

Naomi Janowitz

GOOD JEWS DON'T:
HISTORICAL AND
PHILOSOPHICAL
CONSTRUCTIONS OF
IDOLATRY

The first question British sailors asked the indigenous people they encountered in Polynesia was, “Are you cannibals?” While the question would seem to be about the natives, it also reveals quite a bit about British interests. Gananath Obeyesekere has masterfully analyzed for us why the British were obsessed with “other people’s” cannibalistic tendencies. A small but famous set of stories circulated about British sailors who resorted to cannibalism in dire straits. Thus the question of whether or not the British behavior was morally acceptable was explored via an investigation of “primitive” behavior. A universal human fear and fascination with the possibility that somewhere in the world human monsters consume human flesh also contributed to the British obsession. Obeyesekere concludes, “Polynesian cannibalism is constructed out of an extremely complex dialogue between Europeans and Polynesians, a dialogue that makes sense in relation to the history of contact and unequal power relations and the cultural values, fantasies and the common dark humanity they both share.”¹

The natives’ answers were part of this delicately constructed dialogue. Adopting the outsider’s view of themselves accrued a perverse power to

¹ Gananath Obeyesekere, “‘British Cannibals’: Contemplation of an Event in the Death and Resurrection of James Cook, Explorer,” *Critical Inquiry* 18 (1992): 650.

the natives. That is, the answer “Yes, we eat people” was much more likely to engender respect and belief than a simple denial. Their purported cannibalistic practices were then presented by the British in the terms of British table manners; natives were described as eating white men with a dainty smacking of the lips, though of course this had not begun until the first white men appeared.

What, then, are these reports evidence of? Even if some specific rituals of flesh consumption existed before the British arrived, the entire issue was subsumed by the dominant discourse introduced by the British. It may never be possible to reconstruct the practices apart from that discourse.

With respect to cannibalism in Polynesia, Obeyesekere has given us a tremendous challenge: he urges us to go back and find the historical contexts in which stereotypes emerge and reconstruct the polemical context in which they were articulated. I am going to take up this challenge in a different arena: namely, in relation to stereotypes about Jews and the use of images in worship. This discussion is not yet another attempt to justify the existence of Jewish art since this is no longer an area of controversy. The issue here is the use of images, especially anthropomorphic images, in worship. The once-standard view of Israelite religious practices is now being rethought, which in turn necessitates a reconsideration of debates about images in the late antique period and how Jews entered into that debate. Both these discussions reinforce the theoretical limitations placed on any attempt to build an abstract definition of “idolatry.”

I. BIBLICAL INJUNCTIONS AGAINST IMAGES RECONSIDERED

The current revolution in scholarship about Israelite religious practices is based on a move away from interpreting material evidence through the lens of biblical polemics. This shift occurred both because archaeologists have focused more attention directly on the material evidence and because iconoclastic polemics are being dated to the late preexilic or exilic period.² The polemics can therefore not be used as evidence about earlier Israelite practices. It is also now possible to gather together the analysis of a growing number of biblical scholars who see Israelite religion as looking more like that of their neighbors, even in terms of their use of cultic statues.

As long as the anti-image literary themes were the lens through which biblical practices were interpreted, other evidence was not given its full weight or was simply overlooked. Anthropomorphic images of Yahweh appeared to have been made throughout the preexilic period, with Judahite

² See Herbert Niehr, “In Search of YHWH’s Cult Statue in the First Temple,” in *The Image and the Book: Iconic Cults, Aniconism, and the Rise of Book Religion in Israel and the Ancient Near East*, ed. Karel van der Toorn (Leuven: Uitgeverij Peeters, 1997), 73–95, 75.

practices being no less iconic than those of neighboring cultures.³ Religious observances in the First Temple period appear to have used many types of images, anthropomorphic and not, employed in processions and offered both libations and sacrifices.⁴ Even a quick survey demonstrates the range of evidence, including the finding of religious statues made of ivory, terra-cotta, and faience, as well as seals.⁵

