

**THE OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND OF THE FIRSTBORN:
A PRELIMINARY STUDY FOR UNDERSTANDING
“THE FIRSTBORN OF ALL CREATION” (COLOSSIANS 1:15)
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INTRODUCTION

Any person spending time with a Jehovah’s Witness discussing the deity of Christ will likely be confronted with the claim that Jesus Christ cannot be God because Scripture declares that he is the first created being. To support this claim the Jehovah’s Witness will point to Colossians 1:15 (“the firstborn of all creation” NWT), Revelation 3:14 (“beginning of the creation by God” NWT), and Proverbs 8:22 (“Jehovah produced me as the beginning of his way” NWT). This article examines the meaning of the term “firstborn” in order to assess the accuracy of the Witnesses’ claim concerning Colossians 1:15. The article will first examine the Old Testament background of the term “firstborn,” showing how Paul would have understood and used the word. This will be followed by an evaluation of the arguments the Watchtower uses in *Reasoning from the Scriptures* to defend their claim.

OLD TESTAMENT BACKGROUND OF FIRSTBORN

The term “firstborn” has a rich background in Israelite history and literature. The frequent use of the word in the Old Testament (c. 158x) provides a good starting point for understanding its meaning. Additionally, the firstborn concept occurs in passages where the word does not. These passages must be consulted to avoid the “word study fallacy.” The occurrences in the Pentateuch (over half), describing Israel’s ancestry and earliest history, are especially important in establishing the significance of the word for the covenant people.

Basic Meaning of Firstborn

In a basic sense the word “firstborn” is related to two concepts: birth order and birth right. When “firstborn” is related to birth order it refers to the oldest child in a family, the first child born, either male (Gen. 22:21; 1 Chron. 2:25) or female (Gen. 19:31,33,34,37; 29:26; 1 Sam. 14:49). Additionally the word is also used in contexts involving the birth order of animals (Ex. 11:5; 12:29; Lev. 27:26; Num. 18:15-17) and with the first produce of the harvest (translated “firstfruits” or “firstripe” or “earliest fruit” Lev. 2:14; 23:7; Isa. 28:4; Jer. 24:2). When “firstborn” is related to birth right it refers to the child who is the principal heir to the family estate (Gen. 25:32,34; 27:36; Deut. 21:17). This heir must be a male and is usually, though not necessarily, the first in birth order. The “firstborn” as it relates to birth right may not have been first in birth order if he had an older sister or if the birth right was transferred to him. It was believed that the first male born possessed the father’s strength and virility to a greater degree than all subsequent children (Gen. 49:3; Deut. 21:17; Pss. 78:51; 105:36); therefore, he should be

the heir, for he could best fulfill the responsibilities of the father when the father grew old and weak. If this first born son proved himself incapable of fulfilling the responsibilities of the heir, the birth right, and therefore the title “firstborn”, could be transferred to another son of the father’s choosing (Gen. 49:1-4; 1 Chron. 5:1-2; 1 Chron. 26:10).

Covenantal Significance of Firstborn

However, this basic sense of the word does not fully convey the importance of the firstborn concept in Israelite history. Israel’s history was governed by major covenants and these covenants promised salvation through a coming Messiah. The firstborn concept played a major role in this covenantal- redemptive history of the nation.

