

OT501 Pentateuch / James T. Butler

Exegetical Project Part III

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Christoph Lameter

FTS Box #466

1. Summary of what was learned about Child sacrifice in Israel's neighboring cultures.

1.1. Evidence for Child-Sacrifice

1.1.1. Diodorus Siculus (310 B.C.) writing about child-sacrifice in Carthage

Diodorus tells a story of Carthage that the inhabitants used to sacrifice their children to Kronos. Once, when disaster struck the city, they thought that the quality of the sacrificed children was not sufficient for Kronos. Therefore 200 children from the noblest families were sacrificed. The child was placed on a bronze statue of Kronos (which had characteristic outstretched arms) on the hands of the statue, and then rolled into the furnace. Some scholars doubt this story.

1.1.2. Eusebius on the Phoenicians

Eusebius cites a fragment of Philo of Byblos expressing that the Phoenicians had an ancient custom of sacrificing their dearest children when danger threatened the nation.

1.1.3. Porphyry on the Phoenicians

He says that the Phoenician history is full of stories about child-sacrifices to Kronos (father of the Greek top god Zeus) in times of calamity.

1.1.4. Foundation sacrifices in Palestine

Palestinian archeologists report that they often find skeletons of children in the foundation of houses in ancient Canaanite towns.

1.1.5. Punic and Neo-Punic inscriptions

In Canaanite culture inscriptions were found which often contain the expressions "mlk 'mr" (Latin:"molchomor") and "mlk 'dm". It is assumed that these passages mean "sacrifice of lamb" and "sacrifice of human being". They are thought to refer to the sacrifice of an infant or to a lamb as a substitute. These inscriptions are late (whatever this might mean). "Molk" is also mentioned on two steles from Malta (6th or 7th century B.C.)

The sacrificial term "mlk" has so far not been discovered from Phoenicia.

1.1.6. Discovery of burnt bones of Children at Carthage

In the sanctuary of Tanit at Carthage archeologists discovered urns containing burnt bones of lambs, goats and most often of children. The sanctuary was called "Tophet".

1.1.7. A pillar discovered in Hazor in northern Israel

This pillar with upraised hands seems to indicate the same deities as found in Carthage. The site in Hazor is around 1000 years older than the one found in Carthage.

1.1.8. Occurrence in different religions

Eliade reported the occurrence of child-sacrifice among the Chinese and Celts. The Aztec-Religion had this feature. The Mayas sacrificed women.

Sager and Wolff mention the performance of child-sacrifices in Sardinia, Sicily and Tunisia.

1.1.9. Occurrence predominantly in the elite of the society.

Stager and Wolff found that high officials and nobles were mostly involved in sacrificing children. Child sacrifices became more numerous at the height of Carthage's military and political power.

1.2. Consensus among Scholars

There is a common consensus that there was child-sacrifice in the surrounding culture in the monarchial period. The sacrifice was performed by burning. People in Israel were influenced by this, but the "Yahwist cult" rejected this practice.

The Phoenicians sacrificed children.

The Name of "Moloch" is associated with the sacrifice of children. It seems that children were burned because the biblical writers often mention in this context the "passing (over) fire" or "burnt-offering" of children.

1.3. Disputed Points

1.3.1. Human sacrifice in Ancient Oriental Religions

The fact of child-sacrifices in the surrounding cultures in ancient oriental religions is disputed. Vaux says that human sacrifices were only performed in exceptional cases. He suspects that the evidence he has about the rare cases is not accurate. He interprets the skeletons of children found in the foundations of buildings to be burials and not sacrifices against the general opinion that children were sacrificed and buried in the foundations of the building. He can only think of the Israelites having an ancient custom of sacrificing children.

Westermann is convinced that human sacrifice was common among Israel's neighbors. He states that human sacrifices scarcely ever occurred in primitive religions. Human sacrifices are a sign of higher and developed religions. This is also expressed by Carpenter.

Vaux expresses his doubts that the story in Genesis 22 is meant to explain the substitute for animals for humans as a sacrifice as held by others. He interprets it as a story that showed Israel that their existence was totally dependent on the grace of God and that this shows the extraordinary faith of Abraham in Yahweh. Some apparently claim that Israel conducted child sacrifice and claim as a proof the law concerning the firstborn. Against this he holds that all texts in the Old Testament speak against child-sacrifice even the so postulated "oldest" passages known.

Carpenter sees human sacrifice spread through the whole region of the near east at all times.

1.3.2. Source of the custom

Vaux holds that the practice of child-sacrifice came into Israel late by other cults and was condemned by all spokesmen of Yahwism. It never formed part of the Israelite ritual for sacrifice. Especially the Phoenicians were known for this custom and he sees the source of the custom here.

Others state that this custom was inherent in all surrounding cultures since ancient times.

1.3.3. Root of the custom

Some scholars assume that animals were offered generally as a substitute for men in sacrifice. They claim that originally men were sacrificed.

Others view that this "substitute" sacrifice was there even originally. Therefore human sacrifices were not common.

2. Study of Old Testament passages

2.1. Was child-sacrifice practiced in Israel?

Rebuilding Jericho (1 Kings 16:34)

This passage is often cited in the context of child-sacrifice. But this passage has nothing whatsoever to do with child sacrifice. This passage is the fulfillment of a curse that Joshua pronounced about the one who would try to rebuild Jericho (Joshua 6:26). Hiel's children died and were not sacrificed.

