



Numbers - Chapter One

Summary of Chapter One

The first census, counting the men clan by clan, has two purposes:

1. To demonstrate the fulfilment of the promise to Abraham that his descendants would be as numerous as the sand on the seashore (Genesis 22:17).
2. To count the number of men over 20 years old who could fight. Both considerations should give the people confidence in their battle for the land.

The Levites, the priestly tribe, were not included in the census because they had a more important job than fighting. They were responsible for the tabernacle, God's dwelling place, the most vital part of the whole camp. Israel was the people of God, but without his presence with them in the tabernacle, there would have been no point to their existence. The Levites' task was to ensure God's continuing presence with Israel. They dismantled, carried, and reassembled the tabernacle (vv.50-51). They also guarded it from intruders. Entry to the tabernacle by laypeople could lead to divine wrath breaking out and the death of many Israelites, so the Levites were told to execute any outsider breaking in (vv.51-53). A similar threat had been made against anyone trying to approach God on Mount Sinai; refer to Exodus 19:11-13 and Hebrews 12:18-29).

I **Numbers 1:1-10:10 - Israel Prepares to Enter the Land**

The Book of Numbers tells how Israel moved from Mount Sinai to the Jordan Valley, the eastern border of the Promised Land. All the material in the first ten chapters relates Israel's preparations for a war of conquest.

II.a Numbers 1:1-54 - The First Census of Israel

See the chapter summary above.

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: ² Take a census of the whole congregation of Israelites, in their clans, by ancestral houses, according to the number of names, every male individually; ³ from twenty years old and upwards, everyone in Israel able to go to war. You and Aaron shall enrol them, company by company.

Numbers 1:1-3

The wilderness of Sinai is the area near Mount Sinai. Israel has been encamped there since Exodus 19:1 and will set out on their journey in Numbers 10:11.



The Book of Numbers details the Israelites' experience in the wilderness as they journeyed from Mount Sinai to Canaan. As with the exodus, it is difficult to establish the exact route that the Israelites took, but it is generally believed that they headed east from Mount Sinai until they reached the Red Sea, where they turned northward to the top of the gulf and on to Kadesh-barnea.

The tent of meeting, otherwise known as the tabernacle and described in Exodus 25:31-40, had been completed just one month earlier: <<*On the first day of the first month you shall set up the tabernacle of the tent of meeting*>> (Exodus 40:2) and now served as God's earthly dwelling in which he gave instructions to Moses. It thus reminded Israel of both Sinai and the Garden of Eden.

The first day of the second month, in the second year after they had come out of the land of Egypt was the first day of Ziv; a year and two weeks since the exodus, and ten and a half months since their arrival at Sinai. This provides continuity with both the Book of Exodus and Leviticus.

Everyone in Israel able to go to war indicates that the invasion of the land of Canaan was imminent. God only wanted the men to go into battle, i.e. according to the number of names, every male individually. Until recently this has been the model adopted by most nations throughout history. However, what differs here is the older starting age of 20 with no upper limit specified. It is generally accepted to be 60 years of age, thus aligning the fighting age with the same age range for men paying the highest votive offering: <<*Speak to the people of Israel and say to them: When a person makes an explicit vow to the Lord concerning the equivalent for a human being, the equivalent for a male shall be: from twenty to sixty years of age the equivalent shall be fifty shekels of silver by the sanctuary shekel*>> (Leviticus 27:2-3).

You and Aaron shall enrol them. This was predominately a military census to see who could fight on Israel's behalf in taking the Promised Land. This was the first step in taking the Promised Land, an inventory to ascertain Israel's fighting strength and to give them the confidence to go into battle. Although the Promised Land has been mentioned during the exodus before this point, the focus has been on getting to Mount Sinai and receiving the law. That was just the beginning; now, the focus turns towards entering the Promised Land and recognising it will be a battle. It can be imagined just how this census would affect the nation. As the count was made, every family would know preparation was being made for war.

