



BEWARE OF THE DOGS!

Man's best friend, or not? In his letter to the Philippians, Paul warns the assembly to 'Beware of the dogs, beware of evil workers, beware of those who mutilate the flesh!' (3:2). He appears not to think of dogs as cuddly, lovable pets, but as a suitably disparaging nickname for his bitter enemies who insist that non-Jewish followers of Christ must undergo circumcision.

Throughout the ancient Near East, dogs were regularly used for hunting, herding, guarding, and companionship. However, there is a widespread view that dogs were considered unclean or taboo by ancient Jews. In this case, Paul is warning against those impure factions defiling the holy community. This view stems from the many negative references to dogs found in the Bible. To label someone a dog inferred they were of low status (eg Exodus 22:31) or enemies of Israel (Psalm 22). For John of Patmos, dogs symbolize those excluded from the new Jerusalem (Revelation 22:15). Feral dogs were scavengers (1 Kings 14:11) that roamed in packs on the outskirts of town (Psalm 59:6, 14) and ate dead bodies (1 Kings 16:4; 21:19-24; 22:38; 2 Kings 9:10) as well as their own vomit (Proverbs 26:11). 2 Kings 9:30-36 offers a gruesome story of Jezebel whose corpse is eaten by dogs after being thrown over the city wall.

It was also a popular picture in Roman times that victims of crucifixion served as food for scavenging dogs and birds of prey, thus being denied a proper burial and completing the total humiliation intended by that form of punishment. A minority of scholars have even argued that rather than being buried, Jesus's crucified body may have been left for the dogs.

Even so, as with many topics in the Bible, the Scriptures speak not with a uniform voice but offer several conflicting perspectives. A closer investigation of the Hebrew Bible reveals that dogs are never actually listed as being ritually unclean (Lev 11:27 applies only to contact with animal corpses). Moreover, incidental references suggest they were used by Israelites for farm work, as guard dogs, and as companions. For instance, Job 30:1 mentions the use of dogs for herding. Isaiah 56:10-11 compares Israel's 'blind' sentinels to ineffective guard dogs 'dreaming, lying down, loving to slumber'. In the apocryphal book of Tobit, Tobias is joined by his pet dog as a traveling companion (Tobit 6:2; 11:4).

The range of conflicting perspectives may be in part due to changing attitudes over time. Archaeological evidence suggests that many of ancient Israel's neighbours kept dogs, and that domestication in Israel itself began during the Persian period starting in 539 BCE.

In the New Testament, both negative and positive attitudes towards dogs can be found, sometimes

close together. In Matthew's Gospel, the Canaanite woman (for Mark, the Syrophenician woman) compares herself to 'little dogs' that eat the 'crumbs that fall from their master's table' (Matthew 15:26-7/ Mark 7:27-8). While acknowledging her supposedly subordinate status as an outsider, these dogs should be regarded as household pets rather than impure or defiling hounds. Similarly, in the parable of the rich man and Lazarus in Luke's Gospel, the poor man Lazarus satisfies his hunger with what falls from the table, and has his sores licked by dogs (16:21). This alludes not to Lazarus's misfortune and inability to drive away unclean dogs, but to another prominent role that dogs had in the ancient world: they were widely considered healers. Popular knowledge about a dog's ability to heal through licking is attested in the ancient magical papyri, in which several spells understand a dog's saliva to have therapeutic properties. Dogs also feature in the cult of Asclepius, in which temples housed sacred dogs that would approach visitors to heal them by licking their wounds.

But what to make of Paul's cynophobic polemic in Philippians 3:2? Many interpreters suggest that Paul is cleverly reversing the name-calling of Jews who, it is incorrectly asserted, commonly referred to gentiles as dogs, for both were supposedly considered unclean. There is no evidence, however, of other Jews referring to gentiles as dogs - except possibly for Jesus in Matthew 15:26-7 and Mark 7:27-8. Rather, the metaphor of scavenging wild dogs, encircling and 'mutilating' Paul's communities, seems the more appropriate nuance than any sense of ritual impurity. Ultimately, the depiction of dogs in the Bible is rich and complex, as is the complicated nature of biblical interpretation in general.

