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## **Beyond ‘Image Ban’ and ‘Aniconism’: Reconfiguring Ancient Israelite and Early Jewish Religion in a Visual and Material Religion Perspective**

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# Beyond ‘Image Ban’ and ‘Aniconism’: Reconfiguring Ancient Israelite and Early Jewish Religion\’s in a Visual and Material Religion Perspective

Christoph Uehlinger

## I Introduction: Questioning a powerful conceptual matrix

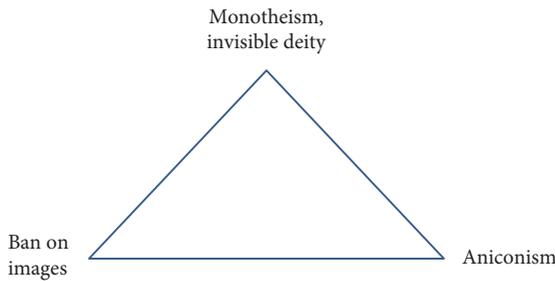
Prohibitions against the production and worship of images representing one’s own or other deities (often referred to in the singular as ‘image ban’ or *Bilderverbot*) – as much as their seeming corollary, the so-called aniconic worship of a single supreme deity – are commonly held to be distinctive characteristics of ancient Israelite and Judahite, Jewish and Islamic religion. The two aspects (the normative rejection of a given ritual practice and the realization of its opposite as alternative practice) are often considered as two faces of a coin. Yet the relation between the two is much more complicated. The terms image ban and aniconism are problematic and both certainly need to be properly defined and qualified.<sup>1</sup> Scholars such as Tryggve Mettinger (1995, 2006), Brian Doak (2015), Milette Gaifman (2012) and others have recently offered important contributions to that end, focusing on first-millennium-BCE Israel, Phoenicia and Greece. The present chapter aims at continuing this conversation while putting it into a wider horizon, both disciplinary and theoretical.

Neither programmatic prohibitions of cultic images nor de facto abstention from producing and using them in cultic rituals or imageless rituals are exclusive to early West Semitic traditions, Judaism and Islam (see the essays collected in Gaifman and Aktor 2017);<sup>2</sup> however, they distinguish these traditions from many others past and present. Moreover, both scholars and the wider public associate these traditions with the concept of monotheism. To be sure, none of the traditions studied by Mettinger, Gaifman and Doak should be considered monotheistic in any way. But the history of Western Asiatic and Mediterranean religion\’s since late antiquity seems indeed to privilege an elective affinity of sorts between the belief in a single, invisible, transcendent deity on the one hand (‘monotheism’) and the injunction not to represent that deity in a cultic image on the other hand. Monotheistic theologies have

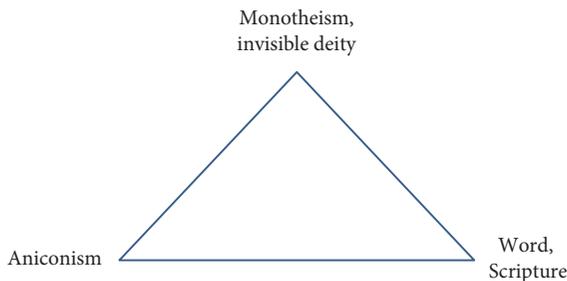
developed sophisticated arguments regarding the presumed inadequacy of any kind of visual, let alone anthropomorphic or theriomorphic (i.e. human, animal or hybrid), form to convey an appropriate representation of the deity (God, capitalized) or to appropriately mediate a presence which is considered all-encompassing, transcendent or both.

### The matrix

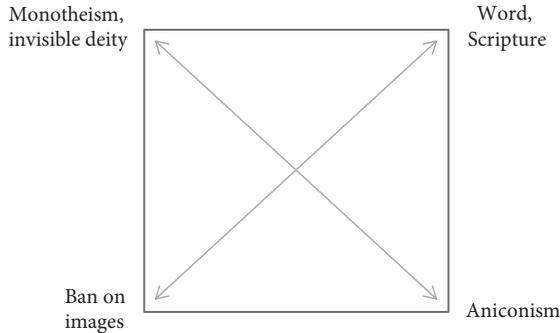
Much in the way of an irreducible matrix, these three aspects (rejection of cultic images, ‘aniconic’ ritual practice and theological assumptions about the deity’s/God’s invisibility) have long been construed to define a kind of *system* of belief and behaviour, in which each reinforces the others and is itself stabilized by them.



A further characteristic of the so-called Abrahamic religion\s (on which this volume concentrates) is their heavy reliance on the transmission of the deity’s will, revealed as ‘divine word’ by prophetic messengers, and ultimately the scripturalization and canonical fixation of that will. Reading from scripture and listening to the divine word forms an important part of Jewish, Christian and Islamic ritual, so that in the believers’ understanding such reading and listening may be experienced as a process of actual communication mediating divine truth and presence. Framed in such a way, listening to the divine (or divinely inspired) word of the invisible deity may be considered a powerful corollary, and even qualitative improvement, of aniconic worship as such. In a second diagram, each angle again reinforces the other two and the three aspects together again form a kind of system.



Once the two triangles are assembled, listening to the divine word (recited or otherwise framed in ways that underline its otherworldly origin) appears to be a strong opposite, and perhaps the ultimate alternative, to encountering the divine in one or several cultic images (cf. Otten 2007). Combining the two triangles produces a diagram of even higher systematic ambition and epistemic strength. This diagram reflects a foundational matrix of normative assumptions about how to relate to the one, invisible, transcendent, but all-communicative God.



The argument presented so far will sound familiar and appear plausible to many modern Westerners, religious or not. This only indicates how much they have been socially and culturally conditioned by a religio-philosophical tradition shared by many Jews, Christians and Muslims since late antiquity and the Middle Ages. The conceptual dichotomy of right and wrong, religion and idolatry, word and image (the latter often extended from cultic image to icon, and even to image tout court) has shaped confessional polemics since the early modern period, provided a powerful instrument to classify and conquer non-European societies, and efficiently infiltrated Western philosophy – not least when the latter sought to emancipate itself from the constraints of religion (cf. Sherwood and Meyer, this volume). The matrix is meant to visualize an epistemic formation; it does not necessarily reflect actual practices. It is a heuristic tool to visualize how conventional modernist discourse on religion, and the discourse of religious studies perpetuating their Protestant ascendancy, construe the relationship of image and word, or the ambiguity of the former versus the validity of the latter, when considering 'Abrahamic religion's'.

The four corners of our matrix operate in different ways in various manifestations of the three religions, particularly in their ritual traditions. Both Jewish and Islamic religion usually reject cultic images, which they attribute to the 'nations', 'pagans' or 'polytheists'; their rituals do not generally make use of images to represent the deity, who is thought to be one and invisible; and they turn to reading from scripture when searching for the deity's will. The situation appears much more complex when we consider the variety of Christian religious traditions. Building on ancient Jewish discourse rejecting 'pagan idolatry', Byzantine iconoclasts and Calvinist Protestants could label 'idolaters' their opponents who valued the use of images in worship; in these instances, the matrix may serve to define a pattern of division *within* the varieties of Christian traditions and their way to distinguish in their midst 'true' from 'false' religion, or faith from heresy.

That Christianity as such (in toto) should range alongside Judaism and Islam in a discussion of imageless worship is therefore all but obvious. If it does so, nevertheless, this is largely due to the weight of Protestant assumptions in the contemporary discourse on 'Abrahamic religions.' If Protestant religious reformers of the sixteenth century claimed to recover the original purity of early Christian ritual from its distortion by Papist idolatry, they also considered reading, listening to and explaining scripture (*Sola Scriptura*) to be the most important element in the worship of the true God. It is along similar lines of thought that modern scholars of religion classify Protestant Christianity, particularly the Reformed and Calvinist traditions, among the 'aniconic' and even iconoclastic, thus ranging them close to Judaism and Islam in their rejection of cultic images and the valuation of scripture as the sole (or most eminent) medium through which the faithful may encounter God.

## Abraham

From a historical, non-theological point of view, many aspects of the development of image-related ritual and theological discourse (that is, iconophile and iconolatrous positions) in early, medieval and early modern Byzantine, Catholic and Oriental Christianities may be regarded as creative receptions, perpetuations and reinterpretations of pre-Christian ('pagan') traditions and ritual practices. One would be hard-pressed to range these traditions among the anti-iconists. Early Islam originated in the late-antique Middle East as a kind of reformation movement directed against both domestic 'idolatry' and various forms of Jewish and Christian religion. Invoking Abrahamic descent (*din Ibrahim*) and the tradition remembering Abraham smashing idols worshipped by the society he had been born into served Muhammad to claim ritual and genealogical precedence over Jewish and Christian claims to true religion; a similar argumentative strategy had already served Paul to claim religious superiority for early Christian versus Torah-obedient Jewish faith.

Should we then consider the matrix described above to represent something distinctively 'Abrahamic' in the first place? Or does that label only serve as a convenient pretext for lumping together three religions which, after all, differ considerably, internally and among each other, in their interpretation of a putative 'image ban', 'aniconism' and the pre-eminence of the revealed word? From the point of view of a historian of religion\, the label 'Abrahamic' is problematic if it obscures the many differences among the streams, sub-streams and confluents of the three traditions. Their many entanglements, and the variety of practices with regard to images particularly within the Christian traditions, cannot easily be homogenized in a simple genealogical model as implied by the 'Abrahamic' metaphor. Historians of religion\ should therefore critically assess rather than step in and follow this 'Abrahamic' genealogical discourse, which is of very recent conjuncture and, in my view, of little analytical use.

Biblical tradition concerning Abraham (most prominently, Genesis 12–25) does not relate Abraham to specifically 'aniconic' forms of worship, nor to any kind of 'image ban' (the latter is brought much later into the biblical narrative, when Moses and Israel meet Yahweh at Mount Sinai, Exodus 20). It was Jewish Midrash which

first associated the divine call experienced by Abraham at Ur with a rejection of idolatry, that is, the illegitimate form of worship which it attributed both to Abraham's forefathers and to his mighty opponent, the legendary Mesopotamian king Nimrod. In ancient Jewish 'rewritten Bible' and Midrash (e.g. *Book of Jubilees* ch. 12; *Genesis Rabbah* ch. 38; cf. Levenson 2012: 117–23), Abraham is said to have destroyed the idols of his family before emigrating west, towards the land that God would show him. This narrative tradition seems to have been largely ignored in (Western) Christian sources, but well-received in early Islam, which added stories relating the purification of the Ka'aba that extended Ibrahim's iconoclastic fame to his son Ishmael (Lowin 2011). If there is anything explicitly 'Abrahamic' in the rejection of cultic images, it may be located among the traditions of late-antique Judaism, early Islam and possibly 'oriental' Christianities, but not in Western or Orthodox 'mainstream' Christianity.

### **Moses**

Biblical tradition and Western Christianity associate the rejection of idolatry with Moses rather than with Abraham. As in the case of Muhammad's reformation, this concerns both the rejection of other gods, the gods of others, and the claim to know how to appropriately worship one's own deity. These motifs are part of a cluster of religious innovations and attitudes conveniently synthesized by Jan Assmann in his concept of a 'Mosaic distinction' (Assmann 1996). Moses's farewell speech and legacy to Israel (Deuteronomy 4) provides the most articulated biblical argument justifying what was meant to become a Yahwistic proprium, namely abstention from figuring Yahweh, let alone any other deity, in material form. Beyond the Torah of Moses, certain strata of biblical writings take issue with 'idolatry', whether in historiography, prophetic critique or parody mocking the production of cult images in Babylonian religion (Jensen 2017). From a historical point of view, these trajectories of biblical material represent the earliest preserved example of 'anti-idolatrous' discourse from the world of Eastern Mediterranean and Western Asiatic religions. Within that material, the prescriptive texts embedded in the Torah of Moses, and among them, especially, the so-called Second Commandment, have made the strongest impact on religious history due to their emblematic link with the Sinai covenant scenario. It therefore seems legitimate to investigate the origins and developments of that prescriptive tradition, in order to historicize its genealogy, break the conceptual spell it exerts on modern scholarship and consider theoretical alternatives.

The present chapter is written with such a double interest in mind, religio-historical and theoretical. Just as the religion or religions of 'Ancient Israel' have not always been monolatric, let alone monotheistic, they have not always been 'aniconic'. Since the biblical tradition stands at the background of most concerns with the figurative representation of the divine that are the focus of this volume, it seems worthwhile to give a brief account of how and under what circumstances these prohibitions may have emerged from (and in opposition to) earlier and more traditional religious custom. In section II, I briefly review current religion-historical knowledge on how Yahweh was represented in Israelite and Judahite religion, especially in cultic settings, prior to the Babylonian destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BCE and the so-called exilic period. Section III will outline how critical scholarship evaluates the antiquity and emergence

of the various biblical forms of a ban on cultic images, both of Yahweh and of other gods in post-exilic times. The relevant disjunction occurred under particular conditions of social change and shift of power during the latter part of the first millennium BCE. I contend that it is possible to explain it in purely historical terms.

Section IV combines a historical and a theoretical concern. I shall ask under what conditions the Torah's normative stance against cultic images could be adopted and appropriated by much later readers of the Bible, modern scholars included, who read it as a faithful description of ancient Israelite actual religious practice, and how this (after all, quite erroneous) perception could contribute to the scholarly construction of ancient Israelite and Judahite religion as essentially different and distinct from the religions of their Levantine neighbours. Modern scholars of the twentieth century have construed theoretical assumptions and categories out of a 'taking-for-granted' reading of normative biblical texts, thus producing ahistorical and apologetic representations of ancient Israel's religion that reflect religious inhibitions and theological bias of their own present rather than the plain sense of the biblical texts themselves. Historians of religion should ask under what circumstances religion-related scholarship can be affected by the theological, religious or cultural bias of its sources even when it claims to practice so-called historical-critical methods of inquiry.

Section V will hint at an alternative approach on how to deal with ancient Israelite, Judahite, but also Jewish, Christian and Islamic religion\ in ways that do not from the outset place them in opposition to other religions. I shall suggest that instead of perpetuating ill-defined and biased concepts such as 'image ban' or 'aniconism', scholars of religion should give preference to second- and third-order categories and a religious aesthetics approach that reach beyond the iconic/aniconic dichotomy. Only then will we be able to address and analyse the varieties of religious traditions and their internal diversity, their ritual practices and their manifold views on mediation in a less biased and more properly descriptive, analytical, comparative and explanatory perspective.

## II Representing Yahweh in ancient Israelite and Judahite religion\

In this section I briefly present the current state of research on ancient Israelite and Judahite religion\, before reviewing the most salient lines of debate regarding the use of cultic images or 'aniconic' media representing the divine in various ritual settings of the monarchic period (roughly tenth/ninth to sixth centuries BCE).

### **Primary versus secondary data**

Among the many shrines and sanctuaries of the time, the main temple of Jerusalem and the question of whether and how Yahweh (the main deity in Israel and Judah and divine patron of the Davidic dynasty ruling in Jerusalem) was represented in this temple occupies a central position in the biblical record and in the scholarly discussion. Historians of religion should resist the scriptural Jerusalem-centred perspective, a product of scribes and schools based in Jerusalem whose ideological agenda stressed

the city's pre-eminence. A more balanced view can be achieved on the basis of archaeological data, which most contemporary historians consider as 'primary evidence' for historical inquiry, and by reading much of the relevant biblical literature somehow against its grain. Ranging biblical literature second in a historical inquiry is necessary for two reasons: first, because, unlike archaeological data, biblical texts represent a stream of tradition and are often far more difficult to date; second, because reading a text against its grain is an hermeneutically tricky operation, in which the modern historian must navigate carefully between uncritical naïveté and wishful imagination. Lucid scholarship acknowledges that when archaeological data (which are external to the religious discourse) and biblical texts (which stand at its roots) are correlated, be it to call on like-minded witnesses or to use one against the other as a corrective, wishful imagination is perhaps the most difficult to resist and to control even when commenting on archaeological primary data. The latter, to be sure, do not speak by themselves. They are generally addressed through a critical lens of inquiry that is itself full of assumptions already shaped by biblical material – and by the matrix discussed in section I.

This said, critical scholarship has over the last few decades come to a certain consensus regarding the status of ancient Israelite and Judahite religion(s) in their Southern Levantine context. Israelite and Judahite religion(s) are increasingly viewed as subsets of West Semitic religion; they may have differed in details of practice and belief from the religion of their neighbours (Phoenicians and Philistines, Arameans, Ammonites, Moabites and Edomites) as much as they shared many common assumptions with them. Current scholarship stresses aspects of diversity much more than claims of essential distinctiveness or tends at least to interpret the latter in terms of the former (Uehlinger 2015).

## **Religion or religions?**

Departing from twentieth-century models considering diversity (and distinctiveness) mainly in 'national' terms (an anachronistic concept still in use in much contemporary scholarship), current research construes diversity by stressing varieties of social, regional, economic and ecological settings and regimes which would have shaped ancient religion and culture as much as ethnic concerns (Stavropoulou and Barton 2010). Not surprisingly then, contemporary scholarship has come to address 'the religions of Ancient Israel' in the plural (Zevit 2001), introducing ever finer distinctions among religious customs and practices within Israelite and Judahite society according to their location and functionality vis-à-vis particular micro-environments, social locations, networks of commercial or political interaction, and so on. That the religion of a Jerusalem-based court or temple scribe would be the same as that of a townsman living in the Judahite countryside, let alone that of officials, traders, landowners or herdsmen from other regions of the northern hill country and beyond cannot be taken for granted anymore. Ironically, even the most naïve reading of the Hebrew Bible would have allowed such a seemingly trivial insight which, however (perhaps under the impact of the national paradigm and the modern search for religious and national cohesion, in Israel as in many other modern Western societies), was resisted rather strangely in most twentieth-century reconstructions of ancient Israelite religion.

