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Israel and Judah: 13. Mighty Men and the Census

by David Sielaff, October 2015

Read the accompanying [Newsletter for October 2015](#)

Israel and Judah: 13

Mighty Men
 and the
 Census

THE SITUATION: Last time, we ended by considering 2 Samuel 23:1–7 containing the last words of King David.^a That section interrupted the sequence of events in David’s life. Now we come to another section about David’s heroes that supported him from before he became King of Judah. The infamous census that David conducted is the last text in the Book of Second Samuel, but that brings us only half way through the Book of Kingdoms.^b As David’s story approaches its end, important information still needs to be conveyed from the biblical texts.

Why were David’s “last words” of 2 Samuel 23:1–7 presented far before other events and announcement of his death? Were David’s last words the original end of Second Samuel? Whatever the case, later editors had the authority to make such changes in the order of the texts. One reason is because there is a symmetry in the present order of information in Second Samuel and First Kings. Look again at the outline by David Dorsey that I presented last time. Note the two highlighted sections. Second Samuel 21:15–22 (dealing with individual Philistine warriors) parallels 2 Samuel 23:8–39 (dealing with companies of Philistine troops).

^a Recall that I follow the narrative structure of Samuel/Kings, and relate the two books of Chronicles to the Samuel/Kings sequence of events, inserting Psalms and other Old Testament writings where appropriate.

^b The Books of Samuel and Kings were in a single scroll and all four were considered by the Israelites to be one book. Dr. Ernest Martin’s judgment was that Isaiah penned most of Samuel/Kings. See *Restoring the Original Bible*, “[Chapter 12: The Old Testament Periods of Canonization](#).” This covers the period from King Saul up to the middle of the 8th century BC (about 750 BC, some 200 years after King David), until the destruction of the northern Kingdom of Israel by Assyria. Isaiah wrote during a religious revival in the reign of King Hezekiah of Judah. (After Isaiah’s death, his prophetic colleagues wrote about later events in the Book of Second Kings.) All the information about David was compiled from writings of participants and official records of the time which existed as we are as told in 1 Chronicles 29:29–30:

“The affairs of David the king, first and last, behold, they are written in the annals of Samuel the seer, in the records of Nathan the prophet and in the records of Gad the vision seer, together with all his reign and his masterful deeds and the times that had passed over him and over Israel and over all the kingdoms of the lands.”

Outline of the End of David's Reign^c
(2 Samuel chapter 21 to 1 Kings chapter 2)

a **famine** caused by Saul's war against Gibeonites (2 Samuel 21:1–14)

- **Ends:** when YHWH answered prayer on behalf of the land (21:14)

| **b** **David's heroes** (21:15–22)

- How they defeated great Philistine warriors

| **c** **David's song of praise** (22:1–51 and Psalm 18)

| **c'** **David's last words** (23:1–7)

| **b'** **David's heroes** (23:8–39)

- Including how they defeated Philistines in battle

a' **plague** caused by David's census (preparing for wrongful war?) (24:1–25)

- **Ends:** when YHWH answered prayer on behalf of the land (24:25)

d **Conclusion:** David's death and Solomon's succession (1 Kings 1:1–2:46)

“David's heroes,” his “**mighty men**” as some translations call them (translated from the Hebrew, *gibbor*), were first listed and described in 2 Samuel 21:15–22 where their victories against individual enemy fighters were described. In 2 Samuel 23:8–39 and 1 Chronicles 11:10–47 a more detailed account is given about David's mighty men, just after “**the last words of David**” of 2 Samuel 23:1–7. The focus there is on their victories over groups of enemies.

TEXT: 1. List of David's Mighty Warriors

2 Samuel 23:8–12

⁸ *These are the names* of the **masters of war** who belonged to David: *Ish-bosheth the Hachmonite*, the head of the three. He **brandished his spear** against 800, all slain at one time.

⁹ Next to him came Eleazar son of Dodai *son of Ahohi* among the three masters of war with David *when they reproached the Philistines*. There they were gathered for battle. As the men of Israel went up [withdrew], ¹⁰ he arose and smote the Philistines until his hand became weary, and his hand clung to the sword. Thus Yahweh performed a great salvation on that day; now **the people**, they

1 Chronicles 11:10–14

¹⁰ And these were the heads of David's masters of war who showed themselves steadfast with him in his kingdom, together with all Israel, **to make him king** according to the word of Yahweh concerning Israel.

¹¹ *This is the roster* of the **masters of war** who belonged to David: *Jashobeam son of Hachmoni*, the head of the three. He **brandished his spear** against 300, all slain at one time.

¹² Next to him came Eleazar son of Dodai *the Ahohite, who was* among the three masters of war.

¹³ *He was* with David *at Pas-dammim*

^c In “[Israel and Judah: 12. David's Special Song](#).” This outline is in David Dorsey, *The Literary Structure of the Old Testament: A Commentary on Genesis–Malachi* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1999), 134.

returned after him, only **to strip them**.

¹¹ Next to him came Shammah son of Agee the Hararite. When the Philistines were gathered *at Lehi*, where there was a portion of a field full of *lentils*, **the people had fled before the Philistines**.

¹² Yet he stood by in the midst of the portion [of a field] and reclaimed it and smote the Philistines. Thus Yahweh *performed* a great salvation.

when the Philistines were gathered *there for battle*, where there was a portion of a field full of *barley*, **and the people had fled before the Philistines**.

¹⁴ Yet they stood by in the midst of the portion [of a field] and reclaimed it and smote the Philistines. Thus Yahweh *saved with* a great salvation.

[end text]

1 Chronicles 11:10. The phrase **“to make him king”** indicates that most of these deeds occurred before David became King of Judah at Hebron, 7 years before he became King of all Israel.

