

ILLUSTRATOR

ANCIENT EGYPT: FROM FARM TO TABLE

To Be a Gentile in Ephesus

Who Was Jethro?



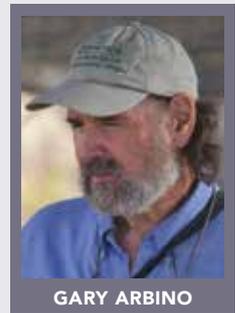
Biblical Illustrator recently had the opportunity to interview Dr. Gary Arbino, professor of archaeology and Old Testament and curator of the Marian Eakins Archaeological Collection at Gateway Seminary in Ontario, California.

ILLUSTRATOR: Dr. Arbino, tell us about the school's archaeological museum.

ARBINO: In the 1970s, Dr. J. Kenneth Eakins, then professor of archaeology and Old Testament, began to assemble a group of items from the ancient Near East for a seminary collection for use primarily in the classroom. His wife, Marian (who participated with her husband in the archaeological dig at Tell el-Hesi, Israel), became the first curator in 1986. We named the museum for her following her death in 1990. What began as a small collection now has over 1,000 holdings.

ILLUSTRATOR: The seminary moving from the San Francisco area to east of Los Angeles has given you the unique experience of designing an archaeological museum.

ARBINO: Yes, in the beginning, design specifics were in a state of flux. From the exact location within the building, to the exact size and footprint, to the flooring and lighting—all these were being negotiated as the initial institutional plans for the build-out evolved. I had to work to make sure the design could be flexible in its space, in order to accommodate both current and future exhibit needs. Additionally, I had to make sure our plans were up to Southern California and ADA codes. It was a lot of planning with a lot of pieces.



GARY ARBINO

COURTESY GEZER EXCAVATION; SAM WOLFF



COURTESY OF CALEB STALLINGS/ THE MARIAN EAKINS ARCHAEOLOGICAL MUSEUM/ ONTARIO, CA

ILLUSTRATOR: What did you learn in the process?

ARBINO: I learned a lot—my technical theatrical background and archaeology experience, as well as some serious handyman work in my earlier days, were helpful. One of the more interesting challenges was that I had to design exhibits, cases, and displays whose final placement and usage were uncertain. But the school budgeted generously for the project; it provided a substantial grant with which we purchased professional-grade display cases. The end result is, I believe, impressive.

ILLUSTRATOR: What will people see when they visit?

ARBINO: We currently have over 250 items on display in four galleries. One gallery focuses on archaeological method and includes a life-size diorama of an excavation. Other

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galleries house artifacts from ancient Egypt, Mesopotamia, Italy, Israel and Judah, as well as more-recent items such as a nineteenth-century Torah scroll from North Africa. The collection includes glassware from the Roman Era; Apulian ceramics; and Greek, Jewish, and Roman coins spanning from Alexander the Great through the Byzantine Period.

ILLUSTRATOR: How are people using the new museum?

ARBINO: We wanted to make it accessible to students, so it is located in the library. Students can examine items in the museum, notice how artifacts represent the ancient world and its cultures in Scripture, and use the exhibits to enhance what they are reading in Scripture. As Dr. Eakins said, "Archaeology adds the pictures to the words of the Bible."

Beyond that, folk from the community are visiting. For instance, we have given tours to Sunday School groups. The mission of the museum continues to be to seek to engage and inform students and visitors, giving insight into the contents, contexts, and interpretations of biblical text.

ILLUSTRATOR: How can readers see the museum's collection?

ARBINO: Of course, we would love people to visit if they are in the area. Our collection is not currently available online, but one of my upcoming projects is to work to create a website for the museum. We hope to have some of the collection along with artifact descriptions online before long.

ILLUSTRATOR: Well, we appreciate what you have done and appreciate you sharing the progress.

ARBINO: Thank you.

OTHER SBC ARCHAEOLOGICAL MUSEUMS

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www.nobts.edu/cntts/museum.html

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New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary

3939 Gentilly Boulevard, New Orleans, Louisiana

The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary

Archaeological pieces on display

James P. Boyce Centennial Library

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Tandy Archaeological Museum

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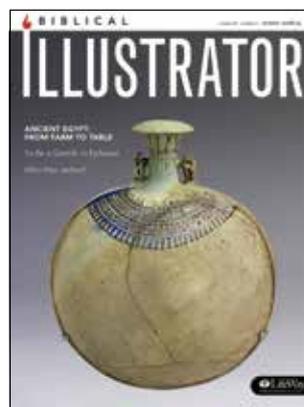
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About the Cover:
Dating from the mid-7th to mid-6th centuries BC, a New Year's flask that may have been used in a ceremony to mark the beginning of the new agricultural year when the Nile River began to flood.

COURTESY OF THE WALTERS ART MUSEUM/ BALTIMORE

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TGP: Genesis 39:1-6,19-23; 41:14-16

WHY
DID
JOSEPH
Shave?

HEBREW *vs.* EGYPTIAN
HAIR PRACTICES

ISTOCK PHOTO

By Seth M. Rodriguez

IN GENESIS 41, JOSEPH'S LIFE was about to take another turn. Previously his brothers had sold him into slavery, Potiphar's wife had falsely accused him of attempted rape, and Pharaoh's chief cupbearer had forgotten about him for two years. Through the providence of God, Joseph was in a holding pattern, sitting in prison. Finally, when Pharaoh had a strange dream that needed to be interpreted, the cupbearer remembered how Joseph had accurately interpreted his (the cupbearer's) dream and the dream of the chief baker. Pharaoh immediately issued an order to bring Joseph from the prison.

Pharaoh was "troubled" (Gen. 41:8)¹ so the order was carried out "quickly" (v. 14). Yet the servants did not bring Joseph directly to Pharaoh. They required Joseph to make a detour: "Then Pharaoh sent for Joseph, and they quickly brought him from the dungeon. He shaved, changed his clothes, and went to Pharaoh" (v. 14). Why was this, specifically the shave, necessary? An understanding of ancient hair practices sheds some insight into this verse.

In general, men living in the ancient Near East valued a thick head of hair and a beard. A painting in the Beni Hasan tomb in Egypt (nineteenth century BC) depicts Semitic shepherds with beards and full heads of hair. At the top of the basalt stele of Hammurabi (Mesopotamia, eighteenth century BC) is a picture of the king receiving the law code from his god. Both Hammurabi and his god have long beards, and the god also has long hair. The carvings from Tel Halaf in northwestern Mesopotamia from the tenth century BC depict warriors with long hair and beards. Isaiah and Jeremiah both describe the Moabites as having beards (Isa. 15:2; Jer. 48:37).

Right: Ceramic razor decorated with an image of the Egyptian goddess Hathor.



Above: Granodiorite statue of a priest wearing a leopard- or cheetah-skin mantle. The garment

was associated with high-ranking priests who performed temple rituals; from Egypt's 26th Dynasty.

Neo-Assyrian wall carvings from the ninth, eighth, and seventh centuries BC depict Assyrian kings and soldiers with long hair and lengthy beards. An example is the siege of Lachish reliefs, which were in Sennacherib's palace at Nineveh; these date from the eighth century BC. These and numerous other examples from ancient reliefs and paintings from various lands and time periods in the ancient Near East support the fact that men in the various nations situated in Mesopotamia and along the eastern coast of the Mediterranean Sea typically had abundant hair on their heads and faces.

The Hebrews were no exception. The most famous depiction of an

IN STARK CONTRAST TO WHAT WAS COMMON ACROSS THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST, EGYPTIAN MEN EXERTED MUCH EFFORT TO REMOVE HAIR FROM THEIR BODIES.

Israelite is on the Black Obelisk of Shalmaneser III from Nimrud (Assyria, 825 BC). This monument depicts Israel's King Jehu or one of his emissaries with a beard and hair reaching down to his shoulders as he bows before Shalmaneser. From a century later, Assyrian reliefs of Sennacherib consistently portray the Israelite men from Lachish with curly hair and beards. Their beards are shorter than those of the Assyrians, which indicates the Hebrew men kept their beards trimmed. The Israelite men depicted on the relief without a head covering have short, curly hair.

Moses instructed the priests not to trim their hair or beards too short (Lev. 21:5). Ezekiel may have given us some insight into the ideal for a Hebrew male's hair when he wrote that the Levitical priests "may not shave their heads or let their hair grow



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ BOB SCHATZ (15/36/3)

Above: Painting on the interior of the tomb of Khnumhotep II at Beni Hasan shows "Asiatic" or Semitic peoples. Many believe the image reflects the look and dress of Hebrew people from the same era.

long, but are to carefully trim their hair" (Ezek. 44:20).

The Old Testament books refer to beards on numerous occasions. Aaron (Ps. 133:2), David (1 Sam. 21:13), Amasa (20:9), Ezekiel (Ezek. 5:1), and Ezra (Ezra 9:3) each had a beard. The Bible also describes groups of Hebrew men with beards (2 Sam. 10:4-5; 1 Chron. 19:5; Jer. 41:5) as well as Hebrew men in general (Lev. 14:9; 19:27; Isa. 7:20).

Furthermore, Hebrew women considered men attractive when they had an abundant amount of hair, providing additional proof that hair was desired in ancient Israelite culture. In Song of Solomon 5:11, the wife praises her husband for his dark hair: "His head is purest gold. His hair is wavy and black as a raven." The handsome Absalom had an abundant amount of hair, so much so that he cut it every year so it would not grow too heavy (2 Sam. 14:25-26). Samson, known for his supernatural strength, is also noteworthy for the amount of hair he possessed. His hair was so long that he braided it into seven locks (Judg. 16:13-19). By way of contrast, Elisha was mocked because he had a bald head (2 Kings 2:23).

In stark contrast to what was common across the ancient Near East, Egyptian men exerted much effort to remove hair from their bodies. The Greek historian Herodotus explained how the Egyptians did things differently than other cultures, including hair practices: "Not only is the Egyptian climate peculiar to that



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ BRITISH MUSEUM, LONDON (31/5/3)

country, and the Nile different in its behaviour from other rivers elsewhere, but the Egyptians themselves in their manners and customs seem to have reversed the ordinary practices of mankind....In other nations the relatives of the deceased in time of mourning cut their hair, but the Egyptians, who shave at all other times, mark a death by letting the hair grow both on head and chin."² Thus Egyptian men typically would not let the hair grow on their heads or their faces. Herodotus also states the peculiar practices of Egyptian priests: "Elsewhere [in the world] priests grow their hair long; in Egypt they shave their heads....The priests shave their bodies all over every other day to guard against the presence of lice, or anything else equally unpleasant, while they are about their religious duties."³

Herodotus wrote in the fifth century BC, but the Egyptian paintings and reliefs indicate these customs were

Above: Scene from the Black Obelisk of Shalmaneser III depicting Assyria's King Shalmaneser, beneath a parasol, accepting tribute

from Israel's King Jehu. This is the only image ever discovered that depicts a Hebrew king. Only the two kings have beards.

common in earlier periods as well. Although males in ancient Egypt typically wore wigs and other head coverings, they were not normally depicted with long hair and beards. In fact, their faces were usually clean-shaven.

Yet how common was it for foreigners to shave before coming before Pharaoh? Not everyone who came into Pharaoh's presence needed to shave his head and beard. When Jacob and five of Joseph's brothers stood before Pharaoh, they were not required to shave (Gen. 47:1-10). Likewise, no mention is made of Abraham shaving before he entered Pharaoh's presence (12:18-20). Later, Moses and Aaron made no special preparations the first time they stood



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/G.B. HOWELL/ ORIENTAL MUSEUM OF CHICAGO (70/6229)

Above: From the Code of Hammurabi, close-up of the figures carved at the top of the basalt stele; Mesopotamian; 18th cent. BC. Hammurabi standing left is portrayed as receiving

the laws directly from Shamash, the Mesopotamian sun god. The horizontal lines on both faces represent thick hair; Shamash's thick beard goes half-way down his chest.

before Pharaoh (Ex. 5:1). So why did Joseph need to shave?

A suggested answer lies in an ancient tale called “The Story of Si-nuhe.” In the twentieth century BC, Si-nuhe was an Egyptian official who ended up living most of his life outside of Egypt. When he was young, the pharaoh died and a new pharaoh came to the throne. For some reason, Si-nuhe felt his life was threatened so he fled to the region of northern Canaan. But when he grew old, the reigning pharaoh invited him to return and live in the royal residence. Upon his arrival in Egypt, he was ushered directly into the pharaoh’s presence. Unlike Joseph, he was not required to shave or change his clothes, but

instead appeared “as a Bedu, in the guise of the Asiatics.”⁴ Because he had adopted the dress and hair style of foreigners, his own children failed to recognize him; seeing him, they exclaimed, “It is not really he!”⁵

At the end of their meeting, the pharaoh announced that Si-nuhe would be admitted into the highest classes of Egyptian society. So he gave orders for Si-nuhe to be taken into “inner chambers” to be properly prepared. There, similar to Joseph, Si-nuhe’s body was cleaned and shaved, and he was given new clothes: “Years were made to pass away from my body. I was plucked, and my hair was combed. A load of dirt was given to the desert, and my clothes to the Sand-Crossers. I was clad in fine linen and anointed with prime oil.”⁶

Si-nuhe’s story suggests two possible reasons why Joseph shaved before he appeared before Pharaoh. The first option is that the Pharaoh’s attendants knew Joseph would be better respected in the royal court if he were clean-shaven like the rest of the



PUBLIC DOMAIN



Right: Ostracon CG 25216, one of the biggest ostracon ever found, about 42 x 8½ inches found in the tomb of Sennedjem at Deir el-Medina. It is broken into two pieces, one side contains the story of Si-nuhe, the other a private letter.

men in the throne room. The second option is that Joseph was required to shave for the same reason as Si-nuhe. Joseph’s reputation preceded him, so the attendants had anticipated the outcome of Pharaoh and Joseph’s meeting. At the very least, they would have expected Joseph to be added to Pharaoh’s court as an advisor. Since they expected Joseph to be added to the upper levels of Egyptian society like Si-nuhe had been, they gave him the same treatment that Si-nuhe had received: he was shaved and given a clean set of clothes (Gen. 41:14). Unlike Abraham, Jacob, and Moses, the attendants expected Joseph to stay and minister before Pharaoh. Thus, they took the necessary steps to prepare him for entrance into Egyptian culture. 📌

1. All Scripture quotations are from the Christian Standard Bible (CSB).

2. Herodotus, *The Histories* 2.35-36 in Herodotus, *The Histories*, trans. Aubrey De Selincourt, rev. ed. John Marincola (New York: Penguin, 1972), 109.

3. Herodotus, *The Histories* 2.36-37 in *Ibid.*, 109-10.

4. “The Story of Si-nuhe” in *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relation to the Old Testament: Third Edition with Supplement*, ed. James B. Pritchard (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1969), 22.

