

## **“Abomination to Egyptians” in Genesis 43:32, 46:34, and Exodus 8:22**

ARON PINKER (MARYLAND, USA)

### ***ABSTRACT***

*Available explanations of the causes for Egyptian sense of abomination in Genesis 43:32, 46:34, and Exodus 8:22 are either too general or incorrect. It is suggested that in Genesis 43:32 the sense of abomination possibly stems from the malodorous woolen garments worn by the Hebrews; in Genesis 46:34 it is perhaps a combination of basic farmer/shepherd distaste and hatred stemming from an association of shepherds with the barbaric nomadic chieftains on Egypt's north-eastern border; and in Exodus 8:22 it might be driven by the Hebrews' custom of burning portions of animals sacrificed to a deity. These suggestions, while speculative, have a Sitz im Leben context.*

### **A INTRODUCTION**

Genesis 43:32 tells that Joseph hosted his brothers as well as some Egyptian officials for dinner. The seating arrangements were, however, unusual: *They served him by himself, and them by themselves and the Egyptians who ate with him by themselves*. The Biblical narrator finds it necessary to supply an explanation for this curious situation, saying: *for the Egyptians could not dine with the Hebrews since that would be an abomination to the Egyptians*. This is not the only case in which something is identified by the Bible as being an abomination (תועבה), repugnant, or abhorrent to the Egyptians.

In Genesis 46:34 Joseph instructs his brothers to tell Pharaoh that they are shepherds so that they would be kept apart from the Egyptians. Again the Biblical narrator explains: *for all shepherds are abominable to Egyptians*. Similarly, in Exodus 8:22 Moses explains to Pharaoh that sacrificing to God inside Egypt is not possible. Doing so would bring a strong and dangerous outburst from the Egyptian populace; the Hebrews would be stoned by the Egyptians. Again the biblical narrator explains that the sacrifices of the Hebrews are abhorrent to Egyptians: *for what we sacrifice to the Lord our God is an abomination to the Egyptians*.

It should be noted at the outset that there is no ambiguity regarding the

meaning of תועבה. The noun תועבה occurs 116 times in the Bible and various forms of the verb occur 23 times.<sup>1</sup> From the Biblical parallels of the verb תעב emerges the sense “hate (שנא), subvert (עקש), despise (שקץ).” Apparently the verb was used to express inconvenience with anything that did not agree with accepted norms and expectations. This sense also agrees with that of the noun תועבה in the Bible. In the earlier books תועבה refers to inconvenience with the practices of other people (Gen 43:32, 46:34, Ex 8:22, Lev 18:22) and with foreign gods or distorted ritual (Deut 7:25, 12:31, 18:12, 22:5, 23:19, 27:16, 32:16, 2 Kgs 16:13, etc.). In the Wisdom Literature תועבה was used mainly in the moral domain (Prov 11:1, 20, 12, 22, etc.), but in Ezekiel, as in Deuteronomy, most of the references (43) are in the domain of ritual.

The expressions of repugnance (תועבה) that were characteristic of the Egyptians naturally raise the question: “What was the specific nature of the offense in each case?” The purpose of this paper is to suggest an answer to this question. In the following we discuss the three cases *seriatim*.

## B GENESIS 43:32

It is interesting to note that Josephus (37-c. 100 CE), in his retelling of Joseph’s story, skips the detail of the Egyptians being unable to eat with the Hebrew (*Ant.* 2:123). Philo (20 B.C.E.-c. 50 C.E.), however, finds in the separation of the guests at the dinner a reflection of Joseph’s gracefulness as a host. He says (*On Joseph*, 202):

And the manner of their entertainment was to each party in accordance with their national customs, since Joseph thought it wrong to overturn ancient laws, and especially at a banquet where the pleasures should be more numerous than the annoyances.

This would imply that Egyptians considered the Hebrew culinary customs abominable, and raises some questions. How did Joseph’s cooks know to prepare food according to Hebrew culinary customs? Could not Joseph’s cooks come up with a menu that would be satisfactory to both Egyptians and Hebrews? What was specifically abominable to Egyptians in the food that was served to the Hebrews?

<sup>1</sup> Milgrom, J. “תועבה.” *Encyclopaedia Biblica*, VIII: 466-467. Milgrom notes that some consider the verb תעב a derivative of the noun, and the true root being יעב kindred to עיב, “obscure, soil, stain.”

Rashi (1040-1105) explains תועבה as “hateful,” referring to Targum Onqelos (c. 90 C.E.) for a rationale. Onqelos explains the reason:

ארי בעירא דמצראי דחלין ליה עבראי אכלין  
(because the cattle that the Egyptians worship the Hebrew eat).

Targum Jonathan (c. 100 C.E.) repeats this explanation. Indeed, almost all the gods of Egypt had two things in common: they had a counterpart of the opposite sex, and they manifested themselves on earth through animals. Hundreds of birds, crocodiles, snakes, frogs, turtles, cows, cats, etcetera were believed to be living images of a particular god and a natural and indestructible part of the environment in which people lived. Most of these gods, however, were local gods and thus of very limited domain. Moreover, sheep, goats, and swine never served as manifestations of gods in Egypt. They were regularly consumed, and not worshipped. Since Joseph’s dinner party was small it would seem likely that a sheep, goat, or pig was slaughtered. His servants must have been well aware of the local dietary proscriptions to comply with Joseph’s order “slaughter and prepare an animal” (Gen 43:16), without being given more detailed specifications regarding the kind of the animal. The lunchtime meal was supposed to be festive, but nowhere are we told that it was according to the tastes and customs of the Hebrew. A guest at the home of such a high ranking official as Joseph was had no say regarding the menu. Thus, we have to reject Onqelos’ explanation. Similarly, one has to reject the explanation of Sa’adiah (882-942): כי מאכלם מתועב אצלם “because their (Hebrew’s) food is despised by them [Egyptians].”

Kimchi (1160-1235), Ibn Ezra (1089-c.1164) and Abarbanel (1437-1508) claim that the Egyptians were vegetarians and consequently could not partake in the meat dinner (Gen 43:17) that was prepared for the Hebrews. He says,

כי העברים היו אכלים בשר כמו שאמר וטבח טבח. והמצרים לא היו אוכלים. ומה שהיו מגדלים הצאן, לחלב וגזה. ואמרו שהיו עובדים למזל טלה, לפיכך לא היו אוכלים שום בשר בהמה.

(for the Hebrews were eating meat as he said ‘slaughter and prepare an animal.’ And the Egyptians did not eat. And the cattle that they raised were for milk and shearing. It was said that they worshiped the constellation Ram (Aries) that is why they did not eat the meat of a beast).

Ibn Ezra even makes the Egyptian vegans as he believes the Hindu in India were (see Ibn Ezra on Gen 46:34). Being vegans the Egyptians despised anyone who ate meat (see Ibn Ezra (long version) on Ex 8:22). These commentators cannot be correct.

Egyptologists have long ago established that Egyptians ate cattle, birds and fish as part of their daily fare.<sup>2</sup> There is evidence suggesting that the Ancient Egyptians were keeping and breeding animals already 6000 years ago.<sup>3</sup> Cattle, sheep, and goats were used for meat and milk. Pigs and fowl (ducks, geese, and pigeons) were used for meat. It is true that the cow was sacred to many goddesses (Hathor, Mehetweret, Bat, Isis, Nut, etc.), bulls were sacred to Ra, the ram and the goose were considered sacred animals of Amun, etcetera.<sup>4</sup> It should, however, be noted that any taboos associated with a specific god applied only to the priesthood and followers of that god. Such taboos had primarily a local character, with no power outside the city or province in which the god was venerated.<sup>5</sup> Also, it should be kept in mind that taboos are frequently practiced by wealthier and more prominent members of the community and are more likely to be ignored by the irreligious and the poor.<sup>6</sup> Thus, being a sacred animal of a god did not preclude its consumption outside the domain of the god. It seems that in the Middle Kingdom (2000-1780 B.C.E.) vegetarianism was quite common at least among priests, and neither pork nor beef were widely eaten. Dental wear in mummies shows that the Egyptian diet was apparently largely vegetarian, as was the case generally in the Near East. Yet, the average Egyptian was not a vegetarian.

Describing the customs of priests in Egypt at a much later period Herodotus (*Histories*, 2.37.2-5) says: "They are free from all personal expense, having bread made for them out of the sacred grain, and a plentiful daily supply of goose meat and beef, with wine in addition. Fish they are forbidden to touch."<sup>7</sup> For a middle class Egyptian the two main meals probably comprised meat, game, vegetables, fruit in season, bread and cakes, all washed down with copious draughts of beer. Montet, however, notes that

<sup>2</sup> Ikram, S. *Choice Cuts: Meat Production in Ancient Egypt*. (Orientalia Lovaniensia Analectica 69. Leuven: Peeters, 1995), 1.

<sup>3</sup> Epstein, H. *The Origin of the Domestic Animals of Africa*, vol I. (Leipzig: Africana Pub. Organization, 1971), 554. The wild cattle (long horned) came apparently to Egypt via Asia between 4000 and 6000 BCE, and were domesticated afterwards.

<sup>4</sup> Moens, M-F. and Wetterstrom, W. "The Agricultural Economy of an Old Kingdom Town in Egypt's Western Delta: Insight from the Plant Remains." *JNES* 47 (1988): 171. In Lower Egypt there was a cow cult of Sekhat-Hor, patroness of herds and supplier of cow products.

<sup>5</sup> Pernigotti, S. "Priests." In *The Egyptians* (ed. Donadoni, S. Chicago: Chicago Univ. Press, 1997), 143.

<sup>6</sup> Webster, H. *Taboo: A Sociological Study*. (Stanford: Stanford University Press 1942), 324.

<sup>7</sup> Ikram, *Choice Cuts*, 35-36. Ikram notes that "It is quite possible that at certain times in certain areas some fish were taboo for all or specific (e.g. priests) people. However, the evidence, especially the lists of taxes and tribute, as well as faunal remains, prove that fish were consumed."

It is by no means certain that even the wealthier Egyptians ate meat at every meal, for we must remember that Egypt is a hot country and that retain trade was virtually non-existent. The only people who could have an ox killed were those who could be sure of eating it inside three or four days, which meant big landowners with large establishments, temple staffs, and people who were giving a banquet; the common people could do so only on the occasions of feasts and pilgrimages.<sup>8</sup>

Among the poorer classes vegetables constituted the main part of the diet. Egypt abounded in esculent roots growing spontaneously in the land irrigated by the Nile. The poor typically fed on milk, cheese, roots, leguminous, cucurbitaceous, and other plants, and the ordinary fruits of the country.<sup>9</sup> Ikram<sup>10</sup> writes:

It is impossible to determine the exact amount of meat consumed and the frequency of its consumption by any ancient Egyptian. ... From the evidence presented above it would seem that the Pharaoh ate meat of all types regularly, perhaps daily. ... Some priests and nobles would have beef regularly too, perhaps four or more times a week, while others would consume it with lesser frequency. Poorer peasants might only have it on feast occasions, while others would augment festival meats with wild or domesticated poultry or small animals.

The ancient Egyptian was not a vegetarian though his consumption of meat was not high. While the Egyptians raised cattle (Gen 47:6), still beef was a luxury item because of scarcity of pasture land. Much of the meat of the cattle was used for religious ceremonies and offerings, and consequently was available to privileged section of the population for consumption. Pork, on the other hand, which was not used in Egyptian rituals, was eaten regularly.<sup>11</sup> Goat meat, too, was

<sup>8</sup> Montet, P. *Everyday Life in Egypt* (transl. Maxwell-Hyslop, A.R. and Drower, M.S. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1958), 89. Cf. Davies, N. de G. *The Rock Tombs of El Amarna*, vol. III. (London: Egypt Exploration Society, 1903-8), plate 4-6.

<sup>9</sup> Wilkinson, J. G. *A Popular Account of the Ancient Egyptians*, vol I. (New York: Bonanza Books, 1988), 167.

<sup>10</sup> Ikram, *Choice Cuts*, 227.

<sup>11</sup> Herodotus, *Histories*, II:47. Herodotus tells that Egyptians never touched a pig. If per chance they brushed against a pig, they would quickly plunge into the river to cleanse themselves. Thus, it was assumed that pigs were taboo to the Egyptian. Egyptologists hypothesized that the taboo stemmed from the pig's association with Seth, god of chaos and evil. Yet, this association did not preclude the pig from being offered to Nefertum, Ptah, etc. There is ample archaeological and textual evidence for pig consumption in Egypt (Boesseneck, J and von den Driesch, A. "Tierknochenfunde vom Tell Ibrahim Awad Im Ostlichen Nildelta," in *The Archaeology of the Nile Delta* (ed. E.C.M. van den Brink. Amsterdam: Netherlands Inst. For the Near East (NINO) [1988]), 122).

eaten throughout Egypt, and even by upper class Egyptians. Montet says, "When we turn to the list of the food that Egypt could supply from her own resources, we may as well begin with meat, of which the Egyptians ate a very great deal. The walls of private tombs are covered with long processions of animals being led to slaughter for human consumption. Cattle were the chief source of meat."<sup>12</sup> This, however, pertains only to the rich. During their long residence in Egypt the Israelites adopted the Egyptian eating habits and longed for meat and fish in the desert (Num 11:4-5). Were the Egyptians vegetarians, it would have been inconceivable that Joseph would have ordered a dinner that was offensive to all but the Hebrews.

Rashbam (c.1085-1174) and Hizkuni (13<sup>th</sup> century) opine that the Egyptians were impolite and considered it shameful to eat with a foreigner (אנשי) (אנשי so Hizkuni).<sup>13</sup> The only support offered for this indictment of the Egyptians is the phrase קראתי לזאת רהב in Isaiah 30:7, the meaning of which is uncertain (see NJPS *ad loc.*).<sup>14</sup> Hizkuni is quite ambivalent in understanding the essence of the תועבה that the Egyptians felt. In Gen 43:32 he seems to follow Rashbam but in Gen 46:34 he indicates a preference for Rashi's explanation, even suggesting that תועבה could mean "fear" (2 Kgs 23:13).

The Egyptian world view was rather insular. They had in general very limited exposure to influences from abroad, though higher officialdom and merchants came in contact with foreigners and many of the slaves were foreigners. Foreign languages were as incomprehensible to the Egyptians as were foreign cultures. This gave rise to the profession of interpreters (מליץ Gen 42:23).<sup>15</sup> Also,

<sup>12</sup> Montet, *Everyday Life*, 75.

<sup>13</sup> Lichtheim, M. *Ancient Egyptian literature; a book of readings*, vol III. (University of California Press: Berkeley, 1973), 208. Strangers in Egypt suffered at times ill-treatment because of xenophobia. The Late Period *Insinger Papyrus*, though general and not specifically descriptive, provides a glance at the treatment of aliens in Egypt:

*Everywhere the stranger is the servant of the inferior man.  
He arouses wrath in the crowd though he has done no wrong.  
Someone will despise him <though> he does not spite him.  
He must listen to insulting cursing and laugh at it as a joke.  
He must forget the crime of (being treated as) a woman because he is a stranger.* [*Papyrus Insinger, Ancient Egyptian Literature*, Lichtheim, M., Vol. III, p. 184f.]

<sup>14</sup> Pinker, A. "Isaiah 30:7b." *BN* 136 (2008): 31-44.

<sup>15</sup> Bresciani, E. "Foreigners," in *The Egyptians* (ed. Donadoni, S. Chicago: Chicago Univ. Press, 1997), 229. Bresciani observes that "The existence of a class of bilingual foreigners, or 'interpreters,' integrated into Egyptian society and employed profession-



during the second millennium B.C.E. diplomatic business with foreign powers was conducted in Akkadian, the *lingua franca* of the day. Egyptians had apparently various avenues for communicating with the Hebrews, which were included among the Asiatics, or sand-dwellers. Inter-personal communication problems cannot be assumed a cause for Egyptian distancing.

Though Asiatics were perceived by the Egyptian as enemies and were often characterized as wretched or craven, it is hard to see how this would preclude them from sharing dinner at the same table. Certainly the Egyptians invited by Joseph were officials and they must have had an interest to learn as much as possible about the neighboring lands about which they were apprehensive. A close reading of the text shows that it does not say “The Egyptians did not want to eat with the Hebrews” but rather *they could not eat* (כי לא יוכלון) indicating that something ritual or physical was the obstacle.<sup>16</sup> Rashbam and Hizkuni cannot be correct in their contention that it was a case of bad manners and distaste of foreigners.

One gets a strong impression that classical Jewish commentators were at loss to explain the specific cause for the Egyptian abomination to dine with the Hebrews. Modern scholarship does not fare any better. Skinner (1930:482) observes that Genesis 43:32

affords an interesting glimpse of Egyptian manners. Joseph’s isolation at table was perhaps due to his having been admitted a member of the priestly caste (Gen 41:45), which kept itself apart from the laity. The Egyptian exclusiveness in intercourse with foreigners, which would be perfectly intelligible to the later Jews, evidently struck the ancient Israelites as peculiar.<sup>17</sup>

Skinner apparently alludes to the Jewish dietary laws, which preclude an observant Jew’s partaking in a “non-kosher” meal. Accordingly, the Egyptians observed some “dietary laws” that made it impossible for them to share the table

---

ally is quite widely documented in the Old Kingdom. ... The fact that that interpreters no longer feature among recognized trades, with the exception of very rare cases, in the New Kingdom might be related to the increasingly profound linguistic contact established between Egyptians and foreigners from other countries in the empire and within Egypt itself.”

<sup>16</sup> Egyptian records often refer to foreigners as being “unclean.” This may have been because they have not been ritually purified, and consequently could not enter a temple/palace, or it may have contained an insult.

<sup>17</sup> Skinner, J. *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis*. ICC. (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1930), 482.

with the Israelites. This explanation does not make sense. The dinner was prepared in Joseph's house by Egyptian cooks. If there were any Egyptian "dietary laws" these cooks would know them and abide by them. Certainly the Egyptian could have no problems with the food that was prepared by their own cooks. It is possible that some prayer accompanied the dinner.<sup>18</sup> However, it is hard to see how the Israelites, the weaker and probably outnumbered party, would have any say in this matter—in particular, if it is assumed that Joseph was an Egyptian priest, as Skinner does.

Speiser believes that Joseph's eating by himself "was evidently a matter of rank, since the cultic and social taboo ('abomination, anathema') against taking food with Hebrews would scarcely include the Vizier who bore a pious Egyptian name (Gen 51:45)."<sup>19</sup> Shunning the Hebrews at the table was, according to Speiser, a matter of "cultic and social taboo," the specific nature of which he does not spell out. One may well question Speiser's rationale for Joseph's eating by himself. Any "cultic and social taboo" would certainly apply more stringently to Pharaoh's representative than to a regular Egyptian, or an official of low rank.

Similarly, Sarna says, "Joseph eats alone undoubtedly because of his exalted status, but the segregation of the Hebrews was due to the Egyptian feeling of racial and religious superiority that engendered contempt for foreigners, who were regarded as unclean."<sup>20</sup> The novel element in this explanation is "cleanliness." Unfortunately Sarna does not elaborate why Egyptian considered foreigners unclean. Was it related to hygiene, or was it of a religious nature? I will later elaborate on this notion.

In another publication Sarna expressed the opinion that the Egyptians shunned not only the Hebrews but also Joseph, who in their eyes was still a Hebrew.<sup>21</sup> This is in line with Sforino's (1470-1550) view. Sforino says:

<sup>18</sup> Wilkinson, *Popular Account*, 186. Wilkinson notes that "The Egyptians, a scrupulously religious people, were never remiss in expressing their gratitude for the blessings they enjoyed, and in returning thanks to the gods for that peculiar protection they were thought to extend to them and to their country, above all the nations of the earth. They therefore never sat down to meals without saying grace."

<sup>19</sup> Speiser, E. A. *Genesis*. AnB 1. (New York: Doubleday, 1962), 328-329.

<sup>20</sup> Sarna, N. M. *The JPS Torah Commentary, Genesis* בראשית (Philadelphia: JPS, 1989), 302. Sarna notes that according to Herodotus (*Histories*, 2:41), because cows were taboo to Egyptians but eaten by Greeks, no native Egyptian would kiss a Greek, use his kitchen utensils, or even eat the flesh of an ox that had been cut with the knife of a Greek.

<sup>21</sup> Sarna, N. M. *Understanding Genesis*. (New York: Schocken Books, 1966), 222.



“That is why Joseph could not eat with his brothers, nor they and he with the Egyptians” (לפיכך לא אכל הוא עם אחיו ולא הוא ולא אחיו עם המצרים).

Sarna believes it likely that in Genesis 43:32 Egyptian ‘particularism’ asserted itself, because the Hebrews were shepherds—an abhorrent profession (Gen 46:34)—and because they ate sheep—an abomination to Egyptians (Ex 8:22).

If that was the case then their custom must have been well known; it was certainly stringently followed. Yet the Bible seems to consider the Egyptian behavior strange. Furthermore, nowhere prior to the dinner were the Egyptians told that Joseph’s brothers are shepherds, and from Genesis 46:34 it seems this was not generally known. There is also evidence that sheep were not an abomination<sup>22</sup> for the Egyptians in the time of Joseph (whether in the 20<sup>th</sup> or 16<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E.), nor would it make sense that Joseph’s cooks would prepare anything that was an abomination to the Egyptians.<sup>23</sup> Finally, Exodus 8:22 does not specify that Moses refers to sheep.

Redford considers *כי תועבה הוא למצרים* a late scribal gloss. He says, “The remark in 43:32 was added not in the interest of antiquarianism, but as purely descriptive of a contemporary phenomenon; Egyptians (of my own time, implied the writer) do not mix with Hebrews (i. e., Israelites).”<sup>24</sup> This does not make much sense. Why state the obvious? Why should the present custom also reflect an ancient custom? Why did the Egyptians in the present or past have this custom? Unfortunately, biblical scholarship has so far provided little beyond generalities regarding the cause for the Egyptian sense of *תועבה*.

Our contention is that the cause for Egyptian sense of repugnance could not have been Egyptian vegetarianism, Hebrew cultic customs, or the Hebrews being aliens. Perhaps, the Egyptians and Hebrews could not sit down next to each other at the same table because the Hebrews wore garments made of wool. Ancient Egypt was well known for the production of linen, spun from the stem of the flax plant. Most of the clothing in Ancient Egypt was made of linen, though a few items were made from wool. Goat-hair textiles were excavated at Tell el-Amarna, in a 14<sup>th</sup> century BCE workmen’s village, and at other ancient sites.

<sup>22</sup> Ikram, *Choice Cuts*, 17. Sheep were associated with the gods Mendes, Khnum, and Amun. Yet, they provided Egyptians with meat, milk, dairy products, wool, gut, hair and skins.

<sup>23</sup> Bresciani, “Foreigners,” 227. In a Demotic tale (Setne, no.2) the son of Ramesses II orders “disgusting things [to eat] according to Ethiopian tastes” to be prepared for his guest, a magician from Kush.

<sup>24</sup> Redford, D. B. *A study of the Biblical story of Joseph (Genesis 37-50)*. (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1970), 235.

However, animal fibers in Egypt did not have the same importance as flax for making cloth.<sup>25</sup> The Ancient Egyptians also believed that wool was unclean and used it only for outer garments that were left outside temples. Priests could not wear leather sandals or wool clothing, which was considered unclean. Egyptians disliked using wool for dead or living, but the Bedouin prized sheep's wool highly.<sup>26</sup>

In Canaan, as in Assyria and Babylon, the most common material for clothing was wool, although linen had been known from an early period and was used for better-quality garments. The visiting Hebrews probably wore only garments made of wool or animal skins.<sup>27</sup> Wool of that period retained much of its grease, since natural colors were used and there was no need for thorough washing. It is easy to imagine that body perspiration, absorbed over some time, caused such garments to become malodorous. The emitted smell was obnoxious to the Egyptians, who cared a great deal about their appearance and hygiene. In contrast to the white linen garments of the Egyptian the wool garments seemed unclean, which in all likelihood they were.<sup>28</sup> Thus, it is possible that Joseph ordered the preparation of the same dinner for all his guests. However, the attire of the Hebrews compelled separation between the Egyptians and the Hebrews, not the fact that they were foreigners, nor that there was a language barrier, which could have been overcome by means of an interpreter. An Egyptian just could not sit with the Hebrew (כי לא יוכלון המצרים) because of their wool clothes. It appears that Ibn Ezra also suspected that the cause for abomination were the clothes of the Hebrew, saying "They will not eat anything which a meat eater has handled. They consider his very garments unclean. It is thus written, 'because the Egyptians might not eat bread with the Hebrew' (Gen 43:32)."<sup>29</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Ryder, M. L. "Wool of the 14th Century BC from Tell el-Amarna, Egypt." *Nature* 240 (08 December 1972): 355 – 356.

<sup>26</sup> Montet, P. *Everyday Life*, 122. The reason for these prohibitions and dislikes has its roots probably in ancient social ranking and Egypt's political history.

<sup>27</sup> The description of the clothes for the High Priest and his sons show that they were of fine linen when they engaged in Temple services, but apparently not otherwise (Lev 16:24, Ex 38:22-29).

<sup>28</sup> Berlin Papyrus 10499 and Papyrus 3022 give the complementary parts of a story about Sinuhe. Sinuhe, an Egyptian palace official, fearing strife in Egypt flees to Syria where he prospers. At the approach of old age, he feels driven to return home to end his days, and be buried, as an Egyptian. When Sinuhe returns back to Egypt and removes his Bedouin trappings, he says: "A load of dirt was given to the desert, and my clothes to the Sand-Crossers."

<sup>29</sup> *Ibn Ezra's Commentary on the Pentateuch, Exodus*. SHEMOT. (Translated by Strickman, H. N. and Silver A. M.; New York: Menorah, 1996), 165-166.

The suggested cause for Egyptian abomination in Genesis 43:32 has, perhaps, also some inner textual support. Having revealed himself to his brothers, Joseph gives each brother a present before sending them back. The present is a change of garments for each brother but five as many for Benjamin (Gen 45:22).<sup>30</sup> Benjamin also received a gift of money. The gift of money to Benjamin shows that a gift of money would have been quite adequate.<sup>31</sup> Joseph's giving garments to each of his brothers seems to indicate that there was a problem with their Canaanite garments, which he had to rectify immediately. He did it tactfully by giving them presents of Egyptian linen garments. It should be noted that he apparently did not send his father, who was in Canaan, a suit of linen cloth.

## C GENESIS 46:34

Targum Onqelos explains כי תועבת מצרים כל רעה צאן by

ארי מצראי מרחקין כל רעי ענא

(because Egyptians kept away all shepherds)

and so does Targum Jonathan. Similarly Josephus says, "for the Egyptians are prohibited to meddle with feeding of sheep" (*Ant.* 2:186). Philo implicitly suggests that the sentence כי תועבת מצרים כל רעה צאן means that the Egyptians were not interested in breeding cattle. He says (*On Joseph*, 257) "hearing that his [Jacob's] sons were skillful breeders of cattle, having great substance in flocks and herds, he appointed them overseers of all his own flocks and herds, and committed to their charge his goats, and his oxen, and his sheep, and all his innumerable animals of every kind."

Ibn Ezra believes that the Egyptians were vegetarians and would not allow anyone to slaughter cattle for sacrifice, as the people of India in his days. Ibn Ezra says<sup>32</sup>

<sup>30</sup> From the plural of חליפות שמלות Ibn Ezra understands that each brother received two suits, and consequently Benjamin received ten suits. Skinner, *Commentary on Genesis*, 489, considers the *changes of raiment* replacement of ordinary clothes with festive clothes. In that case each brother received one suit and Benjamin five suits.

<sup>31</sup> Presents of expensive clothes were a common custom in the Near East. Assyrian kings often mention in the lists of looted items various types of garments. Cf. Judg 14:12-13, 19, 2 Kgs 5:5, 22-23.

<sup>32</sup> Strickman and Silver, *Ibn Ezra Commentary*, 165-166.

I believe that the ancient Egyptians in the time of Moses had the same belief currently held by the people of India, who make up more than half of the world. All of them are descendants of Ham. They do not eat meat until this very day. These people also do not drink milk or blood, or eat fish or eggs. In other words, they do not eat anything coming from a living creature. Furthermore, they abhor any person who eats any of the aforementioned. They consider shepherding to be an especially disgusting type of work.

As was previously noted this position is not supported by historical facts. Ibn Ezra, who never traveled to India, obtained his knowledge from books and hearsay. Though, vegetarianism was important in Hinduism and Buddhism, it was never universal even in India.

Kimchi introduces a distinction between cattle raised by the Egyptians and that by shepherds. Egyptians raised small numbers of cattle for milk and wool. The shepherds on the other hand raised large herds of cattle for meat. Because the shepherds raised cattle for meat they were abhorred by the Egyptians. The core of the abomination was the assumed distaste between vegetarians and carnivores.

Rashbam explains that the Egyptians despised all the shepherds, apparently because they were usually foreigners (note his use of וכן in Gen 43:32) and because cattle was repugnant to them whether for consumption or sacrifice (נבזים היו בעיניהם כל רועי צאן כי מאוס בעיניהם הצאן בין לאכילה בין לזבח), relying on Exodus 8:22. This cannot be true. There were special farms in Egypt for the fattening of oxen for slaughter. These oxen were adorned with ostrich feathers and displayed in processions with their owners before ritual sacrifice to the gods, and later consumption by the clergy and temple servants. For instance, in the days of Ramses III 16,000 cattle were sacrificed per year, just to the god Amun.

Rashi implies that shepherds are abhorred because they tend cattle that represent deities. In this case they should have also had similar sentiments toward their priests. Hizkuni apparently sensed this weakness in Rashi's explanation. Consequently, he suggests in Genesis 46:34 תועבת מצרים "fear of Egypt" (2 Kgs 23:13). This would imply that Egyptians feared the shepherds because they tended cattle that were considered by the Egyptian as being manifestations of various deities on earth. While there might be an element of truth in this notion, תועבת בני עמון can not have the suggested meaning. In 2 Kgs 23:13 תועבת בני עמון parallels שקץ מואב and cannot have the sense "fear," as it is abundantly clear from the list in 2 Kgs 23:24. Indeed, lexicons routinely translate שקץ "detestable thing," and by extension "idols."

Jacob Mecklenburg (1785-1865), the author of the commentary *Hakketav Vehakkabbala* raises the following question: “If תועבה is given the derogatory sense ‘abhorrence, shame’ how can we explain Joseph’s prideful description of his brothers as shepherds, when this occupation was abominable to all of Egypt?”<sup>33</sup> Mecklenburg exploits the Mechilta of R’ Shimon Bar Yohai (Pinchas 250, p. 2) to argue that תועבת מצרים means “the gods of Egypt” in Egyptian but has a derogatory sense in Hebrew. In his view Goshen was the best land in Egypt set aside for the sacred cattle. The Egyptians held the shepherds of these sacred herds in high esteem. Joseph’s intent was to secure for his brothers a position of respect and esteem. Mecklenburg concludes by noting that תעב is kindred to תאב “desire” (Am 6:8). Thus, תועבת מצרים is the same as תאבה למצרים “liked by Egypt.”<sup>34</sup> Notably, Mecklenburg has nothing on Genesis 43:32. It is difficult to reconcile the presumed Egyptian esteem for all shepherds (כל רעה צאן) with their miserable depiction in available iconography.

It seems that these classical Jewish commentators struggled with the questions that we posed in the introduction. They had problems understanding the cause for the Egyptian sense of תועבה, and were looking for a single cause to explain the three cases of תועבה to the Egyptian. For many apparently the Hindu in India served as a useful model. It was thus assumed by these commentators that at the time of Joseph the Egyptians were vegetarians or even vegans, while the Hebrew was a carnivore. As we have seen this position does not agree with historical facts nor does it provide a logical explanation for the text.

Skinner finds the statement כי תועבת מצרים כל רעה צאן rather incomprehensible here. Were all the shepherds despised by Egyptian then the Hebrews would more likely not have been admitted at all, and in particular not to the best pasture land in the country. Skinner notes, “while there is evidence that swine-herds and cow-herds were looked down on by the Egyptians, the statement that shepherds were held in special abhorrence has not been confirmed.”<sup>35</sup> He believes that the clause is an interpolation suggested by Genesis 43:32. However, the versions seem to support the MT.<sup>36</sup> Note also that in Genesis 47:3-4 no aversion is expressed towards shepherds at the highest

<sup>33</sup> Mecklenburg, J. Z. *הכתב והקבלה - בראשית*. (New York: Om Publishing, 1946a), 83.

<sup>34</sup> It seems that there is a version of Targum Onqelos saying here

ארי בעירא דמצרים דחלין ליה כל רעי ענא. Mecklenburg sees this as support for his view that the text should be understood “as the cattle which are revered so are all the shepherds.” He considers תועבת missing a כ of comparison as in גור אריה יהודה [Gen 48:9] and other places.

<sup>35</sup> Skinner, *Commentary on Genesis*, 496.

<sup>36</sup> The Samaritan Bible has in Genesis 46:34 the plural תועבות instead of the singular תועבת in the MT. The Peshitta has “all those who feed sheep” instead of “all shepherds.”

level of Egyptian society. In fact the shepherds are offered high rank and position (Gen 47:6).<sup>37</sup>

Redford considers *כל רעה צאן* a late scribal gloss. He says, "This latter statement seems to be a reflection of the age-old fear and hatred the Egyptian entertained for the *bedu* of the desert."<sup>38</sup> Yet, the MT clearly emphasizes *כל*, any shepherd was abominable to the Egyptian, not just the "*bedu*." Also, Redford does not mention Exodus 8:22, which together with the cases of Egyptian abomination in Genesis, seems to refer to some ancient Egyptian peculiar customs.

Speiser cannot accept the literal meaning of the text "because the taboo cannot apply to shepherds as such; cf. xlvii 6." He believes that "In all likelihood, the term shepherds is here a play on the popular interpretation of the Hyksos as 'shepherd kings', whose temporary domination of Egypt dealt a severe blow to national pride."<sup>39</sup> This would imply that Joseph intimated to his brothers that the Hyksos Pharaoh was aware of the Egyptian resentment toward the "shepherd kings" and by extension toward all shepherds.

Speiser's view is based on the assumption that the Hyksos ruled for an extended period, 511 years according to Menetho. It is now almost certain, as the

<sup>37</sup> The position of a "superintendent of the herds" was considered of high esteem and distinction, held by persons of rank belonging to the priestly and military classes, and has been often mentioned in monument inscriptions. The "superintendents of cattle" (*שרי מקנה*) referred to in the Bible are much lower functionaries in the class of shepherds.

<sup>38</sup> Redford, D. B. *A study of the Biblical story of Joseph (Genesis 37-50)*. (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1970), 235. Redford observes, "Such a situation, at least insofar as the Hebrews are concerned, can only have prevailed at a time when Egyptians and Hebrews had for some time been coming into close contact. This fits the Saite and Persian periods, when racial tensions in Egypt were especially strong, but certainly not the New Kingdom, when there can scarcely be said to have existed a Hebrew people in the sense the writer uses." He (*Story of Joseph*, 242) sets the 7<sup>th</sup> century BCE as the *terminus a quo* and the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE as the *terminus ante quem* for the Joseph story.

<sup>39</sup> Speiser, *Genesis*, 345. The date of the Hebrews' arrival to Egypt and of the Exodus remains uncertain. Many assume that Joseph came to Egypt in the time of the Hyksos (1780-1580 B.C.E.) and the Exodus occurred in the time of the New Kingdom (1580-1085 BCE). This would be in conflict with the Biblical chronology. Josephus explains the name Hyksos thus: "Hycsos, that is, Shepherd-kings: for the first syllable Hyc, according to the sacred dialect, denotes a king, as is Sos a shepherd; but this according to the ordinary dialect; and of these is compounded Hycsos: but some say that these people were Arabians" (*Against Apion*, 1:14).



Turin Canon showed for some time, that this rule lasted about a century.<sup>40</sup> If Ahmose expelled the Hyksos in about 1550 BCE then the Hyksos rule began about 1650 BCE and that would put Joseph's presence in Egypt at about 1600 BCE. Yet according to Exodus 12:40f. the Israelites left Egypt 430 after they arrived in the second year of the famine (Gen 45:11). Furthermore, Solomon's fourth year of rule was the 480<sup>th</sup> year since the exodus from Egypt (1 Kgs 6:1). Assuming that Solomon became king sometimes in the middle of the tenth century (970-930 BCE), as generally agreed, would make Joseph's arrival to Egypt at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, centuries before the Hyksos.<sup>41</sup>

It is now accepted that *hyksos* means "rulers of foreign lands" and is derived from the Egyptian words *hekau* "rulers" and *khaswt* "foreign hill-countries." The Egyptians had used the term since the Middle Kingdom, well before the Hyksos took control of Egypt, to describe the barbaric nomadic chieftains on their north-eastern border. These nomadic chieftains were often shepherds. It is possible that this association also existed in the time of Joseph in Egypt reinforcing the natural contempt between farmer and shepherd.

Wilkinson observes that shepherds were "looked upon by the Egyptian aristocracy as people who followed a disgraceful employment; and it is therefore not surprising that Pharaoh should have treated the Israelites with that contempt which it was usual for the Egyptians to feel towards 'shepherds'; or that Joseph should have warned his brethren on their arrival, of this aversion of the Egyptians, and of their considering every shepherd an abomination. And from his recommending them to request they might dwell in the land of Goshen, we may conclude it was with a view to avoid as much as possible those who were not shepherds like themselves, or to obtain a settlement in the land peculiarly adapted for pasture. It is also possible that much of Pharaoh's cattle were kept there, since the monarch gave orders that if any of these strangers were remarkable for skill in the management of herds, they should be selected to over look his own cattle. ... The hatred borne against shepherds by the Egyptians was not owing solely to their contempt of the occupation; this feeling originated in another and a far more powerful cause—the occupation of their country by a pastor race, who had com-

<sup>40</sup> Gardiner, A.H. *The Royal Canon of Turin*. (Oxford: Printed for the Griffith Institute at the Oxford University by V. Ridler, 1959), pl. 3. The Turin Canon, written in 1290-1226 B.C.E., is a list of Egyptian kings.

<sup>41</sup> Bright, J. *A History of Israel*. (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1959), 174 note 26. Yeivin argues that the Exodus was in the decade between 1370 and 1360 and consequently they came to Egypt about 1800 BCE (Yeivin, Sh. "יציאת מצרים," in *עיונים בספר ישעיהו*, vol. I. (ed. Luria, B.Z.; Jerusalem: Kiriat Sepher, [1976]), 329-334.

---

mitted great cruelties during their possession of the country.”<sup>42</sup>

Montet notes that “[m]ost stockmen were poor enough specimens, worn out by a life of toil, bald-headed, likely enough, with matted beard, some paunchy, some thin as rakes, but all of them weaklings.”<sup>43</sup> They usually lived with their herds, their hygiene not up to Egyptian standards. Native Egyptians were farmers - not pastoralists, and disdained shepherds.

## D EXODUS 8:22<sup>44</sup>

Josephus (*Ant.* 2:307-8) treatment of Exodus 8:21-23 does not mention Pharaoh’s offer to the Hebrews to make their sacrifices in Egypt nor the reason that Moses gives to Pharaoh in Exodus 8:22. Sa’adiah and Rashbam take Exodus 8:22 quite literally, “what the Egyptians despise we sacrifice to our God. If we sacrifice what they despise wouldn’t they stone us?” We may well ask why would the Egyptians possibly become so agitated in this case and stone the Israelites. The despicable item is not being sacrificed to any of the gods of Egypt and thereby insulting them, but to the God of the Hebrews, which is of no consequence to the Egyptian. Indeed, this is the main difficulty in a literal reading of the text.

Rashi suggests that Exodus 8:22 is not what Moses literally said to Pharaoh, but rather what he wrote for the Hebrews. Writing for the Hebrews he referred to the “gods” of Egypt as “abominations” (2 Kgs 23:13). When he spoke to Pharaoh he obviously referred to them respectfully as “gods.”<sup>45</sup> Support for this

---

<sup>42</sup> Wilkinson, *Popular Account*, vol. II, 168-169. Wilkinson suggests that artists, both of Upper and Lower Egypt, delighted on all occasions in caricaturing the appearance of shepherds because of political and nationalistic reasons. It is hard to accept this view. The Shepherd Kings would have put a quick stop to such expressions of dissent.

<sup>43</sup> Montet, *Everyday Life*, 123. See Blackman, A.M. *Rock Tombs of Meir*, II. (London and Boston, Massachusetts: Egypt Exploration Fund (E.E.F.), 1915), Plate XXX(1).

<sup>44</sup> In the Samaritan Bible, the corresponding verse occurs after a shift of four verses, which this bible adds (Sadaqa, A., ed. *Jewish Samaritan Pentateuch*. (Tel-Aviv: Publisher, 1964), 11). The additional four verses essentially repeat Ex 8:16-19 as an execution by Moses and Aaron. It seems that the MT used a shorter version of the story or was edited. In the Septuagint, Peshitta, and Vulgate the corresponding verse is Ex 8:26, because of a different distribution into chapters (adding the last four verses of chapter 7 to chapter 8). Note also that the Septuagint’s βδελύγματα may reflect a plural reading of the MT תועבה, or understanding it as being *pars pro toto*.

<sup>45</sup> A similar opinion was apparently held by the Karaite commentator Yeshuah ben Yehudah (11<sup>th</sup> century), who says that Moses used derogatory language alluding to the gods of Egypt, though when he spoke to Pharaoh he used אלהי מצרים. See Ibn Ezra (longer version) on Exodus 8:22.

position can be found in the Peshitta, which translates Exodus 8:22

And Moses said, It is not proper to do so; for we shall sacrifice to the Lord our God some of the animals that are an abomination (תועבת) to the Egyptians. And if we should sacrifice animals that are idols (תועבת) before Egyptian eyes, they would stone us.<sup>46</sup>

Rashi was, apparently, not comfortable with his explanation, because it implied that Moses did not faithfully transmit what happened.<sup>47</sup> He consequently appended to it the elaboration: “our sacrifice is despicable to the Egyptians, because it is their deity that we sacrifice.”<sup>48</sup> In doing so, Rashi aligns himself even more closely with the Peshitta. However, from Exodus 10:26 it appears that Moses did not know yet which of the cattle would the Israelites be required to sacrifice. Very few of the cattle were sacred to the Egyptian, the cow and bull being perhaps the only ones.<sup>49</sup> It is almost certain that most of the food-animals were oxen.<sup>50</sup> If Moses did not know whether cows would be required for sacrifice how could he argue with certainty “the gods of Egypt we sacrifice to our God. If we sacrifice the gods of Egypt wouldn’t they stone us?”, as Rashi suggests. Moreover, from Leviticus it is clear that only male animals were sacrificed, apparently reflecting an ancient tradition. There was good chance that God’s demand would not be a sacrifice of a cow. Finally, though sacred, cows were eaten in Egypt. The taboos were hardly absolute.

Ibn Ezra (long version) repeats his view that the Egyptians, as the Hindu in India, were vegans and believed that animals should not be harmed. The animals that they raised were in his opinion for use (labor, wool) not consumption. However, the massive numbers of animals that have been annually sacrificed in the temples of Ancient Egypt clearly invalidate Ibn Ezra’s position. For instance, we

<sup>46</sup> *Holy Bible from the Ancient Eastern Text*. (Translated by Lamsa, G. M.; San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1968), 74.

<sup>47</sup> When Rashi uses the phrase יש לוֹמַר he usually seems to imply a difficulty.

<sup>48</sup> The popular supercommentary on Rashi, *Siftei Hachamim* (by R’ Shabtai Bass [1641-1718]), understands Rashi’s second explanation as being a literal reading of the text with תועבה = “abhorrent.” In that case it would be no different than Sa’adiah’s.

<sup>49</sup> Tyson, E.W. (ed.) *Porphyry: On Abstinence from Animal Food*. (trans. Taylor, T.; London: 1965), 69, II:11. Porphyry writes, “With the Egyptians ... any one would sooner taste human flesh than the flesh of a cow. The cause ... is that this animal [is] useful. ... Hence, though they eat bulls, and offer them in sacrifice as first fruits, yet they spare cows for the sake of their progeny. Erman notes that the intentional killing of any holy animal carried the death penalty, as did the unintentional killing of an ibis or falcon (Erman, A. *Die ägyptische religion*. (Berlin: G. Reimer [1905]), 334f.).

<sup>50</sup> Ikram, *Choice Cuts*, 15.

find records of Ramses III: "I multiplied the divine offerings presented before thee, of bread, wine, beer, and fat geese; numerous oxen bullocks, calves, cows, white oryxes, and gazelles offered in his slaughter yard."<sup>51</sup> A coronation inscription of Thutmose III reads "... that I might supply with food his altars upon earth; that I might make to flourish for him the sacred slaughtering-block with great slaughters in his temple, consisting of oxen and calves without limit."<sup>52</sup> A stele of the butler Merer of Edfu informs "the Sole Companion, Butler and Overseer of the slaughterers of the House of Khui in its entirety, who says: I was the priest for slaughtering and offering in two temples on behalf of the ruler."<sup>53</sup> When Seti I (c.1318 - 1304 BCE) sent a thousand troops to the Silsileh quarry he "increased that which was furnished to the army in ointment, ox-flesh, fish and plentiful vegetables without limit. Every man among them had 20 deben of bread daily, 2 bundles of vegetables, a roast of flesh and two linen garments monthly."<sup>54</sup> Temples owned large estates where they raised animals. Large numbers of cattle were also given to the temples by kings and rich officials. Since the meat offered to gods was then consumed by the priests, temple workers, and distributed to the needy, there can be no doubt that the Egyptian was not a vegetarian or vegan.

Mecklenburg apparently sensed the difficulty in Rashi's first explanation. He exploits the Mechilta of R' Shimon Bar Yohai (Pinchas 250, p. 2) to argue that תועבה מצרים means "the gods of Egypt" in Egyptian but has a derogatory sense in Hebrew. For instance, סכל is "stupid" in Hebrew but means "sensible" in Aramaic (Deut 1:13).<sup>55</sup> Mecklenburg's approach to תועבה would obviously resolve the difficulty in Rashi's first explanation. However, there is no evidence for תועבה meaning "the gods" in Egyptian. A similar approach is adopted by Luzzatto (1800-1865) in his explanation of תועבה in Isa 44:19. He takes תועבה = קדוש, as in Latin *sacer*, "holy, untouchable." It is something set aside from use by people, sometimes because of the reverence for it, and sometimes because it is hated and abhorred. This duality would naturally make the knowledge of the cause for תועבה an imperative.<sup>56</sup>

Beno Jacob explains that Moses "Was not exaggerating when he claimed

<sup>51</sup> Breasted, J. H. *Ancient Records of Egypt*, Part IV. (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001), §190. These are the offerings of Ramses III to Amen at Medinet Habu, as described in Papyrus Harris.

<sup>52</sup> Breasted, *Ancient Records*, Part II, §149.

<sup>53</sup> Lichtheim, M. *Ancient Egyptian literature; a book of readings*, vol I. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 87.

<sup>54</sup> Breasted, *Ancient Records* Part III, §207.

<sup>55</sup> Mecklenburg, J. Z. שמות - הכתב והקבלה. (New York: Om Publishing, 1946b), 12.

<sup>56</sup> Shlesinger, P. and Hovev, M., eds., *S.D. Luzzatto's Commentary to the Book of Isaiah*. (Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1970), 325.

that the Egyptians might stone the Israelites, as their reverence for animals is well known. ... This reverence continued in later times, and Herodotus states that cows, sheep, and goats were generally not sacrificed in Egypt.”<sup>57</sup> Beno Jacob feels that the term “abomination,” while suitable for idols (Deut 27:15f., 32:16, etc.), is too strong here. He prefers to translate in Exodus 8:22 תועבה “taboo” (compare Gen 43:32). One may well question the utility of Herodotus’ (484–c. 425 BCE) evidence in general, and in particular for a period that preceded his own time by a millennium. We have mentioned already the sacredness of the cow and bull. There is, however, no evidence that sheep and goats were sacred in the 15<sup>th</sup> century BCE, often assumed as the date of the Exodus.<sup>58</sup>

In Cassuto’s view Exodus 8:22 can be understood in two ways: either the animals in question were venerated as holy by the Egyptians, or they were actually thought of as gods. In the last instance the phrase would be quite derogatory.<sup>59</sup> Cassuto seems to assume that Egyptians would stone the Israelites if they make their sacrifices on Egypt’s soil but Pharaoh, who was considered god in Egypt, would listen to such blasphemous words from a slave and not take drastic actions.

Sarna combines Exodus 8:22 with Exodus 10:26 explaining that “The Israelite do not yet know what animal sacrifice the Lord may demand of them. It may turn out to be one that Egyptians would regard as sacrilegious provocation, given that their religion represents deities in animal form. Hence, the Israelites can only worship their God outside Egypt.”<sup>60</sup> Sarna translates תועבה “untouchable” only in Exodus 8:22, observing that Moses deliberately uses an ambiguous term, which can mean “that which is taboo” to the Egyptians and also “that which is an [Egyptian] abomination in the sight of Israel, namely their animal divinities. However, Moses’ statement in Exodus 8:22 is not tentative, but rather an assertive declaration of existing Israelite custom. Segal surmises that during their sojourn in Egypt, until they became enslaved, the Israelites must have continued their ancestral practice of sacrificing animals and could do so only in the wilder-

<sup>57</sup> Jacob, B. *The Second Book of the Bible: Exodus* (trans. Jacob, W.; Hoboken: Ktav, 1992), 269.

<sup>58</sup> Correspondence of Amenhotep IV (ca. 1370-1353 BCE) discovered in Tel el-Amarna mentions the Habiru making trouble in Palestine and Syria. This is seen by some as referring to the Hebrew conquest of the Promised Land and support for the 15<sup>th</sup> century as the approximate time of the Exodus.

<sup>59</sup> Cassuto, U. *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus* (trans. Abrahams, I.; Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1967), 108-109.

<sup>60</sup> Sarna, N. M. *The JPS Torah Commentary, Exodus שמות*. (Philadelphia: JPS, 1991), 43.

ness near Goshen.<sup>61</sup> The textual reality is that the argument made in Exodus 10:26 has not been made in Exodus 8:22. Furthermore, the meaning of “untouchable” for תועבה is unattested for in the Hebrew Bible. Finally, the ambiguity in Exodus 8:22 can already be found in Rashi. The state of current understanding of Exodus 8:22 is reflected in Fox’s commentary. He simply quotes Cassuto noting that Rashi says it too.<sup>62</sup> Propp does not even venture a comment on the possible nature of the abomination.<sup>63</sup>

It is possible that what was essentially abominable in the Israelite sacrifice was the fact that it was a burnt offering. The Ancient Egyptian apparently did not burn his animal sacrifices or portions of them. Despite the extensive source material available on Ancient Egypt the evidence for burnt offerings seems extremely slight. One can find perhaps indication for a burnt offering by an Egyptian sailor in “The tale of the shipwrecked sailor,” but not of an animal.<sup>64</sup> The *Ipuwer Papyrus* (*Leiden Papyrus* I 344), which has been dated of the late 12<sup>th</sup> dynasty and the Second Intermediate Period (c. 1850 BCE - 1600 BCE), might refer to a burnt offering of an animal. However, the text is rather unclear.<sup>65</sup> Herodotus’ description of burnt animal offerings refers to rites at a period that is a millennium later, perhaps at a time when Egyptians incorporated customs of other nations.

Pernigotti notes that “The ritual of daily worship involved the same stages in all Egyptian temples. . . . The first stage of morning worship was to prepare animal and plant offerings, which had to be presented to the god. . . . The laying of hands on the statue and the recital of prayers preceded the sacred meal. This was composed of the offerings that had been placed on the altars, the actual possession of which was ‘turned,’ as the Egyptians said, to the priests and other temple personnel who used the food for their daily meals. The god received only that part which evaded the perception of the senses.”<sup>66</sup> Offerings of food and drink were

<sup>61</sup> Segal, M. H. “The Religion of Israel Before Sinai.” *JQR* ns 53 (1962/63): 226.

<sup>62</sup> Fox, E. *Genesis and Exodus*. (New York: Schocken Books, 1990), 281.

<sup>63</sup> Propp, W. H. C. *Exodus 1-18*. AB 2. (New York: Doubleday, 1998), 298.

<sup>64</sup> The text reads: “Is it by following the crocodile and cleaving it asunder? Is it by slaying the lion roasted on the fire? [Is it] by sprinkling for Ptah and taking [. . .]? Why do you give to him? There is no reaching him. It is misery which you give to him.” Another section has: “Remember to slaughter oxen [. . .]. Remember to go forth purged [. . .] who calls to you; to put r-geese on the fire [. . .] to open the jar [. . .] the shore of the waters [. . .] of women [. . .] clothing [. . . .] to give praise . . . in order to appease you.”

<sup>65</sup> The text reads: “Then I satisfied myself and I laced some of it on the ground because it was too much upon my hands. I took a fire drill and made fire and made a sacrifice (lit. a perishing in the flame of the gods).” However, “a perishing in the flame of the gods” is not the only reading. Some read “coked some fish.”

<sup>66</sup> Pernigotti, “Priests,” 143.



constantly supplied to the gods, in Egypt laid upon the altars, in other lands burnt for a sweet savor.

The archives of the funerary temple of Neferirkare at Abu Sir provide much information on the redistribution of meat and vegetables originally offered as sacrifices. At least one ox was sacrificed every day and the meat was distributed amongst the priests and other temple employees. Antelopes were sacrificed, too. Poultry (ducks and geese) was also part of the daily offering, an estimated consumption of 10,000 birds a year.<sup>67</sup> It is clear that many people were the beneficiaries of the sacrifices, since one ox feeds almost one thousand people, though the temple records do not allow a more precise determination of the population of meat recipients. However the records do show that meat was offered to the god and then passed on to temple and palace personnel. Leprohon writes, “food, having already served its cultic purpose, was redistributed to the faithful followers of the king for their own offering tables, or simply for their own consumption.”<sup>68</sup> It is possible that the meat was redistributed to other unknown people, or that it was processed and preserved. Meat and vegetables of the temples were an important benefit to many.

The Israelites apparently burnt most of the sacrificed animal or portions of it. The smell of the burned salted flesh was considered as pleasing to the God of the Israelites.<sup>69</sup> This was an abominable act to the Egyptians since it seemed as wanton destruction of prime food. It was also a theological anathema to Egyptians who believed gods enjoyed the essence rather than any substance. They might have considered the burning of the divinity’s food reprehensible and potential cause for a god’s anger upon the land of Egypt. It would not surprise then that they would become agitated and aggressive toward practitioners of rites that would rile the gods, whatever they might be.<sup>70</sup>

This theological argument was probably bolstered also by practical considerations. Wilkinson says, “Beef and goose constituted the principal part of the animal food throughout Egypt; and by prudent foresight, in a country possessing

<sup>67</sup> Posener-Krieger, P. *Les Archives du Temple Funéraire de Neferirkare-Kakai*, 1-2. (Cairo: Institut français d’archéologie orientale du Caire, 1976), 50 n.3, 314, 320, 508, 519, 611, 625, 634-5.

<sup>68</sup> Bresciani, “Foreigners,” 239. Bresciani writes: “It was only natural that the arrival of Asiatic deities in Egypt should have coincided with that of Asiatic peoples. During the New Kingdom [1580-1085 BCE], Syrian and Palestinian deities triumphed in Egypt, alongside other signs of a new cosmopolitanism.”

<sup>69</sup> The specifics in Gen 8:20-21 might point to its etiological purpose.

<sup>70</sup> Leprohon, R. L. “Cultic Activities in the Temples at Amarna,” in *The Akhenaten Temple Project*, 2 (ed. Redford, D.B.; Warminster, Eng.: Aris & Phil, 1988), 49.

neither extensive pasture lands, nor great abundance of cattle, the cow was held sacred, and consequently forbidden to be eaten. Thus the risk of exhausting the stock was prevented, and a constant supply of oxen was kept up for the table and agricultural purposes. A similar fear of diminishing the number of sheep, so valuable for their wool, led to a preference for such meats as beef and goose.”<sup>71</sup> The Israelite ritual practices were also abominable because they undermined the constant supply of important commodities. Moses’ statement in Exodus 8:22 should be understood thus: *It is not proper to do so. Because it is an abomination to Egyptians the way we sacrifice to the Lord our God. Behold, the way we sacrifice, that which is an abomination to Egyptians, before their very eyes, would they not stone us?*

## E CONCLUSION

The enigmatic references in the Bible to “abomination to the Egyptians” have baffled classical Jewish commentators. Their attempts to find a single cause for all the cases of relevance must be considered a failure. Modern scholarship, despite the vast sources on Ancient Egypt, has not come up with specific enough identifications of the “abomination to Egypt.” It seems that these abominations originated from various causes. Coming from a rather different culture the Hebrews dressed differently, engaged in different occupations, and sacrificed differently. These differences led to some distancing between the Hebrews and Egyptians, which the Bible attributed to “abomination to the Egyptians.” Our suggestions are certainly somewhat tentative. They are related to historical facts, making them specific possibilities but not exclusive causes. Hopefully this contribution will rekindle interest in this problem, which has received unsatisfactory treatment in biblical exegesis, and eventually lead to more certain identification of the abominations.

It is notable that the Israelites of the Exodus had ample cause to abominate the Egyptians. Slavery in Egypt because of a change in regime and xenophobia must have been a most traumatic experience. Yet, the Bible commands the Israelites: *You should not abhor an Egyptian, for you were a stranger in his land* (Deut 23:8). During the Hebrews’ sojourn in Egypt they grew from a tribe into a nation. They have spread beyond their initial borders in Goshen and lived in harmony with the Egyptians for a long time. The end to this association was certainly upsetting and painful for Israel. Israel never forgot the oppression of Egypt, making the oppression and redemption cornerstones of its very existence.<sup>72</sup> At the same

<sup>71</sup> Wilkinson, *Popular Account* vol. I, 166.

<sup>72</sup> Loewenstamm, S. E. *The Tradition of the Exodus in its Development*. (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1972), 9.

time, Israel did not forget their good fortunes in Egypt. The “gut reaction,” of an Israelite of that period, could have justifiably been to consider the Egyptian an abomination, yet the Bible commands to think better.<sup>73</sup>

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Blackman, A. M. *Rock Tombs of Meir*, II. London and Boston, Massachusetts: Egypt Exploration Fund (E.E.F.), 1915.
- Boessenek, J and von den Driesch, A. “Tierknochenfunde vom Tell Ibrahim Awad Im Ostlichen Nildelta.” Pages 117-122 in *The Archaeology of the Nile Delta*. Edited by E.C.M. van den Brink. Amsterdam: Netherlands Inst. for the Near East (NINO), (1988).
- Breasted, J.H. *Ancient Records of Egypt*, Part II-IV. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2001.
- Bresciani, E. “Foreigners.” Page 221-252 in *The Egyptians*. Edited by Donadoni, S. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1997.
- Bright, J. *A History of Israel*. Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1959.
- Cassuto, U. *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus* (trans. Abrahams, I.). Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1967.
- Davies, N. de G. *The Rock Tombs of El Amarna*, vol. III. London: Egypt Exploration Society, 1903-8.
- Epstein, H. *The Origin of the Domestic Animals of Africa*, vol I. Leipzig: Africana Pub. Organization, 1971.
- Erman, A. *Die ägyptische religion*. Berlin: G. Reimer, [1905].
- Fox, E. *Genesis and Exodus*. New York: Schocken Books, 1990.
- Gardiner, A. H. *The Royal Canon of Turin*. Oxford: Printed for the Griffith Institute at the Oxford University by V. Ridler, 1959.
- Holy Bible from the Ancient Eastern Text*. Translated by Lamsa, G. M. San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1968.
- Ibn Ezra's Commentary on the Pentateuch, Exodus (SHEMOT)*. Translated by Strickman, H. N. and Silver A. M. New York: Menorah, 1996.
- Ikram, S. *Choice Cuts: Meat Production in Ancient Egypt*. Orientalia Lovaniensia Analectica 69. Leuven: Peeters, 1995.
- Jacob, B. *The Second Book of the Bible: Exodus*. Translated by Jacob, W. Hoboken: Ktav, 1992.
- Leprohon, R.L. “Cultic Activities in the Temples at Amarna.” Pages xxx-xxx in *The Akhenaten Temple Project*, 2. Edited by Redford, D. B. Warminster, Eng.: Aris & Phil, 1988.
- Lichtheim, M. *Ancient Egyptian literature; a book of readings*, vol I-III. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973.
- Loewenstamm, S. E. *The Tradition of the Exodus in its Development*. Jerusalem: Mag-

---

<sup>73</sup> I am indebted to Prof. Betsy M. Bryan, Alexander Badawy Professor of Egyptian Art and Archaeology at Johns Hopkins University, for directing me to a significant reference. Also, I am thankful to Prof. Larry Zalcman of Bar Ilan University for his constructive comments.

- 
- nes Press, 1972.
- Mecklenburg, J. Z. *הכרת והקבלה - בראשית*. New York: Om Publishing, 1946a.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *הכרת והקבלה - שמות*. New York: Om Publishing, 1946b.
- Milgrom, J. *תועבה*. *Encyclopaedia Biblica*, VIII. Jerusalem: Mosad Bialik, 1982.
- Moens, M-F. and Wetterstrom, W. "The Agricultural Economy of an Old Kingdom Town in Egypt's Western Delta: Insight from the Plant Remains." *JNES* 47 (1988): 159-173.
- Montet, P. *Everyday Life in Egypt*. Translated by Maxwell-Hyslop, A. R. and Drower, M.S. Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1958.
- Pernigotti, S. "Priests." Pages 121-150 in *The Egyptians*. Edited by Donadoni, S. Chicago: Chicago Univ. Press, 1997.
- Pinker, A. "Isaiah 30:7b." *BN* 136(2008): 31-44.
- Posener-Krieger, P. *Les Archives du Temple Funéraire de Neferirkare-Kakai*, 1-2. Cairo: Institut français d'archéologie orientale du Caire, 1976.
- Propp, W. H. C. *Exodus 1-18*. AB 2. New York: Doubleday, 1998.
- Redford, D. B. *A study of the Biblical story of Joseph (Genesis 37-50)*. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1970.
- Ryder, M. L. "Wool of the 14th Century BC from Tell el-Amarna, Egypt." *Nature* 240 (1972): 355 – 356.
- Sadaqa, A., ed. *Jewish Samaritan Pentateuch*. Tel-Aviv: No publisher name, 1964.
- Sarna, N. M. *The JPS Torah Commentary, Genesis בראשית*. Philadelphia: JPS, 1989.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The JPS Torah Commentary, Exodus שמות*. Philadelphia: JPS, 1991.
- Segal, M. H. "The Religion of Israel Before Sinai." *JQR* 53(1962/63): 226.
- Shlesinger, P. and Hovev, M., eds. *S.D. Luzzatto's Commentary to the Book of Jesaiah*. Tel Aviv: Dvir, 1970.
- Skinner, J. *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Genesis*. ICC. Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1930.
- Speiser, E. A. *Genesis*. AnB 1. New York: Doubleday, 1962.
- Tyson, E.W. (ed.) Translated by Taylor, T. *Porphyry: On Abstinence from Animal Food*. London: Kessinger, 1965.
- Webster, H. *Taboo: A Sociological Study*. Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1942.
- Wilkinson, J. G. *A Popular Account of the Ancient Egyptians*, vol I-II. New York: Bonanza Books, 1988.
- Yeivin, Sh. *יציאת מצרים*. In *עיונים בספר ישעיהו*, vol. I. (ed. Luria, B.Z). Jerusalem: Kiriat Sepher, 1976.
- Aron Pinker, Monticello Avenue, Silver Spring, Maryland, U.S.A. *E-mail*: [aron\\_pinker@hotmail.com](mailto:aron_pinker@hotmail.com)