



## HOW MANY ISRAELITES DIED IN THE WILDERNESS?

By Louis Rushmore

A 10 year old, "... would like to know how many of the Israelites died while wandering in the wilderness?" The exact number of Israelites who died during the wilderness wandering cannot be known. That number is not revealed in the Bible. Further, since neither the exact number of persons who left Egypt in the Exodus nor the exact number of persons who

proposed to enter Canaan after the 40 years were complete is known, it is not possible to know precisely how many Israelites died in that period.

However, we may make some educated guesses about how many Israelites left Egypt, arrived to enter Canaan 40 years later and perhaps also guess about how many died during the wilderness wandering. From Exodus 12:37 and Numbers 1:45-47, one learns that about 600,000 (603,550) men from 20 years old upward who could wage war were numbered in the Exodus. The tribe of Levi, males under 20 years old and all females were excluded from that census.

The Methodist commentator, Adam Clarke, made the following suppositions to calculate the total population of Israelites at the time of the Exodus. He estimated that two-thirds the number of fighting men or 400,000 wives could be deduced and added to the 600,000. Further, supposing that each family had an average of six children, Clarke added another 2,000,000 persons. Next, he added 45,000 Levite men (not included in the 600,000), 33,000 Levite wives, 165,000 Levite children plus a 20,000 mixed multitude. Clarke estimated the total population of the Exodus to be 3,263,000. (Adam Clarke, *Adam Clarke's Commentary*, Electronic Database. Copyright (c) 1996 by BibleSoft.) The Presbyterian commentator, Albert Barnes, estimated the total population in excess of 2,000,000. The *Jamieson, Fausset and Brown Commentary* cites an Israelite population of 2,400,000 at the time of the Exodus. *Fausset's Bible Dictionary*, the *Keil & Delitzsch Commentary on the Old Testament* and the *International Standard Bible Encyclopaedia* each estimate the number of Israelites then was about 2,000,000. The *McClintock and Strong Encyclopedia* suggests the fleeing host numbered between two and three million.

After a series of rebellions against God by the Israelites, culminating in their refusal to enter Canaan, God refused to allow any of the present generation except Joshua and Caleb to enter Canaan -- 40 years later.

"Your carcasses shall fall in this wilderness; and all that were numbered of you, according to your whole number, from twenty years old and upward, which have murmured against me, Doubtless ye shall not come into the land, concerning which I swear to make you dwell therein, save Caleb the son of Jephunneh, and Joshua the son of Nun. But your little ones, which ye said should be a prey, them will I bring in, and they shall know the land which ye have despised. But as for you, your carcasses, they shall fall in this wilderness. And your children shall wander in the wilderness forty years, and bear your whoredoms, until your carcasses be wasted in the wilderness. After the number of the days in which ye searched the land, even forty days, each day for a year, shall ye bear your iniquities, even forty years, and ye shall know my breach of promise" (Numbers 14:29-34; see also Numbers 32:11-13).

The entire adult population from 20 years old and upward with the exception of Joshua and Caleb were forbidden to enter Canaan and died in the wilderness. Borrowing from Clarke's figures, over 1,078,000 Israelites (600,000 men, 400,000 women, 45,000 Levite men, 33,000 Levite women, plus adults among the mixed multitude) died during the wilderness wandering over those 40 years. Many who were under 20 years old at the initial census who themselves rebelled against God later as adults or otherwise fell victim to the wilderness may have increased the number of dead.

A new generation, numbering 601,730 men 20 years old and up prepared to enter Canaan after the 40 years of wilderness wandering (Numbers 26:51). The number of the men of war was only 1,820 less after the 40 years than what it was when the Exodus began. The population, then, remained relatively constant over the 40-year period, though the adult generation that departed Egypt perished and was replaced with the subsequent generation of Israelites.

More important than the precise number of Israelites who perished in the wilderness wandering is the lesson that God intends for us to learn from those who fell in the wilderness. First Corinthians 10 and Hebrews 3 address those who died while rebelling against God in the Sinai Peninsula.

"Moreover, brethren, I would not that ye should be ignorant, how that all our fathers were under the cloud, and all passed through the sea; And were all baptized unto Moses in the cloud and in the sea; And did all eat the same spiritual meat; And did all drink the same spiritual drink: for they drank of that spiritual Rock that

followed them: and that Rock was Christ. But with many of them God was not well pleased: for they were overthrown in the wilderness. Now these things were our examples, to the intent we should not lust after evil things, as they also lusted. Neither be ye idolaters, as were some of them; as it is written, The people sat down to eat and drink, and rose up to play. Neither let us commit fornication, as some of them committed, and fell in one day three and twenty thousand. Neither let us tempt Christ, as some of them also tempted, and were destroyed of serpents. Neither murmur ye, as some of them also murmured, and were destroyed of the destroyer. Now all these things happened unto them for ensamples: and they are written for our admonition, upon whom the ends of the world are come. Wherefore let him that thinketh he standeth take heed lest he fall" (1 Corinthians 10:1-12).

"Harden not your hearts, as in the provocation, in the day of temptation in the wilderness: When your fathers tempted me, proved me, and saw my works forty years. Wherefore I was grieved with that generation, and said, They do alway err in their heart; and they have not known my ways. So I sware in my wrath, They shall not enter into my rest.) Take heed, brethren, lest there be in any of you an evil heart of unbelief, in departing from the living God. But exhort one another daily, while it is called To day; lest any of you be hardened through the deceitfulness of sin. For we are made partakers of Christ, if we hold the beginning of our confidence stedfast unto the end; While it is said, To day if ye will hear his voice, harden not your hearts, as in the provocation. For some, when they had heard, did provoke: howbeit not all that came out of Egypt by Moses. But with whom was he grieved forty years? was it not with them that had sinned, whose carcasses fell in the wilderness? And to whom sware he that they should not enter into his rest, but to them that believed not? So we see that they could not enter in because of unbelief" (Hebrews 3:8-19).

Rebellion against God will be rewarded with punishment, the worst degree of punishment being that which will be dispensed before the Judgment throne of God (Matthew 25:41, 46; Revelation 20:12, 15; 21:8). Obedient faith (Romans 1:5; 16:26) will be rewarded with salvation (Hebrews 5:8-9; Revelation 2:10), also styled as our eternal rest.

"There remaineth therefore a rest to the people of God. For he that is entered into his rest, he also hath ceased from his own works, as God did from his. Let us labour therefore to enter into that rest, lest any man fall after the same example of unbelief" (Heb 4:9-11).

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