Heath Dewrell presents a compelling analysis of child sacrifice as reflected in the Hebrew Bible and beyond. In his introduction, Dewrell wastes no time in articulating one of the key conclusions of his book: the Israelites were involved in sacrificing children. He builds his study, in part, upon validating this premise, and he emphasizes the complexities of Israelite child sacrifice both in terms of the assortment of sacrificial rites involving children and the rhetorical techniques of biblical authors. Dewrell argues against a reductionistic perspective that might limit Israelite sacrifices to a fundamental ritual type and identifies contradictory trajectories among the voices that address child sacrifice in the Hebrew Bible.

In chapter 1, Dewrell goes straight to the heart of the matter, for no other topic outside of the Akedah (Gen 22) has been so foundational to the academic study of sacrificing offspring in biblical discourse than the issue of môlek, which generally appears in the Hebrew Bible with the definite article, that is, the môlek. There are two primary schools of thought on how to interpret the radicals m-l-

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Yahweh or Ba'al. After surveying the historiography of the topic, Dewrell defends Eissfeldt’s position that the Punic inscriptions and biblical passages represent *m-l-k* as a sacrifice. In support of this perspective, Dewrell counters two of the arguments leveled against recognizing the existence of a biblical *molk*-sacrifice of children. The first is the belief that people in the ancient Near East recognized a god associated with the underworld who went by the name Malik. Dewrell concedes that a deity known as Malik is identified in Near Eastern tradition but indicates that such a deity was neither commonly worshiped nor affiliated with sacrificing children. The lack of extrabiblical evidence for a Molek-like deity who received child victims is, for Dewrell, of particular significance. This line of reasoning, as Dewrell references, was previously articulated. Dewrell’s key contribution to the discussion is in relation to the second matter: the importance of Lev 20:5 and its treatment of Israelites who “prostitute after the *môlek*.” The vein of scholarship that sees such phrasing as particularly evocative of spiritual harlotry with a deity is admittedly compelling, and Dewrell notes that the MT of the verse aligns with the view that biblical Molek was a deity; nevertheless, he argues that the Greek tradition helps reconstruct a more understandable original Hebrew reading, which can be translated as: “And I myself will set my face against that man and against his family. I will cut him off and all who whore after him, for their whoring by means of *mlk*-offerings, from the midst of their people” (34, emphasis original). This reconstruction makes good sense of the clause in the LXX that states “their whoring away into the rulers” (31) by providing a reasonable justification as to why the Greek would have in the plural what the MT gives in the singular. Dewrell realizes that his reconstruction is speculative, but he also adds the additional argument that it is clear from biblical tradition that Yahweh was affiliated with the sacrifices associated with *môlek*, even when denounced as inappropriate. Hence, sacrifices of a *molk* kind to Yahweh, rather than sacrifices to the deity Molek, make better sense of the texts for Dewrell.

Chapter 2 is set up to move the treatment of child sacrifice in early Israel beyond textual analysis to determine the extent to which epigraphic and other material sources demonstrate child sacrificial rites in the Mediterranean world related to Punic and Levantine practices. While the chapter does not set out from the start to address the viability of an important matter underlying the conclusions articulated in chapter 2, the data analyzed in his second chapter position Dewrell in such a way that he can comment on the extent to which Levantine material culture validates his position that Punic *molk* and biblical *môlek* are conceptually intertwined. Dewrell correctly recognizes that, if the two rites are related, then we can expect to find indications that the Levantine Phoenicians performed *molk*-sacrifices, too. Firm corroborating evidence is still absent, as Dewrell shows. Possible inscriptions support for *molk* practices in the Nebi Yunis and Incirli texts, for instance, is suspect. Dewrell is optimistic, however, that future finds may
prove or disprove his perspective that the Levantine Phoenicians influenced the Israelite and Punic *molk* rites. Space constraints do not allow a detailed discussion of the many sources covered in chapter 2, but it is important to note that Dewrell’s focus is not solely upon Punic and Phoenician remains, concluding that none of the possible examples of child sacrifice in epigraphic and anepigraphic sources surveyed unquestionably evinces Levantine offspring immolation, with the exception of the apparent occurrence of infant sacrifice at Umm el-Marra, which is too different and chronologically too far removed from Israelite rites to be pertinent to Dewrell’s study of the Hebrew Bible.

