

1st Samuel

Lesson 21

We must now address an important issue that has to do with the age of Saul at the time he became king. We have just exposed the fault in the mistranslation of 13:1, which has been rendered in many Bible versions as “Saul was ~~thirty~~ years old when he began to reign, and he reigned ~~forty~~ two years over Israel.” A better translation would have been the literal translation of “One year Saul had reigned, and when two years he had reigned over Israel.” Our story in this passage states that after being confirmed as king after the battle at Jabesh-gilead, Saul kept three thousand men. Two thousand were with him, and one thousand were with his son, Jonathan. We also were told that Jonathan led the charge to defeat the Philistines at the garrison in Geba. We would have a mathematical problem with this information if we were to hold to the Chapter 13 verse 1 statement that “Saul was ~~thirty~~ years old when he began to reign....” If Saul became king when he was thirty years old, and he was in his second year as king, Saul would be about thirty-two years old at the time of the defeat of the Philistines in the garrison at Geba, led by his son Jonathan. Where is the problem? May we address it now.

From the days of Moses, the long-standing and direct instruction concerning men who were old enough to fight in battle began at the age of twenty. Near the beginning of the Exodus, a census was taken of all the men who could make up the army of Israel. Moses recorded the LORD’s instruction as follows.

Then the LORD spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai, in the tent of meeting, on the first of the second month, in the second year after they had come out of the land of Egypt, saying, “Take a census of all the congregation of the sons of Israel, by their families, by their fathers’ households, according to the number of names, every male, head by head from twenty years old and upward, whoever is able to go out to war in Israel, you and Aaron shall number them by their armies. (Numbers 1:1–3)

At the end of the book of Numbers, at the end of the forty-year wilderness journey for Israel, a second census was taken to number the men who could be part of the army of Israel. Again, we see the LORD’s instruction to Moses.

Then it came about after the plague, that the LORD spoke to Moses and to Eleazar the son of Aaron the priest, saying, “Take a census of all the congregation of the sons of Israel from twenty years old and upward, by their fathers’ households, whoever is able to go out to war in Israel.” So Moses and Eleazar the priest spoke with them in the plains of Moab by the Jordan at Jericho, saying, “Take a census of the people from twenty years old and upward, as the LORD has commanded Moses.” (Numbers 26:1–4)

We must not forget that all the instruction that the Nation of Israel needed from the LORD when it entered the Promised Land and for the rest of time was given to Israel through Moses during the forty years in the wilderness journey as found in Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. Everything was covered by the LORD for civil, religious, and military life. Young men were not part of the army of Israel until they were at least twenty years of age. The only reason a man twenty years and older was not to be in the army as if he was newly married. In that case, the LORD’s instruction said,

“When a man takes a new wife, he shall not go out with the army nor be charged with any duty; he shall be free at home one year and shall give happiness to his wife whom he has taken.” (Deuteronomy 24:5)

It seems from our passage that Jonathan was in charge of the one-thousand warriors with him at the time of the defeat of the Philistines in the garrison at Geba. If that is the case, in the culture of the civil, religious, and military life in the Nation of Israel, Jonathan had to be at least twenty years of age to serve in Saul’s army. His prestige as the son of Saul might have put him in charge of the men with him; that is understandable. But, his age also had to be considered. Now the math; this math is just speculation based on chapter 13 verse 1. If Saul became king at the age of thirty and he was thirty-two years of age when Jonathan, who was at least the age of twenty at the time, must have meant that Saul became the father of Jonathan when Saul was twelve years of age or under. Impossible? No. Probable? No. If you add at least six years to Saul’s age, then he could have had a son when he was about eighteen. If that were the case, when Jonathan was twenty years of age, Saul would have been about thirty-eight years of age.

