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Light from Mari on David's Census

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2 Sam. 24 narrates how David ordered his trusted general Joab to take a census of Israel, and how the event was followed by the outbreak of an epidemic that wrought terrible havoc in the land. The story, which is closely related to the one in 21 : 1-14 and had once existed as an independent unit, has been assigned its present place by the redactors. That it was a source of surprise and scandal to believers in ancient Israel is borne out by the deliberate endeavour the biblical writers make to offer some sort of theological explanation. According to the tradition in 2 Sam. 24, Yahweh, being angry with his people, "incited¹ David against the Israelites by prompting him to number Israel and Judah" (v.1), but the parallel passage in I Chr. 21 : 1 puts the responsibility for the tragedy on Satan. As the epidemic broke out, the people of Israel felt that the census was a serious sin, insofar as it infringed upon the prerogatives of God, the supreme arbiter of their destiny : this is a theological explanation which cannot satisfy the modern investigator who views things from a different angle, and it is the purpose of this study to understand the account of David's census and the subsequent plague historically. Thanks to the data furnished by the letters from the royal archives of Mari, we are now in a position to rightly interpret the two events

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¹ In the original *wayyāšat*, "and he prompted," a finite form of the causative stem of *sāt*, "to incite, allure, instigate," when the nuance is "to instigate," it is taken for granted that it has to do with something improper, harmful, dangerous (1 Sam. 26:19; Jer. 48:3; Job 2:3 etc.). The translation cited in the text is from the *New American Bible*.

described in 2 Sam. 24 and show their relationship to each other.

Mari, modern Tell Hariri in south east Syria near the Iraqi border, is not even mentioned in the Old Testament, but according to the Sumerian King list² it was the seat of the tenth dynasty after the Flood. Excavations, which started in 1933, soon revealed a remarkable city whose history goes back to the period prior to 2500 B.C., and also unearthed the statues of some of the early rulers. One of them bears the name Lamgi-Mari³, but his reign cannot now be determined. Some time in the nineteenth century the city became one of the centres of the Amorites, and an Amorite named Yaggid-Lim founded a royal dynasty which ruled the realm till 1695, when it was annexed by Hammurabi of Babylon (1728-1686).⁴ Yaggid-Lim's

² For the text, translation and philological comments, of T. Jacobsen, *The Sumerian King List* (The Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago Assyriological Studies 11, 4th impr., Chicago, 1978) pp. 102f. col. V, lines 22-35). Only one name is legible, Ansud, whose bearer is said to have reigned 30 years. The history of Mari is surveyed by Kupper, *Les nomades*, passim; on this book, cf. I. J. Gelb, "The Early History of the West Semitic Peoples," *Journal of Cuneiform Studies* 15 (1961) pp. 27-47. Exhaustive discussions in *The Cambridge Ancient History* I/1-2, II/1-2 (3rd ed., Cambridge, 1971-75). Brief discussions also in Moortgat, in A. Scharf, A. Moortgat *Agypten und Vorderasien im Altertum* (Die Weltgeschichte in Einzeldarstellungen, Munich, 1950) pp. 285ff. H. Schokel, *Geschichte des Alten Vorderasien* (Handbuch der Orientalistik. I. Abt., II. Bd., 3. Absch., Leiden, 1957) pp. 85-105.

³ The name can also be read Lamki-Mari; for the short inscription of this ruler's statue, cf. E. Sollberger-J.-R. Kupper, *Inscriptions royales sumériennes et akkadiennes* (Les littératures anciennes du Proche-Orient, Paris, 1971) p. 88. Early Accadian sources attest the form *Lamgiyum* (also *Lamkiyum*); cf. Gelb, *Glossary of Old Akkadian* (Materials for the Assyrian Dictionary 3, repr., Chicago, 1973) p. 162. It is most likely that the name Lamech (Gen 5:18f. 23) is a modification of Lamki; this is admitted by W. F. Albright, *Yahweh and the Gods of Canaan. A Historical Analysis of Two Contrasting Faiths* (Doubleday Anchor Books, New York, 1969) p. 98.

⁴ The dates given here represent the low chronology of the ancient Orient, whose relations with the other systems proposed by specialists may thus be illustrated (the dates are those assigned to Hammurabi):

successor, Yahdun-Lim, was a contemporary of Shamshi-Addu of Assyria (1748-16), who managed to have the Mari ruler assassinated in a palace revolution, and then appointed as governor his own son Yasmakh-Addu, a teenager : in fact, the father reproaches him, saying that he is a boy and has no hair on his chin !⁵ Shamshi-Addu was succeeded by Ishme-Dagan (1716-1677) who proved to be a very able ruler.

After Shamshi-Addu's death Zimri-Lim, the heir to the throne of Mari who was living in exile, ousted Yasmakh-Addu and became king, ruling the country with great sagacity and ability for nearly a quarter of a century (1716-1695). His palace was quite famous, and the economic conditions were excellent, but Hammurabi (who used to address Zimri-Lim as brother) attacked Mari and defeated him. Zimri-Lim was allowed to continue as vassal of Babylon, but when, a year later, an insurrection broke out at Mari, the emperor struck again, this time razing the city to the ground.

The royal archives of Mari were found to contain some 20,000 cuneiform tablets, most of them are the letters received by Yasmakh-Addu and Zimri-Lim, and from these, we get a graphic idea of the political and economic conditions of the kingdom and its relations with the neighbouring principalities of Yamkhad-Aleppo, Carchemish, and so on.⁶ The documents

| | |
|-----------------------|------------|
| Ultra-high chronology | about 2000 |
| High chronology | 1848-1806 |
| Low chronology | 1728-1686 |
| Ultra-low chronology | 1704-1662 |

There are also variations of high chronology, which need not be discussed here.

