

THE CENSUS

(Numbers Chapter One)

The Magnitude of the Israelitish Host

How astonishing are the miracles recorded in the book of Exodus! Among them we read of the ten plagues, the crossing of the Red Sea, the cloud and pillar of fire, the manna, water from the rock, Moses existing forty days without food or water, etc. The book of Numbers records additional miracles, and relates in detail what may be the greatest miracle of all, the successful journey of an almost countless multitude across the wilderness for forty years. The logistics involved in such a migration constitute it an outstanding miracle of God

When Moses led the Israelites out of Egypt he had such a vast assembly 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. This was just the army. The total expedition probably numbered some two million people.

Amazingly the entire host, including possessions and cattle (Ex. 12:32, 38), was under the leadership of just one man. In addition, Moses, at the outset, had no revealed organization. He also had no public address system, printing press, telephone or other device, such as we find so necessary today, to aid him in communicating with his people. The topography of the land traversed is thought by some to rule out such a large wilderness "church" (Acts 7:38 - KJV). Others cite the extended time it would take for such activities as the Red Sea crossing, breaking up and reestablishing camps, the formation of their line of march, and so on, as reasons for ruling out such a large company.

All of these considerations pose such an 'impossible' situation that we may hesitate to face it squarely. How can this problem be resolved?

Are the statistics in the text in error? Surely not, for we are not faced with only a verse or two, which could be imagined to have suffered from 'corruption of the manuscripts.' Nearly an entire chapter is taken up with precise particulars of the census. Actually, the detailed accounting continues on through the first four chapters of Numbers. In addition, another census was taken some thirty-eight years later in which the army of 601,730 men (Num. 26:51) was almost as large as that in chapter one.

At the time of the Exodus Egypt was already a world power -- yet the Israelites were so numerous that, even though they were evidently untrained and unarmed, the Egyptians believed they posed a significant military threat (Ex. 1:7 – 10; Psa. 105:24). Pharaoh tried to counter this burgeoning Jewish population by treating them harshly, even attempting a form of genocide for a time (Ex. 1:15 – 19). "But the more they afflicted them, the more they multiplied and grew. And they [the Egyptians] were in dread of the children of Israel" (Ex. 1:12).

The massive size of the exodus is further substantiated in other references scattered through the text. Moses complained that the responsibility for caring for such a host was too much for

him to handle (Num. 11:11, 12, 14). In the same chapter he confirms that the census was correct by reaffirming the number of warriors involved (Num. 11:21). When he questioned how meat could be supplied for such a host (Num. 11:22), God asked a question that could well be posed concerning the whole problem of the vast encampment. “Is the LORD’S power limited?” He then declared, “Now you shall see whether My word will come true for you or not” (Num. 11:23 - NASB). *It did!*

Later Balak feared Israel because “they were many” (Num. 22:3) and covered the surface of the earth (Num. 22:5). When Balaam prophesied to Balak he asked, “Who can count the dust of Jacob, or number one-fourth of Israel?” (Num. 23:10). Moses, at the close of the 40 years in the wilderness, said, “The LORD your God has multiplied you, and here you are today, as the stars of heaven in multitude” (Deut. 1:10). Marveling at the growth of the nation over a period of some 400 years he added, “Your fathers went down to Egypt seventy persons in all, and now the LORD your God has made you as numerous as the stars of heaven” (Deut. 10:22 - NASB).

Also, the size of their camp is intimated in one passage. In response to the complaints of the people, God caused quail to fly near enough to the ground to be captured easily by hand. They fell “in the midst of their camp, all around their dwellings” (Psa 78:28). How large was that camp? The quail fell “beside the camp, about a day’s journey on this side and a day’s journey on the other side, all around the camp” (Num. 11:31 - NASB). A day’s journey was probably ten to fifteen miles. So the camp must have covered an area of 100 to 225 square miles. That is a huge camp, room for a lot of people!

Actually these “impossibilities” but enhance the totally miraculous nature of this notable expedition. The strongest arguments of men who insist, “This is impossible!” fall to the ground when God replies, “**It happened!**”

There are some hints in Scripture as to how Moses may have managed his task. The Egyptians had already organized the Israelites into manageable work groups (Ex. 1:11) which could have been utilized in coordinating their escape. Tribal separation was, no doubt, already in place and Moses had considerable time, while the plagues were in progress, to develop at least a temporary ‘chain of command’ and communication network. The early Indians of the American Plains had learned to communicate quickly with one another over many miles by use of smoke signals. Surely they were not more inventive than Moses – who was under God’s personal direction. As a matter of fact God utilized a very similar, but superior, method of guiding the entire encampment. The pillar of smoke by day and the pillar of fire by night, visible to every member of the encampment, lead them during the entire forty years.

