



FEED MY SHEEP

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The Sin of the Census-taking

No, the headline does not mean to imply that our decennial U. S. census-taking is a sin. We now come to another famous incident in the life of David. It is difficult to say with certainty when this incident occurred. I tend to think it occurred somewhere in the late-middle or perhaps even somewhat close to the end of David's reign.

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.

This story recounts one of David's personal failures. But let us not miss the fact that God is angry with whom—David? No, it says Yahweh is angry *at the nation* and in order to bring about a national chastisement, God moves, He incites, He instigates, God provokes and lures David to take a census. How many of us think that just because *God* moves David to do something that David is necessarily going to do it? I do.

This same story is told in 1 Chronicles 21 and we are going to interweave the two accounts. As we read verse 1, we will notice a shocking difference in the two accounts right from the beginning.

1 Chronicles 21:1 And Satan stood up against Israel, and provoked David to number Israel.

In 2 Samuel 24:1 *God* is acting. Here it says *satan* is provoking David. Here is another prime example of the sovereignty of God. We also examined this incident in our book, *Sacred Secrets of the Sovereignty of God*, but it is well worth repeating, this time from a little dif-

ferent angle. We notice that in the account in 2 Samuel 24 that *God* takes the credit for *moving* David to sin.

Here it says that *satan provoked* David. The Hebrew verb is the same in both accounts. It could have been translated by any of those words I used: God moved, He incited, He instigated, God provoked and lured David to take a census. Here *satan* moved, incited, provoked, instigated or lured David to number Israel. For the point of theology we are making here, it does not matter one whit whether you believe the *satan* here is some supernatural, invisible, personal being or fallen angel; or if you believe *satan* is simply an adversary of the human variety. The Hebrew word *sawtawn*, transliterated as *satan*, simply means that—an adversary. At some point after David has ordered the census, he is convicted of sin. Notice whom David blames for the sin.

1 Chronicles 21:8 And David said unto God, I have sinned greatly, because I have done this thing: but now, I beseech thee, do away the iniquity of thy servant; for I have done very foolishly.

Let us assume for the benefit of those who believe in a supernatural, personal devil that the *satan* here is just that. Can you see that there are three levels of responsibility involved in this evil? Namely, God caused it. Satan caused it, and David caused it. Do you see that?

Did David sin? Of course he did. He says he did *and* God punished him for it, so I think we can safely assert that he did sin. Exactly what was wrong with taking the census that made it a sin, we will discuss a

bit further on. But we have now established that he did sin. David did not try to evade responsibility for his sin. He forthrightly admitted it. He did not complain to God that “Hey, that’s not fair. The devil made me do it!” Nor did he complain to God that “*You made me do it!*”

What we are providing here is a tiny refresher course on the sovereignty of God, and if there are readers who have never heard our audio lecture series or read our book on this subject, I cannot urge you strongly enough to obtain it and study it thoroughly; it can change your life by changing your whole outlook on life. It is our CD or cassette album #A-102 (\$33 ppd). (Since we have now published the book version, it has much more material than the audio series.)

We don’t have space here to give you detailed proof of every statement we’re making in this section. If I raise questions here in the minds of newer readers, that is good. I mean to. I hope it will pique your interest enough that you will obtain the album or book. So just as part of a tiny review here, let me ask you: Who created evil? God did. This fact upsets many Christian believers, but look it up! (Isaiah 45:7). I know some commentators say it means “calamities,” but we deal with that in the book.

Is David responsible for his sin? Yes, but he has only a *limited* liability. In this case, the liability is limited to a certain number of Israelites who will die of a plague or pestilence as punishment for the sin. Because remember that 2 Samuel 24:1 told us that God was upset with the whole Israel nation.

It is true that He could have simply punished the nation without having David sin here. But you see, there was another purpose of God which was being played out here by having David sin. Therefore, God caused David to sin, and *then* He punished Israel.

Now, from David’s *human* perspective, could he freely choose either to take the census or not? Yes, from *his* perspective, he had free will. And he chose to sin and that is why he has to accept responsibility for the sin. But only to a limited level because from *God’s* perspective, did David have free will? No, he did not. Because God had foreordained that David would commit this sin. *God foreordained that it was going to be the means of a great blessing.* Good from evil—God does that all the time. What that great blessing was will be seen by the end of this study

(which will span more than this issue of FMS).

