

Scriptures and Doctrine :: The Father's First Born... Ephraim? (Jeremiah 31:9)

The Father's First Born... Ephraim? (Jeremiah 31:9) - posted by todd, on: 2003/10/30 9:55

Jeremiah 31:9 says,

"...For I am a father to Israel, and Ephraim is my firstborn."

Anyone understand this? Genesis 48:8-20 seems related but I doesn't clarify the idea that Ephraim is God's firstborn to me.

Re: The Father's First Born... Ephraim? (Jeremiah 31:9) - posted by almondBranch (), on: 2003/10/30 10:47

I think it is simply a figure of speech, metonymy to be percise. The part is put for the whole.

EG, the two tribes of Judah and Benjamin are often refered to as "Judah" simply because judah was the most significant. Ephraim is somtimes put for Israel, which would mean that God is simply saying the same thing in two differnt ways (in J eremiah 31:9) which is quite common in the OT and rather poetic.

Stuart

Is

Re: The Father's First Born... Ephraim? (Jeremiah 31:9) - posted by Chosen7Stone (), on: 2003/10/30 11:24

Hey Todd. :-)

I was looking through those verses in my study Bible and want to share what I learned. Maybe God will shed some light through me, and the Spirit will guide you to new understanding. (Then you can share, too!)

Well, in Jeremiah 31:1-40 there's a continued theme of restoration that started in Chapter 30. All the people of God are being addressed, though Jeremiah speaks specifically to the northern kingdom and specifically to Judah at certain points.

Culturally, traditionally, and legally the firstborn son is favored not only among the Jewish people, but worldwide during his time period. However, we see throughout the Tanakh (Old Testament) that the lastborn is favored: look at Abel vs. Cain, Jacob vs. Esau, Joseph vs. his brothers (except Benjamin)...and in Joseph's sons Ephraim vs. Manasseh (Genesis 48:1-20). I know this is important in the comparison of Adam to Christ, but that's another thread.

So for God to call Ephraim His firstborn and then see the depiction in Jeremiah 31:20 is weird in the context of the Tanakh, but not the culture...but when you look deeper, you see that Ephraim is not really the firstborn, but holds the position and title...a "chosen firstborn," if you will.

In Exodus 4:22, God tells Pharaoh through Moses that Israel as a whole is His firstborn. Israel is the firstborn among the nations, but what makes Ephraim firstborn among all the tribes (not just Manasseh)?

Genesis 48:1-20 DOES play a major role. Jacob represents all of Israel, and in comparing Joseph's two sons to his own firstborn sons, that sets Ephraim and Manasseh ahead of Israel's other children. This is chapter is not only significant in how they came to be included among the twelve tribes, but how they came to be Jacob's (Israel's) sons (Genesis 48:5). So then, how did Ephraim and Manasseh take precedence over Reuben and Simeon? Because Joseph already had precedence over Reuben and Simeon, and therefore Joseph's children, being adopted as Israel's children, took precedence over Reuben and Simeon, too.

Thus, in then further selecting Ephraim over Manasseh, Israel made Ephraim the "firstborn"...putting him before the rest. In going with the theme of the youngest being the favorite, Ephraim was the youngest of all. Joseph was the second youngest of all his brothers, and Ephraim was youngest of Joseph's two sons.

Phew! God definitely showed me more than I expected to be able to share with you -- so I learned a lesson in my research, and learned a lesson in underestimating God's ability to work with my inability :oops:.

God bless! :-D

Re: - posted by philologos (), on: 2003/10/30 16:16

Hi C7S

your quote:" but when you look deeper, you see that Ephraim is not really the firstborn, but holds the position and title...a "chosen firstborn," if you will."

Just a few thoughts on the above:

Christ is "the image of the invisible God, the FIRSTBORN of every creature". Col 1:15 This is a verse that the JW's like to refer to but they have failed to understand that many apparent 'relationships' in the Bible are cultural idioms. e.g Gen 4:21. "Jubal: he was the FATHER of all such as handle the harp and organ." However if you do 'handle the harp and organ' you are not a physical descendent of Jubal. In fact all physical descendents of Jubal died in the flood. Jubal was the FIRST or, idiomatically, father. In fact, Abraham is MY father. ;-) (and so far as I know I don't have a drop of Hebrew blood in my veins.)

