

to be the difficulties, and in the facing of them to avoid controversial language that would preserve prejudices rather than lead to enlightenment, it seems to us that the old issues of the Reformation are still crucially relevant: the supreme authority of Scripture; who is a Christian and how does a man become one? What is the Church? And, is the Church of Rome a Church at all? So long as such issues are burked the cause of truth will not be advanced.

THE FIRSTBORN AND THE PASSOVER

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This article is part of a much longer work by the author which concentrates on the significance of the FIRSTBORN in the Bible. The whole work forms an important and timely contribution to biblical theology in at least five ways:

1. It helps to confirm the Pauline authorship of Colossians particularly with reference to the words, 'the firstborn of every creature' (1:15) which is shown to be a thoroughly Pauline concept.
2. It also shows convincingly that the 'first-born' does not refer to Christ's position in creation but rather to his role in redemption. In this way the misunderstanding of the term by Arians, both ancient and modern, in order to undermine the deity of Christ is exposed.
3. It questions and rejects the long established view that the setting of the New Testament letters is Greek and Roman rather than Hebraic. For this reason the study of the Old Testament is shown to be essential for the understanding of the New Testament.
4. It sheds additional new light on the gospel of John, Romans and Hebrews.
5. It also illuminates and clarifies further the purpose and significance of the Saviour's person

and work.

Plans are now in progress to publish the whole work in the near future and the copyright of this article is reserved by the author. Mr Holland is Pastor of Grange Baptist Church in Letchworth, Herts.

NEW TESTAMENT SCHOLARSHIP appears to have paid little attention to linking Christ's title, the 'prototokos' (firstborn), with the Passover events. Alan Richardson wrote, after noting the importance of the Passover for the Jews, 'This notion seems to have left little trace upon New Testament theology, though the idea of Christ as "our Passover" and as "the Lamb of God" are distinctly related to it'.¹ F.F. Bruce has written in private correspondence with the author 'Nor do I know of any commentator who links our Lord's title as "the firstborn" in redemption with the firstborn in the Passover!'.²

The two references that Richardson has alluded to, are far from the sum total of the New Testament passages that link up with the Passover, as we shall soon see, but before we identify, and examine those we will state what we believe to be the true setting for the 'prototokos' and then proceed to see if the New Testament text will support our claim.

In the Passover narrative it was the firstborn son who was designated by Yahweh to represent the family. On the Passover night that representation was to be bound up with the family's deliverance from the angel of death. Now we must be clear about this, as it is fundamental to the argument being put forward, that it was not the family that the lamb represented. The lamb represented the firstborn and died in his place. The firstborn's life was threatened because he represented the family. It is this representative role, we believe, which links the New Testament statements that Christ is the Lamb of God (John 1:29) and that Christ is our Passover (1 Cor.5:7) with the statement that he is the firstborn. To be more exact, Christ is the firstborn, the one who represents his family. Because no other could face the angel of death and so spare Christ of his representative role, he died as the paschal lamb had done. He is both the firstborn and the Passover offering, for in the Christian Passover they are one. This double designation firstborn/Lamb of God is not an obstacle to our argument. In Christ we find many offices and titles converge. Prophet and priest converge with king, priest converges with victim, Saviour converges with judge, and in the incarnation God converges with man. The New Testament writers would

have little difficulty in applying such a principle of converging diversity to yet a further realm of Christ's offices and work. The firstborn and paschal lamb converge to be one and the same person. The Exodus was the Old Testament's shadow of the redemptive work of Christ (1 Cor.10:1ff) and it is little short of bewildering that scholarship has failed to look into the significance of the firstborn in that first act of redemption, and to appreciate the application of the title to Christ by the New Testament writers.

This interpretation takes the expression 'prototokos', removes it from the realm where it has been traditionally placed, of being an ontological expression, and places it firmly in the realm of redemptive history. Christ is not the firstborn, but acts as the firstborn. It is a title to express the work he has done in his death. This is borne out even from the Old Testament usage of the expression in the Passover narrative, for the firstborn could, in fact, be the second, fifth or even tenth born in the family. If he was the first male to be born he was the firstborn. This observation is supported by W.Michaelis who wrote on the etymology of the Hebrew 'bekor' (firstborn) that it 'is neither connected with the Hebrew words for "to give birth" - it can be used for fruits etc. as well. Nor is it related to the words for "one", "first", nor the similar word for "head", "chief" - to the concept which it was designed to express there did not necessarily belong a comparison with other things of the same kind, since the first might also be the only one'.³

The significance of our explanation of the title in Colossians 1:15 'the firstborn of all creation', ought to be obvious. For Paul, redemption, like the fall, has a cosmic scope. Romans 8 shows the whole creation waiting for restoration, which will happen at the climax of Christ's redemptive work, when his people are released from bondage and are glorified. The firstborn's significance in the Exodus was only for his family. The significance of the death of Christ, the Christian Passover, goes beyond that of his own family to the universe that was caught up in the tragedy of the fall. So he is 'the firstborn of all creation'.

We can develop this even further when we recognise that the firstborn is also synonymous with the Old Testament redeemer. They are one and the self-same person. Now whilst this is never explicitly stated in Scripture because the equation was so obvious to any Jew, we believe the evidence exists to show it to be so, and this we shall outline

shortly.

Before we turn to the New Testament texts in which 'prototokos' occurs it would be useful to survey the responsibilities that the Old Testament redeemer had to fulfil, and we will see how they developed, providing a backcloth for the work of Christ to be set against.

