

2 Samuel 24:1-25

David Sins by Taking a Census

This incident is recorded here because it explains how the future location of the Temple was supernaturally decided. The first chapter in 1 Kings records David's death and his succession by Solomon, who would build the Temple.

2 Samuel 24:1 - "And again the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel, and he moved David against them to say, Go, number Israel and Judah."

God's anger was at Israel. Why? It is not stated. The rabbis propose this refers to the popular uprising led by Absalom and Sheba. Others say it was for secret sins among the people. Others point out that the legal age of joining the army was 20 and above. David wanted the census count to include those able-bodied men below age 20.

- **Numbers 1:45** - "So all the Israelites twenty years of age or older who could serve in Israel's army were counted according to their families."

The census incident is also recorded in **1 Chronicles 21:1** - "And Satan stood up against Israel, and provoked David to number Israel."

So, was it the Lord or Satan who prompted David to number the people? Probably it was similar to the scene in Job in which Satan approaches God at His council and accuses Job. i.e. God prompted David to take the census using Satan as his agent. God also was said to send an evil spirit to afflict Saul.

In the Old Testament, it is plain that God is in control, and when evil spirits or Satan attack or influence someone, it is with God's permission. Later, after the Exile and in the Book of Daniel we see an emphasis on a more black and white distinction between the forces of evil and opposition to God's plan. From about 300 B.C. up to the time of Jesus especially in apocalyptic literature there is an increasing focus on Satan and his fallen angels, demonic activity and the countervailing activity of God's angelic host, with a view toward final judgment and resurrection on the last day.

Messianic expectation along with demonic possession seemed to peak just as Jesus' ministry begins. Satan tempts Jesus in the wilderness for 40 days. Much of Jesus' ministry involved casting out demons and healing those afflicted by evil spirits. Satan is seen as seeking to thwart the plan of salvation.

That doesn't mean that God was no longer in control. It's sort of as if a stronger magnifier has been snapped into place, focusing in on this particular aspect of the supernatural realm. The reason is to highlight the saving work of the Messiah. In the New Testament, the kingdom of God is shown as defeating satanic opposition.

[Of course even in the New Testament God is shown sometimes as using Satan - for

instance to Peter: "Satan has demanded permission to sift you like wheat." **Luke 22:31–32** - and for refining or chastisement by turning someone "over to Satan for the destruction of the flesh," or as in Paul's "thorn in the flesh" which he said was a messenger from Satan sent to keep him from becoming puffed up. (**2 Corinthians 12:7**)]

There is a limit on how much we can know about God's providence. If God is behind everything, are humans ever responsible for their actions? If Satan is tempting me, can I just say, "The devil made me do it?" Where is the line between free will and predestination? The scriptures give seemingly contradictory answers. But faith tells us God is in control, that we can be tempted by Satan but also by our sinful minds and what the rabbis called our "evil inclination."

- **James 1:13** - "Let no man say when he is tempted, "I am tempted by God"; for God cannot be tempted with evil, neither tempteth He any man."

In David's situation, no matter who or what prompted him to sin, he still had to repent.... And so do we.

"He moved David against them" - David's actions were about to adversely affect the people of Israel by prompting God to send a pestilence.

2 Samuel 24:2 - "For the king said to Joab the captain of the host, which was with him, Go now through all the tribes of Israel, from Dan even to Beersheba, and number ye the people, that I may know the number of the people."

The story in **1 Chronicles** places this census just after a great victory over the Philistines. A census was preliminary to a draft of soldiers and a levying of taxes. It seems, therefore, that David's intent was to increase the power of the king.

There is one scripture that seems to speak to this incident most clearly:

- **Exodus 30:11-12** - "The LORD also spoke to Moses, saying, 'When you take a census of the sons of Israel to number them, then each one of them shall give a ransom for himself to the LORD, when you number them, so that there will be no plague among them when you number them.'"

The half-shekel ransom or atonement money collected was to support the Tabernacle (and later Temple) service as a memory of the Lord's atonement.

- **Exodus 30:16** - "You shall take the atonement money from the sons of Israel and shall give it for the service of the tent of meeting, that it may be a memorial for the sons of Israel before the LORD, to make atonement for yourselves"

This atonement money pointed to God as Israel's true protector and king. By taking a census without collecting this, David was presenting himself as protector, depending on his armed forces as defense instead of God. And the collection was not to pay for soldiers but to support the Tabernacle services.

