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Why Jesus is called the “Firstborn of All Creation”

Description

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 17 καὶ αὐτός ἐστιν πρὸ πάντων

The statement “He (Jesus) is the Firstborn of all creation” in

Colossians 1:15 has been a source of some confusion. Many people use this verse to say that Jesus is a “created being”. They say that “firstborn” can only mean he was born, and thus was created by God.

However, I think they don’t understand the cultural context surrounding this statement.

In the last article, we talked about [why Jesus is called the “Son of God”](#). As always, we found that having the proper CONTEXT (*specifically cultural context*) makes a huge difference.

The Bible was primarily written by Jews, to Jews, who lived in a Jewish culture. So before we tackle what it means for Jesus, let’s look at what it meant in the Jewish culture of the time. (*other middle-eastern cultures too*)

The Firstborn in Jewish Culture

Some background first: The Jews didn't have Social Security. They didn't have a stock portfolio, mutual funds or a pension either. I know this is obvious, but consider what it means for a moment.

What if you would receive no income of any kind once you couldn't work anymore?

How could you plan for that?

They didn't have "bills" per say, but running out of food and starving was a legitimate concern. (*Especially if a famine hit*) Collecting a big pile of money was dangerous because thieves could easily steal it. And the Jews didn't have any banks to securely store money either.

So how did you plan for old age in ancient times?

You had kids.

It might sound strange today because sayings like "kids are expensive" are commonplace. However, in Biblical times it was the opposite. Once a son was old enough to work (*typically 12-14*) they worked in the family business. (*Daughters would work around the house*) kids allowed you to increase your wealth by having more people who could help you earn enough food to live.

And no, we're not talking about child slaves either. Especially in the Jewish culture, children were treasured and loved. The kids had "chores", but unlike taking out the trash, the chores were necessary for the very survival of the family. Hence, having lots of kids was a good thing and having none was a curse.

(*You can see this in many of the women in the Bible who had trouble conceiving. Many of them thought God was displeased with them because they couldn't have children*)

So how does this relate to retirement? (and the idea of the firstborn)

Parents expected their kids to take care of them when they got old. But to do that, they dangled a carrot for their kids: their inheritance. When the father died, all his possessions went to his sons (*or daughters if there were no sons*).

However, that typically still left a mother to take care of. (*women on average live longer than men, and the odds of men dying young were much higher back then*)

So to take care of the parents when they were old – and the mother when the father died – the oldest son (*firstborn*) got a double portion of the inheritance.

It works like this.

- If you had 2 sons, you broke you wealth into 3 parts. The oldest got 2 parts, the other got 1 part.
- If you had 5 sons, you broke your wealth into 6 parts. The oldest got 2 parts, while the rest got 1 part each.
- If you had 10 sons, you broke your wealth into 11 parts, The oldest got 2 parts, while the rest got 1 part each.

The firstborn son typically got double because he was born first and thus (*theoretically*) had the most wisdom and experience. Also, if you've ever read the Birth Order Book by Kevin Leman, you'll know that oldest children are often more responsible than other children. (*though certainly not always*)

The Firstborn Typically got a double portion of the inheritance and more authority than his younger brothers.

This is often called the "birthright" of the firstborn; he had a right to the double portion and extra authority because he was born first...

Most of the time.

But not always. (which I'll show in a minute)

Typically, the father would slowly give the (*adult*) firstborn more and more control of his estate until the oldest son was basically running the whole show. It still belonged to the father, but the son (*in preparation for owning it*) would run it while the father was alive so he would know how to run everything when the father died.

The son got extra stuff (*the double portion and authority*) and the parents weren't destitute in their old age. Everybody wins.

Yay! 🎉™,

(Note: Often, the other duties of the father would fall to the eldest son too. For example – depending on the culture and time period – it could include finding husbands for his sisters, taking care of his younger brothers, taking over a tribal/kingly role, etc.)

Firstborn in the Bible

The word translated "Firstborn" is "[bĀ•kowl](#)" and it appears 123 times in the Old Testament. Most of the time, it refers to the first child born from a person or animal. But it also appears with a different meaning connected to the double portion and authority the eldest son was typically given.

However, the eldest son wasn't always given his "birthright" of being the firstborn.

There are exceptions.

Sometimes, your firstborn just isn't reliable enough to trust with the double portion and authority. Sometimes, you need to pick a different kid because that's what's best. This probably wasn't very common, but they definitely did it.

