

Here we are in the midst of the Passover season. Last night we celebrated the first step in coming out of Egypt – the sacrifice of an innocent lamb . . . a lamb that for four days had lived with us, not in a pasture with the other lambs, but in our home. We had grown fond of the lamb and we had protected it – just to make sure no harm came to it – no gashes, no broken bones, for that lamb was going to be killed and it's blood painted on our door, so that our firstborn son, firstborn daughter, or maybe even my firstborn wife could live.

Because the Israelites heeded the instructions of Moses and sacrificed their lambs while the Egyptians paid little attention to what Moses had said, many sons and daughters of Egypt died that night – even the son of Pharaoh – and consequently Pharaoh expelled the Israelites from Egypt. Thus, the lamb that died brought about the preservation of the firstborn of Israel, which subsequently led to the freedom and salvation of all Israel.

In the midst of the Exodus story, interjected between the beginning of the journey and collecting the bones of Joseph, Moses records these instructions from YHVH -

**ESV Exodus 13:1** The LORD said to Moses, <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." . . . <sup>11</sup> "When the LORD brings you into the land of the Canaanites, as he swore to you and your fathers, and shall give it to you, <sup>12</sup> you shall set apart to the LORD all that first opens the womb. All the firstborn of your animals that are males shall be the LORD's. <sup>13</sup> Every firstborn of a donkey you shall redeem with a lamb, or if you will not redeem it you shall break its neck. Every firstborn of man among your sons you shall redeem. <sup>14</sup> And when in time to come your son asks you, 'What does this mean?' you shall say to him, 'By a strong hand the LORD brought us out of Egypt, from the house of slavery. <sup>15</sup> For when Pharaoh stubbornly refused to let us go, the LORD killed all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, both the firstborn of man and the firstborn of animals. Therefore I sacrifice to the LORD all the males that first open the womb, but all the firstborn of my sons I redeem.' <sup>16</sup> It shall be as a mark on your hand or frontlets between your eyes, for by a strong hand the LORD brought us out of Egypt."

Notice what God is saying –

- First – the firstborn of all the people and all the animals of ISRAEL are His. God's not claiming the firstborn of any of the other nations, just the first born of Israel.
- Second - the firstborn of clean animals are sacrificed, but the firstborn of unclean animals can be redeemed with a clean animal, or it can be killed. God specifically mentions a donkey – a beast of burden. Is this an indication that God doesn't want us using the firstborn . . . maybe because He has a use for them<sup>1</sup>?
- Third - God makes a difference between the males and the females (though He didn't when it came to the death of the firstborn).<sup>2</sup>
- Fourth – firstborn male children are to be redeemed.

Following the text, God says that when your son notices that every time a firstborn male calf is delivered and you take it to the priests to be sacrificed and your son then asks why you sacrifice the firstborn but not the second born, you're to tell your son the Exodus story. You're to tell him

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<sup>1</sup> Deut. 15:19

<sup>2</sup> Exodus 11:5

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that the status of the firstborn changed on that night – that they now belong to YHVH – because of what happened on Passover night. This is expressed again very clearly in the book of Numbers –

<sup>ESV</sup> **Numbers 8:17** For all the firstborn among the people of Israel are mine, both of man and of beast. On the day that I struck down all the firstborn in the land of Egypt I consecrated them for myself,

So what happened that night that caused the firstborn to now belong to YHVH. Obviously – YHVH spared the lives of the firstborn of Israel. How it all came about I still don't understand. It would seem that somehow something was out of balance, both in regards to the Egyptians and the Israelites, and both had an opportunity to spare the lives of the firstborn, but only the Israelites chose to do so. By killing and eating the Passover lamb, the life of the firstborn was spared, but the firstborn now became God's possession. It's still a little cloudy, but that's not the point of this teaching. What we do know is that YHVH now claimed the firstborn of Israel.

So what specifically was God going to do with the firstborn? To help us understand, it's good to understand the middle eastern culture as well as the culture of God Himself.

In many near-eastern cultures, holding the status of firstborn male meant that upon your father's death, you would become in charge of the family, and the clan – the families of your married brothers. In many cultures, though not necessarily the early years of the Hebrews, you would become the priest in the family, leading the family and clan in the worship of your god. It was also customary for you to receive a special blessing as well as a significantly larger inheritance than your younger brothers, but it also became your responsibility to take care of your widowed mother and your younger siblings.

