

## **Naked Bible Podcast Transcript**

### **Episode 24**

### **The Bible's Literary Context: The Military-Historical Annal Genre**

#### **(Part 3 of 8-part series)**

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### **Summary**

In the last podcast episode we continued our series on studying the Bible in a way that amounts to more than reading by taking a look at the legal genre in Old Testament books. Today we're focusing on another genre – military annals. I think the best way of illustrating how this genre can matter for interpretation is to begin with a problem that it solves, one that biblical scholars have grappled with for centuries. More specifically, I'm speaking of the problem of the unrealistically large numbers in the exodus and wilderness journey of Israel. In this episode of the Naked Bible podcast, I'll illustrate this problem from the biblical material, mention a commonly proposed solution, and then introduce you to what I think is a better solution—one that derives from the type of literature we're dealing with in the exodus, wilderness, and conquest narratives.

### **Transcript**

Welcome back to the Naked Bible Podcast.

In the last podcast episode, we continued our series on studying the Bible in a way that amounts to more than reading by taking a look at the legal genre in Old Testament books. (Again, a genre is a type of literature.) And knowing what type of literature you're in helps with interpretation. Today we're going to focus on another genre: military annals or military accounts. I think the best way of illustrating how this genre can matter for interpretation is to begin with a problem that it solves—one that biblical scholars have grappled with for centuries, in fact. Specifically, I'm speaking of the problem of the unrealistically large numbers in the Exodus and wilderness journey. In case you aren't familiar with this famous biblical problem, let me explain. In the census following the Exodus from Egypt in Numbers 1:46, the number of Israelite males older than 20 years of age is put at 603,550, which is slightly more than the second census taken later in the book of Numbers (chapter 26), which gives that total at 601,730. These figures imply that the total population of the fledgling nation of Israel was somewhere between two and three million people. Those figures are very difficult to reconcile with the geography of Canaan and the archeological record and, frankly, other biblical statements about the Israelites on the way to Canaan after the Exodus.

In what follows, I'll illustrate the problem from the biblical text and mention a commonly-proposed solution. But then I'll introduce you to what I think is the best solution—one that derives from the type of literature we're dealing with in the Exodus and conquest narratives.

Illustrating the problem... Several passages illustrate the conundrums that are created by taking these large numbers at face value. For instance, Deuteronomy 7:1-7 presents Israel as "the *least* numerous" nation in Canaan at the time of the conquest. It mentions that there are seven other nations that were larger. Now, if we take two to three million as the population of Israel, the total population of all eight nations combined would have had to range anywhere from 16 to 24 million people, roughly the 2010 population of Florida or Texas, respectively. The size of Canaan, however, is closer to that of New Jersey than either of those states. That presents a problem. Archaeological evidence does not indicate that enough cities and towns existed to support a population of this size. To be really blunt about it, it's nowhere close to accommodating that number of people. If you took every settlement—every village—that's known in Canaan, you just can't get to enough settlements (and of course, enough settlements that are big enough) to accommodate 16 to 24 million people. It's an impossibility.

5:00

A second example also helps put the problem into perspective. The Israelites left Egypt, according to Exodus 12:37, with about "600,000 men on foot, besides women and children." God did not provide the Israelites with manna until roughly 45 days after they left Egypt (according to Exodus 16:1). That means that two to three million people required a different food source than the manna for 45 days. If a family of five sacrificed one lamb (or some other animal) each day to feed themselves, the Israelites would have had to slaughter 120,000 lambs every day—meaning, the Israelites would have had to leave Egypt with 5.4 million animals. Even if they ate meat only a third of the time (15 days), they still would have had to slaughter 40,000 animals every day and leave Egypt with 1.8 million animals. I hope you're getting the picture here. The numbers just don't work.

Lastly, with respect to the Exodus and conquest material, the Bible itself hints really strongly that the two to three million number is very likely a misreading of the biblical text. In Numbers 33:49, the Israelites "camped by the Jordan from Beth-jeshimoth as far as Abel-shittim in the plains of Moab." Since Beth-jeshimoth and Abel-shittim were approximately seven miles from each other, the area of the Israelite encampment would have been about 49 square miles. By comparison, New York City (with a population of 8.1 million in 2010) covers 305 square miles. Taking the number two to three million at face value therefore requires that the Israelite camp had a slightly greater population density than New York City. Of course, in Canaan in the ancient world, you don't have any multi-level living accommodations. There are no high-rise apartments. Again, the picture that we get from the math just doesn't work.

Taking the numbers of the census figures at face value creates transparent difficulties in regard to the accuracy of these stories. Several solutions have been

proposed. I'm going to give you the most frequently proposed one. That is that the Hebrew word for "thousand" (*eleph*) may also mean "tribe" or "clan." In Numbers 10:4, Judges 6:5, and 1 Samuel 10:19, the word *eleph* there (which we would normally translate "thousand") probably does simply mean "tribe" or "clan." If that's the case, the numbers that we're thinking of in the book of Numbers in the Exodus and Conquest narratives may simply refer to military units, which correspond to the aim of the census to determine the number of males eligible for Israel's army. In other words, the 603,000 or so people might just mean 603 tribes or clans or some other military unit. That would, of course, dramatically reduce the number of people we're dealing with. However, there's a problem. The examples where *eleph* might plausibly refer to something other than the specific number of 1,000 often have nothing to do with counting. Moreover, in other passages that *do* involve counting (for example, Exodus 18:21, 1 Samuel 8:12, 2 Samuel 18:1... there are a lot of these), the term really can't have any other meaning than the mathematical tabulation. In other words, proposing that *eleph* means something other than a numerical unit of 1,000 doesn't work in a lot of the contexts. So while on the surface the proposal seems kind of workable, it has its own internal problems. We need a different interpretive approach besides that sort of word study to solve this particular problem.