The first responsibility, we will note, which fell upon the shoulders of the redeemer was the one of securing revenge for the family. When a member of the family was murdered the redeemer's duty was to exact blood vengeance on the guilty party; the law of retribution rested upon his shoulders. Gen.4:14-15, 23-24; Num.35; Deut.19; Josh.20. In the latter part of Isaiah, where Yahweh is often called the redeemer, Yahweh promised to act as the avenger of his people, Isa.43:4, 14-16; 47:4; 49:25-26; 59:16-20. In the New Testament Christ, Himself, is presented fulfilling this same role, Luke 1:68-78; 18:7; II Thess.1:6-9; Rev.6:9-11.

The next role of the firstborn redeemer in the Old Testament was that of securing property which had been lost to the family through debt. In Ruth 4:4 Boaz requested Naomi's nearest kinsman to perform the responsibility of acting as the redeemer to secure the family field. In Lev.25:8-34 we have the principle of Jubilee outlined. It fell upon the 'nearest relative' (v.25) to act as the redeemer, whenever possible, to recover the family's property. Once again, we find Yahweh promising to act as Israel's redeemer in securing what she had lost (Isa.43:6-7; 51:11; 52:8-10). Israel was promised the return of her own land to be her possession. Again, in the New Testament, we find this role attributed to Christ as he recovers the Kingdom of Heaven for those who were deprived of it by sin, Col.1:13-14; Heb.9:15; Rev.5:9-10.

The third role of the redeemer was to fulfil the law of the levirate. This law appointed the redeemer to act as the protector of the widow in the family. If a woman was widowed and childless it was the responsibility of the redeemer to take her as his wife and raise up a family on behalf of his deceased brother. Deut.25:5-10; Ruth 3:13; 4:1-8. Once again, this aspect of the redeemer's role is used to illustrate the act of salvation Yahweh promised to accomplish for his people. 'He will save Jerusalem from her widowhood and raise up children for her' Isa.49:20-21; 50:1-2; 54:1-8; 62:4-5. This same role is applied to Christ, who takes the Church to himself, and acts as her

husband. Note how this fits into the concept of a second marriage in Romans 7:1-4. So also, I Cor.6:20; Eph.5:25; Rev.19:7-8.

So there is a significant connection between the roles of the Old Testament firstborn redeemer and the various aspects of the redemptive work of Christ. This connection gives good ground to suppose that the New Testament use of the 'prototokos' title has an Hebraic origin rather than a Greek. Indeed, when we recall that Psalm 89:27 was seen in rabbinical writings to apply the title 'firstborn' to the Messiah it reinforces the messianic redemptive concept which we claim to be bound up with the title.

Before the argument outlined above can be accepted there are three questions that need to be satisfactorily answered.

- i) Did the firstborn actually represent the family in judgment? Was he a sacrifice for the family?
- ii) Why was it that at the Passover it was the firstborn, and not the father, who represented the family?
- iii) Was the firstborn, and the redeemer, one and the same person, and if so, why two titles when the one of redeemer could satisfactorily cover both roles?

The first of our questions then, is, did the firstborn actually represent the family in judgment?

A.S.Yahuda saw no more significance in the death of the firstborn than it being a battle between Yahweh and the Egyptian gods. He pointed out that the firstborn son of Pharaoh had the same rank as his father, he had the title 'Sa-Ra-en - Khetef' i.e. 'the son of Ra from his body'. He was a god himself. Yahuda argued from this that the significance of the death of the firstborn was 'to defy the mighty gods of Egypt, to expose their impotence to protect the offspring of the 'Son of Ra'.⁴ He saw no other significance in the death of the firstborn of the nation than a means of convincing Pharaoh and his people that the death of the ruler's firstborn was no accident.

Yahuda's explanation of the death of the firstborn is clearly inadequate. If the scope of the firstborn's death was only to support the claim that Pharaoh's firstborn's death was no accident there should

have been no need for Moses to require the Hebrews to secure protection by the death of a lamb. Simply the death of all Egypt's firstborn would have sufficed. The requirement of blood, central to the whole Jewish sacrificial system, and then the permanent memory of this deliverance of Israel's firstborn, reflected in the subsequently inaugurated sacrificial system and dedication of the tribe of Levi to the Lord in place of the firstborn; all is clear evidence enough to show Yahuda's understanding was inadequate.

D.M.G.Stalker noted that 'Set apart' in Exodus 12:12, which literally means 'cause to pass over (he^{re} bhir)' is the word used for sacrificing children to Molech, II Kings 16:3; Ezek.20:31; etc. Stalker did not see direct borrowing to have occurred. He wrote, 'The usages of the two peoples are quite different. Though in Israel the firstborn were to be set apart to Yahweh as his, they were to be "ransomed" from him, a term which could suggest that they were sacrificed in theory, though not in actual fact'. Thus Stalker sees a sacrificial concept to lie in the purpose of the firstborn's death, although he does say 'details of the motivation are somewhat confused. Exodus 12:11ff connects the Passover with the smiting of the firstborn of the Egyptians, while Exodus 12:27 connects it with the sparing of Israel'.⁵

We can add to these opinions those listed by R.A.Stewart. He says, 'It has been argued that the Passover is an adaptation of something much older than Moses - whether a circumcision ceremonial, or an anti-demonic threshold rite, or a shepherd's festival, or a sacrificial attempt to enhance the vitality both of the flock, and of the celebrant, or a sacrifice of the firstborn as old as Cain and Abel, defining by its very reference the offence and punishment of Pharaoh, or a common meal of communion or magic. This list is by no means exhaustive'.⁶

