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## **The Sacrifice of the Firstborn in the Hebrew Bible**

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## Abstract

This research examines the central question: what is the meaning of the demand that all that first opens the womb should be given to the God of the Hebrew Bible? The research studies in detail the concept of the firstborn in the Hebrew Bible and in the Ancient Near Eastern context. It concludes that though children may have been sacrificed to Yahweh, the God of the Hebrew Bible, the statement 'all that opens the womb belongs to me' has the function of opposing the existing practice of child sacrifice. Critical analysis of the Molech cult concludes that sacrifice of children to Molech was commonly practised. Molech is presented in the Hebrew Bible as the god of human sacrifice, a common practice amongst the people of the surrounding nations. The authors of the Hebrew Bible purposefully personified the sacrifice to Molech and presented it in a way to dissuade people from the continuing practice of human sacrifice. The writers explain that this practice is abhorrent to Yahweh. It is noticed that there was no demand for the firstborn specifically in the molech sacrifice.

It is observed that the Book of Genesis, with a polemic view on child sacrifice, presents the story of the near-sacrifice of Isaac. This is to demonstrate that Abraham, the founding father of the nation of Israel, did not actually sacrifice his son Isaac because Yahweh himself provided a substitute, a lamb. The story is presented in this way not only to explain clearly that child sacrifice is not needed, but also to introduce the theme of substitution. The current study also found that the Passover story is presented as a way to show the origin of setting apart the firstborn. Here the word 'consecrate' or 'give' does not imply 'sacrifice,' but rather, 'set apart.' There is no demand for a firstborn as the Passover sacrifice. It is stated clearly in the text that a lamb is used as a substitute.

The redemption of the firstborn of clean and unclean animals is also compared with the rules pertaining to human firstborn. It is stated that the concepts of redemption and substitution were emphatically promoted in order to stop the existing practice of child sacrifice. Thus, the research found that, the demand for 'everything that opens the womb' was a device used by the authors of the Hebrew Bible to remove the existing practice of child sacrifice. The writers were successful and child sacrifice totally eradicated from the religion of the Hebrew Bible.



## Contents

<b>1. Introduction.....</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1. Thesis Rationale .....	1
1.2. Firstborn in the Hebrew Bible .....	3
1.3. Outline of the Thesis .....	5
<b>2. Cult of Molech.....</b>	<b>11</b>
2.1. Introduction .....	11
2.2. History of Research.....	12
2.3. Evaluation and conclusion of the discussion .....	28
<b>3. Firstborn and the Cult of Molech.....</b>	<b>35</b>
3.1. Introduction.....	35
3.2. History of Research .....	36
3.3. Evaluation of the scholarly discussion on firstborn sacrifices.....	55
3.4. Analysis of Two Hebrew Words .....	69
3.5. Conclusion .....	72
<b>4. The Demand of the Deity (Genesis 22): Abraham and the Near Sacrifice of Isaac</b>	<b>80</b>
4.1. Introduction.....	80
4.2. Scope and Limitations .....	81
4.3. History of Research .....	82
4.4. The God of Abraham and His Demand for Child Sacrifice.....	85
4.5. The Interpretation of Genesis 22.....	93
4.6. The Demand of the Deity and Possible Reasons.....	96
4.7. The Deity's Demand and Words used.....	101
4.7.1. 'Your only son' אֶת־בְּנֶךָ.....	101
4.7.2. 'The Beloved Son' / 'the only son' יְהִיד .....	102
4.7.3. 'Whom you love' אֶהְבֶּב .....	106
4.7.4. 'Please' נָא .....	107
4.8. Evaluation .....	109
4.9. Conclusion .....	114
<b>5. The Firstborn and the Passover.....</b>	<b>118</b>
5.1. Introduction.....	118
5.2. History of Research .....	122
5.2.1. Nomadic Pastoral Thanksgiving Festival .....	124
5.2.2. Spring Festival .....	129
5.2.2.1. Nomadic Shepherd's Spring Festival .....	129
5.2.2.2. One Day Spring Festival .....	130
5.2.2.3. Spring Festival of the Tribal League.....	131
5.2.3. Ritualized Slaughter .....	132
5.2.4. Firstborn Sanctification Ritual .....	135
5.3. Etymology .....	137
5.3.1. Introduction.....	137
5.3.2. פֶּסַח: Various forms in the Hebrew Texts.....	137
5.3.3. פֶּסַח in Exodus 12 and 13.....	138
5.3.4. Summary .....	141
5.4. Analysis of Biblical Passages Relating to Passover.....	143
5.4.1. Exodus 12:1-13:16.....	144
5.4.2. Exodus 34:25.....	150

5.4.3. Numbers 9:1-14: .....	152
5.4.4. Numbers 28:16 .....	155
5.4.5. Deuteronomy 16:1-8. ....	156
5.5. Texts outside the Pentateuch .....	162
5.6. Firstborn and the Exodus Event .....	164
5.6.1. Replacement Theory .....	166
5.6.2. The Apotropaic Theory .....	167
5.6.3. A Pastoral Nomadic Theory .....	169
5.7. Historical Passover .....	171
5.8. Evaluation and Conclusion .....	173
<b>6. First-Born Animals Due to Yahweh and Their Redemption/Sacrifice.....</b>	<b>178</b>
6.1. Introduction .....	178
6.2. The Clean and the Unclean Animals .....	180
6.3. The Firstborn and Clean Animals and Unclean Animals.....	182
6.3.1. The Law concerning the Firstling of the Clean Animals. ....	183
6.3.2. The Law concerning the Firstling of the Unclean Animals. ....	192
6.4. Firstborn Animal Sacrifice: The Roles of Priest and People .....	197
6.5. The Principles of Redemption and Killing .....	204
6.6. Conclusion .....	208
<b>7. The firstborn humans given to Yahweh and their redemption .....</b>	<b>211</b>
7.1. Introduction .....	211
7.2. Hebrew words used for Consecration of Human Firstborn .....	215
7.2.1. נָתַן: Natan .....	215
7.2.2. קָדַשׁ: Qodesh .....	221
7.2.3. פָּדָה: Padah .....	226
7.3. The Firstborn and the Substitution: Numbers 3 .....	231
7.4. Consecration of the Human Firstborn: Analysis of Key Hebrew Texts.....	240
7.4.1. Exodus 13.....	242
7.4.2. Exodus 22:28-29 .....	250
7.4.3. Ex. 34:19-20 .....	252
7.4.4. Numbers 8:16-19 .....	254
7.4.5. Numbers 18:12-17.....	260
7.4.6. 2 Kings 3:26-27 .....	264
7.4.7. Micah 6:1-8 .....	267
7.4.8. Passing Children Through Fire .....	270
7.4.9. Topheth and Child Sacrifice in Jeremiah and Deuteronomy .....	273
7.4.10. Child Sacrifice in Ezekiel .....	276
7.5. Conclusion .....	279
<b>8. Conclusion.....</b>	<b>284</b>
<b>Bibliography.....</b>	<b>296</b>

## Chapter 1

### Introduction

#### 1.1. Thesis Rationale

Exodus 13:2 reads, “Consecrate to Me all the firstborn; whatever is the first to open the womb among the people of Israel, both of man and of beast, is Mine.” There is no hint of a redemption clause in this passage as one may find in other passages (Ex. 34:19, 20). In the absence of a redemption clause, Ex. 13:2 can be taken to suggest that the God of the Hebrew Bible was demanding that all the firstborn, both animal and human, be sacrificed to himself. This leads to the question as to whether the sacrifice of the firstborn was in fact part of the religious practice of Ancient Israel. On this point, scholars vary in their opinions.<sup>1</sup> There are a variety of interpretations of the consecration of the firstborn, from the possible existence of a firstborn sacrifice to a merely symbolic allusion to some past experience.

In addition to the demand for the firstborn by the deity of the Hebrew Bible, there are special rights and privileges assigned to the firstborn, such as a double portion of the patrimony and headship of the household or clan after the death of the father or head of clan. These show that the firstborn held a prominent place in the family and in wider society in Ancient Israel. However, there remain many questions related to the rights and privileges of the firstborn and how these might relate to the question of their sacrifice. The principles of primogeniture and the special status of the firstborn can be traced among other ancient near eastern peoples, the neighbours of

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<sup>1</sup> For example, Francesca Stavrakopoulou, *King Manasseh and Child Sacrifice: A Biblical Distortion of Historical Realities* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2004); Jon Douglas Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of The Beloved Son* (London: Yale University Press, 1993); L. E. Stager, “The Rite of Child Sacrifice at Carthage,” in J. G. Pedley and Ann Arbor (eds.), *New Light in the Ancient Carthage* (Michigan: University of Michigan, 1980), pp. 1-11.

the people of Ancient Israel the firstborn in particular.<sup>2</sup> Studies of human sacrifice in this period suggest that many of the neighbouring cultures may have practised human sacrifice, both of adults and children.

This suggests that the absence of any such practice would have marked out the people of Israel. In that case, the question then becomes one of explaining why the Hebrew Bible also contains strong prohibitions of child sacrifice, and why it was not only abandoned but denounced. This leads us to the central questions of the thesis: How are we to understand the command by the God of Israel to consecrate to him ‘the first that opens the womb’ and reconcile this with the strong opposition to human sacrifice of either children or adults evidenced by many authors of the Hebrew Bible? Were the firstborn in Israel ever sacrificed in the worship of Yahweh at any time, and, if so, why was the practice prohibited?

To understand the concept of the firstborn, the research will explain the meaning of the key terms in Exodus 13:2: ‘consecrate,’ ‘all firstborn’ and ‘belongs to Yahweh,’ which are also found in other texts such as Ex. 34:25; Lev. 23:5; Num. 9:1-14; 28:16; 33:3-4; and Deut. 16:1-8. What is it that God is demanding in these texts? Do these phrases imply that all the firstborn in

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<sup>2</sup> Victoria Phillips, “Blessing the Firstborn: A Feminist Critical Reading of Luke 11:27-28,” In E. A. McCabe (ed.), *Women In The Biblical World* (Lanham: University Press of America, 2009), pp. 87-97; Brian Weinstein, “Reuben: The Predicament Of The Firstborn,” *Jewish Bible Quarterly*, 36 (2008), pp. 196-200; Roger Syren, *The Forsaken Firstborn*(Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993); B. J. Beitzel, “The Right of the Firstborn (pi-snaim) in the Old Testament (Deut 21:51-17),” in W. Kaiser Jr. and R. Young-blood (eds.), *A Tribute to Gleason Archer* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1986), pp. 179-90; Elvin W. Janetzki, “Firstborn,” *Lutheran Theological Journal*, 7 (1973), pp. 40-48; William Edward Hulme, *Firstborn* (St Louis : Concordia Publishing House, 1972); Andreas Reichert, *Ael, The Firstborn of God: A Topic of Early Deuteronomical Theology* (Jerusalem: World Union of Jewish Studies, 1977); W. O. E. Oesterley, *Sacrifices in Ancient Israel: Their origin, purposes and development* (London: Hodder, 1937).



Israel were sacrificed or were there alternative ways of ‘giving’ the firstborn to God? Is the interpretation consistent across the Hebrew Bible? For instance, do we find evidence that the firstborn were sacrificed in earlier periods, preceding the development of ways to substitute for them or redeem them?

## 1.2. Firstborn in the Hebrew Bible

Taken at face value, texts such as Genesis 22 and Exodus 13 suggest that the people of Ancient Israel practised human firstborn sacrifice in the very early period of their history.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, the organised religious system of Ancient Israel attested in the books of law and the prophets viewed any form of human sacrifice as a prohibited practice, instead proposing a redemptive theology for the firstborn where substitute sacrifices may be offered or dedication may be by means other than sacrifice. Despite this, scholars claim that, although there was political, religious and legal opposition, the practice continued until the exilic period (586 BC).<sup>4</sup>

A central claim of this thesis is that a crucial text in this regard is the account of the redemption of the firstborn sons of Israel during the final plague on Egypt. In this passage, it is implied that all the firstborn in Egypt were killed in the night, prior to the Exodus. The Israelite

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<sup>3</sup> There is scholarly debate about the historicity of Abraham and related issues. For the purpose of this research, we accept Abraham as a person who was the father figure of the ancient Israelites, as explained by the Biblical Texts. For a critical discussion on the issue see: John Van Seters, *Abraham in history and tradition* (London: Yale University Press), 1975; Paul R. Williamson, *Abraham, Israel and the nations: The patriarchal promise and its covenantal development in Genesis* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2000); A. Malamat, *Mari and the Bible: A collection of studies* (Jerusalem: Hebrew University, 1975).

<sup>4</sup> For example, Stavrakopoulou, *King Manasseh and Child Sacrifice*, pp. 74-76; John Van Seters, “The Law on child Sacrifice in Ex 22, 28b-29,” *Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses* 74 (1998), pp. 364-372.

firstborn were protected by placing the blood of the Passover lamb on their door frames (Exodus 12-13). This gives evidence of a tradition that connected the killing of the Egyptian firstborn and the sparing of the firstborn of Israel. God's demand for the firstborn as His own has then to be read in connection with his provision of means by which they can be spared. However, this position has been challenged and disputed.<sup>5</sup>

In addition, there are questions about the rebellious nature and practices of Israelites. A detailed study of the history of Israel as set out in the Hebrew Bible suggests that the people of Israel failed to keep many aspects of the Mosaic Law, including the redemption of the firstborn. This may be related to their close links with more general ancient near eastern traditions and practices. It is important to determine which factors led to accounts where the people appear to defy the law and its clear warnings. The texts of the Hebrew Bible reflect the interpretation of Israel's practices and history in hindsight by their authors or later editors. These written accounts may not accurately reflect historical events and practices. There is always the possibility that readers are being led to hear and think what the author or editors wanted them to think.<sup>6</sup> We shall study the text as it is written and give validity to the final form of the text rather than reading the ancient context and interpreting the text accordingly.

This work will also focus on the factors that led to the redemption from sacrifice of the firstborn in the religion of Israel.<sup>7</sup> Van Seters and many others<sup>8</sup> have observed that there was a

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<sup>5</sup> For example, see Van Seters, "The Law on child Sacrifice in Ex 22, 28b-29," pp. 364-372.

<sup>6</sup> For discussion see Thomas Hartwell Horne, *An Introduction to the Critical Study and Knowledge of the Holy Scriptures* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013); David McLain Carr, *An introduction to the Old Testament: Sacred Texts and Imperial Contexts of the Hebrew Bible* (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2010).

<sup>7</sup> I will be using the term 'religion of Israel' in the current research to avoid confusion between Judah, Israel, and Judaism. The term the 'religion of Israel' here means the ancient religion

progression in the religious thinking of Israel from firstborn sacrifice to redemption, which will be analysed in detail. It is suggested that Yahweh was believed to accept child sacrifice during the earlier period of Israel's history. Later legislation banned sacrifice of the firstborn and a redemptive clause was introduced whereby an alternative animal offering was ordained. There is textual evidence in the Pentateuchal literature about sacrificing children to certain gods (Lev 18:21; 20:2 – 5; 2 Kings 23:10; Jeremiah 7: 31; 19:5; 32: 35; Ezekiel 20: 25 – 26; Mic. 6: 1-5). The textual evidence seems to suggest that the writers viewed this as a practice carried out in Israel though they opposed the idea of human/ child sacrifice and it is totally removed from the religion of the Hebrew Bible.

### 1.3 The Outline of the Thesis

The present research is subdivided into 9 chapters, including an introduction and a conclusion.

#### Chapter 1. Introduction.

Chapter 2: Cult of Molech. This chapter shall analyze the association between child sacrifice and the so-called cult of Molech. There are questions as to whether the term מֹלֵךְ referred to a god or to a kind of human sacrifice. The position that Molech was a god requiring human sacrifice as part of his worship (cf. Lev. 18:21; 20:2-5; 2 Kings 23:10; Jer. 32:35) has been

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practised by both Israel and Judah. The current research also uses the word 'Israel' for both Judah and Israel.

<sup>8</sup> John Van Seters, *Changing Perspectives 1: Studies in the History, Literature and Religion of Biblical Israel* (London: Equinox, 2011), pp. 399-408; Stavrakopoulou, *King Manasseh and Child Sacrifice*, pp. 74-76; Van Seters, "The Law on child Sacrifice in Ex 22, 28b-29," pp. 364-372.

challenged by many scholars. The current research will review the scholarly debate surrounding Molech and will contribute to the solution by arguing that מִלְכָּם was a kind of human sacrifice which was later personified as a god of human sacrifice in order to weaken any association between Yahweh and such practices.

Chapter 3. Firstborn and the Cult of Molech. This chapter builds on the argument of Chapter 2 and links this to the demand for and possible sacrifice of the firstborn in the Hebrew Bible. The current scholarly debate on the issue will be studied, and the chapter will look at the interrelations between מִלְכָּם sacrifice, the personified god Molech, and the demand for sacrifice of the firstborn in the Hebrew Bible. The central question in this chapter is whether the מִלְכָּם sacrifice exclusively involved the firstborn or whether the victim could be drawn from a wider pool. There are arguments that the cult of Molech was originally part of the cult of Yahweh, which therefore practised child sacrifice. The research reveals that in fact they are different. The מִלְכָּם cult demands the sacrifice of children whereas the cults associated with Yahweh demand redemption of the firstborn. The research finds that though firstborn children were sacrificed in the cult of Molech, there was no exclusive claim for the firstborn to be sacrificed. This chapter also looks at the possible relationship between the demands for human sacrifice by certain Hindu deities and by Molech. It seems that the practice of child or human sacrifice in Hinduism and folk religion shares many similarities with the cult of Molech.

Chapter 4. Genesis 22: Abraham and Isaac. From considering Molech, the study will move on to the first reference to a divine command to offer a firstborn in the Hebrew Bible. The story of Abraham and Isaac has Abraham being asked to offer his firstborn son from Sarah as a sacrifice.

Abraham is pivotal to the history and religion of Israel. Hence the demand that Abraham offer his beloved son as a sacrifice is crucial to understanding the implications of the wider demand for the firstborn in the Hebrew Bible. This study will review the scholarly debate on the subject and examine the motives of the authors in placing the story of the demand from Yahweh for the sacrifice of Isaac in the Genesis account. The result will be analysed in the light of the demand for the firstborn found elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible. The study reveals that the ancient Israelites did indeed practise child sacrifice. The writer of the near-sacrifice of Isaac is trying to convince the people that even their founding forefather, although initially asked to sacrifice his firstborn son, was provided with a substitute. Thus, this urges the people to stop any kind of firstborn sacrifice of children and to find substitutes for them instead.

Chapter 5. The Firstborn and the Passover. Apart from the Abrahamic story, the other important event in relation to the demand for the firstborn is the Passover. In this chapter, a brief outline describes the origin of the Passover recorded in Exodus 12. The connection between the demands for the giving of the Israelites' firstborn children and animals in Ex. 13:2 and the story in Exodus 12 of the death of all the firstborn of Egypt will be evaluated. The demand of Yahweh for the Israelites' firstborn has a strong basis in the killing of all the Egyptian firstborn, as recorded in Exodus. It both echoes and contradicts it. The case is made that the Passover lamb does not have to be a firstborn animal, but can be any animal, as set out in the various descriptions of the Passover. This means that the Passover lamb is not a direct substitute for the firstborn. It is the killing of the Egyptian firstborn that is the counterpart to the instruction to consecrate all of the Israelites' firstborn. The importance of the firstborn in the texts referring to the patriarchal period

is also discussed. The chapter seeks to evaluate the demand to consecrate all the firstborn to the God of the Hebrew Bible as a requirement in the light of the Passover and subsequent Exodus.

Chapter 6. The Firstborn Animals and their Redemption. This chapter analyses the importance of firstborn animals, both clean and unclean, which are compared and contrasted with human firstborn. While firstborn clean animals are to be sacrificed, the unclean are to be redeemed. If they cannot be redeemed for any reason, they are to be killed by breaking their necks. The firstborn (clean or unclean) were not permitted to carry out any kind of work. It is observed that the concept of giving importance to the firstborn was already present in the culture of the ancient near eastern people. According to the Hebrew Bible, all the firstborn were sacred and therefore belonged to Yahweh.

The instructions regarding the firstborn in the Pentateuchal literature are clear. The firstborn animal law is applicable only to male offspring. The firstborn female offspring have no special status. While both humans and unclean animals are to be redeemed, redemption of animal and human is different and their redemption prices are also different. The Hebrew Bible does not consider animals as equal in value to humans. The human firstborn were always considered more valuable than any animal. In Hinduism, by contrast, this principle is not clearly established in the Vedas and other Hindu literatures. This research looks at this unequal valuation as being among the possible explanations for the outlawing of human or firstborn sacrifice in the Hebrew Bible.

Chapter 7. The Human Firstborn. This chapter examines the human firstborn and their consecration to Yahweh. The meaning and usage of key terms such as ‘give to me,’ ‘consecrate to me’ and other phrases related to the consecration of the firstborn are examined in detail. This

study looks at the specific Hebrew words used in the context of consecrating something or somebody to Yahweh. The critical analysis of the usage of different Hebrew words in different parts of the Hebrew Bible reveals their meaning through the context in which they are used. The different opinions of scholars on Ex. 13:2 are assessed here. It is observed that there is no evidence of a culture where *all* the firstborn are sacrificed to their gods or goddesses, although in some cultures human sacrifice in general, and child and firstborn sacrifice in particular, are a common practice. The purposes behind these sacrifices are examined. The study also critically evaluates the concept of substitution and redemption proposed in the Hebrew Bible. This chapter explores the development of the traditions in which firstborn sons were first required to be redeemed by animals, only for this provision to be superseded by the setting apart of the Levites who are deemed to function as surrogates for the firstborn. Possible explanations of the Levites' substitution on behalf of the firstborn are discussed and analysed. This thesis favours the interpretation that the substitution theory has been adapted to justify the priestly origin, function, responsibility, and authority of Levites. The reasons why the later authors and editors of the Hebrew Bible connect the treatment of the firstborn to Israel's specific cultural memories of the Passover celebration and the Exodus are also evaluated.

Chapter 8. Conclusion. The conclusion of these analyses reveals that the firstborn have received a special status in a wide range of cultures. As a result, the firstborn was preferred for human sacrifice in many ancient near eastern cultures. The Hebrew Bible contain evidence that the cult of Yahweh also embraced these practices but that, at some stage in its history, human sacrifice was discontinued. This was effected by the practice of redemption in the early period and substitution in later times, which the texts tied to specific events in the unique history of Israel.

The current research shows that the phrase ‘all that opens the womb belongs to me’ does not necessarily imply a demand for the sacrifice of the firstborn. Contextual reading of the passage reveals that the demand for the firstborn is linked to the specific event of the killing of the Egyptian firstborn prior to the Exodus. Substitution theory culminated in the replacement of the firstborn with the Levites. Finally, the conclusion recaps the discussions of the previous chapters and sums up the findings from the preceding investigations. This section also offers additional suggestions and nuances for further research into the area of the firstborn.



## Chapter 2

### The Cult of Molech

#### 2.1. Introduction

The Molech cult in the Hebrew Bible is directly linked with child sacrifice, and therefore the study of the biblical account of human child sacrifice should start with the cult of Molech. This is the gateway to understanding the human and/or child sacrifice system in the Hebrew Bible. Traditionally, it was believed that Molech was a god requiring human sacrifice as part of his worship (Lev. 18:21; 20:2-5; 2 Kings 23:10; Jer. 32:35). However, Eissfeldt<sup>9</sup> challenged this position based on a lack of evidence for a god named *mlk* outside the Hebrew Bible. He argued that *mlk* was a sacrificial term used for a particular kind of sacrifice where human children were sacrificed. Current scholarly debate argues that Molech may not be a god, but a term used to describe the sacrifice of human children, and some scholars argue that children were sacrificed in the worship of Yahweh. Scholars address this issue in various ways, including suggesting that the writers of the Hebrew Bible misunderstood the term Molech, or purposely diverted the attention of the reader away from Yahweh to a deity of human sacrifice because of the prevailing practice of child sacrifice among the people of the Hebrew Bible.

According to the Hebrew Bible, the worship of מִלְכָּה worship directly involved child sacrifice (Lev. 18:21; 20:2-5; 2 Kings 23:10; Jer. 32:35). In the following pages, I will not only examine the scholarly debate on this issue but also attempt to explain the Molech cult's relation to the

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<sup>9</sup> O. Eissfeldt, *Molk als Opferbegriff im Punischen und Hebraischen und das Ende des Gottes Moloch* (Halle: Niemeyer, 1935).

firstborn. Some scholars<sup>10</sup> believe that the מִלֵּךְ worship of offering human sacrifice in the early period is directly linked to the demand of the God of the Hebrew Bible to consecrate every firstborn to him (Exo. 13:12), and thus try to connect the command in Exodus to ‘give all that open the womb to the Lord’ with the cult of Molech. Thus, they try to connect מִלֵּךְ with Yahweh, and argue that it was Yahweh who demanded and accepted these sacrifices, with מִלֵּךְ being the term for such sacrifices. Others<sup>11</sup> argue that Molech was an Ancient Near Eastern deity who accepted child sacrifices, a god of the netherworld who demanded human sacrifice. The current research will examine these arguments and the scholarly consensus on this matter, and propose an alternative interpretation.

## 2.2. History of Research

The question of the existence of a god named Molech became a heated issue among scholars only after Eissfeldt. However, there were no consensus among the earlier scholars identifying who is Molech. Daumer argues that Molech was an epithet of Yahweh,<sup>12</sup> a god of misfortune.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> B. D. Eerdmans, *The religion of Israel* (Leiden: University Press, 1947), pp. 38-40. For various opinions on the subject of child sacrifice see Susanna Shelby Brown, *Late Carthaginian Child Sacrifice and Sacrificial Monuments in Their Mediterranean Context* (JSOT/ASOR, 3; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991); John Day, *Molech: A God of Human Sacrifice in the Old Testament* (University of Cambridge oriental publications, 41; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); George C. Heider, *The Cult of Molek: A Reassessment* (JSOTSup, 43; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1985); Paul G. Mosca, *Child Sacrifice in Canaanite and Israelite Religion: A Study in Mulk and Milk* (Unpublished Dissertation; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1975); Jon Douglas Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son: The Transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993).

<sup>11</sup> Rebecca Doyle, *Faces of the Gods: Baal, Asherah and Molek and Studies of the Hebrew Scriptures* (Unpublished Dissertation; University of Sheffield, 1996); Mosca, *Child Sacrifice in Canaanite and Israelite Religion* (1975).

<sup>12</sup> G. Daumer, *Der Feuer-und Moloch-dienst der altrn Hebraer als urvalterlicher, legaler, orthodoxer, Kultus der Nation* (Branschweig: F. Otoo, 1842).

Others tried to re-vocalise the word, claiming it was a king god,<sup>14</sup> or perhaps a Phoenician or Canaanite god revived during the reign of Ahab or Ahaz.<sup>15</sup> Though there were a range of differing views and arguments, the scholarly discussion on Molech was significantly changed when Eissfeldt made his bold statement that Molech was a sacrificial term and not a god.

Scholars argue that the sacrifice of the firstborn child was connected with מִלֶּךְ because, in the so-called ‘Book of the Covenant’ such as in Ex. 22:28 (cf. 13:2), the provision for redemption is absent. This argument gained momentum and wide acceptance after the publication of Eissfeldt’s monograph on the cult of Molech,<sup>16</sup> where he argues that ‘Molech’ was a technical term for a specific type of sacrifice. He further suggests that child sacrifice was an acceptable form of worship in the cult of Yahweh prior to the Josianic reformation.<sup>17</sup> Eissfeldt’s argument has two threads based on:

1. The usage of the Punic term *mlk* and
2. The usage of the Hebrew term מִלֶּךְ with preposition לְ and the usage of other words for sacrifice in the Hebrew Bible.

We shall briefly evaluate various scholarly arguments, starting with Eissfeldt.

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<sup>13</sup> E. Meier, “Review of F. W. Ghillany, *Die Menschenopfer der alter Hebraer*,” *TSK* 16 (1842), 1007.

<sup>14</sup> A. Geiger, *Urschrift und Übersetzungen der Bible in ihrer Abhängigkeit von der inneren Entwicklung des Judentums* (Frankfurt: Verlag madda, 1928), 290-308.

<sup>15</sup> See S. W. Baudissin, “Molech,” in *Paulys Real-Encyclopadie* (Leipzig: J. C. Hinrichs, 1903).

<sup>16</sup> O. Eissfeldt, *Molk als Opferbegriff im Punischen und Hebraischen und das Ende des Gottes Moloch* (Halle: Niemeyer, 1935).

<sup>17</sup> Eissfeldt, *Molk als Opferbegriff im Punischen*, p. 59.

Eissfeldt argues that the Punic term *mlk* is used for sacrifice and does not refer to a king. Though many scholars agree with this argument, for example John Day,<sup>18</sup> there are many scholars such as M. Weinfeld<sup>19</sup>, A. Cooper<sup>20</sup> and Heider<sup>21</sup> who dispute Eissfeldt's claim and arguing that the word is a specific term for sacrifice.<sup>22</sup>

Eissfeldt compares the Punic *mlk* with the Hebrew term for sacrifice, and affirms that the Punic *mlk*, the Hebrew מִלְכָּה and other words such as עֹלָה and זָבַח used for sacrifices in the Hebrew Bible have similar usages.<sup>23</sup> Eissfeldt looks at the linguistic usage of the preposition לְ before the Hebrew sacrificial term used with *Molech*; מִלְכָּה לְ could either be translated as 'to the molech' or 'as a *molk* sacrifice,' similarly with עֹלָה לְ - 'as a burnt offering' (Gen. 22:2, 13); זָבַח לְ - 'as a guilt offering'; and לְכָל־נֶדָר 'for any vow' (Deut. 23:19).<sup>24</sup>

Eissfeldt's arguments were further developed by other scholars, notably Fevrier. He published five articles between 1953-1964 claiming that מִלְכָּה was a kind of sacrifice and not a name of a god.<sup>25</sup> He made further claims that מִלְכָּה was a blood sacrifice where not only children

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<sup>18</sup> Day, *Molech*.pp. 9-14.

<sup>19</sup> M. Weinfeld, "The Worship of Molech and of the Queen of Heaven and its Background," *UF* 4 (1972), 135-40.

<sup>20</sup> A. Cooper, "Divine names and Epithets in the Ugaritic Texts," in S. Rummel (ed.), *Ras Shamra Parallels*, vol. 3 (Rome, 1981), p. 446.

<sup>21</sup> Heider, *Cult of Molek*. pp. 45-59.

<sup>22</sup> For a discussion see, Jacob Milgrom, *The Anchor Yale Bible - Leviticus 17 -22: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, (London: Yale University Press, 2008), pp. 1555-1571.

<sup>23</sup> Eissfeldt, *Molk als Opferbegriff im Punischen*, p. 38.

<sup>24</sup> Eissfeldt, *Molk als Opferbegriff im Punischen*, p. 38.

<sup>25</sup> Fevrier, "Molchomor," *RHR* 143 (1953), 8-18; "Le vocabulaire sacrificiel punique," *JA* 243 (1955), 49-63; "Essai de reconstruction du sacrifice Molek," *JA* 248 (1960), 167-87; "Le rite de substitution dans les textes de N'Gaous," *JA* 250 (1962), 1-10; "Les rites sacrificiels chez les Bebreux et a Carthage," *REJ* 4/3 (1964), 7-18.

were sacrificed, but lambs were substituted for the children.<sup>26</sup> In his study, Fevrier tries to prove that there was a development in the sacrifices of people in Phoenicia and Carthage. Following his observations of Phoenician and Carthaginian sacrifices, he proposes that Baal Hammon was a Phoenician god who accepted child sacrifice and was named after his association with the sun god and the burning pit, Topheth, where children were burned as sacrifices. In times of crisis, people made an oath offering their children, usually their firstborn, to Baal Hammon as a מִלְקָח sacrifice. Later the younger children were also included. Fevrier also claims that as the rituals changed over time, people began to buy children from poorer families. This was later changed, and lambs<sup>27</sup> were substituted for children to ensure the favour or miracle they would receive from the deity.<sup>28</sup> Fevrier argues that מִלְקָח was a kind of sacrifice that the Phoenicians practised and which was later adopted by the Israelites.<sup>29</sup>

De Vaux argues against Fevrier's claim that מִלְקָח referred to human sacrifice by stating that, 'the practice was introduced late in the history of Israel and from outside, and it was condemned by all spokesmen of Yahwism- the Deuteronomist, the prophets, and the priestly editors. It never formed part of the Israelite ritual for sacrifice.'<sup>30</sup>

The first attack against the view of Eissfeldt came from Buber, who argues the difficulty in translating Lev. 20:5 if one accepted the view of Eissfeldt. If the final form of the text is the

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<sup>26</sup> Fevrier, "Le rite de substitution dans les textes de N'Gaous," *JA* 250 (1962), 1-10.

<sup>27</sup> This is typically a sociological progress in most of the religions. The evidence in Hinduism and among the tribal religions shall be discussed in chapter 7.

<sup>28</sup> Fevrier, "Les rites sacrificiels," 7-18.

<sup>29</sup> Fevrier, "Essai de reconstruction du sacrifice Molek," 167-87.

<sup>30</sup> De Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions* (trans. J. McHugh; New York: McGraw Hill, 1961), p. 445.

basic principle for interpretation and translation, מִלְּךָ in Lev. 20:5 cannot be translated as a kind of sacrifice. It should be translated as a deity or as the name of an object. Buber argues that in Lev. 20:6 it is the demons that are whored after, and in Jud. 8:27 it is an ephod, an object, which they are whoring after. Thus, in Lev. 20:5 when it says ‘whoring after the *Molech*’, Molech must be a deity or some sort of object deified like the ephod of Gideon.<sup>31</sup> Bea<sup>32</sup> agrees with Buber’s argument, and says that ‘to whore after the *Molech*,’ in Lev. 20:5 is a phrase only used with regard to other deities<sup>33</sup> or objects venerated as deities.<sup>34</sup> De Vaux also agrees with Buber, and says that it is with difficulty one can translate Lev. 20:5 as a kind of sacrifice rather than sacrifice to a deity.<sup>35</sup>

Dhorme<sup>36</sup> argues for the possibility of dysphemistic revocalization of *melek* to *Molech* in parallel to that of Biblical בעל to בשַׁת and עֶשְׂתֵרָה to עֶשְׂתֵרָת . He also argues that the Ammonite *Milcom* and Ugaritic *Mlk* shows the existence of ‘king’ deities during the Bronze and Iron age. In line with the above argument, Albright notes that the Ammorite *Muluk* is the noun form of *mulku*, which means ‘kingship,’ and is the name of a deity related to worship of king. He claims that the early Semitic inhabitants of Mesopotamia and Syria venerated *Malik/Maluk* as the patron deity of vows, and offered children to him in dire circumstances.<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Martin Buber, *Königtum Gottes*, (Berlin: Schocken Verlag, 1936), p. 217.

<sup>32</sup> A. Bea, “Kinderopfer für Molock oder für Jahwe?” *Bib* 18 (1937), 95-107.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Hosea 1-3.

<sup>34</sup> Similar to Gideon’s Ephod (Jud. 8:27).

<sup>35</sup> De Vaux, *Studies in Hebrew Bible Sacrifice* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1964), p. 74.

<sup>36</sup> E. Dhorme, “Le Dieu Baal et le dieu Moloch dans la tradition Biblique,” *Anatolian Studies* 6 (1956), 57-61.

<sup>37</sup> W. F. Albright, *Archaeology and the Religion of Israel* (Baltimore: John Hopkins Press, 1942), 162-165.

W. Kornfield presents new evidence from the text. He disagrees with Dhorme's and Geiger's interpretation of מִלְּךָ, but argues that there is evidence for a god named Muluk in Mari and suggests that both Masoretic text and the Septuagint reflect the old pronunciation of the term מִלְּךָ (Jer. 32:35).<sup>38</sup> He agrees with the point that every other reference to מִלְּךָ can be translated as 'to offer as a מִלְּךָ sacrifice' with the exception of Lev. 20:5, which can only be translated as 'sacrifice to מִלְּךָ,' where מִלְּךָ is a deity or an epithet. He also puts forward seven points to justify his position:

1. The offerings made to the alleged deity are offered in *ge-hinnom*, New Testament *Gehena*, a name for hell.
2. In the Quran 43:77, *Malik* is referred to as the angel who governs hell.
3. In three Akkadian god lists there is a deity named *Malik* (KAV 63.2:37; KAV 42.1:32 and III R 66.2:9), who is the king of the underworld in the Mesopotamian pantheon.
4. A god named *milk* appears in Ugaritic pantheon.
5. Phoenician *Melqart* (King of the City) is associated with fire.
6. The Greek god Kronos received human sacrifice and it has been suggested that the name is related to *kraino*, meaning 'to rule' and thus is lexically parallel to Semitic *mlk*.
7. The south Arabian inscriptions attest a god *mlk*.

Kornfield observes that there was a deity prevalent in the northeast and northwest that Semites and Israelites could have borrowed during the Assyrian period.

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<sup>38</sup> W. Kornfield, "Der Moloch: eine Untersuchung zur Theorie O. Eissfeldts," *WZKM* 51 (1951), 287-313.

In 1975, Eissfeldt's arguments were used in the doctoral dissertation of Mosca, on the subject of 'Child Sacrifice in Canaanite and Israelite Religion.'<sup>39</sup> Mosca argues that *mlk* sacrifice was very common among the Punic people, though it was not specific to the firstborn or lastborn. Looking into the Hebrew Bible, he claims, along with de Vaux, that despite the absence of any redemptive clause in Ex. 22:28b-29 the redemption must have been assumed from the first,<sup>40</sup> and the מִלְכָּה cult must have been the only one involved in child sacrifice in ancient Israel and Judah.

A decade later, two publications were released to support the view that מִלְכָּה is a god of human sacrifice and not a mere sacrificial term. The first was by Heider,<sup>41</sup> and the second by John Day.<sup>42</sup> Heider looks at the archaeological findings and re-establishes the traditional view that מִלְכָּה was a god who demanded child sacrifice, and strongly refuted the arguments of Mosca that מִלְכָּה was a Punic term with its biblical connection.

Heider concludes that, 'no doubt, as Mosca emphasizes, the presence of stelae containing the sacrificial usage of מִלְכָּה as early as the sixth century BC on Malta supports the hypothesis that this lexeme and whatever practice it originally represented were brought with the colonists from Phoenicia. But a connection with Israelite מִלְכָּה, which must be established through Phoenicia, remains conjectural.'<sup>43</sup> After exhaustive analysis of the near eastern materials, Heider looks to the biblical materials, starting with the relevant prohibitions in Leviticus (Lev. 20:5). Connecting the passage with the context and usage of different vocabularies, he links מִלְכָּה to other the underworld

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<sup>39</sup> P. G. Mosca, "The Child Sacrifice in Canaanite and Israelite Religion: A Study in *Mulk* and *mlk*" (Unpublished Dissertation; Harvard University, 1975).

<sup>40</sup> Mosca, "Child Sacrifice in Canaanite and Israelite Religion," pp. 235-238.

<sup>41</sup> Heider, *Cult of Molek*, pp.401-407.

<sup>42</sup> Day, *Molech*, pp. 82-84.

<sup>43</sup> Heider, *Cult of Molek*, p. 188.



deities.<sup>44</sup> Heider rejects the view of Eissfeldt and others that מִלְכָּם relates to the law of firstborn.<sup>45</sup> After analysing the Deuteronomical passages (Deut. 12:31; 18: 9-10), Heider argues that, ‘at the peripheral reading it seems people are offering their children to Yahweh, but in reality they are incorporating the מִלְכָּם cult into the worship of Yahweh as a lesser deity and are offering the children to מִלְכָּם.’<sup>46</sup>

Heider also looks into additional passages in the books of Kings. He argues they were to be seen as comparing two kings and their deeds in relation to the worship of Molek. For example, Ahaz (2 Kings 16:3), a king who participated in these religious practices, is contrasted with Hezekiah who did not sacrifice children; or Manasseh (2 King 21:6), who did practise child sacrifice, with Josiah, who did not (2 King 23:10).

Rejecting a Syrian or Phoenician connection, Heider argues that ‘the evidence points us, furthermore, to suggest a connection between the chthonic Syro-Palestinian deity *Malik-Milku*, known at Ebla, Mari and Ugarit and *Molech*, whose cult likewise appears to have a chthonic (specifically necromantic) character.’<sup>47</sup> After a brief analysis of prophetic literature, he comes to the conclusion that מִלְכָּם is a deity and was worshiped along with Yahweh through the religious syncretism which was thoroughly rejected by the Deuteronomists and prophets.<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>44</sup> Heider, *Cult of Molek*, p. 251.

<sup>45</sup> Heider, *Cult of Molek*, p. 258.

<sup>46</sup> Heider, *Cult of Molek*, p. 269.

<sup>47</sup> Heider, *Cult of Molek*, p. 301.

<sup>48</sup> Heider, *Cult of Molek*, p. 374.

John Day supports Heider in affirming Molech as a god of human sacrifice, as the title of his book,<sup>49</sup> *Molech: A God of Human Sacrifice in the Old Testament Bible*, explicitly reveals. He agrees with Eissfeldt that the Punic *mlk* is a sacrificial term, though he rejects its connection with the biblical מִלְכָּה. He makes the point that it was a cult that belonged to the people the Israelites drove out from the land of Canaan, the Canaanites,<sup>50</sup> and supplements it with textual evidence.<sup>51</sup> Day agrees with the arguments of Heider and others that Molech equates with the Ugaritic *mlk*, the Akkadian *Malik*, and is connected to the underworld deity Nergal.<sup>52</sup> He concludes that *mlk* is a deity who received child sacrifices, though *mlk* has no connection with Yahweh and the law of the firstborn. However, some of the *mlk* worshipers worshiped both *mlk* and Yahweh simultaneously, and found no contradiction in doing so.<sup>53</sup>

After Heider and Day there has been no additional monograph published on the topic of *Molech*, though there have been many discussions about it in articles, chapters and portions of different publications. Ackerman<sup>54</sup> agrees with Eissfeldt and Mosca, arguing that *mlk* is a sacrificial term, but disagrees with them on the point of its connection with the Law of the firstborn.<sup>55</sup> She connects the Law of the firstborn with *mlk* sacrifice, and says that in the early period among the Phoenician and Punic colonies child sacrifice was restricted only to the firstborn, but that this changed in the later period. Looking at the account of Gen. 22 and Ex.

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<sup>49</sup> Day, *Molech*. pp.15 – 28.

<sup>50</sup> Day, *Molech*, p. 55

<sup>51</sup> Cf. Lev. 18:3, 21, 24, 25, 27; 20:2-5, 23; 2 Kings 16:3; 21:2, 11; Isa. 57:5, 7, 9; Jer. 19:5; Ezek. 16:2-3, 20, 21, 36; Ps. 106:37-38; Deut. 12:31; 18:9-10.

<sup>52</sup> Day, *Molech*, p. 52.

<sup>53</sup> Day, *Molech*, p. 70.

<sup>54</sup> S. Ackerman, *Under Every Green Tree: Popular Religion in Sixth-Century Judah* (HSM, 46; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992), p. 139.

<sup>55</sup> Ackerman, *Under Every Green Tree*, p. 143.

22:28 and 34:19-20, she concludes that the Israelites practised child sacrifice from the very early period, and that this was not a syncretic practice of a later period.<sup>56</sup> Adding to the points of Ackerman, K A D Smelik argues that מִלְכָּה was a mere creation of the scribes to cover up the practices of child sacrifice among the people of the Hebrew Bible. He argues that children were sacrificed to Yahweh because Yahweh demanded it.<sup>57</sup> Following on from Smelik, Hartley and Dwyer argued that Punic *mlk* is better understood as a divine epithet rather than a type of sacrifice, and the Hebrew מִלְכָּה refers to a netherworld deity named מִלְכָּה or *malik* as argued by Heider and Day.<sup>58</sup> They conclude that ‘מִלְכָּה worship is the offering of infants to a god named מִלְכָּה by burning on a pyre.’<sup>59</sup> After comparing this with Native American tribal practices of child sacrifice and cultural customs, they conclude that, in any tribal society, incest and worshipping a god outside of the tribe attract the gravest punishment, as one sees in the Hebrew Bible where these include stoning to death and/or cancelling the right of membership of the clan or tribe.<sup>60</sup>

P D Miller, in his book *The Religion of Ancient Israel*, argues that child sacrifice was not part of the Yahweh cult, but a ‘genuinely syncretistic practice.’<sup>61</sup> Miller argues that it was a widespread practice among the Phoenicians and was incorporated into the Yahwistic cult by some upper-class figures, such as King Manasseh. He claims that ‘it was probably somewhere in

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<sup>56</sup> Ackerman, *Under Every Green Tree*, p. 168.

<sup>57</sup> K. A. D. Smelik, “Moloch, Molekh or Molk – Sacrifice? A Reassessment of the Evidence Concerning the Hebrew Term Molekh,” *SJOT* 9/1 (1995), 133-42.

<sup>58</sup> J. E. Hartley and T. Dwyer, “An Investigation into the Location of the Laws on Offerings to Molek in the Book of Leviticus,” in J E. Coleson and V. H. Matthews (eds.), *Go to the Land I will Show You: Studies in Honour of Dwight W. Young* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1996), pp. 81-93.

<sup>59</sup> Hartley and Dwyer, “An Investigation into the Location,” p. 90.

<sup>60</sup> Hartley and Dwyer, “An Investigation into the Location,” pp. 90-91.

<sup>61</sup> P. D. Miller, *The Religion of Ancient Israel* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2000), p. 59.

the eighth or seventh centuries - but possibly earlier - that child sacrifice was incorporated into Yahwistic ritual, presumably by court and upper-class figures, from areas of Phoenician influence where the practice was widespread.<sup>62</sup> Though he agrees with the Phoenician origin of child sacrifice, he differs in connecting it with the Hebrew law of firstborn. He states that there were no sacrifices involved in the law of firstborn 'except possibly in exceptional or aberrant situations.'<sup>63</sup>

Similarly, J. D Levenson supports Heider and argues that 'the best conclusion is that the biblical מִלְכָּה was a chthonic deity honoured through the sacrifice of the little young boys and girls.'<sup>64</sup> Zevit agrees with Day and connects מִלְכָּה with Mot.<sup>65</sup> A. Michel does not make any strong assertion about מִלְכָּה as either the name of a ritual, a deity, or a divine epithet.<sup>66</sup> Michel argues that the earliest reference to מִלְכָּה in the Hebrew Bible is in Jer. 32:35 where the word refers to typical kinds of sacrifice. The references in 2 Kings 23:10, exilic documents, Lev. 18:21 and 20:2-4, and early post-exilic documents could be either a type of sacrifice or a deity who is the recipient of that sacrifice.<sup>67</sup> He concludes that both Lev. 20:5 and Isa. 30:33 are later writings and *mlk* is addressed here as the name of a deity. He states that מִלְכָּה sacrifice was distinct and could have been linked with the law of the firstborn (Ex. 13:12). The later polemicists who wrote some of the

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<sup>62</sup> Miller, *The Religion of Ancient Israel*, p. 68.

<sup>63</sup> Miller, *The Religion of Ancient Israel*, p. 120.

<sup>64</sup> Jon Douglas Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of The Beloved Son* (London: Yale University Press, 1993), p. 19.

<sup>65</sup> Z. Zevit, *The Religion of Ancient Israel: A Synthesis of Parallaxic Approaches* (New York: Continuum, 2001), p. 520

<sup>66</sup> A. Michel, *Gott und Gewalt gegen Kinder im Alten Testament* (FAT, 37; Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2003), pp. 275-278.

<sup>67</sup> Michel, *Gott und Gewalt gegen Kinder*, p. 292.

portions of the Hebrew Bible tried to archaize the practice, though worshipers understood it as part of the worship of Yahweh (Jer. 32:35).<sup>68</sup>

Following a break in the publication of monographs since Day, Stavrakopoulou made ripples in biblical scholarship by the publication of her book titled *King Manasseh and Child Sacrifice: Biblical Distortions of Historical Realities*.<sup>69</sup> She considers the theological and ideological thinking of the biblical writers and concludes neither reflected historical truth, but distorted histories to suit the ideologies and theologies of the scribes, or the so-called authors, as explained in the subtitle of the book. She develops her thesis by looking at King Manasseh, who the biblical authors portray as the reason for the exile. She concludes that he was a good king, stating ‘the portrayal of Manasseh within the texts reveals not a portrait, but a caricature.’<sup>70</sup> She further claims that Manasseh was described in this way due to the sharing of his name with one of the tribes of the faithless Northern Kingdom, and thus the texts portray him as anti-Yahwistic, devoted to other gods and goddesses.

In her work Stavrakopoulou reviews the accuracy of the biblical depiction of these rites, comparing it against historical reality. She rejects the idea that these were dedicatory rituals<sup>71</sup> and affirms that Ezekiel and Jeremiah confirm the killing of children as part of worship that is clearly child sacrifice. She notices that the biblical writers portray child sacrifice as foreign to Israel but as the practice of the nations whom Yahweh had driven out from the land. According to these

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<sup>68</sup> Michel, *Gott und Gewalt gegen Kinder*, p. 299.

<sup>69</sup> Francesca Stavrakopoulou, *King Manasseh and Child Sacrifice: A Biblical Distortion of Historical Realities* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2004).

<sup>70</sup> Stavrakopoulou, *King Manasseh and Child Sacrifice*, p. 134.

<sup>71</sup> The view of Weinfeld and many others, as discussed above.

writers, child sacrifice was the reason for driving the other nations out of the land (Deut. 12:29-31). Stavrakopoulou observes ‘the practise of the child sacrifice is thus condemned not because it is ethically untenable, but because it is foreign.’<sup>72</sup> The texts of the Hebrew Bible claim that child sacrifice was practised by foreigners, like Mesha, the Sepharvites, and the Judahites, who rejected Yahweh and chose to serve foreign deities including the kings Ahaz and Manasseh (1 Kings 11:5-7, 33; 2 Kings 23:10; Isa. 57:9; Jer. 32:35).

Stavrakopoulou argues that, child sacrifice was a prominent form of worship of Yahweh at some early periods.<sup>73</sup> She continues by stating that מִלֶּכֶת was a term used to explain a particular kind of sacrifice, as observed by Eissfeldt, and not a divine name or epithet. She does an in-depth study on the term in her monograph,<sup>74</sup> and points to three alternative interpretations to Lev. 20:5, which is hard to translate as a sacrificial term:

1. She points to the observations of Noth,<sup>75</sup> stating the possibility of a later insertion, though she thinks ‘there is a certain weakness in arguing for an ideological distortion of a sacrificial term into the name of a deity by simply rubbishing the textual integrity of the challenging verse.’<sup>76</sup>
2. Lev. 20:5, ‘I myself will set my face against him and his family and will cut them off from their people together with all who follow him in prostituting themselves to Molek’ may well be dependent on Lev. 18:21 (‘Do not give any of your children to be sacrificed to

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<sup>72</sup> Stavrakopoulou, *King Manasseh and Child Sacrifice*, p. 154.

<sup>73</sup> Stavrakopoulou, *King Manasseh and Child Sacrifice*, pp. 179-201.

<sup>74</sup> Stavrakopoulou, *King Manasseh and Child Sacrifice*, pp. 149-179.

<sup>75</sup> M. Noth, *Leviticus: A Commentary* (trans. J. E. Anderson; OTL; London: SCM Press, 1965), pp. 148-149.

<sup>76</sup> Stavrakopoulou, *King Manasseh and Child Sacrifice*, pp. 249-250.

Molek, for you must not profane the name of your God. I am the LORD') where the former simply misunderstood the latter.<sup>77</sup>

3. The word אֶתְרֵי לְזָנוּת could be referring to the victim himself, not the ritual and thus הַמִּלֵּךְ could be understood as referring to whoring after 'מִלֵּךְ -offering.'<sup>78</sup>

As Eissfeldt and others observe, Stavrakopoulou argues that the מִלֵּךְ offering was so closely associated with 'ghosts' and 'knowers' that it attracted the language of 'whoring' associated with them (Lev. 20:6). Does the word prostituting here literally mean that they are prostituting with the deity, or with the people who are controlled by mediums and spirit? The context seems to convey the meaning that the prostitution here is referring to the kind of worship or the seeking of them for their answers and favours. Rather than a literal prostitution, this is a metaphorical whoring. Thus Stavrakopoulou concludes that 'it is not unreasonable to propose that the biblical association of the child sacrifice with metaphorical whoring may have encouraged the correlation of this language specifically with the term מִלֵּךְ in this verse.'<sup>79</sup>

Though Stavrakopoulou does not make a strong conclusion as to which of the above is the most likely interpretation, she concludes that the verse absolutely precludes understanding מִלֵּךְ as a type of offering rather than the name of a deity, stating 'the biblical portrayal of a god called 'מִלֵּךְ or 'מִלֵּךְ' must therefore be dismissed as fictitious.'<sup>80</sup> She makes a close examination of מִלֵּךְ in many references and asserts that it was Yahweh who is associated with child sacrifice. Lev. 18:21 and 20:3 tells that the sacrifices profane the name of Yahweh and his sanctuary. Jer. 7:31, 19:5,

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<sup>77</sup> Stavrakopoulou, *King Manasseh and Child Sacrifice*, p. 250.

<sup>78</sup> Stavrakopoulou, *King Manasseh and Child Sacrifice*, p. 251.

<sup>79</sup> Stavrakopoulou, *King Manasseh and Child Sacrifice*, pp. 251-252.

<sup>80</sup> Stavrakopoulou, *King Manasseh and Child Sacrifice*, p. 261.

and 32:35 clearly state that child sacrifice is something that Yahweh neither asked for nor countenanced. Isa. 30:33 and 57:3-13 also implies that Yahweh was a participant deity in the sacrifices. Thus, she affirms ‘מִלְאָה or מִלְאָה is better understood as a biblical character, a character masking the probability that in reality, children were sacrificed to Yhwh.’<sup>81</sup>

In her attempt to understand biblical child sacrifice, Stavrakopoulou proposes connecting child sacrifice with the so-called ‘Balaam Text’ from Deir Alla.<sup>82</sup> This is considered one of the most difficult texts to interpret, and she uses the translation of Jo An Hackett.<sup>83</sup> Hackett claims that it is very significant text because of the mention of a deity named *Saddayyin*, who is involved in accepting sacrifices, and that the text also refers to Balaam, son of Beor. *Saddayyin* is associated with the cult of the dead, child sacrifice, and Baal-Peor (Ps. 106:28, 37), and Balaam is connected with the sin of Baal-Peor (Num. 31:16). In her observation, Hackett affirms it is ‘no coincidence that we now have a text that may link child sacrifice with Balaam and the gods he serves, the *sadyin*.’<sup>84</sup> Conversely, she acknowledges that, ‘the extant portion of Combination II are ambiguous enough to admit wide-ranging interpretations.’<sup>85</sup>

Hackett interprets the *nqr* as ‘sprout’ or ‘scion’, referring to it as a child who is used as sort of child sacrifice.<sup>86</sup> However, there are disagreements about this among scholars. For example, Hoftijzer and Kooij prefer to translate it as ‘the blinded one.’<sup>87</sup> Levine thinks it refers to ‘carrion’

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<sup>81</sup> Stavrakopoulou, *King Manasseh and Child Sacrifice*, p. 261.

<sup>82</sup> Stavrakopoulou, *King Manasseh and Child Sacrifice*, pp. 261-282.

<sup>83</sup> J. A. Hackett, *The Balaam Text from Deir ‘Alla* (HSM, 31; Chico: Scholar’s Press, 1984).

<sup>84</sup> Hackett, *The Balaam Text*, p. 89.

<sup>85</sup> Hackett, *The Balaam Text*, p. 85.

<sup>86</sup> Hackett, *The Balaam Text*, pp. 84-85.

<sup>87</sup> J. Hoftijzer and G. van der Kooij, *Aramain Texts from Deir ‘Alla* (Leiden: Brill, 1976), p. 237.



or ‘corpse’.<sup>88</sup> Lipinski translates it as ‘scion’, though he does not agree with the point that it refers to child sacrifice as noted by Hackett.<sup>89</sup>

Stavropoulou not only closely follows Hackett’s interpretation, but also makes further claims based on this interpretation. She tries to connect the Deir Alla *Saddayin* with the Hebrew Bible’s אֱלֹהֵי אֲשֵׁרָה. She makes this connection based on the Ugaritic *sd*.<sup>90</sup> She links this with the Ugaritic *rpu* and other chthonic beings found in the Ugaritic in at least one case.<sup>91</sup> She finds connections between child sacrifice (Gen. 22) and the mention of אֱלֹהֵי אֲשֵׁרָה in the Abrahamic narratives, and suggests that the cult of the dead and child sacrifice were centred around the אֱלֹהֵי אֲשֵׁרָה cult in ancient Israel. She links circumcision (Gen. 17) to the fertility aspect of the cult.<sup>92</sup>

In her analysis, Stavropoulou identifies three kinds of child sacrifice among the people of the Hebrew Bible:

1. The firstborn offering, which had an option of redemption.<sup>93</sup>
2. מִלְּדָה offering, which she considers a ‘royal specialization of the fertility rite of the firstborn sacrifice, in which a royal pregnancy was promised as gift to יְהוָה the patron-

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<sup>88</sup> B. A. Levine, “The Plaster Inscriptions from Deir ‘Alla: General Interpretation,” in J. Hoftijzer and G. van der Kooij (eds.), *The Balaam Text from Deir ‘Alla Reevaluated: Proceedings of the International Symposium held at Leiden 21-24 August 1989* (New York: Brill, 1991), pp. 69-70.

<sup>89</sup> E. Lipinski, *Studies in Aramaic Inscriptions and Onomastics*, vol. 2 (Leuven: Peeters, 1994), pp. 142-145, 159.

<sup>90</sup> *Keilalphabetische Texte aus Ugarit (KTU)*, 9.432; 1.108.12; 1.166.12.

<sup>91</sup> *KTU* 108.

<sup>92</sup> Stavropoulou, *King Manasseh and Child Sacrifice*, pp. 280-282.

<sup>93</sup> We shall discuss this further in the following chapters.

deity of the Judahite royal family, and sacrificed in fire shortly after the birth as a means of encouraging the divine perpetuation of the royal dynasty.’<sup>94</sup>

3. The cult of אֱלֹהִים (gods). This is closely associated with the fertility rites and cult of dead ancestors. She argues that the cult of אֱלֹהִים and Yahweh are similar, and these deities are equal since both receive child sacrifice.<sup>95</sup> However, she claims that the biblical authors deliberately distorted the Yahwistic child sacrifices in a way that the reader should not understand that Yahweh ever received or condoned child sacrifices.<sup>96</sup>

Following Stavrakopoulou, E. Noort made a study of child sacrifice and followed the position of Eissfeldt and Stavrakopoulou. He affirms the arguments of Stavrakopoulou and states ‘the Hebrew Bible texts are polemical in nature and argue that the מִלְכָּה sacrifice did play a role in the pre-exilic Jerusalem cult of Yahweh, though these were rejected in the exilic period.’<sup>97</sup> He argues that the biblical texts regarding this cult intentionally label them as ‘other’ and foreign to the cult of Yahweh so that the followers of Yahwism could easily condemn it.<sup>98</sup> B. H. Reynolds, in his study on מִלְכָּה, supports Eissfeldt’s claims and makes a strong conclusion that ‘the god מִלְכָּה should once again put to rest. He never existed in the minds of Iron Age Israelites.’<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>94</sup> Stavrakopoulou, *King Manasseh and Child Sacrifice*, p. 296.

<sup>95</sup> Stavrakopoulou, *King Manasseh and Child Sacrifice*, p. 298.

<sup>96</sup> Stavrakopoulou, *King Manasseh and Child Sacrifice*, pp. 301-316.

<sup>97</sup> E. Noort, “Child Sacrifice in Ancient Israel: The Status Questions,” in J. N. Bremmer (ed.), *The Strange World of Human Sacrifice* (Dudly: Peeters, 2007), pp. 103-125.

<sup>98</sup> Noort, “Child Sacrifice in Ancient Israel,” p. 109.

<sup>99</sup> B. H. Reynolds, “Molek: Dead or Alive? The Meaning and Derivation of *mlk*,” in K. Finsterbusch, A. Lange and K. F. Diethard Romheld (eds.), *Human Sacrifice in Jewish and Christian Tradition* (Boston: Brill, 2007), pp. 133-150.

### 2.3. Evaluation and conclusion of the discussion

The quoted research shows that the scholarship broadly follows three major thoughts or arguments:

1. Proposed by Eissfeldt: מִלֶּכֶּה was a sacrificial term. It is the name of a ritual where children were sacrificed and is not a deity.
2. Proposed by Weinfeld: מִלֶּכֶּה was a deity to whom children were dedicated and not sacrificed.
3. Proposed by Heider and Day: מִלֶּכֶּה is chthonic deity worshiped by many people or groups in ancient near east. This is the traditional view.

Eissfeldt was successful in his presentation, comparing the Punic materials and solving the issue of מִלֶּכֶּה in the Biblical account. However, applying the interpretation in Lev. 20:5 is problematic since it cannot be translated as a kind of offering as per the text. Though the Punic usage of the word *mlk* for a kind of sacrifice where children were sacrificed is evidenced in the archaeological findings, substituting this finding in the Hebrew Bible does an injustice to the text because the text is clearly speaking about a deity who was receiving child sacrifice, rather than speaking about a kind of sacrifice.

Though there are different arguments about the usage of the word *mlk* in Punic, the word is specifically used on three occasions. Two are directly related to child sacrifice, and the third is related to child sacrifice, but where a sheep substitutes a child. Thus, Day argues that the Punic



an object that was venerated due to its association with such a being.<sup>102</sup> Thus it is hard to interpret Eissfeldt's translation of this passage as 'to whore after the מִלֵּךְ sacrifice' instead of the more commonly accepted usage as 'to whore after the מִלֵּךְ.'

Stavropoulou tries to solve the problem by suggesting that the verse is referring not to the ritual but to the victim, 'whoring after מִלֵּךְ offerings.'<sup>103</sup> If so, this is the only place in the entire Hebrew Bible that speaks about whoring after something other than a supernatural being. The text is warning about the harlotry Israel was committing with a pagan deity, and not on a particular sacrifice. The wider context of the Hebrew Bible clearly affirms this.<sup>104</sup> There are no other references to people playing the harlot after a sacrifice in the Hebrew Bible. However, there is a possibility of a metaphorical usage of the word in this passage as observed by Stavropoulou.<sup>105</sup>

Weinfeld proposes that the references to the child sacrifices in the Hebrew Bible are not actually referring to child sacrifice, but to a kind of dedication. He argues that children were never sacrificed among the people of the Hebrew Bible, and he goes to the point of arguing that the phrase 'pass through the fire' should be understood as a dedication ritual with no connection with child sacrifice of any kind.<sup>106</sup> He argues that מִלֵּךְ phrases from Carthaginian inscriptions

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<sup>102</sup> Cf. e.g. Ex. 34:15-16; Lev. 17:7; 20:6; Deut. 31:16; Jud. 2:17; 8:27, 33; 1 Chr. 5:25; Ezek. 20:30; 23:30.

<sup>103</sup> Stavropoulou, *King Manasseh and Child Sacrifice*, p. 251.

<sup>104</sup> Cf. e.g. Ex. 34:15, 16; Lev 17:7; Deut 31:16; Jud. 2:17; 8:13; Isa. 57:3; Jer. 3:1-9; Ezek. 6:9; Hos. 1:2; 2:7.

<sup>105</sup> Stavropoulou, *King Manasseh and Child Sacrifice*, p. 251. The metaphorical usage shall be discussed further in the following pages of this chapter.

<sup>106</sup> M. Weinfeld, "The Worship of Molech and the Queen of Heaven," 133-154.

should be understood as divine epithets, and have nothing to do with human sacrifice.<sup>107</sup> This argument is also unacceptable according to the wider context of the Hebrew Bible or in the texts he was referring to. The texts of the Hebrew Bible clearly speak of child sacrifice. The text describes the burning of children as a sacrifice to the deities. Weinfeld fails to explain the explicit reference in the Hebrew Bible to these sacrifices.<sup>108</sup> Not only a particular group, such as priests or prophets, or genre makes the claim, but most of the writers in all kinds of genres affirm this practice. Additionally, Weinfeld compares Biblical materials with Assyrian deities and practises. He interprets that children are dedicated to a deity named *Adad-Milki*. There are objections to Weinfeld's translation of the name of the deity *Adad-Milki*.<sup>109</sup> Conversely, it is argued that the translation of the word should be *Sin* and not *Adad-Milki*.<sup>110</sup> Therefore, even Weinfeld's attempt to connect מִלְכָּם with the Assyrian deity is insubstantial.

Affirming the traditional interpretation, Heider and John Day gather numerous near-eastern texts to argue the existence of a chthonic deity named *mlk* and connect this deity with the מִלְכָּם in the Hebrew Bible. The name *Malik* appears in the list of gods in Ugaritic, Ur and Babylonia who can be equated with Nergal.<sup>111</sup> There is clear evidence of *mlk* in Ugaritic,<sup>112</sup> a deity with possible chthonic characteristics.<sup>113</sup> There are a handful of personal names marked with divine

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<sup>107</sup> M. Weinfeld and S. D. Sperling, "Molech, Cult of," *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, vol. 4 (2<sup>nd</sup> edn.; Detroit: Macmillan, 2007), pp. 427-429.

<sup>108</sup> See for example Lev. 18:21; 20:2; 20:4; Num. 31:23; Deut. 18:10; Jud. 11:31; 2 Kings 3:27; 17:16; 21:6; 23:10; 2 Chr. 28:3; 33:6; Jer. 32:35; Ezek. 23:37; Amos 1:15; Zeph. 1:5.

<sup>109</sup> See Weinfeld, "The Worship of Molech," p. 145.

<sup>110</sup> S. A. Kaufman, "The Enigmatic *Adad-Milki*," *JNES* 37/2 (1978), 101-109.

<sup>111</sup> See *KAV* 63.2:37; *KAV* 42.1:32; III R 66,2:9.

<sup>112</sup> RS 24.244 = KTU 1.100/RS 24.251.

<sup>113</sup> See D. Pardee, *Ritual and Cult at Ugarit* (SBL WAW, 10; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2002), p. 177.

determinative in the Akkadian. Heider also points to a few cases from Ebla.<sup>114</sup> However, there are issues with Heider's interpretation. In Ugaritic or Ebla there is no evidence of child sacrifice associated with these names. There is no deity identified as *mlk*, though there are names similar to it such as *Malik* or *Maliku*. It is only an assumption that these names are equal to Hebrew מַלְכָּה. Thus, Heider and Day's interpretation also fails to give a full explanation of the current issue.

