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BIBLICAL BAN ON TATTOOS (Lev 19:26-28) BACKGROUND, CONTEXT, MEANING AND PERSPECTIVES

The main subject of this paper is a critical evaluation of the meaning behind Lev 19:26-28 and research of historical and cultural context of tattoo practice, to lay foundations for its meaning in a wider context. The ban codified in the Book of Leviticus needs to be recognized in its literary and cultural context, which also includes reading into set of surrounding commandments. In order to begin deciphering the meaning behind the biblical regulation, we will retrace how tattoos functioned in the ancient world, with a special emphasis on countries neighboring Biblical lands and affecting them ideologically or culturally (1). Next we briefly determine four general reasons behind tattooing throughout the ancient world (2). We will then proceed to analyze the unit mentioned above (Lev 19:26-28). Our key goal will be to establish what the Bible actually says about tattooing and what the literary and theological context in which the ban occurs is (3). Next step in our research will be a brief analysis of ancient Biblical translations: LXX, Vulgate, Peshitta, and Ethiopic version. Examination of those traditions will be focused on retracing what the main lexical and theological differences between those interpretations are and, thus, how the biblical prohibition was understood in different regions of the ancient world (4). Then, we will present an overview of Rabbinic literature dealing with the subject of tattoos (5). All the previous steps will lead to a final conclusion, which aims to delineate a perspective required to identify the context behind the ban in Lev 19:26-28.

It is expected that further study will be composed to involve theological analysis of a few other biblical texts that possibly mention tattoos to outline approach accepted by authors of different texts throughout the Bible. For that, the following study will be a starting point with both philological and cultural background.

1. 'LET'S TAKE A STEP BACK...'

Canaan was always influenced by its neighboring civilizations. Among those, the main role was played by Egypt and the empires cradled on the shores of Euphrates and Tigris. In order to understand the meaning of biblical prohibition of tattooing one needs to examine what function tattooing served there and why it was performed in those cultures. The same procedure was adopted in Rome, and because those empires were connected to Israel through administration, one can guess they promoted their culture and customs.

Although tides of history kept sweeping through Canaan various nations and their cultures, conquests of Alexander the Great had significantly changed and influenced Middle Eastern cultures reaching as far as India, Greece is omitted from the following analysis. According to my research tattooing has not been practiced among Greeks, and scarce examples of bodily modifications can be explained as being instances of foreign provenience. Another significant set of literature absent from our study is Ugarit. There, the main challenge is the fact that sources are subject to interpretation, whether they actually depict tattooing, and the only fragment possibly pointing to the practice is mentioned in notes 57 and 58.

1.1. EGYPT

First point of reference in any socio-cultural analysis of Israel's life is Egypt, since it influenced Canaan politically and culturally for long ages. This strongly affected social and religious ideas of the Hebrews, since many similarities between the two countries have been observed. Although literary data concerning tattoos in ancient Egypt is wide, it is ambiguous. It dates to later periods so there is no written reference to tattoos or markings on bodies in Egypt before the Greco-Roman period, and even then it is often biased by a tendency to mock Egyptians¹. That is why we will focus mainly on archaeological discoveries.

The origin of Egyptian tattoos is unclear; there was no specific and exclusive word for it in Ancient Egyptian, which may suggest it was not a native custom. Some point to a Nubian influence, since bodies of Nubian women decorated with patterns of dots and dashes have been discovered dated as early as Sixth and as late as Eighteenth Dynasty². But there are also some Predynastic female figures that look as though they have been tattooed³. However, there is no proof that

¹ See C. Graves-Brown, *Dancing for Hathor*, London–New York 2010, 114. One important textual witness is Papyrus Bremner-Rhind, which states: 'their name is inscribed into their arms as Isis and Nephtys' – see R.S. Bianchi, *Tattoo in Ancient Egypt*, in: *Marks of Civilization. Artistic Transformations of the Human Body*, ed. A. Rubin, Los Angeles 1988, 26–27.

² R.S. Bianchi, *op.cit.*, 24; E. Strouhal, W. Forman, *A Profile of Queen Mutnodjemet*, The Bulletin of the Australian Centre for Egyptology 3 (1992), 89; K.W.C. Poon, T.I. Quickenden, *A Review of Tattooing in Ancient Egypt*, The Bulletin of the Australian Centre for Egyptology 17 (2006), 127–128; C. Graves-Brown, *op.cit.*, 116–117; M. Lewy, *Der Alte Orient: Wiege der abendländischen Tätowierungen*, Jewish Museum Berlin Journal 10 (2014), 60–61.

³ See L. Keimer, *Remarques sur le tatouage dans l'Égypte Ancienne*, Caire 1948, 2, fig. 1–5;

the signs represent tattoos, marking, painting or scarification. In later periods any corporal modification was labeled with a glyph ‘*mentenu*,’ which means ‘inscribed,’ ‘etched,’ ‘incised,’ or ‘engraved.’ The same glyph was also encountered in reference to inscribing names of gods on people’s arms. But no specific method was mentioned⁴.

Though not exclusively, tattoos were worn mainly by women, as numerous archaeological findings prove. The most famous tattooed mummies date to the Middle Kingdom (Eleventh Dynasty, ca. 2050–2000 B.C.) and were found at Deir el-Bahri. One of the bodies, which bore geometrically arranged dots and dashes on the abdomen, above the thighs and breasts, as well as on legs and arms, belonged to the Priestess of Hathor, the goddess of sky and protector of pharaoh’s wives, whose name was Amunet. The woman and her companion were first recognized as prostitutes or dancers. But the reality proved more complex than it seemed at first. The tattoos were not associated with immorality and low social status, since inscriptions on the tombs labeled one of the women as *hkr:t nsw w’t.t*. This title, ‘Sole Lady in Waiting’⁵ was often given to the wives of important officials. Both bodies were buried close to the temple of Mentuhotep Nebhepetre, which is an area that seems to have been a property of royal, or at least noble women⁶.

In 1923, 32 years after the above discovery had been made, two other tattooed bodies were found in the same area. Besides similar patterns, tattoos on their chest, arms, legs, dorsum of their feet and abdomen, corpses exhibited scarification. Unfortunately, no titles were included in the tombs, so the status of the bodies cannot be determined, although the place of burial might suggest an equally high social rank of the women⁷. The same markings were later discovered on ‘paddle dolls,’ sometimes called ‘fertility dolls’ or ‘brides of the dead,’ that were fashioned in the New Kingdom period⁸.

W. Hayes, *The Scepter of Egypt*, vol. II, New York 1959, 20; O.F.A. Meinardus, *Tattoo and Name: A Study on the Marks of Identification of the Egyptian Christians*, Wiener Zeitschrift für die Kunde des Morgenlandes 63–64 (1972), 27; G.J. Tassie, *Identifying the Practice of Tattooing in Ancient Egypt and Nubia*, Papers from the Institute of Archaeology 14 (2003), 85–101; J. Huehnergard, H. Liebowitz, *The Biblical Prohibition Against Tattooing*, *Vetus Testamentum* 63 (2013), 73.

⁴ R.S. Bianchi, *op.cit.*, 27. “Although the appearance of certain painted dolls found in archaic graves has led certain writers to assume that tattooing was customary in Predynastic times in Egypt, no positive evidence of this any other form of mutilation of the skin has ever been revealed by the direct examination of the bodies of the Proto-Egyptians” – G.E. Smith, *The Ancient Egyptians and their influence upon the Civilization of Europe*, New York 1911, 55–56.

⁵ This title used to be translated in the past as ‘Sole Royal Ornament’, or ‘King’s Favourite Ornament’. – see G.J. Tassie, *op.cit.*, 90. Later those translations have been proven incorrect.

⁶ G.J. Tassie, *op.cit.*, 90; C. Graves-Brown, *op.cit.*, 114–116; J. Huehnergard, H. Liebowitz, *op.cit.*, 73.

⁷ G.J. Tassie, *op.cit.*, 91; S. Ikram, A. Dodson, *The Mummy in Ancient Egypt. Equipping the Dead for Eternity*, London 1998, 115; J. Huehnergard, H. Liebowitz, *op.cit.*, 73; cf. D.E. Derry, *Mummification. Methods practised at different periods*, *Annales du Service des antiquités de l’Egypte* 41 (1942), 251–253; L. Keimer, *op.cit.*, 14–15.

⁸ R.S. Bianchi, *op.cit.*, 22; E. Waraksa, *Female Figurines (Pharaonic Period)*, in: *UCLA Encyclopedia of Egyptology*, ed. W. Wendrich, Los Angeles 2012, 2 (available: <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/4dg0d57b>; accessed 6 Jun 2017); E.F. Morris, *Paddle Dolls and Performance*, *Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt* 47 (2011), 71–103.

