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Bezalel and Hiram as Artists and Artisans: the Image of the Jewish Artist
in Bible and Tradition, Including the Impact of the Second
Commandment

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CONTENTS

DIGEST

The goal of this thesis is to explore the image of the artist in the Bible and tradition. To pursue this goal, four different approaches to the topic were studied, each viewing the problem of the Jewish artist with a different lens.

When exploring the image of the artist, the Bible presents three characters for study: Bezalel, Oholiab, and Hiram. These three characters were given the task to create the Tabernacle and Temple, through their endowed creative skills. Chapter 2 explored these characters through the eyes of the rabbis, discovering that they, while having the talent and skills of artists, were viewed as wise leaders.

Many scholars and lay people have said that there is no Jewish art, particularly because of the second commandment, which states that one shall not make a graven image. Chapter 3 discusses the topic of aniconism. Aniconism is the ban against making images of God. This chapter is important because it is believed that aniconism was a direct influence on the second commandment, and also directly influenced the art that the Israelites fashioned.

The rabbinic views of the second commandment are explored in Chapter 4. From this chapter, it is clear that rabbis embraced the second commandment to alleviate the threat of *avodah zarah*, idol worship, as well as to create a layer of insulation against the pull of the larger, non-Jewish community. This distinction is important because it does not negate the creation of art, or the artist, but rather places severe boundaries on it. This is not to mean that the rabbis permitted, or were in favor of art; rather they attempted to legislate around the needs of the day.

Archaeological evidence is considered in Chapter 5. Archaeology is a fascinating rubric with which to view the image of the artist because it not only opens windows to real ancient communities, but also presents important facts about the technology and skills available to the artist. It is clear that the artist worked in precious materials that were imported, indicating cultural sharing and openness. While this chapter did not uncover basic facts about the artist per se, it does indicate that there were Israelite artists.

In conclusion, a picture of the artist has only begun to emerge, showing a skilled artisan capable of adapting and adopting materials to fit the needs and requirements that the Israelite culture demanded.

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The desire for aesthetic pleasure- found in words, spaces, shapes, sounds, or pictures—is as natural as the cycle of day and night. As humans, we are drawn to soothing sounds, cool colors, serene spaces, and pleasing pictures. Our judgment of what comprises this pleasure is fairly subjective—yet we cannot deny its power. Art and its creation is the attempt to understand and harness the power of the aesthetic. Many are drawn into the spell of creativity, if not as artists, then as enthusiasts. Studying art, and art history is the way scholars seek to understand both the draw towards creativity, and its product.

The drive to create, in recognition of an important event, in honor of a god, or to further ideas of beauty is apparent throughout time, beginning as far back as archeological research can prove. Creating art, especially in recognition of an event, was compelling even for ancient man. Historians and scholars have found works of plastic art as far back as the Paleolithic Age. Caves in France, such as Lascaux, show paintings of animals, probably in recognition of a hunt.[1]

A few hundred centuries later, in Biblical times, historians and archeologists witness a similar scenario, if with slightly more advanced techniques. Creativity can be witnessed in all aspects of life, from barely stylized monoliths representing gods, to crude jewelry worn by leaders, to highly decorated frescoes, to beautifully worked metal and stone objects.

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[1] Horst de la Croix and Richard G. Tansey, *Gardner's Art Through the Ages*, 7th ed. (New York: Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, Publishers,1980), 25

Important questions are raised concerning Jewish art and artists when one understands that the desire to create beauty is a very real urge, coupled with the concrete examples found by archeologists. The concept of Jewish art has long interested scholars, especially in juxtaposition of the Second Commandment. Joseph Gutmann, a scholar and expert in art history, believes that much of our misunderstanding concerning Jewish art derives from scholars who believe that there is no true Jewish art.

The reason many art historians believe that Jewish art does not exist derives from their study of the Second Commandment: " you shall make no graven images".[2] This commandment has been very influential in our understanding of Jewish art. Most often, it has been interpreted as prohibiting the creation of any image that could be construed as an idol, to be worshipped in place of God. In its strictest interpretation, however, the commandment is understood to mean that one may not create any image in the likeness of anything in the heavens or on the earth.[3] This 'anti-iconic view' has led many to assume that an authentic Jewish art does not exist.

However, one must only glance through biblical history to ascertain the facts: there is Jewish art, in all forms. The Tabernacle, in all its glory, is explained in detail within the Bible itself. The Solomonic Temple, with its graven images such as the cherubim, proves that the Second Commandment was interpreted in anything but the most literal manner. The discovery of the Beit Alpha and Dura Europos synagogues with their detailed decorations shows archeological proof of the plastic arts.

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[2] Exodus 20:4
[3] Franz Landsberger, *The History of Jewish Art* (Port Washington, NY: Kennikat Press 1973), 3

It is clear that the urge to express meaning in an aesthetic, tangible manner is universal, including Jewish endeavors. The study of Jewish art, and especially Jewish artists, is very fascinating to me. The complexities of studying Jewish art and artists vis-à-vis the Second Commandment presents a great challenge. How did the Second Commandment come to hold such a significant place in Israelite, and later Jewish, tradition? How did the Second Commandment co-exist in conjunction with artists such as Bezalel, his partner Oholiab, and, later, Hiram--- who all created decorative pieces that surely were art? As the Bible itself describes Bezalel, aesthetic creation was not only his wont, he was blessed by God to embrace it: "And He has filled him with the spirit of God, in wisdom, in understanding, and in knowledge, and in every kind of workmanship."[4] So, how did the Jews of ancient times consider artists in their communities, especially given the reality of the Second Commandment as it came to be understood?

To be sure, the Second Commandment has made a profound impact on the way Jewish art is understood, and subsequently, studied. This study will include an in-depth discussion of the development of aniconism and the Second Commandment. Aniconism, which may have influenced the development of the Second Commandment, will provide insight of the image of the artists—the ultimate goal of this thesis. And we are particularly interested in exploring what tradition makes of the Jewish artists, like Bezalel, Oholiab and Hiram? And, who is the Jewish artist?

This thesis will discuss the problem of the Jewish artist in the Bible and tradition by looking at: time, social context, historical and archeological research, as well as rabbinic and modern scholarship.

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[4] Exodus 36:1

CHAPTER 2

BEZALEL, OHOLIAB AND HIRAM: ARTISTS IN TRADITION

The Second Commandment prohibits the creating of graven images. From this commandment, many scholars assumed that Jewish art did not exist, much less a Jewish artist. If art in Jewish law was forbidden, then it is logical to assume that Jewish artists did not exist. And yet a curious phenomenon is revealed when studying the Bible: three characters, Bezalel, Oholiab, and Hiram, appear to be artists—or at the very least, to display artistic talent. Their skills helped to create and beautify the Tabernacle and the first Temple. The Bible praises them with great skills in creative endeavors—the ability to work in metal, wood, cloth, and other arenas surely qualifies them as having artistic talent. A dichotomy between the existing text of the Second Commandment, and the artist images presented in Scripture beg for a close discussion of these three characters.

Bezalel, Hiram, and Oholiab are the only three artist-like characters mentioned in the Bible. They proffer interesting character studies, as they represent not only the potential ancient artistic tradition, but were also credited with helping create the Tabernacle and the Solomonic Temple. A study of Bezalel, Oholiab and Hiram is very important; no compendia of midrashim, commentaries, or modern scholarship studying these three characters have been endeavored. By studying these three characters an image of the ancient artist will begin to emerge.

This chapter will trace these personalities through traditional texts, including midrash, talmud, and classical commentators. At times, more modern commentators will

prove helpful. In searching for the artistic image, the question before us is: did the rabbis and commentators consider Bezalel, Oholiab and Hiram to be artists?

Bezalel and Oholiab are mentioned numerous times in the Bible beginning with Exodus 31 and ending in Chronicles. A brief summary of the passages will be helpful. Bezalel and Oholiab are first encountered in Exodus. The passage introducing Bezalel explains that he is filled with the spirit of God, in wisdom, in understanding, and in knowledge, and in all kinds of workmanship; as well as having the ability to devise skilful works and the ability work in gold, silver and bronze. Oholiab is established as Bezalel's direct assistant, into whose heart God has also placed wisdom. Further listed in the Exodus passage are unnamed others, noted in the texts as " all who are wise hearted". "Wise-hearted" is interpreted by the commentators as meaning that God implanted them with wisdom. These anonymous men are Bezalel's and Oholiab's assistants.

Exodus 35 continues with a review of Bezalel and Oholiab's skills, as well as the anonymous others. Immediately following the review of their work, in the first few verses of Exodus 36, Bezalel and Oholiab have finished their work. The text is slightly confusing; it announces that the work was finished before their tasks are even outlined; this detail is offered later, in Exodus 37. Exodus 38:22-23 are the last verses in which Bezalel and Oholiab are encountered in Torah; these verses act as a conclusion to their story.

While Oholiab is not encountered again in the Bible, Bezalel is mentioned in Writings--specifically Ezra and Chronicles. Ezra 10:30 is simply a genealogical verse listing the sons of Pahath-Moab, including in the list the name "Bezalel". It is unlikely that this Bezalel is the same Bezalel of Exodus because Bezalel's father in Exodus is Uri,

son of Hur, of no relation to Pahath-Moab. Therefore, this Bezalel is most likely referring to an unknown character not associated with the Tabernacle.

There are two selections in Chronicles that do refer to Bezalel: I Chronicles 2:20, and II Chronicles 1:5. I Chronicles 2:20 contains information concerning Bezalel's lineage. This verse is in accord with the Exodus texts: Bezalel is the son of Uri, son of Hur. II Chronicles 1:5 mentions Bezalel in reference to the altar of bronze he constructed; this is the same altar which Solomon sought to place in his Temple. II Chronicles 1:5 couples the Tabernacle with the building of the Temple, by placing an object from the Tabernacle into the Temple.

Bezalel and Oholiab, in Exodus, are divinely endowed with special gifts, as well as entrusted with the leadership of building the Tabernacle. The skills attributed to both Bezalel and Oholiab are repeated in similar format each time they are introduced, as is found in Exodus 31:2 and 35:31: "And he has filled him with the spirit of God, in wisdom, in understanding, and in knowledge, and in every kind of workmanship". Understanding basic definitions of these phrases is an important starting place in considering the traditional image of these Biblical characters. For this analysis I follow the lexicon of Brown, Driver and Briggs (BDB). Listed below are the Hebrew descriptive words and their brief definitions, as given by BDB in reference to these specific verses. Through these brief definitions, it will be possible to offer a preliminary Biblical exegesis of these characters, paving the way for other sources. The words analyzed fall into two categories: attributes and tasks.

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ATTRIBUTES:

    a.   *Ruach Elohim*: a late word; as endowing men with various gifts: technical skill [1]

    b.   *Chochmah*: skill in technical work [2]

    c.   *Tvunah*: understanding [3]

    d.   *Daat*: skill in workmanship, compare with *tvunah* and *chochmah* [4]

TASKS:

    e.   *Mlacha*: work as something done or made [5]

    f.   *Chashav*: invent ingenious and artistic things; invent for themselves instruments of music; invent cunning work: of artist devices weaving; inventions of an inventive man; craftsman and inventive workmen [6]

    g.   *Asah*: make, be made of concrete things, work thing made by man; work of art, workmanship [7]

    h.   *Charash*: cut in, engrave, plough, devise. Cut in, engrave, work in metal; engraver, artificer, worker in metal or on gems. Can be associated with idol maker. [8]

    i.   *Charoshet*: Carving, skillful working[9]

These terms show that the Bible has many words for artistic or technical work. Initially, this is surprising, considering the often-repeated argument that artistic skills were lacking in ancient Israel. Yet from these descriptive terms it is clear that Bezalel and Oholiab were truly endowed with magnificent skills.[10] A more in-depth review will show that these definitions further clarify the extent of Bezalel and Oholiab's great skills.

God endowed Bezalel and Oholiab with specific skills—such as engraving skills and weaving skills; and these gifts gave them an expert knowledge of skilled artistry. Notice, however, that none of the words defined above actually use the word artist, or

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[1] *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament,* ed. Francis Brown, S.R. Driver, Charles A Briggs. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1951), 926
[2] Ibid., 315
[3] Ibid., 109
[4] Ibid., 395
[5] Ibid., 522
[6] Ibid., 363
[7] Ibid., 795
[8] Ibid., 360
[9] Ibid., 360

even art. Rather, words for " skill" or "workmanship" are used. The idea appears to be that art served a purpose, and did not exist for its own sake limited the scope of the ancient artist. Rather, the ancient artist was proficient in necessary skills, such as engraving, or woodworking.

The Bible is often interpreted in the light of commentators, midrashim, and other traditional texts. The rabbis' understanding of the biblical artist is an important step toward understanding the image of the artist, at least in post-biblical tradition.

The Second Commandment forbids the creation of carved images; and yet that is exactly what Bezalel and Oholiab are commissioned to do. To deal with this tension, the rabbis endeavored first of all to place Bezalel into the line of pious ancestors. This is known as *Zechut Avot*, the merit of the fathers. Because of past good deeds of ancestors, it is believed that God will grant honor to those descendents. This raises the issue of Bezalel's pedigree. By ensuring proper lineage, the rabbis insure that the Tabernacle will not be mistaken as another Golden Calf. Since Bezalel is of unblemished heritage, the work he createscan not be in tension with the Second Commandment.

A discussion of Bezalel's family tree is found in the midrash collection Tanhuma Yelamdenu; a similar version is also found in Shemot Rabbah. This midrash, using Exodus 35:30, questions the necessity of the text citing Bezalel's lineage as far back as Hur, Bezalel's grandfather.[11] Their answer to this question hearkens back to the Golden Calf. When the people were eager to make the Golden Calf, Hur confronted and rebuked

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[10] Joseph Gutmann, *Sacred Images: Studies in Jewish Art from Antiquity to the Middle Ages.* (Northampton:Varorium Reprints,1989), II:5
[11] Exodus 35:30: "And Moses said to the people of Israel, See, the Lord has called by name Bezalel the son of Uri, the son of Hur, of the tribe of Judah."

them, and they killed him for this effort.[12] Since Hur was martyred for God, God

promised to reward him. The reward was that Holy One would make Hur known and

those who descended from him would be known throughout the world. Therefore, Hur

was rewarded by being the ancestor of Bezalel. Ginzberg comments on this midrash: "As

a reward for martyrdom of Hur, his father, Bezalel was to build the tabernacle".[13]

Bezalel's lineage is tied to the Golden Calf story in a positive way, connecting Bezalel

not to the idol, but to a martyr; not only does this enhance Bezalel's line; it also

eliminates any potential temptation to connect his art with idolatry.

The rabbis thereby manipulate Bezalel's father's lineage to their advantage.

While his mother's side is not mentioned in the biblical text, the rabbis are eager to

connect it positively, for the same reasons. The rabbis manage to connect Bezalel to the

line of Miriam. Rashi clarifies the connection, citing that Hur is said to be the son of

Miriam: Hur's father was Caleb the son of Hezron. Ephrat, who is noted as Caleb's wife

in I Chronicles 2:19-20 is said by the rabbis to be identical with Miriam. Miriam is

equated with Ephrat in Sotah 11b.[14]

By rabbinical finessing to place Bezalel into the line of Miriam, the rabbis appear

to be searching for another way to connect Bezalel to honorable lineage, this time

emphasizing the importance of *zechut imahot*. While Exodus 35:30 describes Bezalel as

the son of Uri, son of Hur from the tribe of Yehuda, further connections are made through

the shared characteristic of wisdom, and as Miriam's reward for her good deeds. Midrash

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[12] What concerns the rabbis is that Hur simply disappears from the text; in Exodus 24:14 Hur and Aaron are mentioned together, but in Exodus 32:1, Hur is not mentioned. Rashi comments on the words in Exodus 32:5 "*vayar Aharon*" "that Aaron saw", explaining that Hur had been killed by the Israelites because he reprimanded them for making the Golden Calf. See also: Vayikra Rabbah 10:3; Pirke D'rabbi Eliezar 44; Bavli Sanhedrin 7a.

[13] Louis Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, vol. 3 (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America 1946),154

Rabbah and Tanhuma teach that Bezalel and Miriam are connected through their wisdom, a trait they both possess. From Miriam, Bezalel descended because Miriam was rewarded for her work as a midwife, and for her loyalty to God.[15] Her reward was the offspring of Bezalel, who was "full of wisdom". The link between them is the phrase from Exodus 1:19, which reads that God " dealt well" with the midwives. "Dealt well", in the Hebrew relates to the word *tov*. This is the word used in connection with Bezalel's work when he made an ark for the Torah, and the ark was called 'good', or *tov*. Through a kind of '*gezera shavah*', the rabbis have connected Miriam's work to Bezalel's.[16] However, aside from the wordplay with "*tov*", the connection in this midrash between Miriam and Bezalel remains contrived.

Tanhuma Yelammdenu explains how Miriam and Bezalel are connected through wisdom more fully. This word play equates the word "fear" with "wisdom". The midrash assumes Miriam was a midwife in Egypt. In Exodus 1:21 it was written "the midwives feared God". The phrase the 'fear of God' is equated with wisdom, from Job 28:28. Miriam is said to have wisdom because she feared God. Bezalel, too, has wisdom from God. Because both Miriam and Bezalel have wisdom, they may be connected. The connection between Bezalel and Miriam remains tenuous at best; while it is unclear why the rabbis chose Miriam as Bezalel's matriarch, it is possible that it was to locate Bezalel closer to Moses.

It was obviously critical for the rabbis to establish Bezalel's lineage as impeccable, as well as to establish that the Tabernacle is a separate matter from the

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[14] Rashi on Exodus 24:14
[15] Note that Miriam and Jochebed are here equated with Shifra and Puah, the Egyptian midwives. For reference, see Ginzberg, vol 2, 251
[16] Midrash Rabbah Shemot, 1:16;Tanhuma Buber, 169

Golden Calf. Through textual maneuvering, Bezalel is clearly connected to most impressive family lines, as well as disconnected with the Golden Calf.

As it is clear that the rabbis worked to establish Bezalel's pure lineage, they also demonstrate a direct connection to God through his name. Many midrashim focus on Bezalel's name; some indicate his character traits. The translation of Bezal-el is "in the shadow of God". His name proves to be a source for rich midrashim that prove his wisdom and leadership skills. As this example from Or Hahayim attests, Bezalel's name implies that through him a shelter for God on earth was made.

Aside from the obvious wordplays with the name Bezalel, the rabbis have created more complicated midrashim that concern Bezalel's name. A midrash from the Tanhuma collection introduces other midrashim which attribute to Bezalel many other names: "Bezalel was the name by which his mother and his people called him, but the Holy One, Blessed Be He, called him by other terms of endearment because of the creation of the sanctuary in the Tabernacle." This midrash foreshadows Bezalel's aliases.

Bezalel is given other designations which are taken from I Chronicles 4:2 and I Chronicles 2:24. According to Shemot Rabbah, Tanhuma Ki Tisa, there are five additional names that God gave to Bezalel, as the builder of tabernacle.[17] The names are taken from two Chronicles texts. The two Chronicles texts are I Chronicles 4:2 and I Chronicles 2:24. I Chronicles 4:2 lists Judah's offspring, citing among them Bezalel. I Chronicles 2:24 tells the death of Hezron, (father of Caleb grandfather of Hur in I Chronicles 2:19) and the birth of Ashshur, the father of Teqoa. The rabbis have connected Bezalel to these verses, claiming he has further aliases that are derived from these verses. The connections in this verse to Bezalel are fanciful. I Chronicles 2:24 lists

successive generations; how and why the rabbis created a linguistic or otherwise meaningful connection to every name listed in these two verses is uncertain. For example, Reaiah, son of Yehuda in I Chronicles 4:2, acts as an alternate name for Bezalel, because it means 'to behold'; this is pertinent because Bezalel was "beheld" by God, Moses and Israel, as one decreed since the beginning of the world to do this work.[18] In an inter-generational connection to another name listed in I Chronicles 4:2, Shobal, teaches that Bezalel earns this name because he erected a tabernacle that towered high.[19] This connection is more difficult; it is attributed to him because he constructed a dovecote for God, making Shobal an abbreviation of "*shobek-el*". Shemot Rabbah 40:4 teaches that a dovecote is appropriate nomenclature, as it is a place for the Israelites to flock as doves into their cote. These connections are creative, but tenuous. Yet, they midrashim offer a beginning character sketch of Bezalel as a seer and a builder. One last example will exhibit some of the characteristics the rabbis deem important. Bezalel is ascribed another name, Lahad, from I Chronicles 4:2. In a creative word play, Bezalel earns this name because Bezalel brought splendor and loftiness to Israel by building the sanctuary, which was the pride and splendor of all Israel.[20] Rabbi Hiyyah adds to this, inverting the letters of Lahad, to *hadal*, because even the smallest (*hadal*) of the tribes associated themselves with him. In other words, Bezalel's leadership skills were so persuasive that even the smallest tribes joined him.[21]

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[17] Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, 155; see also Midrash Rabbah Shemot, 40:4;
[18] Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, 156
[19] Ibid., 156
[20] Ibid.,156; *Hod* is a wordplay that uses part of the word *Lahad*
[21] R. Hanina b. Azzi said about the word play on *hadal*: no tribe was greater than Judah, and none more lowly than Dan, because of his son *Hushim*. God wanted a Danite (Oholiab) and a Judahite (Bezalel) to work together so that no one could despise him or become arrogant, for all are equal under God's sight.

Lehrman observes that though the literal meanings of these verses do not suggest that Bezalel was truly identified with these names, there is evidence in the rabbinical literature that the rabbis possessed many other exegetical works on Chronicles which are not longer extant; in one of them possibly resides the key to the present remarks.[22] Perhaps it was important to the rabbis to connect these traditions to prove Bezalel's worthiness.

The rabbis, it is clear, are eager to prove Bezalel's good character; they use wordplays and other devices to prove Bezalel's impeccable character. The midrashists arrive at a consensus about Bezalel's character: it is said that Bezalel was given the honor of having a good name, as many midrashim show. Tanhuma Buber on Exodus 35:30 teaches that Bezalel was granted the privilege of building the tabernacle because he had earned a good name, as it is written in Proverbs 22:1: "A **good name** is rather to be chosen than great riches and loving father rather than silver and gold". Exodus 31:2: See, the Lord has **called by name** Bezalel. Because Bezalel was given this name by God, his name is good. This is further explained from the words in Exodus 31:1: "And the Lord spoke to Moses saying, See I have called by name" The Hebrew, which reads *kara b'shem*, marks formal authorization, investiture, or commission.[23] Since God invested him formally and mentions his name, Bezalel, his name must deem him worthy of his special attributes.

Through careful reading of midrashic, talmudic and rabbinical commentaries, three prevailing characteristics are ascribed to Bezalel. Two of the three are often paired together in the texts; they are leadership and wisdom. Leadership has already been

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[22] Elimelech Epstein Halevy "Bezalel" in *Encyclopedia Judaica,* vol 4, pg 788,
[23] Gen. 41:41; Ex. 7:1, Isa. 45:3

introduced above in the matter of Bezalel's family line and names. Leadership is often paired with wisdom, another prevailing characteristic, in the sources.

An important source exemplifying Bezalel's leadership skills, as well as his wisdom, is found in <u>Palestinian Talmud Brachot 55a</u>. The Gemara begins with the statement: There are three things that the Holy One, Blessed Be He, Himself, proclaims: famine, plenty, and a **good leader**. The Gemara provides textual support for each of the three claims. Bezalel's character serves as the example for defining a good leader. The text claims that "one does not appoint a leader over the community unless one consults the community"; this refers to the legend that God had told Moses to consult the community concerning the appointment of Bezalel. The community wholeheartedly approved him, teaching that good leaders are elected.

Brachot 55a comments on Bezalel's wisdom as well. The talmudic passage claims that Bezalel was given his name because of his wisdom, which is demonstrated by this story:

> " When God gave the command to Moses, and Moses in turn gave the command to Bezalel to make a Tabernacle, Ark and vessel for God, Moses reversed the order of building when he repeated it to Bezalel: Ark, vessels and Tabernacle. Bezalel, in his wisdom, noticed this difference, and said, first a person builds a house, then brings vessels into it; into what shall I put the vessels that I make? He then said to Moses, perhaps God really said, Make a Tabernacle, Ark and vessels. And Moses replied: Perhaps you were in the shadow of God (bezal-el) and that is how you knew this."

Bezalel's wisdom enabled him to understand intuitively that Moses' order of construction would not work. Only God knew that Moses had switched the order.

Because Bezalel figured it out, he was considered to be in the shadow of God. This midrash teaches that so great was Bezalel's wisdom that he did not act only at Moses' command, but he intuited instructions that God had commanded Moses. Commenting on Exodus verse 31:3, Rashi defines wisdom as what a person hears from others and learns. 'Understanding' he defines as comprehending a matter by one's own intelligence: deducing it from the things one has already learned.[24] Rashi's definition of these terms certainly fits Bezalel as the rabbis envision him.

Bezalel's leadership skills and wisdom are described in a midrash, which cites that Bezalel knew how to join together the letters with which heaven and earth were created. Ramban comments on this aspect of Bezalel's wisdom: "Bezalel was a great Sage in wisdom and in understanding and in knowledge, to understand the secret of the Tabernacle and all its vessels, why they were commanded and to what they hinted". This implies that Bezalel did the noblest work, enabling the Shechinah to dwell on earth. There is a beautiful midrash, which connects Bezalel's attributes of wisdom, understanding and knowledge to Proverbs 3:19-20, about creation. The Proverbs verses read: "God founded the earth with wisdom; He established the heavens with understanding; Through His knowledge the depths were cleaved." By connecting the words wisdom, understanding, knowledge, with Bezalel's knowledge, it is understood that Bezalel had comparable knowledge to the Creator. Without such knowledge, the midrash believes, Bezalel could not have accomplished the holy work of the Tabernacle.

Ginzberg spells out Bezalel's God-like attributes with more clarity. "Bezalel was not only of distinguished family, he was himself a man of distinction, possessed of

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[24] Rashi on Ex. 31:3

wisdom, insight and understanding. By means of these three attributes God created the world (e.g. Proverbs 3:19-20), and with these same attributes Bezalel created the Tabernacle."[25] Even further, the Zohar creates an interesting parallel between the creation story in Genesis and Bezalel's wisdom. Rather than make the connection between Proverbs and Bezalel, the Zohar turns to Genesis, equating 'in the beginning' with wisdom; 'God created' is equal to 'understanding'; 'Heaven' is equated with knowledge.[26] This interesting connection does not seem to be backed up with any direct linguistic connections or other ties to make this parallel more convincing. Rather, it remains an interesting attempt to show the level of Bezalel's wisdom—that he shared similar powers with God, and as God created the world, Bezalel created the Tabernacle. Tanhuma Yelamdenu 10:5 offers added commentary about Bezalel's wisdom, commenting on verse 35:30 "See he has called by name". The midrash bids us to observe what God did for Bezalel. The Holy One, Blessed be He, instilled wisdom in his heart, as it is said in Exodus 35:31: "and He has **filled** him with the spirit of God, in wisdom, in understanding and knowledge".[27] The midrash repeats the sentiment offered above, that with these same attributes did God create the world, as is found in Proverbs 3:19-20, above. Bezalel's wisdom was comparable to God's wisdom when God created the world. As God created the world with wisdom, knowledge and understanding, so too did Bezalel create the Tabernacle, a microcosm of the world, with wisdom, knowledge, and understanding.

Bezalel's wisdom is comparable to Moses' in Shemot Rabbah. When God gave Moses the directions for the candelabrum that was to be placed into the Tabernacle,

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[25] Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, 154
[26] *The Zohar*, vol. 4, trans. Harry Sperling and Maurice Simon. (London: Soncino Press,1931), pg 252

Moses couldn't remember how God wanted it to be constructed. Moses went up to God three times, and on the third time, God showed him an outline in fire of what it should look like. Moses, still having trouble, was directed by God to go to Bezalel. Bezalel instantly made the candelabrum correctly. Moses told Bezalel he deserved his name, for he acted as if he had been in the shadow of the God while God was showing Moses the candlestick pattern.[28]

While Bezalel is given credit for incredible wisdom, Moses was given the instructions for creating the tabernacle, which he passed on to Bezalel. Moses gave the plan and Bezalel carried it out; from this the rabbis infer that one who makes another do a thing receives the same reward as the one who does it. So even though Bezalel did the work, God attributed it to Moses, according to I Chronicles 21:29: " for the Tabernacle of Lord, which Moses made in the wilderness". It seems that the rabbis want to give the honor to both Moses and Bezalel, but Moses, because of his central place in tradition, must retain prominence. Bezalel is given the primary task of being the creator while Moses is given the seemingly superior role of overall supervisor and messenger from God. Bezalel, according to the rabbis, takes second place to Moses, as is shown by the fact that Moses gets credit for the Tabernacle.