5. *Ibid.*

6. *Ibid.*

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BSFL: Luke 2:1-14

CENSUSES

IN BIBLICAL TIMES

ISTOCK PHOTO

BY JOHN POLHILL

ACCORDING TO LUKE 2:1, the occasion for Jesus' birth being in Bethlehem was a census the Roman Emperor Caesar Augustus ordered. Such an official registration of the population was nothing new to that part of the world. Though not as thorough as the Roman censuses, the ancient Near-Eastern empires found such head counts to be a necessity, primarily for military purposes. One is thus not surprised to find census references in the Old Testament and subsequently under the Romans in the New Testament.

In the Old Testament

A census took place at Mount Sinai during the exodus. It had two aspects. The first was for the half-shekel tax that was levied on every male Israelite. Though initially designated for maintenance of the Tent of Meeting (Ex. 30:11-16), this evolved into the "temple tax" that the Jews levied annually even into Jesus' day (Matt. 17:24-27). The second aspect of the Sinai census was conducted by ancestral houses (tribes) and included every male over twenty years old who was fit for battle (Num. 2-3). An assistant from each tribe was designated to assist Moses in the head count (1:5-16). Numbers 1:17-44 lists the total number of each tribe from Reuben to Naphtali. The census was primarily for

military purposes. As keepers of the Tabernacle, men from the tribe of Levi were exempt (vv. 47-54).

A second census is covered in Numbers 26. It was again for fighting men over the age of twenty (26:2). Whereas the males of the first (Sinai) census perished before the Israelites entered the promised land, this census governed the younger generation, those who would fight in the conquest and settle in the land. It was thus both for military purposes and tribal land distribution (vv. 52-56).

A third census is recorded in 2 Samuel 24. Ordered by David, this census displeased God, who sent a plague upon the land in response. The Jewish historian Josephus argued that God's displeasure was because David failed to combine the census with the temple tax as in Exodus 30:11-16.¹ David's commander Joab tried to dissuade him from taking the census (2 Sam. 24:3-4), but to no avail. The problem all along may have been David's arrogance in leaving God out of the picture.

In the New Testament

The Roman Census—The Romans had two types of censuses. One was a registration of Roman citizens in Rome itself, in the provinces, and in the colonies. It was primarily for taxation (often for an exempt status) and for military purposes. Conducted at generally regular intervals, records exist for three—28 BC, 8 BC, and AD 14. The second type of census

Moses conducted a census of the Israelites when they were at Mount Sinai.

Left: Artist's rendering of a Levitical priest.

SINAI: ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ BOB SCHATZ (17/37/11)
PRIEST: ILLUSTRATOR ART/ LINDEN ARTISTS/ LONDON





Modern Bethlehem.

ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ GB HOWELL (94-G-5982)

enrolled non-Roman citizens and was conducted in the provinces, primarily for taxation purposes.² Numerous examples of census lists contemporary with the New Testament have been found in Egypt, written on papyri. They usually list taxable property, such as land holdings, number of slaves, proceeds from crops sold, ship's cargo, and the like.³ The New Testament twice referred to Roman censuses, both times in Luke's writings: Luke 2:1-5 and Acts 5:37. The Greek word used for "census" in both passages is *apographe*, meaning registration, enrollment. The verbal form of the word (*apographo*) occurs four times in the New Testament, Luke 2:1,3,5, and Hebrews 12:23, each time meaning "to be enrolled, registered."

Acts 5:37—Luke related that the apostles were put on trial before the Jewish Sanhedrin. The apostles were charged for disobeying the command no longer to teach in Jesus' name (*Acts 5:27-41*). Incensed, the Sanhedrin was ready to put the apostles to death (v. 33). One of their members, Gamaliel, a respected teacher of the Jewish law (v. 34), urged they not act in haste, arguing that if the apostles' teaching was not from God it would perish, but if it was from God, the Sanhedrin would be in the perilous situation of opposing God (vv. 38-39). He supported his argument with two examples from Jewish history of individuals who opposed God and came to a bad end. One of the two was named Judas the Galilean, who led a revolt "in the days of the census" (v. 37).⁴ Josephus mentioned this revolt several times, linking it to the Roman census carried out in AD 6-7 by the Syrian governor named Quirinius.⁵ The mention of Quirinius links the passage with the census that led Joseph and Mary to Bethlehem.

Luke 2:1-5—The account of Joseph and Mary's trip to

Left and above: Silver shekels from the city of Tyre, 1st cent. AD. Religious taxes, such as those the Jews gave at the Temple at Jerusalem, were paid in the main silver coin in Judea, the shekel of Tyre.

Right: Fragment of Oxyrhynchus papyrus 255; dates from AD 48. The fragment, which measures about 6.3 by 4.5 inches, contains a census record, written in Greek.



