

# Human Sacrifice and the Book of Abraham

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Some time ago the author had occasion to show Facsimile 1 from the Book of Abraham to some of his fellow students in Assyriology. When these students learned that it pictured Abraham about to be offered as a human sacrifice in Babylon, they immediately responded by claiming that there was no evidence that the Babylonians ever practiced human sacrifice. With their negative response and the renewed interest aroused by the recent recovery of the papyrus from which Joseph Smith took Facsimile 1, the author felt constrained to dig into the matter. The following is the result of his probings.

Did the ancient Babylonian's practice human sacrifice? The world of scholarship is confused on the issue. Such scholars as Blome,<sup>1</sup> Ward,<sup>2</sup> and de Vaux<sup>3</sup> flatly deny that human sacrifice was practiced in the Babylon of Abraham's time, though de Vaux concedes that the practice came into use in the seventh century b.c. under the influence of the worship of Molech in Canaan. Other scholars, Jastrow,<sup>4</sup> Jeremias,<sup>5</sup> Meissner,<sup>6</sup> look at the evidence, but remain uncommitted. "On the other hand it is quite uncertain, whether human sacrifice was known in Mesopotamia . . ." are the words of Meissner and reflect the attitude of the other uncommitted scholars.

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<sup>1</sup>Friedrich Blome, *Die Opfermaterie in Babylonien und Israel*. (Rome, 1934), p. 369.

<sup>2</sup>William H. Ward, *Seal Cylinders of Western Asia*. (Washington, D.C., 1910), pp. 58, 309, 367.

<sup>3</sup>Roland de Vaux, *Studies in Old Testament Sacrifice* (Cardiff, 1964), pp. 55-60.

<sup>4</sup>Morris Jastrow, Jr., *Civilization of Babylonia and Assyria* (Philadelphia, 1915), pp. 358, 359.

<sup>5</sup>Alfred Jeremias, *Das Alte Testament in Lichte des Alten Orients* (Leipzig, 1916), p. 399.

<sup>6</sup>Bruno Meissner, *Babylonien and Assyrien* (Heidelberg, 1925), II, 84.

At this point it seems appropriate to define the term "human sacrifice." We will consider an act as a human sacrifice if (1) a person is killed either on an altar or in a temple or other holy place, and, (2) the killing is being done by a priest, priestess, or god. Both of these conditions should prevail.

With this definition of human sacrifice in mind, let us now look at the evidence. The evidence concerning the practice of human sacrifice among the Semites of Babylonia comes from four sources: (1) the circumstantial evidence from archaeological digs, (2) comments in ancient written texts, (3) human sacrifice as pictured on cylinder seals, and (4) the behavior of other Semitic peoples regarding the practice of human sacrifice.

To date, only one archaeological dig has produced any circumstantial evidence. Excavation at the Anu-Adad Temple in Assur, recovered a stele which describes the activities of Samši-Adad IV (823-811 BC). The excavator notes: "It is remarkable that a human skull was found under the stele. From the stele's inscription it is unthinkable that this is a grave with a tombstone."<sup>7</sup> If not a tombstone, then what? Meissner suggests that the skull "originated perhaps from a human sacrifice" (p. 84).

All of this is of course very conjectural, but it does leave one wondering what a human skull is doing under a historical stele in a temple.

Several Assyrian legal documents contain penalty formulas which demand that the person who breaks the contract can redeem himself only by burning his eldest child on the altar of a temple. Below are the texts and their translations:

Text K 439 dated to Sulmu-Sarri (698 BC):<sup>8</sup> Reverse lines 5 and 6 read *i šarrap māras-su rabi-tu itti BANMIN.NU.ERIN a-na Be-lit Sēri i-šar-rap* which being translated reads "he will burn his oldest, daughter with 'a quantity of ritual cider' to Bēlit-Sēri, he will burn."

Text K 1492 dated to Šamaš-Kašid-Abi (669 BC):<sup>9</sup> Reverse lines 7-10 read *lu-u apal-šu rabū lu-u māras-su itti 10 imēr ri-qi-e tāb-te a-na Be-la-tu Se-e-ri: i-šarrap* which is translated

<sup>7</sup>Walter Andrae, *Der Anu-Adad-Tempel in Assur* (Leipzig, 1909), p. 78.

<sup>8</sup>C. H. W. Johns, *Assyrian Deeds and Documents* (Cambridge, 1898), I, 389, 390.

<sup>9</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 227, 228.

as "either his oldest son or his oldest daughter with ten *imer* of good spices he will burn to Bēlat-Sêri."

Text K 1488 with no date given:<sup>10</sup> Reverse lines 7-9 read *apal-šu- a-na<sup>d</sup>Šin i<sup>v</sup> sarrap māras-su rabi-te itti BANMIN.NU.-ERIN a-na Be-lit Sêri i<sup>v</sup>šar-ap* which reads in translation as "he will burn his oldest son to Sin, with a 'quantity of ritual cider' he will burn his oldest daughter to Bēlit-Sêri."

Text AO 2221 dated to Ša-Nabû-Šu (ca. 656 BC):<sup>11</sup> Reverse line 3 reads *apal-šu rabû ina<sup>d</sup>ha-am-ri<sup>v</sup>ša<sup>d</sup>Adad i<sup>v</sup>sarrap* and is translated as "his oldest son he will burn in the sanctuary of the god, Adad."

In an old Babylonian text (Bu 88-5-12, 51) a man is mentioned in a list of offerings as a confirmation oath. Lines 33 and 34 read *awil-ia alap-ia immer-ia lu-u a-wi-lu-tum lu-u al-pu lu-u im-me-ru* which translates as "my man, my ox, my sheep, either a man or an ox or a sheep."<sup>12</sup>

These texts have been interpreted in four ways: (1) Johns suggested that the verb *šarāpu*, "to burn," had lost its force and referred only to a ritual.<sup>13</sup> (2) Furlani argued that since the penalty was so severe, the contracts were never broken.<sup>14</sup> (3) Jastrow was not sure whether these phrases should be accepted literally or as mere threats. He did feel that they suggested "that at one time children were offered as sacrifices in the way indicated."<sup>15</sup> (4) de Vaux finds the argument of Koehler and Ugnad most convincing (de Vaux, p. 59). These two scholars noted that the texts quoted above (except Bu 88-5-12, 51) come from the seventh century b.c. It was at this time that the worship of Molech with its burning of children was introduced to the Hebrews by the Phoenicians. They then speculate that the practice of burning children to a god was passed on from the West Semites to the Assyrians of the seventh century.<sup>16</sup>

<sup>10</sup>*Ibid.*, pp. 351, 352.

<sup>11</sup>*Textes Cuneiformes*, Vol. IX: *Contrats et Letters*, edited by G. Contenau (Paris, 1926), plate XXV.

<sup>12</sup>*Cuneiform Texts*, edited by E. A. Wallis Budge (London, 1898), Vol. 4, plate 8.

<sup>13</sup>Johns, *Assyrian Deeds and Documents*, III, 345, 346.

<sup>14</sup>Giuseppe Furlani, *Il Sacrificio nella Religione dei Semiti di Babilonia e Assiria* (Rome, 1933), pp. 273, 274.

<sup>15</sup>Jastrow, *Civilization of Babylonia and Assyria* pp. 385, 359.

<sup>16</sup>Josef Koehler and Arthur Ugnad, *Assyrische Rechtsurkunden* (Leipzig, 1913), p. 456.

The pictured evidence comes from cylinder seals. Below are the pictures concerning human sacrifice:

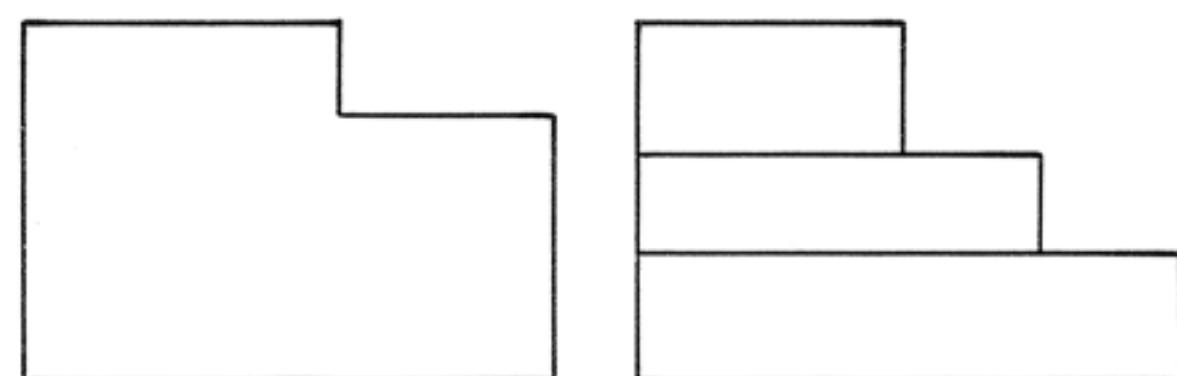
This first seal was catalogued by Ward (#138c, p. 53), Jeremias (#171, p. 399), and Boehmer (#482 and p. 82).<sup>17</sup>



