THE DATING OF THE PERIOD OF THE JUDGES

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The purpose of this article is to raise some problems concerning the date of the beginning of the period of Israel’s history described in the book of Judges 1). It will be shown that the criteria normally used for dating this period are not as conclusive as would at first appear, and that they pose problems from which it is difficult to escape. In this article the term “the period of the judges” will refer only to the period of Israel’s history described in the book of Judges. The term will not include the events described in the books of Samuel.

The problem

There are only two explicit references in the entire Old Testament which date the start of the period of the judges. These are Judg. i 1 and Judg. ii 8 ff., which inform us that the period began a short time after the death of Joshua, son of Nun. No other explicit evidence exists. The only other evidence of this type which could be used is the position of the book of Judges within the sequence of the Old Testament historical books. Since it is placed between the book of Joshua and the books of Samuel, it is possible to argue that this is further evidence that the period began immediately after the death of Joshua and ended before the rise of the monarchy.

A basic problem with this evidence arises when one accepts the findings of a literary analysis for the book of Judges. A conventional analysis of the book divides it into three parts: (1) Judg. 1 i-ii 5, an introduction to the main body of the book which appears to have been added at a later date, (2) Judg. ii 6-xvi 31, the main section of the book, which contains a unifying editorial framework within which are placed the stories of the individual judges, and (3) Judg. xvii 1-xxi 25, an apparently later addition. It seems generally accepted among historians that the data contained in the first part of the book are

1) The writer thanks Ellis Rivkin and David Weisberg of Hebrew Union College, Cincinnati, for discussing with him many of the problems presented in this paper.
historically problematical, that the editorial framework of the second, main part of the book is definitely secondary and in fact bears little relationship to the stories contained in it, and that the third part of the book is also problematical, it being difficult, if not impossible, to decide on the authenticity of its data 2).

Thus the only explicit evidence to date the beginning of the period of the judges is to be found either in problematical material (Judg. i 1) or in secondary and unreliable material (Judg. ii 6 ff.). There is therefore little a priori reason for accepting the editor’s word for this date. It is extremely doubtful if he was concerned with historical accuracy for its own sake. His motivation seems to have been more theological and didactic, and he used the past merely as grist for his mill. Thus he imposed upon the individual stories an orientation which in fact they do not have. He made religious heroes out of men whose ways of life did not exactly lend themselves to such an interpretation. And, more than likely, he imposed a false sequence of events upon the period 3). One is not being unduly sceptical, therefore, if one questions the editor’s assertion that the stories he has knitted together took place after the death of Joshua. In fact, one could argue that it is incongruous of scholars, on the one hand to dismiss both the “all-Israel” orientation of the stories and the internal chronology of the period as being false, while on the other hand accepting almost without question the dating of the period to a time immediately after the death of Joshua.

The problem of determining the beginning of the period of the judges becomes even more important when it is realised that, if we strip the editorial framework from the individual stories in the main section, there is no direct evidence to indicate when the events described in them took place. In none of the stories is any of the earlier or later figures in Israel’s history mentioned, e.g., Moses, Aaron, Eli, or Samuel, and in none of the stories is any of the earlier or later events of Israel’s history mentioned, e.g., the Exodus, the Conquest.


3) Although this point cannot be proven, it is a reasonable assumption. Certainly no scholar today accepts the editor’s sequence of events without question. See Mayes, pp. 5 ff.