What about satan then, is he responsible, too? Yes, but he is just doing his job. He is in fact the agent of God whom God ordered to provoke David. He is responsible to God to carry out the mission of provoking David to sin. If someone believes that God did not order satan to do this provoking, then what they believe must also of necessity include the idea that satan is an independent creature who is outside of God’s control. Can that be? Never! Again, we do not have the space to review all the implications of this here, so that is why we encourage you to get the book or audio album lecture series.

1 Chronicles 21:2 And David said to Joab and to the rulers of the people, Go, number Israel from Beersheba even to Dan; and bring the number of them to me, that I may know it.

What was David’s sin? What is so wrong about taking a census? Moses did it. In fact, God ordered him to do it. So we know there is nothing inherently wrong with taking a census. It is possible that David’s sin may have been two-fold. Here is our first tiny hint of what one part of the sin of David was. He *just wanted to know*, stemming from a motive of vanity and pride at how large his armies were. Joab sees through David and tries to dissuade him of this folly.

3 And Joab answered, the LORD make his people an hundred times so many more as they be: but, my lord the king, *are they not all my lord’s servants? why then doth my lord require this thing? why will he be a cause of trespass to Israel?*

This shows that Joab knew this was a sin in the making. Although Joab was a predominantly rotten character, we have nevertheless seen him do the hard and dirty work when David was unwilling to face it. At the same time, though, we saw that Joab was often doing the right thing with a wrong personal motive. Here it appears that Joab is entirely morally correct.

4 Nevertheless the king’s word prevailed against Joab. Wherefore Joab departed, and went throughout all Israel, and came to Jerusalem.

Thus, in this one verse, we are told that David was not persuaded, that Joab undertook the census and came back to Jerusalem. Now let us return to the historian’s account in 2 Samuel 24 and pick up some of

the details that the Chronicler omits.

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.

Why did King David want to know? I think it was pride! David was looking to have the actual numbers so that he could boast and exalt himself and bask in the glory of his massive armies.

3 And Joab said unto the king, Now the LORD thy God add unto the people, how many soever they be, an hundredfold, and that the eyes of my lord the king may see *it*: but why doth my lord the king delight in this thing?

4 Notwithstanding the king's word prevailed against Joab, and against the captains of the host. And Joab and the captains of the host went out from the presence of the king, to number the people of Israel.

There we are given the tidbit that David was not only arguing against Joab alone, but against the advice of all his top military commanders. When he was not to be persuaded, Joab and his top commanders set out to do the job. Verse 5 through 7 give us the geographical route in which they undertook the work.

8 So when they had gone through all the land, they came to Jerusalem at the end of nine months and twenty days.

We had said that Joab's motives were pure on this occasion, but as I read this verse, it occurs to me that in addition to the fact that it would be a sin, maybe Joab had a personal motive of simply not wanting to be "on the road" for nine months and 20 days. In other words, maybe he viewed this assignment as a real pain in the neck, which he would just as soon not do. But he did it, and in any event, Joab reports the numbers to David.

9 And Joab gave up the sum of the number of the people unto the king: and there were in Israel eight hundred thousand valiant men that drew the sword; and the men of Judah were five hundred thousand men.

Now, let's compare this to 1 Chronicles 21.

1 Chronicles 21:5 And Joab gave the sum of the number of the people unto David. And all *they* of Israel were a thousand thousand and an hundred thousand men that drew sword: and Judah was four hundred threescore and ten thousand men that drew sword.

Uh-oh! Looks like another error in the inspired Word of God, does it not? However, seasoned Bible students know that of the numerous places that superficially appear to be in error, there is always an explanation or some way that can reconcile two apparently conflicting accounts. I mean, what are we to believe: that God inspired the writer of 2 Samuel to write down one pair of numbers and then when God inspired the Chronicler, that God forgot what He had told the other writer and so God just had to fudge it, to guess and hope nobody would notice? It is obviously a sizeable difference. A total of 1,300,000 million men according to 2 Samuel and a total of 1,570,000 according to 1 Chronicles. There are at least a half dozen good explanations, but I will just give you one.

