

OLD TESTAMENT SURVEY

Lesson 26 Part 2

David – The Census Problem

On January 12, 1966, the first episode of Batman appeared on television. I was five, and still remember sitting with Mom, Dad, and Kathryn to watch those early Batman shows.

The first episode was entitled “Hi Diddle Riddle” and featured Frank Gorshin as the Riddler.¹ This was the first of a number of episodes that featured the Riddler as Batman’s nemesis. Those episodes were fun as a kid because the Riddler would leave riddles as clues at each of his crime scenes. Batman and Robin would work to solve the Riddles, frequently using a master computer in the Batcave!

As a youngster, I was always trying to figure out the riddles on my own. Perhaps this was an early clue that riddles would be fun mental pre-occupations for me in my lifetime ahead. After all, I was the kind of goofy-kid who actually *enjoyed* algebra because “solving for x ” seemed like a fun adventure. It seemed to me a mental treasure hunt to get to take a standardized test and figure out the answers to problems.

Some riddles are little more than mind games that are challenging and fun; others are more serious and perplexing. A popular television show today is *House*, based on a set of doctors working week after week to figure out the bizarre and unexplainable illness that threaten the patients. Dr. House has his own technique for solving his riddles. Unlike Batman and Robin, he has no Batcave. Instead he uses the people around him as a sounding board along with an assortment of medical tests that never seem to reveal the true problem until 40 minutes or so into the show.

Beyond the fiction of television, most serious Bible students will come across passages of Scripture that seem perplexing and riddling in meaning. Of course, these are not the simple passages of God in Christ redeeming the world, or of man confessing his sin in repentance and putting faith in Christ. It is hard to see the simple gospel as a riddle.

While there are passages that set out salvation in terms so easily comprehended that children are able to place their faith in the Lord, there are other passages that seem almost impossible to understand. Consider the passages that pertain to

¹ The Riddler’s real name was Edward Nygma ... as in “E Nygma.” The show was never too complicated!

David and the census in 2 Samuel 24 and in 1 Chronicles 21. There are some rather stark differences in these two accounts, which leave the reader puzzling, “What *really* happened?”

THE ISSUES

Consider the difference in simply the first verse as the English Standard Version translates it:

2 Samuel 24

David's Census

¹ Again the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel, and he incited David against them, saying, "Go, number Israel and Judah." ² So the king said

1 Chronicles 21

David's Census Brings Pestilence

¹ Then Satan stood against Israel and incited David to number Israel. ² So David said to Joab and the

In Samuel, it says that the Lord incited David to number Israel while in Chronicles it says that Satan did.

As you read through the different accounts of the census, the results of the census are reported in each text with different numbers:

2 Samuel 24

end of nine months and twenty days. ⁹ And Joab gave the sum of the numbering of the people to the king: in Israel there were 800,000 valiant men who drew the sword, and the men of Judah were 500,000.

1 Chronicles 21

Israel and came back to Jerusalem. ⁵ And Joab gave the sum of the numbering of the people to David. In all Israel there were 1,100,000 men who drew the sword, and in Judah 470,000 who drew the sword. ⁶ But he did not include Levi and Benjamin in the numbering, for the king's command was abhorrent to Joab.

These numbers clearly do not match. In Samuel, Joab reports 800 thousand million fighting men in Israel and 500 thousand in Judah for a total of 1.3 million. Yet in Chronicles, Joab's numbers are 1.1 million in Israel with another 470 thousand in Judah totaling 1.57 million (with a proviso that none were included from the tribes of Levi and Benjamin.)

At the end of the accounts, David buys a plot of land (a “threshing floor”) to stop a plague that has broken out. Differences are found here as well:

2 Samuel 24

And Araunah went out and paid homage to the king with his face to the ground. ²¹ And Araunah said, "Why has my lord the king come to his servant?" David said, "To buy the threshing floor from you, in order to build an altar to the LORD, that the plague may be averted from the people."

...

So David bought the threshing floor and the oxen for fifty shekels of silver.

1 Chronicles 21

²¹ As David came to Ornan, Ornan looked and saw David and went out from the threshing floor and paid homage to David with his face to the ground. ²² And David said to Ornan, "Give me the site of the threshing floor that I may build on it an altar to the LORD—that the plague may be averted from the people."

...

²⁵ So David paid Ornan 600 shekels of gold by weight for the site.

In Samuel, David buys the threshing floor from Araunah for 50 shekels of silver. In Chronicles, David buys the area from Ornan for 600 shekels of gold. The seller is different, the number of shekels is different, and the tender (gold or silver) is different.

Reading the entire passages shows that these are not the only riddles posed to the student. There are several more, some rather subtle, but differences nonetheless.

How does one approach these difficulties?

There is certainly not one single answer to this question, not even one answer that is necessarily better than another. This lesson will follow my personal study over the years in an effort to demonstrate one approach to understanding and “living” with passages like these above.

This lesson has a two-fold purpose. One is to demonstrate an approach to studying these perplexing riddles of interpretation. A second is to try to unravel the story and understand what we can about what happened. In the process of this lesson, we will also get a fuller understanding of how we handle Scripture especially in the far-reaching historical passages of the Old Testament.

