

What Makes a Thing Abominable?

Observations on the Language of Boundaries and Identity Formation from a Social Scientific Perspective

Abstract

Previous attempts to synthesise biblical texts' usage of *tw'bh* have associated the language with cultic concerns in Deuteronomy and Ezekiel or with ethical concerns in Proverbs. The reconciliation of these interests, especially in conjunction with a number of additional outlier texts, has proved problematic. This investigation suggests that the texts which use *tw'bh* and *t'b* exhibit a persistent focus on issues of identity, on the transgression of boundaries and on perceptions of the compatibility and incompatibility of fundamental social, theological and ideological categories. This understanding goes some way towards providing an explanation of the diverse appearances of these terms across the biblical texts.

Keywords: *tw'bh*, *t'b*; abomination, to abhor; Israelite ethnic identity; Proverbs; Deuteronomy; Ezekiel; Genesis; Leviticus

Introduction

The Hebrew noun *tw'bh* and its associated verb *t'b* are traditionally rendered into English as 'abomination, abhorrent thing' and 'to abhor'.¹ Though the English usage of

¹ E.g., *HALOT* 4, s.v. תועבה and s.v. תעב; *BDB*, s.v. תעב; *DCH* 8, s.v. תועבה and s.v. תעב; H.D. Preuss, 'תועבה *tō'ēbâ*; תעב *t'b*', in G.J. Botterweck, H. Ringgren and H.-J. Fabry (eds.), *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* (vol. 15; transl. D.E. Green; Cambridge, 2006), pp. 591-604; E. Gerstenberger, 'תעב *t'b*

this language is overwhelmingly biblical or biblically-derived, it is normally understood as an attempt to convey the hateful or objectionable nature of the thing thus described: this is a thing not liked, not approved, not favoured; something that is or should be shunned or avoided. But while this makes clear the sentiment that this terminology attempts to convey, it does little to explore or explain why it is used in particular instances. What is it about the people, acts and objects which are described in these terms that makes the language of ‘abomination’ appropriate?

Though there might in theory be no greater uniformity amongst these entities than a most basic objectionable nature, there is in practice a certain consistency in the types of issues which are described using this language in the biblical texts. *tw’bh* is not used of merely any person, act or object that an author dislikes, but rather of those things that are perceived as profoundly different and which are therefore rejected; it is used of people, practices and objects associated with opposed ethnic identities in particular, as well as concepts and practices that are considered fundamentally incompatible. The delineation and protection of boundaries, in other words, represents the key to the usage of *tw’bh* and *t’b*.

An attempt to synthesise the biblical texts’ usage of *tw’bh* is, of course, hardly new. Most discussions have associated the language with Yahwistic cultic concerns, suggesting that it appears in instances where something is considered non-Yahwistic and is therefore objectionable on cultic grounds. The strongest case for this understanding of the term is its appearance in Deuteronomy and Ezekiel, in which cultic issues are especially prominent; thus the inimitable Zimmerli, under the influence of

pi. to abhor’, in E. Jenni and C. Westermann (eds.), *Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament* (vol. 3; transl. M.E. Biddle; Peabody, Mass., 2004), pp. 1428-1431.

Ezekiel, described the noun as ‘ein Sammelwort für alle kultisch verunreinigenden Sünden’.² The contention that *tw’bh* is always used of things that are objectionable on cultic grounds, however, runs into a stumbling block when faced with the significant use of the term in the book of Proverbs. How, for example, are statements such as ‘my mouth will utter truth; wickedness is an abomination to my lips’ (Prov 8:7) or ‘the devising of folly is sin, and the scoffer is an abomination to all’ (Prov 24:9) to be construed in cultic terms? In discussions of the Proverbs texts the cultic explanation has thus tended to give way to an emphasis on ethical objectionableness, with the underlying motivation for the use of the term by the wisdom literature understood to be ‘the sense of moral outrage occasioned by bad conduct’.³ Yet, though an ethical content for the term in Proverbs is widely accepted, the limitations of this interpretation are revealed in the difficulty of explaining why certain acts are thus described: Whybray concludes ‘this word...connotes not something which is of itself evil, but an attitude of intense hatred’, while Clements suggests that ‘what is wrong is wrong *in itself* and is

² W. Zimmerli, *Ezechiel, 1. Teilband: Ezechiel 1-24* (BKAT 13/1; Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1969), p. 154; cf. S. Schroer, *In Israel gab es Bilder* (OBO 74; Göttingen, 1987), p. 353.

³ R.E. Clements, ‘The Concept of Abomination in the Book of Proverbs’, in M.V. Fox, V.A. Hurowitz, A. Hurvitz, M.L. Klein, B.J. Schwartz and N. Shupak (eds.), *Texts, Temples and Traditions: A Tribute to Menahem Haran* (Winona Lake, Ind., 1996), pp. 211-225, here p. 212; cf. W. McKane, *Proverbs: A New Approach* (OTL; London, 1970), pp. 301-302; B.K. Waltke, *Book of Proverbs: Chapters 1-15* (NICOT; Grand Rapids, Mich., 2004), p. 271; K.J. Dell, *The Book of Proverbs in Social and Theological Context* (Cambridge, 2006), pp. 171-172, 176.

recognized by the feelings of outrage that it engenders'.⁴ Attempts to render this ethical usage continuous with a cultic emphasis derived from Ezekiel and Deuteronomy have also foundered, resulting in declarations such as, in reference to Prov. 11:1, that '[t]he saying applies the terminology of ritual...to weights used in commerce'.⁵

Unfortunately, however, the rationale behind such a peculiar transference is not immediately apparent; why would an author apply cultic language to deceptive commercial practices? Reversing the process, therefore, others conclude that the primary lexical sphere of the *tw'bh* language was in the wisdom literature, in which it had a primarily ethical meaning; that this was then adopted by Deuteronomy through its connections with a wisdom tradition; and that, from Deuteronomy's usage in connection with cultic practices, it was taken up by Ezekiel to refer to practices with a polluting effect on the cult. In his classic study, Humbert concluded that the variability in usage is a reflection of the history of moral thought in Israel.⁶

⁴ R.N. Whybray, *Proverbs* (NCB; Grand Rapids, Mich., 1994), p. 100; Clements, 'The Concept of Abomination', p. 222. On the affective element (hatred, outrage) which these scholars identify see further below.

⁵ R.J. Clifford, *Proverbs: A Commentary* (OTL; London, 1999), p. 121 *et passim*. Elsewhere Clifford attempts a middle ground with 'something contrary to proper religion – improper worship or improper action' or 'things perverted from their right purpose' (Clifford, *Proverbs*, p. 77, 132).

⁶ P. Humbert, 'Le substantif *to'ēbā* et le verbe *t'b* dans l'Ancien Testament', *ZAW* 72 (1960), pp. 217-237; cf. Hallo, 'Biblical Abominations', p. 38; McKane, *Proverbs*, pp. 301-302; M. Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic School* (Oxford, 1972), pp. 265-267, 296; J. L'Hour, 'Les interdits *to'ēba* dans le Deutéronome', *RB* 71 (1964), pp. 481-503; A.D.H. Mayes, *Deuteronomy* (NCB, London, 1981), p. 189; contrast Gerstenberger, 'תעב', p. 1431, who suggests that cultic usage may have preceded legal and ethical usage. Another possibility, with an emphasis on sexual relations, arises from the term's use in Leviticus 18 and 20, though this is usually subsumed under the priestly, i.e., cultic, interests of the

Insofar as many passages identify the things called *tw'bh* in relation to YHWH, or in relation to behaviour that ought or ought not to be pursued, a broad category such as 'religion' or 'ethics' might conceivably incorporate the majority of the appearances of these terms under a single umbrella. Yet even such sweeping categories eventually fail. Texts such as the Proverbs verses noted above only concern 'religion' insofar as they appear in a wider context presupposing a religious outlook. Passages such as Gen 43:32, in which communal dining between Hebrews and Egyptians is identified as *tw'bh*, are all but impossible to shoehorn into a religious rubric. As for ethics, it is difficult to discern what Gen 46:34, discussing of the role of shepherds in Egyptian society, or Ps 88:9, despairing of the psalmist's abandonment by his friends, have to do with moral or immoral behaviour. The diversity in the term's usage thus remains a persistent obstacle to attempts to understand synthetically the contexts in which the terminology of 'abomination' is considered appropriate by biblical authors. It is perhaps unsurprising, in light of this diversity, to see someone like Hallo declare that the *tw'bh* language simply 'embraces two widely divergent realms'.⁷

Despite this resistance to neat taxonomic classification, the passages in which the *tw'bh* language appears do have a common interest. Across a diverse range of genres and subjects, *tw'bh* language is used in texts that are concerned with boundary delineation, boundary transgression and boundary protection. Sometimes these

Holiness Code (see J. Milgrom, *Leviticus 17-22: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* [AB 3A; New York, N.Y., 2000], p. 1569).

⁷ W.W. Hallo, 'Biblical Abominations and Sumerian Taboos', *JQR* 76 (1985), p. 38; cf. Milgrom, *Leviticus 17-22*, p. 1569, who goes so far as to argue that the exclusively sexual contexts of *tw'bh* in Leviticus indicate that 'the priestly texts were not influenced by wisdom literature'.

boundaries are conceptual or categorical; in many cases the texts are concerned with ethnic boundaries. The underlying focus of the *tw'bh* language, in all of these texts, is fixed on their authors' concerns about boundaries: attempts to differentiate between and to articulate ideas about the incompatibility of two (or more) categories (of people, practices or objects), to express a sense of demarcation and alienation between them, and, with regard to ethnic groups, to describe the foreignness, strangeness, alienness and ultimate rejection of outsiders.

The recognition that *tw'bh* language has to do with difference and differentiation is not a wholly novel suggestion. A number of years ago Gerstenberger tentatively suggested that the Hebrew term *tw'bh* 'may have also been used...to guard against that which was foreign or strange'; others have associated its appearances in Deuteronomy especially with prohibitions of 'Canaanite' practices.⁸ In a more recent discussion of Lev 18, Olyan has suggested that the term relates to the 'violation of a socially constructed boundary'.⁹ The extent to which this offers an account of the biblical authors' otherwise bafflingly diverse application of this language, however, has not been fully appreciated: the rejection of the particular acts or objects that are labelled as *tw'bh* is connected to a well-established biblical interest in identity delineation and identity formation.

In connection with this focus on boundaries and identity concerns it is helpful to draw on two current discussions in the social sciences: anthropological analyses of ethnic identity and the importance of boundaries for the formation and continuation of

⁸ Gerstenberger, 'תעב', p. 1431; cf. L'Hour, 'Les interdits to'eba', p. 503.

⁹ S. Olyan, "'And with a Male You Shall Note Lie the Lying Down of a Woman": On the Meaning and Significance of Leviticus 18:22 and 20:13', *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 5 (1994), p. 180, n. 3.

ethnicity identities and psychological research on the affective expression of and response to boundaries and boundary transgression.

Ethnic identity is a phenomenon which is both difficult to define and difficult to identify.¹⁰ Prominent in most analyses, however, is a focus on cultural practice and, in particular, on the importance of an ethnic group's members' perception of differences

¹⁰ For introductions to ethnic identity see M. Banks, *Ethnicity: Anthropological Constructions* (London, 1996); and the classic essays in J. Hutchinson and A.D. Smith, *Ethnicity* (Oxford, 1996). On the use of the concept in biblical studies and ancient Near Eastern studies, with extensive introductions to the relevant literature, see especially D.A. Nestor, *Cognitive Perspectives on Israelite Identity* (LHBOTS 519, London, 2010), pp. 12-125 and K.E. Southwood, *Ethnicity and the Mixed Marriage Crisis in Ezra 9-10: An Anthropological Approach* (OTM, Oxford, 2012), pp. 19-72; note also the various attempts at applying this concept by E.T. Mullen, Jr., *Narrative History and Ethnic Boundaries: The Deuteronomistic History and the Creation of Israelite National Identity* (SBLSymS, Atlanta, Ga., 1993); K.L. Sparks, *Ethnicity and Identity in Ancient Israel: Prolegomena to the Study of Ethnic Sentiments and Their Expression in the Hebrew Bible* (Winona Lake, Ind., 1998); A.E. Killebrew, *Biblical Peoples and Ethnicity: An Archaeological Study of Egyptians, Canaanites, Philistines, and Early Israel, 1300–1100 B.C.E.* (Archaeology and Biblical Studies 9, Leiden, 2005); the essays by D. Collon, C. De Bernardi, M. Roaf, G. van Driel and B. Levine in W.H. Van Soldt (ed.), *Ethnicity in Ancient Mesopotamia: Papers Read at the 48th Rencontre Assyriologique Internationale: Leiden, 1–4 July 2002* (Leiden, 2005); R.S. Sadler, Jr., *Can A Cushite Change His Skin? An Examination of Race, Ethnicity, and Othering in the Hebrew Bible* (LHBOTS 425, London, 2005); Z. Bahrani, 'Race and Ethnicity in Mesopotamian Antiquity', *World Archaeology* 38 (2006), pp. 48–59; and the essays by R.F. Person, Jr. and R.S. Sadler, Jr. in D.R. Edwards and C.T. McCollough (eds.), *The Archaeology of Difference: Gender, Ethnicity, Class and the 'Other' in Antiquity: Studies in Honor of Eric M. Meyers* (AASOR 60/61, Boston, Mass., 2007); C.L. Crouch, *The Making of Israel: Cultural Diversity in the Southern Levant and the Formation of Ethnic Identity in Deuteronomy* (VTSup 162, Leiden, 2014).

between their own cultural practices and the cultural practices of others.¹¹ This trend in ethnic theorisation may be traced most influentially to the work of Barth, who articulated the concept in terms of the experience, articulation and maintenance of boundaries.¹² Similarly emphasising the importance of interaction in the formation of ethnic identity, Emberling and Yoffee suggest that

ethnic identity depends on perception of similarity and difference. It is not any specific feature of a group of people, but the recognition of significant difference between its members and outsiders that distinguishes it as a group separate from others...it is an aspect of social relations.¹³

One of the more peculiar, and often more troubling, aspects of ethnic identity is the common tendency for ethnic groups to describe outsiders in profoundly negative terms, as ‘offensive...tainted, contaminating, immoral, and somehow less or lower than one’s

¹¹ See F. Barth, ‘Introduction’, in F. Barth (ed.), *Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Cultural Difference* (London, 1969), pp. 9-38; S. Harrison, ‘Identity as a Scarce Resource’, *Social Anthropology* 7 (1999), pp. 239-251; S. Harrison, ‘Cultural Difference as Denied Resemblance: Reconsidering Nationalism and Ethnicity’, *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 45 (2003), pp. 343–361; T.H. Eriksen, *Ethnicity and Nationalism: Anthropological Perspectives* (Anthropology, Culture and Society 1, London, 1993); and others.

¹² Barth, ‘Introduction’; also P. Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (Cambridge Studies in Social Anthropology 16, transl. R. Nice, Cambridge, 1977).

¹³ G. Emberling and N. Yoffee, ‘Thinking about Ethnicity in Mesopotamian Archaeology and History’, in H. Kuehne, R. Bernbeck and K. Bartl (eds.), *Fluchtpunkt Uruk: Archäologische Einheit aus Methodologischer Vielfalt: Schriften für Hans J. Nissen* (Rahden, 1999), p. 273.

own tribe – animal or subhuman.¹⁴ Several recent analyses of this phenomenon have highlighted the role of emotions, especially disgust, in evoking this reaction to the outsider.¹⁵ Disgust, in its various manifestations, is ‘fundamentally about protecting and maintaining the self’.¹⁶ This is most obvious in the immediate, bodily sense in which disgust prompts the desire to avoid contact with or the intake of alien substances, but it has also taken on the wider and more abstract function of protecting the body corporate: the ethnic group.¹⁷ That which is perceived to threaten the integrity of the ethnic group provokes a reaction of disgust: the other is dirty, filthy; to be avoided and not under any circumstances to be touched. Boundaries and especially a concern with the transgression of boundaries are again critical: ‘Phenomena that confuse our sense of proper boundaries, especially self-other boundaries, frequently diminish the sense of identity. Taboo as well as feelings of disgust toward what lies between categories protect us from the intercategory realm.’¹⁸ The emotional reaction, in other words, serves the social function of demarcating and reinforcing group boundaries. Whether the entities these boundaries define are innate or created is incidental to their social effect. Rather, it is the perceived incompatibility between the categories which is essential: ‘The core idea involved in disgust...is the idea of contamination: when one advances disgust as a

¹⁴ D. Kelly, *Yuck! The Nature and Moral Significance of Disgust* (London, 2011), p. 135.

¹⁵ E.g., Kelly, *Yuck!*; S.B. Miller, *Disgust: The Gatekeeper Emotion* (London, 2004); M. Nussbaum, *Hiding From Humanity: Disgust, Shame, and the Law* (Oxford, 2004).

¹⁶ Miller, *Disgust*, p. 5.

¹⁷ For a proposal regarding the evolutionary adaptation of an initially biologically-based response for the regulation of social interactions, see Kelly, *Yuck!*, pp. 101-136.

