The Book of Abraham begins with an account of the biblical patriarch Abraham almost being sacrificed to the “dumb idols” and “strange gods” of his kinsfolk (Abr. 1:7–8). The form of sacrifice practiced by Abraham’s kinsfolk in Ur of the Chaldees (vv. 8, 13) was said to be “after the manner of the Egyptians” (vv. 9, 11), and indeed a “priest of Pharaoh” was involved in this procedure (vv. 7–8, 10). This suggests that Abraham’s kinsfolk had adopted Egyptian practices and incorporated these elements into their local (Chaldean) rituals.

This raises the question of whether the ancient Egyptians ever practiced what is commonly called “human sacrifice.” Scholars disagree on what precise terminology to use when describing this phenomenon. Egyptologists typically use phrases such as “sacred violence,” “ritual slaying,” “sanctioned killing,” “capital punishment,” “ritual homicide,” and the like to avoid the pejorative connotations that arise with the term “human sacrifice.” Whatever it is called, however, the practice


documented among the ancient Egyptians ultimately involved putting humans to death for transgressing religious or political boundaries and norms, sometimes done in a ritualistic or ceremonial manner. There is, in the words of one Egyptologist, “indisputable evidence for the practice of human sacrifice in classical ancient Egypt.”

Some of the evidence for this practice dates to the likely time of Abraham (ca. 2000–1800 BC), and “the story presented in the Book of Abraham matches remarkably well with the picture of ritual slaying” in Egypt during the same period. For example, a stone inscription from the eighteenth century BC records “the establishment of penalties for intruders [of sacred space]: anyone found within the limits, except a priest on duty, is to be burnt.” This indicates a cultural setting “in which slaying someone for desecration of sacred space was an accepted practice.” A royal inscription from two centuries earlier depicts the Egyptian king decreeing death upon “children of the enemy” for desecrating a temple. This apparently included punishment by flaying, impalement, beheading, and burning. “When the sacred house of a god had been desecrated, the Egyptian king responded by sacrificing those responsible.”

There is also direct archaeological evidence for “human sacrifice” or ritual slaying at an Egyptian fortress at the site of Mirgissa in northern

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Sudan. During the time of Abraham, this site was part of the Egyptian empire and was under Egyptian control. Discovered at the site was “a deposit . . . containing various ritual objects such as melted wax figurines, a flint knife, and the decapitated body of a foreigner slain during rites designed to ward off enemies. Almost universally, this discovery has been accepted as a case of human sacrifice.”

This view is supported by execration texts, or magical spells used to ward off evil and curse enemies by ritually destroying a wax or clay human effigy (comparable to a voodoo doll). It would appear from the evidence uncovered at Mirgissa that on some occasions these rituals were performed on actual human victims, including foreigners who were seen as a threat to Egyptian political and social order.

From this evidence, we can conclude that Egyptian “human sacrifice” during Abraham’s lifetime was more or less “ritual” in nature, that it was sometimes undertaken “for cultic offenses” or offenses against Egypt’s gods, that “the pharaoh [was sometimes] involved and the sacrifice [was sometimes] under his orders,” that sometimes these sacrifices were initiated “for rebellion against the pharaoh,” and that “the sacrifice could take place both in Egypt proper and outside the boundaries in areas under Egyptian influence.” While caution is still necessary because of gaps in the available data, enough evidence is available to indicate that “institutionally sanctioned ritual violence [in ancient Egypt] centered [on] two main ideas: interference with cult, and rebellion.” This converges remarkably well with the Book of Abraham, offering a plausible historical context for Abraham’s near-sacrifice.

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Further Reading

