

Firstborn, Redemption and the Feast of Unleavened Bread

Reuben, you are my first-born, my might, and the first fruits of my strength, pre-eminent in pride and pre-eminent in power.

So said Jacob to his son Reuben as recorded in Genesis 49:3

Joanne! You are **my** firstborn – and you are very special to me! And our other firstborn children - Michael, Kristi, Kurt, and Madison – you too, are very special to your parents.

Before continuing, and for the benefit of you children who are *not* the firstborn in your families, I should stress that we parents do not love you any less than your older brothers and sisters.

In ancient Israel, however, the firstborn child in every family was considered to be extra special. This apparent favouritism within each family was not just a Hebrew tradition. It was a set of rules given to them by God, through Moses, and was recorded in detail in the books of Exodus, Numbers and Deuteronomy. Frequently, throughout the Bible, instructions with regard to firstborn children are given in the same place as the instructions for the Feast of Unleavened Bread. But why?

In this article, I would like to examine the special significance of the connection between the firstborn children and the Feast of Unleavened Bread.

Firstborn set apart in Old Testament Israel

First of all then, let us go back to the instructions for that first Feast of Unleavened Bread at the time of the Exodus and see how God, at that time, set apart the firstborn of Old Testament Israel.

The Israelites were already accustomed to certain special treatment of their firstborn from the period covered in the book of Genesis. You are familiar with such scriptures regarding Esau and Jacob, Rachel and Leah, Reuben and Joseph, Ephraim and Manasseh. But here, at the very beginning of His commission to Moses to lead Israel out of Egypt, and despite the fact that he human Israel (whose name was changed from *Jacob*) had an older brother (Genesis 32:28; 25:25), God clearly identifies the children of Israel, collectively, as His firstborn:

And you shall say to Pharaoh, 'Thus says the LORD, Israel is my firstborn son, and I say to you, "Let my son go that he may serve me; if you refuse to let him go, behold, I will slay your firstborn son.'" (Exodus 4:22-23)

God's warning to the Egyptians that He would kill their firstborn was pre-planned right from the beginning. It was not, as *The Ten Commandments* motion picture would have you believe, a last minute decision that God resorted to when all the other plagues failed to achieve their desired effect. In His mercy, God repeated His warning to Pharaoh, thus giving him plenty of opportunity to repent:

And all the firstborn in the land of Egypt shall die, from the firstborn of Pharaoh who sits upon his throne, even to the firstborn of the maidservant who is behind the mill; and all the firstborn of the cattle. (Exodus 11:5)

Throughout Exodus Chapter 12, God gives Moses detailed instructions on how to keep the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread. Then, at the beginning of Chapter 13, seemingly right out of the blue, God ever-so-briefly introduces His setting apart of the firstborn male children within the nation of Israel:

And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, sanctify all the firstborn to me, whatever opens the womb among the sons of Israel, of man and of beast. It is mine. (Exodus 13:1-2 MKJV)

In verses 3 to 10, He continues giving more detailed instructions for the Feast of Unleavened Bread. Then, in verse 11, He returns to the subject of the firstborn and gives some more detailed rules:

And it will be, when the LORD shall bring you into the land of the Canaanites, as He swore to you and to your fathers, and shall give it to you, you shall set apart to the LORD every one that opens the womb, and every firstborn that comes of any animal which you have; the males shall be the LORD's. And 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. (Exodus 13:11-13 MKJV)

The word "redeem" means, in simple terms, "buy back." If a family's firstborn donkey was more critical to their livelihood, they could buy it back from God by offering a lamb in its stead. Of course, God did not demand His people to offer their firstborn children as literal human sacrifices. They too were to be bought back by means of a lamb sacrifice. Continuing on in verse 14 of Exodus 13:

And it shall be when your son asks you in time to come, saying, What is this? you shall say to him, The LORD brought us out of Egypt by the strength of His hand, from the house of bondage. And it happened when Pharaoh would hardly let us go, the LORD killed all the firstborn of the land of Egypt, both the firstborn of man, and the firstborn of animals. Therefore I sacrifice to the LORD all that opens the womb that are males. But all the firstborn of my sons I redeem. And it shall be for a token upon your hand, and for frontlets between your eyes. For the LORD brought us out from Egypt by strength of His hand. (Exodus 13:14-16)

