

Firstborn and the Law of Primogeniture (Birthright)

What is the significance of understanding the biblical term “firstborn” to our culture today? Is it a chauvinistic cultural practice with no relevance to today? The Bible has made distinctions between firstborn and younger brothers, Jews and Gentiles, and men and women. How does understanding the concept of “firstborn” help us understand our roles in serving God?

Because God placed a significance on the “firstborn,” Ancient Near East culture has believed that the first born human or animal had the purest and strongest blood, and thus were considered the best representatives of their race. The lifespan of Adam and the subsequently shorter lifespan of his descendants provide an example for the basis of this belief.

Within Ancient Near East culture, the term “firstborn” anoints the oldest son with the assignment of special privileges and responsibilities. He was second to his father and had authority over his younger siblings. Upon the death of his father, he was entitled to the Birthright, which was a double portion of the estate among his brothers and leadership of the family. As new head and spiritual leader of the home, the firstborn cared for his mother until her death, and provided for his unmarried sisters until their marriage. The Birthright, however, can be lost or sold as exemplified by the passing of the Abrahamic Covenant to Isaac, Jacob, and Joseph (Gen 21:5-10, 25:29-34, 48:3-5).

Inheritance rights became a difficult issue in the case of multiple wives, and God prescribed a law to protect the rights of the firstborn (Deut 21:15-17). This law, revealing God’s view of firstborns (aside from the Abrahamic Covenant), may explain God’s love for Hagar (Gen 21:10-21).

While the younger brothers of a family may not be the “firstborn,” they became the head and spiritual leader of their respective families when they married and left the home. And they would have the privilege to pass on their Birthright to a son. Thus all males, “firstborn” or not, would ultimately be the priest and leader of his family. This responsibility is why God decreed that all males are circumcised as part of the Abrahamic Covenant (Gen 17:9-14). It is also the reason why all males must appear before the Lord 3 times a year as part of the Mosaic Covenant to commemorate the Passover meal and the first 7 days of the Exodus (Feast of the Unleavened Bread), Israel’s wandering in the wilderness (Feast of the Tabernacles [Ingathering]), and the first harvest in the Promised Land (Feast of First Fruits) (Ex 23:14-17).

With the Mosaic Covenant, God selected the firstborn Hebrew as a testimony and remembrance of His Divinity and Power.

As a remembrance of His deliverance from Egypt, by the destruction of Egypt’s firstborn and the preservation of Israel’s firstborn, God placed a special claim on the firstborn of each Hebrew family’s male, animals and plants; the giving of the firstborn was symbolic of giving back what was His (Ex 13:11-15, Deut 14:22-23, Num 8:14-19). Because all firstborn were in God’s possession, it was necessary for a family to buy back or redeem the firstborn infant from God for 5 shekels, which was given to the priests when the infant was 1 month old (Num 18:15-17).

Yet while God claimed the firstborn Hebrew male of each family as His own, they were not dedicated to Him. Instead He took the men of the tribe of Levi as their representative and dedicated them to the service of the Tabernacle and to assist the priests Aaron and his sons (Num 3:5-9, 3:40-51, 8:14-19).

Firstborn and the Law of Primogeniture (Birthright) (page 2)

Often the term “firstborn” is used figuratively and expresses God’s dear affection for an individual, king, or group of people who enjoy a special relationship with Him and receive the benefits of an heir.

In this sense, while David was the youngest of eight sons (1 Sam 16:7-12), God considered King David as a firstborn, because he was the king of His chosen firstborn nation (Ps 89:27). And, in affirmation, the unconditional Davidic Covenant was made.

Similarly, the nation of Israel was chosen as God’s firstborn among nations (Ex 4:22). The nation of Israel was to be a nation of priests and represent God’s means of bringing earth His blessings and message of salvation (Ex 19:6).

This was born out in the New Testament when the Mosaic Covenant was still in force. Jesus selected twelve Jewish men as disciples and prepared them for spiritual leadership; the number referred to the twelve tribes of Israel (Matt 19:27-28). While Jesus ministered to many Gentiles, He considered the Hebrews as a priority and preference (Matt 2:1-6, 10:5-6, 15:21-28, Mark 7:24-30, Rom 1:16).

