

FIRSTBORN

A word study focused on Christ, the Firstborn

Who hath delivered us from the power of darkness, and hath translated us into the kingdom of his dear Son: In whom we have redemption through his blood, even the forgiveness of sins: Who is the image of the invisible God, **the firstborn of every creature**. [Col 1.13-15]

What does it mean that Christ is the “firstborn of every creature”?

- Is He, as taught by the Jehovah's Witnesses, "the first and highest creation of God," and thus cannot be the Eternal Second Person of the Triune God?
- Was Jesus Christ born as the Son of God? Was He "eternally begotten"? Did He have a beginning as a "created God"?
- What does *firstborn* mean?

Because the Bible is of no private interpretation (2Pet 1.20), the only way for us to understand the term *firstborn*, as used in the Bible, is by comparing Scripture with Scripture (spiritual things with spiritual things) in order to let the Bible define itself (1Cor 2.13).

Knowing this first, that no prophecy of the scripture is of any private interpretation. [2Pet 1.20]

Which things also we speak, not in the words which man's wisdom teacheth, but which the Holy Ghost teacheth; comparing spiritual things with spiritual. [1Cor 2.13]

The term *firstborn* has two basic uses in Scripture:

1. *Firstborn* can refer to the first child born chronologically.
2. *Firstborn* can also be used as a title referring to one of preeminent position or rank.

The following study attempts to trace the mean of *firstborn* through the Bible, focusing specifically on the use of *firstborn* in relation to the Lord Jesus Christ.

I. *Firstborn*: Born First, Chronologically

A. This is by far the most common use of the term *firstborn* in Scripture.

1. (Exod 13.2) The *firstborn* is “whatsoever openeth the womb.”
2. For example, the following references are to children born first among siblings (physical, chronological; the first child is called the firstborn):
 - a) Genesis 19.31, 33, 34, 37; 22.21; 25.13; 27.19, 32; 29.26; 35.23; 36.15; 38.6-7; 41.51; 46.8; 48.14, 18; 49.3.
 - b) Exodus 4.23; 6.14; 11.5; 12.12, 29; 13.13, 15; 22.29; 34.20.
 - c) Numbers 3.2, 12, 13, 40-46, 50; 8.16-18; 18.15; 33.4
 - d) Deuteronomy 25.6
 - e) Joshua 6.26 (cf. 1Kg 16.34); 17.1
 - f) Judges 8.20
 - g) 1Samuel 8.2; 14.49; 17.13
 - h) 2Samuel 3.2
 - i) 1Chronicles 1.13, 29; 2.3, 13, 25, 27, 42, 50; 3.1, 15; 4.4; 5.1, 3; 6.28; 8.1, 30, 39; 9.5, 31, 36; 26.2, 4, 10
 - j) 2Chronicles 21.3

- k) Nehemiah 10.36
 - l) Psalm 78.51; 105.36; 135.8; 136.10
 - m) Micah 6.7
 - n) Hebrews 11.28
3. Observe an interesting comparison in Zechariah 12.10, a prophecy of the Lord Jesus Christ who is compared to an *only son* (e.g., John 3.16) and then to a *firstborn son* (e.g., Col 1.15, 18).
 4. The term *firstling* is used the same way as *firstborn*, to refer to the person or animal born first chronologically. For example:
 - a) Genesis 4.4
 - b) Exodus 13.12-13; 34.19-20
 - c) Numbers 3.41; 18.15, 17
 - d) Leviticus 27.26
 - e) Deuteronomy 12.6, 17; 14.23; 15.19; 33.17
 - f) Nehemiah 10.36

B. Jesus was the *firstborn* of Mary.

And knew her not till she had brought forth her firstborn son: and he called his name JESUS. [Mat 1.25]

1. (Luke 2.7) Jesus was Mary's firstborn son chronologically because He was the first of several other siblings that were born to Mary.
2. Mary had other children (from Joseph) after Jesus was born first: Matthew 13.55-56; Mark 3.31-35; Acts 1.14; Galatians 1.19.
3. This reference to Jesus being the firstborn of Mary, however, only refers to His humanity, not His divinity. Mary is not the "Mother of God"; God has no mother. Mary is the mother of Jesus, God in the flesh, because the Holy Spirit created the body for Jesus in Mary's womb.

