

Joshua 5:4

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

And this is the cause why Joshua did circumcise: All the people that came out of Egypt, that were males, even all the men of war, died in the wilderness by the way, after they came out of Egypt.

Analysis

And this is the cause why Joshua did circumcise: All the people that came out of Egypt, that were males, even all the men of war, died in the wilderness by the way, after they came out of Egypt.

This verse begins the explanation for renewing circumcision. The phrase "this is the cause" (zeh hadavar, זֶה הָדָבָר) introduces the rationale. All males who experienced the Exodus—"men of war" (anshei hamilchamah, אָנָשִׁים הַמְלָחָמִים), the fighting-age males—died during wilderness wandering. This was divine judgment for unbelief at Kadesh-barnea when they refused to enter Canaan (Numbers 14:26-35).

The phrase "died in the wilderness by the way" emphasizes the protracted nature of judgment—not immediate death but gradual attrition over forty years. God's patience allowed the condemned generation to live out their days while preparing the next generation for obedience. This demonstrates divine justice (punishing rebellion) combined with mercy (sustaining life and preparing successors).

Theologically, this illustrates that unbelief disqualifies from inheritance. The generation that witnessed the Exodus, received the Law at Sinai, and saw countless miracles nevertheless forfeited Canaan through unbelief. Hebrews 3-4 applies this warning to Christians: "Take heed, brethren, lest there be in any of you

an evil heart of unbelief" (Hebrews 3:12). The wilderness generation serves as a negative example, warning that profession without faith, privilege without obedience, and exposure to truth without submission lead to judgment.

Historical Context

The rebellion at Kadesh-barnea (Numbers 13-14) occurred approximately 1444 BCE (traditional dating), two years after the Exodus. When the twelve spies returned from Canaan, ten reported truthfully but fearfully, while Joshua and Caleb urged faith. The people believed the fearful majority, rejecting God's promise and even proposing to return to Egypt. God's judgment decreed that everyone twenty years or older (except Joshua and Caleb) would die in the wilderness, while their children would inherit the land.

The forty-year period corresponded to the forty days of spying—one year for each day (Numbers 14:34). This demonstrates proportional justice in God's judgments. Archaeological evidence from the Sinai and Negev regions shows limited Late Bronze Age occupation, consistent with a nomadic population wandering rather than establishing permanent settlements. The wilderness generation lived as sojourners, never possessing permanent inheritance—a perpetual reminder of the cost of unbelief.

This judgment shaped Israel's corporate memory and theological understanding. Psalm 95 memorializes it as a warning against hardened hearts. The prophets invoked the wilderness period as both judgment (disobedience) and mercy (divine sustenance). The New Testament uses it as a paradigm for the danger of apostasy (1 Corinthians 10:1-13; Hebrews 3:7-4:13). The death of the Exodus generation established that God's promises are inherited by faith, not automatic birthright.

Related Passages

Ephesians 2:8 — Salvation by grace through faith

John 3:16 — God's love and salvation

Study Questions

1. How does the wilderness generation's unbelief despite witnessing miracles warn against presuming on spiritual privilege or heritage?
2. What does this passage teach about the relationship between unbelief and forfeiting spiritual inheritance?
3. How should the forty-year delay—allowing the rebellious generation to die while preparing the next—shape our understanding of God's patience and judgment?
4. In what ways does Hebrews 3-4's application of this passage to Christians challenge complacency in the church?
5. What 'wilderness' periods in your spiritual journey have resulted from unbelief, and how can genuine faith restore forward progress toward God's promises?

Interlinear Text

כִּי הִיא רְקִבָּר אֲשֶׁר מִלְּהָוֵשׁ עַל יְהוָה
H2088 And this is the cause H1697 H834 did circumcise H4135 H3091 why Joshua H3605

כִּי לִזְכָּר יְמֵינָם מִמִּצְרָיִם בְּצָאתָם
H3605 H2145 H4714 H3318 All the people after they came out of Egypt that were males

בְּדַבָּר מִתְּהִלָּתָה אֲנָשִׁים
H1870 H4057 H4191 H4421 even all the men of war died in the wilderness by the way

מִמִּצְרָיִם בְּצָאתָם
H4714 H3318 after they came out of Egypt

Additional Cross-References

1 Corinthians 10:5 (Parallel theme): But with many of them God was not well pleased: for they were overthrown in the wilderness.

Deuteronomy 2:16 (Parallel theme): So it came to pass, when all the men of war were consumed and dead from among the people,

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