

# THE PUZZLE OF DAVID'S CENSUS

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2 Samuel 24 and 1 Chronicles 21 are often understood to mean that it was sinful for David to take a census of the people and that God allowed Satan to induce David to commit that sin because he was angry with Israel and wanted to use David's wrongdoing as a basis for punishing them. These texts are notoriously difficult, but that understanding not only has God wanting David to sin to fulfill his intention to punish Israel, which casts him as a tempter rather than a tester,<sup>1</sup> but it also proposes an inexplicably circuitous justification for the punishment of Israel. As Paul Himes puts it:

[W]hy would God incite *David* to sin as an excuse to punish *Israel* for her sin? Why not simply cut out the middle-man and punish Israel directly? The problem is compounded when we see David's clear intermediary role in the story. It is difficult to understand why it was necessary for YHWH to incite somebody to sin in order that they may play an intermediary role so that YHWH could punish Israel, with whom he was already angry.<sup>2</sup>

Himes argues, as have a few others, that Ex. 30:11-16 points the way to a better understanding. That text reads (ESV):

<sup>11</sup> The LORD said to Moses, <sup>12</sup> "When you take the census of the people of Israel, then each shall give a ransom for his life to the LORD when you number them, that there be no plague among them when you number them. <sup>13</sup> Each one who is numbered in the census shall give this: half a shekel according to the shekel of the sanctuary (the shekel is twenty gerahs), half a shekel as an offering to the LORD. <sup>14</sup> Everyone who is numbered in the census, from twenty years old and upward, shall give the LORD's offering. <sup>15</sup> The rich shall not give more, and the poor shall not give less, than the half shekel, when you give the LORD's offering to make atonement for your lives. <sup>16</sup> You shall take the atonement money from the people of Israel and shall give it for the service of the tent of meeting, that it may bring the people of Israel to remembrance before the LORD, so as to make atonement for your lives."

This passage suggests that taking a census of the people of Israel was an inherently damning activity. It put each person counted under a sentence of death by a plague, but provision

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<sup>1</sup> James 1:13 states: "Let no one being *tested* say, 'I am being *tempted* by God,' for God cannot be tempted by evil, and he himself *tempts* no one." The Greek word *peirazō* has the sense of both "testing" and "tempting," and that distinction should be recognized in this verse (NJB, CEB; see, also HCSB and CSB). The distinction is one of motivation. God permits hardships in the life of a believer, but he does not do so with the intent that the person will disobey. Paul A. Himes asks in "[Failure to Atone: Rethinking David's Census in Light of Exodus 30](#)," *Themelios* 48.1 (2023), 47: "[W]ould God incite somebody to sin with whom he has a personal, intimate relationship (as contrasted with Pharaoh)? Would not this create a view of God as a capricious 'agent provocateur,' for whom 'the end justifies the means,' luring an innocent victim to punishment by tempting him to commit an evil act?"

<sup>2</sup> Himes, 48. This article is based on Himes's paper.

was made for ransoming their lives from that fate by collecting atonement money in the amount of half a shekel per person, which was an offering to the Lord and was to be used for the service of the tent of meeting. So the person conducting the census brought a deadly plague on the people but also could act as an intercessor on their behalf by collecting from them the ransom payment by which their lives would be spared. William H. C. Propp states:

The key concept in this paragraph is the root *kpr*, which in the simple form denotes ransom (*kōper*) and with the reduplicated middle radical (*kipper*) refers to purification and reconciliation with God, what I call "Clearing." Exod 30:15-16 implies that this *kōper* payment effects *kippūrîm* 'Clearing.' . . .

For what sin or impurity does the ransom silver effect Clearing? . . . [M]ore likely the impurity is generated by the specific act of counting the people which infringes on divine prerogatives.<sup>3</sup>

He later adds:

*Why a ransom?* The half-shekel tax is described as *kōper nepeš* 'ransom for each individual life' and as *kesep kippūrîm* 'Clearing Silver' (30:12, 16). How have the Israelites become so estranged from Yahweh that they must literally buy back their lives?

As 30:12 makes clear, it is the very act of counting that necessitates *kippūrîm*. . . .

