

CHAPTER 1

Israel was now to be formed into a commonwealth, or rather a kingdom; for “the Lord was their King” (~~1~~1 Samuel 12:12), their government a theocracy, and Moses under him was king in Jeshurun, ~~5~~Deuteronomy 33:5. Now, for the right settlement of this holy state, next to the institution of good laws was necessary the institution of good order; and account therefore must be taken of the subjects of this kingdom, which is done in this chapter, where we have,

- I.** Orders given to Moses to number the people (v. 1-4).
- II.** Persons nominated to assist him herein (v. 5-16).
- III.** The particular number of each tribe, as it was given in to Moses (v. 17-43).
- IV.** The sum total of all together (v. 44-46).
- V.** An exception of the Levites (v. 47, etc.).

~~1~~NUMBERS 1:1-16

THE NUMBERING OF THE ISRAELITES

I. We have here a commission issued out for the numbering of the people of Israel; and David, long after, paid dearly for doing it without a commission. Here is,

1. The date of this commission, v. 1.

(1.) The place: it is given at God's court *in the wilderness of Sinai*, from his royal palace, *the tabernacle of the congregation*.

(2.) The time: *In the second year* after they came up out of Egypt; we may call it the second year of that reign. The laws in Leviticus were given in the first month of that year; these orders were given in the beginning of the second month.

2. The directions given for the execution of it, v. 2, 3.

(1.) None were to be numbered but the males, and those only such as were fit for war. None *under twenty years old*; for, though some such might have bulk and strength enough for military service, yet, in compassion to their tender years, God would not have them put upon it to bear arms.

(2.) Nor were any to be numbered who through age, or bodily infirmity, blindness, lameness, or chonical diseases, were unfit for war. The church being militant, those only are reputed the true members of it that have enlisted themselves soldiers of Jesus Christ; for our life, our Christian life, is a warfare.

(3.) The account was to be taken *according to their families*, that it might not only be known how many they were, and what were their names, but of what tribe and family, or clan, nay, of what particular house every person was; or, reckoning it the muster of an army, to what regiment every man belonged, that he might know his place himself and the government might know where to find him. They were numbered a little before this, when their poll-money was paid for the service of the tabernacle,

~~(1285)~~ Exodus 38:25, 26. But it should seem they were not then registered by *the house of their fathers*, as now they were. Their number was the same then that it was now: 603,550 men; for as many as had died since then, and were lost in the account, so many had arrived to be twenty years old, and were added to the account. Note, *As one generation passeth away another generation cometh*. As vacancies are daily made, so recruits are daily raised to fill up the vacancies, and Providence takes care that, one time or other, in one place or other, the births shall balance the burials, that the race of mankind and the holy seed may not be cut off and become extinct.

3. Commissioners are named for the doing of this work. Moses and Aaron were to preside (v. 3), and one man of every tribe, that was renowned in his tribe, and was presumed to know it well, was to assist in it — *the princes of the tribes*, v. 16. Note, Those that are honourable should study to be serviceable; he that is great, let him be your minister, and show, by his knowing the public, that he deserves to be publicly known. The charge of this muster was committed to him who was the lord-lieutenant of that tribe. Now,

II. Why was this account ordered to be taken and kept? For several reasons.

1. To prove the accomplishment of the promise made to Abraham, that God would *multiply his seed exceedingly*, which promise was renewed to Jacob (¹⁰³⁴Genesis 28:14), that *his seed should be as the dust of the earth*. Now it appears that there did not fail one tittle of that good promise, which was an encouragement to them to hope that the other promise of the land of Canaan for an inheritance should also be fulfilled in its season. When the number of a body of men is only guessed at, upon the view, it is easy for one that is disposed to cavil to surmise that the conjecture is mistaken, and that, if they were to be counted, they would not be found half so many; therefore God would have Israel numbered, that it might be upon record how vastly they were increased in a little time, that the power of God's providence and the truth of his promise may be seen and acknowledged by all. It could not have been expected, in any ordinary course of nature, that seventy-five souls (which was the number of Jacob's family when he went down into Egypt) should in 215 years (and it was no longer) multiply into so many hundred thousands. It is therefore to be attributed to an extraordinary virtue in the divine promise and blessing.

