

2 Sam. 24:1 - *Again the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel, and he incited David against them, saying, "Go, number Israel and Judah."* (ESV)

1 Chron. 21:1 - *Then Satan stood against Israel and incited David to number Israel.* (ESV)

The reading of 2 Samuel 24:1 in most translations seems to ascribe the temptation to God. Also, the parallel record in Chronicles contradicts the original narrative. How can these be explained?

E. W. Bullinger produced the greatest work on figures of speech in the Bible ever written. In the section on Ellipsis, he cited 2 Sam. 24:1 as an example of "Omission of the Nominative." This describes a sentence in which the subject performing the verb is omitted. Often, translators fill in the gap with what they believe is the implied nominative noun or pronoun. The ESV, for example, adds the pronoun "he," assuming God is the subject who incited David. Most English translations do this. Bullinger's notes on this example are as follows:

2 Sam. 24:1 – "And again the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel, and he moved David against them to say, Go, number Israel and Judah."

Here the nominative to the verb "moved" is wanting. Someone moved, and who that was we learn from 1 Chron. 21:1, from which it is clear that the word Satan or the Adversary is to be supplied, as is done in the margin: – And again the anger of the LORD was kindled against Israel, and [ the Adversary ] moved David against them to say, Go, number Israel and Judah."

This is how different translations fill the omission: "he" (ESV, ASV, NASB20, KJV, NKJV, RSV, NIV, CSB); "[an adversary]" (YLT, LSV); and "it" (NASB95; LSB).

The literal translations place the noun from Chronicles in brackets to show that it's not in the original text of Samuel. This is more accurate than adding a pronoun.

Another figure of speech is worthy of note. Bullinger, in his section on Idiomatic Usages of Verbs, wrote this:

4. Active verbs were used by the Hebrews to express, not the doing of the thing, but the *permission* of the thing which the agent is said to do.

Ex. 4:21 – “I will harden his heart (i.e., I will permit or suffer his heart to be hardened), that he shall not let the people go.” So in all the passages which speak of the hardening of Pharaoh’s heart. As is clear from the common use of the same *Idiom* in the following passages.

Many apologists propose this explanation: God allowed David to be tempted.

Another explanation is proposed in the NET footnotes.

2 Sam. 24:1 – The LORD’s anger again raged against Israel, and he incited David against them, saying, “Go count Israel and Judah.”\* (NET)

\* **sn** The parallel text in 1 Chr 21:1 says, “An adversary opposed Israel, inciting David to count how many warriors Israel had.” The Samuel version gives an underlying theological perspective, while the Chronicler simply describes what happened from a human perspective. The adversary in 1 Chr 21:1 is likely a human enemy, probably a nearby nation whose hostility against Israel pressured David into numbering the people so he could assess his military strength. See the note at 1 Chr 21:1.

The Hebrew word “Satan” simply means adversary. The context determines whether Satan or some other opponent is the subject. NET notes in 1 Chron. 21:1 that references to Satan usually include the definite article (“the satan”), while this verse lacks the definite article.

The census was not of the general population but to assess Israel’s military might. It was likely condemned because it exhibited weak faith, much like kings who trusted in foreign alliances and imported horses. Israel did not need numbers, because God had promised victory if they were faithful. (1 Sam. 17)