⁵ The father writes : "You are little (*si-ih-ra-et*), you are not a man (*u-ul-et-le-et*), you have no hair on your chin (*u-ul shar-tum in-a li-ti-ka*)" (I, 79:49f. 108:6f. 118:7f.).

⁶ There is a very extensive bibliography on the Mari texts (which unfortunately remains inaccessible to biblical scholars in India). For a good orientation, cf. W. von Soden, "Das altbabylonische Briefarchiv von Mari," *Die Welt des Orients* 1 (1947/50) pp. 187-204. On the relationship between Mari and Israel, cf. A. Bea, "Die Texte von Mari und das Alte Testament,"

make mention of the different tribal groups of the realm, of whom the most prominent were the Haneans, the Yaminites (or, as they are at times called, the Benjamins), and the Shuteans.⁷

As Speiser has pointed out,⁸ Mari and the Bible share certain ties, and there is also much detailed agreement between them on several points, whereas there exist no such links between the Mari records and cuneiform sources from elsewhere in Mesopotamia. The agreements, when investigated carefully, will no doubt lead to a better understanding of the Hebrew Bible, but one must of course be on guard against drawing too hasty conclusions. It is well-known how fantastic theories were built up on the assumption that the Mari texts included the word *dawidu*, an assumption that was later on proved to be utterly mistaken: the word in question had to be read *dawdu* (*dabdu*), "defeat," and had nothing to do with the name David.⁹

Biblica 21 (1940) pp. 188-96. J. C. L. Gibson, "Life and Society at Mari and in Old Israel," *Transactions of the Glasgow Oriental Society* 18 (1958/60) pp. 15-29. G. E. Mendenhall, "Mari," *The Biblical Archaeologist Reader* II (New York, 1964) pp. 8-20. A. Parrot, "Les tablettes de Mari et l'Ancien Testament," *Revue d'Historie et de Philosophie Religieuse* 30 (1950) pp. 1-11; "Mari et l'Ancien Testament," *ibid.* 35 (1955) pp. 117-20. H. Schmoket, "Mari und Israel," *Theologische Literaturzeitung* 76 (1951) cols. 53-59. For the present study the author has made use of the series *Archives royales de Mari. Transcriptions et traductions* (Paris, 1950ff.). The texts are cited as follows: the Roman numeral refers to the volumes in the series and the Arabic figures to the serial number of the documents and the lines.

⁷ In cuneiform texts, *Shutū*, a name that is cognate with biblical *Shēt*, "Seth" (Gen 4:25f.). According to Albright, *op. cit.*, p. 47, "the sons of Seth" in Balaam's oracle (Num. 24:17) are the nomadic Shutu of the Mari age.

⁸ Cf. his "Census and Ritual Expiation," p. 18.

⁹ There occurs often in the Mari letters the clause *shanat X dawidam N idūku*, "the year X in which N killed dawidu" (at first translated "generalissimo"). The phrase *dawidam dāku* (whence *idūku*) alternates with *dawidam mahāṣu*, "to smite..." For references, cf. Dossin, "Les noms d'années et d'éponymes dans les 'Archives de Mari,'" *Studia Mariana*, pp. 52 (nos. 4f.) 55 (no. 6-9), 56 (no. 10); cf. too Kupper, *Les nomades*, pp. 60-62. The right

This study, however, has the much more modest aim to consider the connections between David's census and a rite known in the Mari texts as *tebibtu*.

The Mari texts speak of a certain ceremony or rite called *tebibtu*,¹⁰ literally, "purification;" this technical term is a nominal formation from the root *ebebu*.¹¹ "to be pure," whose intensive stem appears as *ubbubu*. Since this particular stem has, in the Semitic languages, the causative nuance,¹² there arises the meaning "to purify" (water, men, houses, etc.). Cuneiform sources use *ubbubu* with reference to the river-*ordeal*,¹³ the exculpation of shepherds when the god of

reading and interpretation have been established by H. Tadmor, "Historical Implications of the Correct Rendering of Accadian *dāku*," *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 17 (1958) pp. 129-41. Tadmor remarks: "The cuneiform sources offer only one parallel to Biblical *Dāwīd*, the personal name *Da-wi-da-nu-um*" (p. 130, n. 4).

¹⁰ On the word, cf. *The Chicago Assyriam Dictionary* (Chicago, 1956) V, pp. 6f. (*ebēbu*). J.-R. Kupper, "Le recensement dans les textes de Mari," *Studia Mariana* (Leiden, 1950) pp. 99-110 (pp. 100f.); *Les nomades en Mésopotamie au temps des rois de Mari* (Bibliothèque de la Faculté Philosophie et des Lettres de l'Université de Liège, fasc. 142, Paris, 1957) p. 27, n. 1. Von Soden, *op. cit.*, p. 196; *Akkadisches Handwörterbuch* (3 vols., Wiesbaden, 1965-81) I, pp. 180f; III, p. 1341.

¹¹ The word is a feminine noun, created with the help of the prefix *ta-* which is common Semitic; an explanation of the process involved here and of the actual vocalization cannot be attempted in a note. The curious reader may be referred to von Soden, *Grundriss der akkadischen Grammatik* (Analecta Orientalia 33/47, 2nd ed., Rome, 1969) § 56.27a (p. 68).

