

2017.11 SBL Biblical Law:
The Divine Image and Its Prohibition —
Textual and Iconographic Considerations

“Divine Presence and Its Representation in the Elohist and Priestly Histories”
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The paper (1) proposes a set of concepts and categories for describing institutionalized representation of divine presence as opposed to literary; (2) on that basis compares ideas of divine representation in the elohistic and priestly histories; (3) argues that [a] the elohistic history banned all direct representation and rich forms of indirect representation for political, not theological reasons, and [b] the priestly history advocated for those very forms of indirect representation; and (4) shows how in narrative terms each history situates Yahweh's whereabouts accordingly.

In a work published in 1994 called *Idolatry*, Moshe Halbertal and Avishai Margalit surveyed reasons for biblical or Israelite bans on representing Yahweh through images, or their aniconism. They critiqued various views and offered their own, that it is matter of access, what I call the social poetics of hierarchy, or etiquette. Physical imagery affords one who looks at the object and maybe holds it control over it, or the tacit but potent possibility of control. This manipulability compromises the divine majesty and upends the hierarchical ontology.¹

An earlier article in 1979 by Michael Klein made a comparable point regarding the language of the Targums. Where biblical text presents divine activity, Targums often insert the preposition “before” דִּקְ to present actions apart from the deity. Klein argued that this substitution does not reflect the problem, how human the divine, the long-dominant view, but how majestic; it applies general Aramaic idiom of majesty. The majestic does not act directly; rather, actions happen before it, issue from it. Implicit causality is more dignified than explicit; actions and results are willed rather than done.² Sure enough, the satirical *Esther* employs just such an idiom as part of

its caricature of Xerxes. Along these lines, in 2012 I argued that secondary distancing techniques exist in the Hebrew Bible too. Pilgrimage expressions originally about seeing Yahweh's face were modified in the Hellenistic period to speak of appearing before him, not due to anti-anthropomorphic impulses but a concern that textual vivification puts the precious audience-experience into the hands and minds of common readers.³

Together these and studies like them bring out a problem. The texts that have Yahweh banning image-representation, in particular the narrative ones, also present him in anthropomorphic terms, even visualizable ones, not just as a technical matter of referential necessity, but at a deep level of conceptualization. They represent him having a body with a face, eyes, nose, ears and mouth, heart and innards, legs and above all hands; he has senses and sensations, emotions and realizations; he acts, moves, inspects organs like an expert, and speaks languages. The works at Psalm 82 and Deut 32 may present him as a son, of El-Elyon.⁴ Most importantly, they conceive him royally, to be majestic and to be approached as such; he holds court with a council of divine beings and expects human beings to offer tokens of *homage* in his space. The only biblical texts I can think of that attempt to advance more fully the unfamiliarity and difference of the deity are the radical depiction of Yahweh in Isaiah 40–48 and the musings about Elohim by the character Qohelet, and both have their form of regression or retraction. The author of Isaiah 40–48 returns Yahweh to the categories of the known in his later materials, at chapter 49 and following, and the character presented as having just quoted Qohelet reassures his pupil that Elohim really does keep track of what people do and holds them to account.⁵

To attempt to coordinate the scenes depicted in biblical literature with activities and scenarios

we think existed outside in the real world, then, I think we ought to take seriously this difference between the discourse of the text and that of the characters in the text and develop distinct categories for them. How do collectives physically represent the divine and how does literature?

I begin by offering my own definitions for terms and concepts that I find confusing. I consider an icon to be a physical image that represents an entity and a measure of presence. Iconic value or iconicity refers to a particular image being treated as presentative. Either an image has iconicity or it doesn't. Iconography is the artistic character of the imagery, which has two aspects, (1) the specific image chosen for presence and (2) its degree of detail.

A standing stone may have minimal iconography, but to the degree that it serves presentation, the people who selected, placed, positioned and acted around it considered it fully iconic. I do not see in minimal artistic effort reticence towards iconicity, nor even in minimalistic artistry, when the minimal character itself has meaning. A stone of minimal artistry may serve to represent the divine ancestors as a single collective or a single deity who gives attention to a human collective. Minimal artistry can reflect energy-efficiency or it can be expressive.

