

David Counts the Fighting Men

Second Samuel 24:1-17

and First Chronicles 21:1-17

DIG: This story presents us with many theological and ethical problems as we seek insights into David's self-inflicted dilemma. What prompted David's request to take a census: God's anger? Satan's ruse? David's pride? David's insecurity? Some external threat? If YHVH asked David to do it, then why the subsequent punishment? How did Joab remain true to his own conscience while taking David's census? How could the Adversary dupe a man after the LORD's own heart? Why was David so conscience-stricken? Why three options? And why punish the people for something that David ordered? Who is the Angel of ADONAI and where have we seen Him before? Does God change His mind? How so? Under what circumstances?

REFLECT: In what ways are you proud of your accomplishments, acquisitions or responsibilities? Behind your proud array or aura you show to the world, are you also insecure? Are you like David? Tempted to lean upon the strength of your superior assets rather than in weakness depend upon YHVH? Though you may have prayed for strength in order to achieve great things for ADONAI, where has He made you weak, that you might learn to humbly depend on Him?

The last four chapters of Second Samuel serve as an appendix to David's career. These events occurred earlier in the king's life but are presented here to show the other kinds of problems David had to face - famine and plague (Chapters 21 and 24) - the men David relied on to fight his battles (Chapter 23), and how the king learned to praise God through his trials (Chapter 22 and Psalm 22).

The Sin: Once again (see Ef - The LORD's Wrath Against Isra'el) the anger of ADONAI burned against Yisra'el. God allowed Satan to incite (Hebrew: *suth*, meaning to allure, instigate, persuade or stir) David to take a census of Yisra'el and Y'hudah (Second Samuel 24:1). There was nothing illegal about a national census, as long as it was done according to commandments laid down by the Torah (see the commentary on Exodus Eu - The Atonement Money for the Tabernacle). As a good Jew, Yeshua paid His Temple tax (see the commentary on The Life of Christ Gf - Jesus and the Temple Tax) even though He knew that much of the ministry at Herod's Temple had been polluted by the sons of Annas (see the commentary on The Life of Christ Iv - Jesus Entered the Temple Area and Drove Out All Who Were Buying and Selling), and had been rejected by His Father (Matthew 23:37 to 24:1).

But the census that David ordered wasn't to collect the annual Tabernacle tax, it was a military census. So the king said to Joab and the army commanders (Hebrew: *sar*, meaning *captain, chief or chief of the commanders*) with him, "Go throughout the tribes of Yisra'el from Dan to Beersheba and enroll the fighting men (Hebrew: *chayil* meaning *strength, army, armies, elite army, forces or warriors*), then report back to me so that I may know how many there are" (2 Samuel 24:2; First Chronicles 21:2). The census was motivated by pride and pride is number one on the list of the sins that God hates (Proverbs 6:16-19). It is the ground in which all other sins grow. The Torah makes a distinction between sudden sins of passion and willful sins of rebellion (Deut. 19:1-13; Exodus 21:12-14). But David's census was willful rebellion (and he had over nine months to repent).⁴⁹¹

In the various scenes in David's history, Joab doesn't come across as a godly man, but even he was against the project, and so were his officers. He protested as strongly as he could, saying: "May the LORD your God multiply the troops a hundred times over, and may the eyes of my lord the king see it. My lord the king, are they not all my lord's subjects? Why does my lord the king want to do such a thing? Why should he bring guilt on Isra'el?" The king's word, however, overruled Joab and the army commanders; so Joab left the presence of the king and went throughout Isra'el to enroll the fighting men (Second Samuel 24:3-4; First Chronicles 21:3-4).

After crossing the east side of the Jordan, they camped near Aroer, south of the town in the gorge, and then went through Gad and on to Jazer. They went to Gilead and the region of Tahtim Hodshi, and on to Dan Jaan and around toward Sidon on extreme north of the Kingdom near the Mediterranean Sea. Then they went south toward the fortress of Tyre and all the towns of the Hivites and Canaanites. Finally, they went on to Beersheba in the Negev of Judah, but they didn't count the Levites because they were exempt from military duty (Numbers 1:49, 2:33) or the men of Benjamin (Second Samuel 24:5-7). But Joab did not include Levi and Benjamin in the numbering, because the king's command was repulsive to him. The Tabernacle was located at Gibeon in Benjamin territory (First Chronicles 16:39-40, 21:29), and Joab may have thought it unwise to invade holy territory on such a sinful mission.

After they had gone through the entire Land, they came back to Jerusalem at the end of nine months and twenty days. Joab reported the number of the fighting men twenty years old and upward who were fit for military service to the king: In Isra'el there were about eight hundred thousand able-bodied men who could handle a sword, and in Judah was about five hundred thousand. This command was also evil in the sight of YHVH so He punished Isra'el (Second Samuel 24:8-9; First Chronicles 21:5-7).

The Choice: Eventually coming to the realization that his command to take the census of Isra'el's fighting men had not only been repulsive to Joab, but also evil in the sight of God, David was conscience-stricken. He said to ADONAI, "I have sinned greatly in what I have done. Seven times in Scripture we find David confessing, "I have sinned (Second Samuel 12:13, 24:10 and 17, First Chronicles 21:8 and 17; Psalm 41:4 and 51:4). Now, YHVH, I beg You, take away the guilt of Your servant. I have done a very foolish thing." ADONAI forgives our sins when we confess them (First John 1:9), but there are still consequences. Since it was David's sin that would reap the whirlwind, YHVH gave him the choice of the consequence. Why? Because David's disobedience in numbering his military out of pride was a sin of the will. A deliberate choice on his part.⁴⁹² Before David got up the next morning, the word of the LORD had come to Gad the prophet, who had given him sound advice during his outlaw period (First Samuel 22:5). "Go and tell David, 'This is what YHVH says: I am giving you three options. Choose one of them for me to carry out against you' (Second Samuel 24:10-12; First Chronicles 21:8-10)."

It is universally acknowledged that Jews, traditionally speaking, have understood their religious obligations within the context of the covenantal relationship between God and Isra'el. Consequently, Jewish ethics are addressed to members of a covenanted community, rather than to autonomous individuals. Therefore, all Israelites, the innocent as well as the guilty, were responsible for the nation's guilt. Ha'Shem punished Isra'el for David's sins as well as their own. Hadn't the people rejected David for Absalom? And then some followed Sheba? Hadn't they rejected the head of the Covenant and thereby God's Covenant itself? For these reason and other reasons, YHVH intended to punish them.⁴⁹³

The Judgment: So Gad went to David and said: This is what ADONAI says: Take your choice: Three years of famine in your land? Or three months of being swept away by your enemies while they pursue you with their swords. Or three days of plague in your land, with the Angel of the LORD ravaging every part of Isra'el. The shorter the time the more intense the suffering. The three punishments are named in God's covenant with Isra'el (Deuteronomy 28), so David probably wasn't surprised. Relayed to David through Gad, the LORD's three options turned out to be three punishments.

Now then, think it over and decide how I should answer the One who sent me. David said to Gad, "I am in deep distress. Let me fall into the hands of God for His mercy is very great; but do not let me fall into human hands" (Second Samuel 24:13-14; First Chronicles 21:11-13). The rabbis teach that if David chose famine, he would have placed his people in the hands of the food merchants; if he chose war, he would have placed Isra'el in the hands of the enemy; so David chose the plague in which only YHVH was in control. And David put himself in a position to share equally with his people.

Concerning famine, David would still have plenty of food, concerning war, David had a great army to protect him, but with the plague, only God would be in control.

The Plague: The Torah states that the unintentional sin of the high priest was equivalent to the sin of the entire congregation (Leviticus 4:1-11, 13-14), so how much more would the judgment apply to a king who had sinned intentionally? Knowing the mercy of ADONAI, David wisely chose the plague for his punishment.⁴⁹⁴ So ADONAI sent a plague on Isra'el from that morning until the end of the three-day period, and seventy thousand men of Isra'el died between Dan and Beersheba (Second Samuel 24:15). The plague affected the whole country. And just as in the days of Sennacherib's attempted siege of Jerusalem (see the commentary on [Isaiah Gp - The Timeline of Sennacherib's Invasion of Judah](#)), the Angel of the LORD was the instrument of the divinely sent plague.

