

The Binding of Isaac and Child Sacrifice in the Ancient Near East: A Comparative Analysis

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Abstract

Sacrifice in general in the sense of some people is giving something as a form of loyalty or self-devotion in various forms, such as property, even life will be given. If we look at and have heard history, several civilizations in the past had immoral and inhumane religious practices. The practice of child sacrifice has been a subject of considerable interest and debate within biblical and ancient history studies. This study examines the narrative of the Binding of Isaac (Genesis 22) within the broader religious and cultural context of child sacrifice in the Ancient Near East (ANE). While the Akedah shares thematic similarities with ANE sacrificial traditions—particularly the motif of offering a firstborn to a deity—it simultaneously presents a profound theological and ethical departure from those practices. Drawing on textual, archaeological, and comparative literary evidence from Mesopotamian, Canaanite, and Phoenician sources, this paper explores the ideological function of child sacrifice in ANE societies as an expression of extreme piety, covenantal obligation, and ritual appeasement. In contrast, the Genesis account frames the near sacrifice not as an act of ritual devotion, but as a divine test of Abraham's faith and trust. Significantly, the intervention of YHWH at the climax of the story—commanding Abraham not to harm Isaac and providing a ram as a substitute—functions as a narrative critique of human sacrifice and a theological reorientation. Rather than affirming the cultural norm of child sacrifice, the Akedah undermines its legitimacy and introduces a new paradigm: one that emphasizes divine provision, the sanctity of life, and ethical boundaries in worship. This paper argues that the story's literary form and theological message must be understood both in dialogue with and in opposition to its ANE context. Through this comparative lens, the Binding of Isaac emerges not merely as a story of obedience, but as a transformative moment in the history of ancient religion—marking a decisive shift toward a moral and monotheistic understanding of divine-human relationships.

Keywords:

child Sacrifice; Leviticus; Ancient Near East

INTRODUCTION

The account of Abraham's near sacrifice of his son Isaac, found in Genesis 22 and often referred to as the Akedah ("Binding"), has long puzzled theologians, historians, and

anthropologists. At first glance, this dramatic moment seems to echo the broader context of child sacrifice in the Ancient Near East (ANE), where such offerings were not uncommon, particularly in times of crisis or for securing divine favor. Yet upon closer inspection, the biblical narrative simultaneously resonates with and subverts ANE ritual norms, positioning itself in deliberate tension with its cultural milieu (Delaney, 1998).

In the ANE, child sacrifice, especially the offering of a firstborn—was often tied to fertility cults, the appeasement of deities, or vows made in desperation. Canaanite and Phoenician cultures, for instance, provide archaeological and textual evidence of child sacrifice to deities like Molech, Baal, and El, sometimes in the form of fire rituals. The practice may have carried a form of sacred legitimacy, seen as the ultimate expression of devotion or piety.

The story of Abraham, then, is startlingly familiar in its initial setup. Abraham is called by God to offer his beloved son on a mountain—a demand that, within the ANE context, might not have seemed alien. However, the theological and narrative trajectory of the story takes a radical turn: at the critical moment, God intervenes, providing a ram as a substitute and explicitly rejecting the human sacrifice. This dramatic reversal introduces a powerful theological statement: YHWH does not require, nor does He desire, child sacrifice. The event marks a break with surrounding cultural practices and redefines what true obedience and faithfulness look like in the biblical worldview (Ruvilla, 2012).

The events are triggered by Abraham's deed rather than God's order, which raises crucial concerns such as "Why does God need to try Abraham at this point in his life, after so many other trials, and why this horrible test?" Was there anything Abraham did that made God demand this sacrifice? Because Isaac is not a newborn and there is no immediate crisis, two circumstances in which such offers were made, the majority of scholars have rejected the popular interpretation that God wishes to show that the practice of child sacrifice is now prohibited (Scolnic, 2020).

