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Census as Ritual Risk: From Mari tēbibtum to Biblical kipper

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Abstract

This article examines why census-taking is associated with plague and ritual danger in the Hebrew Bible. Exodus 30:12 requires a ransom to prevent plague during a census, while 2 Samuel 24 depicts David's census as followed by a devastating pestilence. Rather than interpreting the census as a violation of divine sovereignty or as an inherently ominous act of counting, this article argues, based on the "embodied cognition" model, that census-taking became ritually dangerous because it was closely linked to military mobilization and the collective risks of war, death, corpse contamination, and epidemic disease. The argument begins with the Mari texts, where census-taking is designated by the Akkadian term tēbibtum, "purification." This terminology suggests that the census was not merely an administrative procedure but an event requiring ritual management. In the Hebrew Bible, however, the corresponding response is expressed through כפר, a term associated with ransom, expiation, and atonement. This shift from tēbibtum to כפר reflects the conceptual convergence of impurity and transgression as dangerous conditions capable of generating communal disaster. The census therefore provides a case study for the integration of purification and atonement in biblical ritual thought.

Keywords: Census; Mari; tēbibtum; kipper; purification; atonement

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Census as Ritual Risk

1. Introduction

Exodus 30:12 stipulates that when a census is taken, each person who is counted must give “a ransom for his life” (נַפְשׁוֹ כֶּפֶר), lest a plague break out among them. 2 Samuel 24 presents the relationship between census-taking and plague in a more narrative form. Despite Joab’s objection, David counts Israel and Judah, and as a result Israel suffers a devastating pestilence. These two texts share a common assumption: census-taking is not merely an administrative act, but an action that exposes the community to the danger of disaster.

These passages raise an important interpretive question. Why is census-taking understood as an act that can bring about plague or generate a dangerous condition even though it is carried out by divine command? Previous scholarship has explained this problem in several ways. Some scholars have understood the census as an infringement upon divine sovereignty. Others have emphasized its military character and connected it with expiation for acts of war. Still others have argued that census-taking itself was regarded in ancient societies as an ominous act of counting and therefore required a ritual response. Yet these explanations do not adequately account for the fact that census-taking is sometimes commanded by God within the Hebrew Bible, nor for the fact that not every act of counting requires either ransom or protection from plague.

An important comparative body of evidence that sheds new light on this problem is found in the Mari texts. In the Mari documents, census-taking is expressed by the Akkadian term *tēbibtum*, whose basic meaning is “purification.” This suggests that, at Mari, the census was not understood simply as an administrative procedure, but as a ritual event connected with purity, divination, and communal well-being. In particular, the fact that census-taking in the Mari evidence appears in connection with military mobilization, the welfare of cities, the taking of omens, and the offering of sacrifices indicates that the census was perceived as an event requiring the management of communal risk.

This article reads the Mari evidence alongside the census texts of the Hebrew Bible and reinterprets the ritual danger of census-taking from the perspective of “embodied experience.” Recent studies of impurity have emphasized that impurity did not arise merely from an abstract symbolic system or from mythological speculation, but from concrete human experiences of disease, death, pollution, and contagion. From this perspective, census-taking was not dangerous because the act of counting was inherently ominous. Rather, it came to be understood

as dangerous because it was closely associated with military mobilization. That is, the census was an act that anticipated the collective risks of war, death, corpse contamination, and epidemic disease within the camp. These experiences of danger led census-taking to be perceived as an event exposed to the possibility of impurity and disaster.

Mari and the Hebrew Bible, however, express this danger through different ritual languages. The Mari texts describe census-taking with *tēbibtum*, the language of purification, whereas the Hebrew Bible treats the danger associated with census-taking through כפר, the language of expiation. This article argues that this difference is not merely a matter of vocabulary, but reflects a process within biblical ritual thought that impurity and sin gradually merged into a single ritual problem. In other words, census-taking provides an important case study for the way in which impurity and sin, despite having different origins, came to be subsumed under the integrative ritual language of כפר as dangerous conditions capable of producing communal disaster.

The purpose of this article is therefore twofold. First, by comparing the Mari evidence concerning *tēbibtum* with the census texts of the Hebrew Bible, it argues that census-taking was perceived as an act requiring ritual management because of the collective risks associated with military mobilization. Second, by attending to the fact that the Hebrew Bible uses the language of כפר rather than the purification language found at Mari, it seeks to explain how purification and expiation, impurity and sin, became functionally integrated within biblical ritual thought. In this respect, census-taking may be understood as a key case for the convergence of purification and atonement in ancient Israelite ritual thought.

2. Previous Research

In modern biblical scholarship, the relationship between census-taking and plague has generally been explained in three major ways. First, some scholars understand the census as an infringement upon divine sovereignty. R. E. Clements, C. Houtman, and others argue that knowing the number of persons was regarded as a way of acquiring authority or control over them. On this view, census-taking constituted a human encroachment upon the sovereignty over life and community that belongs only to God. The census, therefore, was not a mere administrative procedure but an act that revealed human arrogance and the desire for control, thereby becoming a sin which caused divine disaster.¹

¹ Ronald E. Clements, *Exodus* (Cambridge University Press, 1972), 562–63; Cornelis Houtman, *Exodus* (Kok Publishing House, 1993), 1:194; Song-Mi Suzie Park, “Census and

This interpretation has a certain explanatory value, especially for 2 Samuel 24, where David's census is evaluated as a sin. Yet it has limitations when applied to the full range of census texts in the Hebrew Bible. Nowhere does the biblical text explicitly state that the act of counting itself violates divine sovereignty. On the contrary, in Exodus 30, Numbers 1, and Numbers 26, census-taking is carried out by divine command. Moreover, Exodus 30:12 does not prohibit the census itself; rather, it stipulates that when a census is taken, each counted person must give *כפר נפשו*, "a ransom for his life." This suggests that the central issue is not the prohibition of counting as such, but the management of a particular dangerous condition associated with census-taking. Thus, an interpretation that explains the census simply in terms of human arrogance or infringement upon divine sovereignty stands in tension with passages in which census-taking is permitted or even commanded.

