

iii. The results of the census (1.17-46). It is interesting to note the great difference in the sizes of the various tribes. The order of the tribes here is the same as in verses 4-16, except that Naphtali and Asher are interchanged, and Gad is placed third, perhaps because of its proximity to Reuben and Simeon in the camp position (11.10-16).

The large numbers in this census have created a difficulty for some readers, who find it hard to believe that the nation of Israel was so numerous during its march through the wilderness. Yet when we consider the large families that were customary and the length of time that was spent in Egypt before the beginning of the oppression, the amount of increase is seen to be not at all unreasonable. Passage of so large a group through the wilderness transcends ordinary history. Were it not for the constant divine provision it would have been impossible (cf. Dt. xxix.5). Some have tried to escape the difficulty by assuming that the word thousand is to be taken as meaning family or clan rather than being an exact number. This interpretation overlooks the fact that most of the numbers include hundreds as well as thousands, that the tribe of Gad numbered 42,650 (25), and that the total number of fighting men is given as 603,550 (46).

It is difficult to preserve numbers accurately in ancient documents, which had to be copied and recopied. Various types of abbreviations may have occasionally been used and sometimes misunderstood. Actually, however, the number of figures in the Bible which occasion real difficulty is comparatively small. In only one instance among the many figures in Nu.1-iv is there reason to suspect an error of transmission, and in that case it is probably only a matter of the loss of one Hebrew letter. Cf. note on iii.39 below.

iv. The omission of the Levites (1.47-54. ). The tribe of Levi was not included in the military census (49), but was set apart for the care and transportation of the tabernacle (50-51). The Levites are not to have a place among the regular tribal encampments, but to pitch close to the tabernacle (53). Fuller explanation of these provisions is given in later chapters.