1 Chronicles 5:1

1 Now the sons of Reuben the firstborn of Israel (for he was the firstborn, but because he defiled his father's bed, his birthright was given to the sons of Joseph the son of Israel; so that he is not enrolled in the genealogy according to the birthright.)

1 Chronicles 26:10

10 Also Hosah, one of the sons of Merari had sons: Shimri the first (although he was not the firstborn, his father made him first)

Genesis 48:17-20 (*Gen 41:50-52 tell us that Manasseh was born first*)

17 When Joseph saw that his father laid his right hand on Ephraim's head, it displeased him; and he grasped his father's hand to remove it from Ephraim's head to Manasseh's head.

18 Joseph said to his father, "Not so, my father, for this one is the firstborn. Place your right hand on his head."

19 But his father refused and said, "I know, my son, I know; he also will become a people and he also will be great. However, his younger brother shall be greater than he, and his descendants shall become a multitude of nations."

20 He blessed them that day, saying,

"By you Israel will pronounce blessing, saying,
"May God make you like Ephraim and Manasseh!"

Thus he put Ephraim before Manasseh.

God Himself does this order switching.

Jeremiah 31:9

9
"With weeping they will come,
And by supplication I will lead them;

I will make them walk by streams of waters,
 On a straight path in which they will not stumble;
 For I am a father to Israel,
 And Ephraim is My firstborn.â€•

Jeremiah is interesting because While Ruben was supposed to be Jacob's (*Israel's*) firstborn.Â (Remember that Jacob's name was changed to *Israel*) Israel changed his firstborn to Joseph because of Ruben's sin.Â Likewise, Joseph's son Manasseh was the firstborn, but here God called Ephraim His firstborn.Â Ephraim is VERY far from being born first, and yet is called the "firstborn".

Genesis 48:3-5

3 Then Jacob said to Joseph, "God Almighty appeared to me at Luz in the land of Canaan and blessed me,

4 and He said to me, "Behold, I will make you fruitful and numerous, and I will make you a company of peoples, and will give this land to your descendants after you for an everlasting possession."

5 Now your two sons, who were born to you in the land of Egypt before I came to you in Egypt, are mine; Ephraim and Manasseh shall be mine, as Reuben and Simeon are.

I would like to point out, that first Jacob includes his grandchildren Ephraim and Manasseh with his own children. (This is borne out in Israel's history.Â All over the the Old Testament they reference the "half tribes" of Ephraim and Manasseh.) Then, he makes Ephraim his firstborn...Â Over ALL of his own children (Ephraim's uncles)

Here we have someone who is clearly NOT Jacob's firstborn "becoming" the firstborn. And the verse in Chronicles I quoted above makes this clear. (*I'll copy/paste to save you some scrolling*)

1 Chronicles 5:1

1 Now the sons of Reuben the firstborn of Israel (for he was the firstborn, but because he defiled his father's bed, his birthright was given to the sons of Joseph the son of Israel; so that he is not enrolled in the genealogy according to the birthright.)

Again, When Israel was God's nation, Ephraim was His "firstborn", even though he wasn't born anywhere near first.

The fact that you can change your firstborn is actually enshrined in the Mosaic Law... Sort. God places a specific limitation on the practice. He has a prohibition against favoritism when changing your firstborn.

Deuteronomy 21:15-17

15 If a man has two wives, the one loved and the other unloved, and both the loved and the unloved have borne him sons, if the firstborn son belongs to the unloved,

16 then it shall be in the day he wills what he has to his sons, he cannot make the son of the loved the firstborn before the son of the unloved, who is the firstborn.

17 But he shall acknowledge the firstborn, the son of the unloved, by giving him a double portion of all that he has, for he is the beginning of his strength; to him belongs the right of the firstborn.

God says you can't pick a different firstborn just because you like his mother better. However, the practice of picking a different firstborn is acknowledged here, it's just limited. (*you can look at 1 Chron 26:10 – quoted above – if you disagree*) God Himself seems to like taking non-firstborns and making them firstborns. I say this because He said of David:

Psalms 89:20-27

20

I have found David My servant;
With My holy oil I have anointed him,

21

With whom My hand will be established;
My arm also will strengthen him

22

The enemy will not deceive him,
Nor the son of wickedness afflict him.

23

But I shall crush his adversaries before him,
And strike those who hate him.

24

“My faithfulness and My lovingkindness will be with him,
And in My name his horn will be exalted.

