

THE INFLUENCE OF EGYPT ON ISRAELITE CULTURAL AND RELIGIOUS MORES

Joshua Seth Houston

Before the Hebrews enter the land of Canaan, Yahweh says, “Today, I have taken away the disgrace of Egypt from you” (Josh 5:9). Yahweh speaks these words after the second generation of Hebrews undergo Abrahamic circumcision. The Hebrews could not take on the national identity of “Israel” until they had removed the national identity of “Egypt.” Israel’s experience with Egypt was a key part of Israel’s cultural setting.¹ Abraham travels to Egypt (Gen 12:10–20), Joseph becomes a slave to a high-ranking Egyptian official (Gen 39:1–6), and the early family of Israel travels to Egypt to escape famine (Gen 46:3–7).² Joshua 5:8 suggests that the impact of Egypt remained on the people while the Hebrews wandered in the wilderness.³ The circumcision

¹ Rodger Dalman, “Egypt and Early Israel’s Cultural Setting: A Quest for Evidential Possibilities,” *JETS* 51 (2008): 449.

² The travels to Egypt in Genesis form a chiasm. Shortly after Abram’s call to “go out from your country, your relatives, and your household to the land that I (Yahweh) will show you,” Abram goes to Egypt with his nephew, Lot, and his possessions. Abram left his homeland, but he did not leave his relatives (i.e., Lot) or his household (i.e., his possessions) and did not follow Yahweh but went to the “safe place” of Egyptian comfort. The end of Genesis 11 and 12:1–4 are not in chronological order. Stephen (Acts 7:2) said, “The God of glory appeared to our father Abraham when he was in *Mesopotamia, before he dwelt in Haran*” (emphasis added). Note also that the NIV and KJV translate 12:1 as, “God had said,” which the waw consecutive allows. When Terah died, he finally went to the land God would show him but took Lot. Abraham did not leave his country, his kindred, or his father’s house at the beginning.

³ The narrator and actors view Egypt in contrasting lights. The narrator/author often places Egypt in the negative while Egypt seems to be a positive reality for the actors in the narrative. In the context of Jeremiah, Egypt appears in the negative. There is nothing inherently evil about Egypt; this is Yahweh’s way of saying that the Israelites will not be able to escape the wrath of God in wars and famine by traveling to a place of peace and prosperity. This echoes the scene of Jacob and his sons traveling to Egypt in hopes of better circumstances; however, the result, while good during the lifetime of Joseph, would lead to a worse environment than before. Derek Kidner notes, “As for Egypt’s impressive temples, gods, and obelisks, so reassuring to this superstitious company, all such things would prove merely combustible, portable or breakable, and the whole land as easily picked up and put on by a conqueror as a cloak by a shepherd.” Derek Kidner, *Jeremiah* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2014), 132.

of the Hebrew men in Joshua 5:2–9 serves as one of many ways in which Yahweh removes this impact.

Scholarly views regarding Israelite assimilation tend to fall on two extremes. On the one hand, scholars in the 1970s championed a method that sought to exploit the parallels of social and religious practices between surrounding ANE texts and Israelite literature.⁴ John Van Seters argued that the parallel information provided enough concrete evidence to support these claims.⁵ Gösta Ahlström's 1986 work *Who Were the Israelites?* intended to uncover Israel's origin without using the Pentateuch.⁶ On the other hand, other scholars view Israel in a vacuum. Such scholars recognize Israel's view of itself as separate from the rest of the world.⁷ However, Israel does not exist in a cultural void. The exodus narrative, though often overlooked, provides details concerning the Hebrew people's relationship to Egypt.

The customs of the Hebrews during the exodus demonstrate a spiritual metamorphosis. The Hebrews were not holy when they left Egypt (cf. Deut 32:17). The need to create sacred space among the people and the need for a holiness code emphasizes this metamorphosis. Certainly, the Hebrews retained some sense of their Abrahamic mores.⁸ Thus, Leon Kass argues

⁴ James Hoffmeier, *Israel in Egypt* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 4.

⁵ Van Seters employed a comparative approach extending beyond, but including, ANE documents. Van Seters explores Greek documents and Israel's own historiography. Others such as Thomas Thompson follow suit. See John Van Seters, *In Search of History: Historiography in the Ancient World and the Origins of Biblical History* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1997), 7.

