

Exegetical Notes, Numbers 26:1-65
"The Second Census"

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Verses 1-4a

After the plague the LORD said to Moses and Eleazar son of Aaron, the priest,
²*"Take a census of the whole Israelite community by families—all those twenty years old or more who are able to serve in the army of Israel."*³ *So on the plains of Moab by the Jordan across from Jericho, Moses and Eleazar the priest spoke with them and said,*⁴*"Take a census of the men twenty years old or more, as the LORD commanded Moses."*

- 38 years before, God had ordered a census of the Hebrew people. At that time, Israel was commanded by God to begin the conquest of the Promised Land but she refused to do. Those rebellious people were turned back into the wilderness where they had wandered from place to place as punishment for failing to obey and trust God. Now almost all of that generation, the exception being Caleb and Joshua and Moses, had died.
- It was time for the conquest of the Promised Land to begin again. So, once again, God ordered Moses to count the men of military age in preparation for invasion of the land.

Verses 4b-11

These were the Israelites who came out of Egypt:

⁵*The descendants of Reuben, the firstborn son of Israel, were:*

through Hanok, the Hanokite clan;

through Pallu, the Palluite clan;

⁶*through Hezron, the Hezronite clan;*

through Karmi, the Karmite clan.

⁷*These were the clans of Reuben; those numbered were 43,730.*

⁸*The son of Pallu was Eliab,⁹ and the sons of Eliab were Nemuel, Dathan and Abiram. The same Dathan and Abiram were the community officials who*

rebelled against Moses and Aaron and were among Korah's followers when they rebelled against the LORD.¹⁰ The earth opened its mouth and swallowed them along with Korah, whose followers died when the fire devoured the 250 men. And they served as a warning sign.¹¹ The line of Korah, however, did not die out.

- The tribes were listed in the census according to their order in the first census, beginning with Reuben and ending with Naphtali. While most of the tribes increased in number from the first census several did not.
- Reuben showed a slight decrease in number from the first census.
- Listed in the section dealing with Reuben are the names Dathan and Abiram. These men are mentioned in Numbers 16:1-7 as leaders in Korah's rebellion against Moses. Scholars are agreed that their names are given specifically as a warning to the Hebrews that rebellion against God's plan does not work.
- The line, "The line of Korah did not die out," establishes two truths: 1. God is merciful. He did not entirely destroy the rebellious leaders. 2. There was still rebellion in the hearts of the Hebrew people for not all the rebellious ones were destroyed.

Verses 12-14

The descendants of Simeon by their clans were:

through Nemuel, the Nemuelite clan;

through Jamin, the Jaminite clan;

through Jakin, the Jakinite clan;

¹³ *through Zerah, the Zerahite clan;*

through Shaul, the Shaulite clan.

¹⁴ *These were the clans of Simeon; those numbered were 22,200.*

- Simeon experienced the greatest decline in numbers from the first census. The tribe declined by 37,100 men. Scholars believe that this decline is due to the events described in Numbers 25. Zimri, the man who blatantly defied God by marrying a Midianite woman was from the tribe of Simeon. Apparently the tribe supported/defended Zimri. When the plague mentioned in Numbers 26:1 began, Simeon suffered most from it. Thus, their numbers were decreased in the second census because many of them had died for their rebellion against God.

- Again, the text shows the mercy of God. Not everyone from this rebellious group was dead. And it reminds us that there was still rebellion in the hearts of the Hebrews.

Verses 15-18

The descendants of Gad by their clans were:

through Zephon, the Zephonite clan;

through Haggi, the Haggite clan;

through Shuni, the Shunite clan;

¹⁶ *through Ozni, the Oznite clan;*

through Eri, the Erite clan;

¹⁷ *through Arodi, the Arodite clan;*

through Areli, the Arelite clan.

¹⁸ *These were the clans of Gad; those numbered were 40,500.*

- Gad also decreased slightly from the first census.

Verses 19-22

Er and Onan were sons of Judah, but they died in Canaan.