In some cases, the firstborn's authority over his siblings remained even after the family was grown. A possible example can be found in the story of David when he failed to show up for a New Moon celebration at the home of King Saul. Keep in mind that David had at this time already been anointed King of Israel, and that his brothers knew it. Never-the-less, it seems that David's older brother still had the authority to demand his presence at an event back home.

<sup>ESV</sup> **1 Samuel 20:27-29** <sup>27</sup> But on the second day, the day after the new moon, David's place was empty. And Saul said to Jonathan his son, "Why has not the son of Jesse come to the meal, either yesterday or today?" <sup>28</sup> Jonathan answered Saul, "David earnestly asked leave of me to go to Bethlehem." <sup>29</sup> He said, 'Let me go, for our clan holds a sacrifice in the city, and my brother has commanded me to be there. So now, if I have found favor in your eyes, let me get away and see my brothers.' For this reason he has not come to the king's table."

In addition to the cultural considerations, the Torah extended another benefit to the firstborn – he was to be given a double portion of the inheritance<sup>3</sup> irrelevant of the status of his mother.

As we can see, both culturally and Biblically the status of firstborn carried with it a lot of responsibility. Thus, when YHVH claimed the firstborn, He more than likely had in mind a responsibility for them to perform. Obviously, the firstborn of clean animals were destined to be sacrificed, but what about the firstborn of the male children? As we'll see, their responsibility was to become the priesthood of Israel.

Looking back through the books of Genesis and Exodus, we see a number of examples of priests, the first and most obvious being Melchizedek, the king/priest of Salem.

<sup>NKJ</sup> **Genesis 14:18** Then Melchizedek king of Salem brought out bread and wine; he was the priest of God Most High.

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<sup>3</sup> Deut. 21:15-17

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After Melchizedek, there were a number of other priests including the priests of Egypt, and of course, Jethro – the priest of Midian. Though the other nations had priests, there is no mention of a priesthood in regards to Abraham and his descendants. There are the *elders of Israel*, but no priesthood. The first time we see a priesthood of Israelites mentioned is in Exodus 19 where YHWH is meeting with the Israelites at Mount Sinai.

<sup>ESV</sup> **Exodus 19:1** On the third new moon after the people of Israel had gone out of the land of Egypt, on that day they came into the wilderness of Sinai. . . . There Israel encamped before the mountain, <sup>3</sup> while Moses went up to God. The LORD called to him out of the mountain, saying, "Thus you shall say to the house of Jacob, and tell the people of Israel: <sup>4</sup> You yourselves have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. <sup>5</sup> Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; <sup>6</sup> and you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation. These are the words that you shall speak to the people of Israel." <sup>7</sup> So Moses came and called the elders of the people and set before them all these words that the LORD had commanded him.

Here we see all Israel being given an opportunity to become priests – a nation of priests. This offer was extended to all the tribes, not just Levi. God was going to make up His priesthood from among all the tribes of Israel, they would all share in the responsibility of representing the God of Israel and teaching the Way to others. When we look further we'll see that the responsibility of the priesthood would have fallen on the firstborn – the ones protected by the blood of the lamb and dedicated for this service at the Passover in Egypt. It could be said that "the Passover created a nation of priests".

Things changed with the Golden Calf incident. Aaron was the firstborn in his family. His siblings included his sister Miriam and his brother Moses. Being that Aaron, along with Miriam and Moses, were prominent players in the events of the past months, and since Aaron was firstborn – the leader of the family, it would be his responsibility to promote the religious beliefs of the family, which were of course directed toward YHWH. But Aaron failed in his responsibility, giving in to the idolatrous practices the people learned in Egypt.

Aaron was not alone in forsaking his responsibility. So did the rest of the firstborn of Israel. But when Moses told the people to choose who they were going to serve, only the tribe of Levi came forward.

<sup>ESV</sup> **Exodus 32:26** then Moses stood in the gate of the camp and said, "Who is on the LORD's side? Come to me." And all the sons of Levi gathered around him.

All the other tribes failed to come forward. The newly established Priesthood of Israel had failed in their responsibility and were no longer qualified to be priests. Thus the priesthood had to change. The priesthood would no longer be composed of the firstborn of Israel, but instead, it would become all the tribe of Levi, firstborn or not. This is made clear in Numbers chapter 3.

