

God, Satan, And David's Numbering Of Israel

by David C. Grabbe

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In a scene from William Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, the title character says to his friend, "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy." As Hamlet alludes, the universe contains things beyond what human knowledge can detect or explain. However, God's Word provides glimpses into the spiritual reality inhabited by the Father, the Son, and angels, both good and bad. These actors govern and guide life on earth yet can only be understood through faith.

The incident of King David's numbering of Israel demonstrates the interplay between God and Satan, which humans cannot detect. It teaches us about God's justice, plus the nature and seriousness of sin, especially for a leader.

It also contains an apparent contradiction in Scripture. The account in I Chronicles 21:1-2 states that *Satan* moved David to number Israel:

Now Satan stood up against Israel, and moved David to number Israel. So David said to Joab and to the leaders of the people, "Go, number Israel from Beersheba to Dan, and bring the number of them to me that I may know it."

However, the parallel account in II Samuel 24:1-2 says that *God* was behind Israel's numbering:

Again the anger of the LORD was aroused against Israel, and He moved David against them to say, "Go, number Israel and Judah." So the king said to Joab the commander of the army who was with him, "Now go throughout all the tribes of Israel, from Dan to Beersheba, and count the people, that I may know the number of the people."

There are a couple of ways to reconcile this. One is to remember that the Hebrew word *satan* (*Strong's* #7854) means "adversary." Significantly, the first usage of this word is in relation to God! Numbers 22:22 reads:

Then God's anger was aroused because [Balaam] went, and the Angel of the LORD took His stand in the way *as an adversary* [*satan*] *against him*." (Emphasis ours throughout.)

Based on that, it could be said that God stood up as a *satan* against Israel as well due to His wrath against them. No definite article precedes *satan* in I Chronicles 21:1, and a couple of translations state that "an adversary" opposed Israel (New English Translation) or stood up against Israel (Young's Literal Translation), which allows God to have been that adversary.

An Alternative Explanation

But a second way to understand what happened fits with another biblical pattern: that *both* God and Satan were involved in motivating David to number Israel. The opening chapters of Job provide a clear example of God using Satan as the instrument of Job's calamities. However, the record also suggests that it was God who brought Job to Satan's attention to goad the Devil into challenging God to remove His protection. So, in the broadest sense, both God and Satan were responsible for Job's trial. God was ultimately responsible, but Satan acted within parameters that God set for him.

An incident in the life of King Ahab similarly shows God using a rebellious demon in His judgment for Ahab's unrighteousness, something that may stretch our sense of propriety and our concept of God. It may disturb us, but it is part of the record God left for us. Notice I Kings 22:19-22:

Then Micaiah said, "Therefore hear the word of the LORD: I saw the LORD sitting on His throne, and all the host of heaven standing by, on His right hand and on His left. And the LORD said, 'Who will persuade Ahab to go up, that he may fall at Ramoth Gilead?' So one spoke in this manner, and another spoke in that manner. Then a spirit came forward and stood before the LORD, and said, 'I

will persuade him.’ The LORD said to him, ‘In what way?’ So he said, ‘I will go out and be a lying spirit in the mouth of all his prophets.’ And the LORD said, ‘You shall persuade him, and also prevail. Go out and do so.’ Therefore look! The LORD has put a lying spirit in the mouth of all these prophets of yours, and the LORD has declared disaster against you.”

This passage harmonizes with Hamlet’s sentiment that there are more things in heaven and earth than men can apprehend. Here is an account of a gathering of the host of heaven, both the loyal angels and the sinful ones. God asks for a way to bring about Ahab’s fall, and a demon proposes that he could deceive Ahab through the king’s prophets, a suggestion God accepts.

While this may stretch our concept of God, it shows that His sovereignty extends over all things, even over beings who have corrupted themselves. Even as God uses fierce and deplorable men like Nebuchadnezzar and Hazeal as instruments of punishment, so He will use rebellious angels to accomplish His will. We see this in the life of Ahab as well as in Job.

We can understand how both God and Satan could have been behind David’s numbering of Israel. The two accounts simply emphasize one or the other. God instigated the numbering, and Satan broadcast the suggestion, influencing David to conduct a census.

Was God Unfair?

Perhaps what happened to David seems unfair. It appears on the surface as if God and Satan caused David to stumble, and then God punished David (and the nation) for stumbling. But there is more to this story.