Christ in Colossians is not 'creation's firstborn' biologically but positionally. 'Firstborn' is not a biological term here but a statement of position and role. Again, did you know that the Church only has firstborn members? viz Heb 12:23. Literally the 'firstborn ones'; it is in the plural. You are firstborn son, my sister;-)

So what is the main truth to recognise about firstborn ones? The main idea was one of provision. The firstborn son was expected to carry on the family business according to the father's will. It guaranteed continuity of direction and provision. The family inheritance was divided among the sons with the 'firstborn' inheriting a double portion AND his mother AND sisters to care for!! The double portion was not to make him rich above his brothers but to enable him to provide for others.

Christ is creation's firstborn because God has made him THE HEIR and HE cares for the whole creation; hence Col 1:17 "in Him all things are held together".

As firstborn ones, each member of Christ's church has some added provision too which is not for his own needs but for the needs of the family. Col 1:25 "the dispensation of God which is given to me for you". Lovely phrase that 'given to ME for YOU'. (and you can be sure that He has given something to YOU for ME)

When God speaks of Ephraim as His firstborn I think it was, most likely, a message of reassurance to the tribes which had vanished into Assyrian bondage more than a hundred years earlier. No doubt they regarded themselves as lost 'beyond redemption', but God still regards them as His own and as a word of promise. Remember Israel means God's Prince. Now what is a prince? He is King's son; he stands in closest proximity to the King and is entrusted with His will. And as firstborn he would be provided with all he needed to fulfil his appointed purpose. What a promise to prodigal Israel/Ephraim.

Just a word of encouragement to all 'firstborn ones' out there.. You are expected to carry on the family business according to the Father's will, and He has provided all you need to see it through.

Re: - posted by Chosen7Stone (), on: 2003/10/31 18:02

Wow Ron,

Awesome reply, and awesome teaching. I learned so much through your post...the concept of "firstborn" was definitely God's lesson-of-the-week for me. Thank you for offering yourself to His use -- you've edified and taught me. :-)

Re: - posted by todd, on: 2003/10/31 21:17

Thanks for your contributions everyone. This whole "first-born" paradigm is totally new for me so I am not really grasping it yet. But like so many other kingdom paradigms, I will probably never grasp the fulness of meaning.

Ron, you wrote:

"When God speaks of Ephraim as His firstborn I think it was, most likely, a message of reassurance to the tribes which had vanished into Assyrian bondage more than a hundred years earlier. No doubt they regarded themselves as lost 'beyond redemption', but God still regards them as His own and as a word of promise."

Could you expand on this for me?

Some scattered thoughts:

Deuteronomy 33:13-17 (Moses' blessing to the sons of Israel before his death)

"And of Joseph he said, 'Blessed of the LORD be his land, with the choice things of heaven, with the dew, and from the deep lying beneath, and with the choice yield of the sun, and with the choice produce of the months. And with the best things of the ancient mountains, and with the choice things of the everlasting hills, and with the choice things of the earth and its fulness, and the favor of Him who dwelt in the bush. Let it come to the head of Joseph, and to the crown of the head of the one distinguished among his brothers. **As the first-born of his ox, majesty is his, and his horns are the horns of the wild ox; with them he shall push the peoples, all at once, to the ends of the earth. And those are the ten thousands of Ephraim, and those are the thousands of Manasseh.**

So the separate tribes of Ephraim and Manasseh are brought under one blessing to Joseph (which clearly appears to be the most prestigious blessing of all the tribes). And within that chief blessing, Ephraim seemed to get the ultimate place of prestige, i.e. the ten thousands verses the thousands of Manasseh (though this is unclear to me). This reminded me of the song they sang for David that made Saul jealous.

Some comments from my Holman Bible Atlas:

"Jacob favored the younger Ephraim over the elder Manasseh, foreshadowing the eventual prominence of the tribe of Judah... Joshua allotted Ephraim the isolated, higher mountainous plateau south of Shechem reaching to Bethel. Ephraim had no clear watershed was an agriculturally fertile region known for its vineyards and orchards... Bethel and Shiloh were two of the significant towns of Ephraim."
-pp. 87

"The two kingdoms of Israel and Judah, though originating in the empire of David and Solomon, were fundamentally different in character. Israel, also called Ephraim by the prophets, normally was the wealthier, more powerful, and larger of the two... Politically, Israel centered on the old tribal territories of Ephraim and Manasseh. Shechem, Tiraz, and finally Samaria- all located close together in Manasseh- served as capitals."
-pp. 115

(So it seems that Ephraim was more of a political name for the kingdom of Israel. But this is strange since all the main capitals were in Manasseh)

"On occasion Jesus retreated from Jerusalem to avoid plots upon his life. He withdrew to Ephraim, probably the site of ancient Ophrah (Josh. 18:23), a village often identified with et-Taiyibeh northeast of Jerusalem."
-pp. 227

Jeremiah 30:24 (last verse of chapter 30)

"The fierce anger of the LORD will not turn back, until he has performed, and until he has accomplished the intent of his heart; **in the latter days you will understand this.**"

Jeremiah 31:1

"At that time," declares the LORD, "I will be the God of all the families of Israel, and they shall be My people."

