A DEFENSE OF THE HYPERBOLIC INTERPRETATION
OF LARGE NUMBERS IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

david m. fouts*

For some scholars the use of large numbers in the OT is an interpretive issue. For others it involves the theological issues of inerrancy and the historical veracity of Scripture. It is the purpose of this paper to demonstrate and defend the premise that the issue is hermeneutical rather than theological, involving interpretation rather than inerrancy. To develop this, the major points of my doctoral dissertation[1] will be presented in summary form.

I. SELECTED DIFFICULTIES IN SCRIPTURE

1. *The population of Israel at the exodus.* The size of the population of Israel at the exodus has been traditionally estimated at between 2,000,000 and 3,000,000, figures based on the number of fighting men enumerated at the censuses of Numbers 1 and 26.[2] Though this is not an impossible figure for a nation as numerous "as the sand of the sea, which cannot be counted due to abundance" (Gen 32:13), it does present some demographic and archeological conundrums. Such an estimate of population size for Israel may or may not be appropriate for the land of Palestine in antiquity.[3] But if indeed there were seven nations more numerous than Israel already in the land and if indeed Israel was the least of all nations as the Scriptures indicate (Deut 7:1, 7), the demographic problems increase exponentially. The land of Canaan would have been crushed under the weight of up to

---

* David Fouts is associate professor of Bible at Bryan College, Dayton, TN 37321-7000.

[1] D. M. Fouts, *The Use of Large Numbers in the Old Testament* (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, 1991). Cf. also Fouts, "Added Support for Reading '70 Men' in 1 Samuel vi 19," *VT* 42 (1992) 394; "Another Look at Large Numbers in Assyrian Royal Inscriptions," *JNES* 53 (1994) 205–211.

[2] M. Broshi, "La population de l'ancienne Jérusalem," *RB* 82 (1975) 5; cf. E. H. Merrill, "Numbers," *The Bible Knowledge Commentary* (ed. J. F. Walvoord and R. B. Zuck; Wheaton: Victor, 1985) 217; E. J. Young, *An Introduction to the Old Testament* (rev. ed.; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964) 85.

[3] One must admit that if the census figures are taken at actual value the two named midwives of Exod 1:15 were fully employed. For the view that the names may refer instead to two overseers or to two guilds of midwives see N. M. Sarna, *Exploring Exodus* (New York: Schocken, 1986) 25. M. Hoegger ("L'interprétation des grands nombres dans l'Ancien Testament," *Ḥokhma* 25 [1984] 4) also points out that the people could assemble immediately around the Tent of Meeting and were able to hear Moses and Aaron (Exod 16:8–12) and that Moses alone was able to judge all the people until adopting Jethro's wise counsel (18:13–14). Such facts seem to indicate a somewhat smaller populace.

21,000,000 people (more than the present population of the entire state of Texas) prior to the conquest of Joshua.[4] There is little archeological support to testify concerning such a large population at any time in the past.

If the largest numbers are accepted at their actual value or even as rounded-off approximations in Numbers 1 and 26 (and related passages), either Deut 7:1 and 7:7 (and related passages) or the conclusions of archeologists are in error. One is reticent to deny either the validity of Scripture[5] or of the results of scholars who have no theological ax to grind. Conversely, if Deut 7:1 and 7:7 are accepted as factual[6] and the results of archeology are accepted as being at least close to the truth, one must admit that the largest numbers are used in some other way than expressing actual value or even rounded-off approximations.

2. *The number of Levites and of Israelite firstborn.*   Numbers 3 records several large numbers that cause problems if taken at face value. Concerning the number of Levites three group totals are given, the sum of which is 22,000 (Num 3:39). The sum as given is incorrect; it should be 22,300. The number of all Israelite firstborn is given as 22,273 (3:43), with 273 being the excess above the number of the Levites (3:46). G. B. Gray has pointed out that this would yield at least 25 sons per family, given a population of between 2,000,000 and 3,000,000 persons.[7] The figures do indeed appear to be difficult if taken at face value.