THE APPROACH

When faced with these riddles, some people might choose to simply ignore them and move on to more understandable or perhaps more relevant passages. Why teach on 2 Samuel 24 and 1 Chronicles 21 when people are struggling to pay bills or hold a marriage together? Why spend the mental energy on these passages when they do not seem to hold the answers to life’s immediate needs? A different reason for some who ignore the passages is fear. What if there is no ready answer to apparent contradictions? Could we lose our faith over this? Could it mean that all of Scripture is unreliable and there might be historical errors in the reporting of key events like the resurrection?

The problem with ignoring the passages is they do not go away. The passages are there, and someone is going to study them. Someone is going to search for answers, and surely believers should have some input in what those answers might be. Furthermore, it is very possible that these passages do offer some insight into life’s immediate problem. If we do not carefully study them, then we might never know or benefit from what the passages teach and offer.

So, what do we do?

There are a number of tools available to people for study on these issues. These tools include:

- Study Bibles and alternate translations
- Books and commentaries on the texts
- Word study books on the texts
- Journal articles
- General works on the transmission of Scripture

These are not the only resources, however. There is a wealth of opinions that can be found from other people. Certainly, these are found on the Internet, but also over a cup of coffee or lunch. Some might even find a church where these matters are discussed in classes! Another resource that should never be forgotten or discounted is prayer. God's Holy Spirit is assured as an aide to understanding and learning. Writing about wisdom, Paul told the Corinthians:

these things God has revealed to us through the Spirit. For the Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God. For who knows a person's thoughts except the spirit of that person, which is in him? So also no one comprehends the thoughts of God except the Spirit of God. Now we have received not the spirit of the world, but the Spirit who is from God, that we might understand the things freely given us by God. And we impart this in words not taught by human wisdom but taught by the Spirit, interpreting spiritual truths to those who are spiritual.

When we consider these resources, some might wonder where to start. My suggestion is always start with the text.

The Bible Texts

Take a good translation (or two or three) and read the passages carefully, making notes about the riddles one finds perplexing. Doing so here produces the problems set out in the earlier section. We could note them as follows:

1. Who incited David to act, God or Satan?
2. How many warriors were counted, 1.3 million or 1.57 million?
3. Who sold the threshing floor, Araunah or Ornan?
4. Did David pay 50 shekels or 600 shekels?
5. Was the payment in silver or gold?

In addition to noting the problems, we should also read carefully to note the rest of the story within its context in each passage. In all of these areas, I find it best to write down the thoughts both to capture them from a fleeting memory and to force myself to think and pray through them. As the stories unfold in context, we see the following:

2 Samuel 24

2 Samuel 24 is clearly not written in a chronological order within the history recorded in Samuel. If we go back to chapter 23, we read of David's "last words," so in chapter 24 we have a whole story that must have taken place before David's last words. This does not tell us immediately why the story is placed where it is, but it does alert us that the placement is not simply because "it happened in that order." Perhaps it was an added appendix from a prophet or scribe with "more room at the end of a scroll." Perhaps it served a narrative purpose by its structural placement. It might have been something else entirely.

The LORD's (Yahweh's) anger was kindled against Israel, and he incited David to number Israel and Judah. We are not told why God was angry, or what sins of Israel were at issue. From reading the earlier chapters of 1 and 2 Samuel, we do know of a number of sins of the people, including siding with Absalom against David. But here, there is no specific sin specified.

David ordered his general Joab to complete a census, but Joab protested. Joab urged that God should add innumerable people to David's kingdom, but David should not delight in taking a census. This tells us that David seemed to be taking delight in this, even though it was something that seemed wrong to Joab.

King David trumps the general Joab and the census is accomplished. It goes throughout the country over a period of nine months and twenty days. The census ends with Joab coming to Jerusalem, giving David the numbers of 800,000 able soldiers in Israel and 500,000 in Judah. At this point we are told, "David's heart struck him."

David confesses that he had "sinned greatly" and acted "very foolishly." He asks the LORD to take away his iniquity. The next morning, the LORD sent the seer Gad to David. Gad tells David that God gives three options for punishment. Option one is three years of famine; option two is three months of war/flight; and option three is three days of pestilence. Reading this section one notices a footnote to the three years of famine. In the ESV the footnote reads:

Compare 1 Chronicles 21:12, Septuagint; Hebrew *seven*.

This footnote is sending us to 1 Chronicles 21:12 which also uses “three years” of famine. The Septuagint (which is the Greek version of the Old Testament, likely translated from Hebrew and Aramaic into Greek in the immediate centuries before Christ) also uses “three years” for the famine. The Hebrew text, however, says “seven years” not three. This footnote is added so the reader knows both the options of the various texts and also that the editors believe the Septuagint gives the more reliable and authentic reading for this passage.

David responds to Gad that he selects the punishment that falls into God’s hands rather than the hands of man. David does so in confidence that God is merciful.

The LORD then sent a pestilence on Israel from morning to the “appointed time” with 70,000 men dying. The angel of destruction then stretched out his hand toward Jerusalem to destroy it, but the LORD relented at that point, staying the angel’s hand saying, “It is enough.” This happened when the angel was at the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite. The Jebusites were the residents of Jerusalem prior to David conquering it.

