

section four
christology and passover

Chapter ten.

The firstborn and the Jewish cult.

“the sacrifice of the firstborn son constitutes a strange and relatively overlooked bond between Judaism and Christianity and thus a major but unexplored focus for Jewish-Christian dialogue. In the past, this dialogue has too often centered on the Jewishness of Jesus, and particular, his putative roles, even if real, have historically been vastly less important in Christian tradition than Jesus' identity as the sacrificial victim, the son handed over to death by his loving father or the lamb who takes away the sin of the world.”¹

The study of Romans 3.21ff has led to the conclusion that the Passover was the source of the language and imagery used by Paul to describe the death of Christ. After decades of research, there is independently of this study a growing appreciation that the traditional titular method of approaching Christological study has failed to yield significant results.² This growing recognition has caused some to question the very methods that have been employed in the reconstruction of the early church's thinking. So for example, Osborn stated that a new approach to the Christological material is needed and said: “Christological theory is in the process of a paradigm shift in methodology. Where this process will take us is not at the moment apparent.”³ Wright⁴ endorses this shift saying: “Today there is tacit agreement that the study of titles is not the way to proceed- even to the extent of leading some Jesus-scholars relegating them to the margin of their enquiries.”

Methodological changes.

Part of this methodological shift has been to recognise the antiquity of the Christological material. It is increasingly being realised that the liberal reconstruction that saw Christological development to have been driven by the Gentile mission does not fit the evidence. Holloway for example, has cautioned against such reconstruction saying: “it is dubious to erect historical reconstructions without acknowledging and taking into account, the pre-history of such traditions.”⁵ Berkey adds to this growing disquiet when he said; “the discovery of Jewish roots of the New Testament is indeed of tremendous significance for the search for the origins of Christology.”⁶ Deismann has commented that “the origin of the cult of Christ (and that means Christology) is the secret of the earliest Palestinian community.”⁷ He went on to say that it was the Jewish Christians who were the driving force of Christology in the first century. The early development of the Christological material is also supported by Martin who said that: “it was the Jerusalem church which reworked the messianic Psalms and applied them to Jesus.”⁸

¹ Levinson, *Death*, Preface X.

² So Caird, “Jesus”, 59; Keck, “Towards”, 368-9; Holloway, “Christology”, 77; Hurtado, “Retrospective”, 23 and Macgregor, “Principalities”, 17

³ Osborn, “Christology”, 49.

⁴ Wright, *Jesus*, 614.

⁵ Holloway, “Christology”, 280.

⁶ Berkey, “Perspectives”, 118.

⁷ Deismann cited by Hengel, *Son*, 65.

⁸ Martin, “Reflections”, 39.

Early interests and influences.

It has also become clear that the NT church was interested not in ontology but in soteriology and that in the NT, just as in the OT, redemption and creation are inseparably linked.⁹ Moreover, it is increasingly being realised that much of Pauline Christological material does not result from interaction with Hellenistic philosophy, but is in fact heavily indebted to primitive Hebraic motifs.¹⁰ These observations give grounds for exploring the Passover as a setting for the development of NT Christological beliefs. Such a study has the support of those scholars who are appealing for a fresh approach, including a reassessment of methodology.¹¹

Scholarly support.

My suggestion that the Passover is significant for understanding NT soteriology and Christology is supported by the observations of number of scholars. Keck, for example, has shown that the Jesus event interprets the title.¹² The scriptures were obviously re-read in the light of the great Paschal offering which Jesus clearly wanted his death to be understood as and which the early church clearly focused on.

This paschal enquiry is especially encouraged by Daly's comment: "Thus, growing out of a religious atmosphere in which all the important events of the past were considered to be Paschal events, and in which participation in the Paschal rite assured the individual and the nation of receiving the salvific effects of the Pasach, and in which the eschatological end event was looked forward to as a Paschal event, it is not surprising that the New Exodus Christology is so thoroughly Paschal."¹³

Moule also gives encouragement to pursue this enquiry by his observation that: "To a unique degree, Jesus is seen as the goal, the convergence point, of God's plan for Israel, his covenantal promises.....The Passover gathers up into itself a large number of strands of covenant promise: to speak of "its full realisation" is to use the root we are considering in a highly significant manner."¹⁴

⁹ Gibbs, *Creation*, 19.

¹⁰ Longenecker, "Distinctive", 541 says that *prōtotokos* was used by the Jewish Christians and in "Christology", 59 he says that Paul was not the originator of the Christological terms in Colossians. Kehl, *Chritushymns*, 82ff says that *monogenēs* equals firstborn, so also Buchsel, *TDNT* 5:737; Hughes, *Image*, 36 and Bretscher, "Exodus", 309. Howard, *Christology*, 7 sees an early development for Christological formulations, so also Dunn, "Reflections", 99-100. Hengel, *Son*, 65 says that it is misleading to unravel Christological titles into different strands.

¹¹ Hengel, *Son*, 57 who also warns that: "We only know the tip of the iceberg of Paul's Christology (op cit 14). Longenecker, "Distinctive", 526 warned of the danger that Christological studies are based on a faulty method of subtracting Hellenistic ideas from information and saying that the rest is Palestinian. Grech, "Sources" 137 points out that the Jews re-read texts in the light of experience and that probably the Christians followed the same hermeneutic. Contra Juel, "Incarnation" 119 who says that is wrong to say that: "the later the tradition in the NT the more thoughtful", and Gibbs, *Creation*, 152 who says that Paul did not receive his Christology ready made. Thus, the 'titles' are being recognised as being very primitive and are the product of the immediate response to the Easter event. It would be natural to bring the idea of the redemption of all creation into the concept of salvation at a very early stage for it was part of the expectation of the New Exodus as predicted by Isaiah that would be accomplished by the Davidic prince. de Lacy, "Image", 27 says, "Many of the Church's assertions contain deep Christological implications but it is not evident that these implications were made explicit before the activity of Paul". I would argue that it was not Paul who made identified these implications, they had been made clear by Jesus and the early church was teaching them long before Paul came into its ranks. See also Longenecker, "Distinctive", 541; Caird, "Jesus", 59 and Chouinard, "Christology", 115-132. For a review of Christological trends see Bray, "Trends", 52-63.

¹² Keck, "Towards", *passim*.

¹³ Daly, *Sacrifice*, 203. Daly however does not develop the observation any further.

¹⁴ Moule, "Fulfilment", 318 and Perrin, *Pilgrimage*, 76.

In the light of these observations, it would seem that an examination of Christology in a Paschal setting would be a valid line of enquiry. If, as I have argued, Passover has moulded Pauline cultic thinking, then it may also have moulded his Christological understanding. Such a suggestion becomes even more reasonable when it is realised that the cross, centred firmly in the Jewish Passover, defines the person of Christ. The central character in the Passover was the firstborn, and this is a description that is applied to Christ. We shall therefore examine the use of this term in Biblical literature to see if it has any soteriological/Christological significance.

Neglected enquiry.

Despite the encouraging remarks of Daly, Moule and Levenson above noting the importance of the Passover for the Jews, none of their observations have been pursued to any significant degree. For most scholars the Passover has exerted little influence on the NT writers. Indeed Richardson wrote: "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."¹⁵ Morris wrote: "It is plain that the New Testament writers do not make the passover their major category when they interpret the death of Jesus."¹⁶

The two ideas that Richardson has alluded too are far from the sum total of the New Testament themes that link *protōtokos* with the Passover. But before I identify and examine these texts I shall outline what we believe to be the true setting for *protōtokos* and then see if the texts of the Old and New Testaments support my claim.

Methodological difficulties.

The context is vital for an accurate understanding of the use of any term. This is where our study of the OT material relating to the firstborn presents numerous difficulties. The contexts of passages outside of the Pentateuch in which references to the firstborn occur are difficult to establish. They are not normally ones where there are substantial pointers to a definite historical context. More often than not the passage presupposes a common understanding which two and a half thousand years or so have removed so minimising any degree of certainty of what they originally meant.

For this reason, any study of OT material on the subject of the firstborn must be undertaken with considerable caution.¹⁷ We will inevitably have to depend on cumulative argument¹⁸ rather than 'hard evidence'. Justification for attempting such a task is the evidence for the presence of Paschal themes in Paul, the clear dependence of Paul on the OT for the Second Exodus motif and the growing awareness that the Christological terms have their roots in the OT.

The firstborn as a representative.

¹⁵ Richardson, *Renewal*, 218

¹⁶ Morris, *Atonement*, 104.

¹⁷ Ringgren, *Israelite*, 96 warns of the difficulty of understanding the pre-exilic situation in Israel concerning child sacrifice because the only information that we have is polemic and is the view of the side that won.

¹⁸ See Casey, "Aspects", 181 for the validity of cumulative argument.

In the Passover narrative it was the firstborn son who was designated by Yahweh to represent the family. This was bound up with the family's deliverance from the angel of death. It is vital to note that it was not the family as a whole that the lamb represented, but only the firstborn. The firstborn's life was threatened because *he* represented the family. It is this representative role, I believe, which links the New Testament statements that Christ is the Lamb of God¹⁹ and that Christ is our Passover²⁰ with the statement that he is the firstborn. To be more precise, Christ is the firstborn, the one who represents his family. Because no other could face the angel of death and so discharge Christ of his representative role, he died as the paschal lamb had done. He was 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 my argument. In Christ many offices and titles converge. Prophet and priest converge with king, priest converges with victim and Saviour converges with judge. The New Testament writers would have little difficulty in applying such a principle of converging diversity to yet another realm of Christ's offices and work. The firstborn and paschal lamb converge to become one and the same entity. The Exodus was the Old Testament's foreshadowing of the redemptive work of Christ²¹ and it is little short of astonishing that scholars have failed to look into the significance of the firstborn in that first act of redemption in seeking to interpret the application of the title to Christ by the New Testament writers.

Firstborn and redemptive history.

The interpretation I am presenting takes the expression *protōtokos*, and rejects the traditional ontological interpretation by placing it firmly in the context of redemptive history. The point is not that Christ is the firstborn, but that he acts as the firstborn. It is a description expressing the work he has done in his death. This is borne out even in 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 Michaelis²² who commented on the etymology of the Hebrew *bekor* (firstborn) that it: "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."

The significance of my explanation for the description in Col. 1:15 "the firstborn of all creation" ought to be obvious. For Paul, redemption, like the fall, has a cosmic dimension. Romans 8 show the whole creation waiting for restoration. This will happen at the climax of Christ's redemptive work, when his people are released from bondage and are glorified. The firstborn's

¹⁹ Jn. 1:9.

²⁰ 1 Cor. 5:7.

²¹ 1 Cor. 10:1ff.

²² Michaelis, *TDNT* 5:873. Henninger, *Erstgeborenrecht*, 174 says that all of a man's firstborn sons from his different wives came under the same regulations. The law of the firstborn was commonly followed by the surrounding nations but without any evidence of religious significance (p176). There is dispute as to the scale of the inheritance of the firstborn, so Ysevat, *TDOT* 2:127.

significance in the Exodus was only for his family. The significance of the death of Christ, the Christian Passover, goes beyond his own family to the universe that was caught up in the tragedy of the fall. So he is ‘the firstborn of all creation’.

The firstborn and the redeemer, an Old Testament relationship.²³

This is developed even further when we recognise that the firstborn is synonymous with the Old Testament redeemer. They are one and the selfsame person. This is never explicitly stated in scripture probably because the equation was obvious to any Jew. However, Biblical evidence does exist that demonstrates this interdependence and this shall be outline shortly.

Before turning to the New Testament texts in which *protōtokos* occurs it will be useful to survey the responsibilities of the Old Testament redeemer to see how they developed to provide a background for the work of Christ.

The redeemer and vengeance.

The first responsibility²⁴ which fell upon the shoulders of the redeemer, was that 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 meant that the responsibility rested upon his shoulders.²⁵ In the latter part of Isaiah, where Yahweh is often called the redeemer, Yahweh promised to act as the avenger of his people.²⁶ In the New Testament Christ himself is presented fulfilling this same role.²⁷

The redeemer and inheritance.