3. *The number of the Ephraimites in Judges 12.*   Judges 12:6 states that for mispronouncing "Shibboleth" 42,000 Ephraimites were slain at the river Jordan, a number that exceeds the census total for that tribe in either Numbers 1 (40,500) or Numbers 26 (32,500).[8] Even allowing for an increase of the Ephraimite warrior population after the conquest does not alleviate the problem of the enormity of the number of those slain.[9]

4. *The wall at Aphek.*   1 Kings 20:30 asserts that after Israel had killed 100,000 Syrian foot soldiers at a nearby battle, 27,000 more fled into the

---

[4] This estimate is based on seven nations, each more numerous than Israel. If only the sum total of all the nations was greater in number than Israel, then Deut 7:7 would be in error.

[5] As does Broshi ("Population" 5).

[6] One must note that even accepting Deut 7:1, 7 as figurative does not mitigate the problem of the enormity of the largest numbers.

[7] G. B. Gray, *Numbers* (ICC; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1963) 13.

[8] It may be that the figure cited refers to the total of all Ephraimites killed in both the battle and attempting to ford the river, but the figure is still too enormous to be considered at face value.

[9] One may contrast this number with the account of a member of the 32nd Iowa Infantry in the Civil War battle of Pleasant Hill, LA, on April 9, 1864, who records that somewhat less than 23,000 federal troops were engaged in battle (S. F. Benson, "The Battle of Pleasant Hill, Louisiana," *Annals of Iowa* 7/7 [1906] 7). The commander of the federal troops, Major General N. P. Banks, estimated the Confederate force at 15,000 (N. P. Banks, official report of April 13, 1864, made to Major General H. W. Halleck, *War of the Rebellion: Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies: The Red River Campaign* [part 1], *Official Reports* [Washington: Government Printing Office, 1890] 34.183). A total of 38,000 were engaged; fewer than 2,000 were killed or wounded.

city of Aphek where a wall fell on them, apparently killing them as well. One would think that this wall or its remains would be somewhat comparable to the Great Wall of China to be so calamitous in its collapse and that it would have been at least partially unearthed by now. If there is some other significance to the large numbers, however, the size of the wall may not matter.

5. *The Davidic census in Samuel and Chronicles.*   One of the most perplexing problems involving large numbers is the different numbers offered in the 2 Samuel 24 (1.3 million) and 1 Chronicles 21 (1.57 million) accounts of the census ordered by David. Like the censuses of the book of Numbers, the totals are entirely too large.[10] Thorough textual study of these passages seems to indicate that the differences cannot be explained as simply due to textual corruption. Only if the numbers are taken as something different than actual or as rounded off can one maintain the integrity of Scripture.

6. *Summary.*   These five representative problem passages should be enough to encourage the reader that the present study is not simply valid but is of utmost importance.[11] Those who would challenge an essentially conservative view of Scripture often do so by appealing to passages that involve large numbers.[12] It is therefore necessary that this study be undertaken in order to discover the way that large numbers were used in the OT. Accepting them at face value often leads to internal disharmony with other Biblical passages. There are also the archeological data to contend with. These facts may no longer be ignored by conservative scholars. But the simple dismissal of the numbers as obvious exaggeration or simple error by many scholars is just as dangerous.[13] What is needed is a balanced approach that examines the numbers as they are encountered in the text and suggests a plausible explanation of their use consistent with other Scriptural data and with the demographics demonstrated by regional archeology.

II. HISTORY OF INTERPRETATION

It was not until the Reformation that scholars began accepting the large numbers at face value. Throughout most of early Church history, scholars in

[10] C. Schedl, "Biblische Zahlen—unglaubwürdig?", *TPQ* 107 (1959) 59.

[11] D. W. Patten has recently listed some other problem areas but adopts Wenham's interpretation (see below; "The Two Censuses in the Book of Numbers," *Proceedings of the Second Seminar of Catastrophism and Ancient History* [ed. M. A. Luckerman; Los Angeles: Catastrophism and Ancient History, 1985] 19–29). Patten's admitted ignorance of Hebrew (p. 29) helps to explain this interpretive decision.