In the narrative of the Binding of Isaac, Abraham is a one-dimensional, nearly superhuman figure whose whole being is devoted to carrying out the will of God as he is traveling to sacrifice his son. This perspective holds that Abraham should be praised for carrying out God's purpose without hesitation or question because there is no textual proof of any thought or reluctance on his part. (Jacobs, 2010). The two primary streams of historically oriented interpretations of the meaning of Genesis 22 are those that attempt to place the text within the context of ancient Israel's cultic history and those that

situate it within the discussion of theodicy in Old Testament texts.(Lombaard, 2008)

Thus, the Akedah can be seen as both a reflection of ANE sacrifice traditions and a polemic against them. It acknowledges the cultural reality of child sacrifice as the perceived highest form of offering, but subverts it by emphasizing divine mercy, substitutionary sacrifice, and ethical boundaries in worship. In this way, the story establishes a new theological paradigm: God tests obedience but affirms the sanctity of life.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a comparative and interdisciplinary research methodology that integrates textual analysis and historical-critical methods to examine the narrative of the Binding of Isaac (Genesis 22) considering child sacrifice practices in the Ancient Near East (ANE). Textual and literary analysis is using the primary biblical text, Genesis 22, is analyzed using literary-critical tools to uncover narrative structure, themes, theological motifs, and intertextual relationships. Particular attention is given to language, repetition, symbolism, and rhetorical devices that shape the theological message of the *Akedah*. The analysis also considers the broader literary context within the Pentateuch and the role of the passage in the Abrahamic cycle. Historical-critical approach for this study applies historical-critical methods to situate Genesis 22 within its historical and cultural milieu. This includes investigating the composition history of the text, potential source traditions, and the socio-religious environment in which the story emerged and was redacted. Special emphasis is placed on understanding how Israelite religion evolved in contrast to or in response to neighboring belief systems.

DISCUSSION

ANE Child Sacrifice

Sacrifice is more than just a religious statement. Because of its highly symbolic nature, it can be manipulated in a variety of ways by those who execute it. They may utilize the ritual to negotiate and preserve power and identity through carefully planned "performances." Among ancient Mesopotamian cultures, human sacrifice was an uncommon custom. The archaeological remains from the royal death pits at Early Dynastic Ur (c. 2600–2450 BCE) are our finest sources of information.(Siddall, 2020) The definition of sacrifice, the reasons behind making a sacrifice, and what it means to be

sacrificed. Originating from the Latin words *sacer*, which means "sacred," and *facere*, which means "to make," sacrifice is closely associated with what Westerners perceive to be a cult or religious practice.(Garroway, 2014)

Within the context of Israel's cultic past, Genesis 22 acknowledges the long-standing custom of child sacrifice and attempts to eliminate it by revealing God's preference for an animal. The purpose of placing this prohibition at the very beginning of Israel's religious history that is, with the arch-patriarch Abraham in the Genesis 22 narrative is to demonstrate to the text's intended audience that child sacrifice was forbidden from the very beginning of their Yahweh-belief.(Lombaard, 2008). A later dating for Genesis 22 is more likely than an earlier dating for precisely this reason: the topic of child sacrifice becomes more acceptable at a certain distance from the exile and the strongest impact of Deuteronomic theology. Given the ethical inclinations towards social justice from these prophets onward, it appears doubtful that child sacrifice would have continued as a practice in the Judean worship after the exile or even after the prophets Hosea and Amos. (Lombaard, 2008).

Molech: A God of Human Sacrifice

In ancient Middle Eastern and North African societies, the deity Moloch—also spelled Melech—was connected to child sacrifice. His precise roots are unknown, but some historians believe that Moloch is related to the sun deity Baal, who was worshipped as early as the fourteenth century BCE by the Phoenicians, an agricultural people who lived in Canaan. The most common depiction of Moloch is that of a man with a bull's head. His idol, or statue, is a brass figure with a man's big, potbellied stomach and a bull's head. It was a hollow stomach, an open furnace, lighted with flames. The kid would roll into the fire after worshippers laid it on the idol's outstretched hands as a sacrifice. Moloch's adherents thought that these human sacrifices protected their crops and livestock and increased fertility. During emergencies like starvation, drought, illness, or war, these sacrifices became even more crucial (Cheston, 2022).

