

A Kingdom and Priests

Why Jesus is Worthy

⁹ And they sang a new song, saying, "Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation,
¹⁰ and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth."

(Revelation 5:9-10)

Two Nations: A Contrast of “Firsts”

There are **two nations** in the OT which are **contrasted with one another** by the English word “**first**.” Balaam has just prophesied of a “star” and a “scepter” coming out of Jacob (**Num 24:17**). This star would become Israel’s Messiah. His prophecy is a furtherance of one made by Jacob centuries earlier to his son Judah who was told that a “**lion**” would come out of Judah and the scepter would not depart from his hand (**Gen 49:9-10**). That “lion” we have seen is in **Revelation 5:5**, and he is the Lord Jesus Christ.

Just three verses later, Balaam looks upon someone called **Amalek** and says, “**Amalek was the first among the nations, but its end is utter destruction**” (**Num 24:20**). “First” is the Hebrew word *reshith* (Gk: *archē*). It happens to be the first word of the entire Bible: *bereshith*, where it is translated “**in the beginning...**” You can hear that it can **relate to time**. In this way, it is sometimes translated into English as “**firstfruits**,” which are literally the first crops of a harvest, or metaphorically (the firstfruits of a man’s strength, i.e. his oldest son; **Gen 49:3; Ps 78:51; 105:36**). But it could mean the **first in order or power or prominence**, like a chief—the first rank.

The second nation is **Israel**. It does not call Israel the “first” but the “**firstborn**.”¹ “**Then you shall say to Pharaoh, ‘Thus says the LORD, Israel is my firstborn son’**” (**Ex 4:22**). This isn’t talking about the man Jacob, but the nation Israel. This nation is the firstborn. This is a different Hebrew word—*bekor* (Gk: *prōtotokos*). Like the other, it is a word that often describes **first in time**, as in **the oldest boy**. We can see this in the very next verse when it adds, “**And I say to you, ‘Let my son go that he may serve me.’ If you refuse to let him go, behold, I will kill your firstborn son**” (**23**). That, of

¹ It appears that Israel is sarcastically or ironically called “the first (*reshith*) of the nations” in **Amos 6:1**, though this is unclear grammatically.

course, refers to the tenth plague where God killed the oldest sons of Egypt. As such, it can overlap with the other word.

However, it is important that God often changes this to make it mean **the child that receives the blessing**, particularly in regard to the **birthright, kingship, and priesthood**. He may be, but often is not, the actual firstborn. In this way, “firstborn” is a **title of privilege** not of birth. Firstborns get special things. We can see this in a passage where both words come together.

In a verse found in the same chapter that Jacob blessed Judah’s lion, just a few verses earlier, we read, “**Reuben, you are my firstborn (*bekor*), my might, and the firstfruits (*reshith*) of my strength, preeminent in dignity and preeminent in power**” (**Gen 49:3**). The next verse says however that he was, “**Unstable as water, you shall not have preeminence, because you went up to your father’s bed; then you defiled it**” (4). Essentially, Jacob is taking away Reuben’s birthright as the oldest son. The Targums give the interpretation of Jacob’s prophecy here. “**Reuben, you are my first-born, my might, and the beginning of my strength. For you it would have been fitting to take three parts—the birthright, the priesthood, and royalty**” (**Onkelos Gen 49:3**). But, “**Because**

you sinned, my son, the birthright was given to Joseph, the kingship to Judah, and the priesthood to Levi” (Ps-Jon Gen 49:3). Those are the blessings of the firstborn, which in God’s timetable often isn’t the oldest son (Abel not Cain, Isaac not Ishmael, Jacob not Esau, etc.).

These ideas all come together in Revelation 1:5-6 where it calls Jesus, “... the faithful witness, the *firstborn* of the dead, and the *ruler* of kings on earth. To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and made us a *kingdom*, *priests* to his God and Father, to him be glory and *dominion* forever and ever. Amen.” And this in turn is the foreshadowing of the great center song of five that appear in Revelation 4-5. “Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and *nation*, and you have made them a *kingdom* and *priests* to our God, and they shall *reign* on the earth” (Rev 5:9-10).

Revelation 1:5-6	Revelation 5:9-10
... the faithful witness, the firstborn of the dead, and the ruler of kings on earth. To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood	“Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation,

and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.”

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This is obviously an incredibly important passage, or rather duo of passages, full of ideas that we dare not quickly pass over. They are **the heart** of our doctrine of Christ and his work of salvation. They begin the book. They are the center of heavenly praises. Therefore, I want to spend this sermon looking at this middle song in more detail. We'll use our two nations as a backdrop to tell the story of this song.

The First of the Nations

Though the term does not appear in Revelation 5, “**firstborn**” does appear in the parallel in Revelation 1. So let's think about this idea first. If Amalek is the first of the nations, what might this mean? To answer, we would need to know who Amalek is. The Amalekites first appear in **Genesis 14:7** in what I call the “**giant wars**” in the days of Abram. In these wars, Chedorlaomer defeated the Rephaim, the Zuzim, the Emim, and the Horites (**Gen 14:5**), four tribes named in Deuteronomy 2 as giants (“**tall as the Anakim**”). He then turns to the Amalekites and the

Amorites, two more tribes mentioned in Numbers 13 as giants (the “are of great height ... we seemed like grasshoppers”).

The word next appears in [the lineage of Esau](#). It tells us that Esau had a son named Eliphaz. Eliphaz had a concubine named Timna. Timna bore Amalek to Eliphaz ([Gen 36:11](#)). Since this is the only Amalek whose origin we know, most commentators [assume](#) that this is the tribe that was attacked in Abram’s day. The obvious problem is that the giant wars took place at least 100 years before Esau’s grandson was even born.

Knowing this, we end up with a typical translation like Chedolaomer, “[defeated all the country of the Amalekites...](#)” ([Gen 14:7](#)), making it sound like they took [the area](#) of the later Amalekites, but not the people called Amalekites. There are problems with this. First, while each of the other tribal wars takes place in a certain location, it is clear that the king is defeating the people mentioned. This would be the only instance where that would not be the case. Why not simply tell us who they actually fought like in every other tribe? Second, the LXX says, “[They cut in pieces all the princes of Amalec.](#)” But how could they do that if they weren’t even born yet? It seems that the LXX knows about

another Amalek besides the one in Esau's line (it seems reasonable to me that Esau's grandson was named after him).

Curiously, the Arabians have retained some very ancient stories about this. They say that Amalek was the son of Ham, the grandson of Noah and, curiously, that he gave birth to a race of giants called the Adites.² This clearly puts them in another family tree from Esau and takes them back to ancient times, which fits much better with the idea that Balaam said that they are the first of the nations. Clearly, that could not be said of Esau's grandchild. If this is the correct Amalek, then "first" would bare some relationship to the very earliest of nations.

We next find them in a story of Moses where, curiously, they are the first enemy that Israel must defeat in the wilderness (Ex 17:8-16). This is the famous story where

² Brannon Wheeler, *Mecca and Eden: Ritual, Relics, and Territory in Islam* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 114-16; also Augustine Calmet and Charles Taylor, "Amalekite," in *Calmet's Great Dictionary of the Holy Bible*, (Charlestown: Samuel Etheridge, 1812), https://www.google.com/books/edition/Calmet_s_Great_Dictionary_of_the_Holy_Bi/N5a2SRCNO3sC?hl=en&gbpv=1&dq=amalekites+giants&pg=PP131&printsec=frontcover; John Lawson and John M. Wilson, "Amalekites," *A Cyclopaedia of Biblical Geography, Biography, Natural History, and General Knowledge Vol. 1: Aaron-Egypt* (London: A. Fullarton & Co., 1866), 71-73, https://www.google.com/books/edition/A_cyclop%C3%A6dia_of_biblical_geography_biog/NMECAAAAQAAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1&dq=amalekites+giants&pg=PA72&printsec=frontcover; Thomas Tucker Smiley, "Amalek," *Scripture Geography* (Wilmington, DE: Willard Hall Porter, 1875), 76-78, https://www.google.com/books/edition/Scripture_Geography/2ZgXAAAAYAAJ?hl=en&gbpv=1&dq=amalekites+giants&pg=PA77&printsec=frontcover. Isidore Singer (ed.). "Giants," In *The Jewish Encyclopedia: A Descriptive Record of the History, Religion, Literature, and Customs of the Jewish People from the Earliest Times to the Present Day, 12 Volumes* (New York; London: Funk & Wagnalls, 1901-1906), 5:659.

Now, the Jews also seemed to have some idea that there were two Amalekites. The Testament of Simeon (6:2-5) speaks about them in parallel with Canaan, Ham, and Shem, thus taking us back to Noah. Esau is nowhere in view.

