

1 Samuel 13: Biblical Reading and Reflections

Disclaimer: this is an automatically generated machine transcription - there may be small errors or mistranscriptions. Please refer to the original audio if you are in any doubt.

Date: 23 July 2020

Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 00] 1 Samuel chapter 13 Saul lived for one year and then became king, and when he had reigned for two years over Israel, Saul chose three thousand men of Israel.

Two thousand were with Saul in Michmash and the hill country of Bethel, and a thousand were with Jonathan in Gibeah of Benjamin, and the rest of the people he sent home, every man to his tent. Jonathan defeated the garrison of the Philistines that was at Geba, and the Philistines heard of it.

And Saul blew the trumpet throughout all the land, saying, Let the Hebrews hear! And all Israel heard it said that Saul had defeated the garrison of the Philistines, and also that Israel had become a stench to the Philistines, and the people were called out to join Saul at Gilgal.

And the Philistines mustered to fight with Israel, thirty thousand chariots and six thousand horsemen and troops, like the sand on the seashore in multitude. They came up and encamped in Michmash, to the east of Beth-Avon.

When the men of Israel saw that they were in trouble, for the people were hard-pressed, the people hid themselves in caves and in holes and in rocks and in tombs and in cisterns, and some Hebrews crossed the fords of the Jordan to the land of Gad and Gilead.

[1 : 08] Saul was still at Gilgal, and all the people followed him trembling. He waited seven days, the time appointed by Samuel, but Samuel did not come to Gilgal, and the people were scattering from him.

So Saul said, Bring the burnt offering here to me, and the peace offerings. And he offered the burnt offering. As soon as he had finished offering the burnt offering, behold, Samuel came.

And Saul went out to meet him and greet him. Samuel said, What have you done? And Saul said, When I saw that the people were scattering from me, and that you did not come within the days appointed, and that the Philistines had mustered at Michmash, I said, Now the Philistines will come down against me at Gilgal, and I have not sought the favour of the Lord.

So I forced myself and offered the burnt offering. And Samuel said to Saul, You have done foolishly. You have not kept the command of the Lord your God, with which he commanded you.

For then the Lord would have established your kingdom over Israel forever. But now your kingdom shall not continue. The Lord has sought out a man after his own heart, and the Lord has commanded him to be prince over his people, because you have not kept what the Lord commanded you.

[2 : 18] And Samuel arose and went up from Gilgal. The rest of the people went up after Saul to meet the army. They went up from Gilgal to Gibeah of Benjamin. And Saul numbered the people who were present with him, about six hundred men.

And Saul and Jonathan his son and the people who were present with them stayed in Gibeah of Benjamin, but the Philistines encamped in Michmash. And raiders came out of the camp of the Philistines in three companies.

One company turned towards Ophrah, to the land of Shuel. Another company turned towards Beth Horon. And another company turned toward the border that looks down on the valley of Zeboim, toward the wilderness.

Now there was no blacksmith to be found throughout all the land of Israel. For the Philistines said, Lest the Hebrews make themselves swords or spears. But every one of the Israelites went down to the Philistines to sharpen his plowshare, his mattock, his axe, or his sickle.

And the charge was two-thirds of a shekel for the plowshares and for the mattocks, and a third of a shekel for sharpening the axes and for setting the goads. So on the day of the battle there was neither sword nor spear found in the hand of any of the people with Saul and Jonathan.

[3 : 23] But Saul and Jonathan his son had them. And the garrison of the Philistines went out to the pass of Michmash. The beginning of 1 Samuel chapter 13 presents us with a knotty textual question.

If you compare different English translations, you will notice that the years mentioned in verse 1 vary from one to another. The problem is exacerbated by the fact that the version in the ESV, which seems to have the strongest textual case in its favour, is decidedly odd.

It employs a formula familiar from the books of the kings and elsewhere. Saul was X years old when he became king, and he reigned for Y years. However, here it says he lived for one year, and then he reigned for two years.

What are we to make of this? We should probably start with the second number. In Acts chapter 13 verse 21, the apostle Paul declares that Saul reigned for 40 years, a number that's also given to us in Josephus' antiquities.

So it is difficult to argue that Saul literally only reigned for two years, even if we were able to imagine the events of his reign described in 1 Samuel occurring within such a brief span of time, which we can't.

[4 : 29] The second number might arguably refer to the number of years that Saul reigned before the events of chapter 13 occurred. That is how the ESV takes it. Another possibility is that the years refer to the period of time during which Saul was the divinely sanctioned monarch.

Some, such as David Toshio Samora, argue that the expression should be read as an ironic one. Two years should be understood to mean a few years, in a more indefinite sense.

