

Scriptural Age of Accountability

Is child baptism Scriptural? At what age does the Bible consider one an adult, and a candidate for immersion?

What is the minimum age for baptism into Yahshua's Name? The Apostle Peter clearly showed that one should be old enough to repent. When the Jews were convicted of their sin, they asked what they should do. Peter responded in Acts 2:38, "*Repent and be immersed every one of you in the Name of Yahshua the Messiah for the remission of sins, and you shall receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.*" Obviously a person should be old enough to understand repentance before being baptized. What does the Bible mean by "repent?" Briefly, to turn completely from our wicked ways, stop doing those things that Yahweh condemns, and obediently follow in the footsteps of Yahshua. We are to be totally broken up over our past sins and vow not to repeat those things we know are wrong and sinful. When we do sin, we are to confess our sin and ask forgiveness through Yahshua.

Jews Hold Bar-Mitzvah at 13

Luke chapter 2 relates how Yahshua was left behind by His parents in Jerusalem following the Passover and the days of Unleavened Bread. He was about age 13, and even today Jewish boys have a ceremony known as "Bar-Mitzvah," meaning *Son of the Covenant*, when they are accepted into the congregation. Is 13 the age of accountability, the age when one can with complete understanding repent and then be immersed?

Some groups immerse young people at the early age of 10 or 12. It is difficult to find Biblical justification to immerse at that age. Let us continue considering other examples and alternatives. The Savior Himself did not begin His ministry until He was 30 years of age, right after His baptism. Early on, the priests began their service at age 30 as well.

Surely at 30 one is mature and responsible for one's behavior. Most of us would wonder whether at 30 too many years have already passed before making a commitment to Yahweh. Does the Bible speak of a younger age?

Differing Ages of Maturity

At what age does Yahweh deem us accountable for our actions? The Bible speaks of babes not knowing their left hand from their right. We are also encouraged to be children in attitude and men in understanding. There is an age when Yahweh considers children no longer children, but at the acceptable age of understanding.

Yahweh recognizes that a youth has limitations, as in the following example regarding large amounts: "*And the rest of the trees of his forest shall be few, that a child [lad] may write [record] them.*" (Isa. 10:19) A young child would be limited in his grasp of large quantities. This indicates that we comprehend progressively more as we mature in understanding and discernment, which should be obvious to all.

Admittedly there are those who mature in the Bible at a young age who realize well beyond their years the seriousness and the importance of baptism. There are also some who even at the age of 30 have not reached a proper level of maturity.

So what conclusion can we come to? Thankfully, the Bible does indeed give us an age in which one is considered accountable for what one does.

Yahweh's Assembly in Yahshua understands Scripturally that upon reaching the age of 20, Yahweh accepts one as being mature and an adult, therefore responsible for one's actions. Let us now look at Scriptural support for the age of 20 in Yahweh's dealings with Israel.

Israelites Counted in Census at 20

Israelites were counted in the census beginning at the age of 20. The first chapter of Numbers deals with the polling of the various tribes, all counted from 20 years of age and over.

To indicate those considered a part of the body of Israel, Yahweh demanded that the people be numbered and those age 20 and over were then to pay a half-shekel tax.

"Every one that passes among them that are numbered, from twenty years old and above, shall give an offering unto Yahweh." (Ex. 30:14) This "Temple tax" was considered a ransom price, a payment of dues, exacted from all who were 20 and over as an acknowledgement of their responsibility as Israelites, Exodus 30:12-16; 38:26. Yahshua supported this tax, Matthew 17:24.

A Special Group: Ages 20 to 60

Israelites could dedicate themselves or a member of the family to Yahweh by being slaves of service in the Temple, Leviticus 27:1-8. Because only Levites were acceptable for this type of work in the Temple, others apparently gave a monetary equivalent instead.

Divisions by age groups are given in Leviticus 27:1-8, with a corresponding monetary value for each group. Yahweh divides groups from 20 years to 60 years; 5 years to 20 years; from a month until 5 years; and 60 and above.

