

# COMMENTARY ON NUMBERS

## *Bamidbar* בְּמִדְבָּר In the wilderness “More Than Just a Number”

Numbers 1:1-4:20  
Hosea 2:1-22

*Bamidbar* is the first Torah portion of the Book of Numbers, from which this text takes its traditional Hebrew name. The first words in this *parashah* describe how Israel is going to spend the next thirty-eight years “in the wilderness” (Heb. *b'midbar*, בְּמִדְבָּר). During this journey Israel will learn to depend upon the Lord and follow Him, eventually being able to occupy the Promised Land. Great trials are on the horizon, as the nurturing process will mold Israel into a set-apart people uniquely chosen to be God’s light to the nations:

“Then the LORD spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai, in the tent of meeting, on the first of the second month, in the second year after they had come out of the land of Egypt, saying, ‘Take a census of all the congregation of the sons of Israel, by their families, by their fathers’ households, according to the number of names, every male, head by head from twenty years old and upward, whoever *is able* to go out to war in Israel, you and Aaron shall number them by their armies’” (Numbers 1:1-3).

As you consider *Bamidbar* this week, you can readily appreciate why it is commonly called “Numbers.”<sup>1</sup> There are many facts and figures transcribed, as Moses is requested to take a census of the male population eligible for military service. As I spent some time considering various aspects of the tabulation process, what came to my mind was the reality **that the Ancient Israelites were more than just “numbers” to God.** The Holy One demonstrated some concern for not only these people, but also demonstrates concern up until today—for the destinies of each one of His human children and how they fit into His plan for the ages.

Although there has been a previous census mentioned in the collection of finances for the Tabernacle (Exodus 38:26), it was not the specific reckoning of people that we see in the Book of Numbers. We get to finally see some of details of how large the Israelite Exodus was from Egypt, and obviously how they needed the Lord’s provision. We have to remember that these events took place over 3,300 years ago in the general area today

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<sup>1</sup> The English title “Numbers” is a carryover from the Greek Septuagint. The LXX’s Jewish translators chose the name *Arithmoi* (ΑΡΙΘΜΟΙ), meaning “numbers.”

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known as the Sinai Peninsula.<sup>2</sup> Now that we will begin to focus in on the actual people involved in the Exodus, it is difficult to imagine how, given the primitive conditions, Israel could make its trek. As the accounting begins and you contemplate the numbers, you realize that we are easily dealing with several hundred thousand people.<sup>3</sup> Moving these people through a wilderness environment for a total of forty years was indeed a miraculous achievement. Here in *Bamidbar*, we can begin to appreciate the level of organization and cooperation that made much of this possible.

## Organizational Structure

It might be difficult for us to fathom several hundred thousand people with various belongings and livestock, bivouacked in the desert. The logistical needs including food, water, and basic sanitation for this amount of people is overwhelming (even though it might not be that much bigger than a giant sports stadium filled to capacity along with thousands of tailgaters). Thankfully, God was responsible for providing the basic sustenance, water, and there were instructions in place to deal with the sanitation problems (cf. Deuteronomy 23:13). *Some degree of organization had already been implemented.*

In *Bamidbar*, we witness that the Ancient Israelites are very much structured by various tribal, clan, and family units. When the Israelites left Egypt, they had the accommodating will to depart in a kind of martial array (Exodus 13:18), requiring people to know their place within the social framework. A group of people as large as Israel does not move in this manner, without a substantial degree of cooperation among the different families, clans, and tribes. But, if we remember back to some of the early challenges experienced during Moses' tenure of leadership, we should recall how his father-in-law Jethro was very instrumental in helping establish some specific organizational structure to the mass of Israelites:

“Furthermore, you shall select out of all the people able men who fear God, men of truth, those who hate dishonest gain; and you shall place *these* over them *as* leaders of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties and of tens...So Moses listened to his father-in-law and did all that he had said. Moses chose able men out of all Israel and made them heads over the people, leaders of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties and of tens” (Exodus 18:21, 24-25).

As this advice was instituted, the people of Israel began to have different levels of leadership, which brought additional order into the camp, and alleviated much of the stress that was upon Moses and the elders. It seems, from a practical standpoint, that by the time

<sup>2</sup> There is debate over the exact route of the Exodus, with some favoring different sites in the modern-day Sinai Peninsula, and others alternative locations, perhaps even in modern-day Saudi Arabia. Consult Duane A. Garrett, ed., et. al., *NIV Archaeological Study Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), pp 108-109, 112; and the FAQ, “Exodus, Route of.”

<sup>3</sup> Editor's note: In Numbers 2:32 we are told “the total of the numbered men of the camps by their armies, [was] 603,550,” which according to some would make the total population of the Israelites somewhere in the range of 2-3 million. There are many conservative scholars who have difficulty with this conclusion, pointing out how the Semitic term *elef* (אֶלֶף), often rendered as “thousand,” does have cognates that can regard it meaning “troop” or “company.” If 603 *elef* 550 is taken to mean something less than 603,550, then the total population of the Israelites is reduced to somewhere probably in the hundreds of thousands. Bible translations, though, tend to stay on the safe side with the rendering of “thousand.”

For a further discussion, consult K.A. Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 264; and the “Excursus on Large Numbers,” in Timothy R. Ashley, *New International Commentary on the Old Testament: The Book of Numbers* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), pp 60-66. Also see the FAQ, “Exodus, numbers of.”

the census seen in Numbers takes place—thirteen months after the departure from Egypt—that the Israelites have already positioned themselves around the Tent of Meeting according to their tribes. At this point, Moses and Aaron formalize the specific directives from God, delivered in our Torah portion. Now, even more order is established between the different tribal units:

“Now the LORD spoke to Moses and to Aaron, saying, ‘The sons of Israel shall camp, each by his own standard, with the banners of their fathers’ households; they shall camp around the tent of meeting at a distance’” (Numbers 2:1-2).

After processing some of the logistical thoughts, and wondering how this mass of people could function in the wilderness, I concluded that it was simply **the miraculous intervention of God Himself** which ultimately had to sustain Israel.

## Everybody Counts!

As I reread the opening statements of *Bamidbar*, one expression really caught my attention. Moses and Aaron, in conducting the census, were to count each eligible male by their heads, *l’gulgelotam* (לְגִלְגֹּלְתָם), “every male individually” (Numbers 1:2, NRSV) or “one by one” (NIV). **What did God mean by having these people counted “head-to-head”?**

I looked up the Hebrew term *gulgolet* (גִּלְגֹּלֶת), frequently translated as “head,” and naturally did a word study. In my reading, it seemed to me that the Lord was really interested in each individual person who was being numbered for service. When you speak to a person face-to-face—or head-to-head as it is here—you tend to have a very sincere and intimate conversation with one. You acknowledge the most recognizable part of the person with your most recognizable part. Note how much Moses wanted to see the face of the Most High, but was denied:

“The LORD said to Moses, ‘I will also do this thing of which you have spoken; for you have found favor in My sight and I have known you by name.’ Then Moses said, ‘I pray You, show me Your glory!’ And He said, ‘I Myself will make all My goodness pass before you, and will proclaim the name of the LORD before you; and I will be gracious to whom I will be gracious, and will show compassion on whom I will show compassion.’ But He said, ‘You cannot see My face, for no man can see Me and live!’ Then the LORD said, ‘Behold, there is a place by Me, and you shall stand *there* on the rock; and it will come about, while My glory is passing by, that I will put you in the cleft of the rock and cover you with My hand until I have passed by. Then I will take My hand away and you shall see My back, but My face shall not be seen’” (Exodus 33:17-23).

Here, the Lord acknowledges that He knows Moses by his name, but He is not able to let Moses see His face—because according to this testimony, Moses would die. Apparently, a mortal cannot look directly upon the sight of pure holiness and live.

But as we contemplate this head-to-head experience of Numbers 1:2, we note that each of the Israelites may have had to look into the eyes of either Moses or Aaron, or at least would probably have had to see them as the census took place. *Do we see a desire from the Lord to recognize each person in the camp?* Certainly, the opportunity to present yourself to Moses and Aaron either at, or near the Tent of Meeting, would have been a great privilege. By this time in the wilderness journey, both Moses and Aaron had certainly distinguished themselves as anointed servants of God. Now as representatives of God, they are instructed

to count each male who was twenty years old and over, who was eligible for military service.

I imagine how one would feel when it was his turn to be personally counted and be recognized by either Moses and Aaron, or at least some of those in Moses' and Aaron's close confidence. These were the two chosen representatives of God Himself who would hear your name, and see that it was tabulated for the purpose of the census. Thinking about this, what came to my mind was that this could have been like a graduation from school, or even a military commissioning ceremony. It could also be thought of as some kind of spiritual *ordination* in the minds of those who received the recognition of being counted, being listing for their responsibilities concerning the future journeys of Israel, and the battles, up ahead.

The Hebrew word *gulgolet* simply means “skull,” in reference “for each person” or “enrolment by head count” (*HALOT*).<sup>4</sup> You are probably familiar with this term because the location where Yeshua was crucified outside Jerusalem was called Golgotha,<sup>5</sup> derived from either *gulgolet* (גֻּלְגֻלֵּת) or the Aramaic *Gulgulta* (גֻּלְגֻלְתָּא), meaning Place of a Skull (likely due to some kind of rock formation).<sup>6</sup> Does the counting in Numbers 1:2 reveal anything more than what appears on the surface?

The term *gulgolet* appears twelve times in the Tanakh: five times it appears in this Torah portion,<sup>7</sup> and it is seen twice in Exodus,<sup>8</sup> when the manna was gathered for each family and when the statute for the poll or head tax was being declared:<sup>9</sup>

“This is what the LORD has commanded, ‘Gather of it every man as much as he should eat; you shall take an omer apiece [*l’gulgolet*, לְגֻלְגֻלֵּת] according to the number of persons each of you has in his tent” (Exodus 16:16).

“[A] beka a head [*l’gulgolet*] (*that is*, half a shekel according to the shekel of the sanctuary), for each one who passed over to those who were numbered, from twenty years old and upward, for 603,550 men” (Exodus 38:26).

Within the Torah portion *Bamidbar*, the Lord calls upon Moses to count the eligible men head-to-head:

“[A]nd they assembled all the congregation together on the first of the second month. Then they registered by ancestry in their families, by their fathers' households, according to the number of names, from twenty years old and upward, head by head [*l’gulgotam*, לְגֻלְגֻלְתָּם]...Now the sons of Reuben, Israel's firstborn, their genealogical registration by their families, by their fathers' households, according to the number of names, head by head [*l’gulgotam*], every male from twenty years old and upward, whoever *was able to go out to war*...Of the sons of Simeon, their genealogical registration by their families, by their fathers' households, their numbered men, according to the number of names, head by head [*l’gulgotam*], every male from twenty years old and upward, whoever *was able to go out to war*” (Numbers 1:18, 20, 22).

<sup>4</sup> *HALOT*, 1:191.

This is different from another word commonly rendered as “head,” *rosh* (רֹאשׁ), which dependent on context can regard authority in various places.

<sup>5</sup> Mark 15:22; Matthew 27:33; John 19:17.

<sup>6</sup> The common term Calvary is derived from the Latin rendering *Calvariae*.

<sup>7</sup> Numbers 1:2, 18, 20, 22; 3:47.

<sup>8</sup> Exodus 16:16; 38:26.

<sup>9</sup> The other times *gulgolet* appears in the Tanakh are: Judges 9:53; 2 Kings 9:35; 1 Chronicles 10:10; 23:3, 24.

You can assume that each of the remaining tribes was also recognized and numbered by its “skulls.” The leadership of Israel, in the census taking, has some kind of face-to-face encounter with the people numbered—letting them know that they have value as appreciated members of the community. *There is certainly something impressive about having a leader recognize your existence.* In a representative way, the Holy One is letting Moses, Aaron, and the elders perform a vital function in encouraging the Israelites. What this said to me is that the Lord is very interested in the individual, and that He looks upon each person as a unique creation. **Everybody counts to Him!**

Continuing in this Torah portion, you read about the different people mentioned and realize that the men listed are not just numbers, but instead are names with distinct tribal identifications (Numbers 2). Each of them descended from named fathers, and each has been granted a position among his peers—something truly encouraging if you were an Egyptian slave only thirteen months prior. If you read and think about the names, recognize how the Father often allows people to live out the etymological meaning of their names. Realize that each individual has worth and value in *His eyes*, even if one does not mean very much to others. Here, the Lord appreciates the roles of the Exodus generation so much, that a special census is taken of them for posterity.

