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Numbering the Tribes

1: 20-46

Numbering the tribes DIG: How might Isra'el's staggering numerical growth in the previous 400 years be related to ADONAI's promises to Abraham (Genesis 12:2, 15:5, 17:4-6, and 22:17)? How do the numbers of the tribes point to God's faithfulness? How are worship and warfare related?

REFLECT: The phrase "able to go to war" is used fourteen times in Chapter 1. What makes us "able to go to war" (see the commentary on [Ephesians Ca - The Spiritual Battle](#))? What is the Hebrew Roots Movement? Why is their doctrine false? How can you thank the Lord that He desires to give us wisdom and guidance for our lives and ministries.

The lists of names and numbers are the material and tangible signs of God's blessing, God's faithfulness to past promises, and the surety of God's future promise keeping.

The **tribal** names are important. **They** are etched into **the breastplate of the High Priest** (see the commentary on [Exodus, to see link click Ga - Fashion a Breastplate for Making Decisions](#)), carved onto **the gates of the New Jerusalem** (see the commentary on [Revelation Fu - The New Jerusalem had a Great High Wall with Twelve Gates](#)), and represent the totality of **Isra'el**.



For modern readers, the first chapters of **Numbers** are almost mind-numbing, with all its roll call of **tribal leaders** and the repetitive listing of **the twelve tribes** and **their census numbers**. We may find it hard to get enamored with the story that seems to have such a mechanical and numerical beginning. But for the ancient readers of **the book**, such lists and numbers bore crucial insights into the very soul of their identity, their unity, their relationship with **YHVH**, and their place within the community of **God's** people.

Many today are fascinated with their own brand of numbers, censuses, polls, market indicators, interest rates, stock market averages, statistics, and number-crunching machines called computers. Many define their identity and value and future by computing numbers that measure our human accomplishments, whether political strength, or material possessions, or military hardware, or number of square feet. But **the census** list in **Numbers** reminds us that the identity, value, and future hope lie in the tangible and concrete way in which **ADONAI** is working and stirring among us in this world. What is **YHVH** accomplishing in and through us? What are the beginnings of the real fulfillment of **God's** intentions for us and our community in this time and place? In what ways might we gain confidence in where we are right now? In what ways might we gain confidence to pursue our vocations as **God's** people by taking a realistic look at **God's** real fulfillments of promises already partially fulfilled?

The promise first given to **Abraham** (see the commentary on **Genesis Dt - I Will Bless Those Who Bless You and Whoever Curses You I Will Curse**) involved both the promise of **the Land** and the promise that **God** would make **Abraham a great nation**. In **the near historical sense**, both promises come to partial and tangible fulfillment in **the census** list shown here. The vast number of Israelites in **the census** totals suggest that **Isra'el** was indeed moving toward becoming **a great nation**. And the purpose of **the first census** (see **Ai - The First Census: The Old Generation of Rebellion**), counting warriors to take part

in the conquest of **the Land**, points toward progress if fulfilling the promise of **the Land**. These are signs that **God's** promise is in the process of coming true.

Even **Abraham himself**, in **Genesis 15**, sought tangible signs that **ADONAI** would be true to the promise of **descendants**. **Abraham believed God and it was credited to him as righteousness (Genesis 15:6)**. But in **Genesis 15:8**, **Abraham** asked for a more visible sign: **O ADONAI, how am I to know that I shall possess it?** In response, **God's** presence moved as **a flaming torch** between the split carcasses of animals in a ceremony whereby **Ha'Shem** pledged to fulfill the promise to **Abraham** or else be split in half like those animals (see the commentary on **Genesis [Eg - I Am the LORD, Who Brought You Out of Ur of the Chaldeans](#)**). **The census** lists are not nearly as dramatic a sign, but they are nonetheless real and concrete indications that **YHVY** intends to make good on the promises given to **Isra'el** long ago.²⁰

The men twenty years old and over who were subject to military service were recorded by name, family and clan, starting with the descendants of Reuben, Isra'el's firstborn. Reuben's title is given to account for the fact that **he** heads the list even though **Judah** is to lead the march (**10:14**). These lists follow the birth order and mothers' status to some extent. The **sons of Leah** came first, then **Rachel's** offspring came next, and the handmaid's children came last. The exception comes when **Gad**, a larger military power, replaced third-born **Levi**, whose priestly tribe did not serve in the military.²¹ Since the handmaid's children were placed last, and **Gad** was placed with **Reuben**, there was nowhere else for **Asher** to be placed other than **with Dan**. **The census** was used to facilitate the division of **the Israelites** into four camps of three tribes each: **Reuben** was camped to the south, **Judah** was camped to the east, **Ephraim** was camped to the west, and **Dan** was camped to the north (see **[Am - The Camp of the Twelve Tribes of Isra'el](#)**). Notice that all the **numbers** below (and in fact all the figures in the book of **Numbers**) are even numbers with the exception in **3:43** where there were **22,273 first born Israelite men over twenty** (see **[As - The Census and the Redemption of the Firstborn](#)**). Because **the census** was taken primarily for military purposes, it would naturally be arranged by **hundreds, fifties, etc. Here are the totals (1:20)**:

Descendants of Reuben son of Leah (1:21)	46,500
Descendants of Simeon son of Leah (1:22-23)	59,300
Descendants of Gad son of Leah's handmaid Zilpah (1:24-25)	45,650
Descendants of Judah son of Leah (1:26-27)	74,600
Descendants of Issachar son of Leah (1:28-29)	54,400

Descendants of Zebulun son of Leah (1:30-31)	57,400
Descendants of Ephraim Rachel's grandson (1:32-33)	40,500
Descendants of Manasseh Rachel's grandson (1:34-35)	32,200
Descendants of Benjamin Rachel's son (1:36-37)	35,400
Descendants of Dan son of Rachel's handmaid Bilhah (1:38-39)	62,700
Descendants of Asher son of Leah's handmaid Zilpah (1:40-41)	41,500
Descendants of Naphtali son of Rachel's handmaid Bilhah (1:42-43)	53,400

Census summary and total (1:44-46): Moshe, Aaron and the twelve leaders of Isra'el, each from a clan, counted the people of Isra'el by their clans, those twenty years old and over and were able to go to war; **and the grand total came to 603,550.** The lists of names and numbers are the material and tangible signs of **God's** blessing, **God's** faithfulness to past promises, and the surety of **God's** future promise keeping (see [Ae](#) - **Stars of Heaven, Grains of Sand, and the Promises of God**).

The names of **the twelve tribes** have always allured Gentiles. Historically, innumerable sects have arisen, associating themselves with **the tribes**. In the Hebrew Roots movement today (see the commentary on [Galatians Ak](#) - **The Hebrew Roots Movement: A Different Gospel**), there are some Gentiles who believe they descended from **the tribes of Isra'el**, though they can provide no substantive evidence to prove it. Of course, it is possible that any person might have **Israelite** blood coursing through their veins. It is equally possible that they do not. When **Messiah** returns, **He** will certainly restore all **twelve tribes**, whoever or wherever **they** might be. In the meantime, we should **avoid foolish controversies and genealogies (Titus 3:9)**. It does a person no good to assert that he "might" be something! Instead, we should focus on what we certainly are: **new creatures in Messiah** (see the commentary on [Second Corinthians Bd](#) - **A New Creation**). We are fellow heirs, citizens in the Kingdom of **Messiah**. We have all been brought near by the same atonement and given the same Torah.²²

*Dear Heavenly **Father**, Praise **You** that **You** deeply desire a loving relationship with all who will humbly come to **You** as their **Lord** and **Savior (Romans 10:9-10)**. Heaven's door is open to Jew and Gentile (**Galatians 3:26-28, Ephesians 2:13-18**) who choose to come to **You** in repentance and find rest for their souls. **You** called out to the crowds: **Come to Me, all who are weary and burdened, and I will give you rest (Matthew 11:28)**. Though all are offered the opportunity to choose **You**, it is so sad that many people are full of pride and choose to put themselves on the throne of their lives, rather than to exalt **You** as their **Lord**.*

Peace is greatly sought after and will be found by following **You, the Prince of Peace**. I will have peace that lasts for all eternity! **For to us a child is born, a son will be given to us, and the government will be upon His shoulder. His Name will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, My Father of Eternity, and Prince of Peace. Of the increase of His government and shalom there will be no end - on the throne of David and over His kingdom - to establish it and uphold it through justice and righteousness from now until forevermore. The zeal of ADONAI-Tzva'ot (Isaiah 9:6-7). Peace will come when Messiah Yeshua reigns. Yeshua will be great and will be called Ben-Elyon. ADONAI Elohim will give Him the throne of David, His father. He shall reign over the house of Jacob for all eternity, and His kingdom will be without end (Luke 1:31d-33).**

It is so wise and wonderful to love **You** and follow **You** in complete faith, for **You** have promised **Your** children an eternal heavenly home of **peace** and rest. **For we who have trusted are entering into that rest (Hebrews 4:3a)**. In **Messiah Yeshua's** holy name and power of **His** resurrection. Amen