The only similar term outside the Bible is the Punic *mlk*, identified by Eissfeldt, which is used for a kind of sacrifice as found in the Hebrew Bible, though the term is the name of a deity. There is more probability that it was a personified cultic practice, because personification is a common practice among the writers of the ancient world.<sup>115</sup> The Hebrew Bible has many personifications,<sup>116</sup> and מַלְכָּה in Lev. 20:5 is one among many. *Mlk* is a kind of sacrifice, as described in Punic, but it is personified in the Biblical literature to show its impact in the religious system of the Hebrew Bible. The Hebrew Bible writers project this practice as a living deity with whom people are whoring and playing harlotry because of its gruesomeness, although in reality it is a practice of sacrificing children to Baal. Thus here whoring is also used metaphorically to show people's unfaithfulness to their god, Yahweh, by doing the things that are not pleasing to him but approved and accepted by other deities.<sup>117</sup> It is metaphorically used in

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<sup>114</sup> Heider, *Cult of Molek*, p. 411.

<sup>115</sup> A practice can be personified and later a deity by that name can emerge. For example, in India, Sati is a religious practice whereby a widow (young or old) is forced to jump or is bound and thrown into the funeral pyre of her husband. Today there is a deity named after this practice. See Arvind Sharma, *Sati: Historical and Phenomenological Essays* (New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 2001), pp. 19-21; Reena Mishra, *The Institution of Sati in India* (New Delhi: Abhijeet Publications, 2009); Mala Sen, *Death by Fire: Sati, Dowry Death and Female Infanticide in Modern India* (Phoenix, 2002).

<sup>116</sup> For example, Sin is personified in Gen. 4:7; Blood is personified in Gen. 4:10.

<sup>117</sup> There are issues here regarding the recipient deity, which will be discussed in the following pages.

many places of the Hebrew Bible. Personification and metamorphism were common to the Hebrew Bible writers. Thus, here the kind of sacrifice has been personified and the act of performing the sacrifice is described as whoring. One cannot read it as a literal whoring, which is neither possible nor meant here. Though temple prostitution was part of fertility cults among the ancient near eastern people, whoring after the victim for sacrifice is unheard of. Therefore, we may safely conclude that, the זָלַם in the Hebrew Bible (including Lev. 20:5) is a reference to the personification of the kind of sacrifice people were offering to Baal or to other deities worshiped at different shrines. This understanding shall lead us to the discussion of how זָלַם sacrifice is connected with a demand for all the firstborn by the God of the Hebrew Bible.



## Chapter 3

### Firstborn Sacrifice and the Cult of מִלֶּךָ

#### 3.1. Introduction

The arguments in the previous chapters have established that מִלֶּךָ is a type of child sacrifice. Biblical authors personified the term because of its influence in their society. The discussion of the current chapter regards the important question - was the מִלֶּךָ sacrifice connected to the firstborn child?

In my pursuit to answer the above question, the primary sources for consideration are the texts in the Hebrew Bible. These texts, listed below, are called ‘the law of the firstborn’. Ex. 13:2, 11-13; 22:28-29; 34:19-20; Lev. 27:26-27; Num. 3:11-13; 18:13-18; 8:16-19; 18:13-18; and Deut. 15:19-23. In the verses Lev. 27:26-27 and Deut. 15:19-23 there is no mention of human firstborn. The redemption clause for the firstborn is mentioned in all the references except Ex. 13:2 and 22: 28b-29. The redemption is either by a sheep or, in the later days, according to the text, by replacing the firstborn with the Levites for the service of Yahweh as the substitute for firstborn. The redemption clause is found in Ex. 13:11-13, though it is absent in 13:2, and nothing is spoken regarding redemption in Ex. 22.

Ex. 22:28b-29 (English v. 29b, 30) reads, ‘Do not hold back offerings from your granaries or your vats. You must give me the firstborn of your sons. Do the same with your cattle and your sheep. Let them stay with their mothers for seven days, but give them to me on the eighth day.’

This verse has become the focal point for the argument and discussion as to whether the firstborn were sacrificed or not in ancient Israel. The subsequent question is: if the firstborn were

sacrificed, who was receiving the sacrifice? Yahweh is demanding the firstborn and says they belong to him. Does that mean that Yahweh was accepting the firstborn as sacrifice? Or was the firstborn sacrifice an aspect of the מִלֶּכֶד sacrifices as discussed in the previous chapter? These are the central points of discussion in this chapter.

### 3.2. History of the research

Studying Jer. 7:31; 19:5 and Ezekiel 20: 25-26, Robertson Smith argues that some of the Israelites sacrificed their firstborn children to Yahweh before the exile. However, though he is the earliest modern scholar to make a statement on this kind of practise, he gives his opinion that ‘to conclude from this that at one time the Israelites actually sacrificed all their firstborn sons is absurd, but, on the other hand, there must have been some point of attachment in ancient custom for the belief that the deity asked for such a sacrifice.’<sup>118</sup>

Though he believes that there could have been rare firstborn sacrifices, it was not a common practice due to the costly nature of the sacrifice. The firstborn were considered to be holy because their blood was the purest, strongest and most sacred of the kin (cf. Gen. 49:3).<sup>119</sup> This idea underpins the fundamental understanding behind making the firstborn of human and animal special. Smith’s contemporary, Wellhausen, agrees with him on this and says that the reason the redemption clause is absent in Ex. 22:28b-29 is that the authors never considered the

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<sup>118</sup> W. Robertson Smith, *Lectures on the Religion of the Semites* (New York: D Appelton & Co, 1889), p. 445.

<sup>119</sup> Smith, *Lectures on the Religion*, p. 445.

possibility of sacrificing the human firstborn.<sup>120</sup> Wellhausen observes, ‘the law of the firstborn was originally of pastoral ritual expressing their gratitude to the deity for the bountiful blessings they received.’<sup>121</sup> He argues that, though there were rare occasions of child sacrifice of the firstborn in the early periods in some extraordinary occasions, it became more prevalent only a short time prior to the exile (Jer. 7:31; 19:4; Ezek. 20:26).<sup>122</sup> He also suggests that this requirement was not based on a strict following of the law or preserving the law’s original nature. It was, rather, an innovative move.

R. Smend argues “since redemption clause is absent, the firstborn were to be sacrificed. However, there is no evidence of such a regular practice among the ancient Israelites; the author must have been thinking about the dedication of the firstborn to the service of their God. The firstborn were dedicated to serve in the shrines or temple under the priests, as described in the book of Samuel.”<sup>123</sup> B. Baentsch argues that initially it was the firstborn of the animals, particularly sheep, that were annually sacrificed during the spring season, but this was later changed as they began to grow large cattle.<sup>124</sup> He believes that the absence of the redemption clause means the firstborn human children were to be sacrificed, as well as the firstborn of animals, though the author did not imply that meaning and in practice it is impossible. It is beyond the capacity of human tolerance to kill every firstborn, and the survival of any group who did so would be in question. He believes that in the earlier periods, even before the concept of

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<sup>120</sup> J. Wellhausen, *Prolegomena to the History of Israel* (trans. J. Southerland Black and A. Menzies; Edinburgh: A & C Black, 1885), p. 87.

<sup>121</sup> J. Wellhausen, *Prolegomena to the History of Israel*, p. 87.

<sup>122</sup> J. Wellhausen, *Prolegomena to the History of Israel*, p. 87.

<sup>123</sup> R. Smend, *Alttestamentlichen Religionsgeschichte* (Freiburg: J C B Mohr, 1899), p. 283.

<sup>124</sup> B. Baentsch, *Exodus – Leviticus – Numeri* (HKAT 1, 2; Gottingen: Vandehoeck und Ruprecht, 1903), pp. 203-204.

Yahwism evolved, the ancient people would have rarely practised firstborn sacrifices. However, he is of the opinion that even in the earlier period in Yahwism, the children were undoubtedly redeemed.<sup>125</sup>

Looking at Ex. 22:28b-29, Stade argues that the context is clearly speaking of sacrifice. ‘The harvest of the field are to be given to Yahweh and the firstborn of all the animals are also needed to be sacrificed. Thus, the firstborn of the human kind also needed to be sacrificed as that of any firstborn animal.’ He stresses the usage of the one Hebrew verb *נָתַן* for animal and human, and thus claimed that the same word implies the same meaning, and nothing else. After examining the reference in Ezekiel (20:26, 39) he further argues that whatever is given as a gift is to be sacrificed to Yahweh. However, he also thinks that there is no evidence for such a rigorous sacrifice of all the firstborn, and thus it was not done. Moreover, there is no evidence of dedicating the firstborn for the service of the temples or shrines as something strictly adhered to by the ancient people. He argues that, if that was the case, Hannah may not have dedicated Samuel for the service in the temple because he would have already belonged to Yahweh as her firstborn. He also suggests that there is no dispute or doubt that the redemption clause in Yahwism must have been in force from the very early days.<sup>126</sup>

Looking at archaeological evidence from Gezer, Ta’anach, and Megiddo, along with biblical passages including the Aqedah, Jephthah’s vow, and Mesha’s sacrifice, Kittel argues that child sacrifice was commonly practised in this region. He argues that, in its original form, the

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<sup>125</sup> Baentsch, *Exodus – Leviticus – Numeri*, p. 204.

<sup>126</sup> D. B. Stade, *Biblische Theologie des Alten Testaments* (Tubingen: J. C. B. Mohr, 1909), p. 246.

Law of the Firstborn is set out in Ex. 22:28b-29 and 13:13, and redemption was a later addition. According to the original law, the firstborn were sacrificed as part of the religious piety and practice of the people. However, Kittel denies that the absence of the redemption clause in the earlier law made people sacrifice their firstborn to their god; rather, he suggests that redemption by means of substitution was already in place, even though the law required the actual sacrifice. He thinks that this was widely practised in the folk religion of the time, which was also connected with cults of dead ancestors, burial rites, and necromancy.<sup>127</sup> Further to this point, Gressmann argues that Ex. 22:28b-29 is the earliest passage regarding child sacrifice, and is the key passage in dating the Covenant Code as something belonging to the very early period of Israelites' history. He argues that other versions of the law, with details of the sacrifice and redemption clauses, must be understood as later ones. He thinks that before redemption became the norm of Israel, child sacrifice would have had occurred in its early history.<sup>128</sup>

After looking at the evidence from archaeology for child sacrifice in the fourteenth century BC from Gezer and at Ezekiel's affirmation that, at some earlier point in time, Yahweh had accepted child sacrifice (Ezek. 20:25, 26), R. Russaud states that child sacrifice was part of Israelite religion in the early periods. He thinks that there are common elements and similarities between the child sacrifices in Gezer and Canaan. The Israelites would have abandoned this practise with the acceptance of redemption in the later periods. Dussaud argues that, 'since Yahweh is involved in human reproduction,' offering the firstborn is the best way ensure the family would survive, and in doing so they substituted the child with the prescribed redemption.

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<sup>127</sup> R. Kittel, *Geschichte des Volks Israel*, vol. 2 (Gotha: Friedrich Andreas Pethes, 1909), p. 119-20.

<sup>128</sup> H. Gressmann, *Die Schriften des Alten Testaments* (Gottingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprechi, 1921), p. 232.

There are traces of the old practice of sacrificing children still clearer in the Hebrew Bible that I will look into further in the next chapter.<sup>129</sup>

There are scholars who believe that there was a progression in arriving at the firstborn human sacrifice. In earlier periods, people offered first fruits and vegetables. Later, this included animal firstborn before finally developing to human firstborn (Ex. 22:28). The human firstborn were then later substituted by animal sacrifice (Gen. 22:13; Ex. 34:19-20; 13:2; 13:12) and by meal offering (Jer. 7:18). Thus, some argue that firstborn sacrifice stands as intermediate in the development of the religion.<sup>130</sup>

Wendel claims that child sacrifice was practised in the pre-historical period of Israelite religion. He thinks that Ex. 22:28b-29 and 34:20 are the earliest form of the law of the firstborn. In his view, the Canaanite practice of child sacrifice would have greatly influenced and reinforced the practice. However, he argues that, 'Though there are roots of firstborn sacrifices in the early practises of Israelite religion, there is no evidence for it in the Yahweh cult in the historical period.'<sup>131</sup> The child sacrifices that occurred during this time were performed as *זְבָחִים* offerings, which were not associated with the worship of Yahweh.

Wendel agrees with these points, claiming that there is evidence of people offering child sacrifice to Yahweh. He also contends that this is due to the merging of Yahwism with other

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<sup>129</sup> Dussaud, *Les origines cananeenes du sacrifice Israelite* (Paris: Ernest Leroux, 1921), p. 167.

<sup>130</sup> For example, G. Holscher, *Geschichte der israelitischen und judischen Religion* (Giessen: Topelmann, 1922), pp. 28-29.

<sup>131</sup> A. Wendel, *Das Opfer in der altisraelitischen Religion* (Leipzig: 1927), pp. 153-155.

foreign elements.<sup>132</sup> Lods argues that redemption was the key element and common practice in Yahwism from an early period (Ex. 34:20; Gen. 22). He does accept that there is clear evidence of child sacrifice in the Hebrew Bible, and holds that Ezekiel and his contemporaries are interpreting Ex. 22:28b-29 as a reference to child sacrifice. However, after looking at the Jephthah and Mesha stories and Mic. 6 (cf. 1 Kings 16:34; 2 Kings 3:27; Mic. 6:1-8) he concludes that children were sacrificed only in extraordinary circumstances.<sup>133</sup>

Agreeing with other scholars of his time, Eichrodt concludes that Ex. 22:28b-29 is not referring to a common firstborn sacrifice practised among the people. Quoting Gen. 49:3, he argues that ‘Firstborn were treated with high esteem from the very early composition of the Hebrew Bible.’<sup>134</sup> He also denies that the ‘bad laws’ mentioned in Ezekiel are suggesting that Yahweh had commanded people to sacrifice their firstborn to Him; like many other prophets, Ezekiel merely affirms that the sins of the people turned Yahweh’s blessing into curse. Eichrodt thinks that this is the reappearance of the ancient pagan influence they had encountered in the 8<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> centuries.<sup>135</sup>

Agreeing with Eichrodt, Blome takes the argument further, suggesting a complete rejection of any kind of child sacrifice in the Hebrew Bible in general, and Yahweh worship in particular. He interprets Ex. 22:28b-29 as some form of dedication of children to Yahweh,

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<sup>132</sup> Wendel, *Das Opfer in der altisraelitischen Religion*, p. 155.

<sup>133</sup> A. Lods, *Israel: des origins au milieu du VIII siecle* (Paris: La Renaissance du Livre, 1930), pp. 329-330 – cited from O. Keiser, *Von der Gegenwartsbedeutung des Alten Testaments: Gesammelte Studien zur Hermeneutik und zur Redaktionsgeschichte* (Gottingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprechi, 1984), p. 153.

<sup>134</sup> Walter Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, vol 1. (trans. J. A. Baker; Philadelphia: SCM Press, 1961), pp. 93-94.

<sup>135</sup> Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, p. 94.

perhaps for the temple service, rather than a demand for child sacrifice. He connects the redemption of a firstborn donkey, an unclean animal, with a lamb as a confirmation that all the firstborn belong to Yahweh, rather than as a demand for sacrifice. For Blome, the ‘bad laws’ in Ezekiel is a reference to all that Ezekiel accuses his audience of having rejected and neglected (Ezek. 20: 4). Blome thinks that Ezek. 20:25 is referring to the permission Yahweh gave people to follow the evil laws of the other people, which apparently includes child sacrifice, because they have rejected Yahweh and his commandments.<sup>136</sup>

Eissfeldt does not discuss the firstborn law in detail since his thesis is that children were offered to Yahweh prior to the Deuteronomistic reform. However, he denies that human firstborn were ever sacrificed among the Israelites, claiming that it was never a custom among them. Agreeing with other scholars, he concludes that children were sacrificed only in extreme situations, and this was not a common practice. He also argues that though the redemption clause is absent in Ex. 20:28b-29 since it is included in all other references, the redemption was intended even in this passage. He connects the circumcision ceremony with child sacrifice by arguing that in the past, children were symbolically offered to the deity on the 8<sup>th</sup> day, and during the post exilic period this ceremony was adopted into circumcision.<sup>137</sup>

H. Cazelles argues that there is no evidence for the general firstborn sacrifices in Israel. He thinks that Ex. 22:28b-29 is a reference to the firstborn of animals, as the case is in Ex. 13:12 and 34:20. He looks at the archaeological evidence from Gezer and Ta’anach and compares it

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<sup>136</sup> F Blome, *Die Opfermaterie in Babylonien und Isarel*, vol. 1 (Rome: Pontifer institutum Biblicum, 1934), pp. 388-396.

<sup>137</sup> O. Eissfeldt, *Molk als Opferbegriff im Punischen*, pp. 51-55.



with the Biblical account. He affirms that child sacrifices were commonly practised among the Canaanites but not among the Israelites. However, he agrees with the point that the Israelites' ancestors practised child sacrifices along with the other nations among whom they were living. By the time the Israelites formed as a nation or a group of people, the principle of redemption was in place.

Cazelles finds a problem in the absence of the redemption clause in this passage. However, he thinks that the seven days mentioned in v. 29 is the key, and he connects Ex. 22:28-29 with circumcision. Seven days is the full cultus period for the cult of Yahweh; for example, the cleansing of a leper or the purification period of Nazirites. Children were circumcised on the eighth day (Gen 17:12). Thus, he thinks that 'giving' in Ex 22:29 means not sacrificing, but circumcising, a ceremony in which male children are consecrated, making them part of the community. Anticipating the objection that circumcision was for all of the male children and not for the firstborn alone, Cazelles takes the example of Moses. Yahweh was angry (Ex. 4:24-26), but saved his life through the circumcision of his son. Cazelles thinks that Yahweh was angry because his firstborn was not offered to Him, but was satisfied by the circumcision, the foreskin of the child. He argues that the command to offer the firstborn in Ex. 22:28b-29 is a combination of commands linked to the first fruits - fall harvest (Ex. 22:28a), firstborn children (Ex. 22:28b) and the spring lambs (Ex. 22:29).<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>138</sup> H. Cazelles, *Etudes sur le Code de l'Alliance* (Paris: Letouzey et Ane, 1946), pp. 83-84 – cited in O Kaiser, "Den Erstgeborenen im Alten Testament," in O Kaiser (ed.), *Von der Gegenwartsbedeutung des Alten Testaments: Gesammelte Studien zur Hermeneutik und zur Redaktionsgeschichte* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1984), pp. 186-188.

Reacting to the observation of Frazer<sup>139</sup> that there is a close association with the Passover celebration and sacrifice of the firstborn, J. Henninger says that ‘it is highly improbable’.<sup>140</sup> He reasons that the account of child sacrifices in the Hebrew Bible were holocausts - total burning. He also thinks that human sacrifices were not a practice of nomadic tribes, but agrarian people who settled in one place, and thus it would have been a later practise among the Israelites after they had settled in Canaan. After analysing the Canaanite, Punic, and Phoenician child sacrifices, he contends that there is no evidence of a practice among any of the Semitic people for sacrificing all of the firstborn. The child sacrifices were done only in extreme situations, and for a special purpose. The commands to give the firstborn in the Hebrew Bible are seen as a call for the dedication of the firstborn to the divine service and not for sacrificing them in the literal sense of the word. He strongly argues that, ‘Due to the foreign infiltration, children were sacrificed in rare occasions and it has nothing to do with religion of Israel.’<sup>141</sup> In similar a line of thought, Cassuto adds a redemption clause in Ex. 22:28b-29 and argues that a substitute was given to the priest instead of the firstborn.<sup>142</sup>

Mowinckel, in his study of human sacrifice, finds two major purposes of humans sacrifice; namely, cannibalism and foundation offerings. However, he argues that in the ancient near east, human sacrifice of the firstborn served as peace offering. He thinks that the Israelites’

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<sup>139</sup> J. G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough: The Dying God*, vol 4. (London: Macmillan, 1911), p. 177.

<sup>140</sup> J. Henninger, *Les Fetes de printemps chez les Semites et la Paque Israelite* (Paris: Gabalda, 1975), pp. 160-166.

<sup>141</sup> Henninger, *Les Fetes de printemps chez les Semites*, pp. 160-166 – cited in O Kaiser (ed.), *Von der Gegenwartsbedeutung des Alten Testaments: Gesammelte Studien zur Hermeneutik und zur Redaktionsgeschichte* (Gottingen: Vanderhoeck & Ruprecht, 1984), pp. 189-190.

<sup>142</sup> U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus* (trans. I Abraham; Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1967), pp. 294-295.

practise was due to the influence of their Canaanite neighbours. The strict Yahweh followers attributed redemption to the practice.<sup>143</sup>

Noth thinks that the law of the firstborn is artificially linked to the killing of the Egyptian firstborn, though in its original form it was developed from the idea that all of the first fruits, vegetables, animals, or humans belonged to their provider, God. However, he inclines to the argument that there is no historical evidence among the Israelites that any firstborn were ever sacrificed to Yahweh, and redemption was provided by substituting a lamb (Ex. 13:13). Looking at Ex. 22:28b-29, he claims that this is a general statement and must be interpreted under specific instructions given elsewhere.<sup>144</sup>

R. de Vaux, in his presupposition of an early date for Ritual Decalogue, argues that redemption of the firstborn was the common practice among the Israelites. The demand for the firstborn is common for the fruit of the land and of the womb, animal as well as human, for they all belong to Yahweh. The administration of the demand is clearly explained in terms of how human, animal, and fruit of the land had to be offered. He also thinks that when Ezekiel speaks about the bad laws (Ezek. 20:25-26), he was thinking about Ex. 22:28b-29. He argues that Yahweh gave them good laws but they interpreted and understood them in the context of their neighbours, and they followed the bad laws of their neighbours; thus, the good laws of Yahweh became bad.<sup>145</sup> Fohrer argues that the firstborn offering was originally a Canaanite practice,

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<sup>143</sup> S. Mowinkler, *Religion und Kultus* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1959), pp. 70-80.

<sup>144</sup> Martin Noth, *Exodus: A Commentary* (London: SCM Press, 1968), p. 118.

<sup>145</sup> Roland de Vaux, *Studies in Old Testament Sacrifice* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1964), pp. 65-69.

which the Israelites copied. By looking at Gen. 22, he thinks that redemption was already in place from the very early days, and the concept among the Israelites was copied along with the practice of redemption. The offering of the firstborn acknowledges the Lordship and ownership of Yahweh over all their possessions. In other words, redemption was already in place before the Israelites copied it from the Canaanites, and thus it is not something they attributed to the firstborn sacrifice.<sup>146</sup>

Partially agreeing with Fohrer, Childs argues that child sacrifice was a common practice among the Semitic people (2 King 3:27; Mic. 6), and at some point in history the practice became part the Israelites. He argues that from the very early period the practice was abhorred among the Israelites.<sup>147</sup>

Disagreeing with other scholars, Kaiser makes the argument that the child sacrificial materials were later insertion to the text - probably in the postexilic period. He argues that, 'The accusation of the child sacrifice by the kings in the Northern Kingdom (2 Kings 17:17) is a postexilic polemic insertion based on Deut. 18. In arguing that 2 Kings 17:25-28 naturally connects with 2 Kings 17:41.'<sup>148</sup> He says that the Sepharvites' burning of their sons to Adrammeleck and Anammelek is also a later insertion. In other words, Kaiser thinks that though there could have been child sacrifices in the ancient world, the texts we have were postexilic

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<sup>146</sup> George Fohrer, *History of Israelite Religion* (London: SPCK Publishing, 1973), pp. 197-198.

<sup>147</sup> B. Childs, *The Book of Exodus: A Critical, Theological Commentary* (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974), p. 195.

<sup>148</sup> O. Kaiser, "Den Erstgeborenen im Alten Testament," in O Kaiser (ed.), *Von der Gegenwartsbedeutung des Alten Testaments: Gesammelte Studien zur Hermeneutik und zur Redaktionsgeschichte* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1984), pp. 150-153.

polemic insertions to blame the failure of keeping the law as the cause for their defeat and to make an appeal for a return to the law.<sup>149</sup>

After analysing and interpreting many passages such as Ex. 13:2, 12; 22:28-29; Lev. 18:21; 20:2-5, Mic. 6:7, Kaiser argues that ‘There were no people in the ancient near east who practised a strict sacrifice of all their firstborn; it was never a general law.’<sup>150</sup> Agreeing with others scholars as discussed above, Kaiser says that ‘firstborn or human sacrifice was not at home with Israelites ancestors,’ and thus he rejects the idea that at any time in the history of Israel the firstborn were ever regularly sacrificed. He thinks that in the earlier period young cattle were sacrificed, and later older ones were included. Later, humans were added, and even in the earliest period of human sacrifice redemption must have been in place among the Israelites. He questions the existence of child sacrifice to a significant degree among any ancient communities.<sup>151</sup>

Analysing various versions of law related to the firstborn, Fishbane comes up with a history of the development of the firstborn sacrifices in the Hebrew Bible. He opines that the first of its kind was a general statement as one may find in Num.18:15a, ‘The first offspring of every womb, both human and animal, that is offered to the LORD is yours.’ Fishbane argues that under this law, the firstborn were sacrificed to Yahweh. The next passage in consideration is Ex. 22:28b-29, ‘You must give me the firstborn of your sons. Do the same with your cattle and your sheep. Let them stay with their mothers for seven days, but give them to me on the eighth day.’ He thinks that the statement ‘do the same with your cattle and your sheep’ is a later addition.

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<sup>149</sup> O. Kaiser, “Den Erstgeborenen im Alten Testament,” p. 151.

<sup>150</sup> Kaiser, “Den Erstgeborenen im Alten Testament,” p. 161.

<sup>151</sup> Kaiser, “Den Erstgeborenen im Alten Testament,” p. 164-165.

Fishbane notices the change of verb here as ‘give’ rather than ‘sacrifice’. Thus, he argues that during this period firstborn children were dedicated or given to the service of God in various ways, rather than sacrificing them as in Num. 18:15. He points to two major reasons for this change:

1. Theological motivations, which condemned the act of sacrificing the children.

2. Socioeconomic reasons.<sup>152</sup>

This led to the substitutionary method of redeeming the firstborn, which he terms as ‘compromise measures’.<sup>153</sup>

Yahweh is considered as the ancestral father or divine ancestor, who is worthy of receiving the first fruits and firstborn, as that of the Canaanites. Ackerman argues that, ‘sacrificing children to לַיְהוָה was a common practice among the Israelites in the earlier period.’ She thinks that Ex. 22:28b-29 and 13:1-2 clearly speaks about the demand for sacrifice and its actual performance. Connecting the firstborn sacrifice of King Mesha (2 Kings 3:27), the reference to firstborn sacrifice in Micah (Mic. 6:6-7), and the Tophet in the Ben-Hinnom valley, she puts forward her arguments for the existence of firstborn child sacrifice among the Israelites as a routine practice.<sup>154</sup>

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<sup>152</sup> M. Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), pp. 182-85.

<sup>153</sup> Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel*, p. 187

<sup>154</sup> S. Ackerman, *Under Every Green Tree: Popular Religion in Sixth-Century Judah* (HSM 46; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992), pp. 121-159 .

Taking the middle ground, Levenson agrees with the point that, ‘at some point Israelites did or would have asked to sacrifice their children’, as in the case of Abraham, Jephthah, or Mesha, but this was not a regular practice among the people.<sup>155</sup> He thinks that Jeremiah (Jer. 19:5-6) and Ezekiel (Ezek. 20:25-26) are clearly referring to Ex. 22:28a-29. The audience would have understood that Yahweh did ask for the firstborn in the earlier texts, and now it is condemned. In consideration of the demand of the firstborn in Ex. 22:28b-29, Levenson compares it with the code of Hammurabi. He argues that the present passage ‘articulates a theological ideal about the special place of the first-born son, an ideal whose realization could range from literal to non-literal implementation, that is from sacrifice to redemption or even to mere intellectual assent without any cultic act whatsoever.’<sup>156</sup>

In the scholarly discussion as to whether Ex. 20:28b-29 refers to the demand of sacrificing the firstborn, J. Milgrom returns to the traditional view. He argues against Fishbane, Ackerman, and Levenson for interpreting the passage to mean there was a time when the firstborn was sacrificed among the Israelites. He argues against the suggestion of Fishbane that Ex. 22:29a, ‘Do the same with your cattle and your sheep’ was a later insertion, since it is not properly connected with the remaining portion of the passage. Milgrom says that the second half of the verse, ‘Let them stay with their mothers for seven days, but give them to me on the eighth day’ fits well with the first in the natural sense. It has no connection with phrase ‘the firstborn of your sons’ in the previous verse. Milgrom also looks into the word יִקְרִיבוּ in Num. 18:15, and says that the word does not

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<sup>155</sup> Jon Douglas Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of The Beloved Son* (London: Yale University Press, 1993), p. 17.

<sup>156</sup> Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of The Beloved Son*, p. 9.

mean ‘will sacrifice’ but means ‘will contribute’ or ‘donate’, the same as one finds in Ex. 22:28-29. The word נתן means give, and these words do not imply any meaning as sacrifice.<sup>157</sup>

Milgrom also argues against the observations of Ackerman that child sacrifice was routine in ancient Israel, based on her evaluation of Mesha’s sacrifice and Mic. 6:7, ‘Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of olive oil? Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?’ Milgrom argues that both these incidents are based on a special vow taken on a special occasion. Thus, he concludes that child sacrifice, if indeed there was any, was reserved for exceptional circumstances. He also rejects the view of Ackerman that there are various versions of the law. Milgrom points to the redemption itself as showing that actual child sacrifice was very seldom performed.<sup>158</sup>

Looking at the arguments of Levenson, Milgrom states that, ‘Child sacrifice existed and the law of the firstborn is referring to the actual demand and sacrifice of firstborn.’ Milgrom contends that it was not practised among the Israelites. He observes that the Mesha and Jephthah incidents were incidental, and not in accordance with the law of the firstborn. Even in the story of Abraham there is no connection with the law of the firstborn. It was a test of faith in which there was no promise of a substitute. Abraham was not aware of the provision of the substitute until he saw it.<sup>159</sup>

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<sup>157</sup> J. Milgrom, “Were the Israelite Firstborn Sacrificed to YHWH? To Molek? Popular Practice or Divine Demand?” in A. I. Baumgarten (ed.) *Sacrifice in Religious Experience* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), p. 51.

<sup>158</sup> Milgrom, “Were the Israelite Firstborn Sacrificed,” p. 53.

<sup>159</sup> Milgrom, “Were the Israelite Firstborn Sacrificed,” p. 53.



Looking at Ezek. 16:20, 21, ‘And you took your sons and daughters whom you bore to me and sacrificed them as food to the idols. Was your prostitution not enough? You slaughtered my children and sacrificed them to the idols.’ and 23:39, ‘On the very day they sacrificed their children to their idols, they entered my sanctuary and desecrated it. That is what they did in my house.’ Milgrom observes that these are not referring to the law of firstborn. Referring to ‘other statutes that were not good and laws through which they could not live’ in Ezek. 20:25-26, ‘So I gave them other statutes that were not good and laws through which they could not live; I defiled them through their gifts - the sacrifice of every firstborn - that I might fill them with horror so they would know that I am the LORD.’ Milgrom argues that this does not mean that at some time Yahweh condoned child sacrifice and now rejects it. He argues that here either the people misinterpreted Yahweh’s commands or that Yahweh deliberately misled them due to their perverse nature.<sup>160</sup> Milgrom also notices two Hebrew words used for redemption of the firstborn, נָאֵל and פְּדָה. He observes that נָאֵל implies the meaning that the redeemed property had originally belonged to the donor, and through the process of donation or dedication it is passed on to the deity, whereas פְּדָה implies that the property originally belonged to the sanctuary. Thus, where this word is used in connection with the firstborn, it means that they already belong to the sanctuary. Parents do not offer them to the sanctuary, but are returning them to their original owner. The priest has to ensure that they are redeemed properly since they are the property of the sanctuary. He also thinks that the מִלֵּךְ cult has no relation to the law of the firstborn.<sup>161</sup>

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<sup>160</sup> Milgrom, “Were the Israelite Firstborn Sacrificed,” p. 53.

<sup>161</sup> Milgrom, “Were the Israelite Firstborn Sacrificed,” p. 53.

In her landmark work, *King Manasseh and Child Sacrifice*, Stavrakopoulou argues that in Ex. 22:28-29, both animal and human 'are to be treated in exactly the same way.'<sup>162</sup> She rejects the argument of Fishbane that there was a development in the law of the firstborn in which child sacrifice was gradually replaced by redemption. She argues that 'it is possible that laws requiring the dedication of the human firstborn may have co-existed with regulations allowing for the redemption of the human firstborn.'<sup>163</sup> She also suggests that, 'the sacrifice of the firstborn animal did not replace the sacrifice of the human victim, but rather coexisted alongside the sacrifice of the human firstborn.'<sup>164</sup> She thinks that this is the way firstborn sacrifice was also practised among the Phoenician and Punic world. In her understanding, this does not give room to the idea that there were groups who adhered to the general call to the sacrifice of the firstborn and others who did not. She argues that firstborn child sacrifice was an unlikely practise even by an isolated group due to sociological, biological, and economic reasons.<sup>165</sup>

Stavrakopoulou connects the demand of the firstborn with the promise of fertility. She bases this argument on the claim that the phrase 'the one who opens the womb' refers to the fertility of the mother. Stavrakopoulou argues that in the Isaac stories, Isaac is connected with his mother rather than his father (Gen. 16:1; 17:19; 21:1-12), and she notices the point that Isaac is referred to by the term 'only-begotten' son, a term with equal value and status of a firstborn as one finds in Zech. 12:10. She also links the mother's fertility with Jephthah's story and suggests that she is a mature girl but yet to give birth to her firstborn (Judges 11: 37, 38). Stavrakopoulou also connects the reference of the firstborn in Mic 6: 7 as 'fruit of the womb' is a reference to

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<sup>162</sup> Stavrakopoulou, *King Manasseh and Child Sacrifice*, p. 181.

<sup>163</sup> Stavrakopoulou, *King Manasseh and Child Sacrifice*, p. 183.

<sup>164</sup> Stavrakopoulou, *King Manasseh and Child Sacrifice*, p. 284.

<sup>165</sup> Stavrakopoulou, *King Manasseh and Child Sacrifice*, p. 285.

fertility. Similarly, she thinks that there is a close link between circumcision and firstborn sacrifice. She observes that this link has a direct connection with the fertility.<sup>166</sup> After these observations, she asserts that, ‘although the biblical texts cannot offer historically accurate information about the purpose of the firstborn-sacrifice, it is possible that it was bound up with the hope of continued fertility.’<sup>167</sup> Though Stavrakopoulou’s argument seems valid, upon closer analysis of the three texts she uses as the basis for her argument there appears to be little evidence for such a claim. As per the textual evidences we have, Sarah had no other children, and thus it is certain that the text and story have no relation to fertility. In the story of Jephthah, there is no account stating that Jephthah benefited from the vow he made. The vow was made for something he accomplished with the help of his deity, and not for something he is expecting to receive. It is a sacrifice of gratitude and thanksgiving rather than offering a sacrifice to receive any blessings. Thus, we conclude that the Jephthah story also has no relation to the fertility cult. The passage in Micah is referring to sin and remission rather than fertility.<sup>168</sup> Micah 6:7 says ‘Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of olive oil? Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?’ Therefore, we conclude that the story of Abraham’s near sacrifice of Isaac, Jephthah’s sacrifice of his daughter, and the reference in Micah to offer the firstborn as a sacrifice has no links with fertility cult as argued by Stavrakopoulou.

In his commentary on Exodus, Propp agrees with the argument of Stavrakopoulou and others that the firstborn may never have been commonly sacrificed in Israel. He also thinks that

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<sup>166</sup> See Stavrakopoulou, *King Manasseh and Child Sacrifice*, p. 286.

<sup>167</sup> Stavrakopoulou, *King Manasseh and Child Sacrifice*, p. 286.

<sup>168</sup> Cf. Mic. 6:7b: “Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?”

Ex. 22:28b-29 is not referring to a demand for offering the firstborn to Yahweh. He argues against any society sacrificing their firstborn children as a regular practice for any reason. He considers it ‘as axiomatic that a kind of natural selection weeds out customs inimical to the survival of the family and the society...and killing every male firstborn would be no less than Darwinian suicide.’<sup>169</sup> However, Propp agrees with the point that children, including the firstborn, would have been sacrificed in some exceptional or extreme situations as one finds in 2 Kings 3:26-27<sup>170</sup> which reads, ‘When the king of Moab saw that the battle had gone against him, he took with him seven hundred swordsmen to break through to the king of Edom, but they failed. Then he took his firstborn son, who was to succeed him as king, and offered him as a sacrifice on the city wall. The fury against Israel was great; they withdrew and returned to their own land.’

Arguing that Ex. 22:28b-29 is the oldest legislation of firstborn, K. Finsterbusch maintains that the firstborn sacrifice did exist at some time in the history of Israel.<sup>171</sup> She mainly focuses on the theoretical base and the gender issues with the firstborn sacrifice. She notes the usage of the word *ḥōn* in Ex. 22:28b, and says that this word is very ambiguous in its usage and could mean sacrifice, though she does not argue for its interpretation as an imperative demand for firstborn sacrifice. She also thinks that the exclusive claim for male firstborn was a later development (Num. 3:40-43; Deut. 15:19); in the earlier period, the demand was for the firstborn, either male or female. She takes Ex. 34:19 ‘The first offspring of every womb belongs to me’ as

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<sup>169</sup> William C. Propp, *The Anchor Bible: Exodus 19–40: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, vol. 2A (New York: Doubleday, 2006), p. 268.

<sup>170</sup> Propp, *Exodus 19–40*, p. 270.

<sup>171</sup> K. Finsterbusch, “The First-born between Sacrifice and Redemption in the Hebrew Bible,” in K. Finsterbusch, A. Lange and K. F. Diethard Romheld (eds.), *Human Sacrifice in the Jewish and Christian Tradition* (Boston: Brill, 2007), p. 92.

her basis for the above conclusion. She argues that in earlier days it was meant for both male and female. She also notes the usage of the language that the firstborn belongs to Yahweh, rather than any request that they should be given to Yahweh in Ex. 34:19 and in other references. She argues that this implies that a debt is being paid, rather than a gift being given. In other words, the language shows Yahweh as the owner of the firstborn and that giving them back to him is an obligation, rather than something done in order to receive any kind of blessing.<sup>172</sup> She says that in this sense of the word, the firstborn sacrifices are an ‘expression of thankfulness or reverence to God as the giver of all life’, and not an attempt to influence God to obtain his blessing or to ensure he is gracious, forgiving, and kind.<sup>173</sup> This argument is in line with the understanding of Milgrom’s observation of the usage of two words for redeem: פָּדָה and גָּאַל. However, it is to be noted that the sacrifice of the firstborn does carry a sense of forgiveness and redemption according to Mic. 6:7 as it reads, ‘Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of olive oil? Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?’

### 3.3. Evaluation of the scholarly discussion on the firstborn sacrifices:

It has been noted that the key issue in regard to the firstborn is whether they were sacrificed among the Israelites or not. The difficult passages in this regard is Ex. 22:28b-29, Ezek. 20:26, and Mic. 6:7. These verses seem to plainly convey that at some time in their history, the firstborn were sacrificed among the Israelites. However, the degree and the popularity of the sacrifice is in question. The discussion of the scholarly consensus can be divided into three groups:

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<sup>172</sup> Finsterbusch, “The First-born between Sacrifice and Redemption,” p. 98.

<sup>173</sup> Finsterbusch, “The First-born between Sacrifice and Redemption,” p. 108.

1. The firstborn were sacrificed at some time in Israel's history, but later this was replaced by the redemption.
2. The firstborn were sacrificed only in some exceptional cases and substitutes were available.
3. The firstborn were never sacrificed; redemption was in place from a very early period.

It seems that the second position is the most acceptable according to the texts available to us from Hebrew Bible. It would be very difficult to understand a community in which all of the firstborn were always sacrificed, as de Vaux observes. This would bring into question the very existence and survival of the community. However, the third position that the firstborn were never sacrificed nullifies the facts and figures clearly mentioned throughout the Hebrew text. In all probability, firstborn were redeemed unless the situation was exceptional.

The observation of Stavrakopoulou<sup>174</sup> that there were different versions or variations of laws that were practised by different groups among the Israelites is a brilliant suggestion for solving the key issue of the lack of redemption clause in Ex. 22:28b-29 and other passages. This allows different people to practise different rituals, though one seems to look down on another. Thus, people had greater choice. Confusion arises for a modern reader when one tries to read all the relevant texts in unison, thinking all are speaking about the same thing. In this way one may

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<sup>174</sup> Stavrakopoulou, *King Manasseh and Child Sacrifice*, p. 285. For a broader discussion and further development of the topics, see F. Stavrakopoulou and John Barton (eds.), *Religious Diversity in Ancient Israel and Judah* (London: T & T Clark, 2010). The discussion on the sociological issues related to diverse practices within the same religion will be further analysed in the discussion on sacrifices in Hindu religion.

categorise at least five different ways in which people understood or interpreted the law of the firstborn:

1. The firstborn belongs to Yahweh and returning it to its owner is an obligation.
2. The firstborn are very special and thus only to be offered in special occasions to get out of particular situations of danger (the Mesha story).
3. The firstborn need to be sacrificed for the remission and forgiveness of the unpardonable sin that a parent or community have committed (as one finds in Mic. 6:7).
4. Yahweh demands the firstborn, and thus it is necessary to offer them to please Yahweh at some point. Thus, they thought offering the firstborn is part of Yahweh worship and they did sacrifice some of their firstborn.
5. Firstborn were sacrificed in the worship of other pagan deities such as  $\text{בַּעַל}$  in the valley of ben Hinnom (Jer. 19:5; 32:35).

The  $\text{מִלְכָּה}$  cult and the firstborn Sacrifice:

The key passage in this connection is found in the book of Jeremiah, although there are three additional passages. The primary one is Jer. 32:35 which reads, ‘They built high places for Baal in the Valley of Ben Hinnom to sacrifice their sons and daughters to  $\text{מִלְכָּה}$ , though I never commanded - nor did it enter my mind - that they should do such a detestable thing and so make Judah sin.’

The second reference is Jer. 7: 31, ‘They have built the high places of Topheth in the Valley of Ben Hinnom to burn their sons and daughters in the fire—something I did not command, nor did it enters my mind.’

The third reference is Jer. 19:5 ‘They have built the high places of Baal to burn their children in the fire as offerings to Baal - something I did not command or mention, nor did it enter my mind.’

According to the final form of the texts, these are the utterances of Yahweh against the practice of child sacrifice by the people of Israel. According to the prophetic voice, these are the cruel activities of the people that caused Yahweh to punish the Israelites. Scholars try to connect these references with the Yahweh’s claim of the firstborn in the Pentateuchal literature.<sup>175</sup> This was mainly due to the demand of Yahweh for the firstborn, and the association of the Israelites with the child sacrifice, though the authors of the text try to project it as a product of religious syncretism.

The authors of these texts clearly express four facts about the child sacrifices in general:

1. There were places where children were sacrificed to idols.

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<sup>175</sup> Ex. 22:28: “Do not hold back offerings from your granaries or your vats. You must give me the firstborn of your sons”; Ex. 34:10: “The first offspring of every womb belongs to me, including all the firstborn males of your livestock, whether from herd or flock”; Ex. 13:2: “Consecrate to me every firstborn male. The first offspring of every womb among the Israelites belongs to me, whether human or animal”; Ex. 13:12-13: “you are to give over to the LORD the first offspring of every womb. All the firstborn males of your livestock belong to the LORD. Redeem with a lamb every firstborn donkey, but if you do not redeem it, break its neck. Redeem every firstborn among your sons”; Ex. 13:15: “When Pharaoh stubbornly refused to let us go, the LORD killed the firstborn of both people and animals in Egypt. This is why I sacrifice to the LORD the first male offspring of every womb and redeem each of my firstborn sons.”



2. There were deities who received or demanded children sacrifices.<sup>176</sup>
3. These sacrifices were practised in the high places.
4. Topheth in the valley of Ben Hinnom was prominent.

According to the Deuteronomical texts, this practice is a violation of what Yahweh had commanded them (cf. Deut. 18:10; cf. 2 Kings 23:10), and confirms that this is something Yahweh dissociates from himself and pronounces severe punishment upon the people.<sup>177</sup> It is to be noted, as McKane observes, that the language used here strongly affirms that the practice was ‘something which Yahweh did not command and which he could never have contemplated’.<sup>178</sup> However, it is clear that the worshipers of Yahweh were offering these sacrifices to him without realising that they are doing something their God did not approve. That means there were misunderstandings among the people about the child sacrifice, or the writers of the Hebrew Bible misunderstood the whole concept of child sacrifice.

The four probabilities could be:

1. The younger generation were not aware of the warnings of the Law of Moses regarding the sacrifice of children and to abhor from the practises of their neighbours. Since the people around them did it for their gods, some of the people of Israel also did it to please

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<sup>176</sup> Ba`al and Yahweh both seem to demand the firstborn. Though the biblical writers project a rejection of child sacrifice onto Yahweh, he claims that “all that opens the womb belongs to him”. I will be looking at mlk sacrifices in the following pages.

<sup>177</sup> William McKane, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Jeremiah*, vol. 2. (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1996), p. 848.

<sup>178</sup> McKane, *Jeremiah*, vol. 1, p. 179.

their God, Yahweh, thinking that this is what they also need to do for their God to get his blessings.

2. The younger generation did know that this was something wrong, but were influenced by their neighbours and friends and joined them in the community celebration and were practising what their friends were doing. This is a sociological aspect for any society. They would have ignored the commands of the prophets and the Law of Moses. This is true even in modern society, in relation to many things and practises of everyday life.
3. There is a possibility of different kinds of Yahweh worship among the people of the Hebrew Bible. One of the options is child sacrifice, and people performed it as would anybody else in this ancient cultural context.
4. The writers of the Hebrew Bible consider child sacrifice as something abominable during the post-exilic period. Many people, including national leaders, did practise child sacrifice in the past, though the text clearly states that they were worshipping other gods. That means Israelite religion was polytheistic, though there were people who practised monotheism. It was the scribes, together with the influence of the elite, who eradicated polytheism and made a monotheistic society.

Though one may find some glimpses of child sacrifice to Yahweh when one closely studies the text of the Hebrew Bible, it does not support this interpretation. The authors of the Hebrew text may have had some ideological or theological motif in the way they presented Yahwism to their audience. When a modern reader takes the text as it is, one may not find evidence that the Yahwism of the Hebrew Bible was against any kind of child sacrifice.

The key argument connecting Yahweh with child sacrifice is mainly based on the usage of the Hebrew verb עָבַר. The verb עָבַר is consistently used in the Molech cult/sacrifice for giving a person or child to the deity. The same verb is used in the context of Yahweh's demand of the firstborn in Ex. 13:12. Though there is no firstborn connection in relation to the Molech cult/sacrifice in the book of Jeremiah, there is a clear connection in Mic. 6:7, which reads 'Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of olive oil? Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?'

Mic. 6:7 seems to imply that the sacrifice of children in general, firstborn in particular, was practised among the people of Israel, though the purpose may have been different from the other common sacrifices. It is to be noted that child sacrifice was not a regular sacrifice, as that of other common animal or grain sacrifices. It was administered as a last resort for bringing a solution to the gravest of issues and most critical of problems. According to the records from Micah, it was offered for the appeasement of their unpardonable transgressions. This means that people sacrificed their children to receive forgiveness for their sins and wrongdoings. According to the prophetic voice, they did it for the remission of their sins, though eventually, according to the text, it brought forth curses from the God of the Hebrew Bible. The Micah passage is rhetorical in style, expecting a strong and opposing negative answer. This shows that people were offering their firstborn, which was not what God desired. It was something he hated and poured out his anger on. There is a strong condemnation of child sacrifice in many texts of the Hebrew Bible (Deut. 12:31; Lev. 18:21; 20:2-5; Ezek. 16:20-21; 20:25, 26, 31; 23:37,39; Isa. 57:5, 9).<sup>179</sup>

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<sup>179</sup> For a discussion see Jack R. Lundbom, *The Anchor Bible: Jeremiah 1-20* (Doubleday: The Anchor Bible, 1999), pp. 492-503.

A key passage in the prophetic books is found in Ezekiel 20:25-26. This reference opens with different questions and issues in terms of firstborn and their sacrifice. The passage reads, ‘So I gave them other statutes that were not good and laws through which they could not live; I defiled them through their gifts - the sacrifice of every firstborn - that I might fill them with horror so they would know that I am the LORD.’ According to the text, it is Yahweh who gave them the laws that are not good. This means that the demand for the firstborn is something Yahweh gives to punish the people. In other words, sacrificing their firstborn is not what Yahweh wants them to do, though it was he that gave the law and asked for the firstborn to be sacrificed.

According to the prophetic voices of Ezekiel and Jeremiah, the practice of child sacrifice was not part of Yahweh worship, but rather ‘They arise because of the people’s nature to adopt practices of other culture and violation of the law given to them.’ Greenberg thinks that it is a rhetorical style of exaggeration. He comments that, ‘Unique to our passage is the fusion of terms drawn from the firstborn law with that of burning children, resulting in the unprecedented and incredible charge that Israelites regularly offered up every firstborn as sacrifice - a manifest exaggeration.’<sup>180</sup> In this context, Ezekiel is pointing out that the ‘child sacrifice is a sort of ultimate proof of Israel’s wickedness, a defilement incurred by their worship itself.’<sup>181</sup> According to the authors, this leads Yahweh to let them experience these painful things. Here it is not Yahweh who gave them the laws that they are unable to follow, but rather their actions and behaviours lead Yahweh to allow them to follow their choice. For example, Eichrodt comments that, ‘Nevertheless it shows a profound understanding of the divine reality so unsparingly

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<sup>180</sup> Moshe Greenberg, *The Anchor Bible: Ezekiel 1-20* (New York: Doubleday, 1983), p. 370.

<sup>181</sup> Robert W. Jenson, *SCM Theological Commentary on the Bible: Ezekiel* (London: SCM Press, 2009), p. 158.

portrayed by the prophet. Israel's faith in God, unable as it was to accept either the seriousness of the demand for a decision or the life-giving kindness of her God, had to experience the shock of finding herself wrong in her overconfident assumption of how God would behave, before she could be touched by any awareness of the mysterious holiness of God.<sup>182</sup> Rabbi Fisch observes that according to the Hebrew grammatical usage the verb 'I gave' in this context must be interpreted as 'I caused to give'.<sup>183</sup> This is a rhetorical style of Ezekiel. The people's action leads God to act to punish them. In other words, man's disobedience in following the statutes of God made them harder to follow the laws of God. God allowed the pervasive nature of man in indulging in painful actions that they thought as good things, though it was not asked for or allowed by their God. Though it is the children who are undergoing the pain, the pain the parents undergo is also considered to be a punishment from God for their disobedience and hardened hearts.

Thus we need to understand that the law became bad due to the disobedience of the people; the good law was interpreted in a wrong way. God asked to redeem or consecrate the firstborn, whereby people indulged in sacrificing their children. This good law became bad law for them. In other words, here the law of sanctification of the firstborn (Ex. 13:2) turned to a law of pollution and killing.<sup>184</sup> Referring to Ezek. 20:25-26, Joyce argues that Ezekiel, as he did elsewhere (16:20-21; 20:31; 23:37), 'Seems to connect Israelite observance of child sacrifice with the worship of

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<sup>182</sup> Walther Eichrodt, *Ezekiel: A Commentary* (The Old Testament Library; London: SCM Press, 1970), p. 272.

<sup>183</sup> S. Fisch, *Ezekiel: Hebrew Text & English Translation with an Introduction and Commentary* (London: The Soncino Press, 1950), p. 126.

<sup>184</sup> Fisch, *Ezekiel*, p. 126.

alien gods and idols.’<sup>185</sup> This is again true in the whole understanding of God and his deed according to the texts of the Hebrew Bible (cf. Ex. 9:16; 10:2; Isa. 6:9ff; 63:17; 1 King 18:36). ‘Yahweh makes His law, which is otherwise celebrated as light (Ps. 119:105) and a way of life (Ezek. 20:11), the occasion of punishment is unique in the Hebrew Bible.’<sup>186</sup>

After looking at the Ezekiel passage, Heider argues that it is a polemic attack of the prophet to the people who are in apostasy. He observes “The result of Israel’s refusal to obey Yahweh is as it was for Pharaoh and the death of the firstborn, only this time at the willing hands of the rebels themselves.”<sup>187</sup> Jenson notes that ‘Ezekiel now calls child sacrifice a sort of ultimate proof of Israel’s wickedness, a defilement incurred by their worship itself (Ezek. 20:26a), and the command to perform it an ordinance that does not promote life.’ But God also says that it is he who gave the command. Jenson provides a reason that ‘He did it to punish Israel for inveterate rebellion by driving them into rebellion’s final depth, into sheer horror, where they might finally acknowledge their desperate situation (20:26b).’<sup>188</sup>

Greenberg also agrees with this idea, stating ‘Because Israel consistently rejected God’s good, life giving laws, God’s condign punishment was to replace them with not-good laws, by observing which one would gain not life but death (cf. 18:18; 36:31).’<sup>189</sup> This is true if one compares it with other prophetic utterances where people were hardening their minds (cf. Isa

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<sup>185</sup> Paul M. Joyce, *Ezekiel: A commentary* (Library of Old Testament Studies, 482; London: T & T Clark, 2009), p. 151.

<sup>186</sup> Walther Zimmerli, *Ezekiel 1-24* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1979), p. 411.

<sup>187</sup> G. C. Heider, “A Further Turn on Ezekiel’s Baroque Twist in Ezek. 20:25, 26,” *JBL* 107/4 (1988), 721-724.

<sup>188</sup> Robert W. Jenson, *Ezekiel* (SCM Theological Commentary on the Bible; London: SCM Press, 2009), p. 159.

<sup>189</sup> Greenberg, *Ezekiel 1-20*, pp. 368-369.

6:9ff). A similar situation is found in Is. 63:17, which reads ‘Why, Yahweh do you made us stray from your ways and harden our hearts not to fear you?’

However, one also should consider the way people wrongly interpreted the law of the firstborn. There could have been different groups who believed in the literal practice of the demand of the firstborn, even if not every firstborn. This should be understood in the light of Stavrakopoulou’s interpretation of various religious traditions or practices among the people. The prophet could have been speaking from a point of theodicy, and might have been basing his understanding on the demand to offer every firstborn to Yahweh. Ezekiel 20:25-26 is the prophetic interpretation of the law of the firstborn, condemning the firstborn sacrifice, arguing that this sacrifice was given to them by Yahweh to be practised. Hence, the texts reveal that people were offering their firstborn even in the worship of other gods and idols such as Baal, or in the personified sacrifice of Molech or Yahweh.

For Ezekiel, child sacrifice is an abomination and Yahweh is neither pleased with it nor accepts it. These passages clearly imply, however, that it was Yahweh who gave these commands, perhaps referring to Yahweh’s demand for the firstborn. This is the bad law according to the prophetic voice. It was intended for good but turned bad by its wrong usage and interpretation by the people in sacrificing their children, perhaps even for Yahweh. People thought they were doing a good thing, as did the worshippers of other gods. In response, the prophets stated clearly that it was not the will of Yahweh and that child sacrifice was something practised by other people in relation to the people of Israel, though Israelites also practised it.

The evidence is substantial, however, that children were sacrificed in the Molech sacrifice. One needs to consider the relation between Yahweh's demand for the firstborn and the Molech sacrifice. The central question is, are they same, or different?

John Day, in his concluding remarks states 'It may be confidently asserted that the Molech sacrifices are not to be equated with the offering of the firstborn to Yahweh in any case.'<sup>190</sup> These two are entirely different in every respect for the following reasons:

1. Yahweh demands only the firstborn, and even in this he is not demanding that they are sacrificed. The people of Israel had done so at some point in their history, which prophets and the writers of the Hebrew Bible polemically attacked. In the Molech cult, however, there is no exclusive demand for the firstborn; the victim can be any child, including the firstborn. The following Hebrew Bible texts affirms this:

- Lev. 18:21 reads 'You shall not give any of your children to devote them by fire to Molech, and so profane the name of your God: I am the LORD'. This means Molech receives any child, not just the firstborn.
- Lev. 20:2-5 reads 'Say to the people of Israel, any man of the people of Israel, or of the strangers that sojourn in Israel, who gives any of his children to Molech shall be put to death; the people of the land shall stone him with stones. I myself will set my face against that man, and will cut him off from among his people, because he has given one of his children to Molech, defiling my sanctuary and profaning my holy name. And if the people of the land do at all hide their eyes from that man, when he gives one of his children to Molech, and do not put him to death, then I will set my face against that man and against his family, and will cut them off from among their people, him and all who follow him in playing the harlot after Molech.'

2. There is a provision of redemption in Yahweh's demand for the firstborn. In Molech sacrifice, there is no thought of redemption (cf. Ex. 13:13, 'Redeem with a lamb every

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<sup>190</sup> Day, *Molech*, p. 71.



firstborn donkey, but if you do not redeem it, break its neck. Redeem every firstborn among your sons.’).

3. Yahweh did not ask for the female firstborn, or any other children outside the firstborn male, whereas in the Molech cult girls were also sacrificed.<sup>191</sup> 2 Kings 23:10 reads, ‘And he defiled To’pheth, which is in the valley of the sons of Hinnom, that no one might burn his son or his daughter as an offering to Molech.’ Jer. 32:35 states, ‘They built the high places of Ba'al in the valley of the son of Hinnom, to offer up their sons and daughters to Molech, though I did not command them, nor did it enter into my mind, that they should do this abomination, to cause Judah to sin.’
4. The prophets reject all kinds of child and human sacrifices, with strong words even regarding dedicating girls to the temples (Ezek. 16:20-21; 20:31; 23:37-39).

It is to be noted that Yahweh’s demand for the firstborn and the Molech sacrifice of children cannot be equated. The Hebrew Bible writers were aware of the practice of child sacrifice in different contexts. It seems that during the time of the prophets it could have been a widespread practice among the people of the Hebrew Bible. Perhaps people would have been performing it, thinking this was something their God demanded and was pleased with. However, the prophetic voices were against the common practice of the people, condemning it as an act of apostasy and urging them to leave it and return to the ‘true form of worship’. This indicates that there is a

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<sup>191</sup> For a detailed discussion on the subject see George C. Heider, *The Cult of Molek: A Reassessment* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1985), pp. 229-272; John Day, *Molech: A God of Human Sacrifice in the Old Testament* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 65-71.

possibility of an official and popular religious trend among the people, as observed by Stavrakopoulou.<sup>192</sup>

The literature of the Hebrew Bible varies in its presentation of the practice of what is official and what is not. There are times when kings and the royal cult approved of child sacrifices as part of the official religion. During those times, some prophets and priests stood against it. There are other times where the kings were against all forms of idol worship and sacrifices. During these times the priests and prophets who supported child sacrifice stood against the monarchs. This was a repeating pattern, as these two opposing groups persecuted each other. The supporters of the official religion persecuted the popular practice since they had both the power and authority. This is a commonly observed phenomenon in many cultures. The wider context of each reference to child sacrifice and Molech sacrifice reveals the writer's disapproval of the practices, rather than its approval. The aim of the writer was polemic, attacking these practices and calling the people to return to their God. The prophets informed them of their apostasy and the impending punishment from their deity if they did not turn back.

Scholarship agrees with the point that there was not a single editor of the Hebrew Bible. There is a possibility of many different editors, editing different portions of the Hebrew Bible at different times. Nevertheless, the entire Hebrew Bible text unanimously abhors and totally rejects the practice of child sacrifice by the Israelites in their worship of Yahweh. There is evidence of child sacrifice in the worship of Yahweh. This means that there was a wrong understanding either among the religious officials, the population, or the authors of the Hebrew Bible.

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<sup>192</sup> Stavrakopoulou, *King Manasseh and Child Sacrifice*, p. 181.

This is clearer when we look at the usage of two Hebrew words used for sacrifice.

### 3.4. Analysis of two Hebrew words

There are two words mainly used to explain the concept of consecration or set apart: **קָדַשׁ** and **עִבְרָה**. These two words are often used interchangeably, though it seems that their implied meaning and usage has differences.

In Ex. 13:12, the word **עִבְרָה** means ‘set apart for a special purpose’, and is used as a synonym for **קָדַשׁ** (Ex. 13:2). However, the word **בִּרְעָה** literally means ‘pass over to’ or ‘pass on to’, in the sense of transferring something from the authority of one titleholder to another.<sup>193</sup> Thus, the author or final editor is very careful in his choice of words in this context. He purposefully avoids **קָדַשׁ**<sup>194</sup> in order to establish the intended meaning in this context. The word is used elsewhere in the context of sacrificing children. For example, in Deut. 18:10, it is used in the context of warning about the practice of passing (**עִבְרָה**) children through fire in sorcery, divination, and in the worship of other gods and goddesses. It reads, ‘No one pass his son or daughter through fire one who uses divination, practises witchcraft and one who interprets omens or a sorcerer.’ 2 Kings 16:3, 4 reads ‘But he walked in the way of the kings of Israel. He even burned his son as an offering, according to the abominable practices of the nations whom the LORD drove out before the people of Israel. And he sacrificed and burned incense on the high places, and on the hills, and under every green tree.’ 2 Kings 17:16, 17 reads, ‘And they forsook all the

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<sup>193</sup> See *BDB*, pp. 717-720.

<sup>194</sup> **קָדַשׁ** could mean be holy, consecrate, sanctify, set apart, treat as belonging to the deity, removed from ordinary use. See *DCH*, vol. 7, pp. 190-195.

commandments of the LORD their God, and made for themselves molten images of two calves; and they made an Ashe'rah, and worshiped all the host of heaven, and served Ba'al. And they burned their sons and their daughters as offerings, and used divination and sorcery, and sold themselves to do evil in the sight of the LORD, provoking him to anger.' In this context, the children are burned or sacrificed in fire as part of worship that is prohibited by the God of the Hebrew Bible. 2 Kings 17:18 says that this became the reason for their fall into the hands of their enemies, for their God hates it.<sup>195</sup>

This shows that the word עֲבֹרִי is used as a synonym for child sacrifice, whereby a child is transformed from the human realm to the holy realm to be sacrificed to the deity. However, there are disagreements about the usage of עֲבֹרִי among scholars.

Houtman thinks that הִבְעִיר is the technical term for child sacrifice.<sup>196</sup> Scholars assume that here הִעֲבִיר must have been a wordplay with<sup>197</sup> הִבְעִיר due to the use of an animal in sacrifice.<sup>198</sup> Thus, the author or the final editor may be using wordplay in this context. הִבְעִיר could be a derivative from the הִעֲבִיר because both words have a closely connected meaning. Children have been passed through fire, as animals, to offer them as a sacrifice to the deity.

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<sup>195</sup> Cf. 2 Kings 16:5. 2 Kings 17:18-20 reads “Therefore the LORD was very angry with Israel, and removed them out of his sight; none was left but the tribe of Judah only. Judah also did not keep the commandments of the LORD their God, but walked in the customs which Israel had introduced. And the LORD rejected all the descendants of Israel, and afflicted them, and gave them into the hand of spoilers, until he had cast them out of his sight.”

<sup>196</sup> Houtman, *Exodus*, p. 215

<sup>197</sup> See Houtman, *Exodus*, p. 215, n. 143.

<sup>198</sup> הִבְעִיר means beasts or cattle. See *BDB*, p. 129.

However, the word *הַעֲבִיר* can have different connotations and meanings based on the context of its usage. Though there seems to be a connection between these two words, they come from different roots. With this wordplay, the author of Exodus prefers the word *קָדַשׁ* over *קֹדֶשׁ*.<sup>199</sup> *קָדַשׁ* is used in the sense of sacredness, whereas *עֲבָרָה*<sup>200</sup> is used in the sense of action. Thus, in Ex. 13:12 *עֲבָרָה* is meant to show the action of sacrificing the firstling; it is an act, not abstract or conceptual as that of the usage of the word *קָדַשׁ*. Therefore, it is possible to argue that at some points (at least in rare occasions), the firstborn were sacrificed - an action of literal sacrifice, rather than a mere concept.

The other key passage is Lev. 20:2, ‘Say to the people of Israel, any man of the people of Israel, or of the strangers that sojourn in Israel, who gives any of his children to Molech shall be put to death; the people of the land shall stone him with stones. I myself will set my face against that man, and will cut him off from among his people, because he has given one of his children to Molech, defiling my sanctuary and profaning my holy name.’ This passage speaks about the punishment due for a man who offers his children to Molech sacrifice. Here the word *נתן* is used in terms of giving children as a sacrifice to Molech. The context is that people who gave their children to Molech as a sacrifice were to be stoned to death (Numbers 18:16,19; 1 Sam. 1:11). The word *נתן* can only mean ‘give’, and it must be qualified by words such as to whom, where, what, or how. It is interesting to note that the active giving, *נתן*, in the Molech sacrifice is usually qualified by an additional phrase, burning or putting the children in the fire, whereas in the case of Yahweh’s demands it is not mentioned. Though the *נתן* is used in giving the object of worship

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<sup>199</sup> See *DCH*, vol. 7, pp. 196-204.

<sup>200</sup> See *DCH*, vol. 6, pp. 232-244.

to both Molech sacrifice and Yahweh, the qualifying adverbs are not used for the things given to Yahweh.

Ex. 22:29, reads ‘You shall not delay to offer from the fullness of your harvest and from the outflow of your presses. The first-born of your sons you shall give to me.’ This simply says to give to God and is not qualified by saying how to give. This means that it is a general statement affirming a general practice known to the author and familiar to the readers. In the case of Molech sacrifice, people know that giving to Molech sacrifice is to burn the children in fire. This was a common understanding of the people who were eyewitnesses to the religious rituals of these cults. It is very difficult for us to understand the context of these writings apart from assuming that there were people who offered their children to Molech sacrifice. The writer is warning them about the punishment due to such people, though they may have had offered it to Yahweh as well, thinking that is what was demanded of them. The author, in his ideological perception, is speaking against such people and their practice, which had been popular in the past but was no longer.

