

Numbers 1: The Numbering Of Soldiers.

- If you encounter Bible critics talking about the Numbers in the Torah as a reason the Bible is not inspired, you can safely dismiss them. Read the article at the end from the Faithlife Study Bible if you want more information about the number of soldiers, possible meanings, etc.,

Numbers 2: The Structure of the Camp.

- Most notable in the structure of the camp is that it is an ancient war camp. The commander would be in the middle, surrounded by his troops.
- The “front” of the camp faced east, with the gate of the Tabernacle also facing east. In Hebrew culture, the East is the equivalent of our North. Jesus, likewise, will come from the East.
 - The lead tribes and soldiers were encamped in the East, led by the tribe of Judah.

Numbers 3: The Levites

- Numbers 3:7-10: The Levites, much like the Cherubim, are the guards of sacred space; while the other tribes would go fight against the enemy, the Levites would stay behind to guard the “furnishings of the tent of meeting and the people who came to minister to the Lord.” *Regardless of the physical or spiritual conflict we face, we cannot neglect our meeting with the Lord and must guard His presence in our personal lives and our congregation..*
 - Often forgotten is our role as Royal Priests in the NT, which gives us the responsibility to protect the Presence of the Lord in our lives and those around us. Paul tracks this in 1 Corinthians 12-14, speaking of the gifts of the Spirit and orderly worship.
- Numbers 3:11-13: Further details on the Exodus 32 Rebellion. Because of the Tribe of Levi’s quick repentance, they are chosen over the firstborn of the population of Israel to be the priests.
- Numbers 3:14-39: The encampment order of the clans of the Levites as well as what articles of the Tabernacle they were responsible for. Paul also tracks this, speaking of the members of the body in 1 Corinthians 12-14. *It is easy to look at someone else and falsely compare ourselves to them. It may not be our role to do what they are called to do. Our role is not diminished by anyone else in the body; if each Levitical Clan didn’t properly do their part, the Tabernacle System broke down, and Yahweh’s Presence wouldn’t be with the people. Paul alludes to this that not everyone is a hand or an eye, but all are members of the body.*
- Numbers 3:40-42: This is a repeat of previously given information to highlight its importance.
- Numbers 3:43-51: As a reminder that the Lord saved them from Egypt and the Angel of the Lord passed over the Israelites for the final plague, they were to redeem the firstborn of every mother and father and every livestock animal. This offering didn’t “redeem” them spiritually or morally speaking, but it was an offering to the Lord to say, “Thank you for saving us.”
 - Instead of bringing an animal sacrifice for the firstborn of the Levites and the Levites’ livestock, they could bring shekels. Instead, the regulations of this are written here; this allowed the ease of burden should livestock shortages occur for any reason. *Do not allude this to multiple ways of salvation; there is only one means of salvation, the shed blood of Jesus. This passage does speak to God paying attention to the small details of our lives.*

Numbers 4 - Continuation of Numbers 3.

Numbers 5 - Various Laws

- Numbers 5:1-4: Specific Regulations regarding those who are unclean. Verse 3 is the key verse, “in the midst of which I dwell.” For more on unclean and sacred space, see Leviticus Notes.

- Numbers 5:5-10: Repentance was allowed in the OT; notice that no sacrifice is offered as no sacrifice atoned for intentional sin. The person who is repentant and returns to faith (verse 6) was required to make reparations for their sin.
- Numbers 5:11-31: One of the weirdest passages in the Bible. Some rituals were allowed to be carried out by the Lord to determine His will. Casting Lots, for example, and this “Love Potion.” It is important to note that these rituals are never seen again following the coming of the Holy Spirit and should not be practiced today.
 - Lesson: Death is the penalty for those caught in adultery (Leviticus 20:10-11). However, the woman here is not caught in the act but is suspected for whatever reason (the text speaks to the fact that a husband might also be unreasonable in their accusation). The Lord allowed this practice to determine if a woman had committed adultery to remedy this. The lesson is that God sees it all; while sin can be hidden from man, nothing is hidden from His sight. As a result, it can be punished by God and God alone. Similarly, if one is accused of a sin that they have not committed, God knows and is our vindicator regardless of how man might see us.