We would claim that whatever the origin of the Passover might be, the full significance of the firstborn's death, like so many other Hebraic concepts, can be seen clearly only when it is placed in the context of the solidarity of the family and nation. R.P.Shedd supports this when, explaining the significance of sacrifices for sin, he says that they were not to be seen as a 'mechanical transference of penalty'. Shedd goes on to say, 'There is no compulsion to explain this identification merely on the basis of the psychic life of nature (i.e.'mana') in which man shares. As in the case of the commemoration of the Passover, or circumcision, (in which the initiate or member was identified

with the redemptive event), it is the event of the death of the victim in which the guilty party shares. This is the impression gained from an examination of the Passover ritual outlined in Exodus 12. The lamb was the vicarious substitute for the firstborn of the nation, which in turn realistically represented the nation. It is the vicarious substitution of the experience of death which must be recognised. What should have happened to the firstborn is through the principle of a sacrificial commutation of the penalty brought upon the substitutionary victim'.⁷

Shedd, whose work 'Man in Community' explores the semitic concept of solidarity, is clarifying the very matter we are grappling with. He is saying that it is missing the full significance if we simply see the lamb dying for the firstborn. If a lamb had not been slain, the firstborn would have died as the representative of the family. What the lamb is to the firstborn, the firstborn is to the family, a substitutionary sacrifice. We shall shortly see how identification of this principle brings clarity to other passages related to the theme of the firstborn, but for now we shall rest our case on Shedd's submission that the firstborn's role as a sacrifice was avoided only because a lamb was slain as his substitute and the firstborn shared in the victim's death on the basis of semitic solidarity.

There are three Old Testament passages which we believe support our claim that the death of the firstborn was related to punishment and deliverance. They are Jer.31:9; Micah 6:7 and Zech.12:10. The Jeremiah passage is used by Matthew in his nativity narrative, and we will consider that passage later when we examine Matthew's understanding of the passage. We will, at this stage, limit ourselves to the passages in the minor prophets.

The passage recorded in Micah is a familiar one in which the prophet is asked by Israel what it should do to atone for its sin, the people are represented as saying 'With what shall I come before the Lord and bow down before the exalted God? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, even ten thousand rivers of oil? Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?' (Micah 6:6-7).

The reference to this offering of the firstborn as an atonement bears a number of possible interpretations. E.Henderson says, 'It was

customary among the ancients, on calamities or dangerous emergencies, for the rulers of the state, to prevent destruction of all, to offer the most dearly beloved of their children as a ransom to divine vengeance'.⁸ This is supported by G.W.Wade who said, 'The idea behind the kind of sacrifice here imagined is plainly that atonement for sin could be made by the sinner through some self-inflicted mortification or loss'.⁹ J.M.P.Smith saw this passage as proof of the practice of human sacrifice being practised in Micah's day, but refused to accept it was for atonement. Smith saw it to be a reference simply to a desire to please Yahweh, and going to extremes to achieve that goal. He said, 'The phrase Sin of my soul has been taken by many as sin-offering of my soul; but this cannot be, for the parallel word transgression never has the meaning guilt offerings, and the technical sin offering of the later law certainly never contemplated the possibility of human sacrifice as one of its constituent elements'.¹⁰ Smith's remarks, however, require that the people had their religious understanding technically concise and clear, and the very point of the passage is to show that they did not have any such understanding. H.McKeating argues against using the passage to show human sacrifice was widely practised. He claims that the question asked is rhetorical, expecting the answer, 'Of course not!' The argument is, McKeating says, 'If the costliest sacrifice cannot achieve such an end, what is the point of the ordinary sacrifices of rams, calves or oil?'¹¹ E.B.Pusey sees the passage as a rebuke, 'They would not withhold their sons, their firstborn sons, from God, part, as they were of themselves. They would offer everything (even what God forbade) excepting only what alone He asked for, their heart, its love and its obedience'.¹² C.Von Orell saw the passage as definitely reflecting an attempt to expiate for sin by means of the firstborn's death, 'The climax grows in boldness; shall I give my firstborn for my sin, properly, as my sin, but with the sense of expiating for sin, **כַּיְשׁוּב** having both significances'.¹³

The range of opinion recorded shows a variety of attitudes to understanding the purpose of the suggested sacrifice of the firstborn. It would seem to us that there is no forcing of the intended meaning of the passage when saying it is expressing belief, even if only popular belief, of some possibility of dealing with a situation of crisis by the death of the firstborn. This is suggested by the attitudes of the surrounding nations who did follow such practices. This is the view of Orell who went on to say, 'An example of such desperate efforts to win the favour of the deity, or to avert His wrath, was furnished by heathen neighbours, such as the Moabites (II Kings 3:27) and especially

the Phoenicians'.

Our reasoning supports those scholars who see here a suggestion that the sacrificial death of the firstborn might be offered as an appeasement to God's wrath, and an attempt to avert His judgment. If this is true, it links up with what we have claimed for the purpose of the firstborn's death in the Passover, and we do not need to look for any external influence for this statement. The people saw the conditions to indicate God's judgment would fall, and they ask, 'Will it be as when it fell in Egypt, and will it be averted in the same way?'

The next passage to consider is that of Zechariah in which he says, 'And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and supplication. They will look on me, the one they have pierced, and mourn for him as one mourns for an only child, and grieve bitterly for him as one grieves for a firstborn son' (Zech.12:10).

The text of this passage poses a problem in that some MSS give 'look on him whom they have pierced', while others have 'look upon me whom they have pierced'. The majority of commentators accept that because the latter 'look upon me', with Jehovah speaking, is so difficult, it must be the original and the 'looking upon him' was introduced to overcome the problem of speaking of the piercing of Yahweh.¹⁴ Attempts have been made to identify who has been pierced. Those who wish to uphold the text that gives 'look upon him', make a range of identifications as to who has been pierced. These vary from Onasis III who was assassinated in 170 BC, to Simon the Maccabee who was assassinated in 134 BC, to a representative of Yahweh. A.E.Kirtpatrick held the latter position and said, 'It is Jehovah who has been thrust through in the person of his representative'. This view, of course, could accept both texts, but it is difficult, as J.B.Baldwin has pointed out, to see how two distinct people die in the death of one representative.¹⁵ Rex Mason also accepts the one pierced is a representative of Yahweh, probably a little known figure belonging to the prophetic circle. He comes to this conclusion because he sees the mourning over the treatment of the one who had been pierced follows repentance, rather than precedes it, so indicating in Mason's thinking that hardly suggests the role of the 'Suffering Servant', still less a Messianic one.¹⁶ In other words, it is not the cause of repentance but an effect of it. But this requires that we should expect repentance to be natural once the evil has been exposed. This, however, cuts across what Zechariah is actually

stating. The repentance will be of divine origin, not human. Once this has been given they will see their crime in a new light that will lead to bitter mourning. Thus Mason's argument loses its thrust, because we cannot measure the degree of importance to be attached to the one pierced, by his effect to produce repentance. This is borne out fully by Paul's explanation of repentance in II Cor.7:9-11 where he distinguishes between two types of sorrow, one worldly, and the other godly. Hinckley Mitchell dismisses a Messianic identification for the one pierced by saying, 'Those who identify the one pierced as the Messiah overlook one point of great importance, namely, that while the effusion of the Spirit and the effect produced by it are evidently future, the act of piercing the nameless victim belongs to the past. This means that the one pierced was not the Messiah whose advent all will agree was still future when these words were written; but someone who had at that time already suffered martyrdom'.¹⁷ But this comment cannot be upheld. It requires that we accept Zechariah to be speaking from the vantage point of his own historical situation, looking forward to what will happen, whereas examination of the passage shows he is speaking from the vantage point of the vision of the outpouring of the spirit of prayer and supplication, and from that point the piercing is a past event. In other words, it is past not from the point at which Zechariah lives, but from the event he is speaking about. When the outpouring of the spirit of prayer and supplication takes place they will have committed the offence. Calvin interpreted the text as saying that God was wounded by the sins of his people ¹⁸ while T.V.Moore argues that its interpretation can only be for the Messiah being pierced. Moore said, 'This evasion is utterly inadmissible and the text still stands, asserting that the Jews would look at Jehovah whom they had slain, a prophecy which can only be interpreted in the light of the cross'. ¹⁹ In spite of the divergence of opinion, we would claim that it clearly links a redemptive event with the death of one likened to a firstborn. Obviously the main original reason for the reference to the firstborn is to emphasise that the grief will be intense, but the mention of grief over the loss of the firstborn could not but recall the Passover event to any Jew. The passage's significance and meaning would go far beyond what a superficial reading of the text might convey. The passage would draw together the strands of Jewish redemptive history, and at the heart of that, is the role of the firstborn. This understanding is supported by the context itself (Zech.12:7-9). The preceding verses speak of the smiting of the nations by Yahweh as he defends Israel, a theme that obviously has its counterpart in the Exodus events. This claim is supported by the way John uses the

passage in the opening of the Revelation, in a setting glorying in the redemptive work of Christ (Rev.1:4-8). It is also used in John's Gospel, in the very context of Christ's death, which John repeatedly links with the Passover event (John 19:37).

R.Le Deaut ²⁰ suggests that by New Testament times, and later, the first Passover was regarded as having an expiatory character. This view is supported by R.E.Brown²¹ who thinks this came about because by this time lambs were sacrificed within the Temple area by the priests. Against these views is C.H.Dodd ²² who argues the reverse. He claims that there was probably expiatory significance in the Passover ritual in its very earliest stages, which he sees to be pre-Mosaic, but long before New Testament times this had been dropped. From the evidence we have considered we would suggest the true picture is that the Original Passover was regarded as an expiatory sacrifice, and all subsequent celebrations were memorials of the original without expiatory value.

The next question which we have set ourselves to resolve is, why was it the firstborn, and not the father, who represented the family?

As the Passover event took place after 400 years in Egypt it is reasonable to suppose we might find some significance in the role of the firstborn in that nation's understanding. It is this that V.L. Trumper argued for.²³ He considered that the text of King Unas (Osiris, Budge Vol.1 p121) to reveal the firstborn's special significance in Egypt. In that text, the dead King has succeeded in making his way into Heaven. The passage describes the terror of the gods when they see him arriving, as they soon discover that he is mightier than they, and he commences to chivy them about. One of the lines describing the being says, 'He is God the firstborn of the firstborn'. Trumper went on to point out that from the writings of Herodotus we learn that it is probable that the sacred bull representing Apis, which was kept in the Temple, was the first and only born. It is specially stated that the cow who was his mother had no subsequent offspring.

The influence of the Egyptian religious belief is clearly seen in the golden calf Israel worshipped soon after leaving Egypt (Ex.32:1-4). It could be argued from this that the significance of the firstborn also came from Egypt. The dynasty depended upon the survival of the firstborn son of Pharaoh. If he did not in turn give birth to another 'son of Ra' his throne was directly threatened. It is obvious that with

the birth of the firstborn his significance was even greater than his father's, for the future of the nation, the throne, and even Ra himself, was then focussed upon the safety of the new son of Ra. The father's death would be by no means as calamitous as the death of his firstborn. His representative role was more crucial than that of his father's, until he himself had fathered a son.

But there is yet another concept that could have given the death of the firstborn such an important significance in representing the family, and its origin is in Abraham and his son Isaac. When Isaac was offered up by Abraham (Gen.22) even though the sacrifice was not actually made, Jewish understanding in keeping with their understanding of social solidarity and the doctrine of the merits of the fathers, saw Israel, the nation as a whole, actually offered up in Isaac. By this offering, of Israel's firstborn, the Jew saw himself offered up to God and so sacrificed. This doctrine of Israel's sanctification in Isaac has been carefully documented by Moore.²⁴ The evidence for the significance of the offering of Isaac has slowly emerged over the last century.²⁵ The testing of Abraham as to whether he would obey God and offer his son is known in Rabbinic studies as the Aqedah, which means 'the binding'. It is also the term used for binding sacrifices to the altar in preparation for sacrifice.