¹² As examples we may cite Accadian *damāqu*, "to be good" *dammiqu*, "to make good," *salāmu*, "to be friendly," *sullumu*, "to render friendly" (von Soden, *op. cit.*, § 88c (p. 1157), Hebrew' *āšhar*, "to go on," *ishshēr*, "to lead on," *shālēm*, "to be complete," *shallēm*, "to complete," etc.; cf. H. Bauer-P. Leander, *Historische Grammatik der hebräischen Sprache des Alten Testaments* (2nd ed., Hildesheim, 1962) § 38g-q (pp. 281-83).

¹³ This is the case with the Code of Hammurabi (V:48), *u-te-eb-bi-ba-ash-shu*, "(if the river-god) has purified him," i.e., declared him innocent. We may also cite from the poem *Ludlul bēl nēmaqi* ("I will praise the lord of wisdom") the following clause: *a-na ub-bu-bi-ka ish-pu-ra-an-ni* (III:26), "he has sent me to purify you."

pestilence has visited their flock or the lion has made a kill, ¹⁴ and the oath in the presence of the god Shamash, the great judge. Finally, the verb has also purely secular meanings, for it occurs in contexts where there is question of shearing sheep, agricultural activities, and the like. ¹⁵

The unique thing about *te'ibtu* is that it is closely bound up with conscription, but despite the military objective, it had also a religious aspect. Kupper, who had once considered *tebibtu* as a purely military affair, later on, influenced by etymology attributed to it a predominantly religious significance. ¹⁶ A similar position is represented by Gadd as well, ¹⁷ but this seems unlikely, since the passages dealing with the rite have a military background, which is very well highlighted by the synonyms occurring in the sources.

The synonyms attested by the texts are *paqādu* and *shaṭāru*, "to recruit, conduct conscription, raise up an army, mobilize," etc., ¹⁸ which have as their object *šābu*, "army." ¹⁹ At times *šābam shaṭāru* alternates with *šābam paqādu* (III, 21 : 10f = 19 : 7); the following injunction is worthy of special note: "Let the troops (*šābam*)... be recorded (*lu shaṭer* on a tablet by

¹⁴ This provision too occurs in the Code of Hammurabi (XLV:79): *ma-har-DINGIR (šlim) u-ub-ba-am-ma*, "(the shepherd) shall purify himself before the god" (by uttering the oath); for more details, cf. n. 33 below.

¹⁵ C.-F. Jean, "Lettres de Mari IV transcrites et traduites," *Revue d'Assyriologie* 42 (1948) p. 74 (lines 11-17).

¹⁶ Cf. *Les nomades*, pp. 23f.

¹⁷ C. J. Gadd, "Tablets from Chagar Bazar and Tell Brak," *Iraq* 4 (1940) pp. 22-66 (pp. 26f.).

¹⁸ The first verb is common Semitic; cf. von Soden, *Akkadisches Handwörterbuch* II, pp. 824-26 (on the military sense, cf. p. 825b); the second (dialectal variant *saṭāru*), found also in Arabic, Old South Arabian and Hebrew, literally means "to write, write down" (the names of those conscripted); cf. von Soden, *op. cit.* III, pp. 1203f.

¹⁹ On the army in Mari, cf. Jean, "L'armée du royaume de Mari," *Revue d'Assyriologie* 42 (1948) pp. 135-46 (on census, cf. pp. 140f.).

name" (I, 42 : 22-24). As we shall subsequently have occasion to remark, the equivalents of these two verbs in Hebrew do denote military conscription. Let us now see what the texts have to say about *tebibtu*.

Ishme-Dagan (1716-1677) writes to Yasmakh-Addu, his brother who is the governor of Mari, that he has conducted the *tebibtu* rite everywhere and asks the latter too to do the same in his territory (I, 29 : 20f. ; cf. II, 1:24f.) ; Kibri-Dagan, in compliance with Zimri-Lim's orders, enlists men and sends the king two copies of the document of enlistment (III,19:5-21 ; cf. I,89:9f. . The function takes place after the arrival of the *sugagu* (III, 21. - 5), and, interestingly enough, on one occasion Yasmakh-Addu was himself present for the ceremony with a large contingent of Haneans ²⁰ We also know that military leaders too were present,²¹ so that the rite's connection with recruitment becomes undeniable.

Furthermore, according to the documents, *tebibtu* took place all over the land. The people of Qirdakhat are purified at Chagar Bazar,²² and the Haneans of Nakhur and the regions round about are also purified (V. 51 : 9-19). The texts single out as centres of *tebibtu* Ekallatum, Yakhrura, Razma in the area of Yamutbal (II, 18 : 4-8), Mari, Qattunna (I, 82 : 9-15), Gashshim, Shunem (II, 1 ; 24-28), Khashum in Membiaa (I, 37 ; 32-41), and Yadmaras (V, 51 . We are also told

²⁰ Cf. Gadd, *op. cit.*, p. 52 (no. 957). On the present document the total of the men present is not indicated, but from tablet no. 926 it is clear that 3 250 Haneans were involved in the purification ; cf. Kupper, *Les nomades*, p. 6, n.2. The word *sugagu*, which is part of the special vocabulary of the Mari letters, means "head of village/tribe, sheikh," and most of the time the plural form is used by the scribes. The exact sense is seen, for example, in *awil Hana su-ga-gu-um* (X, 93:3'), "the Sheikh of the Haneans." The term figures too as a personal name. For details, cf. Kupper, *op. cit.*, pp. 16f. (full references).

