

# Bite Size Bible Study

The Exodus #90

By Pastor Lee

I have always had an issue with the number of people leaving Egypt on the Exodus. Jeff Brenner in his book "Brenner's Commentary on the Torah" has provided a possible solution to this seemingly unrealistic estimate of those leaving Egypt.

*The people of Isra'el traveled from Ra'amses to Sukkot, some six hundred thousand men on foot, not counting children. A mixed crowd also went up with them, as well as livestock in large numbers, both flocks and herds. Exodus 12:37-38 (CJB)*

According to this passage, 600,000 male descendants of Jacob left Egypt. If each man was married and had an average of five children, it would bring the entire population of Israel to between 2 and 6 million people. This is not including the mixed multitude that came out with them, nor the flocks and herds that they brought out. This large number of people creates a few problems and has led to many possible conjectured opinions as to why the text would use such a large number. To get an idea of how many people we are talking about San Diego County population is estimated at 3.3 million for 2021.

The first problem is the size of this "army" in Exodus 12:37. How could Pharaoh's army of 600 chariots be considered a threat to 600,000 warriors of Israel?

Another problem is the simple logistics of supplying food and water, and of moving such a large number of men women and children. It has been estimated that it would take 1,500 tons of food, 4,000 tons of wood as fuel and 11,000,000 gallons of water each day to supply the basic needs of such a large group. Short of a very large miracle this cannot be found in a desert area.

Deuteronomy 23 considers a problem not often mentioned – the location of the latrine when a camp is made. *Also you are to have an area **outside the camp** to use as a latrine. You must include a trowel with your equipment, and when you relieve yourself, you are to dig a hole first and afterwards cover your excrement.*

A camp of this size would be approximately five by five square miles, assuming only 1,000 square feet per family. Someone located in the center of the camp would require a hike of 2.5 miles to use the restroom.

A further problem is the estimated population of the nation of Israel compared to the estimated population of Egypt at that time. It is estimated that the whole population of Egypt at the time of the Exodus was between two and five million. According to the population estimates of Israel, the people of Israel would outnumber the population of Egypt.

Another issue was the large number of people not being possible, given the number of generations available from Levi to the Exodus. The average number of children born to the descendants of Jacob is three to five. If we assume that each of the twelve children of Jacob had five children, and the generation of Kohath, Amram, and Moses had five children each, the maximum number of people (men, women and children) descended from Jacob at the time of the Exodus would be approximately 7500.

The Hebrew text of Exodus 12:37: "*some six hundred thousand men on foot, not counting children*" reads "*k'shesh me'ot **eleph** rag'liy hagebaryim l'vad mitaph.*"

This could also be translated as "about six hundred chiefs {*eleph*} on foot are the warriors apart from the children." We now have a group of warriors that would find the 600 chariots of Pharaoh a formidable army. If we also assume that each chief (head of the family) included a wife and five children, we have 6,000 people.

Changing the translation of the word "*eleph*" to chiefs will also fit the census records of numbers: *The number of the tribe of Reuben was forty-six thousand five hundred. Numbers 1:21 (RSV)*

The Hebrew of this passage could also be translated as: "The number for the tribe of Reuben is six and forty (forty-six) chiefs and five hundred." With this alternate translation, we have 46 chiefs and 500 family members. When we apply this method to the remainder of the tribes, we come to a total number of 598 chiefs and 5,550 others (The standard translation of the complete census is 603,550; if the three is changed to a five, a possible error, we have 605,550, very close to the 598-- two short of 600) chiefs and 5,550 people.

With this translation of "*eleph*" we find a much more plausible reading of Exodus 12: 37-38, leaving us with a more manageable figure of about 7,000+ individuals who traveled to Mt. Sinai.

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