A study by G.Vermes published in 1961²⁶ made use of Rabbinic sources, the targums and the intertestamental literature relating to the Aqedah. One of the major contributions of this work was that it drew attention to Pseudo Philo's 'Liber antiquitatum biblicarum'. This was previously known by scholars but had been somewhat neglected in New Testament research.

According to Vermes there are two types of targumic tradition with regard to Genesis 22: the primitive kernel as represented by the 'Fragmentary Targum' and 'Neofiti' and the secondary version represented by 'Pseudo-Jonathan' and a Tosefta fragment of the 'Jerusalem Targum'. The distinctive features of the oldest targumic tradition are:

1. Abraham told Isaac that he was to be the sacrificial victim
2. Isaac gave his consent
3. Isaac asked to be bound so that his sacrifice might be perfect

4. Isaac was favoured with a heavenly vision
5. Abraham prayed that his own obedience and Isaac's willingness might be remembered by God on behalf of Isaac's children
6. Abraham's prayer was answered 28

Pseudo-Jonathan presents the whole episode as a test of Isaac's fidelity, as well as of Abraham's love and faithfulness.²⁹

Vermes showed that the targumic tradition about Isaac's active role in the sacrifice was already implicit in three works of the first century A.D.: The 'Jewish Antiquities' of Josephus, '4 Maccabees' and Pseudo Philo's 'Liber antiquitatum'. Josephus wrote that the offering of Isaac was not only a test for Abraham, but also insisted on Isaac's merit and on his voluntary self surrender.³⁰ In '4 Maccabees' Isaac is presented as the proto-martyr, and in several other passages there is an allusion to the power of the blood of the martyrs, but with no explicit relation to Isaac.³¹ Pseudo-Philo stresses the willingness, even the joy, of Isaac. He relates Isaac's sacrifice to other sacrifices offered to God and accepted by God for the sins of men. Finally, Pseudo Philo presents Isaac as being hopeful for the beneficent effect of his self-offering upon future generations.

Vermes went on to show that in '4 Maccabees' Isaac is implicitly the model of a martyr's death offered for the sins of Israel.³² He suggests that this is linked with Isaiah 53 where in verse 7 the servant is compared to a lamb brought to the slaughter, just as was Isaac. Also, Isaac's sacrifice was ordered by God, as was the servant's (Is.53:10).

Vermes emphasised the sacrificial nature of Isaac's offering by linking Isaac's free consent with the tradition in Pseudo Philo and later midrashic texts that Isaac's blood was shed. The Fragmentary Targum explicitly mentions a prayer by Abraham for the pardon of transgressions of Isaac's descendants.³³ Other targums are not as explicit but it seems that the sacrifice was thought to have played a unique role in the salvation of Israel.³⁴ Vermes concluded from the testimony in Rabbinic sources that the Temple sacrifices (which were offered on the very site of Isaac's offering: II Ch.3:1, Jubilees 18:13, Josephus) and perhaps all sacrifices, were intended as a memorial of Isaac's self-oblation. Vermes thought that this suggests that the atoning efficacy of the 'tāmîd' offering and of all the sacrifices in which

a lamb was immolated and perhaps even of all expiatory sacrifice depended on the power of the sacrifice of Isaac.³⁵

There is another interpretation of the significance of the Aqedah, identified by Vermes as the secondary version. It rejected the expiatory significance of the Aqedah because no blood was shed, and interpreted its significance to be that of an example of faithfulness even unto death. J.Sweetnam noted how the writer of the Epistle to the Hebrews emphasized that without the shedding of blood there is no remission of sins, and thinks this is to stress the obvious superiority of Christ's sacrifice, whose blood was actually shed. But there is further significance in the Aqedah for our study of the firstborn. Le Déaut, whose work³⁶ supports Vermes' claim that a Rabbinical tradition saw a propitiatory significance in the offering of Isaac, noted from study of the Intertestamental 'Poem of the Four Nights' found in the text of Codex Neofiti I at Ex.12:42, that there are four key events affecting Israel. These are creation, the birth and sacrifice of Isaac, the Passover in Egypt, and the end of the world, and all are said to take place on the night of the Passover. Le Déaut also noted that Jubilees also links the sacrifice of Isaac with the date of the Passover.³⁷ This led him to conclude that there was an important significance in the events of the Passover for the Jewish interpretation of the Aqedah. Sweetnam gives support for this view³⁸ believing that if there was a connection between the Passover and the Aqedah it would probably be based on the common factor of the redemption of the firstborn and would probably precede the Exile.

There is yet a further link between the Aqedah and the theme of the firstborn. Not only was Isaac the firstborn of the Covenant people, but his binding was actually linked with the Passover itself. The efficacy of the blood of the Passover lamb was not seen to be in itself but in it being a reminder of the sacrifice of Isaac. In the 'Mekilta de-Rabbi Ishmael' is a halakhic midrash which Sweetnam thinks was edited not earlier than the end of the fourth century A.D. but dating in substance from the Tannaitic period.³⁹ The passage is concerned with selected sections of Exodus. At 7:78-82 occurs the reference to the Aqedah. It is a comment on the words 'And when I see the blood' from Ex.12:13.

