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# King David's War Crimes

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## **Abstract**

In building the Israelite state, G-d punished King David for war crimes on three occasions mentioned in II Samuel. Specifically, sending Uriah the Hittite to the front lines, his reluctance to kill Avshalom during his rebellion, and his defiance of divine authority in calling for a census of the Israelite people to see who was eligible for the army. This paper compares these war crimes of King David to the six war crimes listed in the Book of Amos, chapters 1 and 2. Then this paper compares the war crimes of King David to the two of King Saul, found in I Samuel; his impatience for Samuel at the war preparations, and his inability to exterminate Amalek. By making these comparisons, this paper will attempt to determine whether King David was properly punished for his war crimes, or if he was divinely "let off the hook" for being a great king.

*Keywords:* King David, War Crimes, Bible, (Book of) Samuel, (Book of) Amos

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King David was seen as the epitome of Jewish kings. A leader, both political and religious, who time and time again found favor in G-d's eyes despite acting out, King David also came from the true royal tribe of the Israelite people, Judah. King David's predecessor, King Saul, came from the house of Benjamin, and while a strong leader, was not of the true bloodline set to rule the Israelite people. Even though King David set the bar for kingship, he

committed war crimes as well, specifically found in 2 Samuel 11, 15, 18-19, and 24. In the battles he fought, King Saul committed war crimes that would lead to his eventual removal from the throne, which appears in 1 Samuel 13, 15, and 28. Finally, the crimes of both kings will be compared to the six listed in Amos 1-2. Based on the crimes and punishments in Amos, this essay will conclude by analyzing whether King David received adequate punishment for his crimes, compared to the punishments received by King Saul or those prophetically instituted in Amos.

The matter of Uriah the Hittite was recorded in 2 Samuel 11. King David, still the bloodthirsty warrior, had sent his general Yoav to “destroy the children of Ammon, and besiege Rabbah,” but when Yoav and his armies went to Rabbah, David “tarried at Jerusalem,” his thoughts very much away from battle.<sup>1</sup> While “tarrying,” David saw a woman bathing, and inquired after her. He was told that she was “Bathsheba, the daughter of Eliam, the wife of Uriah the Hittite,” and David requested she be brought to him.<sup>2</sup> He slept with her and sent her home, only to find out later that he impregnated her. David called for his general Yoav again, asking for Uriah to be sent to him. He arrived in the king’s court, where David wined and dined him for two days. David sent a rather hungover Uriah (with a note to Yoav), back into battle. Having received the note from David via Uriah, Yoav read it. It stated: “Send Uriah into the face of the greatest battle, and leave him there, so that he may be struck and killed.”<sup>3</sup> Yoav listened to the king and sent Uriah into the heat of battle, where he was killed. Yoav sent a messenger back to the king that he had listened, with added instruction in case David was angered at the circumstances of Uriah’s death. David was unmoved, saying, “Do not let this thing bother you, the sword eats one way or another; make your battle against the city stronger, overthrow it;

and encourage him,” reminding readers just how much of a jaded warrior King David was in his heyday.<sup>4</sup> When Batsheva was told of the death of her husband, she “made lamentation for her husband,” in mourning.<sup>5</sup> David, intending to marry the newly single woman, waited until her mourning period ended before he took her into the royal household. He officially married Batsheva and she bore his son. The last line of 2 Samuel 11 tells the reader how G-d felt about David’s actions in the matter of Uriah: “And the thing that David had done was displeasing in the eyes of the LORD.”<sup>6</sup>

The second error in warfare was in 2 Samuel 15, started by a coup staged by Avshalom, David’s son. Avshalom left Jerusalem with at least two hundred men of Israel, and gained additional support as he rode to Hebron. Rather than staying protected in Jerusalem, David decided to flee rather than fight, saying: “Arise, and let us flee; for else none of us shall escape Avshalom; make haste to leave, unless he quickly overtakes us, and smites the city with the edge of the sword,” even though the king’s camp numbered six hundred, outnumbering Avshalom’s.<sup>7</sup> David’s critical error here was that he simply did not wish to battle. David chose to flee and then spent several verses avoiding conflict, only to regain his crown at the end of the chapter in the most peaceful and non-King David-like manner. In 2 Samuel 18 and 19, readers see the capture and killing of Avshalom at the hands of General Yoav, followed by David’s subsequent, yet odd, mourning. David spends the first five verses of chapter 19 mourning, before being berated by Yoav for the next two verses.<sup>8</sup> In his beratement of the king, Yoav identified the second error in David’s warfare, the fact that King David still saw Avshalom as his son and heir rather than a traitor to the rightful King of Israel and Judah, and therefore a would-

be usurper. David spent the rest of chapter 19 reaffirming his position as king of Israel and Judah.