This relationship between the firstborn and the Feast of Unleavened Bread is repeated in Exodus Chapter 34:

The feast of unleavened bread you shall keep. Seven days you shall eat unleavened bread, as I commanded you, at the time appointed in the month Abib; for in the month Abib you came out from Egypt. All that opens the womb is mine, all your male cattle, the firstlings of cow and sheep. The firstling of a donkey you shall redeem with a lamb, or if you will not redeem it you shall break its neck. All the first-born of your sons you shall redeem. And none shall appear before me empty. (Exodus 34:18-20)

God gives additional instructions in the twenty-second chapter of Exodus:

You shall not delay to offer the first of your ripe fruits and of your sap [KJV: *your liquors*; RSV: *the outflow of your presses*]. You shall give the firstborn of your sons to me. Likewise you shall do with your oxen and with your sheep; it shall be with its dam [*mother sheep*] seven days. On the eighth day you shall give it to me. (Exodus 22:29-30 MKJV)

Here, God told the Israelites that their firstborn cattle and sheep were to be offered to Him on their eighth day of life. Likewise, the firstborn of the Israelite children – or rather the redeeming sacrifice lambs with which the parents bought back their newborn babies from God – were to be offered on the babies' eighth day of life. In the case of a boy, this was also the day of his circumcision. The baby was "presented" to God at this time and, although the parents had redeemed the baby, God still claimed the firstborn as being special to Him and still belonging to Him!

It should be noted that the eighth day presentation and offering were peculiar to the firstborn only and was in addition to the sin offering and burnt offering (pigeons, turtle-doves or lambs) which were required for every other newborn baby and for the ritual purification of the mother:

And the LORD spoke to Moses saying, Speak to the sons of Israel, saying, If a woman has conceived seed and has borne a male, then she shall be unclean seven days;... And in the eighth day...he... shall be circumcised. (Leviticus 12:1-3 MKJV)

This was to take place on the baby boy's eighth day of life, the same day on which he was redeemed (bought back). Later another offering was to be given:

And she shall then continue in... her purifying thirty-three days. She shall touch no holy thing, nor come into the sanctuary, until the days of her purifying are fulfilled. But if she bears a female, then she shall be unclean two weeks,... And she shall continue in... her purifying sixty-six days. And when the days of her purifying are fulfilled, for a son or for a daughter, she shall bring a lamb of the first year for a burnt offering, and a young pigeon or a turtle-dove, for a sin offering to the door of the tabernacle of the congregation, to the priest. (Leviticus 12:4-6 MKJV)

Please note that she could not make this offering until her purification time was over. Continuing in verse 7:

And he shall offer it before the LORD, and make an atonement for her. And she shall be cleansed..... This is the law for her that has borne a male or a female. And if her hand cannot reach to a lamb, then she shall bring two turtle-doves or two young pigeons. The one shall be for a burnt offering, and the other for a sin offering. And the priest shall make an atonement for her, and she shall be cleansed. (Leviticus 12:7-8 MKJV)

Originally then, it appears that God had set apart all firstborn children as belonging to Him and to be used in His service. At the institution of the Levitical priesthood, however, God substituted Levite priests for His service in place of the firstborn of the other tribes. See Numbers chapter 3:

And the LORD said to Moses, "Behold, I have taken the Levites from among the people of Israel instead of every first-born that opens the womb among the people of Israel. The Levites shall be mine, for all the first-born are mine; on the day that I slew all the first-born in the land of Egypt, I consecrated for my own all the first-born in Israel, both of man and of beast; they shall be mine: I am the LORD." And the LORD said to Moses, "Number all the first-born males of the people of Israel, from a month old and upward, taking their number by names. And you shall take the Levites for me – I am the LORD – instead of all the first-born among the people of Israel, and the cattle of the Levites instead of all the firstlings among the cattle of the people of Israel." So Moses numbered all the first-born among the people of Israel, as the LORD commanded him. And all the first-born males, according to the number of names, from a month old and upward as numbered were twenty-two thousand two hundred and seventy-three.

