

Numbers 1:1-4

<https://thebiblesays.com/commentary/num/num-1/numbers-11-4/>

The first thing the LORD wanted Moses to do in preparation for leaving Mount Sinai was to take a census of all the tribes and families of Israel. They were to count all of the males twenty years old and older by tribes, families, and households. The reason for this was to obtain a count of how many men would be able to go to war.

The first verse of the book of Numbers has many significant features. Perhaps the most important is that it begins with *the Lord spoke to Moses*. This phrase, or a slight variation of it, occurs over 150 times in the book of Numbers, giving it great importance. In fact, it appears in every chapter in the book except 22 – 24, the chapters containing the story about Balaam.

It was crucial that the commands and instructions given in the book were seen as coming from the LORD, their covenant God, not Moses. As will be seen, there were occasions where Moses' authority was questioned. However, by using this phrase, the LORD confirmed that when Moses spoke, it was to convey His revealed word, not Moses'.

The word of the LORD came to Moses while the Israelites were still *in the wilderness of Sinai* and Moses was *in the tent of meeting*, the place where the LORD met personally with Moses. The “tent of meeting” is also called “the tabernacle” (Numbers 1:51) and “the tabernacle of the Testimony” (1:50, 53).

This occasion for the LORD speaking to Moses happened *on the first of the second month, in the second year after they had come out of the land of Egypt*. This is exactly one month after the construction of the tabernacle (Exodus 40:17).

The LORD commanded Moses to *take a census of all the congregation of the sons of Israel*. The count was to be taken

–*By their families*. The word “families” (Heb. “mishpakha”) can also be translated “clan,” “tribe,” or “extended family.”

–*By their fathers' households*. This refers to more immediate family members.

–*According to the number of names*. This probably means that the numbering was to be done on a family-by-family basis.

–*Every male*. Females were excluded from military service.

–*Head by head*. This is a Hebrew idiom (“kol-zakar legulkelotom,” lit. “all the number of skulls”). Similar to the modern phrase, “get a head count.”

–*From twenty years old and upward.* Twenty years old was the minimum age to serve as a soldier.

–*Whoever is able to go out to war in Israel.* This implies that the person had no physical limitations that would affect his ability to fight in a battle. This was the purpose of the census—to get a count of how many men were available for military duty in case of war.

The LORD told Moses that he *and Aaron shall number them by their armies.*

In verse 4, the LORD told Moses to appoint people to help with the numbering. Specifically, He said that *with you, moreover, there shall be a man of each tribe, each one head of his father's household.* Moses was to designate one man from each tribe to help with the census. He needed to be a “head of his father’s household.”

Biblical Text

¹Then 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 head³ 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.