

The End of David's Reign – Judgment and Promise

I. Introduction

1. The Bathsheba episode initiated the beginning of the end of David's kingdom, for it incurred the Lord's "sword" by which David's house – the house He had covenanted to build – would be cut to pieces until nothing remained.
2. That judgment began with David's baby and quickly shifted to his other children, leaving Amnon dead, Tamar defiled and broken, and Absalom in exile. From there, Yahweh directed His sword against David's kingship and kingdom, cutting him off from his throne and soon severing ten tribes from his dominion. David wouldn't live to see his kingdom rent in two, but the Lord revealed this intent to his son Solomon – *the son ordained to build His house*.
3. The Samuel narrative emphasizes the beginning of the dissolution of David's house and kingdom, *and yet it is careful to show that Yahweh had not rejected His covenant with David*.
 - a. Though driven from his throne, David was restored to it after Absalom's death. So the Samuel account records David's final words in which he celebrates Yahweh's covenant with him and rejoices in faith that He will fulfill it. * 2 Sam. 23:1-7
 - b. That poem of exultation and faith is then immediately reinforced by a curious and calamitous episode, namely David's census of his kingdom. * 2 Sam. 24

II. The End of David's Reign

A. David's Demand for a Census

1. The author of the book of Samuel chose to conclude his account of David's reign with this episode (cf. 1 Chron. 21), and there are at least three likely reasons for this:
 - a. First, it underscored the inconsistency of David's life and reign. David was a faithful man driven by a heart devoted to his God, and yet his faithfulness was tainted by instances of unfaithfulness that had catastrophic consequences. David, too, was a flawed human ruler whose kingship was marred by the "procedure of the king."
 - b. Beyond that, God ordained this episode of unfaithfulness to be the occasion for securing the site of the future temple. *David's faithful devotion motivated his desire to build Yahweh a permanent sanctuary in Jerusalem, and the Lord used this instance of David's unfaithfulness to see his desire realized.* * cf. 1 Chron. 22
 - c. Most of all, this episode provided profound insight into David's ultimate significance.
2. The Lord clearly found fault with David's census action, and yet it served His good purpose to establish His dwelling place on Mount Zion. *But what exactly was David's offense?*

The most common view is that his demand for a census showed a lack of trust in Yahweh for Israel's security, the assumption being that David's goal was to determine the number of Israelite men available for his army. *But if David was acting according to God's instruction to Moses in Exodus 30, it puts his offense in an entirely different light and answers the difficulties in this account (such as the Lord moving David to sin in order to punish Israel).*

- a. Viewed in terms of the Mosaic census law of Exodus 30, Yahweh was provoking David to take a census of Israel for the sake of their atonement – *an atonement that would provide resource for the sanctuary that was soon to be built by his son Solomon* (ref. 1 Chron. 22-29). For the Lord’s directive to Moses required each Israelite to pay half a shekel as a personal ransom (price of atonement), but one that would go toward the ministrations of the tabernacle/sanctuary that was soon to be constructed (Exod. 35-40). *The Mosaic census underscored the truth that covenantal purity was essential to Israel’s ongoing relationship with its God, which the sanctuary and priesthood would administer. Thus Yahweh’s warning that failure to pay the atoning price would bring a plague.*

Of course, David’s census can only be connected with Exodus 30 if the Mosaic census obligation was a *recurring* requirement and not just a one-time phenomenon. Numbers 31 seems to suggest this (ref. esp. 31:48-50), as does the fact that the census ransom was to serve the *ongoing ministrations* of the sanctuary as a *memorial* for the children of Israel (cf. Exod. 30:16; Num. 31:25-54). As well, readings from the Dead Sea Scrolls and Josephus (first century Jewish historian) also indicate that at least some Jews understood the Mosaic requirement of Exodus 30 to be an ongoing part of Israel’s life.