¹⁸ Miller, *Disgust*, p. 160.

reason for prohibiting a practice, one is trying to prevent oneself, or one's society, from being contaminated by the presence of that practice.'¹⁹

The use of affective, emotional language like *tw'bh* in instances of boundary transgression (or threats of) in the biblical texts makes sense as part of a phenomenon in which emotions work 'to reject and devalue outsiders', conveying 'a totality of rejection and a passion in denigration that relate[s] the outsider to all things physically repulsive or morally debased.'²⁰ Rather than relying on rational arguments for the differentiation and separation of ethnic groups (and other categories), affective language invokes the power of the human emotional response in order to preserve boundaries. The following discussion sets out the case for understanding the usage of the *tw'bh* language in this light.²¹

¹⁹ Nussbaum, *Hiding From Humanity*, p. 83; cf. W.I. Miller, *The Anatomy of Disgust* (Cambridge, Mass., 1997).

²⁰ Miller, *Disgust*, pp. 153-154.

²¹ For an attempt to ground some of the biblical texts' moral statements in emotional reactions such as disgust see especially T. Kazen, 'Dirt and Disgust: Body and Morality in Biblical Purity Laws', in B.J. Schwartz, D.P. Wright, J. Stackert and N.S. Meshel (eds.), *Perspectives on Purity and Purification in the Bible* (LHBOTS 474; London, 2008), pp. 43-64; T. Kazen, *Emotions in Biblical Law: A Cognitive Science Approach* (Hebrew Bible Monographs 36; Sheffield, 2011); also G. Hepner, *Legal Friction: Law, Narrative, and Identity Politics in Biblical Israel* (SBL 78; New York, N.Y., 2010), pp. 108-110. With regard to the *tw'bh* language one should especially note Fox: 'The root-meaning of *t-'b* is "disgusting," "loathsome," not necessarily on ethical or religious grounds. Sometimes *t-'b* just signifies simple disgust, with no ethical connotations' (M.V. Fox, *Proverbs 1-9: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* [AB 18A; London, 2000], p. 166; cf. Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy*, p. 226: 'that category of things which the delicate find odious and abhorrent'). Kazen, though focusing on the affective aspect of

Nominal Usage

As the verb is considered denominative, it makes sense to begin the analysis with the noun. This also has the advantage of providing a large data set for study. As already noted, the noun occurs most frequently in Deuteronomy and Ezekiel. However, these texts' strong interest in the cult renders it preferable to begin elsewhere, with texts usually seen as lexical outliers, because the significance of the cult for our understanding of *tw'bh* is one of the sticking points when it comes to Proverbs. By forcing a change of focus, texts which are inexplicable according to either the ethical focus associated with Proverbs or the cultic focus attributed to Deuteronomy and Ezekiel offer an opportunity to reconsider the underlying interest of these texts and their motivation for using *tw'bh* language.

Amongst the most notable texts to have resisted attempts to fit them into either the cultic or ethical paradigms are those in Genesis. In Gen 43:32, communal dining between Hebrews and Egyptians is identified as *tw'bh*, while in Gen 46:34 the entire shepherding profession is described as *tw'bt mšrym*. When noted at all, the *tw'bh* language in these passages has baffled commentators. With regard to Gen 43:32, Speiser is obliged to conclude 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'; he is similarly perplexed by Gen 46:34, declaring that '[t]he taboo cannot apply to shepherds

tw'bh, does note that it seems often to be associated with the practices of foreign peoples (Kazen, *Emotions in Biblical Law*, p. 120, 123-124).

as such'.²² Linking the passage to the cultic paradigm, Lowenthal hazards that the Egyptians avoided shepherds because of their contact with animals which the Egyptians worshipped.²³ As Cohn has noted, however, religious issues are largely absent from the narratives about the ancestors in Genesis and the term's appearance here seems unlikely to derive from concerns about worship.²⁴

In both cases, the issue is better understood in terms of the identity associations of the activities in question: these are activities which are foreign to Egyptian practice or activities in which the Egyptians, as a group, do not customarily engage. They are, in other words, boundary markers of Egyptian and non-Egyptian ethnic identities. Recognising the texts' interest in differentiating between Egyptians and non-Egyptians, L'Hour proposed that the phrase 'exprime une caractéristique exclusive des Égyptiens, par laquelle ils se distinguent de tous les autres peuples'.²⁵ With this in mind Gen 46:34 might be more clearly rendered as instructions based on the norms of Egyptian practice: 'You shall say, "Your servants have been keepers of livestock" ... because shepherds are strange (*tw'bh*) to the Egyptians'. The issue under discussion is the familiarity or unfamiliarity of shepherds to Egyptian cultural and social practice: Joseph is attempting to facilitate the integration of his brothers into Egyptian territory by instructing them to

²² E.A. Speiser, *Genesis* (AB 1; New York, N.Y., 1964), pp. 328-329, 345.

²³ E.I. Lowenthal, *The Joseph Narrative in Genesis* (New York, N.Y., 1973), p. 120; he has no explanation for the term in Gen 43:32 (p. 87).

²⁴ R.L. Cohn, 'Negotiating (with) the Natives: Ancestors and Identity in Genesis', *HTR* 96 (2003), pp. 147-166. The possibility that Gen 43:32 might relate to Egyptian religious sensibilities is implied by von Rad, on the basis of Herodotus, but he makes no attempt at such an explanation with regard to Gen 46:34 (G. von Rad, *Das erste Buch Mose, Genesis Kapitel 25,19 – 50,26* [ATD 4; Göttingen, 1956], p. 341).

²⁵ L'Hour, 'Les interdits to'eba', pp. 486.

explain their profession in terms that the pharaoh will understand and that will make them appear more amenable to the Egyptian context into which they hope to be integrated. In fact, the brothers ignore Joseph's instructions, answering the pharaoh with the declaration that they are, indeed, shepherds. Notably, however, the pharaoh alters his description of the brothers in his response: he uses instead the familiar language of cattlemen, which Joseph had urged upon his brothers in his attempt to ease their acceptance. In a similar way the use of *tw'bh* in Gen 43:32 reflects the sense that communal dining between Egyptians and Hebrew threatens to transgress an important cultural dividing line between the two groups. Anthropologically speaking, communal food consumption ranks amongst the most prominent expressions of group identity.²⁶ It is also, as an instance of the physical ingestion of substances into the body, an identity marker especially open to affective interpretation:

behaviors related to cuisine – what food one will eat, what one refuses to eat, how one procures and prepares that food – provide a clear, observable source of information about the types of food taboos one adheres to. This information is about something quite basic to survival, but eating practices also inevitably contain and display information about group membership, and thus about the other types of social norms one accepts. In short, many facets of cuisine come to act as ethnic boundary markers...people show their colors when they reveal

²⁶ See G. Emberling, 'Ethnicity in Complex Societies: Archaeological Perspectives', *Journal of Archaeological Research* 5 (1997), p. 318; in the biblical context also P. Altmann, *Festive Meals in Ancient Israel: Deuteronomy's Identity Politics in Their Ancient Near Eastern Context* (BZAW 424; Berlin, 2011), pp. 42-66, with further references.

what they find, or do not find, disgusting. These behaviors mark whether one is a member of one particular group or another.²⁷

Strikingly, Exod 8:22 (ET 8:26) describes sacrifices that the Israelites are meant to make for YHWH as *tw'bh*. Rather than representing a condemnation of the cultic action as such, however, the description reflects the text's recognition of a significant potential issue regarding the differences in cultural praxis that characterise the two distinct ethnic identities involved in the story. Moses' protest is not a matter of religious (im)propriety; rather, he objects to the performance of the sacrifices in Egypt. Furthermore, it is not for religious reasons that the Hebrews cannot make their sacrifices in Egypt. Rather, Moses is concerned about the Egyptians' likely reaction to the sacrifices, with which they will not be familiar: he suspects that the unfamiliarity of such practices to the Egyptians is liable to render their reaction hostile. Thus: 'It would not be right to [offer sacrifices], for the sacrifices that we offer to YHWH our god are strange (*tw'bh*) to the Egyptians. If we offer in the sight of the Egyptians sacrifices that are strange (*tw'bh*) to them, will they not stone us?'²⁸ Given the context of the conversation in the midst of the plagues, and more specifically in the context of the first of the plagues to differentiate between the Egyptians and the Hebrews, Moses is rightly concerned: the sacrifices would clearly

²⁷ Kelly, *Yuck!*, p. 123.

