



Attitudes toward Dogs in Ancient Israel: A Reassessment

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Abstract

For the past half-century, many scholars have argued that the Israelites viewed dogs with contempt. They point to passages in the Old Testament that depict dogs as despicable creatures who should be avoided. Such a sentiment is puzzling in light of the widespread utilization and enjoyment of canines throughout the ancient Near East. A closer examination of these Old Testament texts reveals that, although the word **כֶּלֶב** was often used pejoratively, dogs were not contemptible in Israelite society. In fact, Job 30.1 and Tob. 6.2 and 11.4 illustrate that they were valued for their services as sheepdogs, travel companions, guardians, and possibly pets.

Keywords: dog, dog burial, Ashkelon dog cemetery, 'dog' as insult, Tobit, Job 30.1.

In 1960, D. Winton Thomas published an influential article entitled, '*Kelebh* "Dog": Its Origin and Some Uses of It in the Old Testament'. In the article, Thomas argued that the Israelites held a negative attitude toward dogs. They viewed the dog as 'a vile and contemptible animal', 'the most ignoble and contemptible of animals', 'that lowly animal...

despised and generally wretched'.¹ Since Thomas's seminal work, most scholars have followed his lead, and many of them seem to be influenced by the attitude of modern Muslims regarding dogs. For example, John Gray says the following in a commentary on the books of Kings: 'The dog, excluded from dwelling-houses, as among the Muslims, were the scavengers of the ancient East. Never regularly fed, they were ready at all times to devour any edible thing exposed in the streets.'² John McKenzie voices the same sentiment: 'In the ancient Near East, much as in the modern Near East, the dog is not kept as a pet nor is he employed for hunting or as a watch dog. Most dogs have no owners and are nuisances and scavengers which run about the streets.'³

While it is true that many Old Testament texts portray canines in a negative light, not all references to dogs are negative. Some are merely neutral, and a few show that the Israelites valued dogs. Furthermore, Israel's neighbors all employed canines in various tasks and even enjoyed their companionship, especially the Egyptians, Persians, and Greeks. This was further confirmed by the archaeological discovery of thousands of dog burials at ancient Ashkelon. The dog was greatly appreciated and utilized in the ancient Near East, and it is peculiar that Israel would be the only group to abhor them. A look at the book of Tobit, as well as archaeological and textual evidence from Israel's neighboring cultures, will demonstrate that the claims of Winton are exaggerations. The Israelites often used the word כָּלֵב derisively, but their attitude towards dogs was not entirely negative.

In this article I will begin by outlining the use of dogs in the ancient Near East, paying special attention to the burial of dogs. Second, I will examine a few Old Testament passages that clearly portray dogs in a negative manner and then consider potential reasons for the Israelites to hold dogs in contempt. Third, I will turn to three passages that show that the Israelites valued dogs: Job 30.1 and Tob. 6.2 and 11.4. Finally, I will

1. D. Winton Thomas, 'Kelebh "Dog": Its Origin and Some Usages of It in the Old Testament', *VT* 10 (1960), pp. 410-27 (417, 424, 427).

2. J. Gray, *I & II Kings* (OTL; Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1963), p. 308; G. Johannes Botterweck, 'כָּלֵב', in *ThWAT*, IV, p. 163.

3. John L. McKenzie, 'Dog', in *Dictionary of the Bible* (Milwaukee: Bruce Publishing Company, 1965), p. 202. This attitude has also permeated New Testament scholarship. Otto Michel ('κύων, κυνόριον', in *TDNT*, p. 1103) says the following about dogs licking Lazarus's sores in Lk. 16.21: 'It is...a sign of the supreme wretchedness of the poor beggar; he has to endure even contact with these unclean animals'.

explain how a more positive view of dogs can affect the exegesis of certain texts, and then I will end with some closing remarks.

I. Dogs in the ancient Near East

Originally descended from wolves, dogs were domesticated in the ancient Near East at an early period. Many scholars attribute the date of domestication to 10,000 BCE, citing a canid jawbone discovered in the Palegawra Cave in present-day Iraq.⁴ Other scholars, however, claim that the jawbone merely represents an atypical wolf. For more reliable evidence, such scholars point to the skull of a Saluki dog found at Tepe Gawra (15 miles northeast of present-day Mosul).⁵ The skull dates to approximately 4000 BCE, meaning that the domestication of dogs occurred at least by the fourth millennium.

Once they were tamed, dogs could be trained to perform a variety of functions. Many civilizations used dogs for hunting both in the Near East as well as the eastern Mediterranean. This is evident by the many iconographic representations of dogs which depict dogs accompanying hunters in their pursuit of game. In an Egyptian painting, Pharaoh Tut-ankh-Amen 'is depicted as a hunter on his chariot, chasing gazelles and shooting them with arrows while two dogs attack the wounded animals'. A fresco discovered at the Mycenaean city of Tiryns presents 'greyhounds attacking a boar previously wounded with a spear'. Assyrian reliefs from the palace of Ashurbanipal reveal that hunters restrained dogs with leashes and then released them at the appropriate time to chase and catch the hunted animals.⁶ Finally, the golden bowl of Ras Shamra contains a scene with hunters accompanied by dogs, illustrating that such dogs were in use at Ugarit as early as the fourteenth century BCE.⁷

Shepherds also utilized dogs in their daily work. Sheepdogs were valuable because of their loyalty to their masters and because they 'efficiently

4. E.g. E. Firmage, 'Zoology', in *ABD*, IV, p. 1143.

5. D. Brewer, T. Clark, and A. Phillips, *Dogs in Antiquity: Anubis to Cerberus, The Origins of the Domestic Dog* (Warminster: Aris & Phillips, 2001), p. 53.

6. O. Borowski, *Every Living Thing: Daily Use of Animals in Ancient Israel* (Walnut Creek, CA: AltaMira Press, 1998), pp. 134-35. The Egyptian Pharaoh had 'dog keepers' (*mnyw tsmw*) for the same purpose (Botterweck, 'פֶּלֶב', p. 158).

7. Mitchell Dahood, *Psalms. II. 51-100* (AB, 17; New York: Doubleday, 1968), p. 146. Dahood thinks the dog was also kept as a pet at Ugarit and cites a passage from Tale of Keret (*UT* 125.15-16) in support. However, he admits that the sense of the passage 'is not perfectly clear'.

and aggressively guarded the flock or herd against robbers and predators'. In fact, 'no form of grazing was possible without herding dogs or sheep-dogs'. For small herds (two to five sheep), only one dog was necessary, but larger herds required two dogs. They not only guarded the flock but they also assisted the shepherd in leading the sheep; one dog walked at the front and the other at the back.⁸

In addition to protecting the flock, dogs could also be used to protect the home. In a letter dating to the second millennium BCE, an Egyptian officer stationed on the border with Palestine says, 'There are 200 large dogs here, and 300 wolfhounds... which stand ready every day at the door of the house whenever I go out'. Guard dogs wore collars and were tied near the entrance of a house or building. They protected their owner against potential thieves as well as wolves and other dogs.⁹ The ferocious bark of a guard dog would have deterred anyone from trespassing, which is undoubtedly why Egyptian policemen made use of them.¹⁰

Besides protection, dogs also provided companionship. Several cultures in antiquity kept dogs as pets, such as the Egyptians, Greeks, Romans, and Persians. Many of these dogs wore collars displaying their names, and the Greeks even erected funerary monuments for their deceased pets. Dogs accompanied their masters on various errands and even to work or school. At mealtime, it was common to find a dog sitting at the feet of his master in hopes of catching a fallen scrap. Children also enjoyed playing with their pets. Clay figurines from Mesopotamia show children riding on top of dogs, and the Greeks sometimes harnessed dogs to small carts for their children to ride in.¹¹

Because they valued (and possibly cherished) dogs, many ancient cultures buried their dogs. Normally dead animals were left in the place where they died or thrown on a refuse heap outside the city walls,¹² but a

8. Joshua Schwartz, 'Dogs in Jewish Society in the Second Temple Period and in the Time of the Mishnah and Talmud', *JJS* 55 (2004), pp. 254-55.

9. Borowski, *Every Living Thing*, pp. 135-36; Schwartz, 'Dogs in Jewish Society', p. 253.

10. Schwartz, 'Dogs in Jewish Society', p. 249 n. 16.

11. Schwartz, 'Dogs in Jewish Society', pp. 250-53; Borowski, *Every Living Thing*, pp. 136-37.

12. B. Halpern, 'The Canine Conundrum of Ashkelon: A Classical Connection', in L. Stager, J. Greene, and M. Coogan (eds.), *The Archaeology of Jordan and Beyond: Essays in Honor of James A. Sauer* (Studies in the Archaeology and History of the Levant, 1; Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2000), pp. 133-44 (134); P. Wapnish and B. Hesse, 'Pampered Pooches or Plain Pariahs? The Ashkelon Dog Burials', *BA* 56 (1993), pp. 55-80 (72).

number of cultures preferred to inter their dead canines. Over the past few decades, archaeologists have uncovered many of these burials in both the Mediterranean world and the Near East. On the island of Cyprus, dog burials date back to the Early or Middle Bronze Age.¹³ Some Egyptian dog burials are even earlier, 'reaching as far back as the Neolithic and Badarian cultures'. Moreover, the Egyptians often mummified their dogs, and thousands of dog mummies have been unearthed at Roda, Thebes, Suares, and Abydos.¹⁴ The most elaborate dog graves were found in ancient Greece, where people placed tombstones at the head of the grave, often with an inscription. Some Greeks, however, were so attached to their pets that they preferred to have their dogs buried alongside them when they died.¹⁵

Civilizations of the ancient Near East also buried dogs. In the Levant, dog burials have been found in Beirut (eight dogs), Khalde (eight dogs), Dor (seven dogs), central Israel, Ashdod (five dogs), Gilat (two dogs), and Hesban (six dogs).¹⁶ In contrast to dogs that have been discarded onto a trash heap, these animals were interred carefully. In most cases the dogs are laying on their sides, usually one dog to a pit. Moreover, archaeologists have found grave goods next to the dog skeletons at Gilat and Beirut.¹⁷ At the latter site, 'flint tools were carefully arranged on the chests of several of the animals'.¹⁸

The most fascinating of these burial sites is a dog cemetery discovered at the ancient Phoenician city of Ashkelon. The Leon Levy Expedition of the 1980s discovered the remains of over 1000 dogs; some of them were complete skeletons, while others were only partial skeletons. The head of the expedition, Lawrence Stager, has called the site 'the largest animal

13. Leslie P. Day, 'Dog Burials in the Greek World', *AJA* 88 (1984), pp. 21-32 (25-26).

14. Wapnish and Hesse, 'Pampered Pooches or Plain Pariahs?', pp. 70-71. According to the authors, not all Egyptian dogs were mummified. Archaeologists have found an unwrapped dog skeleton in an animal cemetery in Gurob.

15. Schwartz, 'Dogs in Jewish Society', pp. 250-51. Many cultures buried dogs with human beings, including the Romans and Egyptians. The oldest find of a human buried with a dog comes from Ein Mallaha in northern Israel and dates to roughly 9600 BCE. A human skeleton is lying on its side with a puppy skeleton beneath its left hand (Simon J.M. Davis, *The Archaeology of Animals* [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1987], pp. 137-38, 147).

16. Wapnish and Hesse, 'Pampered Pooches or Plain Pariahs?', pp. 68-69; H. Sader, 'The Phoenicians' Best Friend? Dog Cemetery Found in Beirut', *BAR* 22 (1996), p. 24.

17. Wapnish and Hesse, 'Pampered Pooches or Plain Pariahs?' p. 69.

18. Sader, 'The Phoenicians' Best Friend?', p. 24.

cemetery of any kind known in the ancient world'. Estimates put the total number of canine carcasses at over 700, and there may have been more originally. The cemetery lies on the Mediterranean coast, and the sea has eroded the western edge of the site. Stager thinks the total number of dogs buried here probably numbered 'in the thousands'.¹⁹

Besides the large number of burials, the care with which the dogs have been buried has also intrigued scholars. The team's zoologists, Paula Wapnish and Brian Hesse, describe the findings thus:

In general, each dog burial seems to have been a discrete event... The more complete skeletons were found singly, each in its own unlined, shallow pit... There were no skewed heads, or other skeletal distortions that characterize animals that were just pitched into a convenient hole... The dogs were buried on their sides with tails carefully arranged to curl toward the feet.²⁰

The discovery of hundreds of carefully buried dogs contrasts sharply with previous dog finds, and scholars have been unable to explain why. Several proposals have been put forward, but Stager's hypothesis has received the most attention. He believes the Phoenicians considered the dog a sacred animal and used dogs in healing rituals. He explains, 'Presumably the dog became associated with healing because of the curative powers evident from licking its own wounds or sores'.²¹ Many nations in the ancient Near East, says Stager, associated dogs with healing deities such as Eshmun in Phoenicia and Gula in Mesopotamia. He notes that archaeologists have uncovered a temple to the goddess Gula in Isin called the *e-ur-gi-7-ra* or 'dog house', with plaques and figurines of dogs found in the vicinity. Moreover, '33 dog burials were found in a ramp leading to the temple', and the canines were laid in shallow pit graves just as at Ashkelon.²² Without speculating on the exact role of these dogs in the rituals, Stager surmises that dogs wandered freely around the temple area in Isin and were buried on site when they died. He thinks the same situation applied to Ashkelon. Canines 'were probably associated with a particular deity and with that god's sacred precinct, about which the dogs were free to roam'. When they died, they were buried in a cemetery nearby.²³

19. Lawrence Stager, 'Why Were Hundreds of Dogs Buried at Ashkelon?', *BAR* 17 (1991), pp. 27-42 (30).

20. Wapnish and Hesse, 'Pampered Pooches or Plain Pariahs?', p. 58.

21. Stager, 'Why Were Hundreds of Dogs Buried at Ashkelon?', p. 39.

22. Wapnish and Hesse, 'Pampered Pooches or Plain Pariahs?', p. 69.

23. Stager, 'Why Were Hundreds of Dogs Buried at Ashkelon?', p. 38.

While Stager's hypothesis has some merit, there are several difficulties with it. The most obvious is asserted by Stager himself: 'We have not yet found a shrine or temple associated with the dog cemetery'.²⁴ He quickly adds that much of the area has yet to be excavated and that part of the site has collapsed into the sea, implying that a temple once stood near the cemetery but has since been washed away. But the fact remains that no cultic structure has been found, and this problem is compounded by the absence of figurines and plaques like the ones found at Isin. Moreover, the dogs of Ashkelon were never offered as a sacrifice since their bones lack butchering marks. They appear to have died of natural causes.²⁵ Furthermore, Stager alleges that dogs were linked to the Phoenician god Eshmun, but excavations at the main sanctuary of Eshmun in Sidon have yielded no dog figurines or any connection to dogs whatsoever.²⁶ In short, there is no evidence that the Phoenicians believed dogs were sacred or used them for purposes of healing.

The most likely explanation is that the Phoenicians buried dogs to which they had some emotional attachment. As with most people in the ancient Near East, the Phoenicians valued canines for their role as hunting dogs, sheepdogs, guard dogs, and possibly pets. Dogs are renowned for their loyalty, and in their everyday interaction with these animals, it would not be unusual for the Phoenicians to develop a strong bond with them. Stager concedes that the Phoenicians had a strong bond with the dogs, but it was not the result of affection. 'This concern', he says, 'for the proper burial [of dogs]...reflects an intense relationship between dogs and humans. Yet, because many of these dogs lived only for a short time, if at all, the attachment could not be based on mere companionship.'²⁷ Approximately 60 to 70 percent of the skeletons at Ashkelon are puppies, and some were only a few weeks old when they died.²⁸ According to Stager, a few weeks is not long enough for emotional attachment, but he has overlooked countless instances in modern Western cultures where humans quickly become attached to puppies. If pet owners today can develop strong bonds with puppies in a very short period of time, the ancient Phoenicians could have done the same. Thus, there is no reason to

24. Stager, 'Why Were Hundreds of Dogs Buried at Ashkelon?', p. 38.

25. Stager, 'Why Were Hundreds of Dogs Buried at Ashkelon?', p. 32; Wapnish and Hesse, 'Pampered Pooches or Plain Pariahs?', pp. 60-61.

26. Sader, 'The Phoenicians' Best Friend?', p. 24.

27. Stager, 'Why Were Hundreds of Dogs Buried at Ashkelon?', p. 38.

28. Stager, 'Why Were Hundreds of Dogs Buried at Ashkelon?', p. 31; Wapnish and Hesse, 'Pampered Pooches or Plain Pariahs?', p. 56.

think that a dog owner would be less inclined to bury a puppy than an adult dog. The burials at Ashkelon might not resemble the more elaborate dog monuments found in ancient Greece, but the cemetery probably serves the same function. Phoenicians who had grown attached to their dogs buried them in a common plot rather than jettison their bodies onto the trash heap.

II. Negative Statements about Dogs in the Old Testament

The question remains, however, that if most cultures in the ancient Near East valued dogs for their services and even kept them as pets, why would Israel view dogs as loathsome? The answer is that the Israelites did not detest dogs, but they had reasons to hold them in low esteem. First, feral dogs often patrolled the streets as scavengers searching for anything to eat. They feasted on the carcasses of both dead animals and human beings. The books of 1 and 2 Kings contain several prophecies predicting that a pack of wild dogs will consume the corpse of a wicked monarch. The infamous Jezebel as well as the descendants of Jeroboam, Baasha, and Ahab all suffer this fate.²⁹ The Psalmist likewise alludes to this phenomenon when characterizing his enemies as ‘dogs prowling the city’, and when he says, ‘Many dogs surround me, a pack of evildoers closes in on me’ (Pss. 22.17; 59.7, 15).

Another reason the ancient Israelites may have disliked dogs is their predilection for licking blood. In Psalm 68, the speaker declares that Yahweh will grant Israel victory against its foes. On that day, ‘You will wash your feet in your enemy’s blood; the tongues of your dogs will lap it up’ (Ps. 68.24). Similarly, the author of 1 Kings recounts how dogs licked up the blood of Ahab. After he died in battle, the people retrieved his chariot and washed it at the pool of Samaria where ‘the dogs licked up his blood and harlots bathed there, as the LORD had prophesied’ (1 Kgs 22.38). The Torah prescribes that no one shall eat the blood of an animal, for ‘the life of a living body is in its blood’ (Lev. 7.26-27; 17.11, 14; Deut. 12.23). Even though the prohibition applies only to humans, the Israelites may have been disgusted by the tendency of dogs to lick blood.³⁰

29. 1 Kgs 14.11; 16.4; 21.24; 2 Kgs 9.10, 36. All translations are from the NAB.

30. Elaine Goodfriend, ‘Could *keleb* in Deuteronomy 23.19 Actually Refer to a Canine?’, in D.P. Wright, D.N. Freedman, and A. Hurvitz (eds.), *Pomegranates and Golden Bells: Studies in Biblical, Jewish, and Near Eastern Ritual, Law, and Literature in Honor of Jacob Milgrom* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 1995), pp. 386-91.

Still another reason for Israel to despise dogs is the possible use of dogs in pagan rituals. Stager's claim that dogs were employed in healing rituals all over the ancient Near East is an overstatement, but they played some role at the temple in Isin and were also utilized by the Hittites for removing illness.³¹ The precise role of these dogs is uncertain, but perhaps the Israelites associated dogs with these pagan cults and therefore abhorred them. This seems unlikely, though. First, it is hard to discern what influence, if any, the Hittites had on the people of Israel. Throughout their history, the Israelites lived among the Canaanites, Egyptians, Assyrians, Babylonians, Persians, and Greeks. They were inevitably influenced by these cultures, but there is no evidence that the Israelites interacted with the inhabitants of Asia Minor. Second, the Hittites used dogs in a ritual to purify an army after defeat, but they also used goats, and goats were not abhorrent in Israel.³² Moreover, the Egyptians used dogs in rituals to ward off illness,³³ but they also used other animals such as bulls for cultic purposes, and the bull was not detestable in Israel either.³⁴ Finally, the temple at Isin dates to roughly 1000 BCE,³⁵ and it is improbable that the Israelites would have been familiar with a temple or cult in Babylonia hundreds of years before the Exile.

A final way in which the Israelites might exhibit disgust for dogs is through insults. Suspecting he is being disrespected, Goliath asks the young David 'Am I a dog?' in 1 Sam. 17.43, and David calls himself a 'dead dog' in 1 Sam. 24.15. Several characters use the epithet of 'dead dog' or 'dog's head' throughout 1 and 2 Samuel as a form of self-deprecation, and at least one scholar has suggested that the term *קָלָב* constituted 'an extreme form of self-abasement' in the ancient Near East.³⁶ But to use the word 'dog' as a derogatory term does not imply that the

31. Firmage, 'Zoology', p. 1143.

32. Firmage, 'Zoology', p. 1143; J. Sasson, 'Isaiah LXVI 3-4a', *VT* 26 (1976), pp. 199-207 (205). Sasson claims that Isa. 66.3 ('Merely slaughtering an ox is like slaying a man; sacrificing a lamb, like breaking a dog's neck') shows familiarity with this Hittite ritual. However, the verb for breaking, *קָרַץ*, occurs five other times in the Old Testament in this sense (Exod. 13.13; 34.20; Deut. 21.4, 6; Hos. 10.2), but in no instance does it connote sacrifice. He also admits there is no 'reliable testimony which would liken a ritual performed in Anatolia of the Late Bronze Ages to a prophetic utterance made in Israel at least half a millennium later' (p. 206).

33. Stager, 'Why Were Hundreds of Dogs Buried at Ashkelon?', pp. 39, 42.

34. Richard Carrington, 'Animals in Egypt', in A. Houghton Brodrick (ed.), *Animals in Archaeology* (London: Barrie & Jenkins, 1972), p. 89.

35. Wapnish and Hesse, 'Pampered Pooches or Plain Pariahs?', p. 69.

36. Marvin H. Pope, *Job* (AB, 15; New York: Doubleday, 1973), p. 219.

Israelites viewed canines as ‘the most ignoble and contemptible of animals’. Even in modern cultures where dogs are kept as pets, to call someone a dog is offensive. The ancient Assyrians used the word ‘dog’ in the same way. In the Akkadian letters of the Neo-Assyrian period, ‘dog’ or ‘dead dog’ represents a form of self-disparagement.³⁷ Yet the Assyrians did not regard dogs as loathsome creatures but used them for hunting and other activities just as their neighbors did.³⁸

Furthermore, calling oneself a dog is not the only form of abasement in the Bible. The Old Testament uses other animals such as cattle for the same purpose. Amos 4.1 refers to the wicked inhabitants of Samaria as ‘cows of Bashan’, and Jer. 10.21 says that Israel’s leaders ‘were stupid as cattle’.³⁹ Yet cattle were not contemptible animals but a valuable commodity. A man who possessed many cattle was the beneficiary of God’s favor (Job 42.10-12). To call a person a dog or a cow or any animal is an insult not because that animal is vile but because human beings are more dignified than animals.

Attitudes toward dogs in modern cultures can also provide a lens with which to better understand these insults. Many cultures today enjoy the services that dogs provide, especially their assistance in hunting. Some of these cultures, however, do not show affection for their dogs and even mistreat them. For example, the BaMbuti Pygmies of Zaire use dogs extensively in their hunting excursions and yet exhibit ‘excessive cruelty and viscosness towards their hunting dogs’.⁴⁰ Likewise, the Beng of the Ivory Coast give names to their hunting dogs and take care of them when sick or injured, but they never pet their dogs or even feed them. In fact, when an American visiting the Beng tried to pet one of their dogs, ‘Both the dog and its owner looked at him in surprise—it had clearly never occurred to anyone, canine or human, that such a thing should or even could be done’.⁴¹

37. P. Kyle McCarter, *I Samuel* (AB, 8; New York: Doubleday, 1980), pp. 384-85. The same phenomenon occurs in the Amarna letters and the Lachish letters.

38. One more way that dogs could be viewed as unclean appears in Prov. 26.11: ‘As the dog returns to his vomit, so the fool repeats his folly’. Although disgusting for a human to do, the Israelites would not have found this offensive for animals. Many clean animals also chew the cud (Lev. 11.3; Deut. 14.6).

39. See also Ps. 22.13; Prov. 7.22; Hos. 4.16.

40. James Serpell, ‘From Paragon to Pariah: Some Reflections on Human Attitudes to Dogs’, in James Serpell (ed.), *The Domestic Dog: Its Evolution, Behaviour, and Interactions with People* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 245-56 (248).

41. Alma Gottlieb, ‘Dog: Ally or Traitor? Mythology, Cosmology, and Society among the Beng of Ivory Coast’, *American Ethnologist* 13 (1968), pp. 477-88 (478).

Moreover, many civilizations eat dog meat but do not despise canines or abuse them in any way. Sometimes the opposite is true. For example, in the islands of the South Pacific, it is customary for people to eat dogs, and yet it is also common for a Polynesian woman to nurse puppies with her own breast milk.⁴² From a Western perspective, these behaviors might seem perplexing and even contradictory. Nevertheless, these cultural phenomena illustrate a wide spectrum of attitudes toward canines. What may appear to Westerners as contempt and disgust may not actually be so. Biblical scholars, therefore, should be careful in interpreting passages that seem to denigrate dogs. Even though the Israelites may have used the word ‘dog’ in a derogatory manner, this does not imply that the Israelites reviled them.

Before I turn to Old Testament passages that reveal positive uses of dogs, there is still one more text cited by scholars as evidence of Israelite disdain for dogs: Deut 23.19. The verse reads, ‘You shall not offer a harlot’s fee or a dog’s price (מְחִיר כֶּלֶב) as any kind of votive offering in the house of the Lord, your God’. According to some scholars, the parallelism of ‘harlot’s fee’ and ‘dog’s price’ implies that כֶּלֶב is an epithet for a male prostitute.⁴³ However, no other Old Testament passage uses כֶּלֶב in the same manner, and ‘no ancient Near Eastern text suggests that “dog” could mean male prostitute’.⁴⁴ Perhaps the phrase should be understood literally: no one should bring money acquired from selling a dog into the Temple. The reasoning behind such a prohibition is not readily apparent. It could be that dogs were viewed as unclean, and money spent on them would thus be unwelcome in a sacred place. However, no book of the Old Testament ever explicitly identifies the dog as unclean or impure. Moreover, if the Deuteronomist viewed dogs as unclean, it is odd that he omits them from the list of unclean animals in Deuteronomy 14. As Jeffrey Tigay notes, ‘there is no fully convincing explanation of this phrase [in Deut. 23.19]’,⁴⁵ so it is probably best to omit this verse from the discussion of Israelite attitudes toward canines.

42. Serpell, ‘From Paragon to Pariah’, pp. 249-50.

43. HALOT, II, p. 476; Botterweck, ‘כֶּלֶב’, p. 164.

44. Richard D. Nelson, *Deuteronomy* (OTL; Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2002), p. 281.

45. Jeffrey H. Tigay, *Deuteronomy* (JPS Torah Commentary; Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1996), p. 216.

III. Positive Uses of Dogs in the Old Testament

Although many passages in the Old Testament depict dogs in a negative way, a few texts illustrate that the Israelites used dogs for the same functions as their ancient Near Eastern counterparts. The first text comes from the book of Job. When speaking about his enemies, Job declares, 'But now they hold me in derision who are younger in years than I, whose fathers I should have disdained to rank with the dogs of my flock' (Job 30.1). While this verse does not present a very positive view of dogs, it nonetheless shows that Job did not consider dogs so contemptible as to avoid all contact with them. Rather, he valued dogs for their ability to herd sheep, and he kept them on his estate.

The book of Tobit presents a more positive image of dogs. Two passages, Tob. 6.2 and 11.4, mention that a dog accompanies Tobiah and the angel Raphael on their journey to Media. The dog does not play a significant role in the story and is mentioned almost as an afterthought. Tobit 6.2 reads, 'When the boy left home, accompanied by the angel, the dog followed Tobiah out of the house and went with them'. In ch. 11, Tobiah and the angel return from their trip, and 'the dog ran along behind them' (Tob. 11.4). Although these texts are brief, they demonstrate that the dog is a travel companion who protects Tobiah and the angel from predators and bandits. Notice, too, that the dog follows Tobiah 'out of the house'. He obviously shares the same living quarters with his owners and is not 'excluded from dwelling-houses' as Gray asserts. This dog may even be a pet.

Several scholars, however, claim that the dog in Tobit is the result of Gentile influence and does not reflect Jewish culture at the time. The book of Tobit was probably composed in the Diaspora between 300 and 175 BCE,⁴⁶ and the author's Gentile environment may have affected his view toward dogs. He could have been influenced by Hellenistic culture, which held dogs in high esteem, or Zoroastrianism, which regards the dog as a sacred animal.⁴⁷ Furthermore, he may have used one or more stories from Gentile literature when composing his own book, perhaps one where a dog plays a role in the plot.⁴⁸ Whatever the source, these scholars assert that the dog in Tobit is 'a vestigial remnant' of a Gentile legend and

46. Carey Moore, *Tobit: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB, 40A; New York: Doubleday, 1996), pp. 40-43.

47. Scwharz, 'Dogs in Jewish Society', pp. 252-53.

48. For a summary of these proposals, see Moore, *Tobit*, pp. 197-98.

reflects the pro-canine sentiments of that culture. It does not indicate Jewish attitudes toward canines.⁴⁹

This theory is problematic, though. The author of Tobit was not a careless redactor who indiscriminately adopted elements from other writings. To the contrary, he was a careful writer whose work ‘is one of the best extant examples of an ancient Semitic short story... In the silver age of Hebrew–Aramaic literature Tobit may be regarded as a classic.’⁵⁰ Furthermore, the author would not have incorporated an item into his story that was incompatible with Jewish culture. He was ‘a devout Jew, well acquainted with his Hebrew Scriptures’, and he borrowed heavily from biblical books such as Genesis and Deuteronomy.⁵¹ In fact, the primary message of Tobit is to remain faithful to the Torah in spite of one’s Gentile surroundings. If Jews held dogs in contempt, then it is unlikely that the writer of Tobit would mention the dog at all.

Another possibility is that the book of Tobit reflects the views of post-exilic Jews and not necessarily those of earlier Israelites. If so, then perhaps the Israelites of the monarchic period abhorred dogs, but, after the exile, Jewish views on canines changed, and they began to utilize dogs for a variety of tasks. Although possible, this hypothesis is problematic for two reasons. First, Job 30.1 shows that at least some Israelites used dogs for shepherding, and Job is not necessarily a late text. Some would even argue for an early date. In fact, it is impossible to date the book of Job with any degree of certainty.⁵² Second, it is not clear what could have caused Jews to change their minds regarding dogs. One might argue that contact with canine-friendly cultures such as the Persians or Greeks influenced the Jews, but the Israelites of the exilic and pre-exilic periods also interacted with Egyptians, Assyrians, and Babylonians, all of whom valued dogs as well. There is no ostensible reason, then, why later cultures could have influenced Israel in this regard when earlier ones did not.

Although there are not many Old Testament texts that present dogs in a positive light, they at least prove that the claims by Thomas and others are inaccurate. In Israelite culture, dogs were not ‘vile’, ‘contemptible’,

49. Moore, *Tobit*, p. 14.

50. R.H. Pfeiffer, ‘The Book of Tobit’, in *History of New Testament Times with an Introduction to the Apocrypha* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1949), p. 278.

51. Joseph A. Fitzmyer, *Tobit* (Commentaries on Early Jewish Literature; Berlin/New York: W. de Gruyter, 2003), p. 35. For a good analysis of the Deuteronomic nature of the book of Tobit, see Alexander A. Di Lella, ‘The Deuteronomic Background of the Farewell Discourse in Tob 14.3-11’, *CBQ* 41 (1979), pp. 380-89.

52. Pope, *Job*, p. xl.

‘despised’, and ‘generally wretched’. Even if the Israelites did not adore dogs as much as their Greek counterparts, these animals were not so deplorable that an Israelite would avoid them altogether. At least some Israelites, such as Job and Tobit, valued dogs enough to use them for herding their sheep, accompanying them on long journeys, and possibly serving as a family pet.

IV. Conclusion

With this modified understanding of dogs in Israelite society comes a new approach to Old Testament passages that mention dogs. To be sure, many of the negative comments about dogs, such as calling oneself a ‘dead dog’ remain pejorative, but other statements are not necessarily negative. For instance, Exod. 22.30 reads, ‘You shall be men sacred to me. Flesh torn to pieces in the field you shall not eat; throw it to the dogs.’ Some scholars understand this verse to be alluding to wild dogs: an animal carcass found in the countryside should be left for scavengers, namely, dogs. Botterweck, for example, remarks, ‘Because dogs ate garbage, carrion, and corpses, they were counted among the unclean and loathsome animals to which unclean flesh might be tossed (Ex. 22.30[31])’.⁵³ A more positive view of dogs, on the other hand, could yield a different interpretation. These dogs could be sheepdogs, and the injunction would be especially relevant for a shepherd: when you come across an animal carcass in the field, do not touch it but let your sheepdogs consume it.⁵⁴

This distinction between wild dogs and sheepdogs raises a final point. The Old Testament uses the same word for both: כָּלֵב. Perhaps translators should not use ‘dog’ for every occurrence of the word but should instead use ‘wild dog’ when the passage refers to feral dogs patrolling the village. This would distinguish detestable scavengers from valuable helpers. But even if translations do not change, commentaries must. No scholar should issue blanket statements such as, ‘In the Bible...the dog is always spoken of in contempt’.⁵⁵ The books of Job and Tobit illustrate that such claims are exaggerations. At least some Israelites valued dogs and did not view them as vile, contemptible creatures.

53. Botterweck, ‘כָּלֵב’, p. 154. See also McKenzie, *Dictionary of the Bible*, p. 202.

54. Goodfriend, ‘Could *keleb* in Deuteronomy 23.19 Actually Refer to a Canine?’, p. 392. Another potential passage for re-interpretation is Ps 68.24. When God addresses Israel and refers to ‘your dogs’ (כָּלֵבֶיךָ), this may indicate that the Israelites kept dogs on their property for herding or guarding.

55. Firmage, ‘Zoology’, p. 1143.