INTRODUCTION

The Hebrew Bible is well known for its strictures against making divine imaes. The classic expression comes from the Decalogue: "You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth" (Exod 20:4). And is later elaborated on in a number of different contexts.

For those of us interested in ancient iconography, arguably the most pressing question about these laws is whether, or perhaps when and in what contexts, ancient Israel actually had cult images of Yahweh.

In recent years, the search for Yahweh's image has garnered considerable attention in the study of Israelite religion. Like a good episode of Law & Order: SVU, numerous suspects have been identified in the search process.

One such suspect is the so-called Munich terracotta, which was acquired by Jörg Jeremias in 1990 at a Jerusalem antiquities market. Though it is in damaged condition and is generally lacking in detail, some have speculated that this provides us with an 8th century Judahite figural representation of Yahweh and his Asherah.

Another often-discussed suspect comes to us in the form of an image of two figures, perhaps one male and one female, preserved on an early 8th c. pottery shard from Kuntillet 'Ajrud, a site located in the northern Sinai. This artifact offers even more tantalizing evidence than the Munich terracotta in part because of the presence of an accompanying inscription that reads "Yahweh of Samaria and his Asherah."

There's been a good bit of debate about whether these or other artifacts truly represent Yahwistic iconography. The purpose of this paper is not to once and for all settle the debate about any particular artifact. Rather, my purpose here is to re-evaluate the assumptions and methodologies that traditionally have governed how the search process is conducted. In doing so, I want to suggest a new way of thinking about the search for Yahweh's image that is informed by recent insights from the study of visual culture and has the potential to reshape how we understand how ancient Israel negotiated the image ban in religious experience.

THE TRADITIONAL APPROACH

Let me begin with a few observations about how the search for Yahweh's image has traditionally been carried out. On the whole, the search has been characterized by a rather artist- and object-centered approach. That is, the driving questions of the search center around whether, based on the style and formal features of the object in view, one can reasonably conclude that the artist, or those who commissioned the object, originally intended for the artifact to represent an image of Yahweh.

To answer such questions, past studies have relied on rather sophisticated iconographic and archaeological methodologies that have considered important questions about what constitutes Yahwishtic iconography and have given careful attention to the find contexts of given artifacts and what they might suggest about their cultic function.

At many levels, this seems hardly worth questioning. For one, the study of art history, which has deeply informed biblical iconographic methodologies, is itself an artist and object-centered discipline insofar as it primarily concerned with questions of an image's production – that is, how, why, and by whom a given piece is made. And further, one might note that hte basic formula of the image ban is likewise focused on issues of production insofar as it what it expressly prohibits is the *making* of divine images.

However, questions about production, and the artist's intentions are not the only ones we might raise when considering whether ancient Israelite viewers would have understood certain artifacts as visual representations of their God. Namely, we also might consider questions about the role of the viewer and the nature of an image's reception.

A VISUAL CULTURE APPROACH

Such questions are at the heart of the emerging field of visual culture studies.

The term visual culture refers to the full expanse of images produced, manifested, and consumed by a given culture, as well as the agents, practices, and institutions that put those images to use. The study of visual culture first surfaced in the early 1990s and can generally be understood as a product of a broader pictorial turn that has swept across various disciplines in the humanities and social sciences, and more recently, religious studies.

Two characteristics of visual culture studies are worth highlighting for the purposes of this study:

First, the study of visual culture is a viewer- and practice-centered discipline rather than artist- and object centered one. What this means is that visual culture studies considers not only images but also the social, cultural, institutional, and intellectual practices that put those images to use. Underlying this focus is the conviction that what an image means is not strictly determined by an analysis of its formal qualities but is also a function of the image's reception and use, and thus from perspective of visual culture, the question of an image's meaning cannot be isolated from the everyday spaces, embodied performances, and liturgical settings in which that image functions.