- b. David’s offense, then, wasn’t taking a census of his people, but failing to exact the half shekel ransom from them. The text of 2 Samuel states that the Lord moved David to take a census *because His anger burned against Israel*, which itself indicates that He intended it to make atonement for them. David apparently failed to have his men collect the required ransom, and this is what provoked Yahweh to pour out a plague on the people.
- c. This crucial omission on David’s part seems to be the matter of *satanic deception* (1 Chron. 21:1), and this is what he realized when the census was completed. *As Israel’s appointed shepherd, David was responsible for overseeing Israel’s relationship with their covenant Lord, and his “oversight” had left them alienated from Him with their sin unatoned. Rather than interceding for them as Yahweh directed, David had effectively abandoned Israel to endure His retribution.*

B. Yahweh’s Reaction to David’s Sin

1. When David recognized what he had done, he pled with the Lord to forgive him, and He responded by giving him three options in judgment (2 Sam. 24:10-15; 1 Chron. 21:7-14). By moving David to commission this census, Yahweh was affirming his role as shepherd-mediator for his people. *David had failed to secure their atonement as the Lord intended, and now He was requiring him to mediate the penalty they would receive in their unatoned state.*
2. David entrusted the penalty to the Lord and His mercy, and He sent a lethal plague among the Israelites that killed seventy thousand men (not to mention women and children).

C. David’s Intercession for Israel

1. When David saw what was happening, he pled with the Lord to withdraw His hand from the people and direct His punishment toward him as the one who had sinned.
2. At that point, Yahweh’s death angel was preparing to move against Jerusalem as he stood on Araunah’s (Ornan’s) threshing floor, and the Lord answered David’s plea by instructing him to intercede by building an altar there and offering sacrifices to Him. David did so, at last fulfilling his responsibility to facilitate atonement and forgiveness for his people.

Conclusions:

1. The Lord's anger against Israel lay behind David's census, and thus His offered punishments focused on the nation rather than David personally. *David begged Yahweh to allow him to bear the stroke on behalf of Israel, and He granted his plea by directing him to intercede for them through an appointed offering at the place of judgment.*

Remarkably, it was David's faithful priestly intercession following his calamitous failure that set the stage for the Jerusalem temple that was the object of his continual longing.

2. Yahweh had enacted the Mosaic census law to address Israel's covenant violation – collectively as a nation, but also *individually*. It called for a ransom from each individual Israelite, which payment was to be used to support His sanctuary and its ministration. *The Lord devised this means of personal and collective atonement to serve the system that He was putting in place to mediate His covenant relationship with His people.*
3. Now, and notably by means of this catastrophic circumstance, Yahweh had forever connected the Mosaic census – with its emphasis on atonement and the priestly ministration of His sanctuary – with David and His covenant with him.
 - a. The atonement provided by the half-shekel ransom was now associated with *David's priestly intercession* as Yahweh's chosen shepherd. * cf. 2 Sam. 24:17 with 7:1-8
 - b. So this atoning ministration by David was at the *Lord's direction* and at *great personal cost*. The census law provided atonement for Yahweh's covenant people through a prescribed personal payment of half a shekel; *here, their atonement came through a payment and priestly ministration rendered by David alone.*
 - c. Also, Yahweh prescribed the *place* of David's atoning intercession. He directed David to intercede for Israel at a place of *winnowing* (a threshing floor) where His angel stood poised to desolate Jerusalem, the city where David had installed His ark.

David believed – and the Lord affirmed – that Jerusalem was to be the site of His permanent sanctuary, and David's priestly offering atoned for and preserved the sacred city and its inhabitants, even as the ransom of Moses' census sustained the tabernacle.

4. Thus this episode of census, plague and intercession served as a fitting conclusion to David's reign, even as it helped illumine his personal significance in Yahweh's purposes and the significance of His covenant with him.
 - a. It did so first by further developing the *priestly dimension* of David's role as Yahweh's chosen king and shepherd of His people. * recall again 2 Sam. 6 and Psalm 110
 - b. It also proved out David's belief that Jerusalem was to be the “city of the great God” – the place where Israel and all mankind would meet with Him. * ref. 1 Kings 8
 - c. And more narrowly, it identified the specific site of the sanctuary Solomon would build per the covenant promise – a site associated with *winnowing*. Yahweh would henceforth be encountered and worshiped at this place, and there He would judge and winnow His people. *And one day, David's covenant son would fulfill his father's atoning ministration in that place and so winnow the sons of Israel and all mankind.* * Luke 3:15-17