

NUMBERS

Chapter 1

A Census of Israel's Warriors

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 all the congregation of the people of Israel, by clans, by fathers' houses, according to the number of names, every male, head by head. **3** From twenty years old and upward, all in Israel who are able to go to war, you and Aaron shall list them, company by company. **4** And there shall be with you a man from each tribe, each man being the head of the house of his fathers. **5** And these are the names of the men who shall assist you. From Reuben, Elizur the son of Shedeur; **6** from Simeon, Shelumiel the son of Zurishaddai; **7** from Judah, Nahshon the son of Amminadab; **8** from Issachar, Nethanel the son of Zuar; **9** from Zebulun, Eliab the son of Helon; **10** from the sons of Joseph, from Ephraim, Elishama the son of Ammihud, and from Manasseh, Gamaliel the son of Pedahzur; **11** from Benjamin, Abidan the son of Gideoni; **12** from Dan, Ahiezer the son of Ammishaddai; **13** from Asher, Pagiel the son of Ochron; **14** from Gad, Eliasaph the son of Deuel; **15** from Naphtali, Ahira the son of Enan.” **16** These were the ones chosen from the congregation, the chiefs of their ancestral tribes, the heads of the clans of Israel. **17** Moses and Aaron took these men who had been named, **18** and on the first day of the second month, they assembled the whole congregation together, who registered themselves by clans, by fathers' houses, according to the number of names from twenty years old and upward, head by head, **19** as the LORD commanded Moses. So he listed them in the wilderness of Sinai. **20** The people of Reuben, Israel's firstborn, their generations, by their clans, by their fathers' houses, according to the number of names, head by head, every male from twenty years old and upward, all who were able to go to war: **21** those listed of the tribe of Reuben were 46,500. **22** Of the people of Simeon, their generations, by their clans, by their fathers' houses, those of them who were listed, according to the number of names, head by head, every male from twenty years old and upward, all who were able to go to war: **23** those listed of the tribe of Simeon were 59,300. **24** Of the people of Gad, their generations, by their clans, by their fathers' houses, according to the number of the names, from twenty years old and upward, all who were able to go to war: **25** those listed of the tribe of Gad were 45,650. **26** Of the people of Judah, their generations, by their clans, by their fathers' houses, according to the number of names, from twenty years old and upward, every man able to go to war: **27** those listed of the tribe of Judah were 74,600. **28** Of the people of Issachar, their generations, by their clans, by their fathers' houses, according to the number of names, from twenty years old and upward, every man able to go to war: **29** those listed of the tribe of Issachar were 54,400. **30** Of the people of Zebulun, their generations, by their clans, by their fathers' houses, according to the number of names, from twenty years old and upward, every man able to go to war: **31** those listed of the tribe of Zebulun were 57,400. **32** Of the people of Joseph, namely, of the people of Ephraim, their generations, by their clans, by their fathers' houses, according to the number of names, from twenty years old and upward, every man able to go to war: **33** those listed of the tribe of Ephraim were 40,500. **34** Of the people of Manasseh, their generations, by their clans, by their fathers' houses, according to the number of names, from twenty years old and upward, every man able to go to war: **35** those listed of the tribe of Manasseh were 32,200. **36** Of the people of Benjamin, their generations, by their clans, by their fathers' houses, according to the number of names, from twenty years old and upward, every man able to go to war: **37** those listed of the tribe of Benjamin were 35,400. **38** Of the people of Dan, their generations, by their clans, by their fathers' houses, according to the number of names, from twenty years old and upward, every man able to go to war: **39** those listed of the tribe of Dan were 62,700. **40** Of the people of Asher,

their generations, by their clans, by their fathers' houses, according to the number of names, from twenty years old and upward, every man able to go to war: 41 those listed of the tribe of Asher were 41,500. 42 Of the people of Naphtali, their generations, by their clans, by their fathers' houses, according to the number of names, from twenty years old and upward, every man able to go to war: 43 those listed of the tribe of Naphtali were 53,400. 44 These are those who were listed, whom Moses and Aaron listed with the help of the chiefs of Israel, twelve men, each representing his fathers' house. 45 So all those listed of the people of Israel, by their fathers' houses, from twenty years old and upward, every man able to go to war in Israel— 46 all those listed were 603,550.