'And When I See the Blood I see the blood of the sacrifice of Isaac, for it is said, "And Abraham called the name of that place Adonai-Jireh" (The Lord will see) etc. Likewise

it says in another passage, "And as he was about to destroy the Lord beheld and He repented Him", etc. (I Ch.21:15). What did he behold? He beheld the blood of the sacrifice of Isaac, as it is said, "God will Himself see the Lamb" etc. (Gen.22:8)'

The significance of the Aqedah for the interpretation of the New Testament will be dealt with later. At this point we will limit our study to the material so far considered which we believe offers significant evidence to **suggest** that the firstborn was associated with vicarious judgment on behalf of the family. It was a principle established before the inauguration of the Passover event, when Isaac was offered up as the eldest son of the Jewish people. So whilst accepting that the father was the head of the family yet nevertheless he did not represent it in the face of judgment. That fell upon the firstborn by divine decree.

Our third question is, are the firstborn and redeemer one and the same person?

Now it must be stated that although this was not always so in practice, nevertheless it was clearly the ideal. The firstborn and the redeemer were intended to be one and the same person. The difference in the roles is that the firstborn acted in respect to sacrificial representation, as previously outlined, and this could not be abdicated or handed on. That role was bound up in the very person of the firstborn. There was only one way of avoiding the role being played out, that was by substitutionary sacrifice. The redeemer's role, however, was a role that could, and often was, handed on to the next of kin, either because of death or because of abdication.

The two titles, firstborn and redeemer, are never explicitly tied together in the Old Testament. This need not be a problem to our thesis, for to the Jews the identity would be so obvious that it would never need to be stated. But evidence does exist to show how natural the relationship was. Boaz had to approach the one who was next of kin to Ruth's former husband (Ruth 4:4). Although Boaz was related, there was another who had the responsibility of redemption before himself. Obviously it would work down through the members of the family. The eldest, or firstborn, being the redeemer. If the eldest was dead, or refused to act, it went to the next eldest brother. If there were no brothers, or if they refused to act, the role of the redeemer fell upon

the nearest relative who would accept the duty, the process of elimination having to be gone through before a relative could take on the role, as established in Lev.25:25. This is exemplified in the account Luke gives of the Sadducees' attempt to trick Jesus on the resurrection. The Sadducees make it clear that the eldest remaining brother took the unfortunate widow so as to fulfil the role of the redeemer. 'The first one married a woman and died childless. The second and then the third married her, and in the same way the seven died' (Luke 20: 27-30). Coupled with this, Edersheim has pointed out that the practice of inheritance under Jewish law gave the eldest son, the firstborn, twice the inheritance of any other member of the family. Hence, if there were five the inheritance was divided into six parts and the eldest received two parts so as to fulfil the responsibilities of the redeemer.⁴⁰

There is another sphere in which the firstborn/redeemer role can be seen to be inter-related, if not synonymous. It is in Jewish Messianism. We have already noted that the king (later to be applied by the Rabbis to the Messiah) was called the Lord's firstborn (Psalm 89:27). Clearly, it originally had reference to the king's promised superiority over the kings of the earth. This title is also linked with that of the 'Son of God' (Psalm 2:8) given because the king had the responsibility of representing Yahweh to his people. He was to uphold Yahweh's laws, protect his people and sustain the poor, especially the widow. He was, in other words, the redeemer. This designation, redeemer, although not actually given to the king himself, was applied to Yahweh in the context of kingship when he was declared to be 'Israel's king and redeemer' (Isa.44:6). Clearly, there is a close association between the titles 'Son of God', 'redeemer' and 'firstborn'. In fact, when we examine the whole of the verse of Isaiah 44:6, which we have made reference to, we find further evidence that our train of thought is correct. Isaiah says, 'This is what the Lord says - Israel's King and Redeemer, the Lord Almighty: I am the first and the last; apart from me there is no God'. These very titles were gathered together by John and used to honour Christ. He wrote, 'Grace and peace to you from him who is, and who was, and who is to come, and from the seven spirits before his throne, and from Jesus Christ who is the faithful witness, the firstborn from the dead, and the ruler of the kings of the earth. To him who has loved us and washed us from our sins by his blood, and has made us to be a kingdom and priests to serve his God and Father - to him be glory and power for ever and ever! Amen. Look, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him,

even those who pierced him; and all the peoples of the earth will mourn because of him. So shall it be! Amen. "I am the Alpha and the Omega" says the Lord God, "Who is, and was, and who is to come, the Almighty" (Rev.1:4-8). That the last part of the above quoted passage from Revelation is to be applied to Christ is confirmed by the fact that in verse 17 of the same chapter Jesus himself says, 'Do not be afraid. I am the First and the Last'. John is therefore gathering the very titles that we are considering, those of 'firstborn', 'king' and 'First and Last', and in a context saturated with terms of redemption, ascribes them all to Jesus.

Supporting what we are claiming is the rabbinical interpretation of Isaiah 59:20. 'The redeemer will come to Zion to those in Jacob who repent of their sins, declares the Lord'. In periqta 166b the peculiar form of 'plene' in which the word 'Goel' (Redeemer) is written is taken to indicate the Messiah as the Redeemer in the full sense. Hence the Messiah is called the Firstborn (Ps.89:27) and the Redeemer (Isa.59:20) in rabbinical literature. In fact, these titles are linked elsewhere in the rabbinical writings. Edersheim wrote, 'Ps.2:7 is quoted as Messianic in the Talmud, among a number of other Messianic quotations (Sukk.52a). There is a very remarkable passage in the Midrash on Ps. 2:7 (ed. Warsh. p.5a), in which the unity of Israel and the Messiah in prophetic vision seems clearly indicated. Tracing the 'decree' through the Law, the Prophets, and the Hagiographa, the first passage quoted is Ex.4:22, 'Israel is My firstborn son'; the second, from the prophets Isa.52:13, 'Behold My servant shall deal prudently', and Isa. 42:1, 'Behold, My servant, whom I uphold'; the third, from the Hagiographa, Ps.110:1, 'The Lord said unto my Lord', and again Ps.2:7, 'The Lord said unto Me, Thou art My Son', and yet this other saying (Dan. 7:13) 'Behold, one like the Son of Man came with the clouds of heaven'. Five lines further down, the same Midrash, in reference to the words 'Thou art My Son', observes that, when that hour comes, God speaks to Him to make a new covenant, and thus He speaks, 'This day have I begotten Thee' - this is the hour in which He becomes His Son'.⁴¹

We have long recognised that the title servant in the servant songs of Isaiah oscilate between the individual servant and the community, but here it is shown that this solidarity extends to other titles, including that of firstborn. Not only this, but the titles themselves are interlinked, so firstborn is linked with the suffering of the servant title, they illuminate the meaning of each other.