For more on Numbers 5:11-31, see “I Dare You Not To Bore Me With The Bible” Michael Heiser Page 39.

Numbers 6 - The Nazarite Vow and The Priestly Blessing

- Numbers 6:1-21: Any member of the Israelite society could set themselves apart for the Lord by taking a Nazarite vow. Some of these vows were life-long (or supposed to be lifelong), i.e., Sampson (Judges 6:17) and Samuel (1 Sam 1:11), but could also be for a brief time. The purpose of the Nazarite vow was to separate oneself for the Lord’s use.
 - There were three prohibitions :
 - 1) Nothing from the grape and no strong drink. Priests were understandably unable to drink alcohol while on duty; however, when they were off duty, they were allowed to partake of alcohol (drunkenness was extensively looked down upon). A Nazarite had no time off duty; they were always ministering to the Lord with their lives. Prohibition of alcohol and fruit of the vine speaks to separating oneself from the world without even the appearance of sin.
 - 2) Uncut hair. Priests could not shave their hair because of Egyptian Religion, and Canaanites who would shave their hair; they were expected to keep their hair trimmed (Ezekiel 44:20). The Nazarites would have stood out in the society by having longer hair than anyone around them. This unwanted attention could cause one to give up their vow and certainly would have added pressure to their lifestyle, being a prominent representative for Yahweh. *Similarly, our lifestyle, how we act, speak, love, think, etc., should reflect that we are followers of Jesus. It will make us stand out, which could bring us further attention (good or bad), but this should not deter us from our dedication to following Jesus. From the Nazarite vow, we can learn the importance of always remembering that we are His representatives, we don’t take days off, and we shouldn’t be different from one situation to another. The Nazarites would have been unable to cut their hair in one situation and put it back on for another; they either were or were not Nazarites.*
 - 3) No contamination by a corpse. Touching corpses made one unclean and therefore unfit for sacred space. This would be an improper mixture as a Nazarite was completely consecrated to the Lord. Nazarites could not intentionally make themselves unclean (if it were accidental, they would have to bring a sacrifice to clean themselves). *As believers, it is our responsibility to keep ourselves clean, fit to be sacred space as the temple of the Holy Spirit; we should refrain from every and all means of spiritual death (sin).*
- Numbers 6:22-27: The priestly blessing:
 - Yahweh Bless you: filled with strength, prosper, bless

- and keep you: watch over, guard
- Yahweh make his face shine upon you: reveal Himself to you, show us His glory (Exodus 33-34)
- and be gracious: favor and compassion
- Yahweh lift up his countenance upon you: “look upon with favor”, “smile”
- and give you peace: shalom - encompasses prosperity (Deut. 23:7; Prov. 3:2); good health (Ps. 38:4); friendship (Jer. 20:10; 38:22); and general well-being (in greeting, 1 Sam. 16:4; 2 Sam. 18:28; cf. shalom, the well-being offering).

Numbers 7 - The Dedication of the Temple and Offerings to the Lord

Numbers 8 - The Lampstand and Levites

- Numbers 8:1-4 records the making of the lampstand proceeding cleansing of the Levites for service. It is essential to realize that the Levites were being purified to minister to the Lord who was there, not just an empty tent.
- Numbers 8:5-22 records the purification of the Levites for service in the Tabernacle. Recalls why the Lord chose the Levites instead of the firstborn of all of Israel (see note on Exodus 32 for more detail).
- Numbers 8:23-26 speaks to the importance of raising up the previous generation; too often, we can think we are the generation and focus too much on ourselves. While there is always work for everyone to be done (v26), we must constantly raise our children to know Jesus and serve Him and those around them..