When David saw the angel striking the people, he had said to the LORD, that he was the sinner, not the people (his “sheep”) and God should visit the punishment on David instead. The timing of this is not given. The tenses seem to indicate that this was before the hand was stopped (when God was still striking the people). In the order of the story, it is given after God has already stopped the killing.

Gad then comes to David that day and tells him to raise an altar to the LORD on the threshing floor. David and Araunah discuss price and decide on 50 shekels of silver for the floor and oxen. David then built the altar and sacrificed. The story concludes that the LORD responded to the plea for the land and the plague was averted.

1 Chronicles 21

1 Chronicles 21 tells the same basic story but with some additions, some deletions, and some differences. We note those, but first must see the context of the Chronicles passage.

David has conquered Jebus (now called “Jerusalem”) from the Jebusites (1 Chron. 11) and built himself houses there (1 Chron. 15). David then has the Ark of the Covenant brought to Jerusalem. David places the Ark in a tent, but decides he wants to build a house for it. The Lord tells David that he will not build the house, but David’s son will (1 Chron. 17). David

defeats a number of enemies, Philistines, Moabites, Ammonites, and Syrians.

Within that context, we get to the text of chapter 21. Reading the passage, we immediately see the difference of Satan standing against Israel and inciting David to number Israelites. David orders Joab to do so and Joab protests, like in Samuel. Again, David's orders trump Joab's ethics and the numbering is done.

This time, the numbers come back at 1.1 million men who "drew the sword" in Israel and 470,000 in Judah. Unlike Samuel, Chronicles notes that Joab did not number Levites or Benjaminites because David's command was "abhorrent to Joab."

God was "displeased" and he struck Israel. David repents and then Gad is sent to David with the choice of the three options given in Samuel. Again, David leaves the choice to God, noting his mercy. The Lord sets out the three-day pestilence and 70,000 are killed. God sends his angel to destroy Jerusalem but as the angel of destruction was about to destroy Jerusalem God stops, saying, "It is enough; now stay your hand."

At the time the angel is at the threshing floor of Ornan the Jebusite. David sees the angel standing between heaven and earth with his sword stretched out over Jerusalem. David repeats his confession and plea for the personal responsibility as given in Samuel, though this time we are told the elders are with him.

Gad instructs David to build an altar and David proceeds as in Samuel, except the amount paid is 600 shekels of gold rather than 50 of silver. Before the story ends in Chronicles, we are told that while the Ark was in Jerusalem, the Tabernacle (tent) of Moses and the alter of burnt offering were in Shiloh rather than Jerusalem. David then proclaims that the House of the LORD God would be built upon the threshing floor and the sacrifices would move there as well.

The next chapter has Solomon instructed to build the temple and David puts aside many of the materials Solomon will need.

Prayer

I think it best not only to pray while reading, but also to pray overall. In this lesson, we can pause and pray, "Most Holy God and Father, we seek you and your Spirit in our hearts and minds as we strive to understand these passages. We want to hear what you have to say to us. Please open our hearts and our minds to better hear and honor you. Give us insight and direction. Above all else, please

bring us closer to you and let us be satisfied with the measure of understanding you give us today. In Jesus's name we pray Amen!"

Books, Commentaries, Textual Studies, and Transmission Studies

There is a host of books and commentaries on every book of the Bible, including 2 Samuel and 1 Chronicles. I like to grab a number of them to read and move through them one at a time, making notes about each one as I study.

One important thing to remember when reading commentaries is the perspective of the author(s). There is a wide range of perspectives on the authority of Scripture, for example, and how one understands the Old Testament to be God's word certainly makes a difference in how one understands the passages in question. In this regard, I like to read across a spectrum of authors, those who approach Scripture as I do as well as those who do not. It is always important to know which is which, however.

Some of the commentaries I used in reviewing this passage along with pertinent notes are set forward below.

ESV Study Bible Notes

The ESV Study Bible handed out to our class has notes at the bottom of each page tied to particular verses. These notes are by scholars who are evangelical in their theology, meaning that they view Scriptures as "the very words of God to us."² These notes are a wonderful resource for those without access to commentaries or other scholastic resources. Reading through them we see the following opinions in Samuel:

- God might have "incited" David, but God does not do evil. He does, however, use evil moral agents to accomplish his purposes.
- The census seems to have been a sinful lack of David's trust in God as the military source of strength, along with a sinful pride in the forces at his command.
- There are handy insights and a map of the process of the census.
- The difference in the Hebrew text of seven years versus the Septuagint and Chronicles reading of three years is explored. The Hebrew text is noted as most likely wrong in transmission somewhere. Alternatively, it is viewed as a symbolic number as

² *The ESV Study Bible, English Standard Version*, (Crossway Bibles 2008) at 9.

opposed to the Chronicles and Septuagint, which give the real number.

- David's offer to bear the punishment for the people is noted as a symbol for what Jesus as Messiah would do centuries later.
- The 50 shekels paid is suggested to be for the threshing floor and oxen while the 600 shekels of gold is considered for the entire Mount Moriah area (the "site" in Chronicles versus simply the "floor" in Samuel.)
- The threshing floor is noted to be where the temple would get built later.