The rabbis said that a census should only be taken for a military or other emergency, and even then not to be a head count, but always by collecting the half-shekel. The ransom money was not collected in David's census, so God sent a plague, just as the scripture said.

The whole incident ends with David purchasing the land for the temple which would replace the Tabernacle and tent of meeting as the place of atoning sacrifice.

One more hint is given in **1 Chronicles 27:23** - David's census was not completed "because the LORD had said he would increase Israel like to the stars of the heaven," as God told Abraham.

- **Genesis 15:5** - "And he brought him forth abroad, and said, Look now toward heaven, and tell the stars, if thou be able to number them: and he said unto him, So shall thy seed be."

This originally pointed to the stars and constellations portraying the story of the mighty Deliverer who would come as the Messiah to crush the serpent's head.

- **Galatians 3:16** - "Now to Abraham and his seed were the promises made. He saith not, And to seeds, as of many; but as of one, And to thy seed, which is Christ."

Taking a census of Israel is focusing on the wrong thing. The strength of Israel's army is never what brings victory, but God alone.

It is also important to note that this incident is placed in **2 Samuel** just after the list of David's "mighty men," who represent the means God uses to bring victory in spiritual warfare.

In the meantime, everyone seemed to know this but David. He seemingly was blind to what he was doing.

Joab was so disgruntled that he purposely left out the Levites (who were not supposed to be numbered anyway - **Numbers 1:49**) - and the tribe of Benjamin from the count (**1 Chronicles 21:6**). The whole project took almost 10 months (**verse 8**).

Repentance

2 Samuel 24:10 - "And David's heart smote him after that he had numbered the people. And David said unto the LORD, I have sinned greatly in that I have done: and now, I beseech thee, O LORD, take away the iniquity of thy servant; for I have done very foolishly."

David is again forgiven, but as with the case of Uriah and Bathsheba, there are consequences of his actions. God sends a message by way of the seer Gad.

2 Samuel 24:13-14 - "So Gad came to David, and told him, and said unto him, Shall seven years of famine come unto thee in thy land? or wilt thou flee three months before thine enemies, while they pursue thee? or that there be three days' pestilence in thy land? now advise, and see what answer I shall return to him that sent me. And David said unto Gad, I am in a great strait: let us fall now into the hand of the LORD; for his mercies are great: and let me not fall into the hand of man."

To fall into the hands of the Lord, there is always hope for mercy.

Not wanting the humiliation of being chased by his enemies, David opts for either the famine or the pestilence. As we saw, the pestilence was the scriptural judgment on this sin.

2 Samuel 24:15 - "So the LORD sent a pestilence upon Israel from the morning even to the time appointed: and there died of the people from Dan even to Beersheba seventy thousand men."

A census born in pride now leads to a sharp reduction in population.

Remember that God was already angry at Israel for their own sin - possibly because of Absalom's rebellion which they all mostly joined.

The Angel Appears

2 Samuel 24:16 - "And when the angel stretched out his hand upon Jerusalem to destroy it, the LORD repented him of the evil, and said to the angel that destroyed the people, It is enough: stay now thine hand. And the angel of the LORD was by the threshingplace of Araunah the Jebusite."

Meanwhile "David and the elders, clothed in sackcloth" (**1 Chronicles 21:16**), were lying on their faces in humiliation before the Lord.

David here reaches a deeper stage of repentance:

2 Samuel 24:17 - "And David spake unto the LORD when he saw the angel that smote the people, and said, Lo, I have sinned, and I have done wickedly: but these sheep, what have they done? let thine hand, I pray thee, be against me, and against my father's house."

David always repents without excuses or rationalizations.

In this statement David reflected the God Shepherd who took the sin of the world upon himself and died in their stead. i.e. the "sheep" had sinned, as stated in **verse 1**. But David wanted to take it all on himself.

The Threshing Floor of Araunah

2 Samuel 24:18-19 - "And Gad came that day to David, and said unto him, Go up, rear an altar unto the LORD in the threshingfloor of Araunah the Jebusite. And David, according to the saying of Gad, went up as the LORD commanded."