Wherefore when he cometh into the world, he saith, Sacrifice and offering thou wouldest not, but a body hast thou prepared me. [Heb 10.5]

Then said Mary unto the angel, How shall this be, seeing I know not a man? And the angel answered and said unto her, The Holy Ghost shall come upon thee, and the power of the Highest shall overshadow thee: therefore also that holy thing which shall be born of thee shall be called the Son of God. [Luke 1.34-35]

4. In this we see the following point, that Jesus was also the Firstborn of the Holy Spirit.

C. Jesus was the *firstborn* of the Holy Spirit.

1. Jesus was the first, chronologically, to be born of the Holy Spirit.
 - a) Christ was born of the Holy Spirit first: Luke 1.34-35
 - b) We (Christians) have also been born by the Holy Spirit, but after Christ (He was the first to be born of the Spirit; we were after Him): John 1.12-13; 3.3-8; Rom 8.29; 1Cor 12.13; 2Cor 5.17.
2. (Heb 1.5-6) The day the Son of God was brought into the world (the day Jesus was born of Mary) was the day He was begotten of God.
 - a) Hebrews 1.5 is a quote of Psalm 2.7. "This day" of Psalm 2.7 and Hebrews 1.5, in the context of Hebrews 1.5-6, refers to the day Jesus was born of Mary (when He was brought into this world; John 1.14 cf. Isa 7.14; 9.6a).
 - b) Observe, however, that the Father gives a title to the Son of God before the Son was born of Mary: He was and is the "firstbegotten" (this refers to our second point of study, that the term *firstborn* can be a title referring to a preeminent position or rank).

c) Hebrews 1.5-6 shows us that Psalm 2.7 refers to “this day” when Jesus was born—the first to be born of the Spirit of God.

(1) Don't let this confuse you, though, because later we are going to see that “this day” of Psalm 2.7 also refers to Jesus' resurrection.

(2) This is not uncommon in Scripture, to have a prophecy that has a double fulfillment.

3. Christ is the “Only Begotten” of the Father.

And the Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us, (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only begotten of the Father,) full of grace and truth. [John 1.14]

a) In the context of Jesus being the *firstborn of the Spirit*, it is important to point out that, even though Jesus was the first to be born of the Holy Spirit, He is the only begotten of the Father.

b) Jesus Christ is the *only* One begotten *physically* by the Spirit—a *physical birth* by the Holy Spirit (we are born spiritually by the Spirit and then resurrected physically; Jesus was the only one conceived miraculously by the Holy Spirit in the womb of a human woman).

c) Other references to the Only Begotten: John 1.18; 3.16, 18; 1John 4.9.

D. Christ was the *firstborn* from the dead.

And he is the head of the body, the church: who is the beginning, the **firstborn from the dead**; that in all things he might have the preeminence. [Col 1.18]

1. Even though others were resurrected from the dead before Jesus, they all died again. Jesus is the first to be “born from the dead” (to come back to life after being dead) and who will die no more.

a) (Rev 1.5) He is the “first begotten of the dead”.

b) (Rev 1.18) He will never die again—He is alive for evermore.

c) Therefore, the Lord Jesus Christ is the firstborn from the dead, never to die again.

2. In Acts 13.32-37, Paul quotes Psalm 2.7 in reference to Christ's resurrection, never again to see the corruption of death.

a) (v32-33a) The promise that was fulfilled in Jesus Christ was the promise of the resurrection.

(1) (Acts 24.14-15) The hope the Jews held to was the hope of the resurrection from the dead.

(2) This is the promise found in the prophecy of Ezekiel 37, the Valley of Dry Bones.

(a) (Ezek 37.11) The promise was to the whole house of Israel (all 12 tribes).

(b) (Ezek 37.14) The promise was the resurrection: “Ye shall live.”