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 the principle of Jubilee is outlined. It fell to 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.²⁸ Israel was promised the return of her own land to 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.²⁹

The redeemer and widowhood.

²³ For a study of Yahweh as redeemer in Isaiah see Holmgreen, *Concept*, 1ff.

²⁴ Simpson, *Worth*, 88 points out that *apolutrosis* and its cognates are frequently used in the LXX for redemption by one who is under special obligation because of kinship or some other comparable relation to the person being redeemed, i.e., by a *go’el*. Procksch, *TDNT* 4:329-330 also notes the OT background of the *go’el* imagery. 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 *protōtokos* description has an Hebraic rather than a Greek origin. Indeed, when we recall that Psalm 89:27 was seen in rabbinic writings to apply the title “firstborn” to the Messiah it reinforces the messianic redemptive concept which I am claiming to be bound up with the title.

²⁵ Gen. 4:14-15; 23f. the messianic redemptive concept which I am claiming to be bound up with the title. Gen. 4:24; Num 35; Deut. 19.

²⁶ Isa. 43:3-4, 14-15; 47.4; 49:25-26; 59:16-20.

²⁷ Lk. 1:68-79; 18:7; 2 Thess. 1:6-9; Rev 6:9-11.

²⁸ Isa.51:11; 52:8-10.

²⁹ Col 1:13-14; Heb. 9:15; Rev. 21:1-4.

The third role of the redeemer was to fulfil the law of the levirate.³⁰ 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 the deceased brother.³¹ Once again, this aspect of the redeemer's role is used to illustrate the salvation Yahweh promised His people. 'He will save Jerusalem from her widowhood and raise up children for her'.³² 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 Rom. 7:1-4.³³

The significance of the death of the firstborn.

The argument outlined above assumes three important points: That the firstborn's death was vicarious, that he represented his family and that the title redeemer was dropped in favour of 'firstborn'. These details need to be examined further and established as valid if my claims are to be upheld. I shall therefore seek to answer the following questions.

a) What was the significance of the death of the firstborn? If we have established a representative role in which the firstborn died for the family we then need to ask:

b) Why was it that at the Passover it was the firstborn and not the father, who represented the family? And finally:-

c) Why do we have two titles, namely firstborn and redeemer, when the title redeemer would have adequately covered the roles that both titles suggest?

Passover and the death of the firstborn.

Our first task then is to enquire into the significance of the death of the firstborn in the Passover. To begin with we can note that the Passover is widely accepted as existing as a ceremony prior to its adoption by the Jews who then gave it their own meaning. Stewart³⁴ 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."

Egyptian influence?

Yahuda³⁵ considered the Passover from another perspective and saw no more significance in the death of the firstborn than that it representing 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

³⁰ For further discussion see Davies, "Ruth 1 V:5"; 232ff and Beattie, "Ruth", 251-267

³¹ Deut. 25:5-10; Ruth 3:13;4:1-8.

³² Isa. 49:20-21; 50:1-2; 54:1-8; 62:4-5.

³³ So also I Cor. 6:20; Eph. 5:25; Rev. 19:7-8. To whom the church was originally married is a question I have dealt with in chapter 5.

³⁴ Stewart, *NBD*, 937.

³⁵ Yahuda, *Accuracy*, 85-6.

of Egypt, to expose their impotence to protect the offspring of the 'Son of Ra'."

Yahuda saw no other significance in the death of the firstborn of the nation than that it was 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 then there would have been no need for Moses to require the Hebrews to secure protection by the death of a lamb. The death of all of Egypt's firstborn would have sufficed. The requirement of blood is central to the whole Jewish sacrificial system, and then the permanent memory of this deliverance of Israel's firstborn. The importance of blood is reflected in the sacrificial system subsequently inaugurated and the dedication of the tribe of Levi to the Lord in place of the firstborn is clear evidence that there is a fundamentally redemptive element in the death of the firstborn.

Sacrificial significance.

Stalker noted that 'set apart' in Exodus 12:12, which literally means 'cause to pass over (*herebhir*)' is the word used for sacrificing children to Molech in II Kings 16:3; Ezek.20:31; etc. Stalker does not posit direct borrowing. He comments: "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."³⁶

Thus Stalker sees a sacrificial intent behind 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."

By New Testament times the Passover was regarded as having expiatory value. This view is supported by Brown³⁷ who thinks this came about because by this time lambs were sacrificed within the Temple area by the priests. Against this view Dodd³⁸ argued that, though there was probably expiatory significance in the Passover ritual in its very earliest stages, which he sees to be pre-Mosaic, it had been dropped long before New Testament times. From the evidence we have considered we would suggest that the original Passover was regarded as an expiatory sacrifice, and that all subsequent celebrations were memorials of the original without expiatory value. If this is so, then it would suggest that while the sin of the nation was dealt with in the original Passover, it was on the annual Day of Atonement that the ongoing sin of the nation was dealt with.

Family representation.

Whatever the origin of the Passover might be, the full significance of the

³⁶ Stalker, *Ezekiel*, 221. For an overview of Passover in the Biblical narratives see Prosic "Passover" 45-55. and Broadhurst *Passover*.

³⁷ Brown, *John* 1:62. See Gigsby "Sacrifice" passim for a detailed review.

³⁸ Dodd, *Interpretation*, 234. This is very similar to the view of Jeremias, *Eucharistic*, 225, who says: "Even if the annual Passover offering was not regarded as atoning in effect, the original Exodus Passover offering and the eschatological Passover were so regarded."

firstborn's death, like so many other Semitic concepts, can only be seen clearly when it is placed in the context of the family and nation. Shedd³⁹ supports this understanding of the significance of sacrifices for sin; he says that they were not to be seen as a: "mechanical transference of penalty." Shedd goes on: "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 that 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."

Shedd, whose work *Man in Community* explores the Semitic concept of solidarity, is clarifying the very matter we are seeking to understand. Other scholars share this understanding. Jacob for example, says: "The offering of the firstborn is a ransom for the parents (Ex.22:23ff) and each time that the Old Testament speaks of human sacrifice (1 Kings 16:34; 2 Kings 3:27; Mic. 6:7; Dt. 12:31; Jer. 7:31; 19:5; Ex 20:25-31), the aim of this sacrifice is to safeguard, at the cost of a single life, the life of the whole group."⁴⁰

The observations of both Shedd and Jacob are valuable in our attempt to understand the significance of the death of the firstborn. They are, however, confusing "psychic personality" or "corporate personality" with the Semitic concept of solidarity,⁴¹ in which the one can represent the many. This is found in many examples in the Old Testament, ranging from the great covenant figures of Adam, Abraham, Moses and David through to Achan,⁴² who brought judgement on his family through his disobedience.

Passover and circumcision.

In Ex. 4:21-26 the Lord speaks to Moses saying, "Then say to Pharaoh, This is what the Lord says, Israel is my firstborn son, and I told you, "Let my people go, so that they may worship me". But you refused to let him go, so I will kill your firstborn son". At a lodging place on the way the Lord met Moses and was about to kill him, but Zipporah took a flint knife, cut off her son's foreskin and touched Moses' feet with it. "Surely you are a bridegroom of blood to me" she said, so Lord let him alone. (At that time she said "bridegroom of blood" referring to circumcision)'.⁴³

The full significance of this passage will only be appreciated when we see it as a statement about what God is to do in the coming Exodus event recorded in chapter 12.

Cole pinpoints the relationship between Israel and the Egyptians in this passage: "Israel, considered collectively, is God's firstborn, presumably as being His chosen people and as 'first-fruits' of all the peoples (Jer. 31:9; 2:3). If Pharaoh will not give God's firstborn up to God, to whom all firstborn belong, then

³⁹ Shedd, *Community*, 37.

⁴⁰ Jacob, *Theology*, 294-5.

⁴¹ Rogerson, "Corporate", 1-16.

⁴² Josh. 7:3ff. Thus Greenstein "Plague" 563 is wrong when he says that the fact that the cattle of the Egyptians died is proof that the death of the firstborn was not to be understood as a punishment. The fact is even as early as the Exodus text there is evidence of the material world is considered to be effected by the sin of man, hence the commands to destroy the possessions of the Canaanites.

Pharaoh's own firstborn must die instead since 'Israel' is collective here, it is reasonable to suppose that 'Pharaoh' is also a collective term; thus, 'your firstborn' includes all the firstborn in the land. Otherwise we should have to assume that the original reference was to Pharaoh's son alone and no other."⁴³

Thus, Israel, the nation whom Yahweh elected to be in a special relationship to Himself is threatened by Pharaoh. Moses is sent as Yahweh's spokesman. The comparison is between Israel collectively and the firstborn sons of Egypt. Pharaoh had sought not only to control Yahweh's firstborn, but the policy of killing the male babies was a deliberate policy that endangered Israel's very existence. Even though this policy was probably abandoned sometime in Moses' own infancy, it still bore witness to the dispensability of Yahweh's firstborn. Yahweh will now demonstrate His own might on Egypt.

But the second part of this Exodus passage⁴⁴ is just as significant for our understanding. It is a passage that has caused considerable difficulty for Old Testament scholarship. Durham⁴⁵ says that these verses are among the most difficult verses in the book of Exodus. Why does Moses become the victim of a savage attack by Yahweh? Moses is on his way to Egypt. He is apparently acting in obedience to a call that few others would even contemplate; yet he falls foul of Yahweh's anger. Why?

Possible explanations.

There are various explanations offered for the circumcised or non-circumcised state of Moses. Some claim that he was not circumcised, while others reason that he could not have escaped it as a member of the royal court of Egypt where circumcision was widely practiced. Others point out that Egyptian circumcision would not have been as full as that performed by the Jews: Moses was therefore incompletely circumcised. To this we must ask even if circumcision had been carried out on Moses in his childhood or youth, would Yahweh have accepted it as it would have lacked the context of the covenant promises? These questions will probably never be resolved, but what we must not overlook is the remedy that rescued Moses from death. Zipporah's action is not altogether clear. She certainly circumcised their son, possibly because to circumcise Moses himself (if he was capable of 'further' circumcision) was more than he could bear in his extreme weakness. Alternatively, or possibly additionally, there is the concern that Moses would not have been immediately able to resume his mission if he had been circumcised. It is noticeable that Zipporah and the boy who had up until this point accompanied Moses, now disappear from the narrative for the whole of the Exodus episode. The Hebrew text leaves uncertain whether Zipporah casts the foreskin at Moses' feet or her son's whom she has just circumcised or the attacking angles.

Vicarious circumcision.

There are many technical questions in the account of the circumcision of Moses's son that are all worthy of serious study but not essential for our own enquiry. What is clear from the passage is that, whatever its purpose, and

⁴³ Cole, *Exodus*, 78.

⁴⁴ Ex. 4:21-26.

⁴⁵ Durham, *Exodus*, 56.

whatever its precise ritual structure, Zipporah performs a vicarious act upon her son for the sake of her husband. None of the suggested exegeses of the passage nullifies my case. Indeed, each is valid in contributing insight to various aspects of the theme.

It is this representative relationship between Moses and his son that links the preceding passage with the warning of Yahweh that was about to be given to Pharaoh. The judgment that was to fall on Pharaoh, the representative of the Egyptian people, was to fall on both his own firstborn and the firstborn sons of his people. The phrase, 'surely you are a bridegroom of blood to me.' is explained by the author as referring to circumcision. It has been suggested that this is a reference to a premarital circumcision ceremony that was commonly practiced in some cultures. This seems to miss the point of the statement she makes. If it was this, it would have been something in the past, prior to their own marriage, whereas the force of the accusation clearly relates to the act she has just performed. It might therefore be better to see it as her exclaiming that her marriage to Moses has brought her to face death in her husband's experience and that this has been averted only at the cost of blood, in the circumcision of their son.⁴⁶

The intention of Yahweh to strike the firstborn is repeated again in Ex. 11:4-7. In this passage Yahweh impresses upon the Israelites their certain safety in the coming judgement. Not even a dog will bark. There will be absolutely no cause for alarm. Not so for the Egyptians. For them, every firstborn will be struck dead by the visiting angel of death. The fact that Pharaoh who is a firstborn, survives the Passover suggests that the judgement was not inclusive of all firstborn, but only of the youngest generation of each family and species of animal.