COIN: ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ BRITISH MUSEUM/ LONDON (31/27/48)

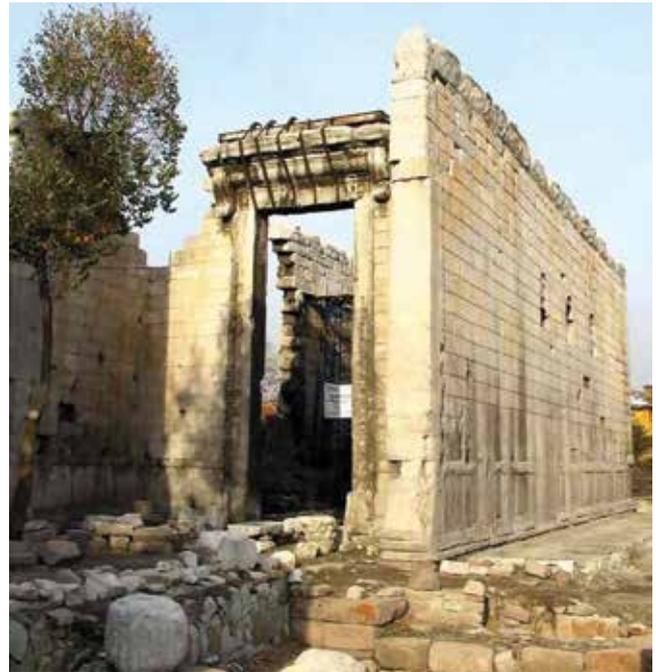
PAPYRUS: PUBLIC DOMAIN

Bethlehem begins with the phrase "in those days," which is rather imprecise but typical of Luke's time references. It may link with Luke 1:5, "in the days of Herod, king of the Jews" (cf. Matt. 2:1). It was also the time when Caesar Augustus decreed that the entire civilized world was to be "enrolled" in a census. Octavian, the great-nephew of Julius Caesar, ruled over the Roman Empire from 31 BC to AD 14. In 27 BC, the Roman Senate bestowed on him the title *Augustus* ("revered one"), which designated him in some sense as the earthly manifestation of their gods. His census was likely was not a simultaneous empire-wide enrollment. Romans conducted these censuses by province and completed them at different times from province to province. The time had come for a Judean census.

Verse two states the census was conducted while Quirinius was governing Syria. In imperial provinces, the governing official, called the "legate," was responsible for



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ BRENT BRUCE (91-B-0021)



PUBLIC DOMAIN

Left: Grounds of the Beit Jamal Monastery, outside of Jerusalem. The monastery marks the burial site for Gamaliel, Paul’s rabbinic instructor.

Above: Ruins of the Temple of Augustus in Ankara (modern Turkey). An inscription posted on the side of the temple brags about the emperor’s accom-

plishments, including his taking three censuses. One of these may have been the one that caused Mary and Joseph to go to Bethlehem.

taking the census. Quirinius held that position in AD 6-9. Obviously this was later than the census of Luke 2:1-5. At that time Herod was the king. He died in 4 BC, and Jesus was born before his death.⁶ No record exists for Quirinius serving as Syrian legate before his AD 6-9 tenure. Scholars have attempted to solve this problem in several ways.⁷ Some have suggested a textual error that changed the actual governor’s name, replacing it with Quirinius, but no manuscript evidence supports this. Others have suggested that Luke 2:2 should read, “this census took place prior to the one when Quirinius governed Syria.” This, though, does violence to the natural translation of the Greek. A more likely approach suggests that Quirinius could have been a lesser official under the Syrian legate during the latter days of Herod when he *initiated* the census, completing it in AD 6-7 when he became the legate himself.

Why did Joseph travel to Bethlehem to be registered? A Roman census was usually taken according to one’s place of residence. Thus, some have suggested Joseph may have owned property in Bethlehem. If that were the case, why would he not have stayed there rather than seeking lodging in an inn (Luke 2:7)? The more likely explanation is that the Romans accommodated the Jewish practice of registering by one’s tribe. Joseph belonged to the same tribe as David, the

tribe of the Messianic promises, so his place of enrollment was Bethlehem, the city of David.

Hebrews 12:23—One other example of the census vocabulary occurs in Hebrews 12:23. It is in the verbal form, “to be registered, enrolled, counted in a census.” In a description of the New Jerusalem, the community of the new covenant, Christians are described as “the firstborn who are *enrolled* in heaven” (emphasis added). Perhaps this forms a suitable framework with Luke 2; the salvation that began with the birth of a Child in a time of registration culminates with the believer’s registration in the community of the redeemed. 📌

1. Josephus, *Antiquities* 7.318-20. The problem is that God commands that David take the census in 2 Sam. 24:1. Compare with the parallel account in 1 Chron. 21:1-6, which attributes the whole matter to Satan.

2. Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *The Gospel According to Luke I-IX*, vol. 28 in *The Anchor Bible* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1981), 400.

3. James H. Moulton and George Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the New Testament* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1952), 59-60.

4. All Scripture quotations are the writer’s translation.

5. Josephus, *Antiquities* 18.4-10, 18.23, 20.102; *War* 2.118, 2.433, 7.253.

6. The calendar we use missed the date of Christ’s birth by 4-6 years.

7. See Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1977), 547-56, and Darrell L. Bock, *Luke 1:1-9:50*, vol. 3A in *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994), 903-909.

