

Firstborn and Redemption (Part 1)

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I am going to read out of the Revised Standard Version:

Genesis 49:3 Reuben, you are my firstborn, my might, and the firstfruits of my strength, pre-eminent in pride and pre-eminent in power.

So said the patriarch Jacob to his firstborn son, Reuben. I am going to embarrass my firstborn now. Joanne, you are my firstborn, and you are very special to me! All of our other firstborn children here and out there in "telephoneland" are also very special to your parents.

Before I continue, I want to talk to the children who are not the firstborn in your families, to stress that your parents certainly do not love you any less than your older firstborn brothers and sisters. However, in ancient Israel, the firstborn child in a family was considered to be extra special. This apparent favoritism was not just a Hebrew tradition; it was a set of rules that were given by God through Moses and recorded in detail in the books of Exodus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy.

Frequently throughout the Old Testament, we see instructions regarding the firstborn children. Surprisingly enough, they frequently seem to be in same places that we find the instructions for the Feast of Unleavened Bread. Why is this? In the first part of this split-sermon, I would like to examine the special significance of the connection between the firstborn children of Israel and the Feast of Unleavened Bread.

First of all, the firstborn was set apart in Old Testament Israel. Let us go back to the instructions for the very first Feast of Unleavened Bread. At the time of exodus from Egypt, let us see how God set apart the firstborn of Old Testament Israel.

Right from the Genesis period, the Israelites were already accustomed to the certain special treatment of the firstborn. You are all familiar, I am sure, with the firstborn accounts in Genesis and the relevant scriptures regarding Isaac and Ishmael, Esau and Jacob, Rachel and Leah, Reuben and Joseph, and Ephraim and Manasseh. Here at the very beginning of God's commission to Moses to lead Israel out of Egypt, God names children of Israel collectively, as His firstborn.

Exodus 4:22-23 "Then you shall say to Pharaoh, 'Thus says the LORD: "Israel is My son, My firstborn. So I say to you, let My son go that he may serve Me. But if you refuse to let him go, indeed I will kill your son, your firstborn."'"

This is despite the fact that human Israel, the individual Israel—or Jacob, as his name was initially—was not actually the firstborn of his father Isaac. Esau was actually Isaac's firstborn, but of course, he despised his birthright. God clearly names Israel as His firstborn son!

Also, please notice God's warning that he would kill the Egyptian firstborn, recorded way back in Exodus 4. It seems to have been pre-planned right from beginning and was not a last-minute, chapter-twelve decision to which God resorted when the other plagues failed to achieve the desired effect. *The Ten Commandments* movie seems to depict that it was a last ditch effort on God's part. Rather, in His infinite mercy God repeated His warning to Pharaoh and gave him plenty of opportunity to repent.

Exodus 11:5 "And all the firstborn in the land of Egypt shall die, from the firstborn of Pharaoh who sits on his throne, even to the firstborn of the female servant who is behind the handmill, and all the firstborn of the animals."

Throughout Exodus 12, God gives Moses detailed instructions on how to keep the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread. Then at the beginning of chapter thirteen, seemingly right out of blue, God ever-so-briefly introduces His setting apart of the firstborn male Israelite children.

Exodus 13:1-2 Then the lord spoke to Moses, saying, "Consecrate to me all the firstborn, whatever opens the womb among the children of Israel, both of man and beast; it is mine."

In verses 3-10, God continues with more detailed instructions about the Feast of Unleavened Bread. Then, in verse 11, He returns to subject of the firstborn and gives more detailed rules.

Exodus 13:11-13 "And it shall be, when the LORD brings you into the land of the Canaanites, as He swore to you and your fathers, and gives it to you, that you shall set apart to the LORD all that open the womb, that is, every firstborn that comes from an animal which you have; the males shall be the LORD'S. But every firstborn of a donkey you shall redeem with a lamb; and if you will not redeem it, then you shall break its neck. And all the firstborn of man among your sons you shall redeem."

The word *redeem* is one of those religious-sounding words at which our minds tend to balk, but it simply means "to buy back" or "to ransom." For instance, if a family's firstborn donkey were critical to the family's livelihood, then they could buy it back from God by giving a lamb instead. Of course, God did not demand that the Israelites slay their firstborn children as literal human sacrifices; the firstborn children were to be bought back with a lamb sacrifice.