2 Samuel 23:8. **“Ish-bosheth the Hachmonite”** is an unusual translation by the Concordant Literal Version, based on a conjecture. Most modern translations render it as “Josheb-Basshebeth, a Tahkemonite.” No one knows what the “Basshebeth” or “Tahkemonite” mean, but he had a different name in 1 Chronicles 11:11. Having two names was not uncommon. One name is likely a description or a title.

Verses 8/11. The term **“masters of war”** indicates they were commanders of troops under Joab who was under King David. Later, other members of **“the thirty”** were individuals who distinguished themselves with various feats of valor.

He **“brandished his spear.”** This phrase is unclear to commentators, but it likely means that he raised his spear and led his men into battle and together they killed many of the enemy. The difference between 800 and 300 is surprising. The Greek Old Testament has the same numbers in these verses. Josephus says the number was 900 (*Antiquities of the Jews* 7:308). Commentators have no explanation for the difference. The Hebrew words for “eight” and “three” are very different. The important thing to take away from this verse is that this warrior stood his ground, not retreating, in hand-to-hand combat while hundreds of Philistines (and presumably some Israelites) were killed around him by his own hand and that of other Israelite warriors.

The Scriptures were entrusted to the Jews for preservation. After all, all knew about the discrepancies in numbers, yet the Word of God remains true, Romans 3:1–2: **“What, then, is the prerogative [advantage] of the Jew, or what the benefit of circumcision? Much in every manner. For first, indeed, that they were entrusted with the oracles of God.”** They may have failed in that as they failed in other things.

Verses 9/12. The difference between the two phrases **“son of Ahohi,”** or **“the Ahohite”** probably refers to Ahohi being the leader of a clan that Dodai belonged to, rather than Ahohi being Dodai’s son.

2 Samuel 23:10. The Israelites returned to fight alongside Eleazar, and stayed to strip the bodies of the dead of armor, weapons, and valuables, which has been common practice since wars began. Eleazar’s **“hand became weary, and his hand clung to the sword,”** meant that the muscles of his cramped hand needed to relax before he could let go of the sword handle. Josephus explains it differently: **“his sword clung to his band by the blood he had shed”** (*Antiquities of the Jews* 7:309). Such explanatory statements in the text give credence to the narrative.

2 Samuel 23:11. Why was **“Shammah son of Agee”** not mentioned in Chronicles? We cannot know, but perhaps Shammah’s descendants were heretics or rebels and the writer omitted him from the hero list.

Verses 11/13. The Israelite soldiers retreated, but Shammah (and later some others, verse 13), held their ground and gained the victory.

Verses 12/14. As in 2 Samuel 23:10 the same words are used, YHWH gave Israel **“a great salvation”** or a great victory. Robert Bergen notes in his book *1, 2 Samuel*, vol. 7, The New American Commentary (Nashville: Broadman & Holman Publishers, 1996), 469:

“The writer’s acknowledgment of a union between human skill and divine enablement affirms and extends the theology of war present in the previous chapter (cf. [2 Samuel] 22:35, 38).

Yahweh the Warrior trained, strengthened, and gave victory on the battlefield to his anointed David, but he did not limit this treatment to David. Other soldiers of the covenant, such as Eleazar, could also experience this divine blessing.”

In the following section the narratives tell about three other remarkable heroes. They are three of the thirty, and presumably not of the three already named, but their names are not given.

TEXT: 2. *List of David's Mighty Warriors*

2 Samuel 23:13–17

¹³ Three of **the thirty** head men went down *and came during the harvest* to David at **the cave of Adullam**, while a *Philistine kinfolk troop* was encamping in **the vale of Rephaim**.

¹⁴ David was then in **the fastness**, and the garrison of the Philistines was then at Bethlehem.

¹⁵ Now David voiced his yearning and said, **“Who may give me to drink water from the cistern of Bethlehem that is at the gate?”**

¹⁶ So three *of the masters of war* rent their way [broke] into the camp of the Philistines and bailed water from the cistern of Bethlehem at the gate. When they had carried and brought it to David, *then he* would not drink it, but poured a libation of it to Yahweh. ¹⁷ He said, **“Far be it from me, *O Yahweh*, for me to do this. Should I drink the blood of the men who went risking their souls?”**

And he would not drink it. These are the exploits that the three masters of war performed.

1 Chronicles 11:15–19

¹⁵ Three of **the thirty** head men went down *to the rock* to David at **the cave of Adullam**, while a *force of Philistines* was encamping in **the vale of Rephaim**.

¹⁶ David was then in **the fastness**, and the garrison of the Philistines was then at Bethlehem.

¹⁷ Now David voiced his yearning and said, **“Who may give me to drink water from the cistern of Bethlehem that is at the gate?”**

¹⁸ So *the* three rent their way [broke] into the camp of the Philistines and bailed water from the cistern of Bethlehem at the gate. When they had carried and brought it to David, *then David* would not drink it, but poured a libation of it to Yahweh. ¹⁹ He said, **“Far be it from me, *my Elohim*, to do this. Should I drink the blood of these men who went risking their souls? For it was at the risk of their souls that they brought it.”**

And he would not drink it. These are the exploits that the three masters of war performed. **[end text]**

Let me repeat what I previously wrote about these five verses in Samuel and Chronicles on page 6 of **“Israel and Judah: 3. David, Philistines, and Uzzah”**:

We are not given details how these three mighty men of David accomplished their remarkable feat. Did the three assault the unwallied town of Bethlehem themselves and fight their way to the well? Or, did they use stealth to obtain the water during the night? Whatever the case, the incident took place about the same time as the first battle with the Philistines.

