

B'midbar

במדבר

“In the wilderness”

Numbers 1:1 – 4:20

Torah Together



This portion contains details on the first census taken by the Israelites after they left Egypt. At first glance, it may seem boring and tedious. However, a closer look can reveal some interesting insights into God's sense of justice.

1. The Census - 1:1-54

a) When did this census of Israel take place? Specifically who was counted? Why do you think God ordered this census?

The census occurred “on the 1st day of the 2nd month (i.e., Iyar 2) in the 2nd year after the Israelites came out of Egypt.” (vs 1) Specifically, “men 20 yrs old or more who are able to serve in the army” (vs 3) were counted. The Israelites were preparing to enter and conquer the Promised Land and God was preparing them as an army.

b) What tribe was omitted from this census? Why? Why do you think the tribes of Ephraim & Manasseh were included instead of the tribe of Joseph?

The tribe of Levi was omitted because they were “to be in charge of the tabernacle” and were not to serve in the army. Jacob adopted Joseph’s sons, Ephraim and Manasseh, as his sons in place of Joseph, thus giving Joseph the double portion. (See Genesis 48) Thus the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh are on the same footing as Jacob’s other sons.

c) What job did the tribe of Levi have? Were members of other tribes allowed to help? When the Israelites were encamped, where were the Levites to set up their tents?

The Levites were in charge of the tabernacle, its furnishings and everything belonging to it. They were to take care of it, camp around it, and whenever the Israelites were to move, the Levites were to take it down and set it up. No one outside this tribe was to help: “Anyone else who goes near it shall be put to death.” (vs 51) Also the Levites were to set up their tents around the tabernacle so the “the wrath will not fall on the Israelite community.”

A Year at the Mountain

As we begin the book of **Numbers**, the Israelites were still encamped at Mt. Sinai, as they were at the end of **Exodus**. They spent more than a year at the foot of Mt. Sinai.

An Army of Slaves?

In ancient times, a census was usually taken to number the men available for war. Do you think this played a role in God's command to Moses?

Scripture Link:

Genesis 48:1–6 may help explain why the tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh are included but not the tribe of Joseph.

d) The table below lists the results of the census for the 12 tribes. Do you notice anything interesting?

Scripture Link:
Exodus 6:23 reveals that Elisheba, the wife of Aaron, was of the tribe of Judah, the sister of Nahshon and daughter of Amminadab.

Tribe	Leader	Men
Rueben	Elizur son of Shedeur	46,500
Simeon	Shelumiel son of Zurishaddai	59,300
Gad	Eliasaph son of Deuel	45,650
Judah	Nahshon son of Amminadab	74,600
Issachar	Nethanel son of Zuar	54,400
Zubulun	Eliab son of Helon	57,400
Ephraim	Elishama son of Ammihud	40,500
Manasseh	Gamaliel son of Pedahzur	32,200
Benjamin	Abidan son of Gideoni	35,400
Dan	Ahiezer son of Ammishaddai	62,700
Asher	Pagiel son of Ocran	41,500
Naphtali	Ahira son of Enan	53,400
TOTAL:		603,550

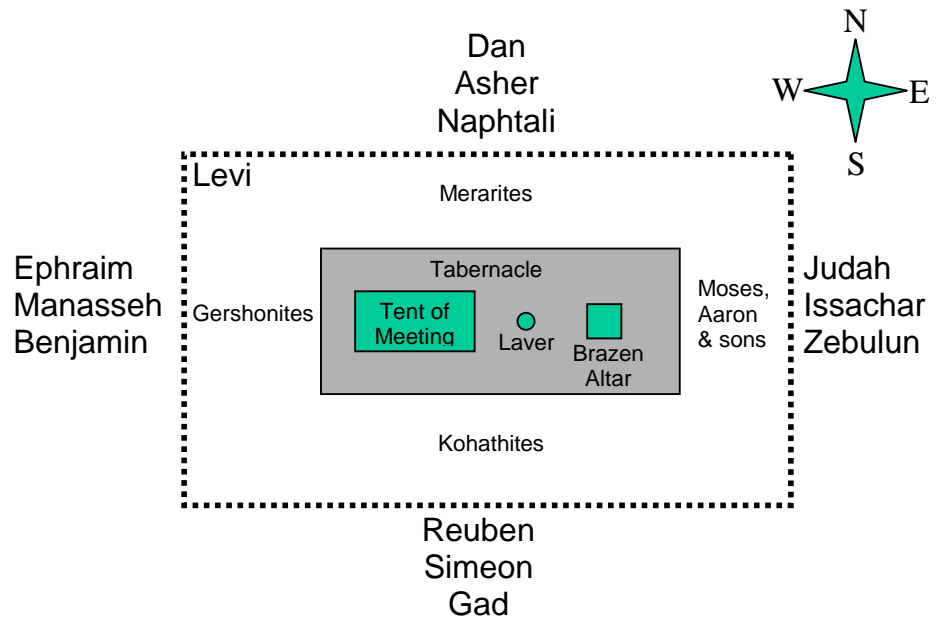
Items of interest:

