

SUMMARY OF THE ARTICLE:

THE MOLOCH CULT  
AND ITS ANCIENT NEAR EASTERN BACKGROUND

by

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Evidence concerning Moloch worship in ancient Israel is found in the legal as well as in the historical and prophetic literature of the Bible. According to the legal and historical sources, the cult involved is "giving" or "passing" children (through fire) to Moloch. There is no mention in those sources of real *sacrificing*. "Giving/passing through fire" may mean delivering/dedicating children to idolatry by means of a fire ceremony (cf. e. g. Th. Gaster, *Myth, Legend and Custom in the Old Testament*, 1969, 586f). Indeed, according to rabbinic interpretation, this prohibition is against delivering children to pagan priests by making them pass between fires (Mishnah *Sanh.* 7, 3; BT *Sanh.* 64 C). A similar view underlies the Book of Jubilees which is more ancient and in other respects contradicts rabbinic *halakhah*. The Book of Jubilees 30:7 ff connects intermarriage, or rather the marrying of one's children to pagans, with the sin of Moloch.

This tradition, which could hardly be an invention, is now corroborated by Assyrian documents. The framework of the penalty clauses of some neo-Assyrian contracts includes the threat that if one of the parties violates the contract, he will "burn" his son to Adad the King and give his daughter to Ishtar (who was known as the queen of heaven). Scholars, and especially the Assyriologist K. Deller (*Orientalia* 34 (1965), 382ff) have indicated that the "burning" has to be taken in this case in the figurative sense. This is supported by the fact that in some cases it is explicitly stated that the offender will dedicate his sons as priests to Adad the king and his daughters as *hierodules* to Ishtar.

It seems therefore that *Moloch* is a tendentious misvocalisation of *Melech* and is referring to the weather god Adad/Hadad (= Baal) who was named king just as his consort Ishtar was called "the queen of heaven" (Jer. 7:18; 44:17). From the fact that King Achaz who opened the door to Assyrian culture (by his alliance with Tilgath Pileser III) was the first king to indulge in the worship of Moloch (II Kings 16:3ff) it may be in-

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ferred that this cult was introduced through Assyro-Aramean influence along with other practices such as the burning of incense on the roofs (II Kings 23:12), the sun chariots (23:11) etc. There is no reason to attribute Moloch worship to Phoenician influence, as is commonly supposed. If this were the case, one would expect to find Moloch worship in northern Israel, which was overwhelmed by Phoenician influence, especially during the Omri dynasty. No allusion, however, to this practice in the northern kingdom has been found. It is also probable that the people brought to Samaria by the Assyrians contributed to the dissemination of this cult, as may be learnt from II Kings 17:31 where *Adadmelech* (sic) is the god to whom the Sapharvites burn/dedicate their children.

The prophetic sources, it is true, speak of "burning", "slaying" and "slaughtering" children (Jer. 7:31; 19:5; Ezek. 16:21; 20:31; 23:27; 23:29; Isa. 57:5; and one has to add Ps. 106:37-38) but this is stated in a very general manner and in a moralising tone and, what is more important, at a period when Moloch and Tophet were no longer in existence (cf. II Kings 23:10). It seems therefore that the prophets refer in this case to a cultic practice which had been eradicated long ago and therefore presented it in an exaggerated and unauthentic manner, in contrast to the legal-historical sources which are more ancient and also precise in their formulation and therefore more trustworthy.

Summary by the author

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