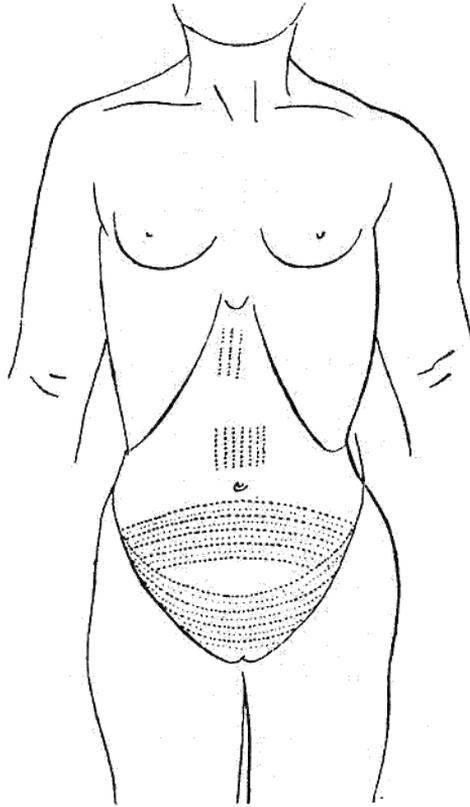


Figure 1. Detail of the tattoos on Amunet's friend's abdomen⁹

Since all the women were either elite court ladies or even priestesses of Hathor, it can be concluded that marking the body was not purposed on amusing men. It is possible that the signs were intended as marks specific for the devotees of Hathor. Positioning of the patterns near genital areas may point to either fertility or protection rituals engaged in the process¹⁰. This leads us to a later tradition of tattooing

⁹ L. Keimer, *Remarques sur le tatouage dans l'Égypte Ancienne*, Caire 1948, 11, fig. 9; D. Fouquet, *Le tatouage médical en Égypte dans l'antiquité et à l'époque actuelle*, *Archives d'Anthropologie Criminelle* 13 (1898), 271–278.

¹⁰ 'The priestess Amunet and the figurines in question are all associated with Hathor, the most lascivious of all Egyptian goddesses [...]. Nevertheless, the eroticism which is undoubtedly associated with Egyptian tattoo of the Middle Kingdom correlates [...] with a prevailing religious attitude that linked physical procreative drives with the loftier aspirations of a resurrection in the Hereafter.' – R.S. Bianchi, *op.cit.*, 22–23; 'Tattoos on the abdominal part of the female body would have become particularly notable when the woman became pregnant – the patterns would expand, forming an even more symbolically interesting pattern, like a web or netting design.' – G.J. Tassie, *op.cit.*, 91. But earlier conclusions were pointing towards therapeutic purpose: 'The examination of these scars, some white, others blue, leaves in no doubt that they are not, in essence, ornament, but an established treatment for a condition of the pelvis, very probably chronic pelvic peritonitis.' – see D. Fouquet, *op.cit.*, 271–272.

(or at least, painting) the image of Bes, Egyptian god, on women's thighs as depicted in paintings and carvings from New Kingdom period¹¹. Bes is believed to play an apotropaic role, watching over households, and especially over women and mothers during childbirth¹². However, the practice of tattooing dots and dashes existed side by side with the custom of putting silhouette markings representing Bes.



Figure 2. Selected Bes' depictions, employed as tattoos in New Kingdom period¹³

This theory is supported by evidence from later periods, as cultic tattooing was practiced and often mentioned by Philo and other texts, although no body bearing such signs has been preserved and discovered. In the Greco-Roman period tattooing obtained another meaning – slaves were branded and at the same time tattooing became a form of penalty. Discoveries at Akhmim might prove the assumption, since the recovered bodies bear marks on the chin and sides of the nose, however due to the decomposition and scarcity of findings, it is impossible to determine whether it was a common practice in ancient Egypt¹⁴.

¹¹ It is important to remember that high-status women were usually depicted fully clothed, but because of the paucity of archaeological data, it is impossible to determine whether this custom was shared by all women in Egypt – see G.J. Tassie, *op.cit.*, 94–96; C. Graves-Brown, *op.cit.*, 113.

¹² R.S. Bianchi, *op.cit.*, 24–25.

¹³ L. Keimer, *Remarques sur le tatouage dans l'Égypte Ancienne*, Caire 1948, 41, fig. 39.

¹⁴ C.P. Jones, “Stigma: Tattooing and Branding in Graeco-Roman Antiquity”, *The Journal of Roman Studies* 77 (1987) 139–155; P. Grandet, *Le papyrus Harris I (BM 9999)*, Cairo 1994, Bibliothèque d'étude 109/1, 337; A. Magor, *People Illustrated*, *Archaeology* 2 (1999), 54–57; E. Strouhal, *Life in Ancient Egypt* (London 1992) 88–89; L. Meskell, *Private Life in New Kingdom Egypt*, Princeton 2002, 161; L. Meskell, R.A. Joyce, *Embodied Lives. Figuring Ancient Maya and Egyptian Experience*, London 2003, 58; B. Menu, *Captifs de guerre et dépendance rurale dans l'Égypte du Nouvel Empire*, in: *La dépendance rurale dans l'Antiquité égyptienne et proche-orientale*, ed. B. Menu, Bibliothèque d'étude 140; Cairo 2004, 187–209; C. Graves-Brown, *op.cit.*, 114; M. Lewy, *op.cit.*, 61–62; A. Loprieno, *Slavery and Servitude*, in: *UCLA Encyclopedia of Egyptology*, ed. E. Froom, W. Wendrich, Los Angeles 2012) 10 (available: <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/8mx2073f>; accessed 6 Jun 2019). Texts suggesting practice of marking slaves in Egypt originate from the times of Ramses III – see L. Renaut, *Signation chrétienne et marquage des captifs dans le monde antique: pratiques et représentations*, in: *Entre traces mémorielles et marques corporelles. Regards sur l'ennemi de l'Antiquité à nos jours*, ed. J.-C. Caron, N. Planas, L. Lamoine, Clermont-Ferrand 2014, 275–277. The verb *abwt*, which describes the action, is usually associated with fire – R.S. Bianchi, *op.cit.*, 27; N.S. Fox, *Marked for servitude: Mesopotamia and the Bible*, in: *A Common Cultural Heritage: Studies*

1.2. MESOPOTAMIA

Any analysis of tattooing practice in Mesopotamia lacks reference to archaeological data and, therefore, only textual allusions can be brought up. It is usually stated that in Mesopotamia slaves were marked, incised or branded in the flesh either on their foreheads or on their hands. This mark, called *huṭārtu* in Akkadian, was meant to identify the slave's rightful owner; the Laws of Hammurabi forbid removing or obliterating it. Doing so, and even encouraging a slave to do so was considered a capital crime¹⁵. But before marks were used on slaves and servants, the first method of visual identification was a special haircut, namely a lock of hair growing from a specifically determined part of the scalp with the rest of the hair shaved. This was a practice continued in later periods with household servants. When a slave was to be freed, the hairdo was removed¹⁶.

Besides punitive signs imposed on runaway slaves¹⁷, Babylonians also gave their slaves markings stating the name of the owner. From among numerous texts, we shall only bring up one, from the Late Babylonian period, which mentions markings on slaves' bodies:¹⁸

ša ritti imnišu ana šumi ša PN šaṭrata uḥuṭārti šanīti ana šumi ša PN₂ šaṭrata

(a slave girl) whose right hand is inscribed with the name of PN
and (further identified by a second slave mark *huṭārtu*) inscribed with the name of PN₂

Alternative expressions denoting markings on the body included *šimtu* (sometimes spelled as *šindu*), *šaṭāru* and *eṣēru*. We lack any reference to what method was involved, with the writings often describing them as signs made with dye, similarly to those used for branding cattle in the Old Babylonian period. The second and third terms generally mean 'to write, draw, or incise,' and thus offer an insight into the method of marking one's body. The skin was incised with a sharp object and drops of indelible ink were inserted between the layers of the skin.

Another example of markings made on hands was connected to the practice observed in the Neo-Babylonian period. In this case oblates of Eanna temple were branded with a sign on their hands, signifying that they had become slaves of their god or of the temple:¹⁹

on Mesopotamia and the Biblical World. Fs. Barry L. Eichler, ed. G. Frame et al., Bethesda, MD 2011, 271; L. Renaut, Signation chrétienne, op.cit., 277, on the other hand, opts for a metaphorical meaning of the verb.

¹⁵ The Laws of Hammurabi (226–227) also mention that slaves were required to wear a special haircut, required to wear during the Old Babylonian Period; see also G.R. Driver, J.C. Miles, *The Babylonian Laws*, Oxford 1952–1955, 422; H.W.F. Saggs, *The Greatness That Was Babylon*, New York–Washington 1969, 171.

¹⁶ N.S. Fox, *op.cit.*, 268–269.

¹⁷ Other punitive actions involved piercing (*palāšu*), severe mutilation (*hapū* or *nakāsu*) of the ears, nose, lips, tongue or jaw. MAL A40 includes a sentence imposed on a slave woman: dressing in clothes not befitting her class and cutting off her ears. Anyone helping her to avoid the penalty and protecting her from the authorities would have his ears pierced and tied to the back – see also laws A4, A5, A24, A44, A59, LH205 and LH 205 – see N.S. Fox, *op.cit.*, 271–272.

¹⁸ Original text and translation – CAD VI, 264.

¹⁹ Original text and translation – CAD XVII/1, 307.

kakkabti rittašu taltemit u šaṭāri ina muḥḥi rittišu ana Nanâ taltatar

(the slave girl herself) marked her hand with the star and wrote an inscription on her hand,
'to (the god) Nanâ'

The text shows that a name written on girl's hand was a sign that she had become property of her god. In other words, her statement makes her a servant (*širku*, literally 'the given one') to her god²⁰. In other texts, the verb *šamātu* is often employed to describe marks on persons devoted to a god, as a parallel to animals branded with the name of their owner.

