

# FAQ

**FROM THE MESSIANIC APOLOGETICS ARCHIVES (2000-2018)**

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**MESSIANIC APOLOGETICS**  
messianicapologetics.net

# Frequently Asked Questions

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# Abbreviations and Special Terms

The following is a list of abbreviations for reference works and special terms which are used in publications by Outreach Israel Ministries and Messianic Apologetics. Please familiarize yourself with them as the text may reference a Bible version, i.e., RSV for the Revised Standard Version, or a source such as TWOT for the *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*, solely by its abbreviation. Detailed listings of these sources are provided in the Bibliography.

- ABD: *Anchor Bible Dictionary*  
AMG: *Complete Word Study Dictionary: Old Testament, New Testament*  
ANE: Ancient Near East(ern)  
Apostolic Scriptures/Writings: the New Testament  
Ara: Aramaic  
ASV: American Standard Version (1901)  
ATS: ArtScroll Tanach (1996)  
b. Babylonian Talmud (*Talmud Bavli*)  
B.C.E.: Before Common Era or B.C.  
BDAG: *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Bauer, Danker, Arndt, Gingrich)  
BDB: *Brown-Driver-Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon*  
C.E.: Common Era or A.D.  
CGEDNT: *Concise Greek-English Dictionary of New Testament Words* (Barclay M. Newman)  
CGL: *Cambridge Greek Lexicon* (2021)  
CHALOT: *Concise Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Holladay)  
CJB: *Complete Jewish Bible* (1998)  
CJSB: *Complete Jewish Study Bible* (2016)  
DRA: Douay-Rheims American Edition  
DSS: Dead Sea Scrolls  
EDB: *Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible*  
EJ: *Encyclopaedia Judaica*  
ESV: *English Standard Version* (2001)  
Ger: German  
GNT: *Greek New Testament*  
Grk: Greek  
HALOT: *Hebrew & Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (Koehler and Baumgartner)  
HCSB: *Holman Christian Standard Bible* (2004)  
Heb: Hebrew  
HNV: Hebrew Names Version of the World English Bible  
IDB: *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*  
IDBSup: *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible Supplement*  
ISBE: *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*  
IVPBBC: *IVP Bible Background Commentary (Old & New Testament)*  
Jastrow: *Dictionary of the Targumim, Talmud Bavli, Talmud Yerushalmi, and Midrashic Literature* (Marcus Jastrow)  
JBK: *New Jerusalem Bible-Koren* (2000)  
JETS: *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*  
KJV: *King James Version*  
Lattimore: *The New Testament by Richmond Lattimore* (1996)  
LITV: *Literal Translation of the Holy Bible* by Jay P. Green (1986)  
LES: *Lexham English Septuagint* (2019)  
LS: *An Intermediate Greek-English Lexicon* (Liddell-Scott)  
LSJM: *Greek-English Lexicon* (Liddell-Scott-Jones-McKenzie)  
LXE: *Septuagint with Apocrypha* by Sir L.C.L. Brenton (1851)  
LXX: *Septuagint*  
m. Mishnah  
MT: *Masoretic Text*  
NASB: *New American Standard Bible* (1977)  
NASU: *New American Standard Update* (1995)  
NBCR: *New Bible Commentary: Revised*  
NEB: *New English Bible* (1970)  
Nelson: *Nelson's Expository Dictionary of Old Testament Words*  
NETS: *New English Translation of the Septuagint* (2007)  
NIB: *New Interpreter's Bible*  
NIDB: *New International Dictionary of the Bible*  
NIV: *New International Version* (1984)  
NJB: *New Jerusalem Bible-Catholic* (1985)  
NJSB: *Tanakh, A New Translation of the Holy Scriptures* (1999)  
NKJV: *New King James Version* (1982)  
NRSV: *New Revised Standard Version* (1989)  
NLT: *New Living Translation* (1996)  
NT: *New Testament*  
OT: *Old Testament*  
REB: *Revised English Bible* (1989)  
RSV: *Revised Standard Version* (1952)  
t. Tosefta  
Tanach (Tanakh): the Old Testament  
Thayer: *Thayer's Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament*  
TDNT: *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*  
TLV: *Messianic Jewish Family Bible—Tree of Life Version* (2014)  
TNIV: *Today's New International Version* (2005)  
TWOT: *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*  
UBSHNT: *United Bible Societies' 1991 Hebrew New Testament revised edition*  
v(s). *verse(s)*  
Vine: *Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*  
Vul: *Latin Vulgate*  
YLT: *Young's Literal Translation* (1862/1898)  
WMB: *World Messianic Bible* (2020)

# Exodus, numbers of

## What can you tell me about the controversy surrounding the numbers of the Exodus?

Whether one is aware of it or not, there has been considerable discussion over the past century regarding the numbers of the Exodus, and hence the population of Ancient Israel in the wilderness. This is not a liberal discussion or a conservative discussion, exclusively. Both liberals and conservatives, Jewish and Christian scholars, have expressed various opinions about the meanings of the population of Israel as seen in both Exodus 12 and Numbers 1.

The traditional view of conservative, evangelical Protestantism, is that 600,000 men were in the Exodus (Exodus 12:37), and that within a year the population of the men of Israel over twenty had risen to 603,550.<sup>1</sup> The Rabbinic tradition as seen in the Talmud likewise seems to confirm this:

**“R. Simeon b. Judah of Kefar Akko says in the name of R. Simeon, ‘You have nothing whatsoever in the Torah for which six hundred three thousand five hundred and fifty covenants were not made, equivalent to the number of people who went forth from Egypt.’ Said Rabbi, ‘If matters are in accord with the view of R. Simeon of Judah of Kefar Akko which he said in the name of R. Simeon, then you have nothing whatsoever in the Torah on account of which sixteen covenants were not made, and there is with each one of them six hundred three thousand five hundred and fifty’” (b.Sotah 37b).<sup>2</sup>**

This discusses the opinion that 603,550 individual “covenants” were made at Mount Sinai.

