
The Power of Perceptions: the Ancient Near East as a Case in Point¹

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ABSTRACT

The contemporary world is a living testimony to the enormous potential for conflict lurking in political and religious ideologies of all kinds, and of the negative conceptions associated with the concept of 'otherness'. What is of significance, however, is that the label 'otherness' is not an inherent quality, but the result of a power relation: the power to perceive the 'other' as 'anti-same'. This universal human phenomenon has a long history and the first examples of its destructive consequences are already evident from time immemorial in the cultures of the ancient Near Eastern world. The first part of this paper examines the psychological and cultural factors underlying the perception of 'otherness' (also known as 'labelling/stereotyping' in anthropology and psychology). The second part applies this framework to some relevant evidence from the ancient Near Eastern cultures. Examples of perceptions of ethnic, social and religious 'otherness' are presented.

1. INTRODUCTION

In her book *Identity and Difference* (1997) the social scientist, Kathryn Woodward, observes: 'Whereas, in the 1970s and 1980s, conflict was explained and discussed in terms of conflicting ideologies, that terrain of contestation is now more likely to be characterized by competing and conflicting identities ...' (1997: 18ff.). Although this is undoubtedly the most probable explanation of what is happening in the contemporary world, it must at the same time also be stressed that the issue of identity has always been a contentious issue in the history of humankind, and will continue to

be the case. The construction of identity has to do with power: the power to perceive yourself and 'others' in terms of social, political and religious categories that you and your social grouping deem fit and justified. What usually happens is that the perceiving 'we' group ascribes to itself all kinds of noble characteristics that are to be regarded as 'cultivated' and 'normative', whilst the unknown 'other' is represented in terms of the directly opposite or abject qualities (cf. Pongratz-Leisten 2001; Cohen 2001, with literature).

These types of cultural polarisation are, however, nothing new in the history of humankind; they have been with us from time immemorial. The earliest examples of the power of representation can be traced back to the cultures of the ancient Near East. One such classic example hails from ancient Mesopotamia (*The Marriage of Martu*, Lines 128ff.; see Klein 1996) where a civilised Sumerian city dweller expresses his perception regarding his nomadic neighbours, people who in almost every respect represent 'an inverse' nature of existence, in the following terms:

Lo, their hands are destructive, (their) features are (those)
[of monkeys],
They are those who eat the taboo [of] Nanna, [*they have*]
no reverence,
In their constantly roaming around, ...
[*Being*] the abomination [of] the temples of the gods,
Their [counsel] is confused, [they cause] only
dis[turbance],
A *man* who is clothed in leather-sac, who ...
A tent-dweller, [*buffeted*] by wind and rain, [who offers
no] prayer,
He who dwells in the mountains, [knows not] the places
[*of the gods*],
He who digs up mushrooms at the foot of the mountain,
who knows no submission.²
He eats uncooked meat,
In his lifetime has no house,
When he dies, he will not be buried (Klein 1996: 89; see
also Van de Mierop 1997: 43).

According to this judgment, nomads are ignorant about the fundamental institutions of civilization, such as fixed shelter, agri-

culture, cuisine and proper burial practices (Cooper 1983: 31). This reminds one of what Thucydides wrote several years later (c. 400 BCE) about the Aetolians in Greece: 'The Aetolians ... dwelt in unwalled villages which were widely scattered ... they speak a dialect more unintelligible than any of their neighbours, and are believed to eat raw meat' (Limet 2005: 372).

Similar unflattering remarks, however, could likewise have been made regarding city life, which, seen from another perspective, represents a directly inverse manner of existence. The following quotation is from the Babylonian Erra epic, where the god Erra is aroused by warmongering creatures, the 'Seven', who have the following to say about city life:

But the noble who stays in the city can never eat enough.
 His people will hold him in low esteem, he will command
 no respect,
 How could he threaten a campaigner?
 However well developed is the strength of the city
 dweller,
 How could he possibly best a campaigner?
 However toothsome city bread, it holds nothing to the
 campfire loaf,
 However sweet fine beer, it holds nothing to water from
 the skin,
 The terraced palace holds nothing to the (wayside) sleep-
 ing spot (Van de Mieroop 1997: 45; see also Machinist
 1987: 268ff.)

