

Laura Ngo

Professor Schniedewind

AN N EA 10W (LEC 1)

18 May 2021

Plague of Jerusalem

Throughout his reign, the people of Israel revered King David for his greatness and obedience to God. The early chapters of 2 Samuel describe how God chose David to conquer Jerusalem (1010-970 BCE). After doing so, David renamed it the City of David, and his monarchy prevailed as he began to rule over the land and people of Israel. In his early days as a king, David often sought guidance and counseling from God; in return, he accomplished many goals throughout the evolution of his kingship. With the power of God on his side, he united the faith and spirit of twelve tribes to live under his rule, protected his people from foreign enemies, brought the Ark of the Covenant into the heart of his kingdom, and sacralized Jerusalem as a space of divinity. His deeds affirmed him as the seemingly ideal king that many admired and respected. However, nearing the end of his forty-year rule, his commitment to pleasing God became a commitment to betraying God, David's gravest sin being the misguided census against all of the Israelites. Although Joab, his military commander, condemned the act because he knew that it would bring chaos onto the people and was morally unjust, King David ignored him and followed through with the counting. Soon after, he and all of Israel paid the ultimate price. 2 Samuel 24 and 1 Chronicles 21 both utilize vivid imagery of the disaster and chaos over Israel, parallelism to Moses' census, and symbolism to construct their narratives of the plague of Jerusalem but differ in who incited King David to sin. Additionally, both stories portray God's wrath in response to human disobedience and mercy toward his beloved children in Jerusalem, a

theme of God's salvation over Jerusalem also present in the siege of Sennacherib, to exemplify how the census impacted the sanctity of Jerusalem.

2 Samuel 24 accounts for God as the inciter of David's census over the Israelites; the progression of this census draws parallel to Moses' census as it illuminates how the possibility of sin through a political ruler's reliance on numbers can damage the sanctity of Jerusalem. At the peak of David's career as a warrior and king, one of his goals was to strengthen his military power to rise above all enemies. However, in doing so, he began to take pride in his work and authority by relying on sources beyond what God allowed. With this in mind, the text states how "the anger of the Lord was kindled against Israel [as] he incited David against them, saying, 'Go, count the people of Israel and Judah'" (2 Samuel 24:1). Although the text informs that God prompted David to take the census of Judah and Israel, it may have implicated that God wanted to test David's true intentions: if he were to remain true to God and his word, or fall into the temptation of the numbers that represented his success in conquering the Philistines, Hittites, and others. Aside from his pride, numbering the people would grant him knowledge of how many could serve in his military and fight for the kingdom. This event can be parallel to the census during Moses' time in which God had requested him to count the Israelites before building the Tabernacle. Moses notes how the Lord told him that when he takes a census to register all of the Israelites, that he "shall give a ransom for their lives to the Lord, so that no plague may come upon them for being registered" (Exodus 30:12). Both censuses held their people accountable for fulfilling their obligation as children of God, whether through being recruited for the military, providing ransom in support of the Tabernacle, or through religious devotion to maintain the purity of Jerusalem.

However, these stories contrast in the intentions between Moses and David: Moses aimed to exemplify that the Israelites and Jerusalem belonged under God's protection whereas David negated Jerusalem as a sacred space and sought ultimate allegiance to himself. Moses entrusted in God's command and only counted the Israelites as a way to acquire a ransom to signify God's ownership over Israel. With God's consent, Moses numbered those who were twenty years old and above to provide an offering to God. Not only was a portion of the ransom appointed toward the service of the Tabernacle, but the census intended to emphasize that the Israelites belonged to God. In other words, the people were not at risk of the plague, for it was God's permission that granted Moses the ability to call for a census. Contrastingly, God did not permit David to call the census. Rather, David's need for pride proved his frailest faith and ungratefulness in God. This sin of pride inhibited his logic in acknowledging caution. Despite Joab's questioning and protest against the census, his arguments were to no avail since the "king's word prevailed against Joab and the commanders of the army" (2 Samuel 24:4). Moreover, the text emphasizes the extent of the census (Miscal 70). He details the vast land that Joab and the leading commanders covered, the nine months it took for them to travel and return, and the eight hundred thousand soldiers in Israel and five hundred thousand in Judah who were "able to draw the sword" (2 Samuel 24:9). The imagery of the expansive measures that David took to gain security and pride exemplifies his reliance on numbers as a way of reassuring himself of the work he had done as a king and uniter of the Israelites. Also, this census portrays that he was seeking ultimate allegiance to himself and his kingdom. The Israelites were God's people, not his. Yet, for him to purposely disobey God's regulations for military eligibility, can also represent that he placed himself at a level of authority that would be equivalent to God's. With David's unfaithfulness against God, God may have sought to accomplish the greater good.