Chapter 3 addresses Yahwistic demands that firstborn Israelites must be provided to him. This is an important issue, but it is complicated by variations in how biblical writers cover the subject. With the exception of Exod 22:28–29 (Eng 29–30), other relevant passages, including Exod 13, speak of redeeming human firstborns or that Levitical priests were to stand in as living substitutes. By analogy, we could assume that the law of giving firstborns to Yahweh relates to living devotion instead of sacrifice, but this would be ill-advised. Dewrell rightly argues in favor of a straightforward reading of Exod 22, indicating the impracticality of devoting children to the priesthood after the first seven days of their lives because that would require a staff of wet-nurses. It would have been more sensible to leave such children with mothers until weaned. He regards the passage as indicative of firstborn sacrifice and counters modern scholarly assumptions about the apparent absurdity of this form of child sacrifice by explaining that sacrificing firstborn children would not have had a significant impact upon an ancient society’s demography in a world where infant mortality was high and people tended to give birth to higher numbers of offspring than in the modern West. What is more, Dewrell advances, we cannot apply modern Western conceptualizations about the value of children to the ancient world, in which mortality rates were higher. The Israelites inhabited a Mediterranean world in which infanticide was practiced, which helps us contextualize the practice of firstborn sacrifice. Dewrell also situates Israelite firstborn sacrifice within the cultic practice of offering firstfruits. In this regard, to provide first things to Yahweh would have been done in order to secure blessings for additional fertility. Despite arguing for a literal understanding of Exod 22:28–29, Dewrell understands that nowhere else in Hebrew Bible is it mentioned that firstborn children were sacrificed after completing their first week of life. For him, these verses, which are part of an early tradition known as the Covenant Code, reflect a subset of Yahwism that seems to have practiced firstborn sacrifice in contrast to other Yahwists who promoted alternatives. The longevity of firstborn sacrifice in Israelite tradition is, for Dewrell, reflected in the book of Ezekiel (see 20:25–26).

Chapter 4 builds upon the preceding chapters by identifying and comparing different sacrificial rites involving children in the Hebrew Bible. Dewrell notes dissimilarities
between the more generalized idea of firstborn sacrifice addressed in chapter 3 and the firstborn immolations mentioned in 2 Kgs 3, Mic 6, and Judg 11. For Dewrell, both the sacrifice of Mesha’s son in the Kings narrative and the prophetic discussion of child sacrifice in Micah correlate to crisis-oriented sacrifices in contrast to the firstborn sacrifices demanded by Exod 22. It is argued, moreover, that the Jephthah account in Judges presents a Yahwistic-directed votive sacrifice of an unintended human victim, a daughter, associated with warfare, but its apparent folkloristic presentation renders the passage unusable for reconstructing the history of Israelite child sacrifice. Other issues are examined as well, such as the Sepharvaim sacrifices of 2 Kgs 17 and the deaths of Hiel’s children referenced in 1 Kgs 16; Dewrell does not regard the latter as sacrificial. A significant portion of the chapter is devoted to a discussion of Hebrew mōlek in light of material covered thus far in the book, arguing that Hebrew mōlk-sacrifices to Yahweh were ostensibly incorporated into the Jerusalem cult based upon Phoenician practices by Ahaz, who is known for his syncretistic behavior and for being the initial monarch associated with mōlk-sacrifices (2 Kgs 16). Isaiah 30:33 is read, furthermore, as indicating the eighth-century date for the beginning of tophet rites. Drawing upon the Punic data, Dewrell considers the Israelite mōlk-sacrifices as potentially votive in nature but not clearly linked to the ritual activity conveyed in Judg 11. He contends, too, that firstborn sacrifice and mōlk-sacrifice were separate practices in Israel because the latter form was not restricted to particular type of child.