Ward suggests that this seal represents two distinct scenes. On the left half two gods are talking. The other scene shows a god, drawn twice for symmetry, ready to kill a foe. On the other hand, Jeremias suggests that this may be a victim being dragged to the sacrificial altar at the left.

In lieu of our definition of sacrifice, it is appropriate at this point to define an altar. From the seals studied by Ward the following types of altars have been noted (pp. 360-367):

Stepped Altar



Hourglass Altar

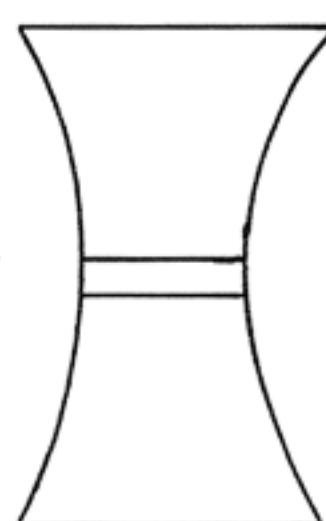
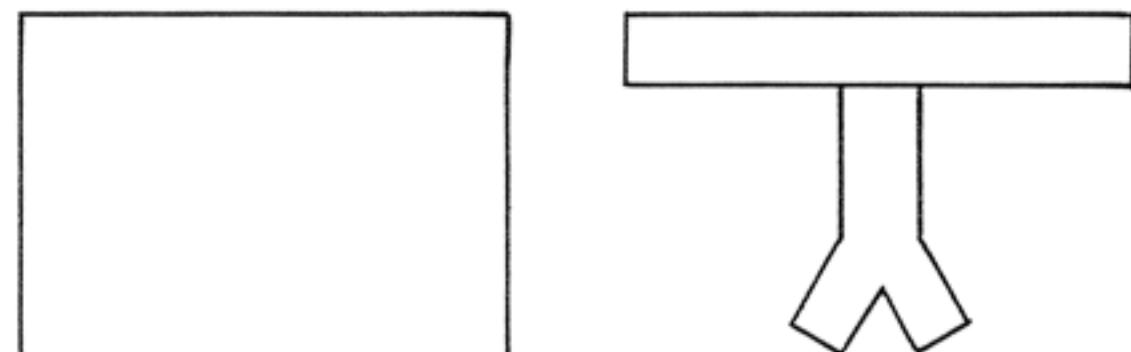


Table Altar



<sup>17</sup>Rainer Michael Boehmer, *Untersuchungen zur Assyriologie und vorderasiatischen Archäologie, Band IV: Die Entwicklung der Glyptic während der Akkad-Zeit* (Berlin, 1965).

Thus, in our first seal we find both the stepped and hour-glass altars present along with a god holding a knife of some sort. Note also the presence of a bird which is very similar to the bird in Facsimile 1 of the Book of Abraham.

This second seal was catalogued by Jeremias (#170, p. 399). Jeremias interpreted this seal as a human sacrifice. Indeed, we have a man about to be slain by a god, or a priest in the presence of god.



The third seal of interest to us was catalogued by Osten.<sup>18</sup> We have here our best pictured evidence which shows a man about to be sacrificed on a table altar. Concerning this seal



Osten says, "Sumero-Akkadian seal No. 153, however, shows a god being killed or sacrificed on an altar. This scene has a mythological meaning, but we may consider it as evidence that in earlier times in the Near East human beings were sacrificed" (p. 155).

We will now look at the practice of human sacrifice among other Semitic and neighboring peoples.

Gurney translates a Hittite text as follows: "If the troops have been beaten by the enemy they perform a ritual 'behind' the river, as follows: they 'cut through' a man, a goat, a

<sup>18</sup>Hans Henning von der Osten, *University of Chicago, Oriental Institute Publications, Vol. XXII: Ancient Oriental Seals in the Collection of Mr. Edward T. Newell* (Chicago, 1934), #153, p. 113.

puppy, and a little pig; they place half on this side and half on that side, and in front they make a gate of . . . wood and stretch a . . . over it, and in front of the gate they light fires on this side and that, and the troop walk right through, and when they come to the river they sprinkle water over them.”<sup>19</sup> He further notes that in a broken passage a prisoner of war is on a list of items for sacrifice.

