



[Slide 1] We are beginning a three-week series on the Old Testament book of Numbers, which immediately makes me think of the Count von Count.

[Slide 2; Google “Count von Count” to find an image to insert here.] That’s not quite what we’re going for with this series, especially since there is some R-rated content in Numbers which isn’t very Sesame Street!

[Slide 3] So, what’s the deal with this book? Here’s some background before we dive in:

- Tradition claims it was written by Moses; or at least under his authority.<sup>1</sup>
- It is the fourth of five books by Moses, sometimes called the Pentateuch. Together, the five books tell the story of Israel’s beginnings. Genesis records creation through the early handful of Israelites ending up in Egypt. Exodus picks up hundreds of years later when the Israelites had become slaves; it ends with them free and at Mt. Sinai. Leviticus formalizes the Israelite religion with a focus on their religious laws. Numbers picks up the story at Mt. Sinai.
- It was written around 1400 BC (3400 years ago) in ancient Hebrew.<sup>2</sup>
- Numbers was not the original title of the book; that was what Greek translators renamed it around 2000 years ago, referencing the counting of the Israelites that happens in the book.<sup>3</sup>

There’s one more piece of background information I want to give you, but first a hint about it from one of the greatest movies of all time. [Slide 4, “Three Amigos – Thirst”, <https://youtu.be/trMOanQQIJ8>, length 1:34]

[Slide 5] The original Hebrew title for Numbers was “In the Desert,”<sup>4</sup> which is a much more accurate title for the book, since it covers the forty years the Israelites spent in the desert, beginning with them leaving Mt. Sinai, and ending with them ready to invade and claim the Promised Land forty years later. Let’s dive in!

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<sup>1</sup> *NIV Archaeological Study Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2005), 194.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>3</sup> R. Dennis Cole, *Numbers* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2000), 23.

<sup>4</sup> *NIV Archaeological Study Bible*, 194.

[Slide 6] *Numbers 1:1-4 (NLT)* <sup>1</sup> A year after Israel's departure from Egypt, the Lord spoke to Moses in the Tabernacle in the wilderness of Sinai. On the first day of the second month of that year he said, <sup>2</sup> "From the whole community of Israel, record the names of all the warriors by their clans and families. List all the men <sup>3</sup> twenty years old or older who are able to go to war. You and Aaron must register the troops, <sup>4</sup> and you will be assisted by one family leader from each tribe.

The first four chapters of Numbers records the process of counting all the men who could become soldiers in preparation for conquering the Promised Land. [Slide 7] Numbers 1:46 tells us that the total was 603,550 men.

[Leader tip: If you are concerned about time, the following discussion on the translation of the numbers could be abbreviated to simply state something to the effect of, "In recent years, experts have realized the ancient Hebrew would be better translated to describe an army possibly as small as 5500, which makes a lot more sense for the time period when massive nations like Egypt had an army around 20,000-30,000 soldiers.]

Today, that would be tied for the seventh largest army in the world.<sup>5</sup> The United States is in third place with 1.3 million active duty troops. China is the largest with 2.2 million soldiers!

603,550 is a huge army. It's something people have really debated.

- 603,550 fighting age men would have meant the overall population was between 2 and 2.5 million people.<sup>6</sup>
- Deuteronomy 7:7 claims they were the smallest of all the nations. For comparison, Egypt's population was 2.5-3 million.<sup>7</sup> Canaan's population was far smaller; their territory could not have supported more than a million people.<sup>8</sup>
- Exodus 23:29-30 claims there were not enough Israelites to fully occupy Canaan!<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2017/03/22/us/is-americas-military-big-enough.html>

<sup>6</sup> R. Dennis Cole, *Numbers* (Nashville, TN: Broadman & Holman, 2000), 78.

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.thetorah.com/article/ancient-egypt-population-estimates-slaves-and-citizens>

<sup>8</sup> Gordon J. Wenham, *Exploring the Old Testament: A Guide to the Pentateuch* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity Press, 2016), 107.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*, 107.

