Those Puzzling Old Testament Numbers

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The old testament at various places records numbers which seem impossibly large. Some have assumed that these figures were simply invented, and are evidence that the Bible is historically unreliable. But who would make up such figures? Would any man invent a story of a bus crash in which 16,000 passengers were killed? It is much more likely that these Old Testament numbers were faithfully copied out, despite the fact that they did not seem to make sense. Invention does not satisfactorily account for them. The explanation must lie elsewhere. And in fact patient research has gone a long way toward resolving this knotty problem.

A Bible scholar suggests an explanation for contradictory and gigantic numerals

There is evidence that the Old Testament text is on the whole marvelously well preserved.

There is also evidence from the parallel passages in Samuel, Kings, and Chronicles and (especially) in Ezra 2 and Nehemiah 7 that numbers were peculiarly difficult to transmit accurately. We have instances of extra noughts being added to a number: 2 Samuel 10:18 reads "700 chariots," 1 Chronicles 19:18 reads "7,000." A digit can drop out: 2 Kings 24:8 gives the age of Jehoiachin on accession as 18, whereas 2 Chronicles 39:9 gives it as 8. In Ezra 2 and Nehemiah 7 the digits often vary by one unit. And there are other errors of copying, many of which are easily explained.

In the modern Hebrew Bible all numbers are written out in full, but for a long time the text was written without vowels. The absence of vowels made it possible to confuse two words which are crucial to this problem: *'eleph* and *'alluph.* Without vowel points these words look identical: *'lp. 'Eleph* is the ordinary word for "thousand," but it can also be used in a variety of other senses: e.g., "family" (Judges 6:15, RV) or "clan" (Zechariah 9:7; 12:5, 6, RSV) or perhaps a military unit. *'Alluph* is used for the "chieftains" of Edom (Genesis 36:15–43); probably for a commander of a military "thousand"; and almost certainly for the professional, fully-armed soldier.

At certain periods warfare was conducted by two sharply distinguished types of fighting men—the Goliaths and the Davids—the professional soldiers who were fully armed, and the folk army, whose only weapons were those of the peasant shepherd. It seems clear that in a number of places the word for professional soldier has been misunderstood as meaning "thousand." Take, for example, the attack on the little town of Gibeah in Judges 20. Verse 2 says that 400,000 footmen "that drew the sword" assembled. If these were in fact 400 fully armed foot-soldiers, the subsequent narrative makes excellent sense. The Benjamite forces (verse 15) consist of 26 soldiers armed with swords, together with 700 men armed only with slings. At the first attack (verse 21) the Israelites lose 22 of their crack soldiers, the next day (verse 25) they lose a further 18; on the third day (verses 29, 34) an ambush is set, consisting of, or led by, 10 of them. (Could 10,000 men take up their positions undetected?)

The losses begin again (verse 31) "as at other times"—and in this case the scale of loss has been clearly preserved, for about 30 Israelites (not apparently sword-armed soldiers), 25 Benjamite soldiers, and 100 others are killed. Eighteen of them were killed in the first stage of the pursuit, 5 were later "cut down in the highways" and 2 more at Gidom. The remaining 600 slingers took refuge in the rock of Rimmon. Similarly, in the assault on Ai (Joshua 7–8) the true proportions of the narrative become clear when we realize that the disastrous loss of 36 men is matched by the setting of an ambush, not of 30,000 men of valour, but of 30.

David's feast in Hebron in 1 Chronicles 12 appears to be attended by enormous numbers, not of ordinary men, but of distinguished leaders—some 340,800 of them. In this case it looks as though in fact there were "captains of thousands" and captains of hundreds," and that by metonymy or by abbreviation "thousand" has been used for "captains of thousands" and "hundreds" for "captains of hundreds." "Thousand" and "hundred" have been treated as numerals and added together. When these figures are unscrambled, we get a total of roughly 2,000 "famous men," which seems eminently reasonable.

Along these lines most of the numerical problems of the later history fall into place. In 1 Kings 20:27–30, the little Israelite army killed 100 (not 100,000) foot-soldiers, and the wall of Aphek killed 27 (not 27,000) more. The Ethiopian invasion had a thousand, not a million, warriors (2 Chronicles 14:9). Ten (not 10,000) were cast down from the top of the rock (2 Chronicles 25:12).

The figures of the Levites seem consistently to have collected an extra nought. The mystery of Plato's Atlantis has been solved by recognition of this same numerical confusion. Plato obtained from Egyptian priests what now turns out to be a detailed

account of the Minoan civilization and its sudden end. But as all the figures were multiplied by a factor of ten, the area was too great to be enclosed in the Mediterranean, so he placed it in the Atlantic; and the date was put back into remote antiquity, thousands of years too early. This same tenfold multiplication factor is found in the figures of the Levites in the book of Numbers. When it is eliminated Levi fits into the pattern as a standard-size tribe of about 2,200 males. These figures agree remarkably well with the other indications of population in the period of the conquest and the judges.

By the use of these methods a very large proportions of the numerical difficulties can be resolved.

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[1] (1975). *Bible and Spade*, *4*(1), 25–27.