25

“I shall also set his hand on the sea
And his right hand on the rivers.

26

“He will cry to Me, “You are my Father,
My God, and the rock of my salvation.”

27

“I also shall make him My firstborn,
The highest of the kings of the earth.

Again, in verse 27 we see the firstborn connected with authority and preeminence, **NOT** birth order. David was not the first king. In fact, he wasn’t even the oldest of his brothers. He was the Youngest son of Jesse.

1 Samuel 16:11

“And Samuel said to Jesse, “Are these all the children?” And he said, “There remains yet the **youngest**, and behold, he is tending the sheep.” Then Samuel said to Jesse, “Send and bring him; for we will not sit down until he comes here.”

The most of the time, the person who inherits the double portion and authority is the oldest son. But the oldest son’s “birthright” (*the double portion and authority*) can be given to another. In that case, the other son is the “firstborn” even though he wasn’t born first.

Please note: the Title “Firstborn” Follows the POSITION (*authority and double portion*) NOT the birth order.

Consequently, it can refer to either the Title (*which grants authority and a double portion*) or to the order of birth.

Perhaps the best example of this is Kleenex.

And yes, I mean the tissues you blow your nose on.

Most people know that Kleenex isn’t something you blow your nose on. Kleenex is the name of a company who’s most famous product is facial tissue (*for blowing noses*). However, “facial tissue” is

so synonymous with the brand Kleenex, that we say “Kleenex” when we mean “facial tissue”.

So it is with the idea of firstborn.

While we might say “Kleenex” (*Firstborn*) what we actually mean is “facial tissue” (*the double portion and authority*).

...But it can also mean the first person/animal to leave the womb. Either translation is correct and it depends on the context to make it clear.

Why Jesus is called the Firstborn of all creation

So now that we’ve looked at the cultural context and some biblical context, let’s look at the context of the passage in Colossians. (*And remember, we’re looking at this passage because many people use it to claim that Jesus was created*)

Colossians 1:12-19

12 giving thanks to the Father, who has qualified us to share in the inheritance of the saints in Light.

13 For He rescued us from the domain of darkness, and transferred us to **the kingdom of His beloved Son**,

14 in whom we have redemption, the forgiveness of sins.

15 He is the image of the invisible God, **the firstborn of all creation**.

16 For **by Him all things were created**, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, **whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities**—all things have been created through Him and **for Him**.

17 **He is before all things**, and in Him all things hold together.

18 He is also **head of the body**, the church; and He is the beginning, **the firstborn from the dead**, so that He Himself will come to have first place in everything.

19 For it was **the Father’s good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in Him**,

Now – bearing in mind everything we’ve discussed so far – do you think Paul is talking about Kleenex (*being born first*) or tissue paper (*the authority and double portion*)?

We’ll come back to that in a moment. First, let’s look at some context from the rest of scripture about

Jesus' Authority:

Matthew 28:18

18 And Jesus came up and spoke to them, saying, "All authority has been given to Me in heaven and on earth."

Ephesians 1:20-22

20 which He brought about in Christ, when He raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly places,

21 far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come.

22 And He put all things in subjection under His feet, and gave Him as head over all things to the church,

And now about what the Father has given to Jesus:

Matthew 11:27

27 All things have been handed over to Me by My Father; and no one knows the Son except the Father; nor does anyone know the Father except the Son, and anyone to whom the Son wills to reveal Him.

John 3:35

35 The Father loves the Son and has given all things into His hand.

So, Jesus was definitely given The Father's authority, and he was definitely given... well, everything. (If a father only had one son, he got everything in the Jewish culture,)

Now, let's examine the passage in greater detail.

Colossians 1:15-19

15 He is the image of the invisible God, the **firstborn of all creation**.

16 For **by Him all things were created**, both in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—**all things have been created through Him and for Him**.

17 **He is before all things**, and in Him all things hold together.

18 He is also head of the body, the church; and He is the beginning, **the firstborn from the dead**, so that **He Himself will come to have first place in everything**.

19 For it was the Father’s good pleasure for all the fullness to dwell in Him,

Let’s look at verse 17 first. It plainly states that Jesus “is before all things”. You can take that statement one of two ways. (*That I see, and they aren’t mutually exclusive.*)

#1 – You could say that means that Jesus existed before all things. A strictly literal interpretation of that would mean that – if Jesus is completely separate from The Father as some say – then Jesus would’ve existed before the The Father. (*though with the trinity position it means they both existed before all things*) Obviously, if that is the proper translation then the case is closed and Jesus was not created.

