

Numbers 1: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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[0 : 0 0] Numbers chapter 1. The Lord spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai, in the tent 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 people of Israel, by clans, by fathers' houses, according to the number of names, every male, head by head, from twenty years old and upward, all in Israel who are able to go to war. You and Aaron shall list them, company by company, and there shall be with you a man from each tribe, each man being the head of the house of his fathers. And these are the names of the men who shall assist you, from Reuben, Eleazar the son of Shediah, from Simeon, Jalumiel the son of Zerushaddai, from Judah, Nashon 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, Elishamah the son of Ammihad, and from Manasseh, Gamaliel the son of Pedazur, from Benjamin, Abidun the son of Gideoni, from Dan, Ahiazah the son of Amishaddai, from Asher,

Pagiel the son of Achran, from Gad, Eliasaph the son of Duel, from Naphtali, Ahira the son of Enan. These were the ones chosen from the congregation, the chiefs of their ancestral tribes, the heads of the clans of Israel. Moses and Aaron took these men who had been named, and on the first day of the second month they assembled a whole congregation together, who registered themselves by clans, by fathers' houses, according to the number of names from twenty years old and upward, head by head, as the Lord commanded Moses. So he listed them in the wilderness of Sinai. The people of Reuben, Israel's firstborn, their generations, by their clans, by their fathers' houses, according to the number of names, head by head, every male from twenty years old and upward, all who were able to go to war. Those listed of the tribe of Reuben were forty-six thousand five hundred. Of the people of Simeon, their generations, by their clans, by their fathers' houses, those of them who were listed, according to the number of names, head by head, every male from twenty years old and upward, all who were able to go to war. Those listed of the tribe of Simeon were 59,300. Of the people of

Gad, their generations, by their clans, by their fathers' houses, according to the number of the names, from twenty years old and upward, all who were able to go to war. Those listed of the tribe of Gad were 45,650. Of the tribe of Judah, their generations, by their clans, by their fathers' houses, according to the number of names, from twenty years old and upward, every man able to go to war. Those listed of the tribe of Judah were 74,600. Of the people of Issachar, their generations, by their clans, by their fathers' houses, according to the number of names, from twenty years old and upward, every man able to go to war. Those listed of the tribe of Issachar were 54,400. Of the people of Zebulun, their generations, by their clans, by their fathers' houses, according to the number of names, from twenty years old and upward, every man able to go to war. Those listed of the tribe of Zebulun were 57,400. Of the people of Joseph, namely of the people of Ephraim, their generations, by their clans, by their fathers' houses, according to the number of names, from twenty years old and upward, every man able to go to war. Those listed of the tribe of Ephraim were 40,500. Of the people of Manasseh, their generations, by their clans, by their fathers' houses, according to the number of names, from twenty years old and upward, every man able to go to war. Those listed of the tribe of Manasseh were 32,200. Of the people of

Benjamin, their generations, by their clans, by their fathers' houses, according to the number of names, from twenty years old and upward, every man able to go to war. Those listed of the tribe of Benjamin were 35,400. Of the people of Dan, their generations, by their clans, by their fathers' houses, according to the number of names, from twenty years old and upward, every man able to go to war.

Those listed of the tribe of Dan were 62,700. Of the people of Asher, their generations, by their clans, by their fathers' houses, according to the number of names, from twenty years old and upward, every man able to go to war. Those listed of the tribe of Asher were 41,500. Of the people of Naphtali, their generations, by their clans, by their fathers' houses, according to the number of names, from twenty years old and upward, every man able to go to war. Those listed of the tribe of Naphtali were 53,400. These are those who were listed, whom Moses and Aaron listed with the help of the chiefs of Israel, twelve men, each representing his father's house. So all those listed of the people of Israel, by their fathers' houses, from twenty years old and upward, every man able to go to war in Israel. All those listed were 603,550. But the Levites were not listed along with them by their ancestral tribe. For the Lord spoke to Moses, saying, Only the tribe of Levi you shall not list, and you shall not take a census of them among the people of Israel. But appoint the Levites over the tabernacle of the testimony, and over all its furnishings, and over all that belongs to it.