What can we draw from this discovery? First, we have no idea how old Saul was when he became king. Any fast and hard date would simply be speculation. Second, Saul was already married and had children when he became king. That statement seems to be a fact. Third, if Jonathan was twenty years of age at the time of the defeat of the Philistines at the garrison in Geba, he was at least thirty years old when David was born in the tenth year of Saul’s reign. Therefore, Jonathan was at least twenty-eight to thirty years older than David. Fifth, thirty-eight years after this defeat of the Philistines, Jonathan would be at least fifty-eight years old when he died with his father at the battle of Gilboa. His son, Mephibosheth, will be five years old, meaning that Jonathan was fifty-three years old when Mephibosheth was born. It also means that Saul was more or less in his eighties when he died with Jonathan. Alas, all of this is just speculation as to the plain and simple math. Without the true ages of Saul and Jonathan, we are left clearly in the dark and cannot make any hard and fast conclusions. One thing we do know is that Saul had one surviving son by the name of Ishbosheth, who became the king of eleven of the tribes of Israel. He was king over these eleven tribes for two years before being killed. At the time of Saul’s death, Ishbosheth was forty years old. (2 Samuel 2:8-10)

May we make a few last points to expose erroneous errors concerning Saul’s age and his length of reign. Some in Jewish tradition hold to the position that Saul became king when he was forty years of age and then died at the end of his second year as king at the age of forty-two. If that was the case, his son, Ishbosheth, was conceived when Saul was two years old. Impossible? Yes. Another arm of Jewish tradition holds that Saul became king at age thirty and ruled for only twenty years. This point also has a problem. In that case, Saul died at the age of fifty with a forty-year-old son, who was not even his oldest son. Impossible? Yes. Yet another Jewish tradition holds that Saul was forty years old and reigned for twenty years. That position means that Saul was sixty years old when he died, and Ishbosheth was forty years old. Impossible? No. Probable? Could be. (see “Saul” in the Jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/13224-saul)

As we move on, the writer will give another example which seems to be for a different reason; it was to expose the trouble Saul was having with his troops abandoning him as king.

2. The Story of the Gathering of the People with Saul (13:5-7)

In this following example, it seems the writer is establishing the trouble that Saul will soon face with the coming of the Philistines. The writer tells us the story of the gathering of the people with Saul. Verse 5.

“The people were then summoned to Saul at Gilgal. Now the Philistines assembled to fight with Israel, 30,000 chariots and 6,000 horsemen, and people like the sand which is on the seashore in abundance; and they came up and

camped in Michmash, east of Beth-aven.” “When the men of Israel saw that they were in a strait (~~for the people were hard-pressed~~), then the people hid themselves in caves, in thickets, in cliffs, in cellars, and in pits.”^{7a} Also some of the Hebrews crossed the Jordan into the land of Gad and Gilead. But as for Saul, he was still in Gilgal, and all the people followed him trembling.” (13:5-7)

If the writer has put these last two stories in chronological order, then the writer must be indicating that Jonathan’s defeat of the Philistine garrison in Jeba (Geba) kindled the attention and wrath of the Philistines who returned to the tribal area in massive numbers. In the first of these two stories, Saul, after his victory at Jabash-gilead, had gathered his forces at Mishmash and sent everyone home except three thousand men. Two-thousand men stayed with Saul; one thousand men were with Jonathan in Gibeah. Jonathan influenced the men to attack the Philistine garrison. In response, the Philistines came in mass to the last area Saul had camped, Michmash. In this story, Saul had moved from Michmash to Gilgal. At Gilgal, Saul’s army heard of the massive army of Philistines gathered at their last campsite in Michmash. There at Gilgal, the news of the Philistine army struck fear in Saul’s army, and they all ran to hide. With this setup in the story, the Philistines were established in the Promised Land and would be a constant thorn in the side of Saul until after the Ark was returned from being captured twenty-seven years after Saul became king.

The passage ends by saying, “*But as for Saul, he was still in Gilgal, and all the people followed him trembling.*” In other words, when the soldiers ran to hide from the Philistines, Saul did not run. He remained at Gilgal. When the verse says, “*and all the people followed him trembling,*” it means that Saul was the established King of Israel, the people were faithful to follow Saul as king, but they were terribly afraid of the Philistines.