned against Israel, and He said, “Because this nation has transgressed My covenant which I commanded their fathers and has not listened to My voice,

21 I also will no longer drive out before them any of the nations which Joshua left when he died,

22 in order to test Israel by them, whether they will keep the way of the LORD to walk in it as their fathers did, or not.”

23 So the LORD allowed those nations to remain, not driving them out quickly; and He did not give them into the hand of Joshua.

The Testing of Israel (c. 1365 BC)

Judges 3:1–6

1 Now these are the nations which the LORD left, to test Israel by them (*that is*, all who had not experienced any of the wars of Canaan;

2 only in order that the generations of the sons of Israel might be taught war, those who had not experienced it formerly).

3 *These nations are*: the five lords of the Philistines and all the Canaanites and the Sidonians and the Hivites who lived in Mount Lebanon, from Mount Baal-hermon as far as Lebo-hamath.

4 They were for testing Israel, to find out if they would obey the commandments of the LORD, which He had commanded their fathers through Moses.

5 The sons of Israel lived among the Canaanites, the Hittites, the Amorites, the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites;

6 and they took their daughters for themselves as wives, and gave their own daughters to their sons, and served their gods.

Mesopotamian Oppression (c. 1365 – c. 1357 BC)

Judges 3:7–8

7 The sons of Israel did what was evil in the sight of the LORD, and forgot the LORD their God and served the Baals and the Asheroth.

8 Then the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel, so that He sold them into the hands of Cushan-rishathaim king of Mesopotamia; and the sons of Israel served Cushan-rishathaim eight years.

Rest Under Othniel (c. 1357 – c. 1317 BC)

Judges 3:9–11

9 When the sons of Israel cried to the LORD, the LORD raised up a deliverer for the sons of Israel to deliver them, Othniel the son of Kenaz, Caleb's younger brother.

10 The Spirit of the LORD came upon him, and he judged Israel. When he went out to war, the LORD gave Cushan-rishathaim king of Mesopotamia into his hand, so that he prevailed over Cushan-rishathaim.

11 Then the land had rest forty years. And Othniel the son of Kenaz died.

Moabite Oppression (c. 1317 – c. 1299 BC)

Judges 3:12–14

12 Now the sons of Israel again did evil in the sight of the LORD. So the LORD strengthened Eglon the king of Moab against Israel, because they had done evil in the sight of the LORD.

13 And he gathered to himself the sons of Ammon and Amalek; and he went and defeated Israel, and they possessed the city of the palm trees.

14 The sons of Israel served Eglon the king of Moab eighteen years.

Rest Under Ehud (c. 1299 – c. 1219 BC)

Judges 3:15–30

15 But when the sons of Israel cried to the LORD, the LORD raised up a deliverer for them, Ehud the son of Gera, the Benjamite, a left-handed man. And the sons of Israel sent tribute by him to Eglon the king of Moab.

16 Ehud made himself a sword which had two edges, a cubit in length, and he bound it on his right thigh under his cloak.

17 He presented the tribute to Eglon king of Moab. Now Eglon was a very fat man.

18 It came about when he had finished presenting the tribute, that he sent away the people who had carried the tribute.

19 But he himself turned back from the idols which were at Gilgal, and said, "I have a secret message for you, O king." And he said, "Keep silence." And all who attended him left him.

20 Ehud came to him while he was sitting alone in his cool roof chamber. And Ehud said, "I have a message from God for you." And he arose from his seat.

21 Ehud stretched out his left hand, took the sword from his right thigh and thrust it into his belly.

22 The handle also went in after the blade, and the fat closed over the blade, for he did not draw the sword out of his belly; and the refuse came out.

23 Then Ehud went out into the vestibule and shut the doors of the roof chamber behind him, and locked *them*.

24 When he had gone out, his servants came and looked, and behold, the doors of the roof chamber were locked; and they said, "He is only relieving himself in the cool room."

25 They waited until they became anxious; but behold, he did not open the doors of the roof chamber. Therefore they took the key and opened them, and behold, their master had fallen to the floor dead.

26 Now Ehud escaped while they were delaying, and he passed by the idols and escaped to Seirah.

27 It came about when he had arrived, that he blew the trumpet in the hill country of Ephraim; and the sons of Israel went down with him from the hill country, and he *was* in front of them.

