

IS THERE AN AGE OF ACCOUNTABILITY?

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Concerning the question of a so-called age of accountability, this is fascinating to me for a particular reason: My late father criticized my mom and me for "bumping our gums" on this issue when I first made my Christian commitment at age 18. Mom and I were speculating on the issue, and he pushed me to look it up in the Bible. That was an incredible teaching moment (and not the only one) when he taught me to base my doctrine on the Bible, and if I could not find it in the Bible, what made me think the idea was even Christian? I do the same with my students: if you have something to say about God or theology and you cannot find it in the Bible, shut up.

So here are some of my thoughts:

1. Israelites were considered eligible for military service from age 20 and up (Num 1:2-3).
2. Israelites were counted in censuses from age 20 and up (Num 1; Exod 30:14-16).
3. Vows could be made by people of any age, but they were cheaper for younger people (Lev 27:1-8).
4. People from 20 and up were required to make a payment concerning atonement from age 20 and up (Exod 30:14-16).
5. Priests were expected to perform their duties from age 25 until age 50 (Num 8:24-26), but this was clearly not a hard and fast rule, for Moses, Aaron, and Eli were all performing priestly duties at much older ages than 50.
6. As for the case of a "stubborn and rebellious son" who was to be executed (Deut 21:18-21), no terms are used indicating that he was a youth (Hebrew na`ar) or child (yeled) or toddler (tahf). My guess from the context is that it would refer to a teenager or someone in his 20's who was not married and still living in the house.
7. Jesus said that the Kingdom of Heaven/Kingdom of God belongs to children (Matt 19:13-15; Mark 10:14-16).
8. God did order Israel to wipe out the Canaanites and Amalekites of all ages (Deut 20:17; Josh 6:21; 1 Sam 15:3).
9. Perhaps the strongest case for an age of accountability concerns God's ruling on who would not enter the promised land. Those who were held accountable for their rebellion were Israelites 20 years old and older (Num 14:26-35).

I find no statement which says "people X age and younger are not held accountable for their sins" except in the case of the Israelites in the wilderness, but the emphasis in the Bible seems to be on adult decisions. If Jesus' statement about the Kingdom of Heaven does not imply that children get some kind of a pass, then I'm not sure what it implies. The Jewish practice of the Bar and Bat Mitzvah, declaring children adults before God at age 13, does not have a Biblical foundation.

I also cannot think of any statement in the Bible which tells us to worry that children might go to hell if they are not baptized or similar.

The question is not, "Are children capable of sin?" Surely they are, and Psalm 25:7 acknowledges that, although that would appear to imply being a teenager-25 (the sins of my youth). If the question is society's view, I am not addressing that. The question as I understood it related to what God holds people accountable for, and our only information about that comes from Scripture. I see adults held accountable for their sins, not children.

SOME PASSAGES WHICH BEAR ON THE ISSUE

EXO 30:14 "Everyone who is numbered, from twenty years old and over, shall give the contribution to Yahweh.

EXO 30:15 "The rich shall not pay more and the poor shall not pay less than the half shekel, when you give the contribution to Yahweh to make atonement for yourselves.

EXO 30:16 "You shall take the atonement money from the sons of Israel and shall give it for the service of the tent of meeting, that it may be a memorial for the sons of Israel before Yahweh, to make atonement for yourselves."

EXO 38:24 ¶ All the gold that was used for the work, in all the work of the sanctuary, even the gold of the wave offering, was 29 talents and 730 shekels, according to the shekel of the sanctuary.

EXO 38:25 The silver of those of the congregation who were numbered was 100 talents and 1, 775 shekels, according to the shekel of the sanctuary;

EXO 38:26 a beka a head (that is, half a shekel according to the shekel of the sanctuary), for each one who passed over to those who were numbered, from twenty years old and upward, for 603,550 men.

LEV 27:1 Again, Yahweh spoke to Moses, saying,

LEV 27:2 "Speak to the sons of Israel and say to them, `When a man makes a difficult vow, he shall be valued according to your valuation of persons belonging to Yahweh.

LEV 27:3 `If your valuation is of the male from twenty years even to sixty years old, then your valuation shall be fifty shekels of silver, after the shekel of the sanctuary.

LEV 27:4 `Or if it is a female, then your valuation shall be thirty shekels.

LEV 27:5 `If it be from five years even to twenty years old then your valuation for the male shall be twenty shekels and for the female ten shekels.

LEV 27:6 `But if they are from a month even up to five years old, then your valuation shall be five shekels of silver for the male, and for the female your valuation shall be three shekels of silver.

LEV 27:7 `If they are from sixty years old and upward, if it is a male, then your valuation shall be fifteen shekels, and for the female ten shekels.