1 Chronicles 21 presents a deviating narrative of 2 Samuel 24 by attributing David's census as Satan's idea, resulting in a clarification of who directly tempted David but also how God assessed David's intrinsic motivation to assert himself as a higher authority than God. He begins with the statement: "Satan stood up against Israel, and incited David to count the people of Israel" (1 Chr. 21:1). With this juxtaposition from 2 Samuel 24, it becomes clear that Satan was the true instigator in which David freely chose to give in to temptation. On one hand, we can imagine Satan as the well-known personified figure that later literature within the Bible acknowledges as God's fallen angel and enemy. He may have understood that God had pre-existing anger with Israel before the census because God condemned their sinful ways of living. As so, Satan not only saw the tempting of David as a direct attack on the people of Israel but also as a tactic to reveal David's insecurity about his power and military prowess; with God's permission, he then acted as a mediator to provoke David into calling for a census (Evans 553). In other words, although God was sovereign over this conflict, God employed Satan as an instrument of temptation to sin to test David's faith and loyalty. As Satan carried out the provocation to destroy David and the people of God, God was able to see that his loyal shepherd had succumbed to the devil and allowed for pride to overcome him. On the other hand, Satan can also symbolize a person's internal demons that influence them to sin. Although the devil influenced David, it was ultimately his decision to choose between the demonic impulse to fulfill his pride or to remain loyal to God's will. Regardless, God condemned David and his people.

The plausibility of a census deserving divine anger and punishment can appear questionable; however, we can justify God's rage over David and the Israelites with David's disrespect toward God's protection over Jerusalem. The ordering of a census "was always an unpopular measure because it was usually a prelude to taxation and forced labor" (Armstrong

79). Yet, for David, the census served as a tool for military draft and coercion to fight under his authority. In accumulating numbers, David gains an advantage over the people, whether through tax increases or other unjust intentions regarding his military. Moreover, by nature, it represented his lack of honor in the sacredness of Jerusalem and distrust in God's providence and protection over the people of Israel. Unlike in his initial stages of kingship, where he only sought God's command, he fell ill to his sickness of pride and insecurity. Perhaps, he believed that the knowledge of numbers would enhance his reputation. In other words, David's ordering for the census both served as a moral and political violation of his power as a king and faith as a believer in God.

Eventually, although David desired to fulfill his pride, he soon began to feel remorse as his conscience convicted him of dishonoring the sacrality of Jerusalem and God's protection over the city. Immediately repenting, David's prophet, Gad, came to speak of God's offerings of punishment. David's three choices were three years of famine, three months before enemies would come to siege and attack, or three days of pestilence. Similar to Satan's role within this narrative, God seemingly also utilizes Gad as a mediator and messenger between himself and David. In response, David states that he could not bear to decide his punishment and to let him "fall into the hand of the Lord, for his mercy is great; but let [him] not fall into human hands" (2 Samuel 24:14). The following morning, God chose pestilence on Israel, and within the day, seventy thousand people from Dan to Beer-sheba were wept with the plague and fell to their deaths. The idea of Israel's expense for David's actions may seem jarring, but there can be speculation as to why God punished the entirety of Israel. Although 2 Samuel does not disclose this, we can assume that God may have been furious with the disorganization and sinfulness of the nation; the census could have affirmed that God needed to take action on such chaos. In other

words, throughout David's reign, he devoted himself to fortifying Jerusalem as a sacred space, which then resulted in an increased devotion amongst his people. In turn, with his sudden act of betrayal, it could be possible that he can influence the Israelites into sinning against God and rejecting the spirituality and holiness within Jerusalem. With this, if God were to allow David and his people to further sin, the holiness of Jerusalem would eventually degrade into a profane space in which chaos would wreak (Eliade 23). As so, God had to take it upon himself to judge David's sin and punish the kingdom to discipline and bring the city salvation. To save David and the Israelites, God prompted him to repent.

God required David to build a sacrificial altar at the sacred site of Mount Zion in his name to gain his mercy. To note, David was not free to choose a sacred site (Eliade 28). After the plague of Jerusalem, Gad spoke the will of God and informed David that he "could only avert the plague...by building an altar to God" on the "threshing floor of Araunah" (Armstrong 79). Mount Zion not only alludes to where Abraham offered Isaac in an attempt to prove his devotion to God, but many biblical accounts recall this site as a place of action in which people would come to prove their faith in God by performing spiritual acts. People exalted it as the axis Mundi and it carried great spiritual significance; thus, it was the ideal space in which David could repent for allowing his pride to lead him astray to sin (Tweed 4). Although Araunah offered to give the place without charging David, David "behaved with admirable courtesy" and "insisted on paying the full price" (Armstrong 79). He "bought the threshing floor and the oxen for fifty shekels of silver" and built the altar to the Lord (2 Samuel 24). With this insistence of paying the entire cost, a tangible sacrifice on David's part, the text exemplifies his remorse and improvement of character. In rejecting Araunah's offer, he affirmed that it was his sacrifice to make and that he respected the sanctity of the theophany, a place that belonged to the gods (Armstrong 79). In