²⁰ *The descendants of Judah by their clans were:*

through Shelah, the Shelanite clan;

through Perez, the Perezite clan;

through Zerah, the Zerahite clan.

²¹ *The descendants of Perez were:*

through Hezron, the Hezronite clan;

through Hamul, the Hamulite clan.

²² *These were the clans of Judah; those numbered were 76,500.*

- Er and Onan were the sons of Judah. Their story is told in Genesis 38:1-10. Both of these men were married to Tamar and displeased God. Both of them are called "wicked in the Lord's sight." Their story is an ancient one predating the exodus from Egypt. Once again, their names are mentioned here to show that God is merciful and to warn Israel that rebellion against God does not pay. However, Judah increases in number from the first census. Er and Onan had no portion of importance in present matters.

Verses 23-25

The descendants of Issachar by their clans were:

through Tola, the Tolaite clan;

through Puah, the Puite clan;

²⁴ *through Jashub, the Jashubite clan;*

through Shimron, the Shimronite clan.

²⁵ *These were the clans of Issachar; those numbered were 64,300.*

- Issachar increased in the second census.

Verses 26-27

The descendants of Zebulun by their clans were:

through Sered, the Seredite clan;

through Elon, the Elonite clan;

through Jahleel, the Jahleelite clan.

²⁷ *These were the clans of Zebulun; those numbered were 60,500.*

- Zebulun increased in the second census.

Verses 28-37

The descendants of Joseph by their clans through Manasseh and Ephraim were:

²⁹ The descendants of Manasseh:

through Makir, the Makirite clan (Makir was the father of Gilead);

through Gilead, the Gileadite clan.

³⁰ These were the descendants of Gilead:

through Iezer, the Iezerite clan;

through Helek, the Helekite clan;

³¹ through Asriel, the Asrielite clan;

through Shechem, the Shechemite clan;

³² through Shemida, the Shemidaite clan;

through Hopher, the Hopherite clan.

³³ (Zelophehad son of Hopher had no sons; he had only daughters, whose names were Mahlah, Noah, Hoglah, Milkah and Tirzah.)

³⁴ These were the clans of Manasseh; those numbered were 52,700.

³⁵ These were the descendants of Ephraim by their clans:

through Shuthelah, the Shuthelahite clan;

through Beker, the Bekerite clan;

through Tahan, the Tahanite clan.

³⁶ These were the descendants of Shuthelah:

through Eran, the Eranite clan.

³⁷ These were the clans of Ephraim; those numbered were 32,500.

These were the descendants of Joseph by their clans.

- Since in the first census (Numbers 1) both of Joseph's sons were given inheritance rights, their clans are counted separately in the second census, too. The difference in this list is that, here, Manasseh is listed first. In the first census, Ephraim was listed first. Scholars agree that this difference is shown to Manasseh because that tribe had become the larger of the two.
- In verse 33, the names of Zelophehad's daughters are mentioned. In chapter 27, these women set their case for inheritance before Moses. It is decided that since their father had no sons to receive his inheritance, it should be given to his daughters.

Verses 38-41

The descendants of Benjamin by their clans were:

through Bela, the Belaite clan;

through Ashbel, the Ashbelite clan;

through Ahiram, the Ahiramite clan;

³⁹ through Shupham, the Shuphamite clan;

through Hupham, the Huphamite clan.

⁴⁰ The descendants of Bela through Ard and Naaman were:

through Ard, the Ardite clan;

through Naaman, the Naamite clan.

⁴¹ These were the clans of Benjamin; those numbered were 45,600.

- Benjamin increased in the second census.

Verses 42-43

These were the descendants of Dan by their clans:

through Shuham, the Shuhamite clan.

These were the clans of Dan: ⁴³ All of them were Shuhamite clans; and those numbered were 64,400.

- Dan increased in the second census.

