



The Baal Cult under Ahab & Jezebel: Documentation of Child Sacrifice among the Carthaginians & Phoenicians; “Molech” Not a God but a Burnt Offering

Ahab bought into the Baal cult under the influence of his wife, Jezebel, who was the daughter of Ethbaal, the Phoenician King of Tyre. The degeneracy of this heathen religion led to a complete loss of ethics in Ahab's soul and this was transferred to the immoral civil acts that he and his wife committed and to which the people of the Northern Kingdom were largely complicit.

The Baal cult plagued the Israelites from the beginning and the extent of the degeneracy it inspired is described by:

Albright, William Foxwell. *Yahweh and the Gods of Canaan: A Historical Analysis of Two Contrasting Faiths*. (London: School of Oriental and African Studies, 1968. Reprint. Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2001), 234-39:

Greek and Roman authors have provided us with a wealth of information about the practice of human sacrifice in Phoenicia and North Africa.

Quintus Curtius \ker' shē-us\ (first century A.D. Roman historian), the chronicler of Alexander's campaigns, says that when the inhabitants of Tyre were threatened by Alexander's siege of the city [332 B.C.], they decided to resort to a practice which had been in disuse for centuries, namely, revival of the institution of human sacrifice in order to appease the anger of the gods. (p. 234)

From his statement we might infer that it had been abandoned for 'many centuries,' but we may safely limit ourselves to several centuries. In any event, it was still being practiced in Phoenicia when the early Punic (Phoenician) colonies in the western Mediterranean were founded (tenth and eighth centuries B.C.). Among classical authors who have transmitted details about the burning of children as sacrifices are especially Diodorus Siculus \sik' yu-lus\ (first century B.C.) and Tertullian \ter-tul' yen\ (second century A.D.). Diodorus followed Timaeus \tī-mē' us\, a Sicilian who was contemporary with the events in question, whereas Tertullian was himself an African of pagan parentage, whose background in law gave him valuable information about the efforts of successive Roman emperors to stamp out the practice of human sacrifice. (pp. 234-35)

In spite of the documentation available in pagan and Christian sources about human sacrifice in Phoenicia and Carthage, the rationalistic critics of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries refused to believe that the reports had any basis, especially since archaeological work seemed not to furnish any support.

In 1921 the situation changed with the discovery at Carthage of a pointed stele (stē' lē: carved or inscribed stone slab or pillar) from about the third century B.C. dedicated to Tennit [Tanit], with the representation of a priest holding a human infant in the usual position for offering a lamb. [Note: The Carthaginian appellation of the goddess Anath, *Tennit-panê-Ba'al* means 'Radiance of the Presence of Baal.' Tennit was often identified with Juno, the Roman goddess of women as the "queen of heaven" and as Virgo, the goddess of fertility identified with the Babylonian Ishtar and known as the 'Heavenly Virgin.'] This isolated find was followed in 1930 by the discovery in eastern Algeria of five stelae inscribed in Latin, dating from the second or third century A.D. From these texts there emerged interesting variations of a dedicatory formula "To the holy lord Saturn (Ba'al-hammôn), a great sacrifice of night-time, breath for breath, blood for blood, life for life." Evidently there had been an increasing tendency to substitute a lamb for a child, a fact which would explain the substitutionary formula 'life for life.' (p. 235)



In 1935 Otto Eissfeldt published a monograph in which he brought the evidence together, combining it with the data from biblical 'Moloch.' He showed convincingly that *molek* was a sacrificial term and not the name of a Canaanite divinity. Punic *mol*k and Hebrew *molek* are in fact the same word, and both refer to a sacrifice which was, for Phoenicians and Hebrews alike, the most awe-inspiring of all possible sacred acts—whether it was considered as holy or as an abomination. There are probably few competent scholars who now believe that a **god Moloch** is intended in any biblical passage referring to human sacrifice. (p. 236)

About 1920, stelae of the same types began to be found by natives in Carthage itself, in the area which became known as 'Tophet' [תֹּפֶת \tō' pheth\; place of burning]. In 1925 excavations were carried out by a Franco-American expedition headed by Francis W. Kelsey. Here we have a stratified site, consisting of three main strata, the lowest of which seems to date from the ninth-seventh centuries B.C. This period yielded many urn-burials of children (mostly very young infants) and sacrificial animals, all of which had been cremated. (p. 237)

Other 'tophets' have been located at Sousse \sous\ (northeast Tunisia) and elsewhere in Punic Africa; the former particularly important, since it also yielded a cremation pit like one described by Diodorus (first century A.D.). In the Phoenician settlements in Sardinia and Sicily, a number of examples of sanctuaries of the 'tophet' category have now been excavated. (pp. 237-38)

There is a certain resemblance in function to sacrificial stelae from the temple of Dagon at Ugarit \yu-gar' it\, which bear inscriptions recording mortuary offerings. (p. 238)

There is also a substantial amount of written evidence for the existence of human sacrifice among the Moabites and Aramaeans during the tenth-seventh centuries B.C. The biblical evidence with respect to Moab is found in II Kings 3:26f and Amos 2:1. In the former passage Mesha \mē' sha\, king of Moab, is said to have sacrificed his first-born son, heir to the throne, on the city wall before the horrified besiegers. (p. 239)

One of the key points made by Albright is that the Hebrew word *molech*: מֹלֵךְ \mō' lek\ does *not* refer to a cultic god but rather to the practice of human sacrifice. If this is true then the use of the word *molech* in Scripture refers directly to this evil act.