It is rather amazing to think that the Lord would have taken the time to record who these Israelites were—when many people today do not often know who their great-grandparents were, and do not have genealogical records in their possession. Was this census like a selective service registration for the military draft? How would this have affected the individual Israelites’ place in society? How would it have influenced Israel’s transition from a disparate nation of slaves into an organized nation of priests?

As I contemplated these things, I had a very sobering thought: of all the names I was looking at among the Israelites, *only two* of this generation actually made it into the Promised Land. We will learn in later Torah readings that only Joshua and Caleb, because of their faith, are spared from dying in the wilderness. All of the rest perish and do not make it across the Jordan River.

## The Rock of Our Salvation

Remember that King David, and other Psalmists and Prophets, have often referred to the Lord the Rock (Heb. *tzur*, צֵרַר):

“The LORD is my rock and my fortress and my deliverer, My God, my rock, in whom I take refuge; My shield and the horn of my salvation, my stronghold” (Psalm 18:2).

“And they remembered that God was their rock, and the Most High God their Redeemer” (Psalm 78:35).

I believe these passages are all about the Messiah of Israel. *He is the Head. He is the Chief Cornerstone.* Thinking about Yeshua, and my earlier examination of the word *gulgolet*, one cannot help but think about His execution—atonement for our sins:

“They took Yeshua, therefore, and He went out, bearing His own cross, to the place called the Place of a Skull, which is called in Hebrew, Golgotha. There they crucified Him, and with Him two other men, one on either side, and Yeshua in between” (John 19:17-18).

This event is what every person must look to for salvation. We all are counted and numbered among the people of the world, **but it is imperative that you be counted among the company of the redeemed!** It does not matter if a person is of the numbers of the bloodlines of Israel, because ultimately only a remnant of Israel and humanity at large

will probably decide to believe in the finished work of the Messiah. The author of Hebrews observes,

“For we who have believed enter that rest, just as He has said, ‘AS I SWORE IN MY WRATH, THEY SHALL NOT ENTER MY REST’ [Psalm 95:11], although His works were finished from the foundation of the world” (Hebrews 4:3).

Remember, the Israelite males who were recognized, numbered, and commissioned in *Bamidbar* lacked the faith in God to believe—and consequently perished in the wilderness. Only a remnant of two believed and entered into the Promised Land.

Today, many in the Messianic community believe that claiming some kind of identity in either Judaism or Israel is sufficient enough to be tallied among the redeemed. *Do not be deceived!* According to Isaiah’s prophecies, only a remnant avoids the judgment that will be unleashed upon the unrighteous:

“A remnant will return, the remnant of Jacob, to the mighty God. For though your people, O Israel, may be like the sand of the sea, *only* a remnant within them will return; a destruction is determined, overflowing with righteousness. For a complete destruction, one that is decreed, the Lord GOD of hosts will execute in the midst of the whole land” (Isaiah 10:21-23).

Brothers and sisters, make sure that you believe in the atoning work accomplished by Yeshua at the rock of Golgotha! Make sure that you are not just numbered among community of Israel because you make a profession of faith in Israel’s Messiah—but that **you are actually counted among the redeemed remnant** who knows Him as Lord and Savior!

## **Naso** נָסוּ

### Take

### “Blessings and Shalom”

Numbers 4:21–7:89

Judges 13:2–25

The most striking feature in this week’s Torah portion, *Naso*, is the reciting of what has become known as the Aaronic Benediction. While a standard feature of the Jewish liturgical tradition and of the weekly *Shabbat* service, Christians are certainly familiar with this blessing as well:

“Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, ‘Speak to Aaron and to his sons, saying, “Thus you shall bless the sons of Israel. You shall say to them: The LORD bless you, and keep you; the LORD make His face shine on you, and be gracious to you; the LORD lift up His countenance on you, and give you peace.” So they shall invoke My name on the sons of Israel, and I *then* will bless them”’ (Numbers 6:22-27).

*Naso*, of course, includes much more information than just its record of the Aaronic Benediction. *Naso* is a rather interesting Torah reading because it gives meticulous instruction about a wide variety of topics. Initially, as Numbers 4 concludes, the *parashah* begins by summarizing additional details about the priestly functions of two of the Levitical families numbered and responsible for specific duties concerning the Tabernacle and the