In chapter 5, Dewrell presents a thought-provoking and detailed study of the polemical approaches advanced against child sacrifice by biblical authors, identifying a trend in which mōlk-sacrifice and firstborn immolation were treated separately in early source material but were eventually conflated in rhetorical denunciations of child sacrifice. Multiple perspectives are evident in the Hebrew Bible, according to Dewrell. For example, Deuteronomic and Holiness passages consider the foreignness of mōlk-sacrifice but treat firstborn sacrifice differently: one dismisses Yahweh’s claim to firstborn humans by not referencing it, whereas the other promotes the idea of redeeming the firstborn. Ezekiel and Jeremiah vary also. They both explain that mōlk-sacrificial practices are foreign and contain the additional element that the sacrifices are directed toward foreign deities or a particularly significant outside god (Ba’al). Regarding firstborn immolation, the books of Ezekiel and Jeremiah are in stark contrast. Ezekiel explains that Yahweh commanded firstborn sacrifice as a means of punishing the Israelites, yet Jeremiah indicates that Yahweh never endorsed such sacrifices at all. Dewrell ends with a succinct summation of his primary points.

*Child Sacrifice in Ancient Israel* is an important study that bolsters the views of Eissfeldt regarding the nature of Punic and Israelite mōlk-sacrifice and, therefore, helps advance the argument against the existence of a deity known as Molek in the Hebrew Bible.
Dewrell’s book aligns him with others (e.g., Mosca and Stavrakopoulou) while making original contributions. The work is well reasoned, acquainted with a wide array of scholarship, and based upon sound philological analysis. Dewrell is cautious in his approach in order to remain faithful to the kinds of evidence we current have at our disposal, lest he overreach in making definitive conclusions. He realizes, for instance, that a key part of his argument lacks confirmation: it is currently unknown if the Phoenicians performed *molk*-sacrifices of the kind found in Punic areas. The Phoenician connection to biblical child sacrifice is an essential element of Dewrell’s view that Ahaz brought the rite to Jerusalem. Anticipating an affiliation between Punic and Israelite practices is natural, given similarities in *m-l-k* terminology and burnt sacrifice. If and when unambiguous evidence from Phoenicia is discovered, others, including myself, may be more inclined to accept that the Hebrew and Punic rites are closely related. Phoenician origins would certainly enlighten references in Jeremiah to child sacrifices connected to Ba’al and the Jerusalem tophet. It is truly lamentable that the Incirli text is not in a better state of preservation or that the Nebi Yunis artifact had not been found through scientific excavations. As it now stands, both are inconsequential for understanding the potential Phoenician origins of *molk*-sacrifices, as Dewrell explains in chapter 2. While I can agree with Dewrell on several issues, it is particularly on the issue of biblical *môlek* that our views are most out of sync.

A point of general agreement and a highlight of Dewrell’s analysis is his identification of diversity in the Israelite cult and the ancient perspectives about it. First, Dewrell recognizes variations in biblical rhetoric diachronically to show several approaches to the issue of child sacrifice while attempting to separate how different rites were written about in the biblical corpus. Second, he realizes that Israelite religiosity was not homogenous, noting that whereas some Israelites may have sacrificed firstborn children, others did not view Yahwism as containing a general requirement to perform such a rite. The biblical texts show that within ancient Israel there were competing perspectives on human sacrifice, as Dewrell correctly explains, and it is clear that an internal debate on the matter occurred within Yahwism starting in the late monarchical period.¹ Third, Dewrell considers child sacrifice in ancient Israel to have been complex, with three types: two grounded in local tradition (firstborn sacrifice in general and firstborn sacrifice in crisis situations), and one founded upon outside influence (*molk*-sacrifice).

