

Numbers 26: Biblical Reading and Reflections

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Preacher: Alastair Roberts

[0 : 0 0] Numbers chapter 26. After the plague, the Lord said to Moses and to Eliezer the son of Aaron the priest, Take a census of all the congregation of the people of Israel, from twenty years old and upward, by their fathers' houses, all in Israel who are able to go to war. And Moses and Eliezer the priest spoke with them in the plains of Moab by the Jordan at Jericho, saying, Take a census of the people from twenty years old and upward, as the Lord commanded Moses. The people of Israel who came out of the land of Egypt were Reuben the firstborn of Israel, the sons of Reuben, of Hanok the clan of the Hanukites, of Paliu the clan of the Paliuites, of Hezron the clan of the Hezronites, of Carmi the clan of the Carmites. These are the clans of the Reubenites, and those listed were 43,730, and the sons of Paliu, Eliab, the sons of Eliab, Nemuel, Dathan, and Abiram. These are the Dathan and Abiram, chosen from the congregation, who contended against Moses and Aaron in the company of Korah, when they contended against the Lord. And the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them up together with Korah, when that company died, when the fire devoured two hundred and fifty men, and they became a warning. But the sons of Korah did not die.

The sons of Simeon, according to their clans, of Nemuel, the clan of the Nemuelites, of Jamin, the clan of the Jaminites, of Jakin, the clan of the Jakinites, of Zerah, the clan of the Zerites, of Shul, the clan of the Shurites. These are the clans of the Simeonites, 22,200.

The sons of Gad, according to their clans, of Zephon, the clan of the Zephonites, of Haggai, the clan of the Haggites, of Shunai, the clan of the Shunites, of Osnai, the clan of the Osnites, of Eri, the clan of the Erites, of Arod, the clan of the Erodites, of Aureli, the clan of the Erelites. These are the clans of the sons of Gad, as they were listed, 40,500. The sons of Judah were Ur and Onan, and Ur and Onan died in the land of Canaan. And the sons of Judah, according to their clans, were of Shelah, the clan of the Shelanites, of Perez, the clan of the Perizzites, of Zerah, the clan of the Zerahites. And the sons of Perez were of Hezron, the clan of the Hezronites, of Hamel, the clan of the Hamelites. These are the clans of Judah, as they were listed, 76,500. The sons of Issachar, according to their clans, of Tola, the clan of the Tolaites, of Puva, the clan of the Punites, of Jashub, the clan of the Jashubites, of Shimron, the clan of the Shimronites.

These are the clans of Issachar, as they were listed, 64,300. The sons of Zebulun, according to their clans, of Sered, the clan of the Seredites, of Elon, the clan of the Elonites, of Jaliel, the clan of the Jalielites. These are the clans of the Zebulunites, as they were listed, 60,500. The sons of Joseph, according to their clans, Manasseh and Ephraim. The sons of Manasseh. Of Mekir, the clan of the Mekirites. And Mekir was the father of Gilead. Of Gilead, the clan of the Gileadites. These are the sons of Gilead. Of Eazar, the clan of the Eazarites. Of Helak, the clan of the Helokites. And of Azrael, the clan of the Azraelites. And of Shechem, the clan of the Shechemites. And of Shemida, the clan of the Shemidaite. And of Hepha, the clan of the Hephaite. Now Zelophehad, the son of Hepha, had no sons but daughters. And the names of the daughters of Zelophehad were Mela, Noah, Hogla, Milcah, and Terza. These are the clans of Manasseh, and those listed were 52,700.

These are the sons of Ephraim according to their clans. Of Shuthullah, the clan of the Shuthilahites, of Bika, the clan of the Bikarites, of Tehan, the clan of the Tehanites, and these are the sons of Shuthilah, of Iran, the clan of the Iranites. These are the clans of the sons of Ephraim as they were listed, 32,500. These are the sons of Joseph according to their clans.

