

Professor Petrie on the Census Numbers.

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IN a recent issue of the *Expositor* (6th Series, vol. xii., pp. 148-152), Professor Flinders Petrie put forward a new theory of the census lists in Numbers, and he has now worked it out further in his "Researches in Sinai" (p. 208 *et seq.*). The view put forward is this: There is a probability that written records descending from the time of Moses form the basis of these lists. Now, as they stand, the numbers are impossible, but if the thousands in the various numbers be put aside, the hundreds present some curious phenomena. "There is not a single round thousand, there is not a single 100, 800, or 900; and the greater part of the numbers fall on 400 or 500" (p. 210). A similar peculiarity distinguishes the tens of thousands, but that has no bearing on the theory, and is not noticed by Professor Petrie. From this it is inferred that the hundreds have a separate origin from the thousands. The conclusion does not necessarily follow from the premiss, though, for the purpose of testing the theory, it is better to assume that Professor Petrie has proved this point. But, if this be so, what are the thousands? "The word *alāf* has two meanings, 'a thousand' and 'a group' or family" (p. 211). Hence it is suggested that for the thousands we ought, in fact, to read families or tents. And here comes a remarkable fact. It would almost seem as if the Professor had not read the census lists, and had contented himself with taking the numbers without regard to their context. This, at least, appears to be the only explanation of his words. "Let us test this hypothetical emendation. If it were not true, the thousands then need have no connection with the hundreds, and so the hypothesis would fall through by the absurd results reached for the number of people *per* tent. For instance, if the numbers had no relation in their original meaning, we might find 22 tents for 700 people, or 32 *per* tent" (p. 211). That is exactly what we do, in fact, find, if we look at the words of the

census. Take the case of Ephraim in the second census. Professor Petrie thinks that the number 32,500 really means that there were 500 people in 32 tents, giving an average of about 16 persons in each tent, and he explains this by saying: "The richest tribes may have had two parents, four or five children, both grand-parents, making eight or nine, and herdsmen and servants of the Hebrews and of the mixed multitude who went up with them" (pp. 211, 212). It has entirely escaped his notice that the numbers in the census are not the numbers of the people, but only those of *males above the age of twenty years*, "all that are able to go forth to war in Israel." If, therefore, we allow for women and children, we do, in fact, find far more than thirty-two per tent; and, in the words of the Professor himself, "the hypothesis falls through by the absurd results reached for the number of people *per* tent."¹

In view of this fact, it is unnecessary to do more than indicate some other insuperable objections to this view. The numbers of the Levites and the firstborn, and the story of Korah with 250 princes of the congregation, are waved aside as conflicting with this theory, and the total number of elders is cut down to the seventy mentioned in the Hebrew text. "Allowing that 5 tents and under were not represented by a separate elder, there would be 58 elders, each with 10 tents, and the 12 sheykhs of the tribes would make up 70" (p. 214). But

¹ Professor L. E. Steele writes as follows: "I find, from a conversation which I have since had with Mr. Currelly, that Professor Petrie has carelessly used the word 'people' for 'men' throughout his chapters on the Exodus. He has merely, however, in this followed the phraseology of the modern Arabs, who count their population, as the Bible does, by heads of families. This, of course, will make what would appear at first sight a considerable difference; it is a discrepancy, however, to which your correspondents are welcome, as the difference between 27,000 or so and 3,000,000, leaves the difficulty much where it was" (*Church of Ireland Gazette*, August 17, 1906, p. 695). There must be some mistake, as in the passage quoted—"We might find 22 tents for 700 people or 32 *per* tent"—the word "people" cannot mean either men or heads of families. It may be added that in the book of Numbers the population is not counted by heads of families, but by fighting men. This passage also rebuts another statement of Professor Steele's (*ibid.*) that the word "tent" is not employed in its literal sense, but rather as equivalent to "family group." Had that been Professor Petrie's meaning, he could never have suggested this test.

Professor Petrie forgets to wave aside a number of other passages which militate against his hypothesis. Here are a few instances. In Exod. xii. 37, 38, we hear of "six hundred thousand on foot that were men, beside children," and also "a mixed multitude." This cannot possibly mean 600 tents (or families) on foot, beside children and a mixed multitude. Secondly, Exod. xviii. 21-26 contemplates an organization comprising "rulers of thousands, rulers of hundreds, rulers of fifties, and rulers of tens." This surely should also have been waved aside, for it is in hopeless conflict alike with the tent theory and the elders theory. And whatever may be thought of some other passages, it would be impossible to explain this chapter by saying that "this corruption of a perfectly rational text may have been the cause of the introduction of other corruptions of numbers in order to agree with it" (p. 214). Obviously the judicial organization cannot be regarded as a corruption introduced to agree with the census numbers. Then, again, whatever view may be taken of the numbers, it is very difficult to dissociate Exod. xxxviii. 25, 26—the silver obtained by a tax of half a shekel levied on 603,550 men from twenty years old and upwards, where the number is carefully checked—from the thousands of the census lists. In the *Expositor* article (p. 151) Professor Petrie suggests that this is a later introduction, but in the "Researches" he is silent on that point. Once more, the numbers sent against the Midianites in Num. xxxi.—a thousand from each tribe—cannot be construed as being "of every tribe a family."

On the whole, therefore, it must be reluctantly said that the question of the numbers remains precisely where it was before Dr. Petrie propounded his new theory.

