

Just How Old Was Saul?

I would like to suggest an understanding of an Old Testament passage which is dependent upon a discussion in an earlier blog entry which can be found [here](#). Quite simply, that discussion considered a peculiar Hebrew idiom, the most familiar expression of which is the numerical proverb found occasionally in the book of Proverbs. I repeat some of that discussion here in order to make possible the ensuing suggestion.

The construction is disarmingly simple and quite flexible. It is the literary device which is framed in terms of a numerical progression – basically, “ χ , yea $\chi + 1$.” The wisdom teacher, Agur, especially loved this form of expression; four times in Proverbs 30 this construction is employed, always with the numbers “3, yea 4” (30:15, 18, 21, 29). In each case, the four items are iterated after the introductory accounting. This is the most obvious form of the device, as both numbers are explicit.

On the other hand, many times only one numeral is explicit, but the list which follows makes clear the numerical progression; for instance, in Prov 30:7, Agur implores, “Two things I asked of you...”, but in the next verse he lists *three*. And again, in many cases there is no digit expressed at all, but the progression from one number to the next carries the weight of the expression, as in Agur’s opening distich “The man declares to *Ithiel*, to *Ithiel* and *Ucal*” (30:1). Finally, the digits may be used with no ensuing list, as in Amos 1:3 – “Thus says the LORD, ‘For *three* transgressions of Damascus and for *four* I will not revoke its punishment...’”

So what is the point of this curious device? Very simply, it expresses *fullness*. For instance, it is not true that there are *only* seven things the Lord hates, but He *really despises* these seven (Prov 6:16-19). *Ithiel* and *Ucal* – whoever they were – were *precisely* the audience for whom Agur intended his wisdom sayings. And Damascus has filled *to overflowing* its cup of iniquity. In a day when italics and underscoring were not available, and when most people accessed the Scriptures by ear at any rate, such a device for communicating fullness, completeness, or intensity was precious to speakers and writers.

The suggestion is that this literary device – foreign to the modern reader and thus easily overlooked – might well be the key to the proper reading of one of the most cryptic verses in the Old Testament. That verse is 1 Samuel 13:1. Briefly, the verse is problematic for two inter-related reasons. First, the structure of the verse is clearly parallel to certain forms of the “regnal formula” with which the reigns of the kings of Judah and Israel are consistently introduced in Kings and Chronicles;¹ given that unmistakable similarity, the conclusion is reasonable *that the intent of 1 Samuel 13:1 was to record the data normally included via that regnal formula*. And second, the text as it stands is incoherent *given the assumption that the author did in fact intend to record those data*.² Thus the almost universal persuasion that (given that assumption) the only way to make sense of the verse is to assume that the text is corrupt, that digits have fallen out of the verse.³

The Issue of Similarity

The first of those two issues needs to be considered more carefully, viz. the matter of the similarity between 1 Sam 13:1 and certain iterations of the “regnal formula.” The regnal formula is not fixed or static, but it is often constructed of just two pieces of data relevant to the reign of a king: the *age of the man when he assumed the throne* and then *the number of years he reigned on that throne*. Note for instance the following examples:

- 2 Chron 12:13 Now Rehoboam was forty-one years old when he began to reign, and he reigned seventeen years in Jerusalem (cf. 1 Kgs 14:21)
- 2 Chron 20:31 Now Jehoshaphat reigned over Judah. He was thirty-five years old when he became king, and he reigned in Jerusalem twenty-five years (cf 1 Kgs 24:22)
- 2 Chron 21:5, 20 Jehoram was thirty-two years old when he became king, and he reigned eight years in Jerusalem (cf. 2 Kgs 8:17)
- 2 Chron 22:2 Ahaziah was twenty-two years old when he became king, and he reigned one year in Jerusalem (cf. 2 Kgs 8:26)

There are in fact variations on the formula,⁴ but in many cases these two data – the age at which the man became king and the number of years he reigned – are found together in this form. (Other instances include Joash, 2 Chr 24:1 & 2 Kgs 14:2; Amaziah, 2 Chr 25:1 & 2 Kgs 15:2; Uzziah, 2 Chr 26:3; Jotham, 2 Chr 27:1, 8 & 2 Kgs 15:33; Ahaz, 2 Chr 28:1 & 2 Kgs 16:2; Hezekiah, 2 Chr 29:1 & 2 Kgs 18:2; Manasseh, 2 Chr 33:1 & 2 Kgs 21:1; Amon, 2 Chr 33:21 & 2 Kgs 21:19; Josiah, 2 Chr 31:1 & 2 Kgs 22:1; Jehoahaz, 2 Chr 36:2 & 2 Kgs 23:31; Jehoiakim, 2 Chr 36:5 & 2 Kgs 23:36; Jehoiachin, 2 Chr 36:9 & 2 Kgs 24:8; Zedekiah, 2 Chr 36:11 & 2 Kgs 24:18 & Jer 52:1.)

The Hebrew form in these instances is very regular. For instance, 2 Chron 21:5 reads,

בֶּן־שְׁלֹשִׁים וּשְׁתַּיִם שָׁנָה יְהוֹרָם בְּמַלְכוֹ וּשְׁמוֹנֶה שָׁנִים מָלַךְ בִּירוּשָׁלַם									
in Jerusalem	he reigned	years	and 8	in reigning	Jehoram	years	and 2	30	Son

[Literally, “A son of thirty and two years is Jehoram in his reigning, and eight years he hath reigned in Jerusalem.” YLT]

2 Kings 8:26 reads,

בֶּן־עֶשְׂרִים וּשְׁתַּיִם שָׁנָה אַחַזְיָהוּ בְּמַלְכוֹ וְשָׁנָה אֶחָד וּבִירוּשָׁלַם									
in Jerusalem	he reigned	one	and year	in reigning	Ahaziah	years	and 2	20	Son

[Literally, “a son of twenty and two years is Ahaziah in his reigning, and one year he hath reigned in Jerusalem” YLT]

The point to stress is that the two elements of the statement are rather formulized. First, the age at which the man became king is expressed as “A son of χ years in his reigning,” and the length of his reign is written as “ χ years he reigned in Jerusalem.”

Given that rather standard expression of the regnal formula, compare the wording of 1 Samuel 13:1.

בֶּן־שָׁנָה שָׂאוּל בְּמָלְכוֹ וּשְׁתֵּי שָׁנִים מָלַךְ עַל־יִשְׂרָאֵל

over Israel	he reigned	years	and two	in reigning	Saul	a year	Son
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[Literally, “A son of a year is Saul in his reigning, yea, two years he hath reigned over Israel.” YLT]

The similarity in structure between that form of the regnal formula and the introductory note found in 1 Sam 13:1 is unmistakable. It is entirely reasonable to conclude from that similarity that it was the intent of the divinely superintended historian to record the age of Saul when he took the throne and the years of his reign, and then – because of the incongruity of the verse given the numbers that are found in the text – to deduce that the digits which would render the verse intelligible must have fallen out of the text at some point in the long history of transmission.

A Word regarding the Textual Evidence

It is important to point out that the issue in this verse is not competing textual evidences. Emanuel Tov cites this text as an example of “unintentional (erroneous) omissions” the recognition of which “is not based on comparative textual evidence, but on content analysis.”⁵ Again, Wallace acknowledges in a note to his rendering of this text in the NET Bible that “admittedly the textual evidence for this decision is weak, but the same can be said of any attempt to restore sense to this difficult text...” The almost ubiquitous persuasion that this text is corrupt – that digits have fallen out – is a consequence not of extant variants, but of the apparent incongruity of the text as it stands according to virtually all of the textual evidence. This is what Tov means by the phrase “content analysis.”