⁶ See Ahlström, Gösta W. *Who Were the Israelites?* Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1986.

⁷ For example, Ronald Hendel observes, "Ancient Israel was a nation in the Near East, but it conceived of itself as a unique people." See Ronald Hendel, "Israel Among the Nations: Biblical Culture in the Ancient Near East," in *Remembering Abraham: Culture, Memory, and History in the Hebrew Bible*, ed. by Ronald Hendel (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 3.

⁸ Yahweh did not explain to Moses who Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob were at the burning bush (Exod 3:6). Debate continues concerning how and how much Moses knew about his Hebraic heritage. While much of that cannot be known, what can be known is that Moses knew the important details concerning his Hebraic religious heritage.

that Israel is the anti-Egypt.⁹ Kass suggests that to understand Israel, one must understand Egypt but only in so far as Egypt contrasts with Israel.¹⁰ Israel and Egypt certainly contrast one another; yet, Kass misses the fact that these contrasting features are not immediate or ongoing during the captivity or the subsequent exodus.

Craig Bartholomew notes that the period of the New Kingdom (ca. 1567–1085 BCE) demonstrates a rise in implicit and explicit theology.¹¹

If the Amarna Period can only be seen as a decisive downturn for the fortunes of most of Egypt's cults, the following Ramessid era was characterized by recovery and unprecedented growth. Rameses II ... is credited with building more temples than any other monarch in Egyptian history.¹²

The increasing interest of religion and cult in Egypt during the late bronze age would have impacted the cultural mores of its residents—whether citizens or captives.

Matters of Daily Life

References to Hebrews with Egyptian names, the taking of Egyptian clothing, and cravings for Egyptian food demonstrate the level of Egyptian acculturation. Sociologists suggest acculturation can occur as quickly as a few weeks or as prolonged as a few years.¹³ Biblical

⁹ Leon Kass, *Founding God's Nation: Reading Exodus* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2021), 136.

¹⁰ Kass, *Founding God's Nation*, 137.

¹¹ Craig Bartholomew, *The Old Testament and God: Old Testament Origins and the Question of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2022), 213.

¹² Richard Wilkinson, *The Complete Temples of Ancient Egypt* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2000), 25.

¹³ Debate abounds concerning the definition and use of the terms “assimilation” and “acculturation” in their respective contexts. Ariela Schachter, “From ‘Different’ to ‘Similar’: An Experimental Approach to Understanding Assimilation,” *ASR* 81 (2016): 981–1013.

tradition places the Hebrews in Egypt for multiple generations.¹⁴ Though scholars debate the exact chronology of Israel's period in Egypt, a sociological perspective shows a history of multigenerational captives. The biblical text demonstrates that the older generations passed down their learned behavior to the younger generations.¹⁵

Clothing

Readers of Exodus overlook the cultural implications of the pillaging scene of Exod 12:33–36.

The Egyptians were urging the people on, in order to send them out of the land quickly, for they were saying, “We are all dead!” So the people took their dough before the yeast was added, with their kneading troughs bound up in their clothing on their shoulders. Now the Israelites had done as Moses told them—they had requested from the Egyptians silver and gold items and clothing. The LORD gave the people favor in the sight of the Egyptians, and they gave them whatever they wanted, and so they plundered Egypt.

Upon their flight from Egypt, the Hebrews asked for and received silver, gold, and clothing from the Egyptians. Yahweh foretold of this plundering in Exod 3:19–22 and 11:1–3.¹⁶ Randall Bailey

¹⁴ Determining the chronology of this event is difficult from the biblical text and archeological evidence. Exodus 12:40 states that the Israelites dwelt in Egypt for 430 years. Genesis 15:13 predicts a period of captivity for 400 years. Rashi, having recalculated the chronology, asserted Israel was in Egypt for 210 years. The rabbis explain that the prophecy in Gen 15 took place 30 years prior to the birth of Isaac; thus, 430 in Exodus refers to the time since Gen 15. Adopting this approach accounts for the 400 and 430 years recorded. It is beyond the scope of this study to address matters of chronology. What is significant is that the narrative places the Hebrews as multigenerational captives. See David Gadeloff, “How Long Was the Sojourn in Egypt: 210 or 430 Years?” *JBQ* 44 (2016), 183–89.

¹⁵ There was a gap between Hebrew and Egyptian culture to be sure, but to what degree this gap existed is difficult to say. When Abraham goes to Egypt in Gen 12:10–20, the text does not imply that a translator or interpreter aided in Abraham's conversation with the Pharaoh. The same is true with the Joseph narrative. It does not seem plausible to suggest that the high Egyptian officials would have known Semitic languages. It is more plausible then—given Egypt's status as the dominant world power—that other cultures knew of Egyptian language and culture and were not purely ignorant concerning Egyptian life. To assert this further would require a separate study. Suffice it here to say whether the gap between Hebrew and Egyptian culture was broad or narrow, the gap existed nonetheless.

¹⁶ Scholars debate the ethical issues surrounding the “plundering” (לָצַד) of the Egyptians. For a discussion of the ethical issues surrounding the plundering narrative, see Cornelis Houtman, *Exodus*, trans. Sierd Woudstra, 3 vols. (Leuven: Peters, 2000), 382–386; G. W. Coats, “Despoiling the Egyptians,” *VT* 18 (1968): 450–57; N. C. Collins, “Evidence in the Septuagint of a Tradition in which the Israelites Left Egypt without Pharaoh's Consent,” *CBQ* 56 (1994): 442–48.

notes that the text emphasizes the Hebrews' ability to leave Egypt in a state of joy.¹⁷ Yet, the issue is not the motive behind the plundering but the objects that the Hebrews took. The items of gold and silver will serve as the material for the golden calf (Exod 32) and the metal to form the utensils in the tabernacle (Exod 26).¹⁸ The collection of precious metals—of which the Hebrews would certainly not have possessed on their own—foreshadows the construction of the tabernacle. The collection of these items answers the narrative question of where slaves could have received such valuable items.

While the metals serve a purpose later in Exodus, the third collected item is odd. The collection of silver and gold presents the Hebrews collecting what they do not have in their context as slaves. However, the Hebrews also collect clothing, something they would have possessed in some form already. Regarding clothing in ancient societies, Garroway, Palmer, and Erisman note, "Dress is more than a material object. It is a means to understand how society constructs and performs identity, both individual and collective."¹⁹ If one applies Garroway, Palmer, and Erisman's observation to the Hebrews, the request for Egyptian clothing symbolizes a willingness to look Egyptian during the exodus.

The plundering of clothing reflects cultural identity. On the one hand, the plundering of clothing from the Egyptians signifies the "stripping" of Egypt, the first phase in Egypt's demise against the long-oppressed Hebrews that will ultimately cumulate in the destruction of Pharaoh's army (Exod 14:23–41). But on the other hand, the Hebrews surely possessed clothing before their escape. Why would they need Egyptian clothing? The Egyptians held their clothing in high

¹⁷ Randall Bailey, *Exodus* (Joplin, MO: College Press, 2007), 153.

¹⁸ Victor Hamilton, *Exodus: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 193.

¹⁹ Nili Sacher Fox, Kristine Henriksen Garroway, Christine Elizabeth Palmer, and Angela Roskop Erisman, eds. *The Body Lived, Cultured, Adorned: Essays on Dress and the Body in the Bible and Ancient Near East in Honor of Nili S. Fox* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 2022), 2.

regard.²⁰ There was little difference in clothing style between the Pharaoh and a common farmer.²¹ Egyptian clothing varied depending on the season. Cotton served as the primary fabric resulting in a light and breathable garment while wool composed other garments for cooler weather.²² Hebrew slaves would not have worn the lavish colors and heavily decorated garments of the Egyptians.

Given that the exodus from Egypt to Canaan should have taken 11 days (cf. Deut 1:2), the Hebrews may have believed that the foreign powers in Canaan would surrender without a fight if they looked like the domineering world power. To be sure, Yahweh approved of the Hebrews plundering of the clothing as he approved of the plundering of silver and gold. When the Hebrews use these gifts to serve Yahweh, the gifts symbolize a new beginning, but when they do not, they perpetuate the past with its idolatry and oppression.²³

Moses looked like an Egyptian when he fled to Midian. The daughters of Ruel (i.e., Jethro) tell their father, “An Egyptian man rescued us from the shepherds” (Exod 2:19). Conversely, Pharaoh’s daughter recognized the infant Moses as a Hebrew (Exod 2:6).²⁴ If Stephen’s chronology is correct (Acts 7:23), Moses had lived forty years in Egypt and learned all the ways of the Egyptians. When Moses fled from his Egyptian home, he did not leave his

²⁰ Bob Brier and Hoyt Hobbs, *Daily Life of the Ancient Egyptians* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2008), 128.

²¹ Brier and Hobbs, *Daily Life*, 134.

²² Brier and Hobbs, *Daily Life*, 128–29.

²³ Hamilton, *Exodus*, 193.

²⁴ Most critical commentaries do not tackle this question (e.g., Peter Enns and Victor Hamilton say nothing of the issue in their critical commentaries). Thomas Dozeman suggests that the identification of Moses as a Hebrew is a literary device intended to separate the people of God from the Egyptians. Dozeman adds, “The birth story of Moses is not intended to make Moses Egyptian, but to place him in Egyptian culture.” At the least, Exod 2 places Moses in an identity crisis that will ultimately cumulate in Moses’s becoming Hebrew in Exod 4:24–26. Enns, Peter. *Exodus*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000; Hamilton, *Exodus*. Thomas Dozeman, *Exodus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 84.

Egyptian identity behind. Moses may have spoken the Egyptian language to the women at the well but a better explanation for their ability to recognize him as Egyptian would be because his clothing and grooming style reflected Egyptian culture.

The law of Moses presents two laws regarding clothing: (1) the prohibition against a mixed material garment (Lev 19:19; Deut 22:11) and (2) the prohibition against wearing clothing of the other gender (Deut 22:5). Mixed material (often cotton and wool or linen and cotton) composed the clothing of the ancient Egyptians.²⁵ The command to not wear mixed material clothing implies the shedding of an Egyptian cultural practice. More controversial is whether the Egyptians practiced crossdressing or engaged in a form of gender fluidity. Discussions of Egyptian crossdressing tend to revolve around the female Pharaoh Hatshepsut.²⁶ Kelly-Anne Diamond notes, “There were several other leaders in the New Kingdom who displayed non-binary gender identities, such as Queen Tiye, Akhenaten, Nefertiti, and Tawosret.” Some Egyptologists suggest that Hatshepsut represented a third gender indicating that she dressed like a man in daily life.²⁷ While female pharaohs often wore the regalia of male pharaohs, the practice of crossdressing among the popular level in Egypt is more difficult to analyze. Suffice it to say that the practice of crossdressing in Egypt (regardless of the degree to which it occurred) demands a connection to the clothing prohibition in Deut 22:5. Though Yahweh approves of the plundering of clothing in Exod 3:22, it seems that Yahweh also views the Hebrews’ Egyptian identity as a thing to shed since he places laws on the Hebrews that would prevent them from wearing certain Egyptian clothes. As Garroway, Palmer, and Erisman suggest, clothing allows

²⁵ Julie H. Wertz, “Unraveling the (Production) Secrets of an Egyptian Textile,” *Harvard Art Museums*, May 28, 2020, <https://harvardartmuseums.org/article/unraveling-the-production-secrets-of-an-egyptian-textile>.

²⁶ Kelly-Anne Diamond, “Hatshepsut: Transcending Gender in Ancient Egypt,” *Gender & History* 32 (2020): 168.

²⁷ Diamond, “Hatshepsut,” 169–70.

for an understanding of societal constructs and identity. The Israelites taking and wearing Egyptian clothing demonstrates a high degree of Egyptian acculturation.²⁸

Food

The exodus narrative indicates that the Hebrews left Egypt with food rations. Exodus 12:34 states, “So the people took their dough before the yeast was added, with their kneading troughs bound up in their clothing on their shoulders.” Exodus 12:39 adds, “They baked cakes of bread without yeast using the dough they had brought from Egypt, for it was made without yeast. Because they were thrust out of Egypt and were not able to delay, they could not prepare food for themselves either.” When the Hebrews approached the wilderness of Sin, they said, “If only we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the pots of meat, when we ate bread to the full, for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger!” (Exod 16:3). The narrator wants the reader to realize the absurdity of the complaint. The Hebrews left Egypt with their flocks, herds, and bread. The food of slaves was far measlier than the complaint suggests. Although this complaint is hyperbolic, it does indicate the type of diet held in Egypt—a diet offset by the law of Moses.

Food reflects cultural identity.²⁹ Egypt’s foodway was predominantly bread, onions, beer, and fish.³⁰ The desire for these foods during the exodus demonstrates the desire for the Hebrews

²⁸ Fox, Garroway, Palmer, and Erisman, *The Body Lived, Cultured, Adorned*, 2.

²⁹ Hasty, Jennifer, David G. Lewis, and Marjorie M. Snipes. *Introduction to Anthropology* (Houston, TX: OpenStax, Rice University, 2022), 431.

to hold on to their assimilated lifestyle of Egypt. Yahweh's response to their complaint is to send quail (meat) and manna (bread). Yahweh gives what the people requested, but he does so in a way that allows the shedding of Egyptian identity.

Meat

According to Herodotus, the Egyptians had three distinct categories of animals: (1) sacred animals that could not be killed, (2) sacred animals that could be killed, and (3) animals that were not sacred.³¹ W. M. F. Petrie suggests that what had long been understood as "animal worship" before the Dynastic Period seems only to be an understanding of the relationship man has with animals.

It is difficult to separate now between animals which were worshipped quite independently, and those which were associated as emblems of anthropomorphic gods. Probably, we shall be right in regarding both classes of animals as having been sacred at a remote time, and the connection with the human form as being subsequent. The ideas connected with the animals were those of their most prominent characteristics; hence it appears that it was for the sake of the character that each animal was worshipped, and not because of any fortuitous association with a tribe.³²

Lions, baboons, snakes, hawks, and bulls held sacred status in Egypt.³³ The Egyptians believed the gods took the forms of these animals or possessed the animal.³⁴ Different animals appear in

³⁰ "Foodway" describes a society's collection, production, and consumption of food. There is interest in understanding how culinary traditions shape identity. While written accounts, artwork, and visible food remnants help tell the story of a culture's foodways, anthropologists also use residue studies of traces of food and drink in pottery, baskets, and gourds and stable isotope analysis of human bones and teeth, in which they measure isotopes (radioactive elements found naturally in food) to determine the diet of an individual and the environment in which they lived. These clues to ancient foodways can reveal a great deal about daily life. See Hasty, Lewis, and Snipes, *Introduction*, 434.

³¹ Juliet Clutton-Brock, *Animals as Domesticates: A World View through History* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2012), 53.

³² William Matthew Flinders Petrie, *The Religion of Ancient Egypt* (London: Archibald Constable & Co, 1908), 21.

³³ Lions adorn Pharaoh's bed and throne. The baboon often denotes wisdom.

³⁴ Petrie, *The Religion of Ancient Egypt*, 22.

different regions of Egypt; thus, the Egyptians worshipped different animal images based on their geography.³⁵ Herodotus notes the Egyptians viewed the pig as an unclean animal.³⁶ However, there is no spiritual harm if one encounters a pig; one must only wash himself in the river.³⁷

Herodotus's comments on the relationship between the Egyptians and swine.

Secondly, swineherds, native born Egyptians though they be, are alone of all men forbidden to enter any Egyptian temple; nor will any give a swineherd his daughter in marriage, nor take a wife from their women; but swineherds intermarry among themselves. Nor do the Egyptians think right to sacrifice swine to any god save the Moon and Dionysus; to these they sacrifice their swine at the same time, in the same season of full moon; then they eat of the flesh. The Egyptians have an account of the reason why they sacrifice swine at this festival, yet abominate them at others; I know it, but it is not fitting that I should relate it.³⁸

Herodotus observes the pig's use in Egyptian religious acts. While the pig is not a popular source of food in Egypt, the lower classes commonly consumed pork with no severe religious repercussions.³⁹

³⁵ For example, the sacred animal of Thebes was the ram because the ram is associated with the god Amon. The jackal was known to parade around cemeteries; thus, the jackal became revered as Anubis. The bull was sacred throughout both upper and lower Egypt, though the bull received special attention in Memphis. See, Petrie, *The Religion of Ancient Egypt*, 21–25.

³⁶ The myth of Seth disguising himself as a black pig and striking Horus in the eye seems to be the origin of the pig as an “abomination to the gods.” James B. Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament with Supplement* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1969), 10.

³⁷ Herodotus, *The Persian Wars*, trans. A. D. Godley. Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1920), 335.

³⁸ Herodotus, *The Persian Wars*, 335.

³⁹ *The Eloquent Peasant*, an Egyptian story dating to the Middle Kingdom, lists pigs with other favorable food stock. See, Petrie, W.M. Flinders. *Egyptian Tales Translated From The Papyri. First Series, Ivth To Xiith Dynasty. Illustrated By Tristan Ellis*. New York: Frederick A. Stokes, 1899. Youri Volokhine notes, “The pig is clearly associated with a *bwt* aversion in the Middle Kingdom's Coffin Texts. The pig is also generally excluded from the tables of offerings, except in special ritual circumstances, in XXth Dynasty and then Ptolemaic texts. Obviously pork provides a popular and very widely consumed meat, except that its association with lower value livestock keeps it out of higher class cuisine. The mythological bond between the male pig and the god Seth may also contribute to the animal eventually being despised in the priestly world. Nevertheless, no recommendation for the shunning of the animal is attested in the priestly monographs or elsewhere. On the contrary, the sacrificial killing of pigs for Sekhmet is mentioned in Ptolemaic texts. Ultimately, it should be noted that explicit mentions of dietary restrictions are infrequent. The question of food is not decisive or central to obtaining ritual purity.” Youri Volokhine, “Ancient Egyptian Food Prohibitions,” *ANE Today*, 4 Aug 2022, <https://www.asor.org/anetoday/2022/08/ancient-egyptian-food-prohibitions/>.

The Egyptians viewed animals in connection with worship, piety, and myth.⁴⁰ The type of meat consumed depended on factors such as social status, availability, and religious considerations. Meat was a rare gift for the Egyptians.⁴¹ Although the Egyptians considered the cow a sacred animal, beef was prepared by roasting, stewing, or grilling.⁴² This is likely what the phrase קִיר הַבָּשָׂר (“pots of meat”) indicates in Exod 16:3. Sheep and goats were popular choices for meat in Egypt.⁴³ Goat meat appears in various recipes including stews and grilled dishes.⁴⁴ The Egyptians domesticated various types of poultry such as ducks, geese, and chickens for meat and egg production. Nile fish such as tilapia and catfish serve as the main source of protein in ancient Egypt.⁴⁵ In addition to domesticated animals, the Egyptians hunted wild game such as hares, desert ungulates, and birds.⁴⁶

The above Egyptian diet presents three animals deemed unclean by the law of Moses in Lev 11:1–47: (1) pigs, (2) catfish, and (3) hares.⁴⁷ It is not surprising then to read that the Hebrews crave the food—whether clean or unclean—that they had in Egypt. The Mosaic law prohibits the consumption of these meats. The Hebrews may have regularly eaten foods such as pork or catfish during their captivity. When Yahweh commands these meats not be eaten, he

⁴⁰ Moazami, “Evil Animals,” 300–01.

⁴¹ Brian Muhs, “Ancient Egyptian Cuisine,” *News and Notes* 237 (2018): 14.

⁴² Muhs, “Ancient Egyptian Cuisine,” 13.

⁴³ Muhs, “Ancient Egyptian Cuisine,” 14.

⁴⁴ Muhs, “Ancient Egyptian Cuisine,” 15.

⁴⁵ Muhs, “Ancient Egyptian Cuisine,” 15.

⁴⁶ Muhs, “Ancient Egyptian Cuisine,” 15.

⁴⁷ There are no food restrictions in Genesis. Though some see a dietary transition from Gen 1:30 to Gen 9:3 (i.e., vegetarian to carnivore), G. J. Wenham notes that there is nothing in Gen 1:30 that prohibits humanity from eating meat. Genesis 9:3 may then endorse the post-fall practice of eating meat rather than inaugurate the practice. Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis*, WBC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 34.

states, “for I am the LORD who brought you up from the land of Egypt to be your God, and you are to be holy because I am holy” (Lev 11:45). The connection of the dietary code to the Hebrews’ liberation from Egypt represents another shedding moment. Bulmer adds, “Deuteronomy emphasizes that Israel is God’s chosen people, and Leviticus that it must be ‘holy.’ This status required them to assert, both their separateness from, and their ethical superiority to, their neighbors.”⁴⁸ In the same way that the Hebrews could no longer wear certain types of Egyptian clothing, now the Hebrews could not eat the same types of Egyptian food. The Hebrew’s craving for the food of Egypt is more than a narrative reflection on Egypt’s prosperity compared to the poverty of the desert. The craving for meat reflects a desire to eat culturally defining food.

Bread

While the Hebrews cravings are for pots of meat, they also craved bread.⁴⁹ Carol Meyers observes that bread and other cereal grains were arguably the most important nutritional sources in the biblical period.⁵⁰ Wheat dominated lower Egypt while barley was more prevalent in upper Egypt.⁵¹ But just as the Hebrews had meat when they left Egypt, the Hebrews also had bread. The departure occurred so rapidly that their dough did not have time to rise (Exod 12:34). The transition from Egypt (i.e., the world’s breadbasket) to the wilderness (i.e., barrenness) prompts

⁴⁸ Their ritual practices and prohibitions could, therefore, not be expected to be symmetrical and complementary to those of neighboring peoples, following a classic totemic model.” Ralph Bulmer, “The Uncleaness of the Birds of Leviticus and Deuteronomy,” *Man* 24 (1989): 308.

⁴⁹ Recent scholarship has suggested that the Bevel Rim Bowl was not a ration bowl but a bread mold. This is predominately based on similarities between the Bevel Rim Bowl and the Egyptian Old Kingdom bread mold. The function of the Egyptian bread mold (*bd3* or *bedja*) appears in tomb scenes, figurines, and models. See Michael Chazan and Mark Lehner, “An Ancient Analogy: Pot Baked Bread in Ancient Mesopotamia and Egypt,” *Paléorient* 16 (1990): 21.

⁵⁰ Carol Meyers, “Having Their Space and Eating There Too: Bread Production and Female Power in Ancient Israelite Households,” *Nashim* 5763 (2002): 14.

⁵¹ Archaeologists have found cereal grains in tombs as food for the dead in the afterlife. F. Filce Leek, “Further Studies concerning Ancient Egyptian Bread,” *JEA* 59 (1973): 199.

the Hebrews to crave what they once had. The craving is not for tangible bread but for the feeling of fullness.

The law of Moses does not view bread as something unclean. The only connection between bread in the law of Moses and the bread of Egypt is the lack of yeast during the Feast of Unleavened Bread (Exod 23:15). The first Passover anticipated an immediate departure from Egypt (Exod 12:8). The event marked a new start for the Hebrews with the unleavened bread representing the haste in their departure.⁵² The leavened bread they so craved called their minds back to, as Bailey facetiously says, “the good ole days” of slavery in Egypt.⁵³ The removal of the leaven to commemorate their departure from Egypt makes this new food culturally identifying. In this case, unleavened bread serves as a foodway for Israel.

Alcohol

Though Exod 16:3 does not mention any type of beverage, Israel’s dependence on wine as their source of alcohol demonstrates a shift from the Egyptians. Wine appears in several religious rituals prescribed by the Law of Moses. Wine served as a drink offering that one offered along with burnt offerings (Exod 29:40), and wine was a part of the Passover meal (Exod 12:8).

Although the Egyptians consumed wine, beer was the more popular.⁵⁴ The New English Translation renders the term שֶׁכָּר as “beer” in Deut 14:26 and 29:6, though other translations use the phrase “strong drink,” “fermented drink,” or “similar drink” in that שֶׁכָּר is like wine in being alcoholic.⁵⁵ The two passages in Deuteronomy indicate the Hebrews continued consuming

⁵² Bailey, *Exodus*, 150.

⁵³ Bailey, *Exodus*, 185.

⁵⁴ Salwa Maksoud, M. Nabil El Hadidi, and Wufaa Mahrous Amer, “Beer from the Early Dynasties (3500–3400 cal. B. C. of Upper Egypt, Detected by Archaeological Methods,” *Veget Hist Archaeobot* 3 (1994): 219.

alcohol in the form of wine and beer. However, the law of Moses also indicates a transition concerning alcohol's place in Hebrew culture. The Law of Moses placed restrictions concerning the consumption of alcohol for the priests. Priest could not consume wine or strong drink when they entered the Tent of Meeting or while performing their priestly duties (Lev 10:8–9). The Law of Moses prohibited the consumption of alcohol for those who took a Nazirite vow. These individuals must abstain from wine, strong drink, and any product made from grapes (Num 6:1–4).⁵⁶

In several Egyptian mythological narratives, beer impacts Egyptian deities. For example, the Egyptian goddess Hathor became drunk and thus spared humanity from annihilation.

According to the ancient Egyptian myth, the goddess Hathor decided to finish off the human race. She would have been successful, too, if not for the intervention of the god Ra, who ordered Sektet to mix beer with the mysterious dada fruit and some human blood. When Hathor arrived the next morning to wreak destruction, she found the land flooded with this tempting concoction. Unable to resist, she took one sip, and then another, eventually becoming so drunk that she no longer recognized human beings.⁵⁷

The Israelites would have known these tales. Although the gods of Egypt drink beer and to become drunk, Yahweh differs. There is no indication that Yahweh consumed the drink offering (נְסִיחָה).⁵⁸ The drink offering consists of pouring a fourth hin of wine (approximately one gallon) on the altar as a sweet aroma to Yahweh (Lev 23:13). Yahweh does not drink the wine nor does Yahweh become drunk.

⁵⁵ HALOT notes שֶׁכָּר refers to an intoxicating beverage, likely beer made from barley. See HALOT, s.v., “שֶׁכָּר.”

⁵⁶ נָזַר means “to consecrate oneself.” The Nazirite is a “consecrated one.” The term יַיִן (wine) and שֶׁכָּר (beer, strong drink) appear together here. However, the New English Translation renders שֶׁכָּר as “strong drink” rather than “beer” as it does in Deut 14:26 and 29:6. The remainder of the verses emphasizes products from grapes: the juice, raisins, seed, or skin. The vinegar (חֶמֶץ) may refer to the souring of wine. Thus, wine seems to be the thrust of the passage. שֶׁכָּר likely does not refer to beer per se but indicated a catch-all term for intoxicating drink. Wine is prevalent in Israel; thus, wine received the most attention in Num 6:1–4.

⁵⁷ Karim El-Gawhary, “Religious Ferment(ation),” *MERIP* 211 (1999): 14.

⁵⁸ The verbal form נָסַח indicates a pouring out usually as a drink offering though Isa 40:19 uses the term to describe the process of idol casting. HALOT, s.v., “נָסַח.”

Peter Leithart views the wine offering as a sabbatical act indicating rest and celebration.⁵⁹ In this way, Leithart suggests Yahweh drinks the wine as a sign of rest in the promised land. However, this overlooks two issues. First, the drink offering appears with a burnt offering as a “soothing aroma” in Lev 23:13. Yahweh does not consume the items. He smells them. Second, Yahweh never becomes drunk or has clouded judgement. Yahweh’s original sabbatical rest in Gen 2:2 did not require alcohol or an offering. Wine may symbolize rest and relaxation in the new land, but Yahweh does not require the consumption of wine to perform those acts with his people.⁶⁰ The cultural shift from the popularity of beer—though beer remained accessible in Israel—to wine presents another foodway denoting cultural shedding.

Conclusion

The Israelites did not exist in a cultural vacuum. This study has demonstrated that Israel possessed cultural and religious mores that carried over into daily life and religious practice. The law of Moses and the events of the exodus narrative serve as the way in which the Hebrews shed their Egyptian mores to become their own nation, Israel.

⁵⁹ Peter Leithart, “The Theology of the Drink Offering,” *Theopolis* 17 July 2018, <https://theopolisinstitute.com/the-theology-of-the-drink-offering-2/>.

⁶⁰ Though beer is more popular in Egypt, wine holds a high place in Egypt’s religious practices. Wine appears in offerings to deities, in aspects of funerary rituals, and in the mythology of Egypt’s gods. Poo, Mu-Chou. *Wine and Wine Offering in the Religion of Ancient Egypt*. New York: Routledge, 1995.