

# Human Sacrifice

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.”<sup>1</sup> 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.”<sup>2</sup> Whatever it is called, however, the practice

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1. Past studies have looked at the practice of “human sacrifice” among Mesopotamian and Levantine peoples and the implications for the Book of Abraham. See William James Adams Jr., “Human Sacrifice and the Book of Abraham,” *BYU Studies* 9, no. 4 (1969): 473–80; and Kevin Barney, “On Elkenah as Canaanite El,” *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 19, no. 1 (2010): 29–30. See also the discussion in Beate Pongratz-Leisten, “Ritual Killing and Sacrifice in the Ancient Near East,” in *Human Sacrifice in Jewish and Christian Tradition*, ed. Karin Finsterbusch, Armin Lange, and K. F. Diethard Römheld (Leiden, Neth.: Brill, 2007), 3–33.

2. See the discussion in Kerry Muhlestein, *Violence in the Service of Order: The Religious Framework for Sanctioned Killing in Ancient Egypt* (Oxford: Archaeopress, 2011), 5–8; Herman te Velde, “Human Sacrifice in Ancient Egypt,” in *The Strange World of Human Sacrifice*, ed. Jan N. Bremmer (Leuven, Belg.: Peeters, 2007), 127–34; Donald B. Redford, “Violence in Ancient Egyptian Society,” in *The Cambridge World History of Violence*, vol. 1, *The Prehistoric and Ancient Worlds*, ed. Garrett G. Fagan and others

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.”<sup>3</sup>

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.<sup>4</sup> 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.”<sup>5</sup> This indicates a cultural setting “in which slaying someone for desecration of sacred space was an accepted practice.”<sup>6</sup> 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.”<sup>7</sup>

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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(Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), 342–59, esp. 350–52; and Jacobus van Dijk, “Ritual Homicide in Ancient Egypt,” in *The Value of a Human Life: Ritual Killing and Human Sacrifice in Antiquity*, ed. Karel C. Innemée (Leiden, Neth.: Rijksmuseum van Oudheden, 2022), 41–52. It should be remembered that the Book of Abraham itself never calls the practice described in its opening chapter “human sacrifice,” instead referring to it as the “sacrifice of the heathen” (Abr. 1:7), an “offering,” or a “thank-offering” (vv. 8–10). Quibbling over what Egyptologists today prefer to call the practice is largely a red herring. What matters is whether what is described in the text of the Book of Abraham converges with the external evidence.

3. Robert Kriech Ritner, *The Mechanics of Ancient Egyptian Magical Practice* (Chicago: Oriental Institute, 1993), 162–63.

4. Kerry Muhlestein and John Gee, “An Egyptian Context for the Sacrifice of Abraham,” *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 20, no. 2 (2011): 72.

5. Stela Cairo JE 35256, lines 5–6, in Anthony Leahy, “A Protective Measure at Abydos in the Thirteenth Dynasty,” *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 75 (1989): 42–43, quote at 49.

6. Muhlestein and Gee, “Egyptian Context for the Sacrifice of Abraham,” 73; compare Harco Willems, “Crime, Cult and Capital Punishment (Mo’alla Inscription 8),” *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 76 (1990): 27–54.

7. Muhlestein and Gee, “Egyptian Context for the Sacrifice of Abraham,” 73, citing Donald B. Redford, “The Tod Inscription of Senwosret I and Early 12th Dynasty Involvement in Nubia and the South,” *Journal of the Society for the Study of Egyptian Antiquities* 17, nos. 1–2 (1987): 42–44.

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.”<sup>8</sup>

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).<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup>

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.”<sup>11</sup> 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.”<sup>12</sup> This converges remarkably well with the Book of Abraham, offering a plausible historical context for Abraham’s near-sacrifice.

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8. Muhlestein and Gee, “Egyptian Context for the Sacrifice of Abraham,” 73; compare Ritner, *Mechanics of Ancient Egyptian Magical Practice*, 162–63; and Stephen O. Smoot, “Framing the Book of Abraham: Presumptions and Paradigms,” *Interpreter: A Journal of Latter-day Saint Faith and Scholarship* 47 (2021): 294–99.

9. See Kerry Muhlestein, “Execration Ritual,” in *UCLA Encyclopedia of Egyptology*, April 2008, <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/3f6268zf>.

10. Muhlestein and Gee, “Egyptian Context for the Sacrifice of Abraham,” 74; Velde, “Human Sacrifice in Ancient Egypt,” 131–32; Smoot, “Framing the Book of Abraham,” 294–99.

11. Muhlestein and Gee, “Egyptian Context for the Sacrifice of Abraham,” 74.

12. Kerry Muhlestein, “Sacred Violence: When Ancient Egyptian Punishment Was Dressed in Ritual Trappings,” *Near Eastern Archaeology* 78, no. 4 (2015): 229.

### Further Reading

- Muhlestein, Kerry. "Sacred Violence: When Ancient Egyptian Punishment Was Dressed in Ritual Trappings." *Near Eastern Archaeology* 78, no. 4 (2015): 229–35.
- . *Violence in the Service of Order: The Religious Framework for Sanctioned Killing in Ancient Egypt*. Oxford: Archaeopress, 2011.
- Muhlestein, Kerry, and John Gee. "An Egyptian Context for the Sacrifice of Abraham." *Journal of the Book of Mormon and Other Restoration Scripture* 20, no. 2 (2011): 70–77.