²⁸ Durham picks up on the apparent lack of religious emphasis in his suggestion, on the basis of this and the Genesis texts, of 'a general Egyptian antipathy toward all things Israelite' (J.I. Durham, *Exodus* [WBC 3; Nashville, Tenn., 1987], p. 115); Hyatt similarly concludes that '[t]heir sacrifices would...have differed from those of the Egyptians in their manner and the accompanying ritual to such an extent that the latter would consider them abominable' (J.P. Hyatt, *Exodus* [NCB; London, 1971], p. 112).

identify the Hebrews to an irate Egyptian population, rendering them obvious targets for retaliatory action.²⁹ The sacrifices are described as *tw'bh*, in sum, because they serve as a distinguishing feature, a dividing practice, between the Hebrews and the Egyptians.

Before moving on, it is worth a moment's pause to note the non-Israelite perspective reflected by the Genesis and Exodus texts. Given that the dominant perspective of the biblical texts overall is Israelite, it is hardly surprising that many of the passages that use *tw'bh* use it from the Israelites' point of view. In doing so, they often render it an approximate synonym for 'non-Israelite'. In contrast to this default position, however, the references in Genesis and Exodus highlight that this is the perspective of the available texts, rather than an inherent quality of the term itself.

More typically, Kings and Chronicles use *tw'bh* from the perspective of Israelites to describe practices associated with or attributed to non-Israelites. Again, the domain of *tw'bh* concerns the differentiation of ethnic identities and, in particular, the maintenance of boundaries between these identities. In these passages *tw'bh* is used in reference to practices with (supposedly) non-Israelite origins or associations; it appears especially in the context of warnings about the problematic consequences, for Israelite ethnic identity, of adopting such practices. There is also a special focus on the delineation and protection of this Israelite ethnic identity *vis-à-vis* the non-Israelites who previously inhabited (or, more probably, still inhabit) the land: those with whom the archaeological evidence suggests the Israelites had the most in common and with

²⁹ That the *tw'bh* language appears at the same time as the introduction of a distinction between the Egyptians and the Hebrews as to the effects of the plagues is also noted by B.S. Childs, *Exodus: A Commentary* (OTL; London, 1974), p. 157.

whom they would have been most profoundly in conflict over the differentiation of identities.³⁰

A few examples are illustrative. At the end of the reign of Rehoboam, the people are condemned for ‘committ[ing] all the abhorrent practices (*tw’bt*) of the nations that YHWH drove out before the people of Israel’ (1 Kgs 14:24): in other words, for transgressing the boundary between Israelites and non-Israelites that, in the most physical of terms, had been established through the eviction of the non-Israelites from the land to be inhabited by Israelites.³¹ The text uses *tw’bh* to emphasise that the problem with the practices in question is their association with the pre-/non-Israelite inhabitants of the land and, in the circumstances of the Israelites’ adoption of these practices, to highlight and reject the implications of these associations for the Israelites’ own ethnic identity. The reason that these acts are considered objectionable, in other words – the reason that they are ‘abominable’ – is that they pose a threat to the Israelites’ identity *qua* Israelites. When Israelites pursue these practices they endanger their distinctiveness, abandoning the peculiarly Israelite characteristics that set them

³⁰ On the anthropology of identity conflicts in instances of cultural similarity see Harrison, ‘Identity as a Scarce Resource’; Harrison, ‘Cultural Difference as Denied Resemblance’; Barth, ‘Introduction’; T. Parsons, ‘Some Theoretical Considerations on the Nature and Trends of Change in Ethnicity’, in N. Glazer and D.P. Moynihan (eds.), *Ethnicity: Theory and Experience* (London, 1975), pp. 53-83. On the appearance of emotive language in such contexts see Miller, *Disgust*, pp. 161-162.

³¹ On the importance of spatial and physical proximity for ethnic identity, see A. Cohen, *Custom and Politics in Urban Africa: A Study of Hausa Migrants in Yoruba Towns* (London, 1969), p. 204.

apart from the pre-/non-Israelite inhabitants of the land and contaminating the category 'Israel' through the adoption of non-Israelite practices.³²

When Ahaz's actions are denounced by the author of 2 Kings, the nature of his offense is similarly articulated. *tw'bh* appears at the same time that the text explicitly announces the connection between the author's objection and the act's association with non-Israelites: 'He even made his son pass through fire, according to the abhorrent practices (*tw'bwt*) of the nations whom YHWH drove out before the people of Israel' (2 Kgs 16:3 // 2 Chr 28:3; similarly 2 Chr 36:14). A few chapters later, the description of the deeds of Manasseh in 2 Kgs 21 is summarised with the explanation that these were 'abhorrent practices (*tw'bwt*) of the nations' (2 Kgs 21:2 // 2 Chr 33:2). Here again, the offensiveness and rejection of the acts described as *tw'bh* are intimately connected to their non-Israelite associations. Manasseh's perpetuation and encouragement of these non-Israelite practices is even said to have resulted in a greater evil than when they had been engaged in by the non-Israelites themselves (2 Kgs 21:11); this makes sense insofar as the pursuit of these practices by non-Israelites posed no threat to Israelite

³² The impossible definite article on *tw'bh* has prompted many scholars to delete the word entirely; this has the effect of producing the even more explicit statement that 'they acted like all the nations whom YHWH had driven out from before the people of Israel' (e.g., M. Noth, *Könige, Teilband 1. Könige 1-16* [BKAT 9/1; Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1968], pp. 320, 324; E. Würthwein, *Die Bücher der Könige, 1. Könige 1-16* [ATD 11,1; Göttingen, 1977], p. 181). As either form of this statement suggests, it is probably better to describe the group boundaries in question in ethnic rather than nationalist terms; at stake are the boundaries marked by cultural practices rather than territorial claims as such. For a more sustained discussion of this preference, see Crouch, *The Making of Israel*, pp. 83-93. Note also that the writer's despair over the blurring of Israelite boundaries is reiterated in the identification of Rehoboam's mother, not in the usual terms of patrilineal descent, but as 'the Ammonite' (1 Kgs. 14:21).

identity. It is only when the Israelites began to engage in them that they became dangerous. Whether all (or any) of these practices were actually characteristic of ‘non-Israelites’, whilst being eschewed by persons claiming ‘Israelite’ identity – that is, whether the *tw’bh* language describes existing boundaries, or is engaged in the process of constructing them – is a question to which we will return momentarily.³³

First, however, the effective equation of *tw’bh* with ‘non-Israelite’ may also be seen in the diverse listing of prohibited practices in Lev 18. These practices are identified as *tw’bh* in both specific (Lev 18:22; cf. 20:13) and general terms (Lev 18:26-27, 29-30). The non-cultic background of the majority of the practices described in the chapter is worth emphasising; although the overall priestly context might incline the exegete towards the classification of this *tw’bh* language alongside the cultic concerns of Deuteronomy and Ezekiel, closer examination suggests that this would be superficial and ultimately inaccurate. A link to the cult requires the dubious interpretation of the prohibited activities as pertaining to fertility rites.³⁴ Instead, the practices in question are explicitly presented by the surrounding text as being objectionable and requiring avoidance specifically on the grounds of their associations with non-Israelites. They are introduced by the declaration that ‘You shall not do as they do in the land of Egypt, where you lived, and you shall not do as they do in the land of Canaan, to which I am

³³ On the deep-seated rhetoric of the 2 Kings account of Manasseh in particular see F. Stavrakopoulou, *King Manasseh and Child Sacrifice: Biblical Distortions of Historical Realities* (BZAW 338, Berlin, 2004), pp. 15-139; E. Ben Zvi, ‘Prelude to a Reconstruction of Historical Manassic Judah’, *BN* 81 (1996), pp. 31-44; E.A. Knauf, ‘The Glorious Days of Manasseh’, in L.L. Grabbe (ed.), *Good Kings and Bad Kings: The Kingdom of Judah in the Seventh Century B.C.E.* (LHBOTS 393, London, 2005), pp. 164-188.

³⁴ Thus J.E. Hartley, *Leviticus* (WBC 4; Nashville, Tenn., 1992), p. 298.

bringing you' (Lev 18:3). Egyptians and Canaanites here represent the two critical contexts of Israelite ethnic identity formation: Egypt, from which the people were brought out, in the act that marked the genesis of their existence as Israelites, and Canaan, in which this identity is continuously threatened by the non-Israelite inhabitants of the land. Here, as throughout much of the biblical corpus, Egypt and Canaan function as the entities against which Israel defines itself, in a classic expression of an ethnic sentiment that emphasises the definition and maintenance of the boundaries between itself and an other constructed in opposition to it.³⁵ The text's articulation of these practices as marking fundamental points of differentiation between Israelites and non-Israelites characterises the chapter and illuminates its usage of *tw'bh*. Indeed, Marx speaks of the rhetorical effect of these verses in terms of 'l'incompatibilité radicale', highlighting the function of these practices as critical boundary markers between Israelites and non-Israelites.³⁶ Recalling the oscillation between the conceptualisation of the boundaries of the individual body and the boundaries of the body corporate, we might also and especially note the overtly bodily character of the practices addressed.³⁷ The chapter culminates in the statement that '[w]hoever commits any of these

³⁵ Barth, 'Introduction'; similarly A.P. Cohen, *The Symbolic Construction of Community* (London, 1985); Emberling and Yoffee, 'Thinking about Ethnicity'. On the place of Egypt in Israel's self-understanding see especially F.V. Greifenhagen, *Egypt on the Pentateuch's Ideological Map: Constructing Biblical Israel's Identity* (JSOTSup 361, Sheffield, 2002); also K. Schmid, *Genesis and the Moses Story: Israel's Dual Origins in the Hebrew Bible* (transl. J. Nogalski, Siphrut 3, Winona Lake, Ind., 2010). On exodus from Egypt as a type of 'mythology of origins' characteristic of ethnic identities see Crouch, *The Making of Israel*, pp. 138-140.

