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Did the Exodus Generation Die in the Wilderness or Enter Canaan?

In the context of the Pentateuch, Deuteronomy is read as a continuation of Numbers, in which God decrees that the exodus generation must wander in the wilderness until they have all died, and that only their children may enter the land. Yet Deuteronomy's core narrative presents Moses addressing the same Israelites who left Egypt and wandered forty years in the wilderness on the eve of *their* entry into the Promised Land.

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Moses Forbids the People to Follow Him, James Tissot c. 1896-1902. thejewishmuseum.org

The Scouts Story and the Wilderness Wandering

Numbers 13–14 describes the punishment of the generation of the wilderness. After Moses sends twelve spies to scout out the land and bring back pertinent information, they return with tales of the great power of the natives there, and the Israelites are scared and refuse to enter the land. Although Moses succeeds in convincing God to forgive the Israelites, the story ends with a severe punishment for the generation of the exodus:

במדבר יד:כט בַּמִּדְבָּר הַזֶּה יִפְּלוּ פִגְרֵיכֶם... יד:לא וְטַפְּכֶם אֲשֶׁר אֲמַרְתֶּם לָבַז יִהְיֶה וְהֵבֵיאתִי אֹתָם וְיָדְעוּ אֶת הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר מְאַסְתֶּם בָּהּ.יד:לב וּפִגְרֵיכֶם אַתֶּם יִפְּלוּ בַּמִּדְבָּר הַזֶּה.יד:לג וּבְנֵיכֶם יִהְיוּ רֹעִים בַּמִּדְבָּר אַרְבָּעִים שָׁנָה וְנָשְׂאוּ אֶת זְנוּתֵיכֶם עַד תֹּם פִּגְרֵיכֶם בַּמִּדְבָּר.

Num 14:29 In this very wilderness shall your carcasses drop…. 14:31 Your children who, you said, would be carried off, these will I allow to enter; they shall know the land that you have rejected. 14:32 But your carcasses shall drop in this wilderness, 14:33 while your children roam the wilderness for forty years, suffering for your faithlessness, until the last of your carcasses is down in the wilderness.[1]

Time in the Wilderness: A Demonstration of God’s Wonders

While Deuteronomy is aware of a forty-year wilderness wandering, it makes no mention of the demise of the congregation during or at the end of the journey. Instead of being a punishment where the people perish in the wilderness, the forty-year journey is conceived as God’s demonstration of his wonders for the people, keeping them in good condition for so many years.[2]

This idea is found, for example, in the context of the journey through Edom, when Moses reminds the people how they have been supported until then:

דברים ב:ז כִּי יְ־הוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ בֵּרַכְךָ בְּכֹל מַעֲשֵׂה יָדֶךָ יָדַע לֶכְתְּךָ אֶת הַמִּדְבָּר הַגָּדֹל הַזֶּה זֶה אַרְבָּעִים שָׁנָה יְ־הוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ עִמָּךְ לֹא חָסַרְתָּ דָּבָר.

Deut 2:7 Indeed, YHWH your God has blessed you in all your undertakings. He has watched over your wanderings through this great wilderness; YHWH your God has been with you these past forty years: you have lacked nothing.

In Deuteronomy 8, Moses again describes how God sustained them through their long march in the wilderness:

דברים ח:ב וְזָכַרְתָּ אֶת כָּל הַדֶּרֶךְ אֲשֶׁר הֹלִיכֲךָ יְ־הוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ זֶה אַרְבָּעִים שָׁנָה בַּמִּדְבָּר לְמַעַן עַנֹּתְךָ לְנַסֹּתְךָ לָדַעַת אֶת אֲשֶׁר בִּלְבָבְךָ הֲתִשְׁמֹר (מצותו) [מִצְו‍ֹתָיו] אִם לֹא. ח:ג וַיְעַנְּךָ וַיַּרְעִבֶךָ וַיַּאֲכִלְךָ אֶת הַמָּן אֲשֶׁר **לֹא יָדַעְתָּ וְלֹא יָדְעוּן אֲבֹתֶיךָ**לְמַעַן הוֹדִעֲךָ כִּי לֹא עַל הַלֶּחֶם לְבַדּוֹ יִחְיֶה הָאָדָם כִּי עַל כָּל מוֹצָא פִי יְ־הוָה יִחְיֶה הָאָדָם. שִׂמְלָתְךָ לֹא בָלְתָה מֵעָלֶיךָ וְרַגְלְךָ לֹא בָצֵקָה זֶה אַרְבָּעִים שָׁנָה.