[3 : 57] The sons of Benjamin according to their clans, of Bela, the clan of the Belaites, of Ashbel, the clan of the Ashbelites, of Ahiram, the clan of the Ahiramites, of Shephufam, the clan of the Shufamites, of Hufam, the clan of the Hufamites. And the sons of Bela were Ard and Naaman, of Ard, the clan of the Ardites, of Naaman, the clan of the Namites. These are the sons of Benjamin according to their clans, and those listed were 45,600. These are the sons of Dan according to their clans, of Shuham, the clan of the Shuhamites. These are the clans of Dan according to their clans.

All the clans of the Shuhamites, as they were listed, were 64,400. The sons of Ashur according to their clans, of Imna, the clan of the Imnites, of Ishvi, the clan of the Ishvites, of Boriah, the clan of the Boriites, of the sons of Boriah, of Heber, the clan of the Heberites, of Malkiel, the clan of the Malkielites, and the name of the daughter of Ashur was Sera. These are the clans of the sons of Ashur as they were listed, 53,400. The sons of Naphtali according to their clans, of Jaziel, the clan of the Jazielites, of Gunai, the clan of the Gunites, of Jizah, the clan of the Jezerites, of Shilam, the clan of the Shilamites. These are the clans of Naphtali according to their clans, and those listed were 45,400. This was the list of the people of Israel, 601,730.

The Lord spoke to Moses, saying, Among these the land shall be divided for inheritance according to the number of names. To a large tribe you shall give a large inheritance, and to a small tribe you shall give a small inheritance. Every tribe shall be given its inheritance in proportion to its list.

But the land shall be divided by lot. According to the names of the tribes of their fathers, they shall inherit. Their inheritance shall be divided according to lot, between the larger and the smaller. This was the list of the Levites according to their clans, of Gershon, the clan of the Gershonites, of Kohath, the clan of the Kohathites, of Morari, the clan of the Morarites.

These are the clans of Levi, the clan of the Libnites, the clan of the Hebronites, the clan of the Malites, the clan of the Mushites, the clan of the Korahites, and Kohath was the father of Amram.

[6 : 11] The name of Amram's wife was Jochebed, the daughter of Levi, who was born to Levi in Egypt. And she bore to Amram Aaron and Moses, and Miriam their sister. And to Aaron were born Nadab, Abihu, Eliezer, and Ithamar. But Nadab and Abihu died when they offered unauthorized fire before the Lord.

And those listed were twenty-three thousand, every male from a month old and upward. For they were not listed among the people of Israel, because there was no inheritance given to them among the people of Israel. These were those listed by Moses and Eliezer the priest, who listed the people of Israel in the plains of Moab by the Jordan at Jericho. But among these there was not one of those listed by Moses and Aaron the priest, who had listed the people of Israel in the wilderness of Sinai.

For the Lord had said of them, They shall die in the wilderness. Not one of them was left, except Caleb the son of Jephunneh, and Joshua the son of Nan. Numbers chapter 26 records the second census of the book, here taken before they were to enter into the promised land. This census was for the purpose of military preparation, and also for the purpose of the equitable division of the land among the tribes. It occurs after the plague of chapter 25, in which twenty-four thousand people were killed. The number of Israel then is greatly reduced from what it would have been. In chapter 25, Phineas had killed an Israelite man and a Midianite woman.

The Israelite man was Zimri, one of the sons of the chiefs of the father's houses of Simeon. In the census of Numbers chapter 1, the number of Simeon was 59,300. In Numbers chapter 26, however, their numbers are greatly depleted. They are down to 22,200. It seems reasonable to speculate that the 24,000 killed in the plague were mostly of the tribe of Simeon. Over the period of time between the two censuses, the tribe of Manasseh had greatly increased in number by over 20,000.