Numbers 9 - The First Celebration of the Passover

- Israel celebrated their first Passover since leaving Egypt. A year has gone by since they left.
- Numbers 9:6-10: An exception to ritual uncleanness is made for Passover here. While being unclean meant an Israelite was unable to be with the Lord. In the case of Passover, this is not the case; the Lord accepts everyone for His Passover meal. No doubt a foreshadowing of the atoning blood of Jesus that covers EVERYONE who would partake.
- Numbers 9:13-14: In contrast, those who are away or are unclean have no excuse not to partake. The command is to keep the Passover. Those who do not keep it are to be cut off from the community. This foreshadows those who would reject the sacrifice of Jesus even though it is available to them. They are choosing to be cut off from the people of God.
- Numbers 9:12: the breaking of the bones speaks to Jesus having not a bone broken while He was on the cross for our sins (John 19:31-34). It also speaks to the treatment of the Lord’s offerings. There is no need to break the bones of the sacrificial lamb offered during Passover. We should not abuse the things we offer to the Lord but should treat them with care and humanely.
- Numbers 9:15-23: The manifest presence of the Lord came as a cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. Israel was led by their God not in a cause but in reality. The Lord is unique as no other god offers its presence to lead us, guide us, fight for us, protect us, etc. Yahweh alone is good; Yahweh alone is the one true God.

Numbers 10 - The Silvers Trumpets and Israel leaves Sinai

- Numbers 10:1-10: Israel has a large camp, larger than a single voice could carry. To expedite meetings, they used trumpets.
 - The trumpets are made of silver, a precious metal. Standard with the rest of the Tabernacle, the finer the material, the more important it is. While the trumpets are not made of gold, they are made of material finer than bronze.
 - A possible lesson from this narrative is being careful of what is said to who. As the trumpets sounding in specific ways told Israel who was supposed to come for the meeting, we should be careful, often we can

think everything we hear from the Lord is for everyone, but it is sometimes best to keep it to oneself to meditate on and share with only close confidants. (see [Matt 18:15-20](#))

- [Numbers 10:11-26](#): The camp layout and march resemble an Egyptian war camp. This would have been another poke at the Egyptians whom Yahweh defeated, been familiar to the Israelites, as well as send a message to the people living in the land of Canaan. This was the war party of Yahweh.
- The Lord Himself led the camp (v11-12)

Numbers 11 through 25 are narratives and the circumstances and consequences surrounding those rebellions.

Numbers 11 - The Israelites Complain About Their Food

- [Numbers 11:1-15](#): The Israelites complain about “only having the manna” to eat. They begin to look back on Egypt and its slavery favorably. As a result, the Lord’s anger breaks out in the camp in a literal fire on the outer parts of the camp (v1).
 - Many believers experience the same phenomena in their spiritual lives. We often forget how bad our sin is; we often see the world as offering more than it is. Too often, we let ourselves get tired of the manna (Jesus) and start searching elsewhere for satisfaction, including going back to the ways of the world.
- [Numbers 11:16-30](#): The Lord anoints 70 elders to spread the work throughout the people. Moses, Aaron, and Joshua couldn’t do it alone. They needed help. We must be careful not to carry burdens too heavy for us. We must recognize the people God has placed in our lives and raise people to share. This applies to all life areas: family, friendships, church, etc.
 - Joshua makes an error in Verse 28; some men begin prophesying in the camp; this isn’t bad. We must fight against jealousy and a comparative spirit. Just because the Lord does something in someone else doesn’t mean He has forsaken you. Our attitude should be joyful when the Lord uses those around us. Moses responds that way: “Are you jealous for my sake? Would that all the LORD’s people were prophets, that the LORD would put His Spirit on them!” - Verse 29
- [Numbers 11:31-35](#): Quail is provided to the people, but it is a judgment upon them: “The gift turned out to be a terrible means of judgment, involving a plague and death for the rabble whose inordinate desire is apparently judged all the more severely through their deaths. It is the blindness and unbelief of these false roads to security that most concern the author. Mere sensual desire, or the more sophisticated hankering after Egypt, are both evidence of lack of faith” - Phillip J. Budd, Numbers, vol. 5, Word Biblical Commentary (Dallas: Word, Incorporated, 1984), 131.

