

Torah Portion: Bamidbar (Numbers 1:1-4:20)

[The focus of this Torah portion series is family structure and function as revealed in Scripture. I.e., headship, patriarchy, marriage, etc, graduating to understanding the community and Israel as a whole. If you have not read other portions up to this point, you may want to, as parts build on previous lessons in Torah, available at: <https://natsab.com/torah-portion-series/>]

With this portion, we begin our journey through the book of Numbers. Until now, we have largely focused on family and patriarchy within the basic family structure. There have been several minor forays into the larger structure of Israel, however it is in this book that we will deal multiple times with the tribal and national leadership of a patriarchal nation.

The first 19 verses of our portion present us with quite a bit of information worthy of close consideration. The underlining and minor notes added will give you some clues as you read this passage:

Numbers 1:¹ Then the Lord spoke to Moses in the wilderness of Sinai, in the tent of meeting, on the first of the second month, in the second year after they had come out of the land of Egypt, saying, ² "Take a census of all the congregation of the sons of Israel, by their families, by their fathers' households, according to the number of names, every male, head by head ³ from twenty years old and upward, whoever *is able to* go out to war in Israel, you and Aaron shall number them by their armies. ⁴ With you, moreover, there shall be a man of each tribe, each one head of his father's household.

[of Leah]

⁵ These then are the names of the men who shall stand with you: of Reuben, Elizur the son of Shedeur; ⁶ of Simeon, Shelumiel the son of Zurishaddai; ⁷ of Judah, Nahshon the son of Amminadab; ⁸ of

Issachar, Nethanel the son of Zuar; ⁹ of Zebulun, Eliab the son of Helon;

[of Rachel]

¹⁰ of the sons of Joseph: of Ephraim, Elishama the son of Ammihud; of Manasseh, Gamaliel the son of Pedahzur; ¹¹ of Benjamin, Abidan the son of Gideoni;

[of Zilpah]

¹² of Dan, Ahiezer the son of Ammishaddai; ¹³ of Asher, Pagiel the son of Ochran;

[of Bilhah]

¹⁴ of Gad, Eliasaph the son of Deuel; ¹⁵ of Naphtali, Ahira the son of Enan.

¹⁶ These are they who were called of the congregation, the leaders (princes) of their fathers' tribes; they were the heads (chief) of divisions of Israel."

¹⁷ So Moses and Aaron took these men who had been designated by name, ¹⁸ and they assembled all the congregation together on the first of the second month. Then they registered by ancestry in their families, by their fathers' households, according to the number of names, from twenty years old and upward, head by head, ¹⁹ just as the Lord had commanded Moses. So he numbered them in the wilderness of Sinai.

The first point I would like to draw our attention to is the important timestamp given at the beginning of the chapter. This numbering occurs at the beginning of the second month of the second year since redemption from Egypt. Deuteronomy 24:5 says,

Deuteronomy 24:⁵ “When a man takes a new wife, he shall not go out with the army nor be charged with any duty; he shall be free at home one year and shall give happiness to his wife whom he has taken.

Israel had been taken out of Egypt and betrothed to YHVH one year earlier. The anniversary of the covenant would be Shavuot, about 35 days after Numbers 1:1, therefore, God, who has been protecting and preparing His people at Mt. Sinai, is now preparing them for war. The Spies will be sent out in a few weeks (Numbers 13) and Israel will take the Land. This numbering in our portion is counting and preparing the men of war!

As we study patriarchy and both the family and national structure of Israel, we must remember that God abides by His own Torah! Further, we must remember that these lessons are written for our instruction as we approach the end of the age!!

1 Corinthians 10:¹ For I do not want you to be unaware, brethren, that our fathers were all under the cloud and all passed through the sea; ² and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea; ³ and all ate the same spiritual food; ⁴ and all drank the same spiritual drink, for they were drinking from a spiritual rock which followed them; and the rock was Messiah. ⁵ Nevertheless, with most of them God was not well-pleased; for they were laid low in the wilderness.