David looked up and saw the Angel of the LORD standing between heaven and earth, with a drawn sword in his hand extended over Yerushalayim. Then David and the elders, clothed in sackcloth, fell face down, and turned from disobedience to obedience. Then David spoke to ADONAI when he saw a vision of the Angel striking the people; he said: Was it not I who ordered the fighting men to be counted? I, the shepherd, have sinned and done wrong. But these sheep, what have they done? And like Moshe, David called down the wrath of God on himself and his own family rather than seeing the carnage continue (see the commentary on [Exodus Gw - Please Forgive Their Sin, but if not, Blot Me Out of the Book You have Written](#)). David interceded and prayed: Please! ADONAI my God, let Your hand be against me and against my father's family, but do not let the plague remain on Your people (Second Samuel 24:17; First Chronicles 21:16-17).

So when the Angel of the LORD stretched out His hand toward Yerushalayim to destroy it, ADONAI **relented** concerning the disaster and said to the Angel who was destroying the people, "Enough! Now withdraw Your hand" (Second Samuel 24:16).

As ADONAI would later explain to Jeremiah, if at any time I suddenly announce that a nation or kingdom is to be uprooted, torn down and destroyed, and if that nation I warned turns from their evil, then I will **relent** (Hebrew: *nacham*) and not inflict on it the disaster I had planned (see the commentary on [Jonah Ax - The Ninevites Believed God](#)). These are perhaps the two best passages in all the TaNaKh concerning the problem often raised about the nature of God. That is to say, how is it possible for a changeless God to change His mind? Isn't God someone who never changes? Has God's nature changed? No! It is not God's nature that changed. It's merely God's attitude toward the people who are in view. YHVH is sovereign and can change His plans (Jeremiah 18:7-8). Plans are enabled to be changed when people's hearts change, when they repent in true sorrow for their sin.

In **Numbers 23:19** Moshe said that **YHVH** is not man that **He** should **relent**, in the sense of changing **His** mind. But **the LORD's** response to a changed condition in the conduct of mankind has always followed certain eternal principles. **ADONAI** does act differently toward mankind when they turn from disobedience to obedience. And because **Ha'Shem** has always been consistent with those principles, in reality, there has been no actual change of mind on **God's** part. It only appears that way from our point of view.

Therefore, **the Angel of the LORD** stopped at the threshing floor of **Araunah the Jebusite**. This is the same **Angel of the LORD** who found Hagar near a spring of water in the wilderness (see the commentary on **Genesis Ej - Hagar and the Angel of the LORD**). This is **the Angel of the LORD** who defended **Yerushalayim** (see my commentary on **Isaiah Gw - Then the Angel of the LORD Put To Death a Hundred and Eighty Five Thousand Men in the Assyrian Camp**). This is a unique **Person**. **He** is called **the Angel of the LORD** 58 times in the Bible and **He** is called **the Angel of God** 11 times. This is never a common angel, but always **the second Person of the Trinity**, the pre-incarnate **Messiah**. **The threshing floor of Araunah** was on **Mount Moriah**, a hill east of **Jerusalem**, on which the Temple would eventually be built (**Second Samuel 24:14-16; First Chronicles 21:14-15**).

The humbled **David** who prayed in **Second Samuel 24:17** was very different from the regal **David** of **Second Samuel 24:2**. Like the prodigal son (see the commentary on **The Life of Christ Hu - The Parable of the Lost Son and His Jealous Brother**), **David** had **returned to his senses**. **He** was indeed a man after **God's** own heart (**First Samuel 13:14**). **David** wasn't perfect and there were times in **his** life when **he** departed from that identity, but here, **he** had come back to **his** true self.

What about you? Have you surrendered to **Jesus Christ** as your **Lord** and **Savior**? Has your halo slipped? Do you need to **return to [your] senses** and get back to who you really are? Repent and run to your **Father's** arms. Have you been through much in this life? Don't waste your sorrows. Find someone who needs the wisdom that only you can give. Use your spiritual gifts. Help someone this week. You might be the only "Jesus" they will ever see.