Protection of the firstborn.

It is not until chapter 12 that the protection of Israel's firstborn is explained.⁴⁷ Their firstborn must be protected by the blood of an innocent victim. Every family must be safeguarded by the blood of a lamb.⁴⁸ While the blood spares the firstborn, the whole family are to eat of the lamb. Sharing in the Passover is described as eating it.⁴⁹ It is a clear sign of sharing in the deliverance which the whole community participate in through the death (though averted for the Jews) of the firstborn.

The importance of the Passover for the whole nation of Israel through all generations is not just an afterthought to the Exodus event. Far more space is given to explaining the significance of the Passover and how future generations are to celebrate the event than to the actual account of the critical night itself. All that is said of the inauguration itself is contained in two brief verses.⁵⁰ The event was not only to be celebrated annually by every succeeding generation of Jews, but it was to confront them at critical points in their lives. The birth of their firstborn son, the most treasured moment in the lives of any Jewish couple,

⁴⁶ For further discussion on the significance of circumcision see Chapter 8.

⁴⁷ See Kline, "Feast", 499 who argues that God is not the destroyer but the one who protects from the destroyer.

⁴⁸ Ex. 12:3-18 & 21-23.

⁴⁹ Ex. 12:43-49.

⁵⁰ Ex. 12:29-30

was to be overshadowed by the reminder that he did not belong to them.⁵¹ He was the Lord's. This was also true of animals, as in the Passover. The animal was to be sacrificed.⁵² The donkey, an unclean animal, was to be destroyed, but because it had such a practical value to the Israelite, it could be redeemed by the death of a lamb. At lambing time the air must have carried the stench of burning flesh throughout the land. It would have been a constant reminder that the firstborn belonged to the Lord. There was to be no child sacrifice. 'Redeem every firstborn among your sons.'⁵³ The vicarious nature of the firstborn's role was clearly to be taught to succeeding generations:-

'In the days to come when your son asks you 'What does this mean?' say to him 'With a mighty hand the Lord brought us out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. When Pharaoh stubbornly refused to let us go, the Lord killed every firstborn in Egypt, both man and animal. This is why I sacrifice to the Lord the first male offspring of every womb and redeem each of my firstborn sons.' And it will be like a sign on your hand and a symbol on your forehead that the Lord brought us out of Egypt with his mighty hand.'⁵⁴

The Passover and its significance was to be at the forefront of Israelite thought and theology. Their experience was to determine their treatment of aliens.⁵⁵ Indeed it moulded their whole ethical framework for it was to be the response of gratitude from those who had been redeemed. Furthermore, the practice of the use of phylacteries in prayer and the placing of the law at their doors were a consequence of this injunction.⁵⁶ The Passover and its implications confronted the Jews daily.

The firstborn and the Levites.

The vicarious nature of death of the firstborn seems to be reflected in the Levite representation described in Numbers 8:19. In the earlier verses we find instructions concerning how the Levites were to be prepared for their service in the tabernacle. They had been taken by Yahweh in place of Israel's firstborn, who belong to Him, because they had been spared. Yahweh then gave the Levites to Aaron's sons, the priests, to serve in the tabernacle. In other words, the Levites are substitutes for the firstborn. We find this unusual explanation of the role of the Levites: 'Of all the Israelites, I have given the Levites as gift to Aaron and his sons to do the work at the Tent of Meeting on behalf of the Israelites and to make atonement for them so that no plague will strike the Israelites when they go near the sanctuary'.⁵⁷

Levites and propitiation.

This passage not only once again reveals the solidarity aspect with the Levites representing both the firstborn and Israel, but it contains the unexpected

⁵¹ Ex. 13:1.

⁵² Ex.13:12.

⁵³ Ex.13:13.

⁵⁴ Ex. 13:14-16.

⁵⁵ Lev. 19:33-4.

⁵⁶ Ex. 13:16.

⁵⁷ The LXX reads: Kai apedwka tous Leuitas apodomenous Aarwn kai tois }uiouis autou ek mesou }uiwn Israh]l ergazesqai ta erga tw'n }uiwn Israh]l en th sknhn tou marturiou kai exilaskesqai peri tw'n }uiwn Israh]l, kai ouk estai en tois }uiois Israh]l prosengizwn pros ta }ag]ia.

statement ‘to make atonement’. This cannot be a reference to sacrifices which the Levites will offer for they were excluded from such service.⁵⁸ Only the Aaronic priests were allowed to offer sacrifices. The passage therefore suggests that in some way, the very presence of the Levites, performed a propitiatory act by turning the wrath of Yahweh from the people.

This protective concept is found earlier in the book of Numbers when instructions are given as to where the different tribes are to camp in relation to the tabernacle. Numbers 1:53 says: ‘The Levites, however, are to set up their tents around the tabernacle of the Testimony so that wrath will not fall on the Israelite community.’⁵⁹

The LXX has substituted }amarthma, sin, for the Hebrew qe°cep, wrath. The translators of the NIV have correctly followed the Hebrew and translated ‘so that wrath will not fall’, possibly influenced by the Num. 8:19 text. Thus, the Levites, substituted for the firstborn, continue the propitiatory function. This takes place outside of the tabernacle, so endorsing our earlier suggestion that it had nothing to do with offering sacrifices for the nation. As the lambs had performed this role of saving the firstborn from wrath on the night of the Passover, so now, the firstborn substitutes, the Levites, continue to perform this same function of keeping wrath away from the congregation.

Alternative readings.

Obviously it could be claimed that the Levites avoided wrath coming upon the nation by fulfilling the cultic requirements. If they failed to fulfil the functions allotted to them then wrath would come upon the people. But this interpretation does not do justice to the strong statement that they ‘make atonement for the Israelites.’ If the passage said that they were to serve so that wrath did not come upon the people, that would be valid. But the text does not say that. The statement is emphatic, they are there ‘to make atonement’ so that the plague does not come upon the people when they come to the tent of meeting. The statement is therefore not about averting wrath by fulfilling the cultic regulations. It is speaking of their ministry in the place of the firstborn as being an atonement.

This interpretation finds support in the way the passage was interpreted Rabbinically: “This prerogative was then conferred upon the tribe of Levi who, moreover, dedicating themselves, man for man, to the service of the Lord, served as an atonement for the firstborn, that they might not be destroyed as they deserved.”⁶⁰

⁵⁸ Num. 18:1-7.

⁵⁹ The LXX has: }oi de Leuitai parembaletwsan enantion kuriou kuklw ths skhnhs tou marturiou, kai ouk estai }amarthma en }uiosis Israhl. kai }ulaxousin }oi Leuitai autoi thn }ulakhn ths skhnhs tou marturiou.

The Hebrew of Numbers 1: 53 reads H^l+w!Y!m y^j&nW s^bib l=m!vK^h h^U)d%t w+)a-)y!hy#h q#x#p U^-l-U&d^t B=n? y!cr^a}l w=v^m=rW h^l=w!Y!m a#l-m!vm#r#t m!vK^h h^U)dWt

⁶⁰ Ginzberg, *Legends* 3:226. North; *Numbers*, 69 says that, “it remains quite obscure what in fact is meant by this.” Gray; *Numbers*, p81 says that the Levites screened the people from the anger that would be evoked if the service of the firstborn or their substitutes was withheld. This however is not following the plain sense of the text. Noordtzi, *Numbers*, 80 also sees the passage referring to the danger of committing cultic errors. A similar view is given by McNeile., *Numbers*, 46. Budd, *Numbers*, 93 cites P’eter who says the laying on of hands in the consecration of the Levites (v 16) is not a reference to consecration but is an act of substitution or identification. This would favour our proposed exegesis as does Dunn’s suggestion “Understanding” 135 that the significance of the laying on of hands on the Levites to consecrate them is linked with the laying on of hands on the blasphemer before execution in Num. 8:10 and

The realisation that the wrath is directed against the firstborn and not the family causes us to ask why it was against the firstborn and not the father who was the head of the family?

Supporting evidence.

I have earlier proposed that the firstborn represented the family on the night of the Passover. Is there any evidence to support this? I would suggest that there is. The vicarious suffering of descendants is suggested in the Decalogue. The warning in the second commandment that Yahweh visits the sins of the fathers unto the third and fourth generation⁶¹ has caused Sanders⁶² to note that it implies vicarious substitution in which the children bear the sins of the forefathers. The warning is in the context of the Exodus, the commandments being given as the climax of the redemptive event. If its historical setting is kept in mind, then there is an inevitable link with the immediately preceding event, the Passover.

There is therefore a propitiatory role that the death of the lamb and the presence of the Levites play. They are not separate roles, for they are linked in that they both represent the firstborn. The lamb died in the place of the firstborn and the Levites were functioning in the place of the firstborn. The firstborn, it would seem, were threatened because they fulfilled a representative role for the family and if they had no provision made for them then they died bearing the wrath of God.

The psalms.

The link between the firstborn and atonement is illustrated in Psalm 78. In verse 38 the waywardness of Israel in the wilderness is referred to. She constantly provoked Yahweh to anger. The Psalmist praises Yahweh for His mercy saying: 'Yet he was merciful, he atoned for their iniquities and did not destroy them. Time after time he restrained his anger and did not stir up his full wrath'.⁶³ The Psalmist further wrote about the Egyptians: 'He unleashed against them His hot anger, He did not spare them from death but gave them over to the plague. He struck down all the firstborn of Egypt, the first fruits of manhood in the tents of them, but He brought his people out like a flock he led them like sheep through the desert.'⁶⁴

Lev. 24:14. The Levite's consecration is part of the judgement of Passover so Ginzberg, *Legends*, 3:226. Herrmann, *TDNT* 3: 301-310 points out that Ps 79:8-9 says, 'Do not hold against us the sins of our fathers', and he points out that the ministry of the Levites is intended to atone, and appeals to Num. 8:8-32 especially v19, c.f. Num. 1:53 and 18:5. Kidner, "Metaphors" 119ff points out that in Num. 8:10ff the Levites had hands laid on them and were offered as living sacrifices to the Lord. Procksch, *TDNT* 4: 328-335 points to Num. 18:16 and Ps 49:8 for the redemption of the firstborn. There is clearly, in some way, an atoning significance in the very presence of the Levites, so also Garnet, "Constructions", 147, a presence which is itself substitutionary in the place of the firstborn.

⁶¹ Ex 20:5 and 34:7.

⁶² Sanders, *Palestinian*, 194 says, "If the sons are punished for the transgressions of the father, themselves, then they are not punished for those same transgressions. The entire view that descendants suffer for their ancestors' sin is, as indicated, very rare in Tannaitic literature, but it is interesting, since it leads to something like a view of vicarious atonement". Edersheim *Life* 2:178 says, 'up to thirteen years of age a child was considered as it were, part of his father, and as suffering for his guilt', so *Shabb* 326;1056; *Yalkut on Ruth* Vol ii para 600, p163c. Reese "First-begotten" 647 says that the death of Saul's sons because of his breach of covenant with the Gibeonites was expiatory to atone for his father's perfidy (2 Sam 21:9).

⁶³ wühû´ raHûm yûkaPPër `äwôn wü|lô´-yašHîf wühirBâ lühäšîb ´aPPô wülö|´-yâ`îr Kol-Hámätô Psalm 78:38

⁶⁴ Psalm 78: 49-52.

The thrust of the Psalm clearly shows how Yahweh's anger was only averted by atonement. It was on the night of the Passover His judgement was fully revealed. That judgement focused on the firstborn, the first fruit of Egyptian manhood. There can be only one explanation of how the judgement did not visit the Jewish homes - a vicarious atonement had been made.

It is true that the Hebrew text has *yūkaPPēr `āwōn* 'forgive their iniquity', but this does not exclude the notion of atonement. The passage makes it clear that Yahweh's people were in danger of the same judgement that came upon the Egyptians, then 'He struck down all the firstborn of Egypt (78:38). The forgiveness or mercy that the Jews received was through the provision of an alternative for the firstborn, the Paschal lamb. It was a provision made by Yahweh, so he forgave their iniquities.

The prophets.

Another passage that points to an atoning significance in the death of the firstborn is found in Micah. 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?'⁶⁵

The reference to this offering of the firstborn as an atonement bears a number of possible interpretations. 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."⁶⁶

This is supported by Wade who says: "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."⁶⁷

Smith saw this passage as proof of the practice of human sacrifice in Micah's day, nevertheless he refused to accept it was for atonement. Smith interpreted it as an attempt to please Yahweh, and going to extremes to achieve that goal. He comments: "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 offering, and the technical sin offering of the later law certainly never contemplated the possibility of human sacrifice as one of its constituent elements."⁶⁸ Smith's remarks, however, require that the people had their technical religious understanding concise and clear, and the very point of the passage is to show that they had no such understanding.

McKeating⁶⁹ argues against using the passage to show that human sacrifice was

⁶⁵ Mic. 6:6-7.

⁶⁶ Henderson, *Prophets*, 257.

⁶⁷ Wade, *Books*, 51.

⁶⁸ Smith, *Commentary*, 126-7.

⁶⁹ McKeating, *Amos*, 186-7.

widely practiced. 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?"

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."⁷⁰

Von Orell regards 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, having both significance."⁷¹

Disaster and propitiation.

The range of opinion recorded shows the wide scope of understanding the reference to the sacrifice of the firstborn has. It would seem to me that there is no forcing of the intended meaning of the passage in saying that it expresses belief, even if only popular belief, of the possibility of dealing with a 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 goes 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 Kings3:27) and especially the Phoenicians."

Rabbinic support.

The redemptive significance of Mic. 6:6-7 is further supported by Rabbinic authorities for the text is linked to Isaac in Genesis.⁷² As we shall soon see, Isaac's willingness to die was claimed to have atoning significance by the Rabbis.

This 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 I have claimed for the purpose of the firstborn's death in the Passover, and we do not need to look for any immediate external influence for Micah's understanding. The people felt that the conditions indicated that 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?"

Grieving for the firstborn.

Zechariah also refers to the firstborn when 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.'⁷³ The text of this passage poses a problem in that some

⁷⁰ Pusey, *Prophets*, 237-8.

⁷¹ Orell, *Minor*, 214.

⁷² *Vayera* Lv 4-6^{10a}

⁷³ Zech. 12:10.

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 Yahweh 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. Attempts have been made to identify who has been pierced. Those who wish to uphold the text that gives ‘look upon him’, suggest a range of possibilities as to who has been pierced. These vary from Onias III, who was assassinated in 170 B.C. and Simon the Maccabee who was assassinated in 134 B.C., to a representative of Yahweh.

Mason has argued that it is Jehovah who has been thrust through in the person of his representative. This view could, of course, fit either reading. Mason⁷⁴ sees that the one pierced is probably a little known figure belonging to the prophetic circle. He comes to this conclusion because the mourning over the treatment of the one who has been pierced follows, rather than precedes, repentance. Mason sees this hardly suggests the role of the ‘Suffering Servant’, still less a Messianic one. 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 a natural consequence once the evil has been exposed. This, however, cuts across what Zechariah is actually saying. 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. Mason’s argument therefore loses its force, because we cannot measure the degree of importance to be attached to the one pierced by his effect in producing repentance. Baldwin⁷⁵ has criticised Mason’s view pointing out that it is difficult to see two distinct people die in the death of one representative.

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.”⁷⁶

But this comment cannot be sustained. It requires that we take 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 of view 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. Calvin⁷⁷ interpreted the text as saying that God was wounded by the sins of his people, while Moore argues that its interpretation can only be that the Messiah is pierced. Moore adds: “This evasion is utterly inadmissible and the text still

⁷⁴ Mason, *Books*, 118-9.

⁷⁵ Baldwin, *Haggai* 190.

⁷⁶ Mitchell, *Haggai*, 330.

⁷⁷ Calvin, *Prophets*, 363.

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.”⁷⁸

Firstborn and deliverance.

In spite of the divergence of opinion, the passage clearly links a redemptive event with the death of one likened to a firstborn. Obviously the original purpose in referring to the firstborn is to emphasise that the grief will be intense. However, 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.⁷⁹ The preceding verses speak of the nations judged by Yahweh as he defends Israel, a theme that obviously has its counterpart in the Exodus events. This understanding, even if we cannot say with certainty that this is what Zechariah thought, seems to be how the NT writers understood it. This is supported by the way John uses the passage in the opening of Revelation, in a setting glorying in the redemptive work of Christ.⁸⁰ It is also used in John’s Gospel, in the very context of Christ’s death which John repeatedly links with the Passover event.⁸¹

The Passover and the day of atonement.

In the closing chapters of Ezekiel we are given the prophet’s vision of a new temple. The eschatological temple is the center of Israel’s worship of Yahweh. Ezekiel rearranges the celebration of the great feasts as described in the following:

‘This is what the Sovereign Lord says. In the first month on the first day you are to take a young bull without defect and purify the sanctuary. The priest is to take some of the blood of the sin offering and put it on the doorpost of the temple, on the four corners of the upper ledge of the altar and on the gateposts of the inner court. You are to do the same on the seventh day of the month for anyone who sins unintentionally or through ignorance, so you are to make atonement for the temple. In the first month on the fourteenth day you are to observe the Passover, a feast lasting seven days, during which you shall eat bread made without yeast. On that day the prince is to provide a bull as a sin offering for himself and for all the people of the land. Every day during the seven days of the feast he is to provide seven bulls and seven rams without defect as a burnt offering to the Lord and a male goat for a sin offering.’⁸²

Scholarly confusion.

This account merges the Passover with the sacrifice of the Day of Atonement. Cooke comments: “This decree marks a notable break with tradition; the distinctive sacrifice to be provided is the sin-offering, and Passover thus becomes a propitiatory rite, the language of Lev. 16:8 which is concerned with

⁷⁸ Moore, *Zechariah*, 200.

⁷⁹ Zech. 12:7-9.

⁸⁰ Rev. 1:4-8.

⁸¹ Jn. 19:36.

⁸² Ezek. 45:18-23.

the Day of Expiation. The paschal meal, an essential feature all the codes, is not so much mentioned; perhaps it is taken for granted.”⁸³

Engell ⁸⁴ noted the activity of the Davidic prince in the Passover and the sacrifice’s atoning significance. Cody notes the merger of the two feasts with the emphasis being on the absorption of the sacrifice of atonement by the Passover and comments: “The feast of the 10th of the seventh month in post-Exilic Judaism is the Day of Atonement, whose ritual, given in Lev. 16, has absorbed the expiatory rites of the 1st and 7th of the first month for which Ezek. 45:18-20 does provide.”⁸⁵

Cody seems to be confused in his understanding, for it is not the Day of Atonement that absorbs the expiatory rites of the Passover, but the Passover which absorbs the expiatory rights of the Day of Atonement.

Fairbairn⁸⁶ also noted how the Day of Atonement sacrifices were assimilated into the Passover, and how the offering for the Passover is transferred to the feast of Tabernacles. However, he saw no other significance than that it illustrates how Ezekiel was able to make free use of Old Testament ritual and: “how he only employed it as a cover for the great spiritual truths he sought to unfold. Fairbairn fails to say what these great spiritual truths were.”

Hengstenbergh has noted that: In this festival the enhancing of the offerings appears quite prominent, which is explained by this, that the grace of redemption sealed by this festival was to receive so rich an accession by the events of the future.⁸⁷

Stalker comments that: “Ezekiel’s offerings are at variance with those recorded in Numbers and elsewhere, proving that the cultic practice of a dynamic faith changes with time.”⁸⁸

Eichrodt⁸⁹ surprisingly makes no mention of the new structure, while Wevers comments: “Unique is the interpretation of Passover as a time for sin offering. Nor is a bullock otherwise used on Passover. Here Ezekiel is at odds with the Pentateuch.”⁹⁰

Zimmerli thought the sacrifices of the Day of Atonement were moved to the beginning of the year to be included in the Passover: to show much more fully, the cleansing of the sanctuary (and of the community) from the sin which has accumulated throughout the year.⁹¹ He further notes that there is no mention of atonement in the ritual itself (although this surely would be implicitly understood to be in these very sacrifices, i.e. of the Day of Atonement). He

⁸³ Cooke, *Ezekiel*, 504.
⁸⁴ Engell, *Essays*, 186.
⁸⁵ Cody, *Ezekiel*, 240.
⁸⁶ Fairbairn, *Ezekiel*, 485.
⁸⁷ Hengstenberg, *Prophecies*, 459.
⁸⁸ Stalker, *PCB*, 304.
⁸⁹ Eichrodt, *Theology*, 2:130.
⁹⁰ Wevers, *Ezekiel*, 328
⁹¹ Zimmerli, *Ezekiel*, 2:482.

noted how the application of the blood of the sacrifice was according to the Passover ritual, and comments that the blood clearly had the power to remove sins.⁹² Zimmerli sees the restructuring of the feasts with sacrifices taken from other occasions of celebration to be an example of a process which is strongly at work in history: “That of leveling out festivals which to begin with in their rituals are clearly distinct. Zimmerli sees the significance of bringing the sin offering into the Passover to be to correct the danger of religious white washing with false festal joy: Before the burnt offerings in which man could easily see his pious activity and alongside these burnt offerings of every single day the sin offering is set.”⁹³ Finally, Zimmerli comments: By prefacing the sin offering of a bull gives both feasts a strong character of atonement.⁹⁴

Ezekiel’s Paschal rational.

While this is a conclusion I would accept, I do need to ask if Zimmerli is right to see the alteration of the feasts as nothing more than an example of religious evolution. Could a priest so conscious of how Israel had adapted her religion in the past at great moral and spiritual cost, so easily partake in the same exercise; or is he saying something vitally significant, so significant that he has to do the unthinkable for a priest: He rearranges the divinely commanded structure of the great feasts. It is difficult to accept that he is intending to add to the significance of the Passover; but is he by this reconstruction intending to remind his people of the original and final eschatological significance of the Passover, i.e. that it was a deliverance from judgment? This significance is not only emphasised in transferring the required offerings of the Day of Atonement to Passover, but in making them more copious than the law itself required.

The importance of the Passover, heightened here by Ezekiel’s vision of its future significance in that the Day of Atonement are offered in a Paschal context is seemingly reflected in Num. 9:13 where we read, ‘If a man who is ceremonially clean and not on a journey fails to celebrate the Passover, that person must be cut off from his people because he did not present the Lord’s offering at the appointed time. That man will bear the consequences of his sin.’

Scholarly opinion.

This understanding of the Passover is not widely shared. The fact is that scholarship has tended to miss the importance of the Passover for the Jews. The range of opinions on the significance of the death of the firstborn reflects this. For example, Helyer⁹⁵ referring to the firstborn in the OT says: the large majority of occurrences in the LXX (130) fall into cultic, genealogical or judicial contexts, yet he gives no space to explore the cultic significance. McGlothlin⁹⁶ sees Mic. 6:6-7 as an example of atonement through the sacrifice of the firstborn, as does Kaufmann⁹⁷ who claims that there is no concrete evidence that the Passover lamb is a substitute for an original human sacrifice.

⁹² op cit 2: 484.

⁹³ op cit 2: 486.

⁹⁴ op cit 2: 486

⁹⁵ Helyer, “Prototokos”, 17, see also his “Research”.

⁹⁶ McGlothlin, “Sacrifice”, 2658.

⁹⁷ Kaufmann, *Religion*, 106. Hicks, *Fulness*, 234 argues that Passover was a sacrifice.