It is thus clear that the forming of perceptions is part and parcel of the cultural history of the human race. From the earliest times this has given rise to the creation of a wide range of stereotypes. In this respect the anthropologist, Redfield, makes the following instructive observation. He claims that the worldview of each culture, or cultural group, consists mainly out of two binary oppositions, viz. 'human/not human' and 'we/they' (1962: 92). These oppositions most often correlate as follows: 'we' equals 'humans' and 'they' equals 'not-humans'. Liverani (1990: 33–45) proposes a slightly different perspective relating to the categorisation/classification of a given cultural world. According to him, the conception of any reality is based on the principles of 'inner' versus 'outer' space, or 'centre' versus 'periphery': all the positive

qualities are ascribed to the location of the perceiving subject, while all the negative qualities are pushed to the periphery.

It is well-known that in the modern world this appreciation of 'culture/not-culture' or 'centre/periphery', most often finds its concrete application in racial perceptions³. The idea of an innately determined ethnic inequality was, however, never an issue in the ancient Near Eastern worldview. Peoples were grouped according to specific characteristics ascribed to them, but such classification was always done in terms of the labels 'culture/not-culture': everything associated with the perceiving subject and his group was marked as culture, while all other cultural groups/items were perceived as belonging to the periphery, and accordingly classified as 'not-culture'. Never was the concept of race in any form advanced to sanction the division between groups.

The earliest recorded reference to humankind's ethnic diversity in terms of language, skin colour and character might well be *The Great Egyptian Hymn to the Aten* (more or less 1400 BCE). In this beautiful poem the god Aten is praised as the creator and sustainer of the whole world, which also included the existence of a diversity of ethnic groups and their languages. A state of affairs in social reality is merely recorded; there is no trace whatsoever of colour prejudice:

You made the world as you wished, you alone,
All peoples, herds, and flocks;
All upon earth that walk on legs,
All on high that fly on wings...
You set every man in his place,
You supply their needs;
Everyone has its food,
His lifetime is counted.
Their tongues differ in speech,
Their characters likewise;
Their skins are distinct,
For you distinguished the peoples
(Lichtheim 2003a: 46; my emphasis)

The voyagers to the new world (the 16–17th century) likewise continued to categorise peoples according to certain social norms, but from that time onwards the phenomenon of ethnicity, and all other negative cultural facets associated with this idea, started to

play a pivotal role in the distinction between different groups. The ideology underlying this cultural 'colonisation', as Said calls it, is, for example, fittingly described by him in his *Culture and Imperialism*: 'What is striking in all these discourses are the rhetorical figures one keeps encountering in their descriptions of "the mysterious East", as well as the stereotypes about "the African ... mind", the notions about bringing civilization to primitive or barbaric people' (1994: XI). Needham (1978: 5), likewise, characterises the initial European contact and prejudice towards the 'other' along the same lines: 'When European voyagers explored the world, they often enough had a clear eye for physique, dress, and habitations, but they more often had a distorted or derogatory view of moral aspects of exotic peoples. Typically, these strange societies had no religion, or no law, or no idea of the family, or not even a true form of language to qualify them as truly human'. An English traveller of the mid-16th century refers, for example, to these 'other' peoples as 'bestly living, without a God, laws, religion, or common wealth; and so scorched and vexed with the heate of the sunne, that in many places they curse it when it riseth' (Snowden 1983: 69)⁴. Another 17th century French visitor to the Cape, South Africa, Francois-Timoléon de Choisy, is also not impressed by the religious sentiments of the indigenous population: 'They hardly have a religion; only when there is a need for rain they address their plea to a certain divine being without a name...' (Van Stekelenburg 2001: 9).

However, the feature of a dark skin colour could also, seen from a different perspective, be regarded as a positive aesthetic asset. In one of the central African creation myths the African regards himself as perfectly cooked, but the white man as underdone because of a defect in the creator's oven where people were fashioned from clay (Snowden 1983: 76). Van Grevenbroek, secretary (1684–1694) of the Political Council at the Cape, South Africa, in like manner, had some very fine things to say about the Khoi: 'their souls are more noble than most Europeans'; one of their chiefs is described as 'more human than most Christians'; towards castaways they display 'a human love barely attested among the first Christians' (Van Stekelenburg 2001: 11).

One of the oldest strategies to communicate the idea of cultural 'otherness' is by way of the powerful guiding principle of 'inver-

sion' (Hartog 1988; Vasunia 2001). This entails that 'otherness is transcribed as anti-sameness' (Hartog 1988: 213). It was in particular the historian Herodotus who resorted to this notion a number of times in his *Histories*. The first step in this strategy of viewing the 'other' was to mention the difference; the second to 'translate' it by bringing into play the schema of inversion. The following example is a familiar one: 'The Egyptians have an 'other' (*heteros*) climate, on the banks of a river which is different (*allos*) from all other rivers and so have they made all their customs and laws of a kind which is for the most part the converse of those of all other men' (Hartog 1988: 213). The Egyptian national character, seen from a Greek perspective, entails, for example, the following oppositions:

Among them, the women run the market and shops, the men weave at home; and whereas in weaving all others push the woof upwards, the Egyptians push it downwards. Men carry burdens on their heads, women on their shoulders. Women urinate standing, men sitting ... Everywhere else, priests of the gods wear their hair long; in Egypt they are shaven. Among all other men, it is the custom, in mourning, ... to have their heads shaven; Egyptians are shaven at other times, but after a death they let their hair and beard grow⁵.

Similar inverse ideas are evident centuries later among American explorers in their perceptions of the native Indians: 'Their language was unintelligible (they did not speak English or Spanish or French or Dutch), they went naked (did not dress like Europeans); they had no government ... they had no religion ... they had no morals ... they were treacherous ... and their customs were barbarous (different from the customs of Europe and therefore not "civilized")' (Calloway 1994: 21).

2. PSYCHOLOGY OF STEREOTYPING / 'OTHERNESS'

Above it was noted that the perception of reality in terms of the categories 'we/they'// 'centre/periphery' can be traced back to the beginning of written history. It is in this regard that the psychological activity of stereotyping becomes important.

The concept of the 'stereotype' has its origin in the art of printing. It was first used in France in the 18th century to describe a

method of printing designed to duplicate text representations. The text information was impressed on clay, or on some or other soft metal, and from these imprints metal plates (stereotypes: *stereos*: 'solid/firm' and *tupos*: 'imprint/model') were made, more than one at a time (Miller 1982: 4). The gradual metaphoric transference of this term to the social-psychological phenomenon of 'stereotyping' reveals primarily two aspects which still have a connection with the original process, viz.

- the idea of *duplication*: all products of the stereotype process are thought to be identical;
- the idea of *rigidity/permanency* (Miller 1982: 4).

In view of this, a stereotype can be defined as: 'A relatively rigid and oversimplified or biased perception or conception of an aspect of reality, especially of persons or social groups ...' (Miller 1982: 4).

But why do people create stereotypes? The idea of the stereotype was first suggested in 1922 by a journalist, Walter Lippmann, in his well-known book *Public Opinion* on how public opinion is structured. He observes that people do not act with regard to the objective environment as it really is, but in terms of their perception of that environment ('the pictures in our heads'). People's particular behaviours are direct responses to that pseudo-environment which they treat 'as if it were the environment itself' (Lippmann 1922: 3). Lippmann advocated various principles which are of cardinal significance for subsequent research on the phenomenon of stereotyping.

- Stereotyping is a common human phenomenon. The real environment is too big and complex for direct acquaintance and therefore people construct a pseudo-environment on a simpler model before it can be managed (Lippmann 1922: 16).

- The observer plays an active role in the forming of stereotypes. According to Lippmann, 'A report is the joint product of the knower and known, in which the rôle of the observer is always selective and usually creative' (Lippmann 1922: 80).

- Stereotypes involve an emphasis on generalisation (Lippmann 1922: 88f).

- Stereotypes are never neutral. They are 'highly charged with the feelings that are attached to them' (Lippmann 1922: 96).

- Given the fact that stereotypes are social constructions of reality, the knower/subject should cultivate the healthy habit of continuously reviewing them (Lippmann 1922: 126).

Against this background we can now turn to a few examples of such stereotyping or perceptions of ‘otherness’ in ancient Near Eastern literary texts. These examples will be presented under the following subheadings:

- (1) the perception of ethnic ‘otherness’;
- (2) the perception of social ‘otherness’;
- (3) and the perception of religious ‘otherness’.

3. THE PERCEPTION OF ETHNIC ‘OTHERNESS’

3.1 ‘Our’ geographical world versus ‘theirs’

Of the primary features in expressing the distinction between the ‘us’ and the ‘other’ is that people view their own territory/world/space as special and different from all other surrounding areas. One of the earliest examples of such typically ethnocentric pronouncements is encountered in ancient Near Eastern texts. According to the Egyptian worldview, for example, Egypt, as the eye of Horus, was destined by the god not to be *a* nation among nations, but *the* nation, created for Horus-Pharaoh. In one of the Pyramid texts this ethnocentric stance is expressed in the following words:

The doors that are on you rise in protection.
They do not open to the westerners,
they do not open to the easterners,
they do not open to the southerners,
they do not open to the northerners.
They open for Horus! It is he who has made them,
he who has raised them, he who has saved them
against all attacks against them by Seth.
(Bresciani 1990: 221ff.)

Another way of representing what is culturally ‘normal’ and what is the ‘inverse’ is by employing different descriptive terms to designate your own territory over against the area of the other. In Sumerian, for example, the inner country is *kalam* (always in the singular), whilst the surrounding lands/mountains are called *kur* (always in the plural) (Kramer 1963: 286; Steiner 1982: 633; Röl-

lig 1995: 88ff.). In Egypt the flat Nile valley is *ta*, while the surrounding mountains are *khasut*; the black agricultural land is *kmt*, while the red outer steppe is *dshrt* (Liverani 1990: 35).

The characterisation of one's 'own nation' over against the 'foreigners' likewise points in this direction. The Egyptians made a distinction between 'men', on the one hand, and Libyans or Asiatics or Africans, on the other. In other words, Egyptians were 'people'; foreigners were not. Non-Egyptians could, however, also acquire the label 'human' if they got to stay in Egypt, learned the Egyptian language, acquired Egyptian names and clothed themselves in the way the Egyptians did (Helck 1977: 311; for aspects of the assimilation of foreigners into Egyptian culture, cf. Vittmann 2003: 241ff.). In Mesopotamia the same kind of norm applied. Compare in this regard the perception about the mountain-people, the Gutians, in the Sumerian text, *The Curse of Agade*:

Not classed among people, not reckoned as part
of the land,
Gutium, people who know no inhibitions.
With human instinct but canine intelligence
and monkeys' features -
Enlil brought them out of the mountains
(Cooper 1983: 31).

Intimately connected with the uniqueness of their own land, their own nation, is the thought that the climatic and geographical conditions of their own land are regarded not only as different, but far superior to those of the 'other' countries. Such contrast is, however, nothing new. For an Egyptian, who was dependent on the annual inundation of the Nile, the rain of the Asiatic countries (which from his viewpoint was an 'inverted' form of irrigation: 'the Nile in the sky'; Wilson 1977: 38) was quite a strange and unfamiliar phenomenon. In the wisdom writing of the Egyptian sage, Merikare, the following remarks are made about the Asiatic landscape and climate, which is seen from their perspective as quite 'abnormal': 'It is a land troubled with water, inaccessible because of the many trees, with its roads bad because of the mountains' (Wilson 1977: 39). Another text emphasises the unpredictable and unsafe nature of this landscape in the following words: 'The narrow valley is dangerous with Bedouin, hidden under the bushes.

Some of them are four or five cubits from their noses to the heel, and fierce of face ... thy path is filled with boulders and pebbles, without a toe hold for passing by, overgrown with reeds, thorns, brambles and wolf's paw. The ravine is on one side of thee, and the mountain rises on the other' (Liverani 1990: 40ff.).

The Asiatic agricultural cycle, as well, was viewed as the direct 'opposite' to what is normal in Egypt. In a Ramesside royal hymn it is said that the Asiatics are 'those who plough in summer and reap in winter' (Liverani 1990: 37).

To Herodotus, in like manner, the climate of Scythia is certainly exceptional and inverted, compared to what the Greeks are accustomed to. The rainfall pattern is a reversal of what is experienced in the Mediterranean regions generally. Regarding Scythia he observes: it never (or virtually never) rains in the winter, which everywhere else is normally the season of rain (in other words: as is the case in the Greek model). On the other hand, it never stops raining in the summer (Hartog 1988: 29).

3.2 'Our' language versus 'theirs'

Language too, can function as a distinguishing mark of what is 'cultivated' and what is 'uncultivated' (Liverani 1990: 38; Röllig 1995: 93ff.). Usually the language of the 'other' is unintelligible, stammering, animal- or child-like speech (Smith 1985: 20). One of the oldest references which reminds one of the *barbaros*⁶ nature of the language of 'strangers' comes from Old Babylonian times, where the Gutians and two other groups were portrayed as 'those who stay in far away places and whose language is confused' (Machinist 1987: 265; see also Röllig 1995: 93). On the contrary, a language such as the Egyptian tongue is lauded as 'the language of men' (Liverani 1990: 38). Mastery of it, as well as adopting the Egyptian life style, is the ideal *par excellence* and the hallmark of any true education. For foreigners to master the Egyptian language, however, a type of physical metamorphosis was a prerequisite since the foreign language is 'inverted' if compared with the 'human/Egyptian' language. One text expresses this view as follows: 'Having been brought into Egypt (the Libyans) were settled into fortresses ... They heard, while in the service of the king, the Egyptian language, and the king let them forget their own language, he overturned their tongues' (Liverani 1990: 38).

One comes across similar remnants of this ethnographic tradition in the Hebrew Bible. According to Ezechiel 3:5, the prophet is not sent to a foreign people ‘of obscure speech and difficult language’ (NRSV), but to his own people; the Assyrians likewise are described in Isaiah 33:19 as those ‘of an obscure speech that you cannot comprehend, stammering in a language that you cannot understand’ (NRSV; see also Smith 1985: 20). The same *topos* can be illustrated from more recent times, the colonisation of the Americas, where the ‘others’ were regarded as ‘parrots’ with no native language but imitators of the European language (Smith 1985: 20).

3.3 ‘Our’ customs versus ‘theirs’

The customs of the ‘others’, likewise, were conceived as completely ‘inverted’ when compared with one’s own particular national character (Röllig 1995: 91ff.). The Egyptians, for example, displayed no understanding of the characteristics of an Asian person. For them: ‘He does not live in a single place, but his feet wander. He has been fighting since the time of Horus, but he conquers not’ (Wilson 1977: 39).

Another telling example of the nature of cultural superiority is encountered in the Egyptian story of Sinuhe from the Middle Kingdom (2050–1800 BCE; cf. Sparks 1998: 77ff.). It recounts the experiences of an Egyptian high official who, for some inexplicable reason, ends up living in Syro-Palestine (the foreign country). Although he apparently becomes well assimilated into this culture, he never forgets his Egyptian roots and time and again longs back to his home country. For him the Egyptian way of life was the absolute ideal, not to be compared to the less enjoyable Syro-Palestinian peasant manner of existence. Understandably, Sinuhe was overwhelmed when he once received the following patriotic message from the Egyptian king: ‘You shall not die abroad! Nor shall Asiatics inter you. You shall not be wrapped in the skin of a ram [as was customary in the nomadic life style: PAK] to serve as your coffin’ (Lichtheim 2003b: 80).

Back in the Egyptian civilization at last, for Sinuhe it was as if years of this ‘inverted’ Syro-Palestinian style of living were literally and figuratively stripped off his body: ‘I was shaved; my hair

was combed. Thus was my squalor returned to the foreign land, my dress to the Sand-farers. I was clothed in fine linen; I was anointed with fine oil. I slept on a bed. I had returned the sand to those who dwell in it, the tree-oil to those who grease themselves with it' (Lichtheim 2003b: 82; see also O'Connor 2003: 169ff)⁷.

4. THE PERCEPTION OF SOCIAL 'OTHERNESS'

Social stereotyping has to do with the conceptions people entertain about one another in a specific social context. The ancient Near East has left us with a wealth of evidence of this. This section will refer only to two examples in this category, viz. those relating to some professions and to women.

Just as is the case in modern times, certain ancient Near Eastern professions were in particular the target of stereotyping. In this respect one would go far to find a better classic example than the Egyptian Middle Kingdom (2050–1800 BCE) *Satire on the Trades*. In this literary piece, which clearly originated in elite circles, the Egyptian scribe is held up as the profession unequalled in every respect. In comparison with the scribe, occupations such as the weaver and the fisherman make a poor showing.

The weaver in the workshop,
He is worse off than a woman;
With knees against his chest,
He cannot breathe air.

.....

I'll speak of the fisherman also,
His is the worst of all jobs;
He labours in the river,
Mingling with crocodiles.

See, there's no profession without a boss,
Except for the scribe; he is the boss.
(Lichtheim 1973: 188–189)

Another ancient Near Eastern social grouping which was also the victim of the power of perceptions was women⁸. If one reads through the multitude of literature about the weal and woe of these ancient Near Eastern figures, very soon the impression emerges that, in the words of Simone de Beauvoir in her book *The Second*

Sex: ‘One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman’ (1972: 295). Naturally there were the exceptions, such as the Egyptian and some Sumerian women, who were apparently in a better position socially than their other ancient Near Eastern sisters, but the following list of negative perceptions about women⁹ could be regarded as relatively widespread from the second to the first millennium BCE in the ancient Near Eastern world:

- Women do not have their own identity: they are either the daughter of a father or the wife of a husband;
- Women's primary justification for existence is the continuation of the male race¹⁰;
- Women are weak and are easily intimidated¹¹;
- Women tend to do wrong. Different kinds of laws are necessary to keep them in a subordinate position¹²;
- Women need the protection of men. The fact that a married woman had to appear veiled in public places (see *e.g.* Middle Assyrian Laws Par 40–41; Lambert 1992: 141) signalled that she was under the protection of a husband¹³;
- A respectable woman is a married woman;
- Women are by nature temptresses and should therefore be approached with circumspection. Compare, *e.g.* the following pronouncement (Stanza VI) in the Akkadian satire *The Dialogue of Pessimism*: ‘A woman is a pitfall, a pitfall, a hole, a ditch, a woman is a sharp iron dagger that slashes a man's throat’ (Foster 1995: 371);
- Women who do not act within the confines of the traditional domestic role ascribed to them (*i.e.* women such as prostitutes and witches; see *e.g.* Tetlow 2004: 201; Rollin 1983) are potentially dangerous and should be avoided.

Another female figure about whom there were also distinct perceptions was the prostitute. This is one of the oldest professions of humankind and already in the Gilgamesh epic this lady plays a pivotal role in introducing the hero's friend, Enkidu, to the gains of civilization¹⁴. If the ancient Near Eastern literary sources depicting her are investigated, she is usually portrayed as someone who is ‘typically contrasted to the “normal” woman, that is, the married woman, from whom she is separated spatially and symbolically, through distinctive dress and habitat’ (Bird 1997: 200; see also

Leick 1994: 157ff.). She is perceived typically to act in the following ways:

- She is totally unable to stay at home: the places where she is active are the public places or the ‘margins’ of society (cf. biblical Rahab, who had her house ‘on the outer side of the city wall’ [NRSV]; Josh 2: 15). Compare also one of her designations in Accadian as ‘she who goes out’ (in contrast to the faithful wife who stays at home)’ (Lambert 1992: 139).
- She is restless and continuously on the move: in the biblical Hebrew book of Prov (7: 11–12) it is said about her: ‘Her feet abide not in her house, now in the street, now in the public squares’¹⁵.
- She employs the strategy of flattery to catch her prey (compare e.g. Shamhat in the Gilgamesh epic and the ‘strange woman’ in Prov 6: 24 ff.)¹⁶;
- She is easily to be recognised by her clothing: compare e.g. the portrayal of the prostitute *par excellence* in the biblical tradition, Jezebel, in 2 Kings 9: 30: ‘She had painted her eyes and dressed her hair, and she stood looking down from a window’ (see also Prov 7: 10: ‘the garment of a prostitute’);
- She is not a suitable marriage partner: compare the advice of a father to his son in the Middle Babylonian *Counsels of Wisdom*: ‘Do not marry a prostitute, whose husbands are legion ... in your trouble she will not support you; in your dispute she will be a mocker. There is no reverence or submissiveness with her’ (Lines 72–77; Lambert 1960: 103).

5. THE PERCEPTION OF RELIGIOUS ‘OTHERNESS’

Measured by the standards of one's own group, the religious convictions of the ‘other’ can appear to be quite strange and even aberrant. Examples of perceptions of unfamiliar religious practices are common right through the history of humankind. Some of the earliest examples date as far back as the Sumerian culture. According to The Weidner Chronicle the Gutians were completely ignorant about what is a proper religious attitude: ‘Oppressive Guti, who were never shown how to worship god, who did not know how to properly perform the rites and observances’ (Cooper 1983: 31). For

Tacitus the Egyptians seemed to worship many animals and monstrous images (Schäfer 1997: 39). It is not surprising that the European travellers of the 16–17th centuries described the religion of the ‘savages’ in similar terms. From a European perspective the following views were expressed about the Brazilians: ‘not only are they like our savages, without any form of religion or knowledge of God, but that they are so blinded and hardened in their cannibalism that they seem to be in no wise capable of the Christian doctrine’ (Eilberg-Schwartz 1990: 38). The Englishman, Greenhalgh, writing more or less at the same time, had the following to say about the religious ritual practices of the Jews: ‘the Jews with their taleisim [i.e. prayer shawls] over their heads presented to the observer a strange, uncouth, foreign and ... barbarous sight’ (Eilberg-Schwartz 1990: 38).

But one would, however, have to search far and wide to outdo the Hebrew Bible in its stereotyping of the religious beliefs of the ‘others’. The arsenal of adjectives and imagery in this respect is simply endless. One classic example is a passage in the Psalms which has the following to say about the gods of the nations:

Our God is in heaven;
 he does whatever pleases him.
 Their idols are silver and gold,
 made by the hands of men.
 They have mouths that cannot speak,
 and eyes that cannot see;
 they have ears that cannot hear;
 nostrils, and cannot smell;
 with their hands they cannot feel,
 with their feet they cannot walk,
 and no sound comes from their throats.
 Psalm 115:3–7 (NEB)

One way of portraying the allure these strange religions had on biblical Israel was in terms of the marriage metaphor. In accordance with this image the foreign religions and their followers are presented in highly emotional language as those who leave no stone untouched to let the chosen people ‘follow after them’ (Deut 6: 14; 8: 19; 11: 28, etc.), ‘make them play the harlot’ (Ex 34: 16, Hos 4: 10, 18, 2 Chron 21: 11, etc.), ‘enticing them’ (Deut 4: 19,

30: 17, 2 Chron 21: 11), 'deceiving them' (Jer 29: 8), and so becoming 'a snare for them' (Ex 34: 12; see also Gerstenberger 1994: 132). The reason for this aberration is clearly not to be sought among the Israelites themselves, but should be attributed to these external, odious influences. Also elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible these religions are described in the strongest possible reprehensible terms: they are 'loathsome' (1 Kgs 11: 5–7, Hos 9: 10), 'dungy things' (Ezech 6: 4–5, 9)¹⁷, 'shameful things' (Jer 3: 24, 11: 13), 'useless idols' (Ps 31: 7), 'abominable images', etc. (Ezech 7: 20). As is typical of stereotyping, no distinction is drawn between the gods and their different manifestations. All are of the same class and nature: 'Baals' (Hos 2: 15), 'Ashtaroth' (Judg 2: 13), 'other gods' (Ex 20: 3), 'the host of heaven' (2 Kgs 23: 4; cf. also Gerstenberger 1994: 133), or 'devils' (*daimonia*; see Deut 32: 17 in the LXX; Dowden 2000: 215). Measured against the Yahwistic religion, which according to this point of view is the sole true religion, all the other religions could obviously only be shameful, worthless and abusive. Gerstenberger rightly remarks that such sharp judgments on the religious convictions of the 'other' do not allow any understanding of them: 'All religious polemic is a precarious projection aimed solely at the defence of the self and its own stability, and do not do justice to the other party' (1994: 139; my translation from the German).

6. CONCLUSION

In our modern world we are in the privileged position of being able to learn from the mistakes of the past. What is hopefully evident from these few examples from the ancient Near Eastern world is the enormous potential for conflict lurking in religious and political ideologies, and the destructiveness caused by such negative perceptions of 'otherness'. It is well known that major wars in history were triggered by such ideas and in our world we are still not safeguarded against this danger. Many of the conflicts raging at present are caused by the increasing diversity of viewpoints and beliefs people are even prepared to die for. This state of affairs led someone like the British scholar Hall to assert: 'The capacity to *live with difference* is, in my view, the coming question of the twenty-first century' (1993: 361). It is against this background that all initia-

tives aimed at the promotion of intercultural and inter-religious dialogue and understanding should be wholeheartedly supported (see e.g. K ung 1992). There is, however, still a long way to go, perhaps even further after the events of 9/11, 2001. In this regard the last word belongs to Lippmann, the father of the idea of stereotyping. He offers the following sound advice:

And since my moral system rests on my accepted version of the facts, he who denies either my moral judgments or my version of the facts, is to me perverse, alien, dangerous ... The opponent has always to be explained, and the last explanation that we ever look for is that he sees a different set of facts ... *It is only when we are in the habit of recognizing our opinions as a partial experience seen through our stereotypes that we become truly tolerant of an opponent.* (Lippmann 1922: 126; my emphasis)

NOTES

¹ This paper is an adapted version of Kruger (2004) and Kruger (2006).

² The 'who knows no submission', which is a paraphrase of 'who does not know how to bend the knee', is connected by Streck (2004: 421, Footnote 2) with 'the ability to practise agriculture'. See also Streck (2004) for the nature of the religion of the Amorite nomads.

³ Goldenberg (1999) argues (with examples) that the idea of race had its origin in classical antiquity, from where it was subsequently adopted into Arabic writings (10 century CE onwards). See also the study by Benjamin Isaac (2006), *The invention of racism in classical antiquity*, Princeton University Press.

⁴ According to Cohn (1994), a similar perception of depravity underlies the supposedly justifiable grounds behind the Israelite conquest of the perverse Canaanite territory in biblical times. For more recent examples of comparable ideas relating to Europe and the new world, cf. Schwartz (1994).

⁵ Vasunia (2001: 94–95); see also the examples gathered by Smith (1978: 248), Nippel (1990) and Schlesier (1994). Whilst Book 2 of Herodotus is devoted to the 'Egyptian *logos*', the greater part of Book 4 (1–144) deals with the otherness of the Scythians, who 'represented that Other in its purest, polarized form, being the ideal type of the anti-Greek: non-agricultural, non-urban, uncivilized, nomadic' (Cartledge 1993: 56).

⁶ Before the 5th century BCE the word *barbaros* was not a designation for the non-Greek world as such, but associated with language (e.g. *barbarophōnos*: 'of a foreign speech'; see Hall 1989: 9). The *Odyssey* refers to two other terms more or less equivalent to *barbarophōnos*: *allothroos* ('of another tongue') and *agriophōnos* ('of wild speech'; Hall 1989: 19).

⁷ Cf. in the same vein Sargon II's intentions (Dûr-Sharrukîn cylinder) to 'civilise' the conquered people who, according to the Assyrian norm, have no proper language and religion: 'People of the four regions of the world, of foreign tongue and divergent speech, dwellers of mountain and lowland ... I carried off at Assur, my lord's command ... Assyrians, fully competent to teach them how to fear god and the king, I dispatched to them as scribes and sheriffs' (Luckenbill 1927: 65f; see also Sparks 1998: 35). A similar tradition is still evident in the writings of the Hellenistic-Babylonian priest, Berossus (4th century BC), who recounts how the wise 'fish man', Oannes, appeared long ago to 'a large group of people who lived in Babylonia like wild animals without laws' and that the reason for his appearance was to teach them 'everything relating to a civilised way of life' (Machinist 1987: 286; my translation from the German).

⁸ It is impossible to supply a representative list of literature published on the role and position of women in the ancient Near Eastern cultures, since it would be too extensive. For good recent overviews, however, cf. Lesko (1987: 42–71), the 47th volume of RAI (2001) *Sex and Gender in the ancient Near East* (Parpola & Whiting 2002) and Haude (2004), with literature.

⁹ For a discussion of 'positive' stereotypes regarding ancient Near Eastern women, cf., however, Asher-Greve (2002).

¹⁰ Compare e.g. the following remark with regard to Mesopotamian (royal) women: '... the woman was primarily seen as the receptacle of the man's semen' (Melville 2004: 54).

¹¹ Cf. e.g. the following two stereotypical pronouncements which clearly reveal that men are usually conceived as warriors and women as the weaker sex (Frymer-Kensky 1998: 20). The first one is a biblical Hebrew prophetic taunt: 'The powerful men of Babylon have ceased fighting, they remained in their strongholds. Their strength has failed, they became women' (Jer 51: 30; see also Isa 19: 16, Nah 3: 13 and Washington 1998: 197, Hoffner 1966). A similar conception of masculinity and femininity is expressed in a Hittite self-maledictory oath: 'Whoever breaks these oaths ... let these oaths change him from a man to a woman! Let them change his troops into women, let them dress them in the fashion of women ... Let them break the bows, arrows, (and) weapons in their hands and let them put in their hands distaff and mirror' (Washington 1998: 197; see also Haas 2004: 218ff.).

¹² Cf. in this respect Lerner's remark (1986: 9): 'Women's sexual subordination was institutionalized in earliest law codes and enforced by the full power of the state'.

¹³ 'Veil was a public sign of sexual unavailability and male ownership' (Tetlow 2004: 215).

¹⁴ Cf. Tablet II of this epic; for a translation, see George (1999: 12ff.).

¹⁵ 'Public availability' was a common trait of this type of woman in ancient times: biblical Hebrew Tamar presents herself 'at the entrance' of the city (Gen 38: 14); Israel waits, metaphorically speaking, 'at the roadside' for her clients

(Jer 3: 2) and in Ezek 16: 24 the 'plaza' is her domain (Kruger 1983). Frequently these ladies gathered at the local inn/alehouse, which at times also served as the brothel (Cassin 1961; Lang 1975: 133ff.).

¹⁶ '... her speech found favour: the counsel of the woman struck him in his heart' (Tablet II: 66ff.; translation by George 1999: 13); cf. also the biblical reference: 'the smooth tongue of a strange woman' (Prov 6: 24).

¹⁷ Cf. Zimmerli's proposal (1969: 150) for the translation of this Hebrew description (*gillûl*) which appears 48 times in the Hebrew Bible: 'Mistdinger'.

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