

The Censuses and the Mustering

Short Note. Revised 2019. PS.

The background to these notes was the question, how essential it is to distinguish between the two verbs נָשָׂא nś' and פָּקַד pqd.

Is it a census (of all people) or is it a (military) mustering?

It is really both. NASB's section heading on 1:1 brings this out: "The Census of Israel's Warriors".

On the one hand, the term עֵדָה 'edah 'congregation' in 1:2 points to the whole political & cultic community.

On the other hand, the military purpose is clear from the criteria in 1:2-3 (NASB):

² ..., according to the number of names, every male, head by head ³ from twenty years old and upward, whoever is able to go out to war in Israel, ... "

Milgrom (on 1:2) comments the words "Take a census" with "That is, for the purpose of military conscription."

Ashley (on 1:1ff.) speaks of a "lay census" (but that is not as opposed to "military census", but as opposed to "census of the Levites"[?]).

The way the camp is set up shows that it has a military purpose (see commentaries). In addition, there is the army-like terminology with "standard" and "banner" (2:2ff.).

The verbs

נָשָׂא nś'

"to lift up", often followed by "the head" or "the number". In this sense it occurs only a few times, usually at the beginning of a paragraph: Num 1:2/49; 3:40; 4:2/22. **In focus is the counting** (THELOT: "to number / take a census). Several English versions say "take a census"; NCV "count all the people".

פָּקַד pqd

This is a more technical term for the actual enlisting (written documentation). It is much more frequent.

The English versions say "number / enroll (NRSV) / record (NJPSV) / muster". (It is also used in other senses in the same chapters.)

Both verbs are used in parallel in 1:49; 3:40 (both with *pqd* first).

The various censuses in chapters 1–4

The book of Numbers reports about several censuses, as follows:

- In 1:3ff, the Israelites from the age of 20 were counted.
- In 3:15ff the Levites from the age of 1 month were counted. (E.g. the Gershonites were 7,500 (v. 22).) The total is given in v. 39.
- In 3:40ff., the male firstborn of the Israelites are counted. The total is given in v. 43.
- The number of the firstborn Israelites and of the Levites are compared (v. 46).
- In 4:3ff the Levites from the age of 30 to 50 are to be counted. – The results are not given until vv. 34ff. This is the age in which they were to perform their heavy duty (4:3 *šābā*). (Could the "guarding" also be done by the younger and older ones? Cf. Ashley on 4:1.)
- In chapter 26, the Israelites are counted again after the 40 years in the wilderness. As before, the Levites are counted from the age of 1 month (v. 62), the other tribes from the age of 20 (v. 2).

Section headings should give some help to understand what each census is about.