[12] Most notable of the objections to the large numbers recorded in historical texts of the OT were those presented by J. W. Colenso, *The Pentateuch and the Book of Joshua Critically Examined*, seven volumes (New York: D. Appleton, 1862–1879). This problem is apparently one of the greatest stumbling blocks to E. Babinski, who dedicates an entire appendix to it (*Leaving the Fold: Testimonies of Former Fundamentalists* [Prometheus, 1995] 413–423).

[13] This is being recognized as well in Assyriological studies; see M. de Odorico, *The Use of Numbers and Quantifications in the Assyrian Royal Inscriptions* (State Archives of Assyria Studies 3; Helsinki, 1995).

general either withheld comment on the passages containing large numbers or interpreted them in a spiritualizing manner. It appears to have been the exception rather than the rule that scholars accepted them at face value. By the time of the Reformation, both Luther and Calvin appear to have done so.

The actual value of the large numbers was not often questioned from the Reformation until the time of de Wette (ca. 1806) and other later scholars who questioned the entire Biblical account of the history of Israel. Most notable of the objections to the large numbers recorded in historical texts of the OT were those presented by J. W. Colenso.[14] He dedicates the better part of his first volume to mocking the results of accepting the census figures at face value. He complains about the size of the camp of the Israelites and the great amount of waste generated by the corresponding large amounts of animal sacrifices, among other things.[15] Colenso obviously ignores the supernatural nature of both the exodus event and the wandering in the wilderness, to which Scripture testifies in Deut 8:3–4. Though one does not condone his mocking attitude, one may agree that he was correct in stating that the presence of such enormous numbers presents a problem to those scholars who desire to maintain an actual value for them, especially in view of passages like Deut 7:1, 7. Perhaps because of this, rejection of the large numbers for being essentially erroneous has been the view of many scholars into modern times.[16] G. Mendenhall writes: "There seems to be a consensus among those who have treated of the census lists in the Book of Numbers since 1903, on at least two points: first, that the word *'elef* does not mean 'thousand' but rather is a designation of some subsection of a tribe; and second, that the numbers are impossible."[17]

Perhaps the earliest modern attempt to explain the difficult problems associated with the OT use of *'elep* was that of W. M. Flinders Petrie,[18] who argued that it meant "tent-group." W. F. Albright attempted to point out the flaws in Petrie's reasoning.[19] He argued instead that the large numbers in the census lists of Numbers actually were derived from the population figures of the monarchy under David.[20] A. Lucas also found the large numbers associated with the exodus to be uncomfortably large. He argued for an adoption of Petrie's view on the basis of population-growth figures and the actual population figures for the region in recent times.[21] H. L. Allrik apparently accepted *'elep* as the literal number 1,000, although he did not specifically deal with the implications of this choice. He concentrated rather

[14] Colenso, *Pentateuch.*

[15] Ibid. 1.86.

[16] Cf. R. de Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions* (London: Datron, Longman, Todd, 1961) 65 ff.; A. Bentzen, *Introduction to the Old Testament* (Copenhagen: G. E. C. Gad, 1952) 2.34.

[17] G. E. Mendenhall, "The Census Lists of Numbers 1 and 26," *JBL* 77 (1958) 52.

[18] W. M. Flinders Petrie, *Egypt and Israel* (London: SPCK, 1931) 40–46 (originally published in 1910).

[19] W. F. Albright, "The Administrative Divisions of Israel and Judah," *JPOS* 5 (1925) 20.

[20] Ibid. 21.

[21] A. Lucas, "The Number of Israelites at the Exodus," *PEQ* 76 (1944) 167.

on the divergent accounts of the censuses of Ezra 2 *vis à vis* Nehemiah 7.[22] R. E. D. Clark proposed that we accept in the term *ʾelep* the meaning of "officers or mighty men of valor."[23] The totals offered in the censuses of Numbers 1, 2 and 26 were therefore combinations of the meaning of *ʾelep* as 1,000 on the one hand and "officers" on the other. Mendenhall attempted to build on the earlier views of Petrie[24] by assuming that the large numbers in the Numbers census lists are reflective of the military organization of the post-exodus Israel but have been inflated to mirror the numbers of the monarchical period. G. R. Driver attempted to explain at least some of the problematic passages in terms of misunderstood abbreviations.[25] J. B. Segal tried to explain the large numbers as simply representative of the symbolic meanings of numerals as a whole.[26] J. W. Wenham offered the most comprehensive attempt at explaining the difficulties by suggesting that *ʾelep* and *ʾallûp* were at times confused and that *mēʾâ* can sometimes refer to a small military unit.[27] Recently M. Barnouin has tried to relate the large numbers of the censuses to Babylonian mathematics.[28] More recent attempts have added little to the discussion.[29]

III. TEXTUAL CONSIDERATIONS AND SEMANTIC RANGE OF MEANING

In my dissertation I undertook a textual analysis of the historical passages that contain large numbers based on the presence of *ʾelep*. Only 35 such textual problems warranted mentioning, most of which occur in Samuel, Kings and Chronicles. Only in one case was a large number significantly reduced based on a textual decision (1 Sam 6:19).[30] In most cases the large numbers remain intact as a valid part of the MT. Where variant readings were accepted, large numbers still remain. Those passages in which there was disagreement between the Samuel-Kings tradition and the Chronicler proved of great interest. It was determined that in many cases transmission error can explain those differences. In a few cases—most notably 2 Sam 24:9

[22] H. L. Allrik, "The Lists of Zerubbabel (Nehemiah 7 and Ezra 2) and the Hebrew Numeral Notation," *BASOR* 136 (1954) 21–27.

[23] R. E. D. Clark, "The Large Numbers of the Old Testament—Especially in Connexion with the Exodus," *Journal of the Transactions of the Victoria Institute* 87 (1955) 84.

[24] Mendenhall, "Census" 52.

[25] G. R. Driver, "Abbreviations in the Massoretic Text," *Textus* 1 (1960) 125.

[26] J. B. Segal, "Numerals in the Old Testament," *JSS* 10 (1965) 7.

[27] J. W. Wenham, "Large Numbers in the Old Testament," *TynBul* 18 (1967) 19–53; see also J. B. Payne, "The Validity of the Numbers in Chronicles," *BSac* 136 (1979) 109–128, 206–220.

[28] M. Barnouin, "Remarques sur les tableaux numériques du livre des Nombres," *RB* 76 (1969) 351–364; "Les recensements du livre des Nombres et l'astronomie babylonienne," *VT* 27 (1977) 280–303.

[29] R. I. Vasholz, "Military Censuses in Numbers," *Presbuterion* 18/2 (1992) 122–125; R. K. Harrison, *Numbers: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992) 45–48; T. R. Ashley, *The Book of Numbers* (NICOT; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 60–66.

[30] Fouts, "Support" 394.

and 1 Chr 21:5—differing tradition, purposeful scribal embellishment in transmission, or literary hyperbole are most likely. The latter seems more palatable to my taste.

Since the text for the most part withstands textual analysis, one must then examine whether the word *ʾelep* has been faithfully rendered as a number and demonstrate how that number is used in historiographical passages.

In contexts (other than census lists) that deal with humans counted, it is at least possible that *ʾelep* could mean something other than the numeral 1,000. Where it occurs in these contexts *ʾelep* is usually qualified with nouns, adjectives or adjectival phrases. These may either precede or follow the numeral(s). The qualifying terms are for the most part used to describe soldiers. Such qualifying phrases include but are not limited to the following examples: *ʾĕlāpîm ʾîš* (Josh 7:3–4), *ʾelep raglî* (Num 11:21), *ʾelep ʾîš šōlēp ḥereb* (Judg 8:10) and *ʾĕlāpîm ʾîš bāḥûr* (1 Sam 24:3). Though these may simply reflect stylistic differences, they may also be intended to demonstrate a meaning for *ʾelep* as something other than the numeral 1,000. Again, and with very few exceptions, the numbers outside the census lists of the book of Numbers are rounded off to the nearest 1,000. This fact could support a possible meaning other than the numeral 1,000. But it seems to me that where *ʾelep* does appear in these contexts it is still functioning grammatically as a numeral. The peculiar nature of gender disagreement of numerals with the nouns (or other numerals) they modify could make this point inconclusive, however. Yet the passages wherein humans and animals are numbered side by side would argue for a literal number 1,000, at least in those passages.

Census lists, while providing syntactical arrangements similar to the above examples, seem to be different in some ways. (1) Census lists often provide a total of the numbers listed. (2) Though the prefatory verses in Numbers 1–3, 26 virtually demand an exact figure, the figures given have apparently been at least rounded off. The census lists of Ezra-Nehemiah on the other hand are precise down to the digits, a very rare occurrence where *ʾelep* is used in contexts of counted humans. (3) Even though numbers in excess of 10,000 are found in most Biblical census lists (and in other contexts as well), only those of Ezra-Nehemiah utilize the number *ribbôʾ* (10,000). The forms *ribbôʾ* and *rĕbābâ* were both known to preexilic writers. Why were they not used? The answer to that question could provide a key to the understanding of *ʾelep* in the contexts of humans counted.

With reference to humans counted, *ʾelep* certainly means the number 1,000 when found in passages speaking of the divisions of the people into "thousands, hundreds, fifties, tens" (Exod 18:21; 1 Sam 8:12; 2 Sam 18:1; etc.).

It has been demonstrated elsewhere that scholars are justified in translating the term *ʾelep* as the number 1,000 in the majority of the cases considered. It might be possible that at times the word could refer to something else. This seems unlikely, however, inasmuch as not every context would support a gloss other than 1,000, and the term still seems to be functioning as a numeral in the remainder of the cases.

IV. ARCHEOLOGY AND DEMOGRAPHICS

Demographic studies based on archeological discoveries in ancient Israel have been conducted primarily over the past three decades.[31] While the results of such pursuits are certainly open to debate, inasmuch as the data may be interpreted variously (and the authors of the studies are quick to point this out), those results may not be far from the actual circumstances that existed in ancient Israel.

Demographic analysis of the land of Palestine over three millennia has determined that at no time did the land contain a population necessary to sustain taking the census figures of Numbers 1, 26 and 2 Samuel 24/1 Chronicles 21 at face value.[32] Since the numbers of the censuses may not be meant to reflect actual totals but rather have some other significance, it may be that other similarly large numbers in the OT likewise have significance apart from reflecting actual totals.

V. USE OF LARGE NUMBERS IN OTHER ANCIENT NEAR EASTERN CONTEXTS

Quite often, large numbers were employed in a hyperbolic fashion in the historiographic literatures of Sumer, Akkad and Assyria, particularly in the royal inscriptional and annalistic genres.[33] The hyperbolic numbers occur in military contexts expressing the number of troops engaged in battle, number of enemies slain or captured, amount of spoil taken, and amount of corvée la-

