

Does אֶלֶף mean *thousand* or *clan/chief* in *Exodus* and *Numbers*?

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All passages from the New American Standard Bible unless otherwise noted.

Some have asserted that the huge numbers of people listed in various places in *Exodus* and *Numbers* are impossible or unlikely for a number of real-world reasons. Those include lack of mention of such big numbers in Egyptians and other secular accounts, archaeological estimates of populations at the time, food supply and other logistics for such huge numbers during the Exodus, number of years Israel was in Egypt, smaller numbers mentioned in the Bible hundreds of years later, trepidation of Israel to invade the Land despite having huge army, etc.

Rather than exegesis, or a critical examination of a text from the text, this is eisegesis, which is critical examination of a text from considerations outside the text. Exegesis focuses on the plain reading of a text, supplemented by other sources in the same work or from a similar time period. When eisegesis relies on other sources that contradict, and thus discount, the plain reading of the text, such analysis leads the text to places it doesn't go. The contradiction is chalked up to scribal interjection, authors' ignorance or wishful thinking.

What follows is a close study of the numbers listed in *Numbers* 1 (see figure 1), the pattern for which is used in following chapters and elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible. The plain reading of the text is that the Hebrew word אֶלֶף *'elef* means *thousand*, rather than *clan*, *chief* or *group*.

First, Hebrew has a system for counting for large numbers of people, animals, precious metals and other things is similar to the ones-tens-hundreds-thousands system of English and other languages.

Second, by the אֶלֶף-means-*clan* model, the total number in Num. 1:46 isn't the same as the total number from each tribe, so the supposed discrepancy has been explained by scribal harmonization of the total figure to fit the total for each tribe.

Tribe	Hebrew verse	אֶלֶף as <i>thousand</i>	Tabulation	אֶלֶף as <i>chief/clan/division</i>	Tabulation
Gad	שָׁשָׁה וָאַרְבַּעִים אֶלֶף וְחַמֵּשׁ מֵאוֹת (Num. 1:21)	five and fours ¹ (40) thousand and six hundreds and fives (50)	$((5 + 40) \cdot 1,000) + (6 \cdot 100) + 50 = 45,000 + 600 + 50 = 45,650$	five and fours (40) clan ² and six hundreds and fives (50)	45 clan and 650: 650
Yehudah (Judah)	אַרְבַּעָה וְשִׁבְעִים אֶלֶף וְשֵׁשׁ מֵאוֹת (Num. 1:27)	four and sevens (70) thousand and six hundreds	$((4 + 70) \cdot 1,000) + (6 \cdot 100) = 74,000 + 600 = 74,600$	our and sevens (70) clan and six hundreds	74 clan and 600: 600
Yissakar (Issachar)	אַרְבַּעָה וְחַמֵּשִׁים אֶלֶף וָאַרְבַּע מֵאוֹת (Num. 1:29)	four and fives (50) thousand and four hundreds	$((4 + 50) \cdot 1,000) + (4 \cdot 100) = 54,000 + 400 = 54,400$	four and fives (50) clan and four hundreds	54 clan and 400: 400
Zebulun	שִׁבְעָה וְחַמֵּשִׁים אֶלֶף וָאַרְבַּע מֵאוֹת (Num. 1:31)	seven and fives (50) thousand and four hundreds	$((7 + 50) \cdot 1,000) + (4 \cdot 100) = 57,000 + 400 = 57,400$	seven and fives (50) clan and four hundreds	57 clan and 400: 400
Ephraim	אַרְבַּעִים אֶלֶף וְחַמֵּשׁ מֵאוֹת (Num. 1:33)	fours (40) thousand and five hundreds	$((40) \cdot 1,000) + (5 \cdot 100) = 40,000 + 500 = 40,500$	fours (40) clan and five hundreds	40 clan and 500: 500
Manasseh	שְׁנַיִם וְשָׁלֹשִׁים אֶלֶף וּמֵאוֹת (Num. 1:35)	twos ³ and threes (30) thousand and hundreds (200)	$((2 + 30) \cdot 1,000) + (2 \cdot 100) = 32,000 + 200 = 32,200$	twos and threes (30) clan and hundreds (200)	32 clan and 200: 200
Ben-Yamin (Benjamin)	חַמֵּשָׁה וְשָׁלֹשִׁים אֶלֶף וָאַרְבַּע מֵאוֹת (Num. 1:37)	five and threes (30) thousand and four hundreds	$((5 + 30) \cdot 1,000) + (4 \cdot 100) = 35,000 + 400 = 35,400$	five and threes (30) clan and four hundreds	35 clan and 400: 400