As we have seen, to count is to control. Knowing the name and number of the stars (Ps 147:4) and everything under Heaven is Yahweh's sovereign prerogative.<sup>4</sup>

Himes offers five reasons to believe that the census referred to in Ex. 30:11-16 was meant to be recurring<sup>5</sup> and then adds two pieces of extrabiblical evidence which "demonstrate that at least some Second Temple Jews assumed a recurring census."<sup>6</sup> After presenting the five reasons, he concludes:

In light of this, David cannot be faulted for taking the census *per se*, nor does this raise a problem for theodicy if God persuaded him to do so – i.e., it was *not* necessarily a sin. Dillard well notes that other kings such as Jehoshaphat also had "military enrollments . . . , but without the dire consequences of David's census"; indeed, Chronicles even has a positive view of "raising great armies." The census itself is not the problem, and surely it seems easier to suppose that the Lord himself had a more positive reason for inciting David to take the census than to entrap David to sin as an inexplicably necessary precursor to the Lord's punishment of Israel.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> William H. C. Propp, *Exodus 19-40*, Anchor Bible (New York: Doubleday, 2006), 476-477.

<sup>4</sup> Propp, 534-535.

<sup>5</sup> Himes, 51-53.

<sup>6</sup> Himes, 54.

<sup>7</sup> Himes, 53-54.

God was angry with Israel (2 Sam. 24:1) and presumably was prepared to put them to death by a plague, but in his mercy, he chose to execute that judgment, to bring the plague on the people, by moving David to conduct a census. That allowed David to serve as an intercessor who could avert the death sentence by administering the census in accordance with the law. He was to be God's instrument of mercy. Himes states, "By inciting David to take a census, YHWH intended David to fulfill the role of intermediary by initiating the atonement via the half-shekel tax, thus turning aside the anger of the Lord."<sup>8</sup>

If, as is regularly assumed, 2 Sam. 24:1 declares that God moved David to take a census for the purpose of *harming Israel*, then obviously he did not stimulate the census for the purpose of *blessing Israel* by allowing David to act as an intercessor. But that assumption may be incorrect. Himes is worth quoting at length here.

[O]ne could object at this point that in the expression וַיִּסְתֵּן אֶת־דָּוִד בְּהֵם ("and [the Lord] incited David against them") in 2 Samuel 24:1, the combination of this verb plus the *beth* preposition must portray the Lord moving David in a way that is meant to harm Israel. I offer here a couple points in response. First, neither וַיִּסְתֵּן nor the *beth* preposition by themselves necessitate the idea that God was trying to get David to do something harmful against Israel. For the former, we note again Joshua 15:18 and Job 36:16. For the latter, the preposition could, in theory, be causal, i.e., God moved David to act in a particular way *because of* Israel. That a *beth causa* can take a group of people as its object is clear from the dialogue between Abraham and God in Genesis 18:28-31, where we have multiple instances of a verb immediately followed by a *beth causa* with, as its object, a number representing a group of people.

The combination of וַיִּסְתֵּן ("to incite") with בְּ allows for an event with negative connotations. Yet the construction is very rare (only 5 times in the entire Hebrew Bible; the verb occurs a total of 18 times). Out of those 4 other occurrences, one of them clearly does *not* fit the pattern of "A inciting B to harm C," specifically Job 36:18, where the *beth* is probably instrumental. Consequently, the possibility exists of taking the construction in 2 Samuel 24:1 as involving a *beth causa*. Regardless, this rare two-word construction is neither clear enough nor consistent enough to definitively determine what is going on in the story.

In other words, a two-word construction that only occurs five times in the entire Hebrew Bible, when one of those constructions clearly has a different sense than the other four, can hardly be determinative for understanding this passage.<sup>9</sup>

The means God used to stimulate David to take the census is indicated in 1 Chron. 21:1, which states, "Then וַיִּשָּׂן (*satan*) stood against Israel and incited David to number Israel." This is commonly taken as a reference to Satan, the chief demon. If that is correct, then God allowed Satan to influence David to take the census, but God's purpose in doing so was to allow David to be a blessing to Israel, whereas Satan's motivation was malevolent. It seems more likely, however, that *satan* in this verse refers to a personal or political adversary that God raised up to motivate a prideful David to conduct the census. The note in the NET states:

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<sup>8</sup> Himes, 48.

<sup>9</sup> Himes, 60-61.

Many interpreters and translations render the Hebrew שָׂטָן as a proper name here, "Satan" (NEB, NASB, NIV, NRSV). However, the Hebrew term שָׂטָן, which means "adversary," is used here without the article. Elsewhere when it appears without the article, it refers to a personal or national adversary in the human sphere, the lone exception being Num 22:22, 32, where the angel of the Lord assumes the role of an adversary to Balaam. When referring elsewhere to the spiritual entity known in the NT as Satan, the noun has the article and is used as a title, "the Adversary" (see Job 1:6–9, 12; 2:1–4, 6–7; Zech 3:1–2). In light of usage elsewhere the adversary in 1 Chr 21:1 is likely a human enemy, probably a nearby nation whose hostility against Israel pressured David into numbering the people so he could assess his military strength. For compelling linguistic and literary arguments against taking the noun as a proper name here, see S. Japhet, *I & II Chronicles* (OTL), 374–75.

