

THE THEOLOGICAL BASIS FOR THE PROHIBITION OF IMAGES IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

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As one examines the Biblical data concerning images, he encounters a consistent emphasis on the absolute prohibition of images. The prohibition¹ is found as a part of the Ten Commandments in Exod 20:4: "You shall not make for yourselves an image (*pesel*), or any likeness (*tēmūnā*) of that which is in heaven above or of that which is on the earth below or of that which is in the waters beneath the earth." This commandment appears to be a primary basis for the evaluations of the kings of Judah and Israel in the historical books² and for the pronouncements by the prophets that Israel and Judah have violated the covenant with Yahweh by following other gods and worshiping idols.³

The prohibition of images most likely forms a significant basis for the contempt with which the prophets viewed images. This contempt is reflected in numerous descriptions of images similar to that of Jer 10:3b-5a: "It is wood cut from the forest, a work made by hands of a craftsman with a cutting tool. They decorate it with silver and gold; with nails and hammers they secure them so that they will not totter. They are like a scarecrow in a cucumber field; they do not speak; they must indeed be carried, because they cannot walk." This ridicule of images frequently emphasizes the fact that the image was made by a craftsman, and since it is the work of man's hands it is not God.⁴ Many passages also emphasize the fact that unlike Yahweh the images are impotent and lifeless; they cannot hear; they cannot stand; they cannot come to help in

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¹See also Exod 20:23; 34:17; Lev 19:4; 26:1; Deut 4:15-19, 25; 5:8; 27:15.

²E.g. 2 Chr 33:2-9, 22; 34; 2 Kgs 17:7-18. There are numerous similar examples throughout the books of Kings and Chronicles.

³Among the examples are Hos 8:1-6; 13:1-3; Isa 2:6-8 ("You have abandoned your people . . . because . . . their land has been filled with idols [*'ēlīlīm*]; they worship the work of their hands"); Jer 1:16 ("I will declare my judgments on them . . . [because] they have forsaken me and have burned incense to other gods, and bowed down to the works of their own hands"); 2:20-28; 11:10-13; Ezek 8:1-18 (after a description of various idolatrous practices Yahweh declares in v 18: "Therefore I shall indeed act in wrath. My eye will have no pity"); Amos 5:26-27 almost certainly describes idolatrous practices and the judgment that would result from it. The refusal of Daniel's friends to bow down to the image (*selem*) that Nebuchadnezzar erected also reflects an awareness of the second commandment.

⁴This is explicitly stated in Hos 8:4-6 and is found also in 13:2; 14:4; Mic 5:12; Hab 2:18; Jer 10:14-16; 51:17-18; Isa 40:19-20; 44:9-17. Outside the prophets this emphasis is found in Pss 115:4; 135:15; Deut 27:15.

response to the cries for help from their people.⁵

The strongly negative attitude toward images throughout the Hebrew Bible is also reflected in several of the words used to describe images. Many of the words used for images (such as *pesel*, *massékâ*, *nesek*, *‘āsāb*, etc.) appear to be simply descriptive of the physical nature of the image.⁶ Several words used to describe images show the extremely negative attitude of the Biblical authors toward images. The word *gillûlîm* often refers to images, and the negative and derogatory connotations of the word are clear from the fact that it is used in parallel with *šiqqûšîm*, “detestable things,” in Deut 29:16 and with *tô‘ēbôt*, “abominations,” in Ezek 14:6.