It is easy to find the reason behind these sacrifices. "Shall I give my first-born for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?" is what Micah 7 says. In the midst of the nation's calamities, folks believed that any cost they could incur to win back Yhwh's favor was worthwhile. In a desperate attempt to appease their Semitic brethren, the Israelites offered their infants as sacrifices to their gods. They made the sacrifices at

an altar or pyre known as "Tapheth" (LXX.), which was built in the valley of Hinnom, rather than in the Temple for some reason, maybe because not all of the priestly and prophetic circles supported the movement.(Singer & Barton, n.d.)

The most well-known instance of Israelite child sacrifice is most likely the practice connected to the Hebrew term מֹלֵךְ, which is traditionally understood as the proper name of a god or demon. It is typically rendered as "Moloch" (according to the Septuagint and Vulgate) or "Molek/Molech" (according to the Tiberian tradition and the Authorized Version). The traditional interpretation holds that throughout the monarchic period, this evil Moloch/Molek creature took great pleasure in the human children who were sacrificed to him by the rebellious Israelites (Dewrell, 2017). Molech (מֹלֵךְ) makes several appearances in the Old Testament, primarily in relation to the sacrifice of children (Lev 18:21; 20:24). There is compelling evidence to suggest that the cult of Molech had an impact on Jephthah's notorious pledge and the subsequent sacrifice of his daughter (Judg 11:29-40). 33 Solomon was captured by foreign deities and built monuments to Molech and Chemosh (1 Kgs 11:7). Molech, who is also mentioned in Jeremiah 32:35 and 2 Kings 23:10, might be better interpreted as mulk, according to Stager and Wolff. The Semitic consonants on the funeral stelae at Carthage are the same Hebrew consonants (מֹלֵךְ) that are sometimes translated as "Molech" in biblical texts (Smith, 2013).

Abraham Akedah

The Akedah is a pivotal event in religious history, according to Levenson. He contends that the Akedah grounds earlier promises of God (such as those found in Genesis 12) that were based solely on God's grace "on the basis of Abraham's willingness to donate Isaac for sacrifice."(Levenson, 1993, p. 193). Many people believe that Genesis 22:1–14 highlights the stark differences between the ancient Israelite religion and so-called "pagan" customs, particularly with regard to the rituals of child and human sacrifice. God eventually steps in and spares Isaac by offering an alternative sacrifice in the form of a ram, even though Abraham is initially summoned to sacrifice his own son. In this way, the Akedah could be interpreted as rejecting paganism and/or reflecting "a transformation of pagan values, specifically, the idea that the pagan gods of nature, embodying as they do projections of human emotions and desires, need to be assuaged and flattered and, as a result, became recipients of the ultimate pacification by human beings, by the periodic sacrifice of their own kind" (Staubli, 2015, p. 78).

In what Talmudic sources believe to be Isaac's 37th year (based on Sarah's death at age 127 and Isaac's birth age of 90), God appears to Abraham, gives him three commands, and gradually reveals what is expected of him.(Lawrence, 2012) In the end, the Akedah represents Abraham's failed attempt to present his cherished son to God as a sacrifice. It carries ominous overtones of deceit, sacrifice, and primogeniture. "God had placed certain demands on his people, demands that we usually refer to as law," according to Tremper Longman III quotes by Lawrance, who describes sacrifice openly as a way to mend a connection with God when a sin has been committed. A rupture in one's connection with God was caused by the violation of this law, and sacrifice was the outward manifestation of inward repentance (Lawrence, 2012).

Benno Jacob contrasts the akedah of Genesis 22:1 with the Ayub in one of the most prominent Jewish comments on Genesis, which was published in Berlin in 1934. He specifically mentions the *haś·śā·ṭān* in Job 2:1 and the account of Bileam, who can also refer to himself as *ḥaś·śā·ṭān* (Numb 22:32). This indicates that Benno Jacob believes the voice of the tempter in Genesis 22 is that of one of God's servants, a member of the council of the heavenly throne, rather than the voice of God.(Noort, 2002).

