

NUMBERS

Part One: The Census, and Final Days at Sinai (1:1-10:10)

I. INTRODUCTION AND INSTRUCTIONS (1:1-4)

A. SETTING OF THE EVENT v. 1

TEXT

Chapter 1:1. And the Lord spake unto Moses in the wilderness of Sinai, in the tabernacle of the congregation, on the first day of the second month, in the second year after they were come out of the land of Egypt, saying,

PARAPHRASE

Chapter 1:1. And the Lord told Moses, in the wilderness of Sinai, in the Tent of Meeting, on the first day of the second month, in the second year after Israel had left the land of Egypt,

COMMENTARY

With his usual brevity, Moses wastes no words in acquainting us with the background facts of *who*, *when* and *where*, or *how*; the text following will answer *what* and *why*. God Himself is the speaker, and Moses the audience. The message for the moment comes at Sinai, in the Tabernacle, soon after the beginning of the second year after coming from Egypt.

Moses had been and will continue to be dependent upon such direct messages. He will face decisions calling for wisdom far above his own, and he is both unwilling to make such decisions alone, and fully aware of the imminent counsel of God. When the Lord's words come to him, he is responsible for seeing that they are brought to the people and, as far as he is able, that they are carried out. The commission for the mustering of Israel is of divine origin.

The term "wilderness" refers to any area which is uninhabited, and is not necessarily represented by our word "desert". *PHC*, p. 4, suggests that the wilderness would connote

Privation, Peril, and Perplexity; the Tent of Meeting would bring Provision, Protection, and Direction. The area of wandering was barren, pathless and perilous. But Israel had the constant promise of God's leading via the cloud and the pillar. The time spent in these dire circumstances would become a time of stern discipline: adhering to the Law would bring its reward, while hating the commands of God would bring just retribution.

The "wilderness of Sinai" may include a district as large as the entire Sinaitic Peninsula; ordinarily, however, it is limited to the southern portion of the peninsula. It is primarily mountainous, with valleys interlaced at various angles. Extremely dry and barren today, there is much evidence that it was less so in the day of Moses, since the Midianites, Amalekites and others grazed their flocks here. However, there has never been a population of any size, with the exception of the incident we are considering.

The Tabernacle, prescribed and constructed in Exodus 25ff., served as the central point of the nation's worship. Here, too, Moses often received God's instructions for his people. It had been erected on the first day of the first month (Ex. 40:2); hence, its use was yet quite new among the people. They were now just one year and two weeks out of Egypt, and would soon move toward Canaan. Numbers will cover the final nineteen days at Mount Sinai. The major event during this time will be the census.

QUESTIONS AND RESEARCH ITEMS

1. How does the book of Numbers follow, logically and chronologically, the previous book of history (Exodus)?
2. How much time has elapsed between the two books?
3. How long had the Israelites been at Sinai as the book of Numbers opens?
4. Identify the "Tent of Meeting" of v. 1, and describe it.
5. Explain how Moses was properly permitted to enter and serve in the Tent of Meeting, since only priests qualified for such activities.

6. Locate the Sinaitic Peninsula, the Wilderness of Sinai, the Wilderness of Sin, and Jebel Musa on a map. Find the approximate location of the encampment of the people while they were in the area.
7. Compile a chronological list of events which occurred while Israel tented at Sinai, in order to introduce the events of the book of Numbers.
8. How long did the tribes remain here after the Tent of Meeting was erected?
9. Discuss how life in the wilderness would prepare Israel for life in their new home, Canaan.
10. How had their bondage and slavery in Egypt readied the people for a rugged period of travel, tenting, and rigid diet?

B. GENERAL INSTRUCTIONS ON THE CENSUS vv. 2-4

TEXT

Chapter 1:2. Take ye the sum of all the congregation of the children of Israel, after their families, by the house of their fathers, with the number of their names, every male by their polls; 3. From twenty years old and upward, all that are able to go forth to war in Israel: thou and Aaron shall number them by their armies. 4. And with you there shall be a man of every tribe; every one head of the house of his fathers.

PARAPHRASE

Chapter 1:2. "Take a head count of all the congregation of the children of Israel by their families, by their fathers' households, according to the number of names; each male, head by head; 3. from twenty years of age and up, whoever is able to go to war in Israel; you and Aaron shall count them according to their armies. 4. Furthermore, there shall be a man of each tribe with you, each one the head of his father's household.

COMMENTARY

The purpose for this census is simply stated by the fact that

it is to include all 20-year old males and up, who are able to go to war. Therefore we may accept the term "muster" which is often used to describe the census. In Exodus 14:14 Jehovah had pledged to fight for Israel. The promise was repeated several times, as in Deut. 1:30; 3:22.

