

2 Samuel 24: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] 2 Samuel chapter 24 Again the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel, and he incited David against them, saying, Go number Israel and Judah. So the king said to Joab, the commander of the army who was with him, Go through all the tribes of Israel, from Dan to Beersheba, and number the people, that I may know the number of the people.

But Joab said to the king, May the Lord your God add to the people a hundred times as many as they are, while the eyes of my lord the king still see it. But why does my lord the king delight in this thing?

But the king's word prevailed against Joab and the commanders of the army. So Joab and the commanders of the army went out from the presence of the king to number the people of Israel. They crossed the Jordan and began from Aroah, and from the city that is in the middle of the valley, toward Gad and on to Jezo.

Then they came to Gilead, and to Kadesh in the land of the Hittites. And they came to Dan, and from Dan they went around to Sidon, and came to the fortress of Tyre, and to all the cities of the Hivites and Canaanites.

And they went out to the Negev of Judah at Beersheba. So when they had gone through all the land, they came to Jerusalem at the end of nine months and twenty days. And Joab gave the sum of the numbering of the people to the king of Israel.

[1 : 1 2] There were eight hundred thousand valiant men who drew the sword, and the men of Judah were five hundred thousand. But David's heart struck him after he had numbered the people. And David said to the Lord, I have sinned greatly in what I have done.

But now, O Lord, please take away the iniquity of your servant, for I have done very foolishly. And when David arose in the morning, the word of the Lord came to the prophet Gad, David's seer, saying, Go and say to David, Thus says the Lord, Three things I offer you.

Choose one of them, that I may do it to you. So Gad came to David and told him and said to him, Shall three years of famine come to you and your land? Or will you flee three months before your foes while they pursue you?

Or shall there be three days pestilence in your land? Now consider, and decide what answer I shall return to him who sent me. Then David said to Gad, I am in great distress.

Let us fall into the hand of the Lord, for his mercy is great. But let me not fall into the hand of man. So the Lord sent a pestilence on Israel from the morning until the appointed time, and there died of the people from Dan to Beersheba, seventy thousand men.

[2 : 2 0] And when the angel stretched out his hand toward Jerusalem to destroy it, the Lord relented from the calamity and said to the angel who was working destruction among the people, It is enough. Now stay your hand.

And the angel of the Lord was by the threshing floor of Arunah the Jebusite. Then David spoke to the Lord when he saw the angel who was striking the people and said, Behold, I have sinned, and I have done wickedly.

But these sheep, what have they done? Please let your hand be against me and against my father's house. And Gad came that day to David and said to him, Go up, raise an altar to the Lord on the threshing floor of Arunah the Jebusite.

So David went up at Gad's word, as the Lord commanded. And when Arunah looked down, he saw the king and his servants coming on toward him. And Arunah went out and paid homage to the king with his face to the ground.

And Arunah said, Why has my lord the king come to his servant? David said, To buy the threshing floor from you, in order to build an altar to the Lord, that the plague may be averted from the people.

[3 : 21] Then Arunah said to David, Let my lord the king take and offer up what seems good to him. Here are the oxen for the burnt offering, and the threshing sledges, and the yokes of the oxen for the wood.

All this, O king, Arunah gives to the king. And Arunah said to the king, May the lord your god accept you. But the king said to Arunah, No, but I will buy it from you for a price.

I will not offer burnt offerings to the lord my god, that cost me nothing. So David bought the threshing floor and the oxen for fifty shekels of silver. And David built there an altar to the lord, and offered burnt offerings and peace offerings.

So the lord responded to the plea for the land, and the plague was averted from Israel. The story of David's sinful census in 2 Samuel chapter 24 is a strange story in several respects.

It also raises the question of why the books of Samuel will conclude on such a peculiar note. Understanding scripture can often be like putting a jigsaw puzzle together. You need to pay attention both to the image upon, and to the shape and the position of the pieces.

[4 : 22] Likewise, when reading scripture, we'll often find that properly placing a piece, as it were, and relating it to other pieces, requires attention both to structural and to larger literary dimensions of the text, as well as to its theological and narrative content.

If you're anything like me, when you're doing a jigsaw puzzle, one of the first things that you look for are the corner and the edge pieces. One of the keys to the reading of 2 Samuel chapter 24 is the fact that it is akin to a corner piece of the text of the books of Samuel.

It is the concluding chapter, which suggests that it might be especially important. It is also part of discernible internal structures, such as that of the concluding section of the book of 2 Samuel, which itself has a book-ended or chiasmic structure.

As Peter Lighthouse notes, Within this concluding section, we should readily perceive parallels between chapter 21 and the famine in the land in this chapter. Both chapters concern the sin of a king and the consequent judgment upon the people and the land.

In both cases, successful sacrifice and atonement is made for the land, both using the same expression to refer to the end of the judgment in their concluding verse, 2 Samuel chapter 21 verse 14, and after that God responded to the plea for the land.

