

# Deuteronomy 21:17

Authorized King James Version (KJV)

But he shall acknowledge the son of the hated for the firstborn, by giving him a double portion of all that he hath: for he is the beginning of his strength; the right of the firstborn is his.

## Analysis

**But he shall acknowledge the son of the hated for the firstborn, by giving him a double portion of all that he hath**—The Hebrew bechor (firstborn) carries legal and theological weight throughout Scripture. The pi shenayim ("double portion," literally "mouth of two") means the firstborn receives twice what other sons receive, not two-thirds of the estate. If there are three sons, the estate is divided into four parts: the firstborn gets two, the others one each.

**For he is the beginning of his strength**—Reshit ono ("beginning of his strength") refers to the father's first exercise of procreative power, establishing the firstborn's unique status. **The right of the firstborn is his** (mishpat ha-bekorah)—this is a legal entitlement, not parental preference. The law prohibits favoritism based on affection for one wife over another, addressing the exact situation in Jacob's household where he favored Rachel over Leah yet had to acknowledge Reuben's legal status (Genesis 49:3).

This law protects inheritance rights from paternal caprice and foreshadows Christ as the eternal Firstborn who receives the full inheritance (Colossians 1:15-18; Hebrews 1:2). The double portion also prefigured Elisha's request for a double portion of Elijah's spirit (2 Kings 2:9).

## Historical Context

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In ancient Near Eastern patriarchal society (circa 1406 BCE), inheritance customs varied, but the firstborn generally received preferential treatment. This Mosaic law standardizes the practice for Israel, establishing clear legal protections against favoritism. Polygamy created complex household dynamics where a man might love one wife more than another—as with Jacob, Elkanah (1 Samuel 1:5), and others. Without this law, fathers could disinherit legitimate heirs based on maternal preference, creating injustice and family discord. The law reflects God's concern for impartial justice and protection of the vulnerable, even within family structures.

## Related Passages

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**Genesis 1:1** — Creation of heavens and earth

**Colossians 1:16** — All things created through Christ

## Study Questions

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1. How does God's prohibition against favoritism in inheritance reflect His impartial justice and challenge our tendency toward preferential treatment?
2. In what ways does the firstborn's double portion and its protection by law illuminate Christ's role as the Firstborn who shares His inheritance with adopted co-heirs (Romans 8:17)?