## Yahweh or Yahwehs?

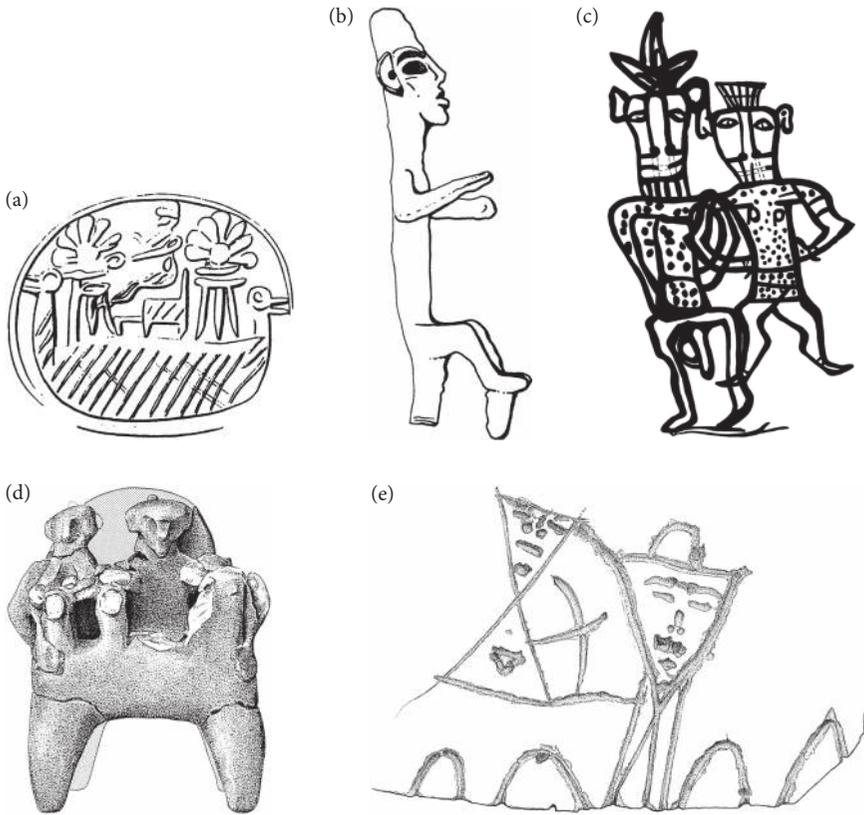
Taking stock of religious diversity in ancient Israel and Judah also affects our understanding of the main deity worshipped in various regions and of the various ways that deity was represented and worshipped in different cultic settings. A major blow against a too-homogeneous view of ancient Israelite religion came from the discovery, in 1976, of inscriptions mentioning ‘Yahweh of Samaria and his Asherah’ and ‘Yahweh of Teman (or Yahweh of the southern steppe) and his Asherah’, alongside figurative drawings on *pithoi* and walls at an ancient way station called Kuntillet Ajrud, located in northern Sinai on the overland road connecting Gaza and Beersheba to the Red Sea (see Meshel 2012 for a final report on the data). A concept used to acknowledge the newly attested situation is ‘Poly-Yahwism’ or the notion of a ‘splintered divine’ (Allen 2014): there was more than a single Yahwism, and more than a single Yahweh. The scholarly task is, on the one hand, material, descriptive and analytical: what forms and locations of worship of a deity named Yahweh do we actually know, and on what grounds? Another question is more theory oriented: Should we consider these different forms varieties of a single deity (the same, if ‘splintered’, Yahweh), or would it be theoretically more appropriate to construe various forms and locations of Yahweh, co-existent at one given time, not only as varieties of the same Yahweh but as several distinct Yahwehs? While the first option represents the majority approach in current scholarship, the latter option is gaining support and credentials. The underlying question is of course to what extent historical research on that issue should or should not continue to be affected by assumptions about divine identity, which are by definition of a theological nature. Stepping out of deep-rooted assumptions (not to say, prejudice) is definitely a very difficult and challenging task.

Turning now to the question how various forms of Yahweh (or various Yahwehs) were represented in ancient Israel and Judah between the tenth/ninth and the sixth centuries BCE, the following, necessarily brief, observations may give a rough idea of the potential variety we should expect once all relevant data are taken into account.

## Varieties of Yahwist iconographies

According to ancient Hebrew and other inscriptions, archaeological findings and biblical texts, Yahweh was worshipped during the so-called monarchic period at many different locations, including Beersheba, Bethel, Dan, Gibeon, Hebron, Jerusalem, Penuel, Shechem, Shiloh, Samaria and others. As mentioned, some inscriptions construe a particular relationship between the deity and a region (e.g. ‘Yahweh of Teman’) or place (e.g. ‘god of Jerusalem’).

As early as 1906, the German scholar Gustav Dalman suggested that an image of Yahweh enthroned could be identified on a seventh-century-BCE Judahite seal acquired in Jerusalem (Figure 5.1a; Dalman 1906). In the 1970s, Swedish biblical scholar Gösta Ahlström pointed to a bronze figurine from early Iron Age Hazor (Figure 5.1b; Ahlström 1970/71). Following the discoveries at Kuntillet Ajrud and their preliminary publication, scholars quickly attempted to identify ‘Yahweh and his Asherah’ among the drawings discovered at that site. Due to the nature of the evidence and religious assumptions about Yahweh (a male single or a male with a wife?), the



**Figure 5.1a** Enthroned god on the bifacial seal of Elishama' ben Gedalyahu (owner's name inscribed on the verso), acquired in Jerusalem, c. seventh century BCE (after Keel and Uehlinger 1998: 308, fig. 306a).

**Figure 5.1b** Bronze figurine of a sitting god from Hazor Str. XI, Iron Age I, eleventh/tenth century BCE (after Keel and Uehlinger 1998: 117, fig. 141).

**Figure 5.1c** Pair of male and female hybrid figures on an ink drawing on Pithos A from Kuntillet Ajrud, c. 800 BCE (after Meshel 2012: 166, fig. 6.20; courtesy Ze'ev Meshel, University of Tel Aviv).

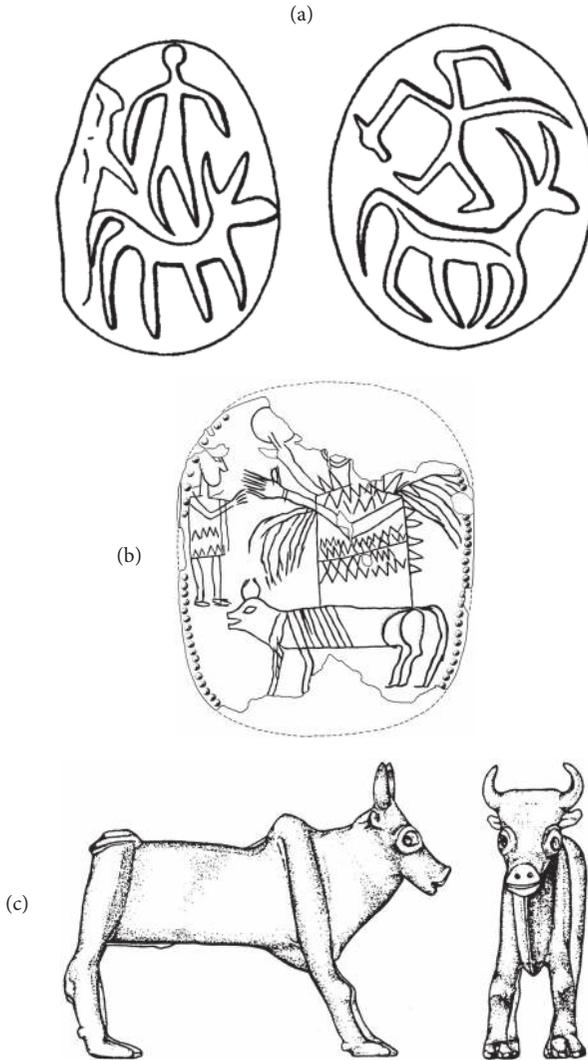
**Figure 5.1d** Terracotta group showing a bearded god enthroned, a stone erected in front of him, and an unbearded (female?) figure standing at his right, flanked by two quadrupeds. Judah, late eighth century BCE (Jeremias 1993: 46, fig. 1; courtesy Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis).

**Figure 5.1e** Two divine (?) figures, situated in a mountainous area, scratched on an eighth-century-BCE pottery sherd from Jerusalem (Gilmour 2009: 91, ill. 4; drawing Dylan Karges, Cobb Institute, Mississippi State University, reproduced courtesy Garth Gilmour, Jerusalem, and Palestine Exploration Fund).

ensuing discussion concentrated more on finding Asherah (a cult symbol or Yahweh's female *paredros*?) among the findings of Kuntillet Ajrud rather than identifying a picture of Yahweh himself. One drawing, however, which shows a hybrid figure combining anthropomorphic, leonine and, for some scholars, bovine features (Figure 5.1c), was soon addressed as a possible representation of Yahweh, and the smaller and slightly feminized figure construed as Asherah (Gilula 1979). The hypothesis has been repeatedly deconstructed and rejected (iconographically speaking, both figures represent variants of a quite well-known apotropaic figure called Bes), but it continues to fuel the scholarly imagination (see again Thomas 2016). Once set to look out for figurative representations of 'Yahweh and his Asherah', scholars have pointed to further potential referents: an eighth-century-BCE terracotta group from the Judean hill country representing a pair of deities, one of them enthroned (Figure 5.1d); two crude figures scratched on an eighth-century-BCE potsherd from Jerusalem (Figure 5.1e); and so on. All these suggestions have remained controversial, to say the least, and none of the suggested artefacts can as yet be proven to represent Yahweh.

Biblical historiography attests two major iconographic traditions for the representation of Yahweh. One, associated with Bethel, Dan and the northern kingdom of Israel (Samaria), is based on bovine iconography, in which a bull can be construed either as the symbolic representation of the storm god himself or as an attribute animal serving as a pedestal of sorts and carrying the anthropomorphic deity on its back (compare Figures 5.2a, b; on the latter item the deity's gender remains uncertain, see Ornan 2006). Bull statues (Figure 5.2c) are probably related to this tradition. Their interpretation as pedestals for an invisible god is motivated by religious inhibition and should be rejected as an instance of wishful thinking. Another tradition, genealogically related to Phoenicia and Canaanite heritage, stresses the notion of divine kingship through the concept of a throne guarded by a pair of winged sphinxes, or cherubim. Since the biblical account of Solomon's Temple in Jerusalem includes a description of giant cherubim in the Holy of Holies, a biblical epithet of Yahweh addresses him as 'riding on cherubim', and Ezekiel 11 describes Yahweh leaving his temple on cherubim, many scholars construe the cherubim throne tradition as peculiar to the Jerusalem Temple (cf. Stordalen, this volume, Figure 1.2). Scholars who consider the so-called image ban tradition a product of post-exilic Judahite scribes are generally inclined to postulate the existence, in the pre-exilic Temple of Jerusalem, of a cultic image representing Yahweh anthropomorphically sitting on a cherubim throne (e.g. Niehr 1997; Römer 2015: 141–59). Admittedly though, this theory lacks full iconographic confirmation and is to some extent no less wishful than its alternative, a deity who in the worshippers' imagination was invisibly enthroned above the cherubim, a view defended by Othmar Keel (2001; 2007: 292–307) and many others (see the discussion by Stordalen, this volume).

Religious iconography from Iron Age Israel and Judah attests to further potential alternatives, for example, an anthropomorphic god standing or riding on a horse (at Tel Moza, *inter alia*) rather than a bull. Scholars have attempted to relate Yahweh to an anthropomorphic heroic figure known as 'Lord of the ostriches' (Keel and Uehlinger 1998: 140). Whether any one of these iconographic types relates to a form of Yahweh or to another deity is unclear; but what is obvious from these and other images is the actual existence of a variety of divine representations in Iron Age II Israel and Judah, including undoubtedly anthropomorphic ones.



**Figure 5.2a** Anthropomorphic deities standing on bulls, as represented on stamp seals from eight-century-BCE Samaria (after Keel and Uehlinger 1998: 193, fig. 207a–b).

**Figure 5.2b** Engraved bronze plaque showing a worshipper facing a long-robbed, winged deity standing on a bull; Tel Dan, eighth century BCE (after Biran 1999: 54, fig. 14; courtesy Nelson Glueck School of Biblical Archaeology, Jerusalem).

**Figure 5.2c** Bronze statue of a bull from a rural sanctuary in the Samaritan hill country, c. eleventh century BCE (after Keel and Uehlinger 1998: 119, fig. 142).

To these anthropomorphic and/or theriomorphic options, one should add a number of non-figurative items, among which is the *maššebah*, or standing stone, attested as a probable representation of Yahweh (and possibly other deities, including ancestors) by archaeological findings and by biblical texts (Mettinger 1995; Bloch-Smith 2015). Another non-figurative representation mentioned in the Hebrew Bible is the so-called ark of the covenant, which is said to have contained sacred stones (or the tablets inscribed by the finger of God) and to have rested under the wings of the Jerusalem cherubim until the first temple's destruction. Since the Hebrew word for 'ark' (*aron*) means 'box, container, cupboard', this tradition has been connected by some scholars with miniature shrine models in stone or terracotta unearthed at various ancient Canaanite, Israelite, Judahite (and Transjordanian) sites (see Garfinkel and Mumcuoglu 2016). Such miniature shrines have rarely been found with actual content (to the notable exception of a much older, sixteenth-century-BCE example from Ashkelon which contained a metal bull figurine), but those found at Israelite and Judahite sites have puzzled archaeologists and their public, raising the question 'To What God?' they may have been employed in ritual (see Mazar and Panitz-Cohen 2008). Scholars sticking to the 'aniconism' paradigm of Israelite religion occasionally construe such shrines (when considered Israelite) as essentially empty and thus 'aniconic', which viewed from a distance seems rather implausible and yet another instance of wishful imagination.

To sum up, there is ample evidence, both primary and secondary, for figural (anthropomorphic, theriomorphic) and non-figurative ('aniconic') representations of deities in ancient Israelite and Judahite religion. The question whether any one (or which ones) of the many options should be positively identified as a visual and material representation of the god Yahweh remains as yet unresolved. But the more the data attest to practices, representations and conceptualizations in line with other Southern Levantine codes and customs, and the more the variety as such increases, the more the theory according to which Yahweh would have been worshipped in exclusively aniconic forms (as forcefully argued by Na'aman 1999 and Mettinger 2006) loses plausibility as an explanatory model. We may thus state as an intermediary conclusion that Yahweh was probably worshipped in ancient Israel and Judah under various forms and representations, among which are anthropomorphic and theriomorphic statuary in some places, and non-figurative material representations in others (Berlejung 2017). In this regard, the local, regional and institutional varieties of his cult would not have differed much (and certainly not in essence) from that of any other major deity in the Southern Levant.

### III The emergence of the biblical ban on cultic images

If ancient Israelite and Judahite religion/s were less distinct from neighbouring religions than what conventional wisdom has assumed, one needs to explain the genealogy of a discourse of distinctiveness with which this volume is concerned and whose roots can be found in the Hebrew Bible. In this section I outline how the emergence of the so-called biblical image ban may be understood from a strictly historical point of view. The prohibition is generally viewed through the focal lens of the so-called Second Commandment of the Decalogue (itself embedded in two distinct literary

contexts, Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5); but the Torah of Moses contains a number of additional texts prohibiting the production and use of cultic images. Again, there is more variety than often assumed, and the prohibitions are less encompassing than what the term image ban suggests, since these texts are exclusively concerned with cult-related imagery, never with images as such in a general sense. This holds true even for the Septuagint, the third-century-BCE Greek translation of the Torah (Tatum 1986). Important studies on the emergence of the biblical 'image ban' include articles by Herbert Niehr (2003) and Matthias Köckert (2007), among others.

The aim of this section is first to clarify the meaning and purpose of the various prohibitions found in the Torah of Moses. In earlier research (Uehlinger 2003), I argue that the variety of formulations reflects a process of increasing exclusion of figurative materials from ritual environments in which Yahweh would be worshipped in post-exilic Judah. My ambition here is to provide a religio-historical explanation which circumscribes and contextualizes the emergence of the biblical prohibitions as part of a historically contingent social process. Whatever its impact on later developments in Jewish, Christian and Islamic religious traditions, neither the process nor its consequences should be reified by historians of religion as a static, 'original' and once-and-forever feature of biblical religion. Methodologically speaking, this section deals with what I have called secondary sources in the previous section, since the relevant 'image ban' texts are all part of the biblical tradition. To analyse them in a historical perspective and to align them in a diachronic sequence is fraught with difficulties. The hypothesis cannot be securely tested against primary evidence for several reasons: first, it is hard to tell from artefactual evidence whether a particular commandment or prohibition was known in a specific context, let alone whether it was followed or not; second, it is virtually impossible to tell from the absence of particular artefacts in specific contexts (in this case, figurative imagery from a cultic context) whether this is the result of a normative injunction of this or that biblical commandment; thirdly, the archaeological record offers an inevitably incomplete documentation, as underscored by every new discovery. Still, I consider my historical reconstruction a plausible scenario for two reasons: internally, it tries to make sense of the variety of formulations, taking into account both a certain expansion in emphasis and a tendency to unify the issue of cult-related imagery; externally, I contend that I could demonstrate from archaeological evidence that at any stage in the postulated development of the prohibitions, the features at issue were actually available as real options (if only to be rejected by the biblical authors) to the post-exilic Judahite (Jerusalemite) society whose ritual regime these texts were probably meant to discipline.

## **Jerusalem versus Bethel**

The starting point of our historical account is the conquest of Jerusalem in 587 BCE by Babylonian invaders who destroyed not only large parts of the city but also the royal palace and the temple adjacent to it. An earlier conquest in 598 had already led to the partial plundering of the temple, affecting particularly its ritual vessels. If the pre-exilic temple housed a cultic image of Yahweh (a hotly debated question which I tend to answer positively, see above), 598 would have offered the first opportunity for the

Babylonians to remove it together with the ritual vessels; but there is no clear evidence for such an operation, which would no doubt have required considerable attention on behalf of the conquerors. It seems safer to hypothesize that if the Jerusalem Temple housed a cultic image of Yahweh, it did so until the destruction of 587, when the image would have been destroyed together with its architectural envelope (Anthonioz 2015). Although one should not imagine post-587 Jerusalem devoid of any ritual activity addressed to Yahweh (Keel 2007: 784–6), the latter probably did not (no more?) involve a figurative cultic image. Limited ritual activity at best may have existed at Bethel, Jerusalem's rival sanctuary sixteen kilometres to the north which by the time had lost much of its former prestige. Biblical writers condemn Bethel and its figurative bull symbolism, whether in the book of the Israelite prophet Hosea (which by the sixth century would be preserved and rewritten by Judahite scribes) or in deuteronomistic historiography (cf. 1 Kings 12; 2 Kings 23), and finally in the latter's retrojection back to the times of Moses (Exodus 32). The 'Golden Calf' episode at the foot of Mount Sinai represents the ultimate disqualification of Bethel's cultic tradition and figurative bull symbolism, rejecting it as the most intolerable of Israelite idolatries (see further Sherwood, this volume).

### 'Image Bans' in the Torah

Apart from the latter narrative, one may distinguish three different strands in the literary development of 'image ban' texts in the Torah of Moses: One strand prohibiting the production of 'gods of silver' and 'gods of gold', preserved in the opening of the so-called Book of the Covenant, emphasizes the precious metal required for the production of cultic images, whether to be used for the worship of Yahweh or of other deities next to him (Exod. 20.22-3). Interestingly, this prohibition is preceded by a memento: 'You have seen [*sic*] that I spoke to you from heaven' (v. 22a), a statement which in its present context qualifies Yahweh's first encounter with Israel at Mount Sinai a few verses earlier. What Israel saw was not Yahweh, but His speaking from heaven. Together with Deuteronomy 4, this is one of the foundational texts establishing the dichotomy between the true (and ultimately transcendent) God who communicates with his people by words of heavenly origin, and other gods whose material preciousness cannot qualify them as real gods.

A second strand of prohibitions derives from the Decalogue, delivered a few verses earlier in Exodus 20 and repeated in Deuteronomy 5. Within the Torah's overall narrative, these words are of the highest authority since the narrative implies that Yahweh spoke directly, without any intermediary, to the people of Israel gathered at the foot of Mount Sinai. The version of the 'image ban' known as the Second Commandment represents a secondary addition to an earlier version of the Decalogue, as even a modern translation may show:

Exodus 20 // Deuteronomy 5

- (v. 3/7) You shall have no *other gods* before (or: facing) me.
- (v. 4/8) You shall not make for yourself a cult image (Heb. *pesel*),  
(or/and) any likeness of anything that is in heaven above,

- or that is on the earth beneath,  
 or that is in the water (reaching even) under the earth.  
 (v. 5/9) You shall not bow down to *them* or serve *them*,  
 for I, the LORD, your God, am a jealous God [...].

The plural pronouns in v. 5/9 ('them') have their referent in v. 3/7 ('other gods'), which implies that in an earlier version of the Decalogue v. 5/9 must have followed immediately after v. 3/7. The original intent of vv. 3/7 seems to have been to ensure the exclusive and solitary worship of Yahweh by excluding any kind of divine company, whether permanent or visiting. V. 4/8 adds a particular specification, excluding the production of a cult image (note that the standard translation 'graven image' is misleading here, since *pesel* includes any kind of material and is not limited to sculpture). The insertion of v. 4/8 has a double *raison d'être*: it excludes the production and worship of cult images *per se*, whether of Yahweh or of other gods, requiring no cult image at all; at the same time, it apparently implies that a cult image of Yahweh would be considered as representing 'another god', too. The latter, rather sophisticated argument would not have been necessary, had the issue of whether and how to figuratively represent Yahweh already been settled by the time of redaction. The emphasis on *no cultic image at all* (meaning: whether of other gods or of Yahweh) implies considerable debate on the issue among post-exilic Yahwists in Jerusalem (and possibly Samaria as well). As for v. 4b/8b, this seems to be a further extension of the prohibition: it excludes the production even of votive figurines (e.g. of animals or human worshippers, well attested in earlier Israelite and Judahite sanctuaries), that is, images which would not have become the focus of worship anyway but which as donations contributed in their own way to the material production of divine presence.

A third strand extends the former's concern with statuary to relief sculpture and even plain standing stones (Lev. 19.4, 26.1), that is, cultic objects known from local shrines and sanctuaries in the countryside that had once been considered perfectly fit for Yahwist worship but which anti-ruralist polemics of a new, post-exilic priestly elite would now disqualify by turning them into features of Canaanite backwoods rituals (Bloch-Smith 2015). Scribes and priests of the same pedigree would now underline their 'aniconic' Yahwism by promoting an anti-iconic, even iconoclastic, attitude against rural sanctuaries (Exod. 23.23-4; Num. 33.52-3) very much in line with the anti-Canaanism of Deuteronomy 12.

A more reflective and eminently theological synthesis of the various strands too briefly summarized here can be found in Deut. 4.1-40. This rhetorically sophisticated and compositionally complex chapter presents itself as an emphatic reminder to Yahweh's original revelation, here located at Mount Horeb, and adds dramatic narrative visibility to the memory of Israel's encounter with God. A large quote of the text will provide some sense of the chapter's rhetoric intensity.

#### Deuteronomy 4

<sup>11</sup> You came near and stood at the foot of the mountain, while the mountain burned with fire to the heart of heaven, wrapped in darkness, cloud, and gloom. <sup>12</sup> Then

the LORD spoke to you out of the midst of the fire; *you heard the sound of words, but saw no form; there was only a voice.*<sup>13</sup> And he declared to you his covenant, which he commanded you to perform, that is, the ten commandments; and he wrote them upon two tables of stone. [...]

<sup>15</sup> Therefore take good heed to yourselves. Since *you saw no form* on the day that the LORD spoke to you at Horeb out of the midst of the fire,<sup>16</sup> beware lest you act corruptly by *making a graven image (pesel, lit. cultic image) for yourselves,*

*in the form of any figure,  
the likeness of male or female,  
<sup>17</sup> the likeness of any beast that is on the earth,  
the likeness of any winged bird that flies in the air,  
<sup>18</sup> the likeness of anything that creeps on the ground,  
the likeness of any fish that is in the water under the earth.*  
[...]

<sup>23</sup> Take heed to yourselves, lest you forget the covenant of the LORD your God, which he made with you, and *make a graven image (pesel) in the form of anything* which the LORD your God has forbidden you.<sup>24</sup> For the LORD your God is a devouring fire, a jealous God.

Scholars have long noticed that this chapter represents a *summa* of sorts of all previous reflections on how the Israelites could experience actual divine manifestation and communication (Yahweh himself speaking) and yet survive; under what conditions they would have been able to remain in their land instead of being led into exile, where they were exposed to the idolatrous cult of the material non-gods (fetishes *avant la lettre*) of foreign nations; how they were allowed to return and under what conditions the returnees would prosper in the country restored to them. With regard to this volume's central topic, it is striking to see how all this is conditioned upon the central obligation of an imageless worship of Yahweh. All emphasis is put on communication with Yahweh and the very possibility of divine presence, a presence that does not tolerate material mediation by any figurative image, but which can only be imagined and remembered in terms of fire. Fire is difficult to grasp and thus somehow immaterial, but as visible and radiating energy it is the symbol par excellence to which the faithful may associate the memory of hearing words of divine origin.

In a brilliantly perspicacious article, Matthias Köckert (2009) has demonstrated that even such a relatively late deuteronomic (fourth century BCE) text, for whose author an icon-related worship of Yahweh seems totally unacceptable, presumes the memory (which it construes and deconstructs in the very process of remembering) that pre-exilic Israel and Judah had not worshipped Yahweh aniconically, that is, the way this chapter and the Decalogue prescribe as ultimately normative:

#### **Deuteronomy 4**

<sup>25</sup> When you beget children and children's children, and have grown old in the land, if you act corruptly by *making a graven image (Heb. pesel) in the form of*

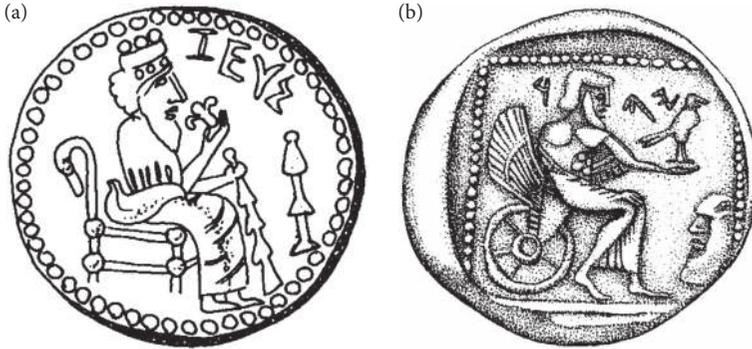
*anything*, and by doing what is evil in the sight of the LORD your God, so as to provoke him to anger,<sup>26</sup> I call heaven and earth to witness against you this day, that you will soon utterly perish from the land which you are going over the Jordan to possess; you will not live long upon it, but will be utterly destroyed.<sup>27</sup> And the LORD will scatter you among the peoples, and you will be left few in number among the nations where the LORD will drive you.<sup>28</sup> And *there you will serve gods of wood and stone, the work of men's hands, that neither see, nor hear, nor eat, nor smell.*

So the Torah of Moses spells out (more lucidly than conservative scholars are ready to admit) that Israel's pre-exilic cult of Yahweh included the use of figurative images and must have been far from 'aniconic' in essence and in principle.

#### IV A hermeneutical pause: How come that modern scholars read prescriptive Torah as a template of actual 'Israelite religion'?

Sections II and III above can be read as summaries of two subsequent stages in the development of ancient Israelite, Judahite and ultimately early Jewish religion, to sum up: from Israelite cult practices which allowed for both iconic and aniconic representations of Yahweh (and of other deities and divine intermediaries) to the implementation of an 'aniconic' official worship of Yahweh in post-exilic (Persian period) Yehud, where Yahweh would now be progressively conceived as the one 'God of Heaven.' It is important to recognize that in fourth-century-BCE Samaria (Figure 5.3a) and Yehud (Figure 5.3b) Yahweh could still be anthropomorphically represented on coinage (Wyssmann 2013; De Hulster 2013). But the regime of his main temples was different, so that the official cult of Yahweh would henceforth operate on largely 'aniconic' assumptions. In this aesthetic regime, the significance and presumed augmented reality of Yahweh (or God) would no more be mediated by a statue or any other *direct* material representation (not even a standing stone, which would have been considered archaic and despised as 'Canaanite'); yet there were *indirect* indexes of presence (most notably, furniture and ritual vessels).

Following the rhetoric of Deuteronomy 4, Yahweh's word encoded in the Torah of Moses should now be regarded as the canonical medium. Yet considering what we know of post-exilic religion from extra-biblical data, it would be short-sighted to simply take the 'logocentric' perspective of Deuteronomy 4 at face value. Religious aesthetics has taught us to keep logocentric pretensions at critical distance and to consider the variety of sensory mediations even in the context of aesthetic regimes which celebrate the pre-eminence of a revealed Word or Scripture. Post-exilic Judahite religion may have been increasingly shaped by theological concerns preserved in deuteronomistic strata of the Hebrew Bible, but biblical tradition was by no means the only, nor probably the most, significant resource to give meaning and significance to late Judahite and early Jewish religion. That religion now centred increasingly



**Figure 5.3a** Enthroned god (labelled ‘Zeus’, possibly referring to Samaritan Yahweh) on the obverse of a bronze obole from the Nablus/Shechem area, fourth century BCE (after Meshorer and Qedar 1999: 51, no. 40; courtesy Israel Numismatic Society).

**Figure 5.3b** Male god sitting on a winged wheel on the reverse of a silver drachm of unknown provenance, fourth century BCE; the legend has been read as Aramaic *YHD* (for Yehud) and as Paleo-Hebrew *YHW* (for Yahweh) respectively (after Gitler and Tal 2006: 231, fig. XVI.25; courtesy Haim Gitler, Israel Museum, Jerusalem).

around the rebuilt Temple of Jerusalem, a sacrificial economy which, together with the temple’s sheer architectural materiality, its environments and the experience of crowds moving through them, would have represented the most tangible (and eminently sensual) aspects of lived religion for most visitors of ancient Jerusalem. A priest-run liturgy seems to have operated in a very peculiar kind of monumental ‘empty space’ (or *Leerstelle*) – empty in the sense that it did not contain what one would normally have expected in a building of the kind. That the temple did not house a statue was known to Jews and non-Jews alike, although the details of the Holy of Holies remained unavailable to the average visitor, for whom monumental architecture, purity concerns and sacrificial preoccupations, and feasting with a crowd or with one’s family were far more important experiences. To be sure, this temple was different from the pre-exilic one, even if the scripturalized imagination of the Solomonic Temple provided a frame for experiencing the post-exilic temple to those who mused on that text (cf. Stordalen, this volume). Still, visiting the Jerusalem complex<sup>3</sup> remained a heavily multisensory experience, not least in terms of visual, material and spatial formations. Its multi-sensoriality would even increase during the Hellenistic and Roman periods, reaching its apogee with the huge renovation and extension of the so-called Second Temple by King Herod the Great. Even a cursory reading of this temple’s enthusiastic description by Jewish historian Flavius Josephus demonstrates that ‘aniconism’ and multi-sensoriality do not mutually exclude each other at all. That this temple’s statue-less character (assumed by all and known to some, but experienced inside by only a very few) was part of a peculiar visual and material regime which still allowed for an intense sensory experience has rarely been discussed by biblical scholars and historians of religion, many of whom tend to take early Jewish ‘aniconism’ as a pretext to switch from the visual to the auditory, or from image to scripture.

## Stages in the evolution from prohibition to positive identity marker

In sum, historical-critical scholarship of the twentieth century construed a representation of ancient Israelite and Judahite religion as 'aniconic' and monolatric from the very beginning. Yet, biblical literature is full of references to ancient Israelite and Judahite 'idolatry'. On the background of the archaeological record, these references may be requalified as distant and somehow distorted memories of previous religious diversity. Why would modern scholars ignore this evidence and reconstruct 'ancient Israelite' practices as having been in line with deuteronomistic interpretations of the Torah? How could biblical scholars produce such disingenuous readings of what their primary object of study actually says?

The main reason, in my view, lies in the normative power of prescriptive Torah, or rather in the assumption of biblical scholars and historians that what the Torah defines as an *ideal* and required ritual regime should be regarded as the *actual*, and under normal circumstances *usual*, form of ancient Israelite and Judahite religion. Such a view can hardly withstand the testimony of archaeological and historical evidence, nor that of critical biblical scholarship. Bluntly put, I suspect that 'ancient Israelite religion' as construed by twentieth-century theologians, biblical scholars and historians of religion owes more to modern synagogue and church education than to biblical, let alone historical and archaeological, data.

The basic hermeneutic problem at stake seems to be the epistemic mutation of positional, explicitly normative prescriptions of biblical texts into seemingly factual statements and rather unengaged assumptions by Biblicists and archaeologists alike. Is it possible to explain such a mutation? Since it affects the episteme, it must be related to the different epistemes' contexts. I suggest that instead of focusing our attention exclusively on the question how to construe and imagine ancient Israelite religion\s from primary and secondary data, we give equal attention to the contexts in which this (re-)construction and imagination took shape in history and takes shape today, and to the religious, institutional and/or scholarly agendas the various (re-)constructions and imaginations were and are meant to serve. Among the many different contexts that one might consider, largely disconnected from each other though genealogically related as members of a widespread family, let me single out the following.

*Stage 1:* The (hypothesized) context from which the earliest biblical prescriptions against the use of cultic images originated – real-life controversies in post-exilic Judah over an issue which particularly priests (many of whom had returned from Babylonia or were descendants of returnees) must have considered of the highest concern, namely how to serve Yahweh and communicate with him in his rebuilt temple.

*Stage 2:* The context (preserved by and available through the Hebrew Bible) in which the dominant outcome of the debates was fixed in prescriptive law (the Decalogue, the Covenant Code and other biblical law codes), supporting narrative (such as the story about the 'Golden Calf', Exodus 32; see Sherwood in this volume) and historiography (such as the tradition about Jeroboam's bull images in 1 Kings 12, for which see Berlejung 2009) by fifth-to-fourth-century temple scribes. The

latter would increasingly read and rewrite these materials in terms of a coherent 'system', the Torah of Moses, to which traditionists would soon attribute the highest authority (Moses being elevated to the status of the most eminent prophet, or more than a prophet). This process leading from social controversy through normative regulations to ultimately canonized scripture must be considered the first phase of a substantial transmutation, out of which the *idea* that Yahweh (God) cannot be rendered in a cultic image because He did not want to render himself visible in such a way emerged as a *fundamental religious principle*, a principle which incidentally allowed to distinguish rather easily the one true God (and one's own religion) from those of all others (the 'nations').

*Stage 3:* The many contexts in which this systemic idea and religious principle would be adopted by Christians as part of their own religious heritage – a transference and adaptation into new social and cultural environments by a multi-ethnic and heterogeneous movement that was an extremely challenging task. The fundamental religious principle that (the Christian) God could not be worshipped in the form of a cultic statue allowed strong dissociation from Greek and Roman ('pagan') religion, but it collided with another, typically Christian principle (divine incarnation) and the notion that Christ himself could be regarded both as God's *logos* and *eikôn*. The issue became pressing when the Church acquired hegemonic power. Yet despite the many controversies, which led to just as many pragmatic and theological accommodations, the religious principle defined in the Decalogue was preserved as one of the most binding parts of Holy Scripture.

*Stage 4:* The context of religious controversies in Western Europe, which from the late medieval to the early modern period led to Reformation, occasionally accompanied by iconoclastic events, and the confessionalization of European Christianity. The binary dichotomy of true worship of God versus idolatry read out from scripture provided a convenient blueprint for dissociating especially Calvinist Protestantism from Papist Catholicism (which being the most proximate was also construed as the most perverse variety of idolatries by polemicists who had little concern for the Eastern European Orthodox traditions).

*Stage 5:* The context of modern biblical scholarship owes as much to Protestant scripturalism as it does to antiquarianism, Enlightenment and romanticism. Protestant scripturalism not only invented new ways of disciplining ritual, but also allowed pious Protestants to imagine themselves as 'the true Israel' – which in turn meant that enlightened Israel should be construed according to rules defined by modern Protestants. Antiquarianism opened new ways to historicize religion, including the religion of ancient Israel. Enlightenment favoured an understanding of religion in heavily intellectualized terms of abstract philosophical principles, a context in which the prohibition to figuratively represent God enjoyed obvious plausibility. Romantic distinction and essentialization of *Volksgeist* led to the idea of the faithful among ancient Israelites as those whose religion stood out from antique heathenism and prepared humanity for recognition of the one true God. Needless to say, these various constructs had little or nothing to do with the long-gone controversies which had produced the biblical texts in stages 1 and 2; but they provided the intellectual framework through which ancient Israel was reinvented.

*Stage 6:* Add to this the context of nineteenth- and twentieth-century biblical scholarship, which in times driven by a spirit of resolute modernity extended and modernized traditional ecclesial interpretation. Steps in, at the end of the nineteenth century, the typically modern, quasi-colonial discipline of biblical archaeology, which allowed Bible-inspired scholars to recover from the ground what former scholars had only imagined in their minds. In a context enriched by comparative history of religion\, anthropology, but also radical dialectic theology, scholars versed in biblical studies and archaeology would produce a new episteme, in which the distinction between Israelite religion and Canaanite idolatry provided the blueprint for classifying and organizing the new material evidence from the past according to pre-established categories. This stage has been crucial for the epistemic transmutation postulated in this section, since the most robust resistance offered against new views on the histories and religion\, of ancient Israel and Judah in contemporary scholarship comes from scholars still operating according to the 'biblical archaeology' paradigm.

*Stage 7:* The modern archaeology of Israel/Palestine should be mentioned as yet another stage and background to our discussion. Secularization notwithstanding, many current debates in the archaeology of Israel/Palestine during the first millennium BCE relate to issues of national, political and religious identity in one way or another. The spectrum of scholarly positions on how to correlate archaeology and the Bible is wide, but defenders of a 'biblical archaeology' approach, in which one of archaeology's essential roles is to confirm and illuminate the Bible (which is thus legitimized to provide the default script for whatever archaeology has not yet brought to light), still represent a significant faction. This is important for my argument insofar as such an approach endorses and promotes the Mosaic principle of Israelite distinctiveness, re-inscribing the biblical dichotomy of Israelite versus Canaanite culture and religion (which for the first millennium BCE is differentiated into Israelite versus Phoenician, Philistine, Aramean, Ammonite, Moabite, Edomite) into artefactual data and thus reifying putative 'national' identities. This epistemic regime has produced scholars who will read the difference of Edomite versus Judahite religion into the terracotta statuaries from Ḥorvat Qitmit versus the standing stones from Tel Arad (see Uehlinger 2006 for a critique), who wonder how a Judahite temple with cultic figurines can have existed in the ninth century BCE a few kilometres west of Jerusalem (Tel Moza, see Kisilevitz 2015 for a preliminary report),<sup>4</sup> or who look at empty miniature shrines made of clay and stage them as models for the 'aniconic' Temple of Solomon and 'the earliest archaeological evidence of the worship of the Lord of the new nation in Judah' (Garfinkel and Mumcuoglu 2016: 210).

Needless to say, this short summary of epistemic transmutation represents an oversimplification and would require refinement for all stages (see Levenson 2011 for a similar, much more detailed argument). Stages 6 and 7, which are closest to us, are perhaps the most delicate to describe, and I should stress that the evaluation given here concerns significant factions within highly contested, controversial fields which are also characterized by increasing methodological sophistication and intellectual brightness. My comments will hopefully not be read as a disrespectful bashing of colleagues whose work I highly appreciate even when disagreeing over models of

interpretation. The aim of this all-too-brief genealogy of 'aniconic Ancient Israel' is to provoke reflection on the impact of epistemic regimes on our understanding of texts, traditions and material culture.

## V From the iconism/aniconism divide to visual/ material culture and aesthetic formation

This section considers the theoretical challenge posed by the epistemic permutations summarized above, and sketches a possible way out of the apparent dilemma by suggesting a more robust engagement with recent theoretical advances in the study of religion\'. From the analytical and evaluative mode adopted in the previous section, I now switch to a more directional stance by offering a few briefly commented theses.

*Thesis 1: Biblical texts prohibiting the production and use of cultic statuary stand at the origin of both religious and scholarly discourses on 'image ban' and 'aniconism'. Historians of religion should not read such texts at face value, but with attention to their variety, taking into account the socio- and cultural-historical contexts and controversies in which they were first formulated, however hypothetical, elusive and hard to recover these ancient contexts may be for modern scholars.*

Texts which stand at the beginning of complex and elaborate discourse traditions (such as the 'image ban' discourse) are particularly likely to imply and reflect debates and controversies on the very issues they pretend to settle when referring to a divine or otherwise authorized authority. A major problem in the interpretation of biblical texts (here, prohibitions of cultic images) is the notorious difficulty to precisely date them in time and locate them in space and society. However, this should not be taken as an excuse to privilege de-contextualizing and ahistorical, over-generalizing modes of interpretation.

*Thesis 2: By extending the prohibitions' scope of application from focal cult images through votive imagery to any kind of figurative representation in a cultic setting, post-exilic Judahite priests and scribes developed a particular aesthetic formation, whose perpetuation installed a new religious habitus ultimately leading to an epistemic regime that would posit itself as presenting a fundamental alternative to other ('idolatrous') regimes.*

Although the principle that the 'God of Israel' should not be represented figuratively may have been debated as late as the second century BCE, it became constitutive of official early Jewish religion since at least the third century BCE, to the extent that external observers would know and comment about this particularity of Jewish ritual. The particularity would become habitual over time, and thus enjoy an ever-stronger plausibility. It is possible to demonstrate that whenever Judaism was construed in strong opposition to pressures from outside or alternatives within, such as during the so-called Maccabean crisis, under Roman imperial rule or during the Jewish Wars, the 'idol-less' Temple could easily become an emblem to enhance social cohesion and a sense of distinctiveness. In contrast, when the Jewish minority living in late-antique

Galilee enjoyed relatively good relations with its Christian neighbours and enjoyed a high degree of self-administration and participation in the overall framework of Byzantine society, religious distinctiveness may still have been an issue but did not need to be expressed through the radical avoidance of all visual imagery, as the famous mosaic floors from late-antique Galilean synagogues demonstrate (Levine 2013 and cf. Bland, this volume).

*Thesis 3: Much like the data studied by anthropologists, historical data related to ancient religious practice and belief (and thus also the biblical prohibitions of the production and use of cult images) need to be studied as closely as possible 'from within', according to their (hypothetically retrieved) meaning, significance, pragmatic functionality for particular social groups and their specific religious ideology and interests.*

For the social historian a text is a product of labour performed by someone occupying a particular position in the social fabric he or she once belonged to. The re-reading and re-working of texts by later generations were yet another kind of such labour. To get a sense of the social fabric in which these processes of writing and reading, rewriting and re-appropriating occurred, one must study the relevant society in its different stages from its primary evidence, based on as many media as possible (texts, images and other artefactual data). Needless to say, such evidence must be situated in ancient ecology, geography, economy, politics and so on. One cannot, however, overestimate the huge gap in terms of epistemic regime between the biblical texts' ancient *Sitz im Leben* (a somehow old-fashioned term which includes both the social location of texts and their social relevance to particular groups) on the one hand, and their modern location in the Bibles of believers or the computers of scholars, on the other.

*Thesis 4: The ultimate aim of religio-historical research is not the most subtle (re-)construction of an ancient religious regime as such and according to its own logic, but its historical explanation in terms of social history and functionality, including ideology. While dense description is predicated on the interpretation of a maximum of relevant data, explanation requires engagement with theory.*

The critical historian studying the evolution of ancient 'image bans' from targeted prohibitions to generalized, habitual *apriori* cannot limit him- or herself to mere exegesis of biblical texts. There is one option which remains closed to him or her (as a historian), namely to consider the 'meaning' of a particular text or discourse tradition as a 'message' for his or her own world view or belief. The critical historian will be curious to learn under what conditions and medial circumstances a restricted prohibitive discourse could turn into a disciplining discourse which today shapes the ritual regime of major religious traditions. Even more relevant in theoretical terms, he or she will need to critically reflect to what extent his or her own assumptions, research questions, terminology and so forth are tributary of the religious discourse tradition he or she wants to unravel.

Is it possible to step out of the pitfalls of a normative tradition which has so strongly impacted Western theological and philosophical thinking as the discourse on 'aniconism' and the *Bilderverbot*? As argued above, the very concept of 'aniconism' is heavily indebted to the mistrust developed in Western intellectual history against the

visual and material mediation of the divine, the transcendent, the ultimately true and real. In order to escape from this conceptual deadlock, one needs theory; alternative ways of approaching the data, ways that do not carry the weight of normative epistemic bifurcations such as the ones lying at the basis of the matrix exposed in section I above.

*Thesis 5: Much terminology employed by scholars (theologians, biblical scholars, historians of religion\, anthropologists) to interpret and explain the religious phenomena discussed in this chapter is closely related if not directly borrowed from the emic terminology of the religious traditions concerned. That the same terminology has also been largely received into secular ideologies confirms rather than weakens the point. Since first-order terminology tends to simply duplicate religious discourse in a way or another, it is unlikely to produce plausible and robust theoretical explanations. This also applies to the domain addressed and debated under the labels of 'image ban' and 'aniconism'.*

Although the term aniconic can be construed to 'describe a physical object, monument, image or visual scheme that denotes the presence of a divine power without a figural representation of the deity (or deities) involved' (Gaifman 2017: 337), an analytical terminology built on dichotomies and normative alternatives (as implied by both 'image ban' and 'aniconism') is in my view rather unhelpful to explain the phenomena and controversies discussed in this chapter in theoretically robust terms. An alternative approach should rest on concepts and a theoretical framework that overarches, or encompasses, so-called aniconic and iconic ritual regimes, allowing to analyse them with the very same questions regardless of their apparent antagonism.

It has long been shown that the binome 'iconic versus aniconic' does not need to be construed in a dichotomic way. The variety of artefactual data from many religious traditions rather invite to regard the two terms as extreme positions on a spectrum of materializations, many of which cannot be properly described as fully iconic or totally aniconic (Uehlinger 1996; Schipper 2013; Aktor 2017). It is here that visual and material religion enter the debate, allowing to make an additional step forward in terms of theory and focus: after all, both the so-called iconic and the aniconic object occupy a particular position in ritual space, can be seen and manipulated in this or another way, may serve to mediate an entity that would otherwise be considered physically absent, and so on. As an example from the history of early Jewish religion after the exile, I may refer to Bob Becking's convincing demonstration on how the temple vessels presumed to be those employed in the pre-exilic temple could materialize continuity and the presence of Yahweh in the post-exilic sanctuary of Jerusalem (Becking 2013). Applied in such a nuanced way to close readings of the data, sophisticated theory may enable scholars to analyse, compare and explain within a consistent framework of second-order concepts and explanatory models objects of study which first-order classifications would regard as essentially heterogeneous and disjunctive.

*Thesis 6: Religion engages people to act as members of communities and, in ritual performance, to engage in particular settings which activate, exacerbate or curb sensory experience according to specific, group- and/or tradition-related rules. Focusing on the issue whether and how the presence of a not-to-be-seen deity might or should not be mediated through material objects and a particular visual representation is but one aspect*

*of that larger condition. What has been described as 'image ban' and 'aniconic' ritual may be peculiar ways to regulate mediation and the participants' sensory experience, but they do not render the ritual setting itself opaque to such experience. 'Aniconic' as much as any other setting or regime can and should be analysed in terms of sensory formation or bodily-and-material culture.*

To dissociate oneself from emic or first-order terminology when analysing material, visual, sensory ritual formations allows the critical scholar of religion to approach them in a way which is both epistemically less enmeshed in the data and theoretically more robust. As Urmila Mohan and Jean-Pierre Warnier rightly underscore (with reference to theoretical work by Michel de Certeau), in religion 'the religious subject is produced and marched in the name of a Real that is produced as such by an Imaginary giving shape to given discourses, bodies and material things' (2017: 377). 'Aniconic' ritual (or 'worship') fully conforms to that rule. It does not force its participants to act as if they were blind and does not eliminate media, the material and the sensory from ritual experience – it simply regulates them in particular ways, no more and no less. 'Aniconic' ritual offers multisensory and at times synaesthetic experiences as much as any other ritual regime. Regardless whether a deity is objectively presentified in a statue or not, his or her hold on participants *is* materially and visually mediated in ritual space in a way or another, and 'aniconic' ritual practice inevitably produces as much as it follows a particular order (an etiquette) of interaction with the deity, and among participants. To analyse this regime and its effects on socially constructed experience and imagination (or, when socially and culturally condensed, the imaginary) is the task of the critical study of religion. Scholars have efficiently conceptualized this task in terms of visual and material religion (Morgan 2010, among others), aesthetic or sensory formation (Meyer 2009, among others, and Promey 2014), religious aesthetics (Grieser and Johnston 2017) or bodily-and-material culture of religion (Mohan and Warnier 2017). Putting the body at the centre of religious experience, Mohan and Warnier suggest to shift the study of religion 'away from the verbalized creeds, doctrines and texts towards the consideration of the bodily-and-material cultures that are prominent in most' (if not in all) in order to 'understand how the bodily-and-material cultures of religious practice contribute to producing the devotee and obtaining compliance' (Ibid.: 369). It is my conviction that to dispose of the dichotomic language game of 'image ban' and 'aniconism' and to address ancient Levantine ritual – as documented in archaeological evidence, inscriptions and biblical texts – in terms of religious aesthetics, sensory formation and/or bodily-and-material culture will open new perspectives for the critical, historical study of ancient Israelite and Judahite, early Jewish and early Christian religion\ – and the study of their many diverse appropriations in subsequent periods and further traditions alike.



- zu erfüllen vermag. Das Bild besitzt seine Kraft in einer Verähnlichung, es erzeugt eine Gleichheit mit dem Dargestellten.
- 8 He does not take into account that images of God – famously as an old man with a beard – have been made and reproduced over and over again, for instance via illustrated Bibles (see Kruse 2003: chapter 3, and below).
  - 9 Particularly instructive is the attention Kruse pays to differences in evoking a sense of the unseen between artists' stance towards images and theologians' stance towards text. For instance, discussing miniature depictions of the creation of the world in the medieval Lambeth Bible, she demonstrates that the images fill descriptive blanks in the text with concrete visual information (see also Brunotte in this volume) and, in so doing, guide – or even 'occupy' – the imagination of their beholders (2003: 137–55). Analysing the specificity of the visual exegesis undertaken by medieval painters, she identifies an image–text syntax that suggests a priority for images over the text not only on the level of the illustrated Bible, but also in a semantic sense, according to which the things and their names and images were created before the biblical text could narrate the creation of the world.
  - 10 Of course, as an art historian Belting focuses on images. But I do not take this statement to imply that pictures are the only media through which deities become present. In this sense, 'iconic presence' is one mediated presence of the transcendent next to others.
  - 11 In her recent long essay 'After Debrosses: Fetishism, Translation, Comparativism, Critique' (2017), Rosalind Morris insists that fetishism and idolatry were separate discourses, and criticizes Böhme for eliding the difference between them (2017: 165). I take her point that it is important to not project an assumed congruence of fetish and idol on historical texts and to remain alert to the fact that fetish and idol refer to different things. At the same time, however, these two terms were used interchangeably by mission societies such as the NMG (see below). The point here is to trace the actual use of these two terms in encounters between missionaries and Africans, and the repercussions of this use for the ways in which indigenous cult objects are spoken about.
  - 12 With thanks to Angelantonio Grossi for alerting me to the media channel of this pastor and to Azizaa (see below).
  - 13 Original: 'Daher fürchte ich mich, einen Ölgötzen zu verbrennen. Ich habe Angst davor, der Teufelsnarr würde mir etwas antun, obwohl ich (einerseits) die Schrift habe, und weiß, dass Bilder nichts vermögen und weder Leben, Blut noch Geist haben, und doch hält andererseits mich die Furcht [gefangen] und macht, dass ich mich vor einem gemalten Teufel, vor einem Schatten, vor einem Geräusch eines leichten Blattes fürchte und ich gehe aus dem Weg, was ich mannhaft suchen sollte [sc. Bilder zu verbrennen]'.

## Chapter 5

- 1 'Aniconism' is a problematic concept for several reasons. First, scholars have deployed 'aniconic' and 'aniconism' as key terms, yet with meanings and values that can vary dramatically' (Gaifman 2017: 343). Secondly, through its via negationis it implies an understanding (and often rejection) of its opposite (see Huntington 2015 with reference to early Buddhism). Thirdly, as an '-ism' it has a propensity to reification and tends to be used in overgeneralizing ways. In my view, there is a long way to go from aniconic ritual practices (de facto aniconicity) to 'aniconism', let alone 'anti-iconism'.

My own use of the term in this chapter is, as a rule, restricted to ritual/cultic contexts where the non-figurative representation of one or several deities and focused communication with a deity is at stake. In such contexts, a non-figural object may function as a representation, a medium of presence and a focus of attention in much the same way as a figurative icon or an image (Schipper 2013).

- 2 Gaifman discusses definitions, examples and comparative perspectives; Aktor, working on data from Hindu traditions, suggests that ‘aniconism’ be conceptualized as a spectrum rather than dichotomically contrasted to ‘iconism’. One article in the collection (Jensen 2017) offers an interesting discussion of biblical data, but the linkage of ‘aniconic propaganda’ to ‘religious seriousness’ betrays the author’s own, strongly normative, interest. See van Asselt 2007 on the epistemic bind between the prohibition of images and Protestant identity.
- 3 Space does not permit to elaborate here on the roughly contemporaneous temple on Mount Garizim, which seems to have reflected a very similar aesthetic regime (Hensel 2016).
- 4 Nadav Na’aman (2017) has offered one of the first attempts to make sense of the new discoveries within established knowledge. As he rightly states, ‘The proximity of the Moza temple to Jerusalem is remarkable, since the Jerusalemite authorities must have considered it a legitimate temple and the cult held therein acceptable’ (Ibid.: 4). To Na’aman, however, anthropomorphic and zoomorphic figurines suggest a ‘non-Judahite connection’ (Ibid.: 10). He therefore suggests that this temple might be a place mentioned in the biblical ‘ark narrative’ (1 Sam. 4.1b-7.1 and 2 Sam. 6.1-20a), namely the ‘House of Obed-Edom the Gittite’, that is, a Philistine. This is not the place to discuss the hypothesis in detail. Whether or not the temple was run by Judahites, it will have offered an opportunity structure to local Judahites. What I find remarkable in terms of epistemic regime is that Na’aman has brought in the argument of ethnic and religious distinctiveness only a few months after the preliminary publication of the finds, to the effect that the finds could be conceptually separated from Judahite religion – a typical process of ‘othering’ as it were, by a highly respected secular historian.

## Chapter 6

- 1 I have discussed the historical and conceptual ground against which Kafka’s opinions are expressed in Bland 2000: 13–58 and Bland 2008: 155–76.
- 2 The pictures from the Sarajevo Haggadah chosen for display were selected from memory of the oral presentation in Oslo in 2015, as the late professor Bland did not specify the selection in his manuscript (the editors).
- 3 For more recent scholarship, focused on iconography, see Kogman-Appel 2006: 16, 99–110 and Epstein 2011 (passim).
- 4 For the conventional, tendentious wisdom asserting Jewish preference for the word and rejection of the image, see Belting 1994: 7, 42, 144.
- 5 For a translation of the entire responsum and supporting documentation, see Bland 2001.
- 6 For a discussion of the affinity between Talmudic law and Byzantine practice regarding two-dimensional images, see Bland 2004.
- 7 For a more complete English translation of the original Hebrew and supporting documentation, see Bland 2001: 284–5; 294–6.

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Figurations and Sensations  
of the Unseen in Judaism,  
Christianity and Islam

Contested Desires

Edited by  
Birgit Meyer and Terje Stordalen

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Judaism, Christianity and Islam are known to privilege words over images. This book shows, however, that the reality is more complex. *Figuration and Sensation of the Unseen* explores the complex procedures used to render the invisible as visible and the elusive as tangible in these three traditions. Working from different disciplinary angles, contributors reflect on figuration and sensation in biblical culture, medieval Jewish culture, the imagination of the unseen in Islamic settings, Christian assaults on 'idolatry' in Africa, baroque and modern Church art, contemporary Eastern Orthodox tradition, photography on the East African coast, European opera and literature, and more.

The book shows that the three religious traditions have formed sensorial regimes: embodied habits, traditions and standards for seeing, sensing, displaying, and figuring that which could not, or should not, be seen. So, the desire for seeing the invisible and experiencing the beyond are paradoxically confirmed, contested and controlled, by the sensorial regimes in vogue. This carries over even into secularized use of religious figurations in arts and literature.

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Birgit Meyer and Terje Stordalen



BLOOMSBURY STUDIES IN MATERIAL RELIGION

# FIGURATIONS AND SENSATIONS OF THE UNSEEN IN JUDAISM, CHRISTIANITY AND ISLAM

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