

## COUNTING HEADS (2 SAM. 24:10–14)

One case of census taking is presented in the Old Testament as at best a mistake and at worst a sin. King David wanted to count his population, but his census is presented as an evil act that would bring punishment on the Israelites (2 Sam. 24:10–13). The Chronicler even suggests that the idea for David's census came from Satan himself (1 Chr. 21:1).

A number of census records have been found among ancient Near Eastern tablets. Empires, stretching over large areas, needed to be able to calculate taxes and assign supplies for their soldiers. They met these obligations by counting and recording the numbers of their people. For propaganda purposes, the Assyrians calculated that they had resettled in different parts of their kingdom 4.5 million conquered people.

An interesting example of an ancient census is the Assyrian Doomsday Book. In these 21 tablets families are registered by the father's name. After the families are listed, the children's height is provided as a means of calculating relative age. A separate section provided a description of land that belonged to each family and how the land was used. Not all families were included in this register, since the Assyrian Doomsday Book was used as a regional guide to noble families who were exempt from Assyrian taxes. From these records it has become clear that early censuses were not used for long-range planning but had specific, immediate purposes.

The Bible nowhere specifies why census taking was considered evil. Nevertheless, David felt guilty over the census he ordered, confessing that he had "sinned greatly" (2 Sam. 24:10). Since it seems obvious that the counting in itself was not bad, the sin had to do with the motivation for counting the people. We can only guess that if David knew the size of his population he might either trust in the size of his army or fear the size of his enemy's army. The census would thus interfere with dependence on God to give victory over Israel's enemies.

far as Beersheba. <sup>8</sup>So when they had gone through all the land, they came to Jerusalem at the end of nine months and twenty days. <sup>9</sup>Then Joab gave the sum of the number of the people to the king. And there were in Israel eight hundred thousand valiant men who drew the sword, and the men of Judah were five hundred thousand men.

### The Judgment on David's Sin

<sup>10</sup>And David's heart condemned him after he had numbered the people. So David said to the LORD, "I have sinned greatly in what I have done; but now, I pray, O LORD, take away the iniquity of Your servant, for I have done very foolishly."

<sup>11</sup>Now when David arose in the morning, the word of the LORD came to the prophet Gad, David's seer, saying, <sup>12</sup>"Go and tell David, 'Thus says the LORD: "I offer you three things; choose one of them for yourself, that I may do it to you." ' " <sup>13</sup>So Gad came to David and told him; and he said to him, "Shall seven<sup>a</sup> years of famine come to you in your land? Or shall you flee three months before your enemies, while they pursue you? Or shall there be three days' plague in your land? Now consider and see what answer I should take back to Him who sent me."

<sup>14</sup>And David said to Gad, "I am in great distress. Please let us fall into the hand of the LORD, for His mercies are great; but do not let me fall into the hand of man."

<sup>15</sup>So the LORD sent a plague upon Israel from the morning till the appointed time. From Dan to Beersheba seventy thousand men of the people

died. <sup>16</sup>And when the angel<sup>a</sup> stretched out His hand over Jerusalem to destroy it, the LORD relented from the destruction, and said to the angel who was destroying the people, "It is enough; now restrain your hand." And the angel of the LORD was by the threshing floor of Araunah<sup>b</sup> the Jebusite.

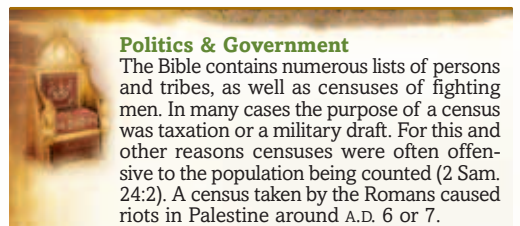
<sup>17</sup>Then David spoke to the LORD when he saw the angel who was striking the people, and said, "Surely I have sinned, and I have done wickedly; but these sheep, what have they done? Let Your hand, I pray, be against me and against my father's house."

### The Altar on the Threshing Floor

<sup>18</sup>And Gad came that day to David and said to him, "Go up, erect an altar to the LORD on the threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite." <sup>19</sup>So David, according to the word of Gad, went up as the LORD commanded. <sup>20</sup>Now Araunah looked, and saw the king and his servants coming toward him. So Araunah went out and bowed before the king with his face to the ground.

<sup>21</sup>Then Araunah said, "Why has my lord the king come to his servant?"

And David said, "To buy the threshing floor from you, to build an altar to the LORD, that the plague may be withdrawn from the people."



#### Politics & Government

The Bible contains numerous lists of persons and tribes, as well as censuses of fighting men. In many cases the purpose of a census was taxation or a military draft. For this and other reasons censuses were often offensive to the population being counted (2 Sam. 24:2). A census taken by the Romans caused riots in Palestine around A.D. 6 or 7.

24:13 <sup>a</sup>Following Masoretic Text, Syriac, Targum, and Vulgate; Septuagint reads *three* (compare 1 Chronicles 21:12). 24:16 <sup>a</sup>Or *Angel* <sup>b</sup>Spelled *Ornan* in 1 Chronicles 21:15