

THE AGE OF THE EARTH AND O.T. JUDGES

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During the more than twenty years that we have been publishing *Reason & Revelation*, our monthly journal on Christian evidences, we have received numerous comments in response to articles that we have written on various biblical and/or scientific issues. Some letters tender a nice commendation. Some express mild disagreement. Still others offer a stern rebuke. And finally, some simply ask for additional information or clarification. Not long ago, we received a letter that falls into the latter category. Its contents read as follows:

I read a series of articles you published some time ago in *Reason & Revelation* on the Bible and the age of the Earth. However, your date for the creation of the Earth appears to be inconsistent with other portions of the biblical text. You apparently failed to take into account Acts 13: 17-20, and you therefore have not left enough time for the period of the judges. Recalculate your dates and you will see that they cause the text in Acts to clash with 1 Kings 6: 1. How can this problem be resolved?

The author of the letter asked a perfectly valid (and extremely interesting) question. This particular inquiry provides an intriguing case study in how alleged biblical discrepancies **can** be answered—even though arriving at a solution sometimes may require an extra dose of determination and some pretty dogged research. First, we would like to elaborate a bit on the seeming discrepancy between the two passages under consideration. Second, we then would like to explain—as the querist asked us to do—how the problem can be resolved. The two passages are as follows (the controversial portion of the text has been placed in bold type).

The God of this people of Israel chose our fathers, and exalted the people when they dwelt as strangers in the land of Egypt, and with an high arm brought he them out of it. And about the time of forty years suffered he their manners in the wilderness. And when he had destroyed seven nations in the land of Canaan, he divided their land to them by lot. **And after that he gave unto them judges about the space of four hundred and fifty years**, until Samuel the prophet (Acts 13:17-20, KJV).

And it came to pass in the **four hundred and eightieth year after the children of Israel were come out of the land of Egypt**, in the fourth year of Solomon's reign over Israel, in the month Ziv, which is the second month, that he began to build the house of Jehovah (1 Kings 6:1, ASV).

A concise summation of the putative problem between Acts 13: 17-20 and 1 Kings 6: 1 was provided by Alan Montgomery in his presentation, “Towards a Biblically Inerrant Chronology,” at the Fourth International Conference on Creationism in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania (August 3-8, 1998). As he explained:

A summation of the reigns of the judges and enemy oppressions reveals that there is a major discrepancy with 1 Kings 6:1, which states that the temple construction began in the 480th year since the exodus. Mauro (1987, p. 41) states that no other era produces “a greater lack of unanimity among chronologists of repute.” ... **Neither can Paul's statement be reconciled to the 480 years.** In Acts 13:20 he says that the Israelites wandered 40 years in the wilderness, conquered the seven tribes of Canaan and were ruled by judges for 450 years until Samuel. If, to these 450 years we add 40 for the wandering in the wilderness, about 22 years of Saul after Samuel's death, 40 years of David and 3 years of Solomon, we arrive at a total of 555 years rather than 480 (1998, p. 401, emp. added).

In short, then, the querist who wrote us was asking this. Acts 13:20 seems to indicate that **after** the fathers were chosen, and **after** the Israelites emerged from Egyptian slavery, and **after** they had wandered for 40 years in the wilderness, and **after** God had helped them conquer the land of Canaan, **then** God provided numerous judges for a

period of about 450 years until the time of the prophet Samuel—who appointed Saul as king, who then was followed by David, who eventually was succeeded by his son, Solomon. Yet 1 Kings 6:1 plainly speaks about the “fourth year of Solomon's reign over Israel” being **only 480 years after the children of Israel had come out of the land of Egypt**. As Montgomery noted, if one tallies the years included in Acts 13, the number is far too high to agree with the 480 years alluded to in 1 Kings 6:1. **If** Acts 13 effectively places 450 years as the period of Israel's judges **after** all the other events that are mentioned, then the conclusion we reached in our articles in *Reason & Revelation* regarding the age of the Earth (that the Earth is approximately 6,000 years old; see Thompson, 1999) does not leave enough time for the reign of Israel's judges. What is the explanation for this conundrum—or is there one? Yes, there is. Permit us to explain.

As we begin, let us offer a summary of principles that must be considered when dealing with alleged contradictions. First, a contradiction does not exist between passages that refer to completely different persons, things, or events. Second, no contradiction exists between passages that involve different time elements. Third, a contradiction cannot be said to exist between verses that employ phraseology in different senses. Fourth, supplementation is not contradiction. And fifth, in order to negate the charge that the Bible contains a real contradiction, all that is necessary is for the Bible student to show the possibility of a coherent harmonization between the alleged contradictory passages (see Jackson, 1983). Actually, the solution to the problem presented in a comparison of Acts 13:20 with 1 Kings 6:1 involves several of these principles. Again, allow us to explain.

The **apparent** discrepancy between the two passages under consideration has to do with the fact that certain Greek manuscripts differ from others in their recording of Paul's statement in Acts 13. When we compare various translations of the verse, it quickly becomes clear that the particular **wording** of the verse is in question.

And when he had destroyed seven nations in the land of Canaan, he divided their land to them by lot. **And after that he gave unto them judges about the space of four hundred and fifty years, until Samuel the prophet** (Acts 13:19-20, KJV).

And when he had destroyed seven nations in the land of Canaan, **he gave them their land for an inheritance, for about four hundred and fifty years: and after these things he gave them judges until Samuel the prophet** (Acts 13:19-20, ASV).

He overthrew seven nations in Canaan and gave their land to his people as their inheritance. **All this took about 450 years. After this, God gave them judges until the time of Samuel the prophet** (Acts 13:19-20, NIV).