In the group of from 20 to 60 years is placed the highest valuation, down to the poor, for whom the priests determine the amount that could be afforded. *"And your estimation shall be of the male from twenty years old even unto sixty years old, even your estimation shall be fifty shekels of silver, after the shekel of the sanctuary."* (Lev. 27:3)

An offering would be appropriate in dedications today as well, such as when children are dedicated to Yahweh.

Military Service Began at 20

Israelites were considered of age for military duty when they reached the age of 20. At this age they had matured in their thinking and could be relied upon to act responsibly and assume military duty in a trustworthy manner.

"From twenty years old and upward, all that are able to go forth to war in Israel: you and Aaron shall number them by their armies." (Num. 1:3)

They then were mature enough to marry and established their own families apart from the parents.

"And they assembled all the congregation together on the first [day] of the second month, and they declared their pedigrees after their families, by the house of their fathers, according to the number of the names, from twenty years old and upward, by their polls." (Num. 1:18)

Those 20 and Over Were Shut Out

Israel had rebelled against Yahweh 10 times and disregarded their astonishing deliverance from Egypt and the miraculous provisions made for their guidance and protection in the

wilderness. After all of Yahweh's miracles, the people complained and murmured against Yahweh. He reacted.

"Your carcasses shall fall in this wilderness; and all that were numbered of you, according to your whole number, from twenty years old and upward, which have murmured against Me," (Num. 14:29).

Numbers 14:2 reveals that "all the children of Israel murmured against Moses and Aaron, and *the whole* congregation..." Perhaps even those under 20 years followed the example of their parents and complained as well. Yet, those under 20 were not included in Yahweh's proscription and would be allowed to enter the Promised Land—likely Yahweh's recognition of their immaturity.

Apparently Yahweh perceives that by age 20 humans are mature and quite aware of consequences for their actions. Those 20 and over were considered adults and responsible for their insurrection against Yahweh. They had to die off in the wilderness.

When certain Israelites rebelled at crossing over the Jordan, wanting to remain on the other side, Yahweh's anger flared, and He restated His condemnation of their attitude:

"Surely none of the men that came up out of Egypt, from twenty years old and upward, shall see the land which I swore unto Abraham, unto Isaac, and unto Jacob; because they have not wholly followed Me:" (Num. 32:11).

Even though the Israelites were redeemed by the blood of the lamb and rescued from Egypt, they remained carnal and rebelled against Yahweh.

Yahweh clearly considers that those who have reached the age of 20 are mature and accountable. Those 20 and over had to wander in the wilderness 40 years. They were inexcusable. They were mature, but had rebelled and had not fully followed Yahweh. Even in their rebellion, however, a loving Yahweh continued to watch over them, Deuteronomy 8:1-4.

Levites Began Training at 20

Evidence indicates that the Levites began their training for the priesthood at age 20. They were guided by the older, experienced Levites during a probationary period of five years, according to the Companion Bible's note on Numbers 8:24. After age 50 they served at less arduous tasks, Numbers 8:25-26.

Numbers 4:1-3 shows that the Levites initially began duties at age 30, but the age was evidently lowered to 20 by King David (1Chron. 23:24-26) because Israel was settled in the land, no longer carrying the tabernacle or vessels, and would permanently dwell in Jerusalem.

"For by the last words of David the Levites [were] numbered from twenty years old and above:" (1Chron. 23:27).

Upon returning from the Babylonian captivity, the repatriated Jews again took up pure worship. Levites 20 years or more were in charge of restoring the house of Yahweh:

"Now in the second year of their coming unto the house of Elohim at Jerusalem, in the second month, began Zerubbabel the son of Shealtiel, and Jeshua the son of Jozadak, and the remnant of their brethren the priests and the Levites, and all they that were come out of the captivity unto Jerusalem; and appointed the Levites, from twenty years old and upward, to set forward the work of the house of Yahweh." (Ezra 3:8)

Numbers 14:22 recounts the anger of Yahweh over Israel's tenth rebellion and the sentence is given in verse 29: *"Your carcasses shall fall in this wilderness and all that were numbered of you, according to your whole number, from twenty years and upward which have murmured against*

Me." Only the little ones under age 20 (verse 31) along with Joshua and Caleb would be allowed to enter the Promised Land.