Moses has to keep his arms in **the shape of the cross**, over a thousand years before Jesus comes, in order to defeat this great foe. He ends up needing help from Aaron and Hur, but eventually they are destroyed. This great nation of giants is defeated not by might, nor by power, but by faith in God's Spirit. In this way, this first nation to attack Israel was **first in pride and arrogance**. And, in fact, something is said of them here that is said of no one else. **"I will utterly blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven"** (14). So much for the first of the nations.

This evil that caused God to do this takes us to **a second point** about them. He stands for **the darkness of the nations** who refuse to come to the light. In this way, he is like **Babylon**, which is called **"the first"** (*rashith*) of Nimrod's **"kingdom"** (**Gen 10:10**). Babylon existed because men after the Flood were eager to reach back up to heaven to interact with the divine realm. For it, God plunged the world into spiritual darkness. He separated all the peoples into **different tribes and tongues, people and nations**, and he gave them over to be ruled by Satan and other heavenly beings.

This dispersion is important for something else stated in our song in Revelation 5. It says that Jesus has done something for **"every tribe and language and people and**

nation.” If you do not know the origin of the nations and what came about there, then such a statement will have much less meaning to you. But if you understand that the origin of the nations came about because of a supernatural curse from God, then the work of the God-man, sent from God himself from heaven, to help them becomes more striking. Did the nations do something good do deserve this grace? Of course not. Grace is unmerited favor with God. It simply pleased God to do something to help us.

The Firstborn of the Nations

It is here that I want to move to the idea of the firstborn in our story. I'll use Paul's great defense of the faith to the people at Athens as a transition, for in it he remembers this event of Babel and the darkness that came because of it. He tells them, “[God] made from one man every nation of mankind to live on all the face of the earth, having determined allotted periods and the boundaries of their dwelling place, that they should seek God, and perhaps feel their way toward him and find him” (Acts 17:27). But they didn't grope around to find him, even though as he tells them, “... he is actually not far from each one of us.”

He then quotes two Greek poets. The first is **Epimenides** who wrote, “**In him we live and move and have our being.**” The second is **Aratus** who wrote, “**For we are indeed his offspring**” (**Acts 17:28**). Paul then runs with this idea of **children**, which is related to “**firstborn.**” “**Being then God’s offspring, we ought not to think that the divine being is like gold of silver or stone...**” (**29**). He’s telling them that even though we were in given over to darkness, we Gentiles are still his children, and he was never far from us. The problem was that satanic deception and sin blinded our eyes to him. The problem was the curse that he had given us over to so that we would not find him, for we were guilty of great blasphemy. That’s *justice* and that *is* what we deserved.

It is into this that **the hubris of evil Amalek is contrasted** as the first nation that attacked God’s people. They came out to wage war against the LORD and against his firstborn. They thought they were “**first.**” In reality, as we have seen, God called Israel his “**firstborn**” child. The “**first**” attacked the “**firstborn.**” That’s the darkness.

But who was Israel? What gave him the right of the firstborn? This is one of the great ironies of redemptive history. **God takes someone who should not have any blessing at all and gives it to him.** In fact, it is worse. Go back

to Babel and the list of seventy nations that came out of it. Try to find Israel among them. It isn't there. It didn't exist. There was **no Israel when Babylon** was being built. There was **no Israel when Amalek** was warring for land in the Middle East.

Gloriously, Israel was not a natural born nation at all. He was **a special creation**, a kind of new-birthing of a nation through Sarah's dead womb and through Abram, a man whom God called out of paganism and placed in **covenant** with himself. God would give *him* blessings he could not have the natural way. This was solely at God's good pleasure. "**Kings will come from you**" (**Gen 17:6**). This was **not his birthright**. Abram's father was no king. It was his *covenant* right, the right of the special "**firstborn**." Another of the great blessings he was told, "**In you all the families of the earth shall be blessed**" (**Gen 12:3**). That takes us back to the idea of the song which harkens back to Babel.

From **Abraham** we have Isaac. From **Isaac** we have Jacob. **Jacob's** name was turned to Israel. And from **Israel** we have the twelve tribes and the people who went down into Egypt in the days of Joseph because of a severe famine. This people were then **forced into slavery** by a Pharaoh who did not know of Joseph. He made life bitter for the children of

Israel. But, “God heard their groaning, and God remembered his covenant with Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. God saw the people of Israel—and God knew” (Ex 2:24). And so they became the firstborn nation.

