

Deuteronomy 12:29-31
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“When the LORD your God cuts off before you the nations which you are going in to dispossess, and you dispossess them and dwell in their land [anticipating their entrance and possession of the land],³⁰ beware [שָׁמַר *shamar* – to guard, keep, watch over, preserve] that you are not ensnared [נִקְשָׁה *naqash* – to be caught, entangled, ensnared, brought down] to follow them [in their pagan practices], after they are destroyed before you [by God, because of their sinful ways], and that you do not inquire after their gods [which was a cause for their downfall], saying, ‘How do these nations serve their gods, that I also may do likewise?’ [don’t be curious about pagan practices so as to desire them]³¹ “You shall not behave thus toward the LORD your God, for every abominable act which the LORD hates they have done for their gods; for they even burn their sons and daughters in the fire to their gods.

Observations:

Moses anticipates that his hearers will enter Canaan and that God will give them victory over the corrupt pagan nations that occupy the land. But Moses warns his people to guard themselves that they do not become trapped in the idolatry that brought about God’s judgment on the Canaanites. Moses said, “When the LORD your God cuts off before you the nations which you are going in to dispossess, and you dispossess them and dwell in their land, beware that you are not ensnared to follow them, after they are destroyed before you, and that you do not inquire after their gods, saying, ‘How do these nations serve their gods, that I also may do likewise?’” (Deut 12:29-30). The word *beware* translates the Hebrew verb שָׁמַר *shamar*, which means *to guard, be careful about, watch over*, and in this context refers a warning that after victory, the Israelites were to guard themselves against the idols and practices that ensnared (נִקְשָׁה *naqash*) the Canaanites and brought about God’s judgment. Moses follows with the statement, “You shall not behave thus toward the LORD your God, for every abominable act which the LORD hates they have done for their gods; for they even burn their sons and daughters in the fire to their gods.” (Deut 12:31; cf., Lev 18:21; 20:1-5). Some of the *abominable* acts practiced by the Canaanites included gross sexual immorality, which included all forms of incest (Lev 18:1-20; 20:10-12, 14, 17, 19-21), homosexuality (Lev 18:22; 20:13), and sex with animals (Lev 18:23; 20:15-16). They also engaged in the occult (Lev 20:6), were hostile toward parents (Lev 20:9), and offered their children as sacrifices to Molech (Lev 18:21; 20:1-5; Deut 18:10). God specifically told His people, “You shall not follow the customs of the nation which I will drive out before you, for they did all these things, and therefore I have abhorred them” (Lev 20:23). Yet, this is what Israel did throughout their history (Psa 106:37-38; 2 Ki 17:6-23; Jer 7:30-31; 19:4-5; 32:35; Ezek 16:20-21).

Excurses on Human Sacrifice in the Old Testament

Cultures throughout human history have practiced human sacrifice. Some of these include Chinese, Egyptians, Canaanites, Greeks, Romans, Africans, Incans, Mayans, Aztecs, Peruvians, Europeans (Brit, Celts), Vikings, Koreans, and Native American Indians.¹ Glenn Sunshine states:

Most pagan religions practiced human sacrifice at some point in their history. Each of the three principal gods of the Celts demanded human sacrifices by a different means—Taranis by bashing the skull in with an axe or burning, Esus by strangling, and Teutates by drowning. The Druids, who presided over these sacrifices, were also well known for putting prisoners of war in wicker cages and burning them alive as a sacrifice to the gods. The Norse also engaged in widespread human sacrifices, with perhaps the best documented taking place at the temple of Uppsala, Sweden. The Greeks and Romans also engaged in human sacrifice in their earlier history. Greek legend tells of a number of human sacrifices in the Mycenaean period, but according to Plutarch the Greeks sacrificed humans as late as the Persian Wars, just prior to the battle of Salamis in 480 BC.²

When it comes to sacrificing their children, the United States of America outdoes all previous cultures. As of 2021, more than 62 million babies have been aborted in America since *Roe v. Wade*.³ **Most children are sacrificed for the parent's self-interest.** One resource states, "In the USA, where nearly half of pregnancies are unintended and four in 10 of these are terminated by abortion, there are over 3,000 abortions per day."⁴ And girls are more likely to be aborted than boys, which translates to a form of gendercide.⁵ The killing of innocent human life is a violation of the sixth commandment, which states, "You shall not murder" (Deut 5:17). Of course, forgiveness is available to those who turn to Christ as their Savior. This is true for any sin, however heinous, even murder.

According to the Mosaic Law, human sacrifice was regarded as murder (Lev 18:21; Deut 12:31; 18:10), and God prescribed death for those who practiced it (Lev 20:1-2). We know from Scripture that by the end of his life King Solomon turned away from the Lord and worshipped idols, even building places of worship for them (1 Ki 11:4-8). These pagan

¹ Owen Jarus, *25 Cultures That Practiced Human Sacrifice*, Live Science (<https://www.livescience.com/59514-cultures-that-practiced-human-sacrifice.html>).

² Glenn S. Sunshine, *Why You Think the Way You Do: The Story of Western Worldviews from Rome to Home* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2009), 29–30.

³ Sam Dorman, "An estimated 62 million abortions have occurred since *Roe v. Wade* decision in 1973", (<https://www.foxnews.com/politics/abortions-since-roe-v-wade>).

