



Primogeniture, A Cultural Tool for the Interpretation of Genesis Narratives.

Udogu Chukwuebuka

(B.A. Theology, M.A. NT Studies)

theomegas2005@gmail.com

Corresponding author.

Email address; theomegas2005@gmail.com

Received; 30/12/2020

Accepted; 29/01/2021

Online Published; 13/02/2021

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Keywords;

Primogeniture

Cultural

Genesis (Genesis-Narratives)

Interpretation

Birth Right

Firstborn

Double Portion

Leadership

Most of the Genesis narratives can only be understood culturally, without which there would be difficulty in comprehending them. The research used analytical, survey methods to interpret certain passages in the light of the custom of primogeniture, and found out that certain passages like the drama of the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden, God's making Cain a vagabond, the genealogy from Adam to Noah (Gen. 5), and many other narratives in Genesis are better interpreted in the light of primogeniture. The research concluded by proving that Primogeniture is a tool for the interpretation of certain Genesis narratives.

Introduction

Most of the Genesis narratives are ridden in cultural setting and can only be explained in the light of their attendant culture. The understanding of some of the cultural practices of the ancients is actually a tool for explaining Genesis narratives. Primogeniture is one of these cultural practices of the patriarchy societies, and its understanding is a useful tool for the interpretation of the book of Genesis.

The law of primogeniture is also known as the law of the firstborn. The word 'primogeniture' is derived

from two words: "prime" meaning 'first'; and "geniture" having to do with 'birth'. Primogeniture is defined as "the state of being the firstborn of the children of the same parents. Or an exclusive right of inheritance belonging to the eldest son" (Merriam Webster online). This exclusive right can either be a double portion for the firstborn son or the entire portion. Since Primogeniture entails two essential things: possession (double portion or entire portion) and leadership position (following the death of the father), the definition of Hagedorn is preferred.

Primogeniture is defined as the system of inheritance and succession whereby the whole estate and headship of the family descends to the oldest son to the exclusion of sisters and younger brothers (Hagedorn, 2004, 201).

In mosaic law/Torah, this right of inheritance was a double portion for the firstborn son and the leadership position of the father (see Dt. 21:15-17). But in pre-flood era, it was the whole portion/estate of the father and leadership. This is usually put into effect upon the death of the father (Gen. 43:33), and could be lost based on unworthiness.

The Nature of Primogeniture

The state of being the first, whether living or nonliving, has some unique implications to the religion and culture of the Jews and their neighboring nations. Sama states that the firstborn has a special social status in the Hebrew Bible. Along with the first fruits of the soil and every firstborn male of herds and flocks, the firstborn was considered to be sacred (1970, 184), see also Exod. 13:2; Num. 8: 14-18; Deut. 15: 19.

For humans, the ancient near Eastern culture placed special privileges for the firstborn sons. These are observable in areas of inheritance, family leadership/succession, and imperial succession. The firstborn is also accorded precedence over his brothers during his father's lifetime, and at the father's death, a double portion (Deuteronomy 21: 15-17) and the leadership place of the father. Again, a point worthy of note is that this right of the firstborn son (Primogeniture) could be lost. Often times, this is made possible on account of attitudes which the father considers grave and serious.

Primogeniture in Ancient Near East

There are several accounts of primogeniture in ancient near East. Space will permit just one of them. The Egyptian myth of the goddess Geb depicts the

prerogatives of the firstborn son in inheritance. The goddess divided Egypt equally between Hur, the firstborn, and Setti. But afterwards she regretted this and gave the whole of Egypt to Hur, the firstborn (ANET, p. 4, as cited in Fachhai, 2006).

Fachhaidid a thorough work on custom of primogeniture in the family inheritance in the Ancient Near East, and his conclusion was that traditions and practices that governed inheritance and primogeniture were more or less similar in all the three regions (Mesopotamia, Egypt and Syro-Palestine), with slight variations, and that evidences indicate that primogeniture was a generally accepted and practised tradition in the Ancient Near East (2006).