II Samuel 24:1 indicates that something larger was going on: “*Again* the anger of the LORD was aroused against Israel.” We are not told which previous time of God’s anger this refers to, but this event is not far removed from David’s attempt to placate the Gibeonites in II Samuel 21.

To recap that story, God had brought famine on the land because of Saul’s massacre of the Gibeonites decades before. (The Gibeonites were Gentiles who made a fraudulent treaty with Joshua, becoming a protected class within

Israel.) After three years of famine, David finally awakened out of his spiritual stupor, and his solution, rather than seeking God, was to deliver some of Saul's descendants to pay for their father's or grandfather's sin.

After David handed over seven of Saul's descendants, God allowed another full season of crop failure before the rains eventually came, ending the famine. Note that God did not intervene to restore Israel but belatedly allowed the normal weather cycle to resume. So, while "God heeded the prayer for the land" (II Samuel 21:14), the reader is left with the feeling that He was not fully satisfied. There were numerous problems with David's mental/spiritual state and behavior (see the sermon, "[David and the Gibeonites](#)," for a complete analysis).

Thus, when the text in II Samuel 24 says that God was angry with Israel *again*, there is a good chance it is tied to David's handling of the Gibeonites.

By itself, David's command to number Israel was not a sin. The nation had been numbered before this and again after this. In fact, the law contains specific instructions for conducting a census, showing that the numbering of the men of Israel was within acceptable behavior for the nation and its leader.

However, it does appear that the census conducted under David was missing a critical part:

When you take the census of the children of Israel for their number, then every man shall give a ransom for himself to the LORD, when you number them, that there may be no plague among them when you number them. This is what everyone among those who are numbered shall give: half a shekel according to the shekel of the sanctuary (a shekel is twenty gerahs). The half-shekel shall be an offering to the LORD. Everyone included among those who are numbered, from twenty years old and above, shall give an offering to the LORD. (Exodus 30:12-14)

Neither II Samuel 24 nor I Chronicles 21 mentions Joab and the officers conducting the census as collecting this half-shekel ransom. Significantly,

later in the story, when David deferred the choice of punishment to God, God chose a plague (II Samuel 24:13-15; I Chronicles 21:12-14), the penalty linked in Exodus 30 to an improper census.

Even so, these texts also contain no mention of God and/or Satan moving David to conduct an *improper* census, just to perform one. Remember that God was already angry, and His provoking David to number Israel is tied to that anger. Putting these factors together, it indicates that the irregularity of the census (that is, the ransom it left out) was a symptom of David's not considering God and His instructions. Something was amiss in David's heart.

David's Motivation

When God moved David to number Israel, He did not cause him to sin. Yet, in verse 10, David declares that he had sinned greatly. The problem was not the census. The problem—or at least *a* problem—was David's motivation, which caused him to be careless in how the census was carried out. An indicator of David's motivation appears in II Samuel 24:9, where the author describes the census results as the number of “valiant men who drew the sword.” This census was not for tax collection or demographic study, but for military purposes. It was an accounting of military strength.

With this as his focus, David was thinking more about might and power than God's Spirit (see Zechariah 4:6). He was looking to national resources rather than trusting in God, apparently having forgotten the lesson of relying on God for victory as he had in his younger days. Besides, David's previous campaigns had already expanded the kingdom up to the limits of what God had ordained. Any military campaign would go beyond the God-given limits of the nation. If that was a thought in David's mind, it was presumptuous.

We can add to the picture by remembering David's history, as well as the basic operations of the human heart when it is not fully submitted to God's Spirit. In the rebellions of Absalom and Sheba, David had faced significant challenges to his authority, including ones from within his own house. He had damaged his reputation through adultery and murder. That resulted in a substantial loss of respect and trust from those under him, such that in the rebellions, “The hearts of the men of Israel were with Absalom” (II Samuel 15:13) and “every man of Israel deserted David” (II Samuel 20:2).

These things were undoubtedly in the back of his mind as he surveyed his circumstances. Maybe he longed to be the hero of the people once again—to be admired and not just tolerated. Perhaps he wanted to rehabilitate his image after tarnishing it so badly. As we see in politics today, military actions distract the people and give the appearance of strong leadership. He may have been looking for more giants to slay or seeking greater conquests. He could have just wanted to do something more exciting than shepherding the nation as God intended.

Whatever the exact motivation, the fact that David was contemplating his military might suggests self-reliance at best and, at worst, selfish ambition and perhaps presumption. But underneath it all, as with the matter of the Gibeonites, God was not in his thoughts. David was thinking about his own circumstances, achievements, solutions, and maybe his legacy, rather than seeking what God wanted him to do.

