Title: The meaning of šāān in 1 Chronicles 21:1: a Linguistic approach

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Abstract:

The word “Satan” (šāān) in 1 Chr 21:1 constitutes a problem. Whereas the major English translations render the text in 1 Chr 21:1: “Satan stood up against Israel and incited David to number Israel,” the parallel text in 2 Sam 24:1 states that it was not Satan but God who incited David to make the census. Bible scholars hold different views on the interpretations of šāān in 1 Chr 21:1. Some scholars interpret the word šāān in 1 Chr 21:1 as a personal name “Satan,” holding that the term refers to a transcendental evil being. Others interpret the word as a common noun, either a celestial being or an earthly adversary or enemy. The purpose addressed in this study is to attempt to present a correct translation of the original Hebrew word šāān in 1 Chr 21:1. The method used to accomplish this purpose is a linguistic and contextual analysis. The linguistic and contextual study may illuminate a correct meaning.

The foremost reason why the scholars interpret šāān in 1 Chr 21:1 as a name “Satan” is the fact that the word has no definite article in this text. Further they hold that the concept developed through the OT passages, and finally, in 1 Chr 21:1 the word šāān became the personal name “Satan.” However, some scholars argue that there is no concept of Satan as personal evil being in the OT, although the Scripture relates a story of fallen angel. Further, there is no clear evidence to support the association of the term šāān with Satan through a
historical development of a Satan concept in the OT passages where the term šātān appears. Recent scholarship also holds that the first reference to the personal name of Satan comes from second century Jewish literatures.

The word šātān occurs 27 times in the Hebrew OT. The word occurs 10 times without an article, and 17 times with an article. In most cases, the word šātān, with or without an article, is used as a common noun. The word šātān linguistically means “adversary,” “enemy,” or “opponent.” However, the word šātān has several meanings in its biblical context. The word šātān means “adversary” or “enemy” in a military context, and “accuser” or “prosecutor” in a forensic context.