### 3.5.Conclusion

Day argues against the whole use of the Hebrew word Molech as a sacrificial term; however, he agrees with Eissfeldt in this regard that the Punic term *molk* is a sacrificial term and has no connection with the Hebrew word מֹלֵךְ. Though Day agrees that Punic *molk* is not a god but a sacrificial term, he does not agree with the point that it is only used as a term for human/child sacrifice due to its usage with a preposition in another two occasions to denote other sacrifices.

However, it seems Day's argument is weak in this context. On the three occasions it is used, it is clear that two of them are used directly for child sacrifices, and the other is used as a sacrifice substitute for a child sacrifice.<sup>201</sup> However, in these three instances the term is used in the context of child sacrifice, and it is more probable that the term is used for a particular kind of sacrifice where child is used as a victim, or a substitute was offered instead of the child, according to these usages.<sup>202</sup> Thus we establish the fact that the Punic term *molk* was used in the context of child sacrifice.

The question remains that, if it is a sacrificial term in the Punic literature, how is it used in the Hebrew Bible, and how did the people/readers understand what meaning it carried? The final form of the texts we have in the Hebrew Bible describes Molech as an idol or a god who accepts child sacrifices. However, there are eight occurrences of the term Molech in the Hebrew Bible (Lev. 18:21; 20:2-5; 1 Kings 11:7; 2 Kings 23:10 and Jer. 32:35), and all except one can be translated either as a Molech sacrifices or to Molech for the Hebrew word מֹלֶךְ.<sup>203</sup>

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<sup>201</sup> See L. E. Stager and S. Wolf, "Child Sacrifices at Carthage – Religious Rite or Population Control?" *BAR* 10 (1984), 47.

<sup>202</sup> See F. Rosenthal, "Canaanite and Aramaic Inscriptions," in J. B. Pritchard, *ANET* (Princeton, 1969), p. 658.

<sup>203</sup> Lev. 18:21: "Do not give any of your children to be sacrificed to Molech, for you must not profane the name of your God. I am the LORD"; or, "Do not give any of your children as a Molech sacrifice, for you must not profane the name of your God. I am the LORD." Lev. 20:2: "Say to the Israelites: 'Any Israelite or any foreigner residing in Israel who sacrifices any of his children to Molech is to be put to death. The members of the community are to stone him'; or, "Say to the Israelites: 'Any Israelite or any foreigner residing in Israel who give any of his children as a Molech sacrifice is to be put to death. The members of the community are to stone him'".

Lev. 20:3: "I myself will set my face against him and will cut him off from his people; for by sacrificing his children to Molech, he has defiled my sanctuary and profaned my holy name"; or, "I myself will set my face against him and will cut him off from his people; for by offering some of his children as Molech sacrifice, he has defiled my sanctuary and profaned my holy name."

The terms for other sacrifices also occur in similar forms as מִלְּךָ. For example, the Hebrew term for burnt offering is לֵעֹלָה, and the term for guilt offering is לְאָשָׁם. These are not translated as deities but as a kind of sacrifice, and thus Molech could be translated in a similar way.

Lev. 20:5 ‘I myself will set my face against him and his family and will cut them off from their people together with all who follow him in prostituting themselves to *Molech*.’ In this verse, it is clear that the word is used to refer to a deity named Molech, rather than a sacrificial term. Scholars try to find different solutions to this interpretation. For example, de Vaux suggests that this could have been a sacrificial term among the Punic, which was mistakenly understood as a god by the Israelite scribes and thus identified in the text as a deity who accepts child sacrifices.<sup>204</sup>

If no god Molech existed, the question to be asked is to which god did they offer their children? In order to understand this, we shall look at the references where child sacrifice is described but does not use the name Molech. In Jer. 32:35 the writer says, ‘They built high places for Baal in the Valley of Ben Hinnom to sacrifice their sons and daughters to *Molech*, though I never commanded - nor did it enter my mind - that they should do such a detestable thing and so make Judah sin.’

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Lev. 20:4: “If the members of the community close their eyes when that man sacrifices one of his children to Molech and if they fail to put him to death. . .”; or, “If the members of the community close their eyes when that man give one of his children as a Molech sacrifice and if they fail to put him to death. . .”

<sup>204</sup> See for example, R. de Vaux, *Studies in Old Testament Sacrifice* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1964), p. 70.



There is a contradiction here. It seems they built the **הַמִּזְבֵּחַ** in the valley of Ben Hinnom for Baal but offered their sons and daughters to Molech. Two deities in one **הַמִּזְבֵּחַ**, but the children were offered to only one deity? Did the other deity, Baal, ever accept child sacrifice? If yes, why is it referring to Molech and not to Baal?

If we interpret the translation of **לְמִלְכָּא** as a Molech sacrifice, the meaning is clearer, and there is no confusion. Traditionally, each place of worship is named after its deity, and the worship is offered to that particular deity in that particular place. If Baal is worshiped at the particular **הַמִּזְבֵּחַ** in the valley of Ben Hinnom, the worship should have been offered to Baal. In this context **לְמִלְכָּא** seems to be referring to the type of sacrifice the people offered to Baal, and not a named god. This interpretation is more clearly attested with other references in Jeremiah. For example, in Jer. 7:31 ‘They have built the high places of Topheth in the Valley of Ben Hinnom to burn their sons and daughters in the fire - something I did not command, nor did it enter my mind.’ Here no name of the deity is mentioned and thus it is ambiguous in identifying the deity. However, children were sacrificed in this place to some deity, and we need to identify the deity in this valley of Ben Hinnom. This is made clearer in Jer. 19:5-6. It reads, ‘They have built the high places of Baal to burn their children in the fire as offerings to Baal - something I did not command or mention, nor did it enter my mind. So beware, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when people will no longer call this place Topheth or the Valley of Ben Hinnom, but the Valley of Slaughter.’ This verse confirms that the high places, **הַמִּזְבֵּחַ**, were built at the Valley of Ben Hinnom for Baal to sacrifice children to Baal. According to the Punic inscriptions, Baal and his partner Tannit regularly received human sacrifices in the local shrines.

Both these verses state that what the people were doing was not something their god Yahweh demanded. This means the people were doing it as if the deity demanded it, but the writer is explaining that this is not something Yahweh demanded. Thus, there is a misunderstanding among the people and the author is trying to tell them that what they understand of the demands of Yahweh was wrong. Yahweh was not demanding that they burn the children, which they had been doing. This plainly expresses that the burning of children was something people practised for their god, whoever their god was. This gives the understanding that child sacrifice was part of the religious system among the people. There are other references in the Hebrew Bible postulating a similar understanding. For example, Micah 6:6-7 states, 'With what shall I come before the LORD and bow down before the exalted God? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousand rivers of olive oil? Shall I offer my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?'

Ezek. 20:24-26 reads, 'Because they had not obeyed my laws but had rejected my decrees and desecrated my Sabbaths, and their eyes lusted after their parents' idols. So I gave them other statutes that were not good and laws through which they could not live; I defiled them through their gifts - the sacrifice of every firstborn - that I might fill them with horror so they would know that I am the LORD.'

These two verses confirm that it is not only this generation, but their fathers also worshiped these idols that demanded child sacrifice, and their god also accepted it and allowed it, though the author tries to convince the readers that the consequences of this action will incur the

displeasure of Yahweh. This leaves open the argument that it was acceptable to offer the firstborn as a sacrifice in the early period of Israelite religion. In other words, the God of the Hebrew Bible gave them instructions to offer firstborn to him, though, according to the author, it was to horrify them and defile them.

According to Ezek. 20:24, there are two laws. There was a law given first, which they did not obey, and there was a second law that contained other laws (v. 25) that were not good. This leaves us the question, does God cause good and evil? The people burned their babies thinking they were doing something to please their deity in their ignorance, but according to the text, they were allowed to do this by the deity, in order to punish them.<sup>205</sup> The key question here is it referring to the demand of the firstborn by their God, or something else? According to the textual evidence, there is no other demand of offering a human sacrifice to the god of the Hebrew Bible, and it could be referring to the demand of the firstborn. If that is true, were the firstborn ever sacrificed to the God of the Hebrew Bible?

Additionally, there are other interesting aspects in regards to the reference of Josiah's reformation. 2 Kings 23:10 reads, 'He desecrated Topheth, which was in the Valley of Ben Hinnom, so no one could use it to sacrifice their son or daughter in the fire to מִלִּיךְ.' The very purpose of removing the Topheth at the Valley of Hnnom was to prevent people from sacrificing their children. This is not speaking about any people from outside, but the people of the Hebrew Bible. That means it was a very common practice among the people even in the time of Josiah.

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<sup>205</sup> There is a paradox here, but the limited scope of this research does not allow further study into it.

This verse also shows that not only were the sons offered, but they also sacrificed their daughters. The demand for the firstborn was for male. This demonstrates that, apart from the demand of the firstborn, there is some other connection here in terms of child sacrifice. In other words, child sacrifice is not based on the demand of the firstborn, but based on some other factors, which is not clearly explained anywhere in the texts. Josiah found the book on the 18<sup>th</sup> year of his reign, and only then did the reformation take place. Does that mean that even in the first 18 years of Josiah's reign they were offering children to their God as an acceptable form of worship? Had they never felt guilty about it? It leaves us to read and understand that until that period the worship of 'other god and goddesses' were in the temple and among the people (2 Kings 23:4-20) at various places. It was a common practise or a popular religion among the people. That means child sacrifice was an acceptable form of worship among the people until they read the Law of Moses. This also reveals that even King Josiah was not aware that child sacrifice was not something acceptable by their God until he read it from the Law. This leaves many questions about the beliefs and practices of people up until Josiah's reformation. If even the king was unaware of the Law of the Lord and its demands and restrictions, how should the common people be expected to know? Once they had read the law, they realised its requirements and Josiah removed the Topheth from the Valley of Ben Hinnom and other places, as we see in 2 King 23. According to the text, even worship at the temple was polytheistic and syncretistic in nature,<sup>206</sup> and Josiah tried insisting monotheism in this context.

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<sup>206</sup> See 2 Kings 23:4-7: "The king ordered Hilkiah the high priest, the priests next in rank and the doorkeepers to remove from the temple of the LORD all the articles made for Baal and Asherah and all the starry hosts. He burned them outside Jerusalem in the fields of the Kidron Valley and took the ashes to Bethel. He did away with the idolatrous priests appointed by the kings of Judah to burn incense on the high places of the towns of Judah and on those around Jerusalem—those who burned incense to Baal, to the sun and moon, to the constellations and to all the starry hosts. He took the Asherah pole from the temple of the LORD to the Kidron Valley outside Jerusalem

To solve these issues, there were many solutions put forward. Some suggested that these are due to scribal error. There could have been scribal errors while copying the manuscript. However, this is beyond any such error, because it is not only in one place but also throughout the whole text. The theodicy of the God of the Hebrew Bible is the basic principle behind all the texts and in the mind of the author.

It is argued that the scribes were writing and arguing based on their understanding of child sacrifice at the time of writing, rather than looking behind the history of the practices. It is considered an abhorrent practice, and thus the writers are trying to push it out of the religion of the Hebrew Bible, though the people practised it in the earlier period and it was a common practice of the public. Whether it was syncretistic or not, people thought it an acceptable form of worship. If it were syncretistic in nature, the people would not have taken it very lightly, and the prophets would not have told that ‘These are the laws given by their God to punish them.’ People were doing it without any fear or reluctance, for they were doing it with an attitude of offering these sacrifices to their God as they had been doing it in the past. Perhaps it is a surprising thing for the audience, considering a normal form of worship as illegitimate. This will become clearer when we analyse the Abrahamic call to offer his son as a sacrifice to his deity.

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and burned it there. He ground it to powder and scattered the dust over the graves of the common people. He also tore down the quarters of the male shrine prostitutes that were in the temple of the LORD, the quarters where women did weaving for Asherah.”

## Chapter 4

### The Demand of the Deity:

#### Genesis 22 – Abraham and The Near Sacrifice of Isaac

##### 4.1 Introduction

The near-sacrifice of Isaac in Genesis 22 is one of the central events in the Hebrew Bible for the Jews, Muslims and for Christians.<sup>207</sup> Thus, analysis of the account of the near-sacrifice of Isaac is very important for understanding the sacrifice of the firstborn in Judaism. Among these three religions there are differences in the interpretation, and thus the understanding, of the story, though the underlying fact seems to be same; namely, the supreme love of God by the worshiper, more than his love for any other cherished things of the world, including his own children in general, and the firstborn in particular.

The focus of the current research is to study the text in Genesis 22 in order to understand the concept of the deity's demand for child sacrifice. Thus, the current chapter will be looking the story in the wider context of the demand for and practice of child sacrifice in the Hebrew Bible.<sup>208</sup>

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<sup>207</sup> For a comprehensive discussion on the subject among these three religions, see Frederic Manns (ed.), *The Sacrifice of Isaac in The Three Monotheistic Religions* (Jerusalem: Franciscan Printing Press, 1995).

<sup>208</sup> It is interesting to note scholars' arguments for comparing human sacrifice to Jihad in Islam, performed to please God and advance the Kingdom of Allah/Islam in the world. For further discussions see Yoel Natan, *Moon-o-theism*, vol. 2 (Yoel Natan, 2006); Galina Lindquist and Don Handelman (eds.), *Religion, Politics, and Globalization: Anthropological Approaches* (Berghahn Books, 2013); Philip W. Sutton and Stephen Vertigans, *Resurgent Islam: A Sociological Approach* (Polity, 2005).

## 4.2 The Scope and Limitations

Though the current study is not primarily concerned with the historicity of Genesis 22, there are differing views on the historicity of the account, as well as the sources of the account. Briefly, these views centre on the source type. Genesis 22 was assigned to the ‘E’ source by most source critics, though some argue it comes from J.<sup>209</sup> Many source critics divide the chapter and assign Gen. 22:1-14 and 19 to ‘E’<sup>210</sup>, while v. 15-18 are assigned to J. However, Speiser argues that the style and vocabulary are closer to J than to E, and the mention of ‘God’ instead of ‘Lord’, the typical clue to the E source, could be a scribal error. Speiser also notes ‘Yahweh’ in 22:11 and 14.<sup>211</sup> There are others, such as Van Seters<sup>212</sup> and Alexander,<sup>213</sup> who argue that the names are an inadequate guide to source analysis<sup>214</sup>, and the final form of the present text was a product of ‘J’ rather than any other source. Westermann thinks that, although the original story may go as far back as the patriarchal age, the current form of the story must have been composed in the late stage of the whole composition of Genesis.<sup>215</sup> However, it seems the names of God are used interchangeably, and for the author Elohim and Yahweh are the same deity.

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<sup>209</sup> Jean Louis Ska, “Genesis 22: What Question Should We Ask the Text?” *Biblica* 94/2 (2013), 257-267.

<sup>210</sup> The name Elohim appears in Gen 22:2, 3, 8, 9, 12. The theme ‘fear of God’ is also found in Gen 22:12.

<sup>211</sup> E. A. Speiser, *The Anchor Bible: Genesis* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1964), p. 166.

<sup>212</sup> Van Seters, *Abraham in History and Tradition* (London: New Haven, 1975), p. 239.

<sup>213</sup> T. D. Alexander, “Gen 22 and the Covenant of Circumcision,” *JSOT* 25 (1983), 17-22.

<sup>214</sup> See G. W. Coats, “Abraham’s Sacrifice of Faith: A Form Critical Study of Gen 22,” *Interpretations* 27 (1973), 389-400.

<sup>215</sup> Claus Westermann, *Genesis* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1988.); see also R. W. L. Moberly, “The Earliest Commentary on the Akedah,” *VT* 38 (1988), 302-323; T. Veijola, “Das Opfer des Abraham: Paradigma des Glaubens aus dem nachexilischen Zeitalter,” *ZTK* 85 (1988), 129-164.

For a modern reader, a plain reading of the text leaves no confusion in terms of the names of deity. For example, if we take the story in its current form, it is consistent, as the names seem to be used interchangeably.<sup>216</sup> The text in its current form does not give any indication of two different deities known by two different names, Elohim and Yahweh. The current research is focused on the story as it appears in the text, and tries to understand the demand of the deity for offering a human child, Isaac, as a sacrifice. Therefore, the scope of the current research is focused on the narrative, as opposed to the historicity, of the source documents.<sup>217</sup>

#### 4.3 History of Research

Recent developments in the critical study of the origin of Genesis and Exodus have stimulated debate around the traditional historically-oriented, redaction-critical discussion on the hiatus between Genesis and Exodus. The issue is the claim that it was a priestly and post-priestly redaction that supposedly combined Genesis and Exodus at a literary level.<sup>218</sup> This argument is an outgrowth of the earlier discussion that looked at the development of each unit from its earliest stage to the latest, which was advocated by Rendtroff.<sup>219</sup> Erhard Blum<sup>220</sup> and David Carr further developed the findings and proposals of Rendtroff.<sup>221</sup>

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<sup>216</sup> For an interpretation of the many senses of the text, see Christopher S. Morrissey, "A Model for the many Senses of Scripture," *Contagion* 19 (2012), 231-247.

<sup>217</sup> For a brief look into some of the issues related to our current passage in Genesis, see Koog P. Hong, "Abraham, Genesis 20-22, and the Northern Elohist," *Biblica* 94/3 (2013), 321-339; T. B. Dozeman and K. Schmid (eds.), *A Farewell to the Yahwist? The Composition of the Pentateuch in Recent European Interpretation* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2006); R. Rendtroff, *The Problem of the Process of Transmission in the Pentateuch* (JSOTSup, 89; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990); D. M. Carr, *Reading the Fractures of Genesis: Historical and Literary Approaches* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1996).

<sup>218</sup> Dozeman and Schmid, *A Farewell to the Yahwist?*

<sup>219</sup> R. Rendtroff, *The Problem of the Process of the Pentateuch*.



Similarly, there are debates and investigations on the basis of the source model. There are differing views and opinions amongst scholars. Some hold to the traditional source criticism as set out in the documentary hypothesis proposed by Wellhausen.<sup>222</sup> There are others who argue for dating the Yahwist as an exilic writer. A recent development by a group of scholars who are attempting to revitalize the source model by proposing that source criticism is purely a literary endeavour has led to their being described as ‘Neo-Documentarians.’<sup>223</sup> Additionally, there are scholars who think in line with the traditional source critic frame work but argue that source ‘E’ is a northern-based tradition, and ‘J’ is its southern revision.<sup>224</sup>

The historicity of the Patriarchs is also in question among the wider scholarship. There are at least three major interpretations regarding the historicity of Abraham and Isaac.

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<sup>220</sup> Erhard Blum, *Studien zur Komposition des Pentateuch* (BZAW 189; Berlin: Dalter de Gruyter, 1990).

<sup>221</sup> Carr, *Reading the Fractures of Genesis*.

<sup>222</sup> For example, see E. W. Nicholson, *The Pentateuch in the Twentieth Century: The Legacy of Julius Wellhausen* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1998); Richard Elliott Friedman, *Who Wrote the Bible?* (New York: Harper Collins, 1997); Richard Elliott Friedman, “The Recession of Biblical Source Criticism,” in R. E. Friedman and H. G. M. Williamson, *The Future of Biblical Studies: The Hebrew Scriptures* (Atlanta: SBL, 1987), pp. 81-101; Richard Elliott Friedman, *The Bible with Sources Revealed: A New View into the Five Books of Moses* (Harper Collins, 2009); Richard Elliott Friedman, “Three Major Redactors of the Torah,” in C. Cohen and S. M. Paul (eds.), *Birkat Shalom: Studies in the Bible, Ancient Near Eastern Literature and Postbiblical Judaism Presented to Shalom M. Paul on the Occasion of his Seventieth Birthday* (Eisenbrauns, 2008), pp. 3-34.

<sup>223</sup> See for more details of the argument, Joel S. Baden, *J. E. and the Redaction of the Pentateuch* (Tubingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009); B. J. Schwartz, “Does Recent Scholarship’s Critique of the Documentary Hypothesis Constitute Grounds for Its Rejection?” in *The Pentateuch: International Perspectives on Current Research* (Tubingen: ISD, 2011), pp. 12-14.

<sup>224</sup> For example, see Z. Weisman, *From Jacob to Israel: The Cycle of Jacob’s Stories and its Incorporation within the History of the Patriarchs* (Jerusalem: 1986); Z. Weisman, “The Interrelationship Between J and E in Jacob’s Narrative: Theological Criteria,” *ZAW* 104 (1992), 177-197; Tzemah L. Yoreh, *The First Book of God* (BZAW 402; Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010).

1. Abraham and Isaac were historical figures from the past. The accounts in Genesis 22 describe historical realities passed down through the generations as part of an oral tradition, generating different pericope that were the sources for the current texts. Though the historicity of the details in the text is questioned, Abraham and Isaac are accepted as historical figures.<sup>225</sup>
2. The characters portrayed in the texts by Abraham and Isaac are combinations of several different historical but unnamed characters.<sup>226</sup> These stories cannot be fitted to any single person, and thus are combinations of many stories applied to different historical figures.<sup>227</sup>
3. Abraham and Isaac are a literary creation of ancient authors or storytellers. There is no historicity attested to these figures other than that given by the authors. They are works of fiction.<sup>228</sup> The purpose of these writings is still open to investigation. A key factor is perhaps an ideological presentation by the writers to convince their audience about the practices of their venerated ancestors.

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<sup>225</sup> William Foxwell Albright, *Archaeology and the Religion of Israel* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins, 1969).

<sup>226</sup> See for a discussion Christo Lombaard, "Isaac multiplex: Genesis 22 in a new historical representation," *HTS* 64/2 (2008), 908-910; Christo Lombaard, "The Patriarchs and their Pentateuchal references: Outlines of a new understanding," *Journal for Semitics* 20/2 (2011), 470-486.

<sup>227</sup> Lombaard observes that "An identical position could be taken on traditions related to the patriarch Isaac as a purely literary creation: the diversity of Isaac passages does not enable us to link them together to come to a broad vision of the shared figure of "Isaac". More accurately, one would always have to refer to this composite or multiplex character in the plural, as "Isaacs"" ("Isaac multiplex," p. 909).

<sup>228</sup> Van Seters and many others. See Van Seters, *Abraham in History and Tradition* (Yale University Press, 1975).

Though these three different interpretations offer solutions to certain questions relating to the historicity of the patriarchs, none of them gives a complete solution to the issues related to the Patriarchal narratives. If these figures were mere literary creations of the authors based on the aetiological and ideological motives, they are in one sense deceiving their audience, even though it is a form of writing designed to bring the people back to their God, whose worship system has been formulated by these authors.

If the stories represent a multiplicity of personalities reduced to an individual, then this must raise the question: why not they present them as individuals? The presumption is that the authors are trying to unify the tribes by making them understand that they all belong to one father, even though it was not true. These questions need further investigations, and they are beyond the scope of this research into the ancient practice of child sacrifice based on the demands of their deity. Whatever the solution to these textual problems, the fact remains that the Hebrew Bible contain a story that links one of the most prominent of the ancestral figures in Genesis to the possibility that Yahweh demands the sacrifice of a first-born child. In the next section, the implications of this for the understanding of the sacrifice of the firstborn in the Hebrew Bible are examined.

#### 4.4 God of Abraham and His Demand for Child sacrifice.

Genesis 22 is a difficult passage for Biblical scholars to interpret and discover its meaning.<sup>229</sup> The key issue here is to understand the nature of the God of Abraham.<sup>230</sup> Who is this God, and

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<sup>229</sup> Antohony Philips, "Difficult Texts: The Sacrifice of Isaac – Gen 22," *Theology* 118/6 (2015), 438-440.

why is he asking for a child sacrifice? There were many interpretations or solutions to the problem of theodicy when God is portrayed as demanding the only son of the family, who was born in the very old age of his parents who had waited many years with promise, and thus is so precious. Abraham is required by the deity to administer the sacrifice of his one and only son, Isaac. Abraham shows himself willing to sacrifice his son as an act of obedience demanded by the deity. Is this not more understandable if the practice was common among the people of the time? According to the story, the obedient father was taking his child to sacrifice him, though the text does not reveal whether the mother is aware of Abraham's intentions. If it had not been a common practice, one might argue, Abraham would have discussed it with his wife. There appears to be no hint of doubt in Abraham's mind about the reality or feasibility of the demand, perhaps indicating that these kinds of sacrifice were common during the time of Patriarchs according to the text and its author. Scholars have tried to interpret this story in many different ways.

Justifying the act of God in this story goes back at least as far as the Book of Jubilees, whereby the God who put Abraham on trial was not the God of the Hebrew Bible, but a demon named *Mastema*.<sup>231</sup> B. Jacob proposes a similar interpretation in stating that the *הַאֱלֹהִים* in Gen. 22:1 is a divine being, a member of the divine court, similar to the Satan or the sons of God as found in Job 1:6, or an angel of Yahweh as described in Num. 22:22, or the spirit referred to in

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<sup>230</sup> There are many attempts to compare the God of Abraham with the other deities around. For a profound study on the subject, see Stavrakopoulou's attempt to connect God of Abraham, Elshadai as revealed to Abraham in Gen 17, with *Sadday* as God of Child sacrifice (*King Manasseh and Child sacrifice*, pp. 272-282).

<sup>231</sup> *Book of Jubilees* 17.

1 Kings 22:19-23.<sup>232</sup> However, it is clear from the text of Genesis 22 that the God who asked Abraham to sacrifice his son in Gen. 22:1-2 is the same God who also stopped Abraham from killing Isaac (Gen. 22:11-12). The first-person speech in this passage is also notable, as it does not say ‘from God,’ but ‘from me’, showing the same person is speaking.

The purpose of the demand is clear. The question within the demand is why the firstborn and only offspring was to be sacrificed? In a plain reading of the text, the demand from the deity was to test Abraham.<sup>233</sup> But this raises another issue: the foreknowledge of the deity. In Gen. 22:12, God speaks and says ‘now I know’. This implies that the purpose of this test was to increase the knowledge or understanding of the deity about the dedication of the worshiper, raising questions about God’s foreknowledge and omniscience.

Rather than concentrating on the problematic figure of Yahweh, however, Gunkel makes a bold statement that the story was aimed at the abolition of child sacrifice among the people of Israel.<sup>234</sup> He argues that child sacrifice was a common practice in the ancient near east. The story

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<sup>232</sup> B. Jacob, *Das erste Buch der Tora* (Berlin, 1934), p. 492.

<sup>233</sup> Consider the following references in the Hebrew Scriptures which give some information on why God tests people.

Deut. 8:2: “Remember how the LORD your God led you all the way in the wilderness these forty years, to humble and test you in order to know what was in your heart, whether or not you would keep his commands.”

Deut. 13:3: “you must not listen to the words of that prophet or dreamer. The LORD your God is testing you to find out whether you love him with all your heart and with all your soul.”

Jud. 3:4: “They were left to test the Israelites to see whether they would obey the LORD’s commands, which he had given their ancestors through Moses.”

2 Chr. 32:31: “But when envoys were sent by the rulers of Babylon to ask him about the miraculous sign that had occurred in the land, God left him to test him and to know everything that was in his heart.”

These verses reveal a common purpose with the present story.

<sup>234</sup> Hermann Gunkel, *Genesis* (Gottingen, 1910), pp. 240-242.

in Genesis 22 is a way of teaching the people to reject child sacrifice. God asks for the son, but he provided a substitute lamb. In other words, God is satisfied with the lamb, and child sacrifice is unnecessary.

Ska puts forward three objections to this:

1. Isaac himself says in Gen 22:7 that the normal victim of a sacrifice is a lamb.
2. Child sacrifices were very rare among Semites. Phoenician and Carthaginian children's tombs contain complete bodies of infants that died from natural causes and not those of sacrificed infants.
3. Accepting that the story signals an end to child sacrifice tends to suggest an earlier date for the narrative than may in fact be accurate.<sup>235</sup>

Ska, however, overlooks the possibility that child sacrifice was practiced in Israel. As earlier chapters have shown, it was practised among the Israelites as part of the worship of Yahweh. The author of this story, so the argument goes, is trying to convince the people to stop child sacrifice by quoting this story involving their ancestral founding father. The author appears to be trying to convince the people that their ancestral fathers were indeed asked to offer their firstborn son as a sacrifice, but God changed this and provided a lamb. Therefore, it was no longer necessary or pleasing to their God to offer their firstborn or any other child. This interpretation and understanding of the passage fits well with the whole context of child sacrifice in general, and the firstborn in particular.

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<sup>235</sup> Jean Louis Ska, "Genesis 22: What Question Should We Ask the Text?" *Biblica* 94/2 (2013), 257-267.

Von Rad, in his understanding of the history of salvation, tries to set child sacrifice in the context of the fulfilment of the promise in Gen. 15 that Abraham will be the father of nations through Isaac.<sup>236</sup> He argues that, despite the apparent danger of sacrificing one's child, the promise shall be fulfilled. Since Gen. 15 is considered sourced from E, von Rad claims that Genesis 22 is from the same source. This is disputable, as I have argued above. It is more probable that the source is from J rather than E. Though there are issues with source, von Rad's argument is that in the context of salvation history the עֲקִידָה fits well. There are stages of the history, and here there is a fulfilment of the promise in one sense. More importantly, it is part of the whole salvation history of the Hebrew Bible, as the paradigm for the theory of substitution, which is a key theological theme.

Timo Veijola ignores all previous insights and postulates the innovative thought that Abraham in this story stands as a 'paradigm of faith in the post-exilic period.'<sup>237</sup> Veijola argues that the text is late in origin, and was in circulation to increase the faith of the post-exilic Jews. There is indeed an element of faith in the text, but this is not clearly expressed by the author in Genesis 22. Adding faith to the story was a later development by the New Testament authors. It is doubtful whether the author of Genesis 22 intended to include any reference to faith in this story as it is not expressed clearly in the text, though the concept is prevalent in other stories. The text is clearly describing the event as a test.

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<sup>236</sup> G. von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary* (revised edn; London: SCM Press, 1972), pp. 237-239.

<sup>237</sup> Timo Veijola, "Das Opfer des Abraham – Paradigma des Glaubens aus dem nachexilischen Zeitalter," *ZTK* 85 (1988), 129-164.

The opening passage stands as the title for the story, ‘Some time later God tested Abraham.’ Therefore, it is clear, according to the text, that this particular child sacrifice was not a paradigm of faith in the post-exilic period for the Jews but a test of Abraham’s obedience to God’s demand. Veijola argues that the author is trying to justify the suffering of the people through a radical argument to rationalise the activities of God as just and righteous in spite of their suffering. In this case the author of Genesis is portraying the founding father of the nation as an example of pain and suffering at the thought of having to sacrifice his firstborn and only son, but before he can do this God demonstrates his justice. Veijola also claims that the book of Job has a similar ethos.<sup>238</sup>

Other scholars believe that the writers of Scripture were attempting to produce something incontrovertible. ‘Their literary products were agenda-driven and discoursed for a purpose - to convey the theological thrust of the text, pericope by pericope - not merely created to convey information.’<sup>239</sup> ‘History is therefore never history, but history - for.’<sup>240</sup> As Block declares, ‘In the Scriptures historiographic compositions are primarily ideological in purpose. The authoritative meaning of the author is not found in the event described but in the author’s interpretation of the event.’<sup>241</sup> That, of course, Levinson observes,

‘Is not to claim that the events so described in the biblical text did not happen, but simply that it is the Holy Spirit’s in-the-text accounts of those events that are to be attended to for life transformation, not the restoring and deciphering of those behind-the-text events

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<sup>238</sup> T. Veijola, “Abraham und Hiob: Das literarische und theologische Verhältnis von Gen 22 und der Hiob-Novelle,” in C. Bultmann, W. Dietrich & C. Levin (eds), *Vergegenwärtigung des Alten Testaments: Beiträge zur biblische Hermeneutik* (Festschrift für Rudolf Smend zum 70; Geburtstag; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2002), pp. 129-144.

<sup>239</sup> Ska, “What Question Should We Ask the Text?”, 261.

<sup>240</sup> Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1966), pp. 257-58.

<sup>241</sup> Daniel I. Block, *Judges, Ruth* (NAC 6; Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1999), pp. 604-605.



themselves: the accounts are inspired, not the events, for doctrine, reproof, correction...such an interpretive undertaking that considers what authors do with what they say is integral to the field of pragmatics, dealing with those aspects of meaning not necessarily secured exclusively by a semantic theory.<sup>242</sup>

In other words, ‘No historical narrative is a transparent windowpane for viewing the facts beyond; historical narratives are more like stained-glass windows which artistically reveal the significance of certain facts from a specific faith perspective.’<sup>243</sup>

The key question here regarding the text does not regard the historicity of the account or ideological presentation of certain stories, which could be historical or not, but what the author is trying to challenge in the common beliefs or practices among the people by telling them what their God requires, based on the past treatment of their ancestor - the father from whom, according to the author and the text, the whole nation is formed. Davies<sup>244</sup> and later Lombaard<sup>245</sup> argue that there were struggles among the various factions of society, and the text asserts that Abraham’s Yahweh group was dominant. The text stands as a closing salvo in the internal struggle for dominance amongst the patriarchal groups. Indeed, there are others who think it was part of a ritual cult initiation. For example, White argues that, ‘The whole story stands as an

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<sup>242</sup> See Stephen C. Levinson, *Pragmatics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), pp. 12, 17.

<sup>243</sup> Sidney Greidanus, *The Modern Preacher and the Ancient Text: Interpreting and Preaching Biblical Literature* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1989), p. 196.

<sup>244</sup> P. R. Davies, “Abraham and Yahweh: A case of male bonding,” in H. Shanks (ed.), *Abraham & Family: New Insights into the Patriarchal Narratives* (Washington D.C.: Biblical Archaeology Society, 2000), p. 40.

<sup>245</sup> C. Lombaard, “The Patriarchs and their Pentateuchal references: Outlines of a new understanding,” *Journal for Semitics* 20/2 (2011), 482.

initiation foundation, namely as a myth accompanying the rites of passage of cult-clan leaders, initiates and novitiates.<sup>246</sup>

Bremmer<sup>247</sup> argues the case that the text is purely aetiological in nature, created by the imaginative capacity of the author, whereby the author of the text is trying to explain the importance of the existing tradition of Moriah as a traditional site for sacrifice, without challenging the idea. The name of the place is well explained in Gen. 22:14, so that the audience accepts its importance and avoids any questions or expressions of doubt. Boehm argues that this is a pivotal text, designed to convince the people of the prohibition of child sacrifice among the people of Israel. He considers the text as ‘an early-Yahwistic prohibition text, either warning against or putting to an end child sacrifice that may have occurred within ancient Israel.’<sup>248</sup>

Steins suggests a canonical and intertextual reading of Genesis 22. He points out a range of quotations and allusions to other texts in the narrative of Abraham’s test. He thinks that Genesis 22 is a kind of prolepsis of God’s theophany and covenant with Israel that culminated in Sinai.<sup>249</sup> However, the text seems to have no relation to the Sinaitic covenant or law, and appears to stem from a different context.

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<sup>246</sup> H. C. White, *Narration and discourse in the book of Genesis* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 203.

<sup>247</sup> J. N. Bremmer, “Sacrificing a child in ancient Greece: The case of Iphigeneia,” in E. Noort & E. Tigchelaar (eds), *The sacrifice of Isaac: The Aqedah (Genesis 22) and its interpretations* (Leiden: Brill, 2002), p. 35.

<sup>248</sup> O. Boehm, “Child sacrifice, ethical responsibility and the existence of the people of Israel,” *Vetus Testamentum* 54/2 (2004), 154.

<sup>249</sup> G. Steins, *Die – Bindung Isaaks – im Kanon (Gen 22)* (HBS 20; Freiburg im Bresigau, 1999), pp. 169-182.

Though it is hard for the modern reader to identify the intentions of the author in presenting certain stories and their recipients, these are important factors that enable a modern reader to understand the text. This can be further enhanced with understanding of the knowledge of the recipients and the context of the writing, as well as an understanding of the practices of the people to whom the author was writing.<sup>250</sup> Ska points out that ‘The real meaning of Genesis is the active participation of the reader in the appalling quandary of a father asked to offer his son in holocaust to the very divinity that first promised and afterwards granted him this son.’<sup>251</sup> For Abraham, Isaac is much more than a son. He is the person in whom the whole promise of God is resting. Speiser points out that ‘Isaac was...the only link with the far-off goal to which Isaac’s life was dedicated. To sacrifice Isaac, as God demanded, was to forego at the same time the long-range objective itself.’<sup>252</sup>

#### 4.5 The Interpretation of Genesis 22

It is important to try to unlock some of the ideas in chapter 22 by placing it in the wider context of the book of Genesis and examining its literary features. One striking element in this chapter is the dialogues between the deity and Abraham. Dialogues between the two can be traced back to the very early stage of Abraham’s call in Gen. 12.

Chapters 12-21 narrate at least nine incidents of conversation between Abraham and his deity:

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<sup>250</sup> For a discussion on the issues related with narration and its interpretation, see C. Lombaard, “Problems of Narratological Analyses of Genesis 22:1-19,” in M. Augustin and H. M. Niemann (eds), *Thinking Towards New Horizons* (Frankfurt: Frankfurt am Main, 2008), pp. 49-62.

<sup>251</sup> Ska, “What Questions Should We ask the Text?” 264.

<sup>252</sup> E. A. Speiser, *The Anchor Bible: Genesis* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1964), p. 164.

1. Gen. 12:1-5: Call of Abram and his response in obedience - Abram does not speak here, but rather acts upon the call.
2. Gen. 12:7-8: God's promise of descendants who will possess the land his deity is going to give them.
3. Gen. 13:14-18: Promise to inherit the land he sees - Abram is instructed to look around the land and is assured of it as the possession for him and for the generations to come through him.
4. Gen. 15:1-6: Through a vision God is assuring Abraham that he will be greatly rewarded. Abraham questions the promise, since he did not have a child and was considering the possibility of his servant Eliezer becoming his heir. These doubts are removed and the promise is renewed and made clearer that his own son - son from his flesh - would be the inheritance.
5. Gen. 15:7-21: Abram's concerns and worries for his descendants possessing the land is the key. This conversation has an element of keeping the covenant and its method, vision and trance.
6. Gen. 17:1-27: God affirms his promise and changes his name from Abram to Abraham, and his wife's name from Sarai to Sarah. The covenant of circumcision was instituted. Abraham believes that Ishmael would receive the promise but the deity affirmed that this would not be the case. A child born from his legal wife Sarah would be the heir.
7. Gen. 18:1-15: The theophany – the deity's visit in the form of strangers finally reveals the plan for Sodom and Gomorrah.
8. Gen. 18:16-33: Recounts a dialogue between Abraham and deity's servants. Abraham pleads for his nephew Lot. This is the only place where there is no promise mentioned in

the conversation. In all the conversations to this point, it was deity who took the initiative. In this case, Abraham takes the initiative and speaks directly to the servants of his deity.

9. Gen. 21:11-14: God's intervention and advice to Abraham in family matters is very insightful. The domestic situation was disturbing and Abraham was distressed. The writer observes that 'The matter distressed Abraham greatly because it concerned his son' (Gen. 21:11). God intervenes and advises Abraham how to deal with the situation and re-affirms the promises regarding his sons through Sarah and a slave woman. The writer explains the fulfilment of the promise in Ishmael's life in the remaining passages of Gen. 21.

It is interesting to note the whole focus of the successive dialogues here is prosperity, promise of the land, and progeny. The author is keen to point out that Abraham became very rich, perhaps richer and more powerful than the kings around him. The writer supplements this with two stories from Abraham's life. In Gen. 12-15 it was unclear where the descendants would come from. Towards the end of first-half of Gen. 16, Abraham and Sarah decide to have a descendant through Sarah's Egyptian maid, Hagar. However, in Gen. 17, the deity clearly states that the heir is going to be a child through Sarah, seemingly impossible because of her age. That means the birth of the child itself is a miracle, only possible through the direct intervention of God. Therefore, the author is developing his thoughts around the twin threads of promise and fulfilment. The author is also portraying the viewpoint that human ideas and interventions can result in failure. What God promises shall come to pass, in spite of all odds. This again may shed some light onto who the intended audience was: people who are in distress, confused, and not seeing the fulfilment of the promise.

The language of the promise used earlier is similar to the one used in Genesis 22 (Gen. 22:11; cf. Gen. 13:16; Gen. 15:5). The promise of the land became a reality to Abraham. ‘The land I will show you’ has become ‘this land’ (Gen. 12:7), something Abraham could see and experience, a land where he is placing his feet (Gen. 13:5), a land where he is now residing (Gen. 17:8). According to the author, Abraham is closely following the deity, obeying whatever he is being asked to do, and therefore receiving the fulfilment of the promise. The writer is developing a close connection between Abraham and his deity. Whatever the deity commands, Abraham obeys it without question. Abraham questions his deity only in relation to the fulfilment of the promise, which the deity clarifies and fulfils.

One of the characteristics of Abraham throughout the narrative of Genesis 12-21 are his actions. Abram (and later Abraham) does what his deity asks, and is silent in his response. He never questions but believes and obeys. This pattern is vividly portrayed in Genesis 22, the Aqedah. However, we need to see that in the earlier passage where unconditional blessings are offered there is no demand from the deity. In Genesis 22, there is an unconditional demand from Abraham’s deity without any promise. All the previous promises are about wealth, land, and descendants - a typical ancient promise.

#### 4.6 The Demand of the Deity and Possible Reasons

The current story becomes clearer when we examine more closely the reading of the incidents and the past experiences of Abram with his deity. The deity gives Abram a new name, Abraham (Gen. 17: 5), as a sign of the promise that he will be the father of many nations. At this juncture

the promise has not yet been fulfilled, as Isaac has not been born. The slave Eliezer, who was supposed to be the heir, was denied the privilege of becoming the heir (Gen. 15:4) by the terms of this promise. Ishmael, the son of Abram through Hagar, has also been sent away (Gen. 17:19-21 and Gen. 21:12-13). The only hope now is in Isaac. The response of Abraham to the call of God is also interesting: ‘here I am’ - הִנְנִי . Though this word is casually used in the communication, Abraham is responding in a way that indicates he is attentive to listen to what the deity is saying.

There is limited communication between Abraham and his deity in Genesis 22. There is a call from the deity, followed by a verbal response and an immediate action from Abraham. Levenson’s interpretation of the word הִנְנִי shows the total readiness and obedience of Abraham; however, this is not necessarily conveyed in the text. Speiser also translates הִנְנִי as ‘Ready!’; arguably translating הִנְנִי as ‘ready’ is neither what we see in Abraham’s response nor what is intended by the author. Abraham is simply responding to his deity’s call without knowing what the deity is going to say. It is a simple phrase in which nothing is implied in the response of Abraham. Abraham’s earlier communications with the deity are also straightforward. For example, the same word is used in his communication with Isaac (Gen. 22:7). In Gen. 22:7 it is the response of a father to his son’s question, and one would not translate it as readiness. This would be the usual way Abraham or any individual would communicate and respond to anybody in general, and here between Abraham and his God in particular. The word is derived from the demonstrative pronoun הִנֵּה, which has the meaning ‘behold.’ Could there be an implied meaning placed by the author in this situation presenting Abraham as someone who is going to show forth what God is going to do, an expectation of something?

Genesis 22 starts with the author's introductory statement, 'after these things.' Unlike the other discourses between God and Abraham, here the author is narrating the story. Among the first 19 verses, the author speaks in 17 of them. The author uses this word once before, in Gen. 15:1, to introduce another incident that also had a great impact. In other words, the author wants the reader to consider the way in which the deity dealt with Abraham in the past. The Hebrew word here for things, הַדְּבָרִים, could mean; things, matters, events, manner, cause, and words or speech.<sup>253</sup> This means that the author is drawing the attention of the readers to the things that happened in the life of Abraham, as explained in previous chapters.<sup>254</sup>

In Genesis 22 the scene is totally changed whereby Abraham, who has strictly obeyed the deity, is put to the test, a severe test that he may not have imagined. The author is very clear in adding the statement indicating it is a test. The deity is testing his loyal follower.

Testing and proving faith are key themes in the Hebrew Bible. This is not only to be found in the Pentateuchal literature, but also in prophetic, poetic, and wisdom literatures. The word used here for testing is also unique. The Hebrew word is נָסָה, which has a variety of meanings such as test, try, tempt,<sup>255</sup> assay, and prove, or put to the proof.<sup>256</sup> This also has an indication of testing in

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<sup>253</sup> See *DCH*, vol. 2, pp. 397-411.

<sup>254</sup> Phyllis Tribble sees הַדְּבָרִים as the remark of the whole story on what happened in the life of Sarah. She says that it "collects a tortuous saga of multiple dimensions" (Phyllis Tribble, *Genesis 22: The Sacrifice of Sarah* [Valparaiso University Press, 1990], p. 271).

<sup>255</sup> KJV translate the word twelve times as 'tempt,' twice as 'assay' and once each as 'adventure' and 'try.' See the various usages of the word in Ex 15:26; 16:4; 17:2, 7; 20:20; Num. 14:22; Deut. 4:34; 6:16; 8:2, 16; 13:3; 28:56; 33:8; Jud. 2:22; 3:1, 4; 6:39; 1 Sam. 17:39; 1 Ki. 10:1; 2 Chr. 9:1; 32:31; Job 4:2; Ps. 26:2; 78:18, 41, 56; 95:9; 106:14; Eccl. 2:1; 7:23; Isa. 7:12; Dan 1:12, 14.

<sup>256</sup> *DCH*, vol. 5, pp. 697-698.



order to see or ascertain.<sup>257</sup> Helfmeyer observes that the word has an implied meaning here that there is a visual aspect of the testing, whereby the truth that is believed is being tested as a demonstration to see the truthfulness and trustworthiness of the belief.<sup>258</sup> A similar scenario can be seen in the story of the Queen of Sheba's confession that, after testing Solomon, she believes the reports of what she heard about his wisdom and wealth since she has seen it with her own eyes (cf. 1 Kings 10:7). This means that in the usage of the word נִסָּה, the underlying connotation is that there will be proof to vindicate what has been believed, and this will be transparent and affirm what has been heard and believed.

Von Rad thinks that here God is not serious about the sacrifice of Isaac, and when the author uses the word נִסָּה, he is showing that it is *only* a test. Von Rad says that 'the reader is told in advance, however, that the story concerns a temptation given by God, a demand which God did not intend to take seriously.'<sup>259</sup> Speiser and Sarna also follow a similar argument.<sup>260</sup> Levenson, however, argues that the word נִסָּה means an action, and there is no connotation in it to suggest that the test will not be completed as demanded.<sup>261</sup> This means the deity actually intends to demand the firstborn to be sacrificed, and there is nothing implied in the word נִסָּה to suggest the test means that the action need not be carried out. This means the word is directly demanding a human firstborn sacrifice, without question. This is in sharp disagreement with von Rad's and others interpretation.

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<sup>257</sup> *BDB*, p. 650.

<sup>258</sup> F. Helfmeyer, "Nissa," in G. J. Botterweck, H. Ringgren and H. Fabry (eds), *Theological Dictionary of the Hebrew Scriptures*, vol. 9 (Grand Rapids: WB Eerdmans, 1998), p. 445.

<sup>259</sup> G. Von Rad, *Genesis: A Commentary* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1972), p. 239.

<sup>260</sup> See E. A. Speiser, *Genesis*, p. 164; Sarna, *Genesis*, p. 151.

<sup>261</sup> Levenson, *Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son*, p. 126.

The midrashic traditions also narrate and explain the tests of Abraham. The Jewish traditions in midrash explain the ten trials of Abraham, and conclude that the one in Genesis 22 is the most severe. The word  $\pi\alpha\tau\epsilon\iota\sigma$  is used explicitly to ensure the reader understands the severity of the trial.<sup>262</sup> It is interesting to note that neither the deity nor Abraham describe the incident as a test; it is the narrator or the author. The readers are left not knowing whether Abraham was aware that this was a test. Although the author expresses this as his way of looking at the story or incident, it may not be the case for Abraham or for his deity. The author is interpreting it here as a test in order to convey a particular message to his current audience and not necessarily what it meant to Abraham. Readers need to consider how Abraham understood it when he was asked to sacrifice his son, his one and only son, the long-awaited promised son. This should be the focus of the discussion.

A reading of the text without these author's comments leaves us with the strong sense that Abraham was unaware of the fact that it was a test. In that case, Abraham is obeying the demand of the deity as discussed above. Without any question, Abraham takes the boy to be sacrificed as demanded by the deity. To Abraham, satisfying his deity is the primary focus, rather than his own needs or pleasures. This is a concept well understood in most primitive cultures, even today. Abraham does not tell Sarah what he is about to do, perhaps because he knows she may not accept or allow it. Is Abraham planning to perform the sacrifice in secret so that no one will stop him? He does not even take his slaves for assistance to the place of sacrifice. It may be that he was thinking that the slaves might have stopped him from sacrificing Isaac.

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<sup>262</sup> For an understanding of the ten trials in Midarash, see Jo Milgrom, *The Binding of Isaac: The Akedah- A Primary Symbol in Jewish Thought and Art* (Berkeley: Bibal Press, 1988), pp. 31-62.

## 4.7 The Deity's Demand and Words used

### 4.7.1 'Your only son' אֶת־בְּרִיךְ

Abraham is asked to take 'his son, his only son whom he loves' (Gen. 22:2). Does this show that there was a practice of sacrificing one's children in Ancient Israel? There is no clear-cut and straightforward answer to this question. However, it seems that there could have been the practice of sacrificing children from other families, either kidnapped, purchased, or pledged. This could be the reason Abraham is specifically asked to sacrifice 'his' one and only son. The words of the deity leave no room for misunderstanding by Abraham. He could not use a child from one of his servants or slaves and offer them as a sacrifice. We do not know whether Abraham had performed this kind of sacrifice in the past. The instant obedience of Abraham to the command to sacrifice Isaac reveals that he may have done something similar, or at least have been aware of the practice in the past, as there appears to be little surprise on his part. However, this is speculation and we have no textual evidence for this.

Interestingly, this command is not based on the claim that 'all that first opens the womb belongs to me'. In this sense, Isaac, being the one who opened the womb of Sarah, technically would belong to the deity. Conversely, here it is said that Isaac is Abraham's son, showing Abraham as the custodian of the child. Yahweh does not demand Isaac as a right and as his possession. The deity gave the child to Abraham and the child belongs to Abraham, as is implied in the expression 'your son'. In the passage, God speaks of a possessive relationship. The words are very specific: take 'your son, your only son, whom you love' -Isaac.

#### 4.7.2 ‘The Beloved Son’ – ‘the only son’ - יְהִיָּדָה

The word יְהִיָּדָה could mean ‘descendants’, ‘inheritance’, ‘privilege’, and ‘affection’.<sup>263</sup> The word can also mean ‘the only’, ‘the precious one’, ‘the love’, ‘the promise’, ‘unique’, ‘chosen’, ‘favourite’, or ‘the one in whom every desire rests’.<sup>264</sup> There is none like him; he is unique in every respect.<sup>265</sup> Here Isaac is being contrasted with Eliezer and Ishmael. Isaac is the promised covenant partner (Gen. 17:19) and chosen heir from God and by God (Gen. 21:12). The word also implies the privileges, such as inheritance, of a firstborn. Though Ishmael could have been the heir by birth order, God elevates Isaac to the position of firstborn son. Slotki argues that the word יְהִיָּדָה here means ‘favourite one’. He is relating the word to Abraham’s two sons: Ishmael and Isaac, with Isaac being the deity’s favourite.<sup>266</sup>

However, a closer reading of the whole story suggests an opposite point of view where Ishmael is Abraham’s favourite son, even after Isaac was born. Genesis 17 opens with another epiphany, in which the deity renews his promise to Abram. The deity says, ‘I am making a covenant with Abram.’ Abram is silent in the first part (until v. 16). God changes their names to Abraham and Sarah from Abram and Sarai. Towards the end of the chapter, after hearing God’s promise that he would have another son through Sarah, Abraham falls on his face and starts to laugh as he considers the impossibility of having a child at this age. He suggested an alternative plan to the deity: ‘O that Ishmael might live in thy sight!’ Abraham believes it to be impossible to

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<sup>263</sup> *DCH*, vol. 4, pp. 200-201.

<sup>264</sup> *BDB*, p. 402.

<sup>265</sup> *DCH*, vol. 4, p. 201.

<sup>266</sup> J. Slotki, “Judges: Introduction and Commentary,” in A Cohen (ed.), *Joshua and Judges* (New York: Soncino Press, 1980), p. 257.

have another child. Arguably, Abraham is not taking seriously enough the promises made by his deity, as in his mind it is impossible. The deity tells him that he is going to have a child through Sarah, though Abraham is content with Ishmael. The scenario may indicate that Abraham is thinking of adopting Ishmael as his firstborn. The struggle of Sarah in the family with Hagar and her son Ishmael should be seen in the context of a mother's struggle to obtain firstborn rights and a double portion for her own son against the adopted son from the slave. The following discussion affirms this.

Gen. 16:4 states that Sarai was treated with contempt after Hagar conceived Ishmael. Sarai would have been more tolerant of Hagar if she had been able to give progeny to Abram. Sarah's security was also in question on many previous occasions.<sup>267</sup> In the male-dominated ancient near eastern culture, she was voiceless in many contexts. For the safety of Abram, she is given away to Pharaoh by hiding her real identity as Abram's wife (Gen. 12:10-17).<sup>268</sup> Even after giving Hagar to Abraham, and having a child through her, Sarai is not safe. She is given to Abimelech by Abraham, who tells the same lie as he did with Pharaoh (Gen. 20:1-7). In both cases, Abram/Abraham is blessed with riches and prospers. It is the deity who intervenes in her situation and rescues her from both the incidents. Abram/Abraham is silent in both cases.<sup>269</sup> We could conclude that Sarah is left with a sense of insecurity. In addition, her maid, Hagar, becomes

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<sup>267</sup> Scholars tend to think that Abraham thought of acquiring material wealth from Pharaoh on account of his wife, who was presented as his sister. See S. P. Jeansonne, *The Women of Genesis: From Sarah to Potiphar's wife* (Minneapolis: Fortress, Press, 1990), p. 14.

<sup>268</sup> There is hot debate on the words Abraham used for his wife Sarah as sister. Scholars like Speiser try to construct a relation to it by arguing that she is indeed a sister of Abraham, by same father but by a different mother (*Genesis*, pp. 91-94). However, there are others who deny this and argue for a different interpretation. See for example Jeansonne, *The Women of Genesis: From Sarah to Potiphar's wife*, p. 122.

<sup>269</sup> For detailed discussion see Schneider, *Sarah*, pp. 85-90.

the wife of Abram, (Gen. 16:3). Hagar has given birth to a son and Abraham now has an heir to carry on his name.

As we have observed, in the theophany after the birth of Ishmael, Abram does not ask for offspring through his wife Sarah, which he had done on previous occasions. Even after receiving the promise of a son through Sarah, he pleads with God, ‘Oh that Ishmael might live before you.’ Thus, it appears that Sarah is cornered in every respect. Even after the birth of Isaac, the narrator records that only Sarah is excited by the event.

Such textual details suggest that, for Abraham, both his sons were to be treated the same, and that he may have given priority to Ishmael. When Sarah requests that Hagar and Ishmael be expelled, the narrator notes ‘This upset Abraham very much because Ishmael was his son.’ (Gen. 21:11). The literal translation of *בְּנֵי אֲבֹרָתָם בְּעֵינֵי מְאֹד הִדְבָּר וַיִּרַע* would be ‘and the matter was distressing greatly in the eyes of Abraham because of his concerns for his son’. Wenham translates this as, ‘and Abraham was very displeased for his son’s sake by the remark’.<sup>270</sup> This means Abraham had many ‘loves’ for him, as the word *אֲוֹדָת* is plural here. Thus, Slotki’s argument of translating *יְהִיד* as favourite son is incorrect in this context of comparison with Ishmael.

Levenson makes a study on the word *יְהִיד* and concludes that the word *יְהִיד* occurs only twelve times in the biblical narrative, and is prominently used in the context of child sacrifice.

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<sup>270</sup> Wenham, *Genesis*, vol. 2, p. 77.

Thus, he argues that the word refers to children chosen as sacrifices to Yahweh.<sup>271</sup> However, a close look at the passages where  $\text{בְּנֵי־עֹלָוָה}$  is used give us a different interpretation to the one proposed by Levenson.

There are twelve occurrences of the word in the Hebrew Bible, and of those only four are directly used in relation to sacrifice<sup>272</sup>; the remaining eight are used in a different context.<sup>273</sup> Among these four usages, three are found in Genesis 22 and the other is in Judges. A contextual examination of the usages of the word suggests Levenson's interpretation may be flawed. The word  $\text{בְּנֵי־עֹלָוָה}$  is not used here in a sacrificial sense. Therefore, Genesis 22 does not intend to show a

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<sup>271</sup> Levenson, *Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son*, pp. 27-31.

<sup>272</sup> Gen. 22:2: "Then God said, "Take your son, your only son, whom you love—Isaac—and go to the region of Moriah. Sacrifice him there as a burnt offering on a mountain I will show you.""  
Gen. 22:12: ""Do not lay a hand on the boy," he said. "Do not do anything to him. Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son.""

Gen. 22:16: ""I swear by myself, declares the LORD, that because you have done this and have not withheld your son, your only son. . ."

Jud. 11:34: "When Jephthah returned to his home in Mizpah, who should come out to meet him but his daughter, dancing to the sound of timbrels! She was an only child. Except for her he had neither son nor daughter."

<sup>273</sup> Ps. 22:20: "Deliver me from the sword, my precious life from the power of the dogs."

Ps. 25:16: "Turn to me and be gracious to me, for I am lonely and afflicted."

Ps. 35:17: "How long, Lord, will you look on? Rescue me from their ravages, my precious life from these lions."

Ps. 68:6: "God sets the lonely in families, he leads out the prisoners with singing; but the rebellious live in a sun-scorched land."

Prov. 4:3: "For I too was a son to my father, still tender, and cherished by my mother."

Jer. 6:26: "Put on sackcloth, my people, and roll in ashes; mourn with bitter wailing as for an only son, for suddenly the destroyer will come upon us."

Amos 8:10: "I will turn your religious festivals into mourning and all your singing into weeping. I will make all of you wear sackcloth and shave your heads. I will make that time like mourning for an only son and the end of it like a bitter day."

Zech. 12:10: "And I will pour out on the house of David and the inhabitants of Jerusalem a spirit of grace and supplication. They will look on me, the one they have pierced, and they will mourn for him as one mourns for an only child, and grieve bitterly for him as one grieves for a firstborn son."

sacrificial meaning to the reader; rather, the word  $\text{יָדָו}$  is used to show importance of the son, in this case Isaac, and has nothing specific to do with sacrifice.

#### 4.7.3 ‘Whom you love’ $\text{בְּהֵן}$

Here the word  $\text{בְּהֵן}$  means love, a love either between man and deity, between friends, or between parents and children.<sup>274</sup> The word  $\text{בְּהֵן}$  in Genesis 22 is used in the sense of parental love and family affection.<sup>275</sup> Though the author puts the word  $\text{בְּהֵן}$  in the mouth of the deity, he does not demonstrate in any way the love of Abraham to Isaac. The deity addresses Isaac as the one whom Abraham loves. Perhaps this shows paternal love, but there is nothing deeper suggesting inseparable love whereby the action of sacrificing might harm the very emotions and life of Abraham. The word denotes nothing more than a parental relationship. However, in the Isaac narrative, the author is not showing any kind of special affection of Abraham towards Isaac.

Thus, it is unclear what the author is trying to say in this verse. Perhaps it could be a point where the author is trying to convey the message to the readers that Abraham loves Isaac, and has nothing against him. Though we do not have any point to evaluate, the past stories give no clue to say that Abraham is closer to Isaac than Ishmael. Tribble is very much of the position that the narrator indicates that Abraham’s problem has not been his attachment, but a lack of attachment to Isaac.<sup>276</sup> However, Abraham could have been close to Isaac in the natural sense, in evaluating the life and situations since he is the only child in the family at this stage. Hagar and Ishmael

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<sup>274</sup> *BDB*, pp. 12-13.

<sup>275</sup> *DCH*, vol. 1, pp. 137-141.

<sup>276</sup> Tribble, *Sacrifice of Sarah*, pp. 271-280.



have left, and Isaac was born against all natural odds and impossibilities to the couple's old age. Here the real challenge for Abraham is to overcome his love towards his precious son, set against his loyal commitment and dedication to his deity.<sup>277</sup>

#### 4.7.4 'Please' - נָא

We are faced with a challenge of the promise the deity makes to Abraham when he is told he would make him a great nation (Gen. 12), and now the deity appears to be asking Abraham to sacrifice (Gen. 22) the only hope of forming a great nation. How is this going to happen? Here the usage of the Hebrew participle נָא is interesting to note. According to the Dictionary of Classical Hebrew, the word נָא means 'please', and 'it occurs only in reported speech, usually attached to imperatives or jussives for politeness.'<sup>278</sup> Sarna agrees with this, and argues that 'the Hebrew word נָא to be imperative which usually softens the command to an entreaty.'<sup>279</sup> In this case, Sarna says that 'Abraham has absolute freedom of choice. Should he refuse, he would not incur any guilt.'<sup>280</sup> Conversely, Tribble suggests that the word נָא strengthens the command and adds that God's utterance is 'carefully constructed, with the particle joining the imperative 'take' to suggest consequence.'<sup>281</sup>

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<sup>277</sup> So many scholars. For example, see Levenson, *Death and Resurrection*, p. 128; F. Landy, "Narrative Techniques," in J. C. Exum (ed.), *Signs and Wonders* (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 1989), p. 6.

<sup>278</sup> See *DCH*, vol. 5, pp. 576-577.

<sup>279</sup> Sarna, *Genesis*, p. 151.

<sup>280</sup> Sarna, *Genesis*, p. 152.

<sup>281</sup> Tribble, *Sacrifice of Sarah*, p. 272.

It is interesting to note the usage of the word elsewhere to give a fuller meaning. The word  $\text{נָּ}$  is used by Abram to persuade Sarai and convince her that she has to say to the Egyptians that she is Abram's sister in order to save his life (Gen. 12:13). We are unsure whether Abram was pleading with Sarai or commanding her in Gen. 12:13, and it could be interpreted either way. More likely, Abram is demanding that she obey since it was a male-dominated culture. Additionally, refusal to obey may have caused Abram to lose his life. The occurrences elsewhere suggest that Sarai respected Abram and obeyed him. Sarah's obedience to her husband in a male-dominated culture comes at the cost of her own humiliation, as she was taken into Pharaoh's house so that Abram would be spared suffering or even death.

Consequently, in our current passage in Gen. 22, it is not appropriate to interpret the word  $\text{נָּ}$  as God pleading with Abraham. The word  $\text{נָּ}$  is used in the context of pleading 'by an inferior person addressing their superior.'<sup>282</sup> If this is the true sense of the usage, the meaning is not appropriate here. Abraham is not a superior person in front of the deity, at least from the author and audience's point of view. The deity is not pleading with Abraham, since he is God. This means the usage of the word in Genesis 22 has a different connotation. Additionally, Abraham left to himself would not have made a decision to sacrifice Isaac, because he was God's promise of future nations. Thus Sarna's argument that it was a wilful choice of Abraham is unacceptable on this point. Hence, in all probability, it was a demand from the deity, and Abraham is left without any choice but to listen to the deity and act on this, which Abraham does with his whole heart because of his fear and trust in his deity. There is an element of fear and consequence from the deity that is also implied in this context. Abraham is left with no choice but to sacrifice Isaac

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<sup>282</sup> *DCH*, vol. 5, p. 576.

or face the consequence of losing his promised inheritance. Hence, it is safe to say that Abraham acts under pressure to please his deity and is therefore unable to exercise choice.

Another important note here is the way deity is describing Isaac using specific terms such as ‘your son, your only son, the son whom love’ and invoking the name Isaac. This shows the nature of deity and his affirmation to Abraham about the relationship between Abraham and Isaac. However, the paradox is found in the next verse phrase ‘go to the land of Mori'ah, and offer him there as a burnt offering upon one of the mountains of which I shall tell you.’ (Gen. 22:3b) This is in contrast with the earlier promises the deity made with Abraham and Sarah in their previous encounters. The language expressed here by the deity not only reveals the affection of Abraham for Isaac, but also deity’s affection for Isaac and his parents, as he was the one who gave Isaac to them. This seems to be what the author is trying to convey through usage of this word.<sup>283</sup> Therefore, Abraham acts upon the demand of the deity, and not by a wilful choice.

#### 4.8 Evaluation

In modern society, killing a child for a deity is no longer acceptable. It was condemned from the early days of Judaism, according to the evidence we have in the texts of the Hebrew Bible. However, the challenge is that at some point in history, possibly even among the Israelites, it was practiced. One may need to read and interpret Genesis 22 as a purposeful tool used by the author to speak against such practices. To the modern mind, the notion of child sacrifice to a deity who is demanding child sacrifice, whether it was permitted or not, is no longer an acceptable

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<sup>283</sup> See also Landy, “Narrative Techniques,” p. 4.

practice.<sup>284</sup> However, we need to understand the mind of the ancient people and their concept of child sacrifice. Many parents sacrificed their children to their deity, and it seems to have been a common practice in the ancient world. For anyone living in the ancient world, offering a child sacrifice was a privilege considered as the supreme form of worship, and the highest form of devotion to their deity. Offering the best, the most loved, to their God was a practice of the ancient world. Reading the ancient texts and trying to understand and interpret them based on modern thinking will not yield a correct understanding of their beliefs and actions.

We need to look at how the ancient recipients of the text would have understood it, and should not apply it in the modern context, which results in rejection and condemnation.<sup>285</sup> Abraham's willingness to sacrifice Isaac at the demand of his deity is still surprising when we closely analyse the passage. In this instance, Abraham silently, without any response, does what was asked of him. On different occasions Abraham questions his deity; for example, as to why the promise given in Gen. 15:2,3 was delayed. Later, Abram laughs at the promise of a son as Sarai was over 90 years old, and he requests the deity to bless Ishmael and make him to be the heir (Gen. 17). On another occasion, Abram pleads with the deity for his nephew Lot and for Sodom to be spared. Now, Abraham, who is preparing to sacrifice his son, is silent. This episode shows Abraham's silent obedience, which is a feature of other past events.

Abraham obeys God in everything he is commanded. He prepares all the requisite people for the journey from Haran to the place his deity asks him to go (Gen. 12). In the first journey, he

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<sup>284</sup> For a detailed discussion see R. W. L. Moberly, *The Bible, Theology and Faith: A Study of Abraham and Jesus* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p. 77.

