

The Census of David and the Problem of Causation: Divine Sovereignty, Šāṭān, and Human Responsibility

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Submitted: 18 October 2025 Revision: 16 May 2026 Published: 27 June 2026



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Abstract:

The cause of a long interpretive problem, with incitement of the census attributed to the LORD in 2 Samuel chapter 24:1, and with incitement of the census attributable to the incitement of the LORD in 1 Chronicles chapter. These attributional differences have spawned an assortment of academic interpretations, such as redactional revision, theological development, historiographical reinterpretation, and canonical methods of biblical causation. The paper re-establishes the relationship of the two texts through the qualitative, textual discussion, which involves literary comparison, linguistic examination of the Hebrew word *šāṭān*, and the discussion of biblical structures of mediated agency on a larger scale. Particular attention is focused on those tales in which Godly purposes are fulfilled by secondary participants, like Job 1:1-2, 1 Kings 22:19-23 and the hardening traditions of the Exodus. The article argues that the two census accounts do not necessarily need to be viewed as mutually exclusive accounts, but they can be understood as indicating different levels of causation in the biblical narrative discourse: divine sovereignty as ultimate causation, an adversarial agent as proximate causation and David as the agent of moral responsibility. This suggestion is considered in conjunction with historical-critical interpretations, which see Chronicles as a theological reworking of Samuel. The analysis also suggests that the census was not inherently illicit in itself; the census itself is mentioned elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible as a legitimate event under justifiable circumstances, but it was guilty of intent, covenantal fidelity and royal responsibility. The article provides a constructive interpretation of these passages by placing the texts in broader biblical notions of agency, judgment and accountability, as well as current debates over inner-biblical interpretation, divine agency and the theological rationale of parallel narratives.

Keywords:

divine sovereignty; satanic agency; human responsibility; layered causation; David's census; corporate responsibility.

INTRODUCTION

The parallel accounts of the census of David in 2 Samuel 24 and 1 Chronicles 21 can be regarded as one of the most crucial causation questions of the Hebrew Bible. Both stories relate the identical royal action and its brutal results, but they point to other actors

in the inception of the census. The LORD is enraged with Israel in 2 Samuel 24:1, and David is provoked to count the people. On the other hand, in 1 Chronicles 21:1, there is a contrast between *śāatzaa* and Israel, and it is what makes David want to count the people. These conflicting attributions have led to a long-standing debate of divine sovereignty, antagonistic agency, human agency and the theological correlation of Samuel-Kings and Chronicles. Three broad lines of questioning have been widely used as the basis of exegeses of this tension. Other scholars see the story of the Chronicler as a theological reworking of an existing tradition that accuses God of no actions that are morally problematic. Others see the difference as an indication of the emerging conceptions of evil agency in later Israelite thought. Others continue to believe that the two narratives should be read complement one to each other, in contrast to various aspects of the same phenomenon. As useful as both methods might be, the relationship between the texts remains a topic of debate.

The Biblical texts tend to suggest reality to exist beyond the visible and material reality to a moving and ordered spiritual reality which intersects with human history. Here, both the divine and non-divine agents are portrayed to be involved in the progression of events to an extent that the historical events cannot always be explained in purely human or natural terms. The Old Testament reflects a worldview in which God is the ruler of both heavenly and earthly worlds, and where a multiplicity of agents, human, angelic, and adversarial, operate in a broader structure of divine rule. As a result, the Bible narratives are inclined to offer the causation in layers in such a way that divine will, the activity of mediators and decisions of human beings may exist within the same story. This opinion might sound strange to modern readers, especially those who have been trained to the common solution that favours linear and distinct causation. On the other hand, the biblical narrative does not necessarily isolate a reason at the expense of others. Instead, it tends to put events into a multi-perspective context and attribute them to divine intent, lesser beings, as well as human action. These attributions are not given as conflicting, but complementary accounts of the same reality seen from different viewpoints. There is no abstract exposition that untangles the tension that this multiplicity has produced, but it is an element of the logic of narrative.

This is the case that is particularly dramatic in the story of the census of David. The similar stories in 2 Samuel 24 and 1 Chronicles 21 lay the blame of the census incitement on other actors, and leave the nature of causation and responsibility in the text in

question. The stories are not just a deviation, but instigate further questions concerning the distribution and perception of agency. The question is not then a question of determining one cause but an inquiry about how various types of agency can be working in concert in a coherent narrative structure. This interpretive challenge is enhanced by the presence of *śataan* in 1 Chronicles 21:1. Its meaning, which includes enemy or accuser and is not necessarily a stable personal designation, is diverse. That it is here used gives another dimension of agency which must be considered, in conjunction with 2 Samuel 24:1, attribution to the LORD. The coherence of divine and antagonistic characters in the same storytelling culture might also raise important questions related to the biblical conceptualisations of opposition, mediation and the relationship between divine sovereignty and secondary causation. Meanwhile, the responsibility of humans is predetermined in the story. That David is the one to undertake the census, that he subsequently discovers the transgression, and the series of events that ensues all bear witness to the fact that the agency of humans is not undermined by the presence of the divine or the opposing agency. The episode thereby sheds light on the intricate relationship between divine power, mediate agency, and ethical responsibility.

This research takes the census accounts as a test case in the issue of causation in the Hebrew Bible. It tries to render as clear as possible, in the how agency and responsibility are articulated in each reading, the literary, linguistic and theological aspects of 2 Samuel 24 and 1 Chronicles 21. Rather than assume either incompatibility or harmonisation, the analysis looks at the possibility of explaining the differences in attribution in terms of causation as complementary positions in an overall pattern in the Bible. By so doing, the study seeks to add to the existing debates of divine sovereignty, adversarial agency and human responsibility to the interpretation of the Bible.

The present research involves a qualitative, textual, interpretive approach that best suits when analysing ancient literature and theological texts. Because the research problem in question is concerned with the interplay of two parallel stories about the Bible, as well as the rationale of causation it provides, the study is conceptual and exegetical, but not empirical or statistical. This is not to make a pre-destined theological determination, but to challenge the competing explanations of the differing attributions of agency in 2 Samuel 24:1 and 1 Chronicles 21:1 and to decide as to which reading is most appropriate to explain the textual evidence. Masoretic Texts of 2 Samuel 24 and 1 Chronicles 21 are the principal ones that will be analysed. These readings are said to be

parallel forms of the same episode of the story, which are preserved in various literary works. The paper gives long-term attention to the words, shape and theological stresses of each text in the canonised form they have today. Passages in the Bible relating to the related issues are treated selectively where they can be applied to explain more general forms of agency, judgment and mediated causation. These are Job 12, 1 Kings 22¹⁹23, the hardening of the Exodus tradition and the census law of the Pentateuch. These are comparative as opposed to proof texts. The two census stories are initially compared on the literary level. This stage examines the development of the plot, characterisation, speech patterns, proclaimed motives and theological framing. Special focus is placed on similarities and differences between Samuel and Chronicles, such as what each narrator stresses, leaves out, or distorts. This is to establish how the two texts establish causation and responsibility in the story that they establish. Second, the paper is in dialogue with some important historical-critical explanations of the divergence of the two accounts. These include the view that the Chronicler is editing an earlier Samuel tradition, the view that Chronicles reflects changing conceptions of evil agency and that the differences lie in bigger historiographical agendas. The methods are not a priori rejected. Rather, they are judged by the extent of elucidation, the textual plausibility and the compatibility with the characteristics of reinterpretation of the Chronicler. Third, the important Hebrew words are discussed that can be utilised in the interpretation, in particular, the word *śāṭān* (שָׂטָן) in 1 Chronicles 21:1. Analysis involves lexical and syntactic role, the use of articles and comparison with other occurrences of the word in the Hebrew Bible. Verbs of incitement and other expressions of the divine wrath in the story of Samuel are also considered in the analysis. The lexicons, grammar and text-critical resources of the Hebrew language are consulted with the object of determining the possible meanings without attempting to respond to a single grammatical feature. Fourth, the results of the stages above are taken into discussion with the general biblical patterns of agency and responsibility. This step poses a question on whether the two stories can be read as complementary views that can differentiate ultimate causation, proximate agency, and human accountability. This synthesis is not pursued until it is achieved that the literary, historical and linguistic analysis has been achieved, and thus, theological inferences are not imposed onto the texts.

The conflicting explanations are tested in the light of four criteria: Textual adequacy- are the interpretations of the wording and form of the two stories? Historical

plausibility - does the reading make sense in the light of what is known about the compositional purposes of Samuel-Kings and Chronicles? Linguistic plausibility- do lexical and grammatical statements make sense in the light of Hebrew usage? Theological coherence - whether the interpretation is a discourse on how the divine agency, secondary agency and the human responsibility function in the biblical narrative discourse. Examples of secondary sources are peer-reviewed journal articles, scholarly commentaries, Hebrew lexicons, and monographs on Samuel, Chronicles, divine agency, and the development of traditions of *śataan*. These texts are regarded as critical interlocutors instead of an ultimate authority. The introduction of various viewpoints is strategically aimed at questioning the advantages and limitations of the inferences of the research. The latter Hebrew Bible is interested in the paper, and there is no effort to reconstruct the prehistory of the stories. It does not, either, give a comprehensive reception history in subsequent Jewish or Christian interpretation. These bans are tactical, and make possible a long focus on the textual problem as such; the way the census discourses articulate causation, judgment and responsibility. This method intends to provide a well-rounded and academically rigorous hypothesis of re-examination of the question of causation in the census of David by the synthesis of literary comparison, historical-critical interaction, linguistic analysis and theological synthesis.

The Apparent Contradiction in the Biblical Text

The story of how David counts Israel is often mentioned as one of the most controversial instances of seemingly internal strife in the Hebrew Bible. The difficulty is that the two parallel stories present two agents responsible for the same action. 1 Chronicles 21:1, *śataan* resisted Israel and tempted David to enumerate the people, but 2 Samuel 24:1 declares that the wrath of the LORD was angry with Israel, and he tempted David against them. These writings appear to conflict with the same phenomenon on the surface. Based on the assumption that causation is thought to be single and linear, one explanation would seemingly conflict with the other. This conclusion, however, is mostly based on modern demands of causality and not on the narrative traditions of the Hebrew Bible. The action of several levels of agency is repeatedly reported in the events of Biblical texts, which is why there is the purpose of the gods, the action of mediators and the human culpability of the same episode. This element has been recorded eminently in the

theological and narrative causation studies in the Old Testament, in which historical events are frequently perceived at once by the eye of heaven and earth (Snoek, 2025).

An obvious illustration is found in the traditions of the Exodus in relation to the heart of Pharaoh. In the plague narratives, we read that Pharaoh hardens his own heart, that the heart of Pharaoh was hardened and that the LORD hardens the heart of Pharaoh. These are not expressed as mutually exclusive choices but as complementary narratives of the same historical process. The narrative of human perversity, the punishment of God and the covenant are shared. This tendency demonstrates that the writers of the Bible did not believe that they were restricted to the demands of the time to possess only one source of explanation (Bills, 2020). This line of reasoning is reflected in Job 12. These losses suffered by Job are affected by the immediate action of the foe, but only so far as God has ordained. The narrative does not employ a clash of divine sovereignty and proximate agency, but contrasts the two. God allows and predetermines the test, and the enemy performs the devastating actions. This means that the text is more than one level of causation that is at work in the same event (Silva, 2024).

The same is observed in the vision of Micaiah in 1 Kings 22:19-23. The judgment of Ahab is ordained in the council of heaven, but the instrument of judgment is a spirit that enters the mouths of the prophets of Ahab as a temptation. Divine judgment and the agency of middlemen, as well as Ahab's willing response, help cause the result. Consequently, there is decentralisation of responsibility, and it is not narrowed down to a single cause (Abraham, 2017). These examples lead to the fact that layered causation is not an extrinsic harmonising tool that is imposed on Scripture, but a textual repetition of biblical speech. The Hebrew Bible often tells about events in a manner that incorporates both divine sovereignty, secondary agency, and human responsibility. The census stories should be interpreted in such a broader literary and theological scheme.

In the meantime, we ought to attend to the various stresses of Samuel and Chronicles. Samuel puts the census into context with reference to the anger of God against Israel; he puts emphasis on covenantal judgment and the dominion of God in national history. Subsequent chronicles recognise the contribution made by *šāṭān* as the immediate instigator, and emphasise more on antagonistic mediation and causal morality. As it has been noted by numerous observers, the Chronicler is more inclined to adapt the previous traditions in order to explain the theological issues to the audience of the post-exilic era rather than to simply repeat the story of Samuel (Morrison, 2024;

Lynch, 2014). This way of reading, the two accounts need not be considered mutually excluding accounts. Instead, 2 Samuel 24:1 outlines the census in terms of ultimate causation, that is, the judgment of God against Israel and 1 Chronicles 21:1 outlines the proximate opposing agency of the occurrence. The fact that David takes the decision himself, that Joab complains, and David has confessed later shows that the responsibility of man is not reduced under any condition. These views can be held simultaneously as canonical interpreters have noted that they do not cancel each other (Peckham, 2016). The seeming contradiction is thus seen to be more of an issue of interpretive point of view than of text incoherence. Samuel and Chronicles tell the same story using different causal perspectives, but both are involved in a larger biblical line of reasoning wherein divine sovereignty, mediatory agency and human responsibility can be active at the same time in the same historical event.

Linguistic Reflections: שָׂטָן and its meaning and usage

A more precise Hebrew reading of the word שָׂטָן (*śāṭān*) is one bold step towards the apparently conflicting 2 Samuel 24: 1 and 1 Chronicles 21: 1. This interpretation, though frequently translated as Satan, risks adding to the term some late theological accretions when in the context of the Hebrew Bible the meaning of the term is really functional rather than ontological. It is only then that a keen assessment will take into consideration not only the lexical meaning but also the syntax, definiteness, comparative usage and historical linguistic context.

The relevant clause in 1 Chronicles 21:1 reads: וַיַּעֲמֵד שָׂטָן עַל-יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּקְּטֵה אֶת-דָּוִיד

Here, שָׂטָן is the grammatical subject of the verb וַיַּעֲמֵד (*stood up*) and the prepositional clause עַל-יִשְׂרָאֵל (*against Israel*), which is a manifestation of adversarial position. Notably, there is no usage of the definite article (הַ) after the noun. This point has often been cited as testimony to the fact that the word needs to be translated to read an adversary and not Satan. Subtle in such a conclusion should be. In Biblical Hebrew, the lack of the article does not necessarily indicate indefiniteness. Anarthrous nouns can be indefinite, qualitative or contextually definite. Nevertheless, the lack of the article widens the semantic space and does not give the possibility to the interpreter to assume that the text is addressing a specific or already familiar figure. At least the syntax is unclear whether שָׂטָן is a reference to a specific object known to us or a broader aggressive entity.

