

Numbers 2: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 00] Numbers chapter 2. The Lord spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying, The people of Israel shall camp each by his own standard, with the banners of their fathers' houses. They shall camp facing the tent of meeting on every side. Those to camp on the east side, toward the sunrise, shall be of the standard of the camp of Judah by their companies. The chief of the people of Judah being Nashon the son of Amminadab, his company as listed being 74,600.

Those to camp next to him shall be the tribe of Issachar, the chief of the people of Issachar being Nethanel the son of Zuar, his company as listed being 54,400. Then the tribe of Zebulun, the chief of the people of Zebulun being Eliab the son of Helon, his company as listed being 57,400.

All those listed of the camp of Judah by their companies was 186,400. They shall set out first on the march. On the south side shall be the standard of the camp of Reuben by their companies, the chief of the people of Reuben being Eliza the son of Shediah, his company as listed being 46,500. And those to camp next to him shall be the tribe of Simeon, the chief of the people of Simeon being Shalumiel the son of Zuru-Shaddai, his company as listed being 59,300. Then the tribe of Gad, the chief of the people of Gad being Eliasaph the son of Reul, his company as listed being 45,650. All those listed of the camp of Reuben by their companies were 151,450. They shall set out second. Then the tent of meeting shall set out with the camp of the Levites in the midst of the camps.

As they camp, so shall they set out, each in position standard by standard. On the west side shall be the standard of the camp of Ephraim by their companies, the chief of the people of Ephraim being Elisha the son of Amihut, his company as listed being 40,500. And next to him shall be the tribe of Manasseh, the chief of the people of Manasseh being Gamaliel the son of Pedazur, his company as listed being 32,200. Then the tribe of Benjamin, the chief of the people of Benjamin being Abidon the son of Gideoni, his company as listed being 35,400. All those listed of the camp of Ephraim by their companies were 108,100. They shall set out third on the march. On the north side shall be the standard of the camp of Dan by their companies, the chief of the people of Dan being Ahaizah the son of Amishadai, his company as listed being 62,700. And those to camp next to him shall be the tribe of Asher, the chief of the people of Asher being Pagiel the son of Okhran, his company as listed being 41,500. Then the tribe of Naphtali, the chief of the people of Naphtali being

[2 : 36] Ahirah the son of Enan, his company as listed being 53,400. All those listed of the camp of Dan were 157,600. They shall set out last, standard by standard. These are the people of Israel as listed by their fathers' houses. All those listed in the camps by their companies were 603,550. But the Levites were not listed among the people of Israel as the Lord commanded Moses. Thus did the people of Israel, according to all that the Lord commanded Moses. So they camped by their standards, and so they set out, each one in his clan according to his father's house. Having been numbered in Numbers chapter 1, in Numbers chapter 2 the tribes of Israel are arrayed around the tabernacle. We have already considered the possibility of astral or heavenly symbolism in the numbers of Numbers chapter 1, and when we consider the order of the tabernacle it could be likened to the sun with constellations around it. In the tabernacle and the gathering of Israel around it, we have a correspondence with the heavenly temple. In being arrayed around the tabernacle in such a way,

Israel is being brought up to participate in this higher order. It is not just the tabernacle in their midst that is of great significance, it's the whole camp. Around the 13th century BC, the Egyptian army under Ramses II adopted the formation of the military camp around the king's tent. Gordon Wenham notes the similarity between this formation and the formation of the camp of Israel. The camp here is divided into four groups. The first group consists of Judah, Issachar and Zebulun. These are all tribes of Leah.

The second group, Reuben, Simeon and Gad, are descended from Leah and Zilpah. The third group, Ephraim, Manasseh and Benjamin, are all Rachel tribes. The fourth group, Dan, Asher and Naphtali, are from Bilhah and Zilpah. There are the same clusters of three in chapter 1 verses 20 to 42, but the order there is south, east, west, north, rather than east, south, west, north, as we have in this chapter. This isn't the only time in scripture where we have attention paid to the ordering of gates and the ordering of the tribes. Such attention is especially noteworthy in symbolic passages, where it seems likely that there is some import to the order in which the tribes are listed.

We have such a list in Ezekiel chapter 48 verses 30 to 35. These shall be the exits of the city. On the north side, which is to be 4,500 cubits by measure, three gates, the gate of Reuben, the gate of Judah and the gate of Levi, the gates of the city being named after the tribes of Israel.