[5 : 11] They are to carry the tabernacle and all its furnishings, and they shall take care of it, and shall camp around the tabernacle. When the tabernacle is to set out, the Levites shall take it down. And when the tabernacle is to be pitched, the Levites shall set it up. And if any outsider comes near, he shall be put to death. The people of Israel shall pitch their tents by their companies, each man in his own camp, and each man by his own standard. But the Levites shall camp around the tabernacle of the testimony, so that there may be no wrath on the congregation of the people of Israel.

And the Levites shall keep guard over the tabernacle of the testimony. Thus did the people of Israel. They did according to all that the Lord commanded Moses. The book of Numbers is the fourth book of the Bible and of the Pentateuch. It covers the period from the end of Israel's time at Mount Sinai to their arrival at the borders of the promised land almost 40 years later. It is in many respects a puzzling book. It seems at first glance to be an amalgam of many disparate elements. There are long lists relating to censuses, to sacrifices, and then there's lore and narrative material. These various types of material don't seem to be carefully ordered, but all mixed up together. The reader might well wonder whether there's any logic to it all. Most of the opening 10 chapters of the book occur at Mount Sinai. From Mount Sinai, the people then go to Kadesh, and then they later go from Kadesh to the plains of Moab.

The book of Exodus ended shortly after the beginning of the second year after the Exodus from Egypt. The laws given in the book of Leviticus are given around that same time, overlapping with the final chapters of the book of Exodus. Gordon Wenham argues that there are key parallels to be observed between the three great journeys of Israel, from the Red Sea to Sinai, Sinai to Kadesh, and Kadesh to the plains of Moab. These parallels suggest that we need to think in terms of three cycles, and part of the first cycle along with the second and third cycles feature in the book of Numbers. Wenham lists some of the events that occur in two or more of these cycles.

They're led by a cloud. They win a victory over Egypt. There's a victory song. Miriam appears at a key point. The people complain. Moses intercedes for the people. There's an important well. There's manna and quail. There's water from the rock. There's a victory over Amalek. And then Jethro appears.

Along with these three parallel journeys, there are three parallel stops at Mount Sinai, at Kadesh, and on the plains of Moab prior to entering the promised land. There are further paralleled events at these parallel stops. Wenham lists them as follows. There are divine promises given. There is a 40-day period. There's rebellion. Moses intercedes for the people. There is judgment.

[7 : 46] There is plague. There are laws given concerning sacrifice. An important legal case occurs. There's rebellion against the priests. There's atonement through the priests or the Levites. There are priestly prerogatives laid out. Impurity rules are given. And a census is taken. The book of Numbers begins with the taking of a census. This is the first of two great censuses recorded in the book. Together they are the reason why the book has the name that it does. The taking of the census prepares the people for entry into the land. It is a numbering of the people for military service. The census that takes place at the beginning of Numbers chapter 1 seems to be the same as that which occurred in Exodus chapter 38.

This prepared the people for war, but it also provided material for the building of the tabernacle. It connected the company of the people with the tabernacle structure. The end of the book of Exodus focused upon the construction of the tabernacle. The book of Leviticus could be seen as a filling of what had been formed in the tabernacle. The tabernacle structure was filled with priests and with sacrifices. Its order was also upheld through principles of holiness. Towards the end of the book we saw the focus moving outward to include the wider body of the people. The people making vows, for instance, to offer to the Lord, not merely the priests offering ascension offerings as we had at the very beginning of the book. We might see the book of Numbers as a further phase in this development.

More attention is now given to the larger body of the nation and how they are going to be ordered with the tabernacle in their midst. As Rabbi David Foreman has argued, the importance of this book, in part, is the counting of the people. Not just counting in the sense of numbering, but the mattering of the people. They are an important part of the picture too. They are not just trailing after the tabernacle and the priests in a long procession, but they are a part of the larger picture being ordered around it. Within these chapters we get a sense of the larger structure of Israel as a people. There is the congregation, later becoming the assembly. It's the larger representative body of the people. On some occasions this constitutes the entire nation, every single person included, for instance in certain events of covenant renewal. On other occasions it's all of the adult males. On yet other occasions the congregation might be the leaders of the people who act on the nation's behalf. Jacob Milgram argues that for the most part the congregation seems to be an ad hoc emergency council assembled to deal with trans-tribal crises rather than a standing body. The nation, as it appears in these chapters, has a number of levels of organisation to it. At the highest level there are national leaders, like Moses and Aaron. On the level below that there are the tribes, tribes like Levi, Simeon, Gad, Asher. Below the level of the tribes there are the patriarchal houses, so in the case of Levi that would be Gershon, Kohath, Morari.

