

## Primogeniture in Scripture

### **Introduction**

Throughout history, many cultures have had the concept of *primogeniture*. In essence, primogeniture is the custom of the **oldest son** in a family having *greater* inheritance rights than any of his siblings.

The primogeniture custom was used quite extensively in medieval Europe. In particular, the oldest son of a nobleman would inherit all of the land owned by the family. This was primarily done to avoid dividing up a noble's estate – because large estates could defend themselves better than smaller ones. In addition, the oldest son of a king would inherit the kingship – and this is *still* generally done in European monarchies today.

The custom of primogeniture was also present in the ancient *Hebrew* culture. In general, in the Hebrew culture, the firstborn son inherited *authority* over his family; and he also inherited more property than his siblings. Also, in some cases the firstborn son would receive a *blessing* from his father.

### **Is Primogeniture mentioned in Scripture?**

In addition to being part of the Hebrew culture, primogeniture is also mentioned in the Bible. In fact, in some verses God explicitly *commands* the Israelites concerning that custom.

In many cases, people in Scripture allude to the fact that primogeniture is an existing custom in their culture. For example, Jacob refers to his oldest son – Reuben – as having naturally inherited the “firstborn” privileges, simply because he is the oldest son:

#### **Genesis 49:3 (ESV):**

<sup>3</sup>“Reuben, you are my firstborn,  
my might, and the firstfruits of my strength,  
preeminent in dignity and preeminent in power.

In addition, God Himself stated that the oldest son – of both people *and* animals – is sanctified (i.e., set apart) for Him. Consider these verses:

#### **Exodus 13:2 (ESV):**

<sup>2</sup>“Consecrate to me all the firstborn. Whatever is the first to open the womb among the people of Israel, both of man and of beast, is mine.”

#### **Numbers 8:17 (NASB):**

<sup>17</sup> For every firstborn among the sons of Israel is Mine, among the men and among the animals; on the day that I struck down all the firstborn in the land of Egypt I sanctified them for Myself.

Finally, God explicitly told the Israelites that the oldest son has the “firstborn” privileges; and is therefore to receive a double portion of his inheritance – *even if* the oldest son was born to a wife that the father did not love:

**Deuteronomy 21:17 (ESV):**

<sup>15</sup> “If a man has two wives, the one loved and the other unloved, and both the loved and the unloved have borne him children, and if the firstborn son belongs to the unloved, <sup>16</sup> then on the day when he assigns his possessions as an inheritance to his sons, he may not treat the son of the loved as the firstborn in preference to the son of the unloved, who is the firstborn, <sup>17</sup> but he shall acknowledge the firstborn, the son of the unloved, by giving him a double portion of all that he has, for he is the firstfruits of his strength. The right of the firstborn is his.

**Exceptions to the rule**

So far, the Scriptural evidence of primogeniture looks rather straightforward – the oldest son will *always* receive the “firstborn” privileges. However, it turns out that there are many “exceptions” to this rule in Scripture. In other words, there are many cases in which a **younger** son is given the “firstborn” privileges. Here are some of the more well-known examples, of younger sons being so blessed.

Isaac and Ishmael

Abraham’s **oldest** son was Ishmael – the son that he had with Sarah’s servant Hagar. As a result, one would expect that any family-related blessings would be given to Ishmael; rather than to any younger son of Abraham. However, that is not the case – God states that His covenant with Abraham will continue through his **second** son – Isaac:

**Genesis 17:18-21 (ESV):**

<sup>18</sup> And Abraham said to God, “Oh that Ishmael might live before you!” <sup>19</sup> God said, “No, but Sarah your wife shall bear you a son, and you shall call his name Isaac. I will establish my covenant with him as an everlasting covenant for his offspring after him. <sup>20</sup> As for Ishmael, I have heard you; behold, I have blessed him and will make him fruitful and multiply him greatly. He shall father twelve princes, and I will make him into a great nation. <sup>21</sup> But I will establish my covenant with Isaac, whom Sarah shall bear to you at this time next year.”