- 1) Judah was the largest tribe, followed by Dan, Simeon, & Zebulun.
- 2) Manasseh was the smallest tribe, followed by Benjamin and Ephraim.
- 3) The 2 tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh totaled 72,700, making the "Tribe of Joseph" second in size behind Judah.

2. The Arrangement of the Tribal Camps - 2:1-34

a) Describe the layout of the tribes as they encamp around the tabernacle. Can you draw a diagram of the layout? Which tribe was closest to the tabernacle?

Guarding the Camp
It may seem somewhat surprising that God would specify the precise location where each tribe was to encamp. It certainly implies that God is a God of order. Do you find anything interesting about where God told each tribe to encamp?



The Levites camped closest to the tabernacle with Moses, Aaron & his sons camped near the entrance to the tabernacle area.

b) Describe the order when the Israelites were travelling.

The order of travel can be deduced as follows: Beginning with the tribe of Judah, then Issachar, Zebulun, Reuben, Simeon, and Gad, followed by the Levites and the Tent of Meeting. Next came Ephraim, Manasseh, Benjamin, Dan, Asher, and finally Naphtali bringing up the rear.

3. The Levites - 3:1-51

a) Name Aaron's sons. What happened to the two older sons? Who carried out the duties of the priest during their father's lifetime? Who carried out these duties from then on?

Aaron had 4 sons, Nadab (the eldest), Abihu, Eleazar, Ithamar. Nadab and Abihu were killed for offering unauthorized fire before YHWH (Lev 10:1-3). Eleazar & Ithamar carried out the duties of the priest during their father's lifetime (vs 4). Priests must always be descendants of Aaron.

b) Who was to be the leader of the tribe of Levi? What was the role of the other Levites and how was it different than the role of Aaron's sons?

Aaron and then his sons were to be the leaders of the Levites. They alone could approach the sanctuary to serve God (vs 10).

c) How were God's instructions for counting the Levites different than for counting the rest of the Israelites? Why do you suppose this was so?

The Levite census counted all males 1 month old or more (as opposed to 20 yrs old for the rest of the Israelites). The Levites were to work in service to the priests whereas the other tribes were to serve in the army.

d) What were the names of the 3 sons of Levi, the 3 Levite "clans"? From which clan did Moses and Aaron come?

Levi's sons were Gershon, Kohath, & Merari. Moses and Aaron came from the Kohath clan, their father being Amram (Exodus 6:18-20).

e) List each clan, their numbers, their leader, their responsibilities and where they were to encamp. Do you notice anything interesting?

Clan	Gershon	Kohath	Merari
Leader	Eliasaph	Elizaphan	Zuriel
Responsibility	Tent and curtains	Tabernacle Furnishings	Frames, poles and hardware
Position	West	South	North
Number	7500	8600	6200

TOTAL: 22,300

Scripture Link:

Leviticus chapter **10** tells the story of Aaron's eldest sons. This story helps make us aware of the power of God's holiness and the importance of worshipping Him in the way He has instructed us in the *Torah*.

A Math Error?

There is a discrepancy between **Numbers 3:39** which states that there are 22,000 Levites and the sum of the clans which equals 22,300. Perhaps the 300 extra Levites were the firstborn Levite sons and so would not have been included as possible substitutes for redemption.