³⁶ A. Marx, *Lévitique 17-27* (CAT 3b; Geneva, 2011), p. 59.

³⁷ See Kelly, *Yuck!*, p. 119.

abominable practices will be cut off from their people’, using *tw’bh* in an explicit articulation of the connection between cultural praxis and group identity: whoever thus contaminates and endangers the integrity of the group will be evicted from it (Lev 18:29).

Given the explicitness with which the Leviticus text asserts that these acts are associated with non-Israelites, this is an opportune moment to consider the rhetoric, as opposed to the reality, of such assertions. Drawing on the work of Nussbaum, Milgrom suggests that ‘sexual depravity was a means of both stigmatizing an ancient enemy, the Canaanites, and sending a dire warning to Israel that it will suffer the same fate, expulsion from the land, if it follows the same practices’; he allows, however, that ‘H may have exaggerated the sexual sins of the Egyptians and Canaanites so that Israel would break off all ties with them’.³⁸ The associations between these practices and the Egyptians or the Canaanites are, in other words, not necessarily fully grounded in reality: they may, but equally may not, be making statements of empirical fact. Rather, the text uses the rhetorical and emotive power of such associations as a motivator, discouraging Israelites from engaging in the activities in question on the grounds of a (supposedly fundamental) incompatibility between these non-Israelites (and their practices) and the Israelites themselves. As Miller writes:

³⁸ Milgrom, *Leviticus 17-22*, p. 1520; cf. P.J. Budd, *Leviticus* (NCB; Grand Rapids, Mich., 1996), pp. 260-263; cf. E. Gerstenberger, *Leviticus: A Commentary* (OTL; Louisville, Ky., 1996), pp. 255-257. On the particularly frequent appearance of sexual norms in the delineation of ethnic identities, see Kelly, *Yuck!*, p. 119.

we may declare – however arbitrarily – that a clear line exists between self and Other and we assign dirtiness, decadence, immorality, or some other badness to whoever or whatever occupies the space beyond the dividing line, who is, psychologically, the stranger... Assigning badness to the outsider may provide more security than aversion to the intercategory would furnish, since the notion of things between categories suggests some degree of overlap – of shared protoplasm – between oneself and the offending Other, whereas complete otherness denies any commonality.³⁹

The usage of *tw'bh* in texts of this kind reminds us that ethnic identities are themselves constructed, rather than static entities; the text helps to create the reality it imagines.⁴⁰ Identity is not a matter of immutable boundaries requiring description and obedience but a much more fluid phenomenon; the boundary markers which differentiate one group from the next are in a constant state of transformation, contingent on shifting social and cultural meaning. Depending on the characteristics of the group in opposition

³⁹ Miller, *Disgust*, pp. 160-161.

⁴⁰ On the complexity of the relationship between the real and the imagined in the construction of ethnic identities see, for example, C.F. Keyes, 'The Dialectics of Ethnic Change', in C.F. Keyes (ed.), *Ethnic Change* (London, 1981), pp. 3-30; A. Hastings, *The Construction of Nationhood: Ethnicity, Religion and Nationalism* (Cambridge, 1997); J.D.Y. Peel, 'The Cultural Work of Yoruba Ethnogenesis', in E. Tonkin, M. McDonald and M. Chapman (eds.), *History and Ethnicity* (ASA Monographs 27, London, 1989), pp. 198-215. Note that the articulation of these prohibitions at the chapter level in terms of non-Israelite praxis is not to wholly exclude other motives behind this list (see, e.g., Milgrom, *Leviticus 17-22*, pp. 1525-1532).

to which the Israelites understood their Israeliteness, the practices that most clearly differentiated them from each other could vary. In Barth's classic words:

The cultural features that signal the boundary may change, and the cultural characteristics of the members may likewise be transformed, indeed, even the organizational form of the group may change – yet the fact of continuing dichotomizations between members and outsiders allows us to specify the nature of continuity, and investigate the changing cultural form and content.⁴¹

This constructive process underpins the appearance of *tw'bh* in Leviticus, fraught with its effort to cast an immutable dividing line between Israelites and non-Israelites. It is similarly visible in Ezra, in which *tw'bh* language is concentrated in Ez 9. The chapter is a work of intense identity polemic, focused on marriages between Israelite returnee males and women from the people of the land. With a similar preference for clear categorical divisions, the text identifies these women as Canaanites, Hittites, Perizzites, Jebusites, Ammonites, Moabites, Egyptians and Amorites, set over and against Ezra's

⁴¹ Barth, 'Introduction', 14. On the practical difficulty of identifying group boundary markers see Emberling and Yoffee, 'Thinking about Ethnicity'; G. Emberling, 'Ethnicity in Complex Societies: Archaeological Perspectives', *Journal of Archaeological Research* 5 (1997), pp. 294-344; M. Hegmon, 'Technology, Style, and Social Practices: Archaeological Approaches', *The Archaeology of Social Boundaries* (ed. M.T. Stark, London, Smithsonian Institute, 1998), pp. 264-279; K.A. Kamp and N. Yoffee, 'Ethnicity in Ancient Western Asia: Archaeological Assessments and Ethnoarchaeological Perspectives', *BASOR* 237 (1980), pp. 85-104; I. Hodder, *Symbols in Action: Ethnoarchaeological Studies of Material Culture* (New Studies in Archaeology, Cambridge, 1982), p. 187; Keyes, 'The Dialectics of Ethnic Change'.

Israelites.⁴² Southwood has already convincingly argued that the identification of the women as non-Israelite and ‘foreign’ is historically dubious; the rationale for identifying them as such is rhetorical, an appeal to the social power of affective language in service of an ethnic project. The text’s objective – the ideological and actual separation of these women from the Israelite community which they contaminate – is achieved through the use of divisive and polemical vocabulary such as *zr’ hqdš, bdl* and *nkr*.⁴³ The *tw’bh* language in this chapter (Ez 9:1, 11, 14) helps to construct this absolute concept of Israelite identity: it associates the women with practices, persons and a way of life which is alien to that of Israelites (at least according to the definition of an Israelite championed by Ezra and his supporters) and which must therefore be rejected. Southwood describes the use of *tw’bh* in Ez 9 as ‘a forceful tool which marks off the boundaries’ between Israelites and non-Israelites.⁴⁴ The use of *tw’bh* language in this type of passage, in which the actual ‘non-Israeliteness’ of the person or thing in question may be doubted, reminds us that *tw’bh* is not merely descriptive but also constructive. It is deployed in texts in which there is contention over what does or does not qualify as ‘Israelite’, part of the rhetoric of defining and protecting Israelite identity. These passages reflect the way in which constructions of ethnic identities are prone to conflate the ethnic with the ethical: the contention that ‘you should do this, because this

⁴² On the contents of this list, see, e.g., J. Blenkinsopp, *Ezra-Nehemiah* (OTL; London, 1988), pp. 175-176; H.G.M. Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah* (WBC 16; Waco, Tex., 1985), p. 131.

⁴³ K.E. Southwood, *Ethnicity and the Mixed Marriage Crisis in Ezra 9-10: An Anthropological Approach* (OTM; Oxford, 2012), pp. 123-190; note that this complicates the supposition that *tw’bh* ‘is by now simply a technical term...for foreign religious practices’, as Williamson, *Ezra, Nehemiah*, p. 131 (following Humbert, ‘Le substantif *to’ēbā*’, pp. 228-230).

⁴⁴ Southwood, *Ethnicity and the Mixed Marriage Crisis*, pp. 137-138.

is what Israelites do'. The act that is not Israelite, the person who is not Israelite, is abhorrent, hateful, wicked, evil, condemned.