Military historian Mordechi Gichon understands the “fastness” referred to in the parallel passages above was at or very near Adullam, in the hills above the **“vale of Rephaim”** meaning the Valley of the Rephaim (*Battles of the Bible*, London: Greenhill Books, 1997), pp. 102–104. Adullam is in the hillside just south of the Valley of Elah, the place where David killed Goliath and later the army of Israel chased the demoralized Philistine army (1 Samuel chapter 17). The Valley of Elah connects in the east with the **“vale of Rephaim,”** which is southeast of Jerusalem.

Verses 14/16. “**Fastness**” may be better translated as fortress or stronghold.

Verses 16/18. The cistern was near the gate, whether inside or outside of the town of Bethlehem we do not know. Whatever the case, it was very risky for the three men to do what they did. It is likely that missile weapons (sling-stones, spears, javelins, arrows) were fired at them. In addition, the Philistines may have attacked the three from their camp inside Bethlehem.

Verses 17/19. The mention of “**the blood of the men**” may indicate they were wounded in the attempt, otherwise David’s statement would have been poetic only and have much less force. In Scripture, the power of symbolism is multiplied when the symbols relate to real events. At the end comes a summary statement about the narrative of the three mighty men begun in verses 8/10–11.

TEXT: 3. *List of David’s Mighty Warriors*

2 Samuel 23:18–39

¹⁸ As for Joab’s brother Abishai *son of Zeruiah*, who was head of another three, he brandished his spear against 300, all slain. He won a name among the second three. ¹⁹ He was *the most* illustrious *among* the three; and so he became their chief. Yet he did not come to the rank of the first three.

²⁰ Benaiah son of Jehoiada from Kabzeel was a man of many valiant deeds. It was he who smote the two sons of Ariel of Moab. Once, on a snowy day, he went down and smote a lion inside a cistern.

²¹ He also smote an Egyptian man *who was of imposing appearance*. Although the Egyptian had a spear in his hand, he went down to him with a club and snatched the spear from the Egyptian’s hand and killed him with his own spear.

²² These are the exploits that Benaiah son of Jehoiada performed. So he won a name among the three masters of war. ²³ Though he was more illustrious than the thirty, he did not come to the rank of the first three. Yet David placed him over his household guard.

These are *the names of* the masters of war *of king David*: ²⁴ Asahel brother of Joab *was among the thirty*, Elhanan son of Dodo from Bethlehem,

²⁵ Shammah the Harodite, *Elika the Harodite*,

²⁶ *Helez the Paltite*, Ira son of Ikkesh the Tekoite,

²⁷ Abiezer the Anathothite, *Mebunnai* the Hushathite, ²⁸ *Zalmon* the Ahotite, Maharai the Netophatite, ²⁹ *Heleb* son of Baanah the Netophatite,

Ittai son of Ribai from Gibeah of the sons of Benjamin, ³⁰ Benaiah the Pirathonite, *Hiddai* from the wadis of Gaash, ³¹ *Abi-albon* the Arbathite,

1 Chronicles 11:20–47

²⁰ As for Joab’s brother Abishai, who was head of another three, he brandished his spear against 300, all slain. He won a name among the second three. ²¹ He was *more* illustrious *than the two others of* the three; and so he became their chief. Yet he did not come to the rank of the first three.

²² Benaiah son of Jehoiada from Kabzeel was a man of many valiant deeds. It was he who smote the two sons of Ariel of Moab. Once, on a snowy day, he went down and smote a lion inside a cistern.

²³ He also smote an Egyptian man, *a giant of five cubits*. Although the Egyptian had a spear *like a weaver’s heddle-rod* in his hand, he went down to him with a club and snatched the spear from the Egyptian’s hand and killed him with his own spear.

²⁴ These are the exploits that Benaiah son of Jehoiada performed. So he won a name among the three masters of war. ²⁵ *Behold*, though he was more illustrious than the thirty, he did not come to the rank of the first three. Yet David placed him over his household guard.

²⁶ These are the valiant masters of war: Asahel brother of Joab,

Elhanan son of Dodo from Bethlehem,

²⁷ Shammoth the Harorite, *Helez the Pelonite*,

²⁸ Ira son of Ikkesh the Tekoite,

Abiezer the Anathothite, ²⁹ *Sibbecai* the Hushathite, *Ilai* the Ahohite, ³⁰ Maharai the Netophathite, *Heled* son of Baanah the Netophathite,

³¹ *Ithai* son of Ribai from Gibeah of the sons of Benjamin, Benaiah the Pirathonite, ³² *Hurai* from the wadis of Gaash, *Abiel* the Arbathite,

Azmaveth the Barhumite,³² Eliahba the Shaalbonite, the sons of *Jashen*, Jonathan son of³³ *Shammah* the Hararite, Ahiam son of *Sharar* the Hararite,³⁴ *Eliphelet* son of *Ahasbai*, *the son of the Maacathite*, *Eliam son of Ahithophel the Gilonite*,

³⁵ Hezro the Carmelite, *Paarai the Arbite*,

³⁶ *Igal son* of Nathan *from* Ashterathite, *Bani the Gadite*,

³⁷ Zelek the Ammonite, Naharai the Beerothite, the gear-bearer of Joab son of Zeruiah,

³⁸ Ira the Ithrite, Gareb the Ithrite,

³⁹ Uriah the Hittite;

thirty-seven in all.