Reading through the notes in Chronicles, we see several additional ideas, based in part on the additional information given in the Chronicles account. The additional opinions expressed are:

- The chronicler is noted to have made "significant changes and additions" to the story of Samuel. Notably, the difference in "location" within the David narrative is explored with the Chronicler's placement at a pivot between David's wars and preparations for building the temple. The narrative also underscores the meaning of the temple as God's place of forgiveness and David as a model penitent.
- Satan is given as the "inciter" so that the reader will see Satan in his malice is still a tool for God in carrying out his will. This does not change David's own moral sinfulness for following the course of military ambition and personal pride.
- The numerical differences in the census figures are not a simple "disagreement" because the Chronicler drew upon Samuel in composing Chronicles. Therefore, there must be a coherent reason for the difference, even though the reason is not apparent. Possibilities given include the incomplete nature of the census, giving rise to different numbers as estimations.
- This Chronicles account shows the shift of worship from Gibeon to the new site in Jerusalem.

Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary: 1 & 2 Samuel³

³ Cartledge, Tony, *1 & 2 Samuel (Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary)*, (Smyth & Helwys Publishing 2001).

This commentary series seeks to bring credible scholarship in a user-friendly fashion to the more common (“non-specialist”) reader. Each volume brings the author’s own perspective to the text and some are fairly conservative while others are less so. Tony Cartledge writes this volume. He is an Old Testament Professor at Campbell University Divinity School in North Carolina. He would likely consider himself a “moderate Baptist,” while those more conservative than he would likely brand him a liberal Baptist.

He makes many points already made above, but adds a few more:

- He considers the change from the LORD inciting David to number the people to Satan, as a change made because of the theological discomfort by the Chronicler. He sees the text as the Chronicler insisting that it was Satan and not the LORD. His opinion is that David did the numbering, but the theologians who wrote the texts were on opposite sides of a debate over who incited it.
- He dismisses all the numbers as “too high for an ancient population” especially since Israel today only supports some 6 million people. He believes that if the numbers were accurate, it would have given a full population of Israel over 5 million people. Three possible reasons for the inflated number are given: (1) the numbers include women and children in spite of what the text says, (2) the numbers reflect a corrupted transmission of the text over the centuries, or (3) the use of the Hebrew *'elep* should be translated platoons here rather than thousands.⁴
- The three options for punishment are noted to be a trio typically coming together. In Jeremiah and Ezekiel, there are repeated references to the “death-dealing trio of pestilence, sword, and famine.” He points out that giving David a choice of the three as opposed to inflicting the typical trio together is an indicator of God’s mercy.
- The name “Araunah” is noted for its peculiarity. It is not a Hebrew name and is possibly from a Hurrian root that means “lord” or “king.” The first time it is used in 2 Sam. 24:16 it has the article “the” attached so that it reads literally “the Araunah.” This raises the question that Araunah may have been a title while the name in Chronicles (Ornan) is the actual name of the man in question.

⁴ This idea was set out in greater detail in our lessons on the Israelite exodus available at www.Biblical-Literacy.com.

- He says there is little hope of resolving the costs differences in the two accounts. He does note that Samuel has 50 shekels for the threshing floor and oxen while Chronicles has 600 shekels for the land alone. He also adds that the medieval Jewish rabbi Rashi thought that the 50 shekels should be understood as 50 shekels per tribe of Israel for a total of 600. Of course, this does not resolve the issue of gold or silver.
- He also gives a number of different theories on *why* David's actions were considered sinful.

Word Biblical Commentary: II Samuel⁵

This commentary series seeks to give a fresh translation and a careful approach analyzing the text of the passages. The author taught on the theology faculty of the University of Manchester. He notes many of the opinions previously cited in this paper. Among his additional ideas are:

- The Chronicler's choice of Satan reflected a progressive understanding of the association of evil with demons or Satan.
- He finds none of the explanations of why the census was sinful as convincing.
- He adds some references to the idea that the numbers are artificially high as a mistranslation of the Hebrew *'elep*.
- He also adds a number of citations to support the various ideas surrounding the name of Araunah, including the idea that the name is a title.

The Cambridge Bible Commentary: The Second Book of Samuel⁶

The well-published Old Testament Professor Peter Ackroyd authored this Cambridge volume. The volume is more concerned with interpreting the text than trying to reconstruct the actual history behind the text. Most commentators study Ackroyd's views because of his Old Testament credentials. It is not surprising then to find that most of his comments are

⁵ Anderson, Arnold, *Word Biblical Commentary: II Samuel*, (Word 1989).

⁶ Ackroyd, Peter, *The Cambridge Bible Commentary: The Second Book of Samuel*, (Cambridge 1977).

found in the other commentaries written later. We highlight some of Ackroyd's opinions:

- He notes that the change from the Lord to Satan as the inciter is “shifting the responsibility and avoiding some of the theological difficulty posed by making God act himself.”
- He goes into detail on why the reading of “three” years of famine is right instead of the reading of “seven” years found in the Hebrew text.
- Rather than go into much detail on the apparent inconsistencies of numbers, names and costs, Ackroyd concentrates on his theory that this story is a composite of three different stories. The stories he thinks were combined to make the point that “out of disaster, God brings good.”
- Ackroyd does assert that the 70,000 killed by the plague is a symbolic number meaning simply “a lot!” For Ackroyd, the usage of 7 is always suspicious for a symbolic interpretation in the Bible.
- Ackroyd makes the important point that as originally written, 1 or 2 Samuel should not be viewed in isolation. They are part of a bigger series of writings. The Greek version of these books (the “Septuagint”) combines both Samuels and both Kings into a set of four books, “The Books of Kingdoms.” While 2 Samuel ends with this story in chapter 24, it is to be considered in the immediate flow of 1 Kings 1ff.
- He believes that in the flow of other works, these books become “a vehicle of truth, to be evaluated and assimilated, and long outlasting the particular moments described.”