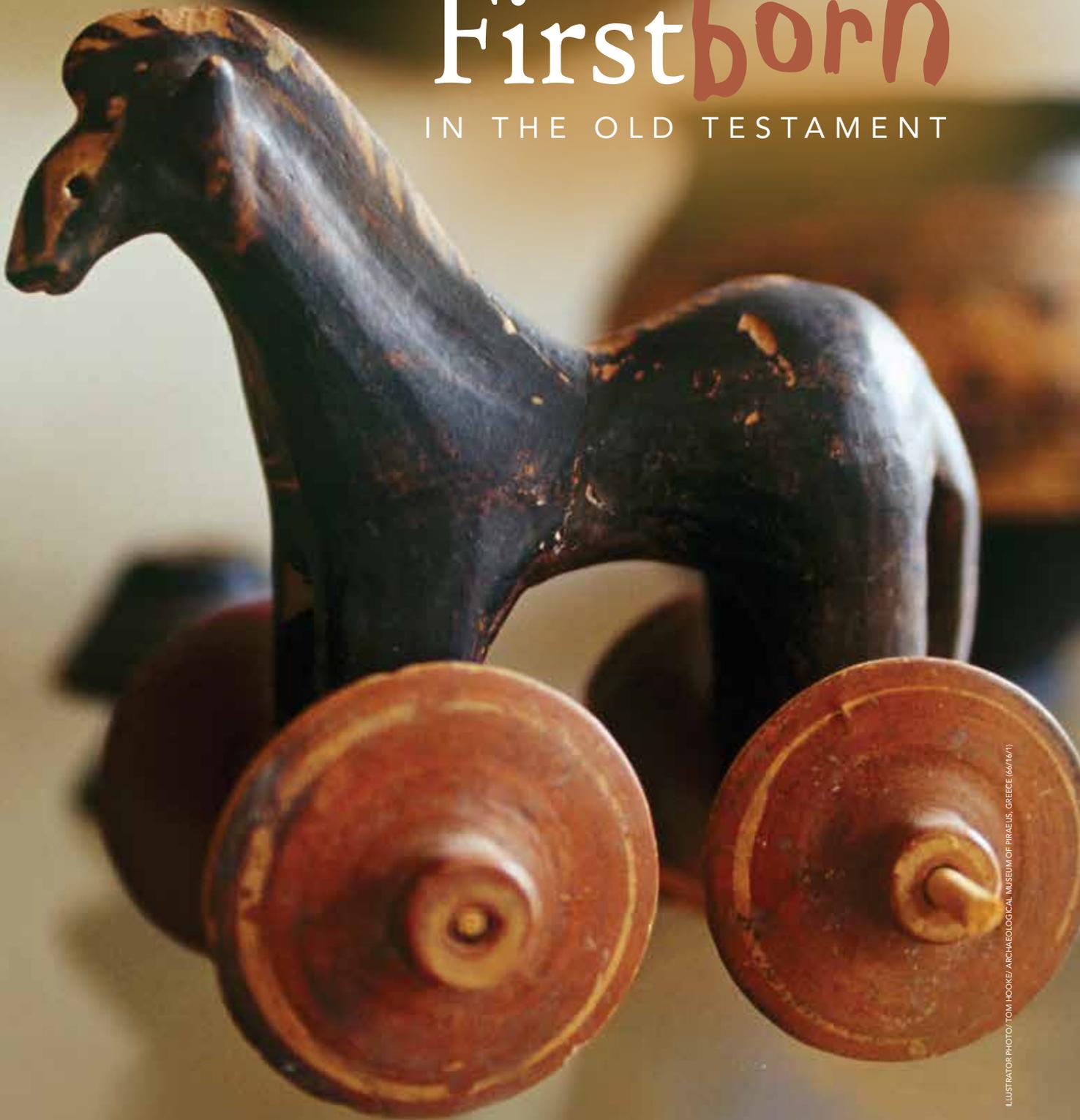
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ETB: Genesis 27:18-29

Firstborn

IN THE OLD TESTAMENT



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/TOM HOOKE/ARCHAEOLOGICAL MUSEUM OF PIRAEUS, GREECE (66/16/1)

BY SUSAN BOOTH

“CAN WE PWETEND that I’m the older bwother?” The voice coming from the crab-apple tree next door belonged to our neighbor’s grandson. I had tuned out the siblings’ chatter as I read through Genesis in preparation for this article. But that one sentence was louder than the rest, perhaps because the older child had already climbed down. The boy’s request to assume the role of the older brother echoes the perennial longing of younger brothers from ages past.