Most infamous perhaps in the eyes of biblical editors were the ancestral figurines, the teraphim (Gen. 31:19, 35; 1 Sam. 19:13). Other images that may have been based on modified human shapes include the distinctly female asherah “cultic pole” and the *massebot* “cultic pillars” attacked by Hosea (Hosea 3:4, 10:1–2).⁶

The Israelite kings and priests who made the golden calves were falling back on ancient and traditional modes of worship in which the deity took the form of a bull (Exod. 31–32; 1 Kings 12:25–31).⁷ The serpent image known as Nehustan, whose creation was attributed to Moses, was taken from the Temple and destroyed only by Hezekiah; even then, its association with Moses was not questioned (2 Kings 18:4).⁸ Members of the deity’s entourage often appeared in the form of animal hybrids.⁹

Given this rethinking of the First Temple period religious practices, the weight of the argument has shifted away from assuming that images were not used in the Second Temple either.¹⁰ Some of the same cultic practices may have continued; alternatively, new images, such as a menorah, may have been added to the First Temple images of the deity.¹¹ Throughout the period anti-imagery language coexisted with all sorts of cultic practices.¹² The injunctions themselves constitute evidence that the practices must have continued, insofar as they must have existed to be attacked.¹³

The challenge of the Second Temple period is to understand both the complex new rhetoric against the use of images and its motivations. The

³ See Christoph Uehlinger, “Anthropomorphic Cult Statuary in Iron Age Palestine and the Search for Yahweh’s Cult Images,” in van der Toorn, *The Image and the Book*, 97–155.

⁴ See Niehr, “In Search.”

⁵ See Uehlinger, “Anthropomorphic Cult Statuary,” 101ff.

⁶ See Saul Olyan, *Asherah and the Cult of Yahweh in Israel* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988).

⁷ See *ibid.*, 31.

⁸ See *ibid.*, 70.

⁹ See Ezekiel 1:5–13, 10:14 for hybrid beasts who carry a throne.

¹⁰ Niehr, “In Search,” 75.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 90.

¹² Izak Cornelius, “The Many Faces of God: Divine Images and Symbols in Ancient Near Eastern Religions,” in van der Toorn, *The Image and the Book*, 21–43, 43.

¹³ See Brian Schmidt, “The Aniconic Tradition: On Reading Images and Viewing Texts,” in *The Triumph of Elohim: From Yahwehisms to Judaisms*, ed. Diana V. Edelman (Den Haag: Pharos, 1995), 75–105.

Deuteronomic editors condemned the use of some cultic items and associated them with “idolatry” for very specific reasons and in a specific historical context.¹⁴

The problem of the relationship between a discourse that attacks the use of images in worship and a simultaneous use of images is not unique to Israelite religion. Recent studies have jettisoned the once-common model that posited fluctuations between iconoclasts and iconodules; such a model fails to account for the fact that the movements exist simultaneously. Images were championed by those who wanted to preserve a particular kind of liturgical practice and its accompanying theology. Iconoclastic circles had their own liturgies and tried to preserve their own practices by presenting them as superior or more original. The variegated evidence left by these struggles was based on the waxing and waning dominance of the various groups and their liturgies. Whichever side happened to have the best institutional support at any one moment gained the upper hand, though the other groups did not disappear.

Emperor Leo III, to take a different historical example, used iconoclastic polemics to explain the defeat by the Arabs; the Christians had been using too many icons in their liturgies and were now being punished.¹⁵ Leo III was simultaneously trying to exploit the Arab victories to centralize his power and consolidate his control over rivals in the church who happened to employ images in their liturgical practices. The specific historical circumstances shaping his rule offered Leo III the opportunity to use anti-iconic rhetoric: the stunning victories of the Arabs occurred at the same time that the church liturgies employed icons.