addition to this, the building of this altar was God's sign to David that he must "put an end to the tension and anxiety caused by relativity and disorientation" (Eliade 27). To put it another way, in his efforts to rekindle his relationship with God, he had to demonstrate his repentance and faith in God by paying for the site and providing burnt offerings for him. Although 2 Samuel 24 and 1 Chronicles 21 presented God's forgiveness and mercy toward David and the people of Israel, God remains a powerful entity, capable of wrath and destruction against those who disobey him.

The siege of Sennacherib further proves God's power and ultimate protection over Jerusalem. King Sennacherib of Assyria besieged the city in King Hezekiah's fourteenth year at the throne in Jerusalem (701 BCE). After praying to God of his situation, God quickly affirmed to King Hezekiah that he would defend and save the city from the enemy. The prophet Jeremiah paints how that same night, "the angel of the LORD set out and struck down one hundred eighty-five thousand in the camp of the Assyrians [and] when morning dawned, they were all dead bodies" (2 Kings 19:35). Herodotus, an ancient Greek historian, describes the plague as an infestation of field mice that swarmed the army's camp, decimating their weaponry and causing them to suffer many casualties (Herodotus 2.141). However, the prophet Isaiah "naturally saw this deliverance as a miracle [in which God had] proved to be a mighty warrior who had brought salvation to his people" (Armstrong 113). He asserted that God had an almighty power that enabled him to defeat and destroy the undefeated Assyrians and that Jerusalem was inviolable because of God's protection. To further expand on the narrative of God's role in the plague of the Assyrians, King Sennacherib and his army proved themselves as a threat to the threshold of divinity for the people of Israel. Although at the time of David's census, the punishment of a pestilence targeted the people of Jerusalem, this did not signify a cease in God's protection and guidance over the city; it was God's way of taking control over the disorientation and disruption

of sanctity that David had caused. Yet, in this siege, God targeted the Assyrians as the perpetrators for polluting the sacred space of Jerusalem. In other words, both David's census and the siege of Sennacherib emphasize the notion of God's discipline and wrath in times of human sin to maintain protection over Jerusalem.

Overall, the biblical texts of 2 Samuel 24 and 1 Chronicles 21 portray David's census and the plague of Jerusalem as an allegory about divine intervention for the sake of salvation over Jerusalem. 2 Samuel 24 implicitly describes God's test in David's faith, illuminating how David succumbed to the temptations of pride. However, 1 Chronicles 21, further informs that God did not directly come to David but utilized Satan as a mediator and instrument of temptation to expose his insecurities about his military prowess and lack of confidence in God's protection. Although the two texts' accounts differ in who incites David, they provide insight into God's wrath and discipline in times of sin. As said beforehand, David's misguided census was, by nature, a representation of his lack of honor in Jerusalem and distrust in God's providence; it served as both a moral and political violation of his kingship and faith as a believer. Thus, in seeking to gain security over his kingship and personal accomplishments, he betrayed God. However, after disciplining David and the Israelites with the plague, both authors exemplify God's mercy in his people despite his angel's ambition to continue with more punishment. With David's construction of the altar of repentance and sacrifice, God forgave David and averted the plague. In short, these accounts frame God as a mighty but merciful entity and illuminate the importance of repentance and discipline as religious followers.

Work Cited

Armstrong, Karen. *Jerusalem: One City, Three Faiths by Karen Armstrong (1997–04-29)*.

Reprint, Ballantine Books, 1997.

Bibles, Harper. *NRSV Bible with the Apocrypha, EBook*. Zondervan, 2011.

Eliade, Mircea, and Willard Trask. “Sacred Space and Making the World Sacred.” *The Sacred and The Profane: The Nature of Religion*. Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1987.

Evans, Paul. “Divine Intermediaries in 1 Chronicles 21 An Overlooked Aspect of the Chronicler's Theology.” *Biblica*, vol. 85, no. 4, 2004, pp. 545–558. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/42614550. Accessed 21 May 2021.

Herodotus, et al. *The Histories (Oxford World's Classics)*. Unknown, Oxford University Press, 2008.

Miscall, Peter. “2 SAMUEL 24: A MEDITATION ON WRATH, GUILT, AND THE KING.” *Shofar*, vol. 11, no. 2, 1993, pp. 65–79. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/42941807. Accessed 21 May 2021.

Tweed, Thomas A. “Space.” *Material Religion*, vol. 7, no. 1, 2011, pp. 118–23. *Crossref*, [doi:10.2752/175183411x12968355482295](https://doi.org/10.2752/175183411x12968355482295).