- Exodus 1:15 tells us that there were only two midwives; that is not nearly enough for a population that large.
- Egypt's army was tens of thousands.<sup>10</sup> How were they able to keep a people group as slaves that could form such a massive army?

Anyone else squirming? What's going on with these four chapters of counting that seem to result in an impossible number of people?

[Slide 8] The answer is simple. The Hebrew word *'elep* was believed for centuries to mean "thousand." [Slide 9] So if the Hebrew said 46 *'elep*500, it was translated 46,500. But linguists have made advances in understanding ancient languages in recent decades and realized that *'elep* could also mean "clans," or "family."<sup>11</sup> [Slide 10] If this is the case, 46 *'elep*500, would mean 46 families provided 500 fighting age men. With that understanding, scholars believe the 603,550 number could be translated as 598 families providing 5,500 or so fighting age men.<sup>12</sup>

Why spend all this time on the numbers? I want you guys to be able to have an answer if someone asks about it! Plus, we're about to look at a story where the Israelites are terrified to begin the conquest of Canaan. If we realize they had an army of possibly only 5,500, that fear makes a lot more sense!

[Leader tip: If you condensed the explanation of the translation, here is where you can resume the message.]

[Slide 11] Which brings us to Numbers 13 and 14. The Israelites had begun preparing for war. They had left Mt. Sinai and had begun the journey to Canaan, the land God promised them.

God told Moses to prepare a group of spies to go into Canaan and scope it out. So, Moses picked twelve leaders and gave them these instructions:

[Slide 12] *Numbers 13:17-20 (NLT)* <sup>17</sup> *Moses gave the men these instructions as he sent them out to explore the land: "Go north through the Negev into the hill country. <sup>18</sup> See what the land is like, and find out whether the people living there are strong or weak, few or many. <sup>19</sup> See what kind of*

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<sup>10</sup> <https://www.archaeology.org/issues/262-1707/features/5627-jaffa-egypt-canaan-colony>

<sup>11</sup> Gordon J. Wenham, *Numbers: Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 2008), 67.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid*, 71.

*land they live in. Is it good or bad? Do their towns have walls, or are they unprotected like open camps? <sup>20</sup> Is the soil fertile or poor? Are there many trees? Do your best to bring back samples of the crops you see.” (It happened to be the season for harvesting the first ripe grapes.)*

God wanted them to know what to expect! He wanted them to see the beauty of the land and envision a life there; to get excited for how God was going to provide for them. The spies spent forty days checking it out and then came back to give their report.

[Slide 13] *Numbers 13:27-30 (NLT) <sup>27</sup> This was their report to Moses: “We entered the land you sent us to explore, and it is indeed a bountiful country—a land flowing with milk and honey. Here is the kind of fruit it produces. <sup>28</sup> But the people living there are powerful, and their towns are large and fortified. We even saw giants there, the descendants of Anak! <sup>29</sup> The Amalekites live in the Negev, and the Hittites, Jebusites, and Amorites live in the hill country. The Canaanites live along the coast of the Mediterranean Sea and along the Jordan Valley.” <sup>30</sup> But Caleb tried to quiet the people as they stood before Moses. “Let’s go at once to take the land,” he said. “We can certainly conquer it!”*

[Slide 14; google “The Man Who Knew Too Little” to find an image to insert here] In 1997, Bill Murray, one of the greatest actors of all time, came out with a movie called *The Man Who Knew Too Little*. It’s a hilarious movie where Murray doesn’t realize he is a spy and goes through all these over the top, ridiculous scenarios that are completely obvious, yet he’s totally clueless. I love it.

I feel like ten of these spies were kind of like that; we’ll see that two of them, Caleb and Joshua, had a different response, but for the ten it was like they were The Men Who Knew Too Little. They spent just over a month exploring the land, and they saw that it was amazing ... but they were overwhelmed by the nations they would have to fight to take possession of it. They were giants, they were huge, their cities had massive walls – which back then meant would result in a lot of dead soldiers from trying to break through. And there were so many different nations. From their perspectives, they knew all the information they needed to know; they didn’t think they could do it. But Caleb and Joshua knew something they didn’t:

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