²¹ Thus Ishar-Lim and Sin-tiri who supervised the purification of the men of Qirdakhat were high military officials mentioned in the Mari letters (XV, pp. 149, 155) ; cf. Kupper, *op. cit.*, pp. 26, n. 2.

²² The tablets allude to it several times (cf. nos. 926, 950, 971, 972, 990 and 996 ; cf. too 921, 924, 925, 927, 935, 945, 953, 957, and 962).

that at times the men to be purified were brought to some principal centre ; thus Shashi Addu asks his son to bring with him the men of Abdu-Amim to Mari where *tebibtu* would take place)1, 36 : 23-29), and the men of Qirdakhat were purified not in their own town but in Chagar Bazar, a centre of great strategic importance.²³

The documents are not quite clear as to how often and at what intervals the function was to take place but we may presume that it had been conducted rather frequently, for Shashi-Addu remarks that the men of Abdu-Amim had not been purified for a long time, i.e., three years (I, 36 : 26-29). In another letter he reproaches his son, who was planning to purify his men before the commencement of a new campaign, for having been so late in the performance of the rite, and recommends that he should see to their purification on his return (I, 42 - 15-20) From these bits of information, we may conclude that the rite was not anything extraordinary or unusual but was something that recurred frequently, to wit, at least once in three years. Moreover, from the fact that the leaders of the land were eager about conducting it regularly we can also draw the inference that it was a custom of long standing. When there was an urgent military operation to be undertaken, the ceremony could be held as a simple matter of course ; thus Yasmakh-Addu thinks of purifying the Benjaminites²⁴ before launching an expedition (1, 5 : 5-21), and a con-

²³ Being situated on the routes linking North Syria with the Tigris region and the Mardin mountains, and also with the valley of the Khabur and the Euphrates, it occupied a key position (Kupper, *op. cit.*, p. 5)

²⁴ A few words are in place about this Mari group. Reference is often made to DUMU. MESH *Ya-mi-in/na/ni*, where DUMU is the Sumerogram for "son," and MESH the sign of the plural, and since the Accadian equivalent of the Sumerian phrase is *marû*, we will have to read *marû Yamîna/i*, "sons of the south," and not *bamû Yamîna/i*. Since DUMU. MESH = *marû* is not part of the name, it would be better to say "Yaminites"; details, in Kupper, *op. cit.*, passim ; cf. too D. K. Schunck, *Benjamin. Untersuchungen zur Entstehung und Geschichte eines israelitischen Stammes* (Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft 86, Berlin, 1963).

tingent of Haneans serves as guards of the palace of Shamshi-Addu only after having undergone purification (II, 1 : 10-12). The rulers could, therefore, carry out the ceremony of purification whenever it was absolutely necessary.

As regards the actual duration of the function, the documents are not clear ; according to the Chagar Bazar tablets, the purification of the men of Qirdakhat lasted six days,²⁵ while that of the Haneans covered two weeks.²⁶ There is no doubt that these two purifications were extraordinary, and as such their duration is quite understandable, but when there was question only of the customary and less solemn ones at frequent intervals, such a long duration need not be postulated.

Let us now try to see what were the constitutive element of a *tebibtu*. Catalogues had to be prepared *ālīsham* (III, 19 : 13, 21 : 13), "city by city," *shumisham* (II, 42:9.23), "name by name," and *ana remānimma* (III, 19:23f), "each individually, separately."²⁷ The presence of the rulers was required for the function, and military officials also had to be at the place, but these details need not be an indication of the religious character of the rite. Among the elements that give the ceremony a religious tone, mention should be made of a ritual bath,²⁸ which is more than amply vouched for by the letter of Shamshi-Addu, asking Yasmakh-Addu to see that the candidates betake themselves to Gashshim and Shunem where there was an abundant supply of water (I, 10 rev. :9-15. II, 1:24-28).

Mari was the scene of a *tēbibtu*, and the city's proximity to the river Euphrates where the ritual washing of a large group of

²⁵ Cf. the references in n. 21.

²⁶ Kupper, *op. cit.*, p. 25. n. 1.

²⁷ The first two words are adverbs created from *ālu*, "city," and *shumu* (=Hebrew *shēm*), "name," *ramānu* is a word whose original significance is not clear, but which in actual practice serves as the reflexive pronoun ; cf. von Soden, *Grundriss der akkadischen Grammatik*, § 43a (p. 45, where examples are given).

²⁸ Kupper, *op. cit.*, p. 24, n. 2 (communication from Prof. Oppenheim on the basis of II, 1:24-28).

men was quite an easy matter might have inspired its choice (I, 82:9-15).

A further item of *iēbibtu* was the ritual meal which was, in all likelihood, preceded by a sacrifice to the gods.²⁹ The Chagar Bazar tablets speak of a *naptanu* in connection with the purification of the men of Qirdakhat,³⁰ and another term denoting the grant of food to the candidates is *sattakhu*.³¹ Both these terms can, of course, be interpreted as simple rations granted to the men recruited for military service, but from the presence of concurrence of the cultic personnel³² it follows that the issuing of food had a sacred character. In any case, there is nothing unusual in a sacred meal after a ritual bath.