A Suggested Resolution of the Perceived Incongruity of the Text as It Stands

I am not offering a way to restore the text of 1 Samuel 13:1, as I am persuaded that the text as it stands has been faithfully transmitted, that it is the text which the divine historian originally penned.⁶ But again, entirely and necessarily seminal to the conclusion of so many that the text stands irretrievably corrupted is *not* the issue of textual variants, but the persuasion that the verse was intended as a regnal formula. But what if the verse was not intended to be the initial Old Testament appearance of that formula; what if the historian never meant to record either Saul’s age when he took the throne or the length of his reign? Indeed, might the verse be better read as another instance of the very common and effective literary device discussed above – the numerical progression.

Notice that the verse very well fits the mold of the numerical progression: “ $\chi, \chi + 1$.” As in Amos 1:3 (‘For *three* transgressions of Damascus and for *four* I will not revoke its punishment...’), there is no list of items subsequent to the numerical progression; rather the progression is in the numbered items themselves. And in both cases the message is to be found not so much in the numerical value of the digits themselves, but in the force of the numerical progression, which literary device is intended to communicate *fullness* or *intensity*.

By this reading, the point of the verse is just as it stands: “Saul was the son of a year (as king), and when he had reigned two years over Israel...” Again, the reference is – as always with the numerical progression – to fullness. The point is probably this: “When Saul was *fully established* as king.” It is not a specific chronological reference.⁷ Rather, it makes the point that an undefined amount of time went by, probably relatively brief, during which Saul fully ensconced himself on the throne, and that only after that period of time did the melancholy events of 1 Sam 13 occur.

The use of the figure in this passage is similar to what I would argue is a use of the same figure by Jesus in Lk 13:32, 33, “...today and tomorrow, and the third day I shall be perfected.”⁸ In that passage, Jesus’ enemies have come to Perea to try to trick Him into returning to Judea where they can move the Roman officials to arrest Him. Jesus’ rather cryptic reply becomes very intelligible if the literary device of numerical progression is recognized. His point is that only in the time of God’s choosing, when the time is full, will He be perfected. In both the Samuel and Luke passages the progression is found in the reference to units of chronology (“today & tomorrow [i.e., 2 days] and on the *third day*” – cf. “Saul was the son of a year in his reigning [i.e., reigned *one year*] and when he had reigned *two years*”). And in both cases there are in fact no specific chronological data being recorded; rather, the progression is intended to express fullness in each case. (In Samuel, “when Saul was *fully established* as king”; in Luke, “in the time of God’s choosing – *when the time is full* – I shall be perfected.”)

The Matter of the Literary Context

Notice that this reading of the verse fits very well in the context of the book. 1 Samuel 1 – 12 is basically the story of the last Judge in Israel, Samuel. But the story of Samuel becomes the story of the appearance of the monarchy in Israel. That is an important element of the history of God’s covenant nation in its own right, but it is the more important because it is such a pivotal step in the process by which that story begins to move ever more dramatically toward David. Indeed, the story of Saul is primarily important as the prelude to David. And thus there is careful explanation of the series of events that brought the nation to the place that they recognized the need for a national ruler and demanded a king of Samuel (1 Sam 4-8).⁹ This is followed by the narrative of Saul’s selection as king, (1 Sam 9 – 10), the demonstration of God’s special anointing upon Saul (1 Sam 11), and then Samuel’s magisterial sermon in which he turned civil power over to Saul but reminded the nation that they were still under the theocratic arrangement, that Yahweh was still their ultimate Sovereign and Samuel still their prophet (1 Sam 12). By the end of 1 Sam 12, the remarkable transition from Judges to Kings has been made, and King Saul has been accepted by the people and acknowledged by the prophet to be the legitimate human king of Israel.