Redemption of the Firstborn

A significant starting point for what this means is that God would “*redeem*” them. Listen to the language of redemption and how it is related to their *slavery*. “I am the LORD, and I will bring you out from under the burdens of the Egyptians, and I will deliver you from slavery to them, and I will redeem (Heb: *ga'al*; Gk: *lutroō*) you with an outstretched arm and with great acts of judgment” (Ex 6:6). This is very similar to another part of our verse, “By your blood, you ransomed people for God...” (Rev 5:9). Redeem and ransom are very closely related.

Just here, I want to show you one more parallel to our song in Revelation. It is Revelation 14:3-4. “They were singing a new song before the throne and before the four living creatures and before the elders. No one could learn that song except the 144,000 who had been *redeemed* (*agorazo*) from the earth. It is these who have not defiled themselves with women, for they are virgins. It is these who follow the Lamb

wherever he goes. These have been *redeemed* (*agorazo*) from mankind as firstfruits for God and the Lamb.”

Revelation 5:8-10	Revelation 14:3-4
<p>And when he had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb ... and they sang a new song: “Worthy are you to take the scroll and to open its seals, for you were slain, and by your blood you ransomed (<i>agorazō</i>) people for God from every tribe and language and people and nation,</p>	<p>They were singing a new song before the throne and before the four living creatures and before the elders. No one could learn that song except the 144,000 who had been redeemed (<i>agorazō</i>) from the earth. It is these who have not defiled themselves with women, for they are virgins.</p>
<p>and you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth.”</p>	<p>It is these who follow the Lamb wherever he goes. These have been redeemed (<i>agorazō</i>) from mankind as firstfruits for God and the Lamb [the firstborn; Rev 1:5].</p>

Here we have the same English word as **Exodus 6:6**: *redeem*. Curiously, this is also the **same Greek word** as in **Rev 5:9** where it is translated as “ransomed.” I’m not certain why the ESV translates it two different ways. The NAS renders both verses with “**purchased**.” What the Lamb has done here is the centerpiece of the praise of heaven. He has redeemed or ransomed people “**from every tribe and language and people and nation**.” Therefore, we need very much to understand what this means.

In our verses, we can see that there is redemption *from something* and redemption *to something*. This is very important. Everyone who is saved is redeemed from something and to something. If you want to be saved, you have to understand what you need saving from, otherwise, why would you need to be saved? If you have been saved, you need to understand what you are saved to, otherwise, the Biblical mandates to serve and worship God will make little sense, and your growth in Christ will be stunted or stopped.

Redemption “From” ...

Let’s look at this idea of redemption “from” first. If you are here and you have not trusted Christ, then what we are about to say is still true of you. You need to understand your condition. Because you are in a precarious place, dangling like Jonathan Edwards said like a spider hanging by a single thread over the pit of hell.

If you were simply to read **Ex 6:6**, you would only think of redemption from something: *slavery*. Douglas Kennard has said, “**The basic concept of redemption is the exchanging of ownership, often by paying a price.**”³ There are two main

³ Douglas W. Kennard, “Petrine Redemption: Its Meaning and Extent,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 30 (1987) : 399 [399-405]. http://calvinandcalvinism.com/?p=3688#_ftn8_6094.

Greek words for this and Peter uses both. Let's look at them. The first is *lutroō*. This word means “to set free, redeem, or rescue.” It often includes paying a ransom. Peter says something very similar to the song of heaven. “You were ransomed ... not with perishable things such as silver or gold, but with the precious blood of Christ, like that of a lamb without blemish or spot” (1Pe 1:18). You can hear the idea of a payment going on.

The second word is *agorazō*. This is the word John uses. It “emphasizes the market imagery of purchasing goods. In such an exchange the goods are set free from the seller, usually to be possessed by the purchaser.”⁴ Peter uses this word also. He says, “False prophets also arose among the people, just as there will be false teachers among you, who will secretly bring in destructive heresies, even denying the Master who bought them, bringing upon themselves swift destruction.” “Bought” is the word *agorazō*. So with these ideas and our verses, we have Jesus the Lamb purchasing or ransoming or redeeming people at the cost of his blood.