Ch 1 Records how the nation was counted and organized into military-style units. People traveled with the order and precision of an army. The numerical strength of each unit was to be carefully recorded by “a man from each tribe ... the head of the house of his fathers” (v 4). The Eng title of the Book is based on the record of the censuses (from LXX *arithmoi*); the Hbr title, “in the wilderness,” gives a better description of the work as a whole. (TLSB)

1:1 *The LORD spoke to Moses.* One of the most pervasive emphases in Numbers is the fact that the Lord spoke to Moses and through Moses to Israel. From the opening words to the closing words (36:13), this is stated over 150 times and in more than 20 ways. The Lord’s use of Moses as his prophet is described in 12:6–8. One of the Hebrew names for the book is *wayedabber* (“And he [the LORD] spoke”), from the first word in the Hebrew text. (CSB)

Lit, “And then the LORD spoke to Moses” indicates that Moses is continuing the account begun in Lv. The division of Lv and Nu was a practical matter of scroll size, not a difference in message. Nu appears to be a summary of a diary that Moses kept. The expression about the Lord speaking is repeated 80 times in Nu, setting the tone for the entire Book and indicating the Lord’s direct and gracious supervision of His people. Today God’s people have the written record of God’s Word, which guides our lives and worship. (TLSB)

Tent of Meeting. The tabernacle. (CSB)

Where the Lord gave directions to His people (e.g., Ex 40:34; Lv 1:1). (TLSB)

wilderness of Sinai. The more common Hebrew name for Numbers is *bemidbar* (“in the desert”), the fifth word in the Hebrew text. The events of Numbers cover a period of 38 years and nine or ten months, i.e., the period of Israel’s desert wanderings. (CSB)

first day ... second month ... second year. Thirteen months after the exodus, Numbers begins. Israel had spent the previous year in the region of Mount Sinai receiving the law and erecting the tabernacle. Now she was to be mustered as a military force for an orderly march. Dating events from the exodus (for another example see 1Ki 6:1) is similar to the Christian practice of dating years in reference to the incarnation of Christ (B.C. and A.D.). The exodus was God’s great act of deliverance of his people from bondage. (CSB)

Nineteen days later, Israel was to leave Mount Sinai. Daily mustering was done quickly because the people were organized by the sanctuary tax census taken months earlier (Ex 30:11–12; 38:26). (TLSB)

1:2–18 *census of all the congregation.* To demonstrate to His people how great the Lord had made them; to make them realize how great His care was for them; to provide order for their living, traveling, and for war, thus demonstrating that their God is a God of order. Cf 1Co 14:40. *clans ... fathers' houses.* Levels and divisions of the people. Tribe names were derived from the 12 sons of Jacob, who had lived four centuries earlier. Clan names were taken from the grandsons of Jacob. Fathers’ houses included all living

descendants of a common, living ancestor. Individual names included every male age 20 and older. (TLSB)

1:2 *Take.* The Hebrew for this word is plural, indicating that Moses and Aaron were to complete this task together (see v. 3, “You and Aaron”), but the primary responsibility lay with Moses. (CSB)

census. Its main purpose was to form a military roster, not a social, political or taxing document. (CSB)

1:4 *One man from each tribe.* By having a representative from each tribe assist Moses and Aaron, the count would be regarded as legitimate by all. (CSB)

1:5–16 The names of these men occur again in chs. 2; 7; 10. Most contain within them a reference to the name of God. Levi is not represented in the list (see vv. 47–53). (CSB)

1:19 *And so he listed them in the wilderness of Sinai.* A summary statement; vv. 20–43 provide the details. (CSB)

1:20–43 For each tribe there are two verses in repetitive formulaic structure, giving: (1) the name of the tribe, (2) the specifics of those numbered, (3) the name of the tribe again and (4) the total count for that tribe. The numbers for each tribe are rounded off to the hundred (but Gad to the 50, v. 25). The same numbers are given for each tribe in ch. 2, where there are four triads of tribes. A peculiarity in the numbers that leads some to believe that they are symbolic is that the hundreds are grouped between 200 and 700. Also, various speculations have arisen regarding the meaning of the Hebrew word for “thousand” (see Introduction: Special Problem). In this chapter, the word has been used to mean 1,000 in order for the totals to be achieved. (CSB)

1:20–40 Tribes numbered according to the census tabulation (vv 5–15). Grouped in threes according to their encampment in military units; e.g., Reuben, Simeon, and Gad were deployed on the south side of the tabernacle. (TLSB)

1:32–35 Because the descendants of Levi were excluded from the census (see note on v. 47), the descendants of Joseph are listed according to the families of his two sons, Ephraim (vv. 32–33) and Manasseh (vv. 34–35). In this way the traditional tribal number of 12 is maintained, and Joseph is given the “double portion” of the ranking heir (cf. Ge 49:22–26; Dt 33:13–17; 2Ki 2:9). (CSB)