(c) (Ezek 37.26 cf. Jer 31.33-34; Heb 8.10) The resurrection of Israel will be like that of Christ because at their resurrection (the fulfillment of the promise), they will receive the New Covenant which is everlasting and they will never again return to the “graves” of the Gentile nations of the dispersion (v12).

(d) The point Paul is making in Acts 13.32-37 is that since God raised Jesus from the dead never again to die, so He will completely and fully fulfill His promise of the same to Israel.

b) (v33b) The resurrection of Jesus from dead: Paul quotes Psalm 2.7 and applies “this day” to the day Jesus was raised up again from the dead.

(1) (Col 1.18) This is why Jesus is called the firstborn from dead: His resurrection is likened to birth.

(2) Remember that prophecies can have more than one fulfillment, and “this day” of Psalm 2.7 refers both to the day Jesus was begotten of Mary (Heb 1.5-6) and to the day He was resurrected (Acts 13.33).

- (3) Some Christian teachers say that Paul's quote of Psalm 2.7 in Acts 13.33 is *not* a reference to His resurrection. However, a simple analysis of the grammatical structure of the passage shows that it does (see last page, phrasing diagram of Acts 13.32-37).
- c) (v34-37) “And”: Jesus will die no more.
- (1) With the word *and*, Paul adds additional information and explanation to what he just said about the resurrection of Christ.
 - (2) With regard to Jesus being raised from the dead, He will no more return to the corruption of the grave. He will never die again.
 - (3) This is what is meant in Colossians 1.18, referring to Christ as the “firstborn from the dead”: He was not the first to be resurrected, but He was the first to be resurrected to life everlasting (never to die again).
3. Christ is the *firstborn* from the dead (never to die again), because we will follow him in our resurrection (never to die again).
- a) (Acts 26.23) Jesus was the *first* to rise from the dead in the way He did (never to die again).
 - b) (Rom 8.29) Christ is the first among many brethren, because we (Christians) will also be resurrected as He was, never to die again.
 - (1) (1Thes 4.13-18) When Christ comes back and translates us into heaven, we will “ever be with the Lord” (we will never die).
 - (2) (Php 3.20-21) We will at that moment receive glorified and eternal bodies like Christ's.
 - (3) (1Cor 15.51-58) When we are resurrected in the rapture and translation of the Church, Death will be swallowed up in the victory of life (we never die again).
 - c) (1Cor 15.20-23) Christ is the firstfruits of the resurrection to life eternal; we will follow.

E. The firstborn male (the male born first chronologically) received the “birthright.”

And they sat before him, the firstborn according to his birthright, and the youngest according to his youth: and the men marvelled one at another. [Gen 43.33]

1. The *birthright* in Scripture is the legal right of the firstborn (chronologically)...
 - a) (Deut 21.15-17) ...to inherit a double portion of all that his father has, and
 - b) (1Chron 26.10) ...to inherit the rule of his father—to be chief among his siblings, ruling over his father's kingdom.
2. The firstborn could lose his birthright.
 - a) (Gen 25.29-34) He could sell his birthright to another sibling, like Esau did.
 - b) (Gen 35.22; 46.8; 49.3-4; 1Chron 5.1) He could forfeit his birthright because of misconduct, like Reuben did because of incest.
3. Quotes:

The birthright of a firstborn included a double portion of the estate and leadership of the family. As head of the house after his father's death, the eldest son customarily cared for his mother until her death, and he also provided for his sisters until their marriage. [Larry Walker, "Firstborn": Holman Illustrated Bible Dictionary, ed. Chad Brand, Charles Draper, Archie England et al. (Nashville, TN: Holman Bible Publishers, 2003), 577.]

A double portion of the family inheritance was the right of the firstborn. This protected the firstborn when there was a polygamous marriage. The son of a favorite wife could not take the place of the first son born of the household (Dt 21:17). [Walter A. Elwell and Barry J. Beitzel, "Firstborn and Birthright": Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Book House, 1988), 791.]