Jacob and Esau

The two sons that were born to Isaac were his older son Esau, and his younger son Jacob. Since Esau was the oldest son, he was naturally entitled to both the family “birthright” (the authority and property privileges), and the family “blessing” (God’s favor and protection).

However, Esau did not end up receiving either the family birthright or the family blessing. First, Esau himself explicitly sold his birthright to Jacob, for a bowl of *lentil stew*. Of course, this demonstrated that Esau did not really care about his birthright. Here is the passage in question:

**Genesis 25:29-34 (ESV):**

<sup>29</sup> Once when Jacob was cooking stew, Esau came in from the field, and he was exhausted.  
<sup>30</sup> And Esau said to Jacob, "Let me eat some of that red stew, for I am exhausted!" (Therefore his name was called Edom.) <sup>31</sup> Jacob said, "Sell me your birthright now." <sup>32</sup> Esau said, "I am about to die; of what use is a birthright to me?" <sup>33</sup> Jacob said, "Swear to me now." So he swore to him and sold his birthright to Jacob. <sup>34</sup> Then Jacob gave Esau bread and lentil stew, and he ate and drank and rose and went his way. Thus Esau despised his birthright.

Esau did not receive the family blessing, either. In essence, Jacob – and his mother Rebekah – tricked Isaac into giving the family blessing to Jacob. Here is the final part of the passage which describes those events:

**Genesis 27:26-29 (ESV):**

<sup>26</sup> Then his father Isaac said to him [Jacob], "Come near and kiss me, my son." <sup>27</sup> So he came near and kissed him. And Isaac smelled the smell of his garments and blessed him and said,

"See, the smell of my son  
is as the smell of a field that the Lord has blessed!  
<sup>28</sup> May God give you of the dew of heaven  
and of the fatness of the earth  
and plenty of grain and wine.  
<sup>29</sup> Let peoples serve you,  
and nations bow down to you.  
Be lord over your brothers,  
and may your mother's sons bow down to you.  
Cursed be everyone who curses you,  
and blessed be everyone who blesses you!"

Also note: the above events were *prophesied* to occur – and, in fact, it appears that God **wanted** Jacob to receive the firstborn privileges. First, when Rebekah conceived, God told her that the older son would *serve* the younger son:

**Genesis 25:21-23 (ESV):**

<sup>21</sup> And Isaac prayed to the Lord for his wife, because she was barren. And the Lord granted his prayer, and Rebekah his wife conceived. <sup>22</sup> The children struggled together within her, and she said, "If it is thus, why is this happening to me?" So she went to inquire of the Lord. <sup>23</sup> And the Lord said to her,

"Two nations are in your womb,  
and two peoples from within you shall be divided;  
the one shall be stronger than the other,  
the older shall serve the younger."

In addition, the prophet Malachi speaks about God's *favor* of Jacob over Esau (and the apostle Paul references this):

**Malachi 1:2-3 (ESV):**

<sup>2</sup> “I have loved you,” says the Lord. But you say, “How have you loved us?” “Is not Esau Jacob’s brother?” declares the Lord. “Yet I have loved Jacob <sup>3</sup> but Esau I have hated. I have laid waste his hill country and left his heritage to jackals of the desert.”

**Romans 9:13 (ESV):**

<sup>13</sup> As it is written, “Jacob I loved, but Esau I hated.”

So, it appears that God “arranged” for Jacob to receive the firstborn privileges – despite the fact that Jacob was **younger** than Esau.

Reuben and Joseph

Jacob himself had twelve sons; with Reuben being his oldest son. As a result, Reuben was naturally entitled to the firstborn privileges; simply because of his birth order. However, Reuben committed a serious sin – he slept with his father’s concubine – and as a result of that, Reuben **lost** the firstborn privileges. Jacob refers to that fact, when he prophesies over his sons near the end of his life:

**Genesis 49:3-4 (ESV):**

<sup>3</sup> “Reuben, you are my firstborn,  
my might, and the firstfruits of my strength,  
preeminent in dignity and preeminent in power.  
<sup>4</sup> Unstable as water, you shall not have preeminence,  
because you went up to your father’s bed;  
then you defiled it—he went up to my couch!

Jacob also prophesied over his son Joseph at that time. Joseph was his second **youngest** son – and yet Jacob gives Joseph his own personal blessings:

**Genesis 49:22,26 (NASB):**

<sup>22</sup> “Joseph is a fruitful bough,  
A fruitful bough by a spring;  
*Its* branches run over a wall.

<sup>26</sup> “The blessings of your father  
Have surpassed the blessings of my ancestors  
Up to the utmost bound of the everlasting hills;  
May they be on the head of Joseph,  
And on the crown of the head of the one distinguished among his brothers.

Once again, the blessings that Joseph received were prophesied ahead of time. First, Joseph received a prophesy from God, that his older brothers would end up *serv*ing him:

**Genesis 37:5-8 (ESV):**

<sup>5</sup> Now Joseph had a dream, and when he told it to his brothers they hated him even more. <sup>6</sup> He said to them, “Hear this dream that I have dreamed: <sup>7</sup> Behold, we were binding sheaves in the field, and behold, my sheaf arose and stood upright. And behold, your sheaves gathered around it and bowed down to my sheaf.” <sup>8</sup> His brothers said to him, “Are you indeed to reign over us? Or are you indeed to rule over us?” So they hated him even more for his dreams and for his words.

His brothers subsequently sold Joseph into slavery; and Joseph wound up in Egypt. However, Joseph was eventually able to rise to a position of power in Egypt – and because of that, he was able to save his family from starvation. Joseph then tells his brothers that his whole ordeal was part of God’s plan:

**Genesis 45:4-8 (ESV):**

<sup>4</sup> So Joseph said to his brothers, “Come near to me, please.” And they came near. And he said, “I am your brother, Joseph, whom you sold into Egypt. <sup>5</sup> And now do not be distressed or angry with yourselves because you sold me here, for God sent me before you to preserve life. <sup>6</sup> For the famine has been in the land these two years, and there are yet five years in which there will be neither plowing nor harvest. <sup>7</sup> And God sent me before you to preserve for you a remnant on earth, and to keep alive for you many survivors. <sup>8</sup> So it was not you who sent me here, but God. He has made me a father to Pharaoh, and lord of all his house and ruler over all the land of Egypt.

So, we can see that God appointed firstborn-related blessings to Joseph – despite the fact that he was a **younger** son.

Ephraim and Manasseh

The sons of Joseph were the older son Manasseh, and the younger son Ephraim. Jacob (Israel) also gave blessings to Manasseh and Ephraim – his grandsons. Joseph wanted Manasseh to have the “primary” blessing – since Manasseh was the older son. However, Israel explicitly placed his right hand on Ephraim (and his left hand on Manasseh) – signifying that Ephraim was to have the primary blessing:

**Genesis 48:14-20 (ESV):**

<sup>14</sup> And Israel stretched out his right hand and laid it on the head of Ephraim, who was the younger, and his left hand on the head of Manasseh, crossing his hands (for Manasseh was the firstborn). <sup>15</sup> And he blessed Joseph and said,

“The God before whom my fathers Abraham and Isaac walked,  
the God who has been my shepherd all my life long to this day,  
<sup>16</sup> the angel who has redeemed me from all evil, bless the boys;  
and in them let my name be carried on, and the name of my fathers Abraham and Isaac;  
and let them grow into a multitude in the midst of the earth.”

<sup>17</sup> When Joseph saw that his father laid his right hand on the head of Ephraim, it displeased him, and he took his father’s hand to move it from Ephraim’s head to Manasseh’s head. <sup>18</sup> And Joseph said to his father, “Not this way, my father; since this one is the firstborn, put your right hand on his head.” <sup>19</sup> But his father refused and said, “I know, my son, I know. He also shall become a

people, and he also shall be great. Nevertheless, his younger brother shall be greater than he, and his offspring shall become a multitude of nations.”<sup>20</sup> So he blessed them that day, saying,

“By you Israel will pronounce blessings, saying,  
‘God make you as Ephraim and as Manasseh.’”

Thus he put Ephraim before Manasseh.

In addition, God Himself refers to Ephraim as His “firstborn”:

**Jeremiah 31:9 (NET):**

I will do this because I am Israel’s father;  
Ephraim is my firstborn son.”

The above verse is quite interesting – God refers to Ephraim as his “firstborn” son – despite the fact that Ephraim is not the oldest son! This explicitly demonstrates that firstborn-related privileges can be assigned to younger sons.

David and his brothers

The prophet Samuel was given the task of selecting a new king, to replace king Saul. God told Samuel that the new king would be one of the sons of a man named Jesse; however, He did not state *which* of the sons would be selected. So, Samuel naturally assumed that the *oldest* son would be selected. However, that was not the case. Here is the passage in question:

**1 Samuel 16:4-13 (ESV):**

<sup>4</sup> Samuel did what the Lord commanded and came to Bethlehem. The elders of the city came to meet him trembling and said, “Do you come peaceably?”<sup>5</sup> And he said, “Peaceably; I have come to sacrifice to the Lord. Consecrate yourselves, and come with me to the sacrifice.” And he consecrated Jesse and his sons and invited them to the sacrifice.

<sup>6</sup> When they came, he looked on Eliab and thought, “Surely the Lord’s anointed is before him.”  
<sup>7</sup> But the Lord said to Samuel, “Do not look on his appearance or on the height of his stature, because I have rejected him. For the Lord sees not as man sees: man looks on the outward appearance, but the Lord looks on the heart.”<sup>8</sup> Then Jesse called Abinadab and made him pass before Samuel. And he said, “Neither has the Lord chosen this one.”<sup>9</sup> Then Jesse made Shammah pass by. And he said, “Neither has the Lord chosen this one.”<sup>10</sup> And Jesse made seven of his sons pass before Samuel. And Samuel said to Jesse, “The Lord has not chosen these.”<sup>11</sup> Then Samuel said to Jesse, “Are all your sons here?” And he said, “There remains yet the youngest, but behold, he is keeping the sheep.” And Samuel said to Jesse, “Send and get him, for we will not sit down till he comes here.”<sup>12</sup> And he sent and brought him in. Now he was ruddy and had beautiful eyes and was handsome. And the Lord said, “Arise, anoint him, for this is he.”<sup>13</sup> Then Samuel took the horn of oil and anointed him in the midst of his brothers. And the Spirit of the Lord rushed upon David from that day forward. And Samuel rose up and went to Ramah.

From the above, we see that God did *not* choose the oldest son to be king – on the contrary, He chose the very **youngest** son!

## One final case of primogeniture

As shown above, the custom of primogeniture is used quite extensively in Scripture. That custom generally refers to a group of “firstborn” **privileges** – of authority, property, and blessings – that will be passed down through a family’s generations.

As the name implies, the “firstborn” privileges will *normally* be given to the **oldest son** in a family. However, Scripture contains a number of “exceptions” to that rule. There are (at least) **three** reasons why an oldest son might *not* receive the firstborn privileges:

- An oldest son can **lose** his “firstborn” privileges, if he behaves improperly – e.g. Esau and Reuben.

- A father (or grandfather) can reassign the “firstborn” privileges to a **younger** son – e.g., Jacob and Ephraim.

- And – most notably – God, Himself, can **appoint** a younger son to have “firstborn” privileges – e.g., Isaac, Joseph, and David.

The reason why the above information is important is because Jesus is also referred to as the “firstborn” in several verses. In particular, the following verse is quoted quite frequently:

### Colossians 1:15 (ESV):

<sup>15</sup> He [Jesus] is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn of all creation.

Some groups claim that that verse *proves* that Jesus is the very first being that God created. In other words, those groups assert that Jesus must be the very **oldest** being in creation – because Jesus is called the “firstborn” of all creation.

However, as shown in this post, the term “firstborn” often refers to a set of *privileges* – rather than to “birth order”. In particular, “firstborn” often refers to **authority** – as in “first in rank”. As it turns out, *other* translations of Colossians 1:15 make note of that *very item*; for example:

### NET:

<sup>15</sup> He is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation

### CJB:

<sup>15</sup> He is the visible image of the invisible God. He is supreme over all creation

Also, just three verses later, Paul himself indicates that he is speaking about *authority*, when he uses the term “firstborn”:

### Colossians 1:18 (ESV):

<sup>18</sup> 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.

There is one other item to consider as well. As noted, under *normal* circumstances the oldest son in a family will “automatically” receive the firstborn-related privileges. As a result, if a given son is the oldest son, then there is **no need** for his father to take any action, to pass down the firstborn privileges to him. On the other hand, if a son is **not** the oldest, then his father must take explicit action, to cause that son to receive the firstborn privileges.

The reason why this is important is because all throughout Scripture, we see that God **explicitly** grants Jesus authority over creation. If Jesus *were* the oldest being in creation, then there would not have been *any need* for God to do that. So, this indicates that Jesus is not the oldest being in creation – instead, that his life began when God caused Mary to conceive (just as 1 Peter 1:20 states).

Here are some passages – from Jesus, the apostles, and the prophets – which show us that God *explicitly* granted Jesus the “firstborn” authority:

Jesus:

**Luke 10:22 (ESV):**

<sup>22</sup> All things have been handed over to me by my Father, and no one knows who the Son is except the Father, or who the Father is except the Son and anyone to whom the Son chooses to reveal him.”

**Matthew 28:18 (ESV):**

<sup>18</sup> And Jesus came and said to them, “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me.

**John 17:1-2 (ESV):**

When Jesus had spoken these words, he lifted up his eyes to heaven, and said, “Father, the hour has come; glorify your Son that the Son may glorify you, <sup>2</sup> since you have given him authority over all flesh, to give eternal life to all whom you have given him.

Apostles:

**Acts 2:36 (ESV):**

<sup>36</sup> Let all the house of Israel therefore know for certain that God has made him both Lord and Christ, this Jesus whom you crucified.”

**Philippians 2:9-11 (ESV):**

<sup>9</sup> Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, <sup>10</sup> so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, <sup>11</sup> and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.

**Hebrews 1:1-2 (ESV):**

Long ago, at many times and in many ways, God spoke to our fathers by the prophets, <sup>2</sup> but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son, whom he appointed the heir of all things



## Prophets:

### **Daniel 7:13-14 (ESV):**

<sup>13</sup> “I saw in the night visions,

and behold, with the clouds of heaven  
there came one like a son of man,  
and he came to the Ancient of Days  
and was presented before him.

<sup>14</sup> And to him was given dominion  
and glory and a kingdom,  
that all peoples, nations, and languages  
should serve him;  
his dominion is an everlasting dominion,  
which shall not pass away,  
and his kingdom one  
that shall not be destroyed.

### **Psalms 2:7-9 (ESV):**

<sup>7</sup> I will tell of the decree:

The Lord said to me, “You are my Son;  
today I have begotten you.

<sup>8</sup> Ask of me, and I will make the nations your heritage,  
and the ends of the earth your possession.

<sup>9</sup> You shall break them with a rod of iron  
and dash them in pieces like a potter’s vessel.”

## **Conclusion**

Colossians 1:15 states that Jesus is the “firstborn of all creation” (or “firstborn over all creation”). Some groups assert that that wording proves that Jesus was the very **first** being that God created – i.e., that God created Jesus *before* He created anything else in the universe.

However, many passages in Scripture explicitly state that a son does not have to be the **oldest** son, in order for him to receive “firstborn” privileges. In other words, those privileges can be assigned to *younger* sons – and there are many Scriptural examples of that very event occurring.

Not only that, but many passages in Scripture state that God explicitly granted “firstborn” authority to Jesus. This indicates that Jesus was *not* the very first being that God created – because if he were, then he would have “naturally” inherited that firstborn authority.

In other words, if Jesus actually were the oldest created being, then God would not have had to “appoint” the firstborn authority to Jesus – because in that case, Jesus would have **already had** that authority – simply by virtue of being the oldest creature.

Hopefully this post will prove useful, if one becomes involved in a theological discussion about Colossians 1:15!