1 A plural number in Hebrew is used in the Bible to put the number in the tens place, e.g., *sevens* equals 70.

2 Note that translating אֶלֶף in this usage as *chief* cannot work grammatically, because אֶלֶף here is singular. To be translated *chiefs*, or even *clans*, the form would have to be אלפים *'elefim*.

3 In Hebrew, שְׁנַיִם *shenayim* (H8147) for *two* is a plural form.

Dan	שנים וששים אלה ושבע מאות (Num. 1:39)	two and sixs (60) thousand and seven hundreds	$((2 + 60) \cdot 1,000) + (7 \cdot 100) = 62,000 + 700 =$ 62,700	two and sixs (60) clan and seven hundreds	62 clan and 700: 700
Asher	אחד וארבעים אלה וחמש מאות (Num. 1:41)	one and fours (40) thousand and five hundreds: 41,500	$((1 + 40) \cdot 1,000) + (5 \cdot 100) = 41,000 + 500 =$ 41,500	one and fours (40) clan and five hundreds	41 clan and 500: 500
Naphtali	שלושה וחמשים אלה וארבע מאות (Num. 1:43)	three and fives (50) thousand and four hundreds	$((3 + 50) \cdot 1,000) + (4 \cdot 100) = 53,000 + 400 =$ 53,400	three and fives (50) clan and four hundreds	53 clan and 400: 400
All the men of Israel older than 20	שש-מאות אלה ושלושת אלפים וחמש מאות וחמשים (Num. 1:46)	six hundreds thousand and three thousands and five hundreds and fives (50)	$((6 \cdot 100) \cdot 1,000) + (3 \cdot 1,000) + (5 \cdot 100) + 50 =$ $(600 \cdot 1,000) + 3,000 +$ $500 + 50 = 600,000 +$ $3,000 + 550 =$ 603,550	six hundreds clan and three clans and five hundreds and fives (50)	600 clan and 3 clans + 500 + 50 = 603 clans and 550

By translating אלה as *clan*, the addition of the clans and number with them in *Numbers* 1 does not add up to 603 clans and 550, but 493 clans and 4,750 (see figure 2).

One conclusion by those who hold to this translation is that the 603,550 figure in verse 46 (and Ex. 12:37 and 38:26) is a scribal harmonization of the *thousand* translation earlier in the chapter and thus an erroneous addition to Scripture.

Use of אלה with counting precious metals and animals in *Exodus and Numbers*

A major challenge to the translation of אלה as *clan*, *division* or even *group* when counting people in the Torah is that the same structure of big numbers is used to enumerate money and animals. Because *clan* or *chief* with creatures and precious metals is a problem in and of itself, let's explore these large numbers using a generic grouping term, *division*, used in certain translations of the plural אלפים in Num. 1:16.

“The silver of those of the congregation who were numbered was 100 talents and 1,775 shekels, according to the shekel of the sanctuary; a beka a head (that is, half a shekel according to the shekel of the sanctuary), for each one who passed over to those who were numbered, from twenty years old and upward, for 603,550 men.” (Ex. 38:25–26)

The counting of the silver in Hebrew is presented this way:

מאת ככר ואלף ושבע מאות וחמשה ושבעים שקל (Ex. 38:25)

