

Saul

Introduction

How long did Saul reign? The answer is found nowhere in the Old Testament. In fact, the only reference to the length of his reign in the entire Bible is found in a speech by the Apostle Paul at Pisidian Antioch recorded in Acts 13: "...God gave them Saul the son of Kish, a man of the tribe of Benjamin, for forty years" (Acts 13:21 NKJV). However, a forty-year reign does not seem to fit the facts given in the larger context of the book of I Samuel (I Reigns in the Septuagint). The length of Saul's reign needs to align with the life of his key contemporaries, Samuel and David, and with any other relevant information we can glean from scripture. In short, it needs to be part of a consistent picture and that is what I will attempt to construct.

An Overlooked Passage

In the passage in Acts 13, Paul is no doubt repeating what was the Jewish tradition of the time; a forty-year reign for Saul neatly fitting into a triad with equal reign lengths for David and Solomon. Josephus, writing at about the same time provides the same forty-year figure (Antiquities, 6:14:9/378), though some manuscripts say twenty years. Interestingly, Josephus in the same passage, tells us that Samuel died in the eighteenth year of Saul's reign, two (or twenty-two) years before Saul's own death. This is an interesting fact that we shall come back to later.

In the context of Saul's reign, there is only a single passage that describes the passage of time. It is found in I Samuel 13:

¹Saul reigned one year; and when he had reigned two years over Israel, ²Saul 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 (I Samuel 13:1-2, NKJV)

Much has been made of this passage, with some using it to set a mere two years as the length of Saul's reign and others assuming a transcription error that caused the loss of a digit along the way (with a variety of reigns incorporating the "2" then possible – 2, 12, 22, etc.). I however do not believe that this passage intended to describe the length of Saul's reign. Rather, I believe it is simply describing an event that took place during or following the second year of Saul's reign. What we can take away from this is that Saul reigned at least two years, and the events described after this occurred after his second reginal year.

There is however a set of passages that do set a boundary on Saul's reign, passages that as far as I know have been overlooked. They relate to the ark of the covenant and its journey from Shiloh to Jerusalem. In I Samuel 4, the ark is removed from Shiloh and taken into battle where it is captured and held by the Philistines for seven months (I Samuel 6:1). Ultimately it is returned to Israel, but not to Shiloh. Instead, it ends up in a home in Kirjath Jearim:

¹Then the men of Kirjath Jearim came and took the ark of the Lord, and brought it into the house of Abinadab on the hill, and consecrated Eleazar his son to keep the ark of the Lord. ²So it was that the ark remained in Kirjath Jearim a long time, it was there twenty years. And all the house of Israel lamented after the Lord (I Samuel 7:1-2, NKJV)

This event takes place before Israel asks for a king, and so before Saul becomes king. There is a companion passage in II Samuel. After David conquers Jerusalem and makes it his capital, he desires to bring the ark to Jerusalem:

³So they set the ark of God on a new cart, and brought it out of the house of Abinadab, which was on the hill, and Uzzah and Ahio, the sons of Abinadab drove the cart (II Samuel 6:3, NKJV)

Things don't end well for Uzzah, but that is another story. What's important in answering the question at hand is the combination of these two passages. The ark is placed in the house of Abinadab before Saul begins to reign and only removed from there when David establishes his capital at Jerusalem. It makes sense that David would want to bring the

ark to Jerusalem as this is a symbolic act consistent with making Jerusalem the capital. Thus, I would expect that this happened within a matter of months of the conquest of Jerusalem and at the same time that David moved his capital from Hebron.

From I Samuel 7:2, we know that the ark was in the house of Abinadab for twenty years. It was removed from this same house following David’s conquest of Jerusalem. Before he moved his capital to Jerusalem, David reigned in Hebron for seven and a half years following the death of Saul (II Samuel 5:5 and several other places). If we then assemble these pieces:

- The ark was moved to Kirjath Jearim before Saul began to reign
- The ark was in Kirjath Jearim for twenty years
- David removed the ark from Kirjath Jearim when he made Jerusalem his capital, seven and a half years after he began to reign following Saul’s death

If we hold to a strict twenty years for the ark to be in Kirjath Kearim, the math then allows a maximum reign length for Saul of only twelve and a half years (20 -7.5). There is perhaps room to fudge the twenty year number upward a bit and we’ll look at that later.

Campaign Seasons

Throughout I Samuel, Israel is constantly at war with the Philistines, and sometimes with other neighbors. In the ancient world, war was not a year-round affair, but was conducted only in the summer months between planting and harvest. Each year had a defined campaign season during which military operations were conducted, and so we can use successive military operations to infer the passage of years. This is particularly true when the results are decisive, preventing further action until the next campaign season, or perhaps even longer. I Samuel records eleven military operations and has a twelfth passage that hints at wider wars over an extended period of time. These are listed in the table below:

Reference	Event
I Samuel 4	Battle with the Philistines at Ebenezer / Aphek. Ark captured
I Samuel 7:7	Battle with the Philistines at Mizpah
I Samuel 11	Jabesh Gilead besieged by Ammonites. Saul breaks the siege
I Samuel 13-14	Jonathan attacks the garrison of the Philistines, battle of Michmash
I Samuel 14:47-48	Saul’s wars against Moab, Ammon, Edom, Zobah, and the Philistines
I Samuel 15	War with Amalek. Final rejection of Saul as king
I Samuel 17	Battle with Philistines at Sochoh. David and Goliath
I Samuel 18	David pays Michal’s dowry with 200 Philistine penises
I Samuel 19:8	War with Philistines, defeated by David
I Samuel 23:1	Philistines attack Keilah at harvest time, defeated by David
I Samuel 23:27-28	Philistines invade the land, Saul gives up pursuit of David
I Samuel 31	Battle with Philistines at Mount Gilboa. Saul and his sons slain

Saul is anointed King between the battle of Mizpah recorded in I Samuel 7 and his relief of the siege of Jabesh in I Samuel 11. I Samuel 13:1 tells us that the next battle against the Philistines at Michmash occurred after he had reigned two years. At the end of the passage describing the events around the battle of Michmash, I Samuel 14:47-48 records a list of enemies that Saul campaigned against, including a war with the Amalekites that is covered in the following chapter. My sense is that this is a summary of his reign and does not denote specific campaigns and thus can be ignored

in our timeline. I Samuel 14:52 states that, “there was fierce war with the Philistines all the days of Saul”, and so there were likely few years without a campaign. If we allow a minimum of one year between campaigns, then we get two years from Jabesh to Michmash, and then one year each (ignoring I Samuel 14:47-48) to the Philistine invasion of I Samuel 23:27-28 for a total of eight years. I Samuel 27:7 states that David took refuge in Philistia for one year and four months. This implies that there is a year of no campaigning between the invasion of I Samuel 23:27-28 and the battle of Mount Gilboa. Adding two years then gives a total of ten years from the beginning of Saul’s reign to his death. This is really a minimum number as there may have been other years without a military campaign.

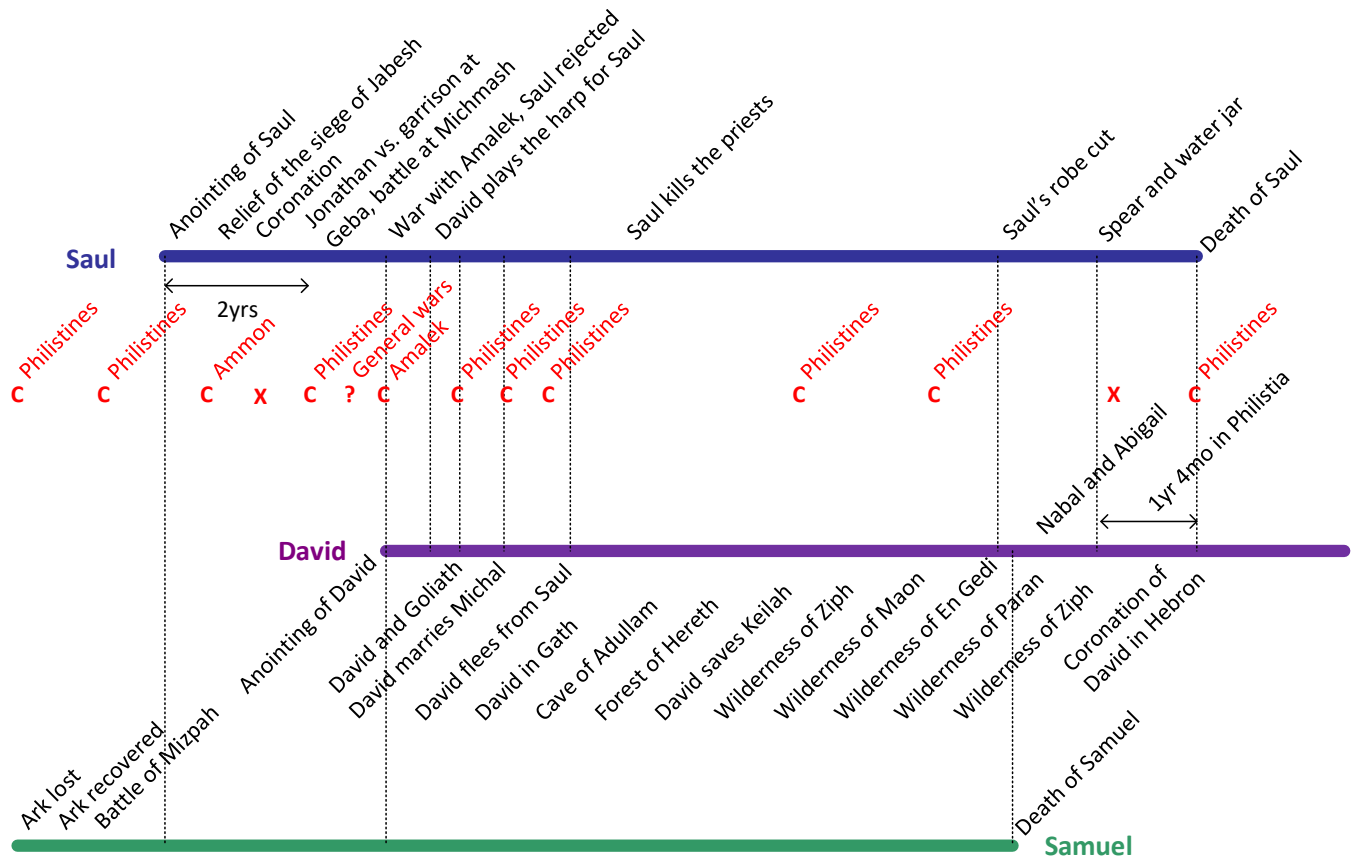


Figure 1: Events in the life of Samuel, Saul, and David. Red C's indicate campaigns. X indicates a year of no campaign

Samuel, Saul, and David

The book of I Samuel is dominated by three main characters: the prophet Samuel, king Saul, and the soon to be king David. We do not have any definitive statements as to the age of any of these three men (e.g., “X was Y years old when”) until II Samuel when we are told that David was 30 years old when he became king over Judah in Hebron following the death of Saul. However, we do have clues from the text as to the relative age (or youth) of each at various times.

Samuel was the last of the Judges and like others before him (e.g. Gideon) appointed his sons to be judges as he grew old. I Samuel 8:1 records this. Samuel’s sons would have had to be adults to take on these important duties, and must have been at least thirty, making Samuel at least fifty at the point in his life where he was asked to give Israel their first king (I Samuel 8:4). What we don’t know is how long this was after the recovery of the ark in I Samuel 7:1 and the subsequent victory over the Philistines at Mizpah (which was likely a year after the ark was initially lost – the ark being seven months with the Philistines would make it the wrong season for a military campaign at the time it was recovered). For us to stick with the twenty years in Kirjath Jearim we have to assume that the events of I Samuel 8 follow immediately after the events of I Samuel 7 (within a year). This makes the statements about Samuel’s time as judge and appointment of his sons from I Samuel 7:15 to 8:1 a parenthetical vs. an indication that much time had passed.

Once Saul was anointed king, he reigned for at least two years before the battle of Michmash against the Philistines (I Samuel 13:1-2). Saul's final rejection as king comes following the defeat of the Amalekites. I place this at least one campaign season later. So David's anointing and the interactions between Saul and David occur from at least three years into Saul's reign until Saul's death in battle. From the context, it may have been more than three years, but I doubt it was significantly longer than that.

David is described in I Samuel 16 at the time of his anointing as "ruddy, with bright eyes, and good looking" (v12), but also later in that chapter as a "man of war" (v19). We also know that at this time David was unmarried, in a culture where marriages often took place in the late teens and early twenties. In I Samuel 17 as he prepares to meet Goliath, David is called a "youth" (v33). It is also noted that David is the youngest of eight sons of Jesse and only the oldest three were present at the battle (v10-15). Looking at the picture that is painted of David in these chapters, I see a young man. Probably at least sixteen, and not older than twenty. Old enough to be full grown but still only a young man. Using that age range and the fact that David was 30 at the time of Saul's death, we can place his anointing ten to fourteen years earlier – very much in line with the evidence we have considered so far.

Josephus tells us, depending on the manuscript, that Saul reigned for 40 years with Samuel dying 22 years before Saul. With a 40 year reign, this means that David would have been anointed king at the tender age of eight. This seems too young in the larger context. However, a twenty-year reign, with Samuel dying two years before Saul, as found in some manuscripts of Josephus, provides flexibility in David's age at the time he is anointed king. Interestingly enough, the diagram in Figure 1 has Samuel dying two years before Saul based on the campaign seasons and David's time in Philistia (Gath/Ziklag) prior to the battle of Mount Gilboa.

Prior to taking refuge in Philistia, David spends some time on the run from Saul in various wilderness locations around Israel. This takes up quite a few chapters, but I can't see this lasting for an extended period of time. David knew that Saul would eventually catch up with him and after three close calls he flees to the safety of Gath. Based on campaign seasons, this period would have lasted between two and three years which seems both long enough to contain all of the events that are recorded and short enough to be reasonable.

Possible Timelines

Now let's try and put all of the pieces together. The movements of the ark suggest, if we take the twenty-year sojourn in Kirjath Jearim at face value, that Saul reigned for a maximum of twelve years. Using the campaign seasons we get a minimum of ten years. If we assign a twelve year reign to Saul, with David anointed king after the third year then we have the timeline shown below as Figure 2. On this timeline, David is anointed king at the age of twenty. Perhaps a bit older than we would like. If we shorten Saul's reign to only ten years, then David's age at his anointing increases correspondingly to twenty-two. In the twelve year reign we would need to insert two years where no campaigns are recorded, most likely between David's slaying of Goliath and the point at which he is forced to flee. This time could also account for the defeat of the enemies listed in I Samuel 14:47-48. Overall I think this timeline works and I would assign Saul a reign of twelve years instead of the traditional forty.

For those that prefer David to be a little bit younger at the time of his anointing as king, I think we have some wiggle room on the time that the ark was in Kirjath Jearim. At a minimum we could add a half year which allows us to increase Saul's reign to thirteen years and drop David's age to nineteen. Perhaps we could increase Saul's reign a little more by treating the twenty-year sojourn of the ark as a round number. As it turns out, I lived in New Jersey for a total of twenty-four years during my adult life, but if asked I would probably round down and say that I lived there for, "twenty years", or perhaps, "over twenty years". If we treat the sojourn of the ark in the same way we could perhaps fudge that number up to twenty-four years. This would increase Saul's reign to as much as sixteen years and drop David's age at his anointing to as low as sixteen – a bit more in line with how he has traditionally been portrayed and with what we find in I Samuel 16-17.