Himes similarly opines, "[T]his writer is skeptical that 1 Chronicles 24:1 would be the only place in the entire Hebrew Bible where an anarthrous [without the article] שָׂטָן is meant to be taken as a proper name."<sup>10</sup>

It was David's failure to conduct the census properly that resulted in the people dying, which is why he said he had "sinned greatly" and acted "very foolishly" (2 Sam. 24:10; 1 Chron. 21:8) and why he felt the death of the Israelites was all his fault (2 Sam. 24:17; 1 Chron. 21:17). Since a failure to collect the required atonement money when conducting a census left the people under a plague, and since the result of David's census was that the people were killed by a plague, the implication is that David had neglected to collect the half-shekel payment necessary to avert the plague. By his sin in improperly conducting the census, which presumably was rooted in an ignorance of the law that kings were required to know (Deut. 17:18–20) and a political desire not to alienate his subjects through additional taxation, he had become a sword rather than a shield. Himes remarks, "Sadly, David's failure to take the half-shekel resulted in the very plague that the atonement tax was supposed to avoid, the very punishment the Torah promised would happen. The problem was not that David's sin caused God's wrath; rather, David's sin lay in the fact that he intensified God's wrath by failing to turn it away from his sheep as intended."<sup>11</sup>

The harm that befell the people after David's census is called *deber* (2 Sam. 24:13, 15; 1 Chron. 21:12, 14) and *maggēpâ* (2 Sam. 24:21, 25; 1 Chron. 21:17, 22), whereas the harm that accompanies the census in Exodus 30 is called *negep* (Ex. 30:12), but that does not mean that the harm that befell the people was something other than the harm that accompanied the census in Exodus. The terms are broad enough to serve as synonyms. As Himes explains:

Second Samuel 24 uses two specific words to denote the tragic consequences (not including general terms such as רָעָה in v. 16): דִּבְרָה (vv. 13, 15) and מַגְפָּה (v. 25). Both words can clearly signify a form of illness or physical malady (e.g., Exod 9:3; Deut 28:21; 1 Kgs 8:37 for the former; Num 14:37; 17:13; 1 Sam 6:4 for the

<sup>10</sup> Himes, 61.

<sup>11</sup> Himes, 48–49.

latter, though cf. 1Sam 4:17 for a more generic sense). More importantly, the latter הַפִּגְמָה is a cognate for פָּגַע, the word which occurs in Exod 30:12. Since פָּגַע, though a rare word, generally seems to refer to "plague," with Num 16:46 being the clearest instance of this (note the link to atonement in that passage), one can safely suggest that whatever the consequences of the sin in 2 Samuel 24, it is broadly the same as the consequences of improperly carrying out a census in Exodus 30.<sup>12</sup>

Joab, the commander of the army, was resistant to David's directive to take the census (2 Sam. 24:3; 1 Chron. 21:3), but we are not told why. It may be, as Himes suggests, citing Robert Gordon, that he, like many in the ancient world, simply distrusted censuses. He may have thought they too often were a prelude to political grasping of one sort or another and may have had a sense that censuses risked divine displeasure and therefore should only be undertaken where there was a compelling national need. But David would not be dissuaded, and so the census was taken throughout the land. However, because Joab objected so strongly to David's order, he did not include Levi and Benjamin in the numbering (1 Chron. 21:6).

There is a famous discrepancy in the census numbers as reported in 2 Sam. 24:9 and 1 Chron. 21:5. The former states, "And Joab gave the sum of the numbering of the people to the king: in Israel there were 800,000 valiant men who drew the sword, and the men of Judah were 500,000." The latter states, "And Joab gave the sum of the numbering of the people to David. In all Israel there were 1,100,000 men who drew the sword, and in Judah 470,000 who drew the sword."

It appears that Joab gave two sets of numbers for each kingdom. For Israel, he reported the number of men "who drew the sword," meaning the number of men over twenty who were in the military, to be 1,100,000. He also reported a subset of that number, the number of "*valiant men* who drew the sword," meaning the number of men who were battle-tested, to be 800,000. For Judah, he reported the "number of men," meaning all males over twenty regardless of any military association, to be 500,000. He also reported a subset of that number, the number of men "who drew the sword," to be 470,000. Perhaps he changed the categories for Judah to "men" and "men who drew the sword" (instead of "men who drew the sword" and "valiant men who drew the sword") to obscure his failure to count Levi and Benjamin.<sup>13</sup>

David was convicted of his sin in taking the census improperly and prayed for forgiveness (2 Sam. 24:10; 1 Chron. 21:8). God promptly sent the prophet Gad to him who gave him a choice of three possible punitive consequences for his sin, all of which would bring death and suffering on the people. The choices were three (additional) years of famine,<sup>14</sup> three months of devastation by Israel's enemies, or three days of a plague in the land (2 Sam. 24:13; 1 Chron. 21:12).