Not all images hold iconic value, like those impressed on clay, stone or papyrus. What do non-iconic images do? They serve memory and mindfulness, recalling divine attentiveness, or claim a divine quality for the human owner, or just heighten the sense of culture.

Within an iconic field, we can make three sets of distinctions. First, between explicit or direct representation, and implicit or indirect representation. In explicit representation, an artifact — any artifact — stands in for the entity represented, from a faceless stone to a magnificent sculpture. Such an image could be anthropomorphic, but if not, the entity present might still be

conceptualized anthropomorphically. In implicit representation, nothing stands in for the represented entity, but other artifacts or activities indicate its presence. Like explicit representation, implicit can avoid anthropomorphism or engage fully in it, like an empty throne. And it can express any of several notions, like utter dissimilarity or the indignity of visual access.

Second, we can distinguish between static representation and dramatic representation. In static representation the entity is present constantly, at a uniform level. In dramatic representation, some human activity expresses change, like descent or wakefulness.

Third, we can distinguish between artifactual representation, which as said can be explicit or implicit, and verbal representation, which can be: words written on or near the artifact; words spoken of or to the artifact or the entity represented by it; or words written in a separate text, the content of which correlates or can be correlated with the artifactual representation. Like the activities of dramatic representation, verbal representation can give explicitness to implicit representation or multiply the representative aspects of the artifactual configuration.

With this set of concepts, categories and distinctions, we can ask what we mean by aniconism or an image-ban. At the various sites found throughout Israel and Judea whose assemblages seem to indicate religious activity, we find many and mixed forms of direct and indirect representation. I am doubtful we can identify any signs of aniconism and even anti-anthropomorphic iconism.

With respect to the literature we have, especially the narrative we think of as historiographical, we should ask: each author we read who has Yahweh ruling out some form of representation, which type does he rule out, what are the scope and limits of the exclusion, and what meaning does the author signal in the text for that particular exclusion? Let's look at the

elohistic and priestly histories, whose authors had Yahweh give Moses a set of rules for Israel to keep. We omit the yahwistic history because its author did not have Yahweh do that.

In my analysis, the elohistic history did not originally include Yahweh's speech to Moses in earshot of the the people, what we, following D, call the ten commandments.⁶ The argument has constructive payoff for our topic. My reasoning goes as follows.

In the elohistic story, somewhere up the divine mountain,⁷ Yahweh tells Moses he offers the Israelites a covenant; they live by his rules and he will bring them to his land and be their king.⁸ Moses tells the people, who accept and agree to whatever the rules will be.⁹ Moses relays their assent to Yahweh, who says that he will descend in view of the people so they can hear Moses and Yahweh talking and know that Moses really brings them Yahweh's rules: הנה אנכי בא אליך בעב. ¹⁰ Sure enough, says the narrator, משה ידבר והאלהים יענו. ¹¹ The *yiqṭōl* verb-form of ידבר and יענו indicates that this happened several times, Moses said something and in response Yahweh replied audibly. In seeing this occur several times the people can exclude coincidence and know Moses really prompts Yahweh and Yahweh really replies on cue. Had the people heard articulate speech there would have been no need to repeat the exercise. Only because it is inarticulate, like thunderclaps, must it repeat. Accordingly, (1) the narrator says the people feared the powerful sounds and sights; (2) they commission Moses to get the laws from Yahweh for them, lest Yahweh speak with them directly and it do them in; and (3) Moses assures them Yahweh planned only to give them an unforgettable experience.¹² So, no ten commandments. But that does not rob us of an image ban.