Verses 44-47

The descendants of Asher by their clans were:

through Imnah, the Imnite clan;

through Ishvi, the Ishvite clan;

through Beriah, the Beriite clan;

⁴⁵ *and through the descendants of Beriah:*

through Heber, the Heberite clan;

through Malkiel, the Malkielite clan.

⁴⁶ *(Asher had a daughter named Serah.)*

⁴⁷ *These were the clans of Asher; those numbered were 53,400.*

- Asher increased in the second census.
- The mention of Serah, the daughter of Asher, in verse 46, is surprising and its reason unclear. As Asher had sons to inherit, the issue cannot be inheritance as it was for Zelophehad. This is made clear in Numbers 27:1-11, as Serah is not one of the females who petition Moses to be inherited.

Verses 48-50

The descendants of Naphtali by their clans were:

through Jahzeel, the Jahzeelite clan;

through Guni, the Gunitite clan;

⁴⁹ *through Jezer, the Jezerite clan;*

through Shillem, the Shillemite clan.

⁵⁰ *These were the clans of Naphtali; those numbered were 45,400.*

- Naphtali decreased in the second census. We do not know why.

Verse 51

The total number of the men of Israel was 601,730

- Israel was smaller, as a whole, in the second census. However, the difference was very slight. The numbers show that Israel was as ready to invade the Promised Land and take it as she had been when God first gave her the order to do so. After 38 years, the nation was again ready to enter the Promised Land.

Verses 52-56

The LORD said to Moses, ⁵³ “The land is to be allotted to them as an inheritance based on the number of names. ⁵⁴ To a larger group give a larger inheritance, and to a smaller group a smaller one; each is to receive its inheritance according to the number of those listed. ⁵⁵ Be sure that the land is distributed by lot. What each group inherits will be according to the names for its ancestral tribe. ⁵⁶ Each inheritance is to be distributed by lot among the larger and smaller groups.”

- The assumption behind these verses is that Israel will enter the Promised Land and take possession of it. When she does, the land will be given to the tribes of Israel proportionately.

Verses 57-62

These were the Levites who were counted by their clans:

through Gershon, the Gershonite clan;

through Kohath, the Kohathite clan;

through Merari, the Merarite clan.

⁵⁸ *These also were Levite clans:*

the Libnite clan,

the Hebronite clan,

the Mahlite clan,

the Mushite clan,

the Korahite clan.

(Kohath was the forefather of Amram; ⁵⁹ the name of Amram's wife was Jochebed, a descendant of Levi, who was born to the Levites in Egypt. To Amram she bore Aaron, Moses and their sister Miriam. ⁶⁰ Aaron was the father of Nadab and Abihu, Eleazar and Ithamar. ⁶¹ But Nadab and Abihu died when they made an offering before the LORD with unauthorized fire.)

⁶² All the male Levites a month old or more numbered 23,000. They were not counted along with the other Israelites because they received no inheritance among them.

- After counting the other tribes Moses was ordered to count the Levites. The Levites had also increased in the second census.

Verses 63-65

These are the ones counted by Moses and Eleazar the priest when they counted the Israelites on the plains of Moab by the Jordan across from Jericho. ⁶⁴ Not one of them was among those counted by Moses and Aaron the priest when they counted the Israelites in the Desert of Sinai. ⁶⁵ For the LORD had told those Israelites they would surely die in the wilderness, and not one of them was left except Caleb son of Jephunneh and Joshua son of Nun.

- Of all those who had been alive when Israel left Egypt, all the adults over the age of twenty years had died in the wilderness except Caleb and Joshua and Moses. Caleb and Joshua had been faithful and trusted God concerning the order to take the land. In reward for their faithfulness, God had promised that they would be allowed to enter the Promised Land. Moses would die before the nation entered the land. It was now time for Israel to move in to take the Promised Land.

(These exegetical notes are the foundational study for the sermon entitled *The Second Census*. They have been prepared by the Reverend Doctor Charles H. Jensen, Senior Pastor at Cornerstone Fellowship, Coatesville Pennsylvania. All rights are reserved by Dr. Jensen and *Cornerstone Fellowship*.)