

N. T. TEXTUAL CRITICISM

VARIANT READING RESOLUTION

TEXT: Acts 13:20

PROBLEM: A dispute exists as to the placement of the phrase, “about 450 years,” in the text of Paul’s exhortation in the synagogue at Pisidian Antioch, in which he was reviewing the events related to the history of Israel. Either 1) the number 450 refers strictly to the overall period of the judges in Israel, or 2) it refers to the period of time between the Israelites’ move into Egypt during the lifetime of Jacob, and the time when the Israelites had distributed the land of Canaan among themselves during the days of Joshua.

EXTERNAL EVIDENCE:

VARIANT 1: The text of Acts 13:19–20 reads, “And when He had destroyed seven nations in the land of Canaan, He distributed their land to them by allotment. After that He gave *them* judges for about 450 years, until Samuel the prophet.”

PRO

1. This reading is supported by the following evidence: Greek manuscripts: D², E, Ψ, 945, 1739, 1891, Byz; Versions: it^e, eth, slav^{ms}; Fathers: Chrysostom, Greek ms^{acc to Bede}; Lectionaries: some (1 603 τριακοσίοις).

2. The Textus Receptus, the Russian Synodal Bible, and the King James Version are among the modern Bibles that feature this reading.

CON

1. Except for this reading’s being found in an innumerable number of manuscripts that are part of the Byzantine Text Type, it is supported by only 5 non-corrected Greek mss, all dating between the 6th and 11th centuries, making for a considerable minority of underlying manuscripts.

2. Except for one Slavonic manuscript and one Old Italian manuscript, only one ancient translation (the Ethiopic) supports this reading.

VARIANT 2: The text of Acts 13:19–20 reads, “When He had destroyed seven nations in the land of Canaan, He distributed their land as an inheritance-- *all of which took* about 450 years. After these things, He gave *them* judges until Samuel the prophet.”

PRO

1. This reading is supported by the following evidence: Greek manuscripts: Ⲑ⁷⁴, Ⲙ, A, B, C, 33, 36, 81, 181, 307, 453, 610, 1175, 1409, 1678, 2344; Versions: it^{ar, c, dem, p, ph, ro, w}, vg, cop^{bo}, arm, geo, slav^{ms}; Fathers: none; Lectionaries: none.

2. Cf. Variant 2, CON 1. Since the reading of Variant 1 was the predominant reading of later Christendom, with its exclusive presence in the Byzantine Text Type and the Textus Receptus, any

manuscripts of the Church Fathers' writings that were preserved up until the Middle Ages may have been "corrected" or discarded, especially since this reading conflicts with the historical numbering in Josephus.

3. The earliest manuscripts are united in support of this variant, including two from the 4th century, as well as the preponderance of uncial manuscripts in general.

4. Six ancient translations of the Bible favor this reading of the text, which is five more than that of Variant 1, when considering whole manuscript traditions.

CON

1. There are no Church Fathers or lectionaries that support this reading of the text.

TENTATIVE CONCLUSION BASED ON EXTERNAL EVIDENCE:

Variant 1 is favored by all of the later Greek manuscripts and the few Church Fathers who write in regard to this passage in Acts. On the other hand, Variant 2 is favored by the early Greek manuscripts and the vast majority of uncials, as well as the bulk of the early versions. On the basis of Variant 1, CON 1 and Variant 2, PRO 2 and PRO 3, choose Variant 2 in overwhelming fashion.

INTERNAL EVIDENCE:

VARIANT 1: The text of Acts 13:19–20 reads, "And when He had destroyed seven nations in the land of Canaan, He distributed their land to them by allotment. After that He gave *them* judges for about 450 years, until Samuel the prophet."

PRO

1. The 450-year period of time referred to by Paul is better to be understood as referring strictly to the era of the judges in Israel. According to *Antiquities VIII.iii.1*, Josephus regards the period of the judges as having taken place over a period of 443 years, which matches fairly closely with the 450 years noted by Paul.

2. Cf. Variant 1, CON 1. An ambitious scribe may have seen the potential for a mathematical error created by this scenario, and accordingly moved the numerical phrase in question to a position that would seem to present fewer objections.

CON

1. In 1 Kgs 6:1, the Hebrew Bible records that Solomon began the building of God's Temple in the 480th year after the exodus. According to the use of the 450 years of Variant 1, this number is not consistent with the 479+ years of 1 Kgs 6:1. If one allows for a rule of 22 years for Joshua, plus 450 years for the judges, 16 years for Saul's reign, 40 years for David's reign, and a full 3 years of Solomon's reign at the time the Temple work began, the total is 551 years, which is 71 years over the 480 years required in 1 Kgs 6:1. This number does not even take into account the period of oversight provided by Joshua's elders who outlived him (Metzger, *Textual Commentary*, 358).

