

A Census of the Children of Israel

Numbers 1

Numbers 1 - *"Now the LORD spoke to Moses in the Wilderness of Sinai, in the tabernacle of meeting, on the first day of the second month, in the second year after they had come out of the land of Egypt, saying: "Take a census of all the congregation of the children of Israel, by their families, by their fathers' houses, according to the number of names, every male individually, from twenty years old and above—all who are able to go to war in Israel. You and Aaron shall number them by their armies. And with you there shall be a man from every tribe, each one the head of his father's house.*

"These are the names of the men who shall stand with you: from Reuben, Elizur the son of Shedeur; from Simeon, Shelumiel the son of Zurishaddai from Judah, Nahshon the son of Amminadab; from Issachar, Nethanel the son of Zuar; from Zebulun, Eliab the son of Helon; from the sons of Joseph: from Ephraim, Elishama the son of Ammihud; from Manasseh, Gamaliel the son of Pedahzur; from Benjamin, Abidan the son of Gideoni; from Dan, Ahiezer the son of Ammishaddai; from Asher, Pagiel the son of Ocran; from Gad, Eliasaph the son of Deuel; from Naphtali, Ahira the son of Enan." These were chosen from the congregation, leaders of their fathers' tribes, heads of the divisions in Israel.

Then Moses and Aaron took these men who had been mentioned by name, and they assembled all the congregation together on the first day of the second month; and they recited their ancestry by families, by their fathers' houses, according to the number of names, from twenty years old and above, each one individually.

As the LORD commanded Moses, so he numbered them in the Wilderness of Sinai. Now the children of Reuben, Israel's oldest son, their genealogies by their families, by their fathers' house, according to the number of names, every male individually, from twenty years old and above, all who were able to go to war: those who were numbered of the tribe of Reuben were 46,500.

From the children of Simeon... those who were numbered of the tribe of Simeon were 59,300.

From the children of Gad... those who were numbered of the tribe of Gad were 45,650.

From the children of Judah... those who were numbered of the tribe of Judah were 74,600.

From the children of Issachar... those who were numbered of the tribe of Issachar were 54,400.

From the children of Zebulun... those who were numbered of the tribe of Zebulun were 57,400.

From the sons of Joseph, the children of Ephraim... those who were numbered of the tribe of Ephraim were 40,500.

From the children of Manasseh... those who were numbered of the tribe of Manasseh were 32,200.

From the children of Benjamin... those who were numbered of the tribe of Benjamin were 35,400/

From the children of Dan... those who were numbered of the tribe of Dan were 62,700.

From the children of Asher... those who were numbered of the tribe of Asher were 41,500.

From the children of Naphtali... those who were numbered of the tribe of Naphtali were 53,400.

These are the ones who were numbered, whom Moses and Aaron numbered, with the leaders of Israel, twelve men, each one representing his father's house. So all who were numbered of the children of Israel, by their fathers' houses, from twenty years old and above, all who were able to go to war in Israel— all who were numbered were 603,550.

But the Levites were not numbered among them by their fathers' tribe; for the LORD had spoken to Moses, saying: "Only the tribe of Levi you shall not number, nor take a census of them among the children of Israel; but you shall appoint the Levites over the tabernacle of the Testimony, over all its furnishings, and over all things that belong to it; they shall carry the tabernacle and all its furnishings; they shall attend to it and camp around the tabernacle. And when the tabernacle is to go forward, the Levites shall take it down; and when the tabernacle is to be set up, the Levites shall set it up. The outsider who comes near shall be put to death. The children of Israel shall pitch their tents, everyone by his own camp, everyone by his own standard, according to their armies; but the Levites shall camp around the tabernacle of the Testimony, that there may be no wrath on the congregation of the children of Israel; and the Levites shall keep charge of the tabernacle of the Testimony."

Thus the children of Israel did; according to all that the LORD commanded Moses, so they did."

Background Notes

Moses was the author of Numbers, the fourth book of the Bible. Moses also wrote the other books of the Pentateuch: Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, and Deuteronomy. The book of Numbers begins a year and a month after the Israelites left Egypt, and one month after the Tabernacle was set up (according to the date in Exodus 40:17). At the end of the book the Israelites were located on the plains of Moab, beside the Jordan River, just before they crossed the Jordan at the time of the conquest of Canaan. *"These are the commandments and the judgments which the LORD commanded the children of Israel by the hand of Moses in the plains of Moab by the Jordan, across from Jericho"* (Numbers 3:13).

Thus the content of the book of Numbers has to do with the events and experiences of the children of Israel, from their time at Mount Sinai until they were ready to enter the Promised Land, under the leadership of Joshua. The time span of the book is approximately 40 years, and it includes the wanderings of Israel because of their unbelief. One of the themes of Numbers is "Wilderness Wanderings," and there's a lot of practical application in this book for wandering Christians.

