

1 Samuel 13:1 and the Preservation of the Hebrew Text

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When I was a new student in my ThM program, one of the prime movers in the Majority Text vineyard was in his last year, and we worked together in the Seminary kitchen. Our tongues wagged about as fast as our hands moved; we did a lot of talking, mostly about things text-critical and theological. In those pristine years, he was a firm believer in the divine preservation of both the Hebrew and Greek Testaments, to the letter. In due time I came to Brazil as a missionary, and he continued in his teaching career. Every furlough (back then field terms were usually five years) I would touch base with him and compare notes. On one of those occasions (I forget which one), when the subject of divine preservation came up, he opened a Bible to 1 Samuel 13:1 and affirmed that the original wording of that verse had been irretrievably lost—bye-bye preservation.

Well now, what he did to me, someone else had done to him, and so on into the night. I rather imagine that this verse has come to represent a difficulty in the thinking of not a few people who would like to believe in the divine preservation of the Text, but . . . Since I still believed in preservation at that time (and continue to do so), his gesture gave me pause—could he possibly be correct? So I sat down and studied the situation (including an inquiry to the local synagogue). Here is my conclusion.

The NKJV renders 1 Samuel 13:1-2 like this: “Saul reigned one year; and when he had reigned two years over Israel, Saul chose for himself three thousand men of Israel. Two thousand were with Saul in Michmash and in the mountains of Bethel, and a thousand were with Jonathan in Gibeah of Benjamin. The rest of the people he sent away, every man to his tent.” In the NIV the first verse is quite different: “Saul was [⌊]thirty[⌋] years old when he became king, and he reigned over Israel [⌊]forty-[⌋] two years.” A footnote informs the reader that the bracketed words are not in the Hebrew Text. An uninitiated lay person who compares the two could easily conclude that they are translating completely different texts, but such is not the case. The Hebrew text is one, without variants—the problem lies in the interpretation.

An interlinear, morpheme by morpheme, rendering of the first verse looks like this: “Son-of-a-year Saul in-his-reigning and-two years he-reigned over-Israel” (except, of course, that Hebrew is read from right to left). The confusion arises in that this became a formula used in the summary statement about a king’s reign: a son of X years was Y in his reigning (= when he began to reign), and he reigned Z years . . . The formula usually occurs at the end of a king’s history, but sometimes at the beginning. Of course, any attempt to apply the formula in 1 Samuel 13:1 is ridiculous. Obviously Saul could not have been one year old when he began to reign, and just as obviously he reigned more than two years. Unfortunately, NIV and others have insisted on imposing the formula on this verse, inventing the ‘thirty’ and ‘forty-’ so as not to have complete nonsense. (This also has the unfortunate effect of contradicting Acts 13:21, that affirms that Saul reigned 40 years, not 42.) I suppose they have convinced themselves that the original numbers have disappeared from the Text, having been irretrievably lost during the process of transmission.

But let us look carefully at the context of 13:1. To begin, Saul being the very first king of Israel, such a formula would not yet be in use—there had been no occasion to write of the

beginning and length of reigns. Then, in the context this is not the place for a summary statement; it is neither the beginning nor the end of the history of Saul's reign. In 1 Samuel 10:24 he was publicly installed as king—since he was the first, there was no precedent, no established procedure. In Chapter 11 Saul defeats the Ammonites and is confirmed in the kingship (verse 15). In chapter 12 Samuel defends his ministry and gives a lesson in history. Chapter 13 resumes Saul's story and starts by saying when he established a standing army—in the second year of his reign. I invite special attention to the concluding statement of verse two, "The rest of the people he sent away, every man to his tent." To be 'sent away' they had to be there. Be where? In Gilgal (11:15), where Samuel's discourse (chapter 12) also took place, as part of the occasion. According to 11:9, Saul had mobilized 330,000 men against the Ammonites, and I imagine that most of them had accompanied Samuel and Saul to Gilgal. So 13:1-2 is a continuation of what happened at Gilgal, and verse one **CANNOT** be a summary statement about Saul's total reign. Of the 330,000 that had been mobilized against Ammon, Saul chose 3,000 to be a standing army and sent the rest home. Perhaps the lack of a standing army had encouraged the Ammonites to get frisky; the news that Israel now had one would serve as a deterrent.

I take the point of 13:1 to be that Saul had a full year behind him, so these events at Gilgal took place during his second year. Hebrew is not my forte, but I would paraphrase our verse something like this, "Saul had reigned for a full year over Israel, and it was during his second year that he chose for himself three thousand men"

I reject as unfounded the allegation that some of the original wording of 1 Samuel 13:1 has been lost. The NIV does a considerable disservice to the Kingdom of God here.