Why, then, is an army necessary at all? It is to be clear again and again that the people of God will be asked to assemble an army when under threat or specific martial instructions of God; it is no less clear that victory would come by the varied devices and power of God. Intervening clouds, locked chariot wheels and the release of divinely walled waters in the Red Sea had disposed of the Egyptian army (Ex. 14). The Amalekites were dealt a defeat at Rephidim, but only while Moses' arms were supported and substained by Aaron and Hur. The army engaged the enemy in typical conflict, and God gave the victory (Ex. 17:8-13). We have only to mention Jericho, Aijalon, and Gideon to be reminded of a few of the numerous unusual means God has employed to make his people triumphant.

Each victory is thus seen as a cooperative act: the people, when they obey the detailed words of God, will see their faith justified when God discomfits the enemy. He did not do for them what they were able to accomplish alone, but supplemented their deeds by His own devices. Failure to comply with divine orders, specifically given or logically inferred, brought reverses and retribution, as when Achan's sin prevented the capture of Ai (Joshua 7:1-26), and Saul's non-compliance in eliminating the Amalekites resulted in his losing the throne (I Sam. 15:1-28).

Responsibility for the counting of Israel is primarily given to Moses and Aaron. The work is to be further subdivided into tribal sections, and into families within the tribes. With such an organized scheme the total might be taken in a minimum of time, and without inconvenience.

Exempted from the first counting were all females, as well as all males below the age of twenty, all Levites, and other males who might be maimed, ill, aged or infirm. Only the most

fit were suitable for military service. The nations they must face in the future are formidable, as reported by the spies later (13:28, 29), and there is no place for the man, how willing, who is not physically able to endure the demands of a rigorous military exploit. God has never been pleased with less than our very best for His service. No man could bring Him a crippled or diseased animal in sacrifice; no handicapped Levite could perform priestly services before Him. Even the slightest defect eliminated either: but we should remember that we speak of physical service only. Our worship is quite another matter, for here God looks only at the heart, which is in no way whatever related to or affected by the physical body. David was selected rather than the other, older sons of Jesse not because of age or stature or countenance—factors which men consider important—but because God had looked upon his heart (see I Sam. 16:4-13); into this man God sent forth His Spirit mightily.

Counting the men by families probably indicated that they would also be organized in such units while serving in the army. The natural bond of blood should contribute to the general *esprit de corps*. Each man might well conceive of his service as a protection of his own home and loved ones. Nehemiah utilized such a plan with brilliant effectiveness in leading the Jews to rebuild the city walls of Jerusalem (Neh. 4:13, 14ff.). Like some other people, the Israelites would also attach great importance to their genealogical records, which were carefully memorized and recited commonly by the children and old men alike.

QUESTIONS AND RESEARCH ITEMS

11. For what special purpose was the number of this congregation to be taken? What other uses might be made of the census?
12. How can the census be called accurate or complete with so many of the people excluded?
13. Can we establish a formula for estimating the total number of the Israelites, since only males are counted, and with the exclusions based upon age and tribe?

14. If God had pledged to fight their battles for the Israelites, why did the instructions state that those to be counted should be "able to go to forth to war"?
15. Suggest some methods by which Moses and Aaron might implement their task of tallying the "head count".
16. Can you think of any reason that the census did not specify an age beyond which the men were not to be counted?

II. THE GENERAL CENSUS (1:5-46)

A. TRIBAL HEADS SELECTED vv. 5-16

TEXT

Chapter 1:5. And these are the names of the men that shall stand with you: of the tribe of Reuben; Elizur the son of Shedeur. 6. Of Simeon; Shelumiel the son of Zurishaddai. 7. Of Judah: Nahshon the son of Amminadab. 8. Of Issachar; Nethaneel the son of Zuar. 9. Of Zebulun; Eliab the son of Helon. 10. Of the children of Joseph: of Ephraim; Elishama the son of Ammihud: of Manasseh; Gamaliel the son of Pedahzur. 11. Of Benjamin; Abidan the son of Gideoni. 12. Of Dan; Ahiezer the son of Ammishaddai. 13. Of Asher; Pagiel the son of Ocran. 14. Of Gad; Eliasaph the son of Deuel. 15. Of Naphtali; Ahira the son of Enan. 16. These were the renowned of the congregation, princes of the tribes of their fathers, heads of thousands in Israel.

PARAPHRASE

Chapter 1:5. And these are the names of the men who shall stand with you: from the tribe of Reuben, Elizur, son of Shedeur; 6. from Simeon, Shelumiel, son of Zurishaddai; [from here through verse 15, the text differs little enough from the previously-printed *KJV* that such redundancy does not warrant repetition] 16. These were the distinguished men of the assembly, princes of their fathers' tribes, and heads of the thousands of Israel.