This is probably the most revealing of Yahweh's determination of the age of accountability. Upon reaching 20 years of age, most are willing to settle down and put away childish things. As Paul says,

"When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child: but when I became a man, I put away childish things." (1Cor. 13:11)

Upon being immersed into Yahshua's name, he or she is expected to follow in the footsteps of Yahshua and be an example to the world. We are to repent of our past life and stop doing those things that offend Yahweh and we are to keep His law. It is through obedience we are molded into the image of the Pattern Son and acceptable through Him.

Even though Yahweh swore that those 20 years and over would not enter the Promised Land because of their constant murmuring and rebellion, He ensured the younger generation that they would be under His loving protection: *"But your little ones, which you said should be a prey, them will I bring in, and they shall know the land which you have despised."* (Numbers 14:31)

Moses repeated the covenant to Israel in the second giving of the Law in Deuteronomy. The new generation was reminded of the promise Yahweh had made with their parents concerning them: *"Moreover your little ones, which you said should be a prey, and your children, which in that day had no knowledge between good and evil, they shall go in thither, and unto them will I give it, and they shall possess it."* (Deut. 1:39)

This new generation had been protected and guided by Yahweh throughout the 40 years wandering in the wilderness. The new generation is reminded: *"And I have led you forty years in the wilderness: your clothes are not waxen old upon you, and your shoe is not waxen old upon your foot."* (Deut. 29:5) Their clothes did not get old, and their shoes did not wear out. He continues to protect His "little ones" even today.

Immersion for the Mature

The question arises concerning those who have not reached the age of 20, should they not be baptized when they profess to believe in Yahweh and want to be baptized, sometimes along with their family?

It has been our experience that often children are susceptible to mere emotions of the moment and desire to be a part of the activities only for fear of being "left out."

The Bible clearly records that only those who were mature adults were immersed, but some groups force into the reading of "household" the inclusion of children.

The example of Stephanus (1Cor. 1:16) is later explained by the statement that the house of Stephanus had "addicted themselves to the ministry of the saints" (1Cor. 16:15). The Greek text indicates that they were mature, evidently over 20 years of age, serving the saints as deacons. If there is but one believer in the house, Yahweh promises His protection upon that house, and the underage children are acceptable to Him:

"For the unbelieving husband is sanctified by the wife, and the unbelieving wife is sanctified by the husband: else were your children unclean; but now are they holy." (1Cor. 7:14) The NIV Bible note explains, "Some believe that such children are called holy because they are included with their parents in the new covenant in [Messiah] just as the children of Abraham were included in the covenant with their father (and so were circumcised)."

An Israelite was born into the family and circumcision was a sign that he was a son of the Covenant through Abraham. The Old Testament is an account of Israelites who were born into the family as babes and grew up in the religion of Israel.

Conversion Requires A Mature Mind

Immersion is a decision arrived at only by the mature who are determined to walk in the footsteps of Yahshua, the Head of the body, the rest of their lives. It is not a light matter, but a lifelong commitment from which there is no turning back, Luke 9:62, Hebrews 6:4-6, 10:26-31.

While we do not baptize babies or children, we do dedicate them to Yahweh in prayer, petitioning Him to watch over these not yet of age. Dedication of the young is certainly appropriate as we read in 1Samuel chapter one. Those too young for baptism into Yahshua's Name should be dedicated to Yahweh to be under His care and protection until maturity when they can decide to be baptized. It is only through Yahshua that we receive the blessings promised to Abraham as well as eternal life, Galatians 3:29, to become a child of the King.

If you have not already taken the step, what hinders you to be baptized? (Write for our mini-study, Why Be Baptized Into the Name of Yahshua?)

© 2007 Yahweh's Assembly in Yahshua
2963 County Road 233, Kingdom City, Missouri 65262
View us online at: www.YAIY.org
Call Toll Free: (877) 642-4101
Main Line: (573) 642-4100