

God's Response to Human Power Structures: The Law of the Firstborn

BibleProject Podcast Released 2 January 2023

Biblical Description & References

Deuteronomy 21:15-17 describes this right of the first born

Vocabulary

- ❖ primogeniture (Latin) - is the right (by law, custom, or practice) of elevating the firstborn
- ❖ bekhor (Hebrew) - firstborn (Strong's #1060)
- ❖ bakar (Hebrew) - verb, to bear new fruit, including producing the first offspring (Strong's #1069)
- ❖ protokos (Greek) - adjective, firstborn (Strong's #4416), used in the New Testament

Notes / Quotes

Tim Mackie: "God is constantly subverting and overturning the natural human assumptions about power and privilege." God inverts the practice of elevating the firstborn.

Old Testament Examples

Adam's sons (Genesis 4)

- ▶ 1st Cain
- ▶ 2nd Abel ★ YHWH favors his offering

Noah's sons (Genesis 10)

- ▶ 1st Japheth - his descendants become the gentile people living north of Canaan
- ▶ 2nd (likely) Shem ★ - his descendants become Israel
- ▶ 3rd (likely) Ham - his descendants become the people of Egypt and Canaan

Terah's (descendent of Shem) sons (Genesis 11)

- ▶ 1st Nahor
- ▶ 2nd Haran
- ▶ 3rd Abram ★ called by YHWH

Abraham's sons (Genesis 16)

- ▶ 1st Ishmael (from Sarah's servant Hagar)
- ▶ 2nd Isaac (from Sarah) ★ YHWH chooses to continue the covenant through Isaac

Isaac's sons (Genesis 25)

- ▶ 1st Esau who sells his birthright to Jacob for a bowl of stew
- ▶ 2nd Jacob ★ Even before the twins are born, YHWH chooses the second born and says to his mother Rebekah "the older will serve the younger" (Gen 25:23); later Jacob tricks Isaac into giving the blessing to him

Jacob's sons (Genesis 29+)

- ▶ 1st Wife Leah (herself a first born)
 - ▶ 1st Reuben
 - ▶ 2nd Simeon
 - ▶ 3rd Levi
 - ▶ 4th Judah ★ receives YHWH's favor
 - ▶ 5th Issachar, 6th Zebulun
- ▶ 2nd Wife Rachel (herself a second born)
 - ▶ 1st Joseph (1st son of Rachel but 11th son of Jacob) ★ receives YHWH's favor
 - ▶ 2nd Benjamin

A Levite man's (and woman's) sons (Exodus 2)

- ▶ 1st Aaron
- ▶ 2nd Moses ★ chosen and elevated by YHWH

Aaron's sons (Numbers 3)

- ▶ 1st and 2nd Nadab and Abihu - died because they made an unauthorized fire before YHWH
- ▶ 3rd and 4th Eleazar and Ithamar - ★ served as priests alongside Aaron

Elkanah's sons (1 Samuel 1, 2)

- ▶ Wife Pennies
 - ▶ had sons and daughters before Hannah
- ▶ Wife Hannah ★ receives YHWH's favor
 - ▶ 1st Samuel ★ elevated above the High Priest Eli's own sons

Jesse's sons (1 Samuel 16)

- ▶ 1st - 7th
- ▶ 8th David ★ YHWH's choice for King
 - ▶ Jonathan, Saul's 1st born, should naturally have succeeded Saul as king had YHWH not chosen David

David's sons

- ▶ 1st - many include Absalom (1 Chronicles 3)
- ▶ not 1st Solomon ★ elevated above David's other sons to become 3rd king of Israel

Mystery / Question

So are we to conclude from the OT narrative that God is against/highly suspicious of firstborns?

No, but “YHWH is opposed to human institutions of power and privilege that distort our perception of what is good and bad...and the way humans try to scheme to get that power.”

Jesus / New Testament

“There’s a very clear emphasis on Jesus’ identity as the firstborn.”

“Jesus holds the place and status of the eternal firstborn within the very being of God.”

“Out of all the humans, here is the one who can truly legitimately be called the firstborn...”

- Colossians 1:15 - the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation
- Colossians 1:18 - He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead
- Romans 8:29 - so that He would be the firstborn among many
- Hebrews 1:6 - angels called to worship the firstborn
- Hebrews 12:23 - assembly/church of the firstborn
- Revelation 1:5 - the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead