

The size of the multitude in the Exodus

A study in the book of Numbers

With all of the miracles recorded in the book of Exodus -- the ten plagues, the crossing of the Red Sea, the cloud of fire, the manna, water from the rock, Moses existing forty days without food or water, etc., perhaps the greatest miracle of all has seldom been properly considered.

When Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt he had such a vast assembly of mankind following him that it staggers the imagination. The careful census taken in the opening chapters of Numbers yields a total of 603,550 men "from twenty years old and upward, all able to go forth to war" (Num. 1:3). This did not include the 22,000 Levites (Num. 1:47; 3:39) nor the women and children. The entire host, with their possessions and cattle (Ex. 12:32, 38), was under the leadership of one man. Not only that, but the one man, at the outset, had no revealed organization, and no public address system, printing press, telephone or other devices to aid him in communicating with his people. This poses such an "impossible" situation that few commentators have been willing to face it adequately. How can this problem be resolved?

Are the statistics in the text in error? No, for we are not faced with only a verse or two which could be imagined to have suffered from "corruption of the manuscripts." We not only have the total, but nearly a whole chapter is taken up with precise particulars of the census. Actually, the total accounting is the subject of the first three chapters of Numbers. In addition, another census was taken some thirtyeight to forty years later. It lists 601,730 adult men of war (Num. 26:51).

At the time of the Exodus Egypt was already a world power -- yet the Israelites were more numerous than the Egyptians and, untrained and unarmed as they must have been, posed a significant military threat (Ex. 1:7 - 10).

There are some hints in Scripture as to how Moses may have managed his task. The Egyptians had already organized them into manageable work groups (Ex. 1:11) which could have served them also in coordinating their escape. Tribal separation was already in place and Moses had had a considerable time while the plagues were in progress to develop at least a temporary "chain of command" and communication network. The trumpets mentioned later could have been in use during this time as well.

The food and water for such a mass of humanity must have been a gigantic problem of immediate and critical importance. As to the food, they were supplied at first by the unleavened cakes and the lambs of the Passover (Ex. 12:34, 39). They could have slaughtered some of their cattle also to supply them with sustenance until the Lord gave them the manna.

The most urgent need was water, and lack of it was their first complaint after the Red Sea crossing (Ex. 15:23). This was supplied at first by the miraculous sweetening of the bitter waters at Marah (Ex. 15:25 -- "Marah" means "bitter."), then their thirst was quenched at the oasis in Elim (Ex. 15:27). Through their forty years in the wilderness they evidently drank from the natural water available (Ex. 15:27; Deut. 21:6, 28) and, when they lacked, the Lord supplied it miraculously (Ex. 17:1 - 7; Num. 20:2 - 11; 21:5, 14 - 18). Notice the abundant quantity of

the water from the rock -- it was not just a trickle! “He opened the rock, and the waters *gushed* out; they ran in the dry places *like a river*” (Psa. 105:41). He could have, on occasion, multiplied the water as Christ multiplied the loaves and fishes, or as Elisha met the widow's need for oil (2 Kings 4:1 - 7). He could have enabled them to go without water for a time as He did Moses when he was on the mount (Ex. 34:28).

We must also remember that the weather has changed rather drastically since Old Testament times. Evidently there was more rainfall then, for in Deuteronomy 11:14 God promised them two rainy seasons in the land, while Jeremiah informed them, later (Jer. 3:3), that the latter rain had been withheld because of their sins. Joel (Joel 2:23) speaks of a day -- still future -- when Israel shall have turned to the Lord, and are permanently in the land (as the following context indicates), when the early and later rain will be restored. How can we doubt that the God who provided wine for a wedding feast (John 2), and will one day cause water to break out in the wilderness and streams in the desert (Isa. 35:6, 7; 41:18), could have met the needs of his people in their journey to the promised land?

We can no more reject the size of the company under Moses, because of the seeming impossibilities involved, than we can reject the incarnation, the resurrection of Lazarus and of Christ, the coming Rapture, or the very creation of the universe. After all, it was not Moses who brought so many people out of Egypt and kept them for forty years in the wilderness -- it was the Almighty God who did it!

--- W. P. Heath Bible Study # 79

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