The meaning might be similar to a non-literal use of the term a couple of, which can occasionally be used as an intentional extreme understatement. For example, if a criminal spoke of having a couple of run-ins with the police, rather than as a literal reference to two years exactly.

The purpose here then would be to discount the significance of the years of Saul's reign. They can be passed over lightly. While he may have been on the throne for two decades by this time, to the author it is but a few years.

Another possibility is that both of the numbers of the years were intentionally left blank in the original and have been subsequently filled in by scribal copyists. Karl Mac Carter is one who suggests this.

[5 : 34] What difference might any of this make? One difference is the age of Saul when he came to the throne. If Saul reigned for 40 years, and the events of this chapter occurred two years into his reign, then Saul must have been in his late 30s at the least when he became king, as Jonathan must have been at least 20, old enough to lead a thousand men into battle.

Another related difference is our understanding of the age of David relative to that of Jonathan. In 2 Samuel chapter 5 verse 4, we are told that David was 30 years old when he began to reign.

This would make Jonathan about 30 years older than David, if 1 Samuel chapter 13 refers to events that occurred two years into a 40-year reign. This also leaves us with the question of how Saul could be described as being, more literally, a son of one year.

That expression is most commonly found in reference to sacrificial animals. Peter Lighthouse suggests that this might refer to the fact that Saul received a sort of adoption by Samuel and became a new man in chapters 9 and 10.

The suggestion then would be that this occurred one year before Saul became king. If this were the case, some comparisons between Saul and an unblemished sacrificial animal at the time of his installation into the kingly office might be invited.

[6 : 48] It is not uncommon for numbers to have been altered in biblical texts, and there are a number of places in scripture where we have different numbers preserved in different textual traditions. There are also places where the numbers seem to be wrong, unless we are missing something about the technical meaning of certain terms.

For instance, common sense would seem to exclude the possibility that the Philistines actually had 30,000 chariots, as mentioned in verse 5. Other translations have 3,000 or 3 thousands, which is more plausible.

Perhaps even more so if we read thousand as thousands, referring to a military contingent, which wouldn't necessarily contain literally a thousand chariots. My position has changed on this question in the last year.

I think it is far more plausible to believe that the events of 1 Samuel 13 occurred at least a couple of decades into Saul's reign. It seems less likely that Saul was nearly 40 when he became king, and still fighting in his late 70s, at the end of the book.

Also that Jonathan was over 30 years older than David. The plausibility of a dating much later in Saul's reign is further strengthened by verse 14. It might be a bit strange to speak of the Lord having sought out and commanded a man after his own heart to be king instead of Saul, if David hadn't even been born yet.

[8 : 06] For these reasons, mostly considerations of plausibility internal to the narrative itself, I am inclined to believe that the numbers given are incorrect and have either been changed from those in the original or added to an original text that had no numbers.

Returning to the narrative, Saul here might be establishing a sort of standing army, divided into two companies, 2,000 with Saul in Michmash and the remaining 1,000 with Jonathan in Gibeah, Saul's home city.

This is the first reference to Jonathan in 1 Samuel. We aren't yet informed that he is Saul's son. Jonathan successfully defeats the Philistine garrison at Gibeah, which will later provoke a massive Philistine counter-offensive.

Israel hears of Saul's victory, but also of the fact that Israel was now facing the prospect of fierce Philistine vengeance. We might recall the way that the Israelites opposed Moses when Pharaoh increased their burdens, or the Judahites sought to give Samson to the Philistines due to their fear of reprisals.

The prospect of remaining submissive to an oppressive power may be a more welcome one than the prospect of a failed rebellion leading to them being crushed. The people are now summoned to join Saul at Gilgal.

[9 : 17] Israel is trapped. Jonathan's actions have incited the Philistine's ire, and the Philistines now retaliate with devastating force. The people hide themselves in caves, holes, tombs, and cisterns, much as they had in the time of the Midianites prior to Gideon's deliverance.

Others flee to the Transjordan, leaving the promised land. And Saul camps at Gilgal, the site where they first camped in the land when they entered under Joshua. However, the people following him are exceedingly fearful.

They are supposed to be the true recipients of the promise of the land, yet it is the Philistines who are like the sand of the seashore in multitude. Saul had been instructed to wait at Gilgal for seven days until Samuel came.

This was the time that Samuel had appointed. And this recalls the instruction given to Saul in chapter 10 verses 7 to 8. Now when these signs meet you, do what your hand finds to do, for God is with you.

Then go down before me to Gilgal. And behold, I am coming down to you to offer burnt offerings and to sacrifice peace offerings. Seven days you shall wait, until I come to you and show you what you shall do.