Beneath those patriarchal houses there can be clans, so the Malites and Mushites are clans of Morari. Chiefs could be within a tribe, or the chief of an entire tribe, a tribal representative.

So in the case of the former, Zoriel, the son of Abahel, is the chief of the father's house of the clans of Morari, so he would represent the Malites and the Mushites. This level of tribal organisation did not seem to persist in the long term, although Milgram notes its use in the case of Reuben, Simeon and Asher in the books of Chronicles. He suggests that this sort of clan structure might have persisted in some of the less settled tribes. Each tribe counted itself and reported back to Moses, enabling the census to be finished fairly quickly. Also, as they are not spread out, as they would be within the land, it could proceed much more swiftly. The numbering includes all of the adult males from 20 years and up, everyone suitable for war. Reasoning from the analogy of the Levites, Milgram argues that no exemptions seem to have been granted. To assist Moses and Aaron in conducting the census, a chief from each of the ancestral tribes was chosen. The names of these figures are given to us in verses 5 to 15. We can presume that this pattern of delegation continued all of the way down. Although they were being mustered for war, the numbering of the people also later had to do with the size of their possession in the land. The repeated expression, their generations, by their clans, by their father's houses, according to the number of the names, from 20 years old and upward, all who were able to go to war, probably gives us some sort of indication of the pattern of the numbering process. The numbers all seem to be rounded to the nearest hundred, save in the case of Gad, which has 45,650. The great size of the numbers has often perplexed commentators, who wonder how such a great company could have been sustained for so long in the wilderness. Besides this, there is the question of why so few could be mustered for battles in places like Judges chapter 4, in the fight against Sisera. If the tribes had so many men of fighting age at this point in their history, where did they all disappear? There is also the question of the ratio of the firstborn males that we find later on to the number of fighting males, a ratio of about 27 to 1, which is mind-boggling. While the number of adult males in the tribes remains fairly constant from chapter 1 to chapter 26 with the second census, there are some dramatic changes. For instance, the tribe of

[12 : 40] Simeon goes from 59,300 down to 22,200. Meanwhile, Manasseh jumps from 32,200 to 52,700. Some have speculated that the text has become corrupted, or that a scribe mistook a number that could serve double purpose, either for the number of thousand or for a family, for instance. As Wenham notes, this position was advanced by Flinders Petri. Understanding the text this way would lead to a different sort of translation. Summarising this position, Wenham observes that the confusion of the two meanings for thousand and family would have produced a misunderstanding where the textual statement the tribe of Reuben consisted of 46 families containing 500 men was misunderstood as the statement that it had 46,500 men. A very different claim indeed. Applied to the numbers of the whole nation, it would give us approximately 600 families with around 5,500 men. There are several variations upon Petri's suggestion, some of them with numbers for the entire company that are considerably higher.

There are, however, as Wenham observes, complicating factors. For instance, in Exodus chapter 38, verses 25 to 26, we read, The silver from those of the congregation who were recorded was a hundred talents and 1,775 shekels by the shekel of the sanctuary. A beaker a head, that is half a shekel by the shekel of the sanctuary, for everyone who was listed in the records, from 20 years old and upward, for 603,550 men. If we are going to change the number of the people in the census, we also have to change the sum of the mustering money. The number 600,000 is mentioned on several occasions, for instance in Exodus chapter 12, verse 37, and the people of Israel journeyed from Ramses to Succoth, about 600,000 men on foot, besides women and children. And then again in Numbers chapter 11, verse 21, But Moses said, The numbering of the Levites, as it is broken down differently, is also difficult to square with the claim that there has been some misapprehension of the meaning of the word thousand. Taking everything into account, it seems most likely that we're supposed to take the numbers as they are, and to take them literally. Of course, this still leaves us with many questions. A further set of questions that we must ask concerns their possible symbolic import. We should begin by observing that the number 600,000 can be broken down into 12 times 50 times 10 cubed. 12, of course, is associated with the tribes of Israel.