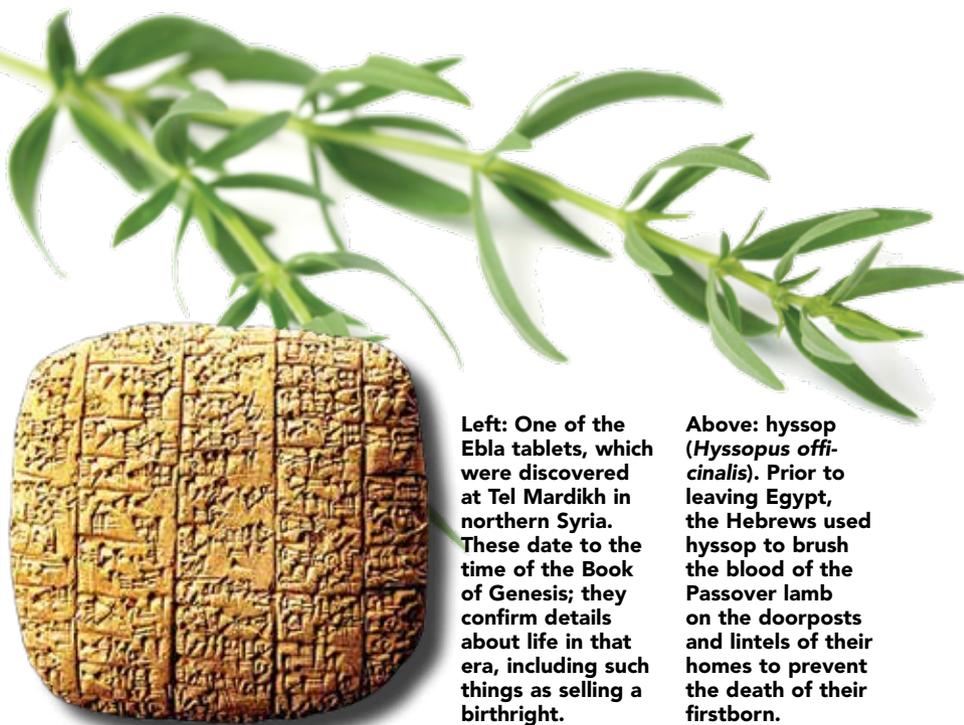
Background and Status

The pages of Genesis are full of stories of younger sons being elevated over their firstborn siblings: Abel (and Seth) over Cain; Isaac over Ishmael; Jacob over Esau; Joseph (and Judah) over Reuben; Ephraim over Manasseh. These examples might suggest the firstborn had no special status. The fact that the narrative highlights these as exceptions, though, underscores the expected norm. The genealogies also hint at

Left: Horse pull toy from Greece.

Below: Workmen’s village at Medinet Habu, Egypt. Workmen, or slaves,

likely lived in this complex. The Jews were in Egypt for about 430 years, the latter part of which they were enslaved (Ex. 12:40).



Left: One of the Ebla tablets, which were discovered at Tel Mardikh in northern Syria. These date to the time of the Book of Genesis; they confirm details about life in that era, including such things as selling a birthright.

Above: hyssop (*Hyssopus officinalis*). Prior to leaving Egypt, the Hebrews used the blood of the Passover lamb on the doorposts and lintels of their homes to prevent the death of their firstborn.

the significance of the firstborn by recording the son’s name and the father’s age at his birth (for example, see Gen. 5:6). When the genealogy includes other children by name, it typically lists them in order of birth. Additionally, the primacy of the firstborn in the Old Testament reflects the social customs of the ancient Near East in general, where private legal documents from neighboring cultures affirm the priority of the firstborn son.¹ Although primogeniture (giving the elder son preference in inheritance) was standard practice during the time of the patriarchs, centuries passed before

Mosaic Law codified the right of the firstborn. As “the firstfruits of his [father’s] strength,” the firstborn son would receive a double portion of the inheritance (Deut. 21:17; ESV).²

Mosaic Law also linked the theological significance of the firstborn to the exodus. Because the Lord had spared the Israelites by passing over them, their firstborn—both sons and animals—rightly belonged to God (Ex. 13:2,14-15). God therefore commanded them to sacrifice the firstborn of flocks and herds (Deut. 15:19-20). If the firstborn animal was not approved for sacrifice—like a donkey—the owner would



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TABLET: PUBLIC DOMAIN

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either break the animal's neck or redeem it by offering a lamb in its place (Ex. 13:13; 34:20). Alternatively, he could buy back the unclean animal by paying its esteemed value plus one-fifth (Lev. 27:27).

Because the Lord forbade human sacrifice, Israelite fathers redeemed their firstborn sons by offering a substitute (Ex. 13:13,15; 34:20). When the newborn was a month old, the father paid a redemption price of five silver shekels (Num. 18:16). The Lord also set aside the Levites to serve Him in the place of the firstborn male offspring of every Israelite woman (3:11-13; 8:13-19).

Privileges and Responsibilities

The firstborn son enjoyed a place of honor and privilege in the family, but he also shouldered a number of responsibilities. As the eldest male he would inherit a double portion of the estate and the leadership of the household. In a patriarchal society, this meant he would assume complete responsibility for the family's property and prosperity. If

necessary, he would represent his family in court and exercise judgment over members of his family. If he became head of the family while his parents were still alive, he assumed responsibility for their physical care and that of his sisters until each sister married.³

"His roles included presiding at sacrificial meals celebrated by the family, supervising burials and funerary rites, and serving as kinsman-redeemer."⁴ Stepping into the role of patriarch with its greater share of responsibilities may well have been the reason for a firstborn son to receive a greater share of the family resources.⁵

Esau and Jacob

In the story of Esau and Jacob, all the above privileges and responsibilities hung in the balance—along with the added weight of passing the Abrahamic covenant to the next generation. That Jacob was born only moments after his twin brother—hanging onto his heel!—may have contributed to the younger

son's sense of injustice that he had so narrowly missed all that rightly belonged to the firstborn.⁶

A normal paternal blessing would have involved all of a man's offspring and witnesses, but Isaac had secretly summoned the elder son—his favorite—in order to bless him.⁷ Isaac asked Esau to hunt for game and to prepare a meal for him before he died. When Rebekah overheard the plan, she spurred the younger son—her favorite—to intercept that blessing. Jacob, disguised as Esau, brought his father the meal. He thus pretended to be his older brother with a bold charade and a bald-faced lie: "I am Esau, your firstborn" (Gen. 27:19; see v. 24).