---

[31] Broshi, "Population" 5–14; "The Population of Western Palestine in the Roman-Byzantine Period," *BASOR* 236 (1979) 1–10; M. Broshi and I. Finkelstein, "The Population of Palestine in Iron Age II," *BASOR* 287 (1992) 47–60; M. Broshi and R. Gophna, "Middle Bronze Age II Palestine: Its Settlements and Population," *BASOR* 261 (1986) 73–90; "The Settlements and Population of Palestine During the Early Bronze Age II–III," *BASOR* 253 (1984) 41–53; A. Byatt, "Josephus and Population Numbers in First Century Palestine," *PEQ* 105 (1973) 51–60; R. Gophna and M. Kochavi, "An Archaeological Survey of the Plain of Sharon," *IEJ* 16 (1966) 143–144; R. Gophna and J. Portugali, "Settlement and Demographic Processes in Israel's Coastal Plain from the Chalcolithic to the Middle Bronze Age," *BASOR* 269 (1988) 11–28; Z. Herzog, "Enclosed Settlements in the Negeb and the Wilderness of Beer-sheba," *BASOR* 250 (1983) 41–49; C. C. McCown, "The Density of Population in Ancient Palestine," *JBL* 47 (1966) 425–436; R. Naroll, "Floor Area and Settlement Population," *American Antiquity* 27 (1962) 587–589; J. E. Packer, "Housing and Population in Imperial Ostia and Rome," *JRS* 57 (1967) 80–89; N. Rosenan, "A Note on the Water Storage and Size of Population," *Early Arad* (ed. R. Amiran; Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1978) 14; Y. Shiloh, "The Population of Iron Age Palestine in the Light of a Sample Analysis of Urban Plans, Areas, and Population Density," *BASOR* 239 (1980) 25–35; W. M. Sumner, "Estimating Population by Analogy," *Ethnoarchaeology: Implications of Ethnography for Archaeology* (ed. C. Kramer; New York: Columbia University, 1979) 164–174; J. Wilkinson, "Ancient Jerusalem: Its Water Supply and Population," *PEQ* 106 (1974) 33–51.

[32] The more recent work of Broshi and Finkelstein, "Population," continues to confirm this.

[33] Babylonian monarchs rarely used large numbers in their royal inscriptions, and Egyptians tended to use general rather than definite terms. That the Assyrians used hyperbole with abandon is only recently challenged; see n. 15 *supra*; cf. also A. R. Millard, "Large Numbers in the Assyrian Royal Inscriptions," *Ah, Assyria . . . Studies in Assyrian History and Ancient Near Eastern Historiography Presented to Hayim Tadmor* (ScrHier 33; ed. M. Cogan and I. Eph'al; Jerusalem: Magnes, 1991) 213–222, and the response by Fouts, "Another Look."

bor employed. It is evident from my study that no other culture used numbers in excess of 100,000 with the same frequency as does the OT. Where numbers in excess of 100,000 do occur they are found exclusively in military contexts. Consider the following examples.[34]

Sargon I of Akkad (ca. 2350 BC) utilized the royal inscription genre to record numbers:

> Sargon, king of Kish, triumphed in thirty-four battles (over the cities) up to the edge of the sea (and) destroyed their walls. . . . Sargon, the king, to whom Enlil permitted no rival—5,400 warriors ate bread daily before him.[35]

His son and successor, Rimush of Akkad (ca. 2300), used large numbers extensively. On a tablet inscription he recorded:

> Rîmuš, der König des Alls: Wahrhaftig, das Königtum hat Enlil ihm gegeben. Den Kampf um Sumer hat er mehrfach, drei(mal), siegreich bestanden. 11.322 Mann hat er hingestreckt; 2.520 Mann hat er gefangen genommen. Auch Kaku, den König von Ur, hat er gefangen genommen; auch dessen "Statthalter" hat er gefangen genommen; ausserdem hat er ihre "Gaben" bis hin zum Unteren Meere hat er an sich genommen. Ferner hat er 14.100 Mann aus den Städten Sumers ausrücken lassen und ins Feldlager (?) verlegt. Und ihre Städte hat er erobert und ihre Mauern geschleift. Später, bei seiner Rückkehr, war Kazallu in Rebellion, doch er hat (die Stadt) erobert. Inmitten des Landes Kazallu hat er 12.052 hingestreckt; 5.862 Gefangene hat er gemacht. Auch, Ašarēd, den Statthalter von Kazallu, hat er gefangen genommen. Ferner hat er seine (Kazallu's) Mauern geschleift. Ingesamt 54.016 Mann, einschliesslich der Gefallenen, einschliesslich der Gefangenen, einschliesslich der Männer, die er ins Feldlager verlegt hat.[36]

In a stone tablet inscription of Shalmaneser I (ca. 1275–1245) concerning the rebuilding of the temple of Eharsagkurkurra "we have the first detailed account of military operations conducted by an Assyrian king."[37] As such it is somewhat akin to the format of later Assyrian annals. It is full of hyperbolic language:

> I slaughtered countless numbers of their extensive army. As for him (Šattuara), I chased him at arrowpoint 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 and I turned 180 of his cities into ruin hills. I slaughtered like sheep the armies of the Hittites and Aḫlamu, his allies.[38]

---

[34] For further ancient Near East examples see Fouts, "Another Look."