אלה as *thousand*: [a] hundred of kikkar (talent) and [a] thousand and seven hundreds and five and sevens (70) [of] sheqel

$$(1,000 + (7 \cdot 100) + 5 + 70) \text{ sheqel} = 1,000 + 700 + 75 = 1,775 \text{ shekel}$$

total amount of silver: 100 kikkar + 1,775 sheqel

אלה as *division*: hundred of kikkar (talent) and [a] division and seven hundreds and five and sevens (70) sheqel

$$[a] \text{ division} + 775 \text{ shekel} = \text{???? sheqel}$$

total amount of silver: 100 kikkar + ???? sheqel

Because an *'elef* of *sheqel* is indefinite in number per this translation, the total number of *sheqel* cannot be determined. However, a unit of measure with a known amount, the *sheqel*, is used in the passage. Are the big numbers in the Torah written in algebraic notation (i.e., $(775 + \aleph)$ *sheqel*, where \aleph is undefined)?

The counting of the men in this passage from Exodus follows the same pattern of Hebrew numbering for silver earlier in the same passage and in Num. 1:46.

“Now the booty that remained from the spoil which the men of war had plundered was 675,000 sheep, and 72,000 cattle, and 61,000 donkeys, and of human beings, of the women who had not known man intimately, all the persons were 32,000.” (Num. 31:32–35)

Like the passage just discussed, this one also has enumerations of people and animals together. The counting is presented in Hebrew these ways:

צאן שש-מאות אלה ושבעים אלה וחמשת-אלפים (Num. 31:32)

Figure 2: Tribe totals with אלה as thousand vs. clan

Tribe	<i>thousand</i>	<i>clan</i> + number
Gad	45,650	45 650
Yehudah	74,600	74 600
Yissakar	54,400	54 400
Zebulun	57,400	57 400
Ephraim	40,500	40 500
Manasseh	32,200	32 200
Ben-Yamin	35,400	35 400
Dan	62,700	62 700
Asher	41,500	41 500
Naphtali	53,400	53 400
Total	603,550	493 4,750

אלף as *thousand*: [of] ts'on (sheep, flock) six hundreds [of] thousand and sevens (70) [of] thousand and fives [of] thousands

$$\begin{aligned} &(((6 \cdot 100) \cdot 1,000) + (70 \cdot 1,000) + (5 \cdot 1,000)) \text{ ts'on} = \\ &((600 \cdot 1,000) + 70,000 + 5,000) \text{ ts'on} = \\ &(600,000 + 70,000 + 5,000) \text{ ts'on} = 675,000 \text{ ts'on} \end{aligned}$$

אלף as *division*: [of] ts'on six hundreds [of] division and sevens (70) [of] division and fives [of] divisions

$$\begin{aligned} &(6 \cdot 100) \text{ division} + 70 \text{ division} + (5 \cdot \text{divisions}) \text{ [of] ts'on} = \\ &(600 \text{ division} + 70 \text{ division} + \text{????}) \text{ ts'on} = (670 \text{ division} + \text{????}) \text{ ts'on} = \text{???? ts'on} \end{aligned}$$

This is a good example of how the translation of אלף as something other than *thousand* falls apart — represents a meaningless number — when the enumeration is rounded to the nearest אלף.

אלף ובקר שנים ושבעים אלף (Num. 31:33)

אלף as *thousand*: and [of] baqar (cattle) two and sevens (70) [of] thousand

$$(2 + (70 \cdot 1,000)) \text{ baqar} = (2 + 70,000) \text{ baqar} = 72,000 \text{ baqar}$$

אלף as *division*: and [of] baqar two and sevens (70) [of] division

$$(2 + 70) \text{ division [of] baqar} = 72 \text{ ???? of baqar} = \text{???? of baqar}$$

אלף וחמורים אחד וששים אלף (Num. 31:34)

אלף as *thousand*: and [of] khamorim (donkeys) one and sixes (60) [of] thousand

$$(1 + (60 \cdot 1,000)) \text{ khamorim} = (1 + 60,000) \text{ khamorim} = 61,000 \text{ khamorim}$$

אלף as *division*: and [of] khamorim one and sixes (60) division

$$(1 + 60) \text{ division [of] khamorim} = 61 \text{ ???? of khamorim} = \text{???? khamorim}$$

אלף כל־נפש שנים ושלשים אלף (Num. 31:35)

אלף as *thousand*: and [of] all [those] nefesh (virgins) two and threes (30) [of] thousand

$$(2 + (30 \cdot 1,000)) \text{ virgins} = (2 + 30,000) \text{ virgins} = 32,000 \text{ virgins}$$

Note that the system of denominations of numbers was the same as was is for the animals.