The book is entitled "Numbers" in our English Bible because the book includes two "numberings" – in chapter 1, before the wilderness wanderings, and in chapter 26, after the wilderness wanderings.

Doctrinal Points

1. God expects His people to maintain order.

The census in Numbers 1 was primarily for military purposes. All the males from twenty years and upward were to be counted: *"all who were who are able to go out to war."* This was not the first census taken of the people of Israel. The purpose of the census in Exodus 30:11-16 was financial support for the Tabernacle. Exodus 38:26 tells us that the total

number of men who were twenty years and older in the earlier census was 603,550 men: *"a bekah for each man (that is, half a shekel, according to the shekel of the sanctuary), for everyone included in the numbering from twenty years old and above, for 603, 550 men."* This is the same total in Numbers 1:46 - *"all who were numbered were 603,550."*

Although a census was taken on two different occasions, the number in Exodus 38 is the same as in Numbers 1. This is not surprising, because the Exodus census was taken only about nine months before the census in Numbers. The number of nineteen-year-olds who turned twenty during this interim was likely about the same number of older men who died.

What doctrinal points can we glean from Numbers 1? Certainly one lesson from this chapter is that God expects His people to maintain order. God didn't want His people to be a disorganized mass, traveling around in the desert! No! Each tribe was numbered, and each person was registered by name, according to their families and their households.

God expects His people to maintain order today, especially for worship and for service. In 1 Corinthians 14, instructions are given about worship in the church. The passage concludes with this admonition: *"Let all things be done decently and in order"* (v40). The Holy Spirit will not be limited or quenched when worship and service to the Lord are done properly and in an orderly manner. God expects His people to maintain order.

2. God expects His people to maintain holiness.

In verses 47-54, the tribe of Levi was given the special responsibility of caring for everything associated with the Tabernacle. In fact, the Levites were to protect the Tabernacle from any desecration. They were to maintain the holy character of God's dwelling place in the midst of His people.

This is also true today. God expects His people to maintain holiness. Some believers in Corinth died because they participated in the Lord's Supper in an unworthy, sinful state, not recognizing the holy character of the "Lord's Supper." *"For he who eats and drinks in an unworthy manner eats and drinks judgment to himself, not discerning the Lord's body. For this reason many are weak and sick among you, and many sleep"* (1 Corinthians 11:29-30). God had taken them to heaven by disciplinary death, because the holy character of the Lord's Supper was not being maintained.

God must judge His people when they fail to maintain holiness. This applies to all areas of life. 1 Peter 1:15-16 says *"but as He who called you is holy, you also be holy in all your conduct, because it is written, 'Be holy, for I am holy.'"* As an example, what about maintaining holiness in our jokes? God has a sense of humor, and He has created us with a sense of humor, so there are times and places for jokes -- but in at times and places some jokes are not appropriate. Sometimes jokes go too far, and they lower God's holy character. Even Christians are not immune from desecrating holy things by inappropriate talk and actions. So let's be careful! God expects His people to maintain holiness.

Practical Application

Assume the Clarity of Scripture.

“Assume the clarity of Scripture” is a principle of Biblical Hermeneutics - that is, biblical interpretation. What does that mean? It means we should assume that the **clearest** and most **straightforward meaning** of a passage in the Bible **is very likely the correct interpretation!**

This principle of hermeneutics certainly applies in Numbers 1, in reference to the big numbers in this chapter. If there were 633,550 men twenty years of age and above (v46), then several million total Israelites must have left Egypt.

Some scholars have trouble with such a large number of people coming out of Egypt and surviving in the wilderness for forty years, so they try to lower the totals given here for the different tribes. They try various ways -- but they can't do it without tampering with the **straightforward meaning** of the text! They're not assuming the **clarity** of Scripture. But there's no problem with these large numbers of people surviving the Exodus and the wilderness, if you believe what the Bible clearly says: God miraculously led His people through the Red Sea and miraculously provided for them in the wilderness! For example, *“The Lord says, ‘During the forty years that I led you through the wilderness, your clothes **did not** wear out, nor did the sandals on your feet’” (Deuteronomy 29:5).*

A few years ago I heard a lecture given by a biblical scholar who didn't believe in the inerrancy of Scripture. He was trying to build a case that only a relatively small number of Israelites who left Egypt at the Exodus - not several million people. In his view, many of the Jews were already in the land of Canaan – in fact, they had never gone down to Egypt at all! Well, I just happened to be reading Numbers 1 in my devotional reading, and I clearly saw that the result of ignoring the **clarity of Scripture** means tearing entire chapters out of the Bible!

So don't practice **“bad hermeneutics”!** Assume the **clarity** of Scripture!