On the east side, which is to be 4,500 cubits, three gates, the gate of Joseph, the gate of Benjamin and the gate of Dan. On the south side, which is to be 4,500 cubits by measure, three gates, the gate of Simeon, the gate of Issachar and the gate of Zebulun. On the west side, which is to be 4,500 cubits, three gates, the gate of Gad, the gate of Asher and the gate of Naphtali.

[5 : 30] The circumference of the city shall be 18,000 cubits and the name of the city from that time on shall be. The Lord is there. Once again, we see some sort of loose maternal clustering of the tribes.

The northern tribes, Reuben, Judah and Levi, are tribes of Leah. Joseph, Benjamin and Dan in the east are tribes of Rachel and her handmaid Bilhah. Simeon, Issachar and Zebulun in the south are of Leah. Gad, Asher and Naphtali in the west are tribes of the handmaids Zilpah and Bilhah. David Chilton suggests that we have an implicit ordering of the tribes in the book of Revelation as well on the gates. Revelation chapter 7 verses 4 to 8 gives the order of the tribes in the 144,000 sealed persons.

In Revelation chapter 21 verses 12 to 13, we are told that the city had a great high wall with 12 gates and at the gates 12 angels and on the gates the names of the 12 tribes of the sons of Israel were inscribed. On the east three gates, on the north three gates, on the south three gates and on the west three gates. If we put these passages together, we can order the tribes around the city in the order that their names are given in Revelation chapter 7, from the east to the north, from the north to the west, from the east to the south and from the south to the west. This yields an order in which Judah, Reuben, Simeon are together, the senior Leah tribes, Gad, Asher and Naphtali are together, the handmaid tribes, Levi, Issachar and Zebulun, junior Leah tribes are together, and then Manasseh, Joseph and Benjamin are together, all tribes of Rachel. James Jordan and others have seen connection between the tribes and the signs of the zodiac. Judah is connected of course to the lion. He's described as a lion's cub in Genesis chapter 49 verse 9. That would be Leo. Reuben corresponds with the water-carrying man. He's described as a man who's unstable as water in Genesis chapter 49 verse 4. That would be Aquarius. Ephraim with his brother is spoken of as the first-born bull in Deuteronomy chapter 33 verse 17. That would connect with the bull and with Taurus. Dan is spoken of as the serpent, a serpent in the way in Genesis chapter 49 verse 17. That would connect him with Scorpio, which can be seen as an eagle, a serpent, or a scorpion. More interestingly, this also reminds us of Ezekiel chapter 1 verses 4 to 10, where we have the description of the chariot vision of Ezekiel.

As I looked, behold, a stormy wind came out of the north, and a great cloud with brightness around it, and fire flashing forth continually. And in the midst of the fire, as it were, gleaming metal.

[8 : 03] And from the midst of it came the likeness of four living creatures. And this was their appearance. They had a human likeness, but each had four faces, and each of them had four wings. Their legs were straight, and the soles of their feet were like the sole of a calf's foot. And they sparkled like burnished bronze. Under their wings, on their four sides, they had human hands. And the four had their faces and their wings thus. Their wings touched one another. Each of them went straight forward, without turning as they went. As for the likeness of their faces, each had a human face. The four had the face of a lion on the right side. The four had the face of an ox on the left side. And the four had the face of an eagle. The throne chariot and the living creatures seem to come from the north, and the face that's facing the prophet seems to be that of the human being. This would make the man's face the south-facing countenance of the cherubim. The lion on the right side would be facing east, the ox would be facing towards the west, and then the eagle would be facing back towards the north.

If we rightly identified the tribes with the zodiacal signs and their symbols, Judah with the lion, Reuben with the man, Ephraim with the bull, and Dan with the serpent or eagle, then the order of the faces in the four cardinal directions in the desert camp corresponds with the order of the cherubim or living creatures in the vision that Ezekiel has of the Lord's chariot throne.

Once again, this would underline the fact that the earthly tabernacle mirrors in some sense the heavenly temple. As we have already seen possible connections between the numbering of Israel and calendrical symbolism, perhaps the possibility of such a connection should not so surprise us. We should however note that the association of the tribes with these particular zodiacal signs, one that many have argued for, does not actually yield the typical ordering of the signs of the zodiac around the camp. A question to consider, where else in scripture might we have allusions to the signs of the zodiac? How can we understand such references without falling prey to the superstitions of astrology?