And having destroyed seven nations in the land of Canaan, he gave them their land as an inheritance. **And after these things he gave them judges till Samuel the prophet, to the end of about four hundred and fifty years** (Acts 13: 14-20, Darby Bible, 1890).

[A]nd having destroyed seven nations in the land of Canaan, He did divide by lot to them their land. **And after these things, about four hundred and fifty years, He gave judges—till Samuel the prophet** (Acts 13:19-20, Young's Literal Translation).

Each one of these five translations has the prepositional phrase “about four hundred and fifty years” describing a different set of events.

The KJV says **the period of the judges** lasted 450 years. The ASV indicates that **the children of Israel were given the promised land** for 450 years. The NIV says that “all this” (the events described in verses 17-19—**choosing of the fathers, the Exodus, the wilderness wandering, and the distribution of the land**) took about 450 years. The Darby Bible seems to agree primarily with the NIV that **all the events** happened “to the end of about four hundred and fifty years.” And Young’s Literal Translation simply plods the phrase in the middle of the sentence and does not give much of an indication as to what it describes. It is obvious that the respected scholars who translated these different versions have had some problems agreeing on the exact events that should fall under the phrase “about 450 years.”

In order to solve this “problem” we must realize, as Jordan has concisely stated,

The proper resolution takes notice of the fact that there is more than one reading for these texts. We have from the early centuries of the Church many manuscripts of the New Testament, and sadly they do not all agree with each other on every point. That necessitates a task called “lower criticism,” which is the study of these various texts to try and determine which reading is correct, or most likely, at a given point of conflict (1998, 10[7]:3, emp. added).

The King James Version was completed in 1611 and then revised several times, one of the latest being in 1769. The Greek text used to produce the King James Version is known as the Textus Receptus. However, after the King James Version was translated and revised, several manuscripts came to light that were older than those used in the KJV translation. C.G. Ozanne assessed Acts 13:17-20 as follows:

In order to appreciate the significance of this reference, it is important to notice that the phrase “four hundred and fifty years” is in the **dative** case. This is in marked contrast with the two references to “forty years,” which are both in the **accusative** case. “The dative implies point of time, not duration” (Bruce). It indicates that at this point in the narrative 450 years had elapsed, dating presumably from the first event recorded in the apostle’s address.... The meaning now is that at the point of time at which the land was given as an inheritance 450 years had elapsed since the choice of the fathers (v. 17) [1970, p. 32, emp. added].

In order to clarify this, we turn to two modern translations, both of which are based on the Alexandrian text (an older, more reliable text than the Textus Receptus, upon which the KJV is based). The New American Standard Version translates Acts 13:19 like this: “And when He had destroyed seven nations in the land of Canaan, He distributed their land as an inheritance—**all of which took about four hundred and fifty years.**” The NIV offers further illumination:

The God of the people of Israel chose our fathers; he made the people prosper during their stay in Egypt, with mighty power he led them out of that country, he endured their conduct for about forty years in the desert, he overthrew seven nations in Canaan and gave their land to his people as their inheritance. **All this took about 450 years** (Acts 13:16b-20a, emp. added).

The “all” of verse 20 refers to the time of the patriarchs (when God “chose” Abraham and Isaac) until the inheritance of Canaan. Old Testament commentator A.C. Hervey concurs:

The usual explanation of the reading of the R.T. [Received Text—BT/KB/AB] ... is that the years are dated from the birth of Isaac, and the meaning is that the promise to give the land to the seed of Abraham was **actually performed within four hundred and fifty years** (after the analogy of Gal. iii. 17), which gives a good sense and is not at all improbable (n.d., 18[4]:405, emp. added).

In other words, the 450 years does not point **forward** to the time of the judges (nor to some period in between the conquest and the judges), but **backward** to the events preceding the time of the judges. Bruce Metzger, one of the foremost authorities on the Greek New Testament, pointed out that in the original text (specifically the Alexandrian text) verses 17, 18, and 19 are all one continuous sentence, and it was the separating of that one sentence into several English sentences that has caused so much confusion (1994, p. 359).

In a footnote in his commentary on the book of Judges, renowned scholar C.F. Keil, speaking of the Alexandrian reading of the text, stated that the phrase under consideration “can hardly be understood in any other sense than this, that **Paul reckoned 450 as the time that elapsed between the call of Abraham (or birth of Isaac) and the division of the land**, namely 215 + 215” (1996, 2: 203, emp. added).

In his *Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*, well-known Greek scholar Daniel B. Wallace stated that “certain formulaic phrases are often employed, ... **referring to the previous events**” (1996, p. 333, emp. added). He then listed Acts 13:20 as one of those instances—and therein lies the key to the alleged discrepancy between 1 Kings 6:1 and Acts 13:20. When the Alexandrian manuscripts are translated properly, it becomes clear that Paul’s statement of “about 450 years” in Acts 13:20 was “referring to the previous events” related in verses 17-19, not the following period representing the time of the judges. The best rendering of this fact comes from the NIV.

The God of the people of Israel chose our fathers; he made the people prosper during their stay in Egypt, with mighty power he led them out of that country, he endured their conduct for about forty years in the desert, he overthrew seven nations in Canaan and gave their land to his people as their inheritance. **All this took about 450 years. After this, God gave them judges until the time of Samuel the prophet** (Acts 13:17-20, emp. added).

After considering all the possible solutions, it soon becomes clear that no discrepancy exists between the disputed passages. In fact, a concise, important piece of the Old Testament chronology falls into place with a proper reading of Acts 13:20, once again proving that it is just “a matter of time” before alleged biblical discrepancies are put to rest.

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