Among current-day Arabs human sacrifice is forbidden and unpracticed, but we find hints that it was practiced in pre-Islamic times. An early Christian story tells of the son of St. Nilus who is saved from being sacrificed to Venice, the morning star, because the Arabs overslept.<sup>20</sup> A story from the third century a.d. says that the Arabs of Duma sacrificed a child every year and buried it under an altar.<sup>21</sup> Isaac of Antioch (fifth century) said that when the Arabs of the Syrian desert took Beth Hur in Mesopotamia, they sacrificed many children to the goddess Al Cuzza. A century later an Arab leader, Mundhir III, sacrificed four hundred nuns to the same goddess. Near Kufa are two stelae called “the two stones rubbed with blood.” These are supposed to have been set up by Mundhir who rubbed them each year with the blood of human sacrifices.<sup>22</sup> During the early days of Islam a story was told of Muhammad’s grandfather. The grandfather had vowed to sacrifice one of his sons if he were to have ten sons. At the birth of his tenth son he was advised to offer a hundred camels instead.<sup>23</sup>

The Old Testament makes frequent mention of the practice of human sacrifice among the Hebrews. Micah 6:1-8 includes human sacrifice in a list of offerings which are secondary to justice, love, and humility. Isaiah 66:3 gives several parallel lines. The first half of each line gives the acceptable practice, and the second half of each line gives the pagan practice:

slay the ram, smite a man  
sacrifice the lamb, offer up a dog

In Leviticus 19:21 and 20:2-5 the sacrificing of a son to

<sup>19</sup>O. R. Gurney, *The Hittites* (Baltimore, 1962), p. 151.

<sup>20</sup>Photius, *Patrologia Graeca*, p. 1xxix, cols. 583-694.

<sup>21</sup>Prophry, *De Abstinentia*, II, 56.

<sup>22</sup>Julius Wellhausen, *Reste arabischen Heidentums* (Berlin, 1897), pp. 40-43.

<sup>23</sup>M. Gaudefrey-Demombynes, *Mahomet* (Paris, 1957), p. 57.

Molech is forbidden. Mention is made of "passing children through the fire of Molech" in II Kings 3:27, 16:3, 17:17, and 23:10.

Human sacrifice in North Africa is discussed by de Vaux (pp. 75-84). The bones in the sacrificial pits of the Carthage temple were studied by a medical student and revealed the following:

Eighth and seventh centuries	
human bones alone	55.5%
animal bones alone	11.1%
mixed	33.3%
Sixth and fifth centuries	
human bones alone	48.0%
animal bones alone	23.0%
mixed	29.0%
Fourth through second centuries	
human bones alone	21.7%
animal bones alone	26.0%
mixed	52.2%

Now that we have looked at the evidence from archeology, texts, pictures, and neighbors, what does it all add up to?

When we remember that the Arabs of Duma sacrificed a child each year and put the body under the altar, it is not so surprising to find a skull buried under a stele in the Anu-Adad-Temple.

Also, de Vaux declared that human sacrifice came with the Phoenicians in the eighth and seventh centuries and that the new mode of worship was reflected in the penalty formulas of seventh-century Assyrian contracts. But the human sacrifices of the Phoenicians and Canaanites were to Molech, whereas the human sacrifice in the contracts were to well-established deities, Sin and Belit-Sêri, who had well-established rituals. Why should they adopt a new ritual? It would seem easier to introduce a whole new religion, such as the worship of Molech, than to change an old ritual. Also, de Vaux fails to take into account the Old Babylonian confirmation oath which lists a man among items to be sacrificed. In this regard it should be noted that Abraham's home, Ur of the Chaldees, was one of the great centers for worship of the moon-god Sin.

Neither can the pictures be brushed aside as weak hints. With the cylinder seal published by Osten (see above) we no longer have weak hints but a strong one.

Further, as we consider how many Semitic and neighboring cultures practiced human sacrifice, it becomes most plausible to think that the ancient Semites of Mesopotamia also practiced it. And it also becomes most plausible to think that an attempt was made to sacrifice Abraham as Joseph Smith declared it was.