

# The Doctrine of the Firstborn

**Preface:** When I came across the birth of Samuel, and when his mother was not ready to bring him to the Tent of God; and then when I looked up a parallel passage in Luke 2 when Jesus was taken to the Temple of God in what appears to be obedience to the Mosaic Law. **And when the eight days to circumcise Him were completed, His name was called Jesus, the name called by the angel before He was conceived in the womb. And when the days of their purification were completed according to the Law of Moses, they brought Him up to Jerusalem to present [Him] to the Lord (just as it stands written in the Law of the Lord: Every male opening a womb shall be called set apart to the Lord and to give a sacrifice according the spoken thing in the Law of the Lord, a pair of doves or two young pigeons.** (Luke 2:21–24 Ex. 13:2, 12 Lev. 5:11 12:8). Reading this caused me to wonder—were all babies to be brought to the Tent or Temple? Were the firstborn supposed to be brought? What was the sacrifice for the firstborn? Wasn't there something about the Levites taking the place of the firstborn. The problem is, if you have an incomplete understanding of the Law, then it appears as though Joseph and Mary are bringing their child, Jesus, to the Tent of God, and sacrificing a pair of turtledoves or pigeons on His behalf. However, there is no such offering listed in the Law for a firstborn. Hence, this doctrine. However, this properly belongs in the book of Exodus.

Topics		
The Hebrew and Greek Words	First Use of <i>Firstborn</i>	Jacob and Esau
The Birthright of Abraham and Promises of God to Abraham	Reuben as Jacob's Firstborn	The Passover
The Levites are Substituted for Jacob's Firstborn	The Correct Interpretation of Luke 2:21–24	Jesus Christ is God's Firstborn
		Conclusions
Charts, Maps and Short Doctrines		
The Line of Abraham		The Abbreviated Doctrine of the Firstborn

1. The related Hebrew words:
  - a. In the Hebrew, the word *firstborn* is  $b^{\circ}k\hat{o}w\ddot{r}$  (בְּכוֹר) [pronounced  $b^{\circ}KOHR$ ]. Throughout the KJV, it is consistently rendered *firstborn*. Metaphorically, this word is used for *anything which is chief or first of its kind* Strong's #1060 BDB #114.
  - b. The feminine noun is  $b^{\circ}k\hat{o}w\ddot{r}\hat{a}h$  (בְּכוֹרָה) [pronounced  $b^{\circ}koh-RAW$ ], which means *rights and responsibilities of the firstborn, privileges of the firstborn, birthright [of the firstborn]; primogeniture*. By virtue of being born first, each firstborn has certain rights and privileges which are bestowed upon him. We have several instances in the Bible where this is taken away. In the plural,  $b^{\circ}k\hat{o}w\ddot{r}\hat{a}h$  has the less technical use of referring to the firstborn animals of a flock (Deut. 12:6, 17 14:23 Neh. 10:36). However, so that you don't go wacky on me and cite this as an example of why Deuteronomy was written by someone different than Genesis (which is where we find this word used more often), we find it used to mean *rights of the firstborn* in Deut. 21:17.<sup>1</sup> The fact that we do not find this word in the other

<sup>1</sup> This is somewhat of a tangent, so bear with me. I certainly believe that Genesis was originally written by someone other than Moses. However, I do not subscribe to the JEPD theory which says that various bits and pieces of the Law were written by several authors and then pieced together hundreds of years later. I believe that Genesis was written by the people of that time

books of the Law indicates that there was never, by God's Law, a set of definite rights and responsibilities which belonged to the firstborn. That was a matter of tradition and culture, but not Law. We find evidence of this in Gen. 29:26. Strong's #1062 BDB #114.

- c. There is another feminine noun *b<sup>e</sup>kîyrâh* (בְּרִיָּה) [pronounced *b<sup>e</sup>-kee-RAW*], which means *firstborn* and it is always of women. Although listed as an adjective in Wigram's Concordance, it always acts as a noun. This word is only found in Gen. 19, 20 and 1Sam. 14:49 and these passages are not really pertinent to our study. Strong's #1067 BDB #114.
  - d. Finally, there is actually a verbal cognate: *bâkar* (בָּרַךְ) [pronounced *baw-KAHR*], which means, depending upon the stem, *to bear a firstborn, to be born first, to bear new fruit, to give the right of primogeniture [to someone]*. Obviously, the use of this word with respect to one's birthright or order of birth will be much more limited than the use of the nouns. It is only found in Lev. 27:26 Deut. 21:16 Jer. 4:31 Ezek. 47:12. Strong's #1069 BDB #114.
2. The related Greek words:
    - a. The noun/adjective *prôtotos* (πρωτότοκος) [pronounced *proh-tot-OK-oss*], which means *firstborn [of man or animals]; the beginning [first] [of a new series]*. Used as an adjective only in Luke 2:7; elsewhere as a noun. Strong's #4416.
    - b. The neuter noun: *prôtotokia* (πρωτότοκία) [pronounced *proh-toht-OHK-ee-ah*], which means *birthright, right [or privilege] of primogeniture, the right or advantages of the firstborn son*. This references the religious leadership of a family (the firstborn belongs to God); and the double-portion of the father's wealth went to him. Balz, Strong, Thayer and Zodhiates. Strong's #4415.
  3. Webster gives us two sets of definitions for *first-born*, which is important in order to interpret the next point:
    - a. First brought forth; first in the order of nativity; eldest; as the first-born son.
    - b. Most excellent; most distinguished or exalted. Christ is called the first-born of every creature.<sup>2</sup>
  4. It is very important in the Bible, the first time a word is used. This sort of sets the tone and/or the parameters for this word.
    - a. When the first man born to a woman occurs in Scripture, he is named Abel but he is not called Adam and Eve's firstborn. We associate this term with the firstborn of Abel's flock which he brings to God to be sacrificed, a sacrifice which God respects (which sacrifice speaks of Jesus Christ). Gen. 4:4
    - b. The first time *firstborn* is used in the New Testament (Luke 2:7), it also refers to Jesus Christ (the only use of that term in the gospels).
  5. Common uses of the term *firstborn*:
    - a. The first and primary use of the word *b<sup>e</sup>kôwr* was simply in genealogical lines (Gen. 10:15 22:21 25:13 35:23 36:15 38:6–7 41:51 Ex. 6:14 1Chron. 1:13, 29 2:3, 13, 20, etc.).
    - b. *B<sup>e</sup>kôwr* is also used to simply used to refer to the *firstborn* of a family where there is no specific message or doctrine related to being firstborn (e.g., Gen. 19:31–37 Num. 3:2 Judges 8:20 1Sam. 8:2 17:13).
  6. It is in Gen. 25 where we have our first indication that being the firstborn carries with it some privileges. This is the chapter where Esau, the firstborn, and Jacob interact with Isaac, their very old and mostly blind father. Jacob is after the blessing of the firstborn. As we go over the sub-points, bear in mind that the Mosaic Law is not been spoken yet and what we are examining here is more tradition than anything else.
    - a. Esau and Isaac were twins, with Esau being delivered first. Isaac came out next, holding onto the heel of Esau. God spoke to Rebekah concerning these two, saying that they would become two nations who would struggle against one another and that the older would eventually serve the younger (Gen. 25:22–26).
    - b. Unfortunately, both Isaac and Rebekah developed favorites—Isaac preferred his firstborn, Esau, the hunter; and Rebekah preferred Jacob, who apparently learned to cook (Gen. 25:27–29).
    - c. When Esau came in from the field, he was starving—hungry to the point of great weakness. Jacob had made a stew. When Esau asked for some, Jacob made Esau give up his birthright for a bowl of stew. Esau's rationalization is that he was so hungry, he was about to die and what good is a birthright after death? Just exactly what this birthright entailed is not told to us. We also do not know who was later told about the exchange of the birthright. It is never disclosed whether this was simply between Esau

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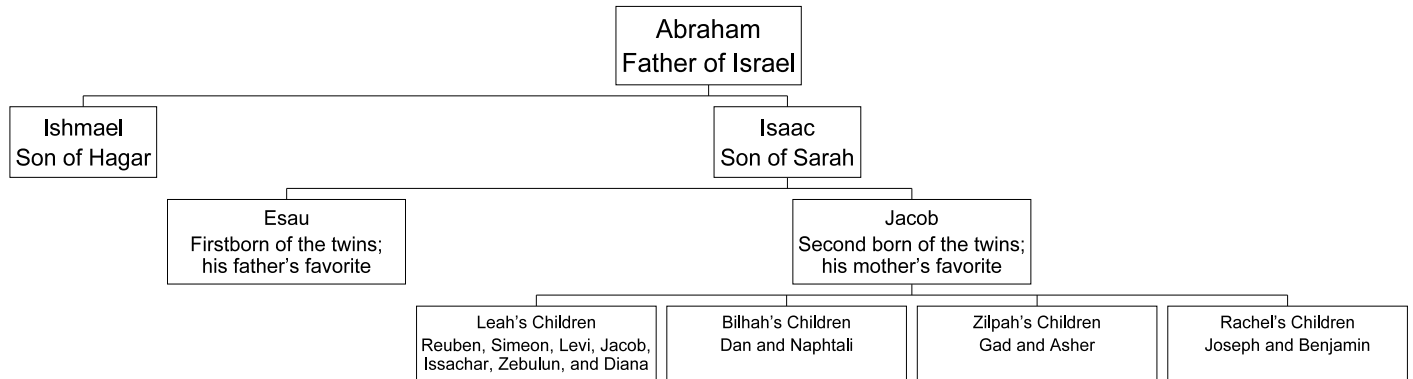
period, where one author added to what a previous author wrote and that this was possibly even the Word of God for the Israelites during their period of slavery to Egypt (it may have also been in the possession of Moses' father-in-law).

