

# CHILD SACRIFICE IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

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## CULTURAL INSIGHT

Child sacrifice was a part of most of the religious and ritual systems in the ancient world. It seems to have been seen as an act of ultimate sacrifice to deities and higher powers and was performed in times of great difficulty. In the Hebrew Bible it is often associated with the worship of the non-Israelite God Molech, who was worshiped through an act of passing one's "seed through the fire" (Leviticus 18:21). Some scholars have connected this ritual to the *Tophet*, a place of ritual burning condemned by the Israelite prophets (see Isaiah 30:33; Jeremiah 7:31). Second Kings 23:10 connects the rituals of the *Tophet* with the worship of Molech. Archaeologists have found apparent examples of similar sacrifices in Phoenician contexts, where they are called *molk* offerings.

Second Kings 3 describes the revolt of the Moabite king Mesha against the kingdom of Israel, which had conquered Moab previously. The battle went poorly for the Moabites, which caused their king to offer his son as a burnt offering. As described in 2 Kings 3:27, this was effective in driving off the Israelite combatants, although the author of Kings did not explain why it was effective.

Because of the reach these ritual practices had, they would have been familiar to the ancient Israelites, even as prophets reminded them that these rituals were not commanded by Jehovah (see Jeremiah 7:31). One of the strongest places where these ritual practices are visible is in the story of Jehovah's commanding Abraham to sacrifice his son Isaac. Because of the Near Eastern background of child sacrifice, this commandment would have felt both strange and familiar. According to the book of Abraham, Abraham himself had been the target of an attempted sacrifice by his father (Abraham 1:5–7). In a similar vein, the yearly Passover served as a reminder that the Lord had *not* taken the firstborn of the Israelites, and so they offered up a lamb instead (Exodus 12:21–27).

### ***Related verses***

Genesis 22:1–2

Exodus 34:19–20

Leviticus 18:21

Leviticus 20:1–5

Deuteronomy 12:29–31

Judges 11:34–39

2 Kings 3:27

2 Kings 23:10

Isaiah 30:33

Jeremiah 7:31

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