Numbers 12: Miriam and Aaron Oppose Moses

- Miriam and Aaron become jealous of Moses. As a result, they become embittered against him.
- It is interesting to note that Miriam is mentioned before Aaron, suggesting that Miriam was the leader in this opposition. Ancient writing often records the person in charge before the others. This is why Miriam takes the brunt of the judgment and is made leprous for seven days before she is healed.
 - Note that leprosy in the Bible (and other ancient writings) includes Hansen’s Disease (the technical term for leprosy today) but is broader in its use and includes a lot of different skin diseases. We should automatically assume every use of leprosy is Hansen’s Disease, especially in the case of [Leviticus 13](#), which was not describing Hansen’s Disease. Miriam could have been afflicted with Hansen’s Disease, or it could have been another kind of skin disease.

Numbers 13: The Spy Narrative

- Moses sends 12 spies into Canaan to spy out the land. One from each tribe minus one from the Levites. They spy out the land for 40 days

- Standouts are Joshua (Hoshea) from the tribe of Ephraim and Caleb from the tribe of Judah
- The spies' report is initially good: see [Numbers 13:23–27](#).
- But they ultimately bring a bad report to the people: [Numbers 13:28-33](#).
 - They mention the fortified and large cities, but the biggest problem is supernatural: the Anakim, giants, Nephilim.
 - Going back to [Genesis 6](#). The sons of God (generally termed angels) had relations with human women and produced unclean (mixed) offspring, the Nephilim. The Nephilim were a primary cause of the flood. As a result, Yahweh started man over
 - The Bible tells us there were Nephilim present AFTER the flood (Genesis 6:4). There are several options as to how this could happen. The list is as follows and is not exhaustive (there are potential problems and traditional hurdles with some of the theories; in the end, we don't know for sure. We know they were there because Gen 6:4 tells us they were there after the flood):
 1. More angels fell and had relations with human women.
 2. One of those brought through the flood (likely one of Noah's son's wives) was an offspring of Nephilim.
 3. The Nephilim, after the flood, come about through demonic rituals where the Nephilim spirits inhabit bodies (there are a lot of pagan cults that have writings describing such things, such rituals are performed today in Satanist cults it is uncertain to what effect).
 4. The flood was regional, or some Nephilim survived on boats (there were other boats at the time).
 - I think option 1 is the most likely, but feel free to explore the other options. It is essential not to be dogmatic about the possibilities. We don't know the answer and won't this side of eternity.
 - Often brought up is when Jesus says, "For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven" - [Matthew 22:30](#). 1) It says angels 'don't', not they 'can't'. This is an important distinction, especially when considering the evidence in the text. [1 Corinthians 11:10](#) told women of the day to cover their hair (in ancient Rome, at the time, having uncovered hair was very provocative, indicating you were available for sexual relations) because of the angels. This is a seemingly pointless thing for the Holy Spirit to inspire Paul to write if angels never could lust and act on that lust. Not to mention [2 Peter 2:4-6](#) and especially [Jude 6-7](#) connect angels falling and sexual immorality. 2) Jesus clearly states angels "in heaven." These angels were not in heaven; they had taken the form of men on earth when these transgressions happened. In scripture, angels taking the form of men are attested to: [Genesis 18](#); [Act 2](#); [Hebrews 13](#).
- The giant clans will be the focus of the battles in Deuteronomy and Joshua. We will speak more about this in the future, but every time the Lord commands Israel to blot out the people of a city, it is because they are connected with the Nephilim. Every city NOT associated with the Nephilim Israel is commanded to "drive out."
- A primary goal in the conquest and King David's battle with the giants is to remove the earth of the offspring of angels and humanity.
- Several of the names of the giant clans are listed here in [Numbers 13](#). Others we will see later in Numbers and Deuteronomy.
- See the article on "Origin Of Demons."