The third item was the taking of a solemn oath, obviously, of allegiance to the ruler, with the invocation of the gods of the land and even of the ruler's name. The oath was of paramount importance since it served to secure for the king the fidelity of the men enrolled in the army, and hence we find Kibri-Dagan carefully noting down in his letter to Zimri-Lim that he made the recruits swear by Dagan, Itur-Mer and the king himself: *ni-ish (il) Da-gan (il) Itur-Mer u be-ia u-ta-am-mi-shu-nu-ti-ma* (III, 19:15-17), "I made them swear the oath by Dagan, Itur-

²⁹ This is suggested by a letter of Shamshi-Addu (I, 10 rev.:9-15) in which he tells his son Yasmakh-Abbu that he returned on a propitious day from Nineveh to Shubat-Enlil, his capital, and then adds that he will take part in *ri-im-ta-am* (accusative of *rimbu*), "bath, ritual washing," offer sacrifices to the gods and lead the troops (*ša-bu-um*, accusative of *šābu* Hebrew *šābā'*) the next day. The monarch's presence at the place where the troops are taking their bath would have been something most unusual had it not been for the fact that it is coupled with the offering of sacrifices and the launching of a military expedition.

³⁰ This Accadian term, which is peculiar to the Mari letters, means "meal, meal time," and is formed from the base *patānu*, "to eat," cf. von Soden, *Akkadisches Handwörterbuch* II, pp. 741f., 847.

³¹ Kupper, *op. cit.*, p. 24.

³² These men bear the titles *shu-gu-nu-u* "of the gods" and *sa-ak-ku sha-qu-ru* "who go with the gods," titles whose meaning is not clear (Kupper, *op. cit.*, p. 24).

Mer and my lord."³³ In the same letter, the writer observes that he has written down the names of the recruits, but this need not have about it a religious significance, especially since the rulers of Mari were particular about keeping records.³⁴

After *tēbibtu*, there took place a redistribution of land. Shamshi-Addu asks Yasmakh-Addu to allow the *status quo* of the Haneans living on the banks of the Euphrates to continue unchanged, and they can retain the lands they have so far been holding (I. 6 : 41-43). In the same letter, the king asks his son not to cause any discrimination, but rather to let everyone hold his land (lines 33-39). We do not know whether this land

³³ The word for oath in Accadian is *nēshu* (also *neshu*), literally, "life" (of the verb *nēshu*, "to live"), and when used with the verb *tummū*, there arises the special sense "to swear" (by the life of...). The last word in the cuneiform text is a finite form of *tummū* which is itself the intensive stem of *tamū* from *tamā'u*, "to swear," cf. von Soden, *op. cit.*, III, pp. 181ff. The formula of oath is uttered "à la fois par les dieux et par le roi, indice du caractère sacré qui revêtait la personne du souverain" (Kupper, *Le reconsement*, p. 103). The custom of swearing by the person of the king was common in Mari (VIII, pp. 172-76), and the violation of the oath meant the crime of *lèse-majesté* (VIII, p. 175), a sacrilege against him (Kupper, *op. cit.*, p. 103, n. 10). The usage here must be taken in conjunction with what is known as the eating of the king's *asakku* (II, 13-39) or *ikkibu*, "taboo, interdict" (VIII, pp. 166-69, 172f; 177; cf. too von Soden, *op. cit.* I, pp. 73, 368f.), whose violation was an offence against the monarch's own person. How are we to understand this oath? It must, in all likelihood, have been a conditional, imprecatory oath, in which the invocation of gods was secondary; the *nēshu* by the monarch's person implied that if in case the oath was violated, the curse connected with it would befall the king, that he would become the object of the gods' wrath, which he would never tolerate. The awareness of this prevented the subjects from going counter to the oath, and this was indeed a shrewd way to keep the soldiers faithful to the ruler!

³⁴ In connection with the writing of the names of the recruits on tablets, E. A. Speiser, "Census and Ritual Expiation in Mari and Israel," *Bulletin of the American School of Oriental Research* 149 (1958) pp. 17-25 (p. 24), invokes the testimony of the Epic of Gilgamesh (VII : iv : 49-52. X : vi : 36-39), where there is question of a doom-book or fate-book. Such considerations, however, do not seem to be at work in Mari.

distribution had anything to do with the seasonal wandering of the tribes, nor do we know for certain whether it was a necessary feature of major purifications or of the ordinary ones as well. However, it could also be omitted or postponed if and when the rulers thought it fit for some reason or other.

The military implication of *tēbibtu* cannot be overlooked, but it had too a religious import, as is clear from our discussions. According to a letter, the rite served to bring peace to the land (IV,57:1 lf.), and if we may say so, it made atonement for the sins of the people and thus restored to them the favour of the gods! It cannot be denied with certainty that this emphasis on appeasement and pacification was a trick of the rulers to coerce the nomadic and semi-nomadic tribes to join the army,³⁵ Perhaps the custom of counting dates on the basis of *tēbibtu* may also point to the rite's religious significance, or at least to the importance attached to it by rulers and other interested parties. The Chagar Bazar tablets mention the function as the beginning of the eponymate³⁶ of Abad-Bani in the month of Ayar,³⁷ under Shamshi-Addu the event is again recalled,³⁸ and during the reign of Zimri-Lim the different happenings are dated with an appeal to the year in which he purified the land.³⁹ To be

³⁵ This point is emphasized by Speiser, *op. cit.*, pp. 24f.

³⁶ Biblical scholars are familiar with the term "eponym" and "eponymous hero" (ancestor), and Assyriologists use "eponym" as the equivalent of the Accadian *limmu*, "eponymate lists," i.e., chronological, annalistic accounts of military expeditions and other notable events drawn up by the scribes serving at the Assyrian chancellory. The emperor, on ascending the throne, presided over the celebration of the New Year Festival in the capital, which meant that he was acting as the *limmu* or eponym official in the first full year of his reign, and ever after this the feast would be presided over by the higher officials, and documents would be dated with reference to the *limmu* year of these persons. "Eponymate," therefore, means the same thing as *limmu*.

