

God's People in the Wilderness: Numbers 1-2

[30 September 2018]

Review

- Implications of the titles and place in the Pentateuch
- Lessons from “seasons” in the wilderness
 - The wilderness is a place of testing
 - It is a place that fosters awareness of the presence of God
 - It is a place where we can easily lose our way
 - It is a dangerous place; we learn dependence on God
 - The wilderness is a place of refuge and restoration

Sinai Peninsula

- Southern part is a likely location for Israel's year-long sojourn at the foot of Mt. Sinai (Horeb)
- Our challenge: to consider the size of the community as it was camped there, received God's miraculous provisions, and then moved forward toward the Promised Land

Getting into the “Numbers”—The First Census [Chapter One]

- Where – the desert of Sinai—in the Tent of Meeting
- When - second year, first day of second month [after the celebration of Passover]
- Who –
 - all men eligible for army – twenty years and older—were counted
 - leaders of each tribe assisted in the process
 - Precision: generations, families, father's houses, number of names of all their “heads”
 - Levite families not counted; why? [see 1:47-53; returning to this]
 - 1:16 – “heads of the clans of Israel” [*alpei yisrael*]
- Why – primarily preparation for conquest and later land inheritance

“Computing the Numbers”

Reuben – 46 *eleph* and 500

Ephraim – 40 *eleph* and 500

Simeon – 59 *eleph* and 300

Manasseh – 32 *eleph* and 200

Gad – 45 *eleph* and 650

Benjamin – 35 *eleph* and 400

Judah – 74 *eleph* and 600

Dan – 62 *eleph* and 700

Issachar – 54 *eleph* and 400

Asher – 41 *eleph* and 500

Zebulun – 57 *eleph* and 400

Naphtali – 53 *eleph* and 400

What do we notice about these numbers? What do we do with them?

Reading eleph as “thousand” and simply adding gives total of 603,550.

These Numbers Recur

- Exodus 12:37 – “about six hundred thousand men on foot, besides women and children”
- Exodus 38:26 has the same number (603,550) in conjunction with the sanctuary half-shekel requirement
- We will see a number in the same ballpark (601,730) at the end of Numbers as they prepare to enter the land after the 40 years of wandering

What Potential Problems Might Be Raised

- Six hundred thousand fighting men implies at the least two to three million people (add women and those under 20 years of age). Two million people travelling through the wilderness, even with miraculous provision, seems unmanageable in the given topography.

- Later texts indicate on more than one occasion that there were too few Israelites to occupy the land (Ex 23:29-30; Deut 7:7). Given the population densities in Canaan at the time, 600,000 fighting men would have overwhelmed Canaan.
- The first battle at Ai was viewed as catastrophic with the loss of 36.

Internal Numbering Challenges

- Numbers 3:43 says the number of firstborn males a month old or more was 22,273. **If, however, the number of all males 20 and older was 603,550, that implies about one million males over one month old. If only 22,273 of those were firstborn, the numbers of males born into each family after the firstborns is staggering. It computes to nearly 50. Adding female children would approximately double that number.**
- **How might we address all these challenges?**

A Potential Solution

- Centers around the meaning of *eleph* (translated “clan” in 1:16). In addition to “thousand,” it can also mean “group,” or “a group united under a leader” = “troop”)
- **How would this work in this census context?**
 - Reuben, for example, would have had 46 troop or family units, 500 men (which would mean about 11 men per troop)
 - Determining the total would have meant adding tribal troop or family units separately from numbers of men - 598 troops or units + 5550 men
 - Later scribes read *eleph* solely as “thousand” and put them together - 598 thousand + 5550 = 603,550
 - In 2:3-31, the numbers for each tribe in the four encampments have been added in a similar fashion.
- The rounded total numbers of individuals in each tribe ranges from 200 to 700.
- Numbers of individuals in each troop within those tribal units would have ranged from 5 to 11 with an average of 8-9.
- This is not intended to accommodate all the appearances of numbers (see for example, 31:4-5 or 31:32-40 – much of which deals with animals)

A pause to sing!

Psalm 63

Camping Arrangements and Travel Instructions

- Roles of Levites
 - Care for and transport of the Tabernacle (1:50-51)
 - Protecting Israel from the holiness of God! (1:53)
- The Tent of Meeting and Levites were in the center (2:17)
- Key tribes on each side – at a safe distance
 - Judah to east (along with Zebulun and Issachar)
 - Reuben to the south (along with Simeon and Gad)
 - Ephraim to the west (with Manasseh and Benjamin)
 - Dan to the north (with Asher and Naphtali)
- Moving the sacred objects (4:5-15)