Thoughts of self-reliance, selfish ambition, and presumption are sins all by themselves. David's sin was in existence *before* the numbering of Israel. The improperly-conducted census was evidence of a sin that was a reality in his heart—self-reliance and leaving God out of his thoughts, at the very least.

Well-known verses support this spiritual fact. In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus teaches that murder and adultery exist as sins in the heart, even if they are not acted upon. Ezekiel 14 contains God's charge against Israelites who had idols in their hearts—they committed idolatry even without bowing before graven images. Covetousness is a sin that takes place entirely within the heart, though it could lead to other sins as well. Finally, God records in Isaiah 14 what Helel, who became the Adversary, said in his heart about ascending and exalting his throne. Helel was guilty of ambition and presumption even before he started the great angelic war.

Because God looks on the heart, He knew full well what was in David. Thoughts of one's own strength, selfish ambition, and presumption are grave sins. David was correct to admit that he had sinned greatly, but, in God's eyes, he was guilty before he sent Joab to number the people.

What God did by moving David to conduct a census simply brought that sin out into the open, like a boil that needed to be lanced so healing could begin. God did not tempt David to sin, let alone cause him to sin. God opened the way so the sin, already in David's heart, would be revealed, and so he could realize how far he had moved from God, both in this action and in his handling of the Gibeonites.

God's Judgment on Israel

There remains the question of why, if God was angry with *Israel*, He brought out what was in *David's* heart, and why, when *David's* sin was manifest, God killed *Israelites*. In Romans 11:33, Paul exclaims, "How unsearchable are His judgments and His ways past finding out!" God's judgment is another thing that our philosophies have not dreamt of. However, an earlier event may shed some light on this.

Joshua 7:1 tells the story of when "*the children of Israel* committed a trespass regarding the accursed things . . . so the anger of the LORD burned against *the children of Israel*." God told Joshua,

Israel has sinned, and they have also transgressed My covenant which I commanded them. For they have even taken some of the accursed things, and have both stolen and deceived; and they have also put it among their own stuff. Therefore the children of Israel could not stand before their enemies, but turned their backs before their enemies, because they have become doomed to destruction. Neither will I be with you anymore, unless you destroy the accursed from among you. (Joshua 7:11-12)

The nation was judged, and twenty-six Israelites lost their lives in battle, yet it was *one* man, Achan, who was guilty. One man perpetrated the theft and deception, yet God judged that *Israel* had sinned. God's judgment may fall on a group, even on a whole nation, for the action of an individual. One sinful representative can affect many.

This perspective may seem utterly foreign to us Americans, with our tradition of individualism. In our view, if we did not do anything wrong, it is

unfair and unjust for us to be involved in any judgment. But God looks at things differently. We cannot see everything as He does, so to us, His judgments are unsearchable. Our only recourse is to learn the lesson of Job and always justify God rather than ourselves, even when we do not understand. It must become hardwired into us that God is always right.

If we apply the Achan scenario to II Samuel 24, the picture emerges that David was the primary reason God was again angry with Israel. This conclusion lends credence to the possibility that chapter 24 was tied to David's distracted handling of the Gibeonites. The irregular census was a further demonstration that David was concerned with his own thoughts, plans, and ideas rather than looking to God for direction.

After David received the census results—which took over nine months—and it finally dawned on him that he was in error, he took it to God, who offered him a choice of punishment. David deferred, asking God to choose, and He subsequently sent a plague that killed 70,000 Israelites, the most significant loss of Israelite life at one time to that point. Even Jerusalem fell under the threat of destruction before God held back the hand of the destroying angel.

God's anger was terrible because something in the nation was seriously wrong, specifically in the life of David. In II Samuel 24:17, David says to God, "Surely I have sinned, and I have done wickedly; but these sheep, what have they done?" God was angry with Israel, but David recognized that he was the guilty party, not "these sheep."

Significantly, when David built an altar and made offerings to stop the plague, there is no mention of a sin offering, even though that would seem to be the most fitting. Perhaps a sin offering was made and was not mentioned. However, II Samuel 24:25 mentions the burnt offering and the peace offering, which indicate that David was rededicating himself to God—being fully devoted to God once again—and seeking the fellowship with God that he had let slip away, leading to calamity.

God, in His mercy and in ways that we do not fully understand, opened the door for David to see himself so restoration could begin at the place where David's son would later build the Temple.