³⁷ O. Dossin, "Les noms d'année d'éponymes dans les 'Archives de Mari,'" *Studia Mariana*, p. 54.

³⁸ Gadd, *op. cit.*, p. 48 (no. 926).

³⁹ Dossin, *op. cit.*, p. 58.

added to these data is usage of business documents which also accept *tebibtu* as the starting point for their calculations ⁴⁰

There is another custom to be noted here: the rulers of Mari were wont to compel under pain of death the recalcitrant and the unwilling to assemble for conscription ; thus an officer who had called the Haneans twice for conscription but in vain, asks Zimri-Lim permission to cut off the head of a criminal and have it circulated among the cities ⁴¹ This was undoubtedly a stern measure, and rather extraordinary, a measure that in a concrete fashion reminded all of the fate in store for them if they failed to obey the summons for census, but with only the data at present available, we cannot be fully sure that this method was often employed by the rulers of Mari. ⁴²

II

Coming now to the Old Testament it must be confessed that we do not find in it any allusion to a rite comparable to the one at Mari and Chagar Bazar, so that we cannot simply equate the Israelite census with the Mari conscription techniques. 2 Sam. 24 too embodies nothing that is a genuine parallel to the custom at Mari. Does this mean that there is no agreement between the Old Testament and the sources analysed in the previous section ?

The fact is that there is a remarkable agreement between the Hebrew and cuneiform texts with regard to the vocabulary in the description of census/conscription. The Mari letters, as has

⁴⁰ Dossin, *op. cit.*, p. 54.

⁴¹ This document (II. 48) is unique in every respect, without any parallel in cuneiform literature, but it has two excellent parallels in Jdg. 19:29f. and I Sam. 11:7 ; discussions in G. Wallis, 'Eine Parallel zu Richter 19:29ff. und 1 Sam 11:5ff. aus dem Briefarchiv von Mari,' *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 64 (1952) pp. 57-61.

⁴² We may also adduce here the custom of killing the ass at the time of solemn agreements, to which reference is made by an official in his letter to Zimri-Lim (II, 37:6-14). True, in this letter there is no allusion at all to *tebibtu* or anything connected with it, but there is the distinct possibility that the killing of the ass took place at the time of major purifications.

already been pointed out, use as synonyms of *ubbubu* the verbs *paqādu* and *shaṭāru*, verbs which are also to be found in the Hebrew Bible in contexts where there is question of mustering an army. In the Old Testament *pāqad*, “to enroll” (cf. below) interchanges with the phrase *nāsā, rō’sh* (Num. 1:2; 26:2), literally “to lift up the head,” which, in Accadian texts, appears as *rēsha nashū*. With the help of these specialized expressions we can draw up an impressive table of correspondences.⁴³

- | | | |
|------------------------|---|---------------------------------------|
| (1) <i>nāsā’ rō’sh</i> | : | <i>rēsha nashū</i> (= <i>ubbubu</i>) |
| (2) <i>pāqad</i> | : | <i>paqādu</i> = <i>ubbubu</i> |
| (3) <i>shātar</i> | : | <i>shaṭāru</i> (= <i>ubbubu</i>) |

There is in Hebrew the verb *kāpar*, “to expiate, atone,” which too should be added to the list :

kāpar : *ubbubu*

This close parallelism, which can by no means be the result of chance or something accidental, deserves to be investigated in depth.

The phrase *nāsā rō’sh* “to take the sum, count, number,” or, what is still better, “to count (the) heads”, cannot be separated from *nāsā’ mispār* (Num. 3:40), “to take the number, count,”⁴⁴ and in the few passages in which the combination occurs, the sense is undoubtedly military: Ex. 30:12, which is part of a section dealing with the census of the Israelites (Ex. 30:11-16),⁴⁵ embodies the clause, *tiśśā’ et-rō’ sh*, “When you count the heads of the children of Israel” The expression in Num. 1:2 and 26:2 is no less significant: *śe’ ū’ et-rō’ sh*, “Count the

⁴³ Speiser, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

⁴⁴ The substantive *mispār* (153 times), “number” (also “narrative, tale”) is a *nomen instrumenti* formed with help of the prefix *ma-mi-* from *sāpar* (107 times), “to count,” and, in the intensive stem “to recount, relate,” cf. *sāper* (185 times), “missive, directive, writing, book.” On the text, cf. M. Noth, *Numbers* (The Old Testament Library, London, 1968) pp. 40f. The verb *nāsā’* (655 times), which has the literal meaning “to lift up, carry, take,” corresponds to Accadian *nashū*.

⁴⁵ Noth, *Exodus* (The Old Testament Library, London, 1962), pp. 235f.

heads of the whole assembly of the children of Israel ⁴⁶ As for the Accadian equivalent *rêsha nashû*, with the order of words inversed, three meanings are suggested by lexicographers: ⁴⁷ (a) "to cite, summon;" (b) "to examine, control;" (c) "to start." All these senses can, however, be reduced to the basic one of "to take into account, take notice of," and, in military contexts, "to count" (in view of conscription).