Deut 8:2 Remember the long way that YHWH your God has made you travel in the wilderness these past forty years, that He might test you by hardships to learn what was in your hearts: whether you would keep His commandments or not. 8:3 He subjected you to the hardship of hunger and then gave you manna to eat, **which neither you nor your fathers had ever known**, in order to teach you that man does not live on bread alone, but that man may live on anything that YHWH decrees. 8:4 The clothes upon you did not wear out, nor did your feet swell these forty years.[3]

Similarly, Moses reiterates this point in one of his final speeches to the people:

דברים כט:ד וָאוֹלֵךְ אֶתְכֶם אַרְבָּעִים שָׁנָה בַּמִּדְבָּר לֹא בָלוּ שַׂלְמֹתֵיכֶם מֵעֲלֵיכֶם וְנַעַלְךָ לֹא בָלְתָה מֵעַל רַגְלֶךָ.כט:ה לֶחֶם לֹא אֲכַלְתֶּם וְיַיִן וְשֵׁכָר לֹא שְׁתִיתֶם לְמַעַן תֵּדְעוּ כִּי אֲנִי יְ־הוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם.

Deut 29:4 I led you through the wilderness forty years; the clothes on your back did not wear out, nor did the sandals on your feet; 29:5 you had no bread to eat and no wine or other intoxicant to drink, that you might know that I YHWH am your God.

These Deuteronomic texts suggest that the forty years of wandering were not a punishment but rather a beneficial opportunity for the Israelites to experience God’s power, when they were deprived of all bounties but still survived and even flourished.

Moses’ Addressees: The Exodus Generation

Throughout Deuteronomy, when Moses speaks to the people who are about to enter the land, recalling their experiences in Egypt and in the wilderness, he speaks to the generation who witnessed it all and not to their children.

Moses consistently refers to the people as the ones who left Egypt:

דברים ד:כ **וְאֶתְכֶם** לָקַח יְ־הוָה וַיּוֹצִא אֶתְכֶם מִכּוּר הַבַּרְזֶל מִמִּצְרָיִם לִהְיוֹת לוֹ לְעַם נַחֲלָה **כַּיּוֹם הַזֶּה**.

Deut 4:20 **But you** YHWH took and brought out of Egypt, that iron blast furnace, to be His very own people, **as is now the case**.
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דברים ד:לד הֲנִסָּה אֱלֹהִים לָבוֹא לָקַחַת לוֹ גוֹי מִקֶּרֶב גּוֹי בְּמַסֹּת בְּאֹתֹת וּבְמוֹפְתִים וּבְמִלְחָמָה וּבְיָד חֲזָקָה וּבִזְרוֹעַ נְטוּיָה וּבְמוֹרָאִים גְּדֹלִים כְּכֹל אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה לָכֶם יְ־הוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם בְּמִצְרַיִם **לְעֵינֶיךָ**.

Deut 4:34 has any god ventured to go and take for himself one nation from the midst of another by prodigious acts, by signs and portents, by war, by a mighty and an outstretched arm and awesome power, as YHWH your God did for you in Egypt **before your very eyes**?
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דברים ו:יב הִשָּׁמֶר לְךָ פֶּן תִּשְׁכַּח אֶת יְ־הוָה **אֲשֶׁר הוֹצִיאֲךָ** מֵאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם מִבֵּית עֲבָדִים.