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 they brought with them out of Egypt (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. Asaph recalled those days in Israel’s history and wrote, “Man did eat the bread of angels; He sent them food *in abundance*” (Psa 78:25 - NASB). On one occasion God miraculously fed them with Quail for a whole month (Num. 11:19, 20).

Their most urgent need was for water, and lack of it was their first complaint after the Red Sea crossing (Ex. 15:24). This was supplied at first by the miraculous sweetening of the bitter waters at Marah (Ex. 15:23, 25 – “Marah” means “bitter.”), then their thirst was quenched at the oasis in Elim (Ex. 15:27). Through their forty years in the wilderness, evidently, they often drank from the natural water available. When they passed through the territory occupied by the descendents of Esau they were told to “buy water from them with money” so they could drink (Deut. 2:6). Then, when they lacked, the Lord supplied it miraculously (Ex. 17:1 - 7; Num. 20:2 – 11). Notice the abundant quantity of the water from the rock -- it was not just a trickle! “He opened the rock, and water gushed out; it ran in the dry places like a river” (Psa. 105:41). “He split the rocks in the wilderness, and gave them abundant drink *like the ocean depths*. He brought forth streams also from the rock, and caused waters to run down like rivers ... the water gushed out, and streams were overflowing” (Psa 78:15, 16, 20 - NASB).

We must also remember that the weather has evidently changed rather drastically since Old Testament times. It seems 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 speaks of a day -- still future -- when Israel shall have turned to the Lord, and are permanently in the land (as the context there indicates), when the early and latter rain will be restored (Joel 2:23). Periodic rains could have done much to supply them with water. One passage of Scripture indicates that God did give them rain to supply their needs. “O God, when Thou didst go forth before Thy people, when Thou didst march through the wilderness, the earth quaked; the heavens also dropped rain at the presence of God; Sinai itself quaked at the presence of God, the God of Israel. Thou didst shed abroad a plentiful rain, O God -- ” (Psa 68:7 – 9 - NASB).

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 did Moses when he was on the mount (Ex. 34:28).¹

Our God provided wine for a wedding feast (John 2), fed 5,000 people from a boy's lunch (Matt. 14), and will one day cause water to break out in the wilderness and streams in the desert (Isa. 35:6, 7; 41:18). How can we doubt that He was able to meet the needs of His people in their journey to the Promised Land?

The entire consideration of the miraculous is at stake. Today, as science becomes increasingly aware of the great expanse of the universe, the almost unlimited variety of life forms, the mind boggling complexity of what was once called “the simple cell,” and the unexpected intricacy of the simplest atom, men draw wrong conclusions from the information. Instead of thinking, “What an awesome God we have!” they reason, “It is beyond belief that even a God could create all this!” Then, in an insane leap of “faith,” they decide that what an all powerful, super intelligent God could not have done was accomplished by blind chance. They insert vast stretches of time to account for it all but, as all experience demonstrates, time is not creative. As a matter of fact time, in itself, is a destroyer. Things do not wear *in* as time goes by

¹ There is an indication that he experienced two forty-day periods without bread or water back to back. After Moses broke the first tables of the law he “fell down before the LORD, *as at the first*, forty days and forty nights; [and] neither ate bread nor drank water” (Deut. 9:18).

-- they wear *out*. Clocks do not run *up* -- they run *down*. It is only when intelligence is applied and energy expended that time becomes a framework for even *improvement*.

The miracles recorded in the Pentateuch, including the movement of two million people across the desert, are also ‘mind boggling.’ As perception of the great magnitude of the miraculous in the story grows, the temptation to even the Christian, if his faith is not strong, is to adopt here the same negative approach the natural man takes in regard to creation. Doubt creeps in and he thinks, “It just *couldn’t* have happened, not literally at least.” We should, instead, take the spiritually positive approach illustrated by Abraham. God made a promise to him that seemed beyond possibility of accomplishment. He fully realized the “impossibility” of a son being born from his body (now, at ninety-nine, as good as dead) and the deadness of Sarah’s womb. However “he did not waver in unbelief, but grew strong in faith, giving glory to God, ... being fully assured that what He had promised, He was able also to perform.” (Rom 4:19 – 21 - NASB).

So we can look the ‘impossibilities’ right in the eye, grow strong in faith, giving glory to God, and be fully assured that what God said He did, *He DID!* We will then cry out in delighted wonder, “Our God is even more gloriously powerful than we realized!”

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 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! “*You* led Your people like a flock by the hand of Moses and Aaron.” (Psa 77:20).

The Significance of the Census

The census taken in this first chapter was intended to be a list of those soldiers who would enter the land so long promised to Israel, and wrest it from its wicked inhabitants. Numbers 1:3, however, has a sad counterpart in Numbers 14:29. Speaking to the Israelites numbered earlier God says, “The carcasses of you who have complained against Me shall fall in this wilderness, all of you who were numbered, according to your entire number, from twenty years old and above.” It required another census at the close of the book to record those who would actually enter the land and, under Joshua, bring God’s judgment on the Canaanites. The story of how this came to be is the major theme of Numbers.

God made it very clear that their occupation of the land would involve warfare. In Numbers chapter one the expression “all who are able to go to war” is repeated fourteen times. God will give the victory, but they are to do the fighting. For us, too, our pilgrimage involves warfare. Ours is not physical battle, nor are our ultimate foes the people who oppose and, at times, persecute us. “For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but against principalities, against powers, against the rulers of the darkness of this age, against spiritual hosts of wickedness in the heavenly places” (Eph 6:12). For this battle we must put on the armor Paul describes (Eph. 6:14 – 17) and be on the alert with all prayer and petition, praying at all times in the spirit – for all saints (Eph. 6:18). We must remember that our enemy is not our fellow believer, however irritating he may be. We all remember the ditty, “Satan trembles when he sees the weakest saint

upon his knees.” Someone has added, “But Satan laughs without restraint when saints go clobbering other saints.” Paul warns us, “If you bite and devour one another, beware lest you be consumed by one another!” (Gal. 5:15).

We also war against fleshly thoughts and speculations, whether arrayed against us by other people or by our own fleshly nature. “For though we walk in the flesh, we do not war according to the flesh. For the weapons of our warfare are not carnal but mighty in God for pulling down strongholds, casting down arguments and every high thing that exalts itself against the knowledge of God, bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ” (2 Cor 10:3 – 5).

The Levites were not numbered with the army (1:47 – 54) since their responsibility was not to take up arms, but to maintain Israel’s relationship with the God who could give them their victories. All through Israel’s history it was their relationship with God, not their military exploits, important as they were, that determined their national welfare. “Now it shall come to pass, if you diligently obey the voice of the LORD your God, to observe carefully all His commandments which I command you today, that the LORD your God will set you high above all nations of the earth ... The LORD will cause your enemies who rise against you to be defeated before your face; they shall come out against you one way and flee before you seven ways” (Deut. 28:1, 7).

As important as our national army is today, in a world that seems to be always eager for war, our real safety lies in our relationship with God. Neither politics nor military might will be able to save this land unless God grants us a sweeping revival such as England experienced under the Wesleys. That great spiritual awakening is credited with saving England from a bloody revolution like the one that occurred in France.²

As *citizens*, being believers, we should stand firmly for high principles and moral behavior. We “ought to be the voices of decency, civility and moral sanity ... [we should] strive for justice, righteousness and mercy [and should] speak out and act against evil.”³ Our primary responsibility as *believers*, however, is not to force Christian behavior on the unsaved. Legislation can judge and punish immorality, but cannot create morality. Instead, we must point them to the Savior. In Paul’s epistles it is the believers, not the unbelievers, who are exhorted to live godly lives. Our lives should demonstrate to those around us what God can do in a life as He works in us both to will and to do His good pleasure (Phil. 2:13 - NASB). The ship of state, even in America, is sinking and doomed at last to the judgment of God. It is more important to get people into the lifeboat than to paint the deck

² “Wesley assuredly was not a promoter of strife: on the contrary, many great historians, from Lecky to Halevy, believe that the spiritual revival he initiated and guided, saved England from revolutionary bloodshed.” -- “England Before and After Wesley” by J. Wesley Bready. Published by Hodder and Stoughton, Limited. Page 322.

³ From “The Almighty Vote,” an article in The Washington Post -- by Peter Wehner, director of policy at Empower America.