[5 : 38] In chapter 24 verse 25, So the Lord responded to the plea for the land, and the plague was averted from Israel. One of the three options of punishment that the Lord gives to David in this chapter was also the punishment that came upon the land due to the sin of Saul, three years of famine.

Seeing the structural parallels and the parallels between the content of these chapters, we will also be alert to the contrasts, to the ways in which, when juxtaposed, certain divergent details stand out from them as especially worthy of note.

A prominent theme throughout this concluding section has been the character of true kingship. In chapter 21, David had to deal with the consequences of the sin of Saul concerning the Gibeonites and the judgment that fell upon the land as a result of it.

In chapter 22, David's psalm reflected on the Lord's deliverance and vindication of the righteous king. In chapter 23, David delivered a final oracle concerning true kingship.

Now, in chapter 24, David deals with the consequences of his own sin in the census. Another crucial theme that binds the whole books of Samuel together, appearing at the beginning and at the end, is the theme of the house of the Lord.

[6 : 49] Near the beginning of the story of 1 Samuel, the Ark of the Covenant is taken by the Philistines. Now, at the end of the book, the land for the temple is finally purchased, and we have an anticipation of its importance as a place where successful atonement will be made for the land and the people, and God's judgment will be arrested.

The story begins with the Lord being angry with Israel and inciting David to number them. In 1 Chronicles chapter 21 verse 1, we have one of the most startling apparent biblical contradictions, as in its account of the same events, we read, Then Satan stood against Israel and incited David to number Israel.

There are, however, a number of ways to deal with the apparent contradiction. First, Satan might well have been the means by which God judged Israel. God can incite people to actions by means of other parties, as we also see in 1 Kings chapter 22 verses 20 to 22.

And the Lord said, Who will entice Ahab that he may go up and fall at Ramoth-Gilead? And one said one thing, and another said another. Then a spirit came forward and stood before the Lord, saying, I will entice him.

And the Lord said to him, By what means? And he said, I will go out and will be a lying spirit in the mouth of all his prophets. And he said, You are to entice him, and you shall succeed.

[8 : 05] Go out and do so. The Lord could have used Satan in such a manner. Second, another possibility is that the word translated Satan here is not in fact a proper name, but refers more generally to an adversary.

David is incited to number the people, presumably as a threatening adversary is raised up against them. However, as we hear nothing more about the adversary, perhaps we should consider the possibility that it was a weak pretext for a significant overreach on David's part.

This still leaves the question of why the Lord would incite David to sin in such a manner anyway. If we didn't have verse 10, we might perhaps argue that David himself wasn't sinning, but simply that the census was a means by which Israel were brought into judgment.

Verse 1 doesn't say that the Lord was angry with David, but that he was angry with Israel and that David was incited against them. However, while the Lord's inciting of David might have been a result cheaply of Israel's sin, David clearly sins in taking it.

We should consider that there are situations when God brings testing upon people as a judgment to expose what is in their hearts, putting them in situations where their feet will slip and they will fail.

[9 : 15] The Lord's testing of David here is itself a judgment. We pray, lead us not into temptation because we seek deliverance from any situation that might overwhelm our weak faith.

However, those who are presumptuous and unfaithful can find that they are placed in such situations. The Lord himself does not tempt us, but he does expose the unfaithful to danger.

The judgment in this chapter comes upon David and the people after David takes the census. This might surprise us. Why would this be considered such a severe sin? Indeed, why would it be considered a sin at all?

The first thing to consider is that the census was a military census, not a more general numbering. David is mustering those suitable for military service. Considering 1 Chronicles chapter 21 verse 1, this was most likely taken in response to a seeming threat of an enemy.

A second thing to consider is the background in Exodus chapter 30 verses 11 to 16. The Lord said to Moses, 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 may be no plague among them when you number them.

[10 : 23] Each one who is numbered in the census shall give this, half a shekel according to the shekel of the sanctuary. The shekel is 20 geras, half a shekel as an offering to the Lord. Everyone who is numbered in the census, from 20 years old and upward, shall give the Lord's offering.

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 their lives. 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 Lord's people was an inherently dangerous thing to do. David's census suffers a judgment that might be associated with sacrilege. Perhaps he failed to observe the proper procedure.

The law of Exodus might give us some insight into why taking a census was such a serious matter. The law warns against the danger of a plague when the Lord's people are wrongly numbered, and the Lord tells them that atonement must be made for their lives.

Why might this be the case? In such a census, the Lord's people were being reckoned up, both by numbering of their leaders, but also by the Lord. A census was a presentation of the people for assessment, as it were, and unless this were undertaken appropriately and with care, judgment might fall upon them.

[11 : 40] They were being inspected, and unless atonement were made for them, they would be brought to the attention of the Lord for punishment. Of course, if the Lord was already angry with Israel, as we see he was here, a census of the nation would be an extremely dangerous thing.