Exodus 13:14-16 "So it shall be, when your son asks you in time to come, saying, 'What is this?' that you shall say to him, 'By strength of

hand the LORD brought us out of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. And it came to pass, when Pharaoh was stubborn about letting us go, that the LORD killed all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both the firstborn of man and the firstborn of beast. Therefore I sacrifice to the LORD all males that open the womb, but all the firstborn of my sons I redeem.' It shall be as a sign on your hand and as frontlets between your eyes, for by strength of hand the LORD brought us out of Egypt."

This relationship between the firstborn and the Feast of Unleavened Bread is repeated:

Exodus 34:18-20 "The Feast of Unleavened Bread you shall keep. Seven days you shall eat unleavened bread, as I commanded you, in the appointed time of the month of Abib; for in the month of Abib you came out from Egypt. All that open the womb are Mine, and every male firstborn among your livestock, whether ox or sheep. But the firstborn of a donkey you shall redeem with a lamb. And if you will not redeem him, then you shall break his neck. All the firstborn of your sons you shall redeem. And none shall appear before Me empty-handed."

You can see that these instructions about the firstborn are constantly folded in with the instructions for the Feast of Unleavened Bread. I do not believe that this is a coincidence; I believe that God intended it to be that way.

Exodus 22:29-30 "You shall not delay to offer the first of your ripe produce and your juices. The firstborn of your sons you shall give to Me. Likewise you shall do with your oxen and your sheep. It shall be with its mother seven days; on the eighth day you shall give it to Me."

Here, God is more specific, telling the Israelites that the firstborn cattle and sheep were to be given to Him on the eighth day of their life. Likewise, the firstborn Israelite children—or, rather, the redeeming lambs with which the parents bought back their firstborn babies—were to be given on the baby's eighth day of life. In the case of a boy, that was also the day of his circumcision.

Thus, the baby was presented to God, as it were, on the eighth day of his life; and although parents had redeemed the baby, it appears that God still claimed the firstborn as special to Him and still belonging to Him! This is an idea that we are going to see all of the way through here. It is almost as if God is saying, "You can keep your firstborn for the time being, but he is still mine."

Please note that on this eighth day, there was a presentation and a special offering—and this was peculiar to the firstborn only. This was in addition to the sin offering and the burnt offering of pigeons, turtledoves, or lambs that were required for every other newborn baby and for the ritual purification of the mother.

Leviticus 12:1-3 Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, "Speak to the children of Israel, saying: 'If a woman has conceived, and borne a male child, then she shall be unclean seven days; as in the days of her customary impurity she shall be unclean. And on the eighth day the flesh of his foreskin shall be circumcised.'"

Again, this was to take place on the baby boy's eighth day of life, the same day on which he was redeemed or bought back. Later, there was another special offering to be given.

Leviticus 12:4-6 "'She shall then continue in the blood of her purification thirty-three days. She shall not touch any hallowed thing, nor come into the sanctuary until the days of her purification are fulfilled. But if she bears a female child, then she shall be unclean two weeks, as in her customary impurity, and she shall continue in the blood of her purification sixty-six days. When the days of her purification are fulfilled, whether for a son or a daughter, she shall bring to the priest a lamb of the first year as a burnt offering, and a young pigeon or a turtledove as a sin offering, to the door of the tabernacle of meeting.'"

Please note that she could not make her purification offering until her purification time was over. This becomes important later on when we read about Jesus' fulfillment of the firstborn laws.

Leviticus 12:7-8 "'Then he shall offer it before the LORD, and make atonement for her. And she shall be clean from the flow of her blood. This is the law for her who has borne a male or a female. And if she is not able to bring a lamb, then she may bring two turtledoves or two young pigeons—one as a burnt offering and the other as a sin offering. So the priest shall make atonement for her, and she will be clean.'"

Originally, then, it appears that God set apart all the firstborn as belonging to Him, to be used in His service. At the institution of the Levitical priesthood, God substituted the Levites for His service, in place of the firstborn of other tribes.