Primogeniture in Genesis

We cannot be certain as to the origin of this ancient law/custom, but we know that it is as old as the history of man. The following are the limited examples in Genesis:

1. **The Expulsion from the Garden of Eden (Gen. 3:21-24):** It is somewhat difficult to decipher the meaning of the drama of expulsion from the garden of Eden. The clues that would help us under this is 1) the Garden was planted by God. Hence, God's Garden; 2) Adam was a son of God (remember that he was begotten by no one but God). This is the point Luke captured in Luke 3:38. Now, as God's son, Adam was to inherit the Garden of Eden. But because of his disobedience, God considered him unworthy and expelled him. He was to go out and struggle for himself to establish his own garden and estate.
2. **Making Cain a Vagabond (Gen. 4):** The meaning of God's response/action to the attitude/action of Cain has remained vague

to many. If only we would understand that it was the law of primogeniture playing itself out, it would not be difficult to understand that passage and drama. In a more primeval era (esp., pre-flood era), the Ancients' system of practicing the "double-portion" was that the firstborn son would takeover his father's estate, while others would move out in search of areas to settle in (wandering about). Cain being the firstborn son, it was his right to inherit Adam's estate, while Abel and others would move out (wander about) in search of areas to settle in. But because of Cain's unworthiness (the killing of his brother, Abel), it eluded him. He was now the one to move out, instead of his younger ones, in search of areas to settle in - this is what the Bible meant by "vagabond or wanderer". Verses 16-17 tell us that Cain moved elsewhere and settled.

3. **The Nature of the Genealogy from Adam to Noah (Gen. 5):** one wonders the exact role of Genesis chapter five. No doubt, it provides a record of origin (ancient ancestors) of Israel. This is the point Whitcomb and Morris made in their observation, "The record in Genesis 5 clearly implies that men had large families in those days. Although in most cases only one son is named in each family (apparently for the purpose of tracing the line of descent from Adam to Noah),..." (1961, 25). Beyond this is a picture of primogeniture. Let us remember that the Ancient system of practicing the "double-portion" was the bequeathal of the father's estate to the firstborn son alone. The arrangement below is a pointer to this truth: Adam - Seth(130 yrs) - other sons and daughters (800 yrs) = 190yrs. Seth - Enosh (105yrs) - other sons and daughters (807yrs) = 912 Enosh - Kenan (90yrs) - other sons and daughters (815yrs) = 905 Continuously, the arrangement went. Three striking points are to be noted: 1) the gap between the firstborn son and

other children of his father. This might be to allow the firstborn son come up and take control of his father's estate before others came up. 2) only the names of the firstborn sons were mentioned. Probably because they were to take over from their Fathers, and 3) these firstborns were the successors of their father's leadership position. All these points suggest Primogeniture.

4. **Ishmael-Isaac Narrative:** it would have been the right of Hagar's son, Ishmael, to inherit Abraham's properties, or at least, the double-portion. But Hagar was not Abraham's wife. Isaac came eventually and inherited it because he was the firstborn son of the legitimate wife, Sarah.

5. **Esau-Jacob Narrative:** the Bible lists Rebekah as the only wife of Isaac, and from her came twin sons: Esau and Jacob. Esau, as the firstborn, was the birthright son according to the custom. However, he proved to be unworthy of the birthright for he married outside the covenant group in contrast to the desire of his parents (Gen. 26:34-35). Secondly, he considered the birthright worthless, and sold it to Jacob for food (Gen. 25:29-34; Heb. 12:16). Jacob took over eventually, though not accounted for in material terms. Chung considers that certain Genesis commentators, Claus Westermann, Hermann Gunkel, Gerhard von Rad, E. A. Speiser, John Skinner, Gordon J. Wenham, Victor P. Hamilton, and Nahum M. Sarna, whose works serve as benchmarks in modern commentary on Genesis, give a negative interpretation of Esau as a "non-elect" character. And that on the whole, Esau is portrayed negatively in the book of Genesis and some of the books in the Bible, especially prophetic literature, Romans and Hebrews,

