

Introduction

Evidence concerning Moloch worship in [ancient Israel](#) is found in the legal, as well as in the historical and prophetic literature of the Bible. In the Pentateuch, the laws of the Holiness Code speak about giving or passing children to Moloch (Lev. 18:21, 20:2–4) and the law in [Deuteronomy](#) speaks of "passing [one's] son or daughter through fire" (18:10). Although Moloch is not named in the [Deuteronomy](#) passage, it is likely that his cult was the object of the prohibition.

The author of the [Book of Kings](#) speaks about "passing [one's] son and daughter through fire" (II Kings 16:3 [son], 17:17, 21:6 [son]). [II Kings](#) 23:10 speaks about "passing [one's] son or daughter through fire to Moloch." Some scholars interpret the phrase *lā-ha'avir ba-esh*, as a reference to a divinatory or protective rite in which children were passed through a fire but not physically harmed. However, the same phrase *lā-ha'avir ba-esh* is found in an unmistakable context of burning in [Numbers](#) 31:23.

Other biblical texts refer to the sacrifice of children. [Psalms](#) 106:37–38 speaks of child sacrifice to the unnamed idols of Canaan. In prophetic sources, [Jeremiah](#) 7:31 and [Ezekiel](#) 20:25–6 speak disapprovingly of sacrificing children to Yahweh (for the "bad statutes" referred to by Ezekiel, see Ex. 22:28–29; but see Friebe); [Jeremiah](#) 19:5 speaks of sacrificing children to Baal; [Ezekiel](#) 16:21, 20:31, 23:37, 39 of sacrificing children to unnamed divinities; as does [Isaiah](#) 57:5. In none of these is there a mention of Moloch. Only in [Jeremiah](#) 32:35 is Moloch mentioned by name and there he is associated with [Baal](#).

Distinction should be made between human sacrifice as a sporadic deed at a time of crisis and distress, such as the holocaust of the son of Mesha king of Moab (II Kings 3:27), or as an act which serves to express an unusual degree of religious devotion as the binding of Isaac (cf. Micah 6:7), on the one hand, and the Moloch cult which was an established institution with a fixed location (the Topheth), on the other. As the classical sources have it, the sacrifices of children at Carthage, a colony founded by Phoenicians on the coast of Northeast Tunisia, usually came after a defeat and a great disaster – a religious practice based upon an ancient mythological tradition. Thus Phoenician tradition ascribed to Sanchuniaton relates that the god Elos (= El) sacrificed his son following a war which brought disaster upon the state. If the classical reports are accurate, it could be maintained that there is no real connection therefore between the Phoenician-Punic child sacrifices which are sporadic and conditioned by crisis and the Moloch worship which was an institution or cult. In contrast though to the classical reports, the archaeological discoveries at Carthage, which attest some 20,000 burials of infant bones along with animal bones in what are evidently not instances of natural death appear to conflict with the classical reports. There is as yet no evidence of child sacrifice in the Carthaginian homeland, the cities of Phoenicia (Lebanon) proper, where far less excavation has been done.

The Name

The accepted view since [Abraham Geiger](#) is that Moloch is a tendentious mis-vocalization of the word *melekh*, "king," the original vowels being changed and patterned after the vocalization of *boshet*, "shame," which was often used as an intentional substitute for Baal (see Euphemism and Dysphemism). It is true that the names Moloch (I Kings 11:7) and Milcom occur in the Bible in reference to an Ammonite god, and that deities by the name Malik/Muluk are attested to from the 18th century B.C.E. onward. However, the laws and warnings against the worship of the Moloch could hardly refer to these particular deities. It is unlikely that one particular god who is not