Company by company. The order to count the potential soldiers was not meant to imply that Israel would take the land because of superior force or merely the bravery of these men, they would receive the Promised Land by the hand of God. Nevertheless, they still had to fight and know what they had available to them going into battle. Christians may fail in spiritual battle because they do not take an honest inventory about where they are spiritually. They may overestimate or

underestimate their spiritual strength and resources. This count of Israel would not let them do that.

In later times God would make it explicit to Gideon that it was not military might that won battles but the Lord's strength and he wanted the people to know that: <<*The Lord said to Gideon, 'The troops with you are too many for me to give the Midianites into their hand. Israel would only take the credit away from me, saying, "My own hand has delivered me"'*>> (Judges 7:2).

In their clans, by ancestral houses. God wanted the count made by their families because the strength of Israel was determined by looking at the strength of individual families.

⁴ A man from each tribe shall be with you, each man the head of his ancestral house. ⁵ These are the names of the men who shall assist you:

From Reuben, Elizur son of Shedeur.

⁶ From Simeon, Shelumiel son of Zurishaddai.

⁷ From Judah, Nahshon son of Amminadab.

⁸ From Issachar, Nethanel son of Zuar.

⁹ From Zebulun, Eliab son of Helon.

¹⁰ From the sons of Joseph:

from Ephraim, Elishama son of Ammihud;

from Manasseh, Gamaliel son of Pedahzur.

¹¹ From Benjamin, Abidan son of Gideoni.

¹² From Dan, Ahiezer son of Ammishaddai.

¹³ From Asher, Pagiel son of Ocran.

¹⁴ From Gad, Eliasaph son of Deuel.

¹⁵ From Naphtali, Ahira son of Enan.

¹⁶ These were the ones chosen from the congregation, the leaders of their ancestral tribes, the heads of the divisions of Israel.

¹⁷ Moses and Aaron took these men who had been designated by name,
¹⁸ and on the first day of the second month they assembled the whole congregation together. They registered themselves in their clans, by their ancestral houses, according to the number of names from twenty years old and upwards, individually, ¹⁹ as the Lord commanded Moses. So he enrolled them in the wilderness of Sinai.

Numbers 1:4-19

A man from each tribe shall be with you, each man the head of his ancestral house. Israel was organised according to the tribes that descended from the original twelve sons of Jacob, who was later renamed Israel by God. Each of these twelve tribes designated one who was the head of his father's house, who was to stand with Moses and stand for their whole tribe. In a sense, this is a representative form of government; each head of his father's house was essentially the 'governor' of the tribe.

Nahshon son of Amminadab is the head of the tribe of Judah and is recorded in the genealogy records of Jesus in Matthew 1:4 and Luke 3:32.

From the sons of Joseph. Although Joseph was the second youngest son of Jacob, he was bestowed the rights of the eldest son when Jacob declared Joseph's two sons to be his own: <<*Therefore your two sons, who were born to you in the land of Egypt before I came to you in Egypt, are now mine; Ephraim and Manasseh shall be mine, just as Reuben and Simeon are*>> (Genesis 48:5). Therefore, Ephraim and Manasseh became tribes in their own right. This maintains the twelve tribes when the tribe of Levi is omitted from the census (v.47).

Deuel is elsewhere called Reuel (2:14). The letters D (ד) and R (ר) are easily confused in Hebrew script. Deuel is most likely the correct version as it is also used in 7:42-47 and 10:20.

These were the ones chosen from the congregation. God names twelve individuals as the heads of each tribe. It is not clear if these men were already the chosen tribal leaders or if God was anointing them at this point.

On the first day of the second month. By appointing the chiefs of the tribes to count their own tribe, the census was begun on the very day it was commanded (v.18).

They registered themselves in their clans, individually. God shows that he was not just demonstrating the overall strength of his army; he wanted them to be known individually.

²⁰ The descendants of Reuben, Israel's firstborn, their lineage, in their clans, by their ancestral houses, according to the number of names, individually, every male from twenty years old and upwards, everyone able to go to war: ²¹ those enrolled of the tribe of Reuben were forty-six thousand five hundred.

²² The descendants of Simeon, their lineage, in their clans, by their ancestral houses, those of them that were numbered, according to the number of names, individually, every male from twenty years old and upwards, everyone able to go to war: ²³ those enrolled of the tribe of Simeon were fifty-nine thousand three hundred.

²⁴ The descendants of Gad, their lineage, in their clans, by their ancestral houses, according to the number of the names, from twenty years old and upwards, everyone able to go to war: ²⁵ those enrolled of the tribe of Gad were forty-five thousand six hundred and fifty.

²⁶ The descendants of Judah, their lineage, in their clans, by their ancestral houses, according to the number of names, from twenty years old and upwards, everyone able to go to war: ²⁷ those enrolled of the tribe of Judah were seventy-four thousand six hundred.

²⁸ The descendants of Issachar, their lineage, in their clans, by their ancestral houses, according to the number of names, from twenty years old and upwards, everyone able to go to war: ²⁹ those enrolled of the tribe of Issachar were fifty-four thousand four hundred.

³⁰ The descendants of Zebulun, their lineage, in their clans, by their ancestral houses, according to the number of names, from twenty years old and upwards, everyone able to go to war: ³¹ those enrolled of the tribe of Zebulun were fifty-seven thousand four hundred.

³² The descendants of Joseph, namely, the descendants of Ephraim, their lineage, in their clans, by their ancestral houses, according to the number of names, from twenty years old and upwards, everyone able to go to war: ³³ those enrolled of the tribe of Ephraim were forty thousand five hundred.

³⁴ The descendants of Manasseh, their lineage, in their clans, by their ancestral houses, according to the number of names, from twenty

years old and upwards, everyone able to go to war: ³⁵ those enrolled of the tribe of Manasseh were thirty-two thousand two hundred.

³⁶ The descendants of Benjamin, their lineage, in their clans, by their ancestral houses, according to the number of names, from twenty years old and upwards, everyone able to go to war: ³⁷ those enrolled of the tribe of Benjamin were thirty-five thousand four hundred.

³⁸ The descendants of Dan, their lineage, in their clans, by their ancestral houses, according to the number of names, from twenty years old and upwards, everyone able to go to war: ³⁹ those enrolled of the tribe of Dan were sixty-two thousand seven hundred.

⁴⁰ The descendants of Asher, their lineage, in their clans, by their ancestral houses, according to the number of names, from twenty years old and upwards, everyone able to go to war: ⁴¹ those enrolled of the tribe of Asher were forty-one thousand five hundred.

⁴² The descendants of Naphtali, their lineage, in their clans, by their ancestral houses, according to the number of names, from twenty years old and upwards, everyone able to go to war: ⁴³ those enrolled of the tribe of Naphtali were fifty-three thousand four hundred.

⁴⁴ These are those who were enrolled, whom Moses and Aaron enrolled with the help of the leaders of Israel, twelve men, each representing his ancestral house. ⁴⁵ So the whole number of the Israelites, by their ancestral houses, from twenty years old and upwards, everyone able to go to war in Israel — ⁴⁶ their whole number was six hundred and three thousand five hundred and fifty.

Numbers 1:20-46

Those enrolled of the tribe of Reuben were forty-six thousand five hundred.

Many people wonder if these numbers are accurate and literal, although rounded to the nearest hundred except in the case of the descendants of Gad. Some think that they are grossly exaggerated, and others have suggested they are increased by a factor of ten. Despite the objections of critics, it is best to trust the simple testimony of God's Word. Surely God could provide for such a multitude in the wilderness and occasional discrepancies in numbers are likely due to scribal errors.

The results of the census are recorded tribe by tribe. The number of men between the ages of 20 and probably 60 comes to a total of 603,550, which is the same

number found in Exodus 38:26, and also confirmed by Exodus 30:12-16; these are identified as everyone able to go to war in Israel (vv.45-46). When women, children, and men under 20 and over 60 are included, the total population would probably have been about 2 million. This remarkable fulfilment of the promises should have given the people every confidence that the invasion of Canaan would succeed. Regarding questions that have been raised concerning these large numbers refer to 'The Large Numbers in the Pentateuch' section in the Introduction document on the website. In this first census Manasseh is the smallest tribe and Judah is the largest. There are two tribes in the 30 thousands; three in the 40 thousands; four in the 50 thousands; one in the 60 thousands, and one in the 70 thousands.

