

The Importance of Being the Eldest Brother and Its Relevance for New Testament Christology

The aim of this study has been to examine the concept of the eldest brother and its possible relevance for the understanding of Jesus in the New Testament. The starting point is the fact that in various African societies there are authors who have presented Jesus as the eldest brother. This means that the status of Jesus is special, and that his role is that of a mediator, protector, and leader. The interesting question is if this understanding of Jesus implies more than a noteworthy, but culturally dependent understanding of Jesus. In this dissertation I will try to clarify whether I can argue for this understanding of Jesus as a New Testament scholar. If we would search for an exegetical basis for this understanding of Jesus—read in light of its first-century Mediterranean context—what understanding of the eldest brother would we then find?

In order to understand what some African authors meant when they called Jesus the eldest brother, I had to survey whether their understanding of the eldest brother was in accord with this “concept” within their respective societies and not merely a contrived understanding on their part. This survey had the added benefit of providing relevant data concerning what to look for when investigating the literary and cultural context of the New Testament. Based on the ethnographic data I have surveyed in chapter two the understanding of the eldest brother as presented by the African authors is in general substantiated.

The next step in my investigation was to ask for the importance of the eldest brother in the first-century Mediterranean literary and cultural context of the New Testament. This is my first research question and it has been discussed in chapter three. It applies to the *importance* of being the eldest brother, i.e. his status and role. The closest we can get at the cultural context of the New Testament is through literary sources. By searching for texts that deal with the eldest brother as social reality in relation to his younger siblings I ended up with the following main texts: Selected texts from the Hebrew Bible/Septuagint (in particular the patriarchal narratives in Genesis), the writings of Philo, the writings of Josephus (mainly *Antiquitates judaicae*), Herodotus’ *Histories*, Plutarch’s *De fraterno amore*, Dionysius of Halicarnassus’ *Antiquitates romanae*, and Livy’s *Ab urbe condita libri*.

The findings from my reading of these texts show that there is no discernible preferential status or role for the eldest brother among the Romans. At most, their tendency to honor seniority enabled them to appreciate the preferential status and role of the eldest brother among other peoples. Among the Greeks I do not find a preference for the eldest brother concerning inheritance and succession. However, the evidence still points to the eldest brother having a preferential status and role among them. He would have a claim to the family name and was commonly trained to become the leader. He was thus better suited to succeed his father than younger siblings. It was also expected of him that he looked after his younger siblings and hence became their role model. In the religious sphere, he took the role as the religious head of the family after their father had died.

Since an important part of this study is to interpret some New Testament texts, I had to look into what we could call the narrower literary context of the New Testament, namely the Hebrew Bible/Septuagint and ancient Jewish texts commenting on biblical texts.

In the HB/LXX, and especially in the patriarchal narratives, I found a strong longing for sons to carry on the family line. The father's eldest is expected to become the successor and heir irrespective of his mother's status. His inheritance rights are special. He will eventually take the role as the leader in the family, and in their father's absence the eldest present is expected to take his role, thus becoming a second father. Both discipline of younger brothers and responsibility for them is assigned to the eldest. He becomes their protector and mediator.

Philo's interest in the firstborn shows more of a cultic character than a legal or familial character, but he adds reasons not found in the biblical texts why the firstborn is eligible to a double portion and expounds on why the second eldest brother should take the role of the eldest brother in the latter's absence.

Josephus also seems to take over the understanding of the eldest brother as found in the biblical texts. He moreover tends to be more explicit about who is the eldest brother in places where the biblical text leaves that open. Deviations from the expected preference of the eldest brother need explanation, according to Josephus. He also emphasizes rights and statuses associated with being the eldest brother.

When the eldest brother is used as a metaphor in the HB/LXX and Philo I have found that the focus is vertical. It is the elevated status and not the different roles associated with that status that is emphasized. Neither in the HB/LXX nor in Philo is his elevated status explained, it is taken for granted.

Given the plurality of roles found for the eldest brother, none of the texts mentions all of them. Taken together, the HB/LXX, Philo, and Josephus share more concerning the status and roles of the eldest brother than what I have found in the Greco-Roman texts. The investigation of the eldest brother as social reality in the literary and cultural context of the New Testament also confirms the general picture of the African understanding.

The *relevance* of understanding Jesus as the eldest brother relates to New Testament Christology. I claim that (at least part of) the eldest brother Christology can be supported by an exegesis of New Testament texts read in light of its first-century Mediterranean literary and cultural context. The selection of texts is based on whether Jesus is described in relation to others by using family language and thus somehow makes him a brother to younger siblings. By also including those texts that were considered important for the African authors I ended up with the following texts discussed in chapter four: Matt 25:31–46, Mark 3:31–35, Rom 8:28–30, Col 1:15–20, and Heb 2:10–18.

In both Mark 3:31–35 and Matt 25:31–46, Jesus is presented as a brother. In neither of these two texts is Jesus' status and role as the eldest brother expressed directly. Taking both the narrower and broader context of these two texts into view, Jesus is presented with characteristics that are in agreement with the status and role of the eldest brother, but the connection is not made explicit.

Paul uses family language in Romans 8 to relate Jesus to the believers. As God's "own" Son and sons of God, Jesus and the believers share common parentage, hence they can on the basis of implicit language be described as siblings. Paul further uses adoption language and family metaphors both to express what differentiates the sonship of Jesus and the sonship of the believers as well as to emphasize what they share. Read together with the statement in Rom 8:29 that Jesus is the firstborn among many siblings, the understanding of him as the eldest brother is strengthened. As the firstborn Jesus' exalted status is emphasized, yet he is subordinate to God as father. Roles applied to Jesus include prototype, example, mediator, and protector. These roles, however, are not ascribed to him in the capacity of being the

eldest brother, but if we consent that Jesus is here described as the eldest brother, these roles expound on what that understanding of Jesus entails.

In Colossians, I have found that Col 1:1–20 implicitly support an understanding of Jesus as brother of the believers because they share common parentage. The title firstborn is found twice in Col 1:15, 18, but only the second relates Jesus to others. Jesus is described as the leader, protector and founder of the church and the first to rise from death, with others expected to follow him. Noting that when the title firstborn is used in a resurrection context in the New Testament, the dead refer to the believers who have died, this allows for understanding Jesus as the eldest brother of many siblings, understood as believers in him. This understanding is more reserved and is not expressed as directly as in Romans.

The final text is found in Hebrews 2:10–18. Family language that focuses on sonship, brotherhood, and inheritance is used to describe the relation between Jesus and the believers. In addition, Jesus is presented as a brother to the believers in agreement with the relation between the high priest and the priests as that of a brother relationship. In the same context where Jesus is described as a brother, he is given roles that warrant an understanding of him as the eldest brother of the believers. Hebrews presents Jesus with the richest description of roles typical of the eldest brother in the same context where he is described as the brother of the believers. Given the understanding of the eldest brother found in the literary and cultural context of the New Testament, the conclusion is that in Hebrews Jesus is presented as the eldest brother of the believers, his siblings.

In this dissertation, I have followed up and brought into the Western type of scholarly discourse a particular understanding of Jesus that is widespread in Africa. My conclusion shows that this African understanding of Jesus to a certain extent has a biblical foundation. Hence, this reading of the Bible from a non-Western point of view has discovered a “concept” also found in the Mediterranean literary and cultural context of the New Testament and applied it in their efforts to understand how Jesus is presented. For this, the African reading of the Bible is to be commended.