But the story is not about Saul; it’s about David. And thus the historian can take no time to chronicle the details of Saul’s enthronement, his establishment of a capital, the arrangement of his court, and so on. Rather, he must hasten to the account of Saul’s sins – first the sin of intruding into the priestly office, for which *his house* was rejected (1 Sam 13 – 14), and then the sin of refusing to completely slay the Amalekites, for which *he was personally* rejected as king (1 Sam 15). Because of

those two sins, Yahweh rejected Saul and his house from being king over Israel and the throne was transferred to the house of David (1 Sam 16). The record is written in such a way as to emphasize that David is not a disloyal secessionist or usurper, that he did not use the special place given him in the court of King Saul as an opportunity to betray that monarch. Indeed, 1 Samuel is primarily an apologetic for the house of David, and as such it would be counter-productive to concentrate on the details of Saul's court and/or his reign.

And thus, after establishing the legitimacy of Saul's *becoming* king (1 Sam 8 – 12), the historian employs a very common literary device to cover whatever period of time occurred before the first of the two great sins which culminated in his *rejection* as king. Again, the point is not chronological *per se*. Rather, the numerical progression is employed to make the point that the sorry account recorded in 1 Sam 13 occurred only after King Saul had thoroughly ensconced himself as king in Israel.

Once Again, the Issue of Similarity

But it was acknowledged above that the vocabulary and syntax of 1 Samuel 13:1 are unmistakably similar to that employed in the form of the regnal formula that introduces the reign of a king by providing two pieces of information: his age at his inauguration and the length of his reign. This cannot be simple coincidence. Surely 1 Sam 13:1 must be identified as the initial use in the Old Testament of the regnal formula.

Again, I would suggest an alternative explanation. Samuel was the very first in a remarkable line of court prophets – prophets raised up by King Yahweh to confront the human king sitting on the throne of the covenant people. Whether or not Samuel is identified as the human author of 1 Samuel, it is reasonable to argue that that divinely superintended record very likely functioned as the template for the successive prophetic records of the successive monarchs of Israel, and later of Judah and Israel.¹⁰ Although this is not the place to develop the idea, I believe the evidence is compelling that the corpus we know as 1, 2 Samuel/1, 2 Kings was not penned retroactively by some one chronicler, but is the compilation of a series of prophetic analyses of successive kings, each written in prophetic voice by the court prophet assigned by King Yahweh to monitor the activities of the human king. One of the ways by which those later prophets paid their respect to the founder of their guild was to make creative use of the literary device by which he introduced the narrative of the very first king. To be sure, the use to which those later prophets put that literary construction was different than the use to which Samuel had first put it. But the use of the words and the syntax, even if distinct in intended meaning, perhaps gave some measure of credibility to their account as a prophetic oracle, and it was certainly intended and perceived as an appropriate note of deference to the man who was chosen by God to establish the monarchy in Israel, to anoint the first two monarchs, and then to exercise prophetic watchcare over the first of those kings.

The sum of the matter

If 1 Sam 13:1 is taken not as the first use of the regnal formula but as another use of a peculiar but common literary device known as numerical progression, a device which always expresses fullness or intensity, the verse is simply saying that the

events of 1 Sam 13 occurred only after Saul was fully established as king in Israel. The text says this perfectly as it stands, so there is no need to reconstruct the text by recovering digits perceived to have fallen out. Further, the similarity of this verse to one oft-used expression of the regnal formula is the result of later prophets creatively patterning their narrative after the archetypal narrative of the founder of the guild of court prophets, Samuel.

¹The concept of the regnal formula is briefly discussed in Bill T. Arnold and Bryan E. Beyer, *Encountering the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998), 223.

²The reason the text is incoherent is that as it stands it would mean – if it is indeed the regnal formula – that Saul became king when he was one year old and reigned for a total of two years. Neither of those chronological data is possible given the narrative of 1 Samuel and the insight of Ac 13:21.

³ See, for instance, Dr. Dan Wallace’s note on 1 Sam 13:1 in the NET Bible (www.bible.com). He states regarding the first part of the verse, “A number appears to have dropped out of the Hebrew text here, since as it stands the MT (literally, “a son of a year”) must mean that Saul was only one year old when he began to reign!” Concerning the second piece of data (“he reigned for two years”), Wallace avers, “The MT has ‘two years’ here... But if the statement in v. 1 is intended to be a comprehensive report on the length of Saul’s reign, the number is too small.” Wallace appeals to Ac13:21 and supplies the figure 40. The NET rendering of the verse is, Saul was [thirty] years old when he began to reign; he ruled over Israel for [forty] years.” Again, Gleason Archer says of the first part of this verse, “the Masoretic text has lost the number that must have been included in the original manuscript” (*Encyclopedia of Bible Difficulties*, 171). The ASV has: “Saul was *forty* years old when he began to reign; and when he had reigned *two* years over Israel...” and in a footnote regarding the first digit, “The number is lacking in the Hebrew text, and is supplied conjecturally.” A number of Bible versions, including Darby’s, RSV, NRSV, ESV, and the New Scofield KJV, acknowledge the perceived loss of digits by inserting an ellipsis into their rendering of this verse: “Saul was ... years old when he began to reign; and he reigned... and two years over Israel.” An ESV footnote at the 1st ellipsis states, “The number is lacking in Hebrew and Septuagint,” and at the 2nd ellipsis, “Two may not be the entire number; something may have dropped out.”

⁴A thorough comparison of the various iterations of the “regnal formula” can be found in William Barnes, “Non-Synoptic Chronological References in the Books of Chronicles,” in *The Chronicler as Historian: Was the Chronicler a Historian?*, ed. Matt Patrick Graham, Kenneth G. Hoglund, Steven L. McKenzie (SBL: Continuum International Publishing Group, 1997), 106-31.

⁵Emmanuel Tov, *Textual Criticism of the Hebrew Bible* (2nd revised edition; Minneapolis, 2001), 236-37. Tov cites some textual variants which supply other digits, but he insists that there is no evidence that any of those variants can be traced to an earlier stage of the text at which the correct figure regarding Saul’s age when he became king was not yet lost. Again, the LXX omits the verse altogether, indicating perhaps that the verse was already regarded as unintelligible by those translators. The reality is that the textual variants are no help in restoring the original text; they simply testify to the fact that if the passage is in fact corrupted, it was corrupted very early in the transmission of the text.

⁶Please do not read this to be a persuasion that no text of Scripture can be or has been corrupted. I do not believe that there is a perfect text. Indeed, I concur that the means of preservation employed by God is providential, and that preservation has been accomplished by means of the multiplicity of texts – none of which is perfect, all of which have been corrupted at this point or that. My contention here has to do only with the text of 1 Sam 13.

⁷Many older versions took the second part of the verse in this way, reading it to mean that the battle described in 1 Sam 13 occurred during the second year of Saul’s kingship. For instance, the ASV “conjecturally” supplies the number 40 for Saul’s age at his enthronement, but allows the second part of the verse to stand, evidently taking it as the time that elapsed before the events of 1 Sam 13 occurred. Older commentators tend to read the second part of the verse in this way as well. For instance, Matthew Henry explains the verse in this way: “Saul reigned one year, and nothing particular happened; but in his second year the events recorded in this chapter took place.” I would commend him for accepting the text as it stands; however, I think he has missed the literary dynamic at stake.

⁸[See a discussion of that passage here.](#)

⁹It is my persuasion that the period of the Judges was God’s way to teach His people that they needed a king (cf. Jdgs 17:26; 21:25), and that the reign of King Saul was God’s way to teach His people that they needed a king of *God’s choosing*.

¹⁰It is my persuasion that Samuel was the author of 1 Samuel 1 – 24. He could not have written any more of the book, as he is recorded as having died in 1 Sam 25. But the idea that the record of the *first* king of Israel served in significant ways as the template for later prophetic narratives of successive kings can stand absent any certain identification of any of those authors.