Scolnic argues that it is challenging to read Genesis 22 without these exegetical layers because the text has been so heavily interpreted. We must set aside any biases and assumptions and read the verse in its context, as opposed to commentary that, for instance, highlights how "monstrous" God's test is. Our issues with this "tough" story are just that—our issues. In a very different way, I will propose that God wants Abraham to show that he understands who is in charge of life. Every one of the eight times that God addresses Abraham in the Book of Genesis has to do with his offspring and/or descendants (Scolnic, 2020).

"The teleological suspension of the ethical," as Søren Kierkegaard put it. His 1843 book *Fear and Trembling*, which offers a Christian philosophical interpretation of the terrifying narrative found in Genesis 22:1–19, is arguably his most famous contribution. Abraham is put to the test by God when he is told to sacrifice Isaac, his son with Sarah, on Moriah. Isaac wonders why there isn't an animal victim on the way there. Abraham responds cryptically, "God will see to the lamb for the offering himself, my son" (Gen 22:8). One The father ties his son (*ʿāqad*) to the altar on the selected mountain. However, an angel interrupts the sacrifice as he lifts the knife. Abraham is blessed by the angel, reiterating and extending God's previous covenantal promise of abundant offspring. This

tale is known to Jews as the Aqedah, or "binding" (E. Schwartz, 2023).

In the view of Kierkegaard, the way Abraham resolves an unresolvable contradiction between moral and divine requirements makes the Aqedah the model of authentic faith. According to Kierkegaard, the divine command is for him to sacrifice his son, which entails murdering him. The moral need is to refrain from murder. According to Kierkegaard, "the ethical as such is the universal, and as the universal it applies to everyone." "It possesses no external element that serves as its telos." Abraham disregards this seemingly universal principle because of what he believes to be an exception: God's mandate. In pursuit of the telos of obeying God, he suspends the ethical teleologically. Faith is the "paradox" in which "the single individual is higher than the universal," according to Kierkegaard (E. Schwartz, 2023).

Abraham is portrayed in Genesis as a product of his cultural surroundings. Although his relationship with one deity is unique, his conception of divinity is not (Ruvilla, 2012). He doesn't invent a new idea of a cult; he just makes new cultic websites. In this context, the evidence regarding child sacrifice suggests that Abraham does not consider God's demand to sacrifice Isaac to be morally repugnant—or even moral in the sense of the word. Instead, he most likely sees it as a fully understandable (although exceptional and challenging) religious duty, just like others in the area did. Since it portrays a crisis situation where a divinely sanctioned system seems to be unraveling inexplicably, the Aqedah is a theodicy. Abraham's faith is based on his trust in God despite this disorder; in other words, he believes that there is divine order hidden behind this apparent disorder. There is substantial Jewish precedence for reading the Aqedah in theodic terms (E. Schwartz, 2023).

Abraham in particular was selected as a parent role model. "Because I have selected him, he will teach his children and his household after him to follow the Lord's path by doing what is right and just," God says of him. But if he was prepared to sacrifice his child, how could he be a model father? Instead, he ought to have told God, "Take me as a sacrifice, not my child, if you want me to show You how much I love You." Kierkegaard's idea of the "teleological suspension of the ethical" must be rejected by Jews and all people. This concept allows religious extremists the freedom to commit atrocities in God's name. It is the reasoning behind the suicide bomber and the Inquisition. It is not the proper understanding of Judaism's rationale. God doesn't urge us to act immorally. We believe that "He is the Rock, His works are perfect; all His ways are just" (Deut. 32:4),

even though we may not always grasp ethics from God's point of view.(Sacks, n.d.) According to the Bible, Sarah is the mute and silenced mother of the Akedah and does not have an active relationship with God at the time of Abraham's testing. Paradoxically, centuries later, she gains prominence in contemporary writing, specifically in Israeli poetry, and has a substantial presence in relation to the story in Genesis (Webber, 2017, p. 275).