The third error David made was making a census of the people in 2 Samuel 24. This opened with, “And again, the anger of the LORD was kindled against the Israelites, and He moved King David against the people, saying, ‘Go number Israel and Judah,’”<sup>9</sup> just like He hardened Pharaoh's heart, He moved David to anger. In anger, King David called for a census of the people in the second verse, demanding Yoav and his army to go out and count the number of people in his kingdom. Yoav responded by telling the king, in verse three, that it was not a good idea to count his people out of (what he believed to be) delight. David paid no heed to Yoav's —or G-d's— warnings and forced Yoav to complete the census anyway. After “nine months and twenty days,” Yoav returned to David with the census of eight hundred thousand men in Israel and five hundred thousand men in Judah.<sup>10</sup> In verse 10, as soon as the census was completed, “David’s heart smote him,” and he repented immediately for his sin.<sup>11</sup> The next morning, the prophet Gad appeared at his door, telling David to choose one of three punishments: seven years of famine in the land, flee for three months while his enemies pursue him, or three days pestilence in the land. David chose “the hand of the LORD, for His mercies are great,”<sup>12</sup> and He killed seventy thousand men “from Dan even to Beer Sheva,” but stopped there, giving Gad new orders for David.<sup>13</sup> Gad told the king to set up an altar for sacrifice to G-d, on the “threshing floor of Araunah the Jebusite.”<sup>14</sup> David clearly bought the materials needed for the altar for fifty silver shekels and burned the sacrifice, quelling G-d's anger towards him for the unnecessary census.

While King David made several mistakes that ultimately left him with much blood on his hands, his mistakes were different from the mistakes of King Saul. Saul made at least three major mistakes, the first of which, a preemptive sacrifice without a priest, took place in 1 Samuel 13. After waiting seven days for Samuel to arrive, the impatient king made a sacrifice without the prophet. Upon Samuel's arrival, he berated Saul for his impatience, telling him for this foolishness, he would lose his kingdom.<sup>15</sup> His second failure, to wipe out the nation of Amalek, occurred in 1 Samuel 15. Despite being told to wipe out Amalek down to every animal,<sup>16</sup> Saul refused to kill "Agag [king of Amalek], and the best of the sheep, and of the oxen, even the young of the second birth, and the lambs, and all that was good,"<sup>17</sup> which led to Samuel telling Saul that G-d had rejected him as king.<sup>18</sup> His last failure, the use of the Witch of Endor to bring back the spirit of Samuel, occurred in 1 Samuel 28. Afraid of the Philistine host amassed to meet his, Saul sought out a necromancer to speak to the spirit of Samuel. The spirit of Samuel, infuriated at being awoken, reminded Saul that he was out of G-d's favor for not killing Amalek and that he would lose to the Philistines in the war to come.<sup>19</sup> While King David's errors were tied to warfare and his political kingdom, King Saul's were tied to his impatience and lack of regard for G-d's word. Arguably, the biggest difference was that Saul's mistakes were transgressions against G-d, while David's were against other men.

There are six war crimes listed in Amos 1-2, committed by cities and punished by G-d. The first war crime fell against Damascus, "because they have threshed Gilead with sledges of iron," and G-d punished them accordingly.<sup>20</sup> The second was against Gaza, "because they carried away captive a whole captivity, to deliver them up to Edom," for which G-d punished them.<sup>21</sup> The third crime was committed by Tyre, "because they delivered up a whole captivity

to Edom, and remembered not the brotherly covenant,” and they were punished by G-d as well.<sup>22</sup> The fourth war crime was against Edom, because they “did pursue [their] brother with the sword, and did cast off all pity, and [their] anger did tear perpetually, and [they] kept [their] wrath for ever,” and so they were punished.<sup>23</sup> The penultimate city was Ammon, “because they have ripped up the women with child of Gilead, that they might enlarge their border,” and were therefore punished. The last city to be punished for war crimes—and thus ending the list of them—was Moab, “because [they] burned the bones of the king of Edom into lime,” leaving the Moabite people unable to mourn him.<sup>24</sup>

Thus, based on these war crimes, it was possible to see if the crimes fit the respective king’s punishments. Punished for having too much blood on his hands, David was unable to build the Holy Temple in Jerusalem, his son King Solomon had the honor instead. As mentioned, David’s sins were against men, yet none were even remotely close to the war crimes ordained in Amos 1-2. Interestingly, the one who does commit the war crime was Avshalom, which, inferred from the fourth war crime against Edom, leads readers to believe that he was responsible for the death of his brother Amnon because of the rape of their sister, Tamar bat David.<sup>25</sup> While King Saul’s crimes were against G-d, and he was punished by losing his life and kingship, his crimes also do not fall under any of those listed in Amos 1-2. Therefore, while under modern rules of engagement some of the actions of David and Saul might be considered war crimes, under the divinely instated war crimes from the Book of Amos, chapters one and two, they have not committed any war crimes.

## Endnotes

1. 2 Samuel 11:1
2. 2 Samuel 11:3
3. 2 Samuel 11:15
4. 2 Samuel 11:25
5. 2 Samuel 11:26
6. 2 Samuel 11:27
7. 2 Samuel 15:14
8. 2 Samuel 19:6-8
9. 2 Samuel 24:1
10. 2 Samuel 24:8
11. 2 Samuel 24:10
12. 2 Samuel 24:13
13. 2 Samuel 24:14
14. 2 Samuel 24:18
15. 1 Samuel 13:11-14
16. 1 Samuel 15:3
17. 1 Samuel 15:9
18. 1 Samuel 15:23
19. 1 Samuel 28:18-19
20. Amos 1:3
21. Amos 1:6



22. Amos 1:9
23. Amos 1:11
24. Amos 2:1
25. 2 Samuel 13:14