"Take the Levites instead of all the first-born among the people of Israel, and the cattle of the Levites instead of their cattle; and the Levites shall be mine: I am the LORD. And for the redemption of the two hundred and seventy-three of the first-born of the people of Israel, over and above the number of the male Levites, (Numbers 3:11-13, 40-43, 45-46)

Also in chapter 8:

For they are wholly given to me from among the people of Israel; instead of all that open the womb, the first-born of all the people of Israel, I have taken them for myself. For all the first-born among the people of Israel are mine, both of man and of beast; on the day that I slew all the first-born in the land of Egypt I consecrated them for myself, and I have taken the Levites instead of all the first-born among the people of Israel. (Numbers 8:16-18)

There is some hint here that, even though God takes the Levites for His daily service, He still claims Israel's firstborn as His own. Then in chapter 18:

Everything that opens the womb of all flesh, whether man or beast, which they offer to the LORD, shall be yours [*Aaron's and the Levitical priesthood's, on behalf of God*]; nevertheless the first-born of man you shall redeem, and the firstling of unclean beasts you shall redeem. (Numbers 18:15)

Again we see that, even after the institution of the Levitical priesthood, God still claimed all the firstborn of Israel as His own and as special to Him. Hundreds of years later, after the Jews had returned from their captivity in Babylon, they re-instituted God's ownership of the firstborn:

Also to bring to the house of our God, to the priests who minister in the house of our God, the first-born of our sons and of our cattle, as it is written in the law, and the firstlings of our herds and of our flocks; (Nehemiah 10:36)

Jesus Christ's fulfillment of laws regarding the firstborn

Let us jump ahead now to the year 4 BC, still in the land of Israel. A lot of water had flowed under Israel's bridge since its early days as a nation and, even though the priesthood had become increasingly corrupt, God's rules regarding the firstborn were still being upheld in that remnant of the nation. Now Jesus Christ, who had just come into the world as the Firstborn (both of His heavenly Father and of His physical mother, Mary), was about to begin a life of obedience to His own laws:

And she gave birth to her first-born son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths, and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn... And when eight days were fulfilled to circumcise the child, His name was called JESUS, the name called by the angel before He was conceived in the womb. (Luke 2:7, 21)

This was Jesus' eighth day of life. He was circumcised and, as He was the firstborn, He was dedicated to God's service from that day on. It is interesting to note that there is no mention of Mary and Joseph offering a lamb as a redeeming sacrifice. It is not mentioned as are the later sin and burnt offerings that they presented later on the fortieth day of Jesus' life on earth:

And when the time came for their purification according to the law of Moses, they brought him up to Jerusalem to present him to the Lord (as it is written in the law of the Lord, "Every male that opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord") and to offer a sacrifice according to that said in the Law of the Lord, a pair of turtledoves or two young pigeons. (Luke 2:22-24)

This appears to be because:

- a) Jesus Himself was to become the Redeeming Sacrifice to which all other redeeming sacrifices had pointed since Moses' time,
- b) His physical life was now completely dedicated to God, as had been pictured by all the other firstborn since Moses' time,
- c) He was not to be redeemed from a life of total service to God – neither by a lamb offering nor by the service of the (now corrupt) Levitical priesthood. It was His perfect life of service that the imperfect Levitical priesthood had pictured since Moses. The Levitical priesthood was soon to be over and His own (Melchisedec) priesthood was soon to be reinstated.

The offering of the two turtledoves or pigeons refers to the fortieth day purification, *not* to the fact that Jesus was the firstborn. Again, this purification offering was required for *all* births, not just for the firstborn. Continuing in verse 27:

And he came by the Spirit into the temple. And as the parents brought in the child Jesus, to do according to the custom of the law concerning Him, (Luke 2:27)

This "custom of the law" refers specifically to the fortieth day purification offerings at the temple. Both Mary and Joseph attended. Mary was still ceremonially unclean on Jesus' eighth day of life and the indication is that the eighth day firstborn and circumcision ceremonies were performed at home, not at the temple. (See Luke 1:57-59 regarding the circumcision of John the Baptist).

Significance of God's firstborn laws to His Church today

All of these sacrifices and offerings were for Old Testament Israel. What is their significance to the people of God's church today?