In **Numbers 3:11-13**, God stakes His claim to “every firstborn in Israel.” When does He say He did this? Does this give you insight into God’s sense of fairness? Also, God allowed the Levites to **take the place of** every firstborn Israelite male. This introduces us to the concept of *substitution* or *redemption*: allowing one person or thing to take the place of another, a key role for the Messiah.

f) From God’s perspective, why were the Levites “set apart” for Himself? How many firstborn Israelite males were counted? How many Levites were counted? What was done about the difference? Does this reveal anything about God’s character?

When God struck down all firstborn males in Egypt, he set aside the firstborn males of Israel as His. God then allowed the Levites to be “exchanged” for the firstborn males of Israel. There were 22,000 Levites and 22,273 first born male Israelites. The extra 273 were “redeemed” for 5 shekels each resulting in 1,365 shekels being given to Aaron for use in worship.

“I have taken the Levites . . . in place of the first male offspring of every Israelite woman. The Levites are mine.”

Numbers 3:12

4. The Kohathites - 4:1-20

a) When God instructed Moses and Aaron to count the Kohathites, which ones were counted? Why just these?

Only men between ages 30 and 50 were to be counted. Presumably, this was the age when a man could carry out the functions of the priesthood for which the Kohathites were responsible.

b) Specifically, what was the work of Aaron and his sons when the tent of meeting was to be moved? What specific role did Aaron’s son, Eleazar have?

Aaron and his sons were to remove the veil between the Holy Place and the Holy of Holies and to cover the Ark of the Covenant (vs 5). They were also to pack the utensils and cover the other furnishings in the Tabernacle (table of presence, altar of incense, lampstand, brazen altar - the laver seems to be omitted). Eleazar was in charge of the entire tabernacle, specifically the oil for light, the incense, the grain for offering, and the oil for anointing.

c) What was the role of the rest of the Kohathites when the tent of meeting was to be moved?

The rest of the Kohathites did the actual carrying of the articles (vs 15).

d) Could Aaron’s sons and the other Kohathites exchange responsibilities from time to time? According to verses 19-20, what would be the result of this?

The duties were assigned by Aaron and his sons and the duties could not be “swapped with each other.” If the other Kohathites “looked at the holy things, even for a moment, they would die” (vs 20).

Digging deeper

1. According to **Numbers 3:11-13**, when did God set apart for himself every firstborn male in Israel? Who is substituted for these firstborn males? Explain the process described in verses 3:44-51. Where else do you see this idea of redemption in God's word?

God set apart the firstborn when He struck down the firstborn of the Egyptians. The Levite males are substituted for the firstborn males of the other tribes. (This kept the priestly duties within one tribe.) Since there weren't enough Levites to substitute for all the firstborn males in Israel, the remainder (273) had to be "redeemed," that is, they had to be "bought back" from God. God prescribed that each man could be redeemed for 5 shekels and the money was given to Aaron (as God's representative).

The most obvious example of redemption is Yeshua redeeming our souls by offering himself as payment for our sins. God in His grace often allows us to be "redeemed" from certain obligations. It is up to us to understand and value that redemption.

2. Analyze the various responsibilities of the Levites. Why do you suppose God prescribed this detailed division of labor? What insights does it give you into God's character?

The Levites were responsible for the entire Tabernacle; the Kohathites were responsible for the furnishings; the sons of Aaron were responsible for the packing and unpacking of those furnishings, and the High Priest (Cohen HaGadol) was responsible for the entire enterprise. Such a division of labor ensured that every person knew his job. God's holiness was evident in that no job changes could be made. Only his chosen ones could actually see some of the furnishings. This shows that God is holy and a God of order.

For believers in the Messiah, our High Priest, Yeshua, has also given us specific responsibilities as we carry out the duties in the "priesthood of believers." See Romans 12:4 – 8.

For each *Torah* portion (*Parashah*), the ancient Hebrew scribes defined a corresponding reading from the prophets, called the *Haftarah* (conclusion). These passages are tied to the *Torah* portion by a key idea or theme. Also, after the New Testament (*Brit Hadashah*) was formalized, Bible scholars chose from it passages that also complement the *Torah* portion. These often provide additional insight into God's character and can lead to a better understanding of the unity and consistency of God's word.

For further study, see
Haftarah : Hosea 2:1-22
Brit Hadashah : Luke 2:1-7; 1 Corinthians 12:12-31