⁴ Worldometer, <https://www.worldometers.info/abortions/>

⁵ Abortion in numbers, (<https://thelifeinstitute.net/learning-centre/abortion-facts/issues/the-numbers>).

worship sites were later used by Israelites to sacrifice their children (Jer 32:31-35). It is recorded that two of Israel's kings, Ahaz and Manasseh, caused their sons to be burned alive to pagan gods (2 Ki 16:1-3; 21:1-6). Apparently, other Israelites were also sacrificing their sons and daughters to idols (Psa 106:37-38; Jer 7:30-31; 19:4-5; 32:31-35; Ezek 16:20-21). Paul tells us that such sacrifices are actually offered to demons (1 Cor 10:20), so it's no surprise that such sacrifices are hellish. Because Israel became corrupt, God destroyed and expelled them from the land by means of military defeat from their enemies. Child sacrifice is mentioned in the list of sins that brought the nation to destruction (2 Ki 17:6-23).

Critics have raised three problem examples of human sacrifice in the Bible, and these include 1) Abraham's sacrifice of Isaac, 2) Jephthah's sacrifice of his daughter, and 3) God the Father's sacrifice of His Son, Jesus.

First, in Genesis 22, Moses records an event in which "God tested Abraham" concerning his son Isaac (Gen 22:1). The Lord told Abraham, "Take now your son, your only son, whom you love, Isaac, and go to the land of Moriah, and offer him there as a burnt offering on one of the mountains of which I will tell you" (Gen 22:2). It's important to note that this was a test of Abraham's faith. God has a pattern of testing His people to humble them (Ex 16:4; 20:20; Deut 13:3; Judg 3:1-2; Isa 48:10). Abraham obeyed and did as the Lord instructed, right up to the moment that Isaac lay bound on the rock, with Abraham's hand raised, ready to slay him with a knife (Gen 22:3-11). But God interrupted and told him, "Do not stretch out your hand against the lad, and do nothing to him; for now I know that you fear God, since you have not withheld your son, your only son, from Me" (Gen 22:12). Abraham then turned and saw a ram caught in a thicket, which he took and offered to God "in the place of his son" (Gen 22:13). Abraham passed the test. He loved and trusted the Lord above all else, even his precious son, Isaac. Abraham learned that God provides for him; therefore, he named the place "The Lord Will Provide" (Hebrew יהוה ירהוּבָּהּ *Yahweh Yireh* or *Jehovah Jireh*) (Gen 22:14). The writer to the Hebrews mentions this event in the life of Abraham, and states, "By faith Abraham, when he was tested, offered up Isaac, and he who had received the promises was offering up his only begotten son; it was he to whom it was said, 'In Isaac your descendants shall be called.'" He considered that God is able to raise people even from the dead, from which he also received him back as a type" (Heb 11:17-19).

Second, in the book of Judges there was an incident where a man named Jephthah offered his daughter as a sacrifice to God, and this because of a vow he made to the Lord (Judg 11:29-40). It's possible that Jephthah felt he had to barter with God as an act of diplomacy in order to secure his victory over the Ammonites, and he did this by making a vow (Judg 11:30-31). God gave Jephthah victory over Israel's enemies, so Jephthah kept his vow. However, it should be noted that Jephthah's act of sacrifice was not commanded by the Lord. Furthermore, it's possible, based on an alternate reading of Judges 11:31, that

Jephthah only dedicated his daughter to service to the Lord rather than actually killing her. The two major views concerning Jephthah's sacrifice of his daughter are as follows:

1. Jephthah actually offered his daughter as a human sacrifice, and the statement "a burnt offering" should be taken at face value. If this is the case, then Jephthah probably derived this strange understanding and commitment from the Canaanite culture, for human sacrifice was forbidden under the Mosaic Law (Lev 18:21; 20:2-5). This would also explain Jephthah's grief when he said to his daughter, "You have brought me very low, and you are among those who trouble me; for I have given my word to the LORD, and I cannot take *it* back" (Judg 11:35).
2. Jephthah only dedicated his daughter for service to the Lord and did not kill her (cf. 1 Sam 1:9-11; 26-28). This understanding is derived from an alternate reading of Judges 11:31 in which Jephthah's vow was to dedicate for service whoever "or" whatever came through the door of his home (YLT). If a person, he/she would be dedicated to God for a lifetime of service, "or" if an animal, it would be sacrificed. This view is both linguistically possible and contextually favorable because Jephthah knew Scripture well enough not to make such a blunder (Judg 11:15-27), the text seems to emphasize dedication when it reads that his daughter "had no relations with a man" (Judg 11:39), and future generations honored her faithfulness (Judg 11:40).

In both of the above possible understandings of Jephthah's actions, God never commanded human sacrifice, and Jephthah is never praised for what he did.

Third, some have criticized the cross of Jesus as a form of forced human sacrifice. The argument is that God the Father forced His Son, Jesus, to be sacrificed on a cross to die a horrible death. It is true that God offered His Son as a sacrifice for our sins; however, Scripture reveals that Jesus went to the cross as a willing substitute, to lay down His life for us. Isaiah tells us, "The LORD was pleased to crush Him, putting Him to grief; if He would render Himself as a guilt offering" (Isa 53:10a). In this verse we see the Father sent and Jesus went. It was an agreement between the two. Jesus said, "the Father loves Me, because I lay down My life so that I may take it again. No one has taken it away from Me, but I lay it down on My own initiative. I have authority to lay it down, and I have authority to take it up again. This commandment I received from My Father" (John 10:17-18). And after Jesus died and was buried in a grave, "God raised Him up on the third day and granted that He become visible" (Acts 10:40). Furthermore, the Father "raised Him from the dead and seated Him at His right hand in the heavenly *places*, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come" (Eph 1:20-21). Jesus was not forced to go to the cross, so His death cannot be compared to the human sacrifices in the Old Testament, in which children and adults were forced to die against their will.