Exodus 12:37 in most English versions appears as something like, “the sons of Israel journeyed from Rameses to Succoth, about six hundred thousand men on foot, aside from children” (NASU). This number is then often extrapolated as meaning that plus women, children, and others of the “mixed multitude” (Exodus 12:38, NASU), the total population number of the community of Ancient Israel must have been in the range of 2-3 million. Numbers 1:46 will later say, “all the numbered men were 603,550” (NASU). Many in Orthodox Judaism and evangelical Protestantism accept this without any further engagement, and almost no Messianics (at least to our ministry’s knowledge) have really engaged this subject further.

Doubts over the total numbers of the Exodus reaching 2-3 million have always existed in both liberal and conservative circles. This is not just limited to massive academic works such as *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* by K.A. Kitchen,<sup>3</sup> as the venerable *NIV Study Bible* also expresses doubts present in conservative examination regarding the Hebrew terminology for “thousand” (Numbers 1).<sup>4</sup> A commonly accessible liberal resource, like the *New Oxford Annotated Bible*, flat asserts that a population of 603,500 is unreasonably high. It indicates how the Hebrew for “thousand” was also a term for sub-section, and thus Numbers 1:21, “the number of the tribe of Reuben was forty-six thousand five hundred” (RSV), really denoted forty-six sub-sections of five hundred men, making the population of Reuben 5,550.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Charles F. Pfeiffer, “Exodus,” in Merrill C. Tenney, ed., *The New International Dictionary of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 334.

<sup>2</sup> *The Babylonian Talmud: A Translation and Commentary*. MS Windows XP. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2005. CD-ROM.

<sup>3</sup> K.A. Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 264.

<sup>4</sup> Kenneth L. Barker, ed., et. al., *NIV Study Bible: Fully Revised Edition* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2020), pp 213-215.

<sup>5</sup> Herbert G. May and Bruce M. Metzger, eds., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible With the Apocrypha*, RSV (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 161.

Bible translations, whether produced by conservatives or liberals, generally do sit on the overly conservative side (often for market reasons). Thus, no Bible translation to date has really broken out of rendering “thousand” as something otherwise, even though there are plenty of commentaries on the Pentateuch which will discuss this issue.

There are good textual reasons to suggest that the total numbers of the Exodus were less than 2-3 million, and even less than 600,000. When one thinks that 2-3 million people were leaving Egypt, moving out toward the Red Sea, he or she should be somewhat perplexed at how easily the Israelites were disturbed when only 600 Egyptian chariots chase them down (Exodus 14:7). As the people cried to Moses, “Is it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? Why have you dealt with us in this way, bringing us out of Egypt?” (Exodus 14:11, NIV). More than a few people wonder if 2-3 million people could have been severely threatened by a mere 600 chariots. (These were not armored tanks!) Either the Ancient Israelites were even more foolish than they are commonly given credit, or there is something which readers often have missed.

The issue in question, in both Exodus 12 and Numbers 1, concerns the Hebrew term *elef*, and what it might mean against its Semitic cognates. In his Exodus commentary, Nahum M. Sarna notes how *elef* might indeed mean “clan” or “a small military unit.”<sup>6</sup> In *On the Reliability of the Old Testament*, Kitchen discusses how *elef*, while often meaning “thousand,” indeed does have clear places in the Hebrew Bible where it means precisely this (Genesis 20:16; Numbers 3:50), but that there are other places where it can regard some kind of a family group, military unit, or section of priests,<sup>7</sup> and so he favors *elef* meaning something other than “thousand” in places like Exodus 12:37 or Numbers 1.

When this is taken into consideration, one is presented with several possibilities concerning the total numbers of the Exodus, which does reduce it from 603,500. Scholars have proposed various sums, ranging anywhere from 20,000-22,000 to often as high at 140,000.<sup>8</sup> When offering any alternatives to the traditional view of 2-3 million in both Exodus and Numbers, one has to ask whether 603 *elef* 550 are the total numbers of fighting men, or the total numbers of men. What about the priests, shepherds, and other men in Israel who formed the infrastructure of the camp? What about the women and children, and the average size of families? What about the men under twenty who could not fight? What about any others? When these factors are considered, one can certainly say in *general terms*, that several hundred thousand could very well have been involved in the Exodus.

In the future as Messianic Biblical scholarship becomes more engaged with contemporary opinion, there are likely to be more discussions regarding this issue. Many will still hold to the traditional view of 2-3 million in the Exodus. But many others are likely to just say that several hundred thousand were involved. Either way, both positions rightly advocate that there were scores of people involved, and to hold to only several hundred thousand being in the Exodus is by no means a liberal position. A liberal position would be suggesting that the Exodus and God’s judgments on Egypt are only important *myths* which formed the basis of a group of nomads called “Israel,” and at the very most, 600 people were involved in some kind of wandering with the numbers exaggerated.

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<sup>6</sup> Nahum M. Sarna, *JPS Torah Commentary: Exodus* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1991), 62.

<sup>7</sup> Kitchen, 264.

<sup>8</sup> Cf. *Ibid.*, 265.