A third thing to consider here is further possible background in the narrative of the Exodus. Peter Lightheart observes the importance of the language of plague here and the way that it recalls that Exodus background.

We should also consider the role played by the destroying angel. Pharaoh had taken the Lord's people, and unless he lets them go, plagues would come upon him. David might be doing the same thing here, treating the people of the Lord as if it was his right to muster them.

A fourth consideration is the fact that the serious judgment that fell upon the land in chapter 21 occurred due to Saul's attack upon the Gibeonites, who were the servants of the Lord, charged with chopping wood and carrying water for the tabernacle.

The Gibeonites came under the Lord's special protection. Again, this might help to give us some clue into what is occurring in this chapter, when the Lord severely judges David for taking a census.

[12 : 45] It might strengthen the explanation that David is judged for claiming the right to treat the people as his own possession. A fifth consideration is raised by David Firth, who notes that the terminology employed for the census suggests the possibility that David is not merely numbering the people for a battle, but is registering them for future administrative purposes, making a claim upon the people of the Lord that he does not have the right to make.

A final key thing to bear in mind is that Joab seeks to discourage David from the census, recognising that it is wrong. David also recognises his sin and repents of it before he is ever confronted by the Lord.

The sin, whatever it is, is not mysterious to them. It seems most likely to me that David took an external enemy as a pretext for making an excessive claim over the Lord's people, registering them for his own purposes.

In the actual numbering, we see the extent of David's dominion at the time. The territory of Israel seems to stretch into Phoenician territory. It's extensive in the Transjordan as well. There are 1.3 million fighting men, divided between Judah, which has 500,000, and Israel, which has 800,000.

The numbers given are different in 1 Chronicles chapter 21, which also claims that Benjamin and Levi were excluded from the numbering by Joab. Various ways of harmonising these texts have been suggested, although none is very straightforward.

[14 : 07] The divide mentioned between Israel and Judah here is significant. While here its purpose may be primarily administrative, it reminds us again of the fault line along which the nation will later split.

If there were this many fighting men, there might have been four or five times as many people as that in the land itself. It gives us an impression of how great the nation had become and numerous people near the height of their power.

David, although he had ignored warnings, warnings that came somewhat unexpectedly from Joab, later was struck by his conscience and confessed his sin to the Lord. The Lord sends the prophet Gad to him the next morning with three choices of punishment, three years of famine, three months of pursuit by his enemies, or three days of pestilence.

David chose the last of these three. We should note the contrast between the sevenfold punishment that came upon Saul's house for his sin concerning the Gibeonites and the threefold punishment that came upon David.

The threefold punishment might be a result of David's confession. If he confesses, the punishment is lessened. David chose the punishment that came most directly from the hand of the Lord. Seventy thousand people were struck down, but the plague was halted as the destroying angel stayed his hand over Jerusalem, ceasing his destruction by the threshing floor of Arunah the Jebusite.

[15 : 24] David interceded for the people. As the shepherd, the judgment for David's sin was falling upon his flock, much as the judgment for his sin concerning Bathsheba and Uriah. The prophet Gad then instructed David to establish an altar on the threshing floor.

The chapter ends with David purchasing the threshing floor in a transaction that should remind us of Abraham's purchase of the field and the cave of Machpelah from Ephron the Hittite back in Genesis chapter 23.

Arunah the Jebusite is presumably one of the Canaanites who formerly possessed Jerusalem before David drove them out. Just as Abraham's purchase of the cave of Machpelah was a hugely significant first parcel of the inheritance, this is the crowning part of the inheritance.

It is on Mount Moriah, associated with the place where the angel of the Lord had stayed the hand of Abraham back in Genesis chapter 22. as we read in verse 14 of that chapter.

So Abraham called the name of that place the Lord will provide as it is said to this day on the mount of the Lord it shall be provided. The full importance of this purchase becomes plain in 2nd Chronicles chapter 3 verse 1.

[16 : 31] Then Solomon began to build a house of the Lord in Jerusalem on Mount Moriah where the Lord had appeared to David his father at the place that David had appointed on the threshing floor of Ornan the Jebusite.

By this point we should hopefully have a clearer idea why this particular story is placed where it is, taken out of chronological sequence and placed as the very conclusion of the book of 2nd Samuel.

The story of the books of Samuel began with the tabernacle facing destruction and dismantling on account of Israel's sin. Now, at the very end of the book, the land for the great building of the temple where things will finally get put back together again is purchased.

In this purchase the story of Israel has finally reached a key landmark. The historical importance of the site as the place where the Lord stopped the plague upon Israel underlines the significance of the location.

This is the place to which Israel can always return to find atonement and the staying of God's hand of judgment. This is the site of mercy and forgiveness. This is the site of God's favour and grace.

[17 : 35] A question to consider. What significance might there be in the fact that this key site is a threshing floor?■■■