Jephtah's daughter (Judges 11:30-40)

This passage is often cited concerning human sacrifices in the bible. Jephtah is making a promise to God to sacrifice a human if he will give him victory. In sight of the enormous importance of this victory he offers all that he can according to common custom of the surrounding nations. The biblical passage offers no evaluation of this whole procedure, but just reports it. Since his daughter is already of a significant age I doubt that this passage can be used to discuss sacrificing of children.

In the Kingdom of Judah

Ahaz (2 Kings 16:3) sacrificed his son as a burnt-offering to other Gods and thereby imitating the surrounding culture. This must have been a sign for the upper-class at that time therefore it can be inferred that many did sacrifice their children in this period.

In the same way Manasseh (2 Kings 21:6) sacrificed his son as a burnt-offering.

King Josiah (2 Kings 23:10) tore down the "topheth" used for sacrificing children to the god Molech. This also indicates a widespread practice of this in the area of Judah in the time of the Kings.

In the Kingdom of Israel

2 Kings 17:17 gives as a reason for the fall of Samaria the sacrificing of children in burnt-offerings to idols. Therefore this practice must have been widespread in Israel in the time of the Kings.

2.2. Child sacrifice to the honor of Yahweh?

There is no evidence for child sacrifice to honor Yahweh. All the Old Testament is unanimous opposed to this practice (Deut 12:31; 1 Kings 16:34; 2 Kings 16:3;17:18; Micah, Jeremiah and Ezekiel).

Even the "most ancient" texts, according to the Source-Theory, contain the command to redeem the firstborn.

Child-Sacrifices were done in the name of other Gods. The name commonly mentioned is Molech or Moloch.

Some interpret the following passages to refer to child-sacrifice to Yahweh:

Ezekiel 20:25-26

In this passage God is cited as saying "I let them sacrifice their firstborn-sons" but this is meant as a punishment. God punished them by the sacrifice of their sons. He did not command this, but the results of their idolatry was the sacrifice of their sons.

Exodus 22:28-29

"The firstborn of your sons you shall give to me [Yahweh]". This only refers to sacrificing of children out of context. In other places it is commanded that an animal has to be sacrificed instead of the firstborn. The firstborn have to be redeemed. Deut 12:31 condemns the sacrifice of children.

This passage therefore has to be understood as referring to this redemption. As a redeemed one the firstborn were under a special blessing (Leviticus 27:10).

2.3. Evidence of confusion concerning Child-Sacrifice.

There is no evidence of any confusion in the Old Testament. There is a constant condemnation of child-sacrifices.

There was apparently confusion in Jephthah's days about human sacrifice. The Pentateuch contains no provision for human sacrifice, but on the other hand human sacrifice is not explicitly forbidden. It is questionable how much of this Jephthah knew. He might have assumed that Yahweh needed a very great sacrifice to give him victory in accordance with what the sacrifices other cults around Israel required.

There was confusion too in the days of the Kings when foreign cults began to influence Israel and the people did not hear the voices of the prophets warning them. (Probably they supposedly were much more advanced and did not need to listen to reactionary propaganda.)

3. Was Genesis 22 intended to address the issue of child sacrifice?

Genesis 22 clearly shows that this practice was widespread at the time of Abraham. When Abraham hears this command of God, he does not question it, because it seems to be familiar to him from the surrounding culture. Of course this command does not make much sense since God had miraculously given him his son Isaac to make him to a multitude of people. Isaac was used to assist his father sacrificing animals as his question for the lamb to be sacrificed indicates.

Abraham was seemingly convinced that the sacrifice of his son would not make the promise of becoming a great people impossible. This shows a great amount of faith in the God whom he had served his whole life.

There was no hesitancy on the part of Abraham even until he took the knife to do the actual act. Abraham was ready to give his son that he loved most for God.

God does not want sacrifices of children, otherwise he would not have stopped Abraham. If the sacrifice of children would have been an accepted practice there would have been no reason for him to stop Abraham. Of course one could argue that this shows a special sacredness of Israel and special grace since Yahweh spared Isaac.

By providing a replacement for the sacrifice of Isaac, Yahweh shows that he does not like human sacrifice and foreshadows the law given at Sinai that all the firstborn - as Isaac was - should be redeemed and that a sacrifice should be made for them before the Lord.

Through this incident it is shown that faith to the end is what God is desiring from his people. But he will not use this to their disadvantage.

This passage also impresses the supposedly Israelite reader. His existence through Isaac is due to a gracious act of God! God could have not let him come into being if he had not wished it.

Genesis 22 is a foreshadowing of the sacrifice on the part of God. Abraham's son was spared, yet God had to give his own firstborn, his beloved Son Jesus Christ for us to redeem us from our sins.

This passage was addressed to the issue of child-sacrifice in the surrounding culture of the Israelites and was intended to show the right way. On the one hand God wants to be love even above the dearest thing on earth. On the other hand this shall not result in human sacrifices.

The introduction of this biblical custom effectively abolished child-sacrifices, because it introduces as a substitute for the custom in the surrounding culture. Sacrificing a child would mean not following the law and custom of Israel and placed somebody outside the covenant.

If the practice of child-sacrifice would not have been common in the surrounding cultures as expressed by Vaux then the passage has a slightly different understanding. Abraham's faith would even have to be judged to be greater because he was faithful to a God who commands a very uncommon thing from him. It is extraordinary to do this without any questioning on his part. In this case the passage cannot show that God does not desire human sacrifice, but would leave the issue ambiguous. This might have just been an exceptionally kind act of God to spare Abraham's duty to sacrifice his son, which is not valid for the following generations. This is contradicted by the following accounts in Genesis of Isaac's and Jacob's children.