⁶ Now these things happened as examples for us, so that we would not crave evil things as they also craved. ⁷ Do not be idolaters, as some of them were; as it is written, “The people sat down to eat and drink, and stood up to play.” ⁸ Nor let us act immorally, as some of them did, and twenty-three thousand fell in one day. ⁹ Nor let us try the Lord, as some of them did, and were destroyed by the serpents. ¹⁰ Nor grumble, as some of them did, and were destroyed by the destroyer. ¹¹ Now these things happened to them as an example, and they were written for our instruction, upon whom **the ends of the ages** have come. ¹² Therefore let him who thinks he stands take heed that he does not fall. ¹³ No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man; and God is faithful, who will not allow you to be tempted beyond what you are able, but with the temptation will provide the way of escape also, so that you will be able to endure it.

The conclusion we can draw from this is that the Torah can teach us much about eschatology and the reformation of Israel into tribes as well as give us a hint concerning timing. While I do not want to be sidetracked by this most interesting topic, I do recommend Steve Moutria's End of Days Series and the possible connections to a one year tribulation:

<https://torahfamily.org/end-of-days-series/>

Steve goes to great lengths in multiple teachings to connect many verses that point to a possible Exodus event that begins either at First or Second Passover and lasts for a one year tribulation. Two verses to whet your appetite are,

Isaiah 61:² To proclaim the favorable year of the Lord
And the day of vengeance of our God;
To comfort all who mourn,

Isaiah 63:⁴ "For the day of vengeance was in My heart,
And My year of redemption has come.

Notice, contextually, Isaiah 61-66 is clearly eschatological!!

So, again, the time stamp we are given in Numbers 1:1 *may* be a strong connector to details involved in the regathering of Israel and the reconstitution of tribes and patriarchal headship at the clan, tribal and national levels. Selah!!

The next interesting point we can note is that the congregation is composed of the 'sons of Israel.' Each son represents his wife or wives as well as children in the assembly. Notice, also, the clear delineation of this role to males. Further, note the patrilineal genealogical designation and the age and qualification (able to go to war) at which a man is recognized and counted.

Numbers 1:² "Take a census of all the congregation of the sons of Israel, by their families, by their fathers' households, according to the number of names, every male, head by head ³ from twenty years old and upward, whoever *is able to* go out to war in Israel, you and Aaron shall number them by their armies.

All of these points have been previously made in other portion commentary except the twenty year old and '*able to go to war*' requirements. Judaism has a bar mitzvah at 13 years of age, however, I do not see a specific designation in Scripture noting that timeframe. While a young woman 'comes of age' in the 12-14 year old time frame, a man, for his headship/leadership role,

has a bit more that needs to happen besides physical maturity and the ability to protect/defend his family.

Numbers 1:4 With you, moreover, there shall be a man of each tribe, each one head of his father's household..... **16** These are they who were called of the congregation, the leaders of their fathers' tribes; they were the heads of divisions of Israel." **17** So Moses and Aaron took these men who had been designated by name, **18** and they assembled all the congregation together on the first of the second month. Then they registered by ancestry in their families, by their fathers' households, according to the number of names, from twenty years old and upward, head by head,

Our first direct instruction regarding a specific head of each tribe is given in this verse. Further, we are given some small clues that the selection of these men *may* have been by Divine call, or at the very least, are the eldest sons of the eldest sons, etc... (Notice, the word 'leaders' above could be translated 'princes', implying a type of nobility which we later witness in the Korach rebellion.) In other places of Scripture, God's selection of a Judge or head of a tribe can be by lot (Ummim and Thummim), direct call, or other similar identification. What we do *not see* is political election or similar democratic process. The only place that democratic process is in view is among the Edomites in Genesis 36. This is important in possible future actions by God in the selection of leaders for the reconstituted tribes of Israel. I explore these thoughts more in an upcoming article on 113Restoration.com titled *Thoughts on Patriarchal Structure and Selection*.