Deut 6:12 Take heed that you do not forget YHWH **who freed you** from the land of Egypt, the house of bondage.
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דברים ז:יח …זָכֹר תִּזְכֹּר אֵת אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה יְ־הוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ לְפַרְעֹה וּלְכָל מִצְרָיִם.ז:יט הַמַּסֹּת הַגְּדֹלֹת **אֲשֶׁר רָאוּ עֵינֶיךָ** וְהָאֹתֹת וְהַמֹּפְתִים וְהַיָּד הַחֲזָקָה וְהַזְּרֹעַ הַנְּטוּיָה אֲשֶׁר הוֹצִאֲךָ יְ־הוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ…

Deut 7:18 …You shall surely remember what YHWH your God did to Pharaoh and all the Egyptians: 7:19 the wondrous acts that you saw **with your own eyes**, the signs and the portents, the mighty hand, and the outstretched arm by which YHWH your God liberated you…
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דברים יא:י כִּי הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר אַתָּה בָא שָׁמָּה לְרִשְׁתָּהּ לֹא כְאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם הִוא **אֲשֶׁר יְצָאתֶם מִשָּׁם**…

Deut 11:10 For the land that you are about to enter and possess is not like the land of Egypt **from which you have come**.
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דברים כט:א …אַתֶּם רְאִיתֶם אֵת כָּל אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה יְ־הוָה **לְעֵינֵיכֶם** בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרַיִם לְפַרְעֹה וּלְכָל עֲבָדָיו וּלְכָל אַרְצוֹ.כט:ב הַמַּסּוֹת הַגְּדֹלֹת **אֲשֶׁר רָאוּ עֵינֶיךָ** הָאֹתֹת וְהַמֹּפְתִים הַגְּדֹלִים הָהֵם.

Deut 29:1 … You have seen all that YHWH did **before your very eyes** in the land of Egypt, to Pharaoh and to all his courtiers and to his whole country: 29:2 the wondrous feats **that you saw with your own eyes**, those prodigious signs and marvels.

Addressed to Israel in the second person, all these statements refer to their own experience in Egypt. Further variations of the phrase “who took you out of Egypt” are often mentioned in regards to Moses’ addressees in Deuteronomy (e.g., 8:14; 13:6; 16:1, 3; 20:1).

Remember Your Experiences in the Wilderness

Together with the references to the distant past in Egypt, Moses consistently reminds the people of things that occurred in the wilderness. Such is the miraculous experience at Horeb:

דברים ד:לג הֲשָׁמַע עָם קוֹל אֱלֹהִים מְדַבֵּר מִתּוֹךְ הָאֵשׁ כַּאֲשֶׁר שָׁמַעְתָּ אַתָּה וַיֶּחִי... ד:לו מִן הַשָּׁמַיִם הִשְׁמִיעֲךָ אֶת קֹלוֹ לְיַסְּרֶךָּ וְעַל הָאָרֶץ הֶרְאֲךָ אֶת אִשּׁוֹ הַגְּדוֹלָה וּדְבָרָיו שָׁמַעְתָּ מִתּוֹךְ הָאֵשׁ.

Deut 4:33 Has any people heard the voice of a god speaking out of a fire, as you have, and survived? … 4:36 From the heavens He let you hear His voice to discipline you; on earth He let you see His great fire; and from amidst that fire you heard His words.

Such is also the incident with Miriam (Deut 24:9), or what Amalek did “to you” בַּדֶּרֶךְ בְּצֵאתְכֶם מִמִּצְרָיִם “on your way out from Egypt” (25:17–18).

In a similar vein, the people are reminded of sins they committed on their journey, at Horeb (9:8–21), at Massah (6:16, 9:22), and at Taberah, Kibroth-hattaavah and Kadesh-barnea (9:22–23). The participants in these events are the current audience.