Bezalel's lineage, leadership skills, and wisdom combine to make Bezalel a highly esteemed character. However, Bezalel's stature does not rise to the level of Moses, who ultimately receives the credit for the Tabernacle. Moses receives credit for the Tabernacle, but Bezalel built it. Bezalel built the Tabernacle with incredible insight. The rabbis make it clear that his talents and skills are from God.

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[27] Ibid., 253

[28] Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, 160; see also Midrash Rabbah Shemot 15:19,

While the rabbis concentrate on Bezalel's wisdom and leadership, they focus little

on his artistic abilities. In fact, it does not appear that any sources earlier than the

medieval commentators discussed Bezalel's skills. The miraculous feature of the

Tabernacle, according to Or Hahayim, was that the normal minor discrepancies between

how different artisans perform the same type of work could not be noticed in the

completed product, even though that product was a composite to which many people had

contributed their skills. This midrash contends that the reason, completed Tabernacle

appeared as the work of a single artisan was that God inspired the various artisans in the

manner in which they carried out their assignments. They did not strive to display the

artist's normal individuality but strove to be part of a team.

Ramban, is quite impressed with Bezalel's abilities:

> " Israel had been crushed under the work in mortar and
> brick, and had acquired no knowledge of how to work with
> silver and gold, and the cutting of precious stones, and had
> never seen them at all. It was thus a wonder that there was
> to be found amongst them such a great wise-hearted man
> who knew how to work with silver and gold, and in cutting
> of stones for setting and in carving of wood, a craftsman,
> embroiderer and weaver . . .".[29]

Ramban offers personal information about his impression of Bezalel whom he seems to

consider a talented artisan. Ramban further comments on Bezalel as an artist, stating in

reference to Exodus 37:1: "And Bezalel made the ark ":

> "[This is] in order to say that the greatest craftsman made
> the ark alone. This is because he is filled with the spirit of
> God, in wisdom, understanding and knowledge. So that he
> could contemplate its meaning and make it with the proper
> intention. For in the actual making of the ark, there was no
> great craftsmanship entailed, there being amongst the other

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[29] *Ramban: Commentary on the Torah.* trans. and ed., Rabbi Dr. Charles B. Chavel. (New York:Shilo Publishing House, Inc), 542

work things which required greater skill than that of the ark".[30]

Ramban's commentaries provide insight to the impression Bezalel's skills had on him; he further attempts to clear up a confusing textual point. Bezalel is said to be the artist for the Tabernacle, yet he creates only the simplest work: the bronze ark. This is, according to Ramban, because his talents lay in his intentions.

Rashi comments on Bezalel's artistic abilities with his interpretation of Exodus 31:4: "to devise cunning works, to work in gold, and in silver, and in copper". On the words *'lachshov machshava'*, to "devise cunning works" this refers to the weaving of an artists work. *"U'vanchoshet"* denotes artisanship generally.

The modern commentators are also concerned with carefully defining words and phrases, as Cassuto's interpretation will show. He offers a number of interpretations of Exodus 31:2: "with wisdom" he defines as one who has expert knowledge of the techniques of workmanship and ability to employ them. "And with understanding" means that Bezalel had the deductive and problem solving skills to help complete his work on the Tabernacle. These attributes enable Bezalel to " think thoughts" or devise plans that enabled him to carry out his assignments in all types of media: "gold, silver, bronze, cutting precious stones, carving wood, to work in every craft."[31]

A modern commentator, Benno Jacob, believes that Bezalel's gift had a dual nature. His task demanded creative thinking, as shown by the words *malechet mahesheva*", from Exodus 35:33, which indicates an artist who does not follow a

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[30] Ibid.,605

[31] Umberto Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus*. (Jerusalem, The Magnes Press, The Hebrew University, 1961), 401-402

prescribed plan or set of measurements. The duality is shown through the fact that he had the knowledge to execute each piece from prescribed materials

The rabbinic sources describing Bezalel's artistic skill are relatively late. Their commentary often relies on a close reading of the text, and they do not offer a vision of Bezalel as the archetypal artist. Commentators, like Ramban, express surprise at such developed talent, or others work within the strict confines of exegesis. Later commentators rarely embellish their careful definitions with characterizations as the rabbis have done.

While Oholiab, Bezalel's partner, does not receive the same consideration in the eyes of the rabbis and commentators, he remains an important figure for study. Oholiab is from the "insignificant tribe" of Dan.[32] The tribe of Dan is considered one of the lowest tribes of children of handmaids. Rashi believes that Oholiab was partnered with Bezalel to do the work of the tabernacle, in order to emphasize that all should participate in the building of the Tabernacle. Rashi uses Job 34:19 as his prooftext: "God regards not the rich more than the poor". Oholiab is of the same caliber of Bezalel. Even though Bezalel's lineage has more status, Oholiab is considered as his associate.

As Bezalel's name deserved attention, so too is Oholiab's name of interest. His name is an allusion to the word tent, "*ohel*", which is very fitting.[33] The Tabernacle was a tent, or a covering, which houses God's presence. Oholiab's role is to help give direction during the building of the Tabernacle. This proves, according to Rashi, that he was endowed with the ability to instruct others, which is a divinely bestowed gift.[34] On

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[32] Ginzberg, *Legends of the Jews*, 156
[33] Cassuto, *A Commentary*, 402
[34] Rashi on 35:34

Exodus 38:23, a verse that reintroduces Oholiab, Benno Jacob writes that Oholiab was the master and foreman of the works.

The Zohar offers an interesting way to envision Oholiab and Bezalel's partnership: Oholiab is of the " left side", which is the side of rigor. Bezalel is the right side; the Tabernacle is made from two sides and must be upheld by both sides. Bezalel, of the right side, and Oholiab, of the left side, results in a combination of balancing of the Left and Right sides.[35] From Exodus 38:22-23, which reads "Bezalel the son of Uri and **with him** was Oholiab, son of Ahisamach, of the tribe of Dan . . .": "with him" means that Oholiab never performed any work by himself, but always acted in association with Bezalel. The Zohar picks up "with him" as well, teaching that it proves that the right side always embraces the left side.[36] The two worked in harmony, enabling each other to perform their assigned tasks. Oholiab is envisioned as the perfect partner contributing to Bezalel's knowledge.[37] While Oholiab is clearly envisioned as the archetypal partner, or assistant, very few other characteristics are attributed to him. He remains in the shadow of Bezalel.

As mentioned above, Exodus also mentions other anonymous helpers, known in the text as " all that are wise hearted". These other artists also helped to build the Tabernacle, and they are mentioned briefly in a few sources. Starting with an earlier source, Tanhuma Yelamdenu, commenting on Exodus 36:1, creates a wordplay on "behemah" as "in whom" God has put wisdom and understanding. Rather than interpret "behemah" as "in whom", a more accurate translation, the midrash chooses playfully to

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[35] *Zohar*, 258
[36] *Zohar*, 260
[37] *Or Hahayim:Commentary on Torah by Chaim ben Attar.* Trans Eliyahu Monk (New York: Sole North American Distributor, Hemed Books, Inc, 1995) 912

indicate that this word suggests that beasts, *behemah*, i.e., animals, as well as wise men, as well as the beasts helped create the Tabernacle. Perhaps this may be an allusion to the animals skins that were used in the Tabernacle. In a much later commentary, Cassuto teaches that: "And their helpers would also have the knowledge and the skill, which is a gift from God, as it says," and in the heart of all that are wise hearted I (God) have put wisdom".[38] This implies that God instilled wisdom not only in Bezalel and Oholiab, but also into all the unnamed others as well. It is clear that these wise men are not characterized as artists, but rather as wise helpers.

As the anonymous helpers, and Oholiab's character, remain a mystery, so too does Hiram, the builder of the Temple of Solomon, an enigma. His character is introduced in I Kings 7 and II Chronicles 2-4. In I Kings 7:13-14, Hiram is introduced as the son of a widow of the tribe of Naftali. Hiram, was filled with wisdom, understanding and cunning to work all works in bronze. In II Chronicles 2:12-13, he is introduced as a skilful man, imbued with understanding, the son of woman of the tribe of Dan, and trained to work in gold, silver, bronze, iron, stone, timber, purple, fine linen, crimson, and also with knowledge of engraving, and ability to execute any design.

While very little early material appears concerning him, interesting information can be found in later, modern commentators. Shemot Rabbah 48:4, a rare example of early material concerning Hiram, teaches that Hiram is equated with Bezalel. Using I Kings 7:14 as a prooftext, which reads: "Hiram was filled with wisdom and understanding and knowledge", we learn that all these things came from the spirit of God. The rabbis are assuming that the word **filled** means that the wisdom was given to him by God. This is compared to Exodus 31:3, which writes Bezalel was "**filled** with the spirit

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[38] Cassuto, *A Commentary*, 402

of God, in wisdom, and in understanding, and in knowledge . . ." Since the same word

appears in Exodus as implying that Bezalel's knowledge came from God, the rabbis

construe that the same is true of Hiram. This earlier commentary offers little to

understand Hiram's character; it is necessary to turn to modern commentators for further

insight on Hiram.