The significance of what we have considered ought to be obvious. This interrelationship enriches the significance of the various titles, and firstborn is coloured by all the redemptive concepts inherent in the person of the suffering servant. The firstborn is the suffering redeemer.

Edersheim has also brought to our attention the fact that the Rabbis linked the firstborn and servant with the title Son of God from Ps.2:7. This points to a redemptive significance behind the heavenly declaration at Jesus' baptism when the heavenly voice declared, 'This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased' (Matt.3:17), which is, of course, an amalgamation of Ps.2:7 and Isa.42:1.

But the strongest strand of evidence that Christ is the firstborn/redeemer comes from the New Testament itself. Examination reveals a startling omission. Christ is never called the Redeemer. His work is constantly described as a work of redemption, but never is He given the title 'the Redeemer'. What we do find, however, is that regularly He is called the firstborn, and that title is always closely related to the descriptions of His work of redemption. This omission is even more significant in that Jewish literature of the New Testament period contains many references to the Messiah being the Redeemer.

There can be only one explanation for the absence of the title Redeemer from New Testament Christology. It has been taken up in the minds of the New Testament writers into the more definitive title 'the firstborn'. This development is quite natural, as Christ's redemptive role always has its origin in the vicarious sufferings he underwent. This was not so in the Old Testament. Only the firstborn had a vicarious role. The redeemer's role was quite separate. Thus, when we come to the New Testament, the writers see it as quite natural to designate Christ as the firstborn, since it is from his vicarious sufferings that his redemptive work flows.

To the evidence so far considered we can add the results of recent sacramental studies. Some Catholic theologians⁴² have refused to accept the Mythraic origin of Paul's thoughts concerning baptism which has been widely accepted by recent scholarship, and have turned to the Old Testament cultic system as a possible origin. Their conclusions are that the dying and rising of Romans 6 has its setting in the Jewish sacrificial system, the Passover being specifically identified as the source. To this can be added the claim of W.D.Davies who, after

examining Paul's understanding of the Lord's Supper, summed up his conclusions by saying, 'We believe that Paschal ideas dominate his view of the Eucharist'.⁴³

The significance of other Messianic titles, used both by the Lord and Paul is also significant for our study. The doctrine of the second Adam suggests the representative role that the firstborn fulfilled. It is through this position that Christ is the federal head and redeems his brethren (Rom.5:9). J.Jeremias has pointed out that Paul avoided the use of 'bar nāshā' Jesus' self descriptive title as it would have misled the thoughts of his Gentile hearers. Instead he rendered the substance of 'bar nāshā' by 'o anthrapos' (Rom.5:15; I Cor.15:21; Eph.5:31f; cf I Tim.2:5). It is evident that Paul knew the self description of Jesus as Son of Man because of the way he interpreted Psalm 8 Messianically when he used it in I Cor.15:27. Jeremias wrote, 'with his Adam/Christ antithesis Paul expresses the same thought as underlies Jesus' self description as 'bar nāshā', namely, that Jesus is the firstborn of the new creation of God. As Adam stands at the head of the 'aiōn outos', as the first man, so the risen Christ stands at the head of the 'aiōn mellōn' as the initiator of the perfect redeemed creation of God'.⁴⁴ And so, to all the material we have considered relating to the firstborn we can add all that Paul has had to say about the last Adam, and indeed, all that Jesus had to say about the Son of Man. Both titles are inseparably linked with the concept of the redeemer/firstborn figure.

Jeremias' work has the support of H.Ridderbross who claimed that the title firstborn of every creature was not only to be linked with Adamic concepts, but is the keystone of Paul's Christology which he says was implicit at the resurrection of Christ. Ridderbross wrote, 'In other words, from Christ's significance as the second Adam all the categories are derived which further defined his significance as the firstborn of every creature'.⁴⁵

Our claim then, at the conclusion of this section of our study is that far from the Passover event having little influence upon the writers of the New Testament as A.Richardson has asserted, it made up the very substructure upon which they built their concepts of redemption. Indeed, we can go even further than this. The doctrine of Christ's Person is illumined and clarified by the doctrine of his work. Therefore, rather than the expression 'firstborn of every creature' being a problem to Christ's deity it rather upholds it. No creature could,

through its death, reconcile all things together. Only the creator himself could achieve this. Only God, himself, could be the firstborn/redeemer of all creation.

We do not have sufficient space in this article to work our thesis out in detail in the relevant New Testament texts, but we will apply it by way of illustration to Col.1:15-18 to demonstrate the significance it holds for Biblical exegesis.