Of course, this leads to a natural question. Who is he paying the ransom to? In the early church, it was very

⁴ Ibid.

popular to say that he was paying the ransom **to the devil**.⁵ For example, **Gregory of Nyssa** spoke of the devil as having asserted his right over mankind through the Fall. I believe this is incorrect, but that we can talk about Satan having some kind of right over mankind. It occurred at the Tower of Babel, when God gave the nations over to the darkness of the heavenly sons of God. Hence, he can tell Jesus that all the kingdoms of the world are his (**Matt 4:8**). He wasn't lying, otherwise, there's no temptation.

Importantly, whenever the Fathers taught this, they **by no means said that he had the *absolute right*** over humanity. Humanity rightly belongs only to the Creator God. Satan did not commit a coup and destroy God's sovereignty. Rather, for various reasons God sovereignly gave them to the devil with the end-goal of defeating him through the person of Christ.⁶ Another way to look at it is that Satan got an early inheritance, rule over men because Adam defaulted on this right as the firstborn son of earth. Would Lucifer, the Light Bearer, do any better?

⁵ Some, however, found this idea repulsive. Gregory of Nazianzus denied the ransom idea all together, saying that paying a ransom to Satan or to God was unacceptable. In this, he probably paved the way for the church to explore other ideas of the atonement such as substitutionary atonement which would become the main view of the Reformation.

⁶ This fascinating discussion is in **Gustaf Aulén**, *Christus Victor: An Historical Study of the Three Main Types of the Idea of the Atonement*, trans. A. G. Hebert (London: SPCK, 1931, 1975), 47-55.

At any rate, Gregory is doing something similar to **Athanasius**, but with slightly different language. The great African Trinitarian spoke of *death* as having lawful dominion over men because of the fall. Of course, we know in Genesis that it was the devil who tempted our parents and therefore Death and the Devil are very closely related to each other.⁷ We also know through that episode, death came to all men because *all sinned* (also **Rom 5:18ff**). So suddenly you have three not one: **sin, death, and the devil**. Think about these three as you listen to Irenaeus commenting on this work of Christ:

The mighty Word, and very man, who, *redeeming us by His own blood ... gave Himself as a redemption* for those who had been *led into captivity*. And since the apostasy [of Adam] tyrannized over us unjustly, and, though we were by nature the property of the omnipotent God, [the apostasy] alienated us contrary to nature, rendering us its own disciples. The Word of God, powerful in all things ... righteously turn[ed] against that apostasy and redeemed from it His own property.

(**Irenaeus**, *Against Heresies* 5.1.1)

⁷ We saw in Rev 1:21 how “Death” and “Hades” are personified as if they are gods. We will see it again in 9:11 with Abaddon/Apollyon.

Curiously, the Bible never comes out and says explicitly that Jesus' death was a ransom or a redemption from Satan or sin or death. **Revelation 14:3** says that we have been redeemed "*from the earth*," which is the realm where all three have dominion. And God has clearly revealed that all people are born **slaves of sin** (**John 8:34**), that we are born in **slavery to the devil** (**Heb 2:14-15**), and that this slavery leads inevitably to **death to all people** (**Rom 6:16**). This is simply the human condition, and no one can escape it—not by finding the Fountain of Youth nor by pretending that it isn't true. It simply is what it is. You can't escape your sin. You can't escape death. And as much as some people think he isn't even real, they can't escape the devil.

Every single person has to **come to grips** with this slavery to **sin, death, and the devil**. Until you do, you will have no reason to think you need salvation from anything. Until you do, you will be held in bondage to all three, without and without hope in this world or the world to come. All that awaits you is the gloomy darkness and fire of hell. But if redemption is about being set free from slavery, then you know that if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed (**John 8:36**).

Redemption “To” ...

But this freedom is not just “from.” It is **redemption “to”** something. Everyone who has been saved must understand this truth of the redemption and the ransom. God does not set us free from slavery and just leave us there in the desert of a new world all alone. Rather, he goes with us. He does this because he takes us to himself as his sons. This is the lesson of the Exodus.

He told **Pharaoh**, “I say to you, ‘Let my son go *that he may serve me*’” (**Ex 4:23**). Again, “Let my people go, that they may serve me in the wilderness” (**7:16**). Again. “Let my people go, that they may serve me” (**Ex 8:1**). In fact, he says it to Pharaoh a perfect **seven times** (see also **8:20; 9:1, 13; 10:3**)! Our song says something similar. “**By your blood you ransomed people for God**” (**Rev 5:10**). We have been ransomed *for God*. We belong to him. Kennard goes on to say, “**Such redemption may result in enslavement to a new owner or in the slave’s being set free.**” In the case of Christians, it is **the paradox of both**. We are set free to serve (**Gal 5:13**).