Pedersen⁹⁸ says that the Jews acquired Canaanite views of human sacrifice but replaced the death of the firstborn by the substituting a lamb. He saw that there were times when there were revivals of child sacrifice around 600 BC as indicated in Lev. 7:32 and 32:36 as well as Ezek. 16:20, but said that these were not to Yahweh, but to Molech. Heider⁹⁹ concluded that, whilst child sacrifice was practiced in Israel at different times, it was never part of authentic Yahwism. To illustrate this he points out that in sacrifice to Molech both male and female children were offered, whereas the law of the firstborn related only to the firstborn males who were to be redeemed. There seems to be little doubt that at different periods Israel sank into the practices of her neighbours, thinking that the sacrifice of the firstborn had special propitiatory significance, so Lewis.¹⁰⁰ Patterson acknowledges that it is exegetically possible to argue for the literal sacrifice of the firstborn but claims that: as a normal demand of OT religion, and indeed of any sane religion, it is inconceivable.¹⁰¹ De Vaux¹⁰² rejected a sacrificial element in the Paschal offering when he noted that nowhere is a firstborn animal prescribed as a Paschal sacrifice. This, however, is to miss the point: the firstborn could not be offered as a substitute for it already belonged to the Lord.¹⁰³ Westerman¹⁰⁴ says that human sacrifice is never a feature of primitive religions. He claims that it is as a religion develops that human sacrifice is offered before the stage when animal sacrifice is practiced.

Against this Mosac concluded that the sacrifice of the firstborn was part of authentic Yahwehism and that the prophets' protestations were not about the practice but about the fact that the people made these sacrifices to other gods.¹⁰⁵ This is supported by Levenson.¹⁰⁶ McGlothlin¹⁰⁷ claimed that human sacrifice was practiced widely before the exile as a means of propitiating the anger of Jehovah, and Reese¹⁰⁸ argued that there are examples of the practice in 2 Kings 3:27 where the Moabite king offered his firstborn to appease the anger of Chemosh. Eichrodt¹⁰⁹ denies that the practice of the sacrifice of the firstborn took place in Israel on the grounds that the child was of such importance to the parents and that it would have severely reduced the manpower of the nation. He does, however, concede that it may have been practiced at times of special crisis.

Jacob also agreed that child sacrifice was practiced in Israel at some point in her history: "The offering of the firstborn is a ransom for the parents (Ex 22:23ff) and each time that the Old Testament speaks of human sacrifice (1 Kings 16:34, 2 Kings 3:27, Mic. 6:7, Dt. 12:31, Jer 7:31, 19:5,32,35, Ezek.

⁹⁸ Pedersen, "Crossing", vol. 3-4:318-9.

⁹⁹ Heider, *Molek*, 254, supported by Day, *Molech*, passim

¹⁰⁰ Lewis, "firstborn" *ISBE* 2:113.

¹⁰¹ Patterson, *HDBN* 4: 334.

¹⁰² de Vaux *Israel*, 11.

¹⁰³ Levine, "firstborn", *EJ* 6:1309

¹⁰⁴ Westerman, *Genesis*, 12-36 357.

¹⁰⁵ Mosac, *Child*, 199-212. Woolf, "Sacrifice", 30-51 says that the reasons for child sacrifice ranged from population or family control, economic reasons as well as for the fulfilment of a vow.

¹⁰⁶ Levenson, *Death*, 3-17.

¹⁰⁷ McGlothlin, "Sacrifice", *ISBE* 4:2658, contra Milgrom, "Firstborn" *IDB Sup* 338.

¹⁰⁸ Reese, "Firstbegotten", *ISBE* 1:1113.

¹⁰⁹ Eichrodt, *Theology*, 148f.

20:25-31), the same aim of this sacrifice is to safeguard, at the cost of these substitutionary rites, the life of the whole group.”¹¹⁰

The significance of the death of the firstborn is contained in Ps. Sol. 18:4: The chastisement was upon us as a firstborn only son. Freed and Simon¹¹¹ point out that Mic. 4:6, shall I give the firstborn of my soul is linked with the offering of Isaac in Gen 22 in the Midrash. Both texts suggest the significance being argued for was generally shared.

The range of evidence suggests that the death of the firstborn was in some way related to atonement for the sins of the people. Whether this was only at the level of popular belief or whether it was part of official Yahwehism continues to be debated.

The firstborn and family representation.

The next question that we have set ourselves to answer is: Why was it the firstborn, and not the father, who represented the family? As the Passover event took place after 400 years of exile in Egypt, it is reasonable to suppose we might find some significance in the role of the firstborn in that nation’s understanding. This is in fact what Trumper¹¹² claimed. He considered that the text of King Unas¹¹³ revealed 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 starts to assert his authority over them. One of the lines describing the King says: “He is God the firstborn of the firstborn.”¹¹⁴ 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 specifically stated that the cow who was his mother had no subsequent offspring.

The influence of Egyptian religious belief is clearly seen in the episode of the golden calf Israel worshipped soon after leaving Egypt.¹¹⁵ 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 became even greater than his father’s, for the future of the nation, the throne, and even Ra himself, was then focused upon the welfare of the new son of Ra. The father’s death would be by no means as calamitous as the death of his firstborn. The firstborn’s representative role was more crucial than that of his father, until such time as he himself had fathered a son.

The firstborn and Isaac.

But there is yet another setting that could have given the death of the firstborn such central significance in representing the family. Its origin is in the

¹¹⁰ Jacob, *Theology*, 294-5
¹¹¹ Freed and Simon, *Midrash*, 485.
¹¹² Trumper, *Mirror*, 121-2.
¹¹³ Osiris, Budge 1 :121
¹¹⁴ cf Ps. 89:27.
¹¹⁵ Ex. 32:1-4.

willingness of Abraham to offer up Isaac.¹¹⁶ Even though the sacrifice was not actually completed, Jewish understanding came to regard the offering as accepted by God as though it had actually been made. This became the basis of a developed doctrine of atonement through the sacrifice of Isaac. Jewish understanding, in keeping with the doctrine of solidarity in which the many share in the experience of their representative, came to see that Isaac had 'died' for his people and so through his death God had extended mercy to Israel. What is of significance for our study is, of course, that Isaac was the firstborn of the covenant people. In the offering of Israel's firstborn, the Jew saw himself offered up and so sacrificed to God. Moore has carefully documented this doctrine of Israel's sanctification in Isaac.¹¹⁷ The evidence for the significance of the offering of Isaac has slowly emerged over the last century.¹¹⁸ The testing of Abraham to see if he would obey God and offer up Isaac is known in Rabbinic studies as the *Aqedah*, which means 'the binding'. This is also the term used for binding the sacrifice to the altar in preparation for its slaughter. A study by Vermes¹¹⁹ made use of the 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 *Aqedah* research.

Genesis 22 and the targums.

According to Vermes¹²⁰ there are two types of Targum tradition with regard to Genesis 22. There is the primitive kernel 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 traditions 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.

Pseudo-Jonathan presents the whole episode as a test of Isaac's fidelity, as well as of Abraham's love of and faithfulness to God.¹²¹ 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., namely *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

¹¹⁶ Gen. 22.

¹¹⁷ Moore, *Judaism*, 3: 540-9.

¹¹⁸ See Wood, "Isaac", 585-9 for an overview of the Isaac theme in the NT. For a summary of the history into *Aqedah* research and an extensive bibliography, see Swetnam, *Jesus*, 4-21 and Levinson, *Death, passim*.

¹¹⁹ Vermes, "Redemption", 1ff.

¹²⁰ op cit 195.

¹²¹ op cit 197.

Isaac's merit and on his voluntary self-surrender.¹²² 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, though with no explicit reference to Isaac.¹²³ *Liber Antiquitatum* stresses the willingness, even the joy, of Isaac. He relates Isaac's 'sacrifice' to other sacrifices offered to and accepted by God for the sins of men. Finally, *Liber Antiquitatum* presents Isaac as being hopeful for the beneficent effect of his self-offering upon future generations.

Vermes¹²⁴ showed further that in *4 Maccabees* Isaac was implicitly the model of a martyr's death offered for the sins of Israel. He suggests that this is linked with Isa. 53 where in verse 7 the servant is compared with a lamb brought to the slaughter, just as Isaac was. Moreover, Isaac's sacrifice was ordered by God, as was the servant's.¹²⁵

Vermes¹²⁶ emphasised the sacrificial nature of Isaac's offering by linking Isaac's free consent with the tradition in later midrashic texts that Isaac's blood was shed. The *Fragmentary Targum* explicitly mentions a prayer by Abraham for the pardon of the transgressions of Isaac's descendants. 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.¹²⁷ Vermes concluded from the testimony in Rabbinic sources that the Temple sacrifices (which were offered on the supposed site of Isaac's binding) were intended to be memorials, reminding Yahweh of the one 'sacrifice' that was efficacious, i.e. that of Isaac. Vermes argued¹²⁸ that this suggests that the atoning efficacy of the *tamid* offering and of all the sacrifices in which the lamb was immolated and perhaps even of all expiatory sacrifices depended on the power of the 'sacrifice' of Isaac.

A second tradition.

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 as that of an example of faithfulness even unto death. Swetnam notes how the writer of the epistle to the Hebrews emphasised that without the shedding of blood there is no remission of sins, and thinks that 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 Deaut's work¹²⁹ supports Vermes' claim that a Rabbinic tradition saw a propitiatory significance in the offering of Isaac. Le Deaut noted from the study of the intertestamental *Poem of the Four Nights* found in the best text of the *Codex Neofiti I* at Ex 12:43, 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. All are said to have taken place on the night of the Passover. Le Deaut also noted

122 op cit 197.
123 op cit 198.
124 op cit 203.
125 Isa. 53:10.
126 op cit 206.
127 op cit 206-8.
128 op cit 208-11.
129 Le Deaut, *Pascale*, 1ff.

that Jubilees also linked the sacrifice of Isaac with the date of the Passover.¹³⁰ This led him to conclude that in the events of the Passover there exists a vital significance for the Jewish interpretation of the *Aqedah*. Swetnam¹³¹ supports this view, believing that if there was a connection between the Passover and the *Aqedah* it would probably have been based on the common factor of the redemption of the firstborn and would probably have preceded the Exile.

There is 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. Indeed the efficacy of the blood of the Passover lamb was not seen to reside in itself, but in it being a reminder of the sacrifice of Isaac. The *Mekilte de-Rabbi Ishmael* is a halakhic midrash which Swetnam¹³² thinks was edited no earlier than the end of the fourth century A.D. but dating in substance from the Tannaitic period. The passage is concerned with selected sections of Exodus. The comment on the words ‘And when I see the blood’ from Exodus 12:13 demonstrates the Isaac/Passover relation: “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.”¹³³ In another passage it says: “And as he was about to destroy the Lord beheld and He repented Him”, etc.(1). What did he behold? He beheld the blood of the sacrifice of Isaac, as it said, “God will Himself see the Lamb” etc. (Gen. 22:8).”¹³⁴

With such a range of evidence, the *Aqedah* clearly seems relevant for understanding something of the significance of the role of the firstborn. Unfortunately the picture is nowhere that simple and requires further investigation.

The *Aqedah* and its developments.

Davies and Chilton have challenged the claim of Vermes that there is evidence of a developed *Aqedah* tradition in existence in the New Testament period.¹³⁵ They accept the existence of the *Aqedah* as a developed doctrine from the end of the second century A.D., i.e. from the time that the Targum traditions were recorded, but they do not accept any sayings prior to that date. These are rejected even though they are attributed to specific Rabbinic authorities which would take their origin back to the Apostolic period or even earlier.

While it is correct to say that David and Chilton’s position is the only one that is the only position that considers evidence whose dating is beyond dispute, nevertheless it imposes on the evidence restrictions, which are totally contrary to the way that ideas emerge. Ideas are verbalised and debated before they ever come into existence in a written form, and this alone ought to permit us, without becoming involved in an argument over the dating of the material, to accept that

¹³⁰ op cit 179-84.

¹³¹ Swetnam, *Jesus*, 67.

¹³² op cit 80 note 458.

¹³³ Swetnam, *Jesus*, 67.