28 He said to them, “Pursue *them*, for the LORD has given your enemies the Moabites into your hands.” So they went down after him and seized the fords of the Jordan opposite Moab, and did not allow anyone to cross.

29 They struck down at that time about ten thousand Moabites, all robust and valiant men; and no one escaped.

30 So Moab was subdued that day under the hand of Israel. And the land was undisturbed for eighty years.

Shamgar and the Philistines (c. 1279 BC)

Judges 3:31

31 After him came Shamgar the son of Anath, who struck down six hundred Philistines with an oxgoad; and he also saved Israel.

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Chronological Notes

- 1) The first oppression mentioned in Judges began c. 1365 BC. If we add all the years mentioned in Judges 3:7–16:31 (oppression years and judgeship years), we obtain a total of 410 years: 1365 BC - 410 = 955 BC. Clearly, we have a problem—this date conflicts with the relative certainty of the chronology of the reigns of Saul (c. 1050 – 1010 BC) and David (1010 – 970 BC). This means that there must be some overlap between one or more oppressions or judgeships.
- 2) The Samson/Philistine Overlap.
 - A) Samson’s 20-year judgeship took place during the Philistine oppression—“he judged Israel in the days of the Philistines” (Judg 15:20). This means we can subtract 20 years, bringing the total down from 410 years to 390 years.
- 3) The Philistine/Ammonite Overlap.
 - A) The last foreign oppression of Israel mentioned in Judges is the forty year oppression of the Philistines. Judges 10:7 notes that this oppression coincided with the Ammonite oppression of the Transjordan tribes. The Ammonite oppression was broken by Jephthah in c. 1106 BC, some 300 years after the conquest of Sihon in 1406 BC (Judg 11:21–26). Since the Ammonite oppression lasted 18 years (Judg 10:8), it follows that the Ammonite oppression began in c. 1106 BC + 18 = c. 1124 BC.¹ The Philistine oppression was concurrent with the Ammonite oppression and thus lasted from c. 1124 BC to c. 1084 BC. This means we can subtract 40 years, bringing the total down from 390 years to 350 years.
 - (1) Samson was born at the beginning of the Philistine oppression (Judg 13:1–3). His years of leadership fell within the forty-year span of Philistine rule (Judg 14:4) but apparently did not outlast it, for the Philistines seem to have been a threat for a short time after Samson pulled down the

¹ Eugene H. Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests: A History of Old Testament Israel*, Second Edition, (Baker Publishing, 2008), 168. So also David M. Howard, *An Introduction to the Old Testament Historical Books*, (Moody Press, 1993), 103; Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., *A History of Israel: From the Bronze Age Through the Jewish Wars*, (Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1998), 176; Israel P. Loken, *The Old Testament Historical Books: An Introduction*, (Xulon Press, 2008), 86.

temple of Dagon (Samuel subdued them at Mizpah). Most likely, Samson began his heroic deeds about midway through the oppression, when he was around twenty years old, and after twenty years of judgeship he died just preceding the end of the oppression.²

- (2) It is interesting to note that the final blow against the Philistine incursion occurred under Samuel at Mizpah in c. 1084 BC (1 Sam 7:11, 13), some twenty years after the ark of the covenant had been taken by the Philistines (1 Sam 7:2).³ The battle of Aphek, which resulted in the capture of the ark, therefore took place in c. 1104, or at the midpoint of the forty-year Philistine period.⁴ It is possible that the capture of the ark provoked Samson to begin his judgeship.
- (3) Samuel was also born during the Philistine oppression. We derive this from 1 Samuel 8:1, 5 which says that Samuel was “old” when he anointed Saul as king of Israel. Merrill comments: “Admittedly, ‘old’ is a subjective term and one should not use it to establish chronological exactness. However, Eli, contemporary with Samuel, was ‘very old’ at age ninety-eight (1 Sam 2:22; cf. 4:15) and David was ‘old’ at seventy, so one may reasonably posit at least seventy as the age of Samuel at the time of Saul’s coronation.”⁵ The corruption of the MT of 1 Samuel 13:1 means that we cannot date Saul’s and David’s reigns with the certainty of Solomon and the other kings. However, a date of c. 1050 BC for the beginning of Saul’s reign will give us no more than a 1 or 2 year error. If we assume that Samuel was seventy in 1050 BC—that puts his birth in 1050 + 70 = c. 1120 BC, just a few years after Samson’s birth and the beginning of the Philistine oppression.