In 1 Chronicles 27:1 it is talking about David's standing army. The KJV uses the word "courses," but the word "division" is more appropriate because these were large military units and that would be the proper word today. We have therefore inserted "division(s)."

1 Chronicles 27:1 Now the children of Israel after their number, *to wit*, the chief fathers and captains of thousands and hundreds, and their officers that served the king in any matter of the courses divisions, which came in and went out month by month throughout all the months of the year, of every division *were* twenty and four thousand.

In other words, the total army was 288,000 (12 months times 24,000 men in each division). Each division was on active duty for a month and then was free until their month rolled around the following year—in a manner similar to our Army Reserves.

It is clear that the Bible often rounds off numbers and if we round off the 288,000 to 300,000 and add it to the 1.3 million given in Samuel, we come up with 1.6 million men. On the other side, we simply round up the number in Chronicles to the nearest hundred thousand and we come up with the same 1.6 million. That is a totally legitimate explanation and, as I said, there are a number of others which offer equally

valid means of explaining the discrepancy.

1 Chronicles 21:6 But Levi and Benjamin counted he not among them: for the king's word was abominable to Joab.

Concerning Levi, God had told Moses that the Levites were not to be numbered (Numbers 1:49). But why did Joab not count the tribe of Benjamin? This is just speculation, but verse 6 seems to indicate that the reason has to do with Joab's distaste for the job. He found the assignment detestable and therefore he dawdled and dragged out the job, hoping that David would change his mind and recall him from the census-taking. But after nine months and 20 days Joab had gone all around the land and had circled up from Beersheba and was just about ready to start numbering the tribe of Benjamin.

So he decided that since he was passing through Jerusalem on his way to the land of Benjamin, that he would stop in at the palace and report to David the totals so far, again in the hope that David would call a halt. Sure enough, by this time, David has realized his sin and stops the count before Benjamin is numbered. We find support for this speculation in...

1 Chronicles 27:23 But David took not the number of them from twenty years old and under: because the LORD had said he would increase Israel like to the stars of the heavens.

24 Joab the son of Zeruiah began to number, but he finished not, because there fell wrath for it against Israel; neither was the number put in the account of the chronicles of king David.

I puzzled for a moment: what does that mean: "neither was the number put in the account of the chronicles of king David."? We just read that Joab reported to him numbers totaling 1,570,000. It has to mean that the *complete* number was not put in the chronicles. It is not only missing Levi and Benjamin, but also those from 20 years old and under.

And verse 24 verifies that indeed Joab did *not* finish the job. I think verse 23 indicates that even in his desire to exalt himself in the size of his armies, David did not go so far as to demand Joab number the youngsters, because, it says, Yahweh had said he would increase Israel like to the stars of the heavens. So what?, someone says, why should that keep David from numbering everybody? Well, remember in

Genesis 15 when God told Abram to go outside and look at the night sky and count the stars—if you are able to, He told him,...so shall thy seed be for multitude. The clear implication is that the total number of stars *cannot* be numbered.

Astronomers say that it is now a proven fact that in our galaxy alone there are at least ten BILLION planets—not stars, but planets! A couple decades ago, astronomers could only speculate if there were *any* other planets in the universe. Now they verify that ten billion planets exist just in the Milky Way itself. And they put the number of stars in the Milky Way alone at 200 BILLION. And who knows how many billions of galaxies there are! It staggers my imagination. What an awesome God we serve! What a Creator! Consider this prophecy which God gave through Jeremiah who lived about 400 years after King David.

Jeremiah 33:22 As the host of heaven cannot be numbered, neither the sand of the sea measured: so will I multiply the seed of David my servant, and the Levites that minister unto me.

So if the people of Israel were to multiply like the stars of heaven and the stars cannot be numbered, then some might argue that for David to attempt to number all of Israel would constitute an abomination. Perhaps. Perhaps not. One could also make the case that if a king *could* count all of Israel then he would know that God had not finished multiplying Israel yet. Furthermore, certainly God understood and we understand that a ruler over a nation does have a legitimate need to know the available manpower for defense purposes. And so there is a balance to be sought when the people are numbered.

But it seems that David was numbering them more out of pride and a desire to exalt himself than out of any real urgent military need at this time. Moreover, there is a second aspect to his sin, which we will pick up with next month.

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