2. It was to intimate the particular care which God himself would take of his Israel, and which Moses and the inferior rulers were expected to take of them. God is called the *Shepherd of Israel*, ¹³⁰¹Psalm 80:1. Now the shepherds always kept count of their flocks, and delivered them by number to their under-shepherds, that they might know if any were missing; in like manner God numbers his flock, that of all which he took into his fold he might lose none but upon a valuable consideration, even those that were sacrificed to his justice.

3. It was to put a difference between the true born Israelites and the mixed multitude that were among them; none were numbered but Israelites: all the world is but lumber in comparison with those jewels. Little account is made of others, but the saints God has a particular property in and concern for. *The Lord knows those that are his* (⁵¹⁹2 Timothy 2:19), *knows them by name*, ¹⁰⁴⁸Philippians 4:3. The hairs of their head are numbered; but he will say to others, "*I never knew you, never made any account of you.*"

4. It was in order to their being marshalled into several districts, for the more easy administration of justice, and their more regular march through the wilderness. It is a rout and a rabble, not an army, that is not mustered and put in order.

~~<CH17>~~ NUMBERS 1:17-43

THE NUMBERING OF THE ISRAELITES

We have here the speedy execution of the orders given for the numbering of the people. It was begun the same day that the orders were given, *The first day of the second month*; compare v. 18 with v. 1. Note, When any work is to be done for God it is good to set about it quickly, while the sense of duty is strong and pressing. And, for aught that appears, it was but one day's work, for many other things were done between this and the twentieth day of this month, when they removed their camp, ~~<CH11>~~ Numbers 10:11. Joab was almost ten months numbering the people in David's time (~~<1248>~~ 2 Samuel 24:8); but then they were dispersed, now they lived closely together; then Satan proposed the doing of it, now God commanded it. It was the sooner and more easily done now because it had been done but a little while ago, and they needed but review the old books, with the alterations since made, which probably they had kept an account of as they occurred.

In the particulars here left upon record, we may observe,

1. That the numbers are registered in words at length (as I may say), and not in figures; to every one of the twelve tribes it is repeated, for the greater ceremony and solemnity of the account, that they were numbered *by their generations, after their families, by the house of their fathers, according to the number of the names*, to show that every tribe took and gave in the account by the same rule and in the same method, though so many hands were employed in it, setting down the genealogy first, to show that their family descended from Israel, then the families themselves in their order, then dividing each family into the houses, or subordinate families, that branched from it, and under these the names of the particular persons, according to the rules of heraldry. Thus every man might know who were his relations or next of kin, on which some laws we have already met with did depend: besides that the nearer any are to us in relation the more ready we should be to do them good.

2. That they all end with hundreds, only Gad with fifty (v. 25), but none of the numbers descend to units or tens. Some think it was a special providence that ordered all the tribes just at this time to be even numbers, and no odd or broken numbers among them, to show them that there was

something more than ordinary designed in their increase, there being this uncommon in the circumstance of it. It is rather probable that Moses having some time before appointed rulers of hundreds, and rulers of fifties (^{<0285>}Exodus 18:25), they numbered the people by their respective rulers, which would bring the numbers to even hundreds or fifties.

3. That Judah is the most numerous of them all, more than double to Benjamin and Manasseh, and almost 12,000 more than any other tribe, v. 27. It was Judah whom *his brethren must praise* because from him Messiah the Prince was to descend; but, because that was a thing at a distance, God did in many ways honour that tribe in the mean time, particularly by the great increase of it, for his sake who was to spring out of Judah (^{<3074>}Hebrews 7:14) in the fulness of time. Judah was to lead the van through the wilderness, and therefore was furnished accordingly with greater strength than any other tribe.

4. Ephraim and Manasseh, the sons of Joseph, are numbered as distinct tribes, and both together made up almost as many as Judah; this was in pursuance of Jacob's adoption of them, by which they were equalled with their uncles Reuben and Simeon, (^{<0485>}Genesis 48:5). It was also the effect of the blessing of Joseph, who was to be a *fruitful bough*, (^{<0492>}Genesis 49:22). And Ephraim the younger is put first, and is more numerous than Manasseh, for Jacob had crossed hands, and foreseen ten thousands of Ephraim and thousands of Manasseh. The fulfilling of this confirms our faith in the spirit of prophecy with which the patriarchs were endued.