This ambiguity can be explained further by applying the use of the word by the Chronicler to other examples of the word. Job 11:1–2 and Zechariah 3:12–2 always use the term with the definite article *הַשָּׂטָן* (the satan). The term is applied, in these instances, to refer to a recognisable position within the divine council, usually understood as a prosecutorial or an accusing position. The very existence of the article is indicative of the fact that the character is not merely an enemy, but the accuser, which is a role that has been invoked in the narrative. In comparison, 1 Chronicles 21:1 does not have either the article or an explicit divine council context. The character works in the realm of the past instead of the future or the courtroom. This is a linguistic change. Compared to Job and Zechariah, which bring in a more strictly defined role, Chronicles does so more vaguely, suggesting either more of an adversarial role in general or an early stage in the development of the concept of a personal agent.

The wide-ranging grammatical phenomenon of anarthrous nouns attests to this conclusion. Typical accounts of Biblical Hebrew remark that nouns without the article can indicate: indefinite reference (as an adversary), class membership (as an adversary), or qualitative force (adversarial opposition). Anarthrous proper names tend to be used, whereas titles or offices are anarthrous common nouns that tend to be used with the article (when they are definite), the king, *לֶךְ־הַמֶּלֶךְ*. The similarity in the use of *הַשָּׂטָן* in Job and Zechariah implies that this word may be understood in such instances as the established position, but the anarthrous form in Chronicles diminishes the determinacy of the referent. The grammar, therefore, does not favour treating *הַשָּׂטָן* in 1 Chronicles 21:1 as unambiguously a proper name.

The semantic spectrum validates this flexibility, as shown by important Hebrew lexicons. According to Brown Drivers Briggs (BDB), the word *הַשָּׂטָן* is used to refer to either an opponent or accuser, of human beings or supernatural beings. HALOT also makes a similar distinction between the generic term opponent and more specific uses in a heavenly context, such as Job and Zechariah. The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew (DCH) emphasises the practical meaning of the term since the act of personalisation is only identified in a given literary situation. In all of these lexicons, it is unanimously agreed that *הַשָּׂטָן* is not necessarily a proper name in early Hebrew. Instead, it is contextually defined as either a human enemy (e.g., 1 Sam 29:4) or a divine messenger, as working in opposition (Num 22:22), or as a heavenly accuser. The use of the Chronicler is not on the

extreme side, and does not, even by the mere test of vocabulary, need to be referred to a full-fledged character of Satan.

There is also a need to put the linguistic portrait of Chronicles in its context of Late Biblical Hebrew (LBH). The Chronicler writes at a time when the theology of Israel is becoming more and more interested in the mediated agency and in the employment of intermediate figures, and at a time when the tradition of the past is more and more often being re-read, in dialogue with the theological problems of the post-exilic community. According to a number of scholars, the Chronicler is inclined to reconstruct the stories to reveal God more clearly and include additional participants. The introduction of *ṣṭ* in 1 Chronicles 21:1 may be a development of theological terms that could be employed to make a distinction between ultimate and proximate causation. However, this has not been concluded yet based on the linguistic evidence. The loss of the article, the absence of mythological development, and the functional sense of the word all indicate the fact that *ṣṭ* is not yet completely elaborated and individualised, as a personalised adversary of the cosmos, as in the later literature of the Second Temple.

Linguistic analysis indicates that *ṣṭ* in 1 Chronicles 21:1 cannot be simply confused with the next character of the same name, Satan, as a proper name. Syntactically, the referent of the anarthrous form is open; comparatively, it is opposite to the more precisely defined *ṣṭ* of Job and Zechariah, lexically it is a part of a broad semantic network of nodes, the work of adversarial action; and historically it is a stage in the gradual development of thought in Israel. It is in this sense that the term may best be construed to mean an agent of adversity, be it a personal or functional agent operating in the arena of divine sovereignty. This text fits into the larger pattern in the Bible where the designations of God are fulfilled by means of secondary agents, and the argument that this text teaches proximate causation, with ultimate causation in 2 Samuel 24:1. The consistency of the two accounts is therefore not disqualified by the linguistic evidence but supported by it.

A Broader Biblical Pattern: God Working Through Secondary Agents

One of the most consistent theological patterns in the Hebrew Bible is the affirmation that God exercises sovereign control over history while working through secondary agents—human and spiritual—whose actions are morally significant yet subordinate to divine authority. This pattern provides an essential framework for

understanding texts in which God's agency appears mediated through adversarial or deceptive figures. Rather than undermining divine sovereignty, such mediation reinforces the biblical portrayal of a God who governs a complex moral universe without relinquishing ultimate control.

The Case of Job

The Book of Job offers the clearest biblical example of God working through a secondary spiritual agent. In Job 1–2, Satan appears among the “sons of God” in the divine council, a setting widely recognised by scholars as a standard feature of ancient Near Eastern royal imagery adapted for Israel's theology (Farrar, 2019). Crucially, Satan does not intrude uninvited; he operates within a divinely sanctioned setting and speaks only with God's permission. The narrative explicitly presents God as the initiator of the exchange. God draws Job to Satan's attention and authorises a limited testing of Job's righteousness. Satan then functions as the immediate agent who inflicts loss and suffering. Scholars consistently emphasise that this structure distinguishes ultimate causation (God's sovereign purpose) from proximate causation (Satan's destructive actions) (Silva, 2024). Importantly, the text does not portray Satan as an independent rival to God. His power is derivative and constrained, operating only within boundaries God establishes. Monnig (2019) notes that Satan's role is prosecutorial rather than autonomous, functioning as a tester of human fidelity within the divine court. This understanding aligns with the broader Old Testament depiction of šāṭān as an adversarial role rather than an ontologically evil being acting outside divine oversight.