¹³⁴ op cit 67.

¹³⁵ Chilton and Davies, “Adeqah”. Chilton, “Night” 87 rejected a pre-Christian *Aqedah* but acknowledge that links with Passover are established by Le Deaut. For a response to Chilton and Davies see O’Neill, “Did Jesus”, 13ff and Segal, “Spare”, 169-184. See also Bruce, *Origins*, 54-55 and York, “Dating” 60. For an assessment of the influence of the *Aqedah* see Wenham “Paradigm”, 102.

the material would have had an existence - how long we would need to try to discover - prior to the date of it being committed to writing. The criteria that Davies and Chilton have laid down have effectively done away with the existence of oral tradition, the principles and reality of which are widely accepted. The only materials Davies and Chilton will accept as valid for determining the likelihood of the *Aqedah* having an influence in the New Testament period are the books of *IV Maccabees*, *Jubilees*, *Josephus* and Pseudo Philo's *Liber Antiquitatum*. They claim that these texts alone can be accepted as relevant texts whose dating is beyond doubt so making their composition relevant to interpreting the New Testament. Having accepted these as valid sources they then go on to dispute the evidence deduced from them by Vermes in the following manner:

Critical evaluation.

- 1). Philo refers to Isaac being dismembered, which rules out any connection with the Passover because that sacrifice was not treated in such a way.
- 2). Josephus presents Isaac's dedication as an example to those who fought against Rome to encourage them to accept martyrdom. Josephus makes no allusion to the theme of redemption. Also Josephus makes little of Isaac's self-offering in comparison to the faith of Abraham, which he emphasises.
- 3). Philo has Isaac saying 'My blessing will be upon all men as there will not be another' This gives a universal significance to the *Aqedah* which it was nowhere else given.
- 4). Davies and Chilton further reject the Passover *Aqedah* material on the grounds that: "whereas there is no doubt that the Passover had a redemptive significance, there is no evidence that it had an expiatory significance. The unhappy confusion of distinct concepts is partly responsible for the current prevalent view of the *Aqedah*."¹³⁶

Davies and Chilton conclude after examining the four works which they have accepted as prior to the NT: "Our discussion of all the relevant passages in this source allows us the confident assertion that there is no evidence of the *Aqedah* to be found."¹³⁷ They confidently assert that: "The current consensus on the development of the *Aqedah* is fundamentally misguided."¹³⁸

When they examine the New Testament they dismiss any reference to the *Aqedah* in Rom 8:33 while accepting that there is a faint possibility of an allusion in Jn. 3:16; 1 Jn. 4:9 and Mk. 1:11.¹³⁹

As to the assessment of Davies and Chilton of the New Testament evidence our argument has shown that not only is there the possibly a far greater presence of this theme of the *Aqedah*/Passover than Davies or Chilton have ever allowed, but that it goes far beyond what even Vermes has identified. It is surprising that studies concerned with the presence or influence of the *Aqedah*/Passover theme in the New Testament have consistently failed to give due weight to considering the context in which a possible allusion or quotation appears. The context

¹³⁶ Davies and Chilton, "Aqedah", 546 note 81.

¹³⁷ op cit 528.

¹³⁸ op cit 546.

¹³⁹ I suggest that these texts are better interpreted in the light of the Passover model.

extends the specific allusion or quotation and produces factors that alter the balance of evidence.

An assessment of evidence.

But what of Davies and Chilton's assessment of the evidence in *IV Maccabees*, *Jubilees*, *Josephus* and *Pseudo Philo*? Have they made a valid assessment of the evidence in this area where there is no serious debate over the dating of the material? I believe that they have not made a correct assessment and I will now respond to their arguments in the order given earlier.

1). Davies and Chilton's argument that Philo refers to Isaac being dismembered, whereas the Passover lamb was not, is not a valid argument for dismissing Philo's evidence. I have already shown that Ezekiel 45:11ff has brought the sacrifices of the Day of Atonement under the structure of the Passover celebrations, and these sacrifices, which were absorbed into the redemptive theme of the Passover, were dismembered. I shall show that this merger of the sacrifices under the theme of Passover was clearly present in the writings of the early church fathers.¹⁴⁰

2). There is no reason why Josephus should not apply the *Aqedah* to non-redemptive themes. This does not preclude the existence of a central redemptive motif. The New Testament writers constantly use Christ's redemptive sufferings as an example for believers to follow in the face of persecution. This use of the sufferings of Christ for encouragement was achieved without in any way weakening the theme of redemption.¹⁴¹

3). The *Aqedah* does not require exclusive attention to be placed on the role of Isaac for it to have theological significance for the New Testament writers. Dahl has pointed out the significance of Abraham's faith in these words: "There existed a specifically Jewish-Christian 'doctrine of the atonement', more explicit than has often been assumed on the basis of Acts. The death of Jesus upon the cross was interpreted as fulfilling what God had promised to Abraham by oath. Abraham had not withheld his son, so God did not spare His own Son, but gave him up for Isaac's descendants. As the sacrifice provided by God, he expiated their former sins."¹⁴²

In other words, the faith of Abraham is an integral part of the *Aqedah* doctrine, latter for Jewish and Christian understanding. In addition, when we remember the total abhorrence the Jews had for human sacrifice, it is to be expected that in Jewish literature it is Abraham's faith rather than the self-sacrifice that is emphasised. Jewish leaders only came to terms with the self-sacrificing aspect of Isaac's surrender as they were forced to respond to the pressure of the Gospel of Christ whose theme was that an act of self-sacrificing love had brought about the redemption of the people of God. What Judaism could cope with was a doctrine of martyrdom, and this was clearly developed in pre-Christian Judaism and the *Aqedah* was used to promote it. In this case, however, even though it

¹⁴⁰ See chapter 15.

¹⁴¹ Heb. 12:1; 1 Pt. 2:20-21.

¹⁴² Dahl, "Atonement" 27.

was seen to expiate sin, it was not the sacrifice of a child in a cultic setting.¹⁴³

Dating texts.

There is another point that needs to be considered regarding this claim of Davies and Chilton, it is that the text concentrates on Abraham's and not Isaac's faith and obedience. Levi¹⁴⁴ has pointed out that the texts (which Davies and Chilton reject as later adaptations) which speak of Abraham's faith rather than that of Isaac are more likely to be pre-Christian. This is because a feature of texts which are responding to the Christian doctrine of redemption in Christ would inevitably have put emphasis on Isaac to emphasise his adequacy to secure redemption for Israel. The fact that these texts do not do this suggests that they have a pre-Christian origin and this in turn points to the existence of the *Aqedah* doctrine at an earlier date than Davies and Chilton are willing to accept.

4). It would be strange indeed if Pseudo Philo, whose concern to commend Judaism to the Greeks was so great that he followed a syncretistic approach to religious belief, did not overstep the boundaries of orthodoxy when dealing with the *Aqedah*. The fact that he writes that Isaac said, "my blessing will be upon all men because there will not be another", is hardly a problem. Indeed, the problem would be if this sort of thing had not been said in a missionary situation.

5). In response to Davies and Chilton's claim that there is no evidence that the Passover had any expiatory significance, I believe that crucial evidence does exist to show that it did. The early church, through the influence of Ezek. 45:22, did attach an expiatory value to the death of Christ who was the eschatological Paschal victim. The evidence suggests that this view was not the product of the early church, but rather that it was part of Judaism. John the Baptist referred to Jesus as the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.¹⁴⁵ There is no suggestion that his hearers had to have this explained strongly suggesting that the atoning significance of the eschatological Passover was well established in the mind of Judaism. Thus, it is incorrect to say that there was no expiatory significance in the Paschal offering.

Possible solutions.

Confining our attention to the material which Davies and Chilton have admitted as valid, what are the possibilities for the development of the *Aqedah*? They are as follows:

1). That there are no *Aqedah* references or allusions in the New Testament. The evidence we have considered suggests otherwise, especially when the texts are read in their context.

2). That there are a few allusions in the New Testament which reflect the emergence of an Isaac typology in the early Christian community that was based on a parallel between the sacrifice of Isaac and that of Christ. This view has the support of most scholars but it does not require that there was anything like the *Aqedah* tradition promoting it. It could have emerged merely as a result of early teachers realising that a type was present in Gen 22.

¹⁴³ Schillebeckx, "Experiment", 293 rejects the application of martyrdom to Jesus because the martyr did not have to be a righteous person.

¹⁴⁴ Levi, "Le Sacrifice", 179.

¹⁴⁵ Jn. 1:29.

3). That there is a unique independent doctrine of salvation in the NT which is the product of the creative genius of Jesus/and/or the apostles. The Jewish apologists responded to this doctrinal model by developing the *Aqedah*. This position leaves the Targums free to respond to the Christian doctrine of redemption by identifying appropriate features in Isaac that allowed them to develop the significance of the *Aqedah* and so produce a more effective answer to the ever threatening Christian insistence that the Jewish community needed to experience the redemption that was in Christ. This is the view held by Levi who argued that the sacrifice of Isaac was just a strand of the Jewish doctrine of the merits of the fathers. The early Christian writers identified the significance of this for their understanding of Christ and developed it themselves. This then made the Jewish apologists go back to the account of the *Aqedah* to try to defend their own position that Judaism had already been provided with its own sufficient sacrifice.¹⁴⁶

4). There is an *Aqedah* doctrine in the New Testament, either emerging or developed which was the result of an ongoing debate with the Jewish community about the nature and means of redemption. This possibility would reflect an ongoing debate, which was spawning ideas that were then incorporated into the New Testament writings. The Christian community, clearly the party taking the initiative and in the early stages of formulating its ideas, was able to respond more readily and incorporated its developing understanding of the *Aqedah* into its writings. Such an immediate response is rarely possible for institutions such as Judaism was, and it would have been some time later that the fully formulated Jewish response would have emerged.

5). There was in existence a fully developed Jewish doctrine of the *Aqedah*, which the early church used as a model to interpret the significance of the death of Christ.

I believe that the true account of the origin and influence of the *Aqedah* lies somewhere between the possibilities of 3, 4 and 5. This does justice to the oral tradition stage of development as well as the Rabbinical evidence together with the evidence of those sources which Chilton and Davies have accepted as sufficiently early to be undisputed. However, the most dominant model for the NT writers was not the *Aqedah* itself, but the Passover with the death of the firstborn. This probably came to the fore naturally, not only because it had been the model that Jesus himself had used to teach the church, i.e. the eschatological Exodus, but also because it was seen to be totally in harmony with the prophetic tradition. Furthermore, it had none of the inherent problems that the *Aqedah* stream had in confusing the meaning and significance of Christ's death, for he certainly was not a martyr; he was the Saviour, and that understanding was set in the context of OT concepts of redemptive history.

The firstborn and the redeemer.

The third question that needs answering is: Why do we have two titles, namely firstborn and redeemer, when the title redeemer would have satisfactorily covered all the roles these two titles suggest?

¹⁴⁶ Fisk's conclusion "Again" 507 is: "It may be impossible to determine whether early Jewish traditions about Isaac fueled the imaginations of early Christians seeking them to make sense of the crucifixion, but the testimony of Pseudo-Philo does lend plausibility to the idea that at least some traditions of the *Aqedah* were available to early Jewish Christians". It is my contention of course that the NT writers were not specifically interacting with this tradition but were developing their own Paschal Theology.

Although the firstborn was intended to be the redeemer, he was not always so in practice. The difference in the roles of the two is that the firstborn acted in respect of sacrificial representation, as previously outlined, and this could not be abdicated or handed on. That role was inextricably bound up with the person of the firstborn. There was only one way for this role could be avoided, and that was by substitutionary sacrifice. The redeemer's role however was one that could, and often was, handed on to the next of kin, either because of death or by abdication. There was no vicarious role in the work of the redeemer. It was essentially concerned with the social welfare of near kinsmen.

Overlapping functions.