Second, visual culture studies focuses not just on visual objects but visuality itself—that is, the effects, habits, gazes, expectations, and responses generated by images in a given social, cultural, historical, and/or religious context. A visual culture approach thus emphasizes that visual perception is not only a biological phenomenon but is rather a culturally shaped habit, and as such, distinct "ways of seeing" are shaped by education, cultural expectations, social context, and even religious beliefs.

It is this latter point that is especially germane for the purposes of this study. And here I want to turn to the work of David Morgan, a scholar who specializes in the study of religious visual culture.

Throughout his research on religious images and those who employ and interact with them, Morgan attempts to analyze how "the structure and operation of vision [is itself] a religious act" and how religious ways of seeing are deeply inflected by prior beliefs, values, and theological commitments. Thus construed, a religious way of seeing is a

means by which viewers, whether consciously or unconsciously, search for what they hope to see or have been trained to look for in an image.[1]

What this means is that conventions of seeing and specific religio-historical contexts can condition visual experience not only by structuring the way in which people interpret visual data but also by opening up the possibility of seeing what others miss or fail to recognize or even what the original artist never intended to convey.

A brief but fascinating example will help illustrate Morgan's point. In his book, *Visual Piety*, Morgan examines popular Christian reception of Warner Sallman's famous mid-twentieth-century depictions of Christ (figures 1-3). I suspect that these pictures might well be familiar to many of you. In his study, Morgan solicited over 500 letters from Christian viewers asking them to explain their responses to Sallman's art. Two particular observations are instructive.

First, despite the fact that Sallman's pale-skinned, light-haired Jesus hardly reflects what someone born in Palestine some 2000 years ago would have looked like, countless viewers attest that they "recognize" Jesus in these paintings. What they recognize, as Morgan points out, is a vision of Jesus learned and cultivated through popular American Christian culture. It might be said that viewers see Jesus in or perhaps beyond these paintings precisely because the paintings reinforce what the viewers already have been trained to believe.[2] Thus through the eyes of faith, these paintings of Jesus become icons—or better yet, visual metaphors—of Jesus's likeness. This is why the image seems so much like Jesus, and this is why so many viewers see Sallman's Head of Christ and cannot help but exclaim: "That's Jesus!"[3]

But religious ways of seeing can do more than just affect how we interpret artistic subject matter. Morgan reports that certain viewers claimed to discern religious symbols within Sallman's *Head of Christ* as if it functioned as a type of "spiritual

[1] Morgan, *The Embodied Eye*, 68. I made a similar point about the selective nature of seeing in my earlier discussion of cognitive research and the iconographic method (§4.4).

[2] The same can be said of the widely popular (and more recent) religious paintings of Thomas Kinkade.

[3] Morgan, *Visual Piety*, 43, 122.

Rorschach blot."[4] Nine such symbols are identified as can been seen in the diagram here. These include a communion chalice, the eucharist, a prophet, a cross, three nuns in prayer, an angel, the blessed mother kneeling, a dove, and a serpent.

Two things are important to note. On the one hand, Sallman himself explicitly denies creating these symbols.[5] What viewers believe to be present in this painting is at odds with the artist's original intentions. On the other hand, the visibility of these symbols is contingent on prior beliefs, many of which seem to follow specific theological affiliations. For instance, Catholic viewers reported seeing the shape on Jesus's left shoulder (labeled "c" in **fig. 6.8**) as a priest or monk saying the *Confiteor* while Lutheran observers recognized in this same shape a prophet from the Hebrew Bible.[6] If you had no such theological affiliations or knowledge of Christian symbolism, you would likely only see a few shadows or splashes of light.

In interpreting this data, Morgan contends that religious ways of seeing prompted these viewers "to textualize images, to treat them as the illustration of devotional or theological discourse" already inculcated through their religious education, and in particular, through their knowledge of the Bible.[7]

In this way, Morgan's study offers a compelling example of how a visual culture approach, with its concern about the reception of an image and socially and religious constructed ways of seeing, begins to offer a new perspective on how viewers think about the relationship of a deity to a given image than what would otherwise be evident from traditional art-historical concerns with an object's formal features and artist's background and intentions.

RETURN TO ANCIENT OBJECTS

In the remainder of this paper, I want to offer a few tentative remarks about what it might look like to apply this type of visual culture approach to the search for Yahweh's

[4] Morgan, *Visual Piety*, 125.

[5] Sallman seems to have been influenced by the religious ways of seeing embodied in later viewers. When he spoke about this painting in talks to Christian communities, he clarified that he did not *consciously* place these symbols into his art. Rather, he claimed that they appeared to him in the process of drawing (ibid., 128-32). This is an interesting case of reverse reception history—that is, the religious ways of seeing of later viewers prompted the author to reassess his own understanding about the original production of the painting!

[6] Morgan, *Visual Piety*, 131.

[7] Ibid., 140.

image. I flesh out these ideas more fully elsewhere, but for this morning, I'll briefly sketch out 3 reflections.

First, and from a methodological perspective, a visual culture approach would suggest that iconographic and archaeological considerations are *not the only point*—and might even be somewhat *beyond the point*—in the search for Yahweh's image.

What I am essentially suggesting is that what Morgan has shown to be true about the effects of religious ways of seeing on contemporary Christian communities might also have been true of ancient Israelite religion. In both contexts, certain ways of seeing, shaped and informed by prior knowledge of biblical texts, were in place that would have led viewers to recognize or see their deity in images that were not intended to be Yahwistic.

For instance, it is plausible that ancient Israelites were familiar with figurative descriptions of Yahweh as a divine warrior, an armed archer, a lion, a bull, a winged form, or luminous presence in the Hebrew Bible. And knowledge of these texts might well have conditioned how Israelite viewers interpreted visual objects that depicted warriors, arches, lions bulls, birds, and solar objects.

Consider, for instance, the numerous winged scarabs and other types of sun disk imagery that becomes prominent in Judahite iconography in the 8th c. While most biblical iconographers recognize a congruency between these images and literary metaphors in the HB that speak of Yahweh shining forth or having other luminous properties, they stop short of suggesting that Israelites viewers would have come to understand, say, a sun disk scarab, as a non-mimetic representation of Yahweh.

However, from a visual culture perspective, it is at least plausible, if not highly likely, that an Israelite viewer would have come to interpret such imagery in light of what they already knew from biblical texts – that Yahweh is a type of solar god. In fact, it is hard to supposed that an Israelites would have looked at an image like this and decaled "That's Yahweh" *even if*—and this is the key point—*those objects were originally intended to display a different subject matter, or indeed, a different god*.

This brings me to my second point. And it's a trickier one. From a historical-critical perspective, is there any substantive evidence that this sort of thing actually happened?

Admittedly this is not easy to ascertain. After all, we don't have the sort of direct contact with viewers as David Morgan did in his study of Warner Sallman's *Head of Christ*. But this need not mean we are left to wild speculation.

There are 2 indirect lines of evidence that are worth mentioning.

On the one hand, it already widely acknowledge that this sort of reinterpreting or repurposing of religious imagery happens at a textual level. For instance, attributes, characteristics, and epithets associated with the Canaanite gods in Northwest Semitic literature were assimilated into the repertoire of literary descriptions for Yahweh early in Israelite history.

In this way, while literary depictions of an elderly, enthroned deity or a smiting god of the storm were once intended to signify El and Baal, respectively, in the theological perspective of early Israel, they were appropriated as divine portraits of Yahweh instead. In these cases, we would not be inclined to say that descriptions of Israel's God as a smiting God of the storm are non-Yahwistic simply because such descriptions originally were meant to describe Baal. Rather, we would acknowledge that the biblical authors were seeing in these old descriptions of Canaanite gods and a picture of Yahweh.

Of course, what I am describing here is a matter of the reception by later readers of literary imagery, not visual imagery. Numerous the less it establishes that, broadly speaking, there is an intellectual tradition in ancient Israel that allowed for the type of phenomenon that I've descried in this paper – seeing or recognizing Yahweh in imagery that was not originally intended to be Yahwistic in its function.

On the other hand, there is more concrete evidence of seeing Yahweh in non-Yahwistic art, but it comes from an adjacent historical periods. The prime example comes from the imagery in early Jewish synagogues and tombs, including those at Yafa, Naaran, Dura, and Beit Alpha from the 4th through 6th centuries CE. These synagogues are filled with images borrowed from Greco-Roman artistic traditions, including eagles, lions, victory wreaths, trees, cupids, cornucopias, the Seasons, and zodiac signs.

Erwin Goodenough, who published a seminal study on this imagery, insists that the use of this Greco-Roman imagery in Jewish worship contexts is not evidence of idolatry or syncretism. Rather it should be understood as "a symbolic adaptation of pagan figures to Judaism."[8] In taking over common themes from Greco-Roman art, early Jewish communities "rejected the old explanations" given for these images and instead reinterpreted them in light of their own religious belief systems.[9] In other words, Jewish observers visualized their deity and other religiously meaningful content in symbols that were initially meant for a very different purpose.

The most vivid example involves the image of Helios within the zodiac, such as the one pictured here from Beit Alpha in northern Israel from 6th c. C.E. In Goodenough's estimation, the image of Helios driving his chariot through the zodiac came to represent Yahweh, the cosmic deity of early Judaism, in part because such connections were already evident, such as in early Jewish literary sources where aspects of helios and astral imagery are already being attributed to Yahweh.[10] Goodenough sums up the matter in this way:

> The zodiac in the synagogues, with Helios in the center . . . seems to me to proclaim that the God worshiped in the synagogue was the God who had made the stars, and revealed himself through them in cosmic law and order and right, but who was himself the Charioteer guiding the universe and all its order and law.[11]

From a visual culture perspective, one might say that in the context of a synagogue, certain religious way of seeing would have been cultivated that encouraged and allowed Jewish worshipers to see Helios imagery, though of non-Jewish origins, as an acceptable way of depicting certain aspects of Jewish faith, if not Yahweh himself. Thus once again, if the image from Beit Alpha was judged from a purely iconographic vantage point, few would likely consider it as qualifying as an unambiguous form of Yahwistic art. But it

[8] Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols*, 4.27. In fact, Goodenough argues that one of things that enabled Jesus' teaching to be so quickly accommodated to the Hellenistic world was the presence of a form of non-rabbinic Judaism that relied upon imagery already well known in the Greco-Roman world.
[9] Ibid., 42.
[10] Ibid., 4.37.
[11] Ibid., 8.215.

would not be all that surprising, if a worshiper at Beit Alpha, who was not an expert on iconographic styles, saw this imagery and said, "that's Yahweh!"

Third, let me offer some final thoughts on the nature of the biblical law against images in light of the above considerations.

Every formulation of the biblical image ban prohibits the *making* (ʿšh) of images of Yahweh, and thus at its core the biblical prohibitions are about artisans and the objects they produce. However, it is not entirely clear whether the spirit of the law also extended to how certain images were received by later viewers – that is, the possibility of *seeing* images *as* Yahweh even if they were intended to be something else.

Did the image ban allow room for Israelites to recognize Yahweh in the visual arts as long as they did not make such imagery? Would the interpretation of a non-Yahwistic image, such as the Bes-like figures from KA, constitute a form of idolatry? The biblical texts do not provide clear answers to these questions. But it is worth noting that it would have been far more difficult to *enforce* a commandment that prohibiting seeing Yahweh in non-Yahwistic art than one that prohibited making images that were intended to be Yahweh in the first.

In either case, when it comes to assessing biblical laws about divine images, iconographic and archaeological considerations don't tell the whole story. For even if such images were not produced, it is likely that ancient Israelites, much like their ANE neighbors, would have claimed to experience their god in visual form. Thus, if we want to fully engage the contours of religious visual culture in ancient Israel, it is not enough to trace the literary development of the image ban nor even its theological rationale. Rather, we must also begin to take seriously questions about visual reception and the way in which the structure and operation of vision [is itself] a religious act that is deeply informed by prior beliefs, values, and theological commitments.