

# It was Not Seven Years, but Three Years of Famine

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One of the Penalties of David's Sin Was Seven Years of Famine  
(*2 Samuel 24:13*)

It Was Not Seven Years, but Three Years of Famine  
(*1 Chronicles 21:11-12*)

Because everyone's hand writing is different, it is sometimes a challenge to know the difference between the number seven and one in the English language. This is why some people draw a line through the middle of the number seven (7) to show plainly that it is not meant to be the number one (1). Prior to the invention of the printing press in the 16th century (see: [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Printing\\_Press](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Printing_Press)) written works were hand copied and, in the case of Holy Scripture, many scribes were involved, and human errors were not uncommon. As the primary language of the Old Testament was Hebrew, the number seven and three had to be examined carefully because they can appear very similar. The main difference is a single stroke to the left, at the bottom of the number three (λ). (If that stroke is not made clearly, the next scribe could confuse a three for a seven (τ), and vice versa. Also, the carbon-based inks used in earlier manuscripts could smudge easily. In the following excerpt from an article on the various inks used in ancient manuscripts, it explains that improvements were made in the ink by the time the Dead Sea scrolls were written so that smudging could be minimized.

'Gall nuts from oak trees present in some, but not all of the black inks on the (Dead Sea) scrolls, were added to make the ink more resilient to smudging (which was) common with

pure carbon inks'  
([en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dead\\_Sea Scrolls](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dead_Sea Scrolls)).

This background information is important because the apparent contradiction between the two texts quoted above is related to an error on the part of a scribe who had copied this section of scripture. In a commentary on 2Samuel 24:13, E.W. Bullinger states the following regarding seven years.

"The Hebrew numeral letters for three and seven were probably very much alike. Hence perhaps mistaken by an ancient scribe" (The Companion Bible; p 444; footnote on 2Samuel 24:13).

Based on the fact that God is merciful, even when he punishes sinners, it is unlikely that the number seven is correct because this would have meant the nation of Israel could have been punished for seven years due to David's sin, and most would have died. Therefore, the more likely text to regard as being accurate would be in 1Chronicles. Also, the number three is used three times in 1Chronicles 21:12 and any slight variation between any of these entries, including the possibility of smudged ink, would have drawn the attention of the scribe who was responsible for copying them.

Either **three** years of famine, or **three** months to be defeated by your foes with the sword of your enemies overtaking you (i.e. losing territory), or else for **three** days the sword of the Lord – the plague in the land, with the angel of the Lord destroying throughout all the territory of Israel. Now consider what answer I (Gad) should take back to Him who sent me (1Chronicles 21:12; Ed. notes in parentheses; emphasis added).

Therefore, this apparent contradiction is not due to God being unreliable in what He says. Instead, it was due to human error when

numerous copies were being made for the purpose of distributing God's word to more people.

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