At the same time, Satan's moral responsibility is not erased. His intent is clearly malicious—aimed at discrediting Job's integrity—yet God incorporates Satan's actions into a larger redemptive process that culminates in Job's vindication and restoration. As Abraham (2017) argues, the Book of Job demonstrates a relational model of divine sovereignty in which God permits genuine agency, even when that agency produces suffering, without becoming morally culpable for evil itself. Thus, Job establishes a theological precedent: God may allow adversarial forces to act as secondary agents to reveal deeper truths, test faithfulness, or advance purposes that transcend immediate suffering.

The Case of Ahab

A similar pattern appears in 1 Kings 22:19–22, the prophetic vision granted to Micaiah concerning the downfall of King Ahab. In this text, the prophet describes a heavenly council in which God seeks a means to bring about Ahab's death at Ramoth-gilead. A spirit volunteers to become a "lying spirit" in the mouths of Ahab's prophets, and God authorises this course of action. Scholars widely agree that this passage is intentionally provocative, challenging simplistic moral assumptions about divine action (Abraham, 2017; Vanhoozer, 2010). However, the text does not depict God as deceitful in character. Rather, it presents divine judgment enacted through an agent whose deceptive nature aligns with the outcome Ahab has already chosen. Ahab has persistently rejected authentic prophetic counsel; the lying spirit confirms him in his self-deception rather than coercing him against his will. Conway (2019) emphasises that the narrative logic is judicial: the deception corresponds to Ahab's moral trajectory and long-standing resistance to truth. The secondary agent serves as an instrument of judgment, not as a rival power acting independently of God. Lennox (2018) similarly argues that the scene underscores God's sovereign freedom to govern even the realm of deception without endorsing it as a moral good. As in Job, responsibility is distributed across multiple levels. God is sovereign over the outcome; the spirit performs the deceptive act; and Ahab remains fully accountable for his decision to follow false prophecy. The text thus preserves divine justice while acknowledging the real agency of secondary actors.

Taken together, the cases of Job and Ahab reveal a consistent biblical pattern in which God works through secondary agents—including adversarial or deceptive figures—without compromising divine holiness or sovereignty. These narratives provide a crucial interpretive lens for understanding other texts where God's action is mediated rather than direct, demonstrating that Scripture affirms layered causation rather than theological contradiction.

Applying the Pattern to David's Census

When the broader biblical pattern of God working through secondary agents is applied to the census narratives of 2 Samuel 24:1 and 1 Chronicles 21:1, the apparent contradiction between divine and satanic causation becomes theologically coherent. Rather than offering mutually exclusive explanations, the two texts present different levels of causation, consistent with the layered agency observed in the cases of Job and

Ahab. The account in 2 Samuel 24:1 states that “the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel, and he incited David against them, saying, ‘Go, number Israel and Judah.’” Here, the narrator emphasises ultimate causation, locating the event within the context of divine judgment. Scholars generally agree that the text presupposes prior covenantal failure on Israel’s part, even though the specific sin is not named (Barry & Van Noord, 2016; Lofstedt, 2021). The census functions as a means by which hidden guilt is exposed and judgment enacted. By contrast, 1 Chronicles 21:1 states that “Satan stood up against Israel and incited David to number Israel.” The Chronicler, writing in a post-exilic context, identifies the immediate agent responsible for the incitement. As discussed earlier, this attribution does not imply independence from God’s authority. Rather, it reflects a developing theological vocabulary that names the adversarial agent involved in the process.

Scholars widely recognise that the Chronicler often reframes earlier narratives to clarify theological concerns for a later audience without denying the authority of the Deuteronomistic History (Knoppers, 2012). In this case, the Chronicler’s introduction of Satan does not negate God’s sovereignty but specifies the mediating role through which divine judgment unfolds. This mirrors the logic of Job, where God permits Satan to act, and of Ahab, where God authorises a deceptive spirit—both cases in which God remains sovereign while acting through secondary agents. Crucially, David’s moral responsibility remains intact in both accounts. Joab’s protest (2 Sam. 24:3; 1Chr. 21:3) indicates that David was not compelled against his will. As Gilmour (2021) notes, the narrative consistently portrays David as culpable, underscoring that divine permission and satanic incitement do not override human agency. David’s subsequent confession—“I have sinned greatly in what I have done” (2 Sam. 24:10)—confirms this moral accountability. Thus, the two narratives should be read as complementary rather than contradictory. God’s anger provides the theological rationale, Satan functions as the proximate agent, and David acts as the responsible moral subject. This layered explanation aligns with the broader biblical pattern of mediated divine action and preserves the coherence of Scripture’s theology of sovereignty, agency, and judgment.

Was David’s Census Inherently Sinful?

A central question in interpreting the narrative of David’s census is whether the act of numbering Israel was, in itself, sinful. A close reading of the Hebrew Bible, supported

by critical scholarship, indicates that the census per se was not inherently sinful. Rather, the sin lay in the motivation, manner, and theological posture accompanying David's action. First, the biblical record demonstrates that censuses were not categorically prohibited. Israel was numbered on several occasions with divine approval, most notably in Numbers 1 and Numbers 26, where God explicitly commands Moses to conduct a census for administrative and military organisation. Furthermore, Exodus 30:12–16 provides regulations for conducting a census, including the payment of a ransom to avert divine judgment. The existence of such legislation presupposes that censuses were legitimate acts within Israel's covenantal life (Walton, 2020). Scholars agree that David's census cannot be condemned simply because it involved counting the people. As Gordon observes, "there is no suggestion elsewhere in Scripture that numbering Israel was intrinsically wrong" (Gordon, 2007). The problem must therefore lie elsewhere. One widely noted issue is the apparent failure to observe the ransom requirement stipulated in Exodus 30. Although neither 2 Samuel 24 nor 1 Chronicles 21 explicitly states that the half-shekel ransom was omitted, the outbreak of a plague—a consequence explicitly linked to an improper census in Exodus 30:12—strongly suggests a ritual irregularity (Price, 2020). This omission reflects not merely a procedural error but a deeper theological negligence: the failure to acknowledge that Israel's strength ultimately belongs to God.

More fundamentally, scholars emphasise David's motivation as the core of the sin. The census in 2 Samuel 24:9 is explicitly described in terms of "valiant men who draw the sword," indicating a military objective. According to O'Connell, the narrative critiques "a royal impulse toward self-reliance and militarisation," where trust shifts subtly from divine provision to human resources (O'Connell, 2016). Joab's resistance further underscores this concern; his objection implies that the census reflects a lack of faith rather than administrative necessity. From a theological perspective, this interpretation aligns with the biblical critique of misplaced trust in numbers, power, and military might. Deuteronomy repeatedly warns Israel's kings against reliance on armies and horses rather than on God (Deut. 17:16; 20:1). David's census thus represents a violation of covenantal trust, even if the act itself was legally permissible. Importantly, David's own confession supports this reading. He does not blame God or Satan but acknowledges personal guilt: "I have sinned greatly in what I have done" (2 Sam. 24:10). As Park (2013) notes, the narrative frames the census as the manifestation of an already disordered heart

rather than the origin of sin itself. In sum, David's census was not inherently sinful. It became sinful because it was driven by self-reliance, conducted without proper theological regard, and symptomatic of a deeper failure to trust in God. The narrative thus reinforces a consistent biblical principle: lawful actions can still be sinful when divorced from faithful dependence on God.

The Question of Self-Reliance and the Motivation of David

The story of the census of David is a matter on which one may elaborate his thoughts on what the king was compelled to do, but the passage does not explicitly tell the psychological stance of David. This should then be interpreted methodologically and findings based upon textual indications and more general trends in canonical development, not a priori reconstruction. In the meantime, the Hebrew Bible always evaluates human activity based on the heart and the narrative leaves enough hints to invite theological speculation as to the character of the heart that moved David to his decision. One of the most significant textual characteristics is the military framing of the census. The outcome is recorded in 2 Samuel 24:9 in the form of valiant men who draw the sword, meaning that the listing is geared towards a measure of the fighting ability of Israel. This fact could reflect a royal fascination with military strength, which, according to some decoders, can be associated with the potential over-reliance on human capabilities rather than divine provisions (Ko, 2018; Gilmour, 2021). This interpretation reflects more general traditions of Deuteronomism, which time and again caution Israelite leaders not to trust themselves to numerical power, horses or chariots, but rather to trust in the presence of God and the promise of God. 17:16; 20:1). They are not anti-military as Wright (2012) observes, but an attack on the theological belief that we can be confident of being safe without God. In this canonical model, the census may be perceived to be a question of where the royal confidence is, even though it is not clearly stated that this is what David intended in the text.

This interpretive image is also contributed by the opposition of Joab. His complaint--May the LORD multiply the people a hundred times--(2 Sam. 24:3)- points out that the census was considered unnecessary or even problematic in the story. Joab does not explicitly give a theological objection, but his protest has been widely construed as a narrative hint that there are other meanings to the command given by David than administrative efficiency (Walsh, 2010). That Joab, otherwise a morally ambiguous

character, should be the one to express this concern may indicate the gravity of the situation, but the text again fails to explicitly tell the reader what kind of error David committed at this moment. Other authors place the census in a larger historical context of David, pointing out the political upheaval and personal failure that led to the census, such as the uprisings of Absalom and Sheba (2 Sam). 15; 20). Based on this interpretation, the census may be considered as an indication of a royal desire to reassure, consolidate or dominate in a period of weakness (Park, 2013). Though these suggestions furnish perhaps historical direction, they are not expressions of the writing, but a kind of commentary, to be received with a becoming caution. Even the story itself merely presents an appraisal of theology in its purest form when the deed has been done. I have done much wrong, I have done many wrongs, I confess to you, David. 24:10)--unconditionally asserts his guilt, although it is not specified what exactly the sin is. The fact that this does not include such an omission implies that this is less about a specific psychological motive than the fact that David is responsible. Lambert (2016) asserts that biblical repentance is common following an unravelling of underlying dispositions, which are expressed through the act and not a previous verbal expression.

