

A Bible Question Answered

by Wayne Goff

The following Bible question was sent to me years ago by an excellent Bible student. My answer follows and you are free to consider it and comment to me about it. I am not infallible, and this question is a fairly difficult one. Also, if you have a Bible question for this column, send it to me and I will do my best to give you a Bible answer.

The Question

I noticed in my daily Bible reading that the Israelites who were allowed to enter the promised land were their children, who were “*too young to know right from wrong*,” (**Numbers 14:26-35**) but in today’s reading Moses told those “*children*” who had grown up that they “*remember well what the Lord your God did to Pharaoh and to all Egypt. You saw with your own eyes the great trials...*” (**Deuteronomy 7:17-24**). Now I just re-read **Numbers 14** and saw that everyone 20 years old and older would die before seeing the Promised Land, but I still have a question. Is the Bible saying that people 19 years old and under don’t know right from wrong, or is that statement in reference to smaller children, perhaps referred to in the sentence “*As for your children that you said would be taken as plunder...*”?

My Answer

I think from what I’m reading in the Old Testament that we have *two separate* descriptions of **who** was to inherit the Promised Land. Obviously, the cut-off for those who would enter the Land was 19 and under (**Numbers 14:29**). Elsewhere the description contains the information that this was the age group *not old enough to go to war* (see **Numbers 1:45; Joshua 5:6**).

Later (**Numbers 14:31**), we read that “*...your little ones, whom you said would be victims, I will bring in, and they shall know the land which you have despised.*” And you are correct in noticing that Deuteronomy says “*Moreover your little ones and your children, who you say will be victims, who today have no knowledge of good and evil, they shall go in there; to them I will give it, and they shall possess it.*” (**Deuteronomy 1:39**).

Overall, I think the Scriptures are referring to *the same group of people*, those 19 and under. However, I don’t think it would be *exactly correct* to conclude that **all of that age group** failed to have knowledge of good and evil. The statement is a *broad sweeping reference* to those who were not held accountable for the rebellion that refused to go to war. The context points to the subject being discussed.

Pulpit Commentary says: “The Hebrews were wont to express totality or universality by specifying contradictory opposites, as e.g. great and small (**2 Chron. 34:30**), master and scholar (**Mal. 2:20**), free and bond (**Rev. 13:16; 19:18**), shut up and left (**ch. 32:36; 1 Kings 14:10**), etc. Accordingly, when *good* and *evil* are set over against each other, the notion of entirety or universality is expressed. ... Hence to know good and evil came to mean to be intelligent, and not to know good and evil to be unintelligent, as is a babe. The children here referred to knew nothing, and consequently could not be held as morally responsible; compare Isaiah 7:15...” [“**The Book of Deuteronomy**,” p. 18].

Likewise, **Keil & Delitzsch** on the passage say: “Joshua would divide the land among the Israelites for an inheritance, viz. (**Ver. 39**) among the young Israelites, the children of the condemned generation, whom Moses, when making a further communication of the judicial sentence of God (**Num. 14:31**), had described as having no share in the sins of their parents, by adding, ‘who know not to-day what is good and evil.’ This expression is used to denote a condition of spiritual infancy and moral responsibility (Isa. 7:15, 16). ...” [vol. 3, p. 290].

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