Abrahamic Covenant: Birth-Right Not Birth-Order

The importance of the firstborn is evident, first, in the Abrahamic Covenant. Abraham had two sons: Ishmael and Isaac. Ishmael was the firstborn son of Abraham, but God chose Isaac to be Abraham’s heir and receive the birth right, the covenantal promise. Isaac then had two sons: Esau and Jacob. Esau was the firstborn, but Jacob received the birth right as heir, the covenantal promise. Jacob’s name was changed to Israel, and he became the father of that great nation. God chose this nation to be His firstborn son (Ex. 4:22). God then made another covenant with Israel, the Mosaic Covenant, developing further the promise of salvation. Throughout this early covenantal history between the time of Abraham and Moses the son who is first in birth order is set aside and another becomes the “firstborn,” obtaining the birth right. This transfer of the firstborn’s honor and privilege to another is not without precedent, however, for God had chosen Abel instead of Cain in the beginning. This transference of birth right is both unusual and consistent. It is unusual in that it goes against the normal practice in which birth order determines birth right. Yet throughout Israel’s covenantal history, God consistently overrules the norm and names His own choice as “firstborn.” So consistent is this practice within Israel’s covenantal history that it establishes a definite literary pattern and a significant theological theme. In the light of Israel’s early covenantal history, the “birth order” meaning of the term “firstborn” fades into insignificance as the “birth right” meaning takes on greater significance, because the birth right privilege includes participation in furthering the covenantal promise of salvation through a coming Messiah.

Mosaic Covenant: Redemption by a Representative Substitute

Another event in Israel’s history gives greater meaning to the term “firstborn.” The importance of the firstborn is evident, secondly, in the Mosaic Covenant. Throughout the ancient Near East it was believed that the firstborn son, as well as the firstfruits of the harvest and the firstborn from the cattle rightfully belonged to the local deity. Offering the firstborn as a sacrifice to the deity was believed to be significant for the group’s survival. The firstborn became a representative figure for the whole group, who depended on the favor of the gods for protection and sustenance. Therefore these firstborn were sacrificed to the gods. This fact sheds light on events surrounding the exodus. Before God rescued the Israelites from Egypt he sent ten plagues on the nation of Egypt (Exodus 7-12), which are often interpreted as judgments on the false gods

of Egypt, the last plague being the death of all firstborn children and animals in Egypt (Ex. 11-12). With this plague Yahweh was showing that the firstborn belonged to Him, that He alone is the true God (Ex. 7:5), that the Egyptian gods are not gods. Then, following the death of Egypt's firstborn, the Lord commanded the Israelites to set apart all their firstborn to Him, for they too belonged to Him (Ex. 13:2). In the case of the firstborn animals, this meant sacrificing the animal to the Lord. However, human sacrifice was not tolerated by God. He therefore instituted a program in which the Israelites could redeem, buy back, their firstborn children. This redemption was achieved through a substitute. An animal was sacrificed in place of the firstborn son (Ex. 13:13-15). But this was not a one time event. God instructed Israel to continue this tradition of redeeming their firstborn sons throughout their history as a way of symbolizing God's act of redeeming the whole nation from Egypt (Ex. 13:14-15). Thus, the firstborn son in Israel had tremendous symbolic significance. He represented the redemption of the nation (as the firstborn in Egypt represented God's judgment of the nation). Later, the Levites became the substitute for the firstborn. The tribe of Levi was set apart to God for service in the sanctuary (Num. 3:12-50; 8:16-18; 18:15-17). In this case the firstborn represented the sacred service of the nation.

Summary of Old Testament Background

This use of the concept and term "firstborn" in the early history of the nation established the real significance of the firstborn for Israel's later history. The firstborn in Israel had a highly significant symbolic role in the nation. As a representative of the whole nation, the firstborn represented the redemption of the nation from servitude and bondage in Egypt as well as the promise that the nation would ultimately bring salvation to mankind through the Messiah. In later Israelite history usage of the term "firstborn" revolved around this covenantal-redemptive-representative significance of the word. Thus, David, the King of Israel, obtained the title "firstborn" because, as King, he represented the nation (Ps. 89:27). Furthermore, God established a covenant with David, promising to establish David's kingdom forever, indicating that a son of David would rule on David's throne throughout history (2 Sam. 7:12-16). Not only was the nation God's "firstborn son" (Ex. 4:22), but the King, the representative of the nation, was also God's "firstborn son" (Ps. 89:27). The Davidic King as God's firstborn son carries on the literary pattern and theological theme established in Israel's earliest history in which God advances his promise of salvation through the coming Messiah by choosing one to be His own firstborn son (without regard to birth order) and covenanting with him.