<sup>285</sup> For a discussion see Levenson, *Death and Resurrection*, pp. 1-17

does not know where he is heading, and on a second occasion he is told of the place where he has to go and do what he is asked. This shows his readiness and unquestionable willingness to obey his God.<sup>286</sup> A theme very much applicable to the people in exile, in spite of all the odds, God is still in control and they must readily and unquestionably obey him. Abram is a man of action and there is no procrastination as he has committed his way to his deity. This is reflected in his sending away of Hagar and in the circumcision of his household.

He is prepared for the sacrifice, having taken everything needed. Thus, as Tribble exclaimed, it is ‘terrible obedience’<sup>287</sup> from Abraham towards the demand of God, and there is no hesitation on his part. The quick action of Abraham invites a quicker response from God in stopping Abraham from killing and sacrificing his son. The words of the deity are two clear instructions not to sacrifice Isaac. The first is ‘Do not lay a hand on the boy.’ The second is ‘Do not do anything to him.’ (Gen. 22:12a) The negation used here is לֹא, which means ‘no’ or ‘nothing’, an adverb of negation. The primary purpose of the voice of the deity is not to recognise Abraham’s obedience, but Isaac’s safety. In other words, the action of Abraham must be stopped immediately. Though the second part of the verse is an appreciation to the act of Abraham’s total obedience, the primary response of the deity was to stop the sacrificing of Isaac.

The second part of Gen. 22:12 ‘Now I know that you fear God, because you have not withheld from me your son, your only son’ reveals the eagerness on the deity’s part to know the

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<sup>286</sup> So Levenson, *Death and Resurrection*, p. 128. Fewell and Gunn are of the opposite view and say that this shows the selfish behaviour of Abraham (Danna Nolan Fewell and David M. Gunn, “Keeping the Promise,” in *Gender, Power and Promise: The Subject of Bible’s First Story* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), pp. 39-55.

<sup>287</sup> Tribble, *Sacrifice of Sarah*, p. 274.

heart of Abraham, though it does raise questions regarding the omniscient nature of the deity. The text seems to imply that the deity is eagerly waiting to know the attitude of Abraham. Would he be willing to sacrifice his only son, Isaac? The text suggests the deity is uncertain about the outcome, because after the event the author records the deity saying ‘for now he knows.’

Another aspect one needs to consider in this verse is the meaning of the phrase ‘you fear God.’ The Hebrew word אָרַךְ could mean ‘awe,’ ‘terror,’ ‘fear,’ ‘to be afraid,’ ‘dread’, or ‘stand in awe of reverence or honour’.<sup>288</sup> Thus, the question: is it the terror of God or the reverence of God motivating Abraham’s total obedience to God? Fewell, Gunn, and many others argue that the former is the driving factor behind the quick action of Abraham. If he is unwilling to sacrifice his one and only son according to the demand of the deity, he may be punished.<sup>289</sup> The context seems to be compelling in this case. Abraham pleads and negotiates with his deity for his relative Lot and his family. Ultimately, he was unsuccessful in this. Abraham would have witnessed the destruction of and would have understood the power of his deity. In Gen. 21, Abraham’s deity commands him to listen to the voice of his wife. This was most unusual in the ancient male dominant world, yet Abraham obeys without question. Now, here in Gen. 22, Abraham is silently obeying the demands of the deity. Is this because he is driven by fear of his deity? The reply of the deity clearly indicates that Abraham’s fear of the deity’s demand is the reason that leads him to take this immediate and unquestioning action. The meaning and the clear translation of Gen. 22:12b would be ‘Now I know that you are certainly afraid of me because you did not hesitate to

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<sup>288</sup> *BDB*, p. 431; *DCH*, vol. 4, pp. 276-281.

<sup>289</sup> Fewell and Gunn, ‘Keeping the Promise,’ p. 54. Likewise Humphreys, *Character of God*, pp. 142-143.

kill your beloved/donated son when I asked you to do so.<sup>290</sup> This obedient act of Abraham brings blessings on him, whereby disobedience would have brought curses and punishments. This is a common teaching in the Deuteronomic literature. Obedience always brings blessing, disobedience brings curses.

This event recounted by the author describes how Abraham obeys his deity in sending away his other son, Ishmael, into the desert. This was a place where there is no hope of survival, only death. Abraham obeys, and his deity protects him and makes him into a great nation. Hagar is sent away, but God speaks to her. Her obedience leads to her returning to the master's house. We read in Gen. 19 how Lot obeys the deity, and thus he is protected from the danger. However, his wife is disobedient and looks back, and is immediately turned into a pillar of salt. Thus, even in the Abrahamic account of Genesis the theme of blessing and protection/rescuing for obedience is very common, and is reflected in Isaac's near sacrifice.

McEvenue argues that killing or sacrificing Isaac was not the plan of the deity. The story shows that Isaac is precious and beloved of the deity, who addresses him as beloved.<sup>291</sup> This word 'beloved' is first used by Sarah, which is then borrowed by Abraham, the Narrator, and then by God. The narrator is showing the affection of the deity for his people, even though he allows them to go through trials and tribulations.<sup>292</sup> This is clearer in the next part, where God is making alternative plans by providing a lamb for the sacrifice. Thus, the core message to the people is to

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<sup>290</sup> Fewell and Gunn, 'Keeping the Promise,' p. 54.

<sup>291</sup> McEvenue, *Interpreting the Pentateuch*, p. 90.

<sup>292</sup> The story would have been in circulation and there could have been different interpretations and teachings on it. See R. W. L. Moberly, "The Earliest Commentary on the Akedah: Genesis 22:15-18," in *From Eden to Golgotha: Essays in Biblical Theology* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1992).

trust and obey the deity. The key theme here is not the act of sacrificing, but willingness in the heart of the people to obey their deity.

The shift in the promises is also noteworthy. The focus of the promise is no longer centred on Abraham, as in the earlier cases, but in the future that his seed will inherit (Gen. 22:17-18). The earlier promises are made clearer here. The earlier stories and narrations were about the what (the land and its blessing), and here it is how (the means and methods of possessing it). Gen. 22:17b says, ‘Your descendants will take possession of the cities of their enemies.’ The tone is of war. It is not easily accessible, and currently the land is under the control of their enemies. Isaac and his descendants will have to fight for this land. The change from a spiritual emphasis to political one is very clear here. They are going to be a blessing to other nations. Though this later promise was an initial promise when Abram was called (Gen. 12:1, 2), it is renewed to his descendants wherever they are. They will be a blessing to the nations. However, the key to all this is obedience. It is interesting to note the shift from Gen. 12:3 to 22:18. Previously it was families of the earth, but now in Gen. 22:18 it speaks of the nations of the earth, a much more broad and inclusive vision.

#### 4.9 Conclusion

The author in this passage tries to convince his audience that child sacrifice is not something their God desires. Though there was a demand from him, even the founding father was prohibited from the act of sacrificing the beloved son, Isaac. From the text, there is no specific clue about the historical setting or the audience. Yet it seems that the author is speaking to a distressed group of



people who are weary with their deity. The author appears to be encouraging the people using a patriarchal story to revitalise their relationship with their deity. Though we know neither the historicity of the account nor the development of the story among the people, it was widely accepted and would have inspired the people to stop sacrificing their children.

This suggests that child sacrifice was practised among the ancient Israelites in different ways. They did it in worship of their Deity, thinking that it was what he was demanding. The only way to receive his blessing was to give him what was being demanded. The people were sacrificing their children in different ways.

The story is presented in such a way to the people to encourage them to stop this practice, with a model from their patriarch. The author's presentation of the characters in this story is interesting. The author or the narrator explains many things - they are his interpretation of events, written into the story. He is presenting the story as a test undertaken by their patriarchal father. The test is used as a means to know the obedience of Abraham. The author is presenting the story in such a way as not a demand for child sacrifice but as a test. The author precludes hints at the outcome, though it was unknown by Abraham. Abraham acts according to the demands of the deity, and is willing to offer Isaac as a sacrifice.

This again confirms the impression that child sacrifice was known among the people, because Abraham acts without any question or hesitation. Perhaps, this leads us to believe that Abraham would have performed child sacrifice in the past. Though there is no evidence in the text, the exclamatory phrase 'your only son' used for Isaac, probably conveys the message that

the sacrifice had to be his own flesh and blood. No child taken or purchased from a different family or a slave child could be offered as a sacrifice to his deity.

The other important thing here is the immediate response from Abraham to the command to sacrifice Isaac. Scholars try to explain Abraham's willingness to obey his deity without question. The underlying question is, what was the reason for the total obedience? Was it faith or fear? Scholars argue the latter is more probable, because of the events Abraham had seen at Sodom. After the willingness and boldness of Abraham to sacrifice Isaac, the deity commends him for fearing him (Gen. 22:12). Therefore, it seems that Abraham does not act expecting a miracle, but out of fear of his God and an impending punishment for disobedience. The text does not speak of any element of faith here, a theme that was later developed by Paul in the New Testament.

The provision of the lamb also needs to be seen in the context of substitution. The theory of substitutionary sacrifice is slowly introduced to the audience. Abraham does not find a substitute, but the deity gives him the substitute, a lamb. His total obedience to the deity eases the situation and provides a solution to the problem - the underlying message to the hearers. The call is to follow their God and totally obey him in everything. Therefore, the purpose of the current text is to expunge any existing child sacrifice in the name of their God among the people of Israel. The author is trying to convince the people that this kind of child sacrifice is no longer needed. Obedience is the key, not acting upon self-learned practices of their forefathers or from the inhabitants of other nations. The author is specifically choosing as an example their founding

father, Abraham, to root out the evil practice of child sacrifice without giving emphasis to or condemning the practice.

In the Abrahamic story in Gen. 22, there are two aspects of note; namely, the faith of Abraham in his whole-hearted trust in his deity and that, though he was demanding human sacrifice in the past, now he has replaced human sacrifice with the sacrifice of lamb. The deity provides a lamb as substitution for Isaac. The author is asking his audience to wait and see the outcome. He must have been challenging them in their given situation and religious practices. The same deity, who demands the firstborn and the only son of aged parents, stops the sacrifice at the last minute and provides a lamb. This is an ingenious way of communicating the message to stop or reject the sacrifice of firstborn children. This is not the desire of God. Thus, the author is trying to deviate the attention of the people from sacrificing their firstborn to their God through a story from their founding father Abraham and his only son Isaac. This leads us to look at the demand of the firstborn in the Passover story, a festival that is central to the formation of their nation and very similar to that of the demand to Abraham.

## Chapter 5

### The Firstborn and the Passover

#### 5.1 Introduction

The demand of God of the Hebrew Bible to ‘Consecrate to me every firstborn male. The first offspring of every womb among the Israelites belongs to me, whether human or animal’ (Ex. 13: 2) appears in the context of the Passover celebration and the killing of the Egyptian firstborn by the Angel of Death. Thus, any study of the sacrifice of the firstborn in the Hebrew Bible would not be complete without looking at the killing of all the Egyptian firstborn after the night of the Passover, the night before the Israelite exodus as depicted in the book of Exodus Chapters 12-13. The commemoration of this incident became part of one of the major celebrations in Israel, which was developed as the Festival of Passover, a festival that united the tribes of Israel together.<sup>293</sup>

This chapter will examine and attempt to understand how Yahweh’s demand for the firstborn and the killing of the firstborn in Egypt in this passage relate to the other accounts of the Passover,

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<sup>293</sup> There are various theories and opinions about the origin of the Passover; the one adopted above is the traditional belief. For a discussion see J. B. Segal, *The Hebrew Passover: From the Earliest Times to A.D. 70* (London Oriental Series, 12; London: Oxford University Press, 1963), pp. 78- 113. See also Joshua Kulp, “The Origins of the Seder and Haggadah,” *CBR* 4 (2005), 109-134; M. Dijkstra, “The Law of Moses: The Memory of Mosaic Religion in and after the Exile,” in Rainer Albertz & Bob Becking (eds), *Yahwism after the Exile: Perspectives on Israelite Religion in the Persian Era* (Assen: Van Gorcum, 2003), pp. 70-98; P. F. Bradshaw and L. A. Hoffman (eds), *Passover and Easter: Origin and History to Modern Times* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 1999); J. Brumberg-Kraus, ““Not by Bread Alone”: The Ritualization of Food and Table Talk in the Passover Seder and in the Last Supper,” *Semeia* 86 (1999), 165-191. Arnow David, “The Passover Haggadah: Moses and the Human Role in Redemption,” *Judaism* 55/3-4 (2006). Michael Avioz, “Moses in the Passover Haggadah,” *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 31 (2009), 45-50. Peter T. Vogt, “The Passover in Exodus and Deuteronomy: An Introductory Examination,” in Jamie A. Grant, Alison Lo and Gordon J. Wenham (eds), *A God of Faithfulness: Essays in Honour of J. Gordon MacConville on His 60<sup>th</sup> Birthday* (New York: T & T Clark, 2001), pp. 30-45.

highlighted in different passages in the Hebrew Bible. The killing of the Egyptian firstborn on the night before the Israelites' exodus from Egypt ought to be read in the wider context of firstborn sacrifices. It is striking, however, that this particular passage highlights the relationship and the significance linking the killing of the firstborn to the redemption of the people of Israel from Egyptian bondage. Why these two motifs are linked in this way is going to be the focus of the discussion here, exploring their connection to firstborn sacrifice.

Though there are volumes of research on Passover, it has not proved possible to find research that exclusively focuses on the relationship between the killing of the Egyptian firstborn, the Passover, the Exodus, and the demand for the consecration of the firstborn among the Israelites. Much of the scholarly discussion of this passage focuses on to the Exodus event as the starting point for the beginning of the nation of Israel.<sup>294</sup> This suggests that it is necessary to look into the importance of killing the Egyptian firstborn for the formation of the nation of Israel, and to understand the demand to consecrate Israel's firstborn as having significance for the security of the newly formed nation. The God of Israel kills all the firstborn of Egypt in the context of redeeming or freeing the Israelites, and demands that all the Israelite firstborn belong to Him. Clearly there are issues in relation to the historicity and theological implications of the Exodus event and the preceding Passover celebration that are beyond the scope of the current research.<sup>295</sup>

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<sup>294</sup> Hundreds of volumes have been published about the Exodus and many theologies are based on this particular event. For example, liberation theology finds its root in the Exodus. But sufficient attention is not given to the Passover, though it is a central theme in the life of Israel which is further developed in New Testament Christology.

<sup>295</sup> For example, see Russell E. Gmirkin, *Berosus and Genesis, Manetho and Exodus: Hellenistic Histories and the Date of the Pentateuch* (London: T & T Clark, 2006); Graham Davies, "Was there An Exodus?" in John Day, *In Search of Pre-Exilic Israel: Proceedings of the Oxford Hebrew Bible Seminar* (London: T & T Clark, 2004), pp. 23-40; D. V. Edelman, *The Fabric of History: Text, Artifact and Israel's Past* (JSOTSupp., 127; Sheffield: JSOT Press,

The present research concentrates on how these motifs came to be combined in the Passover, and on the effect this had on later traditions of the particular combination of motifs in this text.

According to the book of Exodus as we now have it, the crucial event which propelled the people of Israel from Egyptian bondage and into the Exodus was the Passover, with its intimate link to the killing of the Egyptian firstborn. That was the plague that changed Pharaoh's attitude to a sufficient extent as to liberate the people of Israel.

This event is the defining factor in determining the membership of the Israelite community at large, and the root in which their history as a nation begins. Thompson observes that it is 'in the story of the Exodus that we find the earliest events of Israel's history and it is the Passover narrative which marks those events as its beginning.'<sup>296</sup> Therefore, the Passover is hugely significant in the history of Israel.<sup>297</sup>

A critical review of the festival of the Passover evaluating the terminology used to describe the ritual, its origin, development, and its theology will give a fuller understanding of the relationship and importance of the firstborn in the context of the Passover. Of particular interest

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1991); Marc Zvi Brettler, *The Creation of History in Ancient Israel* (London: Routledge, 1998); Francesca Stavrakopoulou and John Barton, *Religious Diversity in Ancient Israel and Judah* (London: T & T Clark, 2010).

<sup>296</sup> Thomas L. Thompson, *The Origin Tradition of Ancient Israel, I: The Literary Formation of Genesis and Exodus 1-23* (JSOTSupp., 55; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1987), p. 172.

<sup>297</sup> It is a festival of great significance. It not only shows the origin and development of Israel as a nation but it also explains the importance of this particular religious ritual. There are questions on the origin of the Passover and its importance. The following pages shall discuss these in detail. Scholars like H. G. May, "The Relation of the Passover to the Festival of Unleavened Cakes," *JBL* 4 (1936), 65, and T. L. Thompson, *The Origin Tradition of Ancient Israeli*, argue that the Passover was a later development and that it was an amalgamation of two separate Bedouin festivals. However, T. D. Alexander, "The Passover Sacrifice," in R. T. Beckwith and M. J. Selman (eds), *Sacrifice in the Bible* (Carlisle: Paternoster Press, 1995), pp. 5-6, rejects this view. We shall be looking into this issue in detail in the following pages.

will be determining what associations there are between the killing of the Egyptian firstborn and the sacrifice of the paschal lamb, and how that relates to the demand of the deity to consecrate all the firstborn among the Israelites. This will elicit the importance of the firstborn in relation to the paschal lamb, and the development of the firstborn theology<sup>298</sup> down through the history of ancient Israel.

It is interesting to note that there is no demand for a firstborn lamb in the Passover sacrifice, though the importance of firstborn children, Egyptian and Israelite, in the Passover celebration is inescapable. Given this emphasis of the firstborn in the Passover narrative, why is there no requirement that the Passover lamb should be a firstling? This study analyses the *Sitz im Leben*,<sup>299</sup> in which this particular combination of motifs was developed, and its influence on the history of Israel. The question does not regard the historicity of the Passover and the subsequent exodus that is said to have taken place as portrayed in Exodus,<sup>300</sup> but the contexts or the social settings where the concept was developed and theologised in various historical situations.

The textual study will not only focus on how the Passover celebration appears in the present Hebrew Bible, but also on the development of the Passover ritual in the ancient context. Though

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<sup>298</sup> Here the term ‘firstborn theology’ is my own creation. I am looking at the demand for the firstborn by the deity and the specific instructions to sacrifice it or redeem it.

<sup>299</sup> A term employed by German Form Critics, and one that is difficult to translate exactly into English. It denotes the social context or ‘life setting’ in which a narrative emerged. The point being made is that particular items in the OT can only be understood when they are related to the culture and social life of ancient Israel. Before the sources which comprise the Pentateuch were written, they were transmitted orally, probably within the context of worship (their ‘*Sitz im Leben*’). The character of the social situation determines the style of the communication.

<sup>300</sup> There are many debates over the historicity of the Passover incident and the subsequent Exodus. Though the scope of this study does not allow detailed discussion of all these, it is worthwhile to note the key literature at this point. See Graham Davies, “Was there An Exodus?” pp. 23-40; Thompson, *The Origin Tradition of Ancient Israel*, pp. 133-154; Tamara Prosic, *The Development and Symbolism of Passover until 70 CE*, pp. 35-54.

the study evaluates the Hebrew texts available in the Hebrew Bible, the focus of attention is beyond the text, to the varying contexts that depend upon the space and time in which related concepts originated, developed, historicised, and was theologised. Thus, the text is read with the background of its development, as it appears in the Hebrew Bible. Evidence will be sought in the wider cultural examination without neglecting the importance of the text. It seems that there is a close relationship between the Passover celebrations of the Israelites and the practices found elsewhere in the ancient near east.

Most modern scholars<sup>301</sup> look to other cultures and peoples in and around Palestine to find the roots of the Passover, to help understand what is unique in this celebration to Israel and what is part of a wider cultural heritage. The Passover texts contain cultural allusions and assumptions that we do not share, which can be illuminated by looking to related cultures and their customs. Additionally, the difficulty in reconciling the various biblical accounts of the practice of the Passover suggests that the celebration developed over time. Here, too, comparative material can be illuminating.

## 5.2 History of Research

Modern interpreters and commentators on the Hebrew texts of Passover have a variety of opinions about the background in which the Passover originated, and therefore offer many different conclusions. Most theories are principally developed on the sociological assumption that

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<sup>301</sup> For example see B. Segal, *The Hebrew Passover: From the Earliest Times to A.D. 70*; T. L. Thompson, *The Origin Tradition of Ancient Israel*, pp. 172-180; Tamara Prosic, *The Development and Symbolism of Passover Until 70 CE*, pp. 60-71; J. Van Seters, "The Place of the Yahwist in the History of Passover and Massot," *ZAW* 95 (1983), 169-170; Gershon Brin, *Studies in Biblical Law: From the Hebrew Bible to the Dead Sea Scrolls* (JSOTSupp., 176; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994), pp. 166-280.



the Israelites were pastoral nomads before they settled in Palestine.<sup>302</sup> Therefore, some scholars argue that the origin of the Passover can be traced to the practices of pastoral nomads.<sup>303</sup> The Nomadic tribes gathered together annually to offer sacrifice to their deity. Together they would eat the meat along with the unleavened bread, vegetables, and bitter herbs. This was considered a time of fellowship, and prayers of thanksgiving were offered for protection, as well as for the year ahead, the New Year.<sup>304</sup>

This hypothesis assumes that the festival of Passover can be interpreted as an amalgam of customs retained from the Israelites' pastoral nomadic life into their settled life in Palestine.<sup>305</sup>

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<sup>302</sup> The scope of the current study will not permit evaluation of the issues related to the origin and settlement of Israelites in the land of Canaan. Scholars are widely divided in their opinions about the issue and there are a range of theories and hypotheses. For a review of see J. H. Hayes and J. M. Miller, *Israelite and Judaeon History* (London: SCM Press, 1977), pp. 1-69. For a discussion on how one could write a history of Israel and the issues related to it, see Lester L. Grabbe, *Ancient Israel: What Do We Know and How Do we Know it?* (London: T & T Clark, 2007), pp. 3-36. See also T. L. Thompson, *Early History of the Israelite People from the Written and Archaeological Sources* (Leiden: Brill, 1992).

<sup>303</sup> See B. Segal, *The Hebrew Passover: From the Earliest Times to A.D. 70*, pp. 155-188; Thompson, *The Origin Tradition of Ancient Israel*, pp. 172-180; Tamara Prosic, *The Development and Symbolism of Passover Until 70 CE*, pp. 54-59; J. Van Seters, "The Place of the Yahwist," 169-170.

<sup>304</sup> Brock-Utne suggests that the *Pesaha*-night was originally a shepherd's feast, celebrated on the night before setting out for summer pasturing and performed with a staff in hand and with girded loins. A. Brock-Utne, "Eine Religionsfeschichtliche Studie zudemursprunglichen Passahopfer," *Archiv Fur Religionswissenschaft*, 31 (1934), 272-278; see also Richard Chess, "And on the Seventh Day, and: The Jewish Calendar," *Prairie Schooner*, 80/2 (2006), 73-75.

<sup>305</sup> Most modern writers also think that it originated from two different festivals or practices. See for example B. Segal, *The Hebrew Passover: From the Earliest Times to A.D. 70*, pp. 155-188; T. L. Thompson, *The Origin Tradition of Ancient Israel*, pp. 172-180; Tamara Prosic, *The Development and Symbolism of Passover Until 70 CE*, pp. 54-59; J. Van Seters, "The Place of the Yahwist," 169-170.

This line of scholarship was initiated by Julius Wellhausen.<sup>306</sup> Currently, there are several alternative views on this subject, which are outlined below.

### 5.2.1 Nomadic Pastoral Thanksgiving Festival:

Wellhausen argues that the Passover was originally a nomadic-pastoral thanksgiving festival, having no seasonal relevance. He also suggests that the Feast of Unleavened Bread was one of the three agrarian feasts found among the Canaanites.<sup>307</sup> The Deuteronomic centralisation led to the loss of the original nature of both the Feast of Unleavened Bread and The Passover. These two festivals were combined together and historicised as part of commemorating the Exodus and the law of the firstborn.<sup>308</sup> Wellhausen puts forward his arguments based on the differences he notices in the Passover accounts in the Hebrew Bible, and from the evidence of similar practices of the surrounding cultures. He argues that the main feature of the festival is the sacrifice of the firstborn.

In the Hebrew Bible, the Book of Numbers connects the Exodus story with Passover (Num. 9:1; 33:3), while Deuteronomy connects Passover and unleavened bread celebrations with the Exodus story (Deut. 16:1, 3, 6). However, it is noteworthy that nothing is mentioned in the text about a demand or requirement of a firstling during the celebration of Passover in the

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<sup>306</sup> J. Wellhausen, *Prolegomena to the History of Israel* (trans. J. Southerland Black and A. Menzies; Edinburgh: A & C Black, 1885), pp. 83-94.

<sup>307</sup> As per J. Wellhausen the three major agricultural festivals among the Canaanites in a year were those of Unleavened Bread and Weeks (marking the beginning and the end of the corn harvest), and Tabernacles as a feast of vintage and bringing of corn from the threshing floors. See Wellhausen, *Prolegomena to the History of Israel*, pp. 83-94.

<sup>308</sup> Wellhausen, *Prolegomena to the History of Israel*, pp. 83-94.

instructions given for the first Passover celebration found in the Exodus text, the above quoted texts, or any other texts in the Hebrew Bible. Wellhausen ignores the implications of this text regarding the absence of a demand for a firstborn as the paschal lamb, and argues that the Israelites acquired many components of the Passover festival from the surrounding cultures.<sup>309</sup> Beer<sup>310</sup> and May<sup>311</sup> agree with Wellhausen, but with a slight difference. According to Beer, the Passover was initially developed from three festivals occurring during the springtime.<sup>312</sup> The nomadic festival involved the killing/sacrificing of the firstborn lamb during the night of the full moon. Beer suggests that this was adopted by the nomadic Israelites. Once they were settled, he argues that the ceremony was held in local shrines and not in houses, as an introductory religious act for the impending harvest. Beer thinks that the sacrificial animal was considered to hold some divine properties, and thus the nomadic community consumed the whole animal with unleavened bread and did not break its bones. They did not use any leaven since leaven was considered ritually impure.<sup>313</sup> He suggests that, at a later stage, the smearing of blood and the commemoration of the tenth plague were attached. He observes that due to some innovative ideas, the sacrificial place was changed from local shrines to houses, though the centralisation of the cult did not find wider acceptance until the exile.

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<sup>309</sup> See for example Wellhausen, *Prolegomena to the History of Israel*, p. 87.

<sup>310</sup> G. Beer, *Pesachim (Osterb): Text, Uebersetzung und Erklarung* (Giessen: Topelmann, 1912), p. 9; H. G. May, "Relation of the Passover to the Festival of Unleavened Cakes," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 4 (1936), 65.

<sup>311</sup> H. G. May, "The Relation of the Passover to the Festival of Unleavened Cakes," p. 65.

<sup>312</sup> G. Beer, *Pesachim (Osterb): Text, Uebersetzung und Erklarung*, p. 9.

<sup>313</sup> G. Beer, *Pesachim (Osterb): Text, Uebersetzung und Erklarung*, p. 23.

Additionally, Beer argues that the Josianic reformation changed the entire perspective of the Passover celebration and the firstling sacrifice, as it achieved national status under Josiah.<sup>314</sup> G. B. Gray agrees with Beer, and suggests that during earlier periods the sacrificial animal was eaten raw, together with its blood and bones.<sup>315</sup> He argues that the prohibition of eating raw meat and breaking of its bones was a practice from which a new generation was asked to abstain, since that practice was now seen as 'odd'. Therefore, it was modified to encompass cooking the meat and smearing the blood on the doorposts. Gray thinks that these practices have an apotropaic effect of protecting the people inside the house.<sup>316</sup>

Though there are convincing elements in Gray's argument, other elements are less so. Gray compares the Israelite paschal sacrifice with the practices of the near eastern people who ate the flesh of the sacrificial animal along with its blood. To support his argument, Gray quotes Smith's<sup>317</sup> observation of ancient Arabian sacrifices, whereby the chosen animal, usually a camel, was bound upon a rude altar of stones piled together. The report says:

'As soon as the leader of the band has thrice led the worshippers round the altar in a solemn procession accompanied with chants, he inflicts the first wound while the last words of the hymn are still upon the lips of the congregation. Once this is done, in all haste he drinks the blood that gushes forth. Then, immediately, the congregation fall upon the victim with their swords, hacking off pieces of the quivering flesh and devouring them raw with such wild haste. This was done in the short interval between the rise of the day star, which

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<sup>314</sup> For a detailed account of Beer's views and other interpretations see G. Beer, *Pesachim (Osterb): Text, Übersetzung und Erklärung*, pp. 9-33.

<sup>315</sup> G. B. Gray, *Sacrifice in the Hebrew Bible: Its Theory and Practice* (New York: KTAV Publishing, re-printed 1925), p. 348.

<sup>316</sup> For a detailed account of G. B. Gray's arguments see G. B. Gray, *Sacrifice in the Hebrew Bible*, pp. 337-382.

<sup>317</sup> See W. R. Smith, *Religion of Semites*, vol. 3 (ed. J. Day; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1995), p. 345.

marked the hour for the service to begin and the disappearance of its rays before the rising sun. The entire camel, body and bones, skin, blood and entrails, were totally devoured.<sup>318</sup>

The blood on the altar of their god creates a bond of blood between the worshippers and their god. Their practice included both drinking the blood and eating the flesh containing the blood so that they ate the meat with the animal's life still in it.<sup>319</sup>

Gray quotes 1 Samuel 14:32, which reads 'They pounced on the plunder and taking sheep, cattle and calves, they butchered them on the ground and ate them, together with the blood.'<sup>320</sup> Gray argues that in this incident the army of Saul practised eating raw flesh.<sup>321</sup> However, it is hardly necessary to think that they actually ate raw flesh in this incident. The text only states that they 'ate the meat with the blood', and it does not say that they ate it raw. In their urgency, they might not have allowed the blood to drain out, and they cooked the flesh with the blood. It is reasonable to think that they would have roasted it in fire and eaten it. There is no concrete

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<sup>318</sup> Gray, *Sacrifice in the Hebrew Bible*, p. 369. It is believed that the raw flesh is understood as the living flesh and in eating it raw, all those who shared in the ceremony absorbed part of the victim's life into themselves.

<sup>319</sup> Smith observes how much more forcibly than any ordinary meal such a rite expresses the establishment or confirmation of a bond of common life between the worshippers, and also, since the blood is shed upon the altar itself, between the worshippers and their god. See W. R. Smith, *Religion of Semites*, p. 345.

<sup>320</sup> In the ancient concept the blood is something belonging to the deity and is considered as sacred, given only to those who are priests or high-ranking people in society. McCarter observes that since blood as "the vital fluid, the essence of life itself (Gen. 9:4; Lev. 17:11; Deut. 12:23), was properly a food for gods alone, the prohibition survived in both Deuteronomic (Deut. 12:23-27) and priestly (Lev. 19:26) regulations." See P. Kyle McCarter, *I Samuel: A New Translation with Introduction, Notes & Commentary* (The Anchor Bible; Garden City: Doubleday, 1980), p. 249.

<sup>321</sup> Hertzberg observes that "it is not that the men had eaten the flesh 'with' its blood – that would have to be *b<sup>e</sup>* and not *'al*, cf. Gen 9:4 – but that they prepared the meal 'on' the blood." Hans Wilhelm Hertzberg, *I & II Samuel: A Commentary* (London: SCM Press, 1960), pp. 115-116.

evidence to show that the Israelites ate the raw meat of the sacrificial animal at any other time, apart from this single reference.<sup>322</sup>

The prohibition of eating raw meat must be understood in the context of the cultures around them, who had the practice of eating uncooked meat.<sup>323</sup> Numerous biblical texts insist that the God of Israel was prohibiting his people from following the practices of their neighbours, whose sacrifices included eating uncooked meat and drinking blood. This practise was not to be imitated by the Israelites (cf. Ex. 23:31-33; Lev. 18:3; Num. 33:52; Deut. 7:16; 12:31-32; Jud. 2:2-3; 2 Kings 17:15; Eze. 20:28, 32; Jer. 10:2).<sup>324</sup> This is one of the key teachings in the Pentateuch. For

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<sup>322</sup> Even here in the text the point is about the prohibition not the permission to eat with the blood or raw flesh. Driver observes that it is “a practice, as the present passage shows, regarded with strong disfavour by the Hebrews.” S. R. Driver, *Notes on the Hebrew Text and The Topography of the Books of Samuel with an Introduction on Hebrew Palaeography and the Ancient Versions and Facsimiles of Inscriptions and Maps* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1913), p. 115.

<sup>323</sup> As noted above, the Arabian tribes killed and ate the raw flesh of the Camel along with its blood. This would have been a common practice among these people. Smith, *Religion of Semites*, p. 345.

<sup>324</sup> A clear look at the teachings in the Pentateuch gives an account of the Israelites’ polemical acts in all their activities in comparison with their neighbours. For example, when everybody else in Palestine ate pork, the Israelites were prohibited from it. This prohibition and distinction is as old as the nation of Israel. Though scholars vary in their opinions on this subject and give different dates for this development, it is very difficult to find an exact date for this separation. It could be that some reform movements started from the time of the Josianic reformation, or the development of the priestly system, or the development of an exclusive Yahwistic group among the people. Whatever the case, this is a key theme in the Pentateuch and is further developed in the prophetic literature. Prophets were polemical in their approach against the people’s behaviour. For a discussion on this see, Jay Sklar, *Sin, Purity, Sacrifice, Atonement: The Priestly Conceptions* (Hebrew Monographs, 2 ; Sheffield: Phoenix Press, 2005), pp. 105-138; M. Douglas, *Purity and Danger* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1966); J. Milgrom, “Ethics and Ritual: The Foundations of the Biblical Dietary Laws,” in E. Firmage, B. Weiss and J. Welch (eds.), *Religion and Law: Biblical-Judaic and Islamic Perspectives* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1990), pp. 159-191; F. J. Simoons, *Eat Not This Flesh: Food Avoidances in the Old World* (Wisconsin: University of Wisconsin Press, 1961); H. Eliberg-Schwartz, “Creation and Classification in Judaism: From Priestly to Rabbinic Conceptions,” *HR* 26 (1987), 357-81; T. Frymer-Kensky, “Pollution, Purification and Purgation in Biblical Israel,” in C. Meyers and M.

example, a reoccurring accusation against Israel was their tendency to associate with and imitate their neighbour's practices such as fertility cults, ancestral cults, idolatry, and other pagan practices that were abhorred by their god (cf. 2 Kings 17:1-43). This reveals the fact that some of the people of Israel did follow these practises, either by thinking that their god accepted them or by the influence of others. The passages that insist on Yahweh's prohibition of following the practices of the other peoples may betray an uneasiness over the similarity of the practices in Israel to those of other peoples. There are scholars who have attempted to find the origin and development of the Passover celebration and its similarities with the neighbours. These scholarly observations are classified in different categories and are analysed below.

### 5.2.2 Spring Festival

A group of scholars argue that Passover was a spring festival practised by the Nomadic people. There are three major views in this regard.

#### 5.2.2.1 Nomadic Shepherds' Spring Festival:

De Vaux proposes this view, and he follows a similar argument to that of Wellhausen and others regarding the origin of the Passover. He tries to find similar festivals among the peoples of the ancient near east to support his argument that the Passover originated from the nomadic shepherd's Spring Festival. In this he agrees with Beer and Gray, but disagrees with

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O'Connor (eds.), *The Word of the Lord Shall Go forth* (Winnona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1983), pp 399-414.

Wellhausen's argument that it was a thanksgiving festival of firstlings.<sup>325</sup> De Vaux claims that the celebration is not concerned with thanksgiving; rather, it points towards the future. Thanksgiving is for the things the deity did in the past, whereas a future-oriented ritual is doing something to please the deity to ensure protection and provisions for the next season. Nomadic peoples offered their firstborn to the deity in their prayers as a way of ensuring protection for the remaining live stock. Conversely, it is to be noted that the Passover celebration in the text appears not as something directed towards the future, but as commemoration and thanksgiving.

#### 5.2.2.2 One day Spring Festival

Van Seters is a key proponent of this view. He argues that the Passover was a one-day spring festival where the sacrificial animal was eaten with unleavened bread by families at the local shrines. He also argues that, in the Diaspora, the Jews practised only the ritual of unleavened bread, since other rituals could not be performed. The subsequent Deuteronomistic reformation brought restrictions to the Passover and the ritual of unleavened bread, standardising it through the decree that the celebrations should be offered at the centralised worship place, and making it a seven-day festival from the initial one-day celebration.<sup>326</sup>

However, Van Seters criticises the use of the traditional-historical method for studying and analysing the Passover stories.<sup>327</sup> He states that:

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<sup>325</sup> R. de Vaux, *Ancient Israel*, pp. 484-492.

<sup>326</sup> Van Seters, "The Place of the Yahwist," 169-181.

<sup>327</sup> Among the scholars of the tradition-historical method, there is no agreement on the sources, origin or date of the Passover materials. For example Wellhausen placed the date for the J source sometime between 10<sup>th</sup>/9<sup>th</sup> century, E 9<sup>th</sup>/8<sup>th</sup> century, D in the 7<sup>th</sup> century, and P in the 6<sup>th</sup>/5<sup>th</sup> century. Wellhausen, *Prolegomena to the History of Israel* (Edinburgh: A & C Clark, 1885), p. 85. S. R. Driver assigns Ex. 12:1-20, 28, 37a, 40-51; 13:1-2 to P; 12:29-30 to J; 12:31-36, 37b-



‘For all its ingenious reconstructions, the disadvantages of the tradition-historical method are considerable. Since it speculates about the shape of the pre-literate tradition, its theories cannot be falsified by an appeal to the present texts. There is no scholarly consensus regarding the date of the different materials associated with the Passover texts. There is also no way to make any judgement between radically different proposals and thus theories about the cult have greatly proliferated. Furthermore, those who follow this method have never demonstrated, by comparative literature, that tradition-history is anything but a completely artificial construction of biblical scholars.’<sup>328</sup>

By using such an argument, Van Seters brings his conclusions on the subject into doubt.

### 5.2.2.3 Spring Festival of the Tribal League:

F. M. Cross suggests that Passover was the Spring Festival of the tribal league at Gilgal, and that the reciting and enactment of the Exodus and conquest traditions was its foundation. According to Cross, the Festival’s main function was the renewal of the covenant that comprised the basis of the community’s common life.<sup>329</sup> H. J. Kraus agrees with Cross’s opinion, joining with Wellhausen in saying that the Feast of Unleavened Bread was a Canaanite thanksgiving

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39, 42a to E; and 12:21-27; 13:3-16 to JE. S. R Driver, *Introduction to the Literature of the Old Testament* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1913), p. 28. However, Van Seters, think that J materials should be dated to the exilic period and that D is the earliest source. Van Seters, “The Place of the Yahwist,” 180-181. Wellhausen and Van Seters maintain that the two festivals were not known or connected to J and D and thus that they were two different festivals in the beginning; however, Haran argues that J knew both feasts and there is no reason to delete the term *pesah* in Ex. 34:25, as recommended by other tradition-historical scholars, or to remove the references to Unleavened Bread from Deuteronomy 16 as suggested by Van Seters. M. Haran, “The Passover Sacrifice,” in *Studies in the Religion of Ancient Israel* (VTSupp., 22; Leiden: Brill, 1972), p. 96. See also J. G. McConville, *Law and Theology in Deuteronomy* (JSOTSup., 33; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1984), pp. 99-12.

<sup>328</sup> J. Van Seters, “The Place of the Yahwist,” 169-170.

<sup>329</sup> F. M. Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1973), pp. 84-86.

festival.<sup>330</sup> M. Haran accepts the nomadic origin of the Passover, but connects the Feast of Unleavened Bread with the barley harvest, which marks the beginning of the harvest season.<sup>331</sup>

### 5.2.3 Ritualized Slaughter:

Levenson suggests that the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread were originally two separate festivals. He comments that the Passover sacrifice was a ritualized slaughter with an apotropaic function, which is evident from the usage of the blood. He notes that, ‘In ancient Arabia there was the custom of sprinkling with the blood on the tents of an army setting out on its march. The Bedouins sprinkle sacrificial blood on the neck and side of their camels in order to protect their herds in time of pestilence. The Samaritans mark the foreheads of their children with blood, preserving a survival of this ancient blood rite.’<sup>332</sup> There are other parallel practices among the Bedouin of Sinai and among the ancient Arabs, who had a custom of smearing the blood of a slaughtered animal at the entrance to a house threatened with cholera.

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<sup>330</sup> H. J. Kraus, *Worship in Israel: A Cultic History of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1966), pp. 46-47.

<sup>331</sup> M. Haran, *Temples and Temple-Service in Ancient Israel: An Inquiry into Biblical Cult Phenomena and the Historical Setting of the Priestly School* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1985), pp. 289-342. Engnell tries to find connection with a better-known festival from Mesopotamia and Canaan. He finds many similarities with the Babylonian Akitu which were also celebrated in the month of Nisan. For a detailed discussion and his arguments see, Engnell, “Paesah-Massot and the Problem of “Paternism,”” *Orientalia Suecana* 1 (1952), 39-50. The name comes from the Sumerian barley harvest festival. The Akitu festival consists of two parts: the sowing of barley in the early autumn, and the harvest in the spring. In the Babylonian religion this festival was dedicated to Marduk’s victory over Tiamat. See Tikva Frymer and Ann Arbor, “The Tribulations of Marduk: The So-called “Marduk Ordeal Text,”” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 103/1 (1983), 131-141; Juley Bidmead, *The Akitu Festival: Religious Continuity and Royal Legitimation in Mesopotamia* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2004).

<sup>332</sup> Wolf, *Lexical and Historical Contributions*, pp. 3-4.

The flesh of the animal was eaten in a common meal called a *fidyah*.<sup>333</sup> A similar kind of practice was administered during the breaking of new ground, the opening of a new well, the building of a new house, or at a betrothal and marriage ceremony.<sup>334</sup> The Bedouin community also practised a sacrifice to secure protection for their community, their possessions, and their herds in the ensuing year. In the sacrifice, they sprinkled the blood of the animal on the participants to anoint them with the blood at a communal meal. The sacrificial animal would have been a firstborn male of the herd, which was to be without any blemish.<sup>335</sup>

The purpose of these rites was apotropaic; that is, to ward off any malign influence that may seek to harm the participants. Levenson argues that the lamb's blood is the substitute for the blood of the occupants.<sup>336</sup> However, Segal<sup>337</sup> opposes this view and states that the rite was redemptive in nature, and not apotropaic. Segal observes that in any apotropaic usage, a priest typically required. In the case of Passover, the blood was not handled by priests but by laymen. The rite was not organised by the priest, but rather by the head of the family. In his view, this absence of priests argues for an early origin of the ritual.

In other sacrifices the priests would eat the flesh of the animal or receive a portion, whereas the family was intended to eat the Passover lamb. Segal observes that the portion was given to the priest to do the 'manipulating' of the blood (cf. Lev. 7:8, 14, 32), which is absent in

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<sup>333</sup> The Hebrew *padah* פָּדָה, means to redeem; cf. Ex. 13:13, 15. See J. B. Segal, *The Hebrew Passover*, pp. 96-101; Otto, פִּסַּח, *TDOT*, vol. 12, p. 5.

<sup>334</sup> J. B. Segal, *The Hebrew Passover*, pp. 162-164.

<sup>335</sup> J. B. Segal, *The Hebrew Passover*, p. 183.

<sup>336</sup> B. M. Levinson, *Deuteronomy and the Hermeneutics of the Legal Innovation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 57-80.

<sup>337</sup> See B. Segal, *The Hebrew Passover*, pp. 43-74.

Passover. The laymen were asked to pour the blood to the ground (Deut. 15:19-23) in cases where the animal is blemished and not fit for sacrifice. In the Passover, some of the blood of the animal was collected and placed on the door posts to remember the redemption from Egyptian bondage.

Segal also observes the usage of the hyssop plant, and states that it is used only in the context of redemption and cleansing (cf. Ex. 12:22; Deut. 21:4; Lev. 14:2; Num. 19:3), and not for any apotropaic purpose.<sup>338</sup> He argues that the Passover Sacrifice and the smearing of blood have a redemptive purpose rather than an apotropaic one. Segal proposes that the family ate the Passover meal as an act of communion, and the blood on the doorposts was sign that the whole family was to be redeemed.

According to Segal, the feasts of Passover and Unleavened Bread were never two separate festivals. The leaven was avoided in the meal and no bones of the Pascal Lamb were broken due to the regulations on ritual purity. This shows a perfect correlation and connection between the celebration of unleavened bread and the Passover sacrifice, both of which are special and sacred. The leaven represents impurity, and was therefore to be avoided to maintain purity in the religious practice. The Passover lamb also needed to be blameless in every respect, and its bones were not allowed to be broken to keep its sanctity, though it need not have been a firstborn. Though there are key elements that Segal observes, the entire argument seems far-fetched. There is evidence from the neighbours of Israel and within the texts that both the feast of Unleavened Bread and Passover were celebrated separately. This shows that they were two different festivals,

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<sup>338</sup> See Segal, *The Hebrew Passover*, pp. 156-165.

something that Segal fails to identify and address. The key motif in the presentation of Passover as per the Passover texts are the deliverance of the firstborn from the firstborn plague, redemption, substitution, sanctification of the firstborn, and the commemoration of the event.

#### 5.2.4 Firstborn Sanctification Ritual

J. Pederson argues that the Passover is directly connected with the rules and regulations of sanctification. He proposes that the nomadic Israelites performed a firstborn sanctification ritual that was later developed as Passover. He also claims that the eating of the unleavened bread might also have been a vestige of the Israelite's nomadic past, and the purpose of it was the sanctification of the first produce of the soil.<sup>339</sup> He argues that at some time in history they were joined together, since their common purpose was sanctification. Later, the idea of commemoration was fused into these festivals. The Deuteronomic reformation made it a Jerusalem pilgrimage festival.<sup>340</sup> Nevertheless, the text in Ex. 12:1-28 explains that the purpose of the Passover is not sanctification alone, but redemption and substitution as well. Pederson states that there are elements of sanctification in the Passover festival such as the selection of the Passover animal, the way the animal is killed, the blood being collected and placed on the door lintels, the care given to not breaking any bones, the purity laws, and the criteria as to who can and cannot participate in the Passover celebration.

Johnstone agrees with Pederson to an extent, but claims that the killing of the firstborn is more related to the offering of firstborn to the deity than to the Passover in the Exodus context.<sup>341</sup>

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<sup>339</sup> J. Pedersen, *Israel: Its Life and Culture*, pp. 398-401.

<sup>340</sup> J. Pedersen, *Israel: Its Life and Culture*, pp. 409-412.

<sup>341</sup> W. Johnstone, *Exodus* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990), p. 46.

He suggests that the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread are two traditions and practices, now brought together to have ‘a dynamic effect on the presentation of the narrative’.<sup>342</sup> It seems that the Passover celebration is not a sanctification ritual alone, as observed by Pederson. The preparation for the Passover should be seen in the context of the sanctity of the ritual, rather than sanctification. Sanctification is a process of setting apart a person or a group of people for a particular task. For example, the Levites were sanctified to do the work in the temple. We do not see that element in the Passover. Redemption is an act of rescuing people from any kind of insecure or dangerous environment. In this sense, the Passover text seems to convey the message that it is a celebration of redemption in the context of Israel’s exodus from Egyptian slavery, and its annual commemoration in the subsequent years.

Having looked at the history of research on Passover, before we analyse further it is better to look at the usage of the Hebrew word  $\text{פֶּסַח}$  in various texts to comprehend its meaning in the wider context. The etymological analysis should shed some light on understanding the word used for Passover and its development in history, enabling us to look at the relationship between the Passover and the firstborn.

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<sup>342</sup> W. Johnstone, *Exodus* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990), p. 47.

### 5.3 Etymology:

#### 5.3.1 Introduction:

The Hebrew word  $\text{פסח}$ , has traditionally been translated as ‘Passover.’<sup>343</sup> However, in recent scholarship there has been a change in the perception and it has been proposed that it is more accurate to translate it as ‘to shield’ or ‘to protect.’<sup>344</sup> Thus the question is, ‘What is the meaning of the Hebrew word  $\text{פסח}$  and how it is related to the consecration of the firstborn?’ Is there any development in the etymology of the word  $\text{פסח}$ ? If there is any, how does it affect the understanding of the concept of Passover and the connection to the firstling consecration/sacrifice?

#### 5.3.2 $\text{פסח}$ :<sup>345</sup> Various forms in the Hebrew Texts:

The word  $\text{פסח}$  has varying meanings in different contexts. The verbal form appears in Ex.12:13, 23, 27; 1 Kings 18:21; Isa. 31:5; 2 Sam. 4:4; and 1 Kings 18:26. The verbal adjective  $\text{פסח}$  is a derivative, and occurs in Lev. 21:18; Deut. 15:21; 2 Sam. 5:6, 8; 9:13; 19:27; Job 29:15; Prov. 26:7; Isa. 33:23; 35:6; Jer. 31:8; and Mal. 1:8, 13. In Ex. 12:13, 23, 27 and Isa. 31:5 it is used in the sense of ‘pass by’ or ‘spare’, ‘protecting’ or ‘shielding’, and ‘passing over.’<sup>346</sup>

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<sup>343</sup> See J. Segal, *The Hebrew Passover* (London: 1963), 96-101; N. Sarna, *Exploring Exodus* (New York: 1986), pp. 86-87.

<sup>344</sup> See for example, Samuel E. Loewenstamm, *The Evolution of the Exodus Tradition* (trans. Baruch J. Schwartz; Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1992), pp. 197-206, 219; *DCH*, vol. 6, pp. 723-724; Rabbi George Wolf, *Lexical and Historical Contributions on the Biblical and Rabbinic Passover* (New York: George Wolf, 1991), pp. 2-5.

<sup>345</sup> *DCH*, vol. 6, pp. 723-724; Wolf, *Lexical and Historical Contributions*, p. 4.

<sup>346</sup> *DCH*, vol. 6, pp. 723-724.

In 2 Samuel 4:4 it is used to describe the gait of Mephiboshet, the son of Jonathan, and in 1 Kings 18:21, 26 it is used in the context of leaping during the sacrifice of the bulls.<sup>347</sup> By looking at the word and its usages in these verses, many scholars who wrote the lexicons believe that there is a diachronic and semantic development from ‘lame’ or ‘walk with a limp’ to ‘spring’ and ‘jump over’.<sup>348</sup> Though many scholars have tried to look for an original meaning of the word and associate it with the above meaning, they have failed to agree on a definitive meaning. It is understood that a basic meaning of ‘hop’, ‘leap’, or ‘jump’ is less persuasive because 2 Sam. 4:4 cannot be subsumed under this meaning,<sup>349</sup> nor can the verbal adjective פָּטַף be derived from it.<sup>350</sup> Additionally, Jenni observes that, ‘The preposition עַל־הַמִּזְבֵּחַ וְיִפְסְחוּ (1 Kings 18:26) contradicts the interpretation as a cultic ‘hobble dance’ around an altar.’<sup>351</sup>

### 5.3.3 פָּטַף in Exodus 12 and 13

In Exodus, it is necessary to look at the usage of the word פָּטַף and its meaning more closely.<sup>352</sup> The two alternative and perhaps closer meanings are ‘protecting’ or ‘shielding’, and

<sup>347</sup> Baruch M. Bokser, “Unleavened Bread and Passover, Feast of,” in *ABD*, vol. 6, p. 755.

<sup>348</sup> Munich E. Otto, פָּטַף, *TDOT*, vol. 12, p. 5.

<sup>349</sup> Segal, *The Hebrew Passover*, 96-101; Sarna, *Exploring Exodus*, p. 86-87.

<sup>350</sup> For a detailed discussion see J. B. Segal, *The Hebrew Passover: From the Earliest Times to AD 70* (London: Oxford University press, 1963), pp. 78-113; Tamara Prosic, *The Development and Symbolism of Passover Until 70 CE*, pp. 35-74; Wolf, *Lexical and Historical Contributions*, pp. 2-23.

<sup>351</sup> E. Jenni, *Das hebraische Piel* (Zurich, 1965), cited in Munich E Otto, פָּטַף, *TDOT*, vol. 12, p. 5.

<sup>352</sup> The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew observes three meanings in the usage of the word in our context:

1) Passover festival: Ex. 12:11; 27:48; 34:25; Lev. 23:5; Num. 9:2, 8; 26:16; 33:3; Deut. 16:1; Josh. 5:10, 11; 2 Kings 23:21, 22, 23; Ezek. 45:21; Ezr. 6:19.

2) Passover of Yahweh: Ex. 2:11; Lev. 23: 5; Num. 28:16.

3). Perform or Keep: Ex. 12:48; Num. 9:2, 6; Deut. 16:1; Josh. 5:10; 2 Kings 23:21; Ezek. 6:19.



‘passing over.’<sup>353</sup> The key passages in consideration are Ex. 12:11, 12, 13, 21, 23, 27. The last part of Ex. 12:11 reads לַיהוָה הוּא פֶּסַח, ‘it is Lord’s Passover.’ Here, פֶּסַח is referring to the whole celebration and not specifically to the sacrifice. Ex. 12:12 speaks about the punishment Egyptians are going to receive and says, בְּאֶרֶץ־מִצְרַיִם וְעָבַרְתִּי, ‘for I will pass through the land of Egypt.’ The Hebrew word עָבַר is used here for passing through the land and not the word פֶּסַח. This shows that the author or the final editor is very specific in his usage of the words, and wherever the word פֶּסַח is used he intends a different meaning than ‘passing by’.

Looking at the Passover recorded in Ex. 12:1-13:16, Johnstone observes that, ‘Ex. 12:1-13:16 is both legislation (12:1-27, 43-49; 13:1-16) and an account of putting the legislation into effect (12:28-42, 50f).’<sup>354</sup> In Ex. 12:13 and 27, LXX uses the Greek word σκεπασω, which means ‘shield,’ ‘protect,’ or ‘cover.’ Symmachus uses a different word, υπερμαχησις, which means ‘defence,’ ‘guard,’ ‘protect,’ or ‘secure’. In Ex. 12:13, the Lord is going to pass through the land but will not touch the Israelites. The Hebrew usage is וְרָאִיתִי אֶת־הַדָּם וְרָאִיתִי, ‘when I see the blood, then I will pass over you.’ It seems that the actual usage here is not passing over but protecting or shielding the people. In other words, it would be better to translate it as *when I see the blood, I will protect or shield or redeem you.*

Ex. 12:21 speaks about the Passover animal, the lamb. It says וְשִׁחַטוּ אֶת־הַפֶּסַח, ‘and slaughter the Passover (animal or lamb).’ Here slaughter is referring to the sacrifice of the animal, the act of killing the paschal lamb. Ex. 12:23 reads וְהָיָה אֶת־הַפֶּסַח וְהָיָה אֶת־הַפֶּסַח, ‘and it shall be that when you see the blood, you shall know that I have passed over you.’

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D. J. A. Clines (ed.) *The Dictionary of Classical Hebrew*, vol. 6 (Sheffield: Sheffield Phoenix Press, 2007), pp. 723-724.

<sup>353</sup> *DCH*, vol. 6, pp. 723-724.

<sup>354</sup> W. Johnstone, *Exodus* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1990), p. 40.

*Yahweh will protect over the doorway and will not permit the one destroying to enter into your houses to strike.* The word פָּסַח could either mean ‘pass-over’ or ‘protect’. The blood on the doorposts is the mark of protection. Yahweh is protecting his people from the plague of the firstborn killer angel. Blood is the sign, and Yahweh is the protector. There were two powers in operation, the Angel of Death and the protecting Yahweh. Though the Angel of Death is the agent of Yahweh in killing all the firstborn of Egypt to bring about the release the people of Israel, Yahweh is also taking on the role of the protector or the guardian of Israel against the Angel of Death.<sup>355</sup>

The other key passage is Ex. 12:27 בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל עַל־בְּתֵי פֶסַח אֲשֶׁר לַיהוָה הוּא זָבַח־פֶּסַח וְאָמְרָתֶם הֲצִיל וְאֵת־בְּתֵינוּ אֶת־מִצְרַיִם בְּנִגְפוֹ בְּמִצְרַיִם *‘Then you say this is the sacrifice of Passover to Yahweh who protected or shielded over the houses of the sons of Israel in Egypt when he struck the Egyptians and he spared our houses.’* Here again the word פָּסַח is used to protect or shield the people of Israel from the killing pestilence. This translation is well attested by early witnesses, including the rabbinic literature. One interpretation reads ‘The Holy One, blessed be He, protected the houses of his children in Egypt so that they might not be smitten, as it is said (Ex. 12:13) “and the Lord will passover over the entrance”’.<sup>356</sup> A Midrash writing states ‘He will see the blood (Ex. 12:23) - it is as if He stood by the entrance and prevented the Destroyer from smiting Israel.’<sup>357</sup>

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<sup>355</sup> This topic needs scholarly attention, since the research on it is scarce. It is a philosophical concept, mainly from Hinduism. Though the Hindu concept differs from the Biblical understanding, there can be some similarities in their conceptual roots. In Hinduism the creator and destroyer are two different deities who are equally powerful. In the present context, it is Yahweh who is protecting the people from the attack of His angel who was sent out to destroy all the firstborn of Egypt.

<sup>356</sup> Mek Besallah Poem, cited in Loewenstamm, *The Evolution of the Exodus Tradition*, p. 198.

<sup>357</sup> Loewenstamm, *The Evolution of the Exodus Tradition*, pp. 198-199.

Therefore, the above analysis of the usage of the word  $\text{כִּפֹּר}$  gives us the understanding that the word could mean ‘protect’, ‘deliver’, ‘passover’, or ‘redeem’.

Having looked at the way the word Passover is used in various places throughout the Hebrew Bible, we will now analyse some of the important passages related to Passover.

#### 5.3.4 Summary

$\text{כִּפֹּר}$  clearly portrays the act of Yahweh in protecting the people of Israel from the killing plague through the protective power of the blood of the paschal lamb. The word also has a direct relation to the killing of the firstborn. In Egypt, all of the firstborn were killed. The Angel of Death would have killed the Israelite firstborn if the blood of the paschal lamb had not protected them. In other words, the paschal lamb became a substitute for the Israelite firstborn. The blood of the Passover lamb was placed on the doorposts and acted as a protective sign or agent. This event leads to the exodus; thus the death of the Egyptian firstborn and the Exodus are also closely related.

According to the texts of the Hebrew Bible, it seems that the author or final editor is trying to connect the consecration of the Israelite firstborn to the Passover celebration. Though the word  $\text{כִּפֹּר}$  is used in different contexts with slightly variant meanings, the Exodus text is very clear about its usage in relation to the Passover. The final editor of the text in Exodus is very careful in the usage of different words.  $\text{כִּפֹּר}$  is used with a specific meaning to serve a specific purpose. There are other words used to differentiate the meanings where the word  $\text{כִּפֹּר}$  could have

been used as a synonym as I have observed earlier.<sup>358</sup> As we have noted with the usage of the word פָּסַח in Ex. 12:11 and עָבַר in Ex. 12:12, the final editor was very careful in selecting the appropriate word to convey his particular message. Thus, it is very clear that the word פָּסַח is used to demonstrate its particular meaning in the context of Passover sacrifice and its relation to the firstborn.

It seems clear that the author is presenting the Passover story in a way that proves that Passover is connected with the firstborn consecration, which is very strongly linked with the Exodus story. The author places the Passover narrative in the context of the killing of the firstborn plague and Exodus to show his audience that these are directly related. The killing of the Egyptian firstborn became the culmination of all the plagues, which seems to lead to the release of the people. In other words, during the killing of the Egyptian firstborn, the Passover lamb became a sacrifice for the redemption of the Israelites, and the author tries to connect this incident with the demand of the deity to consecrate all firstborn to him, which people might have misunderstood; the author is trying to correct this.

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<sup>358</sup> For example, the Hebrew word עָבַר is used here for passing through the land and not the word פָּסַח. This shows the author or the final editor is very specific in his usage of the words and wherever the word פָּסַח was used he had a different meaning in his mind other than the meaning ‘passing by.’

#### 5.4 Analysis of Biblical Passages relating to Passover:

There are many texts in the Hebrew Bible explaining the Passover. This work has selected some of the texts that speak directly about the Passover, the firstborn, and the Exodus.<sup>359</sup> In the analysis of the scholarly debate on the origin of the Passover and its relation to the firstborn consecration we found that there are differing opinions. The study shows that there is a methodological issue in looking at the origin of the Passover and the consecration of the firstborn. I strongly propose that the study should start with the texts relating to these subjects. As we have seen, most of the findings in the scholarship are based on assumptions developed from the comparison of the ancient near eastern practices. Scholars used the tradition-historical method to analyse the passages, and derived their conclusions based on those assumptions.<sup>360</sup> The text was interpreted on the assumption that the practices of the surrounding nations influenced the Israelite festival of Passover. Conversely, I propose the methodology that the research should start with the text in hand, and compare the result with the evidence of similar practices from

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<sup>359</sup> There are many passages dealing with the Passover in the Hebrew Bible. I shall briefly analyse the key passages such as Ex. 12:1-13:16; 34:25; Lev. 23:5; Num. 9:1-14; 28:16; 33:3; Deut. 16:1-8. Though there are other references, such as Josh. 5:10-11; 2 Chr. 30:1-27; 35:1-19; 2 Kings 23:21-23; Ezek. 45:21-24 and Ezra. 6:19-22, we shall not be able to analyse all these due to the limited scope of the study.

<sup>360</sup> However, the reliability of the tradition-historical method in the study of the Passover is again a big challenge for scholars. For example, Van Seters makes the following remark regarding the usage of tradition-historical criticism for finding the origin of the Passover and the feast of the Unleavened Bread: "For all its ingenious reconstructions the disadvantages of the tradition-historical method are considerable. Since it speculates about the shape of the pre-literate tradition its theories cannot be falsified by an appeal to the present texts. There is also no way to make any judgement between radically different proposals and thus theories about the cult have greatly proliferated. Furthermore, those who follow this method have never demonstrated by comparative literature that tradition-history is anything but a completely artificial construction of biblical scholars." J. Van Seters, "The Place of the Yahwist," 169-170.

other near eastern people. This will help develop a better understanding of the text, rather than imposing the surrounding practices onto the original text.

#### 5.4.1 Exodus 12:1-13:16

Exodus 12:1-13:16 is a foundational passage in the study of the Hebrew Bible's account of the Passover, as it is the one text that claims to provide an origin story for the Passover; the other texts merely describe the practice of the Passover. In this text, the author is trying to speak about the origin of the Passover and the reason for future commemoration. The major event in the Passover celebration is the selection of the lamb and its sacrifice.<sup>361</sup> There are specific things to consider in the selection and administration of the Passover sacrifice and celebration.

1. Day of selection: 10<sup>th</sup> Day of the first month
2. Day of Sacrifice: 14<sup>th</sup> Day of the first month
3. Time of Sacrifice: Evening, before the sunset at twilight
4. Place of Sacrifice: Near their houses
5. Specification of the lamb: One year, male, without any blemish
6. Frequency of the celebration: Annually
7. The Specifics of the sacrifice: Blood should be placed on the door lintels. Meat should be eaten by the family; nothing should be left for the next day, and bones should not be broken.

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<sup>361</sup> See Peter T. Vogt, "The Passover in Exodus and Deuteronomy," pp. 30-45; J. G. McConville, "Deuteronomy's Unification of Passover and Massot: A Response to Bernard M. Levinson," *JBL* 119/1 (2000), 30-45.

8. Preparation for the sacrifice: With the belts fastened, sandals on feet and staff in hands and eat it in haste.
9. Method of sacrifice: Slaughter the animal, take the blood and put a portion of it on the doorposts and lintels. The flesh of the animal should be roasted in fire along with its head and legs. The flesh of the animal should then be eaten by the members of the family along with a bitter herb and unleavened bread. It should be eaten in the house and no meat shall be taken out and eaten.
10. Qualification for eating the sacrificial meat: Only those who are circumcised should eat it. No foreigner or hired servants may eat it. A slave who is bought for money may eat it only after circumcision. A stranger who is sojourning with Israel may eat it only if all their males are circumcised.

This passage gives detailed instructions to commemorate the festival for a week, a seven-day feast starting with the eating of the unleavened bread (Ex. 12:14-20; 13:3-10). The week commences on the fifteenth day of the month of Abib and lasts until the evening of the 21<sup>st</sup> day of the month. At the heart of the celebration is the killing of the lamb on the evening of the 14<sup>th</sup> day. The specification for the sacrificial animal is similar to that of other sacrificial animals. Namely, it should be a year-old, male, without blemish, and can be either from sheep or goats. The animal is selected four days prior to the day of sacrifice; that is, on the 10<sup>th</sup> of Abib. Alexander observes that this could be to ensure that they are ritually pure.<sup>362</sup> The sacred nature of the sacrifice is clear in the special instructions given on how to handle the animal's blood, flesh, and bones.<sup>363</sup>

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<sup>362</sup> Alexander, *The Passover Sacrifice*, p. 7.

<sup>363</sup> The blood should be put on the sides and tops of the door frames of the houses (Ex. 12:7, 22); the meat is to be eaten after roasting it in the fire (Ex. 12:8-10), and the victim's bones must not

Typically, sacrifices were offered during the daylight. However, in this context it was offered at twilight. The author tries to explain this timing in historical terms, by affirming that it could have been because the people were slaves and forced to work during the hours of daylight; thus, twilight could have been the only possible time. As soon as they had returned from their forced slavery and labour they would have started the sacrifice. The term used here is *הָעֶרְבַּיִם בַּיּוֹם*, which could mean any time between sunset and complete darkness (cf. Deut. 16:3; Ex. 30:8).<sup>364</sup> Additionally, the 14<sup>th</sup> day of the month coincides with the full moon, which would surely have been the most suitable night for undertaking the activities associated with the Israelite departure from Egypt.

The key element in the celebration is the sacrifice of the Passover lamb. There are different views about the killing of the animal and the usage of its blood. Some scholars argue that it has an apotropaic meaning, in that the blood was placed on the doorposts to protect those who are within the house from the plague sent to kill the firstborn (cf. Ex. 12:7, 13, 22-23). Such an offering would have lent itself to a reinterpretation in terms of the Exodus experience, as its apotropaic function would have been seen as appropriate for protecting the Israelites on the night before the Exodus.<sup>365</sup> Others suggest that the celebration had a purifying purpose, to purify the Israelite houses.<sup>366</sup> Blood is used in this way elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible, especially with

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be broken (Ex. 12:46). Each sacrifice in the Hebrew Bible carries different meanings, with various formalities and procedures. This is also true of the Passover sacrifice.

<sup>364</sup> See for details C. F. Keil, *Manual of Biblical Archaeology*, vol. 2 (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1888), pp. 21-22.

<sup>365</sup> Loewenstamm, *The Evolution of the Exodus Tradition*, pp. 80-94; M. Haran, *Temples and Temple-Services in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: 1978), pp. 320-21.

<sup>366</sup> Van Seters, "The Place of the Yahwist," pp. 180-181.



hyssop (Ex. 12:22) for ritual purification.<sup>367</sup> Levenson argues that the lamb's blood is the substitute for the blood of the occupants and has some apotropaic effects.<sup>368</sup> Segal<sup>369</sup> thinks that the blood here was used for redemption. He notes the usage of the hyssop plant in the context of redemption and cleansing (cf. Ex. 12:22; Deut. 21:4; Lev. 14:2; Num. 19:3). He proposes that the smearing of the blood of the Passover Sacrifice may have a redemptive purpose, and the blood on the doorposts is a sign that the whole family was redeemed. Therefore, the blood mainly accounts for the redemption, consecration, and sanctification (as noted by Pederson)<sup>370</sup> of Israel as the nation or people of Yahweh. This is a major theological theme throughout the whole Bible. Thus, the motive of the author in the story is to describe the formation of the nation and link this to the origin of the Passover, and also to the practise of sacrificing children.

The other important aspect of Passover in Exodus is the eating of the sacrificial animal. The size of the animal determines the number of people who joined in the celebration. If the animal was large, the family would invite their neighbours to join together (Ex. 12:4). Only those who were circumcised could participate and eat the meat (Ex. 12:43-45; 48-49). The above-noted special instructions on Passover sacrifice emphasise its importance.<sup>371</sup> Significantly, in this origin

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<sup>367</sup> Alexander observes that hyssop may have been used for aspergillum, to prevent blood from congealing. It is very much associated with ceremonial cleansing. Cf. Lev. 14:4, 6, 49, 51, 52; Num. 19:6, 18; Ps. 51:7; Heb. 9:19. Alexander, *The Passover Sacrifice*, p. 21.

<sup>368</sup> B. M. Levinson, *Deuteronomy and the Hermeneutics of the Legal Innovation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), pp. 57-80.

<sup>369</sup> See B. Segal, *The Hebrew Passover*, pp. 43-74.

<sup>370</sup> J. Pedersen, *Israel: Its Life and Culture*, pp. 398-401.

<sup>371</sup> Alexander observes that there are close parallels between this account of the Passover sacrifice and the consecration of Aaronic priests in Exodus 29 and Leviticus 8. Moses was to kill the animal, the goat, and sprinkle the blood on the head of Aaron and his children to consecrate them (Ex. 29:20-21; Lev. 8:23-24, 30). Aaron and his sons should then cook it and eat it with unleavened bread (Ex. 29:23) at the entrance of the Tent of Meeting (Ex. 29:32; Lev. 8:31). Because of the special nature of the sacrifice, the meat was not permitted to be eaten by anybody

story the inhabitants of the household killed the Passover lamb, which need not necessarily be a firstborn, before the Egyptian firstborn were killed by the angel.

The celebration has an element of purification, cleansing and consecration. Exodus 13 speaks about consecrating all of the firstborn. This should be understood from the author's view, in the context of the killing the Egyptian firstborn and of the killing of the Passover lamb. The theme the author is trying to promote here is that as the Israelites celebrated the Passover, they were to remember the deliverance the nation experienced as the act of Yahweh, and therefore remember to consecrate their firstborn to Him, since he killed all of the firstborn in Egypt. Thus, following the textual understanding, the consecration of the firstborn cannot be separated from the Passover celebration.

In the present text, the consecration of the firstborn is initiated from the Passover celebration - a theme the author wants to establish with the people. The author or the final editor is portraying the story in such a way that the first Passover celebration took place on the evening before the Exodus departure from Egyptian bondage, and the consecration of the firstborn was established as a part of their deliverance, as well as a commemoration of the killing of all the firstborn in Egypt. Though every culture has a different view and interpretation of the firstborn, the text in

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else and if there was anything left in the morning it was all to be burned up (Ex. 29:33-34; Lev, 8:32). Alexander notices that the eating of the meat and the bread clearly shows the impact of the sacrifice on consecrating the people. Exodus 29:33 reads, "They are to eat these offerings by which atonement was made for their ordination and consecration. But no one else may eat them, because they are sacred." This was true of the Passover meat and the unleavened bread. No foreigners were allowed to eat it unless they were circumcised. By practicing the Passover in the future, the participants were to remember and commemorate their deliverance from the Egyptians. See Alexander, *The Passover Sacrifice*, p. 8.

Exodus is emphasising to the reader that the Israelite understanding of consecrating the firstborn had originated from the Exodus event.

The author is perhaps trying to solve the problem of firstborn sacrifice being prevalent among the people by telling the story of their origin, and how their deity acted to free them. He demands only the blood of the lambs, as described above. The text makes clear that the deity did not kill any of the Israelite firstborn at that pivotal point in their historical deliverance. All of the Egyptian firstborn were killed in that night but, Yahweh did not ask for the blood of the killed Egyptian firstborn.

Additionally, the Passover lamb is slaughtered even before the killing of the Egyptian firstborn. The text makes no claim for the blood of human firstborn in this process, but demands the blood of a lamb. The refusal of Pharaoh to release the captive Israelites eventually leads to the death of the Egyptian firstborn. Hence, the author in Ex. 12, 13 is carefully explaining to people who may have already been practising child sacrifice to stop, since it was not what their deity required, even from the very beginning of their formation as a nation. In other words, the author is calling on the people to understand the demand of their deity not to sacrifice their firstborn, but to consecrate them. Thus, there is no possible interpretation that would involve the people of Israel sacrificing firstborn human children in this passage. Rather, through asking them to consecrate their firstborn to their deity, the author is trying to draw their attention to abandon the practice of firstborn human sacrifice and redeem the firstborn by lamb as their deity demanded from the early days - a brilliant way of ending a probable existing evil.

It therefore seems that the Passover account in Ex. 12, 13 is a methodological device of the author to curtail the firstborn child sacrifice prevalent among the people during the time of the author. It is also to be noted that the author is clearly explaining that the blood of the paschal lamb spares the Israelites' firstborn. In other words, the Passover lamb becomes the sacrifice, instead of their firstborn. In the case of Egyptians, there is no lamb substitute and their firstborn are killed. Thus, though firstborn children may have been sacrificed at some point, that this is no longer required is the key message of the author to the people. Israel's deity only requires a substitutionary lamb. This is the central theme in the consecration of the firstborn among the Israelites.

#### 5.4.2 Exodus 34:25

In this verse, the Passover is mentioned in the context of other three major festivals of the Israelites: Feast of Unleavened Bread, Feast of Weeks, and Ingathering (Ex. 34:18-26). The passage stands in the context of the Israelite's rebellion against Yahweh in worshiping the golden calf (Ex. 34:1-28) and the renewal of the covenant. There are some parallels or similarities of the present passage with Ex. 23:14-19, and in the wider context of Ex. 21:1-23:35. Though the Passover is not explicitly mentioned in Exodus 23, the major pilgrimage festivals such as Unleavened Bread, Harvest, and Ingathering are recorded.<sup>372</sup>

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<sup>372</sup> A closer look at Ex. 23:14-19 reveals parallels with Ex. 34:18-26:  
Three times a year all men are to appear before the Lord (Ex. 23:14, 17; 34:23).  
No one should come with an empty hand (Ex. 23:15; 34:20).  
One should bring the best fruit of the soil into the House of the Lord (Ex. 23:19; 34:26).  
One should not cook a young goat in its mother's milk (Ex. 23:19; 34:26).  
In addition, in spite of the omission of Passover in Exodus 23 there is a close parallel here between Ex. 23:18 and Ex. 34:25. Ex. 23:18 read, "you shall not offer the blood of my sacrifice

Due to the omission of the word Passover, many scholars claim that this is a reference to any ordinary sacrifice. However, scholars differ in their opinion on whether this reference is to the Passover. Alexander thinks that there are good reasons for treating both passages as referring to the Passover, since the word order highlights the importance of unleavened bread, a major element of the Passover (cf. Ex. 12:8, 15, 17-20), but a minor aspect of other sacrifices.<sup>373</sup>

Harran and many other scholars think that Ex. 23:18 is a reference to an ordinary sacrifice.<sup>374</sup>

It seems that the author is very much presenting the theme of Passover here for the following reasons. First, Passover seems to be an essential part of the Feast of Unleavened Bread.

Secondly, if we compare the two passages (Ex. 23:18; Ex. 34:25), there is no other sacrifice, festival, or celebration that could have taken place except the Passover. Thirdly, the celebration is connected with the consecration of the firstborn. Thus, in all probability, the celebration here is Passover.

The only other offering which comes close to meeting these requirements is the thanksgiving or confession offering outlined in Lev. 7:12-15 (cf. 22:29-30). However, it is explicitly stated that this should be accompanied by cakes of bread made with yeast (Lev. 7:13), but the Exodus passage calls for unleavened bread. Therefore, this possibility seems to be ruled out.

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with leavened bread, or let the fat of my feast remain until the morning"; Ex. 34:25 reads, "You shall not offer the blood of my sacrifice with leaven; neither shall the sacrifice of the feast of the Passover be left until the morning."

<sup>373</sup> Alexander, *The Passover Sacrifice*, p. 9.

<sup>374</sup> M. Haran, "The Passover Sacrifice," pp. 95-96. Likewise e.g. A. Dillmann, S. R. Driver, U. Cassuto, and Martin Noth. Driver and Noth think that only the second part of 34:25 relates to the Passover. However, H. Holzinger, B. Baentsch, G. Beer and K. Galling believe that all of 34:25 refers to the Passover. De Vaux holds that both verses are referring to the Passover.

As we see in Ex. 12, it is repeated here “All that open the womb are mine.” (Ex. 34: 19) The Passover celebration and the Feast of Unleavened Bread are mentioned in the context of setting apart the firstborn for Yahweh. The key motive of the author here again is emphatically to affirm that there is a strong connection between the origin of consecrating the firstborn from killing of the Passover lamb among the Israelites, the killing of the firstborn among the Egyptians, and the subsequent Exodus event. The author is trying to connect the consecration of the firstborn with the Passover celebration and the Exodus event in order to reconfirm to the readers that their deity does not require the sacrificing of their firstborn children. Rather, his demand is to consecrate and redeem them with a lamb. The central and unique factor among the people of Israel in what singles out Israel from the Egyptians - and by implication all other nations - is that their firstborn are redeemed.

#### 5.4.3 Numbers 9:1-14

This is the first full account of the Passover celebration after the Exodus. This passage is very important in terms of its instructions to those who are unable to celebrate Passover on the 14<sup>th</sup> day of the first month because of their ceremonial uncleanness. This is due to the sacredness of the celebration. Yahweh gives instructions to the priests that those who could not celebrate it on the set day could do it on the 14<sup>th</sup> day of the second month (Num. 9:11). Apart from the advice on the change of day due to uncleanness, the instructions for the celebration are the same as found in Exodus 12.<sup>375</sup>

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<sup>375</sup> It has to be celebrated at twilight (Num. 9:3). They are to eat together as a family and are to eat unleavened bread and bitter herbs (Num. 9:11; cf. Ex. 12:8). Nothing of the sacrificial animal

The Passover sacrifice is twice mentioned as the Lord's offering (Num. 9:7, 13). The Hebrew word used here is קָרְבָּן, which means 'that which is brought nearer'.<sup>376</sup> This term is frequently used in Leviticus and Numbers for the sacrificial items that are used in the sanctuary. They could include living creatures such as animals (Lev. 1:2, 3, 10), birds (Lev. 1:14), or materials used for offering, such as grains or oil (Lev. 2:1, 4, 5, 12). It also could mean the ornamental objects for decoration (Num. 7:10; 31:50) set apart for a holy place.<sup>377</sup> This does not imply that Passover sacrifices were to be brought into the sanctuary instead of being offered in the home, as is done for the first Passover in Egypt. Instead, the idea of the sacredness of the offering is highlighted in the usage of the word קָרְבָּן. Through the Passover sacrifice the worshipers are coming nearer to their god, and they are bringing their offerings nearer to their god. קָרְבָּן is not meant to signify a sanctuary or a centralised place of worship, but rather the word denotes the sacredness of the offering, in this case the Passover.<sup>378</sup> For example, the usage in Lev. 3:1, 6, 12; Num. 6: 21 and many other references<sup>379</sup> show that it refers to the sacredness of the offering, rather than the place.

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may be left until the morning and they must not break the bones of the animal (Num. 9:12; cf. Ex. 12:10, 46).

<sup>376</sup> The term קָרְבָּן occurs more than 78 times in Leviticus and Numbers, and twice in Ezekiel (Ezek. 20:28; 40:43). Nehemiah 10:35 and 13:31 have קָרְבָּן

<sup>377</sup> For details see *DCH*, vol. 7, pp. 316-317.

<sup>378</sup> For the different usages of the word, *DCH*, vol. 7, pp. 316-317. The Feast of Unleavened Bread is omitted from this passage and it looks like a distinction was drawn between the Passover celebration and the Feast of Unleavened Bread. Alexander thought that the Passover could be pushed into the next month, and that it may not always be practical to set apart one more week in the next month to celebrate the Feast of Unleavened Bread. He observes that Israelites begin a three-day journey on the twentieth day of the second month (Num. 10:11, 33), whereas the Feast of Unleavened Bread normally ended on the 21st day of the month with a sacred assembly, during which it was forbidden to work. Alexander, *The Passover Sacrifice*, p. 10.

<sup>379</sup> See *DCH*, vol. 7, pp. 316-317.

The major issue here centres on uncleanness. In this particular passage, uncleanness is associated with the touching of a dead body.<sup>380</sup> The question they had was, should they wait a year for the next Passover, or is there any alternative solution? That was something new to the community, and Yahweh offers a solution to this problem.<sup>381</sup> The frequency of the Passover celebration is the central theme here. People are not excused from Passover celebration; if a person is clean and not on a journey, they have to participate in the Passover celebration. Deliberate refusal to participate resulted in them being excommunicated from the community (Num. 9:13).

This shows the importance of the celebration, and also its disassociation from any cult of the dead. The story is purposely brought forth here by the author to indicate to the people that the Passover celebration has no association with the cult of the dead, because contact with the dead would result in the people becoming unclean and thus unable to participate in the Passover. In other words, the Passover celebration has an element of redemption from the death and sacrifice. The author was at pains to stress to the readers and hearers that the consecrating of the firstborn and Passover was not connected to the cult of the dead.

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<sup>380</sup> Attitudes to dead bodies vary among the people of the ancient Near East. There were a lot of associated practices. Cults of the dead were very prominent during the ancient period. Though centuries have passed, cults of the dead are still a common practice in many religions and cultures. The Israelites religion considered it as uncleanness though many other religions of those days considered it as something holy. See Jay Sklar, *Sin, Purity, Sacrifice, Atonement*, pp. 105-138.

<sup>381</sup> Special factors also explain why Numbers 9 concentrates solely on the Passover and ignores Unleavened Bread. See Seagal, *The Hebrew Passover*, p. 203.



#### 5.4.4 Numbers 28:16

Though the Passover is mentioned in this verse, nothing is said about the way it is administered. Conversely, other sacrifices are explained in detail in the surrounding chapters. Num. 28:1-29:40 deals with the many different kinds of offerings made by fire, at different times (Num. 28:2). The elements of the sacrifice are burned by fire and become a sweet aroma, pleasing to Yahweh (Num. 28:2). As in Lev. 23, the Passover is mentioned very briefly (28:16) prior to a fuller description of the Feast of Unleavened Bread (Num. 28:17-25). Though the text clearly speaks about the Feast of Unleavened Bread, nothing is said in detail about the Passover. Thus, scholars deduce that the Passover is regarded as a different kind of sacrifice, and does not fall under the categories of other ordinary sacrifices; hence it is omitted here.

In the burnt offerings, the whole animal is burned by fire. These sacrifices depend on the concept that Yahweh enjoys the fragrance from the smoke of the burnt offering. In the Passover, however, the worshipper eats the meat.<sup>382</sup> The lack of further instructions may indicate that the instructions for the Passover already existed, and the people would have been following them. The only concern of the author regards the date of the celebration, that it does not conflict with any other festivals or celebrations of the people of Israel.

Thus, it seems that the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread were celebrated together at the time when the author was writing.<sup>383</sup> The Passover is listed among the other

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<sup>382</sup> See Alexander, *The Passover Sacrifice*, pp. 10-11.

<sup>383</sup> For a discussion see Peter T. Vogt, "The Passover in Exodus and Deuteronomy," pp. 30-45; J. G. McConville, "Deuteronomy's Unification of Passover and Massot," pp. 30-35.

sacrifices in such a way as to show that it is a unique celebration, unlike any other sacrifice. People might otherwise have thought of it as similar to the daily or weekly sacrifice, and failed to realize its special importance.<sup>384</sup> The author or the final editor is trying to emphasize the importance of the Passover in comparison to other common sacrifices. Though nothing about the firstborn is mentioned here, the Passover is a key celebration.

#### 5.4.5 Deuteronomy 16:1-8.

Like other passages, such as Exodus 23:14-19 and 34:18-26, the text in Deut. 16:1-8 gives details about the three main pilgrimage feasts: the Feast of the Unleavened Bread, The Feast of Weeks, and the Feast of the Tabernacle. Again, Passover is mentioned here in connection with the Feast of Unleavened Bread. It is interesting to note that these separations in the earlier passages are due to the different emphases of those passages. For example, Exodus 12-13 distinguishes carefully between the first Passover night and the week set aside for the future celebrations of the Feast of Unleavened Bread. The Passover night and the week are mentioned briefly in Leviticus and Numbers.

The author of Deuteronomy merges the Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread into a single festival, although the distinctiveness of each is kept and the purpose of each is well explained. They are one festival, and are celebrated in the same season and at the same time. The author explains the reason behind the celebration as the killing of the Egyptian firstborn in the night on which the Israelites departed from Egypt.

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<sup>384</sup> For a method of understanding the scripture as communication of facts related to the beliefs of a particular group see J. K. Brown, *Scripture As Communication: Introducing Biblical Hermeneutics* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2006), pp. 26-27; Peter T. Vogt, *Interpreting Pentateuch: An Exegetical Hand Book* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2009), pp. 58-60.

One of the distinctive factors in Deuteronomy is the location at which the Passover was celebrated.<sup>385</sup> Three times it clearly mentions that it should be celebrated at a place where ‘the Lord will choose as a dwelling for his name’ (Deut. 16: 2, 6, 7). Alexander observes that ‘Since the book of Deuteronomy is set against the background of the Israelite’s imminent entry into and settlement of the promised land, it is not surprising that some things should be said about the venue of the pilgrimage feast, the Feast of the Unleavened bread. From this time onwards, the people will no longer live in close proximity to the sanctuary.’<sup>386</sup> The same point is echoed in Deuteronomy 16:11 and 15 with regard to the Feast of Weeks and Tabernacles, respectively. Deuteronomy 16:16 emphatically reaffirms the three feasts: the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the Feasts of Weeks and the Feasts of the Tabernacle.

The nature of the book of Deuteronomy should be considered in terms of analysing its content.<sup>387</sup> Deuteronomy is a non-technical book, in that it is a book that would be read to the people. The following are key factors:

1. Though the author is putting the words in the mouth of Moses and speaking the message, the third-person usage is very clear, though the first-person is the major usage (cf. Deut. 1:3-4).

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<sup>385</sup> For recent discussion on the subject see Peter T. Vogt, “The Passover in Exodus and Deuteronomy,” pp. 30-45; J. G. McConville, “Deuteronomy’s Unification of Passover and Massot,” pp. 47-58; B. M. Levinson, “The Hermeneutics of Tradition in Deuteronomy,” pp. 269-86; B. M. Levinson, *Deuteronomy and the Hermeneutics of Legal Innovation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997).

<sup>386</sup> Alexander, *The Passover Sacrifice*, p. 11.

<sup>387</sup> For a discussion, see J. G. Miller, “Living at the Place of Decision: Time and Place in the Framework of Deuteronomy,” in J. G. Miller and J. G. McConville (eds.), *Time and Place in Deuteronomy* (JSOTSup., 179; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1994), pp. 15-48.

2. Unlike the other four books of Pentateuch, Deuteronomy narrates the entire story of the wandering in the wilderness before entering the promised land (Deut. 1:6-7).
3. In Deuteronomy, the law is presented in a very general way.<sup>388</sup>
4. It was meant for public reading, teaching and memorising (Deut. 4:1, 9; 6:4; 9:1).
5. It contains warnings, cautions, and blessings (Deut. 12:1; 28:1, 15).
6. It has prohibitions specifically from following the cultural ways of the inhabitants of the land they were entering. (Deut. 12:29-31)

When we compare Deuteronomy with other passages relating to the Passover, there are differences in presentation. The analysis below shows the result of comparisons between this and other passages. The central theme is the prohibition of the sacrifice of the firstborn children since their Yahweh only demands a lamb to redeem their firstborn.

There is a difference in the choice of the Passover animal in the Deuteronomical text. The animal for Passover celebration in all other references, especially in the Book of Exodus, is a lamb or goat. Here it can be either from flock or herd.<sup>389</sup> There are several solutions put forward. Segal thinks that it is a scribal error.<sup>390</sup> He observes that this is the only occasion in Deuteronomy where the word order 'flock and herd' are used. If verse two refers to the combined festival of

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<sup>388</sup> For a detailed discussion see J. G. McConville, *Law and Theology* (JSOTSupp., 33; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1984), pp. 39-66.

<sup>389</sup> There are various opinions about this, which we shall discuss in the following pages.

<sup>390</sup> See Segal, *The Hebrew Passover*, p. 205. The Hebrew word צאן ובקר is not the true word order, since the words are not found in this order anywhere else in Deuteronomy. Segal thought that the actual order of the words one finds in Deuteronomy is צאן ובקר. ובקר could be a scribal error, perhaps dittography of the word במקור under the influence of 15:19.

Passover and Unleavened Bread, this order reflects accurately the sequence in which the sacrifices were offered.<sup>391</sup>

Craigie thinks that it is a ‘broadening of the original prescription to include cattle’.<sup>392</sup> Many others suggest that this does not refer to the Passover sacrifice, but to the sacrifice connected with the unleavened bread during or after the celebration; only sheep and goats are used for the Passover.<sup>393</sup>

There are many supporting elements for the latter argument. Firstly, in 2 Chronicles 35:7-9 cattle are closely linked with the provision of sheep and goats for the Passover. However, the text is very clear that only goats and lambs were used for the Passover. Cattle were slaughtered, but not for the purpose of Passover sacrifice. Secondly, the expression לַיהוָה פֶּסַח, ‘Passover to Yahweh’ in Deut. 16: 2 probably refers to the combined festival of Passover and the Feast of Unleavened Bread, and thus verse 2 refers to all sacrifices made during the seven day festival. Thirdly, the opening phrase of Deut. 16: 2, לַיהוָה פֶּסַח וְזִבְחֵהוּ is the only place where וְזִבְחֵהוּ is used, and in all other places עֶזְבָּה is used.<sup>394</sup> Thus, here the text is referring more generally to all other sacrifices to be offered during the weeklong celebration, and not only the Passover sacrifice.

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<sup>391</sup> Segal noted that in Deuteronomy this is the only instance of the flock being mentioned before the herd. For example Deut. 15:19 refers to the firstborn of your herds and flocks; cf. 12:17, 21; 14:23, 26; 32:14. However, outside Deuteronomy it is quite usual find the order ‘flock and herd.’ Cf. Gen. 12:16; 13:5; 20:4; 21:27; 24:35; 26:14. Segal, *The Hebrew Passover*, p. 205.

<sup>392</sup> P. C. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1976), p. 242.

<sup>393</sup> Alexander, *The Passover Sacrifice*, p. 13.

<sup>394</sup> Cf. Exodus 12:48; Lev. 23:5; Num. 9:10, 14; 28:16; Deut. 16:1; 2 Kings 23:21; 2 Chro. 30:1, 5; 35:1.

There is also a difficulty in understanding the meaning of the word עָלָיו - the preposition עַל with the prenominal suffix for ‘him’ or ‘it.’ The preposition עַל has a wide range of meanings.<sup>395</sup> Moreover, one should note that the expression לַיהוָה פֶּסַח in this passage stands as a title word for the whole week-long celebration, starting with the offering of the Passover lamb in the twilight of the first day and the Feast of Unleavened Bread, continuing over the remaining six days. Many scholars<sup>396</sup> agree that it is accurate to translate עָלָיו as ‘in front of him’ or ‘in the presence of him’. It is closely connected with the phrase לַיהוָה פֶּסַח. It is the feast of Yahweh, and they are celebrating it before Yahweh for seven days. They did not eat the meat of the Passover lamb all throughout the week; rather, it was eaten only on the evening of the first day of the feast. The statement in v. 4 explains that the meat of the sacrifice is only eaten on the evening of the first day, and should not remain all night until morning. It does not make sense that the Passover sacrifice should last all throughout the week. The text is clear in stating that all throughout the week there should not be any leaven in their houses, and the Passover sacrifice was offered only on the first day (Deut. 16:4). Thus, it seems that this passage neither contradicts the other Passover texts found elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible in general nor within the Book of Exodus, chapters 12 and 13 in particular.

It should be noted that here again the Passover celebration is set in the context of the question of the treatment of the firstborn as found in the Passover account in Exodus 12 and 13. The previous passage speaks of setting apart the firstborn for Yahweh (Deut. 15:19). Thus, even in this passage it is affirmed that the consecration of the firstborn is directly associated with the

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<sup>395</sup> See *BDB*, pp. 752-759.

<sup>396</sup> For example see Craige, *Deuteronomy*, p. 242; M. Dahood, “Review of The Torah: A New Translation of the Holy Scriptures According to Masoretic Text,” *Biblica* 45 (1964), 283.

Passover celebration and Exodus event. It is also important to note that here too there is no evidence to indicate that it was necessary to offer a firstborn animal as a Passover sacrifice, even though the firstborn of Egypt were killed on the night of the first Passover celebration as per the author.

It is significant that the feast associated with the firstborn in the centralised worship setting takes place in a location chosen by Yahweh. This could be in connection with the annual Passover celebration. The members of the family would come together for the Passover celebration and could have eaten the flesh of the firstborn together with the family after sacrificing it to the deity, though it was not necessary to perform the firstborn sacrifice if the firstborn animal is a blemished one.

Therefore, the Deuteronomic passage is also conveying the same message that the firstborn children are not to be sacrificed, since the Passover lamb had taken their place in Egypt. The Passover demonstrates that the deity is only demanding the sacrifice of a lamb and not every firstborn child. Clearly the Deuteronomistic writer is rejecting any practice of firstborn sacrifice found among the people by presenting the story of redemption and rescue through the blood of the Passover lamb.

## 5.5 Texts outside the Pentateuch:

There are many references<sup>397</sup> to Passover outside of the Pentateuch. One of the major texts is found in Joshua 5:10-11. This passage gives a very short account of the first Passover that the Israelites celebrated in the land of Canaan. The Israelites are camped at Gilgal, and Joshua describes how the Passover had to be celebrated using unleavened cakes made from the produce of the land. Joshua circumcises all of the Israelites once they cross the Jordan, in accordance with the instructions regarding participants given in the Exodus text (Ex. 12:44). Although there is no reference to the weeklong Feast of Unleavened Bread, it should be noted that they eat the unleavened bread the very next day. This yet again confirms the close relation of the Passover and the Feast of the Unleavened Bread. The date of the Passover is same as it is in the Exodus passages, celebrated in the evening as was instructed in Exodus and practised throughout. Therefore, one can infer that the other instructions given during the so-called first Passover found in Exodus were followed with equal care. The other important passages are 2 Chr. 30:1-27; 2 Kings 23:21-23 and 2 Chr. 35:1-19; Eze. 6:19-22; and Eze. 45:21-24. All of these references refer to the instructions given in the Pentateuch and were carried out in accordance with the instructions given in Ex. 12 and 13, because all of these texts make a solemn declaration ‘according to the Law of Moses the man of God’.<sup>398</sup>

The above analysis leads us to the conclusion that there is no fundamental contradiction between the various Passover texts in the Hebrew Bible. After a prolonged discussion of various passages, M Haran concludes that ‘So long as no explicit contradiction between the testimonies

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<sup>397</sup> Though there are other references (e.g. Josh. 5:10-11; 2 Kings 23:21-23; 2 Chr. 30:1-27; 35:1-19; Ezek. 45:21-24; and Ezra 6:19-22), we shall not be able to analyse all these due to the scope of this study.

<sup>398</sup> The scope of this study will not allow doing an extensive study on all these passages.



can be found it would not be fair to assume that they are not fundamentally in accord.<sup>399</sup>

According to the Hebrew Bible, the Exodus is the major incident in the history of the people of Israel, and a major theological theme in the Hebrew Bible. The Exodus story is directly linked with the Passover, and the writers are trying to explain that Passover and Exodus are not only the two major events in the formation of the nation of Israel, but also are the focus of celebration in their relationship with their god, Yahweh.

Alexander thinks that the concept of atonement was the underlying factor in Passover, along with redemption and deliverance. In the other plagues, the Israelites were kept away without any demands. During this plague, however, they are asked to mark their houses with the blood of the paschal lamb so that the evil would pass them by. The blood of the male lamb prevents the killing of the firstborn in the Israelite families. The obvious question is why? The author or the editor is connecting an existing practise and providing a meaning in a way that the people would understand and appreciate the purposes behind what they do. Alexander thinks that it is 'Implicit in this is the idea that the Israelites were inherently no different from the male firstborn of the Egyptians. Without the atoning blood, they were vulnerable to the plague and would have been killed.'<sup>400</sup> However, it should be noted that, according to the Exodus account, the blood mark was a sign to the angel of death to identify the houses of the Israelite family. Additionally, there is a strong teaching on redemption in the Passover. The people were under the bondage of Egypt, and the Passover was the means that led to their release. Thus, the redemption concept was very much present in the Passover. It was the firstborn of Egyptians or those whose houses were not protected with the blood of the Passover Lamb which were killed in Egypt. This

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<sup>399</sup> M. Haran, "The Passover Sacrifice," p. 110.

<sup>400</sup> Alexander, *The Passover Sacrifice*, p. 17.

shows the direct relationship between the Passover and the concept of redemption of the people of Israel as a whole, and more particularly of their firstborn sons.

According to these texts, it was as a commemoration of this incident that the Passover and consecration or setting apart of the firstborn were developed. Yahweh asks the people of Israel to keep the festival of Passover and to consecrate their firstborn to him. The redemption involves offering of a substitute sacrifice, a lamb.

The texts of the Hebrew Bible are trying to connect the prohibition of the practice of the firstborn sacrifice to the Passover and the Exodus event. The texts are written in a way that shows that even in the very first incident of bringing the people of Israel as a nation from Egyptian bondage, Yahweh does not demand the sacrifice and the blood of the human firstborn. Rather, he protects them by the blood of the Passover lamb from the angel of death. The text insists that Yahweh views the sacrifice of the firstborn children as a practice of 'other people', 'not his people'. Anyone practising this sacrifice will be cut off from the community and be punished. Therefore, Passover celebration is a tool the authors could use to prevent prevailing child sacrifice among the popular religious practice of the people.

## 5.6 The First Born and the Exodus Event

The Biblical account tells that on the night before the Exodus took place, all of the firstborn in Egypt were killed. The account in Exodus emphasises that the blood of the Passover sacrifice not only saved the firstborn of Israel, but also led to the Exodus of the Israelites from

Egyptian bondage as Pharaoh released the captives. The Exodus takes place only after the killing of all the firstborn among Egyptians. In other words, the redemption and deliverance of the people of Israel from Egyptian slavery takes place through the preceding sacrifice of all the Egyptian firstborn. The killing of the firstborn becomes the final event that leads Pharaoh to let the people go. The author or the final editor of the text includes the firstborn killing incident in this context to add a theological meaning into the text. Yahweh killed the firstborn of the Egyptians to redeem the Israelites. Hence, their deity is demanding the consecration of all the Israelite firstborn, offering redemption through the offering of a lamb. This is the logical argument the final author or editor is trying to give as the reason for consecrating all the Israelite firstborn.

Redemption through death or the shedding of blood is one of the most significant theological threads running through the Hebrew Bible.<sup>401</sup> Here in the Exodus story, the killing of the firstborn is very important in terms of Israel's departure or deliverance from Egypt.<sup>402</sup> Thus, the consecration of the firstborn and the Exodus are closely connected to each other.

Wellhausen argues that to understand the origin of פִּדְיוֹן one needs to look at the legislations regarding the firstborn.<sup>403</sup> He thinks that Pharaoh's refusal to let the Israelites go and offer their firstborn of the livestock to their god in the wilderness resulted in the killing of the firstborn of the Egyptians. In other words, the intention of the Israelites in the beginning was to go to the

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<sup>401</sup> I am aware of the other views on the theologies developed by central themes such as Covenant, Salvation or holy history among others. I am not attempting to propose another centre for developing Hebrew Bible theology, or for that matter a Biblical Theology; but this is a theme that clearly and vividly runs through the whole Bible. Thus there can be other alternatives, but no substitutes.

<sup>402</sup> Deliverance is a major theme in the Bible. The Exodus event is portrayed as foreshadowing the redemptive act in the New Testament.

<sup>403</sup> Wellhausen, *Prolegomena to the History of Israel*, p. 88.

wilderness and offer the firstborn of their livestock.<sup>404</sup> Taking this view in full consideration, E. Meyer adds that the original idea of the Israelites was to perform a ritual of redeeming the human firstborn.<sup>405</sup> This idea is adopted and advanced by Gressman.<sup>406</sup> The scholarly consensus on the issue of firstborn and Passover sacrifice can be widely classified into three areas.

### 5.6.1 Replacement Theory:

The scholars proposing this theory think that the Passover lamb replaced the ancient practice of child sacrifice. In the classic work *Israel, its Life and Culture*, Pedersen notes that, ‘The interest centres around the firstborn who are slain, that is, among the Egyptians; and the firstborn who are saved, that is among the Israelites.’<sup>407</sup> For him, the  $\pi\tau\tau\epsilon$  in the ancient tradition is something associated with the firstborn sacrifices. He comments that ‘The Paschal lamb entirely disregards the command that it is to be a first-born animal which is sacrificed, though this must necessarily be the starting-point of the whole idea. It is not mentioned in this main legend, and has disappeared entirely from the laws.’<sup>408</sup>

Others think that  $\pi\tau\tau\epsilon$  is the new ordinance in the Israelite sacrificial system to replace the firstborn human sacrifice. For example, Frazer thinks that the Israelites originally sacrificed their firstborn, and eventually the practice was replaced by the paschal lamb. He argues that the blood

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<sup>404</sup> Wellhausen, *Prolegomena to the History of Israel*, p. 87.

<sup>405</sup> E. Meyer, *Die Israeliten und ihre Nachbarstämme* (Halle: Max Niemeyer, 1906), p. 40.

<sup>406</sup> H. Gressmann, *Mose und seine Zeit: ein Kommentar zu den Mose-Sagen* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1913), p. 102.

<sup>407</sup> J. Pedersen, *Israel, its Life and Culture*, vols 3-4 (London: Oxford University Press, 1940), p. 402.

<sup>408</sup> Pedersen, *Israel, its Life and Culture*, p. 402.

of the human was used to daub on the lintels and doorposts, which was later changed to the blood of the paschal lamb, and thus misleads the Angel of Death and saves their firstborn.<sup>409</sup> There are many others who think along the lines of Frazer. Dalman suggests that Yahweh was accepting the firstborn sacrifices of the humans, and then renounced and consented for the sacrifice of lamb as the substitution, just as in the story of Abraham and Isaac.<sup>410</sup> Brock-Utne's pastoral Shepherd's Feast theory also agrees with Dalman, and thinks that Yahweh renounced the human sacrifice of the firstborn sacrifice.<sup>411</sup>

### 5.6.2 The Apotropaic Theory

This theory is mainly proposed by Loewenstamm. He observes, 'The explicit rationale given for the legislation concerning the firstborn of Israel (Ex. 13:11-16; Num. 3:11-13; 8:16-17) is that they were saved from the slaying of the firstborn in Egypt. By confiscating the firstborn of Egypt, Yahweh tangibly reveals His claim that all firstborn are His.'<sup>412</sup> Loewenstamm connects the Passover celebration with a pastoral nomadic story of sacrificing the firstborn in order to protect other flocks by the protective power of the blood from the firstborn sacrifice. In the same way, the firstborn of the Israelites are protected against the killing angel, who was killing all the

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<sup>409</sup> See J. G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough, Part III: The Dying God* (London: Macmillan, 1930), pp. 174-178.

<sup>410</sup> See G. Dalman, *Arbeit und sitte in Palästina*, 1-2 (Gutersloh: C. Bertelsmann, 1928), p. 447.

<sup>411</sup> A. Brock-Utne notes the proposition that on the Passover night, the Egyptian shepherds were getting ready to lead the firstborn of the animals and humans from the land of Egypt to a far place, denying God's right to them. Thus God would kill all the firstborn in Egypt, but Israel was immune to it since they made a covenant with God not to slay their firstborn. This pact was re-affirmed annually in a special celebration called the paschal. In A. Brock-Utne, "Eine Religionsgeschichtliche Studie zu dem ursprünglichen Passahopfer," *Archiv für Religionswissenschaft*, 31 (1934), 272-278. See also L. Rost, "Weidewechsel und altisraelitischer Festkalender," *Zeitschrift des deutschen Palästina-Vereins*, 66 (1943), 205-216.

<sup>412</sup> Loewenstamm, *The Evolution of the Exodus Tradition*, p. 192.

firstborn of Egypt. Loewenstamm states ‘The paschal sacrifice was originally an apotropaic rite performed by shepherds,<sup>413</sup> repeated annually in order to avert some mortal danger believed to be threatened by a fatal ‘Destroyer’ who was thought to be around on a certain night. This rite was presumably of extreme antiquity. Israel’s religion adopted this deeply rooted apotropaic-demonological tradition, but reduced its power by transforming it into a ceremony commemorating a one-time act of deliverance which occurred in the past, and by inserting this event firmly into its national history.’<sup>414</sup> He bases his arguments on the points of Philo and Deuteronomy, where there is no mention of rescuing the Israelites from the destroyer; rather, the paschal sacrifice was merely a reminder of the Exodus.<sup>415</sup>

Thus, it seems that although there could have been some apotropaic elements in the Passover, it was not the purpose of it, at least by the time the texts were written or edited. We do

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<sup>413</sup> A view held by Nikolsky. He thought that the Passover was originally a pastoral celebration of the Shepherds. It was done by clans and not by individual families. This tradition or story was later adopted by the Israelites in their deliverance account. See N. M. Nikolsky, “Pescha im Kulte des jerusalemischen Temples,” *ZAW* 45 (1927), 171-190; 241-253.

<sup>414</sup> Loewenstamm, *The Evolution of the Exodus Tradition*, p. 217.

<sup>415</sup> Loewenstamm observes that the Deuteronomical passage does not mention anything about the destroyer who could be a danger to the Israelites if they failed to place blood of the Paschal lamb on the door posts. In addition, he notes that the Wisdom of Solomon omits the motif of the “Destroyer” who endangered the Israelites. Philo’s usage of Passover and his usage of the word  $\pi\sigma\sigma$  and its equivalent translation in Greek give more insight. It is surprising to note that in the Exodus account of Philo there is no mention of Passover. Philo mentions the Passover elsewhere, but in those references he is speaking of it as reflecting ‘passing over’ the border from Egypt. Loewenstamm noted that this is why Philo uses the Greek word  $\delta\iota\alpha\beta\alpha\tau\eta\rho\iota\omicron\nu$  for the Hebrew word  $\pi\sigma\sigma$ .  $\delta\iota\alpha\beta\alpha\tau\eta\rho\iota\omicron\nu$  is “a cultic word denoting a sacrifice offered by persons embarking on a journey, about to cross a border, a river or the like.” Philo also omits the apotropaic nature of the Passover sacrifice and does not mention anything about placing blood on the door posts and the slaying of the firstborn. Philo comments that “The festival is a reminder and thank-offering for the great migration.” Thus, Loewenstamm comments that “in Philo’s description, even the Pesah celebrated in Egypt was essentially no more than a specialized thank-offering.” Loewenstamm, *The Evolution of the Exodus Tradition*, pp. 208-212.

not see any such element in the texts. The final author or editor's intention looks more like an argument for a redemptive purpose.

### 5.6.3 A Pastoral Nomadic Theory

The question that needs to be addressed further concerns the antiquity of the tradition of the slaying of the firstborn in Egypt and the Passover recorded in Exodus.<sup>416</sup> As we have observed, many scholars argue that the Passover was a pastoral celebration among a nomadic group of people, and this celebration was added to the Exodus story to give more weight to it. Originally it was not directly connected with the Exodus event. Scholars formulate their arguments on the basis of the differences in the way the פסח was explained in Exodus 12:1-28 and Deuteronomy 16:1-7.<sup>417</sup>

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<sup>416</sup> The scope of the present study will not allow me to enter a full discussion of the topic here. To find a possible solution is not easy. Scholars differ in their opinions. A number of them agree on the point that it is a historical incident and took place as it is recorded in the Book of Exodus, though the recording of it could have taken place at some later time in the history. Others claim that the events are not historical but the editor or the writer of the book of Exodus or its fragments was trying to create a history for the ritual practices he finds the people practising. See T. D. Alexander, "The Passover Sacrifice," pp. 6-11; M. Haran, "The Passover Sacrifice," p. 96; A. Cooper and R. Goldstein, "Exodus and Massot in History and Tradition," *Maarav* 8 (1992), 15-37; R. Shaefer, *Das Passah-Mazzoth-Fest* (Gutersloh, 1900); N. M. Nikolsky, "PeschaimKulte des Jerusalem mischen Temples," *ZAW* 45 (1927), 171-190; 241-253; Tamara Prosic, *The Development and Symbolism of Passover until 70 CE* (JSOTSupp., 414; London: T & T Clark International, 2004); Loewenstamm, *The Evolution of the Exodus Tradition*, pp. 189-221.

<sup>417</sup> Though the instruction is very clear regarding the pesaha, there are considerable differences in the text in Deuteronomy when compared with the text in Exodus. The Exodus narrative gives a detailed account of the Passover with full explanations. In Deuteronomy the account is brief and there are some differences with the Exodus account in the explanations. No qualification is mentioned regarding the animal in the Deuteronomic account, whereas the Exodus narrative states that it should be one year old, a male, without any defects, and can be either a sheep or a goat. It should be looked after until the fourteenth day of that month before it is slaughtered. The people should collect its blood and some of the blood should be placed on the sides and tops of the doorframes of the houses where they eat the lamb. These instructions are absent in the

It appears that the Deuteronomical account implies a method of preparation of the sacrificial meat which Exodus forbids.<sup>418</sup> Deut. 16:7 reads *וְאָכַלְתָּ לְתוֹבֵבֶשׁ*, meaning ‘and you cook and eat.’ *וְבִשְׁלָתָּ* is typically used for cooking by means of soaking, which was a common way of preparing other sacrificial meats (see Ex. 23:19; 29:31; Lev. 6:28; 8:31; Deut. 14:21; 16:7). Most translators ignore this concept of the word and use ‘roast’, though the meaning is different.<sup>419</sup> The word *בִּשַׁל* is used numerous times in the Hebrew Bible, and most of the time it is used in the sense of boiling or cooking.<sup>420</sup> It can also mean to bake, without necessarily boiling (2 Sam. 13:8). The word *שָׂלַהֲמָן* means hearth.<sup>421</sup> Thus, it is possible that the Deuteronomical writer is not contradicting Exodus, but rather using a different word that denotes a similar preparation. The Chronicler highlights two different ways of preparation, and affirms that the Paschal lamb was cooked differently (cf. 2 Chron. 35:13). RSV translates it as ‘And they roasted the Passover lamb with fire according to the ordinance; and they boiled the holy offerings in pots, in caldrons, and in pans, and carried them quickly to all the lay people.’ The Passover lamb was roasted, and other sacrifices were boiled and served to the people. The Hebrew words are again the same. There are

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Deuteronomical account. In the Exodus account, the paschal lamb should be slaughtered by each family in front of their houses and they should place its blood on the door posts. Conversely, in Deuteronomy, it should be slaughtered in the centralized worship place and all the people of Israel are to come there and perform the celebration. There is no mention of placing the blood on the door posts. In addition, there are scholarly analyses on the word used for the manner of preparing the meat. The Exodus passage states that it should be *שָׂלַח*, roasted of fire (Ex. 12:8, 9), not eaten raw, soaked, boiled, or cooked in water.

<sup>418</sup> For a discussion see M. Weinfeld, “The Change in the Conception of Religion in Deuteronomy,” *Tarbiz*, 31 (1962), 5.

<sup>419</sup> Amplified Bible reads “And you shall roast or boil and eat it in the place which the Lord your God will choose. And in the morning you shall turn and go to your tents.” English Standard Version translates it as “and you shall cook...”

<sup>420</sup> For example piel form with *ו* consecutive means boil or cook. See the usage in Ex. 29:31; 34:26; Lev. 11:8; 8:31; Deut. 14:21; 16:7; 2 Sam. 13:8; 1 Ki. 19:21. It can also mean a cluster; see Gen 40:10. It can mean cooking with a liquid substance as well; see Deut. 14:21; Num. 11:8.

<sup>421</sup> *DCH*. vol. 2, ב-ג, p. 280.



other texts that clearly express this connection. A study of these texts reveals more of the connection between the firstborn, Passover, and Exodus.

The texts seem to imply that the legislation was based on the *פרט*. We need to look at the *פרט* to understand the legislation, not the other way around. The legislation is formed by looking at the different situations and scenarios. The laws are formulated to control and implement the smooth functioning of different aspects of the society in general, and Passover in particular. In the same way, legislations regarding the *פרט* are formulated for the effective and uniform practise of *פרט*.

#### 5.7 Historical Passover:

T. D. Alexander and Tamara Prosic<sup>422</sup> think that the meaning and rituals found in Exodus 12-13 are very apt for the historical Passover, in that it was the first Passover the Israelites had ever celebrated. The historical settings and the explanations are well fitted to the narrative, which is unique.<sup>423</sup> Alexander observes seven points to affirm the Passover in the historical context described in Exodus:

1. The animal was killed by the elders rather than by the priest, since the Aaronic priesthood was not yet established.
2. There is no reference to an altar or central sanctuary here, which was only established after the Exodus.
3. The paschal animal was killed near the house or in the house, since there is no other form of worship or altar among the Israelites.
4. The Passover sacrifice took place at twilight, unlike the other sacrifices in the later periods, since the people were working during the day under slavery.

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<sup>422</sup> Prosic, *The Development and Symbolism of Passover*, pp. 35-74.

<sup>423</sup> Alexander, "The Passover Sacrifice," pp. 5-6.

5. It was sacrificed at the time of the full moon, giving adequate time for preparation to leave in the morning.
6. The purpose of the Passover was the consecration of Israel, as the holy nation to Yahweh.<sup>424</sup>
7. Later, the Passover observances comprised a weeklong festival in the temple through the Festival of Unleavened Bread.<sup>425</sup>

There is a possibility of a historic Passover, but that is not an important factor in this research. The historicity of the event is not significant for the current research, though the relationship and the motif behind the Passover and the consecration of the firstborn is. There are many differences between the paschal sacrifice and the sacrificing or consecration of the firstborn. The paschal sacrifice becomes the culminating incident that triggers the Exodus. It should be noted that firstborn are never offered as the paschal sacrifice. Loewenstamm<sup>426</sup> observes some of these differences:

1. The law of the firstborn consists of the command to offer the firstborn of the flock and herd, and the stipulation that firstborn asses and humans are to be redeemed. The law of Passover, in contrast, mentions only a yearling male lamb, and not specifically the firstborn.
2. The firstborn of the flock or herd remains seven days with its mother and is offered to the Lord on the eighth day (Ex. 22:29); The paschal lamb is with its mother for almost a year, since it should be a yearling. The paschal lamb was to be separated from the flock on the tenth day of the first month and sacrificed on the fourteenth at twilight (12:3, 6).
3. The firstborn were to be eaten exclusively by the priests, whereas at the paschal sacrifice celebrated in Egypt the priests play no role at all.
4. Moreover, numerous additional stipulations such as the command to roast the פֶּסַח in fire (Ex. 12:8), long recognized by scholars as being quite archaic; the command to eat the פֶּסַח at night (Ex. 12:8), ‘your loins girded, your sandals on your feet and your staff in your hand’ (12:11); being indoors; the blood placed on the lintel and the doorposts (12:22); and the instructions regarding who may partake of the sacrifice (12:3-4, 44-45) are unique to the paschal sacrifice and unparalleled in the law of the firstborn.

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<sup>424</sup> It has elements similar to the Aaronic consecration, because the Aaronic consecration was developed from the paschal sacrifice.

<sup>425</sup> Alexander, “The Passover Sacrifice,” pp. 6-11.

<sup>426</sup> Loewenstamm, *The Evolution of the Exodus Tradition*, p. 193.

The ancient near eastern people of the early period<sup>427</sup> believed in some kind of apotropaic power in the blood. The blood could have been either from humans, animals, or birds. They believed that if the blood were placed on the doorposts, no evil would enter their home. The blood would protect them from possible attack; it is a kind of appeal to their gods for protection from malefic demons.<sup>428</sup> Thus, the blood of the paschal lamb has some kind of apotropaic power. The regulations and restrictions regarding the persons who are permitted to eat<sup>429</sup> the sacrificial meat also support the idea that the sacrifice has some kind of protective and redemptive element.

### 5.7.1 Evaluation and conclusion

Although there is no agreed consensus in the academic literature, scholarship does shed light on the core issues regarding the origin of Passover as depicted in Exodus. The central question is why the author presents this case in this way, whether historical or not. The point seems to be to present as a historical precedent the rituals around what Exodus presents as a key formative event of the people of Israel. If Yahweh does not require the sacrifice of Israel's firstborn children in return for their deliverance from Egypt, then he will not require it in any less extraordinary circumstances. The story validates the power of the substituted sacrifice of the lamb and the practice of substitution.

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<sup>427</sup> The ancient people from 1,000 BCE and before.

<sup>428</sup> See P. Heinisch, *Das Buch Exodus* (Bonn: Hanstein, 1934), pp. 97-104.

<sup>429</sup> There are different opinions about who should eat the meat of the firstborn animal sacrifice. The Book of Numbers says that the meat of the firstborn is to be eaten by the priest (Num. 18:17-19), whereas Deuteronomy says that it should be eaten by the family before the Lord in the chosen place (Deut. 15:20). See J. Segal, *The Hebrew Passover*, pp. 96-101; N. Sarna, *Exploring Exodus* (New York: 1986), pp. 86-87.

Any writer or storyteller must have a purpose, an audience, and a method of telling the story. One purpose is to pass on the message and story to the next generation. It is explicit in Ex. 12:42 and 13:9-10 that the purpose of the telling of the Passover story was to make the coming generation aware of and remember what their god had done for them in the past, whether it was historic or not.

The evidence that has been reviewed in this chapter suggests that various peoples in the ancient near east may have practised a firstborn family festival,<sup>430</sup> which was also known as a sanctification ritual.<sup>431</sup> In this family festival, they would sacrifice a firstling, as a ritualized slaughter, with both apotropaic<sup>432</sup> and redemptive<sup>433</sup> purposes in mind. Additionally, evidence suggests that the pastoral nomads of the ancient Near East had a thanksgiving festival of slaughtering the firstlings.<sup>434</sup> This points to the fact that the firstborn was an important person, both within the family and for the deity. Sacrificing the firstborn meant giving the best to Yahweh.

Consequently, when Exodus presents the story of the killing the Egyptian firstborn as a condition for the deliverance of the Israelites, it conveys a similar message to the audience. However, in the case of the Israelites, Yahweh renounces any demand for the sacrifice of the firstborn child, preferring a lamb. This provides a justification for later teachings that sacrificing a firstborn child is considered an abomination to Israel's deity. This concept was reinforced in

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<sup>430</sup> As observed by S. Mowinckel, *Psalmstudien*, pp. 37, 204-206.

<sup>431</sup> As observed by J. Pedersen, *Israel: Its Life and Culture*, 398-401.

<sup>432</sup> As observed by B. M. Levinson, *Deuteronomy and the Hermeneutics*, pp. 57- 80.

<sup>433</sup> As observed by B. Segal, *The Hebrew Passover*, pp. 43-74.

<sup>434</sup> As observed by Wellhausen, *Prolegomena to the History of Israel*, pp. 83-95; G. Beer, *Pesachim*, p. 9; May, *Relation of the Passover*, p. 65.

two ways: firstly, the assertion that all that opens the womb belongs to the deity without any question; and secondly, they needed to be redeemed, not sacrificed. The first part shows the divine ownership of the firstborn, and second part shows how one could take back the firstborn from the divine ownership. Because all of the firstborn belong to the Lord, there is no need for a special dedication of the firstborn; rather, take them back from divine ownership by making the stipulated payment.

This thought is very closely linked with the Passover story<sup>435</sup> for the people to follow and abstain from any kind of child sacrifice. Thus, one of the purposes of the author could be to counter any belief that Yahweh demands the sacrifice of their firstborn.

Therefore, we may conclude that the author or the final editor of the Passover texts is trying to make a connection between the sacrifice of the paschal lamb with the consecration of the firstborn among the Israelites. The people would have been sacrificing their firstborn in the understanding that Yahweh killed the Egyptian firstborn for their redemption, and asked them to consecrate all of their firstborn. Thus, the people would have thought that their god required their firstborn. Here, the author or the final editor is very creatively presenting the story in a way to tell them that Yahweh is not demanding their firstborn to be sacrificed, but asking them to redeem

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<sup>435</sup> The essential findings of the scholarship are that the author is carefully presenting a historical Passover and trying hard to establish that the Passover celebration originated within the context of the killing of the Egyptian firstborns and subsequent exodus for the following reasons:

1. The ancient near eastern people practised firstborn sacrifice and celebrated different kinds of festivals and rituals in their various life situations;
2. It has direct relation to the Egyptian bondage and forced labour and deliverance/redemption;
3. There were no priests in the first Passover celebrated in Egypt and the instructions given in Exodus 12;
4. The Paschal lamb was killed by the head of the family in their home and not in the centralized place of worship as one find in the later materials.

them by a lamb. Even in the Passover night in Egypt they were protected and redeemed by the blood of the lamb, not by the firstborn of the Egyptians. The author is purposely avoiding the need for a firstborn in the Passover sacrifice, to remove even the thought of sacrificing a firstborn, for Yahweh is not interested in it. In other words, the author is telling that Passover and the Exodus event has nothing to do with sacrificing their firstborn, but Yahweh wants them to remember the incident and thus is asking them to set apart all the firstborn for him. Thus, even the paschal lamb need not be a firstborn. It will be worthwhile to look into the killing of the firstborn and the founding of the nation, making a comparison with the killing of Egyptian firstborn and the formation of the nation of Israel.

The above discussion leads us to the thought that the Passover celebration and Feast of Unleavened Bread were two different festivals that were practised in different ways by different group of people. The authors of the Hebrew Bible take these festivals and join them to the traditions of their faith, showing the origins of some of their practices. The authors could have been doing this to curtail down some of the practices of the people, such as sacrifice of the firstborn, which the people seem to understand as orthodox but were not viewed as such by the authors. Therefore, the authors of the Hebrew texts in all probability are purposefully blocking some of the existing practices of child sacrifice among the people.

As per the text, in the Passover night all the Israelite firstborn are spared, whilst the Egyptian firstborn are killed. According to the records we have in the Hebrew Bible, legislation to offer all of the firstborn to Yahweh is portrayed in the context of the killing of all the Egyptian firstborn on the Passover night. Therefore, it seems that there is a close relationship between

consecrating the firstborn and the killing of the Egyptian firstborn, as well as the Passover and the subsequent exodus. The legislation was formed after the institution of the Passover, and thus one need to look into the Passover to understand the legislation, rather than looking into the legislation to understand the Passover. Therefore, the paschal lamb and the Passover celebration has direct connection to the call to consecrate or sacrifice the firstborn in Israel. The firstborn animals are to be given to the God of the Hebrew Bible, and there is separate legislation for clean and unclean animals and human beings. We shall discuss this further in the next chapter.

## Chapter 6

### The First-Born Animals Due to Yahweh and Their Redemption/Sacrifice

#### 6.1 Introduction

This chapter will review the importance of firstborn animals and examine the motives of the authors in developing this particular theme of offering every firstborn animal to Yahweh in the Hebrew Bible. The authors or editors of the Hebrew Bible try to portray the special status of the firstborn animal from the very earliest period of the history of humanity. The book of Genesis lists the first human generations on earth. The offspring of Adam and Eve, Abel, takes a firstling from his flock, the choicest one, to offer as a sacrifice to his God (Gen. 4:4).<sup>436</sup> The text does not specify any requirements that it is a firstling that should be sacrificed, or any demand from the deity for the firstborn. However, the account records that the deity is pleased with Abel's offering of the firstling, and not with the other offering offered by his elder brother, Cain.<sup>437</sup> However, according to the story recorded in Genesis, the practice of the sacrifice of a firstling is as old as human history.<sup>438</sup> The text also presents an explanation of the historic importance of the human

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<sup>436</sup> Gen 4:4: "and Abel also brought an offering—fat portions from some of the firstborn of his flock. The LORD looked with favour on Abel and his offering."

<sup>437</sup> There is a wide range of issues related to the sacrifice of Cain and Abel and to the question of why God rejected Cain's sacrifice. For detailed discussion see J. M. Bassler, "Cain and Abel in the Palestinian Targums," *JSJ* 17 (1986), 56-64; M. Ben Yashar, "Sin Lies for the Firstborn," *BMik* 7 (1963), 116-119; M. I. Gruber, "The Tragedy of Cain and Abel," *JQR* 69 (1978), 89-97; S. Levin, "The more Savoury Offering: Key to the Problem of Gen 4:3-5," *JBL* 98 (1979), 85; R. Mellinkoff, *The Mark of Cain* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981).

<sup>438</sup> The text also presents an explanation of the historic importance of the human firstborn. See H. Ringgren, *Sacrifice in the Bible*, p. 46. The sacrificial system developed from the very early days of human existence. The importance of the firstborn is as old as human existence. Although many great changes have taken place in human history, in every culture the firstborn is considered as something special. For example, even in the British royal family, the crown falls to the firstborn.



firstborn. In the ancient Near East, there was a wide cultural recognition that the firstborn son had extra rights and privileges in the family, and also received additional inheritance from the father when the patrimony was divided.<sup>439</sup> We will be looking at the importance of human firstborn in the next chapter.

The author of Genesis here not only narrates the story of this first sacrifice, but also explains to the audience the importance of the giving of the firstborn as the sacrifice. Yahweh is pleased with Abel's sacrifice of the best and the firstborn animal, and is not pleased with the offering of his brother Cain. This sacrifice led to the first murder in the human history. The following discussions are aimed at finding what the purpose of the author might be in presenting this story to his audience or readers.

In animal sacrifice, not all of the firstborn animals were sacrificed nor considered as fit for sacrifice. The selection of animals was based on many factors that were bound up with the specific religious practices of the culture and society.<sup>440</sup> For example, the pig is considered a

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<sup>439</sup> Davies, *The Inheritance of the Firstborn*, p. 189; cf. J. Henninger, "Zum Erstgeborenenrecht bei den Semiten," in E. Graf (ed.), *Festschrift W. Caskel* (Leiden: Brill, 1968), 179-80. At Ugarit there were no strict practices for giving a double portion or giving more to the firstborn. It was given to a child with whom the father is well pleased. The choice was left to the father's authority.

<sup>440</sup> For example, cows are considered as the most holy animal by the Hindus in India. Hindus in Kerala, India kill and eat cows even though religiously and culturally they consider them holy, worship them and keep their idols in the temples. But contextually, they buy cow meat from the market for making beef curry. Even upper caste people eat it. See Dwijendra Narayan Jha, *The Myth of the Holy Cow* (New Delhi: Political Science, 2004), pp. 29-35: "The eater who daily even devours those destined to be his food, commits no sin; for the creator himself created both the eaters and those who are to be eaten (for those special purposes) (p. 31); "The consumption of meat (is befitting) for sacrifices..." (p. 92).

clean animal in Hindu religion,<sup>441</sup> and thus is used for sacrifice, whereas in Judaism<sup>442</sup> and Islam<sup>443</sup> it is considered unclean, and therefore inappropriate for sacrifice.<sup>444</sup> Von Rad rightly observes ‘Many animals considered unclean in Israel were highly valued for sacrificial use elsewhere or in older Palestinian cults.’<sup>445</sup> This chapter shall look at the firstborn clean and unclean animals in the Hebrew Bible, and its legislation regarding sacrifice or redemption.

## 6.2 The Clean and the Unclean Animals:

The religion of the Hebrew Bible divides the animal world into two categories: the clean and the unclean. The distinction between clean and unclean animals first appears in Gen. 7:2-3, 8; here it is said that Noah takes into the ark seven male and female of all kinds of clean beasts and fowls, and two male and female, of all kinds of beasts and fowls that are not clean. Again, Gen. 8:20

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<sup>441</sup> Maxine Berntsen, *The Experience of Hinduism* (Mumbai: SUNY Press, 1988), pp. 138-139; R. K. Ankodia, *Hinduism: a religion or social agenda* (New Delhi: Ankodia Publications, 2008), p. 178. Carl Olson, *The Many Colors of Hinduism* (Rutgers: Rutgers University Press, 2007).

<sup>442</sup> Lev. 11:7; Deut. 14:8; Isa. 65:4; 66:3, 17.

<sup>443</sup> “Prohibited for you are 'al-maytah' (dead animals), 'Al-Damm' (blood), 'lahm Al-Khinzeer' (the flesh of the pig), and animals dedicated to other than God” (Quran 5:3); “He has made unlawful for you that which dies of itself and blood and the flesh of swine and that on which the name of any other than Allah has been invoked. But he who is driven by necessity, being neither disobedient nor exceeding the limit, then surely, Allah is Most Forgiving, Merciful (Quran, Al-Baqara 2:173).

<sup>444</sup> For example, in the state of Kerala, in India, dogs are not considered as having any special divinity, but in the neighbouring state of Karnataka, they are highly respected. This is true with many animals across India. For discussion of dog worship see Polly McGee, *Dogs of India* (St. Ives: The Author People, 2015), p. 104; Roshen Dalal, *The Religions of India: A Concise Guide to Nine Major Faiths* (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2010), p. 107; Richard Keith Barz and Monika Theil-Horstmann, *Living Texts from India* (Otto Harrassowitz Verlag, 1989), pp. 45-46; S. N. Sadasivan, *A Social History of India* (New Delhi: APH Publishing, 2000), pp. 150-151; Roshen Dalal, *Hinduism: An Alphabetical Guide* (New Delhi: Penguin Books India, 2010), p. 123. There many other animals considered as holy and some are considered as god. See Nanditha Krishna, *Sacred Animals of India* (London: Penguin, 2014); Marvin Harris, *Cows, Pigs, Wars, and Witches* (New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2011).

<sup>445</sup> Von Rad, *Genesis*, p. 116.

says that after the flood Noah ‘Took of every clean beast and of every clean fowl, and offered burnt offerings on the altar that he had built to the Lord.’ It seems that in these chapters the distinction between clean and unclean animals is intended for sacrifices only. In chapter 9, the writer quotes God as decreeing that, ‘Everything that moves shall be food for you.’ (Gen. 9:3). In Leviticus 11:1-47 and Deuteronomy 14:1-20, however, the distinction between ‘clean’ and ‘unclean’ forms the foundation of the laws related to food. ‘This is the law . . . to make a difference between the clean and the unclean, and between the living thing that may be eaten and the living thing that may not be eaten.’ (Lev. 11:46-47) The permitted food is called ‘clean’, ‘pure’ טָהוֹר; the forbidden food is ‘unclean’, ‘polluted’, ‘impure’ טָמֵא and ‘an abomination’ תּוֹעֵב.<sup>446</sup> Though there is no clear evidence on when this division first occurred, the book of Genesis implies that the practice is ancient. The term ‘firstborn’ is mentioned in Genesis 4 in the account of Cain and Abel offering sacrifices, but the division of clean and unclean animals is first mentioned in Genesis 7, when Noah takes the animals into the Ark. There are no clues in this text to indicate what criteria separated the clean from the unclean animals. Although there is some information on applicable criteria in the list of animals that are clean and unclean in Leviticus 11, no reason is given why these criteria are chosen.

In the flood story, special instructions are given to Noah<sup>447</sup> regarding the number of clean and unclean animals and birds to be accommodated in the boat.<sup>448</sup> Westerman observe, ‘The

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<sup>446</sup> The terminology ‘clean and unclean’ in the law relating to food has a different implication from that borne by the same terms as used in the sacrificial law. See Jehuda Feliks, “Animals of the Bible and Talmud,” in *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, vol. 3 (Jerusalem: Encyclopaedia Judaica, 1971), pp. 7-19 [<http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com/articles/4408-clean-and-unclean-animals>, accessed on 19th October 2013].

<sup>447</sup> There are issues related with the historicity of Noah’s flood. For a discussion see Carol M. Kaminski, *From Noah to Israel: Realization of the Primeval Blessing after the Flood* (London: T

distinction between clean and unclean animals which Noah is to take into the ark is a distinction based on their utility for humans, not on later legal ideas.<sup>449</sup> This accords with the fact that people's lives in the ancient world were very much dependant on animals. A man's wealth was often calculated by the number of animals he possessed. However, not only the so-called clean animals were useful in domestic work; unclean animals such as camels and donkeys were also useful. Thus, it appears that the selection of seven pairs of certain animals was not based on their utility alone, but also their importance in religious sacrifice. If certain animal species were to be used for sacrifice, extra pairs would have had to be admitted so that after their sacrifice there would still be sufficient of that species to produce progeny and to allow for domestic use. Thus, there is a twofold division within the animal kingdom, clean and unclean, potentially related to the idea of sacrifice. In both groups, however, the firstborn has a special significance.

### 6.3 The Firstborn and the Clean Animals and Unclean Animals:

Whether an animal is clean or unclean, the firstborn is considered as special in most of the ancient cultures, since it is the first fruit. Thus, there is an understanding among the ancient people that the firstborn has a special value.<sup>450</sup> When an offering is made to a deity in pressing circumstances, such as a lack of rainfall, it is usually the firstborn that is sacrificed, as they are viewed as special. This seems to be a common practice among the ancient religions and peoples, including the peoples of the Hebrew Bible.

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& T Clark, 2004); Norman Cohn, *Noah's Flood: the Genesis Story in Western Thought* (London: Yale University Press, 1996).

<sup>448</sup> See L. E. Toombs, "Clean and Unclean," in *IDB I* (1968), p. 643.

<sup>449</sup> Calus Westermann, *Genesis 1-11: A Continental Commentary* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1994), p. 428.

<sup>450</sup> Sklar, *Sin, Impurity, Sacrifice, Atonement*, p. 64.

The Hebrew Bible's writers make a claim that upholds the special status of the firstborn, since it is the one that opens the womb. According to the author of Exodus, the reason behind the claim of the firstborn is twofold. Firstly, it is the one that opens the womb of the mother, as described in the verse 'All that opens the womb belongs to me.' (Ex. 13:12, 13) Secondly, this is due to the killing of the Egyptian firstborn. Exodus 13:15 reads 'For when Pharaoh stubbornly refused to let us go, the LORD slew all the first-born in the land of Egypt, both the first-born of man and the first-born of cattle. Therefore I sacrifice to the LORD all the males that first open the womb; but all the first-born of my sons I redeem.'

However, in the fulfilment of this divine demand there is a distinction between the clean and the unclean. The clean needs to be sacrificed and the unclean needs to be redeemed. In the following section, the different laws, explaining how one should sacrifice clean firstlings and redeem or kill the unclean firstlings, will be examined.

### 6.3.1 The Law Concerning the Firstling of the Clean Animals.

There are two elements to be considered when dealing with the consecration of the firstborn of clean animals. According to the writer, the Exodus event is the reason for the sacrifice of the firstborn (Ex. 13:13, 15). It reads 'In the days to come, when your son asks you, "What does this mean?" say to him, "With a mighty hand the Lord brought us out of Egypt, out of the land of slavery. When Pharaoh stubbornly refused to let us go, the Lord killed the firstborn of both

people and animals in Egypt. This is why I sacrifice to the Lord the first male offspring of every womb and redeem each of my firstborn sons.””

As we have observed earlier, the firstborn were sacrificed among ancient Near Eastern peoples. Later writers use the trope of the Exodus event to give a new interpretation of the sacrifice.

The Exodus event brings a new meaning to the sacrifice of the firstborn. According to the Exodus account, the consecration of the firstborn in the Passover starts after the Exodus event. Nonetheless, the author of Genesis presents the sacrifice of a firstborn animal prior to the Exodus event as a kind of offering to please their deity, probably for a blessing, favour, protection, thanksgiving, and fertility. The Book of Exodus presents the sacrifice of an animal as an event commemorating the deliverance of the nation of Israel from Egypt.<sup>451</sup> Thus, there is a difference of ideology or understanding of the consecration or sacrifice of the firstborn in Genesis and Exodus.

The question is, why is there this difference? It may imply that there were different people or communities with different understandings and/or practices. Because of the communities' different faith and practices, there is a difference in both the texts.

The Genesis account does not give any reason why it is the firstborn that is sacrificed, or any teachings on redeeming the unclean. The passage simply mentions that Abel sacrifices the best of

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<sup>451</sup> See the detailed discussion on 'Firstborn and the Passover' in the chapter above.

the firstborn to his God. The Exodus texts, however, present a reason for the firstborn sacrifice and the redemption of the firstborn if it is an unclean animal. The nature of this consecration is found in the laws relating the consecration of the firstlings.

There are biblical references that state that ‘all the firstling of yours is mine’, or ‘all that first opens the womb is mine’<sup>452</sup>, seemingly disregarding any distinction between clean and unclean animals. However, the context tells us that these general statements come before or after the giving of specific instructions regarding the consecration of (animal) firstlings. For example, Exodus 13:12 says that ‘You are to give over to the Lord the first offspring of every womb. All the firstborn males of your livestock belong to the Lord.’ The second sentence shows that the passage is clearly speaking about clean domestic animals. Thus, in order to understand the nature of the sacrifice of the firstborn clean animal, we need to analyse the texts related to it. Though there are many passages in the Hebrew Bible dealing with the consecration of the firstlings, and the current study will primarily look at the seven passages from Pentateuch that are the foundational Hebrew texts with specific instructions regarding the reason and nature of sacrifice or redemption of the firstling clean animals. The texts to be examined are: Ex. 13:1, 2; 13:11-15; 22:29, 30; 34:19, 20; Lev. 27:26; Num. 18:12-18; and Deut. 15:19, 20.

There are similarities of thought in all of these passages regarding the consecration of the firstborn, except for the verses in Deuteronomy. This passage varies considerably from the other texts, and seems to directly contradict the text in Numbers 18:12-18). The Deuteronomic author

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<sup>452</sup> Cf. “all the firstling of your herd and flock” (Deut. 12:6, 17; 15:19); and specific references to ‘the firstling of a cow,’ ‘the firstling of a sheep,’ ‘the firstling of a goat’ (See Ex. 34:19; Lev. 27:26; Num. 18:17).

explains how a blemished firstborn should be treated. A blemished firstborn is considered equal to any other animal, though it should not be used for sacrifice as one does with any other firstling of the clean animal. Though it is not allowed to be sacrificed, the owner is not permitted to keep it either. It had to be killed and eaten by all of the household members. A firstborn animal, blemished or unblemished, could not be used for doing any domestic work. The instruction has a similar ethos to that concerning other firstborn normal animals, with the exception that it could not be taken to the sanctuary for sacrifice. A look at the following chart helps one to understand the differences between Deuteronomy 15:10-21 and Numbers 18:15-18.

Numbers 18:15-18	Deuteronomy 15:19-21
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Firstborn of both human and animals that offered to God belongs to the priests.</li> <li>2. Every firstborn son and unclean male animal must be redeemed.</li> <li>3. Firstlings are to be redeemed when they are a month old.</li> <li>4. The redemption price is five shekels of silver.</li> <li>5. Firstling of cow, sheep or goat should not be redeemed.</li> <li>6. Splash the blood against the altar and burn their fat as a food offering.</li> <li>7. The meat of the clean firstling belongs to the priests.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Set apart firstborn male of herds and flocks.</li> <li>2. Do not put the firstborn oxen to work.</li> <li>3. Do not shear the firstborn sheep.</li> <li>4. The meat can be eaten by the family or household.</li> <li>5. Eat them at the place Yahweh will choose.</li> <li>6. Sacrifice the firstling each year in the presence of God at the chosen place.</li> <li>7. If the animal has any blemish such as being lame, blind, or having a serious flaw, it should not be sacrificed.</li> <li>8. The blemished animal can be eaten by anybody - clean or unclean person - at his or her own town.</li> </ol>

There are detailed conditions relating to firstling sacrifice in the Deuteronomic passage on which the book of Number is silent. The major issues are in relation to the place of sacrifice and who is to be the custodian of the sacrificial meat.



Scholars put forward different explanations regarding these differences. Some argue that these two accounts could have been written in two different periods, using two different sources.<sup>453</sup> However, a closer look at the text gives an alternative answer. It seems that the source could be the same but the historic settings and the audience could have been different for both books. One may find more similarities and common ideology than differences. For example, the core theme is the sacrifice of the firstborn. Conversely, there are differences due to the different contexts, audiences, and settings. This, perhaps, explains the differences. These shall be discussed in detail in the following pages.

The Deuteronomic account shows that Yahweh is demanding his rightful possession and making it legal. It seems that in the first part Yahweh is simply stating the law, while the second part gives an explanation of it. The firstborn are consecrated to Yahweh, and thus they belong to him, a practice that seems to be familiar to the audience. Since the firstborn are consecrated to the deity, they are ‘singled out’ for him to be a particular possession, and so naturally withdrawn from all economic use<sup>454</sup> such as ploughing the land with a firstling ox or shearing the wool from a firstborn sheep. They are made holy to Yahweh, and thus ‘could not be utilized in accord with their normal functions’.<sup>455</sup>

One key difference we need to note is that the author(s)/editor(s) present the context of the book of Numbers as wilderness wandering, while the book of Deuteronomy is set at a point where the people are getting ready to possess the land. In the wilderness, there is not much work

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<sup>453</sup> S. R. Driver, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Deuteronomy* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1902), pp. 185-186.

<sup>454</sup> Gerhard von Rad, *Deuteronomy: A Commentary* (London: SCM Press, 1964), p. 108.

<sup>455</sup> Peter C. Craigie, *The Book of Deuteronomy* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), p. 292.

that can be done with the domestic animals. However, once they enter the Promised Land, the situation is different. Thus, the issues of ploughing and other domestic work would not be relevant in the book of Numbers. The book of Deuteronomy gives special attention to this aspect of the dedication of the animals, since the context is relevant to the colonization of Canaan. Moreover, in all the Pentateuchal books (with the exception of Deuteronomy), firstlings can be sacrificed on the local altars near their tents. This can be explained as reflecting the situation where there is no organized central place or permanent place of worship because the people are sojourners in the wilderness. Though there is a tabernacle, it is not permanently established in one place and is temporary. Again, the circumstances presented in the book of Deuteronomy are different. The people are about to possess the land, and the text promises that they are going to have a permanent place of worship. This may not be the temple, but at least a permanent place where tabernacle will be stationed.

This also means that, in the book of Numbers, the priests are not living in one particular place; they are scattered among the people and thus they are only available for performing sacrifices and offerings at specified times during the annual feasts. Thus, the people are offering sacrifices and offerings based on these rules and regulations. Although the priests' assistance could be obtained when and where available, it is not mandatory.

In Deuteronomy, it is anticipated that the priests are living in and around the place of worship and thus people are not permitted to make sacrifices and offerings without the assistance of a Levitical priest. Priests are readily available, and the people are obliged to follow their lead.

Additionally, Deuteronomy 15:19-21 deals with the problem of the imperfect firstborn. There could have been some instances where the people would have faced issues mentioned in Deuteronomy, and thus the writer is addressing those practical issues, without ignoring the other important elements of firstborn sacrifice. The selection of the animal and the mode of sacrifice are unchanged.

In both texts, the owners of the animals are allowed to eat the meat, along with the priests, from the altars in the local cities and even during the centralized worship. However, after settlement in the land, the people are asked to come to the central place of worship and are instructed to celebrate the firstling sacrifice as a shared meal with their family. The priest can take the best portion, the right thigh and the breast (Num. 18:18). Therefore, it is safe to conclude that there is no change in the core message and understanding of consecration of the firstling of the clean animal in the texts in Numbers and Deuteronomy. The additional material in Deuteronomy is due to the different context of the audience to whom the book was written, and addresses the new issues and questions the audience are facing.

Brin, after analysing the laws in the Hebrew Bible, concludes that there is a pattern whereby a general law is promulgated and then supplemented by specific ways of executing it.<sup>456</sup> Different people interpret the execution of the law in different ways at various times. In the case of the firstling, the general law was that “all that opens the womb is mine.” It is then the result of further interpretation that only the firstlings of the clean animals are offered as a sacrifice to Yahweh. The other issue in relation to the firstborn sacrifice is, is it a burnt offering or a peace

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<sup>456</sup> Gershon Brin, *Studies in the Biblical Law: From the Hebrew to the Dead Sea Scroll* (JSOTSup, 176; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1994), pp. 192-195.

offering? It seems that the specifications around the firstling offering are in line with the burnt offering and not the peace offering, in contrast to the view of Wellhausen.<sup>457</sup>

Wellhausen and his followers base their argument on the fact that, in the peace offering, the flesh of the animal is to be eaten by the owner. Thus, they conclude that the Deuteronomic account is speaking of a peace offering. This interpretation is debatable, since it is not only the owner who is allowed to eat the meat of the sacrifice of the firstborn; rather, it is the whole family. According to Deuteronomy 15:19-21, the firstling is given to Yahweh by the owners when they come to the central place of worship, and Yahweh in turn gives it to the priest. It is only the blemished beast that is given to the owner. It is not necessary to bring it to the sanctuary or to offer it to Yahweh as a sacrifice, and even an unclean person could eat its meat.

Others suggest that the use of expressions such as ‘give to me’ and ‘to me’ in these laws of the firstborn sacrifice imply that the firstborn sacrifice is a gift to the realm of the holy; that is, one is speaking here of a burnt-offering.<sup>458</sup> Brin observes that, ‘One might add that nowhere in the Bible is the subject of the peace-offering described by the term “giving to God.”’<sup>459</sup> This idea is much clearer in Ex. 13:11; 22:29, 30; 34:19, 20; Lev. 27:26 and Deut. 15:19. The firstborn are not consecrated to Yahweh, since they belong to him by the very nature of their birth. It is always

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<sup>457</sup> Wellhausen and others proposed that the first stage as the peace offering is a shared meal, which was subsequently changed into a burnt offering, so that there was a progression (Wellhausen, *Prologomena*, p. 72). Kaufmann disagrees with the argument that it was a peace offering and proposes that at first it was a burnt offering in the early period (JE) but that the final stage of consumption in the temple city, according to D, it was a fellowship offering.

<sup>458</sup> See H. Holzinger, *Exodus*, p. 93; Gray, *Sacrifice*, p. 24; Brin, *Studies in the Biblical Law*, p. 185.

<sup>459</sup> Brin, *Studies in the Biblical Law*, p. 185.

offered to him.<sup>460</sup> Taking the clean firstlings for domestic purpose is a violation of the divine law in Deuteronomy (Deut. 15:19-21).

Some scholars argue that the firstborn sacrifice is more like a burnt offering. For example, Holzinger observes that the sacrifice mentioned in Deuteronomy 15:19, 20 is ‘A total gift to the realm of holy, that is, one is speaking here of a burnt-offering.’<sup>461</sup> It also can be related to the law of gifts to the priests, that is, ‘The organs are burnt upon the altar while the flesh is divided among the priests.’<sup>462</sup> Giving the flesh to the priest is clearly stated in Numbers 18. People give to their God, and he gives it back to the priests (Num. 18:12). Thus, the priests are receiving the offering from God and not from the people. Therefore, it is treated as a burnt-offering.

It seems that there are four ways of offering the firstling of clean animals to Yahweh.

1. Offer the firstlings on the household altar by the head of the family. The local priest, the Levite, may participate and get a portion of sacrificial meat. This was a former practice that was not accepted after their settlement in Canaan, or at least not by later writers (Ex. 22:29-30).
2. The whole household can sacrifice the firstling and eat the meat together (Ex. 34:19, 20).
3. Bring the firstling to Jerusalem once in a year along with other gifts, vows, tithes, and first fruits, and sacrifice the firstling there and eat the meat together (Deut. 15:19-21).

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<sup>460</sup> See J. G. McConville, *Deuteronomy* (Nottingham: Apollos, 2002), p. 274.

<sup>461</sup> H. Holzinger, *Exodus*, p. 93.

<sup>462</sup> J. Morgenstern, *Rites of Birth, Marriage, Death and Kindred Occasions among the Semites* (Chicago: Hebrew Union College, 1966), p. 173.

4. Bring the firstlings to the Jerusalem temple or tabernacle once a year and offer them as a sacrifice. The fat contents are sacrificed and the remaining meat went to the priests (Num. 18:14-19).

Though there are slight differences in the practice, they all still reflect a common basic understanding that the firstborn are to be sacrificed.

### 6.3.2 Law concerning the Firstling of the Unclean animals.

The second group in the animal kingdom, according to the rituals in the Hebrew Bible, is the unclean animals. The most prominent unclean animal name mentioned in the Hebrew Bible is the ass, though the pig is also mentioned many times. The list of unclean animals is made so that people would abstain from sacrificing and eating them. The law of the firstborn also explains how the firstling of the unclean animals is to be dealt with. Significantly, however, specific reference to the firstborn donkey<sup>463</sup> is made in some Biblical passages, while most other references are quite general and mention only ‘unclean animals’ (Lev. 27:27; Num. 18:15). The question is, why is only the donkey is mentioned in these references, and not any other animal? Thomsen suggests that the law of the firstling ass reflects an ancient ritual whose meaning was no longer understood by the time the law was put into written form.<sup>464</sup> This seems improbable, since the author or editors of the text present the Sabbath, some of the festivals such as Feast of Unleavened Bread, the Passover celebration, and circumcision as being ancient and still to be

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<sup>463</sup> See Ex. 13:13; 34:20.

<sup>464</sup> P. Thomsen, “Esel,” in Max Ebert, *Eberts Reallexikon der Vorgeschichte*, vol. 3 (De Gruyter, 1926), pp. 122-123.

carried on. To suggest that only the ritual related to the ass is no longer understood and followed appears highly improbable.

Pederson argues that the law concerning the firstling of the ass is very significant because of the importance of that animal in everyday life, for which reason it is mentioned among the laws whose purpose is the dedication of firstlings.<sup>465</sup> It seems that Pederson is right in his observation. Compared to other unclean animals, the ass plays an important role in the day-to-day life of ancient people. It is a very useful domestic animal, involved in many activities including trade and cultivation. Thus, its redemption is very important for their daily life in comparison with other unclean animals.

According to the Hebrew Bible texts, there are two ways an unclean firstling animal can be redeemed:

1. By paying the specified price (cf. Lev. 27:27; Num. 18:16).
2. With a lamb (Ex. 13:13).

If the firstling is not being redeemed, the animal is to be killed by breaking its neck. These redemption methods are mentioned in Exodus 13:13, 'Redeem with a lamb every firstborn donkey, but if you do not redeem it, break its neck. Redeem every firstborn among your sons.' They are also mentioned in Numbers 18:16, 'When they are a month old, you must redeem them at the redemption price set at five shekels of silver, according to the sanctuary shekel, which weighs twenty gerahs.'

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<sup>465</sup> Pedersen, *Israel: Its Life and Culture*, vols 3-4 (London: Oxford University Press, 1940), pp. 317-318.

There is some confusion in these two accounts of redemption. The Exodus account speaks of redeeming the unclean animal with a lamb, and nothing is said about redemption through silver. Conversely, the Numbers account does not mention anything about redeeming through a lamb but only through silver. Additionally, the Exodus account plainly states that they should ‘redeem the firstborn of all your sons’, but does not say anything about how to do this. The Exodus account of redemption in Exodus 34:20 is also similar to that of Exodus 13:13.<sup>466</sup> This has been an issue in the reading and understanding of the redeeming of unclean animals. Additionally, the Hebrew word in Numbers 18:16 for their redemption price is a possessive noun, וּפְדוּיָו, and does not specify to whom it is referring. The questions one may tend to ask at this point are, is the redemption price for the unclean animal alone? Does it include the unclean animal and the human male firstborn as well, or is it intended for the human firstborn alone? Scholars have differing opinions on this issue. Some argue that the ass should be redeemed with a lamb, and all other unclean animals must be redeemed with five shekels of silver.<sup>467</sup> There are others who say that redemption by five shekels of silver is applicable for a human firstborn male, since it is the same amount mentioned in Numbers 27:6 for redeeming the entire firstborn male during the wilderness wandering from 1 month to 5 years old.<sup>468</sup> On this basis, it is claimed that the redemption mentioned in Numbers 18:16 is only meant for the human firstborn, and has nothing to do with the firstborn of unclean animals.<sup>469</sup>

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<sup>466</sup> Ex. 34:20: “Redeem the firstborn donkey with a lamb, but if you do not redeem it, break its neck. Redeem all your firstborn sons. No one is to appear before me empty-handed.”

<sup>467</sup> For a discussion see Thomas B. Dozeman, *Exodus* (Eerdmans Critical Commentary; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), pp 295-298.

<sup>468</sup> Gray thinks that “it is unlikely, therefore, that the present law was actually intended to fix the same price for firstborn of men and firstborn of unclean cattle” (*Numbers*, p. 231).

<sup>469</sup> Gray argues that v. 16 is a later interpolation (*Numbers*, p. 231). M. Noth agrees and even thinks that it has been moved to this location from its original location elsewhere (*Numbers: A Commentary* [London: SCM Press, 1968], p. 138).



Houtman says that ‘donkey’ in Ex. 13:13; 34:20; Lev. 27:27; and Num. 18:15 talks about the redemption of unclean animals in general.<sup>470</sup> However, this seems unlikely, because the first part of the verse speaks of the general law and then comes to the specific instructions on the redemption of human firstborn and the firstlings of the unclean animals. Levine observes ‘The method of explication, by which a general category is stated and then defined more specifically, is common in legal and ritual texts.’<sup>471</sup> The context of this passage is the ministry in the tabernacle and provision for the priests. It is similar to the law given in Leviticus 27:11, 27. ‘If what they vowed is a ceremonially unclean animal - one that is not acceptable as an offering to the LORD - the animal must be presented to the priest, (vs11) If it is one of the unclean animals, it may be bought back at its set value, adding a fifth of the value to it. If it is not redeemed, it is to be sold at its set value.’ (v. 27)

It can be argued that the redemption price given in Number 18:16 is exclusively for human firstborn and not for the unclean animal.

1. The redemption price given for human firstborn is five shekels of silver (Num. 18:16) and is the same price given for all of the firstborn of Israel, even in the early period as per the text. The text in Num. 3:46 reads, ‘To redeem the 273 firstborn Israelites who exceed the number of the Levites, collect five shekels for each one, according to the sanctuary shekel, which weighs twenty gerahs.’ In this text, there is no reference to unclean firstborn animals.

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<sup>470</sup> Cornelis Houtman, *Exodus* (Historical Commentary on the Old Testament; Kampen: Kok Publishing House, 1996), p. 215.

<sup>471</sup> Levine, *Numbers 1-20*, p. 447.

2. In the Hebrew Bible, animals and humans are not of equal value. Even men and women and children have different values.<sup>472</sup> If an unclean animal's firstborn and human firstborn are not equal, then how can the price of each be equal?
3. The valuation price of the human firstborn, aged between 0 and 5 years, is set at five shekels. This is the period in which the firstborn are to be redeemed (Lev. 27:2-7).
4. The value or the redemption price of the unclean animals is determined by various principles such as its kind, species and age (Lev. 27:11-12).
5. The valuation price of the unclean animal was determined by the priest (Lev. 27:26, 27).
6. The redemption price in Numbers 18:16 is five shekels per head. It is observed that this is a very high price for any kind of animal in the ancient period.<sup>473</sup>

Thus, the price of redemption is unlikely to have been five shekels for any unclean animals. Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that the redemption price given in Numbers 18:16 is exclusively for the human firstborn, and not for both human and animal firstlings.<sup>474</sup> Regarding the redemption of the unclean animals, the text sets out two ways of doing this.

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<sup>472</sup> For example, see Leviticus 27.

<sup>473</sup> It is noted that five shekels could be worth six months' wages in the ancient period. See G. J. Wenham, *Numbers* (Tyndale Hebrew Bible Commentaries; Leicester: IVP, 1993), p. 144.

<sup>474</sup> There are a number of scholars who agree on this point. For example, see Avivah Gottlieb Zornberg, *Bewilderments: Reflections on the Book of Numbers* (New York: Knopf Doubleday Publishing Group, 2015), p. 91; Robert Alter, *The Five Books of Moses: A Translation with Commentary* (W. W. Norton & Company, 2008), p. 836; Martin Sicker, *Reflections on the Book of Numbers* (Author House, 2014), p. 334; Wenham, *Numbers*, p. 144; Philip J. Budd, *Numbers*, p. 206; Timothy R. Ashley, *The Book of Numbers* (The New International Commentary on the Hebrew Bible; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), p. 351; David L. Stubbs, *Numbers* (London: SCM Press, 2009), p. 154.

1. The owner can redeem it or break its neck and kill it (Ex. 34:20). It can be redeemed with a lamb or with money. If the owner is unable or unwilling to redeem it in either way, it should be killed. The decision is left to the owner.
2. The valuation is to be decided by the priest if it has to be redeemed by money.<sup>475</sup> The redemption price of the unclean animals and humans should go to the priest. The priest has the right over the firstborn, even if it is an unclean animal.<sup>476</sup>

The above discussion shows that the law demands that the firstborn of unclean animals needs to be redeemed or killed by breaking its neck. However, we do not know to what extent this was practiced, and how it was implemented. The writers specifically admonish the people to do it without fail. Whether this was enforced will become clearer after looking at the role of the priests in the firstborn animal sacrifice.

#### **6.4 Firstborn Animal Sacrifice: The Role of Priest and People.**

There is some confusion in terms of the place of sacrifice, the people who are to do the sacrifice, and the role of the priest. The Pentateuchal texts seem contradictory in this matter. The texts in Numbers and Deuteronomy appear to convey contrary instructions in terms of the firstborn sacrifice. Once again, the two main passages in this regard are Numbers 18:12-18 and Deuteronomy 15:19, 20. The texts read (the words in italics show the differences between these two passages):

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<sup>475</sup> Lev. 27:27: “If it is one of the unclean animals, it may be bought back at its set value, adding a fifth of the value to it. If it is not redeemed, it is to be sold at its set value.”

<sup>476</sup> The redemption price for a donkey was a lamb (Ex. 13:11-15).

<p>Num. 18:12-18: ‘I give you all the finest olive oil and all the finest new wine and grain they give the LORD as the first fruits of their harvest. All the land’s first fruits that they bring to the LORD <i>will be yours. Everyone in your household who is ceremonially clean may eat it.</i> Everything in Israel that is devoted to the LORD <i>is yours.</i> The first offspring of every womb, both human and animal, that is offered to the LORD <i>is yours.</i> But you must redeem every firstborn son and every firstborn male of unclean animals. When they are a month old, you must redeem them at the redemption price set at five shekels of silver, according to the sanctuary shekel, which weighs twenty gerahs. But you must not redeem the firstborn of a cow, a sheep or a goat; they are holy. Splash their blood against the altar and burn their fat as a food offering, an aroma pleasing to the LORD. <i>Their meat is to be yours, just as the breast of the wave offering and the right thighs are yours.</i>’</p>	<p>Deut. 15:19, 20: ‘Set apart for the LORD your God every firstborn male of your herds and flocks. Do not put the firstborn of your cows to work, and do not shear the firstborn of your sheep. Each year <i>you and your family are to eat them in the presence of the LORD your God at the place he will choose.</i> If an animal has a defect, is lame or blind, or has any serious flaw, you must not sacrifice it to the LORD your God. You are to eat it in your own towns. Both the ceremonially unclean and the clean may eat it, as if it were gazelle or deer. But you must not eat the blood; pour it out on the ground like water.’</p>
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The main issue regards ownership of the sacrificial animal. The account in Numbers indicates that the priests have the sole right over the sacrificial animal. However, the Deuteronomic text explains that the owner of the firstling and his household should eat it together once in a year, in the place chosen by Yahweh. This creates confusion and difficulty in understanding firstling sacrifice. There is no common consensus amongst scholars as to how this should be interpreted.

In attempting to find a solution, one should understand the purpose of Deuteronomy and the context in which the book was written.<sup>477</sup> This will reveal the reasons for its differences with

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<sup>477</sup> The context of both the author and audience should be in consideration. The difference between Deuteronomy and the other Pentateuchal literature must be seen in this context, and thus interpretation of the relevant passages also needs such a consideration. As observed above, the

the other books of the Pentateuch. The interpretation of the laws found in ancient witness, readers, and in the ancient rabbinic writings should throw some light on the differences found in Deuteronomy. The firstling laws found in Exodus, Leviticus, and Numbers are the basic principles. The variations found in Deuteronomy and other biblical books must be understood as the application of these laws.

The Rabbis of the early days, in the first and second centuries CE, have different views and interpretations on the firstling laws. They mainly try to harmonise them. For example, it is said that while the flesh of the firstling did go to the priests, as found in Numbers, there was no reason why they might not have shared it with the one who is offering it, as is found in Deuteronomy.<sup>478</sup> It is difficult to imagine that the owners and their household ate all of the firstlings. However, if it were all given to the priest alone, it would be too much for them as well. Thus, there could be some mutual understanding that some portion of it may be taken by the priest, usually the thigh and breast, and the remainder was given to the owner to eat together with his family. We also should remember that each family might have many firstlings of goats, sheep, and cattle. The presence of the priest for the sacrifices is implied all throughout the Deuteronomic text, though the word priest is not explicitly mentioned. Even in Deuteronomy 12, in the context of other sacrifices, the word priest is not mentioned. That means the meat of the firstborn was shared with the priest, or the priest shared it with the people.

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book of Deuteronomy is written against the setting of the Israelites being about to possess the land. This authorial choice should not be ignored in interpreting the texts in Deuteronomy.

<sup>478</sup> C. F. Keil, *Commentary on the Hebrew Bible: The Pentateuch* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1973), p. 357.

Weinfield interprets Deuteronomy 15 as a contradiction to the law given in Lev. 27:26, and proposes that the secularizing tendency of the writer of Deuteronomy is apparent in allowing the common man to part take in the offering of the firstborn animal and eating its meat.<sup>479</sup> However, though this may look like a socializing or secularizing tendency of the Deuteronomist, this interpretation is less plausible than other arguments because the Deuteronomist focuses on the cultic aspect of the sacrifice, which is not found in the other books of the Pentateuch. The author of Deuteronomy, rather than promoting ‘secularization’, tries to separate the sacred from the secular and make a clear demarcation. For example, among the Pentateuch, Deuteronomy has strong teachings on tithes and offerings (14:22-29; 26:1-15), clean and unclean foods (14:1-21), the year of cancelling debts (15:1-11), how one ought to treat slaves (15:12-18), and marriage and marriage violations (21:10-14; 22:13-30). Therefore, it is not a secular tendency of the Deuteronomist that leads to the contradiction.

Thus, though there are two verses (Deut. 15:19 and Lev. 27:26) in the Pentateuch that appear contradictory in their content, in essence they convey the same message. Although Deuteronomy 15:19 speaks of consecrating the firstborn and Leviticus 27:26 says the firstborn should not to be consecrated, on further analysis both passages are making the same point in different ways and contexts. The Leviticus account affirms the fact that firstlings already belong to Yahweh, and one should treat them as special in comparison with any other normal animal. Thus, the firstling cannot be used to fulfil an oath or a vow in the same way as any other animal.

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<sup>479</sup> Weinfield says that the book of Deuteronomy omits the laws of the human firstborn and the firstlings of the unclean animals because these regulations in no way advance its humanitarian purposes, and because they are based on mythical and magical associations which the author of Deuteronomy does not share (M. Weinfield, *Deuteronomy and Deuteronomistic School* [Oxford: University Press, 1972], p. 215).

The Deuteronomist is telling his audience that all firstborns belong to Yahweh, and thus are set apart for Him and should not be used for any other purpose, including any type of work.

In reading Deuteronomy 15, we need to understand the comparisons and contrasts that the author is drawing from the narratives. The first part of Deuteronomy 15 (v. 1-18) makes a contrast between Israelites and foreigners, and the second part of the chapter (v. 19-23) speaks about which firstlings are fit for the sacrifice, and which are not. This is in agreement with honouring God and giving him dignity in the gifts and offerings people bring. The book of Deuteronomy not only values how one treats their god in all aspects of their life, but also deals with how to treat one's fellow man. The book of Deuteronomy makes numerous strong statements about rules intended to support relationships between the Israelites. In looking at these commands, Weinfield argues that it is a humanitarian book.<sup>480</sup>

It is clear in the book of Deuteronomy that one of its major thrusts is to bind the Israelites together. Their interpersonal relationship must be strong, and they are required to be considerate to each other. There is strong teaching on their attitudes, and how one should relate and behave towards one's own people and foreigners. For example, Deuteronomy 15:1-18 deals with debt and slave release. However, the core point is not humanitarian understanding, as proposed by Weinfield, but the binding covenant that makes Israel a special and well-behaved people in their interpersonal relationships with fellow Israelites and strangers. In other words, the key fact is that they have a distinctive code of behaviour to follow, not how well they behave. The covenant helps them be a strong nation, with greater national unity. As part of this, they are to be responsive and responsible to the needs of their brothers and families.

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<sup>480</sup> Weinfield, *Deuteronomy and Deuteronomistic School*, p. 216.

Even in the sacrifice of the firstlings, as in the laws of tithing and offerings, this value is upheld. There are exceptions to the laws that take into consideration the needs of the people. In relation to the sacrifice offered on the altar with the tithe and firstlings, exceptions are made on two grounds: the distance that people have to travel to the sanctuary and the existence of imperfections in the firstborn. The first is in relation to the convenience of the people. The latter is concerned with the dignity of God. In this connection, the Deuteronomist places the people at the central point of the law. This is made clear throughout the book. Even in looking at clean and unclean animals, they are closely connected with people.

In her study of clean and unclean animals, M. Douglas observes that the animal world is structured in a similar fashion to the human world.<sup>481</sup> Cultic practices and teachings are closely associated with this understanding of the correspondence between the human and the animal world. The firstborn among men, like the firstlings of the animals, are dedicated to God (Ex. 13:2; 22:29; 34:19). Just as the firstborn of the Israelites are redeemed by the Levites, so the firstborn of the non-sacrificial animals are redeemed by the sacrificial animals (Num. 8:16-18; cf. Ex. 13:13). Only unblemished Levites may act as priests; so, too, only unblemished animals are considered fit for sacrifice (Lev. 21:17-21; cf. 22:22).<sup>482</sup>

This parallel between laws pertaining to humans and those to animals can be seen in the use of the Hebrew word עֵבֶר in the instructions regarding the firstborn in Deuteronomy. The word עֵבֶר is used in Deuteronomy 15:19 as the middle point of the chapter. McConville suggests

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<sup>481</sup> M. Douglas, "Deciphering a Meal," *Daedalus* 101 (1971), 71.

<sup>482</sup> G. J. Wenham, "Theology of Unclean Food," *EQ* 53 (1981), 11.



that the word עֶבֶד stands as ‘a bridge between the two parts of the chapter’.<sup>483</sup> He observes that this is also the only place where the word עֶבֶד is used in connection with the firstborn.<sup>484</sup> It should be noted that the use of עֶבֶד in this context clearly corresponds to the use of this root in the laws in Leviticus regarding the way one should treat the poor among their own people. The passage in question reads לֹא־תַעֲבֹד בּוֹ עֶבֶדְתָּ עֶקֶד ‘Do not make him work like the work of a slave.’ (Lev. 25:39) This passage gives the warning that the rich should not make poorer Israelites slaves.<sup>485</sup> The rule contrasts the treatment of Israelites with that of the strangers whom the Israelites can buy and sell as their own possessions (Lev. 25:46). Here the law is addressed to the rich, who may intend to treat the poor as slaves. The poor may be willing to do anything to comply with the demands of the rich, since they have no other means of living. Thus, there is a chance of exploiting the poor.

This is very similar to the regulations regarding the firstborn animals in Deuteronomy 15:19. It reads לֹא תַעֲבֹד בְּבֶכֶר שׂוֹרְךָ, ‘You shall not work with the firstling of your ox.’ Here again the emphasis is not so much on the work the owner of the animal performs, but on the treatment of the animal itself. The animal shall not be used for working. It is the duty of the owner to make sure the firstborn animals are not used for domestic work of any sort.<sup>486</sup>

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<sup>483</sup> J. G. McConville, *Law and Theology in Deuteronomy* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1984), p. 95.

<sup>484</sup> McConville, *Law and Theology in Deuteronomy*, p. 95.

<sup>485</sup> RSV translates “you shall not make him serve as a slave”; ASV has “thou shalt not make him to serve as a bond-servant”; NIV has “do not make them work as slaves”; NKJV has “you shall not compel him to serve as a slave.”

<sup>486</sup> Most English translations missed out this point. NASB translates “you shall not work with the firstborn of your herd.” In addition, the sacredness of the firstborn is already put to the people elsewhere in the Pentateuch, so the people of Israel are aware of it (cf. Ex. 20:10; Deut. 5:14).

Therefore, it is clear that the flesh of the animal was shared with the priest and the priests were present in the sacrifice in the accounts of firstborn sacrifice found in Leviticus, Numbers, Exodus, and Deuteronomy. Though the presence of priests may not have been necessary in the earlier period, it appears their presence is essential later. In addition, there is no contradiction between the books of Leviticus and Deuteronomy in terms of dedicating the firstborn to Yahweh. Leviticus points out that, since the firstborn already belongs to Yahweh, they cannot be used for vows or oaths. The Deuteronomist is reminding his audience that all firstborns belong to Yahweh, and thus are set apart for Him and should not be used for any other purpose, including any type of work. The central point in the book of Deuteronomy is the people and their relationship with each other and with Yahweh. There are many parallels between Leviticus and Deuteronomy in general, and in the consecration and sacrifice of the firstborn in particular. The Hebrew word **עֶבֶד** clearly portrays the link between human and animal firstborn. Though there are differences, their status as firstborn confers similar privileges and responsibilities. This will be clearer when we look at the principle of redemption and killing.

### 6.5 The Principles of Redemption and Killing.

The demand to offer all that opens the womb to Yahweh can only be understood with reference to the principle of redemption and killing in connection with the firstborn. To understand what ‘redeeming’ the firstborn animal means, it is important to look at the usage of the Hebrew word translated as ransom or redemption. Exodus 13:13 uses the Hebrew word **תִּפְדָּה** which means ‘ransom’ or ‘substitute’. If the owner fails to ransom or redeem an unclean firstling, he should break its neck. The unclean animals are not acceptable for sacrifice. The significance of

the word in this context is that the Lord as the controlling party stipulates the ransom. The word *תְּפַדָּה* is used in the same context of the word *כֶּפֶר* and is used simultaneously. The word is used in the context of redeeming a person or animal by paying a value of money and equal valued things,<sup>487</sup> and the word means to make atonement or rescue from a curse and demand.<sup>488</sup> Here it means that ‘One is not simply delivering a person or item from the power of another *כֶּפֶר*, rather one is doing so by means of payment demanded by the controlling party.’<sup>489</sup>

Though the words have similar connotations, the usage and the meaning in this context of redeeming or consecrating the firstborn is entirely different. *כֶּפֶר* is used in the context of ‘covering’, ‘redeeming’, or ‘ransoming’ the person who committed some wrong. Someone in need of a *כֶּפֶר* is one who has done some wrong through which they have placed themselves under the authority of another. Unlike *כֶּפֶר*, the redemption of the firstborn is not because of any wrong committed by the firstborn, or for that matter by anybody else; it is related to the very nature of birth.

The word *כֶּפֶר* has an implied meaning of rescuing somebody from danger. It is used 59 times in the Hebrew Bible, and in most cases it is used in close connection with *כֶּפֶר*. Though the basic meaning of the word is the same, it is used in different contexts with various contextual meanings and understandings. In Exodus 21:28-32 the word is used in the context of a goring ox.<sup>490</sup> Here

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<sup>487</sup> See *DCH*, vol. 6, pp. 651-653.

<sup>488</sup> See *DCH*, vol. 4, pp. 455-456.

<sup>489</sup> Sklar, *Sin, Impurity, Sacrifice, Atonement*, p. 113.

<sup>490</sup> In the case of a goring ox, the conditions are:

1. If the owner of the ox is not aware of its goring nature, the owner is free from the charge and the ox should be stoned to death and its meat should not be eaten.

the word is used to make a ransom for killing a person. It is similar to making restitution.

However, the responsible person from the affected family decides the ransom. The negligence of the owner legally could result in him being stoned, though making a כֶּפֶר might let him live. Here the word כֶּפֶר is used as a mitigated penalty payment to save one's life. However, the owner has no control over this.

Exodus 21:30 says that 'If a ransom is imposed on him' עָלָיו יוֹשֶׁת אִם-כֶּפֶר. There could have been two parties making the כֶּפֶר: 1. The judge or the court and 2. The victim's family.<sup>491</sup>

Therefore, it is important to note that the life of an animal is not equal to the life of a human.

Killing the animal does not make any restitution. The blood or life of an animal cannot substitute the life or blood of a human. For the life of one person, another person's life should be given or a כֶּפֶר should be offered. Animals are under the control of the people. The animal should be killed,

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2. If the owner of the ox knew of its disposition and did not take sufficient precautions resulting in the death of a person both the ox and its owner should be stoned to death. In this case, an option is given to the victim's family to save the life of the owner by demanding a כֶּפֶר. The amount is not specified and the owner has no say in it. The text is not clear as to who should demand the כֶּפֶר. It could be the leader of the community or the priests. However no clue is given.<sup>491</sup> There are many opinions, which favour both cases. Sklar comments that "as it was the family of the injured woman in v. 22 that places the punishment upon the guilty, it seems most likely that it is also the family of the slain that places the כֶּפֶר upon the ox-owner in v. 30" (Sklar, *Sin, Impurity, Sacrifice, Atonement*, p. 71-72). He thinks that in the previous incident found in Ex. 21:22-25 the husband of the woman had the right to impose a fine as he wished (21:22). However, the fact of the matter is just the reverse. The כֶּפֶר is imposed by the victim's family with the consent of the judges. The victim's family does not have the sole authority to impose a כֶּפֶר ransom as they wish. The only hope for the life of the ox-owner is if the כֶּפֶר is imposed. Here כֶּפֶר is the blood money of the ox-owner. In other words, כֶּפֶר stands as the substitute for the price of the killed person and of the ox-owner's life. We do not know the minimum or maximum price set for the life of the ox owner who is alive. One who is alive will be killed if כֶּפֶר is not paid. That means that the victim's family is not allowed to act as they wanted; rather, they are under the stipulations of the judges. The husband can claim or impose a fine on behalf of the wife, but it should be justifiable and approved by the court or judges. The framework for administering justice is fair and reliable.

and is considered as unclean since eating its flesh is not allowed. There is no means of redeeming or making a ransom for the animal in this context. This is consistent with a society that affirms the value of life, but confirms that the value of human beings is above the animal.

Additionally, these provisions force the family to pay more attention to animals that habitually gore. Negligence not only takes the life of the innocent, but also the animal and its owner. The law is applicable to all, irrespective of their social status. The relationship of both families is damaged through this incident, and it can deteriorate or be restored based on the decision of the victim's family. The demand for the ox-owner's life can rupture the relation furthermore, making the situation worse. In this context, placing a כֶּפֶר restores the broken relationship. In that sense, כֶּפֶר acts as a catalyst in reuniting the ruptured relationship. In other words כֶּפֶר stands here as a substitute for the life of the ox-owner.

Thus, כֶּפֶר has a value equal to a life. Life is the most precious thing on the face of the earth, and in this context it can be secured only through placing a כֶּפֶר upon it. This is true with the unclean animals, whose lives can be redeemed by paying a price set by the priest or by giving a lamb as a substitute. Without either of these, the animal cannot be redeemed. Therefore, the above discussion leads us to the conclusion that the clean firstlings are sacrificed and the unclean are either redeemed or killed based on the decision of their owner. According to the text, the firstborn of both clean and unclean animals belongs to Yahweh, and it is the duty of human beings to give them to him as prescribed.

## 6.6 Conclusion

We may conclude that the firstborn, whether clean or unclean animals, belong to God.

Though the biblical legislation in this regard could have been formulated later, it may reflect an ancient practice that was widespread in the ancient Near East. The redeeming of the firstling of unclean animals and the sacrificing of the clean animal has a direct relation to the everyday life of the people. The Israelites are an agricultural society that depends on its livestock for survival, and therefore is deeply concerned to ensure divine favour to protect its animals. Thus, Israelite life is totally orientated around religious practices directly related to their everyday life.

There are also vital social and theological implications behind the legislation. The redemption price paid for the firstborn is equal to the redemption paid to redeem a slave or a person under the law in case of any wrong doing, such as not being careful about a goring ox. The redemption price is set by the victim's family and is accepted by the local authority, usually the priest. The writers present the understanding that firstborn animals belong to Yahweh. How to give them back to him is a major discussion. As a result, there is legislation in Pentateuchal literature as to which animals need to be sacrificed or, alternatively, redeemed or killed. On this fundamental level, there is a textual coherence throughout the Hebrew Bible.

However, there are clear differences in the legislation in Numbers and Deuteronomy regarding the details of these consecrations, sacrifices, and uses of firstborn by the ancient Israelites. They seem to be contradictory to each other, but our detailed analysis has shown that they can be read as complementary as they are giving guidance to two different groups of people in different settings. The Deuteronomist is addressing the issues the people are facing in their

day-to-day life in the new context of settled existence, and is putting forward answers as to how to deal with the situations and issues that arise in this context. The differences represent additional stipulations added to what is said in Numbers, not a replacement for it.

The textual analysis also demonstrates that there is a fundamental agreement in the materials regarding the consecration of the firstborn animals, which is more significant than the apparent divisions and differences. The Deuteronomical laws are presented as the utterances or speech given to an audience who are about to enter into their promised land.

The above discussion also concludes that the life of the animal is not equal to the life of people, though in some circumstances they stand as substitutes. The value of substitution and redemption for human firstborn and animal varied. Five shekels were fixed for men, irrespective of who they are, showing the equality of individuals in the society. The price for the unclean animals is not fixed, but is decided by the priests because the value of animals varies. One may find a good comparison between the redemption placed for the life of the owner of the ox who kills an Israelite individual with the redeeming of the unclean animal. Here the animal is killed for its furious act and the owner of the animal is freed by paying a ransom.

Unclean animals are redeemed by paying a specified price. The owner of the unclean animal has the choice to redeem it or kill it by breaking its neck. It is imperative to offer a clean animal as a sacrifice, as clearly portrayed in the texts. A clean animal can become a substitute for the human firstborn. Here, the clean animal is taking the place of the firstborn human and becoming a ransom. This has a strong relation to how we can understand the killing of the Egyptian firstborn, both human and animal, in the Exodus narrative as the redemption of

Israelites. The author is presenting the story in a way that the firstborn killing plague attacks the firstborn in Egypt. According to the Hebrew Bible, this becomes the foundation for the demand of the firstborn among the Israelites; whether clean or unclean, animals or human, the key principle is that the firstborn belongs to Yahweh. This leads us to consider the principles of sacrificing or redeeming the human firstborn, which will be discussed in the next chapter.



## Chapter 7

### The firstborn humans given to Yahweh and their redemption

#### 7.1 Introduction

Having looked at firstborn animal sacrifice and its importance in the previous chapter, the current chapter will examine the relationship between the firstborn human and Yahweh's demand that 'all that opens the womb belongs to me,' and how this relates to child sacrifice. The central question is "what was the understanding in ancient Israel of the demand of Yahweh when he said, 'all that opens the womb belongs to me?'"

The current chapter will therefore look critically at the possibility that Israelites may have sacrificed children in their worship of Yahweh in the pre-exilic period, and how child sacrifice may be related to the demand for all the firstborn. Two major strands of thought on this question can be discerned. The first is that the firstborn sacrifice was a practice during the early period of Israelite history and that the principle of redemption was adopted sometime later. Indeed, it could be asked whether child sacrifice continued in the later times even though the law of redemption was in place. There are scholars who state that child sacrifice was part of the worship of Yahweh until the time of exile.<sup>492</sup>

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<sup>492</sup> See W. Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, vol. 1 (London, SCM Press, 1967), pp. 149-155; M. Buber, *Kingship of God* (3<sup>rd</sup> edn; London: Humanity Books, 1967), p. 180.

In a recent publication, Stavrakopoulou<sup>493</sup> asserts that the biblical account of child sacrifice as an abhorrent practice of other peoples that was always forbidden to Israel was a purposeful distortion of historical realities. She argues that child sacrifice was practised in the religion of Israel in the early days, and was later condemned through deliberate editing. She bases her argument on the residue of the practice found in the Hebrew Bible and its polemic reaction to the practice.<sup>494</sup>

On the other hand, there are scholars who strongly argue that Yahwism never demanded child sacrifice.<sup>495</sup> Levenson argues that it is hard to support the view that there was a religious evolution from human sacrifice to animal sacrifice in the story of Abraham, the Paschal lamb or firstborn in the Pentateuch.<sup>496</sup> The current chapter critically examines this argument and its validity in the wider context of the Hebrew Bible. In addition, the study also further examines the prominence of the firstborn in the Israelite family. This should enable us to have a clearer understanding of the concept of firstborn and thus to find an apposite answer to the central question of this thesis.

There is textual evidence in the Pentateuchal literature about sacrificing children to certain gods (Lev. 18:21; 20:2-5; 2 Kings 23:10; Jer. 7:31; 19:5; 32:35; Ezek. 20:25-26; Mic. 6:1-

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<sup>493</sup> Francesca Stavrakopoulou, *King Manasseh and Child Sacrifice: A Biblical Distortion of Historical Realities* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2004), p. 302.

<sup>494</sup> Stavrakopoulou, *King Manasseh and Child Sacrifice*, pp. 283-299.

<sup>495</sup> See for example George C. Heider, *The Cult of Molek: A Reassessment* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1985), pp. 229-272; John Day, *Molech: A God of Human Sacrifice in the Old Testament* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 65-71; Jon D. Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son: The transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993), pp. 18-24; T. D. Alexander, "The Passover Sacrifice," pp. 5-6.

<sup>496</sup> Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son*, p. 21.

5). The textual evidence seems to suggest that the writers viewed this as a practice carried out in Israel. The question is whether this was part of accepted religious practice in Israel and later condemned, or whether the condemnation is as old as the Israelite legal code. Levenson, Day and Heider state that the child sacrifice in Judaism was a syncretistic practice.<sup>497</sup> This current chapter will study the responses of the prophets and religious leaders of the time towards such practices, in order to draw a conclusion about this issue.

There are many interpretations and understandings about firstborn sacrifice or redemption. Some scholars argue that, during some periods of Israelite history, the Israelites sacrificed their firstborn male children to Yahweh in the same way as the neighboring cultures.<sup>498</sup> These scholars assume that the statement ‘all that opens the womb belongs to me’ stems from the common practices of the people in the earlier period, which was replaced by substitutional redemption in the later period.<sup>499</sup> However, it is very difficult to believe that, in any culture, all the firstborn children would be sacrificed to their god. There is enough evidence from different cultures around the world to assert that people restricted the practice of sacrificing their firstborn child to some special festivals, celebrations, oaths or vows.<sup>500</sup>

In order to understand the demand of giving all the firstborn to the God of Israel, we will be analyzing some of the important passages where this assertion is clearly expressed. Many studies

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<sup>497</sup> Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son*, p. 21; Day, *Molech*, pp. 83-85; Heider, *The Cult of Molek*, pp. 404-405.

<sup>498</sup> For example John Van Seters, *Changing Perspectives 1: Studies in the History, Literature and Religion of Biblical Israel* (London: Equinox, 2011), pp. 399-408.

<sup>499</sup> For a detailed discussion on human sacrifices in different cultures see See Jan N. Bremmer, *The Strange World of Human Sacrifice* (Peeters Publishers, 2007).

<sup>500</sup> See Jan N. Bremmer, *The Strange World of Human Sacrifice* (Peeters Publishers, 2007).

have been carried out on these passages.<sup>501</sup> Nevertheless, none was directly focused on the concept of the firstborn, their redemption and its implication in the socio-religious life of Israel as a nation.

There are many Hebrew words used in the context of redeeming the firstborn. The three most important Hebrew words are *נָתַן*, *שָׁפַט*, and *פָּדָה*. They relate to the redemption of the firstborn and are vital in unravelling the meaning of the redemption concept in these passages. The analysis shall help to explain and evaluate the concept of redeeming the firstborn in the Yahwism of the nation of Israel. A grasp of the usage and possible interpretations of the above words in the Hebrew Bible, as directly related to offering or consecrating the firstborn to God, will help to reveal the importance of the demand of the God of Hebrew Bible: ‘consecrate to me all that opens the womb.’

Furthermore, as we observed earlier, it is crucial to note that there are instances in the Hebrew Bible where there is no mention of any kind of redemption of the firstborn in relation to the statement ‘all that opens the womb belongs to me’. Does this mean that in such instances people are asked to offer their firstborn to the deity?<sup>502</sup> On the other hand, there are also many

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<sup>501</sup> J. Van Seters, “The Place of the Yahwist in the History of Passover and Massot,” *ZAW* 95 (1983), 175-176; J. R. Bartlett, “Zadok and His Successors at Jerusalem,” *JTS* 19 (1968), 1-18; J. Engnell, “The Passover,” in *Critical Essays in the Old Testament* (London, 1970), pp. 185-199; R. G. Dentan, “The Literary Affinities of Exodus 34,” *VT* 13 (1963), 34-51; Thomas B. Dozeman, *God at War: Power in the Exodus Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), pp. 46-120; Yairah Admit, *History and Ideology: An Introduction to Historiography in the Hebrew Bible* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997); Philip R. Davies, *The Origins of Biblical Israel* (London: T & T Clark, 2007); Megan Bishop Moore and Brad E. Kelle, *Biblical History and Israel’s Past: The Changing Study of the Bible and History* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2011).

<sup>502</sup> Ex. 13:1, 2.

other references in the Hebrew Bible where the consecration or redemption of the firstborn is attested.<sup>503</sup> The study shall also examine these differences and their meaning in the context of the demand for the firstborn.

Numbers chapters 3 and 8 speak about the substitution of the human firstborn with reference to the Levites, the priests. This casts confusion and further widens the issue as to when this substitution took place and what the situation was before it came into effect. Were all the Israelites in favour of this substitution proposal or was it something imposed on the people by some influential people, presumably the priests? Thus the current chapter shall discuss these issues in detail to find the meaning of the demand of the God of the Hebrew Bible that ‘all that opens the womb belongs to me.’

## 7.2 Hebrew words used for Consecration of Human Firstborn.

There are three different Hebrew words or phrases used for giving the firstborn to God. They are: 1. נתן ‘given to the Lord,’ 2. קדש ‘sanctify to the Lord,’ and 3. פדו ‘you shall redeem it.’ A study of these words and the context in which they are used will give a better understanding of the consecration of the firstborn in the Hebrew Bible.

### 7.2.1 נתן: Natan

נתן is a very common word in the Hebrew Bible and used generally with the meaning ‘to give,’ ‘to grant,’ ‘to bestow,’ ‘to pay’ in various senses.<sup>504</sup> The word appears more than 1900 times in

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<sup>503</sup> Ex. 13:12, 13.

*qal* form in the Hebrew Bible.<sup>505</sup> Lipinski<sup>506</sup> observes that the word נתן literally means “not ‘give’ or ‘make a gift’ but rather ‘extend the hand’ in order to place an object at a specific place or to give it over to another person, with or without compensation, as a possession.”<sup>507</sup> Though giving is the general meaning, its usage has a very specific connotation. It is observed that the word generally comes with an accusative object and the preposition ל followed by a name designating a person, and then it has the meaning ‘give,’ ‘pass’ or ‘transfer.’<sup>508</sup> It can also mean transferring goods, properties or possessions to someone else for their usage and care.<sup>509</sup> In addition, the word is used to describe showing favour towards someone.<sup>510</sup>

The other derivative from נתן is מתנת , meaning ‘gift.’ In the Hebrew Bible understanding, health, wealth, long life and wisdom are considered as given by God as gifts to whomever He pleases (cf. Eccl. 3:13; 5:18). The other important meaning and usage of נתן is to indicate the

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<sup>504</sup> For detailed explanation about the usage of the words in different references in the Hebrew Bible and other Hebrew literature, see *DCH*, vol. 5, pp. 784-813.

<sup>505</sup> There are different derivative forms used as personal names such as Natanael (El gave) or yehonatan, Jonatan, Netanyahu (Yahweh gave), netanmelek (the king has given) (cf. 1 Chr. 4:7; 6:26, 41; 26:2). There are many other biblical names which can be associated with the word נתן though there are different opinions about it. For a discussion see, Lipinski, נתן in *TDOT*, vol. 10, pp. 90-95.

<sup>506</sup> Fabry, נתן in *TDOT*, vol. 10, p. 90.

<sup>507</sup> Lipinski, נתן in *TDOT*, vol. 10, pp. 90-91.

<sup>508</sup> Lipinski, נתן in *TDOT*, vol. 10, p. 91. For example Eve gives the fruit of the tree to Adam so that he may eat (Gen. 3:6, 12); Abraham gives his servant a calf so that he might prepare it for the guests (Gen. 18:7); he gives Hagar bread and a skin of water when he sends her away with the child (Gen. 21:14).

<sup>509</sup> This usage can be seen in the creation event whereby God gives all plants, fruit-bearing trees and animals at to be at the disposal of man. See Gen. 1:29; 9:3; 27:9-11; 36:2; Josh. 13:14; 17:4,6; 19:49; Job 42:15; Ps. 111:6; Ezek. 47:23.

<sup>510</sup> See for example, Joseph blessing his brothers and giving more gifts to Benjamin (Gen. 45:22). It is also used in explaining what God is doing with people in terms of giving offspring, wisdom, wealth, honour or victory. See Gen. 17:16; 24:35; 30:6; 1 Ki. 3:6, 9; 5:21; 1 Chr. 25:5; 28:5; Ps. 144:10.

delivery of goods and production.<sup>511</sup> Figuratively it is used as delivering a person over to famine (Jer. 18:21), to a curse (Num. 5:21) or to death (Ezek. 31:14). נָתַן is also used in terms of ‘giving forth’ which is closely associated with bringing forth.<sup>512</sup> The word is used both in the sense of natural production of fruits and vegetables and for bringing the sacrificial things to the house of God or the place of worship.<sup>513</sup>

The word נָתַן also has the meaning ‘to set,’ ‘to put,’ or ‘to place,’ with accompanying prepositions to indicate the place.<sup>514</sup> The verb נָתַן has the meaning ‘transformed’ when the word is used with the accusative and the preposition לְ followed by a dative object.<sup>515</sup> In legal and commercial usage the word has meanings such as compensation, remuneration for work, sale, exchange, loan, wedding contract, and gift.<sup>516</sup> In the religious sense the word נָתַן is used for explaining the kind of gifts and offerings given to the deity as consecrated offerings. There are different usages of the word נָתַן in this sense. In other words, there are many things one can give

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<sup>511</sup> This usage is very important in terms of the Exodus event and the withdrawal of straw for making bricks though the people were expected to produce the same amount of bricks (cf. Ex. 5:18).

<sup>512</sup> For example, וַיִּתֵּן אֶת־קוֹלוֹ in Gen. 45:2 – crying and uttering loudly.

<sup>513</sup> For example in the creation the creator is speaking of bringing forth produce from the plants and trees. This is a natural process. This is without any external cause and the power to produce is within the creation itself by virtue of natural forces. The word is used in many derivative forms. For a full discussion see Lipinski, נָתַן in *TDOT*, vol. 10, pp. 90-103.

<sup>514</sup> The first usage can be seen in the book of Genesis (1:17), בְּרָקִיעַ הַיָּמִין אֵתֵם וַיִּתֵּן, “Elohim placed them in the firmament.” Gen. 9:13 uses the word in a similar way to describe the placement of a rainbow in the clouds.

<sup>515</sup> For various forms and usage of the words in this order see Lipinski, נָתַן in *TDOT*, vol. 10, p. 93; cf. Gen. 17:6; 2 Chr. 7:20; Isa. 49:6; Jer. 15:4; 24:9; 29:18; 34:17.

<sup>516</sup> For a detailed discussion on the usage of the word in this sense see, Lipinski, נָתַן in *TDOT*, vol. 10, pp. 96-104.

to God. A major usage is giving the God of Israel glory ( וּנְתַתֶּם לֵאלֹהֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל כְּבוֹד ) and praise ( לְיִהְיֶה ),<sup>517</sup> and to give strength and power ( עֲצָמוֹת עֲזוֹת נָתַן הוּא שְׂרָאֵלֵי אֵל ).

The verb נָתַן is also used in the sense of consecrated offerings and for consecrating slaves. These are the people who are given as slaves to the temple for service in the temple.<sup>518</sup> 1 Chr. 9:2 speaks of the people who were given over to the service of the temple. In other words, they are ‘the given ones.’ The Hebrew word הַנְּתֻנִים is used to describe other people who were involved in the service of the temple such as יִשְׂרָאֵל, ‘Israel’, הַכֹּהֲנִים, ‘the priests’, and הַלְוִיִּם, ‘the Levites’. Little is known about this הַנְּתֻנִים group. It seems that a group of people were addressed as הַנְּתֻנִים during the time of Ezra; they (הַנְּתֻנִים) were also among the prominent people and a good number of them joined with Ezra in returning to the service of the temple (Ezr. 2:43-54). According to the text in Ezr. 8:20, they were the ones who were appointed by David and the officials.

In addition, the word is used for the purpose of giving something to another person with or without expecting any compensation. The result of the action is usually considered enduring and definitive.<sup>519</sup> Though this is the meaning of the word in common usage, there is a slight

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<sup>517</sup> For a discussion and various usage in this sense see Lipinski, נָתַן in *TDOT*, vol. 10, pp. 106-107.

<sup>518</sup> Lipinski states that this usage is found only in the post-exilic time and in connection with temple service. However, he notes that also during the time of Solomon, there were people worked in the temple as temple slaves. See Lipinski, נָתַן in *TDOT*, vol. 10, p. 107. In Ps. 68:19 (English v. 18), the word is מְתַנֵּן.

<sup>519</sup> To understand the different meanings in different contexts and the way the word appears in the Hebrew Bible see Fabry, נָתַן in *TDOT*, vol. 10, pp. 90-108. For additional study and discussion see B. A. Levine, “The *Netinim*,” *JBL* 82 (1963), 207-212; H. J. van Dijk, “A Neglected Connotation of Three Hebrew Verbs,” *VT* 18 (1969), pp. 16-30; M. Baumgarten, “The



difference in the cultic usage. In the cultic usage, the word can mean sacrifice, consecrate or consecrated offering. Although this usage is very ancient, the meaning varies from context to context. For example, in the case of Samuel (1 Sam. 2:24-28), Hannah was praying to her deity that if the deity gave a son to her, she would return him to the deity for His service. Here the word is used in a reciprocal sense; if the deity gives a son, Hannah would give him back to the deity. There is mutual benefit and agreement over the future of the child she is going to receive from her God. This is the understanding of the word in the cultic usage. The word denotes a transfer of authority from one person to another.<sup>520</sup> Here the firstborn is transferred from the human domain to the divine. Hannah is giving Samuel from her care to the divine. She has no more control over him once she gifts him to God's service. This is the same understanding as applies in offering the firstborn to God. God receives it and then transfers it to the priests (Num. 18:12.). The word is again used in this sense for the ministry of Levites in the temple. Levites are described as 'a gift given to the Lord' (Num. 8:16).<sup>521</sup>

The word נתן is used in terms of offering the firstborn to Yahweh in Ex. 22:29b. In this reference, there is no reciprocal agreement implied by the word or the context. It reads תתן לי בכורי, 'The first-born of your sons you shall give to me'. Here the word נתן is used in the sense of giving to Yahweh through redemption.

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Exclusion of 'Natanim' and Proselytes in 4Q Florilegium," *RevQ* 8 (1972), 87-96; S. C. Reif, "A Note on a Neglected Connotation of 'ntn,'" *VT* 20 (1970), 114-16.

<sup>520</sup> The word is used in e.g. Ex. 30:12, 13; Num. 15:4; 18:12; Deut. 18:4.

<sup>521</sup> See Fishbane, *Biblical Interpretation in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1985), pp. 186-187.

The comparison here is with the firstborn of clean animals such as cattle and sheep as was discussed in the previous chapter. Nothing is said about the unclean animals. The clean animals are to be sacrificed. Thus, the statement ‘Do the same with your cattle and sheep’ in Ex. 22:30, leads to the understanding that the firstborn humans were originally sacrificed to Yahweh. The argument is based on comparing the law in Ex. 22:29 and Ex. 22:30 together. Ex. 22:29 reads ‘Do not hold back offerings from your granaries or your vats. You must give me the firstborn of your sons.’ Ex. 22:30 reads ‘Do the same with your cattle and your sheep. Let them stay with their mothers for seven days, but give them to me on the eighth day.’ Thus, many scholars argue that there is strong evidence here for sacrificing the firstborn male child in the cult of Yahweh.

However, a close study of the text reveals that it is referring to two categories of sacrifice. The analysis of the whole chapter discloses that it deals with various laws related to the daily life of the Israelites. It covers most of their social responsibilities and their ethical code of conduct and the last three verses explain their religious piety. The whole sacrificial system and the idea of giving to the Lord are summarized in the last verses in the chapter. Thus, the last two verses are a concise instruction as to how one should deal with the firstborn - ‘they are to be given to the Lord’. What giving means in this context is determined by what is given. The firstborn of clean animals are to be sacrificed but unclean animals or human firstborn are to be redeemed. Therefore, here the word  $\text{נָתַן}$  does not necessarily entail sacrificing the human firstborn.

In Numbers 3 the word נָתַן is used for consecrating the Levites instead of the firstborn in Israel for the service of the temple. Here נָתַן is used in the cultic sense of giving the Levites to Aaron.

Num. 3:9 reads יִשְׂרָאֵל: בְּנֵי מֵאֵת לֹד הֵמָּה נְתוּנִים וְלִבְנָיו לְאַהֲרֹן אֶת־הַלְוִיִּים וְנָתַתָּה

*‘Give the Levites to Aaron and his sons; they are the Israelites who are to be given wholly to him’.*

The usage of the word נָתַן in this context should be understood as a cultic usage. Here the word is not used to imply those given are to be sacrificed.<sup>522</sup> In the above passage, the firstborn are substituted by the Levites (cf. Num. 3:12-13; Lev. 18:21). In the cultic sense, the word is also used when giving glory to Yahweh.<sup>523</sup> Thus the cultic usage of the word נָתַן stands for offering something to God. It can be any material thing or an abstract feeling like glory, love or kindness. It is not used for a material sacrifice alone. When we apply the meaning of the word נָתַן in the context of giving firstborn to Yahweh, it is not giving for sacrifice alone. This leads us to the conclusion that giving the firstborn to Yahweh does not necessarily mean killing or sacrificing them.

### 7.2.2 קִדְּשׁ: Qodesh

There are various views about the root from which the word קִדְּשׁ originated or developed.

Luzzato suggested that the word קִדְּשׁ is a combination of two words such as יָקַד – meaning ‘burn’ and שָׂרָף meaning ‘fire’. This word קִדְּשׁ translates as something burned in fire. This could refer to

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<sup>522</sup> See B. A. Levine, “The *Netinim*,” *JBL* 82 (1963), 207-212.

<sup>523</sup> The word *kabod* means ‘glory’ and is a synonym for the total wealth of a person (cf. Gen. 31:1, where the word is used describe the wealth of Laban).

the burnt offerings in the initial stage and later to anything consecrated for the glorification of God.<sup>524</sup> Conversely, Baudissin argued that “the biconsonantal root form, קד in שקד, tends to give the meaning as ‘separate’, ‘sunder’, or ‘new’ in the sense of separated from the old”.<sup>525</sup> Though there was widespread acceptance of this view, some linguists argued against it. They observed that the biconsonantal root construction from קד never implies ‘separate’ or ‘sunder’ or ‘new’ in any context. They observed that the notion of separation is found only with פר rather than the קד biconsonantal root.<sup>526</sup> Thus the best way to understand the meaning of the word is by looking at the context in which the שקד is used and to related words in the ancient world.<sup>527</sup>

In Akkadian the word similar to Hebrew שקד is *qadasum*, with a G stem meaning ‘be or become clean’ and with a D stem it means ‘clean’, ‘purify’, ‘consecrate’, or ‘holy’.<sup>528</sup> It can apply to a person, an object, an animal or an image. The term *quddusu* is mostly used in association with other two words, *ellu* and *ebbu*, meaning ‘clean’ and ‘pure’. This has a close association with the word *qadistu* used for the temple prostitutes in the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium; another two words were also coined when referring to these women in the 1<sup>st</sup> millennium - *kulmasitu* and *naditu*. The code of Hammurabi mentioned all three categories of women.<sup>529</sup> The service of these women was the same though different terminology was coined in different times. They were

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<sup>524</sup> Luzzato, cited in Ringgren, שקד in *TDOT*, vol. 12, p. 523.

<sup>525</sup> W. W. Baudissin, “Der Begriff der heiligkeitim AT,” *Studienzursemittischen Religionsgeschichte*, II (Leipzig: 1878), pp. 19-20.

<sup>526</sup> J. F. A. Sawyer, “Root-Meaning in Hebrews,” *JSS* 12 (1967), 37-50.

<sup>527</sup> For a concise but comprehensive study on the meaning of the word in the whole Hebrew literature see *DCH*, vol. 7, pp. 190-204.

<sup>528</sup> For detailed discussion see I. J. Gelb, *Old Akkadian Inscriptions in the Chicago Natural History Museum* (Chicago, 1955).

<sup>529</sup> See *ANET*, p. 174.

considered as sacred and holy women and the act of prostitution itself was considered holy.<sup>530</sup>

These prostitutes were initially respected but social status was gradually diminished and by the neo-Babylonian period these terms were used for the street prostitutes.<sup>531</sup> These practices were dedicated to the goddess of love and fertility, Ishtar, who had the epithet *qadistu*. In the Ugaritic texts it often refers to all kinds of cultic servants.<sup>532</sup>

Though the word *qds* has effectively the same meaning as that of the above it conveys a deeper understanding of the concept.<sup>533</sup> The word occurs in *hifil* or *piel* construct form. In *hifil*

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<sup>530</sup> For a discussion see W. Korfield, "Prostitution sacred," *DBS*, vol. 8, pp. 1356-1374; K. van Der Toorn, "Cultic Prostitution," in *ADB*, vol. 5, pp. 505-513.

<sup>531</sup> See R. Harris, "The Naditu Women," in R.M. Adams (ed.), *Studies presented to A.L. Oppenheim* (Chicago, 1964), p. 107; H. Ringgren, *The Prophetic Conception of Holiness* (1948), p. 183.

<sup>532</sup> W. Von Soden, "Zur Stellung des 'Geweiheten' (*qds*), in Ugarit," *UF* 2 (1970), 329-330.

<sup>533</sup> Regarding the usage of the word in the Hebrew Bible, Kornfield makes the following observations (*qds*, *TDOT*, vol. 12, pp. 527-529):

1. Qdsqal: The stative verb *qdsqal* perfectly designates the status of present or future consecration
2. qdsniphil: God is the only subject in niphil. He shows himself to be holy by manifesting his unchangeable divine holiness before Israel (Ex. 29:43), and the nations (Ezek. 20:41; 28:22, 25; 36:23; 38:16; 39:27).
3. Qdspiel: Bring something/someone into the condition of holiness/consecration according to the cultic regulations; declaring something/someone holy (the Sabbath, Gen. 2:3; Ex. 20:11); and considering/viewing something/someone as holy (Sabbathjer 17:22, 24, 27).
4. Qdspual: The pual is passive to the factitive in the sense of 'be made holy; be holy/consecrated' (Ezr. 3:5).
5. Qdshithpael: One sanctifies or consecrates oneself (Ex. 19:22; Lev. 11:44; 20:7). One brings oneself into the condition of consecration or cultic purity (Num. 11:18; Josh. 3:5; 7:13; 1 Sam. 16:5), or 'is sanctified.'
6. qdshiphil: Causatively to 'make holy, consecrate, offer, surrender to God as a possession' (Josh. 2:7; 1 Chr. 23:13). God can declare something or someone to be consecrated to him (Num. 3:13; 1 Ki. 9:7).
7. qados: The adjective form qualifies ritually significant places, the camp, the people of Israel, its priests, Levites, and believers, as well as God himself. The term *qados* is not used in connection with sacrifices, clothing or utensils.
8. qodes: The abstract noun *qodes*, 'holiness,' is the most frequently occurring derivative of *qds*.

form the word means ‘to transfer something to the realm of the temple and temple services that is divine.’ The object became a holy property (Ex. 28:38; Lev. 22:2; 27:14-16). *שָׁדָךְ* is also used in the sense of ‘set aside’ as well. See Jer. 12:3 ‘and set apart to the day of slaughter’. The *piel* form of the word appears in Ex. 13:2: ‘Consecrate to me all the firstborn; whatever is the first to open the womb’. The first part speaks of the qualification and the second part speaks of its implication. It should be the one who first opens the womb and it must be consecrated to me (Yahweh). This gives the implied meaning that the firstborn are the property of God.<sup>534</sup> It is observed that in *piel* form the word carries the meaning that it acquires sanctity. The implied meaning in this usage is that the firstborn achieve sanctity in the process of being set apart.<sup>535</sup> The text speaks of the firstborn as holy not because they are set apart by human action, but because of the nature of their birth. Anything can become holy by setting it apart for holy purposes.<sup>536</sup> But in the case of firstborn, this is beyond human will and decision. As a case in point, consider Num. 18:17: ‘One may not redeem the firstlings of clean animals because they are holy’ - where *שָׁדָךְ* is used in *piel* form.<sup>537</sup>

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9. qades/ qedesa: The nominalized adjective means consecrated one. It refers to male and female cult functionaries familiar from Canaanite cults, whence they were incorporated and initiated in syncretistic rituals in Israel.

<sup>534</sup> This interpretation was first made by Philo.

<sup>535</sup> Brin, *Studies in the Biblical Law*, p. 219.

<sup>536</sup> Anything sanctified to the Lord becomes holy to the Lord. For example if a man dedicated his house to the Lord it became a holy property (Lev. 27:14). Here again the word *שָׁדָךְ* is used for a sanctified property (R. H. Lowie, *Social Organization* [London: Routledge, 1961], p. 150).

<sup>537</sup> The sanctity of the firstborn and of property are entirely different. See D. Jacobson, *The Social Background of the Old Testament* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1942), pp. 96, 160; R. H. Lowie, *Social Organization* (London: Routledge, 1961), p. 150.

Thus, we may safely say that the Hebrew word *qds* is used mainly in the context of ‘distinguishing between the holy and the common and between the unclean and the clean’.<sup>538</sup> The word implies a separation from common use in order to be regarded as something special. It can be applied to anything, a person, place or object. Whatever is consecrated belongs to the deity or is used for sacral purposes. There are different methods of consecration and the method varies based on its purpose. The turban on the head of the high priest has explicit writing saying that they are holy to God (Ex. 28:36), someone who is separated for Yahweh. On the other hand, the entire people of Israel are to be holy to God. Among them some are chosen for special purpose and expected to be different and separated from the common people. This is applicable to the consecration of firstborn. When the deity commands ‘consecrate all the firstborn (Ex. 13:2),’<sup>539</sup> it does not mean sacrifice all the firstborn, but rather set them apart for him. They are special and should not be considered as common.

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<sup>538</sup> Ringgren, *qds*, *TDOT*, vol. 12, p. 535.

<sup>539</sup> The firstborn law in Ex. 13:2 is interpreted in Lk. 2:23 with the same understanding, “every male that opens the womb shall be called holy to the Lord.” Num. 3:13 reads “for all the firstborn are mine. When I struck down all the firstborn in Egypt, I set apart for myself every firstborn in Israel, whether human or animal. They are to be mine. I am the LORD.” This reference can be compared with the similar one in Num. 8:17: “Every firstborn male in Israel, whether human or animal is mine. When I struck down all the firstborn in Egypt, I set them apart for myself.” The same can be found in Deut. 15:19: “Set apart for the LORD your God every firstborn male of your herds and flocks. Do not put the firstborn of your cows to work, and do not shear the firstborn of your sheep”; Ex. 34:20: “Redeem the firstborn donkey with a lamb, but if you do not redeem it, break its neck. Redeem all your firstborn sons. No one is to appear before me empty-handed.” Cf. also Num. 3:46, 49, 51; 18:15-17.

### 7.2.3 פָּדָה: Padah

The word is used in the context of redeeming the firstborn (Ex. 13:13).<sup>540</sup> It is worth noting that the Hebrew word פָּדָה appears more than 70 times in the Hebrew Bible in various forms. The word פָּדָה is connected with some of the Semitic words such as the Assyrian *padu* and the Akkadian *padu/pedu* which usually means to ‘free’, ‘spare’, or ‘release’.<sup>541</sup> It is interesting to note that the Assyrian king is often referred to as *la padu*, which means ‘merciless’.<sup>542</sup> It can be a word assigned to the ruthless kings who rule over a depraved judicial system or they impose strict and vindictive ruling policies.<sup>543</sup> Conversely the word can also convey a meaning that has a connection to mercifulness or benevolence. Thus, *padu* may have been a free will offering or a demand from the deity in relation to his or her mercy and benevolence towards the people. The Arabic equivalent is *fud*. In old Arabic, the word *fud* is very much associated with the meaning ‘buy’, ‘pay’, or ‘redeem’ similar to that of other ancient Semitic languages.<sup>544</sup> However, in its classic usage, the word was often used in the sense of ‘delivering a person or an animal from imminent destruction or punishment’.<sup>545</sup> This implies that the firstborn would be killed or destroyed if they were not redeemed and *fud* is the way to buy them back or redeem them. Thus, the Arabic word *fud* could mean something offered to rescue the firstborn from being killed or

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<sup>540</sup> Ex. 13:13: “Redeem with a lamb every firstborn donkey, but if you do not redeem it, break its neck. Redeem every firstborn among your sons.”

<sup>541</sup> For a detailed discussion see M. A. Anat, “Determinism and Redemption,” in *BMiqr* 23 (1978), 425-429.

<sup>542</sup> See Cazelles, “Pada,” in *TDOT*, vol. 11, pp. 483-490.

<sup>543</sup> For a detailed discussion see R. J. Thompson, *Penitence and Sacrifice in Early Israel Outside the Levitical Law* (1963), pp. 68-73.

<sup>544</sup> In ancient Arabic the word *fedu*, which is very close to the Hebrew word *Padah*, means ‘to deliver a person or an animal from imminent destruction.’ See J. Pirenne, “The Priesthood in Ancient South Arabia,” in *Proceedings of the Seminar for Arabian Studies* 6 (1976), pp. 137-43.

<sup>545</sup> A. Jaussen, *Countumes des arabes au pays de Moab* (1908), pp. 361-362.



sacrificed. The word *fud* has a similar meaning in Ethiopic and Punic.<sup>546</sup> Therefore it can be affirmed that among the Ancient Near Eastern people, the word has a legal or judiciary tone. In a text written in Ugaritic, the word is used in the context of releasing a person from a legal obligation.<sup>547</sup> It is observed that in the Ugaritic usage the word shows its judicial sense with the releasing from a legal claim.<sup>548</sup> The firstborn redemption was common among the people of Mari.<sup>549</sup> The redemption was usually achieved through substituting a valuable object, either an animal or article.<sup>550</sup> Cazelles suggests that both in cultic and secular contexts in the prebiblical civilization the word always meant ‘set free.’<sup>551</sup>

It seems that the Hebrew word  $\text{פָּדוּם}$  had a similar sense in the Pentateuch to that of these other ancient witnesses. Ex. 13:13 speaks of redeeming the firstborn animal and human. Though the redemption of the animal is by means of a lamb, nothing is stated about the substitution for human firstborn in this particular passage. Ex. 34:20 also speaks of the same idea and an additional statement is made regarding a firstborn ass: they should break its neck if they are not able to redeem it using a lamb. In Ex. 21:8, the word  $\text{פָּדוּם}$  is used in terms of redeeming a female slave,<sup>552</sup> and Ex. 21:30 speaks of redeeming the owner of the goring ox.

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<sup>546</sup> *TDOT*, vol. 11, p. 483.

<sup>547</sup> See *KTU* 3.4; cf. M. Heltzer, “The Organization of Craftmanship in Ugarit,” *Palestinski Sbornik* 10III (1965), 47-60.

<sup>548</sup> *KTU* 3.4. On the obligation meaning see O. Loretz, *UF* 8 (1976), 449.

<sup>549</sup> See A. A. Macintosh, “Exodus 8:19, Distinct Redemption and the Hebrew Roots  $\text{פָּדוּם}$  and  $\text{פָּדָה}$ ,” *VT* 21 (1971), 548-555; M. R. Lehmann, “Identification of the Copper Scroll Based on Its Technical Terms,” *RevQ* 5 (1965), 97-105.

<sup>550</sup> See H. Cazelles, ‘Consecration d’enfant et de femmes,’ in M. Birot, *Miscellanea Babylonica* (1985), pp. 45-50.

<sup>551</sup> Cazelles, “Pada,” in *TDOT*, vol. 11, p. 484.

<sup>552</sup> The term ‘Hebrew slave’ is very misleading in terms of its meaning and implication. Slaves were very common in the Ancient culture and a Hebrew who became a slave or a Hebrew who owned a slave is controlled by the rules of the people. There were four ways a Hebrew could

The owner of a female slave is not permitted to treat her as he wishes. There are rules for both male and female slaves.<sup>553</sup> A Hebrew<sup>554</sup> male slave is free<sup>555</sup> after six years of his service (Ex. 21:2), though slavery among the Israelites was not like that of other Ancient Near Eastern people.<sup>556</sup> According to the text here in Ex. 21:2, 7-8, it seems that a female slave is *not* free after the completion of six years' servitude like the males. She is not free to go as she wishes except under exceptional circumstances as explained in the text.

The first exception is if her owner is not able to keep up with the rules or agreement or covenant he made in buying her as his possession; in this case he is bound to set her free and not allowed to resell her to someone else. The master of the slave needs to allow her to be redeemed by her father or anyone from her lineage.

There is a common misunderstanding in translating Ex. 21:8. It looks like the word *הִפְדָּהּ* is used here in the context of freeing the girl or allowing her to be bought back free by her father or biological relative if the owner/buyer does not like her or finds her unsatisfactory. The girl's

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become a slave: sold by impoverished parents (Ex. 21:2); sold for theft (Ex. 22:2); selling himself as a slave (Lev. 25:39), and being taken as a captive by a foreign ruler.

<sup>553</sup> Sumerians also had special laws regarding how to treat a female slave. See for a discussion J. J. Finkelstein, "Sex Offences in Sumerian Laws," *JAOS* 86 (1966), 355-72.

<sup>554</sup> The word 'Hebrew' itself was used as a synonym for slave. See for example Gen. 39:14; 41:12; 43:32; Ex. 1:15; 2:6). The name was not a respectable one, rather something of a despised one and even the Egyptians were not willing to eat with them (Gen. 43:32). They were a disadvantaged people and were employed in menial jobs.

<sup>555</sup> The term used here is of debatable meaning. The word in Hebrew is *פָּדָה*. It could mean freed or set free or let go. See *DCH*, vol. III, p. 290. Such a person is not given full citizenship or privileges. See Childs, *Exodus*, p. 468.

<sup>556</sup> The rules and regulations for slavery among the Israelites are very unique. There were two kinds of slaves: Hebrew slaves and foreigners. For a detailed discussion see David M. Goldenberg, *The Curse of Ham: Race and Slavery in Early Judaism, Christianity, and Islam* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).

father need not pay back the money the buyer paid to him<sup>557</sup> in purchasing her or as dowry because the second clause states ‘*since he has dealt unfairly with her.*’<sup>558</sup> Here the problem is with him, for he does not like her and thus wants to get rid of her.

The second way that a condition can be broken is by marrying another woman and denying the rights of the former as promised in the covenant. According to the text, marrying another woman is acceptable as long as he is able to keep his promise with the first one. Here the woman has the freedom of choice. If she feels that she is being denied or neglected in her rights and privileges, she is free to go and her master should let her go. Here, *הִרְצֵה* is not something demanded, but an obligation or a moral determination to let her go and be free. Thus, redemption in this context equates to freedom. There is no payment involved. In the first situation, the slave failed to live up to the expectation of the master and thus there is a breach of the conditions, though it is not the fault of the woman, the slave. This does not allow the master to demand a redemption price but rather allows her father to take her back freely, *הִרְצֵה*. The owner has the right to send or give the woman back to her father but not to anyone else. In the second place, the woman has the choice. She can decide to stay or be freed, *הִרְצֵה*, since there is a breach in the covenant.

This text and the usage of the word *הִרְצֵה* has dissimilarities with legal notes regarding a goring ox in Ex. 21:30. The text in Ex. 21:30 speaks about the ransom payment for redeeming the owner of the goring ox who killed someone, whilst Ex. 21:8 speaks of freeing him without

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<sup>557</sup> The owner needed to pay back the money he paid to her father.

<sup>558</sup> NRSV. NIV reads “because he has broken faith with her.” Durham translates it as “If she is unsatisfactory in the opinion of her owner, who has set her apart for himself, he is to permit her to be bought free. He has no right to sell her to a strange family, because he has severed his relationship with her” (Durham, *Exodus*, p. 307).

payment.  $\text{הָרָפָה}$  in Ex. 21:30 stands for the payment one needed to make in order to avoid the penalty imposed by the victim's party.<sup>559</sup>

A similar kind of instruction is seen in Ex. 13:13.<sup>560</sup> Here the word is used in the context of redeeming the firstborn ass and human male child.  $\text{הָרָפָה}$  in Ex. 34:19-20 also has an identical meaning as that of the same word used in other instances. The redemption should be done by offering a lamb for the firstborn of a donkey. The substitute for the human firstborn is not mentioned in Ex. 34:20. In 1 Sam. 14:45 Jonathan was redeemed by the people from the oath of his father Saul. According to Saul's vow, he was supposed to be killed or sacrificed, but the people stood there as agents in redeeming him from the vow of his father Saul. This seems to be a common practice in the Ancient Near East.

The firstborn are consecrated to the Lord and they are redeemed with a specified payment. One should note the difference between consecration and sacrifice. It is true, as Cazelles simply noted, that 'consecration is not sacrifice'.<sup>561</sup>

Firstborn are consecrated or sanctified but not sacrificed. The word  $\text{הָרָפָה}$  is not used in the context of sacrifice but redeeming from a difficult situation. Thus, in the context of the firstborn,  $\text{הָרָפָה}$  is something to replace the firstborn. In other words,  $\text{הָרָפָה}$  stands as a substitute to free the firstborn from the firstborn-covenant which says that 'all that opens the womb belongs to me.'

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<sup>559</sup> See for a discussion B. C. Jackson, "Travels and Travails of the Goring Ox," in S. E. Loewenstamm, *Studies in the Bible and in the Ancient Near East* (1978), pp. 41-56.

<sup>560</sup> The passage is considered as very early and most scholars place its source as E, whereas it greatly varies from the similar passage in Deuteronomy (Deut. 15:19).

<sup>561</sup> Cazelles, "Pada," in *TDOT*, vol. 11, p. 485.

### 7.3 The Firstborn and the Substitution: Numbers 3

Numbers chapter 3 speaks about the consecration of the Tribe of Levi for the service in the tabernacle as associates and helpers of Aaron, thereby making them the substitute for the Israelite firstborn. This is one of the foundational passages in the Hebrew Bible about the firstborn, the service of the Levites and of the priests.

The key passage for our discussion here is Num. 3:11-13.<sup>562</sup> This passage is a complement to the earlier passages in Exodus and Leviticus regarding the priesthood of Aaron and the Levites. It seems that the author or editor of the book is making concrete affirmations and clarifying questions that were raised by his audience from the earlier passages such as Ex. 4:14, 29:1 and 32:29. It looks as if the present observations are clearly based on Ex. 13:12. In the earlier passage it is stated that the firstborn are God's and 'all that opens the womb belongs to him.' The language is the same here when the author says, 'the Levites are mine.' The author is pointing to a substitutionary action from the deity regarding the firstborn of the Israelites and the Levites. Instead of the firstborn, Yahweh is taking the Levites for the service.

To uncover the meaning of the substitution, we need to look at the background of the current passage. There are two censuses in the book of Numbers, which set the basis for the rest of the book. The first one is found in Numbers 3 and the second is in Numbers 4. The first one has two aspects: one is to find the number of firstborns in Israel and the second was to count all

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<sup>562</sup> Num. 3:11-13: "The LORD also said to Moses, "I have taken the Levites from among the Israelites in place of the first male offspring of every Israelite woman. The Levites are mine, for all the firstborn are mine. When I struck down all the firstborn in Egypt, I set apart for myself every firstborn in Israel, whether human or animal. They are to be mine. I am the LORD.'"

the males of the tribe of Levi who are one month old and above. The purpose of the census in Numbers 3 was to replace the firstborn with the Levites. The second census, found in Numbers 4, was to count all the men aged 30 to 50 among the Levites. A special age consideration is given here due to the special duties assigned to them: dismantling, transporting and erecting the tabernacle. This is a hard and heavy job and thus people needed to be strong and healthy.

Num. 3:5 speaks of bringing the Levites and presenting them to Aaron to assist him in his duties in the Tabernacle. Their duties are to help Aaron and the whole community (v. 6) by doing the works of the Tabernacle (v. 7). The duties are specified (v. 8) as taking care of all the furnishings of the tent of Meeting and fulfilling the obligations of the Israelites by doing the work of the tabernacle. The Hebrew word used here is *הִקְרִיב* and it has the meaning ‘bring’, that is ‘to present’, ‘submit’ or ‘deliver’.<sup>563</sup> Here it translates as presenting a person for a sacred service.<sup>564</sup> They are to be brought in front of the priest, Aaron. It is an order from Yahweh as noted in Num. 3:5, which reads ‘The Lord said to Moses’. The author is stating the importance of the ordinance and making it come forth from the mouth of Yahweh. The Lord is providing an alternative by requisitioning the whole tribe of Levi for the service. The next key phrase in Num. 3:5 is *וַהֲעִמְדָה*, which means ‘making them stand’. In other words, Moses has to make the Levites stand in front of Aaron and God as offerings.<sup>565</sup> The idiom ‘to make someone stand before someone’ is used when presenting an inferior to a superior.<sup>566</sup> Here the author is taking the substitution to the next

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<sup>563</sup> *DCH*, vol. 7, pp. 305-312.

<sup>564</sup> *DCH*, vol. 7, p. 311. The word is used with a similar meaning at Ex. 28:1; 29:4, 8; 40:12, 14; Lev. 7:35; 8:6, 24,13; Num. 3:6, 8:9, 10.

<sup>565</sup> *DCH*, vol. 6, p. 473.

<sup>566</sup> See for example the presenting of Jacob before Pharaoh (Gen. 47:7), or of a poor person before a priest (Lev. 27:8). Timothy R. Ashley, *The Book of Numbers* (The New International Commentary on the Old Testament; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), p. 77.

level as the substitution is affirmed and established by Moses though it is initiated by Yahweh. Thus both God and the founder of the nation are the ones who are making it happen, meaning that no one can change it.

The last part of the passage explains the purpose of presenting the Levites<sup>567</sup> to Aaron. It reads וְשָׂרְתוּ אֹתוֹ 'and they shall serve him.' The word שָׂרַת is very important here. It could mean 'minister to', 'to serve', 'to officiate', 'to attend', 'to tend', or 'to take care of.'<sup>568</sup> In any case, the duty of the Levites is to assist the priests. Levine observes that 'This verb has particular significance in Torah sources pertaining to the tribe of Levi, where it appropriately characterizes the type of service performed by the Levites'.<sup>569</sup> The meaning is more clear in Num. 3:7 with usage of the terms אֶת־מִשְׁמֶרְתּוֹ מְרוֹנֵשׁ – 'they shall perform the duties for him' which literally translates as 'they shall keep his service'; לַעֲבֹד אֶת־עֲבֹדָתָהּ means 'to do the service,' which highlights the maintenance function of the Levites. Milgrom translates וְשָׂרַת וְאֶת־מִשְׁמֶרְתּוֹ as performing the duty of a guard.<sup>570</sup> For Milgrom the word לַעֲבֹד means physical work and thus he gives three meanings for the word לַעֲבֹד:

1. general physical labour;
2. the task of transport of the tabernacle;
3. a portion of that task, either dismantling and reassembling or carrying.<sup>571</sup>

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<sup>567</sup> For a critical assessment of the term Levi and its origin see Levine, *Numbers*, pp. 279-290.

<sup>568</sup> *DCH*, vol. 8, pp. 567-569.

<sup>569</sup> Levine, *Numbers*, p. 156.

<sup>570</sup> See Milgrom, *Studies in Levitical Terminology* (Berkeley: University of California, 1970), pp. 9-10.

<sup>571</sup> See Milgrom, *Studies in Levitical Terminology*, p. 61. Also see *DCH*, vol. 8, pp. 237-244.

Though there is no supportive argument for Milgrom's interpretation, it could be true. Levites could have done the duty of a guard but that may not be the only duty they performed; guarding the tabernacle and its articles must have been part of their duty (Num. 3:7-8). Num. 3:9 explains the totality of giving the Levites to the service of Aaron and thus to the whole community, and through this to Yahweh. The usage of the word here is repetitive: נָתַתָּם נָתַתָּם. The word נָתַתָּם translates as 'give' and the phrase literally means 'give, give'. The repetition here shows the importance and adds emphasis to the point<sup>572</sup> that they are wholly given to the service of Aaron. The author seems imply that the firstborn were serving in the religious activities until the selection of the Levites.

The question remains: why were the Levites chosen to do this work and not any other tribe? Though a comprehensive answer is not found in this passage, there is an indication given in relation to the Levites' strong stand against the idolatry caused by the golden calf and the duties and responsibilities of the firstborn. According to the author, the reason behind the selection of the Levites was their ardent commitment to Yahweh when the whole community turned to worship the golden calf. When Moses asked, "Who is on the Lord's side? Come to me," it was all the Levites who gathered around Moses.<sup>573</sup> In the golden calf incident, no one was bold enough to stand and fight against the prohibited form of worship except the Levites and thus the Levites became prominent in the service of God instead of the firstborn.<sup>574</sup>

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<sup>572</sup> Budd, *Numbers*, p. 34. Budds states that this word could have some connection with the group of people known as Nethinim in Ezer. 2:36, 40-43 and Neh. 10:28, who were assigned to do menial work from the time of Solomon. Thus, here he concludes that the word could mean Levites as *Nethinim* to Aaron.

<sup>573</sup> Ex. 32:26: "Then Moses stood in the gate of the camp, and said, Who is on the LORD'S side? let him come unto me. And all the sons of Levi gathered themselves together unto him."

<sup>574</sup> So G. J. Wenham, *Numbers: An Introduction and Commentary* (Leicester: IVP, 1981), p. 70.



This sheds some light on the audience of the book of Numbers and its purpose. The audience seems to be a group of people who were double-minded or syncretistic in their attitude towards Yahweh. The author is trying to tell them that if they serve God faithfully and stand by him, they also will be blessed. The second possibility is a group of people who were questioning the authority of the Aaronic priesthood and the special status of Levites in the community. The author or the editor is cleverly and clearly presenting the case that they are special because they stood for God and they were thus selected by God and appointed by Moses, whose authority can not be questioned.

We should note that Levites are helpers in religious activities and are not priests. The priesthood is reserved for the Aaronic family (Num. 3:10), although Aaron does belong to the tribe of Levi. Moses is instructed to appoint Aaron and his sons as priests. This involves many ceremonial rituals. The precise details are not relevant here. The Hebrew word used for the appointment of Levites is *תָּקַף*. The author or the final editor was very careful in selecting this particular word. It does not simply mean asking to assume an office, but rather positioning in a particular post with authority. The verb clearly suggests “mustering,” rather than simply “counting.”<sup>575</sup> The Levites are appointed to guard and assist Aaron; Aaron’s family are appointed to the priestly service. Levites are given to the Aaronic family to help in the cultic activities, and guarding, moving and settling the tabernacle. The process of selecting the Levites for this purpose is explained in the context of their zeal for Yahweh. Instead of a lamb or a fixed price in redeeming the firstborn, a whole tribe was adopted for a special service.

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<sup>575</sup> Levine, *Numbers*, p. 157.

This shows the hand of a priest in editing this material at the final stage. The primacy of priests is canonized here when the firstborn are replaced by the Levites. This shows a radical change in the cultic administration of Judaism. Numbers 3 throws further light onto this issue of selection and replacement.<sup>576</sup> Verse 11 shows who the author of the whole claim is. It is the Lord who makes it and this reveals the authentic nature of the entitlement. Verse 12 speaks about the divine claim on the Levites as the substitute for the firstborn in Israel, and verse 13<sup>577</sup> reveals the historic reason for selecting the firstborn. Though the substitution of Levites is a new thought in this passage, the substitution in itself was not new for it was practised and advised. This is repeated in Num. 3:40-41. Here not only the human firstborn but the livestock were also in consideration. The firstborn were required to be numbered so that equivalent substitutions could be made.

The reason for selecting the firstborn is connected to the Exodus event and the deliverance of the Israelites from Egyptian bondage.<sup>578</sup> The sacred status of the firstborn is affirmed elsewhere especially in the legal passages such as Ex. 22:29-30; 34:19-20, which we have already analysed. Exodus 34:20 clearly speaks of redeeming the firstborn son rather than sacrificing them. All of the firstborn, animal and human, were to be given to God. The firstborn of the clean animals should be sacrificed while the unclean and human firstborn need to be

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<sup>576</sup> Num. 3:11 reads “The LORD also said to Moses, “I have taken the Levites from among the Israelites in place of the first male offspring of every Israelite woman. The Levites are mine, for all the firstborn are mine. When I struck down all the firstborn in Egypt, I set apart for myself every firstborn in Israel, whether human or animal. They are to be mine. I am the LORD.””

<sup>577</sup> Num. 3:13: “for all the firstborn are mine. When I struck down all the firstborn in Egypt, I set apart for myself every firstborn in Israel, whether human or animal. They are to be mine. I am the LORD.”

<sup>578</sup> Num. 3:13: “for all the firstborn are mine. When I struck down all the firstborn in Egypt, I set apart for myself every firstborn in Israel, whether human or animal. They are to be mine. I am the LORD.”

redeemed. The redemption was bought with a lamb or money, but here the concept is changed and another group of people are being substituted for the firstborn.

Dozeman observes three key elements in the status of the firstborn from the viewpoint of this priestly writer:

1. the priestly writer indicates the firstborn as explicitly having a holy status.
2. The redemption requirement for the firstborn is effective in the wilderness rather than commencing with Israel's future life in the land. Dozeman argues that, as a result, the holy status of the firstborn is a present reality for priestly writers.
3. The priestly writer also provides a one-time means of substitution through the Levitical priestly caste, who are dedicated to God.<sup>579</sup>

Num. 3:11 says the 'Lord has taken the Levites.' The Hebrew word  $\text{לָקַח}$  means 'take position', 'take the ownership', 'acquire', 'obtain' or 'purchase'.<sup>580</sup> That means Yahweh is taking the ownership of the Levites as he owns all the firstborn. Substitution is the vehicle of exchanging the position of ownership. The word  $\text{בְּמָוֶל}$  has many variant meanings and in the present context it means 'in place of' someone or something, 'instead of', 'in return', 'as payment from', 'in succession to', or 'on behalf of'.<sup>581</sup>

It is believed that in the early periods, the firstborn assumed the priestly role in the family after the father. Although we do not have much textual evidence of this from the Hebrew Bible,

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<sup>579</sup> Thomas B. Dozeman, "Numbers," in *New Interpreters Bible*, vol. 2, p. 51.

<sup>580</sup> *DCH*, vol. 4, pp. 564-574.

<sup>581</sup> For a detailed discussion see *DCH*, vol. 8, pp. 621-627.

there is archaeological evidence from the neighbouring peoples.<sup>582</sup> This was true in most ancient cultures, as we have observed earlier. However, Gray argues an unpersuasive case against it. He argues that the firstborn never assumed the role of priests. He offers the following arguments:

1. Samuel, a firstborn, has to be dedicated to the temple-service by a special vow;
2. Jud. 17:5 appears to regard any son indiscriminately in relation to availability for priestly functions;
3. The indications that in early times the priesthood was vested rather in the father (cp. the ritual of Passover, Exodus 12-13; and father = priest, Jud. 17:10). This does not favour a priesthood of the firstborn.<sup>583</sup> The family of Aaron belonged to the tribe of Levi (1 Chr. 6:1-15) and not the tribe of Reuben the firstborn.

Conversely, the Hebrew Bible has plenty of references to the priority being given to the firstborn, despite the fact that very often the opposite occurred. Although Samuel's dedication was based on a special vow, the fact that he was the firstborn cannot be denied. Here the vow of the mother takes prominence over the fact that he was the firstborn and nothing is said of his birth-rights or about his family standing.

Gray's observations about Jud. 17:5 and the shrine at Micah's house fail to note that this is not the common practice. The verse reads 'Now this man Micah had a shrine,' which shows it was worthy of mention, and therefore could not be assumed as a norm. In addition, Jud. 17:5

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<sup>582</sup> The Hammurabi code has that the first child should be the chief heir of the family. See Roth, *Law Collections from Mesopotamia and Asia Minor*, p. 118; Davies, *The Inheritance of the Firstborn*, p. 181.

<sup>583</sup> G. B. Gray, *Numbers* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1903), p. 26.

speaks of ‘one of his sons’ being appointed as priest. This could mean anyone, including the firstborn, since nothing further is said about this son. In any case, the firstborn’s authority comes into play only after the father has relinquished his. Thus Jud. 17:5 does not speak against the firstborn’s priestly status. It is rather a recording of an unusual event that took place among the people. It is important in the eyes of the writer of Judges to make known to the coming generations that practices which were not pleasing to Yahweh then took place.

Num. 3:50 also speaks about blessing the Levites. According to the text, giving to Yahweh is equal to giving to priests and giving to priests is equal to giving to Yahweh as all that is given to Yahweh has been given back to the priests.<sup>584</sup>

All this implies that the substitution of the Levites for the firstborn is a later development. The author or the editor is trying to appeal to the people as he argues for the prominence of the Priests and Levites by introducing the eminence of the firstborn and God’s intention to replace them by the Priests and Levites. The importance of the firstborn child was a common thing in the ancient world and it was the firstborn who would have assumed the religious duties in the house or in the local shrines. The Levite tribe took over the duties of the firstborn in the later period.

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<sup>584</sup> It is a relational element and not contradictory in the Hebrew Bible. There are many studies on the ownership of tithes and offerings. It is commonly agreed that the tithe and the offerings were the means of livelihood for the Levites. The scope of this study will not allow me to go into all these elements. For a discussion see Gary A. Anderson, *Sacrifices and offerings in ancient Israel: studies in their social and political* (Harvard: University Press, 1985). Numbers 3 also records the numbering of the firstborn from one month old onwards. The age for military service was 20 and for service to the tabernacle was 30. It seems that in the ancient world child mortality was high and only a child one month old was considered out of danger from the troubles of birth and new life. If a child dies before becoming one month old, it was considered as a stillborn. For a detailed discussion see W. Gunther Plaut, *Numbers: a Modern Commentary* (New York: Union of American Hebrew Congregations, 1979), p. 26.

However, the customs related to the rights and privileges of the firstborn were practised. They usually received a double portion from the father's property.

#### 7.4 Consecration of the Human Firstborn: Analysis of Key Hebrew Texts

There are many texts in the Hebrew Bible that explicitly speak about the firstborn. The following pages will briefly but critically analyse these passages to bring out the understanding of the firstborn in the Hebrew Bible. The research will not be dealing in detail with questions of date or *sitz-im-leben* of the texts, since they are beyond the limit of the current study. The texts shall be considered as they appear in each book and analysed in the context in which they appear.

One of the central questions is whether consecration means sacrificing or setting apart for some special purpose. Both views have attracted scholarly debate and discussion. Though the texts do not explicitly ask for the sacrifice of the firstborn to the deity, is sacrifice nevertheless implied when the text says 'consecrate to me' or 'give to me all that first opens the womb'? This involves the question of the origin and the purpose of human sacrifice in general and of the firstborn in particular.

It is argued that there could be a belief that fertility is ensured by firstborn sacrifice.<sup>585</sup> The texts relating to the demand of the deity to sacrifice Isaac are referred to in this respect. In the story of Abraham, it is claimed there is a promise of numerous offspring to come on condition that he sacrifices the firstborn of his wife Sarah. To support this point, scholars quote the story of

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<sup>585</sup> Propp, *Exodus*, p. 456.

Hannah (1 Sam. 2:21). When Hannah gave her firstborn to her deity, she received the blessing of five more children. However, according to the textual evidence we have, Abraham was not promised more offspring if he would sacrifice his firstborn, his one and the only son, Isaac, a precious child, the family received after a long period of waiting. The analysis of Genesis 22 and other passages related to this story does not give any such promise of more blessings in offering or sacrificing Abraham's firstborn through Sarah, Isaac. The purpose of the events in Genesis 22 was not to give more offspring, but to test the faith of Abraham. The text reads:

וַיְהִי אַחֲרֵי הַדְּבָרִים הָאֵלֶּה וַהֲאֱלֹהִים נִסָּה אֶת־אַבְרָהָם

The verb used here is נִסָּה, meaning 'test,' 'try,' or 'prove.'<sup>586</sup> Therefore, the textual evidence we have suggests that the command to offer the firstborn in the case of Abraham was not in order to get many more offspring or for many blessings in any other respect, but was a test of Abraham's confidence in his God who gave him the son.

In the case of Hannah, she made a pledge to offer her firstborn to her God, if God answered her cry. It seems that Hannah made a choice not to redeem the child but rather made him a Nazirite for his whole life (1 Sam. 1:11) and offered him at the service of her God under the priest. This would have been a common way of dedicating a child to God by giving him fully to serve in the shrine and assist the priest. If not, the child has to be redeemed. There was no specific demand for the son from God in this case and there is no mention of the possibility of redemption at all. Hannah's prayer was not for more blessings in any respect. In the prayer of dedicating the child Samuel to the service of her God, even before she conceived, and also when

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<sup>586</sup> See *DCH*, vol. 5, pp. 697-698.

she brought the child to the temple, there is no implication that she should get more offspring or wealth.

These stories indicate that offering the firstborn is not a device to obtain more blessing.<sup>587</sup> Such biblical accounts of the meaning of the dedication of the first-born make no direct link to subsequent fertility,<sup>588</sup> though this could have been the driving force in sacrificing the firstborn in other religions.

Though there are many other passages in the Hebrew Bible about the redemption or consecration of the firstborn, the scope of the present study will not allow looking into all of them. Instead, the present study will be focused on some of the key passages directly referring to handing over the firstborn to the God of Israel.

#### 7.4.1 Exodus 13

The Exodus text in 13:12 seems to approve of the calling ‘to set apart’ all the firstborn to God. This passage does not speak about a provision for redemption. In the canonical perspective,<sup>589</sup> this is the first claim for giving the firstborn to Yahweh in the whole of the

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<sup>587</sup> As we have observed, the firstborn male child belongs to him by the nature of his birth. We have observed the origin and development of this concept among the Israelites in the previous chapter.

<sup>588</sup> Propp, *Exodus*, p. 456. Levenson argues in this same line of thought and concludes that a beloved son is lost to a father, only to be replaced or restored. Jon Douglas Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son: the Transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity* (London: Yale University Press, 1993).

<sup>589</sup> Here the word ‘Canonical Perspective’ is used to explain the way the books are ordered and placed in the Hebrew canon as it appears in in the modern Hebrew Bible.



Hebrew Bible. As we have already said, many scholars assume from Ex. 13:2 that there was a time when all the firstborn of the Israelites were offered/sacrificed to their God.<sup>590</sup> There is a possibility of considering that the firstborn human could have been sacrificed in some instances.<sup>591</sup> This kind of firstborn sacrifice in some instances or for special occasions or purposes can be traced in most primeval and modern cultures.<sup>592</sup> Irrespective of geographical regions and religions, this seems to be a common practice.<sup>593</sup>

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<sup>590</sup> There are scholars who argue on this point. See recently John Van Seters, *Changing Perspectives 1: Studies in the History, Literature and Religion of Biblical Israel* (London: Equinox, 2011), pp. 399-408.

<sup>591</sup> For a detailed discussion on human sacrifice in various cultures where human sacrifice was a very common form of worship, see Jan N. Bremmer, *The Strange World of Human Sacrifice* (Peeters Publishers, 2007).

<sup>592</sup> For some recent examples see Dan McDougall, "Indian cult kills children for goddess," *The Guardian*, Sunday 5 March 2006 [<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2006/mar/05/india.theobserver>]; Daniel Miller, "Indian father kills his eight-month-old son with an axe to appease Hindu goddess of destruction and rebirth," 11 October 2013 [<http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2454853/Indian-father-kills-month-old-son-axe-appease-Hindu-goddess-destruction-rebirth.html#ixzz30Mb3HQv1>].

<sup>593</sup> Child sacrifice is a common thing in most ancient cultures. For a detailed discussion see Paul G. Mosca, *Child Sacrifice in Canaanite and Israelite Religion: A Study in Mulk and Mlk* (Unpublished Dissertation; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1975); George C. Heider, *The Cult of Molek: A Reassessment* (JSOTSup, 43; Sheffield: JSOT, 1985); John Day, *Molech: A God of Human Sacrifice in the Old Testament* (University of Cambridge oriental publications, no. 41; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989); Susanna Shelby Brown, *Late Carthaginian Child Sacrifice and Sacrificial Monuments in Their Mediterranean Context* (JSOT/ASOR monograph series, no. 3; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991); Jon Douglas Levenson, *The Death and Resurrection of the Beloved Son: The Transformation of Child Sacrifice in Judaism and Christianity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993); Francesca Stavrakopoulou, *King Manasseh and Child Sacrifice: A Biblical Distortion of Historical Realities* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2004). Even today, it is taking place among primitive tribes around the world. Every year a couple of them appear in the Newspapers in India.

The command in Ex. 13:2, 12 is to consecrate to Yahweh every firstborn.<sup>594</sup> The Hebrew word for ‘set apart’ here is *שָׁדַד*. The word *שָׁדַד*, as we have seen, has a technical meaning ‘to set apart,’ ‘to devote,’ ‘to dedicate,’ ‘to consecrate,’ ‘to sanctify, or ‘to purify.’<sup>595</sup> Here it could have the connotation ‘be careful to set apart what Yahweh has already set apart for him.’<sup>596</sup> The *piel* form, as found in Ex. 13:2, could mean ‘be removed from ordinary use and regarded or treated as belonging to the deity.’<sup>597</sup> Propp rightly observes that the main intent is doubtless more practical: do not profane the firstborn through ordinary use,<sup>598</sup> though the details of the process are explained in Ex. 13:11-16. This process of consecration can be for an individual or a group.<sup>599</sup> In other words, *שָׁדַד* is an act of consecration which ‘indicates a transfer from the profane to the sacred sphere.’<sup>600</sup> In other words, it implies that the subject be removed from the ordinary use.<sup>601</sup> In the present context of Ex. 13:2 this word is used of the transferring of ownership from the human to the divine, i.e. dedication to Yahweh.<sup>602</sup> This means that Yahweh is claiming ownership of the firstborn based on what he has done for them in the past. In the priestly office, the priests are to take the responsibility of the firstborn in terms of serving God as that of a firstborn in a family.<sup>603</sup> Though the process of consecration is not explained here, it is implied in

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<sup>594</sup> Ex. 13:2: “Consecrate to me every firstborn male. The first offspring of every womb among the Israelites belongs to me, whether human or animal.” 13:12: “you shall set apart to the LORD all that first opens the womb. All the firstlings of your cattle that are males shall be the LORD’s.”

<sup>595</sup> *DCH*, vol. 7, pp. 190-204.

<sup>596</sup> Propp, *Exodus 1-18*, p. 421.

<sup>597</sup> *DCH*, vol. 7, p. 191.

<sup>598</sup> Propp, *Exodus: 1-18*, p. 421.

<sup>599</sup> *DCH*, vol. 7, p. 191.

<sup>600</sup> Dozeman, *Exodus*, p. 288.

<sup>601</sup> *DCH*, vol. 7, p. 190.

<sup>602</sup> See *DCH*, vol. 7, p. 191; Dozeman, *Exodus*, p. 288.

<sup>603</sup> See Martin I. Lockshin (ed.), *Rashbam’s Commentary on Exodus: An Annotated Translation* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997), p. 127.

this context and its details are given in the remaining part of the chapter, especially in Ex. 13:11-16.

Exodus 13 is only an introduction to the consecration of the firstborn<sup>604</sup> and to the practice of the unleavened bread. These two concepts were further developed elsewhere in Hebrew Bible. Therefore, the brevity in Ex. 13:2 is not an issue.

Walter Brueggemann rightly observed in commenting on Ex. 13:2 that,

Whether this language of consecration refers at any time to any actual sacrifice of human life, or rather is metaphorical is open to question. But there is no doubt that in Israel's purview consecration to Yahweh meant loyalty and allegiance, and not the taking of life. To make the notion more than a metaphor for loyalty and allegiance would be to contradict the core affirmations of Yahwism, and to think in the categories of Pharaoh's abusive practices.<sup>605</sup>

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<sup>604</sup> The Hebrew word for the firstborn is בְּכוֹר. The referent of the word בְּכוֹר in this passage is not very clear – the firstborn animal or human or both? There are different opinions about its usage in this particular passage. Propp tends to argue that it was speaking only of the human firstborn male, the male child that opens the womb. It does not matter whether the father already had some sons from a different wife or not. However, as we have already observed in the previous chapter the word בְּכוֹר is used to denote either human firstborn or an animal firstborn. In this particular passage (Ex. 13:2), it is used to indicate both human and animal firstborn. The term is clearly used only for male and not for female. The second part of Ex. 13:2 reveals it very clearly. “Consecrate to me every firstborn male.” Thus here the word בְּכוֹר denotes a man's eldest son, his principal heir (cf. Deut. 21:15). In other words it is used in terms of the one who opens the womb first, that means a woman's male firstborn. This allows that a man who has many wives may have many firstborn from his different wives. All of them are to be consecrated though the father could choose one as his principal firstborn after him. The passage is not orientated in terms of men but in terms of women, as the first male child who opens her womb. This is also clearly alluded to in Ex. 13:15: “When Pharaoh stubbornly refused to let us go, the LORD killed the firstborn of both people and animals in Egypt. This is why I sacrifice to the LORD the first male offspring of every womb and redeem each of my firstborn sons.” In cases of multiple wives, the decision was left to the father. In the case of Abraham, he confirmed Isaac as his firstborn. This is also verified by the words of the patriarch Jacob when he addresses his children. He addresses Reuben, the son of Leah, as his firstborn (Gen. 49:3).

<sup>605</sup> Walter Brueggemann, “The Book of Exodus: Introduction, Commentary, and Reflections,” in *New Interpreters Bible*, vol. 1 (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1994), p. 785.

However, Wellhausen thought that the firstborn were offered out of gratitude to the deity<sup>606</sup> for the possibility of fertility and wealth. Though there could be an element of gratitude in the firstborn sacrifice, the primary focus is more commemoration of the past than the present blessing they received. In other cultures, the firstborn sacrifice may have had a connection with thankfulness. In the present passage, there is nothing in relation to what they are having or possessing. The author of Exodus 13<sup>607</sup> connects the custom of the firstborn with the history of the Exodus, the actual deliverance of the people from bondage.<sup>608</sup> This seems closer to the understanding of consecrating or sacrificing the firstlings among the Israelites.

The instructions are clear: the animal or human should be the first that opens the womb and it should be male. The first part of Ex. 13:12 speaks about the broad understanding that all the firstborn belong to Yahweh and the second clause explains that it should be male. These two instructions are very broad. Thus Ex. 13:12 gives a general instruction on how one should deal with the firstborn. Ex. 13:13 explains to the reader about the exemptions in offering the firstborn to their God. That means that chapter 13 gives a full account of the firstborn and the way people should deal with them.

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<sup>606</sup> Wellhausen, *Prolegomena to the History*, p. 85. There are other views regarding the way the firstborn were considered and sacrificed among the Ancient Near Eastern people. R. Smith states that the firstborn were sacrificed and consumed to strengthen the bond between the deity and the participants in the meal, and later it became a sacrificial meal eaten together with the members of the family (cf. Deuteronomy 15).

<sup>607</sup> Scholars have even argued that Ex. 13:13b, 15b are post exilic insertions and that the original text of Exodus 13 contained a command to sacrifice all the firstborn to Yahweh. Though these views are challenged, they still represent prevailing beliefs and arguments. For a discussion see Houtman, *Exodus*, pp. 164-166.

<sup>608</sup> Cornelis Houtman, *Exodus: Historical Commentary on the Old Testament*, vol. 2 (Kampen: Kok Publishing house, 1996), p. 164.

Though scholars identify a hiatus in Ex. 13:1-2 in comparison with the flow of chapter 12, it seems that there is a strong continuity between these two chapters. Chapter 12 explains about the importance of Passover, the criteria for selecting a paschal lamb, how to celebrate the festival, and precautions and restrictions about it. Chapter 13 continues from the previous discussion of the Passover celebration and adds more points on redeeming the firstborn.

The author or the final editor wants to convey an important point to his readers: to make them understand the connection, importance and meaning of the firstborn in the context of the redemption of the people of Israel. In other words, all the three celebrations mentioned in Exodus 12 and 13 (the feast of unleavened bread, Paschal lamb and the sacrifice of the firstborn) centred around the theme of the Israelites' deliverance. These three are interconnected and have a deeper theological meaning.<sup>609</sup> The writer is trying to connect these together rather than dividing them. Shared narratives and theological interpretation are being used to reinforce a message about the unity of the nation.<sup>610</sup> On that premise, the firstling portions in Exodus 13 are not a later insertion or interpolation but a purposeful device by the author or editor to further the ideological purpose of his writing.<sup>611</sup> The acts of God are closely connected to the words of God. This is also true in

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<sup>609</sup> The theological base of Judaism is centralized around these three things. The perception of who God is and what they need to do is based on what the God of Israel has done for them in the past. Thus the theology developed on the basis of their past history and encounters with God in their history.

<sup>610</sup> We should note the crucial factor that the people of Israel were intimately connected with their theology. It seems to me that theological unity was something which the writers of the Hebrew Bible tried to emphasise above almost anything else.

<sup>611</sup> For discussion see Durham, *Exodus*, pp. 176-177; Houtman, *Exodus*, pp. 210-216; Brevard S. Childs, *Exodus: A Commentary* (London: SCM Press, 1974), pp. 184-214.

the present passage. In the present context the author “does not see the Exodus as an ‘act of God’ distinct from ‘the word of God.’”<sup>612</sup>

Ex. 13:12 goes on to refer to redeeming the unclean animal and firstborn of human beings.

It reads:- לַיהוָה: הַזְכָּרִים לְךָ יִהְיֶה אֲשֶׁר בְּהֵמָה שֶׁגֵּר וְכָל־פֶּטֶר לַיהוָה כָּל־פֶּטֶר־רֶחֶם וְהַעֲבַרְתָּ

*“You are to give over to the LORD the first offspring of every womb. All the firstborn males of your livestock belong to the Lord.”*

Ex. 13:13 reads:

וְכָל־פֶּטֶר חֲמֹר תִּפְדֶּה בְּשֵׂה וְאִם־לֹא תִפְדֶּה וְעַרְפָּתוֹ וְכָל בְּכוֹר אָדָם בְּבִגְדֵי תִפְדֶּה:

*“Redeem with a lamb every firstborn donkey, but if you do not redeem it, break its neck. Redeem every firstborn among your sons.”*

The Hebrew word used for redeem is תִּפְדֶּה, imperfect *qal* form of the verb פָּדָה which, as we have seen, means redeem or set free. Houtman observes two kinds of usage of the word in Exodus: 1) In social regulations, a *hiphil* form is used, as in Ex. 21:8, which means ‘cause to be redeemed’; 2) In cultic regulations the *qal* form is used, as in Ex. 13:13, 15; 34:20, meaning ‘to redeem.’<sup>613</sup> He further states that ‘in all instances [the verb] concerns being free from bondage, from belonging to someone (Ex. 21:8; 13:13), from dire guilt, by presenting something in return, something of counter value, a quid pro quo, a ransom.’<sup>614</sup> Although this is a plausible reading, there are exceptions, particularly in the context of this present passage. Here it does not appear as if the animal or human firstborn is to be redeemed from bondage; rather the word is used in

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<sup>612</sup> See Childs, *Exodus*, p. 204.

<sup>613</sup> Houtman, *Exodus*, p. 216.

<sup>614</sup> Houtman, *Exodus*, p. 216.

connection with religious practices. Thus, the text implies that if no redemption is made, the animal is to be killed. The reasonable inference is that, if the human firstborn is not redeemed, he is also supposed to be killed - but not to be sacrificed. This means, for the human child as with the unclean animal, there are only two options available for the firstborn: either to be redeemed or killed. The firstborn of clean animals have only one choice; they must be offered as a sacrifice. There is no redemption available. The redemption is available only for unclean animals. Those species which can be redeemed, have to be redeemed or are killed. They are not fit for sacrifice. Since this is true, the firstborn human too has only these two choices, either be redeemed or killed. The implication is that they, like unclean animals, cannot be sacrificed.

Therefore, the question here is concerned with redeeming or killing, rather than sacrificing the firstborn. If the unclean animal is not redeemed, they are not to be sacrificed, but should be killed. The same logic applies to firstborn humans; if they are not redeemed, they are not allowed to be sacrificed but must be killed. This is the general rule which we can draw from the law of the unclean animal which are not allowed to be sacrificed. Hence, it can be concluded that the authors of these texts are not advocating or even discussing the practice of human sacrifice as such. On the contrary, these texts could be taken to show the impropriety and unacceptable nature of any attempt to propitiate the God of Israel through the sacrifice of a child. It is implausible that all the firstborn were killed by the Israelites and more probable that parents were prepared to pay the redemption amount and redeemed their firstborn. It is also possible that, in some cases, the firstborn were consecrated or dedicated for the service in the temple and for

the priests.<sup>615</sup> Having said this, the purpose of the authors of these legal texts is not to give an account of how the firstborn were treated in the past, but how they are to be treated now. Even if the firstborn had been sacrificed by the people of Israel in their worship to Yahweh, in these texts the authors are introducing the redemption principle to bring this practice to an end, putting it in the mouth of Moses to give it authority and authenticity, whatever the historical situation may have been.

#### 7.4.2 Exodus 22:28-29

Ex. 22:28 תֹּאֲרֹ: לֹא בְעִמָּה וְנָשִׂיא תִקְלָל לֹא אֱלֹהִים

Ex. 22:29 תִּמְוֹ-לִי: בְּנִיךָ בְּכוֹר תֹּאמַר לֹא וְדַמְעָה מְלֹאֲתָהּ

The text in Ex. 22:28-29 is different from those already examined because it uses many different words and phrases that are indicative of how the firstborn can be offered as a gift to God. The phrase used here for giving the firstborn animals to God is identical to that used with the firstborn humans. Verse 28 speak about respecting God and rulers (תֹּאֲרֹ: לֹא אֱלֹהִים) – ‘You shall not revile God, nor curse a ruler of your people’). Cassuto<sup>616</sup> states that both these statements are speaking about God, which seems to be less plausible since the context is

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<sup>615</sup> This is a common practice elsewhere in ancient culture, which even prevails today. Children, especially the firstborn, are dedicated to service in the temple and for the priests. It is a worldwide practise. See Theodore H. Gaster, *Festivals of the Jewish Year* (Los Angeles: Smith Publisher, 1962), p. 149.

<sup>616</sup> U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus* (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1967), pp. 294-295.



clearly speaking about God and the authority God places among the people to rule them justly according to the law of the Lord.<sup>617</sup>

In Ex. 22:29 the offering of the firstborn to God is linked with the giving of other things such as first fruit and firstlings.<sup>618</sup> There is a warning not to delay the offerings, though an exact time is not specified as in the case of the firstborn of clean animals, which are to be sacrificed on the seventh day (Ex. 22:30). It seems that the instructions are similar to the Hittites' instruction on the firstlings and the first fruit.<sup>619</sup> The last part of verse 29 reads תתן-לי: בְּנִיךָ בְּכוֹר “*You must give me the firstborn of your sons.*” Here again the verb used is not the one used for sacrifice but a general one: נָתַן, give to me. נָתַן generally means ‘give,’ ‘give to,’ ‘grant,’ ‘bestow upon’ or ‘pay.’<sup>620</sup> The verb could mean dedicate or consecrate. The word is commonly used for dedications, although when the word is used in the context of animals, it always means sacrifice. Therefore, there is a high probability that this verse could be interpreted as a demand to sacrifice the firstborn. This demand should be read in the wider context of the chapter and the concept in the whole book of Exodus.

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<sup>617</sup> It is important to note the antiquity of the writing at this point. The word used for the ruler is נָשִׂיא and not מֶלֶךְ. Noth states that the word is used for the tribal leader or representative before the kings (*Exodus*, p. 186; cf. Num. 15:1-16; 13:1-15; 34:17-28). That means this was written before the monarchy. The punishment for both is death. See Job 2:9; Lev. 24:5; 2 Sam. 16:9; 1 Ki. 2:8-13; 21:10.

<sup>618</sup> This is again a common practice among ancient cultures and religions. See for example in Hinduism, W. Crooke, *The Popular Religion and Folk-Lore of North India* (Westminster: Archibald Constable, 1896), pp. 169-172.

<sup>619</sup> See U. Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus* (Jerusalem: The Magnes Press, 1967), pp. 294-295. For a chart on the other laws and their appearance in Exodus 21-23, see Childs, *Exodus*, pp. 461-462.

<sup>620</sup> *DCH*, vol. 5, p. 784. For a full length study of the word usage see pp. 784-810.

It is to be noted that Ex. 22:29 is a general statement. When it refers to giving from the yield of the land, it does not specify how much. It simply says, ‘do not hold back offering from your granaries or your vats’. In order to be put into practice, this demand must be read in relation to other more specific commands concerning giving tithes and first fruit to God and to rulers.<sup>621</sup> The same principle should also be applicable to the second section of the verse: ‘You must give me the firstborn of your son.’ This is a general statement not giving details of how the sons are to be given to God. The details are given elsewhere and this verse should be read and understood in that context.

As modern readers we need to understand the verse in the wider context in which the editor or editors of Exodus have placed it to gain understanding. This verse should be understood and read along with Exodus 13:13 and Ex. 34:20, where we read ‘Redeem with a lamb every firstborn donkey, but if you do not redeem it, break its neck. Redeem every firstborn among your sons.’ Exodus taken as a whole book advocates redeeming the firstborn.

#### 7.4.3 Exodus 34:19-20.<sup>622</sup>

This text comes as a part of a warning against improper worship.<sup>623</sup> The command is similar to other references and is a repetition of what has been already stated elsewhere. There is a provision for redemption, though the redemption method is not clearly stated here. Firstborn humans and donkeys are to be redeemed but this is placed close to the statement that ‘no one is to

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<sup>621</sup> Cf. Num. 18:27, 28; Deut. 14:22; 26:12.

<sup>622</sup> Ex. 34:19, 20: “The first offspring of every womb belongs to me, including all the firstborn males of your livestock, whether from herd or flock. Redeem the firstborn donkey with a lamb, but if you do not redeem it, break its neck. Redeem all your firstborn sons. No one is to appear before me empty-handed.”

<sup>623</sup> Dozeman, *Exodus*, p. 748.

appear before me empty-handed.’ People are instructed as to how they are to come to worship their God. Whenever they come for worship they are to bring their offering to the priests. Giving to priests equals giving to their God. Ex. 34:19-20 is very close in content to the reference in Ex. 13:12-13.<sup>624</sup> Here we see a different aspect of Israelite worship in contrast with that of the Canaanites.

The textual data and other available evidence reveals that there is no law demanding the offering of the firstborn to the deity of the neighbouring peoples of the Israelites, though there is evidence, as we noted, about the primogeniture of the firstborn. There was a practice of child sacrifice (at least according to the Hebrew Bible) among the neighbours of Israel.<sup>625</sup> That sacrifice seems, however, to involve both firstborn or lastborn<sup>626</sup> children. Among the Israelites, Exodus insists that the demand was only for firstborn and that it is the firstborn that needs to be redeemed.

Therefore, in the book of Exodus—as we have it as a final product in the Hebrew Canon—there is no demand for sacrificing the firstborn human. The texts speak rather about redeeming the firstborn. The book of Exodus should be read as the coherent work of an editor,

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<sup>624</sup> Ex. 13:12, 13: “you are to give over to the LORD the first offspring of every womb. All the firstborn males of your livestock belong to the LORD. Redeem with a lamb every firstborn donkey, but if you do not redeem it, break its neck. Redeem every firstborn among your sons.”

<sup>625</sup> Paul G. Mosca, “Child Sacrifice in Canaanite and Israelite Religion: A Study in Mulk and Milk” (Unpublished Dissertation; Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1975); Susanna Shelby Brown, *Late Carthaginian Child Sacrifice and Sacrificial Monuments in Their Mediterranean Context* (JSOT/ASOR monograph series, no. 3; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991); Jan N. Bremmer, *The Strange World of Human Sacrifice* (Peeters Publishers, 2007).

<sup>626</sup> For example, Koch observes that the Punic texts suggest that not the oldest but the youngest child was sacrificed to Molek. See Klaus Koch, “Molek Astral,” in A. Lange et. al (eds.), *Mythos im alten Testament und seiner Umwelt: Festschrift für Hans-Peter Müller zum 65* (New York: Geburtstag, 1999), p. 35.

and the final text should be considered as one book. Thus when we look at the demand for the firstborn, we need to consider the teaching of the whole book and arrive at the appropriate conclusions.

The texts related to the demand for the firstborn human can be divided into two categories:

1. Texts that refer to Yahweh's demand for the firstborn but are silent about redemption;
2. Texts that refer to Yahweh's demand for the firstborn but give details of the requirement for redemption.

In the context of Exodus as a whole, it is logical to infer that redemption applies in all cases, whatever might have been the original context of the 'silent' passages. All the passages agree on Yahweh's claim to the firstborn, but the passages referring to redemption would be rendered meaningless if the overall meaning is taken to be that all firstborn children must be killed to meet Yahweh's demands.

#### 7.4.4 Numbers 8:16-19.

Numbers 8 speaks of the final touches involved in setting up the tabernacle: the setting up of lamps (8:1-4) and consecrating the Levites for service in the Temple as assistants to Aaron. The Levites took up the service as a substitute for all the firstborn of Israel (8:5-26). This chapter stands as a connecting element with the previous chapters, which spoke of setting up the tabernacle and the substitutionary selection of Levites for the firstborn in Numbers 3. Numbers 8

speaks about the personnel who are to minister in the Tabernacle. Aaron and his sons are to be priests (8:11, 13) and the Levites are given to them to help and support in the day-to-day work of the Tabernacle. They are a gift to Aaron (8:19) in the service of the Tabernacle. Numbers 9 explains about the Passover celebration in the wilderness. It should be noted that almost all the passages related to the consecration of the firstborn are followed by instruction on the Passover celebration. This shows the unbreakable connection between the two which the author or the final editor is trying to demonstrate.

Though the Numbers 8 passage has many similarities with Numbers 3, there are also unique elements. Numbers 3 speaks of selecting the Levites and numbering them against all the firstborn in Israel and about paying the ransom money; Numbers 8 speaks of the method of consecrating the Levites in the service of the Tabernacle. The central and common point projected in both chapters is the role of the Levites as substitutionary replacement for the firstborn. The major duties of the Levites are explained in Numbers 3-4, and the means of their livelihood is explained in Numbers 8.

It is worthwhile noting the process of consecration of the Aaronites as priests and Levites as their helpers. The process of consecration and the words used for it are entirely different in the two chapters. For the Aaronites the words used are *שָׁדַק* (Lev. 8:12) and *מִלֵּא* (Lev. 8:22). *מִלֵּא* means ‘consecration’, ‘consecration offering’ (cf. Lev. 8:28), ‘consecration to the priesthood’,<sup>627</sup> whereas *שָׁדַק* means ‘set apart’. In contrast, the Levites were ‘purified’ (*טָהַר* means ‘pure’, be

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<sup>627</sup> *DCH*, vol. 5, p. 283.

purified', 'be cleansed', 'be healed', 'be healthy', 'be free'<sup>628</sup>) and 'dedicated' (נָתַן ; cf. Num. 8:16). It is said that Yahweh has taken them instead of the firstborn male children. The word used here is לָקַח (Num. 8:16, 18) which can mean 'take' or 'receive,' 'accept,' 'bring,' 'acquire,' 'obtain,' 'possession.'<sup>629</sup>

קָרַב (Num. 8:6) is used for bringing the Levites to the cleansing and for the service. Thus, usage of the word טָהַר is very important here in terms of separating out the Levites. 'Take the Levites from among the children of Israel, and cleanse them.' 'קַח אֶת־הַלְוִיִּם מִתּוֹךְ בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל וְטַהַרְתָּ אֹתָם:' In the Aaronic consecration, the word טָהַר is never used. The ceremonial cleansing process of the Levites involves rituals and cultic activities which are different from those of the consecration of the priests. They are to shave all the hairs of their body, which resembles purification from some contagious sickness (Leviticus 13-14) or the practice of a person at the end of the Nazirite vow. They need to cleanse themselves in water and wash their clothes.

The literal meaning is 'you shall take the Levites from among the children of Israel to cleanse.' However, the word טָהַר is not used in the literal sense of cleansing but rather in relation to purity in this context. Here טָהַר could technically mean 'to move them into a sphere of purity where they can enter into proximity with holy objects or indeed with God himself, without danger to themselves or to the community.'<sup>630</sup> Levine observes that 'it suffices to point out that it is the conception of the Levites as an offering presented to God that holds the key to their

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<sup>628</sup> *DCH*, vol. 3, p. 344.