Numbers 3:11-13 Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying: "Now behold, I Myself have taken the Levites from among the children of Israel instead of every firstborn who opens the womb among the children of Israel. Therefore the Levites shall be Mine, because all the firstborn are Mine. On the day that I struck all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, I sanctified to Myself all the firstborn in Israel, both man and beast. They shall be Mine: I am the LORD."

Again He is saying, "I am going to do this with the Levites; but concerning the firstborn, mine shall they be." It is almost as though He is giving them back, but He is holding on to them with a tether, as it were.

Numbers 3:40-46 Then the LORD said to Moses: "Number all the firstborn males of the children of Israel from a month old and above, and take the number of their names. And you shall take the Levites for Me—I am the LORD—instead of all the firstborn among the children of Israel, and the livestock of the Levites instead of all the firstborn among the livestock of the children of Israel." So Moses numbered all the firstborn among the children of Israel, as the LORD commanded him. And all the firstborn males, according to the number of names from a month old and above, of those who were numbered of them, were twenty-two thousand two hundred and seventy-three. Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying: "Take the Levites instead of all the firstborn among the children of Israel, and the livestock of the Levites instead of their livestock. The Levites shall be Mine: I am the LORD. "And for the redemption of the two hundred and seventy-three of the firstborn of the children of Israel, who are more than the number of the Levites..."

Then He goes into some details about five shekels each have to be paid for them who were in excess. If you want to read that, it is in Numbers 3: 47-49.

Numbers 8:16-18 "For they are wholly given to Me from among the children of Israel; I have taken them for Myself instead of all who open the womb, the firstborn of all the children of Israel. For all the firstborn among the children of Israel are Mine, both man and beast; on the day that I struck all the firstborn in the land of Egypt I sanctified them to Myself. I have taken the Levites instead of all the firstborn of the children of Israel."

Again, we have these hints here in Numbers 8 and the other scriptures that we have seen. Even though God has taken the Levites to do the work of His daily service, He still claims Israel's firstborn as His own. We see this repeatedly. Even after God claimed Levites for His service, the firstborn of the other tribes are still not "off the hook," as it were.

Let us now look ten chapters later. This is more of a Bible study than a sermon today, but I think that you will find it really interesting. It is amazing how the firstborn laws tie in with this Feast of Unleavened Bread.

Numbers 18:8, 15 And the LORD spoke to Aaron: "Here, I Myself have also given you charge of My heave offerings, all the holy gifts of the

children of Israel; I have given them as a portion to you and your sons, as an ordinance forever. Everything that first opens the womb of all flesh, which they bring to the LORD, whether man or beast, shall be yours; nevertheless the firstborn of man you shall surely redeem, and the firstborn of unclean animals you shall redeem. And those redeemed of the devoted things you shall redeem when one month old, according to your valuation, for five shekels of silver, according to the shekel of the sanctuary, which is twenty gerahs."

Over and over, even after the institution of the Levitical service and the priesthood, God still claimed all of Israel's firstborn as His own and very special to Him. What He was saying here is, "The firstborn are still Mine, and I give them to you." He is saying that He gives them to Aaron and the Levitical priesthood.

Hundreds of years later, after Jews returned from their captivity in Babylon, they reinstated God's ownership of the firstborn.

Nehemiah 10:34-36 We cast lots among the priests, the Levites, and the people, for bringing the wood offering into the house of our God, according to our fathers' houses, at the appointed times year by year, to burn on the altar of the LORD our God as it is written in the Law. And we made ordinances to bring the firstfruits of our ground and the firstfruits of all fruit of all trees, year by year, to the house of the LORD; to bring the firstborn of our sons and our cattle, as it is written in the Law, and the firstborn of our herds and our flocks, to the house of our God, to the priests who minister in the house of our God;

The firstborn belong to God. He took the Levites in His initial service, but He still did not let the firstborn of Israel go.

I want to cut off there for today. In the split sermon on the Last Day of Unleavened Bread, I want to go over two main points from the New Testament era, the first one being Jesus Christ's fulfillment of God's laws (His own laws, actually) regarding firstborn, and, secondly, the significance of God's firstborn laws to the church of God today.