Second, other scholars have focused on the military character of the census. In ancient societies, census-taking was closely connected with military mobilization, and several biblical census texts are likewise concerned with the calculation of military capacity. P. Kyle McCarter explains the relationship between David's census and the ensuing plague in connection with the purity of the military camp. According to McCarter, those who belonged to the army were required to observe strict purity regulations, and David's fault lay not in the census itself but in his neglect of the purity procedures required afterward. Benno Jacob also emphasizes the military character of the census, but he connects it with the possibility of killing in future warfare. For Jacob, the ransom associated with the census functions as a form of anticipatory expiation for potential acts of killing.²

This view rightly emphasizes that census-taking was not merely an act of counting but was connected with military mobilization. Yet there are difficulties in understanding the ransom required at the census as "preventive expiation." In biblical and ancient Near Eastern ritual systems, purification and expiation generally have a retrospective structure: they respond to impurity, sin, disaster, or an ominous sign that has already occurred or has already been identified. Mesopotamian rituals such as *Šurpu* and *Namburbi*, as well as Hittite rituals such as those of *Papanikri* and *Šamuha*, are all rites that remove or transfer a dangerous condition that

Censure: Sacred Threshing Floors and Counting Taboos in 2 Samuel 24," *Horiz. Biblic. Theol.* 35.1 (2013): 21–41; cf. Sammy Githuku, "Taboos on Counting," *Interpret. Old Testam. Afica Afr.* (1999): 113–18.

² P. Kyle McCarter, *II Samuel*, The Anchor Yale Bible Commentaries (Yale University Press, 1984), 513–14; Benno Jacob, *Der Pentateuch : exegetisch-kritische Forschungen* (Leipzig : Veit, 1905), 288.

has already arisen or been recognized.³ These rituals display a consistent pattern: they are not performed preemptively merely because a danger might occur, but are enacted after a particular state of pollution or ominous situation has been identified. To be sure, both the Hebrew Bible and the ancient Near East contain rites that were performed before sin for consecrating particular persons, objects, or groups in order to prepare for divine service. Exodus 29 and Leviticus 8 describe the process by which priests and the sanctuary are placed in a state suitable for cultic service, while the Emar texts attest consecratory rites in which oil and blood are applied to sacred stones in connection with the installation of a priestess or the zukru festival.⁴ Yet these are not purifications intended to avert disaster; rather, they belong to the conferral of cultic status and the sanctification of space for temple ritual. Such rites are fundamentally distinct from rites of expiation whose purpose is the removal of impurity. The aim of purification rites is to wash away, eliminate, or transfer the source or force of impurity to another object.⁵ Therefore, to posit a preventive expiation performed before the census simply on the basis of the military context risks failing to distinguish adequately among the ritual functions of purification, consecration, and expiation.

Especially, B. Jacob's interpretation is also in tension with a passage such as Numbers 31:50, in which a portion of the spoil is offered to YHWH and כפר is performed after the war. If expiation for the military actions to be carried out in the future had already been completed at the stage of the census, it becomes difficult to explain why expiation is again required after the war. Thus, although the military character of the census is important, an explanation that treats it directly as anticipatory expiation for potential killing does not fully accord with the ritual structure of the Hebrew Bible.

Third, a line of research has sought to explain the ritual character of the census through the Mari evidence. In the Mari texts, census-taking is expressed by the Akkadian term *tēbibtum*, whose basic meaning is "purification." Jean-Robert Kupper initially understood Mari *tēbibtum*

³ cf. Isabel Cranz, "Impurity and Ritual in the Priestly Source and Assyro-Babylonian Incantations" (PhD dissertation, Johns Hopkins University, 2012); Yitzhaq Feder, *Blood Expiation in Hittite and Biblical Ritual*, Writings from the Ancient World Supplement Series 2 (SBL Press, 2011), 9–20.

⁴ Daniel E. Fleming, *The Installation of Baal's High Priestess at Emar: A Window on Ancient Syrian Religion* (Brill, 2018), 42:179; Daniel E. Fleming, *Time at Emar: The Cultic Calendar and the Rituals from the Diviner's Archive* (Penn State Press, 2000), 83; cf. Daniel E. Fleming, "The Biblical Tradition of Anointing Priests," *J. Biblic. Lit.* 117.3 (1998): 401–14.

⁵ David P. Wright, *The Disposal of Impurity: Elimination Rites in the Bible and in Hittite and Mesopotamian Literature* (Scholars Press, 1987), 37–45; Cranz, "Impurity and Ritual," 45–46.

as meaning “census” despite its etymological sense, but later argued that “purification rite” is its primary meaning and that census-taking represents a secondary usage. This discussion opened the possibility that the Mari census was not a mere administrative procedure but an event connected with rites of purification.⁶

E. A. Speiser developed Kupper’s work by directly connecting Mari *tēbibtum* with the biblical census texts. He argued that *tēbibtum* does not merely refer to a purification rite, but shows that the census itself possessed a ritual character. According to Speiser, the reason census-taking was regarded as dangerous in the ancient Near East is related to the idea of the “book of life” or a divine register. Just as in the Mesopotamian “tablet of destinies” or the biblical “book of life,” human life was thought to be preserved in a divine record. The act of recording names in a census list would therefore have evoked this divine register and was consequently perceived as ominous. Thus, both Mari *tēbibtum* and biblical כפר are understood as ritual mechanisms for neutralizing the ominous character of census-taking.⁷

Speiser’s interpretation provides an important insight by understanding the census not as a merely administrative act but as an event involving ritual danger. Yet his explanation also has several limitations. Most importantly, if census-taking itself was an inherently ominous act of counting, it becomes difficult to explain why not every act of counting in the Hebrew Bible is associated with ransom or plague. For example, not every census in the Hebrew Bible requires ransom.⁸ The census of the Levites in Numbers 3-4 and the census of the firstborn in Numbers 3:40ff. are carried out without any ransom requirement, and no danger of plague is mentioned. This suggests that the problem did not lie in counting as such.

Moreover, although the “book of life” hypothesis is an intriguing explanation of the danger of census-taking, the explicit evidence connecting it directly to the census texts is limited. The biblical census texts do not directly associate the act of counting with a divine record of life, nor do the Mari texts explicitly state that the making of a population register was understood as an imitation or violation of a divine register. Thus, while the ritual character of census-taking should be acknowledged, the basis of its danger must be explained within a more concrete social,

⁶ Jean-Robert Kupper, “Le Recensement Dans Les Textes de Mari,” in *Studia Mariana*, ed. Andre Parrot, vol. 4 of *Documenta et Monumenta Orientis Antiqui* (Brill, 1950), 100–101; Jean-Robert Kupper, *Les Nomades de Mésopotamie Au Temps Des Rois de Mari* (Presses universitaires de Liège, Les Belles Lettres, 1982), 30–31, <https://doi.org/doi:10.4000/books.pulg.985>.

⁷ E. A. Speiser, “Census and Ritual Expiation in Mari and Israel,” *Bull. Am. Sch. Orient. Res.* 149.1 (1958): 17–25.

⁸ Ernest Neufeld, “The Sins of the Census,” *Judaism* 43.2 (1994): 198.

military, and ritual context.

The foregoing survey provides an important foundation for understanding the relationship between census-taking and plague. The theory of infringement upon divine sovereignty seeks to explain the notion of sin in 2 Samuel 24. The military interpretation rightly emphasizes the connection between census-taking and military mobilization. The use of the Mari evidence has shown that census-taking could involve ritual danger. Yet each of these approaches has limitations. The divine-sovereignty interpretation does not adequately account for passages in which census-taking is commanded by God. The military-expiation interpretation tends to construe expiation too strongly as a preventive act. Speiser's "book of life" hypothesis does not sufficiently identify the concrete basis of its ominousness.

Building on these discussions, this article reinterprets the danger of census-taking from the perspective of embodied experiences of danger associated with military mobilization. That is, census-taking was regarded as dangerous not because the act of counting was inherently ominous, but because it was closely connected with the collective risks of war, death, corpse contamination, and epidemic disease within the camp. Mari *tēbibtum* may be understood as a case in which this danger is expressed in the language of purification, while biblical כפר represents a case in which the same danger is reconfigured within the biblical language of expiation. The following section will first examine the relevance of Mari to Israel and then analyze the census evidence from both traditions philologically.

3. Mari *tēbibtum*: Census as Ritualized Registration

The Mari evidence is particularly relevant because Mari exhibits significant linguistic, cultural, and ritual similarities with ancient Israel. This is evident, for example, in the prominence of West Semitic names such as Yaqob-El,⁹ as well as in broader similarities in prophecy and ritual practices.¹⁰ The Mari census material should therefore not be treated merely as a distant analogy, but may be examined within a shared ancient Near Eastern ritual world.

⁹ Abraham Malamat, *Mari and the Bible* (Brill, 1998), 7–8; Abraham Malamat, *Mari and the Early Israelite Experience* (Oxford University Press, 1989), 30–52; Kupper, *Les Nomades*, 36.

¹⁰ Malamat, *Mari and the Bible*, 59–162, 168–72; cf. Abraham Malamat, "'Prophecy' in the Mari Documents/ניצני בידעת מחקרים ישראל-ארץ" (1956): 74–84; Abraham Malamat, "A Mari Prophecy and Nathan's Dynastic Oracle, Malamat," in *Prophecy*, ed. Emerton J. A., Essays Presented to Georg Fohrer on His Sixty-Fifth Birthday 6 (De Gruyter, 1980), 68–82. Daniel E. Fleming, "Mari and the Possibilities of Biblical Memory," *Rev. Assyriol. Archéologie Orient.* 92.1 (1998): 41–78; Daniel E. Fleming, "Mari's Large Public Tent and the Priestly Tent Sanctuary," *Vetus Testam.* 50.Fasc. 4 (2000): 18–19.

In the Mari texts, census-taking is expressed primarily by the Akkadian term *tēbibtum* and its verbal forms. This term derives from *ebēbum*, “to be pure,” and its basic meaning is “purification.” In the Mari documents, however, the word is used in connection with the counting, registration, or mustering of particular groups. The ARM texts that deal with census-taking include the following:

ARM I 6, 7, 20, 36, 37, 42, 62, 82, 87, 129; ARM II 1, 18; ARM III 19, 20, 21; ARM IV 7, 57, 83; ARM V 35, 45, 51, 65; ARM VIII 8; ARM X 82; ARM XIV 61, 70; ARMT XXII 38; ARMT XXIII 427; ARMT XXVI 168

These texts include plans to count nomadic groups, instructions to survey regions that had not been counted for a long time, and registrations for the distribution of land and property. Yet when the contexts of several texts are considered, the Mari census appears to have been especially closely connected with military mobilization.¹¹ ARM II 1 clearly illustrates this military context:

“i-na *Ḥanē^{meš}* ša tu-ub-ba-bu 4 me ša-ba-am dam-qa-am a-na bâb é-kál-li-ia a-na ú-zu-zi-im ša-ba-at”

“Select four hundred good troops from among the *Ḥaneans* whom you are counting (purifying), and station them at the gate of my palace.”

Here *tu-ub-ba-bu* is the D-stem durative form of *ebēbum*, and literally means “you are purifying.” In context, however, the verb refers to the counting or registration of a particular group. The important point is that the result of this census leads directly to the selection of soldiers. This text therefore shows that Mari *tēbibtum* was not merely an administrative count, but an act connected with military mobilization.

The use of *tēbibtum* in the sense of census-taking at Mari is especially noteworthy. Outside Mari, this Akkadian term is generally associated with purification rites. For example, in tablet W.20030/3, which deals with the *mīs pî* ritual, *tēbibtum* appears as a purification rite performed for the king and his people:

“[LUGAL] u UN.MEŠ-šú te-bi-ib-te [i-šak]-[ka-nu]”
“Let the king and his people perform purification rites.”¹²

In AO. 6451, a cultic text from the Anu ziggurat at Uruk, *tēbibtum* also appears with a strong

¹¹ Kupper, *Les Nomades*, 32; Speiser, “Census and Ritual Expiation,” 18–19.

¹² Werner R. Mayer, “Seleukidische Rituale Aus Warka Mit Emesal-Gebeten,” *Orientalia* 47.3 (1978): 444–48.

ritual meaning in the context of a “hand-purification rite”:

“*a-na* ^dAni ù *An-tum* *ša šame-e* ù ^dBibbê^{Pl} 7-*šu-nu* *a-na sa-al-qa i-na te-bi-ib-tum qâtê^{II}* *ina paramahhi ziq-qur-rat* ^dAni *ki-ma ša ūmi* 16^{kam} *ša* ^{arah}*tebêti innippu-uš*”

“For Anu and Antu of heaven and for the seven planets, an offering shall be made with the hand-purification rite at the *parakku* in the ziggurat of Anu, just as on the sixteenth day of the month *Ṭebētu*.”¹³

These usages show that the basic meaning of *tēbibtum* is not administrative registration but ritual purification. Therefore, the fact that this term is used at Mari to designate census-taking suggests that the Mari census was understood not as a merely secular administrative act, but as an event bound up with purity or ritual management. This point becomes even clearer in ARM V 65. In this text, Asqudum, a servant of Iašmaḥ-Addu, performs activities related to the census at Sagarâtum and then takes omens for the welfare of the city. Among the Mari census texts, ARM I 87, IV 57, V 65, and ARMT XXVI 168 require special attention, and I shall briefly analyze them below.

3.1 ARM V 65

This text contains material in which the act of census-taking is directly connected with ritual practice:

“*i-na te-bi-ib-ti warhim an-ni-in it-ti-šu ana Sa-ga-ra-tim^{ki}* *a-tu-ra-ma te-re-tim a-na šu-lum a-lim^{ki}* *Sa-ga-ra-tim^{ki}* *ana* ITU 6 KAM *e-pu-úš-ma te-re-tum ša-al-ma ù ki-ma*”

“In connection with the census (purification) of this month, I returned with him to Sagarâtum, and I took the omens (*têretim*) for the welfare of the city of Sagarâtum for the sixth month, and the omens were favorable.” (Rev. 15-21)

This text shows that census-taking was combined with divinatory practice. After carrying out the census (*tēbibtum*), Asqudum takes omens (*têretum*) in order to confirm the well-being of Sagarâtum, and he reports his intention to carry out similar measures later at Terqa, Subrum, and Mari. What matters here is that the census does not end as a simple administrative procedure, but is accompanied by a ritual procedure of verification concerning the welfare of the city. This suggests that the census was perceived as an event capable of affecting communal well-being.

¹³ François Thureau-Dangin, *Rituels Accadiens* (E. Leroux, 1921), 79. For further discussion of the purificatory meaning of *tēbibtum*, cf. Spätbabylonische Texte aus Uruk 27:6 (“*ašar te-b[i-ib-ti]*”, “a place of purification”); Cuneiform Texts from Babylonian Tablets in the British Museum, Part 24:39 (“*Šamaš ša te-bi-ib-ti*”, “Šamaš of purification”); Bauer, *Asb.* 2:74 r.8 (“*liššakin te-bi-ib-tú*”, “let a purification ritual be established”); see also CAD T, s.v. *tēbibtu*; AHW, s.v. *tēbibtum*.

3.2 ARM IV 57

ARM IV 57 may be interpreted in a similar direction. After the census, the text states:

“*li-ib-bi ma-a-tim ut-ti-[i]ḥ*”

“The heart of the land became calm.” (Tr. 10-11)

On the basis of this expression, Kupper argued that *tēbibtum* was primarily a ritual act and that census-taking was its secondary function.¹⁴ What is noteworthy is that a similar expression is also found in the Neo-Assyrian *šar pūḥi* ritual.¹⁵ The *šar pūḥi* ritual was performed when a particular eclipse or ominous sign occurred. A substitute king was selected and allowed to act as king for one hundred days; afterward, the substitute king and the royal furnishings were burned. In this way, the king and the state were freed from evil, and the real king returned to the throne after performing rituals such as *Bīt rimki* and *Bīt salā’ mē*.¹⁶ Furthermore, according to SAA X 210 (= ABL 361) and 212 (= ABL 4), the substitute king and Esarhaddon went to the *qersu*, which developed from the Mari portable tent, in order to perform purification rites for the *šar pūḥi* ritual. This is because the *qersu* functioned as a ritual space for the removal of pollution in times of war.¹⁷ In this light, the expression in ARM IV 57, *libbi mātim uttiḥ* (“the heart of the land became calm”), may suggest that communal stability was restored after the census. This expression alone does not prove that the census directly produced pollution or disaster. Nevertheless, the statement that “the heart of the land” became calm after the census shows at least that this act was understood within the sphere of communal instability and restoration. Especially when one considers that census-taking in other Mari texts is repeatedly associated with divination, purification terminology, and military mobilization, ARM IV 57 becomes an important piece of evidence for understanding the census as an event concerned with the management of communal risk.

¹⁴ Kupper, *Les Nomades*, 31.

¹⁵ Speiser, “Census and Ritual Expiation in Mari and Israel,” 20. “*libbi nušaškinšunu ittūḥū*”, “Their heart is at peace”; cf. Robert Francis Harper, *Assyrian and Babylonian Letters Belonging to the Kouyunjik Collections of the British Museum, IV* (University of Chicago Press, 1896), 436 [K. 168:rev. 7-8].

¹⁶ Simo Parpola, *Letters from Assyrian and Babylonian Scholars*, State Archives of Assyria Volume 10 (Helsinki University Press, 1993) [SAA X]; W. G. Lambert, “A Part of the Ritual for the Substitute King,” *Arch. Für Orientforsch.* 18 (1957): 109–12; cf. Jens E. Braarvig and Velizar Sadoski, *Ritual Texts and Contexts: Philology, Pragmatics, and Cultural History* (Hermes, 2020).