1:46 603,550. Except for Joshua and Caleb, all these died in the desert. The mathematics of these numbers is accurate and complex. It is complex in that the totals are reached in two ways: (1) a linear listing of 12 units (vv. 20–43), with the total given (v. 46); (2) four sets of triads, each with a subtotal, and then the grand total (2:3–32). These figures are also consistent with those in Ex 12:37; 38:26. This large number of men conscripted for the army suggests a population for the entire community in excess of 2,000,000 (see Introduction: Special Problem). Ex 1:7 describes the remarkable growth of the Hebrew people in Egypt during the 400-year sojourn. They had become so numerous that they were regarded as a grave threat to the security of Egypt (Ex 1:9–10, 20). Israel’s amazing growth from the 70 who entered Egypt (Ex 1:5) was an evidence of God’s great blessing and his faithfulness to his covenant with Abraham (Ge 12:2; 15:5; 17:4–6; 22:17). (CSB)

Figures for the individual groups add up to the given total. Total population may have been nearly 2.2 million. The Lord kept His promise to Abraham about raising a nation (Gn 15:5) to provide the promised Savior (cf Gal 3:8–9). The census agrees with the round figure given in Ex 12:37 and with the exact count in Ex 38:26 and Nu 2:32. It is somewhat larger than the sum recorded after the lapse of 38 years (26:51).

The remains of those who died in the wilderness would not be found today, as they were buried in shallow graves. (TLSB)

1:1–46 Through a census, the Lord shows Moses that Israel has grown mightily. However, the strength of God’s people does not depend on size and military strength but on His Word and grace. How good to know that God counts you righteous in His sight through His Son, who lived perfectly for you and died as the atoning sacrifice for your sin. In Christ, God numbers you among His people through your Baptism, providing all you need for your earthly journey to the promised land of heaven. • Lord, keep me ever faithful to Your Word, and sustain me with Your grace in the family of all believers. Thank You for freeing me from bondage to sin, death, and the devil, through Christ, my Lord. Amen. (TLSB)

Levites Exempted

47 But the Levites were not listed along with them by their ancestral tribe. 48 For the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, 49 “Only the tribe of Levi you shall not list, and you shall not take a census of them among the people of Israel. 50 But appoint the Levites over the tabernacle of the testimony, and over all its furnishings, and over all that belongs to it. They are to carry the tabernacle and all its furnishings, and they shall take care of 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 if any outsider comes near, he shall be put to death. 52 The people of Israel shall pitch their tents by their companies, each man in his own camp and each man by his own standard. 53 But the Levites shall camp around the tabernacle of the testimony, so that there may be no wrath on the congregation of the people of Israel. And the Levites shall keep guard over the tabernacle of the testimony.” 54 Thus did the people of Israel; they did according to all that the LORD commanded Moses.

1:47 Because of their special tasks, the Levites were excluded from this military count. They too had to perform service to the Lord, but they were to be engaged in the ceremonies and maintenance of the tabernacle (see note on vv. 32–35). (CSB)

Levites were appointed “over the tabernacle” (v 50); therefore, there was no need to tabulate their manpower in a military census. Their numbers and duties are recorded separately in chs 3–4. (TLSB)

1:50 *Testimony.* The Ten Commandments written on stone tablets (see Ex 31:18; 32:15; 34:29), which were placed in the ark (Ex 25:16, 21; 40:20), leading to the phrase the “ark of the Testimony” (Ex 25:22; 26:33, 34). (CSB)

1:51 *Any outsider.* The Hebrew for this phrase is often translated “stranger,” “alien” or “foreigner” (e.g., Isa 1:7; Hos 7:9). Thus a non-Levite Israelite was considered an alien to the religious duties of the tabernacle (see Ex 29:33; 30:33; Lev 22:12). (CSB)

1:52 *standard.* Occurs here and 13 times in ch 2 (only again Sg 2:4, where it is translated “banner”). Designates a banner to identify larger groups. Individual tribes also had distinctive ensigns. (TLSB)

1:53 *wrath.* The Levites formed a protective hedge against trespassing by the non-Levites to keep them from experiencing divine wrath. (CSB)

Unmediated approach to the holy God works disaster (e.g., Lv 10:1–7). Communion with Him is possible only through the means of grace instituted in the covenant. (TLSB)

Levites shall keep guard. Armed, military-style guards. (TLSB)

1:54 *all that LORD commanded Moses.* In view of Israel's great disobedience in the later chapters of Numbers, these words of initial compliance have a special poignancy. (CSB)

1:47–54 The Lord sets the Levites apart for special service. Their duty is spiritual, not military. God charges the Levites with moving, maintaining, and protecting the tabernacle, God's dwelling place. As an added means of protection, He instructs the Israelites to camp around the tabernacle; the Levites serve as the final defense against defilement (vv 52–53). By God's grace, all the people huddle about His sacred dwelling and enjoy the blessings of His presence. • Praise be to God, who sets us apart by His Holy Spirit, and who guards the faith He has worked in us through our Baptism. Amen. (TLSB)