

Numbers

The Tragedy of Unbelief

Even the most avid camper might find it a bit difficult to live for a year in the Sinai desert... especially if he had to camp with _____ other people who didn't have a lot of experience in desert camping.

It has been almost a full _____ since the Israelites arrived at the foot of Mt. Sinai, set up camp and began receiving instructions from God on how they should live. They are obviously anxious to get moving and to start a new life in the Promised Land. And now it's finally time for them to _____ their long-awaited journey, a journey that could normally be traveled in as little as _____ days.

Numbers records this journey to the Promised Land along with the Israelites' ten cases of faithless murmurings against God. The _____ of the people is astounding when measured against God's continued _____ and _____ of their sins. And yet, aren't _____ often guilty of the same cycle: sin, discipline, repentance, forgiveness, sin, discipline, repentance, forgiveness, etc?

Finally, after an arduous journey filled with unbelief, rebellion, heartache, and death, the Israelites arrive in Kadesh-Barnea, at the _____ of the long awaited Promised Land. _____ spies are sent in to check out the land and its inhabitants and _____ spies return with a very negative report. So the people once again decide to _____ against God and they _____ to enter the land that God has promised them. As a result of their rebellion, God condemns them to _____ years of wilderness wandering, one year for each day that the spies had been in the Promised Land.

The book of Numbers records the events that occurred during these 40 years as the generation that rebelled against God _____ out and a new generation takes its place.

Numbers can be divided into five major sections, based on Israel's geographical locations:

<u>Chapters</u>	<u>Location</u>
1-10	Israel at Mt. Sinai
11-12	Israel Journeying to Kadesh-Barnea
13-20	Israel at Kadesh-Barnea
21	Israel Journeying to Moab
22-36	Israel on the Plains of Moab

The book of Numbers derives its name from the _____ numberings, or censuses taken of the Jewish nation. The first census, recorded in chapter 1, was taken in the _____ year after the exodus from Egypt (Num. 1:1-3), and the second census was taken _____ years later (Num. 26:1-4), just before the Israelites entered the land of Canaan, i.e. the Promised Land.

The purpose of these two numberings was to measure the size of Israel's _____, as indicated in Numbers 1:45,46: *"All the Israelites twenty years old or more who were able to serve in Israel's army were counted according to their families. The total number was 603,550"* [see attached excursus on pp. 45-48 for an evaluation of this number].

But in spite of its name, and these two numberings, the main focus of the book of Numbers is actually on the four decades of _____ by the Jewish people in the desert wilderness. A better title for the book might have been "In the _____," which is actually how Jewish writings usually refer to this book.

The book starts with the newly formed nation of Israel being given instructions on _____ arrangements and various _____ rituals before they depart from Mt. Sinai (where they have spent the last year) and head to Kadesh-Barnea, the outskirts of Canaan, the Promised Land (Gen. 17:8; Ex. 6:3,4; Lev. 25:38; Deut. 32:49; 1 Chron. 16:18; Psa. 105:8-11). It is from Kadesh-Barnea that the twelve spies will be sent in order to spy out the land of Canaan in preparation for Israel's invasion (Num. 10:11-13). While the book of Leviticus covers only a one-month period, the book of Numbers covers a period of nearly _____ years, all spent in the _____.

Some key events:

1. First census is taken of all the _____, excluding the Levites, twenty years and older (Num. 1:1-3,45-47).
2. The twelve tribes are given their _____ in the camp (Num. 2).
3. Every male from the tribe of _____, a month old and upwards, is counted (Num. 3:11-15).
4. _____ of priests and Levites are given (Num. 3,4).
5. Various _____ laws are given (Num. 5-10).
6. The Israelites leave Mt. Sinai for the wilderness of Paran and almost immediately start _____ about not having meat. So Moses asks to die (Num. 11:10-15).
7. Moses' brother (Aaron), and sister (Miriam), _____ against Moses, and God strikes Miriam with _____ and then heals her (Num. 12:1-3,9-15).
8. _____ spies (one from each tribe) are sent out into the land of Canaan, but only two (Caleb and Joshua) say "Let's go for it!" (Num. 13:30,31).
9. People _____ about entering the Promised Land and ask to die (Num. 14:1-4).
10. God sentences the rebellious nation to _____ years of wandering in the desert, one _____ for each _____ (40) that the spies were spying out the land (Num. 14:6-12,20-23,29-31).
11. A man _____ the sabbath by gathering _____ and is _____ to death (Num. 15:32-36).
12. God _____ the ten cowardly spies (Num. 14:36-38).
13. Korah, a Levite, leads 250 leaders in a _____ against Moses, but God intervenes and the ground opens up and _____ Korah, the rebels, and their families (Num. 16:28-33)!
14. Moses is sentenced to _____ in the wilderness because he _____ God by claiming to be the one who brought water from the rock by striking it (Num. 20:8-13).
15. The people _____ yet again, and are attacked by venomous _____, but are saved by looking up at a bronze replica of the snakes placed on a pole (Num. 21:4-9).
16. Balaam's talking _____ (Num. 22:21-35)

17. The pagan sorcerer, Balaam, is hired to _____ Israel, but _____ the nation instead (Num. 23:11,12).
18. A death sentence is carried out due to _____ and _____ (Num. 25:1-9).
19. The second census is taken of all the _____, twenty years and older, prior to entering the land of Canaan (Num. 26:2).
20. Moses is told to prepare to _____ and to commission _____ as his replacement (Num. 27:12-14,18).
21. Instructions are given to the _____ generation as they prepare to enter the Promised Land (Num. 26-36).

Some interesting passages:

1. Death penalty for _____ holy objects (Num. 4:15; cf. 2 Sam. 6:1-7)
2. Death penalty for _____ at holy objects (Num. 4:20; cf. 1 Sam. 6:19)
3. The _____ (Num. 6:24-26)
4. Moses' _____ (Num. 12:3)

The types of Christ in the book of Numbers:

1. The _____ (manna) from Heaven (Num. 11:7-9; cf. Jn. 6:31-33)
2. The _____ from the rock (Num. 20:1-14; cf. 1 Cor. 10:1-4)
3. The bronze _____ (Num. 21:4-9; cf. Jn. 3:14,15)

Excursus

The following excerpt is from the Christian website, gotquestions.org, in regards to the census numbers recorded in the book of Numbers.

Problem: Scripture and history suggest a “small” Israel

Apart from the common interpretations of Exodus 12:37 and Numbers 1, the Bible is remarkably consistent in portraying Israel as relatively small, rather than as a large force that others would fear.

Deuteronomy has multiple references to Israel’s being “smaller” than the societies of Canaan (Deuteronomy 9:1–2). Each of the seven individual Canaanite realms was “more numerous and mightier than” Israel (Deuteronomy 7:1). Only Moab expresses fear over Israel’s size (Numbers 22:3). Israel’s success is to be credited to God’s intervention, not their military might (Deuteronomy 7:7). In fact, God reassures Israel not to be afraid (Numbers 13:28) of these other, “greater” nations (Deuteronomy 7:17).

When Israel conducted their census of the Levites and the firstborn from the rest of the tribes (Numbers 3:39, 46), the number of firstborn males is recorded as just over twenty thousand. Using the traditional interpretation of 600,000 adult males implies that firstborns made up only 1 out of every 30 men. If that were the case, the average Israelite family would have about 60 children, boys and girls combined. This reckoning seems unreasonable.

God specifically noted that the conquest of Canaan would take time (Exodus 23:30). This was to avoid eliminating too many people too quickly, resulting in the land becoming desolate and overrun by animals (Exodus 23:29; Deuteronomy 7:22). An army of 600,000 could have easily conquered that territory in a year—but a nation of more than 2 million would easily fill the territory taken in conquest. The prospect of a smaller nation sweeping ahead faster than they could control the territory makes more sense of God’s concern.

Trying to reconcile these points leads to several possibilities. Of these, only the first two seem consistent with a high view of Scripture:

Option One: Large Israel; Literalism

As traditionally interpreted, the population of Israel would have been strikingly large for that era. That does not mean it is impossible. God's miraculous provision could feed millions just as well as thousands. Israel's tentative approach in Canaan might have been pure cowardice (Numbers 13:30–32), and God's reference to them as "least" might have meant they were inexperienced and naïve after centuries of slavery.