In another historical setting—also one of defeat—the Deuteronomic editors connected specific liturgical practices with other rhetorical claims in pursuit of specific goals. The need to “reform” religious practices was used both to explain Israelite defeat and to gain greater control over rival factions, exactly as in the much later Christian case. The Deuteronomic reformers associated the use of images in worship with foreign cults as a way of stigmatizing the former. They would turn to these tropes as another rhetorical stick used to beat the Israelites and explain why they lost. Since the use of images is tainted by being presented as foreign, this implies that the negative valence of “foreign” was more consistent than that of images in worship.

This rhetoric was long accepted at face value; scholars now are questioning whether these practices were foreign or whether this is simply a

¹⁴ The injunction against images at Exod. 20:4–5a is supplemented by Exod. 20:23, 43:17; Lev. 19:4, 26:1; Deut. 4:15–19, 25:5–8. For anti-idol rhetoric, see also Isa. 44:9–20; Jer. 10:1–16; and Hosea 13:2.

¹⁵ See David Olster, “Byzantine Hermeneutics after Iconoclasm: Word and Image in the Leo Bible,” *Byzantion* 64 (1994): 419–58, 424.

spurious claim by the Deuteronomic editors. First Temple cultic use of statues may have been closely tied to the king and his circles, which may have made the rejection of royal images tempting, with the demise of kingship.¹⁶

The particular position of the Deuteronomic editor combined the anti-image and antiforeign cult polemics with another distinct obsession, the centralization of the sacrificial cult in Jerusalem. The destruction of the cultic images was necessitated by the power of competing sites (Beth El, Dan, etc.), which, given their age, were powerful and hard to displace. The rhetoric from these sites denouncing the upstart innovators (the Yahweh-only Deuteronomic editors) is not preserved but we can imagine it.

It is not without its irony that the same language against divine images can come back to haunt those who employed it. Luther was dismayed to see the destruction of statues his reforms had initiated and made a point of having his good friend Cranach paint a major altarpiece for Luther's church in order to moderate the iconoclast fury.¹⁷ So too the fury of the Deuteronomic reformers merged with other types of anti-Temple rhetoric; the Temple was denounced exactly because it embodied, for these groups, the improper use of images. They pushed for a general rejection of the Temple that would have horrified the earlier reformers.¹⁸

It may turn out that, as Brian Schmidt claims, "the place one should look for the 'origins of biblical iconoclasm' is in the post and extrabiblical contexts," to which we will now turn.¹⁹ It is imperative to understand the specific context in which the claim was made and, as Obeyesekere warned us, to consider the extent to which the claims were shaped by the dominant, in this case, Greco-Roman, discourse.

II. THE GRECO-ROMAN CONTEXT OF ICONOCLASTIC CLAIMS

If we can no longer draw a simple line between the ancient Israelite practices and those of emerging Judaism, then we must ask where the emphasis on aniconism comes from in the Greco-Roman period. The first explicit claim that the Holy of Holies was completely empty was made by Josephus in *The Jewish War* (5,219):²⁰ "The innermost recess measured twenty cubits and was screened in like manner from the outer portion by a veil. In this stood nothing whatever; unapproachable, inviolable, invisible to all, it was called the Holy of Holies."

¹⁶ See Ron Hendel, "The Social Origins of the Aniconic Tradition in Early Israel," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 50 (1988): 365–82.

¹⁷ Eamon Duffy, "Review of the Reformation of the Image by Joseph Koerner," *London Review of Books*, August 19, 2004, 15–16.

¹⁸ So too prophetic discourse out of its historical context can be read as being anticult in general as opposed to being against specific cultic practices.

¹⁹ See Schmidt, "The Aniconic Tradition," 94.

²⁰ See Niehr, "In Search," 94.

This description was written after the destruction of the building, an ode to the grandeur and mystery of the past.²¹ The three privatives, “unapproachable,” “inviolable,” and “invisible,” are in sharp contrast to the reality; the Temple was entered by Romans and was then destroyed by them. This presentation articulates with Josephus’s other attempts to impress upon the reader that the Romans realized just how holy the building was even as they destroyed it. In Josephus’s view the Romans recognized this sanctity better than the Jews who profaned the Temple for military reasons. His description of the Holy of Holies plays off his view of this Roman attitude.