10 cubed, or 1,000, is associated with a full company, and 50 is a military numbering. In Exodus chapter 13, verse 18, and Joshua chapter 1, verse 14, the text literally refers to the people entering into the promised land and leaving the land of Egypt in 50s, or possibly in fives. 600,000 then, is a very felicitous number to represent the full company of Israel in military array. In Numbers chapter 3, verse 46, we are given the number of the firstborn that exceeded the number of the Levites, 273, the number of the Levites being 22,000. A scholar named Barnuin made the intriguing suggestion that there is a connection between the numbers of the census and important astronomical numbers.

Before we even entertain such a proposal, we need to ask why we might expect to find such a connection to begin with. The first thing to note is that there is a symbolic connection between Israel and the heavenly host. They will be arranged around the tabernacle, which is elsewhere compared to the sun, and arranged at 12 different points. There is a parallel between the heavens above and the heavens beneath, the order of the tabernacle. Abraham was promised that his descendants would be like the stars in the heaven, not merely in the sense of their number, but also in the sense of their rule. Besides this, we should consider the great calendrical focus that we find within the Pentateuch, and also the great significance given to astronomical phenomena within the ancient world.

The elaborate marking out of time by the stars in the heavens is something that's introduced on the fourth day of creation. Genesis chapter 1 verse 14. And God said, let there be lights in the expanse of the heavens to separate the day from the night, and let them be for signs and for seasons and for days and for years. In their attention to the heavens, the ancients were trying to find more elaborate and extended structures of time within them. Besides all of this, there is the odd character of the numbers within the text itself. The way that they are given to us invites closer examination.

[17 : 00] We have the number 600,000, and then the additional amount of 3,550 in the first case, and then 1,730 in the second. We have already noted the possible significance of the rounded number of Israel.

Perhaps we're supposed to pay attention to the remainder too. We're used to thinking in terms of a solar calendar. When we think in terms of a lunar calendar, it's measured differently. The synodical lunar month, the period of the moon's orbit with respect to the line joining the sun and the earth, is around 29 and a half days. The sidereal lunar month, on the other hand, is the time of the moon's sidereal revolution, relative to apparently fixed stars, and that's around 27.3 days. 27.3 might ring a few bells if we've read a bit further ahead. In chapter 3, we have 273, or 27.3 times 10, more firstborn males of Israel, beyond the number of the Levites. Perhaps notable is the fact that they're from a month old and upward. When we remove the 600,000 from Israel's census, we get 3,550. Divide that by 10 again, we get 355. The sidereal lunar calendar is 13 months in length, and it has 355 days. The 273, the remainder of the firstborn of

Israel, in chapter 3, is the number of the month. The 3,550, the remainder when the rounded number of Israel is removed from the total census, gives us the number of the year. Besides this, we might consider the way that there are 12 or 13 tribes of Israel, depending upon our numbering. Do we include Levi? Do we include the double tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh, under Joseph? This difference between 12 or 13 might remind us of the difference between the 12 months of a synodical year, and the 13 months in a sidereal lunar year. Besides this, when we divide the number of Israel, 600,000, by the number of the Levites, 22,000, we get approximately 27.3, again the number of days in a sidereal month. All of this is highly speculative, but it would not at all surprise me if there were lunar astronomical and calendrical symbolism at play here. The tribe of Levi is the only tribe not numbered in this chapter. They're going to be appointed for a different task, to manage the items of the tabernacle. They will also be camping directly around the tabernacle. A question to consider. In verse 49, they're told not to list or count the tribe of Levi, and in verse 50, there's a play upon the same route, as we're told that they should be appointed over the tabernacle of the testimony. Might this play upon verbal routes, between counting and appointing, help us to understand something of a deeper connection here?