[35] S. N. Kramer, *The Sumerians* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1963) 324.

[36] I. J. Gelb and B. Kienast, *Die altakkadischen Königsinschriften des dritten Jahrtausends v. Chr.* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 1990) 191–193; cf. E. Sollberger and J.-R. Kupper, *Inscriptions royales sumériennes et akkadiennes* (Paris: Cerf, 1971) 101; H. Hirsch, "Die Inschriften der Könige von Agade," *AfO* 20 (1963) 54. Hirsch notes that the reading for the excess 16 is questionable in both texts A and B.

[37] *AR* 1 §112.

[38] *The Royal Inscriptions of Mesopotamia* (ed. A. K. Grayson *et al.*; Toronto: University of Toronto, 1987) 1.184. The figure 14,400 is evenly divisible by 6, 60 or 600.

Tukulti-Ninurta I (ca. 1245–1208) doubles the numbers of the recorded exploits of his predecessor on an inscription on a memorial slab: "On my accession to the royal throne, in my first year of reign, I carried off 28,800 [8 sars; 1 sar = 3600] Hittite warriors from the other side of the Euphrates."[39]

Also likely from the reign of Adad-Nirari II (ca. 912–889) is the Broken Obelisk inscription, which is conspicuous in the data it omits:

> The gods Urta and Nergal, who love his priesthood, granted him (the skill) to hunt in the field and he embarked in ships of the Arvadites and slew a dolphin (*naḥiru*) in the Great Sea. [   ] mighty wild bulls near the city of Araziki, which lies opposite the land of Hatte, and at the foot of Mount Lebanon, he slew. [   ] young of wild oxen he captured alive, and herds of them he collected. [   ] elephants he brought down with his bow, and elephants he captured alive, and brought them to his city of Assur. 120 lions with his brave heart and with his attack, he slew from his hunting(?) chariot, or on foot with the javelin.[40]

The words omitted and bracketed are obviously meant to be numbers (they are not lacunae). One wonders why the numbers were omitted. Many possibilities can be postulated: Did the scribe not know the numbers? Did he seek precision? Did he leave these blanks in order to ascertain which figures would best suit the king, or best glorify him? It is odd that these would be left blank in a carved inscription.

One of the most intriguing phrases comes from a cylinder inscription of Sargon II:

> In the month of *Abu*, the month of the descent of the fire-god, destroyer of growing (cultivated) vegetation, when one lays (*lit.*, who lays) the foundation platform for the city and house, I laid its foundation wall, I built its brickwork. Substantial shrines, built firm as the foundation of eternity, I constructed therein for Ea, Sin and Ningal, Adad, Shamash, Urta. Palaces of ivory, mulberry, cedar, cypress, juniper, and pistachio-wood I built at their lofty command for my royal dwelling place. A *bit-ḥillani*, 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. 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.[41]

What did Sargon mean by "the numeral of my name"? Friedrich Delitzsch suggested that by dividing up Sargon's Akkadian name into its three component parts, one could read 16,283 as the total of the numerical value of the cuneiform wedges.[42] He apparently based this proposal in part on the fact that the names of Assyrian deities had numerical value.[43] Could this

[39] *AR* 1 §164. This doubling of the predecessor's claims apparently escaped the notice of Millard, who inverts the chronological order of the rulers and simply calls the two figures "round numbers" (Millard, "Large Numbers" 214). The figure 28,800 is also evenly divisible by 6, 60 or 600.

