HOW BIG WAS ISRAEL'S ARMY?
Dealing with Large Numbers in the Bible

Boyd Seevers, Ph.D.
Professor of Old Testament Studies, Northwestern College, St. Paul, MN

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When people read the Old Testament carefully, one issue that often arises is that of large numbers, especially regarding soldiers. Could some of these huge numbers really be true? Did Samson really kill 1,000 men in a single battle, using a donkey's jawbone (Judg.15)? Did 30,000 of Joshua's troops fit behind a hill before the ambush at Ai (Josh. 8)? Did the Israelite males at the time of the Exodus really number more than 600,000 (Num. 1, 26), suggesting a total Israelite population of 2-3 million that lived in the desert of Sinai for a generation? If we trust the truth of the Bible, how can we understand such large numbers?

If one accepts that God indeed performs miracles, then he easily *could* have sustained millions of people in the desert. The question is, *did he*? Does the Bible clearly state that millions made the Exodus from Egypt, and that a thousand fell at the hand of Samson? Or, is there another way to understand these stories with their large numbers, especially as they describe the size of Israel's army? This article will argue that one can understand some of these numbers in a way that makes them smaller and thus better fit with the size of other contemporary ancient Near Eastern armies.

In contrast to the texts of other ancient Near Eastern cultures which typically provide little information about the size of their armies, the Bible includes a great deal of information about the numbers of Israelite troops. Unfortunately, much of that information is problematic.[1] The numbers of Israelite troops typically appear in the Bible with the word *'eleph* (אֶלֶף, usually

translated "thousand(s)"). If *'eleph* in these passages carries its normal meaning of "thousand," then many of the numbers appear extremely large. In addition to the examples given above, the Bible says that Israel's newly crowned king, Saul, led a force of 330,000 to respond to the Ammonite attack on the Israelite city of Jabesh Gilead (1 Sam. 11). When the next king, David, took a census of his fighting men, the total came to 1,300,000 (2 Sam. 24:9; the parallel 1 Chron. 21:5 gives 1,570,000).

These numbers appear quite high, especially considering the apparent size of the armies of other, better established contemporary nations. For example, the Egyptians and Hittites met at the Battle of Kadesh in west-central Syria in 1275 B.C., during the time of Judges. At this battle between the two greatest ancient Near Eastern kingdoms of that time, the Egyptians and Hittites apparently assembled approximately 20,000 troops each.[2] Logically, the much younger and less populous nation of emerging Israel would likely have been able to muster a smaller army.

This difficulty has led many to discount the biblical numbers altogether or consider them as intentional exaggerations. Clearly the Bible does include exaggerations, as in the song of the Israelite women after David defeated Goliath. "Saul has slain his thousands, and David his tens of thousands" (1 Sam. 18:7). Surely David had not yet killed tens of thousands of enemies, and Saul probably hadn't killed thousands either. Likely the women were using poetic exaggeration to declare that Saul was a great warrior, and David was even greater. Thus, some argue that the biblical numbers often also exaggerate to make certain points, such as glorifying the God of Israel.

One may also understand the numbers literally, but <u>differently</u> than as usually translated. This distinction hinges on the understanding of the term *'eleph* (אֶלֶף). Though *'eleph* usually meant "thousand(s)," the word could also mean a part of a tribe (perhaps best translated "clan")

that was smaller than the tribe but larger than an extended family ("father's house" בֵּית אָב - Josh. 22:14). For example, Gideon protested to the divine messenger who had called him to leadership, saying "my clan (*'eleph*) is the weakest in [the tribe of] Manasseh, and I am the least in my family" (Judg. 6:15). In a later event, Saul sought the fugitive David among all the "clans of Judah" (אַלְפֵי יְהוּדָה - 1 Sam. 23:23).

Given that *'eleph* can mean "clan," and Israelite soldiers may well have mustered and fought by clans, then *'eleph* might stand for the soldiers who mustered from a particular clan. If correct, this suggests that the Bible may often refer to numbers of tribal units rather than total numbers of troops. Since Israelite society was traditionally organized along familial lines, the biblical writers might have expressed numbers in terms of tribal *units* rather than totals of soldiers. This would also better fit the wider cultural context, where the frequent lack of numbers in the records suggest that ancient Near Easterners were not as interested in total numbers as are modern Westerners.

Understanding *'eleph* as a unit rather than "thousand" seems to solve many of the problems of large numbers associated with the Israelite military. Most of the large numbers that appear too large shrink down to a more believable but still indefinite size if *'eleph* means the unit of troops drawn from a clan. It is perhaps more likely that Saul mustered 330 units of soldiers to rescue Jabesh Gilead rather than 330,000 soldiers. If the Hebrew writers also used the same term to describe enemy troops, then Samson may have killed an entire Philistine *unit* with an animal's jawbone rather than one thousand men.

If one uses this line of understanding, how large would Israel's army have been at the time of the Exodus? They wouldn't have had 600,000+ troops; they would have had 5,550. How so? Rather than the tribe of Reuben mustering 46,500 troops, they mustered 46 clans, (that is),

500 soldiers (Num. 1:21). Applied to the numbers for all twelve tribes, this leads to 5,550 soldiers (in 598 clans) in the first census, 5,750 (in 596 clans) in the second (Num. 26).

If this much lower number of soldiers is accurate, how many total Israelites left Egypt? If one can assume roughly the same number of adult females as adult males, then Israel may have had about 10,000 adults. Assuming the community also had roughly the same number of youth as adults, then Israel had approximately 20,000 people making the journey from Egypt to Canaan. Though this smaller number is much less dramatic than 2-3,000,000, keeping 20,000 people alive and organized for 40 years in the desert would still represent an enormous challenge that required divinely orchestrated miracles.

Additionally, an exodus and invasion force of roughly 20,000 better matches the number of early Israelites as estimated from the archaeological records. These estimates put the number of Israelites at about 21,000 for the time of the Judges, 55,000 during the early monarchy,[3] and 150,000 for the later Old Testament.[4] Along with such archaeological estimates, one must also take into account Moses' statement that unconquered Canaan contained "seven nations more numerous and stronger than (Israel)" (Deut. 7:1). Even allowing for poetic exaggeration, multiplying 2-3,000,000 times any number for the total population of Canaan in the 2nd millennium B.C. seems completely out of line with the physical evidence, whereas a multiple of 20,000 fits much better with archaeological data.

Although this understanding of *'eleph* helps resolve many problems, it doesn't solve them all. The total number of soldiers is then often vague, since clans would have had different numbers of soldiers, perhaps as few as 5 (Num. 1:23) or as many as 150 (1 Chron. 12:26). Additionally, *'eleph* as "clan" leads to difficulties in understanding the titles of officers. As described earlier, the Bible often mentions officers over units of thousands (*'ălāphîm* - אֲלָפִים),

hundreds, and fifties, which sound like literal numbers, or at least some descending sequence. If "thousands" here mean "clans," what do the other two terms mean? Thus understanding *'eleph* as "clan" shrinks the apparently large numbers of troops to a more realistic but vague size, but doesn't resolve all the associated problems.

So, did Samson really kill 1,000 men with a donkey's jawbone? Did millions of Israelites cross the desert of Sinai at the time of the Exodus? Perhaps, but not necessarily. Even accepting that all of God's words are true (Psa. 119:160), one can interpret these enormous numbers differently and shrink the reported size of the Israelite army. By using a different translation of the Hebrew word for "thousand," a person *can* hold on to a high view of Scripture and read the numbers as smaller. Though this perspective doesn't resolve all the tensions associated with these texts, it takes care of many of them.

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[1] For example, J. W. Wenham writes, "It is notorious that the Old Testament in many places records numbers which seem impossibly large" ("Large Numbers in the Old Testament," *Tyndale Bulletin* 18 (1967): 19). R. E. D. Clark states, "If we take them at their face value, the numbers that we find in the Old Testament are sometimes so large that they are altogether unbelievable" ("The Large Numbers of the Old Testament—Especially in Connexion with the Exodus," *Journal of the Transactions of the Victoria Institute* 87 (1955): 82).

[2] Egyptian records rarely give precise numbers of troops, but on this occasion indicate a total of four divisions in the field for the battle. Since a division apparently was comprised of 5,000 soldiers (The 12th cent. B.C. Hammat Stele lists a work detail including five thousand soldiers, and a scribe's logistical problem dated to the late 13th century involves the parts of a division that total five thousand troops), one can easily infer a total of 20,000 Egyptians at the battle of Kadesh in 1275 B.C. On that occasion, Ramesses II clearly had four divisions (named Amon—led by the pharaoh, Re, Ptah, and Sutekh) fighting against the Hittites. They faced an army of Hittites and their allies whose numbers are known only from Egyptian records—perhaps not the most reliable source. Egyptian accounts apparently state that the Hittites mustered 2,500 + 1,000 chariots (x 3 soldiers per Hittite chariot = 10,500) and another 8,000-9,000 infantry. This suggests that the Hittites also had approximately 20,000 troops when these two superpowers fought for control of the northern Levant in the 13th century B.C.

[3] For these first two numbers, see Israel Finkelstein, *The Archaeology of the Israelite Settlement* (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1988), 330-35.

[4] Yigal Shiloh, "The Population of Iron Age Palestine in the Light of a Sample Analysis of Urban Plans, Areas, and Population Density," *BASOR* 239 (1980): 32.