

# What Does the Bible Say About Tattoos?

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[Leviticus](#) 19:28 says, “You shall not make any gashes in your flesh for the dead or tattoo any marks upon you: I am the LORD.” Although this passage clearly prohibits tattoos, it does not give an explicit reason why. This begs the question: Why does the Bible prohibit tattoos?

In his Biblical Views column [“Unholy Ink: What Does the Bible Say about Tattoos?”](#) Mark W. Chavalas, Professor of History at the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse, examines the taboo on tattoos in the Bible. Not only does he analyze traditional explanations for this prohibition, but he also investigates what tattoos signified to ancient Near Eastern peoples, including the [ancient Israelites](#), which suggests the real reason why tattoos were taboo.



**Torah Scroll.** What is said about tattoos in the Bible? Leviticus, the third book of the Hebrew Bible, prohibits them without giving an explicit reason. Why does the Bible prohibit tattoos? *Photo: “Open Torah and Pointer” by Lawrie Cate is licensed under CC-by-SA-2.0.*

Leviticus 19 denounces idolatry and several pagan mourning practices. Some have thought that because of the proximity of the taboo on tattoos to the prohibition of other pagan mourning practices in [Leviticus](#), tattooing must have been a pagan mourning practice. However, we find no evidence of this in ancient texts from the Levant, Mesopotamia or Egypt. As far as we can tell, tattooing was not an ancient mourning practice in these cultures.

This is not to give the impression that tattooing never appears in ancient Near Eastern texts; it does—just not as a mourning practice. In the ancient Near East, tattoos were used to mark slaves. Often the name of a slave’s owner would be tattooed or branded on his hand or forehead. If then the slave were to run away, he could be easily returned to his master. Thus, tattooing was seen as a sign of ownership.

Chavalas thinks that this might be behind the taboo on tattoos in the Bible:

“Tattooing, an insignia of ownership, was perhaps condemned in Leviticus because it reminded them [the Israelites] of their past. After all, they had just spent [the last four centuries as slaves in Egypt](#), where tattooing was also used as a sign of slavery. No longer considered slaves, the Israelites now were prohibited to mark their bodies with permanent signs of servitude to former masters. This did not have to be explicitly articulated to them; no one need ask prison inmates why they shed their orange jumpsuits when they are no longer incarcerated.”

Chavalas also notes that there might be a positive reference to tattoos in the Bible. Isaiah 44:5 reads:

This one will say, “I am the LORD’s,”  
another will be called by the name of Jacob,  
yet another will write on the hand, “The LORD’s,”  
and adopt the name of Israel.

By writing God’s name on his hand, the Israelite in Isaiah 44:5 “was willingly proposing to become a servant of God.” At least in this case, it seems that tattooing was acceptable because the person was marking himself as belonging to the God of Israel.

To learn more about tattoos in the Bible, read Mark Chavalas’s full column [“Unholy Ink: What Does the Bible Say about Tattoos?”](#) in the November/December 2016 issue of *Biblical Archaeology Review*.

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