Some researchers suggested that marking one's arm with a name can be interpreted as a sign of gratitude²¹. However, meaning of the phrase employed, *šalmam naqārum*, is unclear and, thus, disputed²².

1.3. ROMAN EMPIRE

In ancient Rome, leaving marks on the body played a different role. Since literacy was much more widespread, short pieces of information or warnings were put on the skin. This process was mainly connected to two social groups: slaves and soldiers.

The former group, slaves (*servi*), were usually marked as a form penalty for severe crimes. Ancient Roman texts are mainly focused on one specific crime committed by slaves – escaping, with no other violation of the law by slaves reported this widely in Latin sources. Troublesome slaves were given marks on their faces and/or heads describing their crimes and faults. It was commonly performed on slaves who attempted to escape their masters' households. Runaway slaves were marked with the capital letter F (or FUG), standing for Latin '*fugitivus*'. But it was only the first part of the penalty; in addition, fugitives were either sent to become gladiators or to perform most exhausting tasks, for example working in dangerous environment of mines with heads shaved, forever bound in iron collars around their necks and iron chains around ankles. Yet another dimension of the same penalty was that usually they were not allowed to leave the property of their master, or even the building where their work was performed. One of the collars preserved at Rome bears

²⁰ More on the subject of *širku* and a comparison of their situation to that of Egyptian slaves – see R.P. Dougherty, *The Širkûtu of Babylonian Deities*, New Haven 1923; D. Arnaud, *Un document juridique concernant les oblats*, *Revue d'assyriologie et d'archéologie orientale* 67 (1973), 147–156; S. Zawadzki, *A Contribution to the Understanding of širkutu in the Light of a Text from the Ebabbar Archive*, *Altorientalische Forschungen* 24 (1977) 226–230; L. Renaut, *Signation chrétienne*, *op.cit.*, 277–278; N.S. Fox, *op.cit.*, 267–278.

²¹ *pānīki ina amāri šalamki ina aḥīni i niqqur* ('when we see you, we should incise your image on our arms') – F.R. Kraus, *Briefe aus dem British Museum*, *Altbabylonische Briefe* 2, Leiden 1966, text 46:19-21; *šumma baḥṭākū-ma An-Martu bānīka igdamlanni šalmīka ina aḥīya luqqur* ('If I am alive, and An-Martu, your begetter spares me, I should incise your images on my arms') – R. Frankena, *Briefe aus der Leidener Sammlung*, *Altbabylonische Briefe* 3, Leiden 1968, text 22:7-9; see also J. Huehnergard, H. Liebowitz, *op.cit.*, 72.

²² R. Frankena, *Kommentar zu den altbabylonischen Briefen aus Lagaba und anderen Orten*, Leiden 1978, 76–77; CAD XI/1, 332.

the inscription ‘I have run away. Catch me. If you take me back to my master Zoninus, you will be rewarded’²³.

Besides F(UG) marks, different sets of signs were also put on the skin of offenders. Two other marks are “FUR” (from Latin “fur”) for thieves and “KAL” (from grecized word “kalumnia”) for false accusers. However, it is disputable whether the signs put on the slaves were actually tattoos, as it is more likely they were branding, especially if punitive purpose was the dominating motive. Since tattooing is a longer process, which requires at least some sort of consent stated by its receiver, branding, which is a painful imprinting of small texts or figures with hot iron, is a more probable method of punishing wrongdoers²⁴.

Marks on the body have been retraced also in case of soldiers. Putting a mark on them was a necessity, since many of them were mercenaries; when facing harsh climate conditions of or challenging foes, they were likely to run away from the camps or positions assigned to them. If marked with a special set of signs, they were easy to distinguish from the crowd, and could be quickly returned to their superiors and places of assignment or affiliation. They did not play the same role as modern epaulettes or sleeve marks determining their rank, but they served as signs indicating that people wearing them were soldiers on the run. As compared with the same procedure as with the slaves, their signs were meant to discourage them from leaving their positions, rather than penalize them for doing so.

2. ANCIENT REASONS FOR TATTOOING

Although authors agree almost unanimously that tattoos in history were usually treated as a sign of slavery²⁵, one different point needs to be stressed: so far no decisive proof has been presented that tattoos in antiquity had an aesthetic value²⁶. The earliest documented information about aesthetic tattoos come from 247 BCE, and originates in Japan, as recounted by Chinese historians. However, tattoos fell out of use

²³ See M. Johnston, *Roman Life*, Chicago 1957, 158–177; K. Hopkins, *Conquerors and Slaves*. Sociological Studies in Roman History, Cambridge 1981, vol. I, 121; J.-A. Shelton, *As the Romans Did. A Source Book in Roman Social History*, New York–Oxford 1988, 180–183; M. Gustafson, *The Tattoo in the Later Roman Empire and Beyond*, in: *Written on the Body. The Tattoo in European and American History*, ed. J. Caplan, Princeton, NJ 2000, 17–31; C.P. Jones, *Stigma and Tattoo*, in: *Written on the Body. The Tattoo in European and American History*, ed. J. Caplan, Princeton, NJ 2000, 1–16; J.L. Fisher, *Tattooing the Body, Marking Culture*, *Body & Society* 8 (2002) 4, 92–93; C.K. McGeough, *The Romans. New Perspectives*, Santa Barbara, CA 2004; S. Joshel, *Slavery in the Roman World*, New York 2010, 119–121; R.Y. Orizaga, *Roman Cosmetics Revisited: Facial Modification and Identity*, in: *Tattoos and Body Modifications in Antiquity*, ed. P. Della Casa, C. Witt, Zurich Studies in Archaeology 9; Zurich 2013, 115–123; L. Renaut, *Signation chrétienne*, *op.cit.*, 279.

²⁴ Cf. C.P. Jones, *Stigma: Tattooing and Branding*, *op.cit.*, 153.

²⁵ O. Nedelsohn, *Tattoo*, *Encyclopedia Judaica* XIX, 526; M.A. Dandamayev, *Slavery*, ABD VI, 61.

²⁶ Cf. opinions in: C.P. Jones, *Stigma: Tattooing and Branding*, *op.cit.*, 154–155; C.P. Jones, *Stigma and Tattoo*, *op.cit.*, 15; J.C. Angulo, M. Garcia-Diez, M. Martinez, *Phallic Decoration in Paleolithic Art: Genital Scarification, Piercing and Tattoos*, *The Journal of Urology* 186 (2011), 2498–2503.

when the markings started being imposed on criminals²⁷. Based on archaeological and written data retrieved from different cultures, even those from outside the Fertile Crescent, reasons for tattooing can be broken down into four groups: social, punitive, cultic or therapeutic.

When dealing with a social purpose, tattoos are based on a supposition that a visible sign worn on the skin is an expression of initiation or fulfilling conditions which make a person suitable for a new role within and for the community²⁸. The punitive dimension aims to distinguish a criminal from the rest of society; the tattoo works then as a ‘caution’ sign put on the skin. As for the case of cultic tattoos, they are considered as a part of rituals that connect the marked person with the deity²⁹.

Therapeutic tattoos were relatively rare in antiquity, but one such case discovered was that of ‘Ötzi,’ the 5,000-year-old body found in a glacier in Tyrolean Alps (see fig. 3), who had tattooed carbon lines on lumbar spine, a cruciform mark behind the right knee and different signs around ankles. Medical examination of the places underneath the marks revealed ‘age-conditioned or strain-induced degeneration’ of the bones³⁰, as well as osteochondrosis (*necrosis aseptica ossium*) and an early stage of spondylosis in the lumbar spine. His knee and ankle joints betrayed painful degeneration, which was probably why the places were marked with tattoos, as it is shown below³¹. The marks were believed to have the power to cure, although it is difficult to decipher the meaning of the practice³². More importantly, this procedure shows some similarities with Chinese acupuncture, although predates it chronologically by about 2000 years³³.

²⁷ S. Gilbert, *The Tattoo History. A Source Book*, New York–Berkeley, CA 2000, 77.

²⁸ P. Della Casa, *Matters of Identity: Body, Dress and Markers in Social Context*, in: *Tattoos and Body Modifications in Antiquity*, eds. P. Della Casa, C. Witt, Zurich Studies in Archaeology 9; Zurich 2013, 9–14. Among some of the tribes in Papua New Guinea women are tattooed to mark them as ready for marriage. In Borneo and Tahiti men are tattooed with warrior markings.

²⁹ For example, in Ancient Pazyryk culture, dwelling in the territory of modern Iran – see S.A. Yatsenko, *The Tattoo System in the Ancient Iranian World*, in: *Tattoos and Body Modifications in Antiquity*, ed. P. Della Casa, C. Witt, Zurich Studies in Archaeology 9; Zurich 2013, 98; see also R. Satinover Fagen, *Phylacteries*, ABD 5, 369; Ch. Rainier, *Ancient Marks. The Sacred Origins of Tattoos and Body Marking*, San Rafael, CA 2006.

³⁰ K. Spindler, *The Man in the Ice. The Preserved Body of a Neolithic Man Reveals the Secrets of the Stone Age*, Phoenix 2001, 178–184.

³¹ ‘Ötzi’ has also been diagnosed with Lyme disease (or Lyme borreliosis) and among its numerous symptoms there are joint pains, which could be another reason for marking those spots.