5. When they came down into Egypt Dan had but one son (^{<0423>}Genesis 46:23), and so his tribe was but one family, (^{<0052>}Numbers 26:42). Benjamin had then ten sons (^{<0421>}Genesis 46:21), yet now the tribe of Dan is almost double in number to that of Benjamin. Note, The increasing and diminishing of families do not always go by probabilities. Some are multiplied greatly, and again are diminished, while others that were poor have families made them like a flock, (^{<0473>}Psalms 107:38, 39, 41; and see ^{<0223>}Job 12:23).

6. It is said of each of the tribes that those were numbered who were able to go forth to war, to remind them that they had wars before them, though now they were in peace and met with no opposition. *Let not him that girdeth on the harness boast as though he had put it off.*

~~(004)~~ NUMBERS 1:44-46

THE NUMBERING OF THE ISRAELITES

We have here the sum total at the foot of the account; they were in all 600,000 fighting men, and 3550 over. Some think that when this was their number some months before (~~(005)~~ Exodus 38:26) the Levites were reckoned with them, but now that tribe was separated for the service of God, yet so many more had by this time attained to the age of twenty years as that still they were the same number, to show that whatever we part with for the honour and service of God it shall certainly be made up to us one way of other. Now we see what a vast body of men they were. Let us consider,

1. How much went to maintain all these (besides twice as many more, no question, of women and children, sick and aged, and the mixed multitude) for forty years together in the wilderness; and they were all at God's finding every day, having their food from the dew of heaven, and not from the fatness of the earth. O what a great and good housekeeper is our God, that has such numbers depending on him and receiving from him every day!

2. What work sin makes with a people; within forty years most of them would indeed have died of course for the common sin of mankind; for, when sin entered into the world, death came with it, and how great are the desolations which it makes in the earth! But, for the particular sin of unbelief and murmuring, all those that were now numbered, except two, laid their bones under their iniquity, and perished in the wilderness.

3. What a great multitude God's spiritual Israel will amount to at last; though at one time, and in one place, they seem to be but a little flock, yet when they come all together they shall be a great multitude, innumerable, ~~(006)~~ Revelation 7:9. And, though the church's beginning be small, its latter end shall greatly increase. A little one shall become a thousand.

~~014~~ NUMBERS 1:47-54

THE LEVITES NOT TO BE NUMBERED

Care is here taken to distinguish from the rest of the tribes the tribe of Levi, which, in the matter of the golden calf, had distinguished itself, ~~026~~ Exodus 32:26. Note, Singular services shall be recompensed with singular honours. Now,

I. It was the honour of the Levites that they were made guardians of the spiritualities; to them was committed the care of the tabernacle and the treasures thereof, both in their camps and in their marches.

1. When they moved the Levites were to take down the tabernacle, to carry it and all that belonged to it, and then to set it up again in the place appointed, v. 50, 51. It was for the honour of the holy things that none should be permitted to see them, or touch them, but those only who were called of God to the service. Thus we all are unfit and unworthy to have fellowship with God until we are first called by his grace *into the fellowship of his Son Jesus Christ our Lord*, and so, being the spiritual seed of that great high priest, are made *priests to our God*; and it is promised that God would take Levites to himself, even from the Gentiles, ~~261~~ Isaiah 66:21.

2. When they rested the Levites were to *encamp round about the tabernacle* (v. 50, 53), that they might be near their work, and resident upon their charge, always ready to attend, and that they might be a guard upon the tabernacle, to preserve it from being either plundered or profaned. They must pitch round about the tabernacle, *that there be no wrath upon the congregation*, as there would be if the tabernacle and the charge of it were neglected, or those crowded upon it that were not allowed to come near. Note, Great care must be taken to prevent sin, because the preventing of sin is the preventing of wrath.

II. It was their further honour that as Israel, being a holy people, was not *reckoned among the nations*, so they, being a holy tribe, were not reckoned among other Israelites, but numbered afterwards by themselves, v. 49. The service which the Levites were to do about the sanctuary is called (as we render it in the margin) a *warfare*, ~~003~~ Numbers 4:23. And, being engaged in that warfare, they were discharged from military

services, and therefore not numbered with those that were to *go out to war*. Note, Those that minister about holy things should neither entangle themselves, nor be entangled, in secular affairs. The ministry is itself work enough for a whole man, and all little enough to be employed in it. It is an admonition to ministers to distinguish themselves by their exemplary conversation from common Israelites, not affecting to seem greater, but aiming to be really better, every way better than others.