There are many scholars who say that the expression 'firstborn of all creation' or, as the NIV gives it, 'firstborn over all creation' in Col.1:15 is so unPauline that it is evidence that Colossians was not written by Paul. Others explain the phrase as a redaction whilst others claim it is Pauline on the basis that there is no textual evidence to suggest the contrary. The approach taken by those scholars who accept the authority of the phrase can be divided into three. There are those who say its origin is a Greek hymn and that it ought therefore to be kept in the light of Hellenistic thinking. Michel, for example, says, 'it is impossible to explain the meaning of Col.1:15 apart from Hellenistic cosmic thought'.⁴⁶ There are those who say that the term is to be interpreted from an Old Testament/Rabbinical perspective, and one such scholar is W.D.Davies whose thesis we have already examined. There is a third group represented by Lightfoot who say that both the Hellenistic and Hebraic backgrounds are to contribute to the understanding Paul would have us share in through his use of the phrase.

R.P.Martin, a member of the last group mentioned, supports a Greek origin for the hymn. He wrote, 'It is clear that Paul's purpose in appealing to this hymn is to show the primacy of Christ over all orders of creation (so NEB). "Firstborn" cannot therefore mean that he belongs to God's creation; rather he stands over against God's handiwork as the agent through whom all spiritual powers came into existence (v16). He is Lord of creation and has no rival in the created order'.⁴⁷ However, Martin has not resolved the Christological problem that the expression has presented for trinitarians by making Christ to be distinct from the rest of creation because he is the agent of creation. Even as the medium of creation, unless He is of one substance with God, He is still a creature.

In deciding the significance of the hymn its origin is not necessarily of major importance. It would be foolish to think that there was any relationship between the meaning of a hymn sung by a football crowd

and a worshipping congregation. What is important is not so much its origin but its new setting, that is the main factor that determines its application and meaning. Indeed, there may be a complete antithesis between the concepts being presented in the two settings, even though the words are the same. This is illustrated in the case we are examining. In Old Testament/Rabbinical thought the firstborn was a Messianic title, and there was no equation between the Messiah and Wisdom. This fact is acknowledged by Martin when he says, 'No Jewish thinker ever rose to these heights of daring to predict that wisdom was the ultimate goal of creation'.⁴⁸ Martin, nevertheless, thinks that this is what Paul is saying in view of the fact that v20 'Hails the crucified Lord as the great unifier of heaven and earth'. We shall note the significance of this statement of Paul for our redeemer/firstborn thesis shortly, but it is clear that Martin wants us to accept that Paul is introducing Hellenistic concepts to explain Christ's significance, and that those concepts are not illustrating Old Testament/Rabbinical teachings but adding to them, the origin of the extended revelation being originally Greek philosophy.

Whilst the majority of scholars would support Martin's exposition not all are convinced of the Hellenistic origin of the hymn itself. A.M. Hunter thinks that the parallelism and the early position of the verb reflects a Semitic origin.⁴⁹ C.F.D. Moule has noted the parallel between v14 and Acts 26:18. He wrote, 'common to both passages are "e exousia tou skotous os tou setana", the idea of transference from this exousia to God or Christ's Kingdom, and the collection of the conceptions of the promised land ("kleros") and of forgiveness ("aphesis") and God's people ("egiasmenoi" or "agoi") cf also Acts 26:23 quoted in v18 below. Is St Paul in this epistle using ideas which had been with him from the time of his call? In any case behind some, at least, of the ideas in both passages is the Old Testament, Deut.33:3f'. Moule also noted that the expression 'the Son he loves' is a Semiticism for 'his beloved Son'.⁵⁰ Clearly, Paul's thought in this expression links with Psalm 2 and the heavenly voice at Christ's baptism which, as we have seen, pointed toward a suffering Messiah. Such a concept could not be married to a Hellenistic concept of wisdom, nor to a Jewish one for that matter. It does, however, marry to the redeemer/firstborn concept, for Paul follows his statement regarding the son he loves (v13) by saying, 'In whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins' (v14). The hymn begins in v15 eulogising Christ and exalting Him above the whole of creation. But, the hymn is concluded with the statement of v20 'and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on

earth, or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross'. So Paul has returned to his theme of redemption, which he apparently left in v14, and continues it through to 2:12.

It is by identifying the setting in which Paul uses the hymn that the meaning of the firstborn becomes clear. In the Old Testament the firstborn was the sacrifice through whom redemption was achieved. Here the theme is exactly the same. Christians have been delivered by the death of Christ (v13), who is the firstborn of the New Israel (v15). That Paul calls him the firstborn of every creature is totally consistent with what he goes on to say, 'and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood'. This reconciliation of all things, which explains Christ's title firstborn of all creation, is perfectly consistent with Paul's doctrine of redemption as expounded in Romans 8 where he says the whole of creation is in bondage to sin and is waiting for its release at the appearing of Christ. Rather than the expression being totally unpauline, it is thoroughly Pauline in the concept it holds. The significance of the reference to Christ's role in creation is not to be dominated by Hellenistic or Jewish concepts of wisdom. It is merely stating Christ's credentials for being the firstborn of all creation. Being the origin of the first creation he is qualified to be its redeemer and to bring about a new creation.

When we come to the second usage of firstborn in the Colossian passage we come nearer to the traditional interpretation of the kingly Messianic title which we have already observed it to have among the rabbis through its use in Psalm 89:27. Paul cannot be referring to Christ being the first to be raised from the dead, for he would have used the term firstfruit, as he does elsewhere (I Cor.15:20,27). As Moule has pointed out, the phrase is given to Christ to endorse the description of Him being the Head of the body.⁵¹ It is, therefore, a title of one who rules, indeed one who conquers, and that which is conquered is death itself. This interpretation is supported by Helyer who wrote, 'Heb.1:6 is to be linked with Col.1:18 and Rev.1:5 where we likewise have the term applied to the risen and exalted Lord. The title itself recalls the Davidic prophecy (Ps.89:27) and stresses the special relationship which obtains between God and the Son'.⁵² Christ is, therefore, being hailed by the use of this title as the conqueror of the last enemy, death.

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