Accordingly, as stressed in Moses’s statement, the people with whom the covenant is made are *the one generation* who knows firsthand what happened in Egypt and in the Transjordan:

דברים כט:טו כִּי אַתֶּם יְדַעְתֶּם אֵת אֲשֶׁר יָשַׁבְנוּ בְּאֶרֶץ מִצְרָיִם וְאֵת אֲשֶׁר עָבַרְנוּ בְּקֶרֶב הַגּוֹיִם אֲשֶׁר עֲבַרְתֶּם.

Deut 29:15 Well you know that we dwelt in the land of Egypt and that we passed through the midst of various other nations through which you passed.

Elsewhere, the experience of those about to enter the land is contrasted with a small number of people who, as a result of sin, did not make it into the land:

דברים יא:ו וַאֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה לְדָתָן וְלַאֲבִירָם בְּנֵי אֱלִיאָב בֶּן רְאוּבֵן אֲשֶׁר פָּצְתָה הָאָרֶץ אֶת פִּיהָ וַתִּבְלָעֵם וְאֶת בָּתֵּיהֶם וְאֶת אָהֳלֵיהֶם וְאֵת כָּל הַיְקוּם אֲשֶׁר בְּרַגְלֵיהֶם בְּקֶרֶב כָּל יִשְׂרָאֵל.יא:ז כִּי עֵינֵיכֶם הָרֹאֹת אֶת כָּל מַעֲשֵׂה יְ־הוָה הַגָּדֹל אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה.

11:6 and [remember] what He did to Dathan and Abiram, sons of Eliab son of Reuben, when the earth opened its mouth and swallowed them, along with their households, their tents, and every living thing in their train, from amidst all Israel 11:7 but that it was you who saw with your own eyes all the marvelous deeds that YHWH performed.

Whereas Dathan and Abiram were killed during the wandering in the wilderness, the rest of the exodus generation entered the land.

Fathers’ Versus Children’s Experience

When we read the verses in Deuteronomy without preconceptions, we can discern that Moses addresses the people who have left Egypt and wandered in the wilderness for forty years, and are now going to enter the land. These people, according to Deuteronomy, are unlike their children, who would lack these experiences:

דברים יא:ב וִידַעְתֶּם הַיּוֹם כִּי לֹא אֶת בְּנֵיכֶם אֲשֶׁר לֹא יָדְעוּ וַאֲשֶׁר לֹא רָאוּ אֶת מוּסַר יְ־הוָה אֱלֹהֵיכֶם אֶת גָּדְלוֹ אֶת יָדוֹ הַחֲזָקָה וּזְרֹעוֹ הַנְּטוּיָה.יא:ג וְאֶת אֹתֹתָיו וְאֶת מַעֲשָׂיו אֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה בְּתוֹךְ מִצְרָיִם לְפַרְעֹה מֶלֶךְ מִצְרַיִם וּלְכָל אַרְצוֹ.יא:ד וַאֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה לְחֵיל מִצְרַיִם לְסוּסָיו וּלְרִכְבּוֹ אֲשֶׁר הֵצִיף אֶת מֵי יַם סוּף עַל פְּנֵיהֶם בְּרָדְפָם אַחֲרֵיכֶם וַיְאַבְּדֵם יְ־הוָה עַד הַיּוֹם הַזֶּה.יא:ה וַאֲשֶׁר עָשָׂה לָכֶם בַּמִּדְבָּר עַד בֹּאֲכֶם עַד הַמָּקוֹם הַזֶּה.

Deut 11:2 Take thought this day that it was not your children, who neither experienced nor witnessed the lesson of YHWH your God – His majesty, His mighty hand, His outstretched arm; 11:3 the signs and the deeds that He performed in Egypt against Pharaoh king of Egypt and all his land; 11:4 what He did to Egypt's army, its horses and chariots; how YHWH rolled back upon them the waters of the Sea of Reeds when they were pursuing you, thus destroying them once and for all; 11:5 what He did for you in the wilderness before you arrived in this place.

