

Why Doesn't Eleazar Die in the Wilderness?

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[0 : 0 0] Welcome back. Today's question is, what does the entrance of Aaron's son Eliezer into the Promised Land say about the curse upon the generation which rebelled at the edge of the Promised Land? We see him in Numbers 3, Numbers 4, apparently as an adult, Numbers 16 in Numbers 19, and we see him taking over Aaron's office in Numbers 20. Unless another Eliezer is meant, he doesn't die until Joshua chapter 24. Based on the curse in Numbers 14, your corpses will fall in this wilderness, even all your numbered men according to your complete number from 20 years old and upward. Are we to conclude that Numbers had described Eliezer as assisting with priestly service at some age younger than 20, or is this an indication that the curse isn't to be taken literally, and that some men from that generation other than Joshua and Caleb survived? It's a good question and very observant, though maybe perhaps there's more to be observed. If you look at chapter 26 of Numbers, you see the character of Eliezer appear again. He's mentioned in the genealogy of those who were born to Aaron along with Nadab, Lebihu, and Ithamar. Then in verse 62 of that chapter, it says,

Now those who are numbered of them were 23,000 of the tribe of Levi, every male from a month old and above, for they were not numbered among the other children of Israel, because there was no inheritance given to them among the children of Israel. And then it goes on to say, These are those who were numbered by Moses and Eliezer the priest, who numbered the children of Israel in the plains of Moab by the Jordan, across from Jericho. But among those there was not a man of those who were numbered by Moses and Aaron the priest when they numbered the children of Israel in the wilderness of Sinai.

For the Lord had said of them, They shall surely die in the wilderness. So there was not left a man of them except Caleb the son of Jephunneh and Joshua the son of Nun. So I think there is reason to believe that the tribe of Levi was accepted. They were not included in the numbering and thus they were not included in the judgment, which means that Eliezer and presumably others of the Levites were not among those who fell in the wilderness and also went into the promised land from Egypt.

Why might this be? Why might they be accepted beyond just the mere numbering? Well, if we look back at the judgment, it falls upon them as a result of their failure to enter into the land after the spies bring back a bad report. Caleb and Joshua bring back a good report and they are not judged. But Israel generally refuses to enter into the land, into the inheritance.

A couple of points to notice here. Levi did not have an inheritance in the land. They had cities and other things like that they'd be part of, but they did not have a regular inheritance in the land. The second more important thing to notice is that they did not send a spy.

[3 : 1 2] All the other tribes sent spies. The tribe of Levi did not send a spy. So they were not as complicit in that sin. They were not involved in the same way. They did not have the inheritance. They did not send a spy. And we can presume that they weren't caught up to the same extent in the general sin of resistance.

We see another instance earlier on in the story of the Exodus that might be helpful here. As Moses, after the sin with the golden calf, calls people to him and Levi comes to him and 3,000 of their brethren are slain by them that day. So Levi is the faithful tribe on a number of occasions where, out of zeal, they stop rebellion. We see the same thing in chapters, chapter 25 of Numbers, as Phineas, as Phineas arises and stops the plague with an act of zeal. Levi is associated with zealous action for the Lord. They are the ones that act to prevent God breaking out in his wrath against the people. They're the ones who are faithful in ways that the other tribes were not. Now there's plenty of rebellion within the tribe of Levi. But what I think you see is a significant faithful zeal on the part of Levi that gave reason for them to be accepted from the judgment, even above the fact that they are not among those who resisted entering into the inheritance or brought back a bad report. I think this might help to explain the issue. There are further questions that could be asked, I'm sure.

And it's a puzzle that the text does not fully clear up for us, the text or explicitly clear up for us. I think it does give us the solution, but it doesn't foreground it quite as much as we might want.

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