Jesus came to fulfill the messianic prophecy that only Jews would recognize (Matt 5:17-20, Matt 26:52-56, Luke 4:14-21, Luke 24:44-48, John 5:39-47). Only Jews and His disciples would understand and recognize the Savior Jesus Christ (Matt 16:13-17, John 11:23-27). Only Jews would understand the significance of the Passover lamb and the timing of the crucifixion during the Passover meal.

The Jews were chosen, not to be honored, but to be God’s servants. God chose Abraham and his descendants to bless him with an unconditional covenant (Gen 12:1-3, Deut 14:2, Amos 3:2). God had a priority on the man Abraham and his descendants.

The Jews received the Law first, had the prophets, had the knowledge of the one true God, and were the guardians of the Old Testament (Rom 3:1-2, 9:4). God had a priority on Hebrew men who were entrusted to know and teach the Law.

God intended Jesus to come as a Jew and lead the nation of Jews as the means and mission to save the world; salvation would come from the Jews (Rom 9:4-5, Matt 10:1-7, John 4:19-22, Rom 11:13-21). Despite the Jews’ rejection of Jesus Christ, God’s priority on the nation of Israel was for the benefit of the world.

And this priority did not end when Jesus came. Jews will receive either final judgment or blessing before the Gentiles (Rom 2:4-11, Luke 12:41-48). But while God has a priority, the believing Jew is no more righteous than the believing Gentile, and none are saved except through faith in Jesus (Rom 3:9-10, 10:17-20).

Jesus Christ was literally the firstborn of God and the Virgin Mary (Matt 1:18-25, Luke 1:26-35, 2:7, John 3:16). However His birth did not mark His origin in time but only His appearance as a man.

As part of the triune God, Jesus Christ is eternal and pre-existed before and participated in Creation (John 1:3). He has neither a beginning nor an end; He exists outside any human concept of time.

Firstborn and the Law of Primogeniture (Birthright) (page 3)

Yet His birth as a human being, an incarnate form of God, qualified Him for receiving the Birthright as the Firstborn.

While ontologically equal with God the Father, Jesus Christ functioned as the Firstborn among all Christians. And while God predestined Christians to be with Him and conformed to the image of His Son, He intended all Christians to have an intimacy with the Lord Jesus Christ as younger siblings would have with an older brother. (Rom 8:29).

Jesus Christ is the firstborn from among the dead, the first human being to be resurrected from the dead and reside in heaven. Preeminent, sovereign over everything including death, Jesus Christ the Firstborn is exalted, and glorified in Heaven by angels and resurrected saints (Col 1:13-18, Heb 1:6, Rev 1:5).

As a consequence of Jesus Christ's redeeming work, Gentiles are considered adopted sons and sharing in the spiritual inheritance as heirs to God's promise (Gal 4:3-7, Heb 12:23-24, Rom 8:16-17, Gal 3:24-29). In this context, adoption entitles one the privilege of receiving an inheritance.

Roman customs, which influenced the first century church, mandated that the one adopting had to be male and the one being adopted had to be independent and capable of agreeing to the adoption. According to Roman law, the adopted person was considered as being born again into the new family. Paul is the only New Testament writer to use the term "adoption" in this context (Rom 8:15, 23, and 9:4).

Is there any evidence that Jesus explicitly understood His role as the Firstborn? During the crucifixion, Jesus passes on His responsibility for the care of His mother to His disciple John, not to his brother!

Then He said to the disciple, Behold, your mother!" And from that hour the disciple took her into his own household. (John 19:27)

It is important to recognize God's emphasis on the role of the firstborn and males. The mistaken notion that this is culturally determined ignores the Bible and introduces a huge misunderstanding of God's intended role for men and women. Worse it de-emphasizes and perhaps intentionally confuses the priestly responsibility that men have for their families and church.