The current generation is expected to recount the experience of the exodus to the next generation, their children. The latter are always mentioned in third person:

דברים ו:כא וְאָמַרְתָּ לְבִנְךָ עֲבָדִים הָיִינוּ לְפַרְעֹה בְּמִצְרָיִם וַיּוֹצִיאֵנוּ יְ־הוָה מִמִּצְרַיִם בְּיָד חֲזָקָה. ו:כב וַיִּתֵּן יְ־הוָה אוֹתֹת וּמֹפְתִים גְּדֹלִים וְרָעִים בְּמִצְרַיִם בְּפַרְעֹה וּבְכָל בֵּיתוֹ לְעֵינֵינוּ.ו:כג וְאוֹתָנוּ הוֹצִיא מִשָּׁם לְמַעַן הָבִיא אֹתָנוּ לָתֶת לָנוּ אֶת הָאָרֶץ אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּע לַאֲבֹתֵינוּ.

Deut 6:21 And you will say to your son: We were slaves to Pharaoh in Egypt and YHWH freed us from Egypt with a mighty hand. 6:22 YHWH wrought before our eyes marvelous and destructive signs and portents in Egypt, against Pharaoh and all his household; 6:23 and us He freed from there, that He might take us and give us the land that He had promised on oath to our ancestors.[4]

Just as the children did not take part in the exodus, the ancestors of Moses’ addressees were also not part of this experience, as expressed in the historical confession that the Israelites are to recite yearly:

דברים כו:ה אֲרַמִּי אֹבֵד אָבִי וַיֵּרֶד מִצְרַיְמָה וַיָּגָר שָׁם בִּמְתֵי מְעָט וַיְהִי שָׁם לְגוֹי גָּדוֹל עָצוּם וָרָב.כו:ו וַיָּרֵעוּ אֹתָנוּ הַמִּצְרִים וַיְעַנּוּנוּ וַיִּתְּנוּ עָלֵינוּ עֲבֹדָה קָשָׁה.כו:ז וַנִּצְעַק אֶל יְ־הוָה אֱלֹהֵי אֲבֹתֵינוּ וַיִּשְׁמַע יְ־הוָה אֶת קֹלֵנוּ וַיַּרְא אֶת עָנְיֵנוּ וְאֶת עֲמָלֵנוּ וְאֶת לַחֲצֵנוּ.כו:ח וַיּוֹצִאֵנוּ יְ־הוָה מִמִּצְרַיִם בְּיָד חֲזָקָה וּבִזְרֹעַ נְטוּיָה וּבְמֹרָא גָּדֹל וּבְאֹתוֹת וּבְמֹפְתִים.כו:ט וַיְבִאֵנוּ אֶל הַמָּקוֹם הַזֶּה וַיִּתֶּן לָנוּ אֶת הָאָרֶץ הַזֹּאת אֶרֶץ זָבַת חָלָב וּדְבָשׁ.

Deut 26:5 My father was a fugitive Aramean. He went down to Egypt with meager numbers and sojourned there; but there he became a great and very populous nation. 26:6 The Egyptians dealt harshly with us and oppressed us; they imposed heavy labor upon us. 26:7 We cried to YHWH, the God of our fathers, and YHWH heard our plea and saw our plight, our misery, and our oppression. 26:8 YHWH freed us from Egypt by a mighty hand, by an outstretched arm and awesome power, and by signs and portents. 26:9 He brought us to this place and gave us this land, a land flowing with milk and honey.

This speech is written from the perspective of a person who was a slave in Egypt, called out to YHWH, and was miraculously freed and brought to the land. Their “father” came to Egypt and his descendants grew into a nation, but it was only the generation addressed by Moses in Deuteronomy that was freed.

This fits with other verses about Israel’s fathers in Deuteronomy, such as:

דברים ד:לז וְתַחַת כִּי אָהַב אֶת אֲבֹתֶיךָ וַיִּבְחַר בְּזַרְעוֹ אַחֲרָיו וַיּוֹצִאֲךָ בְּפָנָיו בְּכֹחוֹ הַגָּדֹל מִמִּצְרָיִם.