When God asked Abraham to sacrifice his son, He wasn't asking for a child sacrifice; rather, He was asking for something entirely different. He desired that Abraham give up ownership of his son. He sought to make the idea that children are not the property of their parents a non-negotiable premise of Jewish law. Because of this, three of the four matriarchs discovered that they could only conceive by a miracle. The children they had were not the result of a biological process; rather, the Torah wants us to understand that they were the children of God. So why did God tell Abraham to "offer him up as a burnt offering" in relation to Isaac? For all future generations to understand that Jews do not denounce child sacrifice because they lack the fortitude to do so. Abraham serves as evidence that they are courageous. God is the God of life, not death, which is why they don't do it. Death is not considered sacred in Judaism, as seen by the Red Heifer ritual and the commandments of purity. Death contaminates (Sacks, n.d.).

Key Comparative Insights

Aspect	Abraham's Akedah (Gen. 22)	ANE Child Sacrifice Traditions
Purpose	Test of faith and obedience	Appeasement of gods, fulfillment of vows
Outcome	Child spared; animal substituted	Child typically killed and offered
Divine response	God intervenes and prohibits the sacrifice	Deities in ANE often accept or demand sacrifice
Theological message	God values life and provides alternatives	Sacrifice seen as a form of divine devotion

Giving a gift to gods or other supernatural beings is arguably the most often mentioned reason for sacrifice. In fact, the idea of offering something of value to the giver, if not the recipient, is typically implied by the word sacrifice as it appears in contemporary languages. The sacrificial gift is sometimes seen as food for the gods, who

rely on humanity for sustenance. For instance, Mesopotamian mythology explained that humans were specifically made to provide sustenance for the gods, relieving them of hard work. Human blood and heart sacrifices were believed to provide the divine world with essential sustenance in ancient Mesopotamian (G. M. Schwartz, 2012, p. 4).

Abraham's trials are also recounted and explained in the Midrashic traditions. According to Jewish sources, the most terrible of Abraham's 10 tribulations is the one described in Genesis 22. To make sure the reader knows how serious the trial is, the word is used specifically. Interestingly, neither Abraham nor the deity characterize the event as a test; rather, it is the author or narrator who does so. It is unclear to the readers whether Abraham knew this was a test. This may not be the case for Abraham or his god, even though the author states it as his interpretation of the event or story. Here, the author is reading it as a test to deliver a specific message to his audience, rather than what it meant to Abraham (Danam, 2018).

CONCLUSION

The Binding of Isaac (Akedah) stands as a pivotal narrative in the Hebrew Bible, both theologically and culturally, offering a profound commentary on the nature of faith, obedience, and divine morality. When examined alongside the broader context of child sacrifice practices in the Ancient Near East, the story emerges not only as a test of Abraham's loyalty but also as a radical critique of surrounding cultures. While evidence from texts and archaeology confirms that child sacrifice was a real and sometimes revered ritual in neighboring societies such as the Canaanites, Moabites, and Phoenicians, the Akedah marks a significant departure. By ultimately preventing the sacrifice, the biblical narrative subverts the expectation of divine demand for human blood, instead affirming a moral trajectory that distances Israelite religion from its contemporaries. The Binding of Isaac (Akedat Yitzchak) is a profound and deliberate repudiation of child sacrifice, distinguishing the ethical monotheism of Israel from the cultic practices of its Ancient Near Eastern neighbors.

While surrounding cultures often viewed child sacrifice as a means of appeasing capricious deities, the Torah presents a radically different vision—one in which God tests Abraham not to endorse violence, but to reveal the ultimate rejection of it. The dramatic climax, where the angel intervenes and a ram is offered in Isaac's place, serves not only as a divine condemnation of human sacrifice but as a cornerstone of Jewish faith:

obedience must be paired with moral discernment, and the value of human life is sanctified above ritualistic zeal. Yet the enduring message remains clear—unlike the gods of neighboring cultures, the God of Israel does not demand the life of the child, but instead demands the transformation of the heart. The Akedah thus becomes not a story of sacrifice fulfilled, but one of sacrifice averted—a sacred turning point that redefines worship in ethical, not violent, terms.

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