These observations point to a balanced conclusion. The military character of the census, the internal opposition to it, and the fact that it reflected more general biblical exhortations on the subject of false security may point to the fact that the issue of reliance, kingship and dependence on God are at stake. Many interpreters interpret the episode then as the possible movement toward self-reliance or faith in human power, against the ideals of the covenant. The text itself deliberately leaves the very reason why David does so unclear. Cautious reading thus admits that the tale questions theological belief in the perils of placing too much trust in it, but does not make too confident claims concerning the inner processes of David.

National Judgment and Corporate Responsibility

One of the most challenging theological dimensions of David's census narrative is the reality of national judgment resulting from the failure of a single leader. The death of seventy thousand Israelites following David's sin (2 Sam. 24:15) raises pressing questions about divine justice, collective responsibility, and the relationship between individual wrongdoing and communal consequence. While this notion often conflicts with modern assumptions about moral individualism, it is deeply embedded within the

biblical worldview. In the Old Testament, Israel is consistently portrayed not merely as a collection of individuals but as a covenant community, bound together in solidarity before God. Consequently, the actions of one member—especially a representative leader—can implicate the whole. Scholars widely recognise this framework as corporate responsibility, a concept fundamental to Israel's theological self-understanding (Sandmel, 2012). The narrative explicitly situates David's census within a broader context of divine displeasure: "Again the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel" (2 Sam. 24:1). This statement suggests that David's sin did not occur in a moral vacuum but functioned as a catalyst that brought underlying national disorder to the surface. According to Wiseman (2015), the text implies a pre-existing condition of covenantal failure within Israel, for which David's action became the revealing occasion rather than the sole cause.

A clear biblical parallel appears in Joshua 7, where Israel suffers military defeat because of Achan's transgression. Although Achan alone committed the theft, Scripture declares that "Israel has sinned" (Josh. 7:11). As Alston (2019) explains, this language reflects a covenantal logic in which individual actions are never purely private but always relational, affecting the standing of the whole community before God. The punishment of many for the sin of one is therefore not arbitrary but flows from Israel's corporate identity. David's role as king intensifies this principle. Ancient Near Eastern kings functioned as representative figures, embodying the spiritual and moral condition of their people. Cranz (2020) notes that the king in Israel was not merely a political administrator but a theological agent whose faithfulness or failure shaped the nation's covenantal health. David himself recognises this representative responsibility when he pleads, "I have sinned, but these sheep, what have they done?" (2 Sam. 24:17). His confession acknowledges both personal guilt and his mediating role. Modern readers often perceive such judgment as unjust, shaped as they are by individualistic ethical frameworks. However, biblical theology consistently prioritises relational accountability over isolated autonomy. As VanDrunen (2014) argues, divine justice in Scripture is concerned not only with individual innocence but with restoring moral order within the covenant community. National judgment serves a corrective and revelatory function, exposing hidden disorder and calling the community back to faithfulness.

Importantly, the narrative does not end with destruction. David's intercession, altar-building, and offerings led to the cessation of the plague, demonstrating that

corporate judgment is not God's final word. Rather, judgment and mercy operate together, aiming at restoration rather than annihilation. In sum, the episode of David's census affirms a biblical theology of corporate responsibility in which leaders bear heightened accountability and communities share in the consequences of covenantal failure. While unsettling to modern sensibilities, this framework underscores the seriousness of leadership, the interconnectedness of God's people, and the redemptive purpose embedded within divine judgment.

Judgment, Repentance, and Restoration

The concluding movement of the Davidic census narrative (2 Sam. 24:10–25; 1 Chron. 21:8–30) brings into sharp focus the interrelated biblical themes of judgment, repentance, and restoration. Far from presenting divine punishment as an arbitrary act, the text portrays judgment as a measured response to covenantal failure, repentance as a sincere reorientation of the heart, and restoration as an act of divine mercy that reaffirms God's redemptive purposes. Judgment enters the narrative immediately after David's conscience is "stricken" (2 Sam. 24:10), signalling that awareness of sin precedes divine action. This sequence is theologically significant. According to Gilmour (2021), the narrative underscores that divine judgment is not merely retributive but revelatory—it exposes the seriousness of sin and its communal consequences. God's offer of three alternative judgments (famine, military defeat, or plague) further demonstrates that judgment operates within the sphere of divine sovereignty tempered by moral purpose rather than mechanical punishment. David's response to this moment is equally instructive. He refuses to choose a punishment that would place him at a distance from suffering, instead declaring, "Let us fall into the hand of the LORD, for his mercy is great" (2 Sam. 24:14). Scholars widely interpret this statement as a profound theological confession.

Johnson (2013) notes that David's choice reflects a deep trust in God's character, even in judgment, recognising divine mercy as more reliable than human restraint. Judgment is not the negation of mercy but the context in which mercy becomes meaningful. The plague that follows is severe, claiming seventy thousand lives, yet it is deliberately limited. The narrative explicitly depicts God restraining the destroying angel before Jerusalem is annihilated (2 Sam. 24:16). This restraint highlights a key biblical tension: God's holiness necessitates judgment, but His covenantal commitment inclines

Him toward mercy. Shapira (2012) emphasises that such scenes are designed to teach Israel that divine judgment has boundaries set by God's redemptive intent. Central to the movement toward restoration is David's repentance, which is neither superficial nor evasive. His confession—"I have sinned greatly, I have done very foolishly" (2 Sam. 24:10)—is marked by personal responsibility without deflection. Unlike Saul, who repeatedly rationalised his disobedience, David fully acknowledges guilt. According to Tentler (2015), this unqualified confession distinguishes David as a paradigmatic penitent king, even when his sin has devastating consequences.