Deut 4:37 And because He loved your fathers, He chose their heirs after them; He Himself, in His great might, led you out of Egypt.

דברים ז:ח כִּי מֵאַהֲבַת יְ־הוָה אֶתְכֶם וּמִשָּׁמְרוֹ אֶת הַשְּׁבֻעָה אֲשֶׁר נִשְׁבַּע לַאֲבֹתֵיכֶם הוֹצִיא יְ־הוָה אֶתְכֶם בְּיָד חֲזָקָה וַיִּפְדְּךָ מִבֵּית עֲבָדִים מִיַּד פַּרְעֹה מֶלֶךְ מִצְרָיִם.

Deut 7:8 It was because YHWH favored you and kept the oath He made to your fathers that YHWH freed you with a mighty hand and rescued you from the house of bondage, from the power of Pharaoh king of Egypt.

In short, unlike Moses's addressees, the “fathers” did not take part in the journey in the wilderness (Deut 26:5), did not attend the assembly at Horeb, (4:36–37) and did not experience the phenomenon of the manna (8:16). Moses's generation are the people poised to cross the Jordan and enter the land.

Moses’ Explicit Statements

That Moses’s speech in Deuteronomy addresses the exodus generation is expressed most clearly in the proclamation at Horeb, stating that:

דברים ה:ב יְ־הוָה אֱלֹהֵינוּ כָּרַת עִמָּנוּ בְּרִית בְּחֹרֵב. ה:ג לֹא אֶת אֲבֹתֵינוּ כָּרַת יְ־הוָה אֶת הַבְּרִית הַזֹּאת כִּי אִתָּנוּ אֲנַחְנוּ אֵלֶּה פֹה הַיּוֹם כֻּלָּנוּ חַיִּים.ה:ד פָּנִים בְּפָנִים דִּבֶּר יְ־הוָה עִמָּכֶם בָּהָר מִתּוֹךְ הָאֵשׁ.

Deut 5:2 YHWH our God made a covenant with us at Horeb. 3 It was not with our fathers that YHWH made this covenant, but with us, the living, every one of us who is here today. 4 Face to face YHWH spoke to you on the mountain out of the fire.

According to this proclamation, Moses speaks on the eve of his death to the same people who received the revelation at Horeb at the beginning of their journey. This contradicts the narrative in Numbers that the wilderness generation died out while only their children were allowed to cross over the Jordan.

Traditional scholars have tried their best to reconcile this passage with the narrative of Numbers 13–14. For example, Abraham ibn Ezra (1089–1167) glosses the expression לא את אבתינו (not with our fathers) in Deut 5:3, with:

לא את אבותינו לבדם, כי אם גם אתנו.

“Not with our ancestors” alone, “but” also “with us.”

But this suggestion rewrites the verse to mean the opposite of what it in fact says about the distinct role of the current generation.

Modern scholars have attempted similar explanations, such as Jeffrey Tigay who suggests:

Moses regularly speaks to the present generation as if *it* came out of Egypt and stood at Mount Sinai. Although most of those he is addressing were born later … [but they] undoubtedly heard about the events from their parents or others who were present.[5]

Other scholars read the proclamation stressed in Deut 5 as a metaphor for the eternal nature of the laws and their relevance to later generations.[6] But the verse means exactly what it says: Moses is making a covenant with the people who have left Egypt, wandered in the wilderness, and would now enter the land without him. This comports with the Deuteronomic notion, described above, that the generation of the exodus entered the land after YHWH was beneficent to them for forty years in the wilderness. Nevertheless, one problem remains.

The Deuteronomic Later Framework: Moses Dies Along with His People

Moses, the leader of the exodus, will die just outside the land. In retelling the story of the scouts in the opening section of Deuteronomy, Moses explains why:

דברים א:לז גַּם בִּי הִתְאַנַּף יְ־הוָה בִּגְלַלְכֶם לֵאמֹר גַּם אַתָּה לֹא תָבֹא שָׁם.א:לחיְהוֹשֻׁעַ בִּן נוּן הָעֹמֵד לְפָנֶיךָ הוּא יָבֹא שָׁמָּה אֹתוֹ חַזֵּק כִּי הוּא יַנְחִלֶנָּה אֶת יִשְׂרָאֵל.

Deut 1:37 Because of you YHWH was angry with me too, and He said: You shall not enter it either. 1:38 Joshua son of Nun, who attends you, he shall enter it. Imbue him with strength, for he shall allot it to Israel.

Picking up on this claim, Midrash Numbers Rabbah describes Moses’ death as an act of identification with the exodus generation (*Numbers Rabbah* 19.13):

אמר לו הקדוש ברוך הוא למשה שבחך הוא שהוצאת ששים רבוא וקברתם במדבר ואת מכניס דור אחר עכשיו יאמרו אין לדור המדבר חלק לעולם הבא אלא תהא בצדן ותבא עמהן...

The Holy One, blessed be He said to Moses: “Is your glory that you have taken out sixty myriads of people [out of Egypt] and buried them in the wilderness and now [you wish] to will bring a different generation into [the land]? People will say that the generation of the wilderness have no share in the world to come. Rather, it is better if you remain beside them and come with them….”

The midrash here expands upon what Deuteronomy 1 mentions explicitly, that Moses will die together with the wilderness generation outside the land. This, though, contradicts the verses quoted earlier which assume that those who left will enter the land, mentioning no punishment of death for the exodus generation.

As I showed in my ["Moses Dies at the Age of 120: Was It Premature?"](https://www.thetorah.com/article/moses-dies-at-the-age-of-120-was-it-premature) (*TheTorah* 2018), the Deuteronomic references that relate Moses' death to the people's sin (Deut 1:37 -38, 3:26 -27, 4:21 -22), are late insertions in the main narrative of Deuteronomy. These passages were revised based on a later editor’s familiarity with the (non-Priestly) account of the scouts, introducing the tradition that the exodus generation died entirely in the wilderness (Deut 1:35, 2:14–16).[7] The earlier, main source of Deuteronomy seems not to know about the sin of the spies and the subsequent punishment to the wilderness generation.

A Story of One Generation

In Deuteronomy’s core conception, Moses is destined to die in his old age, at the end of the journey with the people, while the latter, after experiencing the lengthy period of forty years travelling in the wilderness, are to enter the land with Joshua at their helm. [8]

Only after the integration of different scrolls and traditions, including the tradition of the scouts and the narrative of the subsequent punishment of the nation, was the wilderness wandering in Deuteronomy reinterpreted as a punishment for sin, and Moses’ death was reinterpreted along these lines. The editors did this by making slight changes to the opening of Deuteronomy but left the rest of the text in its original form, allowing us a glimpse into previous layers of Israelite historiography.

[View Footnotes](https://www.thetorah.com/article/did-the-exodus-generation-die-in-the-wilderness-or-enter-canaan)

1. These verses are from the Priestly strand of the account of the scouts. The non-Priestly strand has the same concept, though it is less explicit in its details. Editor’s note: For one division of the story into sources, see TABS Editors, ["Unscrambling the Scout Story with the Documentary Hypothesis,"](https://www.thetorah.com/article/unscrambling-the-scout-story-with-the-documentary-hypothesis)*TheTorah* (2014).
2. Recalling the wilderness period as a positive opportunity is reflected in various occurrences outside the Deuteronomic narrative: Exod 16.35; Deut 32.10; Jer 2.2, 6, 31.1–3; Hos 13.4–6; Amos 2.10; Neh 9.20–21. Editor’s note: For a look at the wilderness account as a separate origin tradition, see David Frankel, ["Exodus: Not the Only Tradition about Israel's Past,"](https://www.thetorah.com/article/exodus-not-the-only-tradition-about-israels-past) *TheTorah* (2015); *idem*, ["The Song of the Sea and the History of Ancient Israel and Judah,"](https://www.thetorah.com/article/the-song-of-the-sea-and-the-history-of-ancient-israel-and-judah) *TheTorah* (2016).
3. A similar emphasis appears later in the chapter:

דברים ח:טו הַמּוֹלִיכֲךָ בַּמִּדְבָּר הַגָּדֹל וְהַנּוֹרָא נָחָשׁ שָׂרָף וְעַקְרָב וְצִמָּאוֹן אֲשֶׁר אֵין מָיִם הַמּוֹצִיא לְךָ מַיִם מִצּוּר הַחַלָּמִישׁ.ח:טז הַמַּאֲכִלְךָ מָן בַּמִּדְבָּר אֲשֶׁר לֹא יָדְעוּן אֲבֹתֶיךָ לְמַעַן עַנֹּתְךָ וּלְמַעַן נַסֹּתֶךָ לְהֵיטִבְךָ בְּאַחֲרִיתֶךָ.

Deut 8:15 who led you through the great and terrible wilderness with its seraph serpents and scorpions, a parched land with no water in it, who brought forth water for you from the flinty rock; 8:16 who fed you in the wilderness with manna, which your fathers had never known, in order to test you by hardships only to benefit you in the end.

Editor’s note: David Frankel has argued that both of these passages from chapter 8 have been revised to include references to the manna and water miracles, while in the original text, the very fact of the Israelites surviving on virtually nothing is the miracle and the text. See David Frankel, ["Were the Israelites Craving for Meat or Starving for Food?"](https://www.thetorah.com/article/were-the-israelites-craving-for-meat-or-starving-for-food) *TheTorah* (2017).

1. Similarly, regarding the Horeb revelation,

דברים ד:ט …וְהוֹדַעְתָּם לְבָנֶיךָ וְלִבְנֵי בָנֶיךָ.ד:י יוֹם אֲשֶׁר עָמַדְתָּ לִפְנֵי יְ־הוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ בְּחֹרֵב…

4:9 … And make them known to your children and to your children's children: 4:10 The day you stood before YHWH your God at Horeb…

1. Jeffrey Tigay, *Deuteronomy,*JPS Commentary (Philadelphia: JPS, 1996) 46.
2. Mayes explains the verse as the author’s intention “to stress the continuing validity of the covenant law for his own generation.” Andrew D.H. Mayes, *Deuteronomy,* New Century Bible (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 165. Driver talks about “the practice of Deuteronomy to comprehend the past, the present and the future generations of Israel in an ideal unity” by conveying that “the covenant concluded at Horeb is not an ancient covenant… but is one binding on the Israel of today.” Samuel R. Driver, *Deuteronomy,* 3rd ed., International Critical Commentary (London: Bloomsbury-T&T Clark, 2000; orig., 1901), lxix. Weinfeld claims that “Israel throughout its generations is thus presented in Deuteronomy as one body, a corporate personality.” Moshe Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy 1–11,* Anchor Bible; (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 238. This interpretation is common to the rabbinic attitude: “In every generation a person must regard himself as though he personally had gone out of Egypt.” Mishnah, Pesachim 10.5, famously cited in the Passover Haggadah.
3. On the textual relationship between Deuteronomy 1–2 and the non-Priestly account in Numbers see in, Gili Kugler, *When God Wanted to Destroy the Chosen People: Biblical Traditions and Theology on the Move*, BZAW 515 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019), 82–92. Editor’s note: See also, David Ben-Gad HaCohen, ["Using Deuteronomy to Fill in the Lacunae of the Numbers Spies Story,"](https://www.thetorah.com/article/using-deuteronomy-to-fill-in-the-lacunae-of-numbers-spies-story) *TheTorah* (2016).
4. Editor’s note: For a discussion of how Joshua mirrors Moses, see Carl S. Ehrlich, ["Anything You Can Do I Can Do Better: Joshua as Moses,"](https://www.thetorah.com/article/anything-you-can-do-i-can-do-better-joshua-as-moses) *TheTorah* (2018).