Araunah (or Ornan as in 1 Chronicles) was perhaps a Jebusite convert, or as a Gentile had accepted the seven Noahide Laws, or possibly someone who had helped David take the stronghold of Zion like Rahab in Jericho. He had been allowed to keep control of his land on Mount Moriah adjacent to Jerusalem and just below David's palace area.

Mount Moriah was where Abraham bound Isaac and prepared to sacrifice him, until the angel stays his hand. In the same way, the angel here sheaths his destructive sword. Moriah was renamed Jehovah-Jireh "The Lord provides" because God provided a substitute, the ram caught in the thicket.

God has provided Jesus as our substitute on the cross, taking our sins upon Himself. The Temple would be built on this mount where the Passover sacrifice and the Yom Kippur atonement would be acted out every year.

Araunah and his sons are hiding among the sheaves after seeing the Angel appear (**1 Chronicles 21:20**).

David offers to buy Araunah's threshing floor where the Angel had appeared, and where God had directed David to build an altar in order to stop the plague.

Araunah provides oxen for burnt sacrifice, grain for the meal offering along with the threshing instruments and yokes to serve as wood for the altar fire.

2 Samuel 24:23 - "All these things did Araunah, as a king, give unto the king. And Araunah said unto the king, The LORD thy God accept thee."

"as a king" should be "The whole, O king, does Aravnah give unto the king."

But David insists on paying for it all:

2 Samuel 24:24-25 - "And the king said unto Araunah, Nay; but I will surely buy it of thee at a price: neither will I offer burnt offerings unto the LORD my God of that which doth cost me nothing. So David bought the threshingfloor and the oxen for fifty shekels of silver. And David built there an altar unto the LORD, and offered burnt offerings and peace offerings. So the LORD was intreated for the land, and the plague was stayed from Israel."

The version in 1 Chronicles says David paid 600 shekels of gold for the land. The rabbis reconciled these differences by saying 50 shekels paid for the offering, while 600 shekels paid for the surrounding land.

- **1 Chronicles 21:25-30** - "So David gave to Ornan for the place six hundred shekels of

gold by weight. And David built there an altar unto the LORD, and offered burnt offerings and peace offerings, and called upon the LORD; and he answered him from heaven by fire upon the altar of burnt offering. And the LORD commanded the angel; and he put up his sword again into the sheath thereof."

The rabbis said David accounted 50 shekels from each of the 12 tribes, so the land would belong to all of Israel.

"At that time when David saw that the LORD had answered him in the threshingfloor of Ornan the Jebusite, then he sacrificed there. For the tabernacle of the LORD, which Moses made in the wilderness, and the altar of the burnt offering, were at that season in the high place at Gibeon. But David could not go before it to inquire of God: for he was afraid because of the sword of the angel of the LORD."

Later, Solomon would build the Temple on this spot:

- **2 Chronicles 3:1** - "Now Solomon began to build the house of the LORD at Jerusalem on Mount Moriah, where the LORD had appeared to his father David, at the place that David had prepared on the threshing floor of Ornan the Jebusite."

This would be fulfillment of the command in Deuteronomy

- **Deuteronomy 12:5-6** - "But unto the place which the LORD your God shall choose out of all your tribes to put his name there, even unto his habitation shall ye seek, and thither thou shalt come: And thither ye shall bring your burnt offerings, and your sacrifices, and your tithes, and heave offerings of your hand, and your vows, and your freewill offerings, and the firstlings of your herds and of your flocks:"

And After his Ascension, Jesus sent the Holy Spirit on his disciples at Pentecost in that same Temple:

- **Acts 2:1-4** - "And when the day of Pentecost was fully come, they were all with one accord in one place. And suddenly there came a sound from heaven as of a rushing mighty wind, and it filled all the house where they were sitting. And there appeared unto them cloven tongues like as of fire, and it sat upon each of them. And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance."

The rabbis say a remarkable thing about David, as they reflect on his life.

In **Psalm 109:22** David says, "For I am poor and needy, and my heart is wounded within me." The Hebrew says "my heart has died within me." They interpret this to mean he "killed" his evil inclination. He died to self. He reckoned himself as dead to sin.

Because he conquered himself through repentance, he was able through God's help to conquer his enemies and become a man after Gd's own heart.