Asher, Issachar, and Benjamin had also greatly increased, while Naphtali and Ephraim had seen a significant drop in their numbers. The sum total of Israel's number is much the same as it was in Numbers chapter 1. There it was 603,550. Now it is 601,730. The difference between the two numbers is 1,820. Perhaps significant because the number 182 is half the number of days in a year. The tribes are numbered in the same order as they were back in chapter 1. Here as there, the numbering starts with the tribe of Reuben, the firstborn of Jacob. However, while senior in age, Reuben does not enjoy the preeminence among the brothers. Judah is the leading brother and tribe. The tribes are also numbered in the clusters that they appear in their camps around the tabernacle, though here it starts with the southern camp of Reuben, Simeon, and Gad, then moves to the eastern of Judah, Issachar, and Zebulun, then to the west, Ephraim, Manasseh, and Benjamin, and then finally to the north, Dan, Asher, and Naphtali.

[9 : 10] Of the four different sections of Israel's camp, the camp to the east, Judah, Issachar, and Zebulun, was by far the most numerous, with 201,300 persons within it. Dan, Asher, and Naphtali to the north was the second largest, with 163,200, then Ephraim, Manasseh, and Benjamin to the west, with 130,800. Finally, the least numerous part of the camp was Reuben, Simeon, and Gad, to the south, with 106,430 men. Both the tribes of Reuben and Simeon had lost significant numbers of persons through judgments of the Lord upon them. In numbering the tribes here, the tribes are broken down into various clans. These subdivisions would be more important for the division of the land that would later occur, enlisting the sons of Jacob, their sons, and the tribes that arose from them, with their various clans within them. The text also recalls earlier parts of the story, particularly related to unfaithful acts of the people that led to judgment.

The people being numbered here are the survivors and descendants of persons who have been judged on account of their unfaithfulness, and they need to learn relevant lessons from their forefathers' bad examples. Dathan and Abiram, for instance, descended from Reuben, were leaders of the rebellion of Korah, perishing along with their company, with the Lord's fire of judgment devouring 250 men.

Judah had lost two sons, Ur and Onan, on account of their unfaithfulness in the land of Canaan, a fact recalled in verse 19. The two sons of Aaron who were killed by the Lord for offering strange fire in Leviticus chapter 10, Nadab and Abihu, are mentioned in verse 61. Finally, in verses 64 and 65 of the chapter, we are told that not one of those numbered in the census had been among the people of Israel listed in the wilderness of Sinai. Like Dathan and Abiram and their company, Ur and Onan, and Nadab and Abihu, they had all died on account of their sin, save for Caleb the son of Jephunneh, and Joshua the son of Nun.

Besides preparing for war, the numbering of the tribes is for the purpose of the division of the inheritance of the land. Larger tribes like Judah would be given a large inheritance, but smaller tribes like Simeon would be given a smaller one.

The land itself would be divided by Lot. This does not make the manner in which the land was apportioned immediately obvious. How was it actually divided? According to Lot, or according to the size of the tribe? The text says it was both, but we might struggle to understand how both could be the case. This division of the land is also described in places like Numbers chapter 33 verse 54. You shall inherit the land by Lot according to your clans. To a large tribe you shall give a large inheritance, and to a small tribe you shall give a small inheritance. Wherever the Lot falls for anyone, that shall be his. According to the tribes of your fathers you shall inherit. The answer to the problem, it seems to me, is that the location of the tribes land was determined by Lot, and the size of the tribes land was determined according to their relative population.

[12:12] This division of the land among the tribes can be seen later on in the book of Joshua. The tribes in the main census are numbered according to their males from twenty years and upward. In the case of the Levites, they're numbered according to their males from a month old and upward. The number of the Levites increased by one thousand over the period of the Exodus. They do not receive land with the rest of the tribes, but cities will be apportioned for them, cities about which we read in chapter 35. Moses, Aaron, and Miriam are here all presented as the sons and daughter of Amram and Jochebed, the daughter of Levi. It seems quite unlikely that Jochebed was the direct daughter of Levi. Rather she was a descendant of Levi, perhaps of uncertain tribal genealogy.

A question to consider, what effect might the reminder of all of the unfaithful people who had died to that point have had upon Israel as they prepared to enter the promised land?

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