

Exodus 13:11-16

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Verses 11 – 16 contain the LORD’s instructions dealing with the firstborn.

The command to *devote to the Lord the first offspring of every womb* was commanded to begin *when the Lord brings you to the land of the Canaanite*. This is called the Promised Land because it is the land *He swore to you and to your fathers, and gives it to you*. The word “Canaanite” is a generic term that refers to a group of ethnic groups inhabiting the region currently called “Palestine” (13:5). It is the land that the LORD promised to Israel as an inheritance. The Israelites were granted the land because of God’s promise and reward to their father Abraham ([Genesis 12, 15](#)). They now only needed to obey Him in order to possess that which they had already been granted.

The command to *devote to the Lord the first offspring of every womb, and the first offspring of every beast that you own* refers to that which “opens the womb.” Specifically, it is limited to *the males* that open the womb and they *belong to the Lord*. The same principle applied to both humans and beasts. The firstborn of man and beast belonged to the LORD because He redeemed them (preserved their lives) when He passed over the houses with blood on the doorposts.

Though most of the laws concerning the firstborn have already been given, there was a special circumstance added here. The LORD stipulated that *every first offspring of a donkey you shall redeem with a lamb*. To be redeemed meant that the life was preserved but ownership was transferred to the LORD. A donkey (along with other beasts such as a horse) was considered ceremonially unclean ([Leviticus 11:2-4](#)), so they could not be redeemed for sacrifice to the LORD. So, a lamb could be redeemed in order to be sacrificed in its place.

This is repeated in 34:20. However, they were told that *if you do not redeem it, then you shall break its neck*. If the firstborn male donkey was not to be redeemed, then the person who owned the donkey was required to kill it, because no one was allowed to benefit from using it. It belonged only to the LORD. Since human sacrifice was not allowed, *every firstborn of man among your sons you shall redeem*. Just like the blood of a lamb was sacrificed and its blood placed on the doorposts to redeem (prevent the death of) the

firstborn males of the Israelites, a lamb was to be used to “redeem” (or “ransom”) the firstborn donkeys and men.

It is interesting in this regard to point out there was a pattern in the Old Testament Law whereby pure animals (such as lambs) were sacrificed in order to redeem that which is not pure. In this passage, a pure, unblemished lamb was killed in order for an unclean animal (the firstborn donkey) and firstborn male Israelites to live. That which was pure was killed so that which is not pure could live. This pattern can be clearly seen in the New Testament as well. The pure, unblemished Lamb of God ([John 1:29](#)) was sacrificed in order to redeem those that were not pure – sinners like us ([1 Peter 1:18](#)).

Verses 14 – 16 repeat much of what is in verses 8 – 10, except this section concerns the laws of the firstborn, whereas verses 8 – 10 deal with the Feast of Unleavened Bread. But the occasion was the same. It was *when your son asks you in time to come, saying, ‘What is this?’* In response, the LORD’s Law required fathers to *say to him, ‘With a powerful hand the Lord brought us out of Egypt, from the house of slavery.* They were to stress first of all that their deliverance from slavery in Egypt was the work of the LORD and a demonstration of His awesome power.

It came about, when Pharaoh was stubborn about letting us go, that the Lord killed every firstborn in the land of Egypt, both the firstborn of man and the firstborn of beast. The firstborn males of Egypt were killed by the LORD of life and death, and the firstborn of Israel were protected through this judgment. In response to this event, the father told the son what he needed to do. He was to *sacrifice to the Lord the males, the first offspring of every womb, but every firstborn of my sons I redeem.* The males are redeemed by the sacrifice of a pure, unblemished, ceremonially clean animal.

Verse 16 is similar to verse 9 in that the Law concerning the firstborn *shall serve as a sign on your hand and as phylacteries on your forehead.* The fathers were also required by the Law to explain how this came about. It was *with a powerful hand the Lord brought us out of Egypt.* The exact meaning of the Hebrew word translated “phylacteries” is not known. It seems to refer to some kind of mark or sign placed on the forehead. As said earlier in verse 9, orthodox Jews have taken this passage literally and have worn phylacteries or small boxes containing certain parts of the Law on their forehead. The point is that the redemption of the firstborn through sacrifice must maintain a prominent place in the minds and hearts of the Israelites for all generations.

The LORD's mighty works to deliver Israel must dictate that the firstborn belongs to Him. This is the same in the New Testament, where Paul says in [1 Corinthians 6:19-20](#) and also in 7:23 that we are "not our own" but have been "bought with a price." Christians, like the firstborn of Israel belong to the LORD that redeemed them from the penalty of sin and death by dying on the cross – the innocent having been sacrificed in place of us who are born in sin, and therefore unclean.

Biblical Text:

¹¹ "Now when the Lord brings you to the land of the Canaanite, as He swore to you and to your fathers, and gives it to you, ¹² you shall devote to the Lord the first offspring of every womb, and the first offspring of every beast that you own; the males belong to the Lord. ¹³ But every first offspring of a donkey you shall redeem with a lamb, but if you do not redeem *it*, then you shall break its neck; and every firstborn of man among your sons you shall redeem. ¹⁴ And it shall be when your son asks you in time to come, saying, 'What is this?' then you shall say to him, 'With a powerful hand the Lord brought us out of Egypt, from the house of slavery. ¹⁵ It came about, when Pharaoh was stubborn about letting us go, that the Lord killed every firstborn in the land of Egypt, both the firstborn of man and the firstborn of beast. Therefore, I sacrifice to the Lord the males, the first offspring of every womb, but every firstborn of my sons I redeem.' ¹⁶ So it shall serve as a sign on your hand and as phylacteries on your forehead, for with a powerful hand the Lord brought us out of Egypt."