This use of *tw'bh* as part of a process of identity formation rather than simply identity description is visible also in Deuteronomy, in which both the term and a concern for the definition and delineation of Israelite identity *vis-à-vis* non-Israelites are especially prominent.⁴⁵ Given the book's interests in Israelite identity, it is no surprise that studies of the term in this context have been the most likely to recognise its relevance for expressions of identity.⁴⁶ The association is explicit in, for example, the prohibition regarding the use of images of non-Israelite gods – the gods of the pre-/non-Israelite inhabitants of the land (Deut 7:25-26). It is also clear in the prohibitions regarding certain divinatory(?) acts involving children (Deut 12:31; cf. 18:10) and in the prohibition of a wide range of technical divinatory practices; these are explicitly associated with non-Israelites and contrasted with the intuitive (prophetic) divinatory methods to be used by the Israelites (Deut 18:9-12). Rhetorically, at least, it is the non-Israeliteness of these activities that renders them *tw'bh*. Similarly, prohibitions regarding the worship of deities other than YHWH, Israel's particular god, are articulated using *tw'bh* language (Deut 13:15; 17:4; cf. 27:15), corresponding to the deuteronomic

⁴⁵ Rhetorically these are articulated as the pre-Israelite inhabitants of the land, though the nature of Deuteronomy's interests suggests that they are more likely concurrent, but not (deuteronomically) Israelite, inhabitants living alongside Deuteronomy's audience. For more on Israelites and non-Israelites in Deuteronomy see Crouch, *The Making of Israel*, especially pp. 5-7.

⁴⁶ L'Hour, 'Les interdits to 'eba', p. 503; O. Bächli, *Israel und die Völker: Eine Studie zum Deuteronomium* (ATANT 41; Zürich, 1962), pp. 53-55; Humbert, 'Le substantif to 'ēbā', pp. 222-226.

prioritisation of exclusive Yahwistic worship as the key marker of Israelite identity.⁴⁷ The word also qualifies the practices of non-Israelites in the war law (Deut 20:17-18), in which the concern for the protection of group boundaries is overt; the dividing line between Israelites and non-Israelites is secured through the physical destruction of the latter, lest the Israelites be tempted to transgress the boundary between these groups by imitating the non-Israelites' practices. Deuteronomy 32:16 explicitly parallels *tw'bw't* with *zry'm*, strange (gods).

In addition to these explicit passages, there are others in which the quality of a given practice as *tw'bh* is simply stated without further elaboration: the legislation regarding diet (Deut 14:3), sacrificial (Deut 17:1) and voluntary offerings (Deut 23:19), transvestitism (Deut 22:5), remarriage (Deut 24:4) and the use of dishonest weights (Deut 25:16). This has previously created a mania for identifying 'Canaanite' practices behind these prohibitions; such a background for practices mentioned in *tw'bh* laws is now often assumed.⁴⁸ Closer inspection of these texts, however, reveals a complex

⁴⁷ On the function of religion in the formulation of ethnic identities see especially Cohen, *Custom and Politics in Urban Africa*; cf. C. Geertz, *The Interpretation of Cultures: Selected Essays* (London, 1973); P.L. Berger, *The Sacred Canopy: Elements of a Sociological Theory of Religion* (Garden City, N.Y., 1969); L. Peek, 'Becoming Muslim: The Development of a Religious Identity', *Sociology of Religion* 66 (2005), pp. 215-242.

⁴⁸ See, among many others, Hallo, 'Biblical Abominations', pp. 37-38; J.B. Miller, *The Ethics of Deuteronomy: An Exegetical and Theological Study of the Book of Deuteronomy* (D.Phil. diss., University of Oxford, 1995); M. Varšo, 'Abomination in the Legal Code of Deuteronomy: Can an Abomination Motivate?', *ZABR* 13 (2007), pp. 249-260; and the numerous commentary remarks on these passages. In light of recent scholarship on the relationship of Israelites to the land and its inhabitants, this

cocktail of practices with non-Israelite associations that were nevertheless also engaged in by ‘Israelites’ and which Deuteronomy now wishes to prohibit. Given the wider parameters of Deuteronomy’s agenda, in which the definition and protection of Israelite identity is a recurring concern, this suggests that – as in Ezra – the use of *tw’bh* language in Deuteronomy has a constructive function: the text is actively creating a differentiated Israelite identity, developing its own definition of what is or is not Israelite practice according to its own understanding of the relevant boundary markers of the group. Again, ethnic and ethical imperatives are conflated into a single rhetorical project.

Recognising that *tw’bh* appears in connection with issues about group boundaries and boundary delineation improves our understanding of these passages by illuminating the reason that YHWH hates the practices in question, rather than that he hates them merely because they are hateful. Thus in Deut 7:25-26 the destruction of the images of other gods is mandated because they are alien to and incompatible with an Israel that is defined, first and foremost, by its exclusive Yahwism; these images are abhorrent because they transgress the boundaries of Israelite cultural practice. Similarly, in Deut 12:31 it is everything that is non-Yahwistic and thus non-Israelite that YHWH is declared to hate (rather than the tautological ‘everything that is hateful to YHWH that YHWH hates’); the Israelites are prohibited from imitating such practices because to do so would problematize their Yahwistic Israelite identity. Recognising that the *tw’bh* language surfaces in contexts dealing with identity helps to locate these imperatives in the context of Deuteronomy’s wider concerns about Israelite identity. The issue

clearly requires more nuanced reconsideration; for a more extensive discussion of each of these texts, see Crouch, *The Making of Israel*, 146-164, 174-176.

throughout is the definition and protection of Israelite identity in Yahwistic terms. The term's remit includes 'alles, was es aus seiner Umgebung ohne Gefährdung seines eigenen Wesens nicht assimilieren darf'.⁴⁹

Before moving to the prophets, one final observation on the usage of the *tw'bh* language in the legal material is worth mention: it appears only in the book of Deuteronomy and in the Holiness Code sections of the priestly material. By contrast, it is absent entirely from the Covenant Code. It appears, in other words, in precisely those legal texts that have been widely recognised as having a particular interest in the delineation and construction of Israelite identity.⁵⁰ This is an appropriate and sensible usage distribution if this term, as is suggested here, has a strong connection to attempts to delineate the alienness of certain practices, objects and people from the point of view of the boundaries of ethnic groups.

⁴⁹ Bächli, *Israel und die Völker*, p. 53; cf. Gerstenberger, 'תעב', p. 1430.

⁵⁰ J. Joosten, *People and Land in the Holiness Code: A Exegetical Study of the Ideational Framework of the Law in Leviticus 17-26* (VTSup 67; Leiden, 1996); K. Sparks, *Ethnicity and Identity in Ancient Israel: Prolegomena to the Study of Ethnic Sentiments and Their Expression in the Hebrew Bible* (Winona Lake, Ind., 1998), pp. 225-228; I. Knohl, *The Sanctuary of Silence: The Priestly Torah and the Holiness School* (Minneapolis, Minn., 1995), pp. 180-186; R. Barrett, *Disloyalty and Destruction: Religion and Politics in Deuteronomy and the Modern World* (LHBOTS 511; London, 2009), pp. 42-47; J.G. McConville, *God and Earthly Power: An Old Testament Political Theology, Genesis-Kings* (LHBOTS 454; London, 2007), pp. 74-98; S.D. McBride, Jr., 'Polity of the Covenant People: The Book of Deuteronomy', *Int* 41 (1987), pp. 229-244; E.T. Mullen, Jr., *Narrative History and Ethnic Boundaries: The Deuteronomistic History and the Creation of Israelite National Identity* (SBLSymS; Atlanta, Ga., 1993), pp. 55-85. The historical realities of Israelite identity concerns may also explain the increased frequency of use over time (see Gerstenberger, 'תעב', p. 1429).