Moses ascends the mountain to receive the laws, and Yahweh begins with instructions about how to represent him and worship him.¹³ First, he calls Israel's attention to the fact that he speaks from the sky.¹⁴ Then he prohibits gods of gold and silver, saying, *לֹא תַעֲשׂוּן אִתִּי*, which means, as several scholars have shown, "do not make *for me*."¹⁵ Are these icons of Yahweh or of subordinate entities, like council partners, seraphic attendants, fierce guards, or cherubic porters? Does he prohibit direct representation alone or indirect too? If only direct, does the form matter, whether it is human, anything terrestrial, or even unattested composites? If indirect too, again, what are the limits? The elliptical formulation leaves the scope and intent unclear, as well as the connection to Yahweh speaking from the sky. The rest of the rules might clarify.

Yahweh continues and prohibits hewn stones, steps, and incidental self-exposure.¹⁶ He wants altars made of dirt, but if conditions require it, unhewn stones will do.¹⁷ He promises that wherever one builds him such an altar and invokes his name he will come and bless that person.¹⁸ Yahweh does not prohibit wooden poles or standing stones, warn about celestial traps or name specific competing deities. In fact, Moses solemnifies the covenant with twelve standing stones that represent living collectives, the twelve tribes of Israel.¹⁹ Evidently, Yahweh is not purifying worship *per se*, that it not be tainted by Canaanite, Egyptian, or Mesopotamian practices and ideas. If anything, the effect of his rules renders miners, smelters, artisans, quarries, masons, contractors, merchants, overseers, scribal administrators, storage facilities, managers, transporters, wagons, engineers — all of them useless. Yahweh's rules exclude temples and cut the legs out from under the kings who build them and claim them, Israelian and Judean alike.

The author of the elohistic history has Yahweh flip the trope of audience and access; rather

than every and all Israelites visiting him at his royally sponsored glorious home on earth, full of exotic forms of representation, he will visit any and every lowly human host, at a pop-up altar of minimal indirect representation. He can do this because rather than living on earth next door to the king or comparable locals, under the control of a priestly household, he lives in the sky atop this mountain, from which, as they have just seen, he can hear a call and immediately answer.²⁰

This understanding of Yahweh's rules here matches the qualitative terms of the covenant dictated by him at the outset. He said that if the Israelites accept, they will be a kingdom of priests, namely, an entire nation of families with direct access to him.²¹ Plus, a coming episode has the Israelites fail these rules along these lines spectacularly. A hapless Aaron who by all accounts represents institutional priesthood declares a festival for Yahweh, demands the people's gold, melts it down, casts it, with an artisan's tool sculpts a direct-representation icon in animal form, builds an altar before it, sacrifices, and sparks irreverent revelry.²² Up on the mount, Moses refers to the people's racket as neither of victory nor of desperation but of abandon,²³ and the narrator gives us his perception of Aaron as having failed the people miserably.²⁴

We see that the author of the elohistic history has Yahweh ban not icons *per se*, but the temple complex and concept, which in effect bans certain high-profile forms of direct representation and severely restricts indirect representation. The author does so not to revolutionize religion in pure theological terms, to support an abstract idea about God, but in the political and socio-economic terms of his day, to obviate centralized power and give Israelites direct access to Yahweh.

Now let us turn to the priestly history. Juxtaposing the two histories in this context yields striking points of correspondence and difference. Whereas the author of the elohistic history

obviated kingship, insisting that the deity would provide the health and security of his kingdom, the author of the priestly history tacitly presents a qualified kingship in the form of twelve tribal chieftains, **נשיאים**.²⁵ Whereas the elohistic history did so by excluding temples, the priestly centers religious life on a temple-like structure, a single, irreplaceable majestic home for Yahweh permanently to live in. It is maintained in the most regal and exotic finery. Its materials — precious metals, the finest wood and fabrics, exotic powders and ointments, gemstones and more — are donated by the Israelites and wrought by artisans of divine caliber.²⁶ So wondrous is it all that Yahweh must show Moses special images, whether a counterpart in the sky, a prototype, or a phantasm like the future temple visited by Ezekiel.²⁷ Here alone must Israelites sacrifice, not anywhere,²⁸ and managing the tabernacle and the sacrifices are Aaron again and his family.²⁹ They, not the people, call the divine name and channel divine blessing.³⁰

The author of the priestly history presents Yahweh as royalty personified, the quintessence of majesty. The conceptualization of him, his plans and his wants, his space and his service, are utterly anthropomorphic. Yahweh states the purpose of his tabernacle, to live there permanently, and he gives instructions about its design and its use, which make that manifest. Were a Judean reading this history to think it warranted to build the tabernacle and run it, it would be fully iconic and richly representational, but, with no artifact standing in for Yahweh, indirectly so.

Notably, the author does not have Yahweh explicitly prohibit direct representation. This is because within the story, Yahweh lives in the tabernacle; it would be absurdly self-negating for him to have a direct representation of himself there. But we may ask what the author might have wanted Judeans to adopt and apply from the work; what in the story *is* its message and what

serves merely to round it out? If the author writes when a temple stands and that temple features direct representation, does the priestly history support it or decry it? Kingship aside, does the history support or critique other aspects of temple culture? The narrative's consistency makes it difficult, even impossible to discern. In a time without a temple, the history is even more opaque.

Viewed alongside the elohistic history, the priestly history appears as a negative reflection. Two political allegories, set in foundational times, depict Yahweh in contradictory terms. In one, he lives on a mythic mountain, rules out temples and Aaronide priesthood, visits and blesses any Israelite anywhere who builds an altar and invites him. In the other, Yahweh lives in a mobile temple, (1) whose every single detail down to loops and sockets he himself in his incomparable divine wisdom has planned, (2) to which Israelites must come and sacrifice, (3) which an Aaronide priesthood manages, and (4) at which they bless those Israelites.

I see several historical scenarios plausibly explaining this striking set of correlations.³¹ In all of them, though, it is imprecise to claim the histories are aniconic or anti-anthropomorphic *per se*. In one, a minimalistic indirect iconism serves a broader argument about politics. The other features a rich indirect iconism, perhaps to advance the cause of a temple or even several, and it might not even negate direct representation.

Additions to the elohistic history and to the priestly history, the ideas and arguments in the deuteronomic corpus, and related passages in the prophetic literature will all have to await other occasions.

ENDNOTES

¹ Moshe Halbertal and Avishai Margalit, *Idolatry* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994).

² Michael Klein, “The Preposition קדם (‘Before’) as a Pseudo-Anti-Anthropomorphism in the Targums,” *JTS* 30 (1979) 502–507.

³ Simeon Chavel, “The Face of God and the Etiquette of Eye-Contact: Visitation, Pilgrimage, and Prophetic Vision in Ancient Israelite and early Jewish Imagination,” *JSQ* 19 (2012) 1–55.

⁴ To be precise: Deut 31:16–22, 30; 32:1–44 (minus vv. 36, 43, and the end of 44: הוא והושע בן נון).

⁵ Simeon Chavel, “Prophetic Imagination in the Light of Narratology and Disability Studies in Isaiah 40–48,” *JHS* 14/3 (2014) 1–47. On the characters in *Qohelet*, see Michael V. Fox, “Frame-Narrative and Composition in the Book of Qohelet,” *HUCA* 48 (1977) 83–106; Simeon Chavel, “Literary Theory and Biblical Literature: Levels of Speakers in *Qohelet* and *Song of Songs*,” *Society of Biblical Literature National Meeting, Baltimore, 23–26 November 2013*.

⁶ Exod 20:1–13. At two points in the Deuteronomic corpus Moses refers to the speech as the ten commandments (4:10–13; 10:1–4), but not where it is most expected and seemingly warranted (5:1–24), and at two points he presents it as the content of a covenant (4:10–13; 5:1–19; also 28:69). At Exod 34:28, the narrator describes the contents of the tablets Yahweh writes for Moses as “the terms of the covenant, the ten terms” (דברי הברית עשרת) (הדברים), but that description seems to contradict the original one, at 24:12, in which Yahweh tells Moses to ascend the mount so he can give him stone tablets with the “instruction and commandment” (התורה והמצוה) that he has written to instruct them (להוראתם); namely, it reflects the retold version and ideas found in D.

My verse numbers at Exodus 20 follow the “lower” cantillation of the Decalogue, which divides statements 2 and 4 (idolatry and the sabbath) into several verses each and presents statements 6–9 (murder, adultery, theft, and false testimony) all as one single verse; this versification regularizes the verse-length throughout the Decalogue. The “upper” cantillation makes each of the ten statements a single verse; this versification of the Decalogue conveys the ten statements. See the double set of cantillation marks in the Leningrad codex online: <http://www.seforimonline.org/seforimdb/pdf/264.pdf>, and see the separated sets in Aron Dotan, *Biblia Hebraica Leningradnesia* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 2001) 109 and 1227, respectively. The verse numbers in BHS and the like reflect a combination of the verse division of the lower cantillation at statements 2 and 4 and the verse division of the upper cantillation at statements 6–9; it is unclear why.

⁷ Exod 19:3.

⁸ Exod 19:4–6.

⁹ Exod 19:7–8.

¹⁰ Exod 19:9.

¹¹ Exod 19:19.

¹² Exod 19:14–17. Note that when the people say they do not want the deity to speak to them directly (20:15), they do not say “again, anymore” עוד. That Moses’ use of נסה means experience not a test, see Moshe Greenberg, “נסה in Exodus 20:20 and the Purpose of the Sinaitic Theophany,” *JBL* 79/3 (1960) 273–276.

The narrator’s remark, “God said all the following things” (v. 1), that introduces the ten commandments (vv. 2–13) is telling. On the one hand, it begins with the *wayyiqṭōl* verb-form of consecutive action, as if the speech occurred next, after the public communication between Moses and Yahweh. On the other hand, the stress on *all* (כל) seems designed to convey that this is what was said during the inarticulate back and forth.

¹³ For the following analysis of this segment of text, see Simeon Chavel, “The Earthen Altar and a Kingdom of Priests,” *VT* 65 (2015) 169–222.

¹⁴ Exod 20:18.

¹⁵ Exod 20:19. Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus* (3rd ed.; Jerusalem: Magnes, 1959 [Heb. orig., 1942]) 177; Yitzhak Feder, “The Aniconic Tradition, Deuteronomy 4, and the Politics of Israelite Identity,” *JBL* 132 (2013) 251–274, at 264 n. 51, who refer to Deut 1:30; Judg 11:27. Add Gen 4:1.

¹⁶ Exod 20:21–22.

¹⁷ Exod 20:20–21.

¹⁸ Exod 20:20 תזכיר.

¹⁹ Exod 24:3–8, 11bβ. I speculate that at 17:15 the history originally had Moses erecting a pillar (מצבה) rather than building an altar, perhaps the stone he sat on while keeping his hands aloft. Compare Dillmann, *Exodus–Leviticus*, 201; Ehrlich, *Mikra Kifshuto*, 1.167, 33; Houtman, *Exodus*, 2.387–388.

²⁰ Assuming Exod 20:20 תזכיר (see n. 13).

²¹ Exod 19:3–6.

²² Exod 32:2–6.

²³ Exod 32:17–18.

²⁴ Exod 32:21–25.

²⁵ Exod 16:22; 34:1; 35:27; Num 1–4; 7; 10:4; also Lev 4:22–26.

²⁶ Exod 25:1–8; 31:1–11; 35:4–36:7.

²⁷ Exod 25:9, 40; 26:30; 27:8.

²⁸ Lev 17.

²⁹ Exod 28–29 (esp. 28:1; 29:44); Lev 8–16.

³⁰ Num 6:22–27.

³¹ My preferred: the elohistic history is written in the eighth century around the dissolution of the Israelian kingdom or in the seventh after the (perceived) near destruction of the Judean, and the priestly is written in the seventh, with Jerusalem’s escape in mind, as a rebuttal.