The idea of a people group growing from 70 to more than 2 million in 430 years is not implausible. It would require a population growth rate of 2.6 percent. This is extraordinarily high but not too far beyond the 2.2 percent growth rate seen worldwide in the middle of the twentieth century. Biblical references to Israel's increase and Egypt's corresponding fear may reflect that level of explosive growth.

This "traditional" view comes with the primary concerns noted above. It would suggest that secular historical understanding of the sizes of other nations and their military forces is drastically wrong. Or that Israel's massive size somehow went unnoticed in the rest of the world specifically because they were weak and ineffective.

Option Two: Small Israel; Misinterpretation of the Hebrew

The common Hebrew term 'elep is typically translated "thousand" (Exodus 18:21), such as in the first chapter of Numbers. The counts given in this chapter are composed of words, not numerals. Numbers 1:21, for instance, records the men of Reuben's tribe as *sis'sāh vav arbā'im 'elep vav hamēs mē'owt*. The traditional, literal translation is "six and forty thousand and five hundred," usually rendered as "46,500."

However, two words in this phrase are subject to variations: 'elep and vav. The term 'elep (or 'eleph) is used elsewhere in Scripture as a reference to groups, not a literal number, including descriptions of Israel during and after the exodus. It is applied to tribes (Numbers 10:4), clans (Joshua 22:14; Judges 6:15; Micah 5:1), families (Joshua 22:21), and divisions (Numbers 1:16).

Further, the connecting word vav can mean “and,” but it can also mean “or,” depending on context. Exodus 21:15 and Exodus 21:17, for instance, use vav to say that certain sins are committed against one’s father “or” mother.

If ‘elep is a reference to groups of some sort (not numerical thousands), and the second vav in the phrase is understood to mean “or,” then Numbers 1:21 would be translated “six and forty clans, or five hundred.” The tribe of Reuben, then, would have had 500 fighting men from 46 family groups.

Numbers 1:46 gives the final tally: “The total number was 603,550.” If we assume a scribal error in the copying of this verse, however, the total would be “598 families with 5,550 men.” This number would be in keeping with the lower census numbers: the total population of Israelites would be about 22,200, and the average family would have had 8 or 9 children (rather than 60).

Such a scribal or typographical error is entirely plausible. While the Hebrew language itself represents numbers using words, ancient people often used a type of shorthand, employing lines or dots similar to modern-day tally marks. Those would have been relatively easy to misread, and most potential scribal errors in Old Testament manuscripts involve exactly that level of discrepancy (2 Samuel 10:18; 1 Chronicles 19:18; 1 Kings 4:26; 2 Chronicles 9:25; 36:9; 2 Kings 24:8).

This second solution cleanly resolves some primary problems:

- It more easily correlates Israel’s size with Scripture’s description of their relationship to other nations, with a total troop count of around 5,500.
- It more easily aligns with the historical understanding of the size of contemporary cultures, bringing the total population to around 30,000.
- It results in a more reasonable ratio of firstborn to non-firstborn as recorded in the census, with an average family size of about 8 children.

However, this option is not without its own difficulties:

- It requires a copyist's error in Numbers 1:46; otherwise, the total numbers do not correspond.
- Some scholars insist the Hebrew grammar of the passage requires 'elep to mean a literal "thousand."
- The smaller census numbers are difficult to reconcile with the number of those killed in three plagues: at various times, 14,700 (Numbers 16:49), 24,000 (Numbers 25:9) and 23,000 (1 Corinthians 10:8) perished. If the total in the census is taken to imply a nation of 30,000, then how do we account for over 50,000 deaths? [In answer, it's fair to assume that the 3,000 killed in the incident of the golden calf died before the first census was taken. Then, during the time of wilderness wandering, the population increased, only to be reduced again by the other plagues—the second census of Numbers 26, in fact, takes place after the plague that killed 24,000. Also, when they left Egypt, the Israelites were accompanied by a "mixed multitude" (Exodus 12:38, ESV). These foreigners were not included in any census, but the death tolls for the plagues could well have included those who died from among that group.]