³³ Azmaveth the Baharumite, Eliahba the Shaalbonite,³⁴ the sons of *Hashem the Gizonite*, Jonathan son of *Shagee* the Hararite,³⁵ Ahiam son of *Sacar* the Hararite, *Eliphai* son of *Ur*,

³⁶ *Hepher the Mekerathite*, *Ahijah the Pelonite*,

³⁷ Hezro the Carmelite, *Naarai son of Ezbai*,

³⁸ *Joel brother* of Nathan, *Mibhar son of Hagri*,

³⁹ Zelek the Ammonite, Naharai the Berothite—the gear-bearer of Joab son of Zeruiah—

⁴⁰ Ira the Ithrite, Gareb the Ithrite,

⁴¹ Uriah the Hittite,

Zabad son of Ahlai,

⁴² Adina son of Shiza the Reubenite, a head of the Reubenite, and by him thirty,

⁴³ Hanan son of Maacah, and Joshaphat the Mithnite,

⁴⁴ Uzzia the Ashterathite, Shama and Jeiel sons of Hotham the Aroerite,

⁴⁵ Jediael son of Shimri, and his brother Joha the Tizite,

⁴⁶ Eliel the Mahavite, Jeribai and Joshaviah sons of Elnaam, Ithmah the Moabite,

⁴⁷ Eliel, Obed and Jaasiel the Mezobaite.

[end text]

Verses 18/20. We have met Abishai, Joab’s brother and David’s nephew, several times already in the narratives. He was a killer like his brother, but also a brave warrior not afraid to take risks. He also led an attack that killed 300 of the enemy Philistines. He was also a skilled commander of a large component of the army in several major battles.

Verses 19/21. I wonder, what were the criteria to determine the “ranking” of valor for the first 3, the second 3, and the other 24 of **“the thirty”**? Perhaps it was their early declaration of support for David.

Verses 20/22. Benaiah was the son of Jehoiada, a Levitical high priest (1 Chronicles 27:5). Benaiah killed both sons of **“Ariel of Moab,”** a phrase that might be a name or a title. **“Ariel of Moab,”** could also be rendered “Lion of God” (Ari-el, with *ari* meaning lion, and *-el*, being a god of Moab). Thus Benaiah **“smote the two sons of Ariel of Moab”** could also mean that Benaiah **“smote the two sons of the ‘Lion of El’ from Moab,”** referring to some other unidentified great Moabite warrior who was their father.

1 Chronicles 11:23. The Egyptian giant was five cubits tall, which is 7 feet, 6 inches. Such a height is not surprising today. However, in the time of David that height was perhaps very great, yet it was smaller than Goliath or Og of Bashan.

Verses 23/25. Besides being a hero, Benaiah was the loyal leader of David’s **“household guard,”** meaning his personal bodyguard, the Cherethites and Pelethites (2 Samuel 8:18). **“He did not come to the rank of the first three,”** but later he was made commander by Solomon of all Israel’s armies after Joab’s death.

Verses 24/26. Recall that Asahel, another brother of Joab, was killed by Abner (2 Samuel 2:32) in the dynastic struggle of David with the northern tribes of Israel.

The accomplishments of the rest of the heroes (verses 25–39/27–47) are not mentioned at all, although there must have been stories and great deeds done by each of them. Some name correspondences between

2 Samuel chapter 23 and 1 Chronicles chapter 11 are difficult. Beginning in the second half of 1 Chronicles 11:41 through verse 47 there are added names that do not occur in 2 Samuel chapter 23.

There are more than 30 heroes in these lists, particularly in 1 Chronicles 11:27–47, which has 30 names plus 16 more. It is possible that the concept of “hero” was an office limited to 30 men. Perhaps other heroes replaced them when some died, such as when Asahel died before David became king of all Israel. Foreigners such as Zelek the Ammonite (verses 37/39) and Uriah the Hittite (verses 39/41) were on the list. There may have been other foreigners as well.

There are two other lists of names of David’s fighters. One is a list of those who joined him in Ziklag (1 Chronicles 12:1–22). The other is a list of those who joined David in Hebron (1 Chronicles 12:23–40). Neither of these passages have corresponding texts in the Books of Samuel. Read them for yourself from any modern translation, because I will not cover them in these articles.

These men were the core of David’s military. They were the natural leaders, tested in battle, able to train citizen-soldiers to military discipline and basic maneuvers. They were also the professional soldiers David depended upon to strike at crucial places and times so the enemy would think they were defeated and flee. God used such men to give Israel victory as He desired. David’s “**mighty men**” were God’s instruments of victory. King David was the beneficiary of their deeds, as God provided them victory.

Next we read about David being tested by YHWH.

TEXT: 1. David’s Census of Israel: David incited

2 Samuel 24:1–9

¹ *When the anger of Yahweh continued [again] to grow hot against Israel, He incited David against them, saying, “Go, count Israel and Judah.”*

² So *the king* said to Joab and the chiefs of the *army who were with him,*

“Go now to and fro through all the tribes of Israel from Dan unto Beersheba and take a census of the people so that I may know the number of the people.”

³ Joab replied *to the king,*

“May Yahweh your Elohim add to the people a hundred times as many as they are while the eyes of my lord the king are seeing it. But, my lord the king, why does he delight in this matter?”

⁴ Yet the king’s word was unyielding to Joab *and to the chiefs of the army.* So Joab *and the chiefs of the army* went forth *from the presence of the king to take a census of the people of Israel.*

⁵ They crossed over the Jordan and encamped at Aroer to the right side of the city that is in the middle of the wadi; they went toward Gad and on to Jazer ⁶ and came to Gilead and to the land of the Hittites toward Kadesh. They came toward Dan-jaan and round about toward Sidon.

⁷ They also came toward the fortress of Tyre and all the cities of the Hivite and the Canaanite. Then

1 Chronicles 21:1–8

¹ *Satan stood up against Israel and incited David to count Israel.*

² So *David* said to Joab and to the chiefs of the *people,*

“Go, number Israel from Beer-sheba unto Dan, and bring it to me so that I may know their number.”

³ Joab replied,

“May Yahweh add to His people a hundred times as many as they are. My lord the king, are not all of them servants to my lord? Why should my lord insist on this? Why should he involve Israel in quilt?”

⁴ Yet the king’s word was unyielding to Joab. So Joab

they went forth to the Negeb of Judah at Beersheba.