#2 – You could also say that “He is before all things” means He has the first place before all things. As in, a position of preeminence and higher authority. People who say Jesus was created prefer this meaning, and we’ll go with it for now.

If Jesus being “before all things” means he has a higher position, then doesn’t that sound like “higher authority and double portion” a firstborn gets?

Doesn’t it?

This is made more clear by Verse 18 when it says “*so that He Himself will come to have first place in everything*”.

Another a clarifying part of verse 18 is the phrase “firstborn from the dead”. Jesus was certainly not the first person to die, and He wasn’t even the first one to be raised from the dead. However, He is the greatest of those who died. Again, this sounds rather like the “higher authority and double portion” than being born first.

Further, the beginning of verse 18 says that Jesus is “The head of the body”. Again, Jesus’ headship refers to authority not creation.

For more biblical context, let’s look at Romans

Romans 8:29

29 For those whom He foreknew, He also predestined to become conformed to the image of His Son, **so that He would be the firstborn among many brethren;**

We talk about “brothers and Sisters in Christ” a lot. However, Romans makes it clear that while we are brothers, Jesus is the Firstborn. Again, He has a position of higher authority (*and owns everything*) because The Father declared Him to be “The Firstborn”. (*and the firstborn gets the authority and double portion, which Jesus has*)

Further, even if we say Colossians 1:15 refers to Jesus being “born”, that’s NOT a problem because Jesus was born! (*of a virgin named Mary*)

As we saw earlier, God seems to have a fondness of making non-firstborns into firstborns. (*King David for example*) Jesus was certainly not the first person who was born. However, that doesn’t mean The Father couldn’t declare Him the Firstborn because He’s done it before.

Colossians 1:15 *might* (*maybe*) talk about Jesus being born, but again He was born (*of a virgin*) so why is that a problem? Nowhere in the verse does it say “first created of all creation”. Besides being terrible grammar, the sense of creation just isn’t in the verse. Being “born” might be (*which again is no problem*) but being created isn’t.

It seems to me, the most obvious context is about Jesus’ authority.

Many proponents of the “Jesus is created” theory admit the “firstborn” Title is transferable

I learned about the “firstborn” topic because of a few conversations with a Jehovah’s Witness friend of mine. During my research, I checked to see what they (*the Jehovah’s Witnesses*) have to say about the topic. The following quotes are directly from the JW.org website, which is the official website of the Jehovah’s Witnesses.

But the Bible does not always honor the firstborn by listing sons according to birth.

The first place is often given to the most prominent or faithful of the sons rather than to the firstborn. (*emphasis mine*)

[Source](#)

The father could transfer the birthright if he had a good reason, giving the firstborn’s inheritance to a younger son

. In the instances of this noted in the Bible, it was not through whim or favoritism, but there was a basis on which the father determined to make the change in the birthright inheritance. (*emphasis mine*)

Source

They say that Colossians 1:15 means Jesus is created. However, their own website agrees that “firstborn” doesn’t always go to the one born first. It can also refer to a birthright that is transferable to another, more faithful son.

Jesus certainly was – and is – more faithful than any other.

A Note about the Greek word translated “Firstborn”

As already noted, the Hebrew word translated “firstborn” in the Old Testament is the word “bÄ•kowr”. In the New Testament, it’s the Greek word “[Prototokos](#)”. It’s only used 8 times in the entire New Testament. Of those 8 times, only twice does it refer to the child who was born first.

By contrast, twice it refers to Jesus being the “Firstborn of the dead”, which clearly does NOT indicate creation of any kind. In those cases, it clearly refers to the authority (and possibly double portion) that the firstborn was given.

The remaining four times the context isn’t 100% clear which meaning is intended. For the majority “authority” makes more sense in the context, but that doesn’t precluded it meaning “born first”.

Conclusion

Could Jesus being the “firstborn of all creation” mean he was created? I have to concede there is a chance it does. However (*given the context*) it’s a slim chance at best.

Is it possible?

Maybe.

But the overwhelming testimony of the rest of scripture is about Jesus’ authority. The immediate context of the verse is about Jesus authority and preeminence above all things. Some translations even render it this way, including the NIV and half a dozen others.

Colossians 1:15 *(NIV)*

15 The Son is the image of the invisible God, **the firstborn over all creation**

I won't say it's impossible...

But I will say it's highly unlikely.