The firstborn son in Israel represented the nation's calling to be God's firstborn son. As such he represented the nation's redemptive purpose and hope. The nation was called into existence to serve God by bringing salvation to the world. Ultimately this calling and hope centered in a coming Messiah who would realize the promise of salvation. The title "firstborn" had definite Messianic overtones for the Israelites. Redemption would be accomplished through God's "firstborn" son Israel (Ex. 4:22), who is represented by the King, God's "firstborn" son (Ps. 89:27), whose son would redeem the nation and rule forever on David's throne (2 Sam. 7:12-16). It is no surprise, then, that later Rabbis spoke of the Messiah as "firstborn." Rabbi Nathan said, "God said, as I made Jacob a firstborn (Ex. 4:22), so also will I make king Messiah a

firstborn (Ps. 89:27)” [Shemoth Rabba 19 fol. 118:4]. And since God is ultimately the savior of the world, Rabbi Bechai said that “God is the firstborn of the world” [Pent. fol. 124:4].

WATCHTOWER INTERPRETATION OF FIRSTBORN

In *Reasoning from the Scriptures* (pp. 408-409) the Watchtower provides the Witnesses with three arguments for why the term “firstborn” cannot refer to one who is “prime, most excellent, most distinguished,” the pre-eminent one, as Christians claim. They argue that the word “indicates that Jesus is the eldest in Jehovah’s family of sons” (p. 408). This is based on “the customary meaning of ‘firstborn’” (p. 408). Thus, the Watchtower argues that the term is used in the “birth order” sense and not in the “birth right” sense.

Reason # 1: The Father is not called Firstborn

First, the Watchtower reasons, if “firstborn” simply refers to the one who is most excellent, “why are the Father and the holy spirit not also said to be the firstborn of all creation?” [p. 408]. Why is only the Son called “firstborn”? The Watchtower wants the Witness to think that the term cannot refer to pre-eminence because God the Father, who is undoubtedly pre-eminent, is never called “firstborn.” This reasoning betrays a logical fallacy, however. One cannot evaluate a statement about one person on the basis of statements made or not made about another person. For example, a young mother says to her daughter, “you have two hands.” According to the Watchtower argument, her young son could deny the truthfulness of his mother’s statement about his sister, claiming, “you never said I had two hands!” The argument is absurd. Moreover, this reasoning betrays ignorance of Jewish literature, for God is called the firstborn. Rabbi Bechai called God “the firstborn of the world,” as was shown above. More importantly, however, the term firstborn does not simply indicate pre-eminence in the manner the Watchtower describes. Instead it describes a specific type of pre-eminence: Messianic pre-eminence. The term “firstborn” is a Messianic term; therefore, it is appropriate only for Jesus, not for the Father or the Holy Spirit. Thus, the term was not be used of either of them in Scripture.

Reason # 2: Firstborn is Always Part of the Group

Second, the Watchtower argues that “the firstborn of” always indicates that the firstborn is part of the named group. That is, the relationship between the two terms is one involving a basic similarity and equality as parts and whole. For example, the firstborn of an animal is an animal, the firstborn of Pharaoh is part of Pharaoh’s family. The Watchtower wants the Witness to think that the firstborn of creation must be similar to and part of the creation, hence a created being. Again, this reasoning is seriously flawed. When the argument is allowed to be taken to its logical conclusion, its flaws are obvious. The phrase “firstborn of Pharaoh” cannot mean simply that the child is similar to Pharaoh as part of the Pharaoh family. If in fact the firstborn is part of Pharaoh’s family it is only because Pharaoh is the **father** of the firstborn. Likewise, the firstborn of an animal is a part of that animal group just because an animal is the **parent** of the firstborn. One cannot separate being “part of” from its actual cause: giving birth, fathering or mothering. When the Watchtower argument is now applied to Jesus as “firstborn of creation”, the fallacy is revealed. The argument becomes absurd. If Jesus is the firstborn of creation, according to the

