

An examination of 1 Samuel 13:1 and 5

By Fred Butler

My friend Skip had been studying through 1 Samuel when he came to chapter 13. This chapter contains two verses that have caused difficulty for biblical students who believe in an inspired, inerrant Bible. He wrote me and asked the following question: "In reading the beginning of 1 Samuel 13, I have noticed many statements in my study Bible about how the original manuscripts should read in 13:1 and 13:5. Many of the study Bibles I have examined refer to these two verses as containing scribal errors. This is very disturbing to me. How can I stand before the world, hold this book up and say that it is inerrant and has no mistakes or contradictions?"

It is true the average footnote in a study Bible states something to the effect that these two passages contain scribal errors. Evangelical Christianity holds to inerrancy and believes the scriptures are totally free from errors only in the original autographs. The original autographs are understood, for example, as the first letters Paul wrote to the Ephesians, Corinthians, or Galatians; or the first historical record of Saul's battles as contained in 1 Samuel 13. Though the original autographs were without errors, the copies transmitted from those first originals contain copying errors due to mistakes by scribes. This is a phenomenon present in any handwritten document that is transmitted from one generation to the next by being repeatedly copied.

Textual criticism, however, is a scholarly discipline that can determine from the available copies what the originals actually stated, at least to some degree of accuracy. The textual critic will compare copies contained in the original language and perform an analysis on all of those alleged copyist's mistakes. Once an analysis is performed with the available textual evidence, the textual critics can gauge the words written by the original writer. Christians can be confident that we do have God's Word in our hands, because the vast amount of textual evidence affirms the inerrancy of the scriptures in spite of the variants. Moreover, the great bulk of the errors are not significant and they do not affect the essential message, content, and doctrine of the Bible. The footnotes in the average study Bible acknowledging copyist's errors are simply considering the problem of human error when copying material. It would be dishonest for anyone to say there are no variant readings of a particular text.

Though I believe this perspective concerning copyist errors is correct, I do dissent in some areas from its general assessment. I also believe textual critics can err on the side of labeling all these discrepancies as copyist's errors. In my opinion those passages said to contain copyist's errors can often be exaggerated. I personally think the biblical scribes should be given some benefit of the doubt, especially when there is really no evidence to suggest a copyist error has infiltrated a text. This is what I believe is the case with 1 Samuel 13:1 and 5. How, then, do I explain these two verses?

1 Samuel 13:1

Looking first at 13:1, the NKJV reads, "*Saul reigned one year; and when he had reigned two years over Israel.*" The footnote of my study Bible states, "The original numbers have not been preserved in this text...." According to the footnote, and pretty much every other standard study Bible, the original numbers indicating the length of Saul's reign

were not preserved. In other words, it is assumed by the footnote that some where during the transmission process of 1 Samuel, the exact number indicating the length of Saul's reign was inadvertently dropped out of the text due to a copying mistake. The problem with this conclusion is that we really have no definitive proof of this happening. I wrote one of my Hebrew Professors at seminary about this particular passage. When he answered my inquiry, his response was the same as the study Bible. His reasoning was that the text just does not read properly in the original and the only logical conclusion is that the number had dropped out over repeated copying. Perhaps that could be, but it seems to me such a conclusion is only educated speculation.

In the margin of my study Bible, point #1 for chapter 13 states, "The Hebrew is difficult." That is exactly true, but does difficulty necessarily mean that numbers dropped out? The translations of 1 Samuel have taking unique approaches to this verse over the centuries. The Septuagint, the Greek translation of the OT, for example, entirely omits the verse, where as the Syriac translation re-writes the verse to read, "When Saul had reigned 1 or 2 year." The New American Standard also re-writes the verse by placing the words "forty" and "thirty-two" in italics for it to read, "Saul was *forty* years old when he began to reign, and he reigned *thirty-two* years over Israel." Other modern translations render the verse in similar ways, but none of those solutions are satisfying.

First Samuel 13:1 literally reads, *Saul was the son of a year when he became king and ruled two years over Israel*. Instead of pushing this verse into the realm of a copyist error, I think it is better to believe it was what the author originally wrote. I would ask the question, "What was meant by saying Saul was the son of a year, or was one year old?" It is automatically assumed that the author meant to state Saul's age and length of his reign. This is typical when we read through the history of Israel's kings particularly as they are recorded in 1 and 2 Kings and 1 and 2 Chronicles. The writers of scripture mention how old the king was when he began his reign, then how long he reigned. It is believed the same should be for King Saul. The difference with Saul, however, was that he was the first king of Israel. The pattern of recording a king's age at the start of his reign then the length of his overall reign had yet to be established.

I believe it is better to understand the passage as a reference point for the battle of Michmash, which is about to be discussed for the reader. The notable OT historian, Leon Wood, writes, "Rather than depending upon textual criticism to resolve the difficulty, the two-year period mentioned is regarded here as a statement of the time elapsed between the beginning of Saul's reign and the battle of Micmash, rather than a garbled statement of the total length of Saul's reign." (*Survey of Israel's History*, pg. 203, n. 19). The verse would read as it is found in the NKJV. The idea is that Saul reigned one year, then in his second year the conflict with the Philistines took place as it is stated in 1 Samuel 13-14.

1 Samuel 13:5

The second problem in 1 Samuel 13:5 is more significant. The verse reads in the NKJV, "*Then the Philistines gathered together to fight with Israel, 30,000 chariots and 6,000 horsemen, and people as the sand which is on the seashore in multitude.*"

The problem is with the extreme number of chariots deployed by the Philistines. Thirty thousand is way too many chariots. There would not be enough men to drive them, not to mention that historically no ancient, near-eastern

army had such a massive number of chariots. Second Chronicles 14:9 records that Zerah the Ehtiopian maintained an army of a million men, the largest army of men at one time mentioned in scripture, but only had 300 chariots.

Turning to the typical study Bible, the footnote reads something like, "This is probably a scribal error, for the number of chariots is too large in number. Other OT manuscripts read 3,000 which is a more reasonable amount." The footnote is a tad misleading, because the OT manuscripts that have 3,000 in place of the 30,000 are the Syriac and Greek translations of the Hebrew. As far as we know, the Syriac and Greek translators could have been compensating for what they perceived as a copyist error just as modern translators have. Yet, even if we are to take 3,000 as a more reasonable amount of chariots and conclude the number 30,000 reflects a slip of a copyist's hand, 3,000 is still rather large for the amount of chariots used by one army.

Furthermore, verse 5 states the people of the Philistines were like the sand on the seashore in multitude. If we do take the smaller number, we would have 3,000 chariots and 6,000 horsemen, which would be an army of anywhere around 9,000 - 15,000, depending upon how many men rode in the chariots. If we take the top estimation, could a writer honestly proclaim that 15,000 troops are like the "sand in multitude?" 1 Samuel 13:2 has Saul's army numbered as 3,000 men, plus he could get more if needed because he sent some men home. Earlier, in 1 Samuel 11, Saul was able to put together a substantial army of 330,000 men. If the number of the Philistines is only around 10,000 people, then the writer of Samuel is using unnecessary hyperbole.

Commentators have offered their solutions to the number "30,000" over the years. Matthew Henry, for instance, represents the common solution apologists appeal to when he writes in his commentary on the whole Bible,

[B]esides 6000 horse, which in those times, when horses were not so much used in war as they are now, was a great body, they had an incredible number of chariots, 30,000 in all: most of them, we may suppose, were carriages for the bags and baggage of so vast an army, not chariots of war.

Henry's take on the problem is that the 30,000 chariots were not war chariots, but chariots used for carrying supplies or captured spoil. The problem with that solution is nothing in the historical account suggests it is plausible. Where exactly does the text distinguish between different kinds of chariots? It seems fairly clear these were chariots of war.

I think the key to understanding the passage is found in the word translated "chariot." "Chariot" is translated from the Hebrew word *rekeb* and it has a variety of meaning from a chariot as a vehicle, to a rider in a chariot, as well as a chariot unit, including a chariot, a driver, and military personnel. It is my opinion the writer of Samuel wished to convey the total number of men who rode in the chariots, which were about 30,000. The modern day misconception is to think a chariot was a little buggy with a couple of men riding in it. However, the military chariot of the ancient world was like a troop transport. Usually a large group of men would ride in one chariot - about 10-20 at a time. The chariot would pull into battle and this large group of men would disembark, ready for combat. I believe this is what we have here in 1 Samuel 13:5. The 30,000 are not the physical chariots, but the number of fighting men who would ride in them, or fight along side it.