⁸ *Thus they went to and fro* in all *the land*.

At the end of nine months and twenty days they came back to Jerusalem.

⁹ Joab gave the number of the census of the people to *the king*; it came to be, in Israel, **800,000** men *of valor* drawing the sword; and *the men of Judah were* **500,000** men.

went *forth and walked through* all *Israel*.

He then

came back to Jerusalem.

⁵ Joab gave the number of the census of the people to *David*; it came to be, in *all* Israel, **1,100,000** men drawing the sword; and *in* Judah **470,000** men *drawing the sword*.

⁶ As for Levi and Benjamin, he [Joab] did not visit in their midst, for **the king's word had become abhorrent to Joab**.

⁷ This command was also evil in the eyes of the One, Elohim, so that He smote Israel. **[end text]**

2 Samuel 24:1. Most major translations have “again” instead of “continued” of the CLV. God remained angry. Most commentators understand that to mean God was angry as He was in 2 Samuel 21:1–2. **“Against them,”** means against the people of Israel. David became the enemy of his own people.

1 Chronicles 21:1. How can Satan have **“stood up against Israel”**? He has to crawl on his belly (Genesis 3:14). Perhaps Satan can stand when he is in YHWH’s presence, or it is a figure of speech meaning that he volunteered.

Verses 1/1. Why was YHWH angry at Israel at this time? It was because He understood what David’s intentions were, and He knew what David was planning. The Samuel passage says that YHWH **“incited David against them,”** meaning **“against Israel.”** In the Chronicles passage it was Satan who acted **“against Israel and incited David.”** Well, who did the inciting? The answer is, they both did.

In Job 1:8 and 2:2 God prodded Satan with the question, **“Have you set your heart on My servant Job?”** The results for Job were the loss of his many children, his property, and his health. Who caused Job’s problems? YHWH provoked Satan to harm Job. Satan, as the adversary, the accuser, did so willingly. God was responsible and Satan did what he was allowed to do within strict limitations.

Likewise, with the census, YHWH’s anger allowed Satan to go against Israel and incite David to sin. God incited David indirectly through Satan. YHWH is responsible. Satan did what he desired to do which was to help David sin by violating a specific method of census taking specified in the Law of Moses.

Verses 2/2. There was a wrong way and a right way to conduct a census. David sinned because he went against one of God’s specific commands on how to count Israel. The Jewish historian Josephus correctly states the following:

“Now king David was desirous to know how many ten thousands there were of the people, but forgot the commands of Moses, who told them beforehand, that if the multitude were numbered, they should pay half a shekel to God for every head.”

• *Antiquities of the Jews 7.318*

David did not forget. He knew “the commands of Moses,” the Law of God. So why did King David desire the census at that time? In his book *Restoring the Original Bible*, **“Chapter 12: The Old Testament Periods of Canonization,”** Dr. Martin explains:

“Remember in 2 Samuel 24:1–21 when David wanted to number Israel? He wanted something more from that census than just finding out how many Israelites there were in northern Israel and Judah. He was going to do something with those people that he had numbered. David told Joab, who was the commander of the armed forces, to go out and to number Israel. It took Joab over 9 months to do it. David was preparing the Israelites for war, to conquer Assyria up north, to conquer Egypt in the south. After all, he had the economic power to do it at the time,

he thought. He also had the manpower to do it. He had the people behind him because they were then united under him. But God had told David not to do that and so Nathan the prophet had to show him what he was doing was wrong.”

David was susceptible to temptation like anyone else. As the saying goes, “Power corrupts, absolute power corrupts absolutely.” In this case David was tempted with power beyond what God wanted him to achieve under His guidance. YHWH did not want David and Israel to conquer the world. He commanded Satan to tempt David with David’s own desires. An easy task. In the footnote attached to this text above, Dr. Martin explains how David could have determined simple census information:

“In fact, it would have been easy for Israel, or for David, to know how many Israelites were in the country if it was just a simple census being done. All a person would have to do is count the number of half shekels given by every man above 20 years of age. Whether he was poor or whether he was rich, all [males] had to give that half-shekel. If you count the half shekels you would find the number of men. Obviously you could double that for the women, and the children, and you could know about how many there would be.”

Dr. Martin and Josephus were referring to Exodus 30:12–14:

“When you take up the sum of the sons of Israel by their mustered ones then each man will give a sheltering ransom for his soul to Yahweh while one is mustering them, so that no stroke [plague] may come among them when mustering them. This shall they give, everyone passing over to the ones being mustered: a half shekel by the shekel of the holy place, which is twenty gerahs to the shekel; the half shekel shall be a heave offering to Yahweh. Everyone passing over to the ones being mustered from twenty years old and upward shall give Yahweh's heave offering.”

Other commentators believe that David’s motive for his census was to have improved accounting for taxes, which could raise more income to finance wars of conquest. As we will read later high taxes was one cause for rebellion against Rehoboam after the death of his father Solomon as King of Israel (1 Kings chapter 12) when the people of the northern tribes of Israel called the taxes a **“heavy yoke.”**

Verses 3/3. Joab replied to David that he wished YHWH would increase the population of Israel 100-fold. Joab then asks why David insists on conducting this census, which would make the people of Israel guilty. Why is it so important? David gives Joab no answer, so far as is recorded. Joab begins to obey and conducts the census over a 9 month period (2 Samuel 24:8). A census does not take that much time, Joab was doing more than just counting people.

2 Samuel 24:4. It was not just Joab who went but also **“the chiefs of the army”** who conducted the census. It was not just the **“number of the people”** that David wanted to know, but the men of military age.

Verses 9/5. We learn what Joab and the military chiefs were finding. It was the **“men of valor drawing the sword”** (2 Samuel 24:9), in other words, potential warriors. That was the number David wanted to know. Furthermore, they did not only want the count, but they wanted to register them and know who they were.

