

THE RELATIVE AGES OF DAVID, JONATHAN AND MICHAL

DAVID

David began to reign at the age of thirty, 2 Sam. 5.4. This 'reign' clearly covered both his seven and a half years 'reign' over Judah only and his thirty-three years 'reign' over all Israel and Judah; see 2 Sam. 5.5. That is, it dates from 2 Sam. 2.4 - 'the men of Judah came, and there they anointed David king over the house of Judah'. This appears to have followed very quickly after the death of Saul, 2 Sam. 2.1. We conclude that David was 30 years old at the time of Israel's defeat at Mount Gilboa.

As Saul reigned for 40 years, Acts 13.21, David must have been born 10 years into Saul's reign.

David was probably about 20 years of age at the time of his victory over Goliath. This would allow about 10 years for his subsequent persecution by Saul and his time spent with the Philistines - the latter occupying sixteen months, 1 Sam. 27.7.

There is no evidence by which we can establish David's age at the time of his anointing by Samuel. But, given that he was then entrusted by his father to look after the sheep alone, 1 Sam. 16.11, he was unlikely to have been less than 15 years of age.

JONATHAN

The evidence suggests that Jonathan was in command of one third of Israel's standing army *at a very early stage in Saul's reign*, 1 Sam. 13.1-2.

The existing Hebrew text of 1 Sam. 13.1 is defective - and the Septuagint offers no help¹. Rendered literally, the verse reads, 'Saul was a son of year when he began to reign; and he reigned two years over Israel. Saul chose ...'. The most likely meaning is that 'Saul was [...] years old when he began to reign; and he reigned two years in Israel. Saul chose him ...'; see RV, ESV, JND etc. By far the most likely relevance of the 'two years' is that this functions as a time-note by which we to date the subsequent events.²

We are left to supply an age to go into the [...]. The most likely candidates are 30, 35 or 40.

We are told that, when Saul was appointed king, he was a 'young man', 1 Sam. 9.2. The word indicates a young adult: see its use in 'Rejoice, O *young man*, in thy youth; and let thy heart cheer thee in the days of thy youth', Eccles. 11.9; and 'Even the youths shall faint and be weary, and the *young men* shall utterly fall', Isa. 40.30. But this proves little. We must remember that Paul addressed Timothy as a young man, and Timothy must have been around 40 years of age at the time.

If Jonathan was old enough to lead Israel into battle, 13.3, he must have been at least 17 years old - and would therefore have been at least 15 years of age when Saul began to reign. This probably means that Saul began his reign when he was either 35 or 40 years of age - rather than 30 years of age - see above. Jonathan was Saul's firstborn, 1 Chron. 9.39. It is by no means impossible therefore that he was born when Saul was no more than 20 years of age.

If this was so, Saul would have been 35 years of age when he began to reign, and Jonathan would have been 15 years old. (Keep in mind that this is at *the lower end* of the age range. Saul may have been 40 years of age and Jonathan several years older than 15.)

That is, by the time of his and Saul's death, Jonathan would have been at least 55³ - and Saul at least 75!

If David's fight with Goliath took place ten years before the death of Saul and Jonathan (for which see above), then at that time David would have been 20 years of age and Jonathan at least 45.

We conclude therefore that Jonathan was considerably older than David⁴ - at least 25 years older and quite possibly 30 years older.⁵

When Jonathan 'smote the garrison of the Philistines' (two years into Saul's reign), David wasn't yet born - nor would he be born for another eight years (being born 10 years into Saul's reign - see above).

*It is important to note that the difference in age between Jonathan and David rests critically on the translation adopted at 1 Sam. 13.1. The critical question is whether or not a second number has dropped out of the Hebrew text – this time before the ‘two’; see the NRSV text and footnote⁶. The NASB suggests ‘and he reigned *thirty-two* years over Israel’. (Clearly this could not relate to the whole of Saul’s reign; see Acts 13.21. It must act as the time-note for the later events in chapter 13.)*

If the conjecture in the NASB text is correct, it could affect dramatically the conclusion reached about the age disparity between David and Jonathan.

If Jonathan was about 20 years of age at the time of 1 Sam. 13.3, he would have been born 12 years into Saul’s reign – just two years before David.⁷ But, attractive as this particular dating undoubtedly is, it flounders on account of the biblical data about Ish-bosheth. See the last two paragraphs under ‘Michal’ below. For Jonathan to have been Saul’s firstborn, he would have – at the very least – have been born at the very beginning of Saul’s reign. (Ish-bosheth was born five years into that reign and there two other brothers were born between Jonathan and Ish-bosheth.) This would point to Jonathan being in his early thirties at the time of 1 Sam. 13.3, rather than about 20 years of age.

It should be noted that the section 14.47-48 does not *necessarily* mean that the events of chapter 13 came at the outset of Saul’s reign and before he waged his other campaigns. The section functions as a summary of Saul’s entire reign, commencing ‘So Saul took over the kingdom over Israel, and ...’.