³² Arctic people of Yupiget tattooed their joints: shoulders, elbows, hip, wrist, knee, ankle, neck, and waist, because they were seen as places through which demons enter human body – see L. Krutak, *Tattooing*, in: *Encyclopedia of the Arctic*, vol. III, ed. M. Nuttall, New York–London 2005, 2004.

³³ See L. Dorfer et al., *A medical report from the stone age?*, *Lancet* 354 (1999), 1023–1025; K. Spindler, *op.cit.*, 178–184; L. Renaut, *Les tatouages d’Ötzi et la petite chirurgie traditionnelle*, *L’Anthropologie* 108 (2004), 69–105; L. Krutak, *op.cit.*, 2005; L. Krutak, *The Power to Cure: A Brief History of Therapeutic Tattooing*, in: *Tattoos and Body Modifications in Antiquity*, eds. P. Della Casa, C. Witt, Zurich Studies in Archaeology 9, Zurich 2013, 27–28; N.I. Shishlina, E.V. Belkevich, A.N. Usachuk, *Bronze Age Tattoos: Sympathetic Magic or Decoration?*, in: *Tattoos and Body Modifications in Antiquity*, eds. P. Della Casa, C. Witt, Zurich Studies in Archaeology 9; Zurich 2013, 67–74; F. Fahlander, *The skin I live in. The materiality of body imagery*, in: *Own and be owned. Archaeological perspectives of the concept of possessions*, ed. A. Klevnäs, C. Hedenstierna-Johnsson, Stockholm 2015, 60.

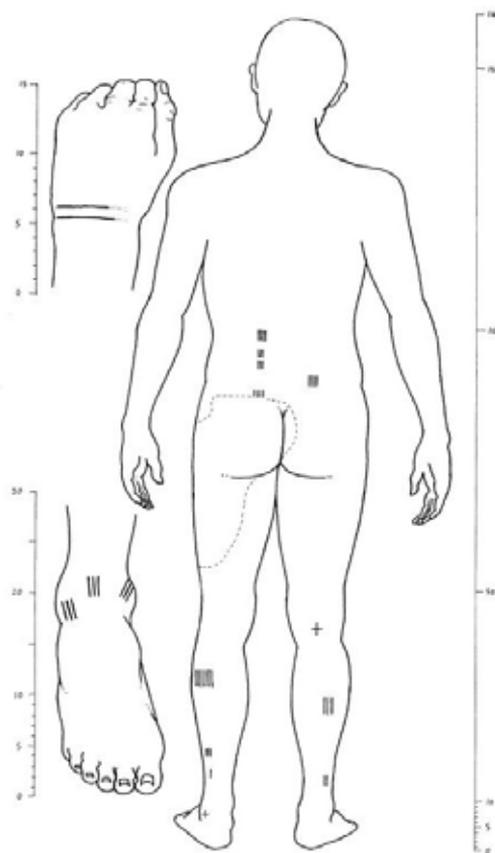


Figure 3. *Tattoo-marks found on 'Ötzi*³⁴

3. Lev 19:26-28 AND ITS BAN ON TATTOOING

The biblical ban on tattooing is expressed in a set of units comprising Lev 19. This chapter forms a unity, since it is clearly remarked with an oft-employed formula of division 'Then the LORD spoke to Moses, saying (*waydabbēr yhwh 'el mōšeh llē'mōr*)³⁵. Chapter 20 starts with the same words, thus, marking the beginning of another unit. Further division within the chapter is based on the phrase 'I am the Lord! (*'ānī yhwh*)³⁶, which is sometimes extended to a form 'I am the Lord, your God! (*'ānī yhwh 'ēlōhēkem*)³⁷. Those phrases are all short forms of historically-

³⁴ L. Renaut, *Les tatouages d'Ötzi et la petite chirurgie traditionnelle*, *L'Anthropologie* 108 (2004), 72.

³⁵ See Lev 4:1; 5:14.20; 6:1.12.17; 7:22.28; 8:1; 11:1; 12:1; 13:1; 14:1.33; 15:1; 16:1; 17:1; 18:1; 19:1; 20:1; 21:16; 22:1.17.26; 23:1.9.23.26.33.44; 24:1.13; 25:1; 27:1. This phrase occurs, also, 12 times in Exodus 44 times in Numbers and once in Deuteronomy.

³⁶ Lev 19:12.14.16.18.28.30.37.

³⁷ Lev 19:3.4.10.25.31.34.

based profession of faith, as mentioned at the end of the chapter: ‘I am the Lord your God, who brought you out from the land of Egypt’ (Lev 19:36).

It is easy to notice that laws concerning different subjects are preserved (religious, ethical, ritual and others), as well as diverse forms are employed (apodictic and casuistic), while the range of those who are subject of the law varies (individuals and society), there are few ways to recognize the internal structure of the passage. It is possible to divide the entire chapter in three parts, since close lexical parallels may be found at the beginning and at the end of the unit:³⁸

v. 3	<i>'et-šabbətōtay tišmōrū</i>	v. 30	<i>'et-šabbətōtay tišmōrū</i>
v. 4	<i>'al-tipnū 'el-hā'ēlīlīm</i>	v. 31	<i>'al-tipnū 'el-hā'ōbōt</i>
v. 14	<i>wəyārē'tā mē'ēlōhēkā</i>	v. 32	<i>wəyārē'tā mē'ēlōhēkā</i>
v. 15	<i>lō-ta'āsū 'āwel bammišpāt</i>	v. 34	<i>wə'āhabtā lō kāmōkā</i>
v. 18	<i>wə'āhabtā lārē'ākā kāmōkā</i>	v. 35	<i>lō-ta'āsū 'āwel bammišpāt</i>
v. 19	<i>'et-ḥuqqōtay tišmōrū</i>	v. 37	<i>ūšəmartem 'et-kol-ḥuqqōtay</i>

Based on this observation it may be concluded that Lev 19 is structured chiastically with central parts enclosing vv. 19–29. However, given the repeated phrase ‘I am the Lord!’ (*'ānī yhwḥ*) and the frequent shifts among first and second singular and second plural, one can divide the chapter into a scheme containing 18 passages of commandments flanked by opening and closing phrases:³⁹

1. Opening (vv. 1–2)	
2. Unit 1 (v. 3)	11. Unit 10 (vv. 20–22)
3. Unit 2 (v. 4)	12. Unit 11 (vv. 23–25)
4. Unit 3 (vv. 5–8)	13. Unit 12 (vv. 26–28)
5. Unit 4 (vv. 9–10)	14. Unit 13 (v. 29)
6. Unit 5 (vv. 11–12)	15. Unit 14 (v. 30)
7. Unit 6 (vv. 13–14)	16. Unit 15 (v. 31)
8. Unit 7 (vv. 15–16)	17. Unit 16 (v. 32)
9. Unit 8 (vv. 17–18)	18. Unit 17 (vv. 33–34)
10. Unit 9 (v. 19)	19. Unit 18 (vv. 35–36)
20. Closing (v. 37)	

³⁸ J. Magonet, *The Structure and Meaning of Leviticus 19*, Hebrew Annual Review 7 (1983), 151–167.

³⁹ J. Milgrom, *Leviticus 17-22. A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary*, Anchor Bible 3A, New York 1964, 1597–1598.

The opening serves also as an introduction of the main subject, which all following regulations lead to and find their fulfillments in – *qədōšîm tihyû* (“be [pl.] saint!”) Scholars who trace the history of development behind the present text of Lev 19 emphasize that it is a sign of a theological revolution that has taken place in Israel when holiness stopped being viewed as a domain of sacred sphere (sanctuaries) and those who serve it (priests and Levites), and started being seen as a virtue, a challenge and a requirement for every Israelite. Participation in holiness was accessible to anyone, who followed the rules mentioned in this chapter.

Most of the interpreters and exegetes base their analysis on a presumption that the ban on tattooing is a synonymous parallel to another prohibition expressed in the first part of the verse: ‘You shall not make any cuts in your body for the dead’ (NAS). Therefore it is implied that tattoos are connected somehow with the mourning rites and rituals⁴⁰. However, it can be observed that the entire unit is not based on twofold stanzas, but rather it is a collection of commandments concerning pagan, or polytheistic rituals, loosely connected to each other⁴¹.

The first prohibition sanctions, literally, ‘eating over the blood (*lō’ tō’kəlû ‘al-haddām*).’ The same phrase occurs in the HB also in 1 Sam 14:33-34 and Ez 33:25. Besides a supposition of a scribal error, incorrectly replacing *dalet* with *resh*⁴², there are three other interpretations of this phrase:

1. preposition *‘al* simply means ‘with,’ as it is suggested in Ex 12:8. This leads to conclusion that the prohibition means to strengthen the ban of eating blood (see Gen 9:4; Lev 7:27; 17:10-14; Deut 12:16.23-25)⁴³;

2. the preposition has a spatial (‘over,’ ‘in front of’) or chronological (‘before’) aspect, meaning ‘before offering the blood to God on an altar,’ in other words – while the blood is still in the sprinkling bowl. This view is based on the story in 1 Sam 14:33-34⁴⁴;

⁴⁰ See W. Engelkemper, *Blut und Haare in der Totentrauer bei den Hebräern*, *Biblische Zeitschrift* 7 (1909), 123–128; J. Huehnergard, H. Liebowitz, *op.cit.*, 59–77.

⁴¹ ‘Thus instead of searching (in vain) for a mourning rite to explain the juxtaposition of tattooing to laceration, tattooing should be regarded as an independent prohibition aimed, perhaps among other objectives, at the abolition of slavery in Israel’ – J. Milgrom, *op.cit.*, 1695. Although we find no reason to pin the tattooing ban with an idea of rising Hebrew society of slaves, Milgrom’s opinion concerning a very loose relation between parts of the verse is a valid observation. It is not uncommon to find commandments that are almost unrelated and focus on different subjects in one verse (for example, Ex 23:18-19; Lev 19:3.16.30).

⁴² This is suggested by other passages suggesting cultic feasting at the hills or mountains (Ez 18:6.11.15; 22:9). However, determining a scribal error demands a textual proof that states otherwise. So far no Hebrew textual witness bears any other reading than the one that has been suggested by MT.

⁴³ A. Dillman, V. Ryssel, *Die Bücher Exodus und Leviticus*, KEH 12, Leipzig 1897; B. Baentsch, *Exodus – Leviticus – Numeri*, Göttinger Handkommentar zum Alten Testament 1/2, Göttingen 1903; K. Elliger, *Leviticus*, Handbuch zum Alten Testament. Erste Reihe 4; Tübingen 1966. One thing needs to be pointed out, after C.M. Carmichael (*A Strange Sequence of Rules: Leviticus 19.20-26*, in: *Reading Leviticus*, ed. J.F.A. Sawyer, Sheffield 1996, 195–196), that it is unlikely for the author to mention eating without listing what is eaten makes no sense, and therefore traditionally accepted meaning ‘eating with’ should be rejected. Anyway, his final conclusion concerning the meaning of this prohibition (‘You shall not celebrate killing, however justified, as in war, by festive eating’) in our opinion is very unlikely and strays too far from the context of entire passage.

⁴⁴ See b. Sanh. 63; Tg. Ps.-Jonathan. Modern views are presented by: H.Ch. Brichto, *On Slaugh-*

3. *'al* holds its regular meaning, but it is a reflection of rite, practiced as a form of divination⁴⁵.

The core of a second regulation, *lō tanaḥšû* ('you will not practice divination') a verb in Piel, occurs in the Hebrew Bible eight more times⁴⁶. Its etiology is debatable and probably it is entrenched in biradical Semitic root *ḥš*, which means 'sound softly, whisper'⁴⁷, of which Hebrew verbs, *nḥš* and *lhš* are cognates. Whatever etymology is assigned to it, the meaning of the verb is closely connected to augury, which was practiced in many branches both in Israel and in its neighboring lands⁴⁸. This must be carefully distinguished from sorcery, that describes attempts to alter the future, as opposed to a simple recognition of what will happen. Although the former has been practiced and accepted for a long time in ancient Israel, the latter has always been condemned (Deut 18:10; Ex 22:17)⁴⁹. However, everyday practice seemed to stray from official regulations (2 Kings 9:22; 2 Chr 33:6; Jer 27:9; Ez 13:18-19; Mic 5:11; Mal 3:5)⁵⁰.

Etymology of the following verb at the center of another prohibition, *wālō' tē'ōnēnū* ('nor [you will practice] soothsaying') is nebulous, as is of the previous one. Various etiologies have been proposed so far, but the two verbs, *'nn* and *nḥš*, are often coupled up by Biblical authors (see Deut 18:10; 2 Kings 21:6; 2 Chr 33:6). Moreover, they often share the stage with *qsm* (Num 23:23; 2 Kings 17:17) and *ḥzh* (Ez 13:6.9.23; 22:28; Jer 14:14; Mic 3:6-7). All of them appear to be virtually inter-

ter and Sacrifice, Blood and Atonement, Hebrew Union College Annual 47 (1976), 39; B.J. Schwartz, *Selected Chapters of the Holiness Code. A Literary Study of Leviticus 17-19*, Jerusalem 1987 (PhD thesis), 161–162.

⁴⁵ This view has been treated as dominant since Maimonides. See also – J. Grintz, *Do Not Eat on the Blood*, Zion 31(1966) 1–2, 1–17; Y.M. Grintz, "Do not Eat on the Blood": Reconsiderations in Setting and Dating of the Priestly Code, ASTI 8 (1970–1971), 79–80. See note 48 below.

⁴⁶ Gen 30:27; 44:5; Lev 19:26; Deut 18:10; 1 Kings 20:33; 2 Kings 17:17; 21:6; 2 Chr 33:6.

⁴⁷ H.-J. Fabry, *Noch ein Dekalog! Die Thora des lebendigen Gottes in ihrer Wirkungsgeschichte*, in: *Im Gespräch mit dem deieinigen Gott*. Fs. W. von Breunig, eds. M. Böhneke, H. Heinz, Düsseldorf 1985, 75–96. Yet, other propositions are given, like treating it as a denominative verb related to the noun *nḥš* and therefore meaning 'observing movements of a snake.' That was a method of divination encountered among the Hittites – see B. J. Collins, *The Hittites and Their World*, Archaeology and Biblical Studies 7, Atlanta 2007, 168.

⁴⁸ Even a brief description of ancient divination techniques practiced in Israel, Egypt and Mesopotamia would exceed acceptable size of the paper, so we will only list the methods: lecanomancy (observing oil patterns on water – Gen 44:5-15?), libanomancy (analyzing incense patterns), augury (observing bird movements), dream incubation (1 Kings 3:5-15), sortilege (throwing lots – Josh 18:8.10; 1 Sam 14:42-43), belomancy (shooting arrows – 2 Kings 13:14-19), rhabdomancy (releasing sticks – Hos 4:12), astrology (Is 47:13), necromancy (consulting spirits of the dead – see 1 Sam 28:9; Is 8:19; 19:3; 29:4) and extispicy (observing animals' organs formation), with a special emphasis on hepatoscopy (analyzing animal's liver – Ez 21:26). Israel's unique method involved unidentifiable *teraphim* (Judg 17:5; 18:4; Hos 3:4; Ez 21:26; Zech 10:2). For further reference see F.H. Cryer, *Divination in Ancient Israel and its Near Eastern Environment. A Socio-Historical Investigation*, Journal for the Study of the Old Testament. Supplement Series 142, Sheffield 1994, 124–186.

⁴⁹ As it was regulated a capital crime in Mesopotamia, as well. The only exception to this rule was exorcising demons and counterfeiting effects of black magic.

⁵⁰ Cf. Y. Kaufmann, *The Religion of Israel. From Its Beginnings to the Babylonian Exile*, Chicago 1960, 87–92.

changeable and their meaning is based solely on the context, when no further comments are added; the significance of the verbs is rather mercurial, and varies from general to specific⁵¹.

Although the meaning of verbs in the following verse (19:27) is rather clear, the motivation of the actions described in it is obscure. The verb *nqp* is at the core of the commandment. In Qal it denotes going round (Is 29:1), but more often it is employed in Hiphil, in which it means ‘to circle,’ or ‘to surround’ (see Josh 6:3; Job 19:6; Is 15:8)⁵². The most plausible subject of this prohibition is forming a haircut in form of a perfect circle, that is ‘the sides in back of the ear equalized with the forehead’ (*Sipra Qedoshim* 6:3; b. Mak 20b; see also Josephus, *C. App* 1:173).

Similar bans appear in three other parts of the Old Testament (Lev 21:5; Deut 14:1 and Ez 44:20). Even though the first of the mentioned texts (Lev 21:5) prohibits head shaving, it needs to be pointed out that the text is addressed to priests, while Lev 19:27 affects all Israelites. The reason behind the ban can be related to the contents of some ancient tombs, which included locks of hair, so the prohibition aims to stop all Hebrew believers from imitating pagan rituals. However, suggestions that hair is a symbol of life force, and therefore cutting them is a sign of rejecting it, lacks any profound and decisive textual proof⁵³.

The reason behind prohibiting of shaving one’s beard is also undetermined. Scholars point to either mourning rituals as mentioned in Ugaritic texts, other biblical passages or customs encountered among nomadic tribes⁵⁴, or tend to view facial hair as a sign of manhood. Even though the latter explanation seems more satisfactory, proof of such a symbolical rendering of beards in the Bible are missing. It is more constructive to recall Biblical accounts, in which shaving a man’s beard was a sign of humiliation which, to a certain degree, excluded him from social life (see 2 Sam 10:5).

The noun which opens v. 28, *šeret*, does not appear anywhere else in the Hebrew Bible. Etymologically, this term is entrenched in root *šrt*, also encountered in Akkadian (*šarātu*), Arabic (*šarāṭa*) and Aramaic (*sāraṭ*)⁵⁵, where it means ‘to tear to pieces,’ or ‘to slit.’ This is also corroborated by other passages where the root is employed; it appears in the Hebrew Bible also in Lev 21:5 – the fragment mentioned above – where restrictions concerning priests are mentioned; the regulations double those listed in Lev 19:27. Another place is Zech 12:3, where it symbolically describes bruising hands of anyone, who attempts to lift a heavy boulder, to which

⁵¹ J. Milgrom, *op.cit.*, 1689; see C.M. Carmichael, *op.cit.*, 200–201.

⁵² Some of the authors connect it to Arabic root *naqafa*, which means ‘to smash’. They base their suggestion on Is 10:34 and Job 19:26. However, this view is often rejected and other possibilities are risen, especially in the reference to the latter text – see W.L. Michel, *Confidence and Despair. Job 19,25-27 in the Light of Northwest Semitic Studies*, in: *The Book of Job*, ed. W.A.M. Beuken, Leuven 1994, 157–177; A. Tronina, ‘Redemptor meus vivat et in novissimo de terra surrectus sim’. *Z dziejów egzegezy Hi 19:25*, *Scripturae Lumen* 2 (2010), 128.

⁵³ Cf. W. Engelkemper, *op.cit.*, 124.

⁵⁴ See W. Engelkemper, *op.cit.*, 123–125.

⁵⁵ Also attested in Ethiopic languages, but always with metathesis – in Classical Ethiopic (Ge’ez) as *šaššara*, Tigre – *sāṭra*, Tigrinya – *sātārā*, Harari – *sētāra* and Gurage – *šātārā*.

Jerusalem is compared. Based on parallelism with a Hithpolel verb *gdd*⁵⁶ in Deut 14:1 and 1 Kings 18:28, the word may also bear the meaning of cutting and gashing.

Although connection between the gesture of gashing one's skin and rituals undertaken after the demise of a relative or somebody close is clear, it is uncertain why the author opts for an ambiguous noun *nepeš*. In the Hebrew Bible it often occurs as an equivalent of the indefinite pronoun ('someone', or 'anyone'), but when authors intend to point to a dead person, they employ phrase *nepeš mēt* (see Lev 21:11; Num 6:6). Therefore, it can be implied that the author bans cutting skin as a religious act, undertaken with a specific intention. Cutting one's skin, as mentioned in a picturesque passage of a 'duel' between Elisha and false prophets (1 Kings 18:20-40), was a part of rites within Baal's cult. But since it is listed among other actions in the funereal context, we cannot dismiss this dimension. In Ugaritic texts, it is mentioned as a part of the mourning ritual after Baal's death (CTA 5 VI:10-23⁵⁷)⁵⁸.

Another noun, *kātōbet*, occurs once in the Hebrew Bible. Its connection with a common root *ktb* is beyond discussion, but since it is juxtaposed with another biblical *hapax legomenon*, *qa'āqa*, the meaning behind the root should be studied carefully. While the former verb undoubtedly describes an act by which one leaves words on a solid material for reading, modern idea of writing is assigned to the root secondarily.

Chronologically, the first meaning behind the root *ktb* was 'to chisel (letters in stone),' or 'to scratch (writing on a wax tablet)'⁵⁹, which can be observed in numerous biblical accounts. That is especially important for the meaning and importance of stone tables, on which the Ten Commandments are written (see Ex 24:12; 31:18; 32:15; 34:1.28).

The meaning is further detailed in the account of the golden calf. When Moses descends from Mount Sinai, he is said to have held the stone tables on which God's writing (*miktāb*) has been engraved (*hārūt*). The verb occurs only once in the Bible, probably as a scribal error, for which the more common verb *hrš* seems more suitable. The noun *miktāb* plays a special role in this analysis, because it is connected to the same root and appears in a similar syntactical function. It is stated that the sacrificial formula is engraved on the idol (see *ktb* in Ex 39:30b); reading as *miktāb pittūhē hōtām* ('inscription, as on the engravings of a seal'). Usually, the noun *miktāb* occurs in the Bible in absolute form with its usual meaning 'document,' 'decree' or

⁵⁶ Attested in Akkadian, Old South Arabic, Aramaic, Syriac and Mandaean; also in Arabic as *ḡdd*.

⁵⁷ The text contains mourning gestures and rites common for entire Near East and parallel to those mentioned in the Bible as for the mourning customs – see Ex 4:25; Josh 5:2-3; Is 47:1; Jer 48:27; Jon 3:6; Ez 26:16; 27:30.

⁵⁸ See W. Engelkemper, *op.cit.*, 123–126.

⁵⁹ E. Klein, *Comprehensive Etymological Dictionary of the Hebrew Language*, Jerusalem–Tel Aviv 1987, 289; G.J. Gevaryahu, *Ketovet Ka'aka (Leviticus 19:28): Tattooing or Branding?*, Jewish Bible Quarterly 38 (2010) 1, 18. This meaning was still used in later periods – see M. Sokoloff, *A Dictionary of Jewish Palestinian Aramaic of the Byzantine Period*, Ramat-Gan 1992, 272. J. Huehnergard and H. Liebowitz, *op.cit.*, 71, point to 'puncturing' or 'sewing' as an original meaning behind the root, based on Arabic cognates.

‘edict,’ (see 2 Chr 21:12; 35:4; 36:22; Ezra 1:1; Is 38:9)⁶⁰ and Ex 39:30 is the only example of the construct state, which points to the nouns as determining its precise meaning. Last noun (*ḥôtām*) denotes a seal or a sign that proves right to a title or ownership.

The second term (*pittūah*), related to a root *pth*, common in biblical texts, which besides its primary meaning ‘to open’ in *Pi’el* has a more nuanced meaning of ‘to engrave’. This is mainly attested in Exodus, Books of Kings and Chronicles. Its *Pu’al* participle counterpart is also recorded in etymological figures as a method of fashioning metal, stone and wood objects, which involves making holes, furrows and engravings. This form is probably a loanword, since in Assyrian verb *patāhu* means ‘to bore’ or ‘to. Among different points of reference, one can find material perforation aimed at items in a specific manner⁶¹. The entire figure (*miktab pittûhê ḥôtām*), therefore, denotes a method of crafting metal that seems to involve engraving, leaving a place for another material or simply punching letter-shaped holes.

Etymology of the latter term, *qa’āqa*, remains vague. Usually, authors suggest roots *qw’* or *q’*⁶², neither of which is attested in Biblical Hebrew. It is more likely, that it is entrenched in the root *yq’*, which often describes breaking bones, bruising or inflicting corporal mutilation. This meaning is further confirmed in Semitic cognates, for example, Arabic (D stem) verb *waqqa’a*⁶³, or Ethiopic *waq’a*⁶⁴. All of those roots can also bear a meaning of striking, flaying, skinning, stripping off and crushing, making it safe to assume that semantic fields of these two separate verbs merged at some point, as is often suggested by twofold definitions contained in dictionaries.

Recognition of a I-w/y duplicated root is corroborated by an analogy with a noun *še’ēšā’*, derived from a root *ys’*. Even though semantically the two terms are similar, *qa’āqa* is most probably a noun which denotes a method employed for writing that involves making painful bruising of the skin⁶⁵.

4. HOW OTHERS SAW IT?

Modern approach to different textual traditions attempts to stray away from a strict comparison of the contents in order to decide how far they confirm Hebrew text, treated as an original version, or differ from it in order to explain, why such deviations occur. Besides attempting to make biblical message comprehensible for those who were its recipients, they also play a role of witnesses of how difficult

⁶⁰ The same meaning is found among inscriptions bearing both *mktb*, *ktbh* and *mktbh* nouns – see G.R. Driver, *Problems in Aramaic and Hebrew Texts*, in: *Miscellanea Orientalia. Fs. A. Deimel*, *Analecta Orientalia* 12, Rome 1935, 57; M. Sokoloff, *op.cit.*, 308; J. Hoftijzer, K. Jongeeling, *Dictionary of the North-West Semitic Inscriptions*, vol. I, Leiden–New York–Köln 1995, 547.

⁶¹ CAD XII, 269–270.

⁶² BDB 891; E. Klein, *op.cit.*, 586.

⁶³ This root can also signify branding a horse.

⁶⁴ W. Leslau, *Comparative Dictionary of Ge’ez (Classical Ethiopic): Ge’ez-English / English-Ge’ez. With an Index of the Semitic Roots*, Wiesbaden 1991, 615.

⁶⁵ See J. Huehnergard, H. Liebowitz, *op.cit.*, 69–70, n. 40.

passages were solved in different parts of ancient world. In the following chapter we will analyze Lev 19:26-28 in different textual traditions (Greek, Latin, Syriac and Ethiopic), in order to discover, how authors perceived the subject of tattoos⁶⁶.

4.1. LXX

The Greek Old Testament reveals a problematic phrase reading ‘eating over the blood’ by ‘eating on the mountains.’ This version could imply scribe’s error, mistaking Hebrew *resh* for *dalet*. Although no Hebrew textual witness confirm such reading, it may be suggested to have followed a ritual mentioned and criticized by Ezekiel (18:6.11.15; 22:9)⁶⁷. The following prohibition is described with a verb οἰωνίζομαι, which occurs nine times in the Greek Bible⁶⁸, and even though etymologically it is connected with a noun οἰωνός, referred to a large bird⁶⁹, it can be assumed that it was employed for describing soothsayers, and the verb could simply mean divining from omens or signs⁷⁰. The verb closing up the verse (ὀρνιθοσκοπέομαι), however, has a straightforward meaning of watching birds for omens⁷¹, and occurs only once in the Greek Bible. In comparison to the previous verb, this one refers to common, smaller birds, as described by noun ὄρνις.

The meaning of a following prohibition is dubious since the noun employed, *siso,h*, is used exclusively in this place in LXX, and no parallels in Greek literature can be traced whatsoever⁷². It is assumed that it means ‘a curl of hair’. Since it is followed by a partitive preposition *evk* it can be assumed that the author means to prohibit putting hair into a specific hairdo. The growth of facial hair, however, is not restricted, as the second part of the verse states. Verb employed (φθείρω) means primarily ‘to destroy,’ but in reference to the shape, or appearance of one’s beard (ὄψις τοῦ πρόγονος) it may also bear a nuance of shaving or cutting.

⁶⁶ Samaritan Pentateuch is left out, since its reading copies literally Masoretic version. Old Latin fragments – as far as I have observed – agree with Vulgate, and Coptic version follows radically LXX and therefore they bring nothing new to understanding the biblical ban. Although Qumran community was very interested in the book, no fragment preserved among texts discovered in the Judean Desert contains pericope Lev 19:26-28.

⁶⁷ The Hebrew Bible is not consistent in describing the rite either with ‘*al* or ‘*el*. Thus, one should either assume those prepositions were used interchangeably, or scribes did commit a mistake while copying the text.

⁶⁸ Gen 30:27; 44:5.15; Deut 18:10; 1 Kings 21:33; 2 Kings 17:17; 21:6; 2 Chr 33:6.

⁶⁹ Usually it was used to describe birds of prey, vulture or eagle – see Philo, *Spec. leg.* 3:115; Josephus, *Ant.* 1:185; 2:71; *Bell.* 3:123. But it often appeared in a sense of an omen or a presage – see Philo, *Deus* 181; *Mos.* 1:263.282.284.287; Josephus, *Ant.* 2:234; 19:87. The later term, reserved especially for divination was οἰωνοίσις – Josephus, *Ant.* 18:212, and those who observed birds were called οἰωνοσκόποι – see Philo, *Spec. leg.* 1:60; 4:48.

⁷⁰ In Philo’s and Josephus’ writings those terms are usually connected to the story of Balaam, which suggests that the term was used in a wider sense, that is ‘diviner,’ or ‘soothsayer.’ M.A. Zipor (*Notes sur les chapitres XIX à XXII du Lévitique dans la Bible d’Alexandrie*, Ephemerides Theologicae Lovanienses 67 (1991) 4, 332–333) treats this view as an actualization of the message behind the Hebrew text.

⁷¹ See also synonymous verb, ὀρνιθεύω – Josephus, *C. App.* 1:202.

⁷² Hesychius notes that this word has originated in ancient town of Phaselis, in Asia Minor, on the coast of Lycia.

Verse 28 opens with a ban of making cuttings (ἐντομίζ) for the deceased (ἐπὶ ψυχῆ). A similar phrase also appears in Jer 16:6, and the entire compound occurs about ten times in the Greek Bible, with all of the uses fitting the funerary context⁷³. As it has been pointed out earlier, regulations contained in Lev 19:26-27 are reflected also in 21:5. Even though the noun ἐντομίζ occurs in both instances, in Lev 21 it is an object of a different verb – κατατέμνω. This observation is important as the verb is connected in the Greek Bible to worship of foreign gods (see 1 Kings 18:28; Hos 7:14). Having used the noun γράμμα, the author closely retains a sense of Hebrew *katōbet*, since the noun derives from a verb γράφω, which means ‘to write,’ the same way as its Hebrew counterpart does. This noun is rare in LXX and, except for geographical names, it is only employed 15 times, usually to describe royal edicts, and only once with a reference to an engraved writing (Ex 39:30). As in the Hebrew version, the noun is followed by an adjective that describes a method by which the writing is made; *stikta*, is entrenched in the verb στίζω, meaning ‘to brand (with a mark of disgrace or other sign), puncture,’ and hence the adjective bears a connotation ‘punctured, spotted, dappled’. Two other nouns derive from the same verb, στίγμα and στίγματις, which in Greek literature refer to a mark on a skin and the person bearing it, respectively. Although it can be disputed whether the mark is branded or tattooed, the second option seems more conceivable.

4.2. VULGATE

In the Latin version of the Bible the unclear meaning of the Hebrew prohibition of ‘eating over the blood (*lō’ tō’kəlū ‘al-haddām*)’ is understood as a repetition of a ban on consuming blood, since similar phrase was employed in those commandments⁷⁴. Another verb, *auguror*, is quite common in the Latin Bible, and even though it is etymologically connected to observing birds (from *avis* ‘bird’ and *garrire* ‘to chirp, chatter’) in search for omens, it has become a general verb for describing divining practices (Gen 44:5.15). In the text, practitioners of divination are called *augures* (Deut 18:14; Is 2:6; 47:13; Jer 27:9; see also Is 57:3 for feminine form), while the practice itself is referred to as *augurium* (Num 23:23; 24:1; Deut 18:10; 2 Kings 17:17; 21:6; 2 Chr 33:6; Sir 34:5). The same excerpts also mention ‘observing dreams’ (Deut 18:10; 2 Chr 33:6), as an equivalent of the Hebrew verb *‘nn*.

The Latin version simplifies commandments from v. 27: the first is generally consistent with restrictions for levitical priests preserved in the Book of Ezekiel (44:20), where the ban refers to shaving or cutting hair; the only discrepancy between the texts is that Leviticus prohibits shaving in a unique pattern – *in rotundum*. The adjective refers to round shapes, and in other parts of Vulgate refers to the way the Jerusalem Temple was built (1 Kings 7:12.23.31.35; 10:19; Ez 4:2; see also 2 Chr 4:2 which describes the molten ‘sea’). In contrast to the Hebrew Bible, Latin version

⁷³ See Lev 17:10; 20:6; 21:11; Num 5:2; 6:6; 9:6.7.10; 1 Chr 22:7; Prov 6:21; Hag 2:13; Ez 44:25 (although the preposition governs the accusative case here).

⁷⁴ Gen 9:4; Ex 3:17; Lev 7:27; 17:10.12.14; Deut 12:23-25; 15:23; see also 1 Sam 14:32.33.34; Ez 22:9; 33:25; 39:17.18.19.

puts no specific restriction on shaving beard (*barba*) to its sides or edges, but bans it completely, like LXX does.

The way ‘cutting one’s skin’ is rendered in Latin Bible resembles closely the Hebrew version. However, the second part of the verse is treated in a different manner. The compound *kātōbet qa’āqa* is treated as consisting of two nouns, the former signifying ‘shapes (*figuras*)’ and the latter – ‘signs (*stigmata*)’. The second term is usually restricted in Latin literature to signs of infamy or punitive marks given to runaway slaves or criminals. The reason behind such a rendering lies in the theological environment where the Vulgate arose. Its author, Jerome, was a Christian theologian, and in his times, social status of slaves had already undergone some changes, relative to the times, when Lev 19:28 was codified. Therefore it can be assumed that Jerome wanted to give a foundation for Christian teaching on tattooing and branding, which in the case of slaves was based on a sense of community and equality among all people (see Ga 3:28; Col 3:11; Phil 1-25).

4.3. PESHITTA

As noted earlier other translations make an attempt to render all varieties of meanings of the phrase of ‘eating over the blood’, Peshitta leaves it out completely and starts v. 26 with a prohibition of ‘divining with birds’, followed by a ban of any divination or foretelling (*qsm*).

The first part of a following verse (27) can be hardly explained in relation to the Hebrew, Greek (LXX) or Latin versions. Although it is ambiguous, neither meaning conforms to the previous versions. The verb *tarabbûn* is a Pael form of the root *rby*, and in reference to the hair it means either ‘to let grow’ or ‘to extend.’ In the case of the first meaning, the prohibition sanctions wearing long hair (presumably, by men). Given the fact that Peshitta is usually viewed as a Christian translation, this regulation may reflect a later disapproval of long hair worn by men (see 1 Cor 11:14). Second meaning, probably referring to women, can be treated as parallel to that observed in the writings of Muslim theologians, who condemned artificial or lengthened hair⁷⁵. It is also possible that the author intended to leave the phrase ambiguous with both meanings representing a valid interpretation. The second part of the verse is a word-to-word translation of the Hebrew reading, since similar terms are employed (namely, *p’t’ ddqnykwn*).

The same exact rendering is found in the first part of the v. 28. In Syriac version, the ‘incisions (*hwrtt*)’ made for the dead are connected to the root *hrt*, which bears a similarity to its Hebrew cognate, *śrt*. The author of the Syriac translation renders the Hebrew phrase *kātōbet qa’āqa as ktb’ dnwqdt*. Meaning of the first noun is clear

⁷⁵ Muḥammad ibn Ismā‘īl Al-Bukhārī, *Ṣaḥīḥ Al-Bukhārī. Arabic-English* trans. Muḥammad ibn Ismā‘īl Al-Bukhārī, Al-Medina 1974, 7:537: ‘I heard the Prophet saying, “Allah has cursed the lady who practices tattooing and that who gets it done for herself, and also the lady who lengthens hair artificially and that who gets her hair lengthened artificially”.’ Although Qur’an makes no mention of tattooing, attitude of Muslim theologians is unanimous in finding it unsuitable, and criticizing the practice (*al-wašima*). It seems that practice was very common among Arab women before the Islam era – for further examples see J. Huehnergard, H. Liebowitz, *op.cit.*, 61, n. 5.

and remains in accordance with its Hebrew counterpart, but the second, which means ‘a dot’, derives from the root *nqz* and it is used to describe pricking or hitting. It is assumed that it refers to the tattooing process, which involves puncturing one’s skin in order to leave an indelible continuous line of ink dots in the form of letters⁷⁶.

4.4. GE’EZ BIBLE

The Ethiopic version of Lev 19:26-28 simplifies ambiguous phrases seen in the Hebrew Bible. In v. 26 author follows mainly LXX replacing ‘eating over the blood’ with ‘eating on the mountains (*bawəsta ’adbār*)’, and ‘soothsaying’ with ‘divining by observing of birds (*wa’ittəyərū ba’of*)’⁷⁷. The rendering of the next verse (27) suggests that the reasons behind the biblical ban and the meaning of the prohibited actions remained enigmatic. For this reason the author interprets the bans in a manner similar to that preserved in LXX: ‘you shall not make yourselves lock(s) of hair (*qwənzā’t*), nor shall you shave the beard on your face (*ṣəḥma gaṣṣəkəmu*).’ One aspect remains vague in the reference to the first part of the verse, namely the verb employed. As the verb *gabra* is a general description of doing or making something. It is unclear whether ‘making lock(s) of hair’ refers to a special hairdo or to cutting hair in a specific manner.

The final verse mentions a ban against bodily mutilation, first performed as a part of mourning rituals: ‘you shall not touch your skin with a razor (*malasē*).’ Although the noun is rendered here as ‘razor,’ it can also signify ‘lancet,’ or ‘needle’ which brings the reader closer to another issue – tattooing. The verse is concluded with an etymological figure, based on the verb *faṭara* (*wa’ifəṭru lakemu fatarā*), which means making gashes or incisions on the flesh, but more often it signifies inscribing or carving magic letters. The noun is often employed to designate magical figures. This suggests a practice of tattooing protective spells or protective figures, connected to specific deities.

5. ‘OUR RABBIS HAVE TOLD US...’

The subject of tattooing does not recur too frequently in the rabbinic literature. It is brought up in Mishnah and Tosefta, in reference to specific methods employed in the process that make one culpable or intention that causes the same effect. They are important opinions since they place the discussion of whether tattoos are acceptable in entirely different context, than that suggested by numbers of scholars.

⁷⁶ As mentioned above, tattoos found on the bodies of Amunet and her companion are dots covering the chest, the abdomen and the genital area, which is consistent with the description of the practice in Peshitta.

⁷⁷ The phrase is constructed pleonastically, since the verb *ṭayyara* by itself means ‘to divine or predict future by observing the flight of birds.’ This is derived from the etymological connection of the root to Arabic verb *ṭāra*, which is also attested in Aramaic and Syriac. The former also preserved the nuance of divining by observing of birds in Pael verb *ṭayyer*.

The ban on tattooing is repeated in mMak 3:6, however, it is not placed in context of mourning rituals, and this observation supports our suggestion, that tattooing is not connected in any way with mourning practices. To be found culpable, writing has to be based on a dye injected hypodermically. The Mishnah does not specify, what has to be written in order to transgress the commandment, but later interpretations (for example, R. Shimon) suggest that it is meant to forbid tattooing God's name. Nevertheless, the Jewish theologians were not unanimous sharing the same view – others stated that the guilt implied having a pagan deity's name tattooed. The important thing to stress out is that in Mishnah in no way connects the subject and intention of tattooing with mourning practices.

Tosefta (*Makkot* 4:15), however, views this subject in a different manner. Both, the tattooing and tattooed ones are guilty of transgressing the commandment, as long as the tattoo marks are connected to the idolatry. The same passage deals with the subject of tattooing slaves stating, that if the marks are meant for keeping the servants from running away, tattooing brings no guilt on their owner.

Although some scholars argue that the rabbinic literature serves as a witness of a shift that has occurred with understanding of tattooing between biblical period and later Jewish literature⁷⁸, it seems more likely, that the later literature preserved the meaning which had already been used in reference to the biblical ban since the time it had been codified. Even though the practice was connected to marking a slave, it has more to do with the Roman customs prevailing in ancient world due to the Roman administration over different regions, than with a supposed view of tattoos as marks of slavery.

6. CONCLUSION AND PERSPECTIVES

The above analysis brought up one very important aspect of the tattooing ban mentioned in the Bible. Both the Hebrew Bible and its ancient translations place the prohibition within the spectrum of forbidden magic practices, treating it equally with divination rites aimed at connecting with foreign gods. As a result, tattooing was practiced among polytheistic societies as a sign of a devotion to god(s), and was not to be imitated by Hebrews, since they were already a special property of the Lord (Ex 19:5), and were not supposed to follow customs of other nations.

The ban thus could be viewed as a sign of devotion to idols were criticized in the Pentateuch. However, we lack any proof that the prohibition was observed. As a matter of fact, some texts – as it will be noted below – may even suggest that the regulation only existed as a theoretical or hypothetical decree.

In order to bring our analysis to an end, three other Biblical books that mention skin markings need to be brought up and briefly analyzed. What is important, the practice is not criticized by the Biblical authors and that is to be a subject of further studies, relating both to theological message of the cited pericopes and to their syntactical and lexical shapes.

⁷⁸ See J. Huehnergard, H. Liebowitz, *op.cit.*, 76.

The first fragment is from the Book of Genesis (4:15), when Cain is given a sign ('ôt) on his forehead. Its purpose is to protect its bearer against unrestricted vendetta. The sign, placed by God is a metaphor of God's will to prevent the violence from escalating endlessly.

Other fragment (Is 44:5) is especially important, since it bears a striking resemblance to a practice encountered in Mesopotamia among oblates. When describing future renewal of Israel using a metaphor of streams flowing through dry grounds, Isaiah describes reaction of the Jews confirming their faith. Besides a verbal confirmation, believer verifies his commitment by writing Lord's name on his hand (*wāzeh yiktōb yādō layhwh*). Although the phrase is cryptic in terms of syntax, with especially the exact meaning and function of the noun *yādō* under much debate, one thing deserves a special attention – marking one's hand with Lord's name is not a subject of criticism. Rather, it is employed as an ultimate sign of a deep devotion⁷⁹.

Similar meaning can be found in the Book of Revelation (14:1; 17:5), where a sign on the forehead is a mark of allegiance. One other text from the same book deserves a moment of attention. In Rev 19:16 it is stated that the white rider bears a writing 'KING OF KINGS AND LORD OF LORDS.' It could be assumed that the Bible suggests that Jesus had a mark of some sort on his thigh, but the structure of the verse suggests that the markings were placed on his vestments.

The verse from Leviticus analyzed above sometimes is often brought up in relation to moral evaluation of modern tattoos, but simple quoting cannot dismiss profound biblical research of the cultural context and thorough exegesis. Bible does criticize tattooing as a sign of devotion to pagan gods. The criticism is focused on tattoos as elements of polytheistic (or pagan) rituals meant for establishing special bond with the idols.

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⁷⁹ J. Huehnergard, H. Liebowitz, *op.cit.*, 70–71.

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Summary

The main subject of the paper is a critical evaluation of meaning behind ban on tattoos in Lev 19:26-28 and analysis of historic and cultural contexts of the practice in antiquity. An exempt of Leviticus is deeply entrenched in its context of commandments which forbid imitating religious customs of surrounding cultures and their magical practices, so the research into all of contexts allows reaching main motivation behind the ban and main meaning behind the practice in Israel and in antiquity in general. First step is analysis of motivation for getting tattoos in Israel's neighboring countries to determine main reasons which led ancient people to tattooing and being tattooed. Then, we undergo a thorough philological and exegetical analysis of bans in vv. 26–28, which allows us to understand perspectives which followed authors of ancient biblical translations. Next, after an overview of rabbinic literature we form main conclusions concerning tattoos practice in Leviticus.

Key words: tattoo, tattoos in antiquity, tattooing prohibition, polytheistic rituals, theological context of Lev 19:26-28

BIBLIJNY ZAKAZ TATUAŻU (Kpł 19, 26-28) TŁO, KONTEKST, ZNACZENIE I PERSPEKTYWY

Streszczenie

Głównym tematem artykułu jest krytyczna analiza znaczenia zakazu tatuażu zawartego w Kpł 19, 26–28 oraz badanie historycznych oraz kulturowych kontekstów praktyki tatuowania w starożytności. Zapis Księgi Kapłańskiej jest osadzony w kontekście zbioru zakazów praktyk magicznych, imitujących religijne zwyczaje narodów ościennych, w związku z czym analiza kontekstu pozwala dotrzeć do głównej motywacji, która towarzyszyła prawodawcy. Pierwszym krokiem jest analiza motywacji tatuażu w krajach ościennych Izraela, by dalej ustalić główne powody, dla których w starożytności wykonywano tatuowanie ciała. Następnie szczegółowej analizie filologicznej oraz egzegetycznej poddane zostaną zakazy z ww. 26–28, by na tej podstawie prześledzić w kolejnym kroku, jak starożytni tłumacze rozumieli te zakazy. Dalej, po zarysowaniu zagadnienia w literaturze rabinicznej, sformułowane zostały główne wnioski dotyczące praktyki tatuowania w Księdze Kapłańskiej.

Słowa kluczowe: tatuaż, tatuaże w starożytności, zakaz tatuażu, teologiczny kontekst Kpł 19, 26–28, politeistyczne rytuały

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