

Deuteronomy 21:16

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

Then it shall be, when he maketh his sons to inherit that which he hath, that he may not make the son of the beloved firstborn before the son of the hated, which is indeed the firstborn:

Analysis

Then it shall be, when he maketh his sons to inherit that which he hath, that he may not make the son of the beloved firstborn (אִתְּכֶם בְּיוֹם הַנְּחִילוֹ אֶת־בְּנָיו)... (לא יוכל לבְּכֹר)—The verb nachol (to cause to inherit) describes the father's distribution of estate. The prohibition lo yukhal levaker (he cannot make firstborn) blocks manipulating the bechor rights. The double portion belonging to the firstborn (v. 17) was legal right, not paternal preference.

Before the son of the hated, which is indeed the firstborn (עַל־פְּנֵי בֶן־הַשְּׂנוֹאָה) (הַבְּכֹר)—The phrase al penei (before/in the face of) means "in place of" or "at the expense of." The law protects objective birth order over subjective affection. Though the father loved one wife more, legal rights cannot be redistributed based on emotion. Justice trumps favoritism.

Historical Context

This law would have prevented Abraham from disinheriting Ishmael for Isaac (though God commanded that specific case), or Isaac from favoring Esau over Jacob. Later, David's failure to discipline Adonijah (who acted as firstborn despite not being so, 1 Kings 1:5-6) nearly cost Solomon the throne, showing the chaos when birth order rights are ignored.

Related Passages

John 3:16 — God's love and salvation

Romans 10:9 — Confession and belief for salvation

James 2:17 — Faith and works

Romans 1:17 — The righteous shall live by faith

Study Questions

1. How does this law's insistence on objective rights over emotional preference challenge modern culture's elevation of personal feelings as ultimate authority?
2. In what areas of life are you tempted to let personal favoritism override established obligations and commitments?

Interlinear Text

אֲשֶׁר יֵאָתָר בֶּן הַנְּחִיל וְהָיָה בְיוֹם
H834 H853 H1121 H853 H5157 H3117 H1961
he maketh his sons to inherit Then it shall be when

הַבְּכֹרִי יִהְיֶה לָּא לְוָיָהּ הַ
H1060 H3201 H3808 H0 H1961
which is indeed the firstborn that which he hath that he may

בֶּן הַנְּחִיל עַל פְּנֵי יְהוָה אֲשֶׁר יֵאָתָר
H1121 H6440 H5921 H157 H1121 H853
he maketh his sons before of the beloved he maketh his sons

הַבְּכֹרִי הַשְׂנוּאָה
H1060 H8130
which is indeed the firstborn of the hated

Additional Cross-References

1 Chronicles 26:10 (Parallel theme): Also Hosah, of the children of Merari, had sons; Simri the chief, (for though he was not the firstborn, yet his father made him the chief;)

1 Chronicles 5:2 (Parallel theme): For Judah prevailed above his brethren, and of him came the chief ruler; but the birthright was Joseph's:)

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