The etymology of the word is not entirely clear, but irrespective of etymology it seems probable that the negative and derogatory associations of the word come from its similarity to *gēl*, “dung, manure” (a word also used by Ezekiel in 4:12, 15), and to *gālāl*, “dung,” used in 1 Kgs 14:10; Zeph 1:17. Thus Yehezkel Kaufmann says that the word *gillûlîm* means “dung-pellets.” Ezekiel frequently makes a connection between *gillûlîm* and uncleanness (*tāmē*),⁸ and there is perhaps a connection between this and Ezekiel’s reluctance in 4:14 to follow Yahweh’s instruction to bake bread over human dung (*gellē hā‘ādām*) because it would make him unclean.⁹ It seems probable that the similarity to the words for dung explains the fact that *gillûlîm* is “always used contemptuously.”¹⁰

The word *‘ēlîlîm* is again of uncertain etymology. It sounds somewhat like *‘ēlōhîm*, and it immediately suggests comparison with the adjective *‘ēlîl*, “weak, worthless.” Thus the weakness of *‘ēlîlîm* would be contrasted with the power of *‘ēlōhîm*. A craftsman can make *‘ēlîlîm*, but the *‘ēlîlîm* are weak and powerless; only Yahweh is *‘ēlōhîm*. Ps 96:5 says, “Indeed, all the gods (*‘ēlōhē*) of the peoples are *‘ēlîlîm*, but Yahweh made the heavens.”

Another word used for idols is *šiqqûš*. The related noun *šeqeš* is used of that which is ceremonially unclean, such as animals forbidden for food, etc. According to Lev 11:43 the Israelites were instructed not to make themselves detestable through eating these detestable creatures; they were not to make themselves unclean through them. This clear ritual dimension seems to provide the background for the use of the word *šiqqûš* for an idol. The word is used most often by Ezekiel,¹¹ and he uses it in a way very similar to the use of *šeqeš* in

⁵Hos 14:9; Jer 10:3–9, 14–16; 51:17; Isa 42:17; Pss 115:4–7; 135:15–17; Deut 4:28.

⁶The word *pesel* comes from a root that means “to hew, hew into shape.” The word *‘āsāb* comes from a root that means “to shape, form.” *Massékâ*, *nesek* and *nāsîk* are probably related to the verb *nāsak*, which means “to pour out”; these words are used for molten images.

⁷Y. Kaufmann, *The Religion of Israel* (New York: Schocken, 1960) 16.

⁸Ezek 20:7, 18, 31; 22:3–4; 23:7, 30; 36:18, 25; 37:23.

⁹Perhaps Deut 23:13–15 is the basis for Ezekiel’s reluctance.

¹⁰KB, I. 183.

¹¹Ezek 5:11; 7:20; 11:18, 21; 20:7, 8, 30; 37:23.

Leviticus. In Ezek 5:11 Yahweh says, "You have made my sanctuary unclean (*timmē't*) with all your detestable things (*šiqqūšayik*)." The same idea is found in 20:7, 8, 30; 37:23. The designation of an idol by the word *šiqqūš*, given its clear cultic background, again shows the extremely negative attitude toward images found in the Hebrew Bible.

The word *tō'ēbā*, "abomination," also has deep associations in the cultic terminology of the Israelites. The use of the verb suggests that the word can refer to something that is abhorrent or loathsome in a physical, ethical or ritual sense. In Ps 107:17–18 the verb is used of people who abhor food (apparently because of sickness that has come as a result of their wrongdoing) and have come to the point of death. Usually *tō'ēbā* is used of an act that goes against established religious or ethical conventions. In the great majority of instances in the Hebrew Bible the word is used of that which violates the moral and ritual standards established by Yahweh as a part of his covenant with Israel, and this appears to be the basis for the prophetic use of the word *tō'ēbā* for idols. The clearest example is found in Isa 44:19. The craftsman cuts down a tree, uses half of it for firewood and fashions the rest of it into an image. The craftsman is not sufficiently aware of the reality of his deed to say, "I have burned half of it in the fire . . . Shall I make the rest of it into an abomination?" Like *šiqqūš* the word *tō'ēbā* was used with the cultic background in clear view, and the word conveys a strongly negative attitude toward idols. Their use in Israel's cult was that which was contrary to the divine will, and thus images were to be abhorred and avoided.