Watchtower's reasoning, then creation is the parent of Jesus; that is, creation gives birth to Jesus. If the Watchtower argument is valid, then the Creation truly is "Mother Earth." Even the Watchtower would not want to believe this, but the logic of their argument demands it, thus showing its absurdity. Obviously the phrase "firstborn of creation" is not being used in the fashion that the Watchtower claims. The phrases "the firstborn of" that the Witnesses cite are not analogous with Paul's statement that Jesus is the firstborn of creation. The Apostle does not reason as does the Watchtower. But the reason the Watchtower must resort to a fallacious argument is because they fail to understand the actual usage of the term in the Old Testament. As was shown above, the "birth order" meaning of firstborn fades as the "birth right" significance takes on greater meaning, culminating in its Messianic connotations. The Watchtower's attempts to limit the meaning to "birth order" cannot be justified.

Reason # 3: Jesus Created "All Other Things"

Third, the Watchtower claims that it is proper to translate Colossians 1:16,17 using the word "other": "all other things were created." They then claim, "Thus he is shown to be a created being, part of the creation produced by God" (p.409). They defend this claim on the basis of Luke 13:2, for several translations insert the word "other" after "all": "all other Galileans." They claim that the idea "other" is actually contained in the meaning of the word "all" in Luke 13:2, hence "all other." But the argument will not hold up, for the insertion of "other" in Luke 13:2 is contextually warranted, not linguistically. The insertion of "other" has nothing to do with the word "all." The sentence reads, "Do you suppose that these Galileans were greater sinners than all *other* Galileans because they suffered this fate?" Quite obviously Jesus is comparing Galileans with Galileans, two equal items. The insertion of "other" is warranted by the context of comparing equals [Galileans] and has nothing to do with the word "all." It is entirely appropriate to insert "other" in Luke 13:2 without changing the meaning of the sentence in any way. However, there is no contextual warrant in Colossians 1:16,17 for the insertion. The two items in the discussion, Jesus and the creation, are not being compared or equated as the two items in Luke 13:2 [Galileans and Galileans]. To insert "other" in Colossians 1:16,17 changes the meaning of the sentence significantly, because it has no contextual justification. The linguistic argument fails to support their claims. However, this is not the real basis for their insertion of "other" in Colossians. The real reason is theological. It is necessary for them to change the meaning of the sentence, otherwise they must acknowledge that Jesus is not part of creation. The Watchtower indicates this is their real motivation when they explain that they are seeking to harmonize this verse with "everything else that the Bible says regarding the Son" (p.408). However, their mishandling and changing of the text, rather than harmonizing with other Scriptures, contradicts other Scriptures (John 1:3; 1:10).

CONCLUSION

The Old Testament background of the "firstborn" concept reveals the falsehood of the Witnesses claim that Jesus is a created being, the eldest in Jehovah's family of sons. The use of the term in the Old Testament to signify the one who held the birthright took on greater significance when the birthright included the covenant privilege of advancing the promise of

salvation through a coming Messianic savior. In fact, the term did not mean birth order when it involved this covenantal-redemptive privilege, for none of the patriarchs carrying the covenantally significant birth right was a firstborn son in the sense of birth order. They were firstborn only in the birth right sense. Ultimately the firstborn son who held the birth right in this covenantal-redemptive sense was the Messiah, Jesus.

Jesus is the “firstborn” who brings the hopes and promises of the nation to realization. He is the firstborn who redeems the world (cf. Ex 4:22). He is the firstborn who rules His Kingdom (all creation) as the son of David (cf. Ps. 89:27; 2 Sam. 7:12-14). All previous history pointed to him and waited for him. The “firstborn” is the promised savior Messiah of Israel who rules and reigns over his creation. When Paul called Jesus the “firstborn” in Colossians he was declaring Jesus to be the long hoped for Messianic Savior.