The numbers are given and they vary considerably from the Samuel to Chronicles verse.

Joab’s Opposition to the Census

Joab gave David an incomplete report, not obtaining the numbers from the tribes of Benjamin and Levi. The tribe of Benjamin had many supporters of the House of Saul, and they still had important influence. The tribe of Levi was scattered in various cities all around the allotted land. The bottom line is, Joab turned in an incomplete assessment.^d

Even Joab (chief of David’s army and a murderer) knew what David wanted to do was wrong. David’s desire was for more than just a count of military capable men. He wanted an assessment of human and

^d Think in terms of handing in an incomplete homework assignment in school. Joab did much worse. He disobeyed his King.

material resources available for large-scale campaigns of conquest. The text seems to say that Joab begged David not to do this. In fact, Joab did not even take count of the men of the tribes of Levi and Benjamin. Why did Joab omit collecting that data? It was because **“the king’s word had become abhorrent to Joab”** (1 Chronicles 21:6). Josephus wrote that David repented by the time Joab returned to Jerusalem, so the census was stopped at that time without numbering those from Benjamin and Levi (*Antiquities of the Jews* 7.320–321). The Chronicles account is certainly true, but Josephus’ could also have some truth.

In this instance, Joab was more righteous than King David, a man after God’s own heart (Acts 13:22). Let Joab’s example in this matter be a lesson to us, that occasionally even the worst people do the right thing for the right reason.[°] Joab’s open disobedience of David’s command was not punished at that time, so far as we know.

God, however, did punish David through a plague, and people suffered because of David’s sin.

TEXT: God’s Judgment and David’s Repentance

2 Samuel 24:10–18

¹⁰ David’s heart was smiting him after he had thus numbered the people; and

David said to Yahweh, I have sinned intensely in what I have done. Now, O Yahweh, I pray, cause the depravity of Your servant to pass away; for I was exceedingly unwise.

¹¹ When David arose in the morning, the word of Yahweh came to Gad the prophet, David’s vision seer, saying,

¹² **“Go, and you will tell David, Thus says Yahweh: I am holding over you three things. Choose for yourself one of them that I may do it to you.”**

¹³ When Gad came to David, he told him and said to him,

“Should three years of famine come to you in your land? Or should you be three months in flight before your foes while they are pursuing you? Or should there be three days of plague in your land?

Now know and see what word I should bring back to the One sending me.”

¹⁴ David replied to Gad, **“Utter distress is mine. Let us fall, I pray, into the**

1 Chronicles 21:8–18

⁸ David said to the One, Elohim, I have sinned intensely in that I have done this thing. Now, I pray, cause the depravity of Your servant to pass away; for I was exceedingly unwise.

⁹ Then Yahweh spoke to Gad, David’s vision seer, saying,

¹⁰ **“Go, and you will tell David, saying, Thus says Yahweh: I proffer you three things. Choose for yourself one of them that I may do it to you.”**

¹¹ When Gad came to David, he said to him,

**“Thus speaks Yahweh: Take your choice.
¹² Should there be three years of famine? Or should there be three months of being swept away before your foes, with the sword of your enemies overtaking you? Or should there be three days of the sword of Yahweh and of plague in the land, with the messenger of Yahweh bringing ruin throughout the territory of Israel? Now see what word I should bring back to the One sending me.”**

¹³ David replied to Gad, **“Utter distress is mine. Do let me fall, I pray, into the**

[°] Perhaps this is why the apostle Paul commands us to pray for our leaders as he wrote in 1 Timothy 2:1–3. To “entreat” means to plead, imploring, or beg:

“I am entreating, then, first of all, that petitions, prayers, pleadings, thanksgiving be made for all mankind, for kings and all those being in a superior station, [why?] that we may be leading a mild and quiet life in all devoutness and gravity, for this is ideal and welcome in the sight of our Saviour, God, ...”

hand of Yahweh, for His compassions are abundant; but let me not fall into the hand of humanity.”

¹⁵ So Yahweh cast the plague on Israel from the morning until the eventides so that 70,000 men of the people died from Dan unto Beersheba.

¹⁶ The messenger of Elohim was stretching forth his hand toward Jerusalem to ruin it. Yet Yahweh showed Himself merciful as to the evil and said to the messenger who was causing ruin to the people, “**Enough, now hold back your hand.**” The messenger of Yahweh was then at the threshing site of Araunah the Jebusite.

David lifted his eyes and saw the messenger of Yahweh standing between the earth and the heavens, with his drawn sword in his hand stretched out over Jerusalem. Then David and the elders, covered in sackcloth, fell on their faces.

¹⁷ Now David spoke to Yahweh when he saw the messenger who was causing ruin to the people; he said,

“**Behold, I myself have sinned, and I myself have been deprived,** I, the shepherd, who has caused this evil, but these are the flock; what have they done? Let Your hand come to be, I pray, against me and my father’s house.”

¹⁸ On that day Gad came to David and said to him, “**Ascend, set up an altar to Yahweh at the threshing site of Araunah the Jebusite.**”

hand of Yahweh, for His compassions are very abundant; but let me not fall into the hand of humanity.”

¹⁴ So Yahweh cast the plague on Israel, and 70,000 men of Israel fell.

¹⁵ Then the One, Elohim, sent a messenger to Jerusalem to ruin it. When he was about to bring ruin, Yahweh was vigilant and showed Himself merciful as to the evil and said to the messenger who was causing ruin, “**Enough, now hold back your hand.**” The messenger of Yahweh was standing at the threshing site of Ornan the Jebusite.

¹⁶ David lifted his eyes and saw the messenger of Yahweh standing between the earth and the heavens, with his drawn sword in his hand stretched out over Jerusalem. Then David and the elders, covered in sackcloth, fell on their faces.

¹⁷ Now David spoke to the One, Elohim,

“**Was it not I alone, I who ordered a count of the people? It is I, the one who has sinned,** I, the shepherd, who has caused this evil; but these are the flock; what have they done? **O Yahweh, my Elohim,** let Your hand come to be, I pray, against me and my father’s house, **and not for a stroke against Your people!**”

¹⁸ As for the messenger of Yahweh, he ordered Gad to tell David that David should ascend to set up an altar to Yahweh at the threshing site of Ornan the Jebusite. [end text]

Verses 10/8. David knew immediately when he read Joab’s report that he had sinned (2 Samuel 24:10). Why not before? Who can say. God was using David to make a point.

Verses 13/12. David chose the punishment from God, 3 days of plague, the shortest of evil choices. We don’t know what the plague was, its symptoms, how it progressed, or why it suddenly stopped. All we know are the effects. (Another later sudden death incident occurred to the Assyrians in their attack upon Jerusalem during the time of King Hezekiah of Judah, told in 2 Kings 19:35; 2 Chronicles 32:21; and Isaiah 37:36).

Verses 14/13. David’s exclamation in English, “**Utter distress is mine,**” inadequately conveys the anguish he was expressing. In fact, no translations seem to express the emotion that he was feeling.

Verses 15/14. The very morning that Gad gave David the choice of three punishments, the plague began.^f By “**eventides**” that same day (about 3 pm in the afternoon, the time of the evening prayer) “**70,000**

^f See “[God and Demographics](#)” and Dr. Martin’s article “[Disease Epidemics and Bible Prophecy](#)” which discuss large-scale death events in the Bible and history.

men of Israel fell.” Probably most of them were of military age. The numbers must have been gathered from all over Israel. See Verses 21/22 below.

Verses 16/15–16. The “messenger of Yahweh” is otherwise known as “the angel of the Lord” (KJV).^g He “was stretching forth his hand toward Jerusalem to ruin it” after he supervised the killing of 70,000 men in one day (or perhaps he did it himself). We are not told if women and children were killed. God told the messenger to “hold back” his hand from killing. God allowed David to see the messenger. What an awesome spectacle: “David lifted his eyes and saw the messenger of Yahweh standing between the earth and the heavens, with his drawn sword in his hand stretched out over Jerusalem.” Other biblical accounts of angels with swords must have come to the mind of David and those with him (Genesis 3:24; Numbers 22:23; and Joshua 5:13). David and those with him fell on their faces in shock.

(Araunah/Ornan, the Canaanite, also saw the messenger; see 1 Chronicles 21:20 below).

Verses 17/17. David declares his guilt and begs for God’s mercy toward His people. He asks YHWH to punish him and his children, “and not for a stroke against Your people.” This act of contrition and self-sacrifice demonstrated David’s true repentance. YHWH stops the plague, nor does He punish David further.

Remember, the events we read about in Second Samuel and First Chronicles were common knowledge among the people. Many knew the cause of the deaths was David and his actions. Joab knew what David did was wrong. The seer Gad likely made sure this information was distributed and well known. We know it was written down because we read the information in our own Bibles in Second Samuel, rewritten from other documents by the author of First Chronicles.

TEXT: 3. David’s Census of Israel: David Purchases the Threshing Floor

2 Samuel 24:19–25

¹⁹ So David went up *according to* the word of Gad *just as* Yahweh *had instructed him*.

²⁰ *When Araunah gazed and saw the king and his servants crossing over to him, Araunah* went forth and prostrated himself before *the king*, his brow toward the earth. ²¹ Araunah said, “**For what reason has my lord the king come to his servant?**”

David *replied*, “**To buy from you the threshing site for building an altar to Yahweh, so that the stroke [plague] may be restrained from the people.**”

²² Yet *Araunah* said to David, “**Let my lord the king take it and offer up what is good in his eyes. See the oxen for the ascent offering, and the threshing sledges and the implements of the oxen for wood.**”

1 Chronicles 21:19–22:1

¹⁹ So David went up *at* the word of Gad *that he had spoken in the Name of* Yahweh.

²⁰ *Ornan had turned back and seen the messenger; yet his four sons who were with him had hidden themselves, while Ornan was threshing wheat.*

²¹ *When David came over to Ornan, then Ornan looked up and saw David and went forth from the threshing site. He* prostrated himself before *David*, his brow toward the earth.

²² David *said to Ornan*, “**Do give me the place of your threshing site, so that I may build an altar to Yahweh on it. At the full current price sell it to me, that the stroke [plague] may be restrained from the people.**”

²³ Yet *Ornan* said to David, “**Take it as your own, and let my lord the king do what is good in his eyes. See, I donate the oxen for ascent offerings, the threshing sledges for wood, and the wheat for the approach present;**”

^g Learn who this “angel of the Lord” is. Read “Chapter 2: The Law Was Given by Angels” in Dr. Martin’s book, *The Essentials of New Testament Doctrine*. This angel is not Jesus, as some believe, because no angel can be called Son of God (Hebrews 1:5).

²³ **All this, O king, Araunah donates to the king.**

Then Araunah said to the king,

“Yahweh your Elohim, may He accept you.”

²⁴ *The king* replied to *Araunah*,

“No, for I shall buy, yea buy it from you at the full current price; and I shall not offer up to Yahweh my Elohim any ascent offerings gratuitously.”

So David *bought* the threshing site

and the oxen for 50 shekels of silver.

²⁵ Then David built there an altar to Yahweh and offered up ascent offerings and peace offerings. *Now* Yahweh *let Himself be entreated* again for the land;

and the stroke was restrained from Israel.

donate all of it.”