<sup>ESV</sup> **Numbers 3:11-13** And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, <sup>12</sup> "Behold, I have taken the Levites from among the people of Israel instead of every firstborn who opens the womb among the people of Israel. The Levites shall be mine, <sup>13</sup> for all the firstborn are mine. On the day that I struck down all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, I consecrated for my own all the firstborn in Israel, both of man and of beast. They shall be mine: I am the LORD."

So instead of the firstborn being dedicated to the service of God, the Levites were given that role. But God didn't just release the firstborn from their service. In order to make the change, God required the firstborn of all the other tribes to make an exchange – buy their way out of the priesthood.

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**ESV Numbers 3:40-48** And the LORD said to Moses, "List all the firstborn males of the people of Israel, from a month old and upward, taking the number of their names. <sup>41</sup> And you shall take the Levites for me- I am the LORD- instead of all the firstborn among the people of Israel, and the cattle of the Levites instead of all the firstborn among the cattle of the people of Israel." <sup>42</sup> So Moses listed all the firstborn among the people of Israel, as the LORD commanded him. <sup>43</sup> And all the firstborn males, according to the number of names, from a month old and upward as listed were 22,273. <sup>44</sup> And the LORD spoke to Moses, saying, <sup>45</sup> "Take the Levites instead of all the firstborn among the people of Israel, and the cattle of the Levites instead of their cattle. The Levites shall be mine: I am the LORD. <sup>46</sup> And as the redemption price for the 273 of the firstborn of the people of Israel, over and above the number of the male Levites, <sup>47</sup> you shall take five shekels per head; you shall take them according to the shekel of the sanctuary (the shekel of twenty gerahs), <sup>48</sup> and give the money to Aaron and his sons as the redemption price for those who are over."

So God allowed a one-to-one exchange – one firstborn could be exchanged for one Levite. But there were more firstborn than there were Levites<sup>4</sup> - 273 more. How were those 273 extra firstborn buy their way out of the service? By paying a redemption price of five shekels each to Aaron and his sons.

From this point on, all the firstborn of Israel, except those from the tribe of Levi, were required to be redeemed. At a month old, the father was to bring five shekels of silver an present them to the priest on behalf of his firstborn son.<sup>5</sup> In addition, since the entire tribe of Levi was now dedicated to serving at the Tabernacle, God had to provide a means for their sustenance – tithing.

So what does this all have to do with Passover, and more importantly, how does it apply to us today? If the priests today are all Levites, do we have any more responsibility in that regards? Absolutely!

God never released Israel from paying the five shekel redemption price for the firstborn. Any firstborn male in Israel is still – in theory – required to serve in the priesthood unless the redemption price has been paid. Keep in mind that God never intended for there to be a Levitical priesthood. It was always His intent that the priesthood include all Israel. Thus it would seem that somewhere in God's plan He would return the priesthood to the firstborn. And He did!

It's interesting to note that there's no record that Joseph and Mary paid the five shekel redemption price for their firstborn son – Yeshua.<sup>6</sup> Being that Yeshua was a Jew, not a Levite, this would have been required. Could it be concluded that since they knew their son's life would be dedicated to the service of God, He was exempt from the requirement? What about the rest of us? Does God considers those of us who are returning from all the tribes to be part of the firstborn and to carry the responsibilities originally committed to the firstborn of Israel. Are we also exempt from the redemption price if our lives are dedicated to God's service . . . has our redemption price been paid?

While contrasting the current generation of believers to those who were present at Mount Sinai, notice what the writer of Hebrews says –

**ESV Hebrews 12:22-24** 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, <sup>23</sup> and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God, the judge of all,

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<sup>4</sup> There were 22,000 Levites – Numbers 3:39

<sup>5</sup> Numbers 18:16

<sup>6</sup> The offering described in Luke 2:22-24 was for the purification of a woman after childbirth (Lev. 12:1)

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and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, <sup>24</sup> and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant, and to the sprinkled blood that speaks a better word than the blood of Abel.

The assembly (the *kahal* in Hebrew) of the firstborn describes Israel and YHVH had intended<sup>7</sup>. The writer of Hebrews is showing that those who are returning to Yah through Messiah Yeshua are supposed to fill the role of the firstborn. This is not to say that they are to replace the Levitical priesthood that was still intact and will be through the millinium, but rather they are to rise above their brothers in respect to their walk and their service to YHVH.