Hiram's name, as did Bezalel and Oholiab's, provides an interesting study. This

study differs from Oholiab and Bezalel, however, because Hiram's name appears in

different forms throughout the text. It appears variously as Hiram, Huram, and Huram-

avi. Some research purports that Hiram is an abbreviation of Ahiram, which also is

known as the name of a king of Byblos, approximately 1200 CE, whose inscribed

sarcophagus was found at Byblos.[39] In II Chronicles 2:12-13, the name appears as

Huram-avi, which translates literally as: "Huram my father". Concerning this occurrence,

Huram-Avi, it could be construed as a dialectical form of "*av*", changing the name to

"Huram-av".[40] Another possibility is that the Chronicler was attempting to establish a

connection between the Temple and the Tabernacle, so Oholiab influenced the artisans'

name. This word play works like this: Oholi-av is equated with Huram-av. Another

scholar writes that Huram-avi means: 'my father, despite being Phoenician, is a devoted

one.'[41] This wordplay is linguistically difficult, and uncertain. However, an important

principle is brought to light through this connection. As it was important for Bezalel to

be connected to important lineage, so too is it important for Hiram to be connected to his

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[39] John Gray, *I & II Kings: A Commentary.* (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1970), 151
[40] Sara Japhet, *I &II Chronicles: A Commentary* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1993), 544
[41] William Johnstone, *I & II Chronicles,* vol. 2 (Sheffield, England: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997), 311.
It is interesting, in this connection, to note that Hirams' father was from Tyre.

lineage. In the text, he was introduced through his mother's line; through this textual connection, Hiram is now connected through his father's lineage.

According to many researchers, both Kings and Chronicles are attempting to make direct connections with the Tabernacle tradition. Aside from the connections with Hiram's name to the Exodus narrative, Gray believes that the description of Hiram's skill in I Kings 7:14: " reechoes practically verbatim the description of Bezalel the artist of the Tabernacle in Exodus 31:3, 35:3".[42] In another example, it is probable that the Chroniclers affinity with Exodus and Oholiab probably led to change in lineage from the tribe of Naftali to the tribe of Dan.

Another possible connection to the Tabernacle tradition can be found in II Chronicles 2:12-15. When he was introduced, Hiram had been given an important role in building the Temple. However, later in II Chronicles, we find that " the Chronicles literary restructuring actually relegates Huram to more obscurity: from [II Chronicles] 3:8 to 4:10, the repeated verb *vayaas* (and he made) refers to Solomon. Huram is mentioned only in 4:11".[43] While it was assumed that Hiram played a significant role in the building of the Temple, Solomon receives the credit. The parallel with Bezalel is important: as Hiram did the work on the Temple and Solomon received the credit, so too did Bezalel complete the work on the Tabernacle, with Moses receiving ultimate credit for its construction.

A difficulty in understanding Hiram's character arises because of the differences between the Chronicles and the King's texts. They list Hiram's artistic abilities quite differently. In Chronicles, Hiram talents extend to every medium, from metal, to stone,

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[42] Gray, *I & II Kings*, 182
[43] Japhet, *I & II Chronicles*, 557

to wood, to textiles, engraving and design. I Kings, however, limits his abilities to bronze. Importantly the same descriptive adjectives occur in both texts. The connection between these two sets of attributes and Bezalel is not to be missed, as the text utilizes the same descriptive adjectives. A major difference is that Bezalel is endowed with *ruah elohim*, and Hiram is not. From this, the modern commentators assume that Hiram does not receive divine inspiration. This can be compared with our midrashic source, Tanhuma Yelamdenu, which does, however, imbue Hiram with divine wisdom. The rabbis, too, link the Tabernacle and the Temple traditions through Bezalel and Oholiab, and Hiram.

In summary, these three characters have presented fascinating case studies. Earlier texts, as seen in midrash and Talmud, envisioned Bezalel as a gifted leader imbued with divine wisdom, as well as one who has noble lineage. The rabbis are not concerned with Bezalel as an artist; Bezalel is esteemed for his wisdom and leadership over his artistic abilities. His artistic skills are a manifestation of his wisdom. Bezalel is regarded as role model, but not one who ascended to the realm of patriarch, or even prophet. It is difficult to conjecture why the rabbis would not consider Bezalel as an artist. One possible reason is the rabbinical fear of idolatry. Considering Bezalel as an artist would connect him with the possible creation of idols—anathema to the rabbis. Oholiab, as Bezalel's archetypal partner, displays admirable leadership skills, whose talents are secondary.

The lack of midrashic material makes it impossible to infer Hiram's image. The modern commentators pay careful attention to the linguistic issues of Hiram's name, as well as the juxtaposition of the Kings and Chronicle's selection. However, with limited midrashic material, and armed with the knowledge that Hiram's story is tied directly to

the Tabernacle episode, it is logical to believe that Hiram, too, is noted for his wisdom and leadership ability rather than his artistic ability.

In conclusion, the rabbis considered Bezalel, Oholiab and Hiram, as leaders infused with divine wisdom, but did not dwell on their artistic abilities. They have been shown, through the eyes of the rabbis and scholars, to have remarkable skills. In short, Bezalel and Oholiab's creative talents were the symbols of their leadership, but leadership and wisdom was more important than the creative talents. The rabbis did not view Bezalel, or Oholiab, or Hiram, as artists, but as wise leaders. It is their leadership role and wisdom that earned them their tasks; their artistic skill indicates the depth of their wisdom and the breadth of their leadership abilities.

CHAPTER 3

THE SECOND COMMANDMENT:
AN INTRODUCTION AND RABBINIC OVERVIEW

The Second Commandment, which forbids the creation of graven images, led to the common belief that there was, and is, no Jewish art. Many—scholars and lay people alike-- believed that it prohibited the creation of any images that were in the likeness of anything in the heavens or on earth. Yet, from a close reading of the biblical text to a close look at historical data, scholars have proved the possible, and permissible existence, of much that can be considered art. From seals to funerary art, to synagogue decoration—each disprove the long held belief that a strict interpretation of the Second Commandment reigned supreme. Juxtaposing the Second Commandment with the artistic accomplishments found in the Bible, such as the Tabernacle, and the Solomonic Temple, alerts one to the tensions between the text and reality. Joseph Gutmann offers this logical argument: "Were the Second Commandment in its entirety to be taken literally, the construction of Solomon's temple, with its graven images, such as the cherubim and the 12 oxen which supported the molten sea, would obviously have been a direct violation and transgression. Yet no censure was evoked by the biblical writers".[1]

The tension between the Second Commandment and artistic images found in the Tabernacle and first Temple led both ancient rabbis and modern scholars further to reflect on the meaning of the Second Commandment. The text of the Second Commandment appears most authoritatively in two distinct places in the Bible, Exodus 20:4 and

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[1] *No Graven Images: Studies in Art and Hebrew Bible.* Joseph Gutmann, ed. (New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1971), 5

Deuteronomy 5:8, although there are as many as ten instances in the Bible where images are prohibited.[2] The central prohibitions read as follows:

> "You shall not make for you any engraved image, **or,** any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth." (Exodus 20:4)

> "You shall not make any engraved image, any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the waters beneath the earth." (Deuteronomy 5:8)

The similarities between the two texts are striking. The only substantive difference between the two is the letter 'vav' found only in Exodus 20:4. Scholars, such as Gutmann, do believe that the two instances of the Second Commandment should be viewed as totally different commandments, because of their textual issues and their *Realpolitik*. He writes that we cannot "completely account for the two formulations of the so called Second Commandment in the Bible. . . ".[3] Scholars have used multiple disciplines in the quest to better understand the repeated Second Commandment. For example, much thought has gone into dating both the Deutronomic and Exodus appearances of the Second Commandment. Understanding the dating of these verses offers some insight into the construction of the Second Commandment. Gutmann offers: " . . . only the phrase, 'you shall not make yourself a graven image' has been associated by many Bible scholars with the desert experience; the rest of the commandment may be a much later addition".[4] Not surprisingly, many scholars assume the remainder of Exodus 20:4 is dated later. Deuteronomy 5:8 is dated around the second half of the 6th

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[2] Carmel Konikoff, *The Second Commandment and Its Interpretation in the Art of Ancient Israel* (Geneve Imprimerie du Journal de Geneve, 1973), 7

[3] Gutmann, *No Graven Images*, xv.

century BCE, which makes it possible that there was a later redaction. According to this understanding, the rest of the commandment was probably retrojected back to the Exodus 20 decalogue to connect it with the transforming Exodus experience. As Gutmann states, "We are still unable to say how much of the text of the commandment in its present form belongs to the original formulation and how much of it is a later Deuteronomic addition. We are not too clear on either the precise circumstances or the specific period within ancient Israel which generated strictures against images".[5] As condemnation of all idolatry seems to stem from Josianic reform in 621 BCE, it makes sense that the Second Commandment's significance would rise in the eyes of the Deuteronomists, especially the priests. Gutmann, with a critical eye, wrote that: "The political and economic drives of secular or priestly rulers always require grounding in the theological- religious justification".[6]

Looking to the difficult dating process of the two proscriptions allows some insight into the historical situation of the Israelites. Considered fairly late, these prohibitions are expressive of a formative time in the Israelite history, a time fraught with upheaval and change. In addition to extensive study of the dating of the Second Commandment, scholars have considered textual issues, historical context, and theological issues.