¹⁷ May, “The Qersu in Neo-Assyrian Cultic Setting,” 445–58. May argues “This letter connects qersu specifically with purification.”; Cranz, “Impurity and Ritual in the Priestly Source and Assyro-Babylonian Incantations,” 169–74.

3.3 ARM I 87

ARM I 87 likewise demonstrates the social risk of census-taking. In this letter, Šamši-Addu advises his son Iašmaḥ-Addu not to conduct a census of the Ḫanean groups, since it could provoke their anger. The issue in this text is not explicitly ritual pollution but political and social resistance. Nevertheless, the evidence shows that census-taking was not a neutral administrative act, but a sensitive event capable of provoking anxiety and resistance among a particular group. This social risk supports the view that census-taking was connected with military mobilization, control, and communal instability.

3.4 Other Relevant sources from Chagar Bazar and Rome

The Chagar Bazar texts related to Mari also show the connection between census-taking and ritual practice. Texts such as A 971, A 978, and AOAT 3:24, 36 record that on “the day of the census” (*inūma tēbibtim*), pure persons (LÚ.MEŠ *ebbūtīm*) offered sacrifices (SA.DUG4 or DI.SAG). This evidence suggests that *tēbibtum* was not simply an act of counting but was performed within a ritual context involving offerings.¹⁸ Thus, in the Mari-related evidence, *tēbibtum* appears to have retained its basic meaning of “purification” while also extending to designate a specific act of counting or registration.

The Roman *lustrum* may also be mentioned as comparative evidence. Dionysius of Halicarnassus, *Roman Antiquities* 4.22; Livy, *Ab urbe condita* 1.44; and Varro, *De lingua Latina* 6.11 indicate that a purification rite was performed after the census (*lustrum*), and that the very name *lustrum* derived from the fact that the census was carried out together with a purification rite. Weinfeld suggested that this Roman custom may have been related to an eastern tradition. What matters here, however, is not whether direct transmission occurred, but that the combination of census-taking and purification rites appears in comparable ways in different ancient societies.¹⁹

The evidence surveyed above shows that census-taking at Mari was not understood merely as an administrative procedure. Mari *tēbibtum* appears in connection with counting, military mobilization, divination, offerings, and communal stability. It is therefore plausible to understand the Mari census as an event that exposed the community to a particular dangerous

¹⁸ C. J. Gadd, “Tablets from Chagar Bazar and Tall Brak, 1937-38,” *Iraq* 7.1 (1940): 27, 54; Oswald Loretz, “Texte Aus Chagar Bazar Und Tell Brak/1,” *Texte Aus Chagar Bazar Tell Brak* (1969).

¹⁹ Moshe Weinfeld, “The Census of Mari, Israel and Rome / במארי מיפקד'ה / וברומא בישראל,” *Zion* 56 (1991) [Hebrew]: 233–37; August Dillmann, *Die Bücher Exodus Und Leviticus* (S. Hirzel, 1897), 352–54.

condition, a danger that was handled through the language of purification and ritual management. Yet this evidence leaves one important question unresolved: why was census-taking understood as a dangerous act that required such purification measures? The following section addresses this question from the perspective of impurity and embodied experiences of danger.

4. Military Census and Embodied Risk

To explain why census-taking was understood as a dangerous act requiring purification or expiation, it is necessary first to consider the nature of impurity. Since Mary Douglas's *Purity and Danger*, biblical studies and ancient Near Eastern studies have tended to understand purity and impurity primarily as symbolic classification systems or as expressions of social order. More recent research, however, especially the work of Yitzhaq Feder, has emphasized that impurity cannot be adequately explained by symbolic theology alone, but is deeply connected with concrete and embodied experiences such as disgust, pollution, contagion, and disease.²⁰ According to Feder, the concept of impurity did not begin with an abstract theological system that was then applied downward to concrete regulations. Rather, it began with the actual human experience of pollution and the risk of contagion and developed from there into social norms and theological discourse. He describes this process as a "bottom-up" process. Images of disgust and contagion arising from contact with filth, corpses, and the sick first take shape at the experiential level; they are then organized into social norms and ritual codes; and finally, they are systematized within theological discourse.²¹ Feder therefore identifies three sources of impurity: "uncleanness," "infection," and "stain of transgression," while regarding the third category as a later development.²² From this perspective, impurity should be understood not merely as "matter out of place," but as the conceptualization of danger and pollution actually

²⁰ Yitzhaq Feder, *Purity and Pollution in the Hebrew Bible: From Embodied Experience to Moral Metaphor* (Cambridge University Press, 2022), 3–10. For example, he observes that in the ancient Near East (*lapāṭu*), Israel (*n-g- '*), Rome (*com-tangere*), and Greece (*epaphē*), impurity and calamity are consistently expressed through the language of "contact." This recurring linguistic pattern suggests that impurity was not merely a symbolic category, but was understood as grounded in real experiences of contagion and pollution.

²¹ Feder, *Purity and Pollution*, 18–19; See also, Yitzhaq Feder, "Pentateuchal and Ancient Near Eastern Ritual," in *The Oxford Handbook of the Pentateuch* (Oxford University Press, 2021), 426.

²² *Ibid.*, 53–54; Yitzhaq Feder, "Contagion and Cognition: Bodily Experience and the Conceptualization of Pollution (Ṭum'ah) in the Hebrew Bible," *J. East. Stud.* 72.2 (2013): 151–67.

experienced by the community.

This perspective is useful for explaining the ritual danger of census-taking. The reason a census required purification or expiation may not have been that the act of counting itself was inherently ominous, but that it was connected with a particular collective experience of risk. In particular, the census at issue in the biblical and Mari evidence is generally connected with military mobilization. A military census calculates the capacity for warfare, organizes troops, and brings the community into a state of war. It was therefore not simply an administrative act of counting people, but an act that anticipated the dangers of war, death, corpse contamination, and disease in the camp. Of course, the census itself does not directly transmit disease or produce corpse contamination. Yet a census connected with military mobilization brings the community into the world of war, that is, into a situation in which the possibilities of death and infection are concentrated. Ancient societies could therefore perceive census-taking as an event that opened the possibility of communal disaster. This is comparable to the *šar puḥi* ritual, in which a lunar eclipse, was understood to generate impurity or danger within the community and therefore required the performance of the substitute-king ritual, even before it had brought about any actual harm. As Sarna and Dillmann already briefly suggested, the danger of the census may be explained in connection with the experience of death in war and epidemic disease within the camp.²³ This interpretation also explains why not every act of counting in the Hebrew Bible is associated with ransom or plague. The counting of the Levites or the firstborn is carried out without a ransom requirement or any threat of plague. It is because these censuses are not for military mobilization, but for the organization of cultic service, affiliation, and substitutionary relationships. By contrast, the censuses at issue in Exodus 30 and 2 Samuel 24 are connected with the counting of the whole community, especially of a group related to the possibility of war. Thus, the problem lies not in counting in general, but in a particular kind of census that entails military risk.

In this respect, the interpretation offered here differs from Benno Jacob's theory of preventive expiation. Jacob argues that a ransom was required in advance to expiate the acts of killing in a future war. However, the concept of impurity, as it developed into a theological category, was understood as a subtle substance that could cling to the human body and cause misfortune or disease, and therefore had to be removed through purification rites.²⁴ It is

²³ Nahum M. Sarna, *The JPS Torah Commentary: Exodus* (The Jewish Publication Society, 1991), 195; Dillmann, *Die Bücher Exodus Und Leviticus*, 353. In Feder's terms, the "infection" image led to the perception of the census as an impure act.

²⁴ Stefan M. Maul, "Zukunftsbewältigung. Eine Untersuchung Altorientalischen Denkens

therefore more appropriate to understand כֶּפֶר at the time of the census not as anticipatory expiation for future acts of killing, but as an act that removes or neutralizes impurity, the ritual danger produced by the census itself. The ransom, then, should not be understood as a device for receiving forgiveness in advance for future sin, but as a means of neutralizing the communal danger caused by impurity so that disaster does not become actualized.

Yet an important problem still remains. If census-taking can be carried out by divine command, why is it still understood as a dangerous condition capable of producing disaster? In other words, how can divine command and the occurrence of plague be narrated together? This problem can be explained more clearly by examining the way impurity and sin generate disaster in the ancient Near East and the Hebrew Bible, that is, by considering the relationship between divine punishment and automatic retribution. The following section will address this issue.

5. Automatic Retribution

As argued in the preceding section, census-taking may be understood as an act that generates a communal state of danger connected with military mobilization. Yet this explanation still leaves one problem unresolved. Exodus 30:12 and 2 Samuel 24 do not describe the disaster associated with census-taking merely as a natural consequence or as a form of social risk. Both texts describe the disaster in the language of divine punishment.

The “plague” in those texts is expressed by the Hebrew terms נִגַּף and דָּבָר. These terms denote divine punishment. The former, for example, refers either to God’s striking and defeating foreign armies (Exod 8:2; 12:23; 1 Sam 7:10), or to his striking his own people so as to bring about death (2 Sam 12:15; 1 Sam 26:10; 1 Sam 25:38; Judg 20:35, etc.). The latter likewise denotes a pestilence brought upon Israel or foreign nations by the hand of God (Exod 9:15; Ezek 28:23; Jer 42:17, etc.).²⁵ Thus, the disaster that follows the census is clearly expressed in the language of divine punishment.

The problem arises here. If census-taking can be performed by divine command, why can it still bring about disaster? In other words, how can divine command and divine plague be narrated within the same event? This tension can be better explained by examining the way

Anhand Der Babylonisch-Assyrischen Löserituale (Namburbi)” (1994): 5–10.

²⁵ Preuss, “נִגַּף,” *Theological Dictionary of Old Testament* IX; Mayer, “דָּבָר,” *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* III; cf. Stephen C. Russell, “David’s Threshing Floor: On Royal Dedication of Land to the Gods,” in *The King and the Land: A Geography of Royal Power in the Biblical World* (Oxford University Press, 2016), 19, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199361885.003.0002>.

divine punishment operates in the ancient Near East and in the Bible, that is, by considering the mechanism of retribution. David P. Wright has noted that, in Hittite and Mesopotamian purification rituals, evil or impurity was not necessarily understood only as the direct action of a personal demon or deity. Purification rituals often function as mechanical procedures that remove evil from a particular object or transfer it to another.²⁶ Similarly, on the basis of Hittite ritual texts, Feder argues that the concept of divine punishment was not understood simply as the action of a personal god, but increasingly came to be expressed as an impersonal and autonomous mechanism. For example, in later Hittite texts, the interchange between NĪŠ DINGIR^{MEŠ} (the oath deities), and NĪŠ DINGIR-LIM (the divine oath), as well as the use of *lingai-* (oath) as the subject that pursues and seizes the transgressor, shows a conceptual shift from the idea that the gods punish to the idea that the oath itself carries out punishment. Moreover, Feder argues that this developmental tendency is attested not only in Hittite sources but also in Mesopotamia and Israel. In the Mesopotamian Šurpu ritual, for example, *māmītu* develops in meaning from “an oath accompanied by a curse” to “the curse itself,” suggesting that disaster could be understood as a mechanism capable of operating without the direct intervention of a particular deity (Šurpu III, 130–133). A similar conception is also found in the Bible. The reason spilled blood must be covered when it remains on the ground (Lev 17:13; Ezek 24:7–8; Job 16:8), or must be expiated by the community (Deut 21:1–9), is that blood functions as a force that can bring disaster upon the community, beyond being merely a moral violation.²⁷ Finally, Feder points out that Leviticus 14 omits the therapeutic rite found in other ancient Near Eastern texts for the treatment of *saḥaršubbu* (skin disease). He explains this omission as an attempt to suppress the view of disease as a “demonic attack” or “divine punishment” and to imply a proto-naturalistic mechanism for the occurrence of disease.²⁸ Accordingly, one may suggest that, in Israel, the notion of sin as the cause of disease was weakened in certain ritual contexts, while the occurrence of disease came increasingly to be understood in mechanical or proto-naturalistic terms.