Serving God is true freedom. Being left alone to your sins would mean you are still in slavery to them. Being left alone to die would mean you are still a slave to death. Being

left alone to have Satan continually pound you would be no kind of freedom. So let's think more about what this serving of God looks like.

We will think about **two of the three great offices** of the Bible: priest and king. Our song says, “**you have made them a kingdom and priests to our God, and they shall reign on the earth**” (**Rev 5:10**). You hear that the saints are two things: a **kingdom** and priests. They specifically are said to do one more thing: **reign on the earth**.

The language here **comes from two places**. First, we have Daniel 7 and the prediction of this in **Daniel's great divine council vision** of the Son of Man coming to the Ancient of Days. It then says, “**The saints of the Most High shall receive the kingdom and possess the kingdom forever, forever and ever**” (**Dan 7:18**, cf. **22**). And again, “**The kingdom and dominion and the greatness of the kingdoms under the whole heaven shall be given to the people of the saints of the Most High**” (**27**).

Kingdoms have laws and rules and order. They maintain civilization and arts and commerce and courts. They engage in the **cultural mandate** to carry out dominion on the earth (**Gen 1:28**). The Christian kingdom is here, Christ told us. It exists in his church primarily, but then in the world as

Christian go into it and engage in cultural interaction. So, Daniel's prophecy explains the reigning on earth. But in Revelation 5:10, the *fullness* of reigning is still a future reality, though it has been made absolutely certain by the work of the Lamb in the now past. It isn't that we will all be kings, but that we will reign as **princes** of the Great King. What a glorious thought in days when tyranny reigns through wicked men. They will not reign forever. The saints will, and it is a done deal. Nothing can stop it. Indeed, even now his saints reign on earth as the only freemen the world truly knows.

The other passage is **Exodus 19:6**. “You shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.” Now we move to the **priesthood**. Here I want us to think a little more deeply. The setting is **the foot of Mt. Sinai**, just a chapter before God gives the Ten Commandments. Israel is being prepared to meet God. They are going to enter into a **conditional covenant** with him. “If you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for the earth is mine” (5). Notice that the idea of being saved “to” him here. They are **to obey his voice and keep his covenant**. Then comes our verse, “If you will indeed obey ... you shall be to me a kingdom of priests and a

holy nation.” Deuteronomy adds, “The LORD has declared today that you are a people for his treasured possession, as he has promised you, and that you are to keep all his commandments, and that *he will set you in praise and in fame and in honor high above all nations that he has made*” (Dt 26:18-19). Again, this then is quite literally what it means to be the firstborn. They will have a status of honor high above all the other nations.

That status consists of being able to serve God Almighty as priests like no one else in the world. Yes, others had priests. But they did not have priests that worshiped and served the Almighty. The most fundamental thing this means is that they “*belong to the LORD*” (Lev 27:26). On the national level, this is what it means that *the nation of Israel is God’s treasured possession*. He *chose* them *to be his* (Dt 7:6; 14:2). He redeemed them from slavery to Pharaoh to belong to him.

This is seen on the individual level of the laws of the firstborn. “*Consecrate to me all the firstborn. Whatever is the first to open the womb among the people of Israel, both of man and of beast, is mine*” (Ex 13:2; cf. 13:13-15; 34:19-20; Num 3:11-13; 8:16-18; 18:15; etc.). Listen to how “redemption” and “firstborn” come together. “Every

firstborn of a donkey you shall *redeem* with a lamb, or if you will not redeem it you shall break its neck. Every *firstborn* of a man among your sons you shall *redeem*” (Ex 13:13). So redemption is part and parcel of being a firstborn, because redemption is not merely from slavery, but from death. “All the firstborn are mine. On the day that *I struck down* all the firstborn in the land of Egypt, *I consecrated for my own all the firstborn in Israel*, both of man and of beast. They shall be mine: I am the LORD” (Num 3:13).