4) The Ehud/Jabin/Deborah Overlap.

- A) The 18-year Moabite oppression and the 80-year rest under the judgeship of Ehud is focused on the central portion of Israel (see Jericho, “the city of the Palms,” in Judg 3:13). Given the unusual length of the rest period, and the fact that Ehud’s death is not directly connected to the end of the rest (Judg 4:1), it appears this period is a good candidate for an overlap.⁶
- B) The 20-year Canaanite (Jabin) oppression and the 40-year rest under the judgeship of Deborah is focused on the northern portion of Israel (see Hazor in Judg 4:2). If we assume Ehud lived for 20 years after defeating Eglon, the 60-year period of Jabin/Deborah might overlap with the last 60 years of the Ehud’s 80-year rest. Thus Ehud’s rest and Deborah’s rest both come to an end with the Midianite invasion, and the time periods again connect in series. This would allow us to subtract 60 years, bringing the total down from 350 years to 290 years.
- 5) The overlaps mentioned above allow us to reduce the total number of years in Judges from 410 years to 290 years. If we examine this length relative to our starting point of c. 1365 BC, we get c. 1365 BC - 290 = c. 1075 BC. This fits nicely within the chronological bookends of Joshua’s death and Saul’s anointing, and leaves enough time for Samuel to grow old and put his sons into power before the people demand a king in c. 1050 BC.

² Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests*, 168.

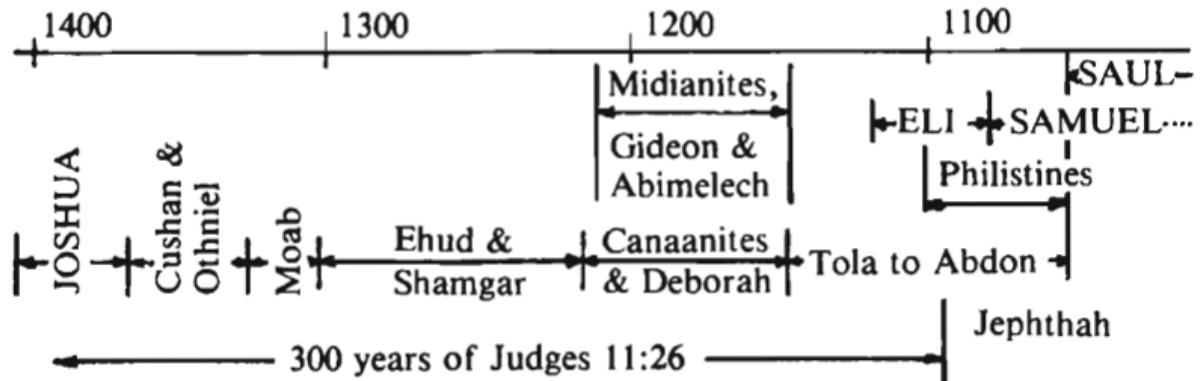
³ Ralph W. Klein, *1 Samuel*, Word Biblical Commentary Vol. 10 (Waco: Word, 1983), 65–66.

⁴ Merrill, *Kingdom of Priests*, 168.

⁵ Eugene H. Merrill, “Paul’s Use of ‘About 450 Years’ in Acts 13:20,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 138:551 (July 1981): 251.

⁶ J. W. Schmidt, *The Joshua-Judges Chronology* (Ph.D. diss., Central Baptist Theological Seminary, 1954). So also J. C. Whitcomb, *Chart of Old Testament Patriarchs and Judges* (Grace Theological Seminary, 1965).

- A) Peet argues for an overlap between the Midianites/Gideon and the Canaanites/Deborah (as shown below).⁷ Is this a better explanation of the data than the Ehud/Jabin/Deborah overlap? It's difficult to say—I remain open on the topic.



⁷ J. H. John Peet, "The Chronology of the Judges," *The Journal of Christian Reconstruction* Vol. 9, No. 1&2 (Winter 1982–83): 216–242. The image is sourced from J. H. John Peet, "Biblical Chronology," *Foundations* No. 14 (Spring 1985): 19–29.