Authorities are fully agreed upon the military sense of the verb *pāqad*, and in census passages it must be rendered "to enroll" (and hence also "to muster"); compare the idiomatic expression *beshēmôt tipqēdû*, "you shall record by name" (Num. 4:32);⁴⁸ here belongs too the phrase *'ôbēr 'al-happeqûdîm* (Ex. 30:13f.), "he who is entered among the enrolled."⁴⁹ In Ex. 30:12, the finite form *tiššā'* is followed by the passive participle plural construct *peqûdêhem* "their enrolled/mustered ones," and in the same text the infinitive construct *bipqôd*, "in enrolling/mustering" (them) occurs twice.⁵⁰ The two ensuing verses contain the simple plural of the passive participle *peqûdîm*, "those enrolled/mustered, the enrolled/mustered ones;" Num. 1:3 attests, as parallel to the imperative form *eš' ū*

⁴⁶ Mendenhall, *The Census Lists of Numbers 1 and 26*, "The Journal of Biblical Literature" 77 (1958) pp. 52-66. The verb *tiššā'* is a finite form of *nāšā'* and *še'û* the imperative plural of the same.

⁴⁷ Speiser, "Census and Ritual Expiation," p. 23.

⁴⁸ Actually the text refers to the various accessories of the tent, but the context is military, concerned with the census; cf. Neth, *Numbers*, p. 43. In the Hebrew phrase cited in the text the second word is the finite form of *pāqad* (303 times), "to attend to, visit, muster" (=Accadian *paqādu*), and the first the plural of *shēm* (=Accadian *shumû*), "name," preceded by the preposition *be-*, "in."

⁴⁹ The form *happeqûdîm* consists of the definite article *ha-* and the passive participle plural of *pāqad*.

⁵⁰ The Hebrew language has two infinitives, absolute, which stands by itself, and construct, which is related to some noun, preposition or pronominal suffix.

(v 2), the finite form *tipqedû*, “you shall enroll/muster,” and the people who are to be included in this military census are defined by the clause *kol-yôšē’ šābā’*, “everyone who is able to go for war.”⁵¹

Ex. 30:11-16 confronts us with something unusual: the writer uses the expression *lekappēr* (cf. vv. 15f), the infinitive construct of the intensive stem of the root *kāpar*⁵² preceded by the preposition *le*, and hence signifying, “to atone, expiate.” There is also in our passage the plural *kippûrîm* (v.16), “atonement.”⁵³ We do not normally expect in a military context the use of a verb that has to do with a cultic rite, and if at all the writers employ it, they must have had some special reason; what it is, we shall see in the next part. and for the time being suffice it to note that the intensive stem *kipper* is synonymous with *ubbubu*.

The last term we have to analyse is *shātar*, “to write,” whose finite forms are never employed in the OT; instead there is always the use of the active participle *shôṭēr* (singular), *shôṭerîm* (plural) *shôṭerē* (plural construct),⁵⁴ and the meaning “scribe, officer, overseer,” is unmistakable, inasmuch as it has once as parallel *sôpēr* (2 Chr. 26:11, “scribens.”) The task-masters the Egyptians had appointed over the Israelites are called *shôṭerîm* (Ex. 5:6. 10.14), but what is still more significant, the term appears as designation of a special category

⁵¹ The last word, *šābā’* (485 times), “army, war, warfare,” corresponds to Accadian *šabu*; the OT uses too the verb *šābā’*, “to wage war”.

⁵² The simple stem *kāpar* (= Accadian *kaṣāru*) occurs just once (Gen. 6:14) with the meaning “to cover, smear,” the stem that is most often used is the intensive one; statistics, with discussions on etymology, in L. Koehler. W. Baumgartner, *Lexicon in Veteris Testamenti Libros* (Leiden, 1953) pp. 451f.

⁵³ The Hebrew form is an abstract plural, used just eight times in the Hebrew Bible (Ex 30:10.16. 29:36. Lev 23:27f. 25:9. Num. 5:8).

⁵⁴ J. van der Ploeg. “Les *shoterim* d’Israel,” *Oudtestamentische Studiën* 10(1954) pp. 185-95. S. R. Driver, *Deuteronomy* (The International Critical Commentary, repr., Edinburgh, 1951) pp. 17f.

of officials in passages dealing with military matters : Deut. 1:15 mentions the *shōṭerīm* along with “officials over thousands, officials over hundreds, officials over fifty, officials over ten.” Elsewhere it is ordained that when soldiers are about to engage in battle, these persons should ask the newly-wed to return home (Deut. 20:5).⁵⁵ In conclusion, there is perfect agreement, as regards military vocabulary, between the OT and the Mari letters, so that it is perfectly legitimate to draw the conclusion that the census in ancient Israel was above all a military affair.

III

There is enough evidence of vocabulary to show that the census ordered by David (2 Sam. 24) had conscription in view. The king, as he issues the command to Joab, makes use of the imperative plural of the technical verb *pāqad*: “Tour all the tribes...and *piqdū* (register) the people that I may know the *mispār* (number) of the people” (v.2), namely of the people fit for military service. The narrative comes to a close with the statement that Joab made known to his lord *mispār mipqad-hā-ām*, “the number of the muster of the people” (v.9). The noun form here, *mipqād*, as a *nomen actionis* “is formed with the help of the prefix *ma > mi*—, and hence what it means is “the activity of registering” (mustering) the people of Israel and Judah in view of military service. From the historical point of view David’s eagerness to know the statistics of the number of people fit to bear arms in the empire he had created with much labour and pain, is something most natural,⁵⁶ and if Joab objected to the idea, it was only because he felt that the king was going

⁵⁵ G. von Rad, *Deuteronomy* (The Old Testament Library, London, 1966), pp. 131f.

⁵⁶ Though it is impossible to say when exactly the census took place, we may presume that it was ordered only after he had consolidated his power and had crushed his foes round about, it is best seen as part of the administrative reorganization of the empire; on this, cf. J. Bright, *A History of Israel* (Philadelphia, 1959) pp. 184f.

counter to Yahweh's will, that he was infringing upon the Lord's sovereignty over his people.