Numbers 14 - The People Rebel against Yahweh (Again)

- [Numbers 14:1-4](#): The people of Israel rebel against the Lord; they would rather "[die] in the land of Egypt." They attempt to appoint a new leader to take them back to Egypt. By not trusting the Lord to give them victory,

rejecting Yahweh's plan, and by the leaders He has appointed over Israel, the people rebel against the Lord again. Their fear has led them to crave their former bondage.

- Numbers 14:6-9: Two spies, likely the only two of the spies whose names anyone remembers, Joshua and Caleb, try to encourage the Israelites that Yahweh would give them the land and they should not rebel against Him.
 - The statement "they will be our bread" in Verse 9 has interesting connotations: It teaches us how the Lord "feeds" us. How he grows us and teaches us. Often the Lord will bring us to situations that we cannot handle on our own, against supernatural enemies and fights we have no business being in; only with Him will we be victorious, and as long as we are close to Him, victory is assured (see Psalm 91). The statement also shows Joshua and Caleb's confidence in the Lord's victory over their enemies. Eating bread is not a difficult task. We should strive to have the same faith.
 - Numbers 14:8-38: Israel rejects Joshua and Caleb's appeal to follow the Lord and attempts to stone them. As a result, Yahweh brings judgment upon the people; this generation will die before the Lord brings Israel into the promised land. Forty years of wandering in the desert (see Article on the Number 40 in the Bible).
 - Numbers 14:38-45: Now regretting their rebellion, some of the people of Israel attempt to fight the giants and the Canaanites on their own with a result of an embarrassing defeat.

Numbers 15 - Laws about sacrifices when Israel inherits the promised land.

- This is a seemingly random passage amid the rebellion narratives before and after it; the purpose of this passage is that even though the current generation is punished and destined to wander the wilderness until the generation passes, their children will inherit the promised land. The Lord speaking to Moses assures readers that Yahweh will still lead His people into Canaan.
- Numbers 15:1-21 concerns laws of sacrificing to the Lord; see notes on Leviticus 1-5 for more details.
 - The affirmation there will be sacrifices in the promised land assured Israel Yahweh Himself will be in the promised land with them, not one of His angels (compare to Exodus 32-33)
- Numbers 15:14-15: non-Israelites are allowed to sacrifice to the Lord as Israelites do. This contrasted the days of Jesus when only Jews were allowed to enter the temple past a certain point under threat of death, a point Jesus was adamantly against (Mark 11:17). In fact, this was the reason given for Paul's arrest in acts, a false accusation that Paul brought non-Jews too far into the temple (Acts 21:27-28).
- Numbers 15:22-31: See Notes on Leviticus Ch 1-5.
- Numbers 15:32-36 shows an example of a person who "reviles Yahweh with a 'high hand.'" On the surface, as a stand-alone story, this may seem unreasonable, but in context, this man was doing more than simply gathering sticks; whatever the purpose this man had was in complete rebellion against Yahweh, this is further supported by Moses and Aaron not immediately sentencing the man but bringing the matter the Lord Himself.
- Numbers 15:37-41: Yahweh speaks to Moses to include tassels of blue on the garment of all Egyptians as a reminder to them of whose they are and the covenant they have with the Lord. The author seems to connect the tassel with the previous event, possibly as an example of the Lord's desire for Israel not to rebel against Him, the tassels being a visual reminder every day and throughout the day that they are His.
 - Today, we don't have blue tassels, but we do have the Holy Spirit, and fellowship with Him is always available. The more we can fellowship with Him in our everyday lives and everyday circumstances, the more holy our lives will be, and the better we will be led by the Spirit.

