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Food, Clothing, and Covenant: Egyptian Cultural Mores and Israel's Transformation in the Exodus Narrative

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Abstract

This article examines the exodus and Pentateuchal traditions as narratives of cultural transformation in which Israel gradually moved from an identity shaped by Egypt toward a distinct covenant identity centered on Yahweh. The study investigates how the biblical text portrays this transition through three primary areas of cultural expression: clothing, foodways, and ritual practice. Employing a literary-theological methodology informed by anthropology, cultural memory studies, and theories of identity formation, the article reads the biblical narrative against the backdrop of Egyptian cultural life to explore how practices of distinction contribute to Israel's emerging self-understanding. The analysis demonstrates that the acquisition of Egyptian garments, the wilderness generation's repeated longing for Egyptian foods, and the regulation of dietary and ritual practices in the Pentateuch function as markers of cultural differentiation. These elements suggest that the narrative depicts a prolonged process through which Israel negotiated inherited cultural patterns while developing a distinct covenant identity. The study argues that holiness in the Pentateuch is expressed through everyday practices that establish boundaries between Israel and its former cultural environment. By placing the exodus traditions in dialogue with discussions of ethnogenesis, cultural memory, and identity formation, this article contributes to ongoing scholarly conversations concerning the formation of Israelite identity and the theological significance of the exodus narrative.

Keywords: Exodus; Egypt; Cultural Memory; Israelite Identity; Ethnogenesis; Pentateuch; Foodways; Holiness and Boundary Formation

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1. Introduction

Before Israel entered the land of Canaan, Yahweh declared, “Today I have rolled away the reproach of Egypt from you” (Josh 5:9). This statement follows the circumcision of the wilderness generation at Gilgal and serves as a significant marker of Israel’s transition from a people shaped by Egypt to a people identified with the covenant promises given to Abraham. The phrase *הָרַפַּת מִצְרַיִם* (“the reproach of Egypt”) suggests that Egypt represented more than a geographical location or political tyranny from which Israel had been delivered; it also functioned as a symbol of a former social, cultural, and religious identity.¹

The Hebrew Bible consistently portrays Egypt as a formative environment in Israel’s collective memory. Abraham traveled to Egypt during a time of famine (Gen 12:10–20), Joseph rose to prominence within Egyptian society after first serving as a slave (Gen 39:1–6), and Jacob’s family settled in Egypt where subsequent generations lived for centuries (Gen 46:3–7). Scholars recognize the issues surrounding the reconstruction of Israel in Egypt. Such issues are outside the scope of this article but have been addressed extensively elsewhere.² Whether understood primarily as history, cultural memory, or some combination of the two, the biblical tradition presents Egypt as an environment that profoundly shaped Israel before the exodus.³ Consequently, the question is not whether Egypt influenced the Israelites, but how the biblical texts portray the process by which Israel negotiated, retained, and ultimately transformed elements of that influence.

Throughout this study, the phrase “Israelite identity” refers primarily to the covenantal identity portrayed within the biblical narrative rather than to a fixed ethnic or biological category. Recent scholarship on ethnicity and identity formation has demonstrated that ancient identities frequently defined themselves through interaction with neighboring peoples and through the establishment of symbolic boundary markers.⁴ William Dever notes that ethnicity in ancient societies is often most visible in the routines of daily

¹ Richard S. Hess, *Joshua: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1996), 141–42.

² See James K. Hoffmeier, *Israel in Egypt: The Evidence for the Authenticity of the Exodus Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997); Donald B. Redford, *Egypt, Canaan, and Israel in Ancient Times* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), 408–429; William G. Dever, *What Did the Biblical Writers Know and When Did They Know It?* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 99–121; Kenneth A. Kitchen, *On the Reliability of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 240–312; and Avraham Faust, “The Emergence of Iron Age Israel: On Origins and Habitus,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the Archaeology of the Levant*, ed. Margreet Steiner and Ann E. Killebrew (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014), 476–492.

³ Hoffmeier, *Israel in Egypt*, 3–18.

⁴ Kenton L. Sparks, *Ethnicity and Identity in Ancient Israel: Prolegomena to the Study of Ethnic Sentiments and Their Expression in the Hebrew Bible* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1998), 17–42.

life. Food production, consumption patterns, and household practices frequently reveal communal boundaries that are otherwise difficult to detect archaeologically.⁵

Ronald Hendel has argued that Israel conceived of itself as a unique people while remaining firmly embedded within the cultural world of the ancient Near East (hereafter, ANE).⁶ Similarly, Avraham Faust's archaeological work suggests that Israelite identity emerged through processes of social differentiation and boundary formation rather than through complete cultural discontinuity.⁷ Studies of cultural memory further demonstrate that communities often preserve memories of former social environments while simultaneously redefining themselves in opposition to those environments.⁸ Jan Assmann similarly argues that cultural memory functions as a means by which communities construct present identity through selective recollections of the past.⁹ Egypt's persistent appearance within Israel's traditions may then reflect an ongoing process of identity negotiation through remembered cultural contrast.

Scholarly approaches to Israel's relationship with Egypt have often tended toward opposite extremes. On the one hand, some comparative studies have emphasized parallels between Israel and its ANE environment to such a degree that Israel's distinctive features become difficult to discern.¹⁰ On the other hand, some approaches have treated Israel as though it existed in relative isolation from the cultures that surrounded it.¹¹ The biblical evidence suggests a more nuanced reality. Israel did not emerge in a cultural vacuum, yet neither was it simply a continuation of Egyptian society. Rather, the exodus traditions portray a people in transition, negotiating a new identity while shedding aspects of an older one.

The historical context of the New Kingdom further highlights the significance of this transition. As Craig Bartholomew observes, the later New Kingdom witnessed substantial religious development and

⁵ William G. Dever, *What Did the Biblical Writers Know and When Did They Know It? What Archaeology Can Tell Us about the Reality of Ancient Israel* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 234–39.

⁶ Ronald Hendel, "Israel Among the Nations: Biblical Culture in the Ancient Near East," in *Remembering Abraham: Culture, Memory, and History in the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Ronald Hendel (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 3–30.

⁷ Avraham Faust, *Israel's Ethnogenesis: Settlement, Interaction, Expansion and Resistance* (London: Equinox, 2006), 1–25.

⁸ Philip R. Davies, *Memories of Ancient Israel: An Introduction to Biblical History—Ancient and Modern* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2008), 31–54.

⁹ Jan Assmann, *The Mind of Egypt: History and Meaning in the Time of the Pharaohs*, trans. Andrew Jenkins (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 112–15.

¹⁰ John Van Seters, *In Search of History: Historiography in the Ancient World and the Origins of Biblical History* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1997), 1–30.

¹¹ See discussion in Mark S. Smith, *The Early History of God: Yahweh and the Other Deities in Ancient Israel*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), xxi–xxvii.

monumental cultic activity.¹² Following the Amarna Period, the Ramesside era was characterized by renewed investment in temples, priesthoods, and state-sponsored religious institutions.¹³ Although the precise extent of Egyptian influence upon the historical Israelites remains debated, prolonged residence within such a setting would have exposed populations living in Egypt to Egyptian cultural and religious practices.¹⁴ Egypt itself was characterized by a highly integrated social and religious system in which political authority, ritual practice, and daily life were closely intertwined, making cultural participation difficult to separate from broader expressions of Egyptian identity.¹⁵ Thus, the biblical texts may be understood as preserving memories of a people gradually learning to distinguish themselves from the world that had long shaped them. The present study approaches the biblical text as a theological narrative of identity formation and intentionally places that narrative in dialogue with what is known of Egyptian cultural practices. Accordingly, the argument advanced here should be understood primarily as a hermeneutical strategy rather than a comprehensive reconstruction of historical influence.

This study adopts an anthropological approach to the biblical text by examining clothing, foodways, and ritual practices as markers of cultural identity. Anthropological studies have long recognized that dress, food consumption, and bodily practices function as visible expressions of communal belonging and social differentiation.¹⁶ Likewise, recent studies of foodways in the ancient world demonstrate that dietary customs often serve as powerful markers of ethnic and religious identity.¹⁷ Such observations are particularly relevant to the Pentateuch, where laws concerning clothing, food, and ritual purity frequently appear in contexts emphasizing Israel's distinctiveness among the nations. Although discussions of Israelite ethnogenesis frequently focus upon archaeological evidence, the present study investigates how the biblical narrative depicts the formation of covenant identity. Consequently, the concern is not whether particular

¹² Craig G. Bartholomew, *The Old Testament and God: Old Testament Origins and the Question of God* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2022), 213.

¹³ Richard H. Wilkinson, *The Complete Temples of Ancient Egypt* (New York: Thames & Hudson, 2000), 25–29.

¹⁴ James K. Hoffmeier, *Ancient Israel in Sinai: The Evidence for the Authenticity of the Wilderness Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 15–39.

¹⁵ See John Baines, "Society, Morality, and Religious Practice," in *Religion in Ancient Egypt: Gods, Myths, and Personal Practice*, ed. Byron E. Shafer (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1991), 123–200.

¹⁶ Nili Sacher Fox, Kristine Henriksen Garroway, Christine Elizabeth Palmer, and Angela Roskop Erisman, eds., *The Body Lived, Cultured, Adorned: Essays on Dress and the Body in the Hebrew Bible and Ancient Near East* (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 2022), 1–10.

¹⁷ Carol Meyers, "Having Their Space and Eating There Too: Bread Production and Female Power in Ancient Israelite Households," *Nashim* 5 (2002): 14–44.

cultural practices can be demonstrated archaeologically but how the Pentateuch employs clothing, food, and ritual to narrate Israel's transformation from a people shaped by Egypt into a people defined by Yahweh.

The primary evidence examined in this study is the literary presentation of Israel within the Pentateuch. Accordingly, the question is not what can be demonstrated about every aspect of historical Israelite life, but what interpretive patterns emerge from the Pentateuch's literary portrayal of Israel's transition from Egypt to Yahweh's covenant community. References to Egyptian culture function heuristically by providing comparative background that illuminates how the Pentateuch portrays Israel's gradual differentiation from the social world associated with Egypt. The goal of this article is to explore how the biblical text portrays Israel's emergence as a distinct community through practices that mark separation from the cultural environment associated with Egypt. In this sense, Egypt functions as a cultural point of reference within Israel's remembered past. Where historical connections can be demonstrated they will be noted, but the primary concern of this study is the way the biblical narrative depicts the gradual formation of Israelite identity through differentiation from an Egyptian world.

2.1 Clothing and the Negotiation of Identity

Readers of Exodus often focus on the economic implications of the Israelites' plundering of Egypt while overlooking the cultural significance of the items acquired. According to Exod 12:35–36, the Israelites requested and received three categories of objects from the Egyptians: silver, gold, and clothing. Yahweh had previously foretold this event (Exod 3:21–22; 11:1–3), and the narrative presents it as a divinely sanctioned act accompanying Israel's departure from bondage. While the acquisition of precious metals has received considerable scholarly attention because of their subsequent use in both the golden calf episode (Exod 32) and the construction of the tabernacle (Exod 25–31), the inclusion of clothing in the list raises important questions concerning cultural identity.¹⁸ Certainly, garments possessed economic value alongside silver and gold; however, the present argument invites consideration of their potential significance as markers of cultural identity. The significance of the Israelites' possession of Egyptian clothing as part of their plunder lies in the narrative movement to later covenantal regulations concerning dress. Read together, these texts portray clothing as one arena in which Israel gradually learned to embody distinction as Yahweh's people.

¹⁸ Victor P. Hamilton, *Exodus: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 192–94; James K. Hoffmeier, *Israel in Egypt: The Evidence for the Authenticity of the Exodus Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 146–48.

The Hebrew text states that the Israelites “asked” (שָׁאַל) the Egyptians for valuables and clothing before their departure. The narrative later describes the result as the “plundering” (נָצַל) of Egypt (Exod 12:36).¹⁹ These terms emphasize not only the transfer of wealth but also the transfer of cultural goods.²⁰ The inclusion of clothing alongside silver and gold suggests that garments possessed significance beyond raw function. Unlike precious metals, clothing was not something the Israelites entirely lacked. Recent studies of dress in the ANE have emphasized that clothing functions as a visible marker of social, ethnic, and communal identity by which societies construct and communicate both individual and collective identities.²¹ Clothing also functions as a boundary marker by signaling membership within particular communities and distinguishing from outsiders.²² Within this framework, the acquisition of Egyptian clothing may reflect more than a practical concern; it may preserve a memory of Israel’s continued participation in aspects of Egyptian cultural life at the time of the exodus.

The request for clothing is noteworthy considering the Pentateuch’s later concern with distinctive forms of dress. Egyptian textiles were highly valued throughout the ANE, and Egyptian clothing reflected broader patterns of social and cultural expression.²³ Although differences existed between elite and non-elite attire, Egyptian garments were recognizable symbols of participation in Egyptian society and culture.²⁴ The narrative’s inclusion of clothing among the items taken from Egypt therefore plausibly reflects the cultural prestige associated with Egyptian material culture.

The figure of Moses provides a further illustration of the relationship between appearance and identity. When Moses fled to Midian, the daughters of Reuel identified him as “an Egyptian man” (אִישׁ מִצְרַיִם; Exod 2:19). The text does not explain the basis for their identification, but outward appearance likely

¹⁹ Scholars debate the ethical issues surrounding the “plundering” (נָצַל) of the Egyptians. For a discussion of the ethical issues surrounding the plundering narrative, see Cornelis Houtman, *Exodus*, trans. Sierd Woudstra, 3 vols. (Leuven: Peters, 2000), 382–386; G. W. Coats, “Despoiling the Egyptians,” *VT* 18 (1968): 450–57; N. C. Collins, “Evidence in the Septuagint of a Tradition in which the Israelites Left Egypt without Pharaoh’s Consent,” *CBQ* 56 (1994): 442–48.

²⁰ *HALOT*, s.v. “נָצַל,” “שָׁאַל.”

²¹ Fox, Garroway, Palmer, and Erisman, eds. *The Body Lived, Cultured, Adorned*, 2.

²² Sparks, *Ethnicity and Identity in Ancient Israel*, 17–42.

²³ Mary Harlow and Marie-Louise Nosch, eds., *Greek and Roman Textiles and Dress: An Interdisciplinary Anthology* (Oxford: Oxbow Books, 2014), 1–12.

²⁴ Bob Brier and Hoyt Hobbs, *Daily Life of the Ancient Egyptians*, 2nd ed. (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2008), 128–35.

played a role. Pharaoh's daughter by contrast recognized the infant Moses as a Hebrew child (Exod 2:6).²⁵ The juxtaposition of these passages highlights the fluidity and complexity of identity within the exodus narrative. Moses was ethnically Hebrew but culturally shaped by Egypt. His identification as Egyptian in Midian suggests that external markers such as language, grooming, or clothing could communicate cultural affiliation even when ancestry remained distinct.²⁶

The significance of clothing becomes even more apparent in later legal traditions. The Holiness Code prohibits garments composed of mixed materials (Lev 19:19), while Deut 22:11 forbids the wearing of cloth woven from wool and linen together. Although scholars debate the rationale for these regulations, Milgrom helpfully interprets them as examples of Israel's broader concern for maintaining distinctions and boundaries within creation and society.²⁷ The language of holiness repeatedly emphasizes separation and differentiation. Leviticus employs the verb בָּדַל ("to separate") to describe Israel's obligation to distinguish between clean and unclean, holy and common (Lev 10:10; 20:24–26). Such terminology suggests that practices of distinction were central to Israel's self-understanding as Yahweh's covenant people.²⁸

While it would be difficult to demonstrate a direct causal relationship between Egyptian textile practices and Israelite clothing regulations, the broader movement from Egyptian cultural participation toward Israelite distinctiveness is evident throughout the Pentateuch. The exodus traditions portray a people leaving Egypt physically, while the legal traditions describe the gradual formation of a distinct covenant identity.²⁹ Within this process, clothing served as a visible marker through which Israel learned to embody its status as a holy people.

Viewed through the lens of identity formation, the acquisition of Egyptian garments and the later regulation of Israelite dress reflect different stages in the same narrative trajectory. The former points to Israel's proximity to Egyptian culture, while the latter reflects the establishment of boundaries intended to

²⁵ Most critical commentaries do not tackle this question (e.g., Peter Enns and Victor Hamilton say nothing of the issue in their critical commentaries). Thomas Dozeman suggests that the identification of Moses as a Hebrew is a literary device intended to separate the people of God from the Egyptians. Dozeman adds, "The birth story of Moses is not intended to make Moses Egyptian, but to place him in Egyptian culture." At the least, Exod 2 places Moses in an identity crisis that will ultimately cumulate in Moses's becoming Hebrew in Exod 4:24–26. Enns, Peter. *Exodus*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2000; Hamilton, *Exodus*. Thomas Dozeman, *Exodus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 84.

²⁶ Thomas B. Dozeman, *Exodus* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 84–85; Ronald Hendel, "Israel Among the Nations: Biblical Culture in the Ancient Near East," in *Remembering Abraham: Culture, Memory, and History in the Hebrew Bible*, ed. Ronald Hendel (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 3–30.

²⁷ Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 17–22: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 3A (New York: Doubleday, 2000), 1655–58.

²⁸ Milgrom, *Leviticus 17–22*, 1769–73; Gordon J. Wenham, *The Book of Leviticus*, NICOT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 268–70.

²⁹ Avraham Faust, *Israel's Ethnogenesis*, 219–41; Mark S. Smith, *The Early History of God: Yahweh and the Other Deities in Ancient Israel*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2002), xxiii–xxvii.

distinguish Israel from surrounding peoples. Clothing functions as a symbol of the larger process through which Israel negotiated the transition from life in Egypt to life as Yahweh's covenant nation.

2.2 Food and Cultural Memory

The exodus narrative suggests that the Israelites departed Egypt with provisions sufficient for the initial stages of their journey. Exodus 12:34 states that the people carried their unleavened dough in kneading bowls wrapped in their garments while Exod 12:39 explains that they baked unleavened cakes because their departure occurred too rapidly for the dough to ferment. The narrative therefore presents the Israelites leaving Egypt as a people possessing flocks, herds, and food supplies (Exod 12:38–39). Against this backdrop, the complaint of Exod 16:3 — “If only we had died by the hand of the LORD in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the pots of meat and ate bread to the full” — appears intentionally exaggerated. The statement reflects a nostalgic reconstruction of the past shaped by present hardship.³⁰

Scholars of cultural memory have observed that communities frequently idealize former circumstances during periods of uncertainty and transition.³¹ The complaint in Exod 16:3 is best understood as an expression of longing for the familiarity and security associated with Egypt. The narrative repeatedly depicts the wilderness generation remembering Egypt selectively by emphasizing its perceived benefits while minimizing the oppression that prompted their deliverance (cf. Num 11:4–6; 14:2–4).

Food occupies a particularly important place within this process because foodways function as markers of social and ethnic identity. Anthropologists define foodways as the patterns of food production, preparation, consumption, and symbolic meaning that characterize a particular community.³² Studies of ethnicity and identity have demonstrated that food often serves as one of the most visible expressions of cultural belonging.³³ Consequently, the Israelites' repeated references to Egyptian food should be understood as more than complaints about hunger. These cravings may represent a desire for the social world and cultural familiarity associated with life in Egypt.

³⁰ Victor P. Hamilton, *Exodus: An Exegetical Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2011), 267–69.

³¹ Jan Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization: Writing, Remembrance, and Political Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 36–40.

³² Jennifer Hasty, David G. Lewis, and Marjorie M. Snipes, *Introduction to Anthropology* (Houston, TX: OpenStax, Rice University, 2022), 431–34.

³³ Kenton L. Sparks, *Ethnicity and Identity in Ancient Israel* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1998), 25–42.

The Egyptians had three distinct categories of animals: (1) sacred animals that could not be killed, (2) sacred animals that could be killed, and (3) animals that were not sacred.³⁴ The Egyptians viewed animals in connection with worship, piety, and myth.³⁵ The type of meat consumed depended on factors such as social status, availability, and religious considerations. Meat was a rare gift for the Egyptians.³⁶ Although the Egyptians considered the cow a sacred animal, beef was prepared by roasting, stewing, or grilling.³⁷ This is likely what the phrase קִיר הַבָּשָׂר (“pots of meat”) indicates in Exod 16:3.

Sheep and goats were popular choices for meat in Egypt.³⁸ Goat meat appears in various recipes including stews and grilled dishes.³⁹ The Egyptians domesticated various types of poultry such as ducks, geese, and chickens for meat and egg production. Nile fish such as tilapia and catfish serve as the main source of protein in ancient Egypt.⁴⁰ In addition to domesticated animals, the Egyptians hunted wild game such as hares, desert ungulates, and birds.⁴¹

The Egyptian diet presents three animals deemed unclean by the law of Moses in Lev 11:1–47: (1) pigs, (2) catfish, and (3) hares.⁴² The Hebrews may have regularly eaten foods such as pork or catfish during

³⁴ Juliet Clutton-Brock, *Animals as Domesticates: A World View through History* (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2012), 53.

³⁵ Mahnaz Moazami, “Evil Animals in the Zoroastrian Religion,” *HR* 44 (2005): 300–01.

³⁶ Brian Muhs, “Ancient Egyptian Cuisine,” *News and Notes* 237 (2018): 14.

³⁷ Muhs, “Ancient Egyptian Cuisine,” 13.

³⁸ Muhs, “Ancient Egyptian Cuisine,” 14.

³⁹ Muhs, “Ancient Egyptian Cuisine,” 15.

⁴⁰ Muhs, “Ancient Egyptian Cuisine,” 15.

⁴¹ Muhs, “Ancient Egyptian Cuisine,” 15.

⁴² There are no food restrictions in Genesis. Though some see a dietary transition from Gen 1:30 to Gen 9:3 (i.e., vegetarian to carnivore), G. J. Wenham notes that there is nothing in Gen 1:30 that prohibits humanity from eating meat. Genesis 9:3 may then endorse the post-fall practice of eating meat rather than inaugurate the practice. Gordon J. Wenham, *Genesis*, WBC (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014), 34.

their captivity.⁴³ When read against the backdrop of Egyptian foodways, the dietary restrictions of Lev 11 may be understood as contributing to a process of cultural differentiation when it connects food to holiness: “for I am the LORD who brought you up from the land of Egypt to be your God, and you are to be holy because I am holy” (Lev 11:45). Bulmer adds, “Deuteronomy emphasizes that Israel is God’s chosen people, and Leviticus that it must be ‘holy.’ This status required them to assert, both their separateness from, and their ethical superiority to, their neighbors.”⁴⁴ The dietary laws may be interpreted as functioning in a manner analogous to Israel’s developing distinctions in dress and ritual practice. The Hebrew’s craving for the food of Egypt is more than a narrative reflection on Egypt’s prosperity compared to the poverty of the desert. Within the narrative, the longing for Egyptian foods functions as more than a complaint about hunger as the text presents them as remembered symbols of the life Israel left behind.

Ancient Egyptian foodways were shaped by the agricultural abundance of the Nile Valley. Bread constituted the dietary staple of Egyptian society, while onions, fish, and beer formed important components of daily consumption across various social classes.⁴⁵ Archaeological evidence, textual sources, and residue analyses demonstrate the centrality of bread and beer within Egyptian life.⁴⁶ As Carol Meyers observes regarding ancient food production more broadly, food preparation and consumption frequently reinforced communal identity and social organization.⁴⁷ Thus, these foods would have been embedded within Egyptian social, economic, and religious structures.

The wilderness complaints preserve memories of precisely these types of culturally significant foods. Although Exod 16:3 specifically mentions meat and bread, parallel traditions recall fish, cucumbers, melons, leeks, onions, and garlic (Num 11:5). These foods and spices were commonly associated with

⁴³ The lower classes in Egypt commonly consumed pork with no severe religious repercussions. *The Eloquent Peasant*, an Egyptian story dating to the Middle Kingdom, lists pigs with other favorable food stock. See, Petrie, W.M. Flinders. *Egyptian Tales Translated From The Papyri. First Series, Ivth To Xiith Dynasty. Illustrated By Tristan Ellis*. New York: Frederick A. Stokes, 1899. Youri Volokhine notes, “The pig is clearly associated with a *bwt* aversion in the Middle Kingdom’s Coffin Texts. The pig is also generally excluded from the tables of offerings, except in special ritual circumstances, in XXth Dynasty and then Ptolemaic texts. Obviously pork provides a popular and very widely consumed meat, except that its association with lower value livestock keeps it out of higher class cuisine. The mythological bond between the male pig and the god Seth may also contribute to the animal eventually being despised in the priestly world. Nevertheless, no recommendation for the shunning of the animal is attested in the priestly monographs or elsewhere. On the contrary, the sacrificial killing of pigs for Sekhmet is mentioned in Ptolemaic texts. Ultimately, it should be noted that explicit mentions of dietary restrictions are infrequent. The question of food is not decisive or central to obtaining ritual purity.” Youri Volokhine, “Ancient Egyptian Food Prohibitions,” *ANE Today*, 4 Aug 2022, <https://www.asor.org/anetoday/2022/08/ancient-egyptian-food-prohibitions/>.

⁴⁴ Their ritual practices and prohibitions could, therefore, not be expected to be symmetrical and complementary to those of neighboring peoples, following a classic totemic model.” Ralph Bulmer, “The Uncleaness of the Birds of Leviticus and Deuteronomy,” *Man* 24 (1989): 308.

⁴⁵ Brian Muhs, “Ancient Egyptian Cuisine,” *News and Notes* 237 (2018): 12–16.

⁴⁶ Marijke van der Veen, *Consumption, Trade and Innovation* (Frankfurt: Africa Magna Verlag, 2011), 41–59.

⁴⁷ Carol Meyers, “Having Their Space and Eating There Too,” *Nashim* 5 (2002): 14–44.

Egyptian agriculture and diet.⁴⁸ The recurrence of such imagery suggests that the Israelites were remembering a former cultural environment. Their longing for Egyptian food may therefore function as a longing for the familiarity of Egypt itself.

Yahweh's response to these complaints is significant. Rather than returning the people to Egypt, Yahweh provides quail and manna (Exod 16:13–15). The provision addresses the Israelites' physical needs while simultaneously reshaping their cultural identity. The manna differs from Egyptian bread because it originates directly from Yahweh rather than from the agricultural systems dependent on the annual flooding of the Nile. Likewise, the quail are presented as divine gifts rather than products of hunting or animal husbandry.⁴⁹ Through these provisions, Yahweh meets the people's needs while redirecting their dependence away from Egypt and toward himself.

Theologically, the transition from Egyptian foodways to divinely provided food anticipates the dietary regulations that later appear in the Mosaic legislation. Leviticus repeatedly connects dietary practice with holiness and covenant identity. The rationale given for these regulations culminates in Yahweh's declaration, "For I am the LORD who brought you up from the land of Egypt to be your God; therefore, be holy, for I am holy" (Lev 11:45). The connection between dietary distinction and the exodus suggests that food regulations functioned not merely as health codes but as markers of covenant identity.⁵⁰ Through food, Israel learned to embody its separation from Egypt and its allegiance to Yahweh.

Consequently, the wilderness food narratives should be read as more than accounts of hunger and provision. They preserve memories of a people negotiating the transition from one cultural world to another. The Israelites' longing for Egyptian food reflects the enduring influence of Egyptian cultural identity. Within the narrative, Yahweh's provision of manna and quail begins the process of redirecting Israel's dependence away from Egypt and toward Yahweh through gifts unique to Yahweh's benevolence.

2.3 Alcohol, Ritual Practice, and Cultural Differentiation

Although Exod 16:3 does not mention beverages specifically, the role of alcohol within Israelite religious life provides another window into the process of identity formation depicted in the Pentateuch. The biblical texts indicate that both wine (יין) and strong drink (שכר) were known and consumed in ancient Israel. Wine appears regularly in sacrificial contexts, particularly in association with drink offerings accompanying burnt offerings (Exod 29:40; Num 15:5–10), while Deut 14:26 and 29:6 indicate that the Israelites continued to

⁴⁸ James K. Hoffmeier, *Israel in Egypt* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996), 146–50.

⁴⁹ Brevard S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1974), 282–85.

⁵⁰ Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 704–12.

consume both wine and other intoxicating beverages.⁵¹ Therefore, the question is not whether Israel consumed alcohol but how Israel's understanding of alcohol differed from that of its Egyptian environment.

Alcohol occupied an important place within Egyptian society. Although wine was known and consumed, beer served as the primary alcoholic beverage throughout much of Egyptian history.⁵² Archaeological evidence demonstrates that beer production was integrated into daily life, temple operations, and state-sponsored food distribution systems.⁵³ Bread and beer constituted the foundational staples of the Egyptian diet. Both appear regularly in textual and archaeological evidence.⁵⁴ Consequently, alcohol formed an important component of Egyptian foodways and social identity.

The Hebrew term שכר warrants particular attention here. Lexicographers generally understand the term to refer to an intoxicating beverage distinct from wine, though the precise nature of the drink remains debated.⁵⁵ Some translations render the term as “strong drink” while others translate it as “beer” in contexts where a grain-based alcoholic beverage seems likely. Whatever the precise referent, the Pentateuch consistently treats wine and strong drink as categories requiring ethical and ritual regulation.

The significance of alcohol becomes especially apparent in Israel's cultic legislation. Following the deaths of Nadab and Abihu, Yahweh prohibited Aaron and his descendants from consuming wine or strong drink when entering the Tent of Meeting (Lev 10:8–11). The stated purpose of the prohibition was to enable the priests “to distinguish between the holy and the common, and between the unclean and the clean” (Lev 10:10). Significantly, the verb בָּדַל (“to separate, distinguish”) appears here as a central component of priestly responsibility.⁵⁶ The restriction therefore connects alcohol directly to one of the Pentateuch's primary themes—the maintenance of boundaries between the holy and the common.

Similarly, the Nazirite legislation required temporary abstinence from wine, strong drink, grapes, raisins, and all products derived from the vine (Num 6:1–4). The Nazirite's abstention did not imply that alcohol was inherently sinful. Rather, it symbolized a heightened state of consecration.⁵⁷ Alcohol occupied

⁵¹ Gordon J. Wenham, *Numbers: An Introduction and Commentary* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1981), 92–94.

⁵² Salwa Maksoud, M. Nabil El Hadidi, and Wufaa Mahrous Amer, “Beer from the Early Dynasties (3500–3400 cal. B.C.) of Upper Egypt, Detected by Archaeological Methods,” *Vegetation History and Archaeobotany* 3 (1994): 219–24.

⁵³ Delwen Samuel, “Brewing and Baking,” in *Ancient Egyptian Materials and Technology*, ed. Paul T. Nicholson and Ian Shaw (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 537–76.

⁵⁴ Brian Muhs, “Ancient Egyptian Cuisine,” *News and Notes* 237 (2018): 12–16.

⁵⁵ HALOT, s.v. “שכר.”

⁵⁶ Jacob Milgrom, *Leviticus 1–16: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, AB 3 (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 611–15.

⁵⁷ Philip J. Budd, *Numbers*, WBC 5 (Waco, TX: Word, 1984), 86–90.

a carefully regulated place within Israelite society and restrictions concerning its use served broader theological purposes related to holiness.

A comparison with Egyptian religious traditions proves helpful here. Egyptian texts frequently associate beer with divine activity, celebration, and mythological narratives. One well-known account describes the goddess Hathor being pacified through intoxication after threatening the destruction of humanity. Karim El-Gawhary recalls the myth.

According to the ancient Egyptian myth, the goddess Hathor decided to finish off the human race. She would have been successful, too, if not for the intervention of the god Ra, who ordered Sektet to mix beer with the mysterious dada fruit and some human blood. When Hathor arrived the next morning to wreak destruction, she found the land flooded with this tempting concoction. Unable to resist, she took one sip, and then another, eventually becoming so drunk that she no longer recognized human beings.⁵⁸

Whether or not such narratives were directly known to the Israelites cannot be demonstrated, but they illustrate the broader religious significance that alcohol could possess within Egyptian thought. Egyptian mythology portrays divine beings consuming intoxicating beverages and experiencing their effects. By contrast, the God of Israel remains fundamentally distinct from such portrayals.

This distinction becomes apparent in the biblical treatment of drink offerings. The term *נסך* refers to a libation poured out before Yahweh in conjunction with sacrificial offerings.⁵⁹ Although the offering consists of wine, the biblical text never suggests that Yahweh literally consumes the beverage. Instead, the offering functions as part of the sacrificial system through which worshipers express their devotion. Leviticus repeatedly describes sacrifices as producing a “pleasing aroma” before Yahweh (e.g., Lev 23:13). This language emphasizes acceptance, not consumption.⁶⁰ Unlike the deities of many ANE myths, Yahweh neither requires intoxication nor experiences its effects.

Theological interpretations of the drink offering have sometimes suggested that the libation symbolizes Yahweh’s participation in Israel’s festal joy. For example, Peter Leithart, argues that the drink offering reflects sabbatical themes of rest and celebration.⁶¹ Such observations rightly recognize the association between wine and rejoicing within the Hebrew Bible. Nevertheless, the Pentateuch consistently

⁵⁸ Karim El-Gawhary, “Religious Ferment(ation),” *MERIP* 211 (1999): 14.

⁵⁹ *HALOT*, s.v. “נסך.”

⁶⁰ Baruch A. Levine, *Leviticus*, JPS Torah Commentary (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1989), 156–58.

⁶¹ Peter Leithart, “The Theology of the Drink Offering,” *Theopolis* 17 July 2018, <https://theopolisinstitute.com/theology-of-the-drink-offering-2/>.

portrays Yahweh as transcending the physical limitations of humanity. Thus, the offering symbolizes covenant fellowship and worship, but the text never depicts Yahweh drinking the wine or becoming dependent upon it.

Viewed within the larger framework of identity formation, alcohol remained a recognized and accepted part of Israelite life, yet its use became increasingly regulated by concerns for holiness, priestly discernment, and covenant fidelity. To be sure, the Pentateuch does not reject fermented beverages. Instead, it reorients their significance within a theological framework centered on Yahweh. In this respect, alcohol provides another example of the broader process through which Israel negotiated its relationship with Egyptian cultural practices while developing a distinct covenant identity.

3. Conclusion

While Israel's departure from Egypt is often understood primarily in geographical, political, or historical terms, the literary and theological evidence examined in this study suggests that the biblical authors also understood the exodus as a process of cultural differentiation. The movement from Egypt to Canaan was not simply a change in location but served as a gradual transition from one culture to another. Consequently, the emergence of Israel as a covenant people involved the renegotiation of practices, habits, and symbols that had been shaped by generations of life within an Egyptian environment. These findings correspond with Dever's observation that ancient Israel is best understood neither as a culture wholly separate from its environment nor as an extension of surrounding societies. Archaeological evidence points instead to a people whose distinctive identity emerged gradually through the adaptation, rejection, and transformation of existing cultural practices.⁶²

Joshua 5:9 again becomes particularly interesting considering this process. Yahweh's declaration that he had "rolled away the reproach of Egypt" from a generation that had not been in Egypt suggests that Egypt represented more than a former residence. Egypt functioned as a cultural reality whose influence remained present long after the crossing of the sea. The wilderness narratives repeatedly portray a people who continued to remember Egypt, long for Egypt, and measure their present circumstances against their experiences in Egypt. Such memories reveal that liberation from Egypt did not immediately erase Egypt's influence over Israel. Rather, the biblical texts depict Israel's identity as emerging through a prolonged process in which older cultural patterns were gradually replaced by new forms of covenantal self-understanding.

⁶² Dever, *What Did the Biblical Writers Know and When Did They Know It?*, 98–122.

The literary and theological evidence considered in this study suggests that the acquisition of Egyptian garments reflects the possibility that Egyptian material culture retained social value among the departing Israelites, and the persistent longing for Egyptian foods in the wilderness traditions reveals more than physical hunger. These examples suggest that the Pentateuch portrays Israel's identity formation as a gradual process of boundary construction. Holiness, in this context, was a lived expression of communal identity.

The argument advanced here should be understood as an interpretive proposal in which reading the exodus and Pentateuchal traditions in dialogue with Egyptian cultural practices provides a fruitful framework for understanding how the biblical text depicts Israel's transition from a people shaped by Egypt to a people defined by covenant relationship with Yahweh. The implications of this study extend beyond the question of Egyptian influence alone. More broadly, the findings contribute to ongoing discussions concerning Israelite ethnogenesis, cultural memory, and the formation of collective identity in the ancient world. The exodus narrative reveals that identities are often forged through the selective retention and reorientation of inherited cultural practices. In this respect, the exodus narrative may be understood as an act of creation. The journey from Egypt to the Promised Land was therefore not only a movement across space but also a movement from one identity to another. By tracing the ways in which the Pentateuch remembers and reconfigures Egyptian cultural influences, this study has argued that the formation of Israel was inseparable from the gradual shedding of Egypt.

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