The NASB conjecture also has implications for the David’s age at the time of his anointing and his fight with Goliath. Clearly, if there was only eight years between 1 Sam. 13.1-3 and Saul’s death, and if we assume that all the events from the beginning of chapter 13 to the anointing of David, 16.1-13 were compressed into two years, there would have been six years at most for the events between David’s fight with Goliath and Saul’s death. This would mean that David was about 24 years of age when he fought the Philistine – as he was thirty when Saul ended his 40-year reign.⁸

The comments of Eugene Merrill on pages 192-194 of ‘Kingdom of Priests’ are well worth reading. Merrill suggests supplying ‘forty’ into the gap in 1 Sam. 13.1 and accepts the reading in the existing Hebrew text of ‘reigned for two years’ – arguing against any conjectural insertion at that point.

MICHAL

Presumably, both Saul’s daughters - Merab and Michal - were considerably younger than Jonathan. Although by no means conclusive, the evidence suggests that Jonathan was the oldest of Saul’s six children, ‘Now the sons of Saul were Jonathan, and Ishui, and Melchishua: and the names of his two daughters were these; the name of the firstborn Merab, and the name of the younger Michal’, 1 Sam. 14.49.

For Michal to have been about David’s age, she would have had to be born around ten years into Saul’s reign - see above. But this seems most unlikely. Consider the information we possess about Ish-bosheth.

The list of Saul’s son’s in 1 Sam. 14.49 makes no mention of Ish-bosheth.⁹ The most natural assumption is that he was born after the list was compiled, and therefore after Michal, who is included in this particular list of Saul’s offspring.

We can locate the birth of Ish-bosheth very accurately in the reign of Saul. We are told explicitly that Ish-bosheth became king over Israel at the age of 40 - and that he reigned for only *two years*, 2 Sam. 2.10. At that time, ‘the house of Judah followed Judah’, 2 Sam. 2.10. But David reigned over Judah for *7½ years* before being made king over all Israel and Judah following the defection of Abner and the murder of Ish-bosheth; see ‘then’, 2 Sam. 5.1.¹⁰

As Ish-bosheth began to reign about five years after the death of Saul - at which point he was 40 years of age - he must have been born about five years into Saul’s 40-year reign.¹¹ If then Merab and Michal were born before Ish-bosheth, they must both have been born before Saul’s fifth year of rule over Israel. But David wasn’t born until the tenth year of that rule - see above. Michal would therefore have been at least five years older than David - and Merab older again.

Footnotes

¹ The Septuagint leaves out 1 Sam. 13.1 altogether, beginning the chapter, ‘And Saul ...’.

² The events of 1 Sam. 13.1-3 lead directly into the events of vv.4-15 and beyond. That is, the early date for 13.1-3 means that Saul had, in effect, forfeit any future dynasty after only two years of his reign; see 13.14.

³ At the time, Mephibosheth was only 5 years of age, 2 Sam. 4.4. Jonathan would therefore have been about 50 years of age when Mephibosheth was born.

⁴ This might add extra force to Jonathan's concern over David's attitude to his descendants - his 'house' and 'seed', 20.14-15, 42. As Mephibosheth had not then been born (see end-note 1), Jonathan either spoke theoretically - on the assumption that he would later father some children - or he had already had other sons, who in the event died before 2 Sam. 9.1-6.

⁵ The evidence for the wide disparity in age between David and Jonathan rests therefore on a much broader base than the simple fact that Jonathan was Saul's 'firstborn' and David was Jesse's 'last-born'. Indeed, that would have been a weak argument in that the text makes it clear that, when David was about 20 years of age, Jesse was a very old man, 17.12.

⁶ 'Two is not the entire number; something has dropped out'.

⁷ Mephibosheth would then have been born when Jonathan was 23 years of age; compare end-note 3.

⁸ Adopting the NASB conjecture would mean that Saul forfeit any future dynasty after thirty-two years of his reign – and only eight years before its end. Compare end-note 2.

⁹ Ish-bosheth - under the name Eshbaal, *is* included in the full list of Saul's sons in 1 Chron. 9.39.

¹⁰ This means that Abner must have held the power in Israel for about 5½ years between the death of Saul and the reign of Ish-bosheth. Ish-bosheth died when he was 42 years of age, 2 Sam. 2.10. When David soon commenced his reign over all of Israel and Judah, he was about 37 years of age, 2 Sam. 5.4-5.

¹¹ If Ish-bosheth was aged 35 at the time of the death of Saul, why wasn't he on Mount Gilboa to die alongside his father and his older brothers? It is possible that Saul had partnered Ish-bosheth with Abner – Saul's commander and cousin, 1 Sam. 14.50 – for the battle. Abner clearly survived Israel's defeat and there is no reason to doubt that Ish-bosheth could have done so as well if in Abner's company at the time. It was, of course, Abner who was responsible to installing Ish-bosheth as king over Israel, 2 Sam. 2.8-9.