Another proposal (the one that I think is the most workable and that really pays attention to the literary genre) is that the Exodus and Wilderness wanderings (the numbers that are presented in those narratives/historical annals/military annals) represent literary hyperbole. A friend of mine, David Fouts, actually did his dissertation work on this problem, so I need to credit him for the convenient examples that follow. Links to David's work can be found on the Naked Bible Podcast site under "Bibliography" if you're interested.

10:00

Comparisons with other ancient Semitic texts of similar genre validate David's suggestion. Ancient Sumerian, Akkadian, and Assyrian literature (particularly roll inscriptions and historical annals) deliberately employ hyperbole. They deliberately blow up the numbers in regard to the large numbers that are used. Historical annals aimed to glorify the god of the king by exaggerating the king's victories. This was deliberate and everybody knew what was going on. In fact, the biblical accounts of the Exodus and Conquest bear striking similarities to contemporary historical or military annals in many ways. Scholars of ancient Near Eastern literature familiar with these genres (the genres of royal inscriptions and military or historical annals) have found a number of instances where the writers deliberately use outlandish numbers for army logistics and movements or maybe troops engaged in battle, or the number of slain or captured enemies, or the amount of booty taken. It's just something that was regularly done in those genres. By way of specific example, an inscription of the Assyrian king Shalmeneser I, who reigned roughly from 1275 to 1245 B.C. (which, if you're interested, is the same chronological context of the Exodus and the Conquest if one adopts the late-date chronology) reads as follows:

I slaughtered countless numbers of their extensive army. As for him, Sattuara, I chased him at arrow-point until sunset. I butchered their hordes but 14,400 of them who remained alive I blinded and carried off. I conquered nine of his fortified cult centers as well as the city from which he ruled ...

While these numbers are likely exaggerations, an inscription by Shalmeneser I's successor (a guy named Tukulti-Ninurta I) certainly illustrates deliberate hyperbole. How do we know that? Because he precisely doubles the numbers found in the previous king's inscription. It's very deliberate. This second inscription of Shalmaneser I's successor (Tukulti-Ninurta I) reads like this:

On my accession to the royal throne in my first year of reign, I carried off 28,800 Hittite warriors from the other side of the Euphrates.

You notice the number 28,800 is exactly double that of the number that were taken by his predecessor (14,400). It's exactly double—a fascinating example here of how a king might expect numbers to be exaggerated.

There's another example, though, that comes from a cylinder inscription of Sargon II (another Assyrian king). This sort of describes some of his activities. It reads, in part:

Palaces of ivory, mulberry, cedar, cypress, juniper, and pistachio-wood I built at their lofty command for my royal dwelling place. A *bit-hillani*, a copy of a Hittite (Syrian) palace, I erected in front of their doors. Beams of cedar and cypress I laid over them for roofs at 16,283 cubits, the numeral of my name. I made the circuit (lit., measure) of its wall, establishing the foundation platform upon the bedrock of the high mountain.

Did you catch the odd phrase, "the numeral of my name?" What did Sargon mean by that? Scholars have proposed that the idea comes from the fact that in Akkadian (a cuneiform language), the syllables of Sargon's name can be divided up or individuated. The result is that Sargon's name is three cuneiform signs. Each of those signs (not coincidentally) have numerical values. In this case, amazingly, the sum total of the three signs of Sargon's name add up to... guess what? 16,283—the same number in that inscription for the cubits mentioned in what he was building. That strongly suggests that the incredibly large number (there's no building associated with Sargon known to archaeology that had a roof that big—16,000+ cubits) is designed specifically to magnify Sargon as king and not give us true math.

15:00

How does this apply to the biblical problem of the large numbers of the Exodus and the Conquest? Well, if we consider the literary genre of those accounts—some sort of historical or military annal designed to do what? Designed to inform the reader of the great victories of the Israelites (not really the Israelites, but of Yahweh, the King of the gods, the King of Israel)... The accounts give us these

figures, these descriptions. If we look at it that way, it can be argued that, like other ancient Near Eastern writers, the biblical writers were using large numbers according to the writing conventions of their own time (which, by the way, argues for their historical authenticity). The point would be that the writer of these accounts was using a known literary device in a known literary genre to draw attention to the might of Yahweh—the King of all kings, earthly or divine—in delivering his people, Israel.

I hope you see, again, the value of thinking about the literary genre of a passage of scripture for understanding it (here's the key idea) *on its own terms*—not on our terms. In its own context, not my context, not the context of the Reformation or the Middle Ages or whatever—its own context.

Before I sign off I should note that this discussion was adapted from my notes in the Faithlife Study Bible from Logos Bible Software. I wrote the study Bible notes for Genesis through Judges in that Study Bible, so if you found this material interesting, I'd encourage you to download the Study Bible for free at [www.faithlifebible.com](http://www.faithlifebible.com). The coupon code is the word FREE. Until next time, thanks for listening.