In Numbers Chapter 26, 38 years later, this census is repeated. The total number of available soldiers will be almost the same, only a loss of some two thousand. However, the numbers of each tribe change significantly, and there is meaning in what happened to each tribe over these critical 38 years.

Judah is the largest tribe. This, like its position in the camp (2:3) and leading the nation on the march (2:9), indicates Judah's pre-eminence among the tribes. This is in line with Jacob's prophecy regarding his sons: <<*Judah, your brothers shall praise you; your hand shall be on the neck of your enemies; your father's sons shall bow down before you. Judah is a lion's whelp; from the prey, my son, you have gone up. He crouches down, he stretches out like a lion, like a lioness – who dares rouse him up? The sceptre shall not depart from Judah, nor the ruler's staff from between his feet, until tribute comes to him; and the obedience of the peoples is his. Binding his foal to the vine and his donkey's colt to the choice vine, he washes his garments in wine and his robe in the blood of grapes; his eyes are darker than wine, and his teeth whiter than milk*>> (Genesis 49:8-12). Both King David and Jesus came from the tribe of Judah.

⁴⁷ The Levites, however, were not numbered by their ancestral tribe along with them. ⁴⁸ The Lord had said to Moses: ⁴⁹ Only the tribe of Levi you shall not enrol, and you shall not take a census of them with the other Israelites. ⁵⁰ Rather you shall appoint the Levites over the tabernacle of the covenant, and over all its equipment, and over all that belongs to it; they are to carry the tabernacle and all its equipment, and they shall tend it, and shall camp around the tabernacle. ⁵¹ 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 any outsider who comes near shall be put to death. ⁵² The other Israelites shall camp in their respective regimental camps, by companies; ⁵³ but the Levites shall camp around the tabernacle of the

covenant, so that there may be no wrath on the congregation of the Israelites; and the Levites shall perform the guard duty of the tabernacle of the covenant. ⁵⁴ The Israelites did so; they did just as the Lord commanded Moses.

Numbers 1:47-54

The Levites, however, were not numbered by their ancestral tribe along with them. Because this was a census of potential soldiers, the tribe of Levi was not counted. They alone among the tribes did not go to war because they had special responsibility to God for the priestly duties of Israel.

Only the tribe of Levi you shall not enrol, and you shall not take a census of them with the other Israelites. It can also be seen that, as in the case of Levi, there are some things that cannot, or should not, be counted. Israel had to appreciate that some of the most important things cannot be counted. Taking inventory is fine; even a necessary first step in organising for victory in taking hold of God's promises. However, it must always be done with the understanding that some of the important factors cannot be counted, such as the Levites were not in Israel. No inventory is totally complete, and God always works mightily through things that cannot be counted.

Any outsider who comes near shall be put to death. Only the Levites could minister to erect and transport the tabernacle and all of its equipment. If any member from another tribe or a foreigner was to approach them, even if their intention was to assist, they would pay the ultimate price for attempting to do so.

The Israelites did so; they did just as the Lord commanded Moses. Counting, or taking inventory, is an essential step in organisation and moving forward. In preparing to enter the Promised Land Israel had to be organised, God is an organised God, as Paul notes: <<*And the spirits of prophets are subject to the prophets, for God is a God not of disorder but of peace*>> (1 Corinthians 14:32-33a); he moves through organisation even when people cannot figure it out! Therefore it was essential that Israel took inventory and saw where they were. God counts things. He counts the stars and has a name for each one: <<*He determines the number of the stars; he gives to all of them their names*>> (Psalm 147:4), and: <<*Lift up your eyes on high and see: Who created these? He who brings out their host and numbers them, calling them all by name; because he is great in strength, mighty in power, not one is missing*>> (Isaiah 40:26). God even counts and knows the number of hairs on a person's head: <<*And even the hairs of your head are all counted*>> (Matthew 10:30)!