The Anchor Bible Commentary on II Samuel⁷

This commentary by Kyle McCarter is considered an academic classic in certain circles. It is often cited, in part because of McCarter's own credentials. At this point, he teaches at Johns Hopkins in Biblical and Ancient Near Eastern Studies. McCarter provides his own translation of the text with thorough notes on why he made the choices he made. His commentary includes many points set out earlier, but we emphasize the following:

⁷ McCarter, P. Kyle, *The Anchor Bible Commentary on II Samuel*, (Doubleday 1984).

- The cause of Yahweh’s wrath is not given because the Israelites may not have known it. It was a conclusion for the people, but the specific causing sin(s) were unknown. This is one reason why the Chronicler supposedly “resolved the contradiction” by substituting Satan for the Lord.
- The numbers are cited as too high for the time and place. McCarter dismisses the idea that the numbers include children and women instead suggesting the Hebrew should be translated “units” giving a total of 6,500 to 18,220 men.
- McCarter dedicates two pages to possible reasons David’s actions were sinful. He suggests it violated laws of purity to enroll men in a warrior census when the men were not yet purified to fight. Thus the census was seen, according to McCarter, as an action that violated purity taboos for all the men.

*The International Critical Commentary on the Books of Samuel*⁸

This old commentary is a classic by a top Hebrew scholar of his day. He was found guilty of heresy in a church trial for stating that there were errors of historic fact in the Book of Chronicles, and he had no compunction about asserting such in his writings. In this commentary, he offers some additional opinions beyond those set out already:

- On the numbers, Smith is blunt, “As in so many other cases, the numbers are not to be relied upon.”
- In spite of the fact the Israel is separated from Judah in the census, Smith does not see this as indicating a late date for this text (*i.e.*, a date after Judah and Israel separated from each other each with its own king).
- Smith thought that David went forward with building the altar after the plague was stayed because David was uncertain if the plague was actually over.
- Smith pointed out the Septuagint manuscript (Legarde) that included the early part of 1 Kings as part of 2 Samuel, emphasizing that the texts should be fully separated in our minds, but the contextual flow of one book to the other should guide our understanding.

⁸ Smith, Henry, *The International Critical Commentary on the Books of Samuel*, (T&T Clark 1899).

- Smith noted that even though the Jewish Masoretic⁹ scribes took great care in copying manuscripts from in the 1,000 plus years after Christ, if errors had crept into the Hebrew manuscripts before that time, those errors would still be present. In other words, he was not certain that the Hebrew text was a replica of the original Hebrew and should be viewed with some measure of caution.

I & II Samuel, A Commentary¹⁰

Originally written in German in 1960, Hertzberg's book is considered a seminal work among academicians in his time period. The series itself is one that embraces the critical studies of Old Testament writings, distinct from a typical evangelical approach. Hertzberg's commentary emphasized:

- The reason that the story is separated from its chronology in 2 Samuel is to stress David leaving not only his kingdom to Solomon, but also leaving for Solomon the holy place for the manifestation of God's presence.
- Hertzberg also emphasized that the story does not end the pestilence by David's prayer, "but by the Lord's mercy, and it is therefore the Lord's mercy which saves Jerusalem and at the same time appoints the place of the future sanctuary."
- Hertzberg also argues the case for Araunah as a title for Ornan rather than a separate name.

Keil & Delitzsch Commentary on the Old Testament: 1 & 2 Samuel¹¹

This commentary series was originally written between 1866 and 1891. The authors were two of the top Hebrew and Old Testament scholars in their day. They approached the Old Testament with a relatively

⁹ Masoretes were Jewish scribes who copied the Jewish Scriptures from as early as the 4th century and continuing up through 1100AD. These scribes had elaborate rules for copying Scriptures to ensure the accuracy of the reproductions. Until the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls in 1947, our oldest Hebrew copies of the Old Testament were Masoretic productions, our oldest texts dating from 950 and 1,000 AD. Older copies of Old Testament scriptures were available in Greek (the Septuagint), Syriac (the "Peshitta") and other languages. See, in general, "Masorah," *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, (Thomson Gale 2007), vol. 13.

¹⁰ Hertzberg, Hans, *I & II Samuel, A Commentary*, (SCM Press 1964).

¹¹ Keil, C. F. and Delitzsch, *Commentary on the Old Testament: 1 & 2 Samuel* (Hendrickson 2006 printing).

conservative mind-set compared to much of academia today. Some of their principal value lies in their understanding of the Hebrew nuances in both vocabulary and grammar. They emphasized:

- Conducting a census is not innately sinful. They thought that David's sin was from self-exaltation. He took glory in the number of warriors and his readiness for war. They argue that because David was boasting in this, the Lord set to reduce his numbers!
- They believed that the reason the Lord was angry with Israel and seeking to punish the people was the general rebellions against David by the people supporting Absalom and Sheba.
- They point out the visual sighting of the angel of destruction was necessary to serve as confirmation that the pestilence was not a natural occurrence, but a supernatural one.
- They suggest that Ornan is a Hebrew name while Araunah is not. Therefore, they saw these as two names for the same person, one his Hebrew name and one his non-Hebrew name.
- On the price paid for the field (number of coins and type of tender), they suggest the only resolution is to note that one text is corrupted over the centuries. They suspect based on price that the Chronicler's number is the correct one.

*Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: 1-2 Chronicles*¹²

In this set of commentaries, the authors have taken a collection of early church commentary on passages of Scripture and given a synopsis of the early church views along with translations of segments of the early church writers. The two early church writers used in the section on the Chronicles passage are Jerome and Bede. Jerome (347-420) was at times an allegorical interpreter of the Old Testament and, later in life, less allegorical and more literal and moral. The Venerable Bede (672-735) studied Jerome and uses an allegorical approach as well as a moral one. These approaches are well illustrated in the opinions of these early church scholars:

- The threshing floor as the future home of the Temple is allegorically seen as the church. That the site belonged to Ornan indicates that the church would grow up among Gentiles rather than simply Jews. (Jerome).

¹² Oden, Thomas, ed., *Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture: 1-2 Chronicles*, (IVP 2008).

- Bede pointed out that the city was originally named “Jebus” meaning “trampled upon.” It was changed to “Jerusalem” meaning “vision of peace.” Bede then noted that the church was indicated by John the Baptist as the threshing floor in Matt. 3:12 (“I baptize you with water for repentance, but he who is coming after me is mightier than I, whose sandals I am not worthy to carry. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. His winnowing fork is in his hand, and *he will clear his threshing floor* and gather his wheat into the barn, but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire.”) For Bede, when the city was Jebus, it was trampled upon, but with the advent of the church (the acquisition of the threshing floor), it became the city of peace.
- Bede also used the name of Ornan (meaning “enlightened”) as an indicator that the church would bring enlightenment to the Gentiles.

The Dead Sea Scrolls Bible¹³

As noted in an earlier footnote, until the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls, the oldest Hebrew text of Samuel and Chronicles dated from around the year 1000. The older copies of manuscripts from the Greek version of the Old Testament (Septuagint) went back to the year 350.

There were some key differences in the Septuagint version compared to the Hebrew version. In the Septuagint, there were three years of famine offered as a punishment option while in the Hebrew text it was seven years. The census numbers are also slightly different in the Septuagint.

Scholars opined that these differences showed that the Septuagint translators in 200–100BC were working with a different copy of the Hebrew text than that preserved by the Hebrew scholars up through the year 1000 (the “Masoretic text”). Of course, a key question was which text was closer to the original text.

Once the Dead Sea Scrolls were discovered (starting in 1947) and as they have been translated, the situation has clarified a bit. For some texts like Isaiah, it has shown a remarkable consistency with the Masoretic text. For Samuel, however, the situation is different. Remnants of four Samuel scrolls were found in the Qumran caves. These scrolls were not complete, but they are full enough to indicate that the Septuagint texts seem to be of

¹³ Abegg, Flint, Ulrich, *The Dead Sea Scrolls Bible*, (Harper 1999).

the same family as the Dead Sea texts.¹⁴ This gives added credibility to the reading that scholars suggested on three years of famine rather than seven.

This publication of the Dead Sea Scrolls provides the Masoretic text, the Septuagint, and the Dead Sea Scrolls to show how the scrolls modify the other texts. It gives the translations for the layperson to see where the Sea Scrolls uphold one text or another. In this way, they are extremely valuable in trying to construct what the original texts may have looked like.

The scrolls have not produced any sections of Chronicles, and the only parts of 2 Samuel 24 uncovered do not add much to the Samuel account. They do provide the name Araunah, and they also add some additional narrative in Samuel showing David's vision of the angel in the same terms that Chronicles gives the vision.

Journal Articles

When dealing with individual passages like those in the lesson today, oftentimes there are good study resources beyond simply commentaries and books. There are hundreds of journals that publish articles pertaining to Scripture, interpretations, word studies, and theology. Often the journals allow a greater focus on the smaller passages than a larger book that has broader concerns. Journal articles are also generally more up to date, at least at the time of their publication. Most of the articles also “offer something new” rather than simply rehashing old material.

The Internet opens up research into the articles using “Google Scholar” searches, for example. A difficulty is accessing the article once you find one you want to read. While the articles can generally be accessed online at a cost, it is much cheaper and easier to find a library or institution that subscribes to a journal service and provides free access to the materials.

One example of a journal search is included in this paper to show the fruits of such research as well as some insight not included in other books reviewed thus far.

“The Threshing Floor of Araunah”¹⁵

¹⁴ For great detail in this, see the actual publication of the Samuel Scrolls with analysis by the team headed by Frank Cross. *Discoveries in the Judean Desert*, (Oxford 2005), Vol 17 at 223-224. The reference work cites 142 superior readings found in the largest Samuel scroll (4QSam^b). Of these, 90 are in agreement with the Old Greek texts. Where the Masoretic text reads superior to the Greek text, however, the scroll almost always supports the Masoretic text. This tells us that the scholars who have been trying to trace the best readings of Samuel among the many options presented by the centuries have actually done an outstanding job—a fact now born out by the discoveries of the scrolls.

This article is not from a high-gear intellectual journal of theology. It is not the most recent pronouncement on the issues. It is not even by one of the world-renowned theologians. But it gives a layer of insight that is accessible through the wonders of the Internet!

The author was a professor at Tel Aviv University and prepared the material for the Israel Society for Biblical Research. Yeiven makes several points worth noting:

- On the name “Araunah” (which Yeiven transliterates as “Arawna”), There is a great detail on the various ways the name is spelled in Hebrew and attached to modifying nouns and verbs. Yeiven believes that the better pronunciation of the name is *Awarna* and equates it to the ancient Khurrite¹⁶ word *Ewerina*, which means “king,” “ruler,” or “head man.” In this sense Araunah is, he suspects, a Jebusite title.
- David had earlier expressed a desire to build a house to the Lord, but Nathan had stopped David. Yeiven believes a fair reading of the text indicates that there was popular support against the building of such a house in Jerusalem, and this event changed the populace’s mind. This was a seminal event in turning perspectives on this issue, clearing the way for the building of the temple in Jerusalem. Yeiven underscores that Chronicles informs us not only David, but the elders saw the angel with outstretched sword at the threshing floor.
- Because Chronicles adds the name “Mount Moriah” to the threshing floor (2 Chron. 3:1), Yeiven thinks that the non-Hebrew name “Moriah” might also be linked. Through a lengthy explanation, Yeiven explains how he believes “Mount Moriah” originally meant “The Mountain of this King,” which links back to the idea of Araunah as a king or “head man.”

Conversations

¹⁵ Yeivin, Sh., “The Threshing Floor of Arunah,” *Journal of Educational Sociology*, Vol. 36, No. 8 (April 1963) at 396-400.

¹⁶ The Khurrites were also known as Hurrians. They were a Mesopotamian people strongest in the 16th to 13th centuries BC.

We have left out a major area of consideration in deciphering the riddles in Scripture: discussions with other people. There is a wealth of common sense, a wealth of learning, and much to be gained when discussing these issues with others. It forces greater focus and also frequently generates new ideas and perspectives.

In this sense, this lesson, along with many others, was sent out to a wealth of people for review and “email discussion.” Among the emails received was one by Weston Fields. Weston holds several doctorates, was a seminary professor, is fluent in the Biblical languages, among others, is a published author many times over, and is the International Director of the Dead Sea Scrolls Foundation overseeing the translation and publication of these important documents. Weston wrote back and made several outstanding points:

- Weston considers these passages “differences,” not “difficulties.” He notes,

The way I look at it, in God’s infinite wisdom and sovereignty his plan was to allow or cause different forms of the text to develop. I always say that my plan would have been to invent the copy machine first, then write the Bible. God obviously had a different way of doing it, and we in the west, so stuck as we are on “a does not equal non-a” probably need to adjust our thinking on textual problems. I, for example, would be much more likely, following my mentor, Talmon, to say that variants mostly arose from scribal intention, not scribal mistakes.

For Weston, he likes the idea of Scripture inspired in the sense of “divinely-caused.” As such, the text is authoritative and accurate for what God intends it to say and convey.

- Weston was struck that the names “Araunah” and “Ornan” in the Hebrew were really the same names. Weston pointed out that the vowel sounds we add to Hebrew consonants were not in the original texts. So when Septuagint translators or Masorete scholars, or any reader was reading or pronouncing the name of whoever owned the threshing floor, they were adding vowel sounds to the Hebrew consonants of the owner’s name. Those consonants are the same in both names: *aleph*, *resh*, and *nun*.¹⁷ He adds,

¹⁷ For you Hebrew scholars, he adds, “In the case of Araunah, the pointing is basically unpronounceable as it stands (a vav with a sheva under it in the middle of the word is such an anomaly) and the final “he” could be a vowel letter or something else like a locative “he,” or pronominal “he,” etc. ... In the case of Ornan, the final nun is probably just an ending of some

Variations of private names are well-known and extensive from then until our own day. I would never pit one text against another on the basis of a name variation anyway: Israel/Jacob; Esau/Edom; Saul/Paul; Peter/Simon; and even W. Mark and Mark!

- On the number differences, Weston writes,

Number differences never bother me in the text. There are always multiple explanations, and there can always be factors we don't know about, cannot now know about, which would explain them. I can think of many general reasons for number differences. Starting with a high view of the intelligence of ancient scribes, I would say that the fact that scribes left "contradictory" numbers in the text shows they might have felt the same.

Now you may not have Weston Fields in your life (or many other wonderful people who help contribute to our lessons) but you need to have in your life people you are close to who live and study the Word of God. These people are not always *the* answer, but they certainly will have good insight and will spur you on in your search for answers!

CONCLUSION

Where does this information leave us? How do we process all this? Does it bother us? Can a common person ever expect to understand Scripture? Is Scripture reliable?

These are great questions and the answers are very important. Let us answer them, but first remind the reader of the view of Scripture that drives these lessons: All Scripture is a revelation from God that delivers to humanity his message in the terms and ways he wishes to deliver it. Scripture is not man's musings in the sense that it comes simply from the human mind or imagination. It is inspired by God and is "profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work."

With confidence, we study these ideas from these scholars to try and best understand not only what actually happened, but even more important, what God's message is in these passages. As we do this, we remember that we are covering some of the most difficult problems in Scripture.

sort, since the root is still aleph, resh, nun. Final nuns pop up all over the place for all kinds of reasons.

In no way should this be discouraging, for God has made his salvation work in Christ so apparent and plainly simple that a child can understand it. This is not a salvation matter! This is a matter of understanding something much more subtle.

For this reason, some people are not bothered and are at peace to simply ignore these passages. That is fine for many, but some evangelical scholars still need to honestly address these passages. Scholastic writing should not be relegated to the cynics that challenge whether Scripture is Holy or simply the religious heritage of a big group of people!

One last word of warning before my “summation” of where I land on these passages: there are times where it is fully acceptable to answer a question on a minor matter like this with, “I don’t know!” There are times where new discoveries will enlighten us, new ideas will come from new scholars, or time will produce a peace or new understanding in our own minds. So to put something on a shelf for a season is not always a bad thing!

Now, having addressed those questions, what can we fairly deduce based on this study? I would suggest the following points:

1. David conducted a census. We do not know his personal motives, because they are not integral to the story’s purpose. We just know that his actions proceeded from sin in his heart.
2. The Lord incited the census (Samuel); Satan incited the census (Chronicles). Now, it is certainly a theoretical possibility that there is a transmission error or that a well-meaning scribe made a change in Chronicles, thinking surely the text before him was wrong, and he was fixing an earlier problem. But there is another very fair possibility: both are right and true! Consider three New Testament scriptures. According to John 3:16, God so loved the world he gave Jesus in death for the salvation of people. According to Paul in Philippians, we are to have the attitude of Christ who emptied himself and took on human form, then humbling himself to the point of death on a cross. Yet, the gospels also teach that Satan entered Judas, worked through the priests, Pilate, and the people to work the crucifixion of Christ. Now we ask, which was it? Did God send Jesus to the cross, did Jesus go on his own, or did Satan bring about the events at Calvary? The answer, of course is, “Yes.” All are true. It is no less a possibility that both Samuel and Chronicles are right in this regard.
3. We do not know the sense of the numbers. Maybe the original texts would clarify it; we do not know. The numbers, however, are not the point of the story and should not hang anyone up from following the flow of the accounts.

4. Similarly, we do not know for certain the amount paid. Perhaps it was 50 shekels of silver for the floor and the oxen with 600 shekels of gold buying the entire mountain (hill) top. The point is not the amount paid, but that the purchase was made to put the temple where God directed.
5. The focused point of these passages is *not* the census; it is *not* God's anger; and it is *not* whether God or Satan incited the census. The purpose of these passages is to explain *why* and *how* the temple was placed where it was. These passages set out the temple grounds as God's location where by his mercy he stopped a righteous punishment of people. With Gentile and Jew in hand, he found a common ground with the historical significance of Abraham offering Isaac, where his hand lifted in mercy. This came hand in hand with David's repentance. It came hand in hand with a sacrifice. This is the point. For this reason, much is left unsaid, and rightly so. The emphasis is to be on the reasons for the temple site, not on how many soldiers were in Judah!

POINTS FOR HOME

1. *"The anger of the Lord...his mercy is great"* (2 Sam 24:1, 14).
 God is the player in this drama. Israel sinned. How? We do not know! David sinned. How? We do not know. But, righteous God brought righteous judgment *until he stopped himself at the point of the soon-to-be-built temple*. God showed his mercy and justice in this story, the two elements that permeate the gospel. Christ on Calvary is both the anger of the Lord and his mercy rolled into one. Where does this leave us? It should leave us on our knees in repentance, confession, and praise for the Almighty One, rich in mercy as he walks in justice.
2. *"I will not offer burnt offerings to the LORD my God that cost me nothing"* (2 Sam. 24:24).
 David was clear that he would buy the area from Araunah/Ornan. David wanted to offer David's best to the Lord, not the best of someone else. What are we offering to God? Someone else's best or our own? Think of something you can do to show your love and honor to God. Do not tell anyone about it. Do not do it to earn God's love. Try to simply do it this week to show God your love for him.
3. *"David lifted his eyes and saw the angel of the LORD standing between earth and heaven, and in his hand a drawn sword stretched out over*

Jerusalem. Then David and the elders, clothed in sackcloth, fell upon their faces.” (1 Chron. 21:16).

Does the vision of God as judge bother you? Do you turn your back to it to ignore it? For David, it drove him to his face on the ground. We should never lose sight of God’s holiness. Dietrich Bonhoeffer was emphatic that we be careful when we speak of “cheap grace.” While God’s grace may seem cheap to us, it cost him his Son. It is the most costly grace possible. His hand stops from judgment because he paid the death price himself. Let us make it a point this week to quietly fall to our face before God in honor, awe, and homage. Let us thank him from the depths of our hearts for the depths of his love.

WANT MORE?

At lunch today, discuss some aspect of Scripture that you find interesting or difficult to understand. Have a good conversation about it with those around you. Then email us at wantmore@Biblical-Literacy.com and tell us about it!