The Hebrew phrasing should have reminded Isaac that his firstborn (*bekor*) had already recklessly traded away his birthright (*bekorah*) for a measly bowl of soup (25:27-34). Instead, the aged patriarch similarly focused on the tasty food that Jacob set before him. When Isaac asked how he had prepared the meal so quickly, Jacob's answer bordered

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At modern Tel Aviv, early morning on the Yarkon River, which is the largest coastal river in Israel. The Yarkon was the southwestern boundary of West Manasseh.

Although Manasseh was the older brother, he did not receive the blessing of the firstborn as his grandfather, Jacob, crossed his hands and gave that blessing to Ephraim.

on blasphemy: “Because the LORD your God granted me success” (27:20, ESV). Ironically, Jacob was unwilling to wait for the Lord to work and had taken matters into his own hands.

Reassured by the feel of goat skin and the smell of his favorite son’s clothes, Isaac pronounced over Jacob a blessing of fertility, prosperity, dominion, and protection. His wording—“Be master of your brothers”—directly disregarded the prophecy pronounced before the twins’ birth: “the older shall serve the younger” (27:28-29; 25:23, NASB). Unwittingly, Isaac had given Jacob the blessing that he intended for his firstborn. When the deception unraveled just moments later, the patriarch recognized that the blessing was binding: “Indeed, he will be blessed!” (27:33).⁸

Lessons and Applications

The Jacob-Esau story demonstrates that God pours out His grace on the undeserving. Against a backdrop of family dysfunction, Esau despised his birthright, while Jacob deceived his father and stole from his brother. Neither brother deserved the blessing, but that is precisely the point. Our Father’s blessing is not based on what we deserve, but on what He freely gives.

The recurring theme of the firstborn continues beyond Genesis as well. At other critical junctures, God elevated younger brothers over firstborns: for example, Moses over Aaron, David over his brothers, and Solomon over Adonijah. Likewise, God called the nation of Israel His “firstborn” even though it was the “youngest and least among the nations (Exod 4:22; Jer 31:9).”⁹ These repeated twists in the plotline prepare the reader to expect the unexpected.

Right: Rock carving discovered in the Negev Mountains dated to the 3rd millennium BC; this scene depicts men hunting ibexes with dogs. Esau, Isaac and Rebekah’s firstborn, was a hunter.

Below: Dating to the Early Bronze Age IV (2350–2200 BC) and from rural Canaan, a terra-cotta bowl turned on a slow potter’s wheel, which evidently had been recently introduced to the region.



ILLUSTRATOR PHOTO/ KRISTEN HILLER (42/0220)



Right: Five-shekel weight from Iron Age II (10th–9th centuries BC); stone is inscribed with the Hebrew sign for shekel. At the birth of a son, the Hebrew father paid five shekels to the priest at the Tabernacle or Temple.



Ultimately, however, no one could have expected that God would offer His firstborn (Heb. 1:6) as a redeeming sacrifice for humankind. Christ willingly relinquished His privileged status so that others might share in His inheritance as “the assembly of the firstborn” (12:23). We might expect siblings playing in the backyard to swap roles momentarily. However, when the older brother offering to take the place of the younger is none other than the

“firstborn over all creation” (Col. 1:15), the result is simply astounding grace. 🕯

1. According to Matitahu Tsevat, relevant documents include those from southern and middle Babylonia (ca. 1800–1600 BC); Mari (18th cent. BC); Nuzi (15th–14th centuries BC); and Ugarit (13th cent. BC). See “בכור” (*bekhôr*, firstborn) in *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament*, ed. G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren, trans. John T. Willis, vol. 2 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 123–24.
2. Unless otherwise indicated, all Scripture quotations are from the Christian Standard Bible (CSB).
3. Victor H. Matthews, “Family Relationships” in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*, ed. T. Desmond Alexander and David W. Baker (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2003), 293.
4. John H. Walton, “Genesis” in *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary*, gen. ed. John H. Walton (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 106.
5. *Ibid.*, 105.
6. John H. Walton, *Genesis: The NIV Application Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 550.
7. Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis 16–50*, vol. 2 in *Word Biblical Commentary* (Dallas: Word Books, 1994), 205.
8. Genesis 28:3-4 and 13-15 record Jacob’s blessing in the more familiar terms of the Abrahamic covenant.
9. Bill T. Arnold, “§1144 בכר (*bkr*, treat as firstborn) in *New International Dictionary of the Old Testament Theology & Exegesis*, gen. ed. Willem A. VanGemeren, vol. 1 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1997), 659. The nation bore the name of Jacob, who was renamed “Israel” in Gen. 32:28.

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