A side note worth of brief consideration is the patriarchal role of elders. Historic Christianity tends to think of elders as elected or appointed positions of oversight for the flock. The usual selection process is quite contrary to Scripture. The simple fact is that elders *were the patriarchs*. The men who sat in the gates were the respected patriarchs of their generation. They had grown up into those positions and were respected by peers and family alike. They *had a vested interest* in the well-being of the family and community because it had sprung from their own lineage! I believe Paul's 'selection' of Godly men who fit certain parameters as elders was a pragmatic temporary measure until a community could begin to mature and have elders naturally 'manifest' through maturity, age, and success in their own household.

It is through this same selection process that I believe the leaders of 1000s and even tribes came to be. Among the elders, there would be obvious degrees of ability and the peers could see among themselves who was trustworthy and had the ability to lead at a higher level of

responsibility. I do NOT believe there were popular election or temporary offices created for these men. This is patriarchy at the macro level!

A final note from these opening verses of Numbers that is worth noting is the *order* of the sons of Jacob in the list. As noted in the above citation of the passage, they are *not* in age order, rather, they are ordered by wife, then by age. This is a significant point that is usually overlooked. Many commenters will consider the overall order of the listed tribes, or consider the meaning of the names, or even ponder which and why one of the thirteen tribes is not listed (Joseph = two tribes, thus leading to 13...), however I have never seen anyone consider the ordering based on the mothers. Yet, here, we clearly have the tribes listed according to their mothers. And, we are about to see that God instructs Moses to organize the tribes around the Tabernacle in a certain order, and again, they are easily divided according to their mothers.

After the numbering of the men of war in Numbers 1, we come to the arrangement of the tribes, ‘at a distance’ around the Tabernacle. The chapter begins,

Numbers 2:¹ Now the Lord spoke to Moses and to Aaron, saying, ² “The sons of Israel shall camp, each by his own standard, with the banners of their fathers’ households; they shall camp around the tent of meeting at a distance.

The major items to take note of include the fact that God dictates where each tribe will camp, He positions and groups them in the manner that He does and they are to camp according to their patriarch’s household: by the sons. His grouping, interestingly, seems to be by birth mother. This is not an endorsement of matriarchy so much as I think He is intentional about keeping like genetics next to each other.

The following rough table illustrates the position of the tribes by direction, grouping and mothers. Scripture is *not* clear on which tribe was in the middle, though I believe the first named tribe* in each group, i.e., Judah, Reuben, Ephraim, and Dan, are in the middle of the group flanked by the other two. If so, this may be a direct connection to Ezekiel’s vision (Ch.1) with the four faced living creatures. The faces would represent the four major tribes: Judah (lion), Reuben (man), Ephraim (ox), and Dan (eagle). Exploring this aspect will have to wait for another day.

<div> <div>N</div> <div>W + E</div> <div>S</div> </div>	<div> <div>Bilhah (5,6), Zilpah (8)</div> <div> <div>Asher (Z) (41,500)</div> <div>*Dan (B) (62,700)</div> <div>Naphtali (B) <u>(53,400)</u></div> <div>157,600</div> </div> </div>	
	<div> <div>Rachel's (11/2, 12)</div> <div> <div>Manasseh (Joseph) (32,200)</div> <div>*Ephraim (Joseph) (40,500)</div> <div>Benjamin <u>(35,400)</u></div> <div>108,100</div> </div> </div>	<div> <div>Leah's (4, 9, 10)</div> <div> <div>Issachar (54,400)</div> <div>*Judah (74,600)</div> <div>Zebulun <u>(57,400)</u></div> <div>186,400</div> </div> </div>
	<div> <div> <div> <div>Gershonites (7,500)</div> <div> <div>Merarites (6,200)</div> <div> <div> <div> <div>Tabernacle</div> </div> </div> </div> <div>Aaron & Sons</div> <div>Kohathites (8,600)</div> </div> </div> </div> </div>	
	<div> <div>Leah (1,2), Zilpah (7)</div> <div> <div>Simeon (L) (59,300)</div> <div>*Ruben (L) (46,500)</div> <div>Gad (Z) <u>(45,650)</u></div> <div>151,450</div> </div> </div>	