31:6

"For there shall be a day when watchmen on the hills of Ephraim shall call out, 'Arise, and let us go up to Zion, to the LORD our God.'"

31:9

"... for I am a father to Israel, and Ephraim is My firstborn."

31:18-20

"I have surely heard Ephraim grieving,

'Thou hast chastised me, and I was chastised, like an unrestrained calf; bring me back that I may be restored, for Thou art the LORD my God. For after I turned back, I repented; and after I was instructed, I smote on my thigh; I was ashamed, and also humiliated, because I bore the reproach of my youth.'

'Is Ephraim My dear son? Is he a delightful child? Indeed, as often as I have spoken against him, I certainly still remem

ber him; Therefore My heart yearns for him; I will surely have mercy on him,' declares the LORD."

Mary,

So Ephraim and Manasseh were really Jacob's (Israel's) sons but Joseph adopted them or something? Can you flush this out more for me?

So many possibilities and implications. Any further input and insight is welcome.

Re: - posted by philologos (), on: 2003/11/1 14:14

Your quote: "When God speaks of Ephraim as His firstborn I think it was, most likely, a message of reassurance to the tribes which had vanished into Assyrian bondage more than a hundred years earlier. No doubt they regarded themselves as lost 'beyond redemption', but God still regards them as His own and as a word of promise.

Could you expand on this for me?"

I'll try, but it will be a bit long winded. My thinking at this point is shaped by OT history. The passage in question was from Jeremiah 31. This is one of the greatest Bible chapters on the New Covenant and it came at an amazing time in the history of God's people.

In Rehoboam's day God gave away the kingdom to another bloodline; that of Jeroboam, son of Nebat. In essence He gave away Israel, only leaving a remnant under Rehoboam's rule "for David's sake". The southern tribes of Judah, Benjamin, Levi and trickles from all the others now became 'the remnant', the carriers of the promise. This was 722 BC.

For the next little while, historically, we have to think carefully just who God is referring to. To begin with the northern kingdom was known as Israel or, with reference to the capital city, Samaria, and on occasion Ephraim which was apparently now the predominant 'tribe'. With the sack of Samaria and expatriation of the northern kingdom the '10 tribes' passed from history into legend. There are lots of speculations but no revelation as to their whereabouts; they became blended inseparably into 'the nations'. They lost their identifiable nationhood.

(By the time the remnants of the southern kingdom of 'Judah' return in Ezra (Ezra 2:70) they are being referred to as 'Israel'; this was approximately 35000 souls as compared to a population of probably 6m (or so) in the time of David's census. Nevertheless they are now 'Israel' and the carriers of the seed and the promise.)

Judah had had more than a hundred years more opportunity than 'her elder sister, Samaria' (Ezek 16:46). Meanwhile the main superpower was now no longer Assyria but Babylon. At the end of the 6th Century BC a series of invasions from Babylon, with forced expatriations, emptied the land of the royal blood and the princes of the nation, leaving behind only the rotten fruit. Jeremiah's prophecies span this period of time when the invasions were taking place.

In Jeremiah's day proud Judah had pretty much 'written off' her 'elder sister' but apparently God had not. In Jeremiah 18 God seems to be using 'Israel' (the lost northern tribes) as an illustration of a profound truth. Even at this late stage God can 'make it again, another vessel'. He is using the illustration to make a point to 'Judah' (the southern kingdom) which is on the threshold of a repeat performance of Israel's folly. The illustration of Jeremiah 18 is an amazing promise but its last statement is a terrible warning. Even when God has promised blessing, it is conditional upon the faithful cooperation of the blessee. (is there such a word?) The final words of the illustration are a threat; thus saith the LORD; "Behold, I frame evil against you". In spite of this Judah is rigid in its rebellion and folly; 'they say 'there is no hope: but we will walk after our own devices, and we will everyone do the imagination of his evil heart'.