As used by writers such as Josephus, arguments against the use of images in worship resonated with existing critiques in the surrounding culture, especially as they were presented to philosophically astute audiences. That is, we find a complex discourse about statues in the Greco-Roman world even as the use of statues was widespread. The practice was criticized from various philosophical stances, beginning, not surprisingly, with the pre-Socratics, who considered traditional worship, including the use of statues, from a number of angles. Xenophanes (sixth century BCE), for example, presented the classic critique that the greatest god is unlike mortals in form and mind.²² He mocked the use of images of the gods, pointing out that if oxen imagined the form of their gods they would think they looked like oxen.²³

Heraclitus (fl. 500 BCE) rejected offering prayers to images as part of a philosophical rejection of their efficacy. He affirmed, “And they pray to these images just as if one were to have conversation with houses, having no idea of the nature of gods and heroes.”²⁴ This critique of images is even more severe than Xenophanes’ since it ridicules the basis of prayer as well.²⁵ Again it sets up a rhetoric that can get out of control, that is, extend to targets beyond the original articulation.

These themes continued to be developed by later philosophers. Antisthenes (mid-fifth to mid-fourth century), also preserved by Clement, stated that knowledge of the deity cannot come from an image.²⁶ Zeno of Citium (335–263 BCE), the founder of Stoicism, argued that temples are unnecessary since the work of builders and artisans should not be con-

²¹ Josephus’s combination of allegorical and romantic presentations is similar to that of the *Letter of Aristeeas*, which also presents a heavily idealized model of cult.

²² Hermann Diels and Walther Kranz, *Die Fragmente der Variakratiker* (Berlin: Weidmann, 1934–37), 21 B 15; Clement of Alexandria *Stromates* 5.14.

²³ Diels and Kranz, *Fragmente* 21 B 16; Clement of Alexandria *Stromates* 7.22.

²⁴ Diels and Kranz, *Fragmente* 22 B 5; Origen *Contra Celsum* 7.62.

²⁵ See Deborah Steiner, *Images in Mind: Statues in Archaic and Classical Greek Literature and Thought* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2001), 121.

²⁶ Clement of Alexandria *Stromates* 5.14.

sidered sacred.²⁷ Again this stance is a much more broad-based rejection of traditional religion than any Israelite version but can be used in regard to images.

These philosophical critiques resembled a distinct but related theme found in later writers who imagined a period in ancient history when religious worship involved no or limited images. Early Roman religious practices were nostalgically presented by Varro as having no role for statues, though religious practices in fact included both the use of small statues in family rituals and larger statues in public cults.²⁸ Plutarch claimed that Numa forbade the Romans to “revere an image of God which has the form of man or beast.”²⁹ It was “impious to liken the higher things to lower, and that it was impossible to apprehend Deity except by the intellect.”³⁰

The earliest Greek religion was also remembered as being free of images, an odd idealization for a religious system we link so inextricably with statues. For example, Pausanias wrote, “At a more remote period all the Greeks alike worshipped uncarved stone instead of images of the gods.”³¹

Of particular interest to us, barbarian practices were praised as being aniconic, whether or not they really were. The Persians, according to Herodotus, did not believe that the gods have the same nature as men and therefore rejected building images, altars, and temples.³² So too the Scythians used only a scimitar of iron as their image of Ares.³³ Strabo depicted the rejection of statues as one of the many sensible traits of the Nabateans.³⁴ Later Ammianus Marcellinus praised the Halani as not only tall and handsome but also as having no temples: according to him, they used only a naked sword fixed in the ground in their worship.³⁵

Jewish modes of worship received a particularly good advertisement in these discussions. Strabo, for example, presented Moses as specifically rejecting the mistaken Egyptian representation of deities as beasts and cattle. He added as a side note that the Greeks were also wrong in “modeling gods in human form” and that it would be better to make a sacred precinct without an image.³⁶ Varro, in the excerpt mentioned above,

²⁷ Origen *Contra Celsum* 1.5.

²⁸ Varro, cited by Augustine *City of God* 4.31.21–29.

²⁹ Plutarch *Numa* 7.7.

³⁰ *Ibid.* 7.8.

³¹ Pausanias *Description of Greece* 4.22.1.

³² Herodotus *The Histories* 1.131.

³³ *Ibid.* 4.62.

³⁴ Strabo *Geography*, 24.4.26.

³⁵ *Ibid.* 31.22.23.

³⁶ *Ibid.* 16.2.35.

presents the Jews as persevering in their anti-iconic stance and not lapsing into error, unlike the Romans.³⁷ In fact, the Jews were equated with philosophers to the extent that they rejected images. Just as themes identified as anti-Jewish emerged in these writers, here we see a kind of philo-Jewish stance that recognizes Jews as embodying an ideal not met by the author's own culture. In all these cases, looking outward to "barbarians" was a way of chastising and critiquing native Greco-Roman practices. An idealized notion of Jewish theology was used as a measure for finding out just how far the author's contemporary society had fallen.

In this context, opposing the use of statues was a way of claiming that Judaism embodied a morally superior, pure philosophy. Being known for the use of images in worship would have equated Jews with Egyptians, whom both the Romans and the Jews liked to look down on. Educated people would equate Jewish theology, unlike Egyptian religion, with philosophical positions common to the elites of the Greco-Roman culture, no matter what Jewish practices actually entailed.

This view gave the Jews a theology that they could parade to non-Jews. They could unite behind it as both a moment of political rejection of intrusive control by outsiders (putting the image of the emperor in their place of worship) and as an opportunity to flaunt a belief that would be recognizable to outsiders. Jews like Josephus sought to act out their self-definition using this specific theme rather than other theological themes that were less recognizable to the Greco-Roman elites.

In the complex recycling of ancient themes, it was early Christian writers like Clement who preserved the ancient Greek philosophical critiques of statues. So too both ancient and contemporary Greek and Roman philosophical ideas were used to articulate Jewish opposition to the use of images. That is, Jewish authors used these ideas to articulate the "Jewish" stance. As others have observed vis-à-vis his depiction of the sects of Judaism as philosophical schools, Josephus could expect his audience to concede the superiority of Judaism insofar as it dovetailed with the best of Greek philosophy. Even if it theoretically could have been articulated based on a select reading of certain biblical texts, the ban on certain images in worship was in fact as bound up with its context as Obeyesekere found the British discourse on cannibalism to be. If this is so, we must ask what is left of the abstract definitions of idolatry that continue to dominate most discussions of Jewish practice.

III. IS AN ABSTRACT DEFINITION OF IDOLATRY POSSIBLE?

Lest we generalize too quickly from the biblical and Jewish contexts, we need a broader range of comparative examples for examining this question.

³⁷ Varro, cited by Augustine *City of God* 4.31.21–29. See also Tacitus *The Histories* 5.5.

Recent studies on Hinduism offer a fascinating glimpse of a tradition in the process of dramatic change. The Vedic texts centered on elaborate sacrifices, which did not include statues of the gods. Thus the post-Vedic emergence of statues of the deities in the second and third centuries CE appears to articulate with a shift to grand-scale temples.³⁸ These temples were supported by a combination of wealthy patrons and a set of religious specialists; these “theists” stood against other “traditional” specialists who sought to carry on the Vedic sacrificial practices.

The “theists” argued that a deity must be accessible for prayer in some concrete form; since Vishnu was known to incarnate himself in a fleshly body, so too he incarnated in stone (carved or not altered). In post-Vedic rituals, Vishnu’s power became associated with a variety of physical objects. This process marks, as Peter Brown calls it in Christian examples, the “centrifugal tendencies of the piety that had spread the charge of the holy on to a multiplicity of unconsecrated objects.”³⁹ In the Hindu example we find evidence of this process in insertions into older texts. An appendix on the care of statues, for example, is presented as if it simply elaborated the older text even though it does not mention statues. A post-Upanishadic text augments liturgical practices with the claim that “God can be worshiped in embodied form only. There is no worship of one without manifest form.”⁴⁰

These developments were part of a split in the Brahmanical classes as distinct groups of elites differed about how to relate to the older sacrificial traditions. Ancient Vedic sacrifices such as the horse sacrifice had been abandoned. Due in part to the tremendous influence of the philosophical ideas of ahimsa (nonharm), some Brahmins wanted to replace the animal sacrifices with grain substitutes, an issue addressed in many Hindu texts. Other Brahmins wanted to replace the horse sacrifice with a new ritual cycle for Vishnu, which takes place not on a Vedic altar constructed for the specific occasion but in an elaborate temple with statues of Vishnu. In this interpretation the Vedic priest was literally relegated to the end of the line in the ritual, given the role of holding a set of water pots.⁴¹

Some modern Hindus, attempting to differentiate themselves from “standard” practice and also to have a renewed sense of authenticity, have revived lost Vedic ideas about images. This recovery of Vedic ideas was no doubt motivated in part by the contemporary dialogues with European scholars and visions of Hinduism that associated statues with

³⁸ Richard Davis, “Indian Image-Worship and Its Discontents,” in *Representation in Religion: Studies in Honor of Moshe Barasch*, ed. Jan Assmann and Albert Baumgarten (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 107–32.

³⁹ See Peter Brown, *Religion and Society in the Age of Augustine* (New York: Harper & Row, 1972), 263.

⁴⁰ Davis, “Indian Image-Worship,” 113.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

illicit sexual practices. In this context, the move toward the use of divine statues, and the liturgies associated with them, was evidence of lower forms of religious practice. Abandoning them would return practitioners to purer, and older, Vedic religious expressions.

Gregory Schopen, in a rare study on the rise of Buddha statues, argues that it was “ecclesiastics of wide religious knowledge,” specifically Buddhist monks and nuns, who paid for the very first statues of the Buddha.⁴² In the case of these early statues, no preexisting model of the Buddha was known, so “the standing Buddha image is really a replica of the earlier standing *yaksa* or royal image, but lacking the regalia and insignia of royalty.”⁴³

Why then was adapting the royal statuary into the Buddhist temple a “major preoccupation of nuns and monks”? The statues were often dedicated to the family left behind by the ascetics who joined temples. Schopen argues that the renunciation of household life was fraught with difficulty since these monks and nuns came primarily from Hindu families. As they turned to the life of the ascetic, they “sought the face of a fellow human being where an earlier generation had wished to see the simmering presence of a bodiless power.”⁴⁴ Later Buddhist texts lose sight of this conflict entirely. In particular, the role of nuns in setting up statues is completely forgotten, as the nuns themselves are forgotten.

These examples demonstrate that it was possible for the use of statues to occur in relation to a very specific historical moment and psychological need; the historical setting can then pass and the original impetus behind the practice become lost, yet the practice continue. New ideologies of practice might arise or might not, but these ideologies are never the leading factor in what has long since become simply “tradition.”

The rhetorical tropes about idolatry have a tremendous staying power. Two recent articles on idolatry include language that is oddly close to that of the Deuteronomic editors. Ries argues in the *Encyclopedia of Religion* that rejection of idolatry is due to monotheism,⁴⁵ while Curtis in the *Anchor Dictionary of the Bible* simply states that “Christianity had its origin out of a Judaism that had been purged of idolatry.”⁴⁶

These modern interpretations of the ancient language of idolatry also appear in the writings of Sigmund Freud. His analysis of idolatry includes

⁴² See Gregory Schopen, “On Monks, Nuns and ‘Vulgar’ Practices: The Introduction of the Image Cult into Indian Buddhism,” *Artibus Asiae* 49 (1990): 153–68.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 166.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 168.

⁴⁵ Julien Ries, “Idolatry,” in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, ed. Mircea Eliade (New York: Macmillan, 1987), 72–81.

⁴⁶ Edward Curtis, “Idolatry,” in *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 376–81.

most of the themes found in recent discussion but in more elegant formulations. Critiquing his position leads us to the heart of modern debate and the limitations of that debate. Freud located the impetus for Jewish notions of idolatry in Moses's rejection of Egyptian practices and specifically in his attempt to revive the fading monotheistic stance of the dead pharaoh Akhenaton. This monotheistic stance included a new attitude toward the deity that was abstract and therefore much more challenging for followers. It also included a strict set of ethical guidelines.

In Judaism, then, sensory perception was given second place to what may be called an abstract idea—a triumph of intellectuality over sensuality or, strictly speaking, an instinctual renunciation, with all its necessary psychological consequences.⁴⁷ The increase in intellectuality leads to (1) an increase in pride, hence the Jews' vision of themselves as the chosen people, and (2) a renunciation of instincts, specifically the incest instinct due to guilt over the primal horde's killing of the father.

When we look at this cluster of ideas, it seems clear that we are not in fact dealing with a strict historical recounting of idolatry but with the manner in which the concept of "idolatry" comes to have meaning within the group that uses it. That is, Freud's analysis lays out a self-understanding that probably relates more to being a Viennese Jew than to being an ancient Israelite: we have strict rules that our god gave us, and these rules make us in some ways superior to others, so they hate us.⁴⁸ According to Freud, the Jews represent an ancient tradition—the very best the entire ancient world, including Egypt, had to offer. Their minority stance is because their views are so much more advanced than others, being precursors of high-level moral thought that would not develop in other cultures for thousands of years (if ever). The Jews were the intellectuals of the ancient world, giving up the world of the body for the world of the mind. Part and parcel of living the life of the mind was a stance against the use of statues in religious practice.

This formulation is not helpful either as a historical explanation for the development of these ideas (the history is a fantasy in the Freudian sense) or as a general proof that people who do worship with statues will kill their fathers without guilt and engage in incest. The Israelite deity is characterized as being particularly "jealous"; in the abstract, however, there is no necessary equation between the themes.

If we move from psychological to philosophical definitions of idolatry, Mosche Halbertal and Avishai Margalit's work *Idolatry* is probably the

⁴⁷ See Sigmund Freud, *Moses and Monotheism*, ed. James Strachey, vol. 23 of *Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Writings of Sigmund Freud* (London: Hogarth, 1964), 77.

⁴⁸ One of Freud's goals was to explain the causes of anti-Semitism.

most widely cited attempt to explain opposition to images based on very general philosophical principles.⁴⁹ They are not interested in any particular historical context, though the authors do realize that notions of idolatry varied over time. Instead, their work focuses on outlining the fine distinctions between forbidden and acceptable depictions of the deity. Biblical injunctions against images, they posit, are based not on “fear of substitution” but instead on “the struggle against mistaken or inappropriate representations.”⁵⁰

This complex distinction is necessary since the Hebrew Scriptures do not prohibit anthropomorphic representations of the deity via language (descriptions of God’s hands). Further, the statue of a cherub is permitted since it is not a part of God but simply something that is associated with the deity.⁵¹ The biblical editor did not worry that the deity’s hand would function as a substitute for the deity himself. Since no one, however, has ever seen God, this view goes, it is impossible to know how to portray the deity. Any mode of representation is likely to be mistaken and should, for that reason, be avoided.

Halbertal and Margalit are forced into this rarefied distinction by their attempt to find a single position that accommodates an array of biblical texts. This unified position distorts the diversity of ideas found in the texts, homogenizing them into a position that ultimately reflects none of them. Various texts permit different types of representation and present positions that cannot be harmonized. For some texts, opposition to visual images does not always necessitate opposition to linguistic “anthropomorphism.”⁵² Nor must “mistaken representations” be the central program. The Deuteronomic editors may have thought they had a very clear notion of what the deity looks like, contra Halbertal and Margalit, but may still have felt that such a mode of representation was not permitted. Yet other texts are by their nature not clear enough for a reader to posit what theory of representation they depend on.

Halbertal and Margalit do make very interesting use of the works of Charles S. Peirce, pointing out that the Hebrew Scriptures prohibit only what are considered “icons” in his system of semiotic analysis. The Peircean terminology offers us a highly refined vocabulary for investigating exactly what was permitted and what was not. The basic distinction

⁴⁹ Mosche Halbertal and Avishai Margalit, *Idolatry* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992).

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 40–41.

⁵¹ This discussion does not consider what philosophical position those who use images (Israelite or non-Israelite) attribute to their practices.

⁵² Halbertal and Margalit carefully outlined how this position is articulated by Maimonides but is not implicated in every iconoclastic philosophy.

between icons and symbols is that the form of the icon includes information about the form of the thing signified, which is not true of the (arbitrary) symbol. The formal similarities mean that outsiders are apt to think that the people who interpret a sign iconically are confusing the representation with the referent. Symbols do not represent based on a formal relationship but on an arbitrary relationship instead. Indexes are based on yet another type of relationship (contiguity).

The major problem with the authors' use of Peirce, and one that haunts those who try to employ his system, is that Peirce is not talking simply about three kinds of signs (symbol, icon, and index) but about a set of relationships between object, sign, and interpretant.⁵³ In other words, for something to function as a particular type of sign it must have a relationship with an object it presents and with an interpretant, which represents the relationship between sign and object. These relationships are always in flux, so that, for example, the meaning of a sign is dependent on how it is interpreted in a specific context.

The vital and direct impact of this point on our discussion is that interpretations of signs are constantly shifting, so that how a specific image, for example, stands for a deity is open to constant revision. Along these lines, we are all familiar with, for example, the debate about how wine "stands for" blood. The core of what we call "idolatry" is a debate about how a sign is understood to stand for its object in the minds of those who use the sign. Nobody would claim that they worship wood or stone in any shape or form; it always stands for something else. W. J. T. Mitchell has argued persuasively that every culture has different ways of defining what images are.⁵⁴ Every religion has some objects that are understood to represent divinity formally; that is, every group interprets some signs as being iconic modes of representation. Religious texts may attempt to regiment these modes of representation by establishing whose interpretation is most authentic, but it is in fact impossible to fix the meaning of a symbol unless it is dead.⁵⁵ On this understanding, idolatry is the claim that other people have the wrong way of interpreting their images, which is by definition, an impossible case to make.

CONCLUSIONS

Given the limits of these historical and philosophical investigations, we may be left with the very unsatisfactory conclusion that we can draw very

⁵³ Richard Parmentier, *Signs in Society: Studies in Semiotic Anthropology* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), 49.

⁵⁴ W. J. T. Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986).

⁵⁵ Richard Parmentier, "Transactional Symbolism in Belauan Mortuary Rites: A Diachronic Study," *Journal of Polynesian Studies* 97 (1988): 305–6.

limited conclusions from opposition to the use of images. A stance about the use of images in worship is always articulated in relationship to a very specific historical setting, and that setting is often lost to us. But perhaps that is the main point after all. As in the case of Leo III, the very usefulness of debates about idolatry for him was that they could be cast in so many forms, offering a flexible mode of disguising debates that are really about something else. In the poignant film *Between Two Worlds* the Christian missionary, talking about the religion of the Hmong people he is trying to convert and mistaking their religion for Buddhism, states that they worship stones.⁵⁶ The Hmong could of course have looked at the statues of Jesus and had their own interpretation of Christian rites.

The “Jewish” position on images in worship may have only been articulated in the context of Greco-Roman ideas. At that time, as in the case of the post-Vedic materials, support for a variety of modes of worship could have been found; an attempt was made to strike a certain posture vis-à-vis the educated audiences of the day. As Jews put Torah scrolls in the niches in synagogues, the only truly empty Holy of Holies was the one that never existed except as an image in the mind of some philosophers.

University of California, Davis

⁵⁶ *Between Two Worlds: The Hmong Shaman in America*, directed by Taggart Siegel (1985).