4. Christ the *Firstborn* has received the birthright. He will reign over the Kingdom of the Father (all creation).
 - a) (Heb 1.1-3) The Father has appointed His Son, the Lord Jesus Christ, heir of all things.
 - b) (1Cor 15.20-28) The Lord Jesus Christ will reign over all things given to Him by the Father.
 - c) (2Sam 7.12-16 cf. Ps 89.3-4, 27-29, 34-36) The Son of David, the Lord Jesus Christ, is called the “firstborn” (v27a) and he will reign as “King of kings” (v27b) over all creation (v34-36).

F. Review & Summary – Firstborn: Born First, Chronologically

1. This is by far the most common use of the term firstborn in Scripture.
2. Christ is referred to in many different ways at the “firstborn” chronologically:
 - a) Jesus was the firstborn of Mary (he had half brothers that were born after Him from Mary and Joseph).
 - b) Jesus was the firstborn of the Holy Spirit (the first to be born by a work of the Spirit of God).
 - c) Christ was the firstborn from the dead (the first to be raised from the dead never to die again).
3. The firstborn male (the male born first chronologically) received the “birthright,” and the Lord Jesus Christ, as Firstborn, has received the Kingdom from the Father.
4. Jesus is the firstborn in these instances because we (Christians) will follow: Romans 8.29; 1Corinthians 15.20-23.
 - a) (Rom 8.29; Gal 4.19; 1Cor 15.20-23) We will ultimately be made like the Lord Jesus Christ in spirit, soul, and body.
 - b) (Rom 8.17) And, the Father willingly offers us the same inheritance He gave the Firstborn, if we will be faithful in this life to exalt and glorify His Son (to labor with Him in the Mission).

II. *Firstborn*: A Title of Preeminent Position or Rank

A. (Exod 4.22) Israel, Chosen as the Firstborn of the Father

1. God calls Israel, the nation, His firstborn son. *Firstborn* is a title used to show preeminence in position or rank.
 - a) (Rom 9.4) Israel was *adopted* as a son. The nation is not “born again” (made alive) until the second coming of Christ (Ezek 37.11-14 cf. Acts 3.19-21).
 - b) (Exod 19.5-6) Israel was adopted and chosen as firstborn because that nation has been given preeminence over all the other nations.
 - c) (Isa 2.1-4) Israel will rule over the Gentile nations as the firstborn rules over his father's kingdom.
2. (Jer 31.9) God is a Father to Israel by adoption (He chose the nation of Israel over every other nation in the world; Deut 7.7 cf. 1Cor 1.27-29).
 - a) Israel to the Father is like Ephraim: (Gen 48.14-20) Ephraim was not the firstborn chronologically but rather was chosen as the firstborn legally.
 - b) Thus we see that the term *firstborn* can be used a title of preeminent position or rank with no regard to chronology or actual, physical birth.

B. (Job 18.13) The Firstborn of Death

1. The firstborn of death is a creature (referred to as “it” in Job 18.12-14a) that brings the wicked person (v5) to the king of terrors (v14b) in hell (v21).
2. Therefore, the firstborn of death is *not* the king of terrors, but rather a subordinate of his.
 - (Heb 2.14) The king of terrors, to whom the firstborn of death submits, is the devil, Satan.

3. The term *firstborn* is used in Job 18.13 as a title setting this creature apart as preeminent in death (that is what he does: death—he brings the wicked to the king of terrors in hell; v5, 14, 21).
4. It appears, then, that this firstborn of death is the Destroyer.
 - a) (Exod 12.23) The Destroyer was sent to kill all the firstborn in Egypt during the Exodus.
 - b) (Rev 9.11) He is preeminent in that he is “king” over the “locusts” of the bottomless pit (Rev 9.1-3) that will be let loose in the Tribulation period. He is the angel of (in charge of) the bottomless pit.
 - c) He is not Satan himself, but the first/preeminent of the fallen angels serving the devil. He is likely the Antichrist (Judas).
5. The point to make for our study: The term *firstborn* is a title referring to a preeminent position or rank. This creature, whoever or whatever he is, is the preeminent destroyer who brings death to men, and dead men to hell.

