

## COUNTING THE DARK STARS

### A Devotional Meditation on Bamidbar (In the Wilderness)

Numbers 1:1-4:20; Hosea 1:10-2:21; Genesis 15:1-6; Deuteronomy 1:10-11; Ezekiel 11:14-16; Matthew 15:24; Romans 11:16-21; Galatians 3:29; Ephesians 2:11-22

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Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu tells of a conversation with Jian Zemin, former president of the People's Republic of China, about the accomplishments of the Jewish and Chinese peoples, who, along with India, are among the oldest civilizations on earth. The conversation took a surprising turn when the Prime Minister asked President Jian about the current populations of those ancient peoples. He quickly answered that China's population was 1.2 billion, and India's 1 billion, but he was astonished when the Prime Minister told him that the world's Jewish population numbered only 12 million. He went on to explain,

Two thousand years ago the Jews constituted ten percent of the population of the Roman Empire. Today there should have been 200 million Jews. . . we Jews lost our land and were dispersed to the four corners of the earth. From this spring all our calamities, culminating in our greatest catastrophe in the twentieth century. This is why for the last two thousand years we have been trying to retrieve our homeland and re-create our independent state there.<sup>1</sup>

That conversation took place in 1999. In 2022, global Jewish population stood at 15.3 million, of whom 7 million live in Israel.<sup>2</sup> Israel's total population is 8.9 million, many of whom are subject to military service. Currently, the Israel Defense Forces have 173,000 men and women on active duty, augmented by 465,000 reservists, for a total of 646,000 warriors, both Jewish and non-Jewish.<sup>3</sup> Compare that to this statistic from the Bible:

So all those counted from *Bnei-Yisrael* [children of Israel], according to their ancestral houses, from 20 years old and up—all able to go out with the army in Israel—all those who were counted totaled 603,550.

Numbers 1:45-46 TLV



*Milky Way over Lake Ninan - Western Australia.*  
Photo by Trevor Dobson, August 12, 2018, [via Flickr](#).

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<sup>1</sup> Benjamin Netanyahu, *A Durable Peace: Israel and Its Place Among the Nations* (New York: Warner Books, 2000), xi-xii.

<sup>2</sup> James Fattal, "Jewish Population Rises to 15.3 Million Worldwide, with Over 7 Million Residing in Israel," The Jewish Agency for Israel, September 25, 2022, <https://www.jewishagency.org/jewish-population-rises-to-15-3-million-worldwide-with-over-7-million-residing-in-israel/>.

<sup>3</sup> "2023 Israel Military Strength," Global Firepower, January 19, 2023, [https://www.globalfirepower.com/country-military-strength-detail.php?country\\_id=israel](https://www.globalfirepower.com/country-military-strength-detail.php?country_id=israel).

That number comes from the first census of Israel 4,000 years ago. It's something of a miracle that the number of Israel's warriors at that time is close to the number of men and women of military age in modern Israel. How many other ancient civilizations can compare their census data over a period of four millennia?

Yet there is something here that should inspire us to ask God a few questions. He made a promise to Abraham the Hebrew, father of the nation of Israel, about the number of his descendants:

He took him outside and said, "Look up now, at the sky, and count the stars—if you are able to count them." Then He said to him, "So shall your seed be."

Then he believed in *ADONAI* and He reckoned it to him as righteousness.

Genesis 15:5-6 TLV

According to Moses, the promise was fulfilled several generations later, as the Hebrew nation was poised to enter the Promised Land. Perhaps that was the case in Moses' day, before the advent of modern telescopes that see much farther into the expanse of the heavens. We know now that our galaxy alone contains at least 100 billion stars.<sup>4</sup> Perhaps Moses had an inkling of that when he prayed that God would increase Israel a thousand times more than they were in his day.

Still, 15 million is hardly a fulfillment of God's astronomical promise, if we take it literally, and if we consider that even in Moses' day skilled astronomers might have counted that many stars. The number of Israelites diminished considerably due to the judgments God inflicted on His Chosen People, but even the prophecies of judgment included words of hope for Israel's two kingdoms, such as this one from Hosea:

"Yet the number of *Bnei-Yisrael* will be like the sand of the sea, which cannot be measured or counted. Instead of 'You are not My people' being said to them, they will be called 'Children of the living God.' Then the descendants of Judah and descendants of Israel will be gathered together. They will appoint themselves one head and they will go up from the land. For the day of Jezreel will be great.

Hosea 1:10-11 (2:1-2) TLV

This promise hints at something we should have understood long ago: not all of Israel is Jewish. The heart of Israel is the Jewish people, the descendants of Judah. There are others descended from the Lost Sheep of the House of Israel, as well as foreigners from the nations, who are coming back into the Covenant Nation thanks to the redemptive work of Israel's Messiah-King. That's what Paul explains when he describes us from the nations as wild olive branches grafted into the olive tree of Israel. Through Messiah Yeshua, we gain identity as Abraham's adopted descendants, kin to his natural Jewish descendants.

Which means that the descendants of Abraham, both natural and adopted, number not in the millions, but the billions.

If we project this back through history, counting all the foreigners who have joined with Israel, as well as the non-Jewish tribes, or Lost Sheep, then we begin to approach the

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<sup>4</sup> "Beyond Our Solar System," National Aeronautics and Space Administration, April 20, 2023, <https://solarsystem.nasa.gov/solar-system/beyond/overview/>.

uncountable number of stars in the heavens. That's when we begin to understand the magnitude of God's promises, and His faithfulness in fulfilling them even though we had no idea what He was doing.

And that's the problem. More accurately, we are the problem. For three thousand years, humanity has grown accustomed to thinking of Israel as the Jewish people, and only the Jewish people. If we ever consider that Christians have been granted access to the Covenant Nation of Israel alongside the Jews, then we either spiritualize it to the point of meaninglessness, or we shove aside our Jewish brethren and claim they no longer have a place in the Covenant.

Our declarations do not nullify the promises of God. We are still among those stars of Abraham's seed, but we act like dark stars: invisible and dangerous.

This, too, is something the prophets foretold:

The word of *ADONAI* came to me saying: "Son of man, as for your kinsmen, your kinsmen, fellow exiles and the whole house of Israel—all of them—are those about whom the inhabitants of Jerusalem said, 'Keep far away from *ADONAI*! This land has been given to us for a possession!'" Therefore say, thus says *ADONAI Elohim*, "Though I removed them far away, among the nations, though I scattered them among the countries, yet for a little while I was a sanctuary for them in the countries where they have gone."

Ezekiel 11:14-16 TLV

When Ezekiel recorded this word, it was the people of Judah who were excluding the exiles of Israel from the Covenant. When Paul wrote to the Romans, the situation was being reversed as those new Hebrews grafted in from the nations were beginning to exclude the Jews. That's why he cautioned them:

But if some of the branches were broken off and you—being a wild olive—were grafted in among them and became a partaker of the root of the olive tree with its richness, do not boast against the branches. But if you do boast, it is not you who support the root but the root supports you.

Romans 11:17-18 TLV

The number of Abraham's descendants may be far greater than any human can calculate, not because we can't count that high, but because we exclude others who are different from us, even though God counts them as part of the Covenant. In other words, the heavens recognize the full number of the redeemed in the Commonwealth of Israel, but to our human reckoning, multitudes of the redeemed are only dark stars.