2. Cf. Variant 1, CON 1. While the Hebrew Bible records a length of almost 480 years in 1 Kgs 6:1, the LXX reads "440th year." With this option, even if the text underlying the reading in the

LXX is correct, the problem experienced in Variant 1, CON 1 is only compounded. The 71-year discrepancy of the MT becomes a 111-year discrepancy when accepting the reading in the LXX.

VARIANT 2: The text of Acts 13:19–20 reads, “When He had destroyed seven nations in the land of Canaan, He distributed their land as an inheritance-- *all of which took* about 450 years. After these things, He gave *them* judges until Samuel the prophet.”

PRO

1. Cf. Variant 1, CON 1. If one takes into account the number of 300 years for the rulerships of the judges up until some time in Jephthah’s term (Judg 11:26), then adds 22 years for the leadership of Joshua, plus 7 years for the balance of Jephthah’s term, 40 years for Sampson’s term, 20 years for Eli’s term, 20 years for Samuel’s term, 16 years for Saul’s reign, 40 years for David’s reign, and 3 years for Solomon’s initial regnal years before the beginning of construction on the First Temple, the total comes to 468 years. If, then, one speculates an 11+-year period of oversight on the part of Joshua’s elders, the total comes to 479+ years, the exact number found in 1 Kgs 6:1.

2. The 450 years reckoned in Acts 13:20 includes the 430 years of Egyptian sojourning (Exod 12:40–41), plus 40 years in the wilderness (Acts 13:17), and about 7 years for the distribution of the land (Metzger, *Textual Commentary*, 358–359). This figure totals 477 years, which may be an approximation of time, or a rounded number.

3. Cf. Variant 2, CON 1. Paul uses the particle of comparison “ὥς” before the phrase “450 years”, thus leaving open the possibility that the number 477 is a close enough approximation of the prescribed time of “about 450 years”.

4. Cf. Variant 2, CON 1. It is possible that Paul, who uses a round number here, is referring not to Exod 12:40-41 and its use of the precise figure, 430 years. Instead, he may be referring to the similarly approximate number of 400 used by the Lord in Gen 15:13 to describe the period of sojourning and slavery that would transpire later in Egypt. If this is true, the approximate number 450 would be accounted for by this “400” years, plus the 40-year wandering in the wilderness, plus the 7 years for the distribution of the land under Joshua, thus totaling 447 years.

5. The reason for the textual change that moved the focus of the 450-year period from the exodus to the time of the judges may be explained as an action to prevent the reader from mistakenly limiting the 450 years to the time that passed between the division of the land by Joshua and the institution of the period of the judges (Metzger, *Textual Commentary*, 359).

CON

1. Cf. Variant 2, PRO 2. The idea of a 477-year approximation for the 450-year period specified by Paul in Acts 13:17-20 is too difficult to accept, as a 27-year difference renders the numerical reference too imprecise.

EVALUATION OF INTERNAL EVIDENCE:

If Variant 1 is the preferable option regarding internal evidence, one must accept an approximation in Paul’s numerical reference as either 71 or 111 years. In other words, the question must be asked whether “about 450 years” fits into an OT biblical history that considers the 480 years of 1 Kgs 6:1—which counts from the exodus to the start of construction on the Temple—to be rounded acceptably to 551

years, if the MT is followed. If the LXX is followed, can the even greater 111-year discrepancy that would exist between the 440-year chronological period and the 551 years needed for the events to be carried out? On the other hand, Variant 2 requires an approximation of only 27 years, if the 430-year period between the entry into the land and the exodus is followed (Exod 12:40–41), or 3 years, if Paul is using the already-approximate number of “400” from Gen 15:13. Based on the simplicity of this choice, Variant 2 is preferred.

FINAL CONCLUSION:

The Acts 13:20 textual variant is a wonderful exploration into the realm of OT biblical history, as it intersects with NT textual criticism and cross-testamental studies. In this case, the choice of the UBS committee seems to be correct, as both External Evidence and Internal Evidence combine in overwhelming support to favor Variant 2 as the correct variant. A 71 or 111-year discrepancy is far inferior to a discrepancy of 27 or 3 years, especially considering that the earliest and best support from the Greek manuscripts clearly favors Variant 2 as well. Variant 1 is probably a later, intentional, scribal variation designed to relieve a supposed problem, though in reality the “correction” turned out to be worse than the “solution” it provided.

Acts 13:20 best refers to the period of time between the Israelites’ move into Egypt during the lifetime of Jacob, and the time when the Israelites had distributed the land of Canaan among themselves during the days of Joshua. Paul does NOT use the number 450 here to refer to the overall length of the period of the judges in Israel, a notion that just does not fit the context of this passage. The Greek text should read, “When He had destroyed seven nations in the land of Canaan, He distributed their land as an inheritance-- *all of which took* about 450 years. After these things, He gave *them* judges until Samuel the prophet.”

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