<sup>2</sup> Noah Webster's 1828 Dictionary of American English from e-sword; topic: first-born.

and Jacob, or whether Jacob informed his parents of this information; however, it is implied that this was known in their family in Gen. 27:36. Gen. 25:29–34

- d. In Gen. 27, Jacob steals the blessing of his father to Esau. He pretends to be Esau (at the urging and help of his mother), and receives the blessing from Isaac that was meant for Esau. This is not necessarily related to one being firstborn or not. Isaac simply, prior to his death, was going to bless Esau, but blessed Jacob instead. Jacob, when masquerading as his brother, identified himself several times to his father as his *firstborn*.

In order to better understand what is to follow, I have included a chart, **The Line of Abraham** for your perusal.



- 7. Although it is never stated outright, what appears to be the original and important birthright and the blessing of the firstborn is the promises of God which were made to Abraham.
  - a. When God tells Abram to leave his homeland, it is with the promise that He would bless Abram greatly and that all the families of the earth would be bless in him (Gen. 12:1–3).
  - b. God promised that the land of Canaan would be given to the descendants of Abraham (Gen. 12:7 13:14–17 15:7).
  - c. God also promised Abram that the child who would come from his own loins would be his heir; furthermore, Abram's descendants would be numbered like the sand of the sea and the stars of the sky (Gen. 15:1–5).
  - d. Although God made several promises to Abraham concerning his many descendants (Gen. 17:1–6), God seemed to give Abraham a promise which was designed more for him and a specific line of descendants. “And I will establish My covenant between Me and you and your descendants after you throughout their generations for an everlasting covenant, to be God to you and to your descendants after you. And I will give to you and to your descendants after you, the land of your visiting, all the land of Canaan, for an everlasting possession; and I will be their God.” (Gen. 17:7–8). Then God promised that these blessings would be fulfilled in a son by Sarai (who was 90 and barren at the time): “And I will bless her and I will certainly give you a son by her. Then I will bless her, and she will be a mother of nations; kings of peoples will come from her...Sarah your wife will bear to you a son and you will name him Isaac; and I will establish My covenant with him for an everlasting covenant for his descendants after him.” (Gen. 17:16, 19).
  - e. Therefore, there is a particular line of Abraham that would be blessed by God forever, and this would have been the likely focus of Jacob. It would have reasonably been considered the birthright of the firstborn. None of this is stated outright; but it is a reasonable assumption. Esau's lack of interest in the birthright makes more sense. If he dies of hunger, obviously his line would not receive the blessing (as he had no line). However, more likely, his thinking was, *these are my children and my children's children—it isn't me, so why should I really give a rip?* Neither Esau or Jacob had promises that they themselves would own the land of Canaan; neither received a promise that they would rule over nations.

This would be a promise which would be passed on through the chosen one's line. Esau apparently did not have nearly as much interest in his own progeny as did Jacob.

8. It is not actually until Gen. 43:33 when the eleven sons were before their brother Joseph in Egypt that we have a mention of a birthright. At this point in time, Joseph's brothers do not know who he is and he knows who they are; so he arranges them at a table for supper in the order of their birth. Since they are grown men from four different mothers, so that making such a distinction would have been impossible for anyone to have done without knowing the actual birth order. Gen. 43:33 reads: **Now they were seated before him, the firstborn according to his birthright and the youngest according to his youth, and the men looked at one another in astonishment.** The word for *birthright* is a cognate of firstborn: b<sup>e</sup>kôwrâh (בְּכֹרֶת) [pronounced b<sup>e</sup>koh-RAW], which means *rights and responsibilities of the firstborn, privileges of the firstborn, birthright [of the firstborn]*. Strong's #1062 BDB #114. This verse clearly associates the birthright of the firstborn with Reuben, although he is not specifically named.
9. Near the end of his life, Jacob (also known as *Israel*) blessed Joseph's children (who were Jacob's grandchildren). The right hand was to go to the head of the oldest and left to the head of the younger child. Jacob crossed his arms, which upset Joseph. Jacob said that Ephraim, the youngest, would be blessed beyond Manasseh, the older (Gen. 48:12–22).
10. Jacob also blesses his own sons, referring to Reuben as his firstborn. Then he tells Reuben that he is spineless. Reuben lacked character and judgment. When he comes to Judah, Jacob says that his brothers would praise him and bow down to him, meaning that the descendants of his brothers would bow down and praise his Descendant. Actually, this has a double-fulfillment: it is fulfilled in the royal line which extends David to the last king of Judah; and this is fulfilled in our Lord as well, Whose humanity is in the line of Judah (Luke 3:23–33). What had happened was that Reuben, due to his lack of leadership, particularly with regards to the brothers' treatment of Joseph, lost his birthright. He lost the leadership aspect of his birthright to Judah and the double portion to Joseph. We will touch on this in 1Chron. 5:1–2, where the passage is properly exegeted (we will examine this probably after the book of Ruth).
11. Although, traditionally, the firstborn was seen as the primary continuation of the line of the father, and often due more blessing and inheritance, God blessed men based upon their regeneration and cursed men if they were negative toward Him. Some of the examples given below have already been covered.
  - a. Jacob was technically the second born of Isaac (he was a twin). The Jewish race was continued through him.
  - b. Reuben was Jacob's firstborn, but Joseph was the most blessed to begin with, but the kingly line eventually went through Jacob. Gen. 49:3–4 1Chron. 5:1–2
  - c. God killed Judah's firstborn Er (it is not clear if this was the sin unto death or if Er was just a particularly odious unbeliever). Gen. 41:51
  - d. The Levites were taken as God's firstborn, instead of the firstborn from every family, as a tribe dedicated to Him. Num. 3:12, 45, 50 The close association with the number of Levites as compared to the number of firstborn was to indication (1) that redemption was involved in setting apart the firstborn; (2) setting apart the Levites as firstborn was analogous to God setting apart Jesus as His firstborn; and (3) the redemption had to be exactly the right amount. Jesus could not just go and suffer on the cross for awhile, and that would do the trick; He had to pay for the sins of all mankind. *Redemption*, by the way, means *payment*.
  - e. This redemption was continued so that all of the firstborn had to be redeemed. Num. 18:15 Again, the idea was to connect redemption with the firstborn with a specific amount (a specific redemption amount).
  - f. There were fathers who also did not give what was traditionally due their firstborn. Hosah made Shimri chief, even though he was not his firstborn. 1Chron. 26:10
12. The Passover: The final judgment against Egypt was to kill their firstborn. This was a type of Christ. Ex. 11–12 Num. 8:16–18 9 Deut. 16:1–6 Psalm 105:36 135:8 136:10 (which passage associates God's love with striking them down) 1Cor. 5:7 Heb. 11:28
  - a. God calls Israel His *firstborn* in Ex. 4:22. The implication is that there could be another born of God. However, God used it in this way: Pharaoh was to let God's firstborn go or He would kill Pharaoh's firstborn (Ex. 4:23).
  - b. God has Moses threaten the Pharaoh with this in Ex. 11:4–6.
  - c. Death of the firstborn is a type of Christ, as Christ is the Firstborn of God. 1Cor. 5:7 Heb. 1:6

- d. Prior to the carrying out of this curse, God instructs Moses in the Passover. All of Israel is to, by household, slaughter a lamb. What God says is chilling: “The whole assembly of the congregation of Israel is to kill it at twilight.” (Ex. 12:6b). The blood of the lamb is then smeared on both sides and at the top of the door frame (Ex. 12:7, 22). That believers were passed over because of the blood about their door (matching the blood on our Lord’s hands, head and feet), is a picture of God not judging us because He has judged His Firstborn in our stead. When God saw the blood of the Passover at the entrance of the house, God would not go into the house and kill the firstborn (Ex. 12:13, 23). Then they were to roast the lamb with fire without removing any part of it, and then to eat the lamb (Ex. 12:7–11). Fire speaks of God’s judgment, which is put upon His Lamb rather than upon mankind, who deserves death.
- e. Easton tells us about the Egyptian Pharaoh who was probably the one whose firstborn died during this time: *Menephtah is probably the Pharaoh whose first-born was slain. His son did not succeed or survive his father, but died early. The son’s tomb has been found at Thebes unfinished, showing it was needed earlier than was expected. Some of the records on the tomb are as follows: “The son whom Menephtah loves; who draws towards him his father’s heart, the singer, the prince of archers, who governed Egypt on behalf of his father. Dead.”*<sup>3</sup>
13. The firstborn of a person’s animals was associated with redemption. Ex. 34:19–20 Lev. 27:26 Deut. 12:6
- a. When Moses took Israel out of Egypt, God told him to set apart all the firstborn of Israel to Him, as they belong to Him (Ex. 13:2, 12). When the firstborn of an ass was born, it was to be redeemed with a lamb (that is, a lamb would be slaughtered to purchase this firstborn back from God—Ex. 13:13). In Ex. 13, where the redemption of every firstborn is required, the mechanics are only given for the firstborn of an ass. Again, the concepts of redemption, the Firstborn and a substitutionary offering are combined.
- b. The term *firstborn* is not found again until Lev. 27:26, where God defines what must be given for the firstborn of one’s unclean animals. This passage is related primarily to tithing and to the consecrating of a man’s possessions to God. They would be purchased back from God at prices specified in this chapter (Lev. 27). That firstborn of the clean animals already belong to God and are not, therefore, consecrated to God (Lev. 27:26).
- c. The firstborn of the flocks were to be dedicated to God. Deut. 14:23 15:19
- d. However, Ezekiel, when speaking of Israel under judgment, tells them that they could not have life by the Law and that they were defiled when offering up their firstborn (from their flocks). Ezek. 20:23–26
- e. Micah asks if all these offerings, including the firstborn, was enough, if they defiled him with their actions. Micah 6:5–8
14. God then made a change in His policy: He took the Levites out of Israel, rather than the firstborn of all the sons of Israel (Num. 3:11–13, 40–41, 45 8:14–18). So throughout the entirety of the Law, there is no specific sacrifice or ritual designed for the firstborn of a family. The reason for this is that God took the Levites to Himself rather than the firstborn of every family. What we have here is a substitution, which is a major theme of the Old Testament.
15. In Deut. 15:19–23, Moses gives specific directions in dealing with the firstborn of the clean animals: they are not to be worked or shorn. They are to be brought to the Tent of God (which is not stated by implied) and slaughtered and eaten. The exception is the firstborn animals with any defect.
16. It is not until Deut. 21:15–17 where we get a better feel for what is given to the firstborn: the firstborn was to receive a double portion. This double portion is not introduced here as some new doctrine, as the Law here is covering the situation of having more than one wife; one loved and the other unloved. The firstborn of the unloved was not to be cheated of his inheritance because he is the son of the unloved. That the firstborn generally receives a double portion seems to be understood.
17. Somewhat related to the firstborn is the levirate marriage. When a man dies before siring a child, his brother is to take his brother’s wife as his own, impregnate her, and raise up the firstborn under the deceased brother’s name.
18. After Jericho was taken by Joshua and his men, he pronounced a curse on the firstborn of anyone who tried to rebuild this city (Joshua 6:26). This was fulfilled in 1Kings 16:64.
19. Jehoram received the kingdom from his father, Jehoshaphat, because he was the firstborn. 2Chron. 21:1–3

<sup>3</sup> M.G. Easton M.A., D.D., *Illustrated Bible Dictionary*; 1897; from e-Sword, topic: first-born.

20. Ephraim is called God's firstborn in Jer. 31:9, a passage where God speaks of Israel and Ephraim returning to Him.
21. Jesus Christ is called the firstborn in Psalm 89:27.
22. What we have, then, in Luke 2:21–24 requires some explanation.
- Luke 2:21–24 reads: **And when the eight days to circumcise Him were completed, His name was called Jesus, the name called by the angel before He was conceived in the womb. And when the days of their purification were completed according to the Law of Moses, they brought Him up to Jerusalem to present [Him] to the Lord (just as it stands written in the Law of the Lord: Every male opening a womb shall be called set apart to the Lord and to give a sacrifice according the spoken thing in the Law of the Lord, a pair of doves or two young pigeons.** Ex. 13:2, 12 Lev. 5:11 12:8.
  - It is easy to misinterpret this passage as follows: It appears, if one does not read the passage carefully, that part of the dedication of the firstborn is the sacrifice of two turtledoves or two pigeons, which dedication ritual is unknown in the Law of Moses. Joseph and Mary are dedicating their firstborn to God and a portion of this dedication is this sacrifice. As we go through the Old Testament, we find there is no such sacrifice offered on behalf of the firstborn. Now, we cannot attribute this to ignorance on the part of Joseph and Mary, nor can we attribute it to tradition, which is not in accordance with the Law for two reasons: (1) it would make little sense for our Lord to be brought into the world with His parents obeying a ritual which was never a part of the Word of God. (2) Secondly, it says that they offered a sacrifice which was in accordance with the Law of the Lord (v. 24). Please realize that the Divine author of Scripture is God the Holy Spirit. This would mean that God the Holy Spirit made a mistake in this passage. So, having studied the Law, somewhat superficially, and then having read this passage in Luke, I had a problem. They did not seem to jive; and this is why I launched into this particular study. This posed to me an enormous potential contradiction, one that most (if not all) of the Scriptural critics missed. However, just because they did not catch this possible problem, does not mean that we are relieved from examining it thoroughly.
  - First of all, as we have studied, the firstborn was set apart to Jehovah God (Ex. 12:2, 13). However, no specific sacrifice or ritual is ever given to us concerning the dedication of the firstborn (except for the firstborn of the unclean animals).
  - Later, the Levites were taken in place of the firstborn (Num. 3:11–13, 40–41). That is, instead of each family setting aside their firstborn to God, God took the tribe of Levi instead as Israel's substituted *firstborn* dedicated to Him.
  - The pair of doves or two young pigeons mentioned were the offerings which were acceptable from those who were poor. The guilt offering is outlined for us in Lev. 5, and these sacrifices were to be offered or to be substituted when one could not afford to bring a lamb before God (Lev. 5:7, 11).
  - A woman who is unclean due to childbirth must also bring a sacrifice. The child is to be circumcised, and then she is to go through a purification period. Then she is to bring a lamb for a burnt offering; and if she cannot afford a lamb, then two turtledoves or two young pigeons (Lev. 12:8). This is to be done whether the child is male or female (Lev. 12:7).
  - Here is where we must carefully interpret Luke 2. If we run the thoughts together incorrectly, then we ascribe to the Law what is not in the Law. Our Lord was circumcised on the eighth day, according to the Law (Lev. 12:3 Luke 1:59 2:21). The purification mentioned is that which Mary went through, having given birth (Lev. 12:2, 4–6 Luke 2:22). At one time, the first male opening of the womb was set apart to God, until the Levites were taken in substitution for the firstborn. However, our Lord is completely and wholly given over to God, so it is proper for Him to be represented as set apart to God. The sacrifice noted was not for a sin or guilt offering—and certainly not for our Lord; nor are these sacrifices something prescribed in the Law for the firstborn. These are the sacrifices that are given as an atonement for any Jewish mother who has given birth (Lev. 12:8).
23. Jesus is called the *firstborn* in the New Testament:
- Paul associates Christ as the firstborn of many brothers with election. **For those whom He foreknew He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, in order that He might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom He predestined He also called, and those whom He called He also justified, and those whom He justified He also glorified** (Rom. 8:29–30).

- b. Jesus is called the *firstborn of all creation* in Col. 1:15–16: He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by Him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities--all things were created through Him and for Him.
  - c. He is also called the *firstborn from the dead* in Col. 1:18–20: And He is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. For in Him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through Him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of His cross. He has this same title in Rev. 1:5
  - d. Heb. 1:5–6: For to which of the angels did God ever say, "You are my Son, today I have begotten you"? Or again, "I will be to him a father, and He shall be to Me a son"? And again, when He brings the firstborn into the world, He says, "Let all God's angels worship Him." (Psalm 2:7 2Sam. 7:14 Deut. 32:43 LXX?).
  - e. We should glean two things from these references: Jesus is not actually born or created, but He is preeminent among all that which has been created. Secondly, His title *Firstborn* is also to tie Him to the Passover event, where the death of the firstborn, redemption, the blood of the Lamb and the passing over all those under His blood are all gathered together as a type, for which Jesus is the antitype.
24. There is an *assembly of firstborn* in heaven, spoken of in Heb. 12:18–25: For you have not come to a mountain that might be touched, and that burned with fire, and to blackness, darkness, tempest, the sound of a trumpet, and the voice of words; which those who heard it begged that not one more word should be spoken to them, for they could not stand that which was commanded, "If even an animal touches the mountain, it shall be stoned;" and so fearful was the appearance, that Moses said, "I am terrified and trembling." 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, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel. See that you do not refuse him who is speaking. For if they did not escape when they refused him who warned them on earth, much less will we escape if we reject him who warns from heaven. I am not quite certain that I understand who these are, although it does sound like believers from the Church Age at first glance. The writer is speaking to Hebrew believers and about the union which they have with Gentile believers, and how they are closer to Gentile believers than with Jewish unbelievers. However, others interpret these as angels, who were the firstborn of God's creation, and still others interpret this as believers from Israel. Since I have not carefully exegeted this passage, I hesitate to take a stand here.
25. The conclusions are:
- a. The firstborn had certain rights and privileges which were tied to its responsibilities as firstborn.
  - b. The firstborn received the double portion.
  - c. The firstborn was the leader of his brothers.
  - d. These privileges were a matter of custom and were not guaranteed nor were they protected by the Mosaic Law. As we have seen in several instances, these privileges were inviolate, but could be gained or lost for several reasons (Reuben and Esau are prime examples of those who lost their birthrights).
  - e. The firstborn was also closely associated with death, redemption, the blood of the Lamb, and Passover, and, in this way, looks forward to Jesus Christ, Who is called the Firstborn throughout the epistles.

The complete **Doctrine of the Firstborn** can be found elsewhere, this is the abbreviated version.

### The Abbreviated Doctrine of the Firstborn

1. Two of the related Hebrew words are:
  - a. In the Hebrew, the word *firstborn* is b<sup>o</sup>kôwr (רִבְּוֹן) [pronounced b<sup>o</sup>KOHR]. Metaphorically, this word is used for *anything which is chief or first* of its kind Strong's #1060 BDB #114.
  - b. The feminine noun is b<sup>o</sup>kôwrâh (רִבְּוֹנָה) [pronounced b<sup>o</sup>koh-RAW], which means *rights and responsibilities of the firstborn, privileges of the firstborn, birthright [of the firstborn]; primogeniture*. By virtue of being born first, each firstborn has certain rights and privileges which are bestowed upon him. We have several instances in the Bible where this is taken away. There was never, by God's Law, a set of definite rights and responsibilities which belonged to the firstborn. That was a matter

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- of tradition and culture, but not Law. See Gen. 29:26. Strong's #1062 BDB #114.
2. The related Greek words:
    - a. The noun/adjective *prōtotokos* (πρωτοτόκος) [pronounced *proh-tot-OK-oss*], which means *firstborn [of man or animals]; the beginning [first] [of a new series]*. Used as an adjective only in Luke 2:7; elsewhere as a noun. Strong's #4416.
    - b. The neuter noun: *prōtotokia* (πρωτοτόκια) [pronounced *proh-toht-OHK-ee-ah*], which means *birthright, right [or privilege] of primogeniture, the right or advantages of the firstborn son*. This references the religious leadership of a family (the firstborn belongs to God); and the double-portion of the father's wealth went to him. Strong's #4415.
  3. Webster gives us two sets of definitions for *first-born*, which is important in order to interpret the next point:
    - a. First brought forth; first in the order of nativity; eldest; as the first-born son.
    - b. Most excellent; most distinguished or exalted. Christ is called the first-born of every creature.<sup>1</sup>
  4. It is very important in the Bible, the first time a word is used. This sort of sets the tone and/or the parameters for this word.
    - a. When the first man born to a woman occurs in Scripture, he is named Abel but he is not called Adam and Eve's firstborn. We associate this term with the firstborn of Abel's flock which he brings to God to be sacrificed, a sacrifice which God respects (which sacrifice speaks of Jesus Christ). Gen. 4:4
    - b. The first time *firstborn* is used in the New Testament (Luke 2:7), it also refers to Jesus Christ (the only use of that term in the gospels).
  5. It is in Gen. 25 where we have our first indication that being the firstborn carries with it some privileges. This is the chapter where Esau, the firstborn, and Jacob interact with Isaac, their very old and mostly blind father. Jacob is after the blessing of the firstborn. As we go over the sub-points, bear in mind that the Mosaic Law is not been spoken yet and what we are examining here is more tradition than anything else.
    - a. Esau and Isaac were twins, with Esau being delivered first. Isaac came out next, holding onto the heel of Esau. God spoke to Rebekah concerning these two, saying that they would become two nations who would struggle against one another and that the older would eventually serve the younger (Gen. 25:22–26).
    - b. Unfortunately, both Isaac and Rebekah developed favorites—Isaac preferred his firstborn, Esau, the hunter; and Rebekah preferred Jacob, who apparently learned to cook (Gen. 25:27–29).
    - c. When Esau came in from the field, he was starving—hungry to the point of great weakness. Jacob had made a stew. When Esau asked for some, Jacob made Esau give up his birthright for a bowl of stew. Esau's rationalization is that he was so hungry, he was about to die and what good is a birthright after death? Just exactly what this birthright entailed is not told to us. We also do not know who was later told about the exchange of the birthright. It is never disclosed whether this was simply between Esau and Jacob, or whether Jacob informed his parents of this information; however, it is implied that this was known in their family in Gen. 27:36. Gen. 25:29–34
    - d. In Gen. 27, Jacob steals the blessing of his father to Esau. He pretends to be Esau (at the urging and help of his mother), and receives the blessing from Isaac that was meant for Esau. This is not necessarily related to one being firstborn or not. Isaac simply, prior to his death, was going to bless Esau, but blessed Jacob instead. Jacob, when masquerading as his brother, identified himself several times to his father as his *firstborn*.
  6. Jacob also blesses his own sons, referring to Reuben as his firstborn. Then he tells Reuben that he is spineless. Reuben lacked character and judgment. When he comes to Judah, Jacob says that his brothers would praise him and bow down to him, meaning that the descendants of his brothers would bow down and praise his Descendant. Actually, this has a double-fulfillment: it is fulfilled in the royal line which extends David to the last king of Judah; and this is fulfilled in our Lord as well, Whose humanity is in the line of Judah (Luke 3:23–33). What had happened was that Reuben, due to his lack of leadership, particularly with regards to the brothers' treatment of Joseph, lost his birthright. He lost the leadership aspect of his birthright to Judah and the double portion to Joseph. We will touch on this in 1Chron. 5:1–2, where the passage is properly exegeted (we will examine this probably after the book of Ruth).
  7. Although, traditionally, the firstborn was seen as the primary continuation of the line of the father, and often

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- due more blessing and inheritance, God blessed men based upon their regeneration and cursed men if they were negative toward Him. Gen. 41:51 49:3–4 1Chron. 5:1–2
8. The Levites were taken as God's firstborn, instead of the firstborn from every family, as a tribe dedicated to Him. Num. 3:12, 45, 50 The close association with the number of Levites as compared to the number of firstborn was to indication (1) that redemption was involved in setting apart the firstborn; (2) setting apart the Levites as firstborn was analogous to God setting apart Jesus as His firstborn; and (3) the redemption had to be exactly the right amount. Jesus could not just go and suffer on the cross for awhile, and that would do the trick; He had to pay for the sins of all mankind. *Redemption*, by the way, means *payment*. This redemption was continued so that all of the firstborn had to be redeemed. Num. 18:15 Again, the idea was to connect redemption with the firstborn with a specific amount (a specific redemption amount).
  9. The Passover: The final judgment against Egypt was to kill their firstborn. This was a type of Christ. Ex. 11–12 Num. 8:16–18 9 Deut. 16:1–6 Psalm 105:36 135:8 136:10 (which passage associates God's love with striking them down) 1Cor. 5:7 Heb. 11:28
    - a. God calls Israel His *firstborn* in Ex. 4:22. The implication is that there could be another born of God. However, God used it in this way: Pharaoh was to let God's firstborn go or He would kill Pharaoh's firstborn (Ex. 4:23).
    - b. God has Moses threaten the Pharaoh with this in Ex. 11:4–6.
    - c. Death of the firstborn is a type of Christ, as Christ is the Firstborn of God. 1Cor. 5:7 Heb. 1:6
    - d. Prior to the carrying out of this curse, God instructs Moses in the Passover. All of Israel is to, by household, slaughter a lamb. What God says is chilling: "**The whole assembly of the congregation of Israel is to kill it at twilight.**" (Ex. 12:6b). The blood of the lamb is then smeared on both sides and at the top of the door frame (Ex. 12:7, 22). That believers were passed over because of the blood about their door (matching the blood on our Lord's hands, head and feet), is a picture of God not judging us because He has judged His Firstborn in our stead. When God saw the blood of the Passover at the entrance of the house, God would not go into the house and kill the firstborn (Ex. 12:13, 23). Then they were to roast the lamb with fire without removing any part of it, and then to eat the lamb (Ex. 12:7–11). Fire speaks of God's judgment, which is put upon His Lamb rather than upon mankind, who deserves death.
    - e. Easton tells us about the Egyptian Pharaoh who was probably the one whose firstborn died during this time: *Menephtah is probably the Pharaoh whose first-born was slain. His son did not succeed or survive his father, but died early. The son's tomb has been found at Thebes unfinished, showing it was needed earlier than was expected. Some of the records on the tomb are as follows: "The son whom Menephtah loves; who draws towards him his father's heart, the singer, the prince of archers, who governed Egypt on behalf of his father. Dead."*<sup>2</sup>
  10. Jesus Christ is called the firstborn in Psalm 89:27.
  11. Jesus is called the *firstborn* in the New Testament:
    - a. The first occasion, already mentioned, is Luke 2:7.
    - b. Paul associates Christ as the firstborn of many brothers with election. **For those whom He foreknew He also predestined to be conformed to the image of His Son, in order that He might be the firstborn among many brothers. And those whom He predestined He also called, and those whom He called He also justified, and those whom He justified He also glorified** (Rom. 8:29–30).
    - c. Jesus is called the *firstborn of all creation* in Col. 1:15–16: **He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation. For by Him all things were created, in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities--all things were created through Him and for Him.**
    - d. He is also called the *firstborn from the dead* in Col. 1:18–20: **And He is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent. For in Him all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through Him to reconcile to himself all things, whether on earth or in heaven, making peace by the blood of His cross.** He has this same title in Rev. 1:5
    - e. Heb. 1:5–6: **For to which of the angels did God ever say, "You are my Son, today I have begotten**

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you"? Or again, "I will be to him a father, and He shall be to Me a son"? And again, when He brings the firstborn into the world, He says, "Let all God's angels worship Him." (Psalm 2:7 2Sam. 7:14 Deut. 32:43 LXX?).

- f. We should glean two things from these references: Jesus is not actually born or created, but He is preeminent among all that which has been created. Secondly, His title *Firstborn* is also to tie Him to the Passover event, where the death of the firstborn, redemption, the blood of the Lamb and the passing over all those under His blood are all gathered together as a type, for which Jesus is the antitype.

Again, this is the abbreviated version of this doctrine.

<sup>1</sup> Noah Webster's 1828 Dictionary of American English from e-sword; topic: first-born.

<sup>2</sup> M.G. Easton M.A., D.D., *Illustrated Bible Dictionary*; 1897; from e-Sword, topic: first-born.

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