²⁴ King *David* replied to *Ornan*,

“No, for I shall buy, yea buy it at the full current price, because I shall not carry what is yours to Yahweh and offer up an ascent offering gratuitously.”

²⁵ So David *gave* Ornan 600 shekels of gold by weight for the place.

²⁶ Then David built there an altar to Yahweh and offered up ascent offerings and peace offerings. *He called on* Yahweh

Who answered him [David] with fire from the heavens upon the altar of the ascent offering.

²⁷ Then Yahweh spoke to the messenger, and he returned his sword to its sheath.

²⁸ At that time, when David saw that Yahweh had answered him on the threshing site of Ornan the Jebusite, then he sacrificed there.

²⁹ But the tabernacle of Yahweh that Moses had made in the wilderness and the altar of ascent offerings were at that time on the high-place at Gibeon; ³⁰ and David was unable to go before it to seek after Elohim, since he was frightened because of the sword of the messenger of Yahweh.

¹ So David said: **“This is to be the House of Yahweh, the One, Elohim; and this is to be an altar for ascent offerings for Israel.”** [end text]

Verse 19/19. David acted immediately on hearing the instructions from YHWH given by Gad the seer.

1 Chronicles 21:20. Araunah/Ornan saw the appearance of the huge messenger with the sword in his hand. His sons quickly hid, leaving their father standing alone on the threshing floor. David followed Gad’s instructions from YHWH and approached Araunah/Ornan. The sight of the messenger and David coming to him was probably the reason he came to a quick agreement with David. (Note God’s control of every factor in these events.)

Verses 20/21. We have another internal time indicator (besides 2 Samuel 24:1 above). David was talking to Araunah/Ornan and making the arrangements to purchase his threshing floor at the top of Mount Zion some time during the 3 days of the plague, perhaps even on the first day. (There was only one mass death event, or so it seems.)

Verses 21–24/22–24. The strange negotiation begins. The buyer wants to pay top dollar for the threshing floor. The seller wants to give it away. King David, the buyer, wins. The threshing floor will be the site of the Temple at Jerusalem, not to be built by David, but by one of his sons.

Verses 24/25. Some feel there is a contradiction between these two texts, that they are saying different

things. Note the sequence of events reading alternately from Samuel to Chronicles:

Samuel: **“So David bought the threshing site ...”**

Chronicles: **“David gave Ornan 600 shekels of gold by weight for the place.”**

Samuel: **“and [David bought] the oxen for 50 shekels of silver.”**

There is no contradiction between the Samuel and Chronicles texts. There is synthesis, with each text giving different information. To sum up, David bought the threshing site for 600 shekels of gold, then he bought oxen for sacrifice at 50 shekels of silver. The number of oxen is not stated.

Verses 25/26. David made two kinds of offerings: (1) an ascent offering and (2) a peace offering.

2 Samuel 24:25. **“Yahweh let Himself be entreated again for the land.”** This is similar to a statement in 2 Samuel 21:14: **“Elohim granted the entreaty [appeal, plea] for the land.”**

1 Chronicles 21:26. This statement of YHWH sending **“fire from the heavens upon the altar of the ascent offering”** was a sign to all Israel that God accepted David’s sacrifice, but more importantly, YHWH accepted David’s repentance. The first instance of God’s fiery acceptance of a sacrifice was when Abram sacrificed to YHWH, and He showed His acceptance of the sacrifice by having a fire pass between the cut up pieces of the sacrifice (Genesis 15:17). It happened again as we are told in Leviticus 9:24:

“Now Moses and Aaron went into the tent of appointment; when they came forth, they blessed the people. Then the glory of Yahweh appeared to all the people; fire came forth from before Yahweh, and it devoured the ascent offering and the fat portions on the altar. When all the people saw it, they were jubilant and fell on their faces.”

• *Leviticus 9:23–24*

Josephus wrote about this incident:

“[The Israelites] contended one with another, and ... fulfilled Moses' injunctions. But as the sacrifices lay upon the altar, a sudden fire was kindled from among them [the sacrifices] of its own accord, and appeared to the sight like fire from a flash of lightning, and consumed whatever was upon the altar.”

• *Josephus, Antiquities of the Jews, 3:207*

Josephus’ statement accords with what we know about lightning. Lightning can come from the sky to the ground, but it also travels from the ground into the sky. This was discovered only after fast-speed photography developed.^h If what Josephus wrote is true, then the **“fire came forth from before YHWH,”** but it may have appeared to originate from the sacrifice.

1 Chronicles 21:29–30. The Tabernacle of Moses was still at Gibeon although the Ark of the Covenant had been brought to Jerusalem previously. David built and sacrificed at the altar on the threshing floor.

At an earlier time, Abraham sacrificed a ram supplied by God to substitute for his son Isaac (Genesis 22:1–20). That took place on the same hilltop where God accepted David’s sacrifice. That hilltop was known as Zion. It is near where King David is buried today (Acts 2:29–36). That hilltop was where Solomon constructed the Temple, and where Jesus preached in a later Temple (Mark 12:35; Luke 19:47, 20:1; John 7:28, 8:2, 20, 18:20), and was sacrificed outside that Temple.

David Sielaff, October 2015

^h From the U.S. Government NOAA website, [Severe Weather 101: Frequently Asked Questions About Lightning](#),

“Does lightning strike from the sky down, or the ground up? The answer is both. Cloud-to-ground lightning comes from the sky down, but the part you see comes from the ground up. A typical cloud-to-ground flash lowers a path of negative electricity (that we cannot see) towards the ground in a series of spurts. Objects on the ground generally have a positive charge. Since opposites attract, an upward streamer is sent out from the object about to be struck. When these two paths meet, a return stroke zips back up to the sky. It is the return stroke that produces the visible flash, but it all happens so fast — in about one-millionth of a second — so the human eye doesn’t see the actual formation of the stroke.”