[10 : 20] This instruction seemed to refer to the initial installation of Saul as king, which occurred at Gilgal at the end of chapter 11. However, the instruction to wait for seven days here recalls that earlier instruction and contrasts Saul's unfaithfulness here with his previous faithfulness.

Note that there he had become a new man near the Philistine garrison at Gibeah and then been instructed to go to Gilgal. Saul waits for seven days. It isn't entirely clear whether the seven days have passed or it is on the seventh day at this point, but he loses his nerve when Samuel does not turn up.

He then takes matters into his own hand and offers the burnt offering and the peace offerings himself. Why is this so serious? First, Saul is acting independently of the prophet Samuel, the one who declares God's word to him and represents the Lord's authority over him.

The whole kingdom depended upon the king's submission to the word of the Lord, that the Lord was the true king of Israel and Saul was under him. The king's heeding of the voice of the prophet was of paramount importance.

Second, it's possible that Saul here assumes the prerogative to play the part of a priest himself, offering the sacrifices himself. On the other hand, it's possible that this is just a shorthand for saying that Saul commanded the sacrifices to be made.

[11 : 39] In the next chapter, we discover that Ahijah, the son of Ahitab, the brother of Ichabod, the priest of the Lord, is camped with Saul and presumably he would have performed such sacrifices for Saul.

Had Saul performed the sacrifices himself, he would have been claiming authority over the worship of Israel in a way that he did not possess. I think the most likely issue here is his disobedience to Samuel and the fact that as the king, he rejects the word of the prophet.

Samuel's confrontation with Saul might remind us of the confrontation with Adam after his sin in the garden, or Moses' confrontation with Aaron after his sin with the golden calf, another instance when someone assumed the right to reorder Israel's worship out of expediency, fear and impatience.

Saul's response is like Adam and Aaron's, full of excuses. Saul has sinned against the Lord and against Samuel. He has jettisoned their fatherly authority over him.

Had Saul been faithful, his kingdom would have endured. However, because of his unfaithfulness, Saul would have no enduring dynasty, and his kingdom would end with him. The Lord would seek out a faithful replacement for Saul, a man after his own heart, which proves to be David.

[12 : 53] It's likely that there was still opportunity for Saul to repent at this point, and for the blessing to be restored to him. On occasions we have these declarations of definite judgment in scripture, but the Lord relents from judgment when the people repent.

The city of Nineveh's repentance at the preaching of Jonah is a good example of this. In Saul, we find a compelling and deeply observant portrait of how power can change someone, even transforming what were once virtues into vices.

In this chapter, we see a hairline fracture in Saul's character start to expand. His characteristic modesty, lack of grand ambition, reluctance to assume power, and his self-doubt express themselves in fear, loss of nerve, and rashness.

Later they will develop into a growing insecurity and paranoia about his possible replacement. Saul will become desperately fixated upon holding on to his power.

His whole mindset gets transformed by power. Once he has tasted power and its potential, and what it means for his identity and legacy, he becomes defined and consumed by it.

[13 : 57] Power holds him more than he holds power. Saul's insecurities drive his sinful actions. His men were abandoning him, and rather than trust the Lord, who defeated the Midianites, who had covered the land like a locust horde, threw 300 men with Gideon, Saul has 600, he lost his nerve and acted rashly.

Saul's fears start to define him, when what he needed was faith in the Lord. A fearful and insecure person wielding power can be a very dangerous thing. Saul decamps from Gilgal and joins with Jonathan and his company at Geba.

The Philistines camp nearby in Michmash. We should note the locations of the camps here are directly reversed from the camps at the beginning of the chapter, as are the relative fortunes of the two forces.

The Philistines now divide their forces into three raiding parties, much as Gideon had divided his forces in Judges. They send out military units in different directions to quell the rebellion, while Saul and his men seemingly are unable to do anything.

Israel's situation is dire. They are without weaponry, as the Philistines have a monopoly on ironworking. Only Saul and Jonathan have weapons. Israel had first entered the land under Joshua in the late Bronze Age.

[15 : 12] One of the major concerns then, which continued to be a concern, was the military technology of the chariot, which enabled certain Canaanite groups to dominate the plains. Now, in the first part of the Iron Age, military dominance depends heavily upon iron smelting and blacksmiths, and the Philistines effectively control access to that technology.

An Israelite who wants even an agricultural tool to be sharpened will have to go to the Philistines and pay them an exorbitant rate for them to do so. This description of the Philistines' dominance, however, sets things up for Jonathan's incredible victory in the chapter that follows.

A question to consider. What can we learn from Saul about the relationship between courage and faithfulness?