These materials show that divine punishment and automatic retribution are not necessarily opposed to one another. In the ancient Near East and in the Bible, disaster is expressed, on the one hand, in the language of divine judgment; on the other hand, it may also be understood as the result that occurs when a particular state of pollution, transgression, oath violation,

²⁶ Wright, *The Disposal of Impurity*, 261–63.

²⁷ Feder, “The Mechanics of Retribution in Hittite, Mesopotamian and Ancient Israelite Sources,” *J. Anc. East. Relig.* 10.2 (2010): 119–57.

²⁸ Feder, *Purity and Pollution*, 80, 90, 105, 261–62.

bloodshed, or impurity has come into being. Divine punishment, then, does not always mean the direct and arbitrary intervention of a deity. At times, it is described as an automatic consequence that follows when the ritual and moral order established in the world has been violated.²⁹ From this perspective, the relationship between census-taking and plague can also be reinterpreted. Census-taking may be performed by divine command, yet it simultaneously exposes the community to a dangerous condition involving war, death, corpse contamination, and epidemic disease. This dangerous condition was not merely a symbolic anxiety, but could be understood within ancient ritual thought as a real force capable of producing disaster. Therefore, the fact that a census was carried out by divine command does not automatically nullify the dangerous mechanism generated by the act itself. The relationship between census-taking and plague should thus be explained through the conjunction of divine punishment and automatic retribution. The Bible describes the plague as divine judgment, but that judgment can be understood as operating through a ritual mechanism activated when a particular dangerous condition arises. In this respect, census-taking illustrates the process by which impurity and sin alike came to be conceptualized as dangerous conditions capable of producing disaster. On the basis of this discussion, the following section examines how Mari's purification language, *tēbibtum*, and the Hebrew Bible's expiatory language, כפר, come to perform the same function within different ritual systems.

6. From Purification to כפר: Biblical Reconfiguration

The materials examined above show that census-taking was understood both at Mari and in the Hebrew Bible as an act involving a certain degree of ritual danger. Yet the two traditions express this danger in different languages. In the Mari documents, census-taking is described with *tēbibtum*, the language of purification, whereas in the Hebrew Bible the same type of danger is handled through כפר, the language of ransom and expiation. This difference is not merely a matter of lexical choice. It shows that the same dangerous condition was interpreted within different ritual-conceptual systems.

The systems of purification and expiation are originally based on different logics. The

²⁹ Similar tensions appear elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible. For instance, sexual activity associated with the divine command to “be fruitful and multiply” (Gen 1:28) nevertheless renders a person temporarily impure (Lev 15:16–18), and the ritual of the red heifer, though intended to remove impurity, renders those who perform it impure (Num 19:7–10). These cases suggest that divine command or ritual purpose does not negate the operation of impurity, which can function according to its own quasi-autonomous logic.

purification system presupposes pollution arising from embodied experiences such as contact, death, disease, and contagion, and its purpose is the removal of pollution. In this system, the problem is not relational guilt so much as a state of impurity that adheres to persons or spaces and threatens the community. The expiatory system, by contrast, is more closely related to sin, bloodshed, compensation, responsibility, and the restoration of the relationship between deity and human beings. In this system, the problem is not merely pollution, but the responsibility and consequences generated by transgression. The two systems therefore operate with different explanatory logics: contamination removal on the one hand, and expiation or relational restoration on the other.

Yet in the ritual language of the Hebrew Bible, these two systems are not completely separate. At their center stands כפר. The nominal form כִּפָּר means “propitiatory gift” or “ransom,” while the verbal form כִּפֶּר is used in some contexts with the sense of appeasement, compensation, or ransom (e.g., Gen 32:20; Prov 16:14; Num 16:46–48). This is likely why the LXX renders the term with ἰλάσασθαι. Moreover, the Hittite verb *šarnink-*, “to compensate,” which corresponds to כִּפֶּר, suggests that ancient Near Eastern sacrificial rites involving blood could serve to compensate for bloodguilt and related offenses.³⁰ Yet the same Hebrew verb is also used in the cultic contexts of Leviticus to refer not only to sin but also to the removal of impurity. The חטאת offering “atones for” or “purifies” (כפר) both sins (פשע, חטאת, עון) and impurity (טמאה) (e.g., Lev 4:26; 16:16, 21)

In this way, כפר encompasses different semantic domains and already contains a conceptual tension within itself.³¹ Feder explains this phenomenon, in which one word bears two meanings, as follows: כפר originally had the sense of “propitiating” victims, but gradually developed into the idea of paying the price through the offender’s blood, or life, and this in turn developed into the Levitical concept of atonement through animal blood.³² In other words, the expiatory rite that removes sin through blood was later integrated into the impurity system, but it had a different origin from the imagery of “uncleanness” and “infection.” Feder distinguishes this as a third category, the “stain of transgression.” This kind of impurity cannot be erased by washing or by ordinary ritual treatment; it must be paid for with blood (cf. Num 35:33–34; Gen 9:6).³³

³⁰ Feder, *Blood Expiation*, 2, 215–27.

³¹ Ibid, 169–70.

³² Ibid., 167–196. See, especially, 195.

³³ Feder, *Purity and Pollution*, 53–54. The distinction between the first two categories and the final one closely corresponds to the scholarly distinction between “ritual impurity” and “moral impurity.” cf. Jonathan Klawans, *Impurity and Sin in Ancient Judaism* (Oxford

Through this process, Feder argues that the shared use of *kipper* for both expiation and purification suggests an earlier association between severe bodily impurity and sin.³⁴ This explanation can account in part for the semantic expansion of כפר, but it does not sufficiently explain why the same phenomenon is expressed through different ritual languages, namely purification and expiation. I propose a different explanation. As argued above, in ancient Near Eastern and biblical evidence, impurity does not arise merely from a symbolic system but from actual experiences of danger and pollution, and this impurity developed into a mechanism capable of generating disaster automatically. Likewise, spilled blood or transgression also functions as a force that can bring disaster upon the community. As Deuteronomy 21:1–9 and Ugaritic and Nuzi materials show, communal expiation is required even when the perpetrator cannot be identified.³⁵ The idea that bloodguilt (*ešhar*) remains on the land and brings disaster, and therefore must be compensated for or expiated (*ešhar šanḥ-*, “to demand blood”; *šarni(n)k-*, “to compensate” or “to expiate”), is also found in Hittite sources.³⁶ In this way, spilled blood, like impurity, remains on the land and automatically calls forth retribution.³⁷

Thus, although impurity and sin have different origins, both are conceptualized as dangerous conditions capable of producing communal disaster. Impurity can bring disaster through contact and pollution, while sin can bring disaster through bloodshed or transgression. As the two systems come to address the same problem, namely the removal of a dangerous condition that threatens the community, purification and expiation become functionally close to one another and converge within the חטאת system, which deals with the removal of evil. As a result, within the ritual system of the Hebrew Bible, כפר functions as an integrative ritual language encompassing both the removal of pollution and the expiation of sin. It is therefore understandable that scholars such as Milgrom have proposed translating חטאת not as “sin offering” but as “purification offering,” since within this integrated system כפר clearly comes

University Press, 2000), 21–31.

³⁴ Feder, *Purity and Pollution*, 99.

³⁵ For Ugarit, see Bruce Wells, “What Is Biblical Law? A Look at Pentateuchal Rules and Near Eastern Practice,” *Cathol. Biblic. Q.* 70.2 (2008): 236–38; For Nuzi, see Cyrus H. GORDON, “An Akkadian Parallel to Deuteronomy 21: 1ff,” *Rev. Assyriol. Archéologie Orient.* 33.1 (1936): 1–6.

³⁶ Feder, *Blood Expiation*, 223–24.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 252–53. Feder argues “Whereas the earliest phase of this belief seems to relate to the belief that the blood of the murdered person, bearing his vital spirit, screams out for vengeance from the gods, the later conception described in both the Hittite and biblical evidence depicts “bloodguilt” as a stain that activates a mechanical process of retribution. This mechanical notion was described above as representing a transition from the idea of “propitiating” (the blood, the victim’s kin, the gods) to “expiating” (the guilt).”

to mean not only “atonement” but also “purification” in the context of the *חטאת* rite.³⁸

What is important in this process is the changing mode by which divine punishment was understood to operate. The mechanism of automatic retribution discussed above allows disaster to be understood not as the intentional action of a particular deity, but as an impersonal result that occurs when certain conditions are fulfilled. Within this framework, impurity and sin are both reconstructed as factors that generate disaster through the same mechanism, and the two concepts consequently become integrated into the same category of problem. That is, contamination and transgression are both understood as “dangerous conditions” that must be removed, and the corresponding rituals likewise perform the same function: removal and neutralization.

From this perspective, it is also possible to explain why the Hebrew Bible uses the expiatory language of *כפר* in connection with the census rather than the language of purification, even though census-taking derives from the production of impurity associated with the imagery of “infection” rather than from the “stain of transgression” associated with bloodguilt. Census-taking was perceived as an act that exposed the community to the dangers of death and epidemic disease, and this danger was understood, like impurity, as something capable of producing disaster automatically. Therefore, the ritual that removes this danger performs the same function as a purification rite, but within the already integrated biblical ritual system it is expressed through the expiatory language of *כפר*.

Ultimately, the shift from *tēbibtum* to *כפר* is not merely a difference of translation or regional vocabulary. It shows that two different ritual systems, impurity and sin, gradually converged functionally as they came to explain the same mechanism of disaster. Mari provides a case in which the danger of census-taking is expressed in the language of purification, while the Hebrew Bible provides a case in which the same type of danger is reconfigured within the integrative ritual language of *כפר*. In this respect, census-taking is an important case for understanding how purification and expiation were integrated within the ritual thought of the Hebrew Bible.

³⁸ Jacob Milgrom, “Sin-Offering or Purification-Offering?,” *Vetus Testam.* 21.Fasc. 2 (1971): 237–39; Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16*, The Anchor Yale Bible Commentary (Doubleday, 1998), 253–54. This line of development continues consistently into the Qumran and New Testament periods. At Qumran, sin and impurity are treated as virtually identical, and in the New Testament as well the boundary between the two becomes blurred. The blurring of the distinction between impurity and sin in the Hebrew Bible may therefore provide an intermediate stage in the later identification of sin and impurity in Qumran and the New Testament. On the concept of impurity in Qumran and the New Testament, see, Klawans, *Impurity and Sin*, 75, 143.

7. Conclusion

This article has argued, through a combined examination of biblical and ancient Near Eastern evidence, that census-taking was perceived not as a merely administrative act but as an event that exposed the community to danger. The fact that census-taking in the Mari documents is expressed by the purification term *tēbibtum* shows that this act was understood in close connection with impurity and invites reconsideration of the meaning of כפר required at the time of a census in the Bible.

Previous scholarship has explained census-taking as an infringement upon divine sovereignty, as military expiation, or as an ominous act. Yet these interpretations do not sufficiently account for both the biblical texts and the ancient Near Eastern evidence. By contrast, this article has understood the census as an act connected with preparation for war and has argued that the experiences of death and epidemic disease associated with this process led census-taking to be perceived as dangerous. This interpretation accords with recent studies that connect the concept of impurity with embodied experience.

This article has also emphasized that both impurity and sin were understood as forces capable of producing disaster. Through the concept of automatic retribution, it has shown that disaster could be understood not merely as the direct intervention of a deity, but as a result that occurs under certain conditions. Within this mode of thought, impurity and sin gradually converge as categories that address the same problem.

This convergence leads to the integration of ritual language. Although Mari uses *tēbibtum* and the Bible uses כפר, both terms perform the function of removing a condition that threatens the community. Therefore, כפר should be understood not merely as expiation, but as a concept that also includes the removal of a dangerous condition.

Ultimately, the transition from *tēbibtum* to כפר is the result of different ritual systems explaining the same mechanism of disaster. This perspective provides an interpretive framework for understanding the biblical ritual system and the concept of כפר more coherently.

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