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<sup>12</sup> Himes, 56.

<sup>13</sup> There are other proposals for reconciling the reports. See, e.g., Kyle Butt, "[The Census of David](#)" (accessed on 8/5/24).

<sup>14</sup> 2 Samuel 24:13 speaks of seven years of famine instead of three years reported in 1 Chron. 21:12. As James Bejon explains in "[Three Years of Famine](#)" (accessed on 8/5/24), "There'd already been four years of famine in Israel – the three mentioned in II Samuel 21 plus the ten months taken to number the people in II Samuel 24 –, so three more would make a total of seven years of famine: cp. I Chr. 21.12."

This may have been a test of whether David had learned the law that he had spurned, had learned that the revealed consequence of an improper census was death by a plague. When David answered, "Let us fall into the hand of the LORD, for his mercy is great; but let me not fall into the hand of man" (2 Sam. 24:14; 1 Chron. 21:13), he may have been choosing the plague option, thus demonstrating his current awareness of the law. That is how the translators of the LXX understood his response.<sup>15</sup> P. Kyle McCarter states, "Ehrlich argues that only plague is entirely 'by the hand of Yahweh,' since famine is also caused by the siege of a city. The decisive indicator, however, is the use of the expression 'the hand of Yahweh,' which is a standard biblical way of referring to plague (I Sam 5:6; etc.), with extensive Near Eastern parallels (Roberts 1971)."<sup>16</sup>

After David's acknowledgement of the law's penalty by his choice, the Lord sent a plague upon Israel, which killed 70,000 men from Dan to Beersheba (2 Sam. 24:15; 1 Chron. 21:14). As the angel was standing by the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite<sup>17</sup> and about to devastate Jerusalem, the Lord commanded him to pause the attack, to stay his hand (2 Sam. 24:16; 1 Chron. 21:15). David saw the angel with his sword stretched out over Jerusalem, then he and the elders, clothed in sackcloth, fell on their faces, and David begged God for the people's lives, asking that the punishment be directed instead toward him and his household (2 Sam. 24:17; 1 Chron. 21:16-17).

In response to David's prayer of intercession, God arranged for David to purchase the threshing floor of Araunah where he was to build an altar on which to make offerings to God, who in response would turn away the plague from the people (2 Sam. 24:18-21; 1 Chron. 21:18-22). David purchased the land,<sup>18</sup> built the altar, offered burnt offerings and peace offerings, and called upon the name of the Lord. This later became the site of Solomon's temple (1 Chron. 22:1; 2 Chron. 3:1). The Lord heeded the supplications for the land, answering David with fire from heaven upon the altar, and the plague was averted from Israel (2 Sam. 24:22-25; 1 Chron. 21:23-27). So God allowed David to act as an intercessor on Israel's behalf to avert the plague, giving him another opportunity to fulfill the role he should have exercised when taking the census.

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<sup>15</sup> Himes, 60 (fn. 65) states, "The LXX unambiguously states, Καὶ ἐξελέξατο ἑαυτῷ Δαυὶδ τὸν θάνατον ('and David chose for himself the death [i.e., plague]).'"

<sup>16</sup> P. Kyle McCarter, *II Samuel*, Anchor Bible (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1984), 511.

<sup>17</sup> He is called Ornan the Jebusite in 1 Chronicles 21. Kyle Runge states in "Balancing the Budget" in Ken Ham, Bodie Hodge, and Tim Chaffey, eds., *Demolishing Supposed Bible Contradictions Volume 2* (Green Forest, AR: Master Books, 2012), 73, "It may be that Ornan also went by the name Araunah, just like many others in that culture. Another plausible solution is that, in the original Hebrew, one of these names is simply a variant spelling of the other."

<sup>18</sup> The discrepancy in purchase amounts – fifty shekels of silver (2 Sam. 24:24) and six hundred shekels of gold (1 Chron. 21:25) – is because the fifty shekels of silver was for "the threshing floor and the oxen," whereas the six hundred shekels of gold was for "the site," meaning the threshing floor and enough of the surrounding land to be sufficient to accommodate the temple that David ultimately intended to build (1 Chron. 22:1). See, Runge, 72-75.