To understand the outbreak of pestilence⁵⁷ at the time of census, we have to bear in mind that people used to be brought together to important centres in the land for the purpose of registration. We have seen that according to the Mari documents, *tebibtu* took place at well-known centres mentioned by name. The account of David's census, concerned as it is primarily with the element of sin in the king's command, remains quite brief, mentioning only the geographical areas covered by Joab and his men. But we can be sure that they camped at the various townships in these regions and accomplished the work of registration. People scattered all over an administrative area had to betake themselves to their ancestral home (Lk. 2:3f.), to be numbered there and since registration would last for a couple of days at a time, they had to stay in the locality until it was all over. Imagine how easily epidemics could break out when crowds are huddled together in one place without sanitary facilities! This is just what happened in the age of David!⁵⁸

The ancients would naturally attribute the calamity to the anger of God, and it was his faith in this common persuasion that prompted Joab to raise a protest when he became cognizant of David's plan. To ward off divine displeasure, the persons conducting the census as well as those being numbered took great pains to make atonement, and this custom that goes back to

⁵⁷ In the original *deber* (49 times), "bubonic plague, pestilence, cattle plague, murraine"; the word which has been regarded as the cognate of the Arabic *dabra*, "running sore" (of mounts), is part of Jeremiah's favourite vocabulary (references in Koehler-Baumgartner, *op. cit.*, p. 202a). In Hab. 3:5, it has as its parallel *reshep*, which is the name of the West Semitic god of pestilence; cf. D. Conrad, "Der Gott Reschef," *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 83 (1971) pp. 157-83.

⁵⁸ So far exegetes have not been able to explain the connection between the census and the plague; compare, for example, the commentary on the story by E. Dhorme, one of the foremost Assyriologists of the first half of the present century, in *La Bible. L'Ancien Testament* (Bibliothèque de la Pélade, Paris, 1957-59) I, pp. 1018ff.

hoary antiquity came to be incorporated into Israel's sacred law; hence the injunction in Ex 30:16 to have money collected and *kippûrîm* made on behalf of the people.⁵⁹ If the Mari rite of *tèbibtu* had religious overtones, it is because the persons concerned were afraid of the ire of the gods, manifested particularly through epidemics.

The discussions so far have been meant to clarify, on the one hand, the military aspect of the census ordered by David and, on the other, the real reason for the tragedy that ensued. The explanation we now have in 2 Sam. 24 of the plague is a late elaboration inspired by several theological considerations. God's proposing to prompt David to undertake the census was motivated by his desire to punish Israel for her sinfulness (v.1) ; his asking David to choose one of the three punishments he had in mind, as well as the remark that the epidemic lasted three days (vv. 12-15) are again another theological theme which, it would seem, was suggested by the popular tradition behind the penitential liturgy in Hos. 6:2. ;⁶⁰ the Israelites taking part in it make confession saying.

After two days he will revive us ;
on the third day he will raise us up...

It has been argued that what we have here is the remnant of an old resurrection myth, but be that as it may, the people who utter these words are hoping that God will soon come to their rescue. Perhaps some popular proverb (compare Prov. 30:15-31) may also have given rise to the idea here. In any case the numeral three in God's words to David points to the element of mercy in the punishment suggested ; even though David deserved death for infringing upon divine rights, he is treated with mildness.

⁵⁹ "Money" ; *kesep* ; the idea of atonement money seems to be wholly alien to the Mari texts.

⁶⁰ H. W. Wolf, *Hosae* (Biblicher Kommentar 14/1, Neukirchen, 1961 pp. 149-51.

The motif of the Lord's repentance (v,16)⁶¹ occurs in the story of the Flood which records how God decided not to ruin the earth any more (Gen. 8:21).⁶² The person of Yahweh's angel who was smiting the people (vv. 16f.), also has its antecedents in the traditions concerning the last of the plague that afflicted Egypt (Ex. 11:4f. 29).⁶³ These details prove beyond doubt that the events of the epidemic subsequent to David's census was the object of intense theological reflection in ancient Israel.

Occurrence of pestilences whenever a census for military service took place had transformed the whole thing into an awful taboo, whose violation would immediately call forth punishment from on high. As far as the people of Israel were concerned, the epidemic meant that the census infringed upon Yahweh's sovereignty and supremacy. It is Yahweh who makes his people become numerous like the stars in the sky and sand on the seashore, and no mortal should, for personal aggrandisement, or because of ambition, dare to interfere with his lordship over his people. This is the way in which the authors of 2 Sam. 24 interpreted the events of the census and the epidemic.

⁶¹ The verb denoting this reaction of God belongs to the reflexive stem of the root *nāḥam*, a stem which is used most of the time with reference to God. Exhaustive survey of the root in H. van Dyke Parunak, "A Semantic Survey of *NHM*", *Biblica* 56 (1975) pp. 512-92.

⁶² We wish to point out for the sake of the non-Hebraist that Gen. 8:21 does not use the root *nāḥam*, though the idea is contained in the verse.

⁶³ In the passages from Exodus, the slaughter of the first-born is accomplished by Yahweh himself, and the verb describing this activity of his is *hāḥāh*, a finite form of the causative stem of *nāḥāh* (501 times; causative stem 482 times), "to strike, smite." According to 2 Sam. 24:17, David saw the angel who was functioning as *maḥāh*, "percentiens" (active-participle of the causative stem).