So you were bought for a purpose. That purpose is to be kings and priests. We know that ruling and judging comes with reigning. What privileges come with the firstborn of the priesthood? In the days of the Patriarchs, it was things like erecting altars, offering sacrifices, paying tithes, imparting blessings, lifting up prayers and praise, teaching the ways of the LORD, and so on. This was the birthright of the firstborn. These were the kinds of things that were now promised to all of the Israelites at Sinai. And this right was not an end to itself. It had a greater purpose. Someone writes, “Israel is to be the priest-nation for the nations of the world, exercising the responsibility of priestly instruction and intercession in behalf of all peoples before Yahweh.”⁸

⁸ W. Harrelson, *Interpreting the Old Testament* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1964) 92, in Scott W. Hahn, *Kinship by covenant: a canonical approach to the fulfillment of God's saving*

And another says, “Israel stands as the firstborn son within the family of nations, for the purpose of mediating the divine blessing of Abraham to all the nations.”⁹ So, God prepared them at the mountain to receive his covenant and law by washing them and consecrating them as holy priests (Ex 19:10), for washing or baptism is the sacrament of the priesthood. And Moses went up the mountain and received God’s law to return to give to the people that they might serve him.

But there was a problem. Within just *a few short weeks*, Israel the nation had broken covenant with God at the foot of the very mountain that he had descended upon in a thick cloud, that the people may hear and believe (Ex 19:9). That didn’t take long. The wicked human heart never does. It is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked, who can know it?

What did they do? They erected the golden calf which brought upon them the fury of the LORD. Moses threw down the two tablets, symbolizing the shattering of the covenant they had sworn only days earlier to obey. And Moses called to himself anyone who would carry out the

promises New Haven; London: Yale University Press, 2009), 140. Hahn has the best treatment I know of on the Leviticus covenant and these priestly implications.

⁹ Hahn, 141.

zeal of the LORD and cleanse the camp like a priest should. **The Levites** were the only ones to heed the call (**Ex 32:26**). God then took away the privilege of the firstborn from the nation and gave it to sons of Aaron.¹⁰ “**Take the Levites instead of all the firstborn among the people of Israel, and the cattle of the Levites instead of their cattle. The Levites shall be mine: I am the LORD**” (**Num 3:45**).

Unfortunately, they were no better morally equipped to carry out these holy duties than the larger nation. We see this from stories like **Korah’s** rebellion, **Nadab and Abihu**, and the **sons of Eli**. Even after the exile, in the last book of our OT, **Malachi** rails on the priests who will not listen to God. Of course, we could say the same thing about the *kings* of Israel as each northern king is compared to the first—the rebellious king Jeroboam and none of them ascend higher than he did. Even in the south, in Judah, there were only a handful of kings that carried out their duties as David had done. And so this leaves us with a terrible mess by the time we get to the end of the OT.

But of course, **none of this caught God by surprise**. Even in the days of the proto-priest-king Patriarchs, they fell into sin. This is why long before Sinai, **God foreshadowed**

¹⁰ Besides Hahn’s excellent discussion, see my book *Waters of Creation: A Biblical-Theological Study of Baptism*.

something to come when Abraham bowed and gave a tenth of all he had to the priest-king Melchizedek, just a few verses after the giants wars. You see, Melchizedek was going to need to come in a different way later on. In human flesh.

This takes us to the Lamb of God, as John the Baptist called him at his baptism, that is at his ordination ceremony into the priesthood ala Exodus 29:4. Jesus would begin his prophetic, kingly, priestly duties immediately after when he went into the synagogue and read Isaiah 61, telling his friends and family that today this prophecy was fulfilled in their hearing. And he would do this why? Because the Scripture says he is the firstborn of all creation (Rom 8:29; Col 1:15, 18; Heb 1:6; Rev 1:5)! He is the true firstborn. This has always been about him, all glory and honor to the Lamb.

I want to focus in on just one thing here as it relates to Amalek as a way of highlighting Christ's work that is celebrated in the song. We have spoken of this idea of a ransom in relation to sin, death, and the devil. Our verses say this was paid by the Lamb's "blood." That is, the Lamb was slain. Again, this was no accident, as Revelation will later say, for "the Lamb ... was slain from the creation of the world" (Rev 13:8 NIV).

The Church Fathers loved the story of Moses defeating the Amalekites, because Moses had to make **the sign of the cross to do it**. His arms extended outwards were the perfect picture of Jesus dying on the cross for our sins. But they do something unique with Amalek that I found very surprising. Justin Martyr said,

A sign of Him who was to be crucified was given to you..., both in the case of the serpents that bit you... and in the case of Moses, by the sign of his outstretched arms, and of Hoshea [Joshua], by his being named Jesus when they were **waging war against Amalek**, which fact God commanded to be recorded, having admonished you not to forget the name of Jesus, who was to erase the memory of Amalek from the face of the earth. However, it is obvious that the memory of Amalek still remains after the time of the son of Nave. God makes it clear that **by the Crucified Jesus** (of whom even those signs were predictions of what would happen to Him) *the demons were to be destroyed*, and to shudder at His name; and that all the authorities and kingdoms were to tremble before Him; and that out of every nationality those who believe in Him would be shown to be pious and peaceful.¹¹

¹¹ Justin Martyr, *Dialogue with Trypho* 131.