Significant exegetical debates are concerned with the juxtaposition of the second and first commandments. Scholars have argued that the Second Commandment, especially in its appearance in Deuteronomy 5:7-9a, is really part of the first commandment. Brian Schmidt makes this argument using a textual link. He translates

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[4] Ibid., 4
[5] Ibid., xiv

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Deuteronomy 5:7-9a: "You shall have no other gods besides me, **that is to say** you shall not make for yourself a sculpted image, **that is** any likeness of what is in the heavens above. . . you shall not bow down to them or worship them".[7] The absent '*vav*' makes this argument possible—it allows Schmidt to propose that it is possible to create an "appositional asyndetic phrase for 5:8" so that the verse can be translated: " a sculpted image, **that is**, any likeness of what is in the heavens above".[8]

Another grammatical connection, arguing for these three Dueteronomic verses to be read as one unit, are the words *lahem* and *taavdeim* which appear in Deuteronomy 5:9. The words, meaning 'to them' and 'serve them', raises the question: what is 'them'? There isn't a referent for the words in Deuteronomy 5:9, leading one to look for a candidate in 5:8 or 5:7. The words *pesel* and *temunah,* in Deuteronomy 5:8, are not ruled out, but appear to be contextually linked with *"Elohim"* which appears in Deuteronomy 5:7. This connects Deuteronomy 5:7-9 into a unified bloc. According to Schmidt,"Thus in Dueteronomy 5:7-9 the worship of other gods is connected with bowing down and serving images"[9].

Gutmann maintains that the Second Commandment textual issues "have not been satisfactorily resolved".[10] Discussing textual issues of the Second Commandment raises questions concerning its meaning. Through studying the broader context of the two appearances of the Second Commandment, in Exodus and Deuteronomy, it has been strongly suggested that there was no ban on image making *per se*, but rather on

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[6] Ibid., xxiv
[7] Brian Schmidt, "The Aniconic Tradition: On Reading Images and Viewing Texts," in *The Triumph of Elohim: From Yahwisms to Judaisms*, ed Diana Vikander Edelman (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996), 80.
[8] Ibid.,79
[9] Ibid.,80
[10] Gutmann, *No Graven Images*, xv

worshipping images. Is it possible that the ban of images is concerned with the worship of potential idols, rather than the creation of images? Yet, it is widely believed that the Second Commandment is a prohibition against making images that could serve as objects of worship.[11] Through the passage of time the prohibition has come to mean a ban on both the worship and the creation of images. This is the most popular modern conviction, and to some extent, the rabbis confirm. Our next task, therefore, is to endeavor a brief overview of rabbinic views concerning the Second Commandment.

As noted in the previous chapter, surrounding cultures and religions influenced aniconism. So, too, is the Second Commandment's interpretations influenced by the *sitz im leben* of the rabbis. From Roman rule to Talmudic times, ending around 500CE, Jewish history was in constant turmoil. Jewish life was in constant change: from servitude to rebellion, to destruction of the Second Temple, to codification of rabbinic law. From the 2nd century CE, the rabbis argued, debated, and eventually codified the Mishnah and the Talmud, as well as compiled early midrashim. These works, as well as the historical upheaval, define Judaism as it is known today.

Importantly, these works did not exist in a vacuum. The laws and debates that rage in the sacred sources reflect the given time of the rabbis. The Second Commandment is no exception to these debates. "The commandment, although based on the original biblical injunction, means something quite different in each new historical context and must be evaluated from that standpoint."[12] Historical circumstances dictate a contextual interpretation of the Second Commandment. For every stage in the Israelite

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[11] Robert Gordis, "Jewish Art and the Second Commandment" in *Art in Judaism: Studies in the Jewish Artistic Experience*, Robert Gordis and Moshe Davidowitz, eds. (New York: National Council on Art in Jewish Life and JUDAISM, 1975), 10
[12] Gutmann, *No Graven Images*, xvi

cult, or in later Judaism, the Second Commandment was reborn. "To explain a single prohibition is to explore its interconnection with the 'principles of patterning' that underlie the various aspects of religion and culture".[13]

The rabbis were directly influenced by their social, political and economic situation, and their interpretation of the Second Commandment reflected their reality. As we will show, the rabbis strove for their ideal—a strict interpretation of the ban against images, but lived in reality, often easing restrictions on ownership and creation of images.

Mishna *Avodah Zarah* 1:8 shows the polarity between the rabbis concerning the creation of images. This mishnah offers sufficient evidence to show that Israelites not only created objects, but received sanction to do so by some rabbis. "One should not make jewelry for an idol such as necklaces, earrings, or finger rings. R. Eliezar says, for payment it is permitted. . .".[14] R. Eliezar, evidently believing that these secondary objects were not going to be worshipped, allowed their creation. Other rabbis, believing that veneration was present, disallowed the work. This short text exemplifies the poles of interpretation surrounding the Second Commandment during the rabbinic period.

The earlier rabbis associated the Second Commandment with the threat of worshipping alien gods. Because God was transcendent, God could not be worshipped in any stylized form, and the early rabbis did almost anything to avoid any association with idolatry. "A study of the tractate *Avodah Zarah* makes it clear that the rabbis regarded contact with idolatry and idolaters solely from the point of view of the dangers arising from social contacts".[15] *Avodah zarah*, the worship of foreign gods was considered a

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[13]Hendel, R.S. "The Social Origins of the Aniconic Tradition in Ancient Israel" Catholic Biblical Quarterly 50 (1988): 373.
[14] Babylonian Talmud Avodah Zarah 19b
[15] L.I.R., "Idolatry", in Encyclopedia Judaica, pg 1250

great sin. "Idolatry is considered by the rabbis as one of the three cardinal sins, from which one is enjoined to suffer martyrdom rather than transgress."[16] In other words, one should choose to die, rather than worship idols.

But especially during later periods, when there was little fear that the people would succumb to idolatry; *avodah zarah* was not regarded as a serious danger. . . "the rabbis in the course of several centuries succeeded in making learning and scholarship effective substitutes for the cult and the ritual of temple times. In doing so they assured the upholding of Judaism and once this was achieved a certain relaxation in the application of the law became permissible."[17]

A strict interpretation of the Second Commandment was often found during difficult times for the Jews. For example, during Herodian rule life was often unpleasant for the Israelites, and they avoided hellenization. Urbach, a well-known scholar, comments on the early motifs used in funerary art: "The artistic ornamentation of the graves in the environs of Jerusalem from the first century BCE and in the following century contains no other motifs than leaf clusters and fruits and flowers of various kinds, and that despite the obvious Hellenistic and Roman influence on the Jewish Architecture of the period."[18] Many of the rabbis and the community were still wary of the pull of idolatry and refrained from the possibility of crossing that boundary.

Still, cities became thoroughly hellenized as cults of Greek, Semitic, Egyptian and Roman gods were introduced and embraced by non-Jews. Paganism was part of the times. The rabbis and Jewish leaders shied away foreign influences, decrying building

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[16] L.I.R., "Idolatry" in Encyclopedia Judaica, vol 8, pg 1250. The other two cardinal sins are incest and murder, as found in Sanhedrin 74a
[17] Konikoff, *The Second Commandment and its' Interpretation,* 97

and places as idolatrous: "Furthermore, it was no longer considered sufficient to prescribe a blessing for one who sees a place from which idolatry has been rooted out, for there were more and more instances in which it was rooted out from one place only to be introduced in another, and in some cases only the introduction and not the rooting was seen. The sages, therefore, treated the gentile cities as foreign soil and proclaimed them ritually impure."[19] Images of gods as well as decorative works were shunned; the rabbis were denying idolatry as well as trying to resist assimilation. "The author of the Wisdom of Solomon, who lived during the first century B.C.E, frowned upon the fruitless labor of the painter. According to him, the art of painting 'leadth fools into lust'".[20]

Philo, a famous early Jewish philosopher, studied Platonic thought, allowing it to be superimposed upon biblical thought. In other words, Philo used Plato to give credence to the biblical tradition.[21] For Plato, art was equated with mischief. Philo closely allied himself with that position. "What Philo has done is to echo the Platonic concept that certain arts—the ' amusement' and 'imitative' arts—should be banned from the ideal state since they are deceptive and arouse passions which the reasonable faculty is unable to control".[22] Philo offers an example of an interpretation of the Second Commandment which does not involve the fear of idolatry or assimilation; rather Philo uses secular philosophy to embrace a strict exegesis.

The generation of Rabbi Judah Hanasi, responsible for the codification of the Mishnah, completed around 200CE, was highly influential in creating Judaism as it is

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[18] Urbach, E. E. " The Rabbinical Laws of Idolatry in the Second and Third Centuries in Light of Archeological and Historical Facts," Israel Exploration Journal, 9 (1959), 154
[19] Ibid., 156
[20] Boaz Cohen, "Art in Jewish Law" in *Art in Judaism: Studies in the Jewish Artistic Experience*, Robert Gordis and Moshe Davidowitz, eds. (New York: National Council on Art in Jewish Life and JUDAISM, 1975), 43
[21] Gutmann, *No Graven Image*, 14

known today. The sages of this time period—from about 70 CE to the death of Judah

Hanasi, are known as Tannaim. The Tannaitic period was very strict. No image of any

living thing, nor the heavens, nor heavenly servants, or darkness could be construed.

Mishnah Avodah Zarah 3:3 teaches that if a man found objects on which is a figure of the

sun, a figure of the moon, or a figure of a dragon, he must throw them into the Dead Sea.