<sup>629</sup> *DCH*, vol. 4, pp. 564-574.

<sup>630</sup> Ashley, *Numbers*, p. 169.

purification.<sup>631</sup> There are three aspects in the cleansing of the Levites: washing their clothes, shaving the body hairs and sprinkling with water.

Milgrom argues that not all the Levites were in the service of the Tabernacle, but only those who are purified and qualified (aged between 30 and 50). According to Milgrom, the term עֲבָדָה (vv. 11, 15, 19, 22)<sup>632</sup> is used for the Levites and the term מְשִׁמְרֵת (cf. vv. 23-26)<sup>633</sup> is used for the guards and not for the Levites at all.

Secondly, he argues that the guard duties would require no purification, since they were performed outside the sacred area, where there would be no contact with sancta. Thirdly one of the purifications rites reads: ‘let them go over their whole body with a razor’ (v. 7), implying that only mature males are involved. Fourthly, verses 23-26 focus on the retirement age of the Levites, constituting a logical continuation of the section speaking of their induction.<sup>634</sup> Milgrom

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<sup>631</sup> Levine, *Numbers 1-20*, p. 274.

<sup>632</sup> “11 Aaron is to present the Levites before the LORD as a wave offering from the Israelites, so that they may be ready to do the work of the LORD. . . . 15 After you have purified the Levites and presented them as a wave offering, they are to come to do their work at the tent of meeting. . . . 19 From among all the Israelites, I have given the Levites as gifts to Aaron and his sons to do the work at the tent of meeting on behalf of the Israelites and to make atonement for them so that no plague will strike the Israelites when they go near the sanctuary. . . . 22 After that, the Levites came to do their work at the tent of meeting under the supervision of Aaron and his sons. They did with the Levites just as the LORD commanded Moses.”

<sup>633</sup> Num. 8:23-26: “The LORD said to Moses, “This applies to the Levites: Men twenty-five years old or more shall come to take part in the work at the tent of meeting, but at the age of fifty, they must retire from their regular service and work no longer. They may assist their brothers in performing their duties at the tent of meeting, but they themselves must not do the work. This, then, is how you are to assign the responsibilities of the Levites.”

<sup>634</sup> Jacob Milgrom, *Numbers* (The JPS Torah Commentary; New York: The Jewish Publication Society, 1990), p. 61.

argues that the firstborn, like the priests, were holy (3:13). The Levites, in replacing the firstborn, did not however assume their sacred status (cf. 8:16; 3:9).<sup>635</sup>

There is no strong basis for Milgrom's argument in the text or in the ancient context. The firstborn did hold some special privileges and responsibility in socio-religious contexts. They were the priests in the family after the father and assumed a prime importance in all activities of the family at large. The firstborn was supposed to have the final word in the family in the absence of the father. In substituting the firstborn with the Levites, the author assumes that the Levites carry the same powers and responsibilities as the firstborn in terms of their religious activities. In addition, the firstborn got some additional material blessings as we have observed earlier. Though it is arguable whether this was a double portion or something extra, they did receive more in comparison with the other children in the family.

We do see such special blessings for the Levites. They did not obtain any material blessing, according to the records in Pentateuch, when the land was divided between the tribes; the Levites received no portion. However, if we look at their economic condition, they would have been better off than any other tribe among the Israelites for the following reasons:

1. All the tribes were to give a tithe (1/10) of all their income and produce to the Levites.

When 11 tribes each supply 1/10 to one tribe, they should have more than the other tribes.

2. Every tribe was to present the first fruits to the Levites. First fruits included both crops and animal wealth. This was in addition to the tithe.

3. The meat and grain people brought for the offering also went to the Levites.

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<sup>635</sup> Milgrom, *Numbers*, p. 64.



4. If anybody made any oaths or vows about dedicating anything to God, they were to bring it to the Levites.
5. The redemption price for every human firstborn also went to the Levites.
6. The redemption price or substitutionary animal for the unclean animal also belonged to the Levites.
7. Everything in Israel devoted<sup>636</sup> to the Lord belonged to Levites.

Thus, replacing the firstborn with the Levites meant that they were entitled to receive more than the double portion of the firstborn. They enjoyed more privileges and responsibilities than any firstborn in Israel.

Num. 8:14 says ‘in this way you are to set apart Levites from the other Israelites, for they are mine.’ Num. 8:21 records that the Levites purified themselves and washed their clothes. The key

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<sup>636</sup> ‘The devoted’ in Num. 18:14 is **הִקְדִּישׁ** which means dedicated one. Milgrom observes that **הִקְדִּישׁ** is the ultimate case of dedication. Not only does it belong to the sanctuary, but it may never be redeemed: it remains in the sanctuary permanently. That which is of no value to the sanctuary must be destroyed. Thus, when the Israelites under Joshua imposed the **הִקְדִּישׁ** upon Jericho, all life and property were put to fire, except for the precious metals and metallic wares, which were “deposited in the treasury of the House of the Lord” (Josh. 6:24). The verb **הִקְדִּישׁ**, a denominative from *herim*, translated here proscribe, actually means “dedicate” (Mic. 4:13), a meaning it has in Moabite, Aramaic and Nabatean as well. It implies that the sanctuary alone may benefit from the dedicated object. Thus, if the object is land or an impure animal, it can be put to work for the sanctuary; For example, a harem land can be cultivated by harem animals. Pure harem animals must be sacrificed on the altar, and the grain harvester from harem lands comprises the grain offerings (*minhah*) on the altar. However, this verse informs us that the meat of the *harem* offerings belongs to the priests, meaning that they are sacrificed as *shelamim*, well-being offerings. And they are similar to the two well-being lambs sacrificed on the Shavout festival; this meat also belongs entirely to the priests (Lev. 23:20). It goes without saying that the *minnah*, the grain offering, is a priestly revenue: only a token handful is offered up on the altar, the rest is eaten by the priests (Lev. 2:2-3; 6:7-11). Thus, this verse states in effect that any food that is *harem* or is produced from *harem* property is for the priests. (Milgrom, *Numbers*, p. 152).

words in these two passages are ‘set apart’ and ‘purified.’ Here the author or the editor is making a careful selection of the word for purification. The word used here for purification is the same word for guilt or sin, that is **אָפֶּטֶן**, which means ‘sin,’ ‘incur guilt,’ ‘endanger,’ ‘miss,’ or ‘fail to attain.’<sup>637</sup> The word used for washing is **כִּבֵּשׂ**, which means ‘be clean,’ ‘wash’ or ‘cleanse oneself.’<sup>638</sup> In the case of Aaron and his sons, Moses, cleansed, washed and anointed them, but here the Levites are doing it for themselves according to the command and instruction. This shows the superiority of the Aaronic priesthood and service in the tabernacle in relation to the other common Levites.

#### 7.4.5 Numbers 18:12-17.

This text explains that it is necessary to take the firstborn to the temple for consecration, though redemption is available through substituting animals. Num. 18:15-17 is further quoted by Nehemiah (Neh. 10:36-37). This indicates that this was a practice known to the Israelites that would be recognized by the readers of Nehemiah. Nehemiah and his people were taking a solemn oath stating that they would strictly follow the Law of Moses. Bringing the firstborn into the temple or place of worship was one of the vows they made.

There are two words used for bringing the gifts into the temple.<sup>639</sup> The word for offering is **רָחַם**<sup>640</sup>. The other word is **רָאשֵׁי תָמָר** which is usually used for the gifts brought into the temple but

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<sup>637</sup> *DCH*, vol. 3, p. 194.

<sup>638</sup> *DCH*, vol. 4, pp. 358-359.

<sup>639</sup> Num 18:12-17: “I give you all the finest olive oil and all the finest new wine and grain they give the LORD as the firstfruits of their harvest. All the land’s firstfruits that they bring to the LORD will be yours. Everyone in your household who is ceremonially clean may eat it. Everything in Israel that is devoted to the LORD is yours. The first offspring of every womb,

not for the priest. This gift went directly into the temple treasury. The word used in Num. 18:12 is ראשיתם which could mean first, first thing, first fruit, firstborn (cf. Gen. 49:3; Num. 24:20; Deut. 21:17).<sup>641</sup> By looking at the usage of the same word in the Book of Nehemiah, some scholars argue that it was developed during the time of Nehemiah (Neh. 10:36).<sup>642</sup> However, it is observed that the word in the earlier period would have been used to denote all the first fruits which were brought to the sanctuary or to the priests and Levites, who were the real custodians of it. God owns it and He gave it to the Levites.<sup>643</sup> In addition, though ראשיתם and בכור could mean the firstborn or first fruits, ראשיתם is not required to be brought into the temple, whilst the בכור has to be brought into the temple (Ex. 23:19; 34:26).<sup>644</sup>

The above discussion reveals that it could have been a common practice among the people to bring firstborn male children to the temple at Jerusalem for the purpose of redemption (cf. Luke 2:23), though some rabbinic teachings let people take the firstborn to priests who were living nearer, on which view the place was not so important.<sup>645</sup> We have also noted the

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both human and animal, that is offered to the LORD is yours. But you must redeem every firstborn son and every firstborn male of unclean animals. When they are a month old, you must redeem them at the redemption price set at five shekels of silver, according to the sanctuary shekel, which weighs twenty gerahs. When they are a month old, you must redeem them at the redemption price set at five shekels of silver, according to the sanctuary shekel, which weighs twenty gerahs. But you must not redeem the firstborn of a cow, a sheep or a goat; they are holy. Splash their blood against the altar and burn their fat as a food offering, an aroma pleasing to the LORD.”

<sup>640</sup> *DCH*, vol. 7, p. 448.

<sup>641</sup> *DCH*, vol. 7, p. 381.

<sup>642</sup> See for example Gray, *Numbers*, p. 229.

<sup>643</sup> See for example, Ashley, *Numbers*, p. 349.

<sup>644</sup> Here the rule that the first fruit of everything in the land should be brought into the temple or place of worship is in opposition to the limited group of crops in verse 12. However, the rabbis limit them to the seven crops enumerated in Deuteronomy 8:8: wheat, barley, grape, fig, pomegranate, olive oil, and honey. See Milgrom, *Exodus*, p. 151.

<sup>645</sup> For example see quotations from the Rabbis see Kaufmann, *History*, vol. 4, p. 335.

differences between the animal firstborn and human firstborn. The religion of Israel considered them as two separate kinds and thus their redemption also varied. Animals were never considered equal to humans in the religion of Israel at all. Generally, the firstborn are divided into three categories:

1. Clean: should be sacrificed and there is no choice. Priests can eat its meat.
2. Unclean: needs to be redeemed or killed.
3. Human: needs to be redeemed.

As we saw, in the book of Exodus read as one canonical book, finally edited and presented to the people, there is no direct demand for sacrifice, though there is a direct and straightforward teaching on redemption. The redemption money shall go to the priest. The ransom price is important here (Num. 18:15), and the word used is *פָּדָה*. The word literally means ransom for a price, redemption or redeem.<sup>646</sup> In this sense it is used to redeem one from the clutches of a demand or difficult situation.<sup>647</sup> The *hiphil* form in Num. 18:15 shows that it means ‘caused to redeem.’<sup>648</sup> There are two words used for ransom: *פָּדָה* and *לָאָה*. *לָאָה* has the same meaning as *פָּדָה*, though it implies ‘reclaim or pay the redemption price for dispossessed relative or property of relative’ (cf. Lev. 25:25, 33, 48, 49; 27:13, 15, 19, 20, 31; Ruth 3:13, 4:4, 6).<sup>649</sup> Thus in a broad sense, as observed by Snaith, *פָּדָה* indicates ransom of that which did not originally belong to one<sup>650</sup> and *לָאָה* indicates buying back what was originally one’s own.<sup>651</sup> In other words, all the firstborn rightfully belong to the Lord (Ex. 13:1-2, 12; 22:28-29) and through

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<sup>646</sup> *DCH*, vol. 6, p. 653.

<sup>647</sup> *DCH*, vol. 6, p. 653.

<sup>648</sup> *DCH*, vol. 6, p. 653.

<sup>649</sup> *DCH*, vol. 6, p. 653

<sup>650</sup> See Lev. 25:25, 33, 48, 49; 27:15; Ruth 3:13; 4:4, 6.

<sup>651</sup> Snaith, p. 164.

the process of redemption people are buying back from Him as the original owner. Therefore they can only be offered not given (Lev. 27:26; Num. 18:12).<sup>652</sup> The author of Numbers is using the word *קָנָה*, a verb which has the connotation ‘buy what did not originally belong to one,’ to support this understanding, instead of *קָנָה*, which means ‘buy back what was originally one’s own’.<sup>653</sup> Therefore, the firstborn belong to God and through redemption the redeemer is buying back from God, who is the original owner. It should be noted that the priests are to ‘conduct the redemption proceedings, but the redeemers are, obviously, the owners, or parents.’<sup>654</sup>

The analysis of Ex. 34:19-20 and Ex. 22:28-29 above shows two streams of thought. The former is part of the covenantal code and the latter is part of the decalogue. In Ex. 22:28 the requirement is that ‘the firstborn of your sons you will give to me,’ and in Ex. 34:19-20 it is that ‘all that opens the womb is mine.’ One implies a debt and the latter requires a heart of gratitude.<sup>655</sup> It seems that these are coming from two different traditions which may stem from different groups in society with different socio-religious belief systems.<sup>656</sup> One demands the firstborn and the other gives space for redemption. These difference shows the religious diversity among the ancient people of Israel who lived in different geographical locations. These could have been contemporary practices, rather than necessarily indicating any progression or change over time.

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<sup>652</sup> Levine, *Numbers 1-20*, p. 447

<sup>653</sup> Milgrom, *Exodus*, p. 152.

<sup>654</sup> Milgrom, *Exodus*, p. 152.

<sup>655</sup> K. Finsterbusch, “The Firstborn,” pp. 95-95.

<sup>656</sup> Stavropoulou brilliantly observed them as different people practising different beliefs and rituals. See, Stavropoulou, *Child Sacrifice*, p. 164.

#### 7.4.6 2 Kings 3:26-27

The story of King Mesha unfolds another meaning of firstborn sacrifice. We find that in an extreme situation King Mesha of Moab was offering his son as a burnt offering on the walls (2 Kings 3:26-27). This led to the Israelites withdrawing from the battle. The key question is, *why* did the sacrifice of the son of the King of Moab lead to the Israelites withdrawing from the war? The verse (2 Kings 3:6) reads ‘The fury against Israel was great.’ Whose fury was it – Chemosh’s or Yahweh’s? In addition, the sacrifice was made to the Moabite God, Chemosh. Why did it affect the Israelites? The word used for wrath in Hebrew is **אַצְרוּ** which means be angry, wrath, rage, strife or indignation.<sup>657</sup> Thus wrath came upon the people of Israel and they had to step back. The sacrifice was made to the Moabite God Chemosh. Does this mean that the anger of Chemosh fell upon the Israelite army?

The sacrifice of Mesha’s firstborn is offered in an extreme situation between life and death. This shows the uniqueness of the sacrifice. There are many interpretations of the passage by different scholars. For example, Sweeney contends that upon seeing the firstborn sacrifice, the Israelites either ‘become so angry’ or ‘lost their courage’.<sup>658</sup> That means the failure of Israel is due to their own misunderstanding of the firstborn sacrifice and the loss of their courage. Here the meaning of the word **אַצְרוּ** is understood as losing heart.

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<sup>657</sup> *DCH*, vol. 7, p. 283.

<sup>658</sup> M. A. Sweeney, *I & II Kings: A Commentary* (OTL; Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 2007), p. 284.

Chisholm argues that the Israelites lost because they failed to take the victory that Yahweh had given them due to their outrage upon seeing a human sacrificed.<sup>659</sup> Vein argued that Israel violated the rules of war contained in Deut. 20:10-20.<sup>660</sup> The context of the story seems to have no connection with the Deuteronomic laws of war and thus it is a lesser possibility. Tiemeyer suggests that the firstborn sacrifice was so powerful that the promise of the victory through Elisha was nullified.<sup>661</sup> She connects the story with Mesopotamian namburni rituals designed to cancel undesired predictions.<sup>662</sup> Tiemeyer thinks that firstborn sacrifice is ‘the most powerful ritual’ act of the ancient world.<sup>663</sup> However, Tiemeyer fails to explain why this most powerful ritual even has the power to cancel a prophecy and make such a great impact on the enemy’s camp.

Westbrook took the concept of firstborn sacrifice here in a different way, as something to appease the Moabite god Chemosh. He argues that Mesha was a vassal and was bound to the treaties he had made with the Israelite king about paying the tribute. These kinds of treaties involved the gods of both the parties. Hence breaking the treaty risks rousing the anger of the god. Thus, through offering the firstborn, Mesha is appeasing his god and thus getting his god

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<sup>659</sup> R. B. Chisholm, Jr., “Israel’s Retreat and the Failure of Prophecy in 2 Kings 3,” *Bib* 92 (2011), 70-80.

<sup>660</sup> J. Sprinkle Vein, “Deuteronomic Just War (Deut. 20:10-20), and 1 Ki. 2:27,” *Zeitschrift Fur altorientalische und biblische Rechtsgeschichte* 6 (2000), 285-301.

<sup>661</sup> L. S. Tiemeyer, “Prophecy as Way of Cancelling Prophecy - The Strategic uses of Foreknowledge,” *ZAW* 117/3 (2005), 345-346.

<sup>662</sup> Tiemeyer, “Prophecy as Way of Cancelling Prophecy,” p. 345.

<sup>663</sup> Tiemeyer, “Prophecy as Way of Cancelling Prophecy,” p. 346.

Chemosh’s favour in the current scenario. Thus, the wrath of Chemosh, which was turned towards the Moabites, is now turned towards the Israelites.<sup>664</sup>

The arguments of Westbrook are based on assumptions rather than any direct evidence. However, according to the text, Mesha’s sacrifice did have a great impact on the current situation and led to the defeat of Mesha’s enemy. Here, Mesha is offering his firstborn because he is losing the battle. This should be differentiated from the mandatory demand for the firstborn by the God of Israel. In the demand for the firstborn, the key element is that every firstborn belongs to the deity and should be given to him. Mesha’s offering is very exceptional here and is designed to appease or obtain favour from his deity.

Although there are these clear differences between the biblical laws on the firstborn and Mesha’s sacrifice of his son, there are also similarities in the practices of these two nations. According to the Mesha Stele,<sup>665</sup> the Moabites were under the control or influence of the Israelite nation for some time and the stele records the victory of Mesha over the Israelites.<sup>666</sup> Some similarities are compared below:

Mesha Stele	Israelites
1. Attributes victory to Chemosh.	1. Attributes victory to Yahweh. <sup>667</sup>
2. Mesha built high place for sacrifice.	2. Israelites also built high places. <sup>668</sup>

<sup>664</sup> R. Westbrook, “Laws in Kings,” in A. Lemaire and B. Helpert (eds.), *The Books of Kings: Sources, Compositions, Historiography and Reception* (Boston: Brill, 2010), pp. 464-466.

<sup>665</sup> Douglas J. Green, *“I Undertook Great Works”: The Ideology of Domestic Achievements in West Semitic Royal Inscriptions* (Mohr Siebeck, 2010).

<sup>666</sup> *KAI*, p. 181.

<sup>667</sup> Deut. 20:4; Jud. 3:9; 6:36-37; 1 Sam. 14:23; 2 Kings 14:27; 19:34; 2 Chr. 20:9; Isa. 25:9; 33:22; Jer. 31:7; Ezek. 34:22; Hos. 1:7; Hab. 1:7; Zeph. 3:17, 19; Zech. 8:7; 9:16.



3. Devoted captives to Chemosh.	3. Devoted captives to Yahweh. <sup>669</sup>
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These similarities point to other similarities with the firstborn sacrifices as well. The Moabite's king, Mesha, sacrificed his firstborn in a very distressing situation to prevent imminent defeat. Does this imply that the Israelites might also have done the same thing in a similar situation? Micah 6:1-8 has been identified as one passage that might support such a hypothesis.

#### 7.4.7 Micah 6:1-8.

The passage is a response from Yahweh to the wrongdoings of people, calling them back to him. Yahweh contends with His people and asks, 'Have I ever failed you in doing what is good for you in your past history?' (Mic. 6:1-5).<sup>670</sup> The people respond by asking the question, "With what shall I come before the LORD, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the LORD be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my first-born for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?" (Mic 6:5-7). This last question brings to mind immediately the situation of Mesha and seems to imply a belief on the part of the speaker that one's life can be preserved from Yahweh's righteous anger by the offer of one's firstborn child.

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<sup>668</sup> 1 Sam. 9:12-13; 1 Ki. 3:2-4; 2 Kings 12:3; 1 Chr. 16:39; 21:29; 2 Chr. 1:3, 13; Mic 3:12.

<sup>669</sup> See Num. 21:2; Deut. 2:34; 3:6; Josh. 6:21; 8:26; 11:11-12; 1 Sam. 15:3, 8, 9.

<sup>670</sup> Mic. 6:1-5: "Hear what the LORD says: Arise, plead your case before the mountains, and let the hills hear your voice. Hear, you mountains, the controversy of the LORD, and you enduring foundations of the earth; for the LORD has a controversy with his people, and he will contend with Israel. "O my people, what have I done to you? In what have I wearied you? Answer me! For I brought you up from the land of Egypt, and redeemed you from the house of bondage; and I sent before you Moses, Aaron, and Miriam. O my people, remember what Balak king of Moab devised, and what Balaam the son of Be'or answered him, and what happened from Shittim to Gilgal, that you may know the saving acts of the LORD."

Micah responds to that question by stating that “He has showed you, O man, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?” (Mic 6:8).

Yahweh neither demands nor takes any pleasure in burnt offerings, whether year-old calves, thousands of rams, ten thousand of rivers of oil, or the giving of the first-born for transgressions. The straight-forward answer to the question to the willingness to offer firstborn for their transgression is ‘No!’ Yahweh will not be pleased with any of these offerings and has not asked people to come to him with these sacrifices and offerings.

There are many commentators who agree that Yahweh never claimed or received firstborn sacrifice and adduce Micah 6 in favour of this argument. For example, J. L. Mays argues that “The proposal is not drawn from the recognized range of possibilities in the cult of Israel. It is rather a function of escalation of the list and reaches beyond the options available in Israel’s cult to exhaust the total cultic enterprise but citing its most desperate measure.”<sup>671</sup> Joining and agreeing with Mays, Wolff concludes that, “the teacher exaggerates in the extreme by pushing his examples of boundless sacrifices toward what is plainly frivolous. He portrays the sheer despair of the intention to give oneself fully to acts of propitiation; going beyond all legal possibilities provided by the Yahwistic cult, he offers to *sacrifice his firstborn*.”<sup>672</sup>

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<sup>671</sup> J. L. Mays, *Micah: A Commentary* (OTL; Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1990), p. 140.

<sup>672</sup> H. W. Wolff, *Micah: A Commentary* (trans. G. Stansell; Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1990), pp. 178-179.

Both Mays' and Wolff's arguments seems less plausible according to the explanation in the text itself. It is beyond doubt that offerings of calves, lambs and oil are in principle acceptable as part of the cult in Israel, though Micah uses exaggerated language to show that increasing the volume of these sacrifices will not make any impact. This does not mean that these offerings are not acceptable or disapproved of or rejected. If offerings of calves, lambs and oil are acceptable, it would seem to follow that firstborn sacrifice was thought acceptable at some point. Why else would it be suggested? The problem is that previously acceptable sacrifices are not effective at the current moment due to the people's wrongdoings, injustice and corrupted life. They cannot substitute these sacrifices for their wrong social behaviours and expect to please their God through these sacrifices. The key fact in these verses is that all these offerings are both significant and valuable.<sup>673</sup> In dire circumstances, these verses suggest they offered their firstborn to Yahweh along with lavish offerings of calves, lambs and oil. However, their hard-hearted attitude towards their fellow men and thinking that the lavish offering to their God would deflect the punishment from their God led to the rejection of these sacrifices.

The verse clearly shows that these are all considered legitimate offerings for Yahweh. Therefore, one might conclude that, during the time of Micah,<sup>674</sup> sacrificing the firstborn to Yahweh in an extreme situation was seen as a legitimate option on much the same terms as Mesha, offered his offspring to Chemosh. Further evidence to support this is found in the biblical assertion that some of the Israelites' kings, for example Ahaz and Manasseh, passed their

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<sup>673</sup> See for a discussion in D. R. Hillers, *Micah: A Commentary on the book of the Prophet Micah* (Hermeneia; Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1984), pp. 78-79.

<sup>674</sup> There is a wide range of argument on the date of Micah. The current research is not able to deal with this issue due to its limited scope. For a good overview, see M. R. Jacobs, *The Concept of Coherence of the Book of Micah* (JSOTSup. 322; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), pp. 14-45.

children through fire. Did they do this in hopes of placating Yahweh in some extreme situation as well?

#### 7.4.8 Passing Children through Fire

Though there are many Kings among the Israelites who were accused of wrongdoings and labelled as wicked in terms of keeping their covenant with their God, only two are accused of passing their children through fire: Ahaz and Manasseh. The accounts of these two kings may suggest some of the realities of child sacrifice among the people Israel apart from the above discussion on Mesha and Micah 6. The following pages shall briefly but critically look at the accounts of these two kings and see if there is any connection with child sacrifice in general and sacrifice of the firstborn in particular. The main accusation against Ahaz is found 2 Kings 16:2-4 and in 2 Chr. 28:3; Manasseh is accused in 2 Kings 21:1-20 and in 2 Chr. 33:6.

2 Kings 16:3-4 reads:

‘He even burned his son as an offering, according to the abominable practices of the nations whom the LORD drove out before the people of Israel. And he sacrificed and burned incense on the high places, and on the hills, and under every green tree.’

Thus the accusation against Ahaz according to the writer of Kings is that he ‘burned his son,’ sacrificed and burned incense on high places, on hills and under every green tree. The author is painting these deeds as the abominable practices of the other nations. This latter part of the accusation is common to many other predecessors of Ahaz, for example: King Solomon (1 Ki. 3:3); King Rehobo'am the son of Solomon (1 Ki. 14:22-24); King Asa (1 Ki. 15:14); King

Jehosh'aphat (1 Ki. 22:43); King Jeho'ash (2 Kings 12:3); King Azari'ah the son of Amazi'ah (2 Kings 15:4); and King Jotham the son of Uzzi'ah (2 Kings 15:35).

The additional sin of Ahaz and Manasseh is that they passed their children through fire. This expression occurs twelve times in the Hebrew Bible.<sup>675</sup> Seven of these occurrences could be more literally translated as 'cause to pass through' with 'by fire'.<sup>676</sup> Three times this expression is connected with מִלְחָה, in connection with the worship of מִלְחָה sacrifice.<sup>677</sup>

There are various interpretations of the Ahaz sacrifice. Montgomery suggests that it is indeed a kind of sacrifice similar to the one the Moabite king Mesha offered, in times of emergency in the war with Syria.<sup>678</sup> However, this proves not to be the case. Mesha specifically offers his firstborn as a sacrifice whereby here the son Ahaz burns is not specified as the firstborn. There is also no emergency recorded in connection with the sacrifice of this child as there was in the case the Moabite king. Ahaz's sacrifice looks more similar to a מִלְחָה sacrifice than Mesha's desperate firstborn sacrifice.<sup>679</sup>

Though many others were reported as wicked kings, Ahaz is unusual in being accused of offering his son as sacrifice and the question is why. Gray opines that 'this is the first instance in the history of Judah of this practice, which is repeatedly mentioned as an act of apostasy in the times of stress at the end of the monarchy of Israel (17:17) and in Judah under Manasseh (2

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<sup>675</sup> Lev. 18:21; Deut. 18:10; 2 Kings 16:3; 17:17; 21:6; 23:10; Jer. 32:35; Ezek. 16:21; 20:26, 31; 23:37; 2 Chr. 33:6.

<sup>676</sup> Deut. 18:10; 2 Kings 16:3; 17:17; 21:6; 23:10; Ezek. 20:31; 2 Chr. 33:6.

<sup>677</sup> Lev. 18:21; Deut. 18:10; Jer. 32:35.

<sup>678</sup> J. A. Montgomery, *The Books of Kings*, p. 457.

<sup>679</sup> Also see Heider, *The Cult of Molek*, pp. 280-281.

Kings 21:6; 2 Kings 23:10).<sup>680</sup> Gray failed to establish this argument and other scholars were critical about Gray's position. Mosca observed that child sacrifice in Israel antedated Ahaz.<sup>681</sup> Heider also argued that the practice of child sacrifice in Jerusalem dates back at least as far as Solomon.<sup>682</sup> The emphasis at this point in connection with Ahaz's activities is to draw a contrast with Hezekiah's reformation, rather than to accuse Ahaz of initiating this practice.

Taking a bold step in the scholarship, Stavrakopoulou argued that the type of sacrifice mentioned in connection with Ahaz was very much part of Yahweh worship in the earlier period. The post-monarchic authors made it illegitimate by terming it foreign and reframed it in a new ethical point of view. She argues that the biblical account is a distorted form of history, a biased writing by the biblical authors, and the product of post-exilic writers who did not approve those existing practices of the past.<sup>683</sup> She proposes that the biblical authors represented child sacrifice as a foreign importation by Ahaz and Manasseh in order to deny its historical place in the religious system of the ancient Israelites.<sup>684</sup>

The above discussions lead us to the point that though there are biblical polemics against child sacrifice and other cultic practices such as offering sacrifices and offerings in *הַמִּזְבְּחֵי הַהָרִים*, hills, valleys and under green trees, the presence of such among the people in the earlier period seems an undeniable fact. According to the Biblical text, these practices were very ancient and existed among the people from a very early period and were practised by the people time and

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<sup>680</sup> J. Gray, *I & II Kings*, p. 631.

<sup>681</sup> Mosca, *Child Sacrifice*, p. 190.

<sup>682</sup> Heider, *The Cult of Molech*, pp. 283-288.

<sup>683</sup> Stavrakopoulou, *King Manasseh and Child Sacrifice*, pp. 156-157.

<sup>684</sup> Stavrakopoulou, *King Manasseh and Child Sacrifice*, p. 158.

again. There were approvals and disapprovals by the people and the leaders time and again. Some faction of the Yahweh worshipers practised it time and again, despite the opposition. The authors of the texts termed it as foreign or against the worship of Yahweh. However, the fact that it was part of the Yahweh worship in the earlier period is not deniable.

#### 7.4.9 Topheth and Child Sacrifice in Jeremiah and Deuteronomy:

Jeremiah is one of the prophets in the Hebrew Bible who openly spoke about תִּפְתֵּי, מִלְּךְדָּן and the related child sacrifices. In Jer. 2:23, he openly speaks about Israel as going after Ba`al. It reads, ‘How can you say, “I am not defiled, I have not gone after the Ba'als”? Look at your way in the valley; know what you have done...’ Though people seem to deny the worship of Ba`al, it is sure that there is some epithet under the name Ba`al. In Jer. 2:8 Jeremiah condemns the people and their prophets for prophesying under the influence of Ba`al. It reads, ‘The priests did not say, “Where is the LORD?” Those who handle the law did not know me; the rulers transgressed against me; the prophets prophesied by Ba'al, and went after things that do not profit.’ A similar allusion is seen in Jer. 23:13: ‘In the prophets of Sama'ria I saw an unsavoury thing: they prophesied by Ba'al and led my people Israel astray.’ This is repeatedly reported all through the book of Jeremiah.<sup>685</sup> It seems that Jeremiah is placing all his opponents in the court of Ba`al. According to the author of Kings, the two kings who are accused of Ba`al worship were Omri (2 Kings 16) and Manasseh (2 Kings 21). It is interesting to note that there is no mention by the author of Kings about the prophets of Ba`al in this period, whom Jeremiah is condemning.

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<sup>685</sup> See for example Jer. 7:9; 9:14; 11:13, 17; 12:16; 19:5; 23:27; 32:39, 35.

Looking at the language and attitude of Jeremiah, Domeris contends that Jeremiah ‘uses antilanguage both to create an alternative reality, by processes like the demarcation of social boundaries, and to maintain such a reality.’<sup>686</sup> Domeris classifies Jeremiah as a member of an ‘anti-society’ who worship only Yahweh in a certain prescribed manner different to the usual way people were doing it.<sup>687</sup> We are not sure whether Jeremiah is pointing to a practice in the past and its residues that are still among the people, or something people were bringing into their daily lives from their neighbours. According to the texts in Jeremiah, it seems that it was a living reality among the people to worship in *תָּפֶת* and *בְּמוֹת*.

For example, Jer. 7:31 reads, “And they have built the high place of Topheth, which is in the valley of the son of Hinnom, to burn their sons and their daughters in the fire; which I did not command, nor did it come into my mind.”

Jer. 19:5 reads, “. . . and have built the high places of Ba'al to burn their sons in the fire as burnt offerings to Ba'al, which I did not command or decree, nor did it come into my mind.”

Jer. 32:35 reads, “They built the high places of Ba'al in the valley of the son of Hinnom, to offer up their sons and daughters to Molech, though I did not command them, nor did it enter into my mind, that they should do this abomination, to cause Judah to sin.”

Ba`al is not connected with worship in Jer. 7:31. In Jer. 19:5 Ba`al is connected with both *בְּמוֹת* and the burnt offering, while in Jer. 32:35 the deity is linked only with *בְּמוֹת* and not with

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<sup>686</sup> W. R. Domeris, “When Metaphor Becomes Myths: A Socio-Linguistic Reading of Jeremiah,” in A. R. P. Diamond and L. Stulman (eds.), *Troubling Jeremiah* (JSOTSup 260; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), p. 251.

<sup>687</sup> Domeris, “When Metaphor Becomes Myths,” pp. 252-254.



burnt offerings. Jeremiah's claim in Jer. 32:35, where Yahweh says that this is neither something he commanded nor that entered his mind, implies that the people Jeremiah was addressing thought this was indeed something demanded by Yahweh, though the prophet disagrees with it.<sup>688</sup> It is important to note what basis there might be for Jeremiah to argue that offering children was something Yahweh totally prohibited. The prohibition against burning children is strongly emphasized in the book of Deuteronomy. In Deuteronomic thinking, this is something totally against the practice of the worship of Yahweh (Deut. 12:31; 13:1; 15:19-23; 18:10; 32; 35). Thus, in all probability, the prohibitions found in the Book of Deuteronomy are related to the strong case Jeremiah is shown as presenting. If one could single out one problem which caused the fall of the nation according to Jeremiah, it would be the practice of child sacrifice.

Having observed the arguments of Jeremiah, several implications are very clear. The people of Jeremiah's time practised child sacrifice. Secondly, the people thought this was very much part of worshipping their God Yahweh. Thirdly, at least some faction or group in the society were not aware of a tradition that indicated that this was something their God prohibited. Fourthly, it is not clear in the book of Jeremiah that these practices involved a special status for the firstborn or last born. As the text stands, any child could be the sacrifice. Fifthly, it seems that the book of Jeremiah is reflecting the Deuteronomic prohibition of child sacrifice. Sixthly, Jeremiah associates child sacrifice with Ba'al worship in the valley of Ben Hinnom where there was a תִּפְתֵּי. Seventhly, child sacrifice was a part of worship in תִּפְתֵּי and תִּפְתֵּי.

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<sup>688</sup> See Mosca, "Child Sacrifice," pp. 228-229.

#### 7.4.10 Child Sacrifice in Ezekiel

The book of Ezekiel has a strong prohibition against child sacrifice, like Jeremiah. Ezekiel condemns the act of child sacrifice in a number of places. Firstly is Ezek. 16:20-21:

“And you took your sons and your daughters, whom you had borne to me, and these you sacrificed to them to be devoured. Were your harlotries so small a matter that you slaughtered my children and delivered them up as an offering by fire to them?”

The prophet Ezekiel is allegorically explaining the idolatry of the people and the sacrifice of children as whoring with other people and forgetting one’s own husband.<sup>689</sup> The imagery is very much applicable to the faithless attitude of the people towards their God, Yahweh. Jerusalem is being personified as the bride of Yahweh and all the blessings as the gift to her from her husband, Yahweh, which she has taken and offered to strangers and made love with them. Children are also considered as Yahweh’s gift and property but their parents offered them to these other gods to be devoured. The major accusation is that the people in Jerusalem sacrificed their children to idols.

Samaria is also personified. Both Samaria and Jerusalem are presented as two whores named Oholah and Oholibah in Ezek. 23:37-39:

“For they have committed adultery, and blood is upon their hands; with their idols they have committed adultery; and they have even offered up to them for food the sons whom they had borne to me. Moreover, this they have done to me: they have defiled my sanctuary on the same day and profaned my sabbaths. For when they had

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<sup>689</sup> For a detailed discussion on the usage of the husband metaphor, see P. Day, “Metaphor and Social Reality: Isaiah 23:17-18, Ezekiel 16:35-37, and Hosea 2:4-5,” in J. Kaltner and L. Stulman (eds.), *Inspired Speech: Prophecy in the Ancient Near East: Essays in Honor of Herbert B. Huffmon* (London: T & T Clark, 2004), pp. 63-71; P. Day, “Yahweh’s Broken Marriage as Metaphoric Vehicle in the Hebrew Prophets,” in M. Nissimén and R. Uro (eds.), *Sacred Marriages: The Divine-Human, Sexual Metaphor from Sumer to Early Christianity* (Wionona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2008), pp. 219-241.

slaughtered their children in sacrifice to their idols, on the same day they came into my sanctuary to profane it. And lo, this is what they did in my house.”

Here again the main accusation is about the sacrifice of children to the idols. This time it is done closer to the temple. People are sacrificing to the idols and then walking into the temple of Yahweh to worship him as well. This seems to indicate a pluralistic form of worship. Ezekiel 16:17<sup>690</sup> speaks of people making male images.<sup>691</sup> Heider connects the male images with the fertility cult one finds among the Canaanites.<sup>692</sup> There is a possibility that the Israelites were practising a similar fertility cult to that of the Canaanites, which the people would have thought as a legitimate form of worship for Yahweh. The prophets condemn this as something which Yahweh did not accept.

The interesting and more critical part of Ezekiel’s approach to child sacrifice is seen in Ezekiel 20, which refers to Yahweh as having given ‘laws which were not good.’<sup>693</sup> The central question is what law Ezekiel is referencing here. Is it the law about the demand for the firstborn found in Exodus 13 or 22 or elsewhere?<sup>694</sup> Ezekiel seems to imply that at some time in history, the people of Israel sacrificed their children to please Yahweh. This was done based on a law

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<sup>690</sup> Ezek. 16:17: “You also took your fair jewels of my gold and of my silver, which I had given you, and made for yourself images of men, and with them played the harlot.”

<sup>691</sup> It is interesting to note that male images are part of Hindu tradition and are connected with fertility. The penis of a Hindu god named Shiva is a centre of attraction and worship all over India. It will be a worthwhile study to look into the relation between this Hindu male image and its counterpart in the ancient near east and make a connection in terms of rituals and worship around it. For a study on Shiva lingam (the idol of Shiva’s penis), see Irene M. Watson, *Shiva Lingam* (Nedlands: Sai Towers Publishing, 2009); Hargrave Jennings, *Shiva Lingam* (Hargrave Jennings, 2015); Duke Savage, *Shiva Worship: Basics of Shaivism* (Create Space, 2016).

<sup>692</sup> Heider, *The Cult of Molek*, pp. 367-368.

<sup>693</sup> Ezekiel 20:25: “Moreover I gave them statutes that were not good and ordinances by which they could not have life.”

<sup>694</sup> For a history of research and detailed discussion see chapter 3.

given by Yahweh. It seems according to the context that Yahweh gave these bad laws to punish them so that they may turn to Him, but they did not do this and in fact found joy in obeying the bad laws which were not good for them.

This law was given not as a delight to Yahweh, but an abomination in His sight and to increase the pain of the people so that they may turn back to their God. Yahweh's hatred of child sacrifice was the message Ezekiel is bringing out. People thought it was the other way around. According to Ezekiel, the people misunderstood the law. Yet the key question is how the people were supposed to distinguish between good and bad laws if both were presented to them as Yahweh's commandments. The people were right to follow the Yahweh's requirements. Ezekiel is now trying to justify to the people a change in the requirements. It seems that the prophet is looking back at what had happened historically and trying to revise the religion and practices which are similar to that of their neighbouring nations. Although these were traditional practices, they now have to be seen as evil and bad. People were called to renounce them and turn to what the prophet claims was the 'true' form of worship all along. The key component in this revision was changing attitudes to child sacrifice.

In Ezekiel, child sacrifice takes place in the worship at the  $\text{בְּנֵי}$  (Ezek. 20:29), the high places. These high places were in existence among the people of Israel from the very early period. Solomon was blessed by the deity during worship in  $\text{בְּנֵי}$ .<sup>695</sup> It seems that in the early period, worship at the  $\text{בְּנֵי}$  was acceptable, but later it came to be considered as an abominable form. This clearly indicates a change in the religious thinking of the people, prophets and leaders.

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<sup>695</sup> It seems that in the early period, worship in *bama* was an acceptable form of worship, but later it was considered as an abominable form.

Thus, we conclude that, worship in  $\text{זָבַח}$  was an acceptable form of worship which the prophets came to consider as illegitimate due to its close affinity with other deities, idols and practises which the exilic or post exilic people consider that Yahweh does not approve. In the past, according to Ezekiel, it was approved, not as a pleasure to the deity, but to punish the people. The call is now to abandon those kinds of painful worship which are not what Yahweh, their God, is asking.

None of these references to child sacrifice is connected to the demand for the firstborn, however. Thus, we may have to conclude that, apart from the demand for the firstborn, there existed a system of child sacrifice in the worship of other deities and occasionally in the Yahweh cult. That means, one should not confuse the demand for all the firstborn with the practice of child sacrifice in Israel that these texts imply. It may be that the firstborn would have been sacrificed for special occasions, but these texts do not support the view that sacrificing all firstborn children was ever a practice in Israel.

### 7.5 Conclusion

Therefore, though sacrificing firstborn human children was part of ancient religious practices, later biblical writers not only prohibited it with strong warnings but sought to argue that it was never Yahweh's intention. The authors or the editors of the Hebrew Bible saw this as something their God had never asked or demanded, or else that the demand was itself a punishment, not an endorsement of the practice. The defensive nature of the writing in the Hebrew Bible on this topic, which sits uneasily with evidence of relics of earlier practices in some texts, indicates that

child sacrifice was practised in some circumstances by some people who were worshipping Yahweh. In addition, there are inferences one may trace to prove that human or child sacrifices were part of Yahweh worship.<sup>696</sup> Despite this, later writers abhorred such practices and warned of severe punishments for those who violated the prohibitions against them. All types of human sacrifices were banned in clear language by these authors or the editors of the Bible. According to the text, these practices were developed among the Israelites as a part of their religious tradition and seem to be continuing even in the later editors' time. The biblical writers tried to oppose them to the maximum degree by portraying them as a product of religious syncretism from their neighbours.

In the Hebrew Bible, humans are regarded as having a high value. At the same time, there is a demand from Yahweh that, 'all that opens the womb belongs to me' and 'consecrate to me every firstborn.' The firstborn are to be consecrated or given to the God. In the understanding of the writers or editors of the Hebrew Bible, fulfilling this demand and consecrating the firstborn to God does not mean sacrificing them. Any reading that concludes that these demands require sacrificing the firstborn entirely misunderstands the subject in the view of these later writers. The above analysis of the words used for giving and consecrating the firstborn and the analysis of the Hebrew texts regarding the demands reveals that they were not a demand for sacrifice. The demand does not equate with killing or sacrificing the firstborn. Even those passages which hint that there may have been an association between the worship of Yahweh and child sacrifice are not evidence of a consistent sacrifice of every firstborn.

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<sup>696</sup> There are instances such as the story of God's command to Abraham for sacrificing Isaac (Genesis 22), or Jephthah (Judges 10), or Ahab's offering of his firstborn for the foundation of building Jericho (1 Ki. 16:34), or the King of Moab's sacrifice of his firstborn son (2Ki 3:26, 27).

The demand that ‘all that opens the womb should be given or consecrated’ to Yahweh does not imply sacrificing the firstborn human baby. Rather, it shows that the firstborn are sacred and special and so belong to the deity. The explanation of why they are special is connected to the Exodus event where all the Egyptian firstborn were killed to bring about the redemption of Israelites from the Egyptian bondage. No text in the Hebrew Bible demands the sacrifice of all the firstborn human beings; rather it asks to consecrate all that opens the womb.

The details of the consecration process are also mentioned in the immediate context of those passages (for example Ex. 13:1-13). Although some of those references appear to be ambiguous, the wider contexts of all the passages and the vocabulary used in them clearly demonstrates that offering children to Yahweh did not imply killing them on an altar.

The provisions for redeeming the human firstborn need to be seen in the context of those for the first born of animals. There are clear instructions in the case of clean animals that they should not be used for common purposes since they are sacred, but are to be sacrificed. In the case of unclean animals, again, the instruction is quite clear: they are to be redeemed if possible. If not, they should not be used for common purpose because they are sacred and thus are to be killed by breaking their necks. They must not be offered as a sacrifice since they are unclean. These instructions are clearly stated in relation to the rules and regulations regarding the firstborn animals.

In the case of firstborn human beings there are some references where redemption is not mentioned in connection with the demand of giving or consecrating the firstborn to God. In

looking at these references, some scholars have suggested that these texts' silence is implying the firstborn had to be sacrificed. However, if all other references do call for redemption as opposed to killing the firstborn children, then to argue that the silent passages are implying sacrifice of the first born seems to conflict with the overall idea of the redemption of the firstborn. There is no instruction to kill the human firstborn if they are not redeemed, as is the case for unclean animals. The redemption price and process are explained in the texts. If they are not redeemed, they are to be given to the service of the local shrines or places of worship.

In addition, the firstborn are substituted by the specially chosen tribe, the Levites, for the priestly duties. In other words, what the firstborn were doing is taken over by the Levites. Substitution is a strong theological element in the Hebrew Bible. One could trace it in the story of Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac. Isaac was replaced by the lamb. The legal texts also require the firstborn to be substituted by a lamb. Later they are regarded as being substituted for by the Levites.

This again confirms the fact that the firstborns were not sacrificed but were redeemed. If they were not redeemed they would have acted as household priests. This is in line with the special rights and privileges assigned to the firstborn in the family as the family priest, after the father. This was the common custom among the Ancient Near Eastern people. Israelites could have practised it before the centralized worship and selection of Levites for the temple services. Though there are issues regarding the date and history of this particular passage, one could historically verify that Levites were the priestly people among the Israelites and thus that at some time in history the Levites had taken over the religious duties of the places of worship in place of



the firstborn, who would have had previously been dedicated to temple service. Therefore, the statement that ‘all that opens the womb belongs to me’ in relation to the firstborn human means ‘redeem them and if not, set them apart for the cultic services.’

However, as noted above that there is evidence that the firstborn were sacrificed on some special occasions in Ancient Near Eastern cultures. Though firstborns were preferred for such sacrifices, people did also sacrifice other children. This was not only done by ordinary people in extreme situations, but also by the kings. Even in the context of the worship of Yahweh, people thought sacrificing their firstborn would cause Yahweh to forgive their sins, accept them and bless them and even considered this to be a commandment from Yahweh himself. Though this was not a common practice, people did practise it. The writers of the Hebrew Bible opposed these practices on two grounds:

1. Sacrifice of the firstborn children was represented as the practice of the peoples surrounding them and not demanded by Israel’s God. Therefore, when we look at the Hebrew Bible as a whole in its final form and even at each book as a unit, the impression is that it opposes the idea of any human sacrifice. The Hebrew Bible does not demand the sacrifice of the firstborn at all.
2. The God of the Hebrew Bible has made a provision of redemption for every firstborn. This was later replaced with the concept of substitution. The Levites were accepted as the people to serve in the temple and took the place of the firstborn. Thus, no more firstborn sacrifice is needed to please their God.

On these two grounds, the writers opposed the idea of human/child sacrifice and totally removed it from the religion of the Hebrew Bible.

## **Chapter 8**

### **Conclusion**

The purpose of this research was to find an answer to the question: How are we to understand the command by the God of Israel to consecrate to him ‘the first that opens the womb’ and reconcile this with the strong opposition to human sacrifice of either children or adults evidenced by many of the authors of the Hebrew Bible? This led to the next question, of whether the firstborn in Israel were ever sacrificed in the worship of Yahweh at any time.

The evidence underpinning the competing claims was assessed by critical analysis and evaluation of the concepts of the firstborn in the Hebrew Bible and those ancient texts which give clues about child sacrifice in the worship of Molech. The current research analysed the relationship between child sacrifice and the so-called cult of Molech in the Hebrew Bible. The question as to whether the term “Molech” refers to a god or to a type of human sacrifice was critically evaluated. The study challenged the traditional position that Molech was a god requiring human sacrifice as part of his worship, with reference to Lev. 18:21; 20:2-5; 2 Kings 23:10 and Jer 32:35.

There are three different interpretations among scholars regarding the identity of Molech and the requirement of child sacrifice.

1. Molech was a sacrificial term. It is the name of a ritual where children were sacrificed rather than of a deity (Eissfeldt’s proposition).

2. Molech was a deity to whom children were dedicated and not sacrificed (Weinfeld's proposition).
3. Molech is a chthonic deity worshiped by many people or groups in the ancient near east (Heider and Day).

Eissfeldt compares the Punic materials and the Biblical account of Molech, though the application of this to Lev. 20:5 is problematic. In Lev. 20:5 מִלְכָּה is clearly portrayed as a deity. Analysis of the Hebrew Bible texts and the Punic findings confirm that these children were sacrificed to Baal (Jer 19:5; 32:35). This led to the conclusion that Baal was the deity to whom child sacrifices were offered. However, it is not possible to argue that wherever מִלְכָּה is found in the Hebrew text, it has the same usage as found in the Punic literature. There are two exceptions in the Hebrew Bible, where מִלְכָּה cannot be translated as a מִלְכָּה sacrifice: Lev. 18:21 and Lev. 20:5. Eissfeldt's translation of Lev. 20:5 as 'all who follow him in playing the harlot after a מִלְכָּה sacrifice' does not do justice to the Hebrew text. The usage of the Hebrew word זָנָו 'whoring' elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible does not agree with this interpretation.<sup>697</sup> Stavrakopoulou's solution, proposing זָנָו as a reference pointing not to the ritual but to the victim himself, 'whoring after מִלְכָּה offerings,'<sup>698</sup> is implausible because there is no other example of this usage referring to the people of Israel playing harlotry after a sacrifice in the Hebrew Bible. The text in Lev. 20:5 is warning about the apostasy of the Israelites in worshiping other gods, their harlotry and

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<sup>697</sup> See e.g. Ex. 34:15-16; Lev. 17:7; 20:6; Deut. 31:16; Jud. 2:17; 8:27, 33; 1 Chro. 5:25; Ezek. 20:30; 23:30.

<sup>698</sup> Stavrakopoulou, *King Manasseh and Child Sacrifice*, p. 251.

unfaithfulness to their God, Yahweh, and not referring to a particular sacrifice.<sup>699</sup> Thus, Eissfeldt and his followers' interpretation of מִלְכָּה as a kind of sacrifice in the Hebrew Bible is untenable.

The claims of Weinfeld that מִלְכָּה was not a child sacrifice but a kind of dedication is misleading. The understanding of the word מִלְכָּה in the Hebrew Bible and in the other ancient near eastern usages is a deity who receives human sacrifice. His argument is not able to stand the test either in the wider context of the Hebrew Bible or in the specific texts he was interpreting, because the texts describe מִלְכָּה as a deity who receives children by burning them in fire. Weinfeld failed to explain the explicit references in the Hebrew Bible about these sacrifices.<sup>700</sup> Weinfeld's comparison of Hebrew Bible materials with Assyrian texts worked against his argument rather than supporting his claims, even in identifying the deity named *Adad-Milki*.

The traditional interpretation of the word מִלְכָּה as the god who received child sacrifices also failed the test in the larger context of finding the meaning and connecting the Hebrew word with the Punic texts, where it is clearly portrayed as a sacrifice. Affirming the traditional interpretation, Heider and Day gathered numerous near-eastern texts to argue for the existence of a chthonic deity named *mlk*, and connected this deity with the biblical מִלְכָּה. The name *Malik* appears in the list of gods in Ugarit, Ur and Babylonia,<sup>701</sup> though there is no evidence that it is a

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<sup>699</sup> Cf. e.g. Ex. 34:15, 16; Lev. 17:7; Deut. 31:16; Jud. 2:17; 8:13; Isa. 57:3; Jer. 3:1-9; Ezek. 6:9; Hos 1:2; 2:7.

<sup>700</sup> See e.g. Lev. 18:21; 20:2; 20:4; Num. 31:23; Deut. 18:10; Jud. 11:31; 2 Kings 3:27; 17:16; 21:6; 23:10; 2 Chr. 28:3; 2 Chr. 33:6; Jer. 32:35; Ezek. 23:37; Amos 1:15; Zeph. 1:5.

<sup>701</sup> RS 24.244 = KTU 1.100/RS 24.251.

god with possible chthonic characteristics that had ever received child sacrifices.<sup>702</sup> Though there are a handful of personal names marked with a divine determinative in the Akkadian, there is no deity identified as *mlk*. It is an assumption that *Malik* and *Maliku* equate to the Hebrew מַלְכָּה. Therefore, the traditional interpretation of מַלְכָּה as the god who demanded child sacrifice also fails to give a solution to these translation issues.

The Punic term *mlk* is the only term identified outside the Hebrew Bible similar to the Biblical *mlk*. In the Hebrew Bible, מַלְכָּה is clearly portrayed as a god who accepts child sacrifice though in the Punic writings *mlk* is clearly a type of sacrifice and not a deity. The current research argues the possibility that *mlk* was a personified cultic practice. מַלְכָּה could have been a kind of child sacrifice in the past, then personified in the Hebrew Bible, as was a common literary practice among the writers of ancient texts. There are many other examples of different things being personified;<sup>703</sup> מַלְכָּה, a kind of child sacrifice, is personified to show its impact on the religious system of the Hebrew Bible. The authors of the Hebrew Bible projected the מַלְכָּה sacrifice as a living deity with whom people were whoring and playing harlotry because of its dreadfulness. In reality מַלְכָּה was the practice of sacrificing children to Baal. This interpretation adds clarity to the understanding of the usage of מַלְכָּה and coheres with its context in the Hebrew Bible. Accordingly, the usage of the word זָנָה ‘whoring’ is also used metaphorically to show people’s unfaithfulness to their god, Yahweh. The authors of the Hebrew Bible were showing the audience that their cultic practises were not acceptable to their God and thus should not be practised.

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<sup>702</sup> See D. Pardee, *Ritual and Cult at Ugarit* (SBL WAW 10; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2002), p. 177.

<sup>703</sup> For example, Sin (Gen 4:7) and Blood (Gen. 4.10) are both personified.

The authors of Hebrew Bible used personification and metamorphism as part of their literary devices to present their thoughts and ideas. This kind of sacrifice has been personified and the act of carrying out the sacrifice is described as זָנָה ‘whoring.’ One cannot read it as a literal whoring, which is neither possible nor intended in this context. Though temple prostitution was part of fertility cults among the ancient near eastern people, whoring after the victim of sacrifice is nowhere reported. Thus, the current research proposes that זָנָה in Lev. 20:5 is a reference to the personification of the kind of sacrifice the people were offering to Baal, or to other deities worshiped at different shrines.

The understanding of זָנָה as a personified sacrifice led to an examination of the nature and uniqueness of this sacrifice and its relation to the demand for the firstborn. The research revealed that there is no connection between Yahweh’s demand for every firstborn and זָנָה sacrifice in relation to child sacrifice. The demand of Yahweh was for firstborn males and not for females. But in the case of זָנָה sacrifice, it could be either male or female children, firstborn or last born.<sup>704</sup> This means that people were offering זָנָה sacrifices, though not as a way of fulfilling the demand for the firstborn by Yahweh. However, it is interesting to note that people were indeed offering their children to Yahweh. The biblical authors suggest that people offered these sacrifices to their God without knowing these sacrifices were unacceptable, even though other

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<sup>704</sup> See Jer. 7:31: “They have built the high places of Topheth in the Valley of Ben Hinnom to burn their sons and daughters in the fire—something I did not command, nor did it enter my mind”; Jer. 32:35b: “They built high places for Baal in the Valley of Ben Hinnom to sacrifice their sons and daughters to Molech, though I never commanded—nor did it enter my mind—that they should do such a detestable thing and so make Judah sin”; Jer. 19:5-6: “They have built the high places of Baal to burn their children in the fire as offerings to Baal—something I did not command or mention, nor did it enter my mind. So beware, the days are coming, declares the LORD, when people will no longer call this place Topheth or the Valley of Ben Hinnom, but the Valley of Slaughter.”

deities among their neighbours did find such sacrifices acceptable. Therefore, it is possible to argue that the claim on the firstborn by their God was not something people were aware of in the past. In order to stop child sacrifice, the authors of the Hebrew Bible introduced the concept that all the firstborn belonged to God and so needed to be redeemed and not sacrificed. The only firstborns to be sacrificed were clean animals.

The research concluded that the Hebrews did practise child sacrifice to Yahweh in the early days. Even under the so-called good king Josiah, child sacrifice was an acceptable form of worship for the first 18 years of his rule (2 Kings 23:4-20). According to the text, Josiah found the Book of the Law in the 18<sup>th</sup> year of his reign. He read the Book of the Law and called for a reformation. This suggests that in the first 18 years of Josiah's reign, the people were offering their children to their God as an acceptable form of worship. That implies that child sacrifice was an acceptable form of worship among the people until they read the law of Moses. This also reveals that even King Josiah was not aware that child sacrifice was not something acceptable to their God until he himself read it in the law. When they read the law, they realised the evil nature of child sacrifice and then Josiah removed the Topheth from the Valley of Ben Hinnom and from other places (2 Kings 23). According to the text, even the worship at the temple was polytheistic and syncretistic in nature,<sup>705</sup> with Josiah then trying to insist on monotheism in this context.

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<sup>705</sup> See 2 Kings 23:4-7: "The king ordered Hilkiah the high priest, the priests next in rank and the doorkeepers to remove from the temple of the LORD all the articles made for Baal and Asherah and all the starry hosts. He burned them outside Jerusalem in the fields of the Kidron Valley and took the ashes to Bethel. He did away with the idolatrous priests appointed by the kings of Judah to burn incense on the high places of the towns of Judah and on those around Jerusalem—those who burned incense to Baal, to the sun and moon, to the constellations and to all the starry hosts. He took the Asherah pole from the temple of the LORD to the Kidron Valley outside Jerusalem and burned it there. He ground it to powder and scattered the dust over the graves of the common

Whether or not this describes the actual historical situation in Josiah's reign, it indicates that the biblical writers acknowledged a tradition of allowable child sacrifice and that the books of the law brought about a change in practice. The writings and arguments of the biblical authors more reflect their own understanding of child sacrifice at the time of writing than any attempt to provide an objective history of the practice of child sacrifice and how it had been perceived by the people. They considered child sacrifice to be an abhorrent practice and thus the writers were trying to halt it by describing it as something alien to Israel. Yet they cannot deny that the sacrifice of children was practised in earlier periods and even continued at the time of writing. People thought of it as an acceptable form of worship to Yahweh. If child sacrifice had been recognised as syncretistic, Ezekiel would not have argued that 'these are the laws given by their God to punish them.' People were engaging in child sacrifice without any fear or reluctance because they regarded it as a traditional part of the cult of Yahweh. Perhaps it was surprising for the audience to discover that their normal form of worship was illegitimate.

The near sacrifice of Isaac in Abraham's story (Genesis 22) reflects this line of thought. The author in this story is trying to convince the audience that child sacrifice was not something their God desired. Although God demanded Abraham's son, even their founding father was eventually prohibited from the act of sacrificing Isaac. The Abrahamic story is presented as a test of faith in the life of their founding father – a test in which Abraham demonstrated his obedience to Yahweh. However, Abraham's apparent willingness, without any question or hesitation, to sacrifice his one and only son again confirms the fact that child sacrifice was a common practice among the people of the time. The exclamatory phrase "Your only son" used for Isaac, probably

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people. He also tore down the quarters of the male shrine prostitutes that were in the temple of the LORD, the quarters where women did weaving for Asherah."



conveyed the message that the sacrifice had to be Abraham's own flesh and blood. It is possible that Abraham could have sacrificed other children, probably children who were taken or purchased from different families or children of slaves to be sacrificed to his deity. The author seems to assume that the people will not doubt the act of Abraham in taking Isaac to sacrifice, implying that sacrificing their children may have been practiced among the people. The audience would have understood the story and its meaning, since the reality for many of them was that they carried out child sacrifice.

The story was crafted in such a way as to convey the clear message that child sacrifice was not required by their God. God himself made provision of a lamb instead of Isaac. Abraham did not have a substitute but God provided a substitute for Abraham, a lamb. Therefore, the Abrahamic story was aimed at expunging the existing child sacrifice in the name of their God from among the people of Israel.

The other key incident in connection with the firstborn is the story of the inauguration of the Passover celebration. This involves both the killing of all the Egyptian firstborn and the announcement of Yahweh's specific demand for the firstborn of Israel. This thesis argues that the author was aiming to convince the people of Israel that their God did not require the sacrifice of their firstborn even in delivering them from the powerful bondage of Pharaoh. The theory of substitution was also thoughtfully introduced. The story validates the power of the substituted sacrifice of the lamb and the practice of substitution.

The Exodus incident reveals the story of the killing of the Egyptian firstborn as a condition for the deliverance of Israelites. In the case of the Israelites, Yahweh renounced any demand for the sacrifice of the firstborn child by providing substitutionary lambs. The theory of substitution is again affirmed in this context in two ways:

1. The statement that everything that opens the womb belongs to the deity;
2. The requirement that the firstborn should be redeemed and not sacrificed.

The first point shows the divine ownership of the firstborn and the second point reveals how one could take back the firstborn from divine ownership. The lack of any requirement that the Passover sacrifice should be the firstborn of the flock serves to remove all thoughts of sacrificing a firstborn from this central celebration of Israel's origins. In other words, the author is explaining that the Passover and the Exodus event had nothing to do with sacrificing their firstborn. On this interpretation, the authors or the editors used the Passover story to discourage a practice which the people seem to have understood as orthodox. These texts are consistent with the hypothesis that the authors are purposefully trying to teach their audience to reject existing practices of child sacrifice in general and sacrifice of the firstborn in particular.

Yahweh's demand for the firstborn, 'all that opens the womb,' is not restricted to humans but extended to all animals, clean and unclean. The details of the consecration process are also mentioned in the immediate context of those passages (for example Ex. 13:1-13). In addition, there are clear instructions in the case of clean animals that the firstborn should not be used for common purposes since they are sacred and to be sacrificed. In the case of unclean animals, again, the instructions are clear that the firstborn are to be redeemed if possible. If not, they

should not be used for common purposes because they are sacred and are to be killed by breaking their necks. These instructions are stated clearly in relation to the rules and regulations regarding firstborn animals (Ex. 13:12-13).

The thesis also explored the possibility of a connection between the demand for the firstborn in the Hebrew Bible and in certain Indian religious traditions, which suggests a need for further research. The central question could be, why human (adult or child) sacrifice is still existent in some parts of India. This question calls for further research, but this thesis has suggested that one key element in the development of Israel's prohibition of child sacrifice was an insistence on a qualitative difference between human and animal life, meaning that humans were removed from the economy of sacrifice.

There are some references (cf. Ex. 13:1-2) where redemption is not mentioned along with the demand for giving or consecrating the firstborn to God. Some scholars have suggested that these texts are silent in this regard because they imply the sacrifice of the human firstborn as well as that of animals. However, if all other references to this practice require redemption as opposed to sacrifice, then to argue that the silent passages are implying sacrifice of the firstborn seems to conflict with the overall idea of redemption of the firstborn. There is no positive instruction to kill any human firstborn. The detailed explanation of the redemption price and process also confirms that the requirement was to redeem and not to sacrifice firstborn children.

It is significant that the theory of substitution of the firstborn is developed in the context of redeeming the firstborn and not sacrificing them. In the texts of Pentateuch, the firstborn were

substituted by a specially chosen tribe, the Levites, as part of their priestly duties. The substitution of Levites for and on behalf of the firstborn deserves further investigation. In Numbers 3 and 8 the God of Israel asks for the Levites to replace the firstborn, though there are ambiguities regarding the date and history of this substitutionary move.<sup>706</sup> Thus it seems that at some point the Levites had taken over the religious duties of the places of worship and the theology of substitution was introduced to satisfy the questions of the people about the legitimacy of the Levites to do the priestly work.<sup>707</sup> This once again confirms that the firstborn were not sacrificed but were redeemed. Therefore, as per the above observations, the statement that ‘All that opens the womb belongs to me,’ in relation to the firstborn human in Hebrew Bible, is a call for redemption rather than sacrifice.

Conversely, the Hebrew Bible prohibits any kind of child sacrifice, though child sacrifice could have been a practice of the past or even during the writing of the Hebrew Bible. The Hebrew Bible proposes a solution of redemption and substitution. It also threatened the people with divine anger if they continue the practice. The prophets accused the people by holding up their current socio-economic and political situation of exile as the form of God’s punishment for the evil act of sacrificing their children.

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<sup>706</sup> Judges 17-18.

<sup>707</sup> Further research is needed in this field though many works have already been done. See for example Deborah W. Rooke, *Zadok's heirs: The Role and Development of the High Priesthood in Ancient Israel* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); Gary A. Anderson and Saul M. Olyan (eds.), *Priesthood and Cult in Ancient Israel* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1991); John A. Davies, *A Royal Priesthood: Literary and Intertextual Perspectives on an Image of Israel in Exodus 19.6* (London: T & T Clark, 2004); John Wolffe (ed.), *Religion in History: Conflict, Conversion and Coexistence* (Manchester: Open University, 2004).

The authors of the Hebrew Bible very successfully articulated stories about their founding father, deliverance from bondage and the great law giver Moses in order to emphatically oppose child or human sacrifice. They were also successful in introducing redemption and substitutionary theology to the religious system. Thus, the demand for the firstborn by Yahweh had a connection with child sacrifice in the pre-Hebrew Bible period, but was then opposed by its the authors. However, skilful reworking means that the demand itself should not be interpreted as a call for sacrifice, but rather as a call to stop the existing practice of child sacrifice. This ultimately resulted in the abolition of the practice among the followers of the Hebrew Bible.

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