C. (Ps 89.27) The Chosen Firstborn of the Father: David and the Son of David

1. The use of *firstborn* is obviously a title of preeminence given to the Son of David in fulfillment of the promises of the Davidic Covenant (v3-4, 28-29, 34-37 cf. 2Sam 7.12-16).
2. This *firstborn* is preeminent (first) in position and rank: He is the King of kings.
3. Thus we see again that *firstborn* can be used as a title (not just as a reference to the first born chronologically).

D. (Isa 14.30) The Firstborn of the Poor

1. The *firstborn* of the poor is the poorest of the poor.
2. The word *firstborn* is used again (here, in Isaiah 14.30) as a title of preeminent position or rank.

E. (Heb 12.23) The Church of the Firstborn (there are two possible interpretations to this phrase)

1. First, if “firstborn” refers to Christ (Rom 8.29; Col 1.15, 18; Heb 1.6), then the Church of (coming from, pertaining to) the Firstborn, Christ, is the Church, the Body of Christ (us, Christians).
 - The “general assembly,” then, would refer to a separate group: The Old Testament saints.
2. Second, if “firstborn” refers to the *kind of people* in the church (the church made up of the firstborn), then the reference is to Israel.
 - a) (Acts 7.38) Israel is called a church in the sense that she is a called out group.
 - b) (Exod 4.22; Jer 31.9) Israel was chosen (adopted) as God's son and called His firstborn because Israel will receive the Gentile nations as an inheritance (reigning over them).
 - c) The “general assembly,” then, would be the same group as the church in Hebrews 12.23.
3. Take your pick. Both of these interpretations work (both grammatically and doctrinally).
4. The point to make for our study: The term *firstborn* is a title of preeminence in position or rank. It refers to one thing or Person that has been given preeminence over all else.

F. (Col 1.15) The Firstborn of Every Creature

1. Observe that the verse says that Christ is the firstborn of every creature (singular) not of all creatures (plural). Christ is *not* the first creature (created being). The verse does *not* say that.
2. (Col 1.16-17) Christ is given the *title* Firstborn of Every Creature because He is preeminent in position and rank over every creature (over everything created) because He is the Creator and Sustainer of every creature (of everything created).
3. Colossians 1.16-17 explains Colossians 1.15. Jesus Christ is given the title of preeminence in verse 15 because of what is said of Him in verses 16 and 17.
4. The Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is *not* a created being. He is the Creator of all things.

Conclusion:

The term *firstborn* has two basic uses in Scripture:

1. *Firstborn* can refer to the first child born chronologically.
2. *Firstborn* can also be used as a title referring to one of preeminent position or rank.

We should always strive compare Scripture with Scripture in order to avoid private interpretations, allowing the Bible, rather, to define itself.

- The Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, is not a created being. He is the Creator of all things.
- The Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, was never “eternally begotten.” He is the second Person of the immutable Godhead (the Father, the Son, the Spirit).

32 And we declare unto you glad tidings,
 how that the promise → THEME / TOPIC / CONTEXT
 which was made
 unto the fathers,
 33 God hath fulfilled the same
 unto us their children,
in that
 → ① he hath raised up Jesus again; *Resurrection*
 as it is also written in the second psalm,
 Thou art my Son,
 this day have I begotten thee.
 34 And
 → ② as concerning that he raised him up from the dead, now no more to return to corruption,
 he said on this wise,
 I will give you the sure mercies of David.
 35 Wherefore he saith also in another psalm,
 Thou shalt not suffer thine Holy One to see corruption.
 36 For David,
 after he had served his own generation by the will of God,
 fell on sleep,
 and
 was laid unto his fathers,
 and
 saw corruption:
 37 But he,
 whom God raised again,
 saw no corruption.

Promise

(Acts 24.14-15) The resurrection

(Ezek 37) The promise of a resurrection given to the Nation of Israel

1. (vii) The whole house of Israel
2. (v14) Resurrection: "ye shall live"
3. (v26 of Jer 31.33-34 + Heb 8.10) Everlasting covenant (never again to return to the "graves" of the Gentile nations of the dispersion: v12)

(Acts 26.23) The point Paul is making: God raised Jesus, therefore He will raise Israel.

- ① Jesus is the first begotten of the dead - Rev 1.5
- ② Jesus is alive for evermore.