The Origin of Demons

The origin of demons from an OT biblical perspective (and an early church perspective) differs from our current traditional perspective. Fallen angels aren't called demons in the OT. They are fallen angels, "the devil and his angels." There is not a single fallen angel called a demon in the original language (it gets translated in Deut 32:17

as demons. This, however, is incorrect, see the article below on “Territorial Spirits”). The term demon originates with the Hebrew word: Rephaim. Which happens to be another term for the Nephilim, the giants. As you read through the Gospels, you may recall that Jesus often casts out demons interchanged with the phrase “unclean spirit.” If we look back to Leviticus and the rules regarding being unclean, we can see that being unclean was due to contamination because of contact or mixture with something unclean. Demons in the minds of those living in the times of Jesus are the disembodied spirits of the Nephilim. They are “unclean spirits” because they are a mixture. That sounds logical, but where is the biblical text? The Hebrew word “Rephaim” is used 19 times in the Bible (excluding 8 times used to speak of the “Valley of Rephaim”). 10 times as giants ([Genesis 14:5](#); [Genesis 15:20](#); [Deuteronomy 2:11](#); [Deuteronomy 2:20](#) (2 times); [Deuteronomy 3:11](#); [Deuteronomy 3:13](#); [Joshua 12:4](#); [Joshua 13:12](#); [Joshua 17:15](#); [1 Chronicles 20:4](#). 9 times as dead, departed, and shades. ([Job 26:5](#); [Psalm 88:10](#); [Proverbs 2:18](#); [Proverbs 9:18](#); [Proverbs 21:16](#); [Isaiah 14:9](#); [Isaiah 14:9](#); [Isaiah 26:14](#); [Isaiah 26:19](#)).

Let’s give [Isaiah 26](#) a closer look for an example. In [Isaiah 26:13](#), “Yahweh is God,” is stated in verse 13, “other lords have ruled but His name alone we bring to remembrance.” Who are these other Lords? Verse 14: “They are dead, they will not live, they are shades (Rephaim; demons), they will not arise, to that end you have visited them with destruction.” These passages are the origin of thinking in the times of Jesus about the demons. When we get into the NT and Greek, the terms get more generalized: good guys begin to refer to as angels, whereas demons are referred to as demons more generally. Thus when the text uses unclean spirit, it is distinguishing specifically what being it is speaking of.

Territorial Spirits:

In [Deuteronomy 32:17](#), the Hebrew “Shedim” gets translated as demons because it’s what the Septuagint (Greek) translators did. This is inaccurate because it doesn’t tell us what beings are in view. The Greek translators (as noted above) called good spirits angels and evil spirits demons, not distinguishing them as the Hebrew text does. There is nothing “wrong” with this; it has the advantages of being easier to understand and having less complicated conversations. However, it lacks the precision necessary when digging deeper into the text on these subjects. Both have their place; we don’t need to go around correcting people who call fallen angels’ demons.’ For our purposes know that that “Shedim” (translated “demons” in [Deut 32:17](#) in most translations) speaks to territorial spirits. (See book: Demons: What the Bible Really Says about the Powers of Darkness 1. “Territorial Spirits (Shedim; Šēdīm) Pg 22 for more)

The Number 40

- The number 40 is common in the Bible. It rained for 40 days and 40 nights as part of the flood. Moses spent 40 days on the mountain with Yahweh (two times). The spies will spy out Canaan for 40 days. Israel will not be able to enter the promised land for 40 years. Elijah will spend 40 days being ministered to by the Angel of the Lord. Jesus will spend 40 days in the wilderness before His temptation.
 - The number 40 represents that changing of a season. You have the earth before and after the flood. You have Israel before and after the covenant. You have Israel before and after entering the promised land. You have Elijah, who was asking the Lord to end his life, will continue his ministry boldly after 40 days with the Angel of the Lord. You have Jesus before He started His ministry and after.
 - The author is telegraphing that a change has happened; something new is here this season. The Lord is always the same, but we go through seasons, and it’s important to recognize when the Lord might bring us into a new season. It doesn’t have to be as dramatic as some of the biblical examples, but often when we find ourselves discontent or distanced from God, it can be the Lord trying to get us to chase after Him so He can bring us through into a new season. It often takes time and requires fighting for Him, but it is worth it in the end.

Faithlife Study Bible Large Numbers in the Exodus and Wilderness Journey

The Problem Illustrated: Several passages present challenges to the large figures of the book of Numbers. Deuteronomy 7:1–7 presents Israel as the least numerous nation in Canaan at the time of the conquest—seven other nations were larger. This means that if the figures in Numbers are to be taken literally that the total population of these eight nations would have had to range from 16 to 24 million people, roughly the 2010 population of Florida or Texas, respectively. The size of Canaan, however, is closer to that of New Jersey than either of these states. Archaeological evidence does not indicate that enough cities and towns existed to support a population of this size.

Further considerations help put the problem into perspective. The Israelites left Egypt with “about six hundred thousand [men] on foot, besides dependents” (Exod 12:37). God did not provide the Israelites with manna until roughly 45 days later (Exod 16:1), meaning that 2–3 million people required a different food source for 45 days. If a family of five sacrificed one lamb (or some other animal) each day to feed themselves, the Israelites would have to slaughter 120,000 lambs each day, meaning the Israelites would have had to leave Egypt with 5.4 million animals. Even if they ate meat only one-third of the time (for 15 days), they still would have had to slaughter 40,000 animals per day and leave Egypt with 1.8 million animals.

The manna also compounds the issue. According to Exodus 16:13–21, there was enough manna on the ground to feed each Israelite every day. The Israelites gathered an average of one omer (roughly two quarts) of manna each day (Exod 16:16–17). This implies that 1–1.5 million gallons of manna appeared on the ground every day. Finally, the Old Testament itself hints that the 2–3 million number is unlikely. In Numbers 33:49 it is noted that the Israelites “camped by the Jordan, from Beth-Jeshimoth up to Abel Shittim, on the desert-plateau of Moab.” Since Beth-jeshimoth and Abel-shittim were approximately seven miles from each other, the area of the Israelite encampment would have been about 49 square miles. By comparison, New York City (8.1 million population in 2010) covers 305 square miles. Taking the number 2–3 million at face value therefore requires that the Israelite camp had a slightly greater population density than New York City—without any multi-level living accommodations.

Since taking the numbers of the census figures at face value yields these issues, several solutions have been proposed.

Proposed Solutions: According to the most frequently cited proposal, the Hebrew word for “thousand” (eleph) may also mean “tribe” or “clan” (Num 10:4; Judg 6:5; 1 Sam 10:19). If so, the numbers may simply refer to military units, which corresponds to the aim of the censuses to determine the number of males eligible for Israel’s army. The chapters in Numbers that record the censuses, then, use eleph as both a number and a term for a military unit. However, the only examples where eleph might plausibly refer to something other than a number have nothing to do with counting. Moreover, in other passages that do involve counting (e.g., Exod 18:21; 1 Sam 8:12; 2 Sam 18:1), the term does not have any other meaning than mathematical tabulation.

Another proposal claims that the author of Numbers deliberately exaggerated the numbers associated with the exodus and the wilderness wanderings; in other words, they represent literary hyperbole. Comparisons with other ancient Semitic texts of similar genres validate this suggestion. Ancient Sumerian, Akkadian, and Assyrian literature, particularly royal inscriptional and historical annals, deliberately employed hyperbole regarding large numbers. The annals aimed to glorify the god of the king by exaggerating the king’s victories. In fact, the biblical accounts of the exodus and conquest bear striking similarities to contemporary annals in many ways. Given this, the hyperbolic use of numbers in the Old Testament anchors the biblical text to the writing conventions of the time—an argument that favors their authenticity as truly ancient documents. The writer of these accounts thus could have used a known literary device to draw attention to the might of Yahweh—the King of all kings, earthly or divine—in delivering His people, Israel.