LEV 27:8 `But if he is poorer than your valuation, then he shall be placed before the priest and the priest shall value him; according to the means of the one who vowed, the priest shall value him.

NUM 1:2 "Take a census of all the congregation of the sons of Israel, by their families, by their fathers' households, according to the number of names, every male, head by head

NUM 1:3 from twenty years old and upward, whoever is able to go out to war in Israel, you and Aaron shall number them by their armies.

NUM 1:17 ¶ So Moses and Aaron took these men who had been designated by name,

NUM 1:18 and they assembled all the congregation together on the first of the second month. Then they registered by ancestry in their families, by their fathers' households, according to the number of names, from twenty years old and upward, head by head,

NUM 1:19 just as Yahweh had commanded Moses. So he numbered them in the wilderness of Sinai.

Many more statements in Numbers 1.

NUM 4:2 "Take a census of the descendants of Kohath from among the sons of Levi, by their families, by their fathers' households,

NUM 4:3 from thirty years and upward, even to fifty years old, all who enter the service to do the work in the tent of meeting.

NUM 4:4 "This is the work of the descendants of Kohath in the tent of meeting, concerning the most holy things.

NUM 4:21 ¶ Then Yahweh spoke to Moses, saying,

NUM 4:22 "Take a census of the sons of Gershon also, by their fathers' households, by their families;

NUM 4:23 from thirty years and upward to fifty years old, you shall number them; all who enter to perform the service to do the work in the tent of meeting.

And other priestly families in Num 4.

NUM 8:24 "This is what applies to the Levites: from twenty-five years old and upward they shall enter to perform service in the work of the tent of meeting.

NUM 8:25 "But at the age of fifty years they shall retire from service in the work and not work any more.

NUM 8:26 "They may, however, assist their brothers in the tent of meeting, to keep an obligation, but they themselves shall do no work. Thus you shall deal with the Levites concerning their obligations."

NUM 14:26 ¶ Yahweh spoke to Moses and Aaron, saying,

NUM 14:27 "How long shall I bear with this evil congregation who are grumbling against Me? I have heard the complaints of the sons of Israel, which they are making against Me.

NUM 14:28 "Say to them, 'As I live,' says Yahweh, 'just as you have spoken in My hearing, so I will surely do to you;

NUM 14:29 your corpses will fall in this wilderness, even all your numbered men, according to your complete number from twenty years old and upward, who have grumbled against Me.

NUM 14:30 'Surely you shall not come into the land in which I swore to settle you, except Caleb the son of Jephunneh and Joshua the son of Nun.

NUM 14:31 'Your children, however, whom you said would become a prey -- I will bring them in, and they will know the land which you have rejected.

NUM 14:32 'But as for you, your corpses will fall in this wilderness.

NUM 14:33 'Your sons shall be shepherds for forty years in the wilderness, and they will suffer for your unfaithfulness, until your corpses lie in the wilderness.

NUM 14:34 'According to the number of days which you spied out the land, forty days, for every day you shall bear your guilt a year, even forty years, and you will know My opposition.

NUM 14:35 'I, Yahweh, have spoken, surely this I will do to all this evil congregation who are gathered together against Me. In this wilderness they shall be destroyed, and there they will die.'"

DEU 21:18 ¶ "If any man has a stubborn and rebellious son who will not obey his father or his mother, and when they chastise him, he will not even listen to them,

DEU 21:19 then his father and mother shall seize him, and bring him out to the elders of his city at the gateway of his home town.

DEU 21:20 "They shall say to the elders of his city, 'This son of ours is stubborn and rebellious, he will not obey us, he is a glutton and a drunkard.'

DEU 21:21 "Then all the men of his city shall stone him to death; so you shall remove the evil from your midst, and all Israel will hear of it and fear.

MAT 19:13 ¶ Then some children were brought to Him so that He might lay His hands on them and pray; and the disciples rebuked them.

MAT 19:14 But Jesus said, "Let the children alone, and do not hinder them from coming to Me; for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these."

MAT 19:15 After laying His hands on them, He departed from there.

MAR 10:13 ¶ And they were bringing children to Him so that He might touch them; but the disciples rebuked them.

MAR 10:14 But when Jesus saw this, He was indignant and said to them, "Permit the children to come to Me; do not hinder them; for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these.

MAR 10:15 "Truly I say to you, whoever does not receive the kingdom of God like a child will not enter it at all."

MAR 10:16 And He took them in His arms and began blessing them, laying His hands on them.

These passages talk about utterly destroying enemy people groups (including children): Deut 20:17; Josh 6:21; 1 Sam 15:3.