"The Tannaim further excluded the making of images even for the purpose of ornament

and beauty".[23] According to Urbach, the situation in the second and third centuries

necessitated social isolation; stringencies were ruled in daily conduct to avoid

temptations. While a peaceful nation status was important, so too were the

commandments. ". . . it was necessary to define clearly the limits to which such

cooperation might be carried"[24] The need for strictness arose because of the attraction for

Jews of hellenistic culture. "The Mosaic prohibition was extended to include every

animate being, not only for the ornamentation of religious edifices, but also for private

homes, sepulchres and coins." [25]

The Tosefta, a compilation of Mishnayot and Beraitot, offers a good textual

example of the duality of rabbinic law. The Tosefta teaches that one who buys scraps

from the gentiles and finds an idol amongst it, must throw it away. It is regarded as the

gentile responsibility to dispose of the idols in the scrap. But if one finds an idol in the

scraps, there are strict procedures of how to desecrate it. "Rabbi Meir taught that an idol

could be desecrated by hitting it with a hammer and spoiling it, but Rabbi Simeon was of

the opinion that even if he only pushed it and knocked it and it fell, it is desecrated. Rabbi

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[22] Gutmann, *No Graven Image*, 15
[23] *Goodenough on the History of Religion and on Judaism.* Frerichs, Ernest S. and Jacob Neusner, eds. (Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1986),138
[24] Urbach, "Rabbinical Laws of Idolatry", 244

was more liberal than both theses sages and maintained that the idol was desecrated merely be being sold or given in pledge, since these actions proved that the Gentile intended to divest the shape of the idolatrous object of any divine significance"[26] R. Meir's basic assumption was that it is in the nature of images to be worshipped, even once a year. Even if there is no proof that they have been worshipped, or if there is no proof that they have been worshipped in the place where they stand, it is enough that they are worshipped in the great city of Rome. Hence, the desecration of an idol requires visible proof of its desecration.[27] "Rabbi, on the contrary, was of the same opinion as those Sages who disagreed with R. Meir. They argued that only images which could be proved to have been worshipped were forbidden, there being other images which were not used for idolatry, but for ornament."[28] The Tosefta arguments, as outlined by Urbach, show the tensions between differing rabbinic opinions. The issue, aside from fear of idolatry, is to remain peaceful with their polity while avoiding unnecessary contact with the pagan world. Mishnah Avodah Zarah 3:3, listed above, discusses how one should throw the image into the sea. Yet, immediately following in the same Mishnah, is this leniency offered by Rabbi Simeon b. Gamliel. If the found objects [have a figure of the sun, a figure of the moon, or a figure of a dragon] and are on precious utensils, they are prohibited, but on common utensils, they are permitted. The rabbis were torn between the reality of their social situation, and the ideal as presented to them by the biblical text. They needed to create specific boundaries on what was, and was not, appropriate, as they

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[25] Cohen, "Art in Jewish Law",167
[26] Urbach, "Rabbinical Laws of Idolatry", 231; see also Tosefta Avodah Zarah, 4:7
[27] Ibid., 231; see also Mishnah Avoda Zarah 3:1
[28] Urbach, "Rabbinical Laws of Idolatry", 232

could define from the text, but also needed to station themselves firmly within the economic and social needs of the Jews.

Outside cultural influences were eventually incorporated into Jewish life. A growing urban Jewish population placed Jews side by side with gentiles, raising problems with rabbinical laws against idolatry.[29] The Jews needed to compete economically, and began to learn the trades of the local population, urging the rabbis to create dispensations within Jewish law to allow creation and ownership of images. The Jewish artisan and craftsman provide an example of a new problem the rabbis had to deal with:

> "Jewish artisans and craftsmen, who lived by making clay and glass vessels, furniture and household utensils, gold and silver trinkets, not only learnt new technical processes from their gentile fellow-craftsmen: they also had to compete with them, which meant at least employing the same methods, i.e. ornamenting and decorating their products with conventional motifs. It was hard for these Jewish craftsmen not to make vessels and trinkets for use in the pagan ritual for their gentile purchasers, or even to avoid making idols. It is only this setting that any practical meaning can be given to various halachic rulings bearing witness to the endeavors of certain sages, from the second to the fourth centuries, to find solutions to problems which arose in their time".[30]

As mentioned above, Mishnah Avodah Zarah 1:8 offers a citation of an halachic argument responding to the craftsman's situation: "none may make ornaments for an idol: necklaces or earrings, or finger rings. R. Eliezar says: if for payment, it is permitted". Urbach notes that: "these words of R. Eliezer's were so astounding that they were actually omitted from several editions of the mishnah".[31] It is remarkable that craftsmen were given permission to create what could so easily be construed as idolatrous. What

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[29] Ibid., 157
[30] Ibid., 158
[31] Ibid., 158

seemed unreasonable to later generations was reasonable to R. Eliezer, according to Urbach: "he [Rabbi Eliezar] was confident that, if put to the test, they would keep the solemn undertaking made in the upper chamber in the house of Nitzah in Lod, to die rather than commit idolatry".[32] Another dispensation is found in Mishnah Avodah Zarah 3:2, which teaches: "if a man found fragments of images, these are permitted. If he found [a fragment in] the shape of a hand or the shape of a foot, these are forbidden, since an object the like these is worshipped". The rabbis allowed the owning of desecrated images—idols that were destroyed beyond ritual use—but were careful to warn against an image that has not been totally destroyed.

The allure of other cultures reached into the heart of rabbinic Judaism, as is shown in the catacombs of Bet Shearim, where inscriptions and other artistic elements were found. Bet Shearim was the burial place for rabbinic leadership—and yet it contained engravings. Urbach notes the tension, noting the findings of inscriptions in Hebrew-such as "Rabbi Simeon", and " This (belongs) to Rabbi Gamliel".[33] Even more confusing are side by side sarcophagi that bear inscriptions such as ". . . why was he called Nahum, the man of the Holy of Holies?", with the answer, "because he never in his life looked upon the image on a coin". This inscription was found in the catacomb with: "others [graves were] adorned with reliefs not only of animals, but also of the human face, such as the well known Zeus-like head, or the countenances of youths and maidens on a lead coffin discovered lately at Bet Shearim".[34] The tension is clear; the rabbis were faced with balancing law and daily life. "Certainly, these finds from Bet Shearim put an end to all the theories based on making a clear distinction between the private world of

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[32] Ibid., 159
[33] Ibid., 152

the Sages, as reflected in the talmudic and mishnaic laws about idolatry, and the other real world that existed outside theirs".[35] "Jewish craftsmen who lived by making clay and glass vessels, furniture and household utensils, gold and silver trinkets, not only learned new technical processes from their gentile fellow-crafstmen: they also had to compete with them, which meant at least employing the same methods, ie, ornamenting and decorating their products with conventional motifs. It was hard for these Jewish craftsmen not to make vessels and trinkets for use in the pagan ritual for their Gentile purchasers, or even to avoid making idols."[36]

The tension between law and daily life can be even further delineated by looking at a political situation the rabbis faced. The Emperor, of necessity, was due loyalty. However, the rabbis were careful in their dispensation when considering the emperor cult. King images were forbidden, while images of officials were permitted. The royal statue was forbidden, even if the cultural influences had to be endured.

> " It is notable that the festivals connected with the Emperor and the empire receive quite different treatment in the halacha from that accorded to the first two festivals mentioned in the Mishna—the calends and the saturnalia. In the case of the latter, R. Johanan limits the prohibition to business dealings only with Gentiles who are known to worship idols on those festivals. This dispensation was also granted by the Amoraim Rab Judah and Rabba. But there is no such limitation in regard to the day of the commemoration of the empire and the days of the Emperors' birth and death. These pagan festivals were observed by everyone, since in them religious and patriotic emotions were fused in a demonstration of the fundamental unity of the empire underlying the many differences between its disparate sections."[37]

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[34] Ibid., 153
[35] Ibid., 153
[36] Ibid., 158; Konikoff, *The Second Commandment and its' Interpretation*, 94
[37] Urbach, "Rabbinical Laws of Idolatry", 240

The rabbis, while allowing the festival leniency, were wary of the danger of assimilation. This is a clear example of a leniency the rabbis had to concede to in order to accommodate their ruling power.

The rabbis also had to confront the issue that Jews were making forbidden forms for themselves.[38] Therefore, the rabbis were forced to legislate appropriate and inappropriate images. Boaz Cohen lists the accommodations the rabbis made when dealing with the creation of images by Jews:

> 1. They took no exception to the introduction of mosaics in the synagogues.
> 2. They permitted sculpture of all living things except that of the combination of the four beings of the heavenly chariot.
> 3. They forbade the use of a signet ring with a human figure on it in relief, even if made by a Gentile, lest suspicion arise that the Jews made it himself. Engravings of human figures, as well as the sculpture of the angels and heavenly bodies, were always forbidden. [39]

According to Goodenough, the later, *amoraic* rabbis took no exception to mosaics in synagogues and allowed sculpture of all living beings except for heavenly chariot, a ring with human figure in relief, engravings of human figures, sculpture of heavenly bodies, and angels.[40] The Genizah text of the Jerusalem Talmud cites two lenient views concerning the Second Commandment:

> 1. In the days of R. Johanan they began to paint on the walls and he did not prevent them.
> 2. In the days of R. Abun (4th century) they began to make designs on mosaics and he did not prevent them.[41]

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[38] *Goodenough on the History*, 139
[39] Cohen, "Art in Jewish Law", 172
[40] *Goodenough on the History*, 139
[41] Joseph M. Baumgarten, "Art in the Synagogue, Some Talmudic Views" in *Art in Judaism: Studies in the Jewish Artistic Experience*, Robert Gordis and Moshe Davidowitz, 32; see also Avodah Zarah 42b

The discovery of the Dura Europos synagogue, from the 3rd century CE, is a prime example of Jewish artistic activity, as well as offering direct support for the rabbinic dispensations concerning the Second Commandment. Urbach's position is that the work of the rabbis was not totally separate from the masses, and uses the Dura Europos synagogue as part of his argument. He writes that the synagogue of Dura Europos and its paintings represent "proof that artists who executed them did not live in an entirely different spiritual world from the Sages; on the contrary, side by side with pagan themes, they introduced a whole series of pictures on biblical subjects, and what is more, their representations of the stories from the Bible have clearly been influenced by the allegories and legends of the Sages".[42]