It seems that there are actually two answers to this question – two explanations for the symbolism of the firstborn and its connection to the Feast of Unleavened Bread. To find these answers, we need to turn back to the original instructions in the thirteenth chapter of Exodus. We are to be like the son in verse 14 who asks, "What is this? What do all of these rules about the firstborn mean?":

You shall set apart to the LORD every one that opens the womb, and every firstborn that comes of any animal which you have; the males shall be the LORD's. (Exodus 13:12 MKJV)

The firstborn of all clean, male animals (cattle, sheep, goats, etc.) were the Eternal's. They were to be killed and sacrificed to Him. Amazingly, these animals appear to represent the Egyptian firstborn and thus represent sin to us.

And all the firstborn of man among your sons you shall redeem. (Exodus 13:13)

The firstborn of Israelite children were to be redeemed or "bought back" by the offering of a lamb. These firstborn children represent the people of God's church today. The redeeming lamb represents Jesus Christ. Verse 14 again:

And it shall be when your son asks you in time to come, saying, What is this? you shall say to him, The LORD brought us out of Egypt by the strength of His hand, from the house of bondage.

Again, we sons of God ask, "What is this? What does it all mean?"

The answer begins: God brought Israel out of Egyptian slavery by His great strength and power. But this "Old Testament answer" is only symbolic of its New Testament antitype. God likewise brought the people of His church out of this sinful "world held captive." Verse 15:

And it happened when Pharaoh would hardly let us go, the LORD killed all the firstborn of the land of Egypt, both the firstborn of man, and the firstborn of animals. Therefore I sacrifice to the LORD all that opens the womb that are males. But all the firstborn of my sons I redeem.

Again, the firstborn animals represent the Egyptian firstborn. God released Pharaoh's strong grip on Israel (His Old Testament firstborn) by killing Egypt's firstborn on that first Passover night. Likewise, God released Satan's grip on the people of His church (His New Testament firstborn) by allowing His Firstborn Son, Jesus Christ, to be killed. Can it really be that our Saviour – the slain Lamb of God – can be symbolized by the Egyptian firstborn? God inspired the apostle Paul to write that Jesus allowed Himself to be degraded to the bottom of the barrel – the level of the lowest of the low – the personification of a curse and of sin itself:

Christ hath redeemed us from the curse of the law, being made a curse for us: for it is written, Cursed is every one that hangeth on a tree: (Galatians 3:13)

Again, the redemption ("buy-back") of the Israelite human firstborn is a reminder of the miraculous preservation of the Israelite firstborn on the first Passover night. It also looked forward to the redemption of the church by the sacrifice of Jesus Christ who became sin like the lambs that represented Egypt and the Egyptian firstborn:

For He [*God the Father*] has made Him who knew no sin [*Jesus Christ*], to be sin for us, that we might become the righteousness of God in Him. (2 Corinthians 5:21)

Because Jesus was willing to become sin for us, and to carry our sins until the time comes when He will put them where they rightly belong – on the head of Satan the Devil – He has become our Firstborn Elder Brother:

For those whom he foreknew he also predestined to be conformed to the image of his Son, in order that he might be the first-born among many brethren. (Romans 8:29)

He is the image of the invisible God, the first-born of all creation... He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the first-born from the dead, that in everything he might be pre-eminent (Colossians 1:15, 18)

And again, when he brings the first-born into the world, he says, "Let all God's angels worship him." (Hebrews 1:6)

And from Jesus Christ the faithful witness, the first-born of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth. To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood (Revelation 1:5)

Finally, let us look at Hebrews chapter 12:

But you have come to Mount Zion and to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to innumerable angels in festal gathering, (Verse 22 RSV)

This RSV translation of this verse refers to these angels as being "in festal gathering" – gathered, just like we are during the Days of Unleavened Bread, for a Feast!

To the general assembly and church of the firstborn who are written in Heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of just men made perfect, (Verse 23 MKJV)

We are part of God's church of the firstborn – God's special New Testament firstborn. Let us not forget, especially after our pre-Passover self-examinations, that, just as each of our children is very special to us, we, individually and collectively as members of His church, are very special and precious to our Heavenly Father.

We are members of God's true church... the church of God's firstborn!

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