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Stars of Heaven, Grains of Sand, and the Promises of God

The exceedingly high **numbers** of the able-bodied men over the age of twenty conscripted into **the armies** of **Isra'el** in **Chapters 1** and **26** are troublesome, to say the least. The **numbers** of **soldiers** in each list total in excess of **six hundred thousand** (**603,550** in **1:46** and **601,730** in **26:51**). These **numbers** of able-bodied men mustered for warfare might require a total population of **Isra'el** estimated to be at least five million. Such **numbers** seem to be excessively large for the times, the locale, the wilderness journey and in comparison to what we now judge to have been **the numbers** of the inhabitants of the land of Canaan whom **the Israelites** set out to conquer.

Many faithful readers of the TaNaKh have taken these large **numbers** at face value and without question. In fact many people who have broad knowledge of the Bible have never considered **the numbers** of the chapters to be a problem; the concepts of an army of **six hundred thousand** and a consequent population of **two-and-a-half-million** (or more) in this account are often just considered to be a part of the routine data from the story of the TaNaKh . . . to be believed, not questioned. Yet, others, when looking at **the numbers** in the book of **Numbers**, believe that they are simply impossibly large.

Some have argued that these **numbers** may have been corrupted in translation. However, for that to have happened, there would have to be a significant reduction of **the numbers** in these census lists of **Chapters 1** and **26**. Thus, the scribal errors would have had to be massive in scope. The entire list in both chapters would have to be in error. It seems that it would take more faith to believe in a corrupted text in these lists than it does to work out the logistics of the numbers as they are presently presented.

The Bible student who does not have skills in reading biblical Hebrew may be surprised to learn that numbers in the Hebrew Bible are not presented in numerical characters, but in words. Thus, the sum for the fighting men of **the tribe Reuben** in **1:21** does not appear in the Masoretic Text as in English versions (**46,500**);

rather, the numbers are words, written out in a laborious but serviceable pattern. Here are the words in transliteration, “six and [plus] forty thousand and [plus] five hundreds,” woodenly expressed.

Considerable focus has been given to the word *‘elep*, translated “thousand” in these two lists. Many scholars have felt that this word for “thousand” might have a different meaning here than the usual numerical idea. The issue is made more complex in that there may be three homonyms (words with the same spelling) that could be confused, either in ancient times or today. First, Hebrew word *‘elep* certainly means “thousand” and is correctly translated. Secondly, another Hebrew word *‘elep* is a graphic term derived from pastoral language that was used to number herds. As one would look out over many cattle, one might speak in approximate terms of animals numbering *‘elep* (“a thousand”). Thirdly, in some biblical passages the Hebrew word for “thousand” (*‘elep*) is a technical term for a company of men that may or may not equal one thousand, for example **Numbers 31:5**, **Joshua 33:14** and **First Samuel 23:33**).

One might argue that the term *‘elep* has lost all sense of a specific numerical value and means simply a “troop.” Each **tribe** might be composed of **thirty to seventy troops**, and the total of the fighting men for these **troops** would number in **the hundreds**. This would mean that for **Reuben**, instead of an actual count of **forty-six thousand five hundred men (Numbers 1:21)**, there were perhaps forty-six troops with **five hundred fighting men**; for **Simeon**, instead of **fifty-nine thousand three hundred men (Numbers 1:23)**, there were **fifty-nine troops** with **three hundred fighting men**, etc. This would yield a total of **589 troops** and some **5,550 fighting men**, with each **troop** having about nine or ten men. This is the preferred conclusion of **Numbers 22-23**. Others believe in dual meanings and some get into symbolic meanings.⁵



However, the promise of **ADONAI** in **Genesis** to **Abraham** and **Sarah** that **they**

would have innumerable **descendants** are clearly in view here. In these **Genesis** texts, **ADONAI** promises **descendants** as numerous as **the stars of heaven** (see the commentary on **Genesis Ef - Abram Believed the LORD and He Credited It to Him as Righteousness**) and **the grains of sand on the seashore** (see **Genesis Fp - The Abrahamic Covenant**). The sheer number of **stars** or **grains of sand** are impossible to count. In addition, **the Exodus** generation **increased so much and grew so strong** that **Pharaoh** said: **Look, the Israelites have become much too numerous for us; thus, we must deal shrewdly with them or they will become even more numerous.** The **war** against the Hyksos had just recently been won, but **the Egyptians** worried that **if war** with the Hittites broke out, **the Israelites** would **join their enemies, fight against the Egyptians and leave the country** (see the commentary on **Exodus Ag - Then a New King Who Did Not Know About Joseph Came to Power**). The remarkably high **numbers** in the census lists in **Numbers Chapters 1** and **26** represent **God's** significant down payment on the promise of countless **descendants**. But the census totals also underscore the partial character of the fulfillment of the ancestral promises. **God** is not finished with **Isra'el** yet. The Promised Land still would lie in the future.⁶

John Calvin (1509 to 1564 noted for his Institutes of Christian Religion 1536) noted the enormous size of the **numbers**, but argued against anyone who would deny **God's** miraculous ability to increase **God's people** from one family to some five million in some two-hundred-and-fifty years. It seems to me that if **ADONAI** can make **the walls of Jericho fall (Joshua 6:20)**, have **Noah's ark** survive **the Flood (Genesis 6-8)**, cause **the ten plagues in Egypt (Exodus 7-12)**, allow **the Israelites** to cross **the Sea of Reeds (Exodus 14)**, rescue **Dani'el** and **his three** friends from **the fiery furnace (Dani'el 3:8-27)**, send **manna from heaven (Exodus 16)**, create a **pillar of cloud and fire (Exodus 13:21-22, 14:19-20)**, rescue **Dani'el** from **the lion's den (Daniel 6)**, rescue **Jonah** from the belly of a **whale (Jonah 2:10)**, still **the moon and the sun (Joshua 10:12-14)**, consume **the burnt offering on Mount Carmel (First Kings 18:20-20)**, float an **iron ax head (Second Kings 6:1-6)**, cure **leprosy (Second Kings 5:1-19)**, cause **the Israelites** cross the **Jordan on dry ground (Joshua 3:1-17)**, have **water flow from a rock (Exodus 17:5-6; Numbers 20:11)**, give a **donkey** the ability to speak (**Numbers 22:21-35**), allow **Enoch** and **Elijah** not to experience **death (Genesis 5:24; Second Kings 2:11)**, sweeten **the waters of Marah (Exodus 15:25)**, end a **drought (First Kings 18:41-45)**, raise **the son of the Shunammite (Second Kings 4:8-37)**, raise a **widow's son from the dead**

(First Kings 17:22-23), part the Jordan River (Second Kings 2:14-15), multiply the widows oil (Second Kings 4:1-7), destroy 185,000 Assyrian troops in a single night (Second Kings 19:35), confuse the language of all the earth at Babel (Genesis 11:1-9), cause Aaron's rod to bud (Numbers 17:1-11), feed one-hundred men with twenty loaves (Second Kings 4:42-44), have the earth open its mouth and swallow up Korah and his men (Numbers 16:1-40), turn Lot's wife into a pillar of salt (Genesis 19:26), and speak from a burning bush (Exodus 3:1-4),⁷ that He could raise up an army in excess of six hundred thousand. Nothing is too difficult for Him.