Peter's first epistle was addressed to the scattered tribes of Israel, those who returning to the worship of the God of Israel. In his epistle, he reminds them of the calling their fathers had received just weeks after the Passover in Egypt.<sup>8</sup>

**NKJ 1 Peter 2:9** But you are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, His own special people, that you may proclaim the praises of Him who called you out of darkness into His marvelous light . . .

Notice what Peter said . . . they were called to be a royal priesthood. The implication is that Israel was to be a kingly priesthood<sup>9</sup> - a nation of king/priests – much like that of Melchisedek. In the book of Hebrews, Yeshua is referred to as the High Priest after the order of Melchisedek<sup>10</sup>, and since He's a High Priest, by implication, there are also "regular" priests in the same priesthood. Is this the priesthood to which the firstborn were called in Exodus 19 and for which they were set apart at the Passover in Egypt?

If the priesthood of the firstborn has been re-established, and if we are to be a part of it, how did it happen? As we've shown, the original priesthood of Israel, the priesthood of the firstborn, was created at Passover when the firstborn of Israel were protected by the blood of the lamb that was painted on the door posts of their houses. Has that happened again, and if so when? Peter again offers an explanation.

**NKJ 1 Peter 1:18-19** <sup>18</sup> knowing that you were not redeemed with corruptible things, like silver or gold, from your aimless conduct received by tradition from your fathers, <sup>19</sup> but with the precious blood of Christ, as of a lamb without blemish and without spot.

What was the "aimless conduct received by tradition from your fathers"? The way this reads we might conclude it's the tradition of the Jews, but the Young's Literal Translation makes it a little clearer.

**YLT 1 Peter 1:18-19** having known that, not with corruptible things -- silver or gold -- were ye redeemed from your foolish behavior delivered by fathers, <sup>19</sup> but with precious blood, as of a lamb unblemished and unspotted -- Christ's --

The "aimless conduct" was the way the Israelites acted foolishly before the Golden Calf. After all, it was that incident that caused the firstborn to begin paying the redemption price in the first place. But now the redemption price has been paid for all those who turn to the service of YHVH and the Priesthood of Mechizedek.

When did it happen? Just as it did at the first Passover. When the Passover lamb was sacrificed and the firstborn of Egypt were killed, the firstborn of Israel were protected from death by the blood of the paschal lamb and subsequently claimed God's service. Likewise, when Yeshua's blood was spilled out and He breathed His last, the redemption price for the firstborn

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<sup>7</sup> Exodus 4:22 - 23

<sup>8</sup> Compare with Exodus 19

<sup>9</sup> The Greek word *basileios* (Strong's 934) means royal, kingly

<sup>10</sup> Hebrews 5:1-10

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was once again paid. How do we know? Because the veil of the Temple was torn at that precise time.

<sup>ESV</sup> **Matthew 27:50-51** And Jesus cried out again with a loud voice and yielded up his spirit. <sup>51</sup> And behold, the curtain of the temple was torn in two, from top to bottom. And the earth shook, and the rocks were split.

Many believe that the veil being spoken of here was the veil to the Holy of Holies, but this is unlikely. First, because it is contrary to the concept of Yeshua being our High Priest, and secondly because a Roman soldiers stationed by Yeshua's cross apparently saw it happen<sup>11</sup>. If indeed that's the case, the centurion would not have been able to see the veil covering the Holy of Holies, but he would have been able to see the veil to the Holy Place, the dividing line that excluded anyone who was not a priest from entering the Temple.

If indeed the veil that was torn was the one going into the holy place that could indicate that the priesthood was now open to all Israel, not just the Levites. In other words, the priesthood of the firstborn is back in operation.

Ancient Israel never had the opportunity to enjoy the benefits of the priesthood of the firstborn, but we do. Just as the firstborn of Israel became Gods at the death of the Passover lamb, we are redeemed by the blood of Messiah Yeshua and become dedicated to his service.

The Jewish sages teach that every man is the priest in his home. The foundation for the Israel of God is homes filled with believing parents teaching their children about YHVH, His Torah, and His Messiah. As God continues to call his people out of bondage, let every man take up his rightful role in the priesthood of Israel.

Shalom Aleichem

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<sup>11</sup> Luke 23:45