The point I was trying to make was that in spite of the utter lost-ness of Israel/Ephraim God was still reaching out to them in promise. This was the nation of whom God had said 'ye are not my people, and I will not be your God.' (Amos) In Jeremiah 31, leading up to the glorious promise of the new covenant, we hear the sound of amazing grace as God declares that He who "scattered Israel will gather him, and keep him, as a shepherd doth his flock". The rebel is addressed as God's prince (Israel) and the barren prodigal is addressed as the fruitful (Ephraim) 'firstborn'.

I'm purposely not filling in all the gaps. Hope this will give you the gist of my thinking.

Re: - posted by todd, on: 2003/11/4 20:08

Ron,
Thank you.

Quote:

"Even when God has promised blessing, it is conditional upon the faithful cooperation of the blessee."

Yeah, I ran across this a some weeks ago and it really made me stop and think about it's implications.

Might this same principle apply to prophecy today? I mean, sometimes we might hear a prophecy that is stated as "The Word of the Lord" and then it doesn't come to pass but in Jeremiah 18 and 26 (verses 3 and 13) we see that, although it's not stated conditionally, prophecy is (at least sometimes) conditional. Could prophecy today sometimes also be conditional upon the response the one(s) prophesied to or about?

It is interesting to note, though, that Jeremiah doesn't pronounce to the people as a "word of the LORD" that God will "repent" if they do. But in 26:13 he does seem to state it quit clearly that "the LORD **will** change his mind..." I think this is very important to note.

But the main point is, just because a certain prophecy is not stated as conditional doesn't mean that it isn't. Right? I mean, God was clearly saying that big time judgement and punishment was coming (without mention of conditionality), and then later we find out that if the people repent, He will too, and the things he "promised" would happen would change. Right?

Re: - posted by Chosen7Stone (), on: 2003/11/4 21:34

Hey Todd...

What an awesome lesson God is teaching you as well as the rest of us through this thread...I don't think any of us will be able to completely "grasp the fullness of meaning," but any revelation God can provide is more than enough.

Quote:
-----Mary, So Ephraim and Manasseh were really Jacob's (Israel's) sons but Joseph adopted them or something? Can you flush this out more for me?

Actually, no. It's the reverse.

Here's the lineage: Jacob/Israel is the father of Joseph, and Joseph is the father of Ephraim and Manasseh. The "Twelve Tribes of Israel" are the twelve families descended from Jacob/Israel, thus forming the twelve tribes or peoples of the nation of Israel. Jacob is called Israel because he represents the nation as a whole.

Joseph and Benjamin are the "babies" of the family, sons of Rachel, the woman that Jacob loved best. Joseph is older than Benjamin. Jacob's ten other sons are from Leah (Rachel's older sister), Bilhah (Rachel's maid), and Zilpah (Leah's maid).

Jacob adopted Ephraim and Manasseh (who, by blood, are his two grandsons by Joseph) as his own. These two replaced Joseph and Levi in the scheme of twelve tribes. The descendants of Jacob's son Levi, the Levites, are the traveling priests who did not have land allotted to them because they needed to serve all of the people. And Joseph's descendants are from his sons Ephraim and Manasseh, who each received land of their own and are tribes of Israel.

Does that make more sense? I have included links to illustrations below...

(<http://www.commandmentsofjehwh.org/Numbers/landof.htm>) Map of the Land Allotted to the Twelve Tribes of Israel

(<http://clawwww.lmu.edu/faculty/fjust/Bible/abraham.jpg>) Descendants of Abraham - Tribal and Priestly Focus

Re: - posted by philologos (), on: 2003/11/5 16:15

I can think of a couple of Bible incidents where cursings were turned to blessings; some in the most extraordinary circumstances.

Jonah 3. Jonah's sermon was pretty brief, "in forty days God will destroy Nineveh". Not a word of promise regarding repentance was given but the Ninevites sought God just on the possibility of a change and received it.

2 Chron 33:13. Manasseh was the most wicked king that Judah had. His sin provoked God to send him into captivity, but when he repented God brought him home again and reinstated him as king. Amazing grace.

And at least one where a blessing was changed to a curse.

1 Kings 11:38 Jeroboam was given promises that his kingdom would be established as firmly as David's was, but he

made Israel to sin' and blew it.

Contemporary prophecy of blessing being withdrawn because of unfaithfulness is an interesting concept. I think it must be so, but I think we ought not to let 'prophets' off the hook with a ready made excuse 'it didn't happen because you didn't believe', and yet sometimes the scriptures make amazing comments e.g. "he could there do no mighty work, save that he laid his hands upon a few sick folk, and healed them." Mark 6:5 clearly implies that He could have done more if faith had been present.

I would be interested to hear what others think.