The two titles, firstborn and redeemer, are never explicitly brought together in the Old Testament. This need not be a problem for my thesis, for to the Jew the identity of the one with the other was so obvious that it would be like saying rain is water. Even so, 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 before he could take her in marriage.¹⁴⁷ Although Boaz was related, there was another who had the responsibility of redemption before himself. Obviously the responsibility would work down through the members of the family. The eldest, or firstborn, was 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 all refused to act, the role of the redeemer fell upon the nearest relative who would accept the duty, the process of elimination clearly had to be gone through before a relative could take the responsibility on himself, as established in Lev. 25:25.

This practice is exemplified in the account Luke gives of the Sadducees' attempt to trick Jesus over the question of the resurrection. The Sadducees make it clear that the oldest remaining brother must take on 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.'¹⁴⁸ Coupled with this, Edersheim¹⁴⁹ 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. The eldest, i.e. the firstborn, was clearly in Jewish law intended to act as the redeemer.

Jewish messianism.

There is another sphere in which the firstborn/redeemer roles can be seen to be interrelated, if not synonymous, namely Jewish Messianism. We have already noted that the king (a role later to be applied by the Rabbis to the Messiah) was called the Lord's firstborn.¹⁵⁰ This originally had reference to the Jewish king's promised superiority over the kings of the earth. This title is also linked with that of the 'Son of God'.¹⁵¹ This title was conferred because the king had the

¹⁴⁷ Ruth 4:4.
¹⁴⁸ Lk. 20:27-30
¹⁴⁹ Edersheim, *Life*, 2: 243 note 1
¹⁵⁰ Ps. 89:27.
¹⁵¹ Ps. 2:7 see Anderson, "Messiah", 157-167.

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 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 Isa. 44.6 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.'

NT Christology.

These very titles were gathered up together by John and used to honour Christ. For example, '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 Lord Almighty.'¹⁵²

That the last part of the passage is to be applied to Christ is confirmed by the fact that verse 17 of the same chapter has Jesus calling himself 'the first and the last'. John is therefore bringing together the very titles that we are considering, those of 'firstborn', 'king' and 'first and the last', and in a context saturated with terms of salvation, he ascribes them all to Jesus. The death of the firstborn in Passover draws both the Paschal imagery and Messianic imagery together. The firstborn who dies is the firstborn over the kings of the earth.¹⁵³

External echoes.

There are echoes of the same ideas in Gentile religions. Rosenberg says: "Both the Jewish and Christian traditions stem ultimately from the ancient Canaanite cult of Jerusalem, in which periodically the king, or a substitute for the king, had to be offered in sacrifice that the power of the deity might be renewed and his wrath diverted from the people."¹⁵⁴

More importantly the role of the king, the Son of God, God's firstborn, has been recognised to be crucial in OT thinking. Engell described the connection between the king and the Passover when he said: "The king is important in the celebration of the Passover as Moses acted as central figure in the Passover - who is modeled after the figure of the sacred king throughout."¹⁵⁵

This introduces a much debated question as to the role Moses in fact played, but what is not in dispute is the fact that the kings of Israel played a central role in

¹⁵² Rev. 1:4-8.

¹⁵³ Ps. 89:27.

¹⁵⁴ Rosenberg, "Jesus". 388, see also Levenson, *Death*, 26-27.

¹⁵⁵ Engell, *Essays*, 1.

the celebration of the Passover.¹⁵⁶ This association is supported by the observation of Moule¹⁵⁷ who thinks that the setting of the Servant title in the NT could be Paschal and that it does not refer to the suffering Servant but the royal Servant, the descendant of David. This suggestion fits into the exposition being suggested. Christ is the Royal Paschal victim. This is endorsed by Perrin who observes that: "Palestinian Christianity arrived at its Christology via a Passover setting."¹⁵⁸

A Question of timing.

The only point of disagreement with Perrin would be the timing of the Christological understanding. Once the primitive nature of the NT Christological material has been appreciated, there is no reason why it should not be recognised as very early, not so much developed by Paul, but given to him in a highly developed form. Paul is therefore not the originator of NT Christology but the receiver of them. The primitive community had arrived at the insights as the Spirit enabled them to reflect on the significance of Christ being their Passover who had achieved the New Exodus for his people through his death. Through reflecting on the predications of the redemption of creation indicated in Isaiah they came to see that Jesus death was unique and achieved things that no creature could ever achieve. Only the creator Himself could redeem creation. Daly comments: "The Jewish Passover as it is understood at the time of Christ, provides not merely the background but the very foundation of Christian soteriology."¹⁵⁹

If it is claimed that the argument being put forward is a corporate redemptive model, i.e., the church, and that Passover was individually appropriated and was therefore in its essence individualistic, then Morris's¹⁶⁰ comment that the Passover was not an individual ordinance and that there is a Mishnah forbidding the slaughter of a Passover sacrifice for a single individual ought to correct the misunderstanding.

Rabbinic support.

What we are saying finds support in the rabbinic interpretation of Isa. 59:20. "The redeemer will come to Zion to those in Jacob who repent of their sins, declares the Lord". In periqta 166b the particular form of 'plene' in which the word *go'el* (redeemer) is written is taken to indicate the Messiah as the Redeemer in the full sense. Hence, the Messiah is called both the firstborn¹⁶¹ and the redeemer¹⁶² in rabbinic literature. In fact, these titles are linked elsewhere in the rabbinic 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 'decrees' through the law the Prophets and

¹⁵⁶ Because the kings of Judah were priests after the order of Melchizedek, see Bruce, *Thoughts*, 89.

¹⁵⁷ Moule, "Influence", 252.

¹⁵⁸ Perrin, *Pilgrimage*, 76, so also Fuller, *Foundations*, 119.

¹⁵⁹ Daly, *Sacrifice*, 207.

¹⁶⁰ Morris, "Passover", 67.

¹⁶¹ Ps. 89:27.

¹⁶² Isa. 59:20.

the Hagiographa. The first passage quoted is Ex. 4:22, 'Israel is My firstborn son;' the second, from the Hagiographs, Ps. 110:1 'The Lord said unto my Lord,' and again 'The Lord said unto Me, Thou art My Son,' and yet this other saying, '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."¹⁶³

We have long recognised that the servant in the Servant Songs of Isaiah oscillates between the individual servant and the community, but here we see that this solidarity extends to other titles of the Messiah as well, including that of the firstborn. Not only this, but equally as important, we can see that there are in fact clear connections between the various titles themselves. They are interlinked so that firstborn is linked to the suffering servant title; they are both facets of the same description and as such they illuminate the significance of the other descriptions or titles.

The significance of what we have considered is obvious. This interrelationship between the various Messianic titles enriches the significance of each of them. Thus, firstborn is coloured by all the redemptive concepts inherent in the person of the suffering servant. The firstborn, the king, is the suffering servant, the redeemer.

Edersheim¹⁶⁴ 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 made at Jesus baptism which proclaimed, 'This is my Son, whom I love; with him I am well pleased',¹⁶⁵ which many see to be an amalgamation of Ps. 2:7 and Isa. 42:1. There are others who see a reference to Isaac in the voice from heaven.

Recent scholarship.

The above study was done without the advantage of an important work that has recently been published and that has come to my attention. While I have already made reference to this work, the support that it gives to my contention concerning the significance and the role of the firstborn in biblical understanding is too important to allow it to slip the readers attention. Michael Singer of the University of Notre Dame reviewed the book saying: "Levinson has written a provocative book that challenges the assumptions of Biblical scholars about the history of child sacrifice in Ancient Israel. His conclusions are significant for historians of religion, theologians, and serious participants in Jewish - Christian dialogue."¹⁶⁶

Levenson himself says: "...the Israelite father is to instruct a son curious about the odd observances of Passover, "I sacrifice to the Lord every first male issue of the womb, but redeem every first-born among my son" (Ex. 13:15). The redemption of the human first-born – the verse assumes there can be more than

¹⁶³ Edersheim, *Life*, 2:716.

¹⁶⁴ Opt cit 2:716.

¹⁶⁵ Matt. 3:17.

¹⁶⁶ Review on the back cover.

one to a father – is necessary because the first - born belongs to Yahweh and can be gotten back only through substitution. “Consecrate to Me every first - born; man and beast, the first issue of every womb among the Israelites is Mine” (Ex. 13:2). The underlying theology of the redemption of the first - born is that, even more so than in the case of other human beings, the life of the son in question is not by right, but by gift. He is alive only by virtue of a legal fiction, one of the several rituals that Israelite religion evolved as a substitute for the literal sacrifice of the son who belonged to God rather than to his mortal father. It is the central thesis of this study that a basic element of the self - understanding of both Jewry and of the Church lies in stories that are the narrative equivalent of these ritual substitutions – narratives, that is, in which the first - born or beloved son undergoes a symbolic death”¹⁶⁷

Levenson’s work is especially significant being a Jewish scholar, for he is admitting that the sacrifice of the firstborn was part of authentic Yahwehism. What I don’t think he adequately appreciates is that the essential nature of the death of the child was that was atonement for the sins of the family. The firstborn was not just the one that Yahweh claimed as His own because He has divine right to the best, the most costly or most highly valued, the firstborn, but because his death alone secured the safety of the family.

The firstborn in the New Testament.

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.¹⁶⁸ Christ's 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 he is called the firstborn, and that title is always closely related to 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.¹⁶⁹

In view of the fact that the Messiah was regularly called the Redeemer in Rabbinic literature, 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 of 'firstborn'. This development is quite natural, as Christ’s redemptive role has its origin in the vicarious sufferings he underwent. This was not the case in the Old Testament. Only the firstborn had a vicarious role. The Redeemer’s role was quite separate and did not involve suffering or death. The redeemer was concerned only with social emancipation which never cost the one acting as the redeemer his life. 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.

¹⁶⁷ Levenson, *Death*, 59. For a critique of Levenson see Placher, “Place”, 11-12.

¹⁶⁸ Noted by Moule, “Influence” 259 and Brown, *HDB* 4:211. Others apply the title without realising that they run contrary to NT usage, so for example, Byfield, *Exposition*, 107; Davenment, *Colossians*, 172; M^cGee, “Redemption”, 148 and Lyonnet and Sabourin, *Sin*, 97-8 and countless Christian hymns. Warfield, *Person*, 328 notes that it is Justin in his Dialogue with Trypho who first calls Jesus the Redeemer.

¹⁶⁹ See Procksch, *TDNT* 4:350 note 8.

The last Adam.

The significance of other Messianic titles used both by Jesus and the New Testament writers is also important for our study. The doctrine of the last Adam suggests the representative role that the firstborn fulfilled. It is through this position that Christ is the federal head and redeemer of his brethren (Rom. 5:9). Jeremias has argued that Paul avoided the use of *bar nāshā*, Jesus' self description, as it would have confused his Gentile readers. Instead he rendered the substance of *bar nāshā* by *ὁ ἀνθρώπου*.¹⁷⁰ It is evident that Paul knew the self description of Jesus as Son of Man because of the way he used it Messianically in 1 Cor. 15:27. Jeremias wrote: "With his Adam/Christ antithesis Paul expresses the same thought as underlines 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 *αἰών μελλών* as the initiator of the perfect redeemed creation of God."¹⁷¹

Jeremias' conclusions have the support of Ridderbos who claimed that the title firstborn of every creature was not only to be linked with Adamic concepts, but is the very cornerstone of Paul's Christology which he says was implicit at the resurrection of Christ. Ridderbos commented: "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."¹⁷²

Son of Man Christology.

Not only is there a case for claiming that last Adam concepts are linked with the description of Christ being the firstborn in redemption, but there are grounds for seeing a link between the Son of Man material which some have already linked with the last Adam concept,¹⁷³ and the firstborn description. Walker¹⁷⁴ has argued that the Son of Man sayings come from Zech. 12:10-14, which has powerful paschal associations. Indeed, I have suggested that there are distinct priestly ideas behind the Lucan use of the description of Jesus as Mary's firstborn.¹⁷⁵ As Adam was seen in rabbinic writings to be the High Priest,¹⁷⁶ and the Aaronic High Priest was the family's firstborn, and some have seen a priestly theme to be present in the Son of Man sayings,¹⁷⁷ so there is the distinct possibility that virtually all of the descriptions of Christology are interlinked in the most amazing way¹⁷⁸ through the theme of Christ being the High Priest of the New Covenant. This ought not cause surprise, for this had been anticipated by Ezekiel in his vision of the Davidic prince serving as priest in the eschatological temple.