This use of *tw'bh* language is also evident in Ezekiel. Though relatively few of the book's *tw'bh* texts provide specific details regarding the term's remit, the passages which do provide further support for an understanding of the *tw'bh* language as addressing boundaries and identity issues.⁵¹ The ability of these practices, in Ezekiel's priestly and cult-orientated thinking, to defile or pollute the sacred space of YHWH is worth remark – and has indeed been the focus of previous discussions on the meaning of *tw'bh* in Ezekiel. This concept is closely related to the concern for boundary transgression and category contamination observed also in other *tw'bh* texts. In Ezekiel,

⁵¹ Brief mention should be made of Ezek 5:9, in which the coming judgment on Jerusalem is directly linked to the city's relationship with the practices and norms of the surrounding nations: the city is accused of having behaved even worse than these others (cf. 2 Kgs 21:11). The exact nature of this relationship, however, is obscured by an ill-timed variant, namely, the presence or absence of a third *l'* in Ezek 5:7. That the issue at hand is related to Jerusalem's activities *vis-à-vis* those of non-Israelites surrounding it is obvious; the uncertainty concerns whether the Israelites are being accused of imitating the practices of non-Israelites, in which case these are the practices which are labelled *tw'bh*, or if they are being accused of doing something which not even the other nations do, and that these other, unidentified practices are what is being described as *tw'bh*. Although a decisive conclusion is impossible, the consistency of the rest of the book in associating things labelled *tw'bh* with non-Israelites tends to favour the interpretation of *tw'bh* in both Ezek 5:9 and 5:11 as a reference to non-Israelite practices. In light of the current discussion it is also worth note that the practices in question are not immediately enumerated in cultic terms but in much broader language of *mšp̄tym* (cf. Lev 18:4-5); cultic practices specifically are not mentioned until Ezek 5:11. It seems unlikely to be coincidence that most commentators leave their first discussion of *tw'bh* in Ezekiel to its next appearance, in Ezek 6, where it conforms more conveniently to the cultic interpretation usually understood for its appearances in this book. L.C. Allen, *Ezekiel 1-19* (WBC 28; Nashville, Tenn., 1994), p. 74, is an exception, obligating a concession that here 'the term functions as an equivalent of general sins or iniquities' rather than specifically cultic matters.

as in Deuteronomy, the practices described as *tw'bh* are antithetical to the Yahwistic cult specifically because of their associations with non-Israelites and their attendant potential to blur the boundaries of Israelite practice. The fundamental marker of Israelite identity in both texts is the exclusive commitment to YHWH; confusion of this exclusivity through the contaminating infiltration of non-Yahwistic cultic practices, or even the outright worship of deities other than YHWH, is impossible to reconcile with Israelite identity.

The vision of the *tw'bwt* in the temple in Ezek 8 has long been recognised to be a vision of practices performed in connection with or by virtue of adoption from practices associated with non-Yahwistic deities. This is indisputable in the case of the women who weep for Tammuz; that the incense burned before the creatures painted on the wall and the worship directed toward the sun were likely also practices adopted in imitation of others is generally agreed.⁵² Indeed, the affiliations of such practices are strong enough to have prompted Eichrodt to gloss *tw'bwt* in this instance as 'heathen practices which ought to be regarded with loathing'.⁵³

The striking, often offensive narrative of Ezek 16 also uses *tw'bh* extensively, beginning with verses in which Jerusalem's ancestry is affiliated with Canaanites, Amorites and Hittites: 'O son of man, make Jerusalem comprehend her abhorrent praxis! You will say, "Thus says the lord, YHWH to Jerusalem: "Your origins and your birth are of the land of Canaan: your father was an Amorite and your mother a Hittite"'

⁵² For discussions of various possibilities, see Zimmerli *Ezekiel 1*, pp. 212-221; W. Eichrodt, *Ezekiel*, (OTL; London, 1970), pp. 122-127; Allen, *Ezekiel 20-48*, pp. 141-146.

⁵³ Eichrodt, *Ezekiel*, p. 123.

(Ezek 16:2-3).⁵⁴ The city's objectionable practices are attributed directly to its non-Israelite heritage. The *tw'bh* language multiplies as the text relates Jerusalem's interaction with outsiders, their practices and their gods. Jerusalem's pursuit of non-Israelite deities and non-Israelite practices are described as *tw'bh* (Ezek 16:22), as are Jerusalem's encounters with Egypt, Philistia, Assyria and Babylonia and the cult objects associated with them (Ezek 16:36, 43; note the verb at Ezek 16:25).⁵⁵ The reiteration of Jerusalem's alien parentage in Ezek 16:43bβ-47 is closely connected to condemnation of its practices as *tw'bwt*, with the concentration of *tw'bh* language in the climactic verses of the chapter following on from the sweeping condemnation of the entire family as a family of non-Israelites (Ezek 16:43bβ-58).⁵⁶ The *tw'bh* language works with the descriptions of Jerusalem's crimes in terms of sexual promiscuity to construct an image of Jerusalem's history in which it has failed to respect the proper boundaries between itself and outsiders, contaminating the Israelite body corporate by consorting with non-Israelites and assimilating their practices (cf. Ezek 20:4-8).

Last but not least, Israel's *tw'bwt* are connected explicitly to the involvement of foreigners in Israel's praxis by Ezek 44:6-9: 'Enough of your abhorrent practices, O House of Israel – your admission of foreigners, uncircumcised of heart and uncircumcised of flesh, to be in my sanctuary, defiling my house...you have broken my

⁵⁴ On 'Canaanites', 'Amorites' and 'Hittites' see Zimmerli, *Ezechiel 1*, pp. 345-348; J.W. Wevers, *Ezekiel* (vol. 1; NCB; London, 1969), p. 120.

⁵⁵ In Ezek 16:22 the apparent prompt for the *tw'bh* declaration is child sacrifice; cf. Deut 12:31; 18:9-12; Ezek 23:36-39.

⁵⁶ On the redactional status of this latter passage, Zimmerli, *Ezechiel 1*, pp. 341-345, though the meaning of *tw'bh* does not appear to have altered over the period in question.

covenant with all your abhorrent practices' (Ezek 44:6b-7).⁵⁷ The language of defilement immediately recalls the idea of contamination which characterises articulations of ethnic identity; the relationship with YHWH, as the defining feature of what it means to be an Israelite, is confused by the admission of non-Israelites to YHWH's sacred premises. The boundaries between Israelite and non-Israelite are literally transgressed.

Given Ezekiel's overall orientation towards the temple and its priestly activities, it is hardly surprising that the specific practices that the book describes as *tw'bh* are usually cult-related. The objectionableness of these practices, however, is not merely that they are cultic practices that Ezekiel does not like, but that they are cultic practices associated with non-Israelites and which, if Israelites pursue them, threaten to dissolve the boundaries which separate the Israelites from their non-Israelite neighbours.⁵⁸ That

⁵⁷ Whether such foreigners were real or rhetorical is a separate issue; for discussions see S.L. Cook, 'Innerbiblical Interpretation in Ezekiel 44 and the History of Israel's Priesthood', *JBL* 114 (1995), pp. 193-208 (on the foreigners specifically, pp. 207-208); W. Zimmerli, *Ezechiel, 2. Teilband: Ezechiel 25-48* (BKAT 13/2; Neukirchen-Vluyn, 1969), pp. 1124-1126; L.C. Allen, *Ezekiel 20-48* (WBC 29; Nashville, Tenn., 1990), pp. 260-261; I.M. Duguid, *Ezekiel and the Leaders of Israel* (VTSup 55; Leiden, 1994), pp. 75-77. If Cook is correct that Ezek 44 is reworking traditions found in Num 16-18, it is notable that the change in language from *zr* to the more explicit *bny zkr* occurs alongside the introduction of *tw'bh* language, which is absent from the Numbers narrative (though, interestingly, *zr* is elsewhere the terminology of Ezekiel; see Zimmerli, *Ezechiel 2*, p. 1124).

⁵⁸ On the overlap/conflation of ethnic categories and purity norms see Kelly, *Yuck!*, pp. 121-122; note also the conceptual association of purity norms with the moral domain of divinity and to the idea of the self 'as a spiritual entity connected to some sacred or natural order of things and as a responsible bearer of a legacy that is elevated and divine' (R.A. Shweder, with N.C. Much, M. Mahapatra and L. Park, 'The "Big Three" of Morality (Autonomy, Community, Divinity) and the "Big Three" Explanations of

the practices are also non-Yahwistic compounds the problem, thanks to the effective equation of Israel with YHWH. Previous attention has focussed on the (non)Yahwistic aspect of the issue, but the points at which the term is especially concentrated in Ezekiel support the suggestion that it is the non-Israelite quality of the things under discussion – and the conflation of non-Israelite and non-Yahwistic in a context in which exclusive Yahwism is the defining feature of Israelite ethnic identity – that renders the language of *tw'bh* especially appropriate.

The prophetic uses of *tw'bh* outside of Ezekiel follow a similar pattern. The term appears in Jeremiah in the context of practices associated with Baal and the *mlk* sacrifices (Jer 32:34-35) as well as the worship of non-Israelite, non-Yahwistic gods (Jer 44:3-5 cf. 2:7-8; 7:9-10; 16:18; 44:15-23).⁵⁹ Malachi 2:11 unpacks the *tw'bh* that Judah has committed in terms of union with a foreign deity, while the two appearances in Deutero-Isaiah are in the polemics against foreign gods (Isa 41:24; 44:19). Again, the contexts in which *tw'bh* language is used suggests that a key reason for its usage is the need or desire to articulate certain practices as being alien to Israelite ethnic identity, with particular attention paid to the significance of the Israelites' god, YHWH, as a (the) boundary marker for Israelite identity.

