

## HOW TO COUNT PEOPLE

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

Numbers 1:1-4:20; Hosea 1:10-2:21; Matthew 17:24-27; John 10:15;  
Acts 15:12-21; Romans 3:1-3; Galatians 3:23-29; Ephesians 2:11-22

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Anyone who has done genealogical research knows the importance of census records. I learned a lot about my grandfather's family from the 1930 Census. The record gives me the name, age, sex, and race of everyone in his household, as well as where they and their parents were born. It also tells me my grandfather was an accountant and a veteran of World War I. That's a lot more information than what's recorded in the 1790 Census. That record tells me my ancestor Daniel McCarn lived in Richmond County, North Carolina, and that there were seven people in his household. Three of those people were free white males over 16, one was a free white male under 16, and three were free white females. The census doesn't even tell me their names, yet it's enough to verify that my family have been citizens of our Republic since its foundation. That's a big deal in this 250<sup>th</sup> year of American independence.



Taking the census in 1790. Image generated by Grok, created by xAI.

Human governments count people to know how much revenue they can raise through taxes, how much manpower they have for armies and for public works, and where they might find support or resistance to government policies and programs. God also counts people, but his approach is different. He connects his census to the Temple, making it a holy undertaking for a holy people he set apart as his own inheritance.

God's census didn't count everyone. Only Israelite men at least 20 years old were included. It's not that women were less valuable in his eyes, but it was the men who went to war, and inheritance was reckoned according to the male line.

We are free to question that. Women in Moses' day did, and God responded by establishing provisions to reinforce the value of every person and make sure their voices were heard. However, he didn't change his standard for how to take the census. That standard was still valid in Yeshua's time, as we learn from Matthew's Gospel:

When they came to Capernaum, the collectors of the two-drachma tax went up to Peter and said, "Does your teacher not pay the tax?" He said, "Yes." And when he came into the house, Jesus spoke to him first, saying, "What do you think, Simon? From whom do kings of the earth take toll or tax? From their sons or from others?" And when he said, "From others," Jesus said to him, "Then the sons are free. However, not to give offense to them, go to the sea and cast a hook and take the

first fish that comes up, and when you open its mouth you will find a shekel. Take that and give it to them for me and for yourself.”

Matthew 17:24-26 ESV

That was the same half-shekel Temple tax that the Torah required all men age 20 and above to pay. It was a mark of full inclusion in the nation of Israel as the seed of Abraham. Which brings up a question about what Yeshua meant when he said the sons are free: is he saying the Temple tax no longer applies to those who have faith in him? We know God’s Temple will be rebuilt one day, and the Temple tax will be required from all Jewish men who want access to it. But what about the rest of us? If we are adopted into Abraham’s family through our attachment to Israel’s Messiah, then does the Temple tax apply to us? Are we even considered members of the nation of Israel? The answer is yes . . . but it’s complicated.

As the book of Numbers explains, the people of Israel were organized by tribes. That included native born Hebrews, as well as foreigners who had attached themselves to Israel. The foreigners could be servants, people who had married Israelites, or even slaves bought with money. We see examples in Caleb the Kenizzite, Ruth the Moabite, Uriah the Hittite, and Ittai the Gittite. All of them were foreigners who made the choice to attach themselves to Israel.

They didn’t become full-fledged members of the nation all at once, however. It’s one thing to declare an intent to be part of God’s people, but that should be followed up by evidence that the declaration is more than words. The evidence comes as the newly declared Hebrews learn how God expects his people to live and start living that way. That’s the process outlined in Acts 15, when the Apostles specified how Gentile believers could be included in the community so they could learn Torah and grow into their new identity.

In ancient Israel, immigrant aliens could begin contributing to the community immediately, but it might take a generation or two before they were fully integrated. Still, they chose to become part of Israel, which is different from the mixed multitude who followed Moses out of Egypt. Jewish tradition says they stayed in a separate camp and retained their identities as foreigners. Although they stayed with Israel to gain the protection and benefits, they weren’t fully integrated with God’s people, didn’t contribute much to the congregation, and often were the first to make trouble.

We are faced with the same choice. Christians are awakening to the truth that our Savior was Israelite and Jewish, and that he followed the Torah. We, his followers, are attached to Israel, the native born of whom are the Jewish people. We aren’t called to become Jews, nor replace them, but we are called to learn God’s ways, which the Jewish people have kept for millennia. That’s why Paul tells us the Jews have great advantages, starting with the fact that they have the oracles of God. That’s why we should learn from them.

We live in the age when God is bringing together the two parts of his covenant people, making them into one flock with one shepherd. Do we want to be part of that united flock, or would we rather remain among the mixed multitude?