Then, as we witnessed in Numbers 1:5-15, the heads of each tribe are ‘designated by name.’ (See Nu. 1:17) As previously mentioned, they likely were selected from among their peers in each tribe, agreed upon by the patriarchs who knew and trusted their abilities and character.

The final note I would like to address in this portion is the ratio of firstborns in Numbers 3:43 compared to the number of fighting men.

Numbers 3:⁴⁰ Then the Lord said to Moses, “Number every firstborn male of the sons of Israel from a month old and upward, and make a list of their names. ⁴¹ You shall take the Levites for Me, I am the Lord, instead of all the firstborn among the sons of Israel, and the cattle of the Levites instead of all the firstborn among the cattle of the sons of Israel.” ⁴² So Moses numbered all the firstborn among the sons of Israel, just as the Lord had commanded him; ⁴³ and all the firstborn males by the number of names from a month old and upward, for their numbered men were 22,273.

Where we previously read,

Numbers 1:⁴⁴ These are the ones who were numbered, whom Moses and Aaron numbered, with the leaders of Israel, twelve men, each of whom was of his father's household. ⁴⁵ So all the numbered men of the sons of Israel by their fathers' households, from twenty years old and upward, whoever *was able to* go out to war in Israel, ⁴⁶ even all the numbered men were 603,550.

While, I believe that Scripture strongly supports the practice of polygyny, I do not think these two passages make the case in the manner that some argue. There are some (and, I have made this mistake) who argue that 603,550 men stemming from 22,273 firstborns means the average family had 27 males and an equal number of females leading to an eye popping 54 children per household... This is highly unlikely, particularly when we consider that pagan Egypt was largely a monogamy-only culture (royalty excepted) and both Miriam and Aaron pitched such a fit when Moses took a second wife in Numbers 12. What likely actually is going on in these verses is that the 22,273 firstborn were born in the year since Israel had left Egypt. This would account for about a 6% population growth if I remember my math correctly.

Here is a quote from one source that a friend sent me in private discussion,

1) The biggest apparent problem is the number of "firstborn sons." Numbers 3:40-43 appears to give us a number for all firstborn sons over one month old. The number is 22,273, which makes for an impossible ratio of children per family (since this would imply that the 2 million people all come from 22,273 families). This would be an apparent contradiction which would show us that something funny is going on.

Some commentators have tried to solve this dilemma by suggesting that the Israelites practiced some form of mass adoption, but this is an argument without textual basis. Upon closer inspection, however, the problem is actually resolvable without such appeals, and the key is found in the specifics of the redemption price given in Num. 3 and Leviticus 27. Num. 3:47 says that the redemption price for each of these firstborn sons was 5 shekels. Lev. 27:6 (which appears in my Bible's interlinear notes at Num. 3:47) explains that the 5 shekel price was specific to sons between the ages of 1 month and 5 years. Therefore, the 22,273 figure from Num. 3:43 is not every firstborn son, but rather all firstborns between the ages of 1 month and 5 years. With this added perspective we are no longer limited to the 22,273 number as the total number of family units available, and thus our apparent contradiction ceases to be.

I simply offer that as a quick and simply demonstration that, while polygyny is perfectly acceptable according to Scripture, and was practised widely in Israel both before and after Egypt, the 'proof text' some see here between these two passages may not be the best source to prove the existence of plural marriage.

Other items in this portion could be covered, but this gives ample material to consider regarding patriarchy, headship, and the structure of Israel as it was being constituted as a nation.

May Yah bless you on your journey!! Shabbat Shalom!!