describe Esau very negatively either by connecting him with Edom as a nation or by giving him as an example of a forsaken, immoral or godless person (2008). So, he gave a theological reconstruct of the person of Esau proving that most of what bible interpreters hold about Esau is erroneous. For him, Esau did not loose much in relinquishing his birthright. For instance, he remained lord over Jacob (leadership position), and was in possession of their father's estate (for Jacob ran away and stay away for so many years). But Chung's assertion is not reason enough to discredit the interpretation that both the Old testament and the New testament writers gave to this Esau-Jacob narrative. Actually, Jacob got the birthright due Esau though he did not enjoy it materially because it was gotten through theft and deceit, and not through the normal means.

6. **Reuben Verses Joseph and Judah Narrative:** Jacob had two legitimate wives, Leah and Rachel. From these and their two female servants, Bilhah and Zilpah, came the twelve sons of Jacob: Reuben, Simeon, Levi, Judah (all from Leah), Dan, Naphtali (from Bilhah), Gad, Asher (from Zilpah), Issachar, Zebulun (from Leah) and, Joseph and Benjamin (Rachel).

The birthrights (double portion and leadership) were Reuben's as the firstborn son. But they elluded him on account of the sin he committed against his father - sleeping with his father's concubine, Bilhah, in his father's bed (Gen. 33:21-22; Gen. 49:3-4). The writer of Chronicles also reveals that Reuben's birthright is given to Joseph because Reuben has defiled his father's bed (cf. 1 Chr. 5:1; Gen. 49:3-4). In this case, the birthrights of Reuben were shared between Joseph and Judah, with the double portion allotted to Joseph and leadership to Judah (Wünc,785; see also 1Chron. 5:1-2).

On a normal ground, the birthrights should have all be given to the firstborn son of the second wife -

Joseph, the son of Rachel (see 1Chron. 5:1). Although Joseph was the eleventh born son in order of birth, he was second in line for the birthright because he was the firstborn son of the second wife. The ideology behind the giving of the leadership position to Judah cannot be reasonably explained, in the record of the practice of primogeniture of the ancient near east, the father had the right to will this privilege to any of his younger sons as he desired. Judah's older brothers have been sharply criticized up to this point (Reuben in 35:22; Simeon and Levi in 34:30). Judah, the fourth son of the first wife was not flawless either (consider his role in selling off Joseph).

Conclusion

There have been several suggestions as to the meaning of the passages and narratives pointed out in this study, most of which are misleading. These passages indeed would be evasive and difficult to understand if not for the application of this ancient law/custom, primogeniture.

References

- Chung, Il-Seung (2008). *Liberating Esau: A Corrective Reading of the Esau-Jacob Narrative in Genesis 25-36* (Doctoral dissertation, TheUniversity of Sheffield , Sheffield, England). Retrieved from <http://www.theses.whiterose.ac.uk>
- Fachhai, L. (2007). *Primogeniture in the Old Testament: Towards a Theological-Ethical understanding of patriarchy in ancient Israel* (Doctoral dissertation, TheUniversity of Stellenbosch, South Africa). Retrieved from <http://scholar.sun.ac.za>
- Hagedorn, A. C. (2004). *Between Moses and Plato: Individual and Society in Deuteronomy and Ancient Greek Law*. Gottingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht.
- Primogeniture (1873) In Merriam-Webster's online dictionary. Retrieved from <https://www.Merriam-Merrian.com/dictionary/Primogeniture>
- Sama, M. N. (1970). *Understanding Genesis: The World of the Bible in Light of History*. New York: Schocken Books.
- Whitcomb, J. C. & Morris, H. M. (1961). *The Genesis flood: The biblical record and its scientific implications*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker book house.