And, “‘God will wage war against Amalek with concealed hand!’ You can perceive that the concealed power of God was in Christ the crucified, before whom *demons*, and all *the principalities and powers* of the earth, tremble” (*Dialogue* 49). Irenaeus says that this is the hidden power of Christ, who *destroys the power of demons*, meaning Amalek (*Against Heresies* 4.24.1).¹² It makes no sense to say this unless they understood that the Amalekites were giants, whom they both believed were the origin of demons.¹³

Suddenly, this gives us a glimpse into more of the power of the cross and the blood of Christ against Satan. Why are they singing? Because of redemption. And what did Jesus do to win this for us? The LORD of Hosts triumphed over the spiritual realm and its *evil rulers* and put them to open shame at the cross (**Col 2:14-15**). Likewise, his blood which ransoms us as the perfect sacrifice that *forgives our sins* (**Heb 9:22**), secures an eternal redemption (**9:12**), and purifies our consciences from *dead* works to serve the living God (**9:14**). Sin, death, and the devil.

¹² See **Mieczysław C. Paczkowski**, “Amalek and the Amalekites in the Ancient Christian Literature,” *Teologia I Człowiek* 26.2 (2014): 147. <https://repozytorium.umk.pl/bitstream/handle/item/2508/TiCz.2014.021%2CPaczkowski.pdf?sequence=1>.

¹³ See **Justin Martyr**, *1 Apology* 5; *2 Apology* 5; **Irenaeus**, *Against Heresies* 4.16.2; 4.36.4. 22; *Demonstration of the Apostolic Preaching* 18.

Jesus, the Firstborn, the Faithful Witness of the new and better covenant, secures all of this for us our great Priest-King in the line of Melchizedek the priest-king of Salem. But, he does this as the “firstborn” of many brothers (Rom 8:29). That’s believers. That’s those who trust in Christ. That’s those who have been redeemed by the blood of the Lamb—people from the nations, people out of darkness, people in slavery to sin, death, and the devil. If you hear his call now but do not yet know him, turn to him in prayer, the first act of a priest. Ask him to forgive your sins, covering you with his blood. Trust God that the bloody sacrifice will atone for you and make you clean by his grace alone.

If you do know him, it’s interesting that our brothers who have gone before us in the faith are called the “firstfruits” in our Revelation 14 parallel. “These have been redeemed from mankind as firstfruits for God and the Lamb” who is “the firstborn” in Revelation 1. If you are in Christ, you will be part of this great harvest of souls at the end of the age. And if you are in Christ, you also know that you now have the authority to rule and serve God as priests and kings, for the national status of Israel which was

funneled through Christ the Firstborn, is not reclaimed by God's people in the church.¹⁴

Therefore, you are saved to God by the blood from your sins and from Satan and from death's sure victory. The Scripture gives a few commands in this regard. "He who was called in the Lord while a slave, is the Lord's freedman; likewise he who was called while free, is Christ's slave. You were bought with a price; do not become slaves of men" (1Co 7:22-23). "You have been bought with a price: therefore glorify God in your body" (1Co 6:20). "You were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another" (Gal 5:13).

You are saved to serve this great God who has won for you such a great redemption. You are saved to serve him as those who will reign. Carry out your dominion in truth and righteousness. You are saved to serve him as his priests. Listen to. "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of

¹⁴ Beale writes of these OT fulfillments, "This means that the Exodus idea of the kingdom and priesthood has been universalized and woven in with the concept of the saints' universal kingdom of Dan. 7, which has been inaugurated in the church." G. K. Beale & S. M. McDonough, "Revelation," in *Commentary on the New Testament use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI; Nottingham, UK: Baker Academic; Apollos, 2007), 1102.

darkness into his marvelous light” (1Pe 2:9). So worship the Lamb, offer the sacrifices of praise, give to God what is his, impart blessings to your family, lift up others in prayer, intercede on behalf of those who do not know Christ, teach others these things that you have been taught. And most of all, give glory and honor and praise to the Lamb of God for such a mighty redemption.

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