אלף as *division*: and [of] all [those] nefesh two and threes (30) division

$$(2 + 30) \text{ division [of] virgins} = 32 \text{ ???? of virgins} = \text{???? virgins}$$

Use of אלף with counting large numbers outside of the Torah

One contention some make is that אלף does take on the meaning of *thousand* later in Israel's history, perhaps during the monarchy period and the exiles. So are the patterns of enumeration later the same as in the Torah? If so, this indicates that this pattern is Hebrew numerical construction, with designations for thousands, hundreds, tens and ones, rather than a word that meant something at one point in history and something different later in history.

ויאמר אלי עד ערב בקר אלפים ושלש מאות ונצדק קדש (Dan. 8:14)

אלף as *thousand*: "He said to me, 'until evening morning thousands (2,000) and three hundreds will be justified holy.'"

$$(1,000 + 1,000) + (3 \cdot 100) = 2,300$$

This passage has a system of thousands followed by hundreds, joined by the conjunction letter ו *vav*. The system for big numbers is similar to that found in the Torah.

ומעת הוסר התמיד ולתת שקוץ שמם ימים אלף מאתים ותשעים: (Dan. 12:11–12)

¹² אשרי המחכה ויגיע לימים אלף שלש מאות ושלשים

אלף as *thousand*: "From the appointed time of the turning aside from the continual and to set up abomination of desolation days thousand hundreds (200) and nines (90). Blessed is he who waits and touches days thousand three hundreds threes (30) and five."

$$1,000 [+](100 + 100) + 90 = 1,290$$

$$1,000 [+](3 \cdot 100) [+](30 + 5) = 1,000 + 300 + 35 = 1,335$$

Notice how the *vav* is missing between the thousands and hundreds places in the number as well as between the hundreds and tens. Similarly in English, the *and* in a long-form number is dropped to save time and make the number less cumbersome to understand: "Two thousand and eleven" vs. "two thousand eleven" or "twenty eleven."

The plain reading of the pattern of counting is that אלף means *thousand*. The massive amount of scribal harmonization of the text to align passages with huge numbers of people, animals and items, as the extension of the אלף-equals-clan view would require, would put in doubt the accuracy of the text and its message. "It's true, even if it's

not true” view of the Torah doesn’t cut it were the Torah to really be the Testimony of the Creator of the heavens and the Earth.

Really, this is a rehash of the Adversary’s claim to Eve, “ ‘Indeed, has God said, “You shall not eat from any tree of the garden”?’ ” (Gen. 3:1). Note what God did say to Abraham:

“ ‘By Myself I have sworn, declares the LORD, because you have done this thing and have not withheld your son, your only son, indeed I will greatly bless you, and I will greatly multiply your seed as the stars of the heavens and as the sand which is on the seashore; and your seed shall possess the gate of their enemies. “In your seed all the nations of the earth shall be blessed, because you have obeyed My voice.’ ” (Gen. 22:16–18)

and to Israel after the 40 years in the wilderness:

“ ‘He humbled you and let you be hungry, and fed you with manna which you did not know, nor did your fathers know, that He might make you understand that man does not live by bread alone, but man lives by everything that proceeds out of the mouth of the LORD. Your clothing did not wear out on you, nor did your foot swell these forty years.’ ” (Deut. 8:3–4)

Therefore, the Creator of the heavens and the Earth can do mighty things such as moving hundreds of thousands of people around in the desert, giving them enough food and water to eat, and dealing with logistical matters.