Another word used to describe images is the word *hebel*, "breath, vapor."¹² *Hebel* is used figuratively for that which is insubstantial or worthless, and the word is clearly used of idols in Jer 10:14–15: "Every goldsmith is put to shame by his image (*mippāsel*); indeed, his molten image (*niskō*) is deception (*šeqer*). There is no breath in them. They are worthless (*hebel*), a work of mockeries; in the time of their visitation they will perish." *Hebel* perhaps refers to idols in various other passages such as Deut 32:21,¹³ though in general no real distinction is made between idols and the gods they represent. In both cases they are *hebel*; they are insubstantial and worthless.

Another of the derogatory words used for images is *šeqer*, "deception, deceit, falsehood." This word is also used in Jer 10:14; 51:17. The prophet says that "every goldsmith is shamed by his idol because his molten image is deception (*šeqer*)." ¹⁴

In Jer 16:18 Yahweh declares that the people have polluted the land in that "they have filled my inheritance with the corpses of their detestable idols" (*bēniblat šiqqūšēhem*). Since an idol had no life it was nothing but a corpse, and contact with a dead body would make a person unclean. Thus the presence of idols in the land had polluted it.¹⁴ This same contempt is expressed in the

¹²E.g., *hebel* occurs in parallelism with *rūah*, "wind," in Isa 57:13.

¹³See also 1 Kgs 16:13, 26; 2 Kgs 17:15; Jer 2:5; 14:22; 16:19; Ps 31:6.

¹⁴Cf. Deut 21:23; the idea is that of the cult (e.g. Lev 11:35–40).

use of other words for idols such as *šāw'*, "emptiness, vanity," and *miplešet*, "horrible thing."

The above summary clearly shows the contempt and ridicule for images that is found in the Hebrew Bible. Images are contrary to the divine will expressed in Yahweh's covenant with Israel; they are thus an abomination. They make the people and nation using them unclean, and so they are likened to other sources of impurity: dung, detested things, dead bodies. They are useless and ineffective, they have no life in them, they are wood and stone, they are vapor and vanity. They are deceptive; they cannot do what their worshipers ask of them; they only disappoint and embarrass those who trust them.

A survey of the passages that express contempt for images reveals that this ridicule clearly focuses in the prophets. The neutral terms that mean "image" are used in contexts that express ridicule in Hosea,¹⁵ Micah,¹⁶ Isaiah,¹⁷ Habakkuk,¹⁸ Jeremiah¹⁹ and Ezekiel.²⁰ Outside the prophets similar statements are found in only a few places such as Deut 27:15; Pss 106:34–39; 115:4–8; 135:15–18. A somewhat different form of ridicule is found in 1 Samuel 5, and contempt is most likely expressed in an even more subtle way in Gen 31:30–35.²¹

The explicitly contemptuous terms used to describe images are found only a few times in the Pentateuch.²² These words are used in Kings and Chronicles,²³ and again they are most frequently found in the prophets.²⁴ This strongly negative attitude toward images was clearly expressed by the eighth-century prophets Hosea, Micah and Isaiah, and it is a frequently encountered emphasis into the exilic period.

It seems virtually certain that the Israelite attitude toward images came out of an awareness of the prohibition of images that is expressed in the Decalogue. It is clear that the prophets and the historiographers considered the prohibition to be a fundamental principle of Israel's religion since they generally evaluated the quality of a king's administration and the prospects for

¹⁵Hos 8:4–6; 13:2.

¹⁶Mic 5:13.

¹⁷Isa 30:22; 40:18–20; 41:29; 42:17; 44:9–20; 48:5.

¹⁸Hab 2:18–20.

¹⁹Jer 10:2–5, 14–16; 51:17–19.

²⁰Ezek 7:20; 16:17.

²¹See e.g. N. Sarna, *Understanding Genesis* (New York: Schocken, 1970) 201; G. von Rad, *Genesis* (rev. ed.; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1972) 309–310.

²²Lev 19:14; 26:1, 30; Deut 4:28; 7:25–26; 27:15; 29:16.

²³1 Kgs 15:12–13; 16:7; 21:26; 2 Kgs 17:2; 19:18; 21:11, 21; 23:24; 2 Chr 15:8, 16; 32:19; 34:33.

²⁴Hos 13:2; 14:4; Mic 5:12; Isa 2:8, 18, 20; 10:10–11; 31:7; 41:29; 44:19–20; Hab 2:18; Jer 1:16; 4:1; 7:30; 8:19; 10:3, 5, 14–15; 13:27; 16:18–19; 25:6–7; 32:30, 34; 44:8; 51:17–18; Ezek 5:11; 11:18, 21; 12:11; 14:6; 20:7–8, 30–31; 37:23 *et passim*; Dan 11:31; 12:11.

blowing or judgment on the basis of Israel's adherence to the first two commandments.

Neither the prophets nor the historiographers clearly distinguish between the violation of the first and second commandments. Perhaps this reflects the fact that much of the idolatry practiced in Israel and Judah resulted from the influence of foreigners with whom Israel came in contact and thus would involve the use of images.²⁵ Perhaps it reflects the idea that an image of Yahweh would not be Yahweh, and any worship of a Yahweh image was then by definition the worship of other gods.²⁶ For the Biblical authors the fact was that Yahweh could not be worshiped by means of an image. The pragmatic reality was that the worship of other gods involved the use of images, and the worship of images (even an image of Yahweh) was the worship of other gods.

Some earlier scholars maintained that the Israelites did allow the use of images in the early period and that the prohibition did not prevail until the time of the monarchy or even the prophets.²⁷ Some have argued that images of Yahweh were allowed but that images of other gods were prohibited from the early period.²⁸ Both textual and archaeological evidence support the conclusion that from the beginning of Israel's occupation of Canaan the prohibition of images was understood and practiced in Israel. John Bright says, "Figurines of the mother-goddess, to be sure, are regularly found in Israelite towns But it is a striking fact that excavations have thus far brought to light not a single image of Yahweh. This certainly argues for the antiquity and tenacity of the aniconic tradition in Yahwism."²⁹

The Bible makes it clear that Israel's history after the settlement in Canaan involved an almost constant struggle against Canaanite religion and culture. As both W. F. Albright and Kaufmann have shown, the result of this struggle was not a synthesis of the two religions. Rather, the Israelite value system prevailed. This happened despite the fact that the Canaanites had a much more advanced material culture than the Israelites. As many have noted it seems that this could only have occurred if the Israelites had some fundamental theological principles firmly in place before the settlement in Canaan. As Stamm has noted, "the further development of Israel and its resistance to Canaanite nature religion after the Conquest remain incomprehensible if there was not

²⁵See e.g. Exod 23:31-33; Judg 2:2-3, 11-12. Jezebel promoted the worship of Baal in Israel, and this was brought into Judah through the marriage of Jezebel's daughter Athaliah to Jehoram of Judah.

²⁶Kaufmann (*Religion* 18) says, "Images of the YHWH cult are assumed to be the product of foreign influence, and a cult involving them is regarded as no worship of YHWH at all, but of other gods."

²⁷E.g. R. H. Pfeiffer, "The Polemic Against Idolatry in the Old Testament," *JBL* 43 (1924) 229-240. Pfeiffer systematically excises all the negative references to images in the early texts.

²⁸T. H. Obbink, "Jahwehbilder," *ZAW* 46 (1929) 264-274. H. G. Reventlow (*Gebot und Predigt im Dekalog* [Gutersloh, 1962] 29 ff.) argues that the second commandment originally prohibited images of foreign deities and that it was then extended to prohibit images of Yahweh. This is pointed out by J. J. Stamm and M. S. Andrew (*Ten Commandments in Recent Research* [Naperville: Allenson, 1967] 83 n. 20).

²⁹J. Bright, *A History of Israel* (3d ed.; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1981) 160.

at the beginning a spiritual impulse of considerable proportions."³⁰

The migrations that constantly moved into the Mesopotamian plain just as constantly became assimilated into the higher culture of those who already inhabited the area. The Philistines, despite their Mediterranean origins, appear to have worshiped Semitic gods during the Biblical period and to have taken over much of the Semitic culture of Canaan. Walther Eichrodt says:

At every turn history shows us primitive conquering peoples who make the change to living in a highly civilized area surrendering more or less rapidly to the indigenous spiritual and legal life. It was so, for example, in the case of the Germans who invaded Italy, or of the Arab hordes which swamped the East Roman civilization.³¹

That the Israelites did not follow the normal pattern despite the pressures toward assimilation that are clearly reflected in the Bible is strong evidence that a body of law and a basic belief system were firmly established among the tribes before the conquest.

The prohibition of images was an essential part of that law. The prohibition of worshipping other gods would have done much to increase resistance to Canaanite religious influence. It seems likely, however, that the use of Yahweh images would have made the assimilation of Canaanite values and practices into Yahwism much easier. Other laws seem to have been intended to separate the worship of Yahweh from various religious practices that were common among the Canaanites.³² It seems probable that the prohibition of images—including images of Yahweh—played a major role in resisting the influence of Canaanite religion. It is clear that this was a part of Israel's law before the conquest of Palestine.

The prohibition of images clearly created a barrier to the assimilation of Canaanite religious values and practices. Perhaps there was behind the prohibition an awareness that it is only a short step from an image that represents the deity to an idol that has become the object of veneration and worship.³³ Perhaps there was an awareness that the more closely the Israelite cult resembled that of the people among whom they lived the more likely it was for them to be influenced by non-Israelite religious values. It seems clear that the prohibition of images did have the practical effect of keeping worship focused on Yahweh rather than on an object. The prohibition also contributed toward

³⁰Stamm and Andrew, *Ten Commandments* 27.

³¹W. Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1961), 1. 83; see also A. Alt, *Essays on Old Testament History and Religion* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1968) 170.

³²E.g., the prohibition of boiling a kid in its mother's milk (Exod 23:19) was perhaps intended to keep the Israelites from a practice similar to a Canaanite religious rite (see B. Childs, *The Book of Exodus* [Philadelphia: Westminster, 1974] 485–486). The idea behind this seems to have been that involvement in such a practice, even on a totally secular level, might lead to the eventual assimilation of the religious values associated with the Canaanite rite. The prohibition of certain mourning practices (Lev 19:27) is another example. Many others could be cited.

³³This is given as the reason for Hezekiah's destruction of the brazen serpent made by Moses in the wilderness (2 Kgs 18:4).

keeping Israel's cult free of foreign religious influence.

It seems likely, however, that the basic reason behind the prohibition was theological rather than pragmatic. It is difficult to determine exactly what that reason (or, more likely, complex of reasons) was, because the reason behind the prohibition is never fully explained. The one direct statement of a reason for the prohibition is found in Deut 4:12–18. There it is pointed out that at Sinai the words of God were heard but no shape (*tēmūnā*) was seen. The passage then declares that since the people saw no shape but only heard a voice they were not to make an image (*pesel*) in the shape of any idol (*kol sāmēl*). This passage does not appear to be a technical, theological statement of the basis for the prohibition of images. Rather, it seems to be more of a homiletical commentary on that part of the second commandment that more precisely defines what making an image (*pesel*) involves.³⁴

Despite this fact the passage does provide some clues as to the theological principles that underlie the prohibition. Some have concluded that in this commandment "God is declared to be spirit."³⁵ It is difficult to maintain this view, however, in the light of the strongly anthropomorphic descriptions of God found elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible (e.g. Num 12:8; Ps 17:15; Isa 6:1–8; Jer 1:9; etc.). The force of this argument is increased by the fact that both the Decalogue and Deut 4:24 argue that Yahweh is a jealous God (and a consuming fire) and present that as the motivation for obeying the commandment.

Deut 4:12–18 occurs in the context of the revelation of the law at Sinai. It seems to the present author that in this context these verses deal with the way Yahweh chooses to manifest himself, with the way he makes himself evident to the senses or understanding. God's presence was clearly evident—not in a form, but rather in the fire that burned to the heart of the heavens; in darkness (*hōšek*), cloud (*ānān*) and thick gloom (*ārāpel*).³⁶ God made his presence and his will known through his voice rather than through a form. This passage does not argue that Yahweh never assumed a form;³⁷ it does not argue that no one would know how to make a form of Yahweh;³⁸ nor does the passage focus on the fact that because Yahweh is incomparable no form would be adequate to represent him—though certainly Moses would have agreed with the statement of Isa 40:18, 25 that this was the case.

Rather, the author of Deut 4:12–18 presents the Sinai experience as a paradigm of Yahweh's self-disclosure to Israel. In contrast to the gods of Egypt or

³⁴"You shall not make for yourselves an image (*pesel*), or any likeness (*tēmūnā*) of that which is in heaven" (Exod 20:4; Deut 5:8).

³⁵E.g., P. Volz (*Mose und sein Werk* [2d ed.; 1932] 40), cited by W. Zimmerli ("Das zweite Gebot" 559). J. Reider (*Deuteronomy* [Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1948] 50) says that the author of Deut 4:17 "wishes to stress the incorporeality and spirituality of God." See also M. Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic School* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1972) 198.

³⁶Deut 4:11.

³⁷Moses is said to have seen the form (*tēmūnā*) of God (Num 12:8).

³⁸Moses or the elders who looked at Yahweh (Exod 24:10–11) could presumably have made a figure of what they saw.

Canaan who were supposed to manifest themselves through images, Yahweh made his presence known and declared his will to Israel entirely apart from the use of images. Deut 4:12–18 does not argue that Yahweh only manifests himself in the fire, cloud, voice, etc., that characterized the Sinai event. Rather, it argues that the Sinai paradigm excludes images as a means by which Yahweh manifests himself. Thus an essential element in Israel's theology was protected in that Yahweh's freedom to manifest himself when and how he chooses is preserved.³⁹ In prohibiting images, the standard means by which the gods of the other ancient Near Eastern peoples supposedly manifested themselves was excluded. This also protected another essential point of Israel's theology, in that the basis for the use of images seems to have been the idea that the performance of the correct rituals on a properly made image secured the presence of the god in the image and then virtually assured the continuing presence of the god with all the blessings that that presence brought about.⁴⁰ The use of images suggested that man can magically influence and control the god in some fashion. Prohibiting the use of images and the human control of the god that seems to have been an integral part of it reflects a fundamental element of Yahwism: Yahweh cannot be controlled by man, nor is he subject to cosmic forces of magic.⁴¹

The conclusion that the prohibition of images is related to the way Yahweh manifested himself to Israel is also suggested by Exodus 32–34, which most scholars agree presently constitutes a related block of material. Despite major difficulties and disagreements regarding various aspects of these chapters it is clear that a major theme of the section is the presence of God.⁴² The theme of God's presence among his people is of course related to the question of how God manifests himself to his people.

In this context it appears that the point of chap. 32 is that the making of the golden calf, which was intended to secure God's presence among them,⁴³

³⁹This included theophanies, dreams, the pillar of cloud and fire, the ark of the covenant, visions, and numerous historical acts such as the exodus, conquest, etc.

⁴⁰W. J. Harrelson ("Ten Commandments," *IDB*, 4. 570) says, "The making of images is designed to express more than an act of worship and devotion; it arises out of the desire to ensure the blessing and protection of the deity who is represented in the form of wood or clay or stone." This does not mean that the god's presence in the image was entirely beyond the god's control, and the theme of divine abandonment is encountered in Mesopotamian literature. See M. Cogan, *Imperialism and Religion*, SBLMS 19 (1974) 9–21.

⁴¹Kaufmann, *Religion* 40–42, 78–87.

⁴²M. Noth (*Exodus* [Philadelphia; Westminster, 1962] 253) says of chap. 33: "The various pieces of Ex. 33 are held together by the theme of the presence of God in the midst of his people, which plays some part in all of them." Childs (*Exodus* 562) notes that this theme was introduced in 32:34 and continues through chap. 33 to 34:9.

⁴³The reason for making the calf is explicitly stated in 32:1: "Make us a god (gods?) who will go before us." It is not clear whether the people intended the calf as an image of Yahweh or of another god. Aaron obviously saw it as representing Yahweh, although the activities associated with it suggest the possibility that syncretistic worship was involved. It is not even clear whether the golden calf was meant as an image or as a throne for the invisible Yahweh, as was suggested by W. F. Albright

not only did not accomplish that goal but greatly jeopardized the future of Yahweh's covenant and his presence with his people. The following passages deal with the intercession of Moses on Israel's behalf and the question of whether Yahweh himself would be present among the people or whether a messenger (*mal'āk*) would go with the people instead. The manifestation of Yahweh through the pillar of cloud at the tent pitched outside the camp, the manifestation of Yahweh through his words to Moses, and the manifestation of Yahweh on Mount Sinai are described in subsequent passages. The covenant stipulations in Exod 34:10–26 may well, in this context, be intended as covenant violations that would again jeopardize the manifestation of Yahweh's presence among them. Thus this section recognizes that Yahweh does manifest himself in various ways. The use of an image, however, by which man attempts to secure and control God's presence is seen to be counterproductive in that it actually jeopardizes Yahweh's manifestation of himself to his people.

Thus it appears that the prohibition of images focused on significant theological concepts that set Israel apart from those among whom she lived. Yahweh is sovereign; he is free to manifest himself when and how he chooses. Yahweh is sovereign; he is not subject to either human control⁴⁴ or to the forces of magic.

Another basis for the prohibition is suggested by the context in which it appears as a part of the Decalogue. The Decalogue contains stipulations that Yahweh sovereignly imposed on his people Israel. No images are to be used in the worship of Yahweh because that is the way Yahweh defined legitimate worship. Irrespective of how other people used images or viewed images, Israel's practice was determined by the covenant with Yahweh: "I am Yahweh your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt You shall not make for yourselves an image."⁴⁵ The self-introductory formula serves two functions in the Decalogue. The statement, first of all, looks back to the previous narrative in Exodus and identifies the one who manifested himself in such awesome power at Sinai as the same one who revealed himself to Moses (Exod 6:2) and as the one who manifested himself in the deliverance from Egypt.

The formula also looks forward as it introduces the Decalogue. As Brevard Childs notes:

The commandments are prefaced by the formula to make clear that they are understood as the will of Yahweh who has delivered his people from bondage

The formula identifies the authority and right of God to make known his will because he has already graciously acted on Israel's behalf.⁴⁶

(*Yahweh and the Gods of Canaan* [Garden City: Doubleday, 1968] 171–172). The fact that the people wanted to make the golden calf in order to secure the presence of God (or a god) in their midst is independent of the answers to these questions.

⁴⁴This point is also made in 1 Samuel 4–6, a passage in which the ark of the covenant is viewed by both the Israelites and the Philistines as "the functional equivalent of a divine image among Israel's neighbors." (This point was made by M. Delcor, "Jahweh et Dagon ou le Jahwisme face à la religion des Philistins, d'après I Sam. V," *VT* 14 [1964] 138. The point has been further developed by P. D. Miller, Jr., and J. J. M. Roberts, *The Hand of the Lord* [Baltimore: John Hopkins, 1977] 9–17, 64 *et passim*.)

⁴⁵Exod 20:2, 4; Deut 5:6, 8.

⁴⁶Childs, *Exodus* 401.

The same formula⁴⁷ is often used in connection with various laws, and it seems to offer a basis for obeying the laws. The phrase is used extensively in the so-called Holiness Code in Leviticus 17–26,⁴⁸ and Norman Snaith appears to be correct in his conclusion about the use of the term there:

The basis for all the laws is that Yahweh is the God of Israel, and they are his people The phrase "I am the Lord," with its fuller forms as in 18.30, 19.36, and 21.15 is the whole basis of the Holiness Code. There are two reasons: one is that Yahweh is the God of Israel; the other is that Yahweh is holy . . . and Israel must be holy too, separated from the other nations in conduct as well as race.⁴⁹

Viewed from this perspective the prohibition of images was simply a covenant stipulation imposed by Israel's Lord, and the prohibition needed no further rationale. Yahweh had decreed that legitimate worship of him should not involve the use of images.

The prophets frequently argued that images were useless since they were nothing more than stone, wood, gold and silver.⁵⁰ It is not entirely clear whether this is based on a correct understanding of how others viewed their images and thus was a denial that the rite of consecration was effective or whether, as Kaufmann has suggested, the Israelites were so far removed from genuine polytheistic idolatry that these statements reflect a misunderstanding of the true nature of idolatry.⁵¹

Another dimension in this has been suggested by Childs, who argues that Israel's response to Yahweh's self-revelation is also involved. God's manifestation in history and word constitutes God's own testimony to himself. Man must not attempt to add to that witness by making an image. Childs says, "God testified to himself in a voice which is fully sufficient (Deut. 4:2). An image is a rival human witness, and therefore false."⁵² Thus man is not to try to add to the revelation of Yahweh that he chooses to give.

The prohibition of images viewed from one perspective required no rationale beyond the fact that Yahweh had commanded that images must not be used in Israel's cult.⁵³ At the same time the prohibition reflected the Israelite under-

⁴⁷Or a shortened form of it, such as "I am Yahweh your God" or "I am Yahweh."

⁴⁸The phrase is given as a basis for observing a wide range of laws—e.g. appointed convocations (Lev 23:43), sabbatical year and year of jubilee (chap. 25), dietary laws (11:44–45), sexual practices (18:2, 4, 30), miscellaneous ritual and ethical matters (chap. 19). Outside of Leviticus the phrase is used in connection with ritual regulations (Num 10:10; 15:41).

⁴⁹N. H. Snaith, *Leviticus and Numbers* (London: Thomas Nelson, 1967) 121–122.

⁵⁰E.g., Isa 40:18–20; 44:12–20; Jer 10:3–5, 8–9, 14–15; also Pss 115:2–8; 135:15–18.

⁵¹Kaufmann, *Religion* 13–20.

⁵²Childs, *Exodus* 409. The same point seems to be made in Ps 106:20. They made a calf at Horeb and "they exchanged their glory (the means by which God made his presence known) for the figure (*tabnit*) of a grass-eating ox."

⁵³This idea is of course also related to the nature of Yahweh in that it clearly recognizes that Yahweh is free and sovereign to establish the forms by which he is to be worshiped.

standing of the nature of Yahweh and so had a theological rationale. The use of images and the human control of the god that was a part of their use would infringe on the freedom of Yahweh to manifest himself when and how he sovereignly determined. By prohibiting the one means by which the gods of the people around Israel supposedly manifested themselves Israel was protected from the assimilation of foreign religious values, and the prohibition of images played a significant role in the successful survival of Israel's religion. It seems clear that the prohibition of images both in practice and in its theological basis is but another example of the fundamentally different religious value-system that distinguished Israel from her ancient Near Eastern contemporaries.