In reference to firstborn sacrifice of a general kind, Dewrell is right: Exod 22 supports the conclusion that at some point in Yahwistic worship, firstborn sacrifice was mandated. I appreciate Dewrell’s observation that perhaps only a segment of ancient Israel recognized

1. I have discussed this topic elsewhere, such as “Debating the Legitimacy of Human Sacrifice in Modern Hinduism and Biblical Tradition,” *Journal of Global South Studies* 35 (2018): 130–54.

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such a demand and followed through with it. As for firstborn crisis sacrifice, I would recommend that there is more to the Egyptian material than Dewrell allows. In chapter 2, Dewrell does not accept the interpretation that Egyptian sources point to a Levantine practice of child sacrifice in the face of besiegement. I, conversely, believe that scholarship has moved in the right direction to see KTU 1.119, the Egyptian material, and 2 Kgs 3 in a complementary light. Granted, KTU 1.119 does not explicitly identify the victim as a human firstborn or male, as Dewrell recognizes, but the context suggests that the people of Ugarit used at least animal sacrifice and other rites in an effort to persuade Ba’al when besieged. The Egyptian sources, which are roughly contemporary with the Ugaritic material, point to a similar practice but with human victims by the inhabitants of the Levant, including people from a city within the cultural sphere of Ugarit. Admittedly, there is some ambiguity in the Egyptian reliefs, but child sacrifice seems the best interpretation. The Beit el-Wali inscription appears to specify that Ba’al and the pharaoh were not equated (contra Dewrell). It would seem that people of the Levant called forth to Ba’al in the face of a severe military emergency, just like Mesha ostensibly sought assistance from Chemosh; on the issue of the divine recipient in 2 Kgs 3, Dewrell and I can agree.

Regarding the kinds of child sacrifice found in the Hebrew Bible, I suggest that at least one additional category be considered: the sacrifice of guilty offspring. One implication of Mic 6 is that some Israelites seemingly believed that children could be sacrificed to address the sins of parents, which is reminiscent of Isa 52–53 and the sacrifice of the Suffering Servant figure. In both prophetic books, the matter of vicarious sacrifice is mentioned by which victims could die for the wrongdoing of others. The Isaiah passage, which is not about child sacrifice, explicitly endorses such sacrifice, whereas the Micah text only mentions the possibility. Dewrell’s book focuses on what I would consider the sacrifice of innocent children, that is, children who are not referenced for having done something wrong that (for some biblical writers) would require their deaths. Psalm 106, for instance, equates wrongful child sacrifice to murder and the taking of innocent lives. Like the writer of this psalm, the Deuteronomistic writers/editors negatively viewed some forms of child sacrifice, such as those that occurred in the Hinnom Valley (2 Kgs 23) but promoted the idea that children could be sacrificed within the context of herem-dedication. Indeed, individuals (children or adults) who were regarded as transgressing Deuteronomistic Yahwism were viewed as viable sacrificial victims, be they foreigners or Israelites (Josh 6; Deut 13; 1 Sam 15). Furthermore, 2 Sam 21, represents the sacrifice of offspring for the guilt of Saul. This passage is especially complex because of the individual innocence of the victims but their collective (and ostensibly generational) guilt due to Saul’s murderous behavior against the Gibeonites. This is not the place to elaborate upon
these points. I conclude by emphasizing with Dewrell that human sacrifice in Hebrew tradition was more diverse than some have allowed. Dewrell has helped further the study of this matter in meaningful ways.

2. For more information on issues raised in the final paragraphs of this review, consult my “How in Ancient Times They Sacrificed People: Human Immolation in the Eastern Mediterranean Basin with Special Emphasis on Ancient Israel and the Near East” (Ph.D. diss., University of Michigan, 2006) or my forthcoming monograph on human sacrifice throughout the Mediterranean world (Eisenbrauns).