[40] *AR* 1 §392.

[41] Ibid. §121.

[42] F. Delitzsch, "Soss, Ner, Sar," *Zeitschrift für Ägyptische Sprache und Altertumskunde* 16 (1878) 63.

[43] Ibid.

have occurred elsewhere in the ancient Near East with regard to large numbers—that is, did others use their names as a basis for the large numbers they selected to use in an historical document? The answers to these questions could affect one's understanding of the use of large numbers both in the ancient Near East and in the OT, but I am unaware of any similar passages.

Much of the literature from Ugarit (Ras Shamra) uses the genres of myth, legend and epic. There are economic texts as well, but no royal inscriptions or other historical genres have yet been discovered. In one Ugaritic text, however, is found the largest number encountered in the research for this present work:

> Let a multitude be provisioned,
>   and let it go out.
> Let the mightiest army be provisioned.
>   Yea, let a multitude go out.
> Let your strong army be numerous,
>   three hundred ten-thousands,
> conscripts without number,
>   soldiers beyond counting.[44]

The language of this epic literature is of course hyperbolic. One notes the terms "without number" and "beyond counting" in synonymous parallelism to the specific 3,000,000. This may support the hypothesis of my dissertation that at times the large numbers in other genres are also to be understood as literary hyperbole.

VI. ANALYSIS OF SCRIPTURAL PASSAGES

Several observations may be drawn from this study:

(1) Scripture is unique among ancient Near Eastern literatures in the size of the numbers it employs and in their frequency of occurrence.

(2) Scripture is distinct in that it admits defeats as well as victories, since Yahweh may be seen to be glorified in both.

(3) Scripture differs from other ancient annalistic inscriptional literature in that it does not offer the accounts in the first-person singular, following instead the format of third-person singular—that is, the chronicle format.

(4) Scripture is similar to other annalistic inscriptional literature in that the historical narratives of the OT often employ figurative language in the near environment of the large numbers, a fact that may support the thesis that the large numbers themselves are hyperbolic.

(5) It appears that all enumerated preexilic censuses in the OT may employ hyperbolic numbers.

(6) Scripture is similar to other ancient historiography in that it may use large numbers hyperbolically in military contexts.

---

[44] My translation of KRT 2.85–91; cf. *CTA* 63.

(7) Scripture is similar to other ancient historiography in that the ostensible purpose of this usage is to demonstrate the relative magnitude of a given leader or king: Yahweh is greater than David, who is greater than Solomon, who is greater than Rehoboam, who is greater than others.

(8) The passages concerning David (2 Sam 8:1–18; 1 Chr 18:1–17) and Solomon (1 Kgs 5:1–32; 2 Chronicles 8–9) are classical royal inscriptions, very close to the neo-Assyrian pattern.

(9) The use of figurative language, including numerical hyperbole, does not mitigate the historical reliability of an account.

(10) The Scriptural pattern is similar to the Assyrian syntactical use of large numbers.

(11) It is fitting that Chronicles, which examines the history of Israel with emphasis on King David, consistently employs the largest numbers to be found in the OT. This reflects a literary pattern of hyperbole, the purpose of which is to glorify both Yahweh and his theocratic ruler David (and his descendants). The Chronicler also uses the relative sizes of the numbers to demonstrate the relative importance of the kings of Israel and Judah. If this is the case, it should not surprise us to find differences between the numbers in Chronicles and their parallels in Samuel and Kings, because the choice of the size of the number may have been due to authorial intent rather than a strict accounting of factual figures.

VII. RAMIFICATIONS

One must wonder what implications the results of this study could have on OT scholarship, particularly in the area of conquest models. As has been noted earlier, the large numbers have often been a stumbling block for accepting the Biblical accounts as legitimate records of history. If the numbers are simply reflective of a rhetorical device common in ancient Near Eastern literature, however, one may no longer question the integrity of the record by use of this argument. The large numbers are often simply figures of speech employed to magnify King Yahweh, King David, or others in a theologically-based historiographical narrative.