David's repentance is further expressed through intercessory identification with the people. His plea, "I have sinned, but these sheep, what have they done?" (2 Sam. 24:17), reveals his acceptance of representative responsibility. As Verhagen (2020) argues, this moment redefines kingship not as domination but as self-giving mediation. David stands between divine judgment and the people, embodying the pastoral dimension of leadership that Israel's monarchy was intended to reflect. Restoration unfolds through sacrificial worship at the threshing floor of Araunah. The insistence on purchasing the site—"I will not offer burnt offerings to the LORD my God that cost me nothing" (2 Sam. 24:24)—has been widely interpreted as a rejection of cheap repentance. Worship, in this context, becomes the tangible expression of a restored relationship. Lambert (2016) notes that true repentance in the Old Testament is always accompanied by costly obedience, signalling a genuine reordering of priorities. The sacrifices David offers—burnt offerings and peace offerings—are theologically significant. The burnt offering symbolises renewed total devotion, while the peace offering signifies restored fellowship between God and the worshiper (Lee, 2018). Notably, the text emphasises reconciliation rather than ritual precision, reinforcing the prophetic conviction that God desires a restored heart over mere cultic compliance.

Finally, the cessation of the plague confirms divine acceptance. The statement that "the LORD responded to the plea for the land" (2 Sam. 24:25) encapsulates the narrative's redemptive arc. Judgment gives way to mercy, repentance yields restoration, and devastation opens the path to renewal. Importantly, the site of judgment becomes the future location of the temple (2 Chron. 3:1), transforming a place of death into a centre of worship and life. As Wright (2025) observes, this transformation reflects a recurring biblical pattern in which God redeems spaces of failure for enduring purposes of grace. In sum, the narrative of David's census presents judgment not as divine cruelty but as a

severe mercy that exposes sin, invites repentance, and culminates in restoration. It affirms that while sin—even by a faithful leader—has grave consequences, God’s final aim remains relational healing and covenantal renewal.

CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated that the apparent contradiction between 2 Samuel 24:1 and 1 Chronicles 21:1 concerning David’s census does not represent a theological inconsistency but reflects a coherent biblical model of layered causation. Contrary to interpretations that attribute the divergence either to editorial error, theological development that corrects earlier texts, or an attempt by the Chronicler to absolve God of moral responsibility, this research has shown that both accounts intentionally articulate different levels of agency within a shared theological framework. The Samuel narrative emphasises ultimate causation by locating the event within divine judgment against Israel, while the Chronicler identifies a proximate adversarial agent without denying divine sovereignty. This complementary relationship has often been underemphasised or fragmented in previous scholarship, which frequently treats the texts as competing explanations rather than as mutually interpretive witnesses within the canon. A further finding that distinguishes this study from much existing literature is its insistence that neither divine incitement nor satanic agency diminishes David’s moral responsibility. Some interpretations tend to resolve the tension by shifting blame predominantly toward either God or Satan, thereby weakening human accountability. In contrast, this study has shown—through narrative, linguistic, and canonical analysis—that Scripture consistently preserves human culpability even within contexts of divine permission and mediated action. David’s confession, Joab’s protest, and the narrative emphasis on motivation collectively confirm that the census exposed a pre-existing disposition of self-reliance rather than creating sin *ex nihilo*. This reading challenges reductionist approaches that isolate causation to a single agent and instead affirms the biblical logic in which divine sovereignty, secondary agency, and human responsibility operate simultaneously.

This study has shown that the Chronicler employs *śāṭān* in continuity with earlier Hebrew usage, identifying an adversarial role that remains subordinate to divine authority. This nuanced linguistic and theological reading avoids both anachronistic demonology and theological minimalism, situating the text firmly within the broader Old

Testament portrayal of adversarial agency under God's sovereignty. In terms of scholarly value, this research contributes to biblical theology by offering a sustained canonical synthesis of divine sovereignty and secondary agency that resists both determinism and moral dualism. By drawing together parallel narratives, linguistic data, and broader biblical patterns such as those found in Job and 1 Kings 22, the study reinforces the legitimacy of reading tension in Scripture as theologically instructive rather than problematic. This approach affirms the integrity of the canonical text and provides a methodological model for addressing other passages where divine action is mediated through morally complex agents. Finally, the study underscores the ethical and theological significance of leadership, corporate responsibility, and covenantal trust. By interpreting the census as a revelatory act that exposed Israel's and David's misplaced confidence in human strength, the research highlights the enduring biblical warning against self-reliance and the profound communal consequences of leadership failure. The narrative's movement from judgment to repentance and restoration further affirms that divine judgment serves a redemptive purpose aimed at renewal rather than destruction.

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