

Leviticus Bible Study #22

For lay leaders and deacons to conduct after the Sunday service, or during a midweek Bible study session.

Leviticus 20:1-5

1 The LORD spoke to Moses, saying, **2** “Say to the people of Israel, Any one of the people of Israel or of the strangers who sojourn in Israel who gives any of his children to Molech shall surely be put to death. The people of the land shall stone him with stones. **3** 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, to make my sanctuary unclean and to profane my holy name. **4** And if the people of the land do at all close their eyes to that man when he gives one of his children to Molech, and do not put him to death, **5** then I will set my face against that man and against his clan and will cut them off from among their people, him and all who follow him in whoring after Molech.

Introduction

Leviticus is the first book of the Bible to mention Molech¹ (also known as Moloch or Milcom). In fact, this is the first mention of a false deity by name in all of Scripture. Why is this the case?

The Gospel is predicated on a past event, namely the Crucifixion of Christ for our sins and His Resurrection on the third day. The man who believes in the Gospel and entrusts his soul to Jesus rests confidently that he is no longer destined for death and damnation; because Jesus defeated sin, death and the devil at the Cross, the believer has confidence for the future – namely a Resurrection on the last day. The ancient Israelite was under a similar dynamic. Because God had delivered their nation from bondage to the Egyptians, they were to entrust themselves to Him and keep faith that He would lead them to the Promised Land. By providing for them through their wilderness years and bringing them into the land, they were to trust that one day He would send the Messiah to deliver them (and the whole world) from the Fall and its consequences.

With the faith though comes expectations. Christians must seek to be like our Savior,² obeying His commands and embodying everything He teaches. In fact, the process of conversion and sanctification begins with our death and ends with our Resurrection in like fashion: though our own mortality is not redemptive the way Jesus's is, it still conforms us to His image.³ So too were the Israelites to embody the redemption given to them in the Exodus. Unlike their bondage in Egypt, they were to love the sojourner as themselves.⁴ They were to grant freedom to their brethren after proscribed periods of enslavement, instead of keeping them in miserable lifelong service. Most importantly, they were to remember that God provided them with lambs to redeem their firstborn in the first Passover; this event would be played out and pantomimed over and over again for each firstborn among both cattle and human alike.⁵ The Israelite was intended to be *about* redemption, for he himself was redeemed from bondage by our Lord. For this reason, Molech is mentioned by name before any other false god. The cult of Molech involved human sacrifice – and most notably that of children.⁶ To the true God, who redeems and commands redemption for children, this practice is abominable.

¹ Leviticus 18:21

² 1 Corinthians 11:1

³ Romans 6:5, 8:29, 1 John 3:2

⁴ Leviticus 19:34,

⁵ Exodus 13:11-16

⁶ <https://biblearchaeology.org/research-articles/abortion-and-the-ancient-practice-of-child-sacrifice/>

Molech and the Ammonite Campaigns

Regarding identity and naming, it is obvious that God has the Ammonite false deity in mind when He speaks to Moses. The writer of 1st and 2nd Kings gives us enough helpful detail to make the correct identification. When Solomon turns from the pure worship of the Lord and builds temples for false gods, the “abomination of the Ammonites” is referred to both as Milcom and Molech, with each one having nearly the same triconsonantal root in Hebrew.⁷⁸ That the Ammonites lived on the eastern border of the Promised Land meant that the competing culture and religion were next door to the future home for the Israelites. This means that the chosen people would hear about Molech far more often than Greek pagan figures or even Egyptian false gods.

Human sacrifices, even those of children, are not unique to the Ammonites, as child sacrifice (among other atrocities) was a common feature of Phoenician and Canaanite paganism in general.⁹ But the close proximity of the Ammonites to Israel made them a unique danger. Not only were the children of Israel going to be exposed to their different way of living, but Ammon was a warlike people, known throughout the book of Judges for constantly harassing Israel and laying siege to Israelite cities; it is their aggression and the mutilation of their victims which solidified the rise of Saul to unify Israel as a kingdom.¹⁰ After the general failure of their attempted conquests, the Ammonites switched to something more deadly.

The shared heritage presented a unique temptation that arose both before and after the years of war. With the Israelites descended from Abraham and the Ammonites descended from the patriarch's nephew Lot,¹¹ it was simple for Israel's pagan neighbor to take the Promised Land by intermarriage, slowly seeding their idolatry into the populace. They looked similar, spoke similar languages, and could always appeal to common descent. Naturally, the Ammonites would do this in response to any failure of harder methods. Sadly, this shift can only be described as a sort of *Anschluss* campaign by the use of their women. The Davidic line was forever marked by Ammonite blood with Solomon's wife Naamah, who bore Rehoboam.¹² The practice continued even until the days of Ezra, who complained to God about further intermarriage between the two nations.¹³ In other words, the Ammonite's marital paganizing campaign not only occurred in Israelite history, but was far more successful than anything they tried militarily.

The Lord's Warning

As any command that the Lord gives which Israel later egregiously breaks, the first verses of Leviticus 20 are stark in their prescriptions. Anyone who engages in child sacrifice must be put to death regardless of the age of the child sacrificed. Anyone who does not wince in horror at the deed is cursed. If the people do not perform the commanded executions, then God will curse them personally. Our Lord knew the stakes. The Israelites were not only close to Molech worship in the land of Canaan but also by familial ties; since the Ammonites and their chief deity represent the *opposite* of the Exodus paradigm they were to live, then any toleration they had of a cult of Molech in the land would surely lead them to spiritual ruin.

7 1 Kings 11:1-8, esp. vs. 5 and 7.

8 <https://biblehub.com/hebrew/4445.htm>

<https://biblehub.com/hebrew/4432.htm>

Milcom is written as מִלְכָּם, while Molech is written מֹלֵךְ. Both share the same root *Melek*, meaning “king.”

9 The Carthaginians are just one such example:

<https://www.ox.ac.uk/news/2014-01-23-ancient-carthaginians-really-did-sacrifice-their-children>

10 1 Samuel 11

11 Genesis 19:30-38

12 1 Kings 14:21-22

13 Ezra 9

The stark warnings and punishments are also on account of the positive ideals given to the people. God did not just give them a set of rules to the end that they would engage in blind loyalty. To the contrary, as we have shown over and over again, the Edenic ideal was to be the operating principle of the nation. Israel was to represent the closest one could get to Eden in this fallen earth, and in Eden children don't die. For that matter, the reasons for which one *would* offer their child in the ancient days (better crops, successful voyages, avoiding inconvenient disabled children) would be illegitimate in a place for which perfection was the prime attribute. Molech worship, just as every other cult and religion in the world at the time, represented the opposite; religion conducted by crass transactionalism and death, feeding and thriving off of the cursed earth instead of seeking the God who could fix it. Thus our Lord warns solemnly against it, that the people may stand apart from the obviously satanic nature of their neighbors' way of life.