One particularly interesting prophetic appearance of *tw'bh* is in Isa 1:13, which depicts various cultic practices as having no sway with YHWH. Confronted with these

Suffering', *Why Do Men Barbecue? Recipes for Cultural Psychology* [ed. R.A. Shweder, London, 2003], pp. 99). That the boundaries of ethnic identity are perceived as a matter of particularly acute concern in the context of cultic practice is not, in other words, surprising or unexpected.

⁵⁹ On the interpretation of the *mlk* offerings – with the constructive capacity of *tw'bh* language in mind – see Stavrakopoulou, *King Manasseh and Child Sacrifice*, pp. 145-316.

practices, YHWH reacts as though the practitioners were non-Israelites and as though the practices themselves were directed at other gods:

Cease bringing useless offerings: incense is abhorrent (*tw'bh*) to me. New moon and sabbath and reading at assembly – I cannot endure such wicked assemblies. I hate your months and times; they have become to me a burden I weary of bearing. So when you spread your hands I will hide from you; though they multiply, your prayer will be nothing to me... (Isa 1:13-15)

Though none of the practices concerned are actually foreign or alien, the attitude with which they are performed renders them as though they were, with no effect on YHWH.

This use of *tw'bh*, in which texts employ the term to describe certain activities or persons as having the effect of making Israelites like non-Israelites, especially in the sense of having no relation to or claim on YHWH who is Israel's god, is often evident in the verb's usages, to which we will return momentarily. It is also evident in the use of *tw'bh* in Proverbs, where the connection with its usage elsewhere has been particularly difficult to articulate. The issue in these passages is the similarly alienating effect of certain practices, especially though not exclusively with regard to the relationship between an individual and YHWH. Thus Prov 3:31-32 warns, 'Do not envy the violent and do not choose any of their ways, for the perverse are abhorrent (alien, unfamiliar, strange) to YHWH while the upright are in his confidence' (cf. Prov 11:20; 12:22 *et passim*). The use of *tw'bh* here emphasises the effect of an action on the intimacy of the relationship between the individual and YHWH; the actions are described as *tw'bh* not because of generic sense of hatred but because they are fundamentally incompatible

with what it means to be an Israelite in a relationship with YHWH. The pursuit of such practices shifts the actor across the boundary which divides Israelite from non-Israelite; YHWH, the Israelite god, responds accordingly. The actions thus described endanger the essential feature of an Israelite's Israeliteness: his relationship with YHWH. Recognising that the use of *tw'bh* is an expression of concerns about boundaries, especially in association with things that are non-Israelite/non-Yahwistic, helps to illuminate many of the actions and attitudes which are described with the *tw'bh* language in Proverbs.

As these initial examples suggest, the ethnic-religious problematic of certain types of actions – that they result in alienation from YHWH – is often explicit in Proverbs' use of *tw'bh*. It is not surprising that this theological aspect has been emphasised in attempts to understand the term's remit in Proverbs. It is when the texts do not refer to YHWH, however – when a theological explanation for why something is 'abhorrent' is lacking – that the connection of the *tw'bh* terminology to situations involving boundaries and boundary delineation is especially helpful in making sense of its usage.

In the texts discussed thus far, the critical reason that acts, objects or people are 'abhorred' relates to these entities' relationship to ideas about boundaries. Acts, people and objects which problematize boundaries are *tw'bh*, rejected on this basis. *tw'bh*, in other words, is most fundamentally about the demarcation of categories and about the maintenance of the boundaries which properly delineate them: keeping separate the things that should be separate (e.g., Israelites and non-Israelites) and, conversely, not separating things that should be united (e.g., Israelites and YHWH). This is why such a wide variety of things are described as 'abhorrent' in Proverbs. Thus: 'Hear, for I will speak noble things and from my lips will come what is right, for my mouth will utter

truth: wickedness is abhorrent to my lips’ is an attempt to express the utterly alien, unfamiliar, and profoundly incompatible nature of the two categories in question (Prov 8:6-7, cf. 16:12). It is in this nuance of the language that the incompatibility of the thing described as *tw’bh* and that with which it is contrasted is most prominent.⁶⁰ It often hovers at the periphery or is implicit in the use of the term elsewhere – alien practices and objects are not merely different or unfamiliar, but actually incompatible with Israelite praxis and incompatible with continued relationship with YHWH, bringing about a separation like that between YHWH and non-Israelites – but it has usually been overshadowed by the religious contexts in which such practices are described.

Verbal Usage

This brings us finally to the verb, *t’b*. In keeping with the use of the noun, the consistent concern of texts that use *t’b* is the issue of identity and boundaries – especially when describing relations between Israelites and non-Israelites, but reflecting also an underlying concern with separation and differentiation. The *piel*, the most common form of the verb, appears in contexts addressing community boundaries and, especially, concerning the appropriate treatment of persons inside and outside those boundaries. In these passages *t’b* conveys a meaning akin ‘to treat like an alien or an outsider’ – often against expectation or instruction. Thus in Deut 23:8, in which the Israelites are instructed that ‘you shall not abhor an Edomite, for he is your brother’ and that ‘you shall not abhor the Egyptian, for you were a *ger* in his land’, the issue at stake is the inclusion or the exclusion of these persons from the Israelite community (cf. Deut 7:26).

⁶⁰ Cf. Gerstenberger, ‘תעב’, pp. 1428-1429: ‘things that essentially do not belong to a defined situation but by inclusion dissolve or call it into question’.

In each case, exceptional circumstances override the preference for Israelite isolationism; the Israelites are instructed *not* to ‘abhor’ the person, but to treat them as members of the Israelite community. Job 19:19; 30:10 and Isa 49:7 attest to similar usage in the context of the differentiation of insiders and outsiders; in each the problem is that someone who ought to be treated like respected member of the group is, in fact, treated like a stranger. Job has gone from a pillar of the community to a pathetic figure lamenting in the dirt; he protests that ‘they treat me like a stranger, they keep aloof from me; they do not hesitate to spit at the sight of me’ (Job 30:10). Ezekiel 16:25 uses the term to suggest that Jerusalem treated her beauty as though it were the property of the nations subsequently named, while several passages in the psalms use it to depict the alienation of YHWH from certain persons, much like Isa 1:13. Though YHWH’s people expect their god to respond to them, in fact YHWH treats them as though they were non-Israelites and strangers: ‘Then the anger of YHWH was kindled against his people and he abhorred his heritage’ (Ps 106:40; cf. Pss 5:7; 107:18; 119:163). Amos 5:10; Mic 3:9 and Job 9:31 reflect a similar range, describing the alienation of persons from things and ideas.

The *hiphil* describes the actions of persons who transgress group boundaries by pursuing practices incompatible with group membership. Thus Ahab ‘acted like a non-Israelite in going after idols, as the Amorites had done’ (1 Kgs 21:26), while Jerusalem, near the culmination of a chapter devoted to describing its consorting with and imitation of various non-Israelite peoples, is given the backhanded compliment of having ‘brought about for your sisters [Samaria and Sodom] a more favourable judgment, because of your sins in which you acted even more like a non-Israelite than they’ (Ezek 16:52; also Ps 14:1 // Ps 53:2). The *niphal* is used of that which is deemed to actually be

alien or foreign; unsurprisingly, this is prone to polemical usage, as in reference to the shameful burial of the king of Babylon (Isa 14:9; cf. 1 Chr 21:6; Job 15:16). As in many of the passages that use the noun, the verb appears in contexts in which the boundaries meant to define a group, govern its behaviour and protect its membership from the contamination of outsiders are being transgressed; contexts in which the markers of Israelite and other identities are problematized and community integrity is threatened with dissolution.

Conclusions

Review of the usage of both the noun *tw'bh* and verb *t'b* suggests that an understanding of these terms as addressing concerns about boundaries and the maintenance of boundaries provides a coherent explanation of their diverse appearances across the biblical texts. *tw'bh* is used of things that are objectionable not merely in generic terms but because of their problematization of the appropriate boundaries between groups of people, concepts and categories: either those which are already extant, or those which the author hopes to construct. Reflecting this concern with boundaries and their defence, the term is especially prominent in texts describing, formulating or defending ethnic identities. In verbal form, *t'b* articulates a concern with the demarcation of boundaries and appears in contexts where these boundaries are challenged. Taken collectively, the texts which use *tw'bh* and *t'b* reveal a persistent focus on issues of identity, the transgression of boundaries and perceptions of the compatibility and incompatibility of fundamental social, theological and ideological categories. Recognition of this focus provides a comprehensible and consistent rationale for, as well as theologically and

sociologically productive insights into, the rejection of the acts and objects that are described using these terms.