The texts offer examples of the tensions facing the Sages on a daily basis. For example, there are midrashim about Jewish craftsmen and artisans who earned their livelihood by making statues and images and constructing basilicas. Urbach believes these midrashim are homilies based on real life. Further proving his point are other midrashim about craftsmen that prove the worthlessness of the idols. The best known midrash is Abraham smashing his fathers idols. This midrash shows that the early sages recognized the inefficacy of the idols.[43] Not only did the midrashim recognize the inefficacy of the idols, but the Jewish craftsmen based their defense of their professional activities on the well known fact that the Gentiles themselves considered the idols to have no efficacy or power."[44] The period of the Talmud is a period of leniency; the rabbis no longer feared idolatry. "This is the reason why R. Johanan did not upbraid his

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[42] Urbach, "Rabinnical Laws of Idolatry", 151
[43] Ibid., 162
[44] Ibid., 164

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contemporaries for starting to decorate their walls with paintings. . ."[45] It is clear,

through textual and archeological example, that Jews embraced the popular symbols of

the day. What is important to note is that they used the symbols for their own needs—

they embraced the object, not its meaning. The rabbinic attitude towards these symbols

was a point of tension: as the rabbis realized that these symbols were meaningless and the

threat of idolatry was negligent, they began to be more lenient.[46]

An important symbol used in the days of the rabbis, the seal, provides important

archaeological evidence in the discussion of the Second Commandment. The seal is akin

to a signature, and is an imprint made from an original signet ring. The Rabbis had to

decide which images would be permissible. If a signet ring had upon it the image of an

idol, one may not use it to seal a document. But if the ring had upon it an ordinary figure

in relief, one was not permitted to wear it, although it was allowed to used as a seal, for

the figure in the wax will be concave, and the image will be in hollow relief. However, if

the figure was in intaglio, it was permitted to wear it, but not to use it to seal."[47] Another

interesting leniency is found in the Jerusalem Talmud, tractate *Avodah Zarah* 3:2. R.

Hiyya, the son of R. Abba, had cups with an image of Roman Fortune engraved on them.

They were considered to be permitted because the water would run down them and that

was considered a form of desecration.[48] "These testimonies render homage to tolerant

spirit of the religious authorities of these cultures, and provide explicit proof of the

existence of the painting and mosaics in the Galilee itself."[49]

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[45] Ibid., 236

[46] *Goodenough on the History*, 135

[47] Boaz Cohen, "Art in Jewish Law"169

[48] Urbach, "Rabbinical Laws of Idolatry", 233; see also Jerusalem Talmud Avodah Zarah 3:2

[49] Gabrielle Sed Rajna. *Ancient Jewish Art: East and West.* (Neuchatel: Imprimerie Paul Attinger, 1985),10

Yet, while many rabbis of the later talmudic period supported leniency in the prohibition, the dissenting voice was still clear. There were rabbis who did not agree with the dispensations, for any reason. "They stressed the all-embracing, absolute nature of the biblical prohibition 'you shall not make yourself a graven image' and maintained that these words applied equally to images of bird and beast, unlike R. Eliezer and R. El'azar bar Zadok and others who held that all features might be copied, even human countenance."[50]

An overview of rabbinic writings of the Second Commandment yields a complex picture. Rabbinic decree depended largely on the threat of *avodah zarah,* as well as the socio-political reality. The political situation dictated the level to which the rabbis were willing to be flexible with Jewish law. Assimilation, too, effected these issues because the rabbis needed to respond to the needs of the Jewish population. It is clear that while the Second Commandment was very important to the rabbis that they legislated according to the needs of the day. The Second Commandment, then, is not understood as a clear cut prohibition; rather the rabbis modified their interpretation of it as they deemed necessary.

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[50] Urbach, "Rabbinical Laws of Idolatry", 235

CHAPTER 4

THE DEVELOPMENT OF ANICONISM AND ITS IMPACT ON JEWISH ART

It is widely assumed that the Second Commandment, which forbids the creation and worship of images, is responsible for the marginalizing of Jewish art and an artistic tradition. However, many scholars argue that the Second Commandment's interdictions against images is a direct result of a long tradition banning the creation of images: ". . . Israelite aniconism is as old as Israel itself and not a late innovation. The prohibition of images, as well as the express prohibition against the creation of the deity, is just the logical conclusion of a very long development".[1] The rise of an aniconic tradition has been a focus of study for many historians and archaeologists. Understanding that the repudiation of the creation of images affected the artistic tradition; it is important to consider the rise of aniconism and its affect on later Jewish understanding of an artistic tradition.

Brian Schmidt defines aniconism as: "the imposition of a ban against the use of anthropomorphic, theriomorphic, or physiomorphic images to represent or house the deity as an object of worship in ritual performance."[2]. The study of aniconism focuses on the ban on images-and creation of images-- which were used for worshipping a god. Many scholars consider the Israelites unique, as they appeared to practice aniconism quite early, as opposed to contemporary, popular practice.

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[1] Tryggve Mettinger, *No Graven Image? Israelite Aniconism in Its Ancient Near Eastern Context.* Coniectanea Biblica, Old Testament Series, 42(Stockholm,Almqvist &Wiksell, 1995),195

[2] Brian Schmidt, "The Aniconic Tradition: On Reading Images and Viewing Texts", in *The Triumph of Elohim: From Yahwisms to Judaisms,* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 1996),77

Tryggve Mettinger delves further into a definition of aniconism. For his definition, he expanded on Girhardsson's terms, 'programmatic aniconsim' and 'de facto aniconism'. Mettinger cites two "levels" of aniconism.[3] 'De facto aniconism', the earlier stratum, is simple tolerance, or indifference to icons. For example, de facto aniconism is found when a cult uses iconic images alongside non-anthropomorphic images. The de facto tradition is earlier, conventional observance, which was not subject to theological reflection.[4] Mettinger identifies aspects when defining de facto aniconism: "indifference to icons", "mere absence of images" and "tolerant aniconism".[5] These terse descriptions imply that the worshipper is dispassionate to their cultic surroundings, a concept that is antithetical to the common understanding of cultic religions. Further confusion arises when trying to understand the idea of "tolerant aniconism". Mettinger implies—but never outrightly states—that this concept refers to the idea that cultic practice followed conventional tradition, even if the cult itself was aniconic.

'Programmatic aniconism', which came later, is a prescribed, conscious effort against images of deity. This type of aniconism was created after the Israelites were theologically more advanced. Programmatic aniconism can be divided according to Mettinger. He offers this bisection:

> "Aniconism as referring to cults where there is no iconic representation of the deity (anthropomorphic or theriomorphic) serving as the dominant or central cultic symbol, that is where we are concerned with either a) aniconic symbol or b) sacred emptiness. I shall call the first of these two types "material aniconism" and the second "empty-space aniconism".[6]

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[3] Mettinger, *No Graven Image*, 18
[4] Ibid.,18
[5] Ibid.,18
[6] Ibid.,19

His subdivision of aniconism is conceptually difficult. Mettinger is essentially describing a phenomenon where a non-figurative object is erected which in some way is symbolic of the deity but, at the same time, is not representative of the deity. He argues that a standing stone, a *massebah*, is an example of material aniconism, because it is a physical symbol, even if it is not representational; it is suggestive rather than figurative.

Empty-space aniconism, using Mettinger's definition, is a space defined as a sacred dwelling place of the deity, but does not contain any image of the deity. An example is the ark from the Tabernacle; it is considered by some scholars to be the throne of God, but without a representation of God. God symbolically dwells there, but no image has been presented. Empty space aniconsim is in place when an object, such as a throne, is pictured without its occupant, the king. Material aniconism is almost the opposite of empty space aniconsism: instead of an empty throne, the throne is filled with a 'material' image of the king/deity. Using the Canaanite cult as a prime example, worshippers were able to see their god; for example, the Canaanite god El, which was represented as seated on its' throne.

It has been argued that aniconsim's roots can be found in the Israelite's nomadic origins. Israel's nomadic roots, asserts Mettinger, had profound impact on the future development of aniconism.[7] This experience did not, for practical reasons, allow the building and/or carrying of idols. As a society in revolution, they pulled back from urbanized [Canaanite] influences, and they needed to conserve material resources. The rejection of graphic images, aside from necessity, also stemmed from political and

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[7] Ibid., 138

theological ideology.[8] Politically, hostility to idolatry was an attempt to thwart hierarchy.

For, in surrounding cultures, the idol was equated with the king, or ruling power. The

idol, symbolizing the deity, channeled power to the priests, or the political hierarchy; it

served to focus and affirm the wills between the deity and priestly/ political power.[9]

Church and state were equal: the power of the god served the political power, and vice

versa. The Israelites were, specifically, anti-monarch, and associated images with a

ruling sovereign. Therefore, they feared that the creation of an idol would appear to give

consent to a monarchical institution, a political model the early Israelites resented.[10]

> ". . . the physical image of Yahweh seated on a throne was
> prohibited. Why? Because it would have served to
> legitimate a kingship that had no place in the universe of
> early Israel. The prohibition of the figure seated on the
> throne extends in two directions: the rejection of the human
> king and the origin of the aniconic God".[11]

The anti-monarchy argument as a main theory of the rise of aniconism is an

attractive one. As nomads, the early Israelites were facing a new world, filled with

conflicting and overlapping world views from other cultures and new experiences. As

nascent Israel settled, their nomadic fears gave way to influences from surrounding

cultures. Eventually the creation of a powerful monarchy and the building of the Temple

by Solomon replaced their distaste for a sovereign power. The study of the Solomonic

Temple is a rich source for understanding later aniconic tendencies.

> "The erection of the Solomonic temple marked the
> consolidation of a new phase in Jewish history- a phase
> radically different from the semi-nomadic era of the tent.

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[8] R.S. Hendel, "The Social Origins of the Aniconic Tradition in Ancient Israel" (Catholