

### **Ish-bosheth – Floyd Nolen Jones, Th.D., Ph.D.**

Ish-bosheth was the youngest of Saul's four sons and, being the only one who survived him after the battle with the Philistines on Mt. Gilboa (2 Sam. 2:4), he was his legitimate successor. His name appears to originally have been Esh-baal, אֶשׁ-בַּעַל, "the man of Baal." (1 Chr. 8:33; 9:39)

He was 40 years old at the time of the battle of Gilboa (2 Sam. 2:10, BC 1055), in which either he was not himself present or he escaped. However, Saul, Jonathan, and two older brothers perished; and he ascended the throne as the oldest of the royal family rather than Mephibosheth, son of his elder brother Jonathan, who was but a child of 5 years old (2 Sam. 4:4).

Too feeble of himself to seize the scepter which had just fallen from the hands of Saul, he was immediately taken under the care of Abner, his great uncle and commander-in-chief of Saul's army, who brought him to Mahanaim on the east of the Jordan – beyond the reach of the victorious Philistines. He was there recognized as king by 11 of the 12 tribes (2 Sam. 2:8-9).

There was a momentary doubt among those 11 tribes as to whether they should accept the offer of David to be their king (2 Sam. 2:7; 3:17). But this was overruled in favor of Ish-bosheth by Abner (2 Sam. 3:17), who then slowly but effectually restored the dominion of the house of Saul over "over all Israel" (except the tribe of Judah, 2 Sam. 3:9).

In 2 Samuel 2:10 Ish-bosheth is said to have reigned two years, which some understand as the entirety of his sovereignty. As David reigned seven and a half years over Judah before he became king of all Israel upon the death of Ish-bosheth (2 Sam. 2:11), the Jewish chronologer (*Seder Olam Rabba*, Dr. H. Guggenheimer ed., 2005, p. 133) and others incorrectly consider there was a vacancy (i.e., an interregnum) of five years in the throne of Israel. That is, after Ish-bosheth died supposedly 5 years elapsed before David was generally recognized as king of all Israel. If the reign of Ish-bosheth was actually only 2 years, such is doubtless the best way of accounting for the other 5½. However, what we know of Abner from Scripture does not allow us to suppose that under him the question of the succession would have been delayed five years.

Moreover, the account reads such that almost immediately upon the death of Saul, David became king over Judah (2 Sam. 2:4) & Abner installed Ish-bosheth of the tribe of Benjamin as king over the other tribes at that time. Furthermore, it was upon the death of Ish-bosheth that David was made king over all 12 tribes (2 Sam. 4:12; cp. "Then" of 2 Sam. 5:1). As this span is clearly one of 7½ years for David (2 Sam. 5:5), it of necessity also fixes Ish-bosheth's as being the same.

Thus, the true historical course is that the reigns of David over Judah and of Ish-bosheth over Israel were nearly contemporaneous – a little more than seven years each. Furthermore, the two years of 2 Sam. 2:10 are only the first of this period. That is, they are given as those years from which to date the commencement of the wars between the house of Saul and that of David. Indeed, the whole kingdom lay in distress as a result of the Philistine victory. These two years of peace between David and Ish-bosheth were those in which Abner consolidated the country and rebuilt his army (18 & 19 year olds would now have become 20 – military age). Ish-bosheth thus reigned about 7½ years. Still, the semblance of authority which he possessed was owed to the will and influence of Abner, who kept the real control in his own hands.

Finally, 2 Sam. 3:1 tells us there was "a long war" between David and Ish-bosheth. A two year span does not really fit as "a long war". To determine its length, we take the 7½, subtract the 2 years of peace before the war started and obtain 5½ years – truly a long war (1053-1048 BC).