

Exodus, numbers of

What can you tell me about the controversy surrounding the numbers of the Exodus?

Whether one is aware of it or not, there has been considerable discussion over the past century regarding the numbers of the Exodus, and hence the population of Ancient Israel in the wilderness. This is not a liberal discussion or a conservative discussion, exclusively. Both liberals and conservatives, Jewish and Christian scholars, have expressed various opinions about the meanings of the population of Israel as seen in both Exodus 12 in Numbers 1. *NIDB* offers a summation of the traditional view:

“The Bible states that 600,000 men took part in the Exodus (Exod 12:37). A year later the number of male Israelites over the age of twenty was 603,550 (Num 1:46).”¹

The Rabbinic tradition as seen in the Talmud likewise seems to confirm this:

“R. Simeon b. Judah of Kefar Akko says in the name of R. Simeon, ‘You have nothing whatsoever in the Torah for which six hundred three thousand five hundred and fifty covenants were not made, equivalent to the number of people who went forth from Egypt.’ Said Rabbi, ‘If matters are in accord with the view of R. Simeon of Judah of Kefar Akko which he said in the name of R. Simeon, then you have nothing whatsoever in the Torah on account of which sixteen covenants were not made, and there is with each one of them six hundred three thousand five hundred and fifty” (b.*Sotah* 37b).²

This discusses the opinion that 603,550 individual “covenants” were made at Mount Sinai.

Exodus 12:37 in most English versions appears: “the sons of Israel journeyed from Rameses to Succoth, about six hundred thousand men on foot, aside from children” (NASU). This number is then often extrapolated as meaning that plus women, children, and others of the “mixed multitude” (Exodus 12:38), the total number of the Ancient Israelites must have been in the range of 2-3 million. Numbers 1:46 will later say, “all the numbered men were 603,550” (NASU). Many in Orthodox Judaism and evangelical Christianity accept this without any further engagement, and almost no Messianics as of today (at least to our ministry’s knowledge) have really engaged this subject further.

Doubts over the total numbers of the Exodus reaching 2-3 million have always existed in both liberal *and* conservative circles. As K.A. Kitchen summarizes, “For the last century or more, commentators have fought shy of the statement that ‘about 600,000 went on foot, plus women and children’ (Exod. 12:37), with its seeming implication of an exodus of two million people or so.”³ Far from this being only an academic discussion, untenable to your average layperson, the venerable *NIV Study Bible* notes (commenting on Numbers 1), “[V]arious speculations have arisen regarding the meaning of the Hebrew word for ‘thousand.’”⁴ The *New Oxford Annotated Bible* goes a step further, indicating:

“The census total of 603,550...is extremely high...It has been suggested that the Hebrew word translated ‘thousand’...is an old term for a subsection of a tribe..., based on the procedures for military muster employed by other ancient peoples, and that the original number follows ‘thousand’ in each case, e.g. Reuben had forty-six tribal subsections with a total of five hundred men (v. 21). This reduces the total [of Reuben] to 5,550.”⁵

Bible translations, whether produced by conservatives or liberals, generally do sit on the overly conservative side (often for market reasons). Thus, no Bible translation to date has really broken out of rendering

¹ Charles F. Pfeiffer, “Exodus,” in Merrill C. Tenney, ed., *The New International Dictionary of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987), 334.

² *The Babylonian Talmud: A Translation and Commentary*.

³ K.A. Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 264.

⁴ Kenneth L. Barker, ed., et. al., *NIV Study Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 189.

⁵ Herbert G. May and Bruce M. Metzger, eds., *The New Oxford Annotated Bible With the Apocrypha*, RSV (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 161.

“thousand” as something otherwise, even though there are plenty of commentaries on the Pentateuch that will discuss this issue.

There are good textual reasons to suggest that the total numbers of the Exodus were less than 2-3 million, and even less than 600,000. When one thinks that 2-3 million people were leaving Egypt, heading toward the Red Sea, he or she should be somewhat perplexed at how easily the Israelites were disturbed when only 600 Egyptian chariots chase them down (Exodus 14:7). As the people cry to Moses, “Is it because there were no graves in Egypt that you have taken us away to die in the wilderness? Why have you dealt with us in this way, bringing us out of Egypt?” (Exodus 14:11, NASU). More than a few people wonder if 2-3 million people could have been severely threatened by a mere 600 chariots. (These were not armored tanks!) Either the Ancient Israelites were even more foolish than we commonly give them credit, or there is something that we might have missed.

The issue in question in both Exodus 12 and Numbers 1 concerns the Hebrew term *elef* (אֶלֶף), and what it might mean against its Semitic cognates. Nahum M. Sarna comments, “the logistics involved in moving two million people together with their cattle and herds across the Sea of Reeds with the Egyptian chariots in hot pursuit” begs many questions. “In response to these problems, it has been suggested that the Hebrew *‘elef*, usually rendered ‘thousand,’ here means a ‘clan’ or that it signifies a small military unit—the number of fighting men levied from each tribe.”⁶ Kitchen goes on to explain,

“In the Biblical texts, the actual words for ‘ten(s)’ and ‘hundred(s)’ are not ambiguous, and present no problem on that score; the only question (usually) is whether they have been correctly recopied down the centuries. With *‘eleph*, ‘thousand,’ the matter is very different, as is universally accepted. In Hebrew, as in English (and elsewhere), words that look alike can be confused when found without a clear context. On its own, ‘bark’ in English can mean the skin of a tree, the sound of a dog, and an early ship or an ancient ceremonial boat. Only the content tells us which meaning is intended. The same applies to the word(s) *‘lp* in Hebrew. (1) We have *‘eleph*, ‘thousand,’ which has clear contexts like Gen. 20:16 (price) or Num. 3:50 (amount). But (2) there is *‘eleph* for a group—be it a clan/family, a (military) squad, a rota of Levites or priests, etc....It is plain that in other passages of the Hebrew Bible there are clear examples where *‘eleph* makes no sense if translated ‘thousand’ but good sense if rendered otherwise, e.g., as ‘leader’ or the like.”⁷

When this information is all considered, one is presented with a number of possibilities concerning the total numbers of the Exodus, which does reduce it from 603,500. Scholars have proposed various sums, ranging anywhere from 20,000-22,000 to often as high as 140,000.⁸ When offering any alternatives to the traditional view of 2-3 million in both Exodus and Numbers, one has to ask whether 603 *elef* 550 are the total numbers of fighting men, or the total numbers of men. What about the priests, shepherds, and other men in Israel who formed the infrastructure of the camp? What about the women and children, and the average size of families? What about the men under twenty who could not fight? What about any others? When these factors are considered, one can certainly say *in general terms*, that several hundred thousand could very well have been involved in the Exodus.

In the future as Messianic Biblical scholarship becomes more engaged with contemporary opinion, there are likely to be more discussions regarding this issue. Many will still hold to the traditional view of 2-3 million in the Exodus. But many others are likely to just say that several hundred thousand were involved. Either way, both positions rightly advocate that there were scores of people involved, and to hold to only several hundred thousand being in the Exodus is by no means a liberal position. A liberal position would be suggesting that the Exodus and God’s judgments on Egypt are only important *myths* that formed the basis of a group of nomads called “Israel,” and at the very most, 600 people were involved in some kind of wandering with the numbers exaggerated.

⁶ Nahum M. Sarna, *JPS Torah Commentary: Exodus* (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1991), 62.

⁷ Kitchen, 264.

⁸ Cf. *Ibid.*, 265.