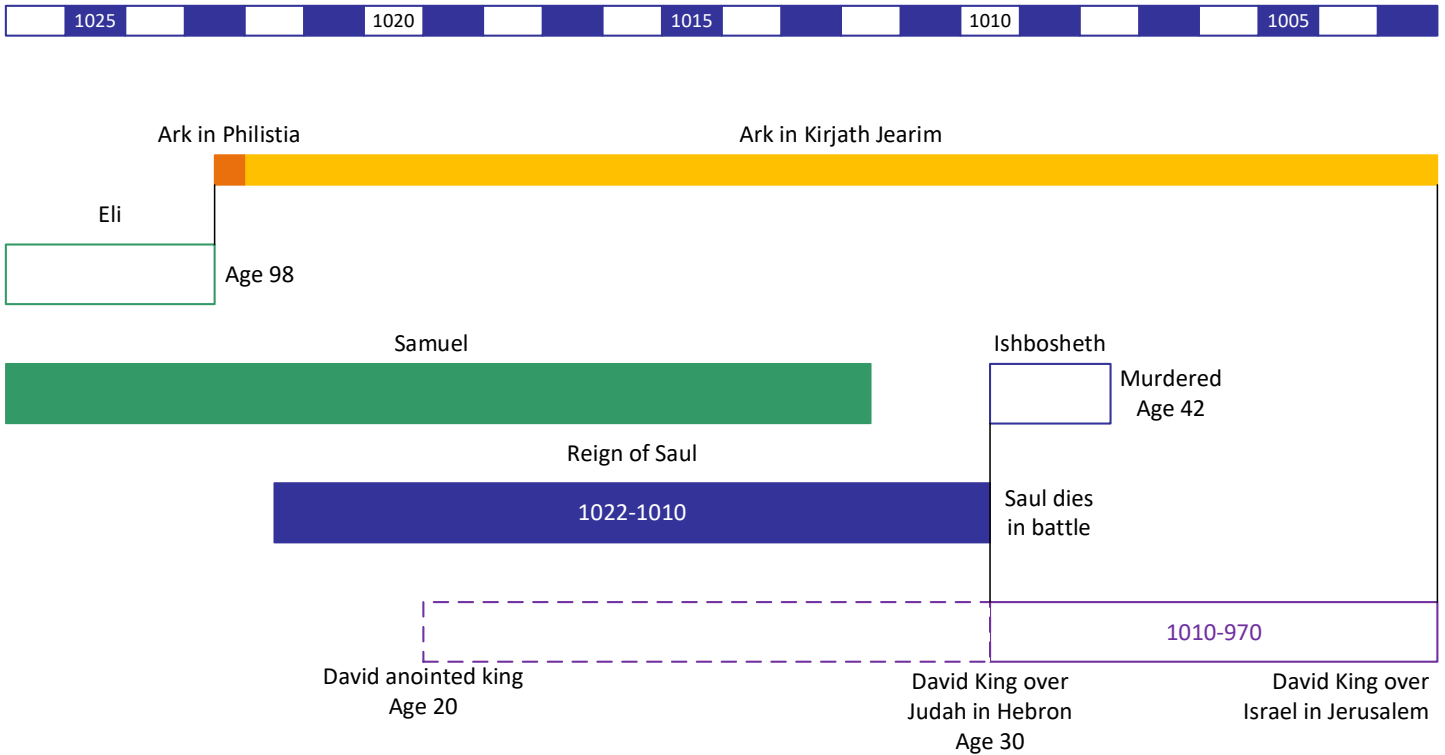


Figure 2: A possible timeline for Saul's reign

Conclusions

Jewish and Christian traditions hold that Saul, Israel's first king, reigned for forty years as indicated in Paul's speech in Acts 13:21. However, the text of I Samuel which records Saul's anointing as king, reign, and death in battle, does not appear to support such a long reign. When the whole of I Samuel (and a little bit of II Samuel) are considered, they point to a much shorter reign. The sojourn of the ark in Kirjath Jearim, between its capture by the Philistines and David's first attempt to move it to Jerusalem, puts a maximum limit on Saul's reign of twelve years. The battles against the Philistines and others that are spread throughout the narrative when combined with the concept of an annual campaign season provide a minimum reign of ten years. Finally, David's apparent age at the time of his anointing as king suggests that we choose the longest possible reign within these constraints, or a reign of twelve years. A more liberal interpretation of the twenty years given for the time the ark was in the house of Abinadab might allow us to stretch this a bit to a maximum reign of sixteen years to achieve a somewhat younger David in the period of I Samuel 16-17. Of course, any of these possibilities are a far cry from the traditional forty year reign.

Where did the tradition of a forty year reign come from? I don't know, but perhaps in the absence of a clear number in scripture this number was assigned to make a nice triad between Saul and the forty year reigns of David and Solomon. The appearance of a twenty year number in some manuscripts of Josephus is also interesting as it aligns to the sojourn of the ark, although it fails to deduct the period where David was king in Hebron. This is not the only time where a Jewish tradition from a speech recorded in Acts does not mesh with a thorough analysis of Old Testament scripture (See my article on Judges for another). In the end I think that the textual evidence points to a number of about twelve years, maybe a little bit longer. But absent other evidence, we can never be completely sure.

Authors Note: This article was written some time after the timeline was developed and so the timeline was built around the traditional forty year reign. I plan to update the timeline at a future date as reducing the length of Saul's reign allows for a reduction of the overlap between judges in the later Judges period. At the same time, to align with this article Samuel will be moved in parallel with both Eli and Saul with little gap between them.