

Who was Moloch?

As with many details in ancient history, the exact origin of Moloch/Molech/Molek worship is unclear. The term Moloch is believed to have originated with the Phoenician mlk, which referred to a type of sacrifice made to confirm or acquit a vow. Melekh is the Hebrew word for “king.” It was common for the Israelites to combine the name of pagan gods with the vowels in the Hebrew word for shame: bosheth. This is how the goddess of fertility and war, Astarte, became Ashtoreth. The combination of mlk, melekh, and bosheth results in “Moloch,” which could be interpreted as “the personified ruler of shameful sacrifice.” It has also been spelled Milcom, Milkim, and Malik. Ashtoreth was his consort, and ritual prostitution was considered an important form of worship.

The Phoenicians were a loosely gathered group of people who inhabited Canaan (modern-day Lebanon, Syria, and Israel) between 1550 BC and 300 BC. In addition to sexual rituals, Moloch worship included child sacrifice, or “passing children through the fire.” It is believed that idols of Moloch were giant metal statues of a man with a bull’s head. Each image had a hole in the abdomen and possibly outstretched forearms that made a kind of ramp to the hole. A fire was lit in or around the statue. Babies were placed in the statue’s arms or in the hole. When a couple sacrificed their firstborn, they believed that Moloch would ensure financial prosperity for the family and future children.

Moloch/Molech worship wasn’t limited to Canaan. Monoliths in North Africa bear the engraving “mlk”—often written “mlk’mr” and “mlk’dm,” which may mean “sacrifice of lamb” and “sacrifice of man.” In North Africa, Moloch was renamed “Kronos.” Kronos migrated to Carthage in Greece, and his mythology grew to include his becoming a Titan and the father of Zeus. Moloch is affiliated with and sometimes equated to Ba’al, although the word ba’al was also used to designate any god or ruler.

In Genesis 12 Abraham followed God's call to move to Canaan. Although human sacrifice was not common in Abraham's native Ur, it was well-established in his new land. God later asked Abraham to offer Isaac as a sacrifice (Genesis 22:2). But then God distinguished Himself from gods like Moloch. Unlike the native Canaanite gods, Abraham's God abhorred human sacrifice. God commanded Isaac to be spared, and He provided a ram to take Isaac's place (Genesis 22:13). God used this event as an illustration of how He would later provide His own Son to take our place.

Over five hundred years after Abraham, Joshua led the Israelites out of the desert to inherit the Promised Land. God knew that the Israelites were immature in their faith and easily distracted from worshiping the one true God (Exodus 32). Before the Israelites had even entered Canaan, God warned them not to participate in Moloch worship (Leviticus 18:21) and repeatedly told them to destroy those cultures that worshiped Moloch. The Israelites didn't heed God's warnings. Instead, they incorporated Moloch worship into their own traditions. Even Solomon, the wisest king, was swayed by this cult and built places of worship for Moloch and other gods (1 Kings 11:1-8). Moloch worship occurred in the "high places" (1 Kings 12:31) as well as a narrow ravine outside Jerusalem called the Valley of Hinnom (2 Kings 23:10).

Despite occasional efforts by godly kings, worship of Moloch wasn't abolished until the Israelites' captivity in Babylon. (Although the Babylonian religion was pantheistic and characterized by astrology and divination, it did not include human sacrifice.) Somehow, the dispersion of the Israelites into a large pagan civilization succeeded in finally purging them of their false gods. When the Jews returned to their land, they rededicated themselves to God, and the Valley of Hinnom was turned into a place for burning garbage

and the bodies of executed criminals. Jesus used the imagery of this place—an eternally burning fire, consuming countless human victims—to describe hell, where those who reject God will burn for eternity (Matthew 10:28).