¹⁷⁰ Rom. 5:15; 1 Cor. 15:21f; cf 1 Tim. 2:5.

¹⁷¹ Jeremias, *TDNT* 1 :143.

¹⁷² Ridderbos, *Outline*, 84.

¹⁷³ Black, "Adam", 173 cf also Schweitzer, "Son", 127.

¹⁷⁴ Walker, "Developments", 599-60 & 605.

¹⁷⁵ See page # of this chapter. (# the next page where Matt 1:25 is dealt with)

¹⁷⁶ Scroggs, *Adam*, 39 & 43ff.

¹⁷⁷ Higgins, "Priestly", 236 and Rowley, *Faith*, 199; Vermes, *Jesus*, 135.

¹⁷⁸ Buchsel, *TDNT* 4:353-4 links the titles Son of God, Last Adam, Second Man and Firstborn together, see also Kaise, "Promise", 222 and Cople, *TDNT* 8:472. Contra Lindekog, *Theology*, 18 who claims that Christology is not organically grown out of the OT but that it is authentically new and original. Cortes & Gratti "Man", 490 say "The entire NT would offer clearer unity, and its theology would appear more unified if, in the Gospels, 'Son of Man' were always translated by its equivalent 'The Son of Adam' or 'Second Adam'"

And so, to all the material we have considered relating to the firstborn we can add all that Paul has 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.

The NT substructure.

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 Richardson¹⁷⁹ asserted, it did in fact form the very substructure upon which they built their concepts. Indeed, we can go even further than this. The doctrine of Christ's Person is illustrated and clarified by the doctrine of his work. Therefore, rather than the expression 'firstborn of every creature' being a problem for the doctrine of the divinity of Christ, it turns out to be the very opposite: it in fact becomes a key statement about it. No creature, no matter how exalted, could be the means of the redemption of creation. Only God himself could be the firstborn/redeemer of the whole of creation. Thus, as the early believers reflected on the OT scriptures, on how Yahweh had promised to redeem creation, and saw it to have been achieved in the death of Jesus, they could come to no other conclusion than that Jesus was God. Their Christology was not ontologically based, although this was its inevitable conclusion, but functionally based, as many are increasingly appreciating.

Pointers to divinity.

This assertion is evident in that Christ is shown throughout the NT to be fulfilling those very promises, which Yahweh gave to save His people. While it could be argued that it is through His personal representative, i.e., His Son, and this need mean no more than Jesus is Yahweh's appointed agent, it fails to take in the whole of the NT evidence. NT Christology is clearly basically functional, and not only is Jesus seen to be fulfilling the Messianic promises, but into this fulfilment model are drawn statements that can mean nothing other than that Jesus is uniquely and ontologically identified with Yahweh. It is Yahweh's titles and unique claims that the Son is given. Thus, for example, Jesus is the resurrection and the life¹⁸⁰ as well as the first and the last,¹⁸¹ titles that are clearly linked to the firstborn description.¹⁸²

The *protōtokos* texts in the new testament.

There are seven references to the firstborn in the NT. They are Matt. 1:25 paralleled in Lk. 2:7; Romans 8:29; Col. 1:15 and 18; Heb. 1:6; 12:23; and Rev. 1:6. Because the Colossian passage is such a key text I shall deal with it in a separate chapter where I can address it more fully. Here I will consider the remaining references and their relationship to the theme that we have been considering.

Matthew 1:25.

The significance of the statement that Mary brought forth her firstborn and laid him in a manger has perplexed translators for generations. They were not able to

¹⁷⁹ Richardson, *Introduction*, 218.

¹⁸⁰ Jn.11:25.

¹⁸¹ Rev. 1:8.

¹⁸² c.f. Rev. 1: 5-7; Col. 1:13-20 and Heb. 1:1-6.

understand why Matthew should say such an obvious thing. The whole narrative has stressed that Mary had no other children, the statement was therefore redundant. Indeed, the presence of the statement in the text has finally been excluded from most modern translations. To justify this exclusion an odd text is appealed to which under normal rules of textual criticism would not be given any authority, for not only does it have no other support but it is very late indeed. The textual critic's maxim is that material is added through the course of time to make the text easier, but not normally removed, unless, as far as the offending copyist is concerned there is a very good reason.

To go along with the modern translators we have to reason that the alleged original reading simply referred to Jesus as Mary's son. At some latter date a copyist has added firstborn son to his text and so introduced a new variant. The immediate problem for this position is that the textual evidence is saying the very reverse, for there is simply no evidence that the firstborn reference was ever not part of the earliest texts.

What would the reason be for adding 'she brought forth her firstborn son?' It is claimed that it was that the redactor wanted to buttress the teaching of the virgin birth. Now this is obviously a possibility, if only the textual evidence for Matthew supported it. But what effectively blows the argument clean out of the water is that the same phrase is found in Lk. 2:7, and in that case there is absolutely not a shred of textual evidence for saying that it has been added by a copyist. No Lucan text misses the statement out. Because of this, the very translators who opt to leave it out of Matt. 1:25 are stuck with it in Lk. 2:7.

If the text is left untampered with, what is Matthew seeking to say through this 'unnecessary' statement? Being a very Jewish story for the Jewish church, it is clearly marking Jesus as the Lord's firstborn. Every Jewish listener of the story of Matthew would instinctively know that this is the Lord's redeemer, the one who will save his people from their sins. Jesus is being introduced as the child born to die, the king, the firstborn, whose destiny is suffering to bring salvation to his people.

This is certainly supported by the way Luke uses the same phrase. He also, using the logic of the modern translators, unnecessarily repeats himself, or does he? There are a number of strange things in the account of Luke that are not so strange once we have the reason for this statement sorted out. Why do Joseph and Mary take the baby Jesus to the temple? It was next to the palace of Herod, the very seat of his government, and they knew that he sought the life of the child. It was not that they had to do it fulfil the law. Simply paying the prescribed half shekel to a scribe could redeem the firstborn child. In fact, despite saying that everything was done according to the requirement of the law, it clearly referred to the purification of Mary, for that is what the sacrifice of the doves was to achieve. What is not mentioned, and this is incredible considering it would be the most important thing that every Jewish couple were to do on the birth of their firstborn, is that they never redeemed the child.¹⁸³ The child was no longer Joseph and Mary's, but he was the Lord's firstborn. This makes sense of

¹⁸³

Noted by Wright, *People, passim* and Platcher, "Place", 10.

Mary singing Hannah's song¹⁸⁴ for she also gave her son to the Lord. It also explains why Jesus was surprised that Joseph and Mary had not expected him to be in the temple¹⁸⁵ when he was found to be missing from the returning pilgrim party. It also explains why he should say that Mary was not his mother.¹⁸⁶ The natural ties had been severed because they had not redeemed him. This of course suggests that Jesus was conscious of a priestly calling from his youth.¹⁸⁷

Romans 8:29.

The meaning of verse 29 is normally seen to be that Paul is saying nothing more than that Christ is the elder brother in the family of God.¹⁸⁸ This however misses the flow of the Roman letter. Once it has been accepted that 3:21ff is Paschal, and that Christ is the Passover sacrifice, then the term firstborn takes on a soteriological significance. We saw earlier that one of the roles of the redeemer, who ideally was the firstborn, was to restore to the family their lost inheritance. This is the theme of the preceding verses. The whole creation, in bondage through the fall, has been redeemed. It waits for the final display of the redemption of the sons of God. It groans, waiting for its own liberation. This will happen when man is re-established as Lord of creation. Christ is therefore the firstborn of many brethren in that he has acted on their behalf, to restore them not only to fellowship with God, but also to the dignity they were created for. This is possible only because in the context of the Passover sacrifice, 3:21ff, he has died as the 'firstborn of all creation'. Further evidence that the above exegesis is correct is given in the passage itself. It is easy to forget that the statement about Christ being the firstborn of many brothers is the conclusion of an argument that began at the opening of the chapter, and is a further development, as already indicated, of the 3:21ff passage. Lest it be thought that the sacrificial language of 3:21 is too far removed to control the meaning of this statement, then 8:3 says exactly the same thing. Christ by his death as a sin offering has brought the power of Sin to an end. By the gift of his Spirit he has equipped his people for their pilgrimage and made them his sons. The passage is following the redemptive event of the Exodus too closely to be a coincidence.¹⁸⁹ Therefore the description of Christ as the firstborn of many brothers must be understood in the light of redemptive history.

Hebrews 1:6.

In this verse Christ is spoken of as God's firstborn whom he has brought into the world. He has earlier been described as the express image of the invisible God and the one who, after cleansing his people from their sins, has sat down on the right hand of the majesty on high.¹⁹⁰ The passage goes on to speak of the transformation of creation when he will 'roll them up like a robe, like a garment they will be changed.'¹⁹¹ The second chapter goes on to emphasise the oneness

184 1 Sam. 2:1-10; Lk. 1:46-55.

185 Lk. 2:49.

186 Lk. 8:19-21.

187 See my forthcoming, *Paul and Christology*.

188 So Marshall, "Incarnational", 9, who claims that: "Paul reserves Son for expressing Jesus relationship to the father when he does not use this term, he speaks of Jesus as the firstborn of God or being the divine image."

189 See Keesmat, *Exodus, passim*.

190 Heb. 1:3.

191 Heb. 1:12.

of Christ with his people, using clear Adamic imagery.¹⁹² Once again, the same motifs found in the other occurrences of the firstborn title are found i.e. those of redemption, kingship and creation.

In 12:23 the writer tells his readers that they have come to the church of the 'first-born'. It is the church which belongs to the firstborn, for it exists as a result of his redemptive activity when he gave himself for her as the Paschal victim.¹⁹³

Revelation 1:6.

The passage speaks of Jesus being the firstborn from the dead and might at first sight seem to be limited to what it is generally seen to refer to, i.e. that Jesus is the Messianic conqueror of death. However, the title is immediately followed with a hymn of praise to the all conquering Messiah in which he is worshipped as the one who has 'freed us from our sins by his own blood, and made us to be a kingdom of priests to serve his God and Father.'¹⁹⁴ The appointment of priests was a direct consequence of the Passover where God claimed for himself all those who He had spared from death. This is clearly New Exodus material. The Paschal significance of the passage is reinforced further when John quotes Zechariah, '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.'¹⁹⁵ The ruler who has been slain returns to claim his own. The two themes of the firstborn Paschal victim and the firstborn Messiah are clearly merged.

The firstborn theme is much wider than the few references that actually contain *protōtokos*. When it is appreciated that the firstborn was also the beloved or the only begotten son, then the firstborn Paschal theme spills over into a much wider range of texts. So, for example, the reference in Jn. 3:16 makes much better sense when it is appreciated that the setting of the statement is entirely within the context of the Passover (2:25) and that the language of wind and water is very much the imagery borrowed from the crossing of the Red Sea. The fact that Nicodemus came to Jesus by night recalls the timing of the Passover and the allusion to the raising of the serpent in the wilderness is clearly part of the original Exodus history. Thus, in Jn. 3:16 the only begotten son is the beloved son, the firstborn, whose death saves his people.¹⁹⁶

Conclusion.

The above evidence suggests that the role of the firstborn in Passover was vitally important to the early church who used its imagery to describe the work of Jesus. While there are possible extra Biblical sources that can be suggested providing the seedbed for NT theological development, it seems that the NT writers stayed within OT paradigms.

¹⁹² Heb. 2:5-18.

¹⁹³ Heb. 9:11-15, 24-28.

¹⁹⁴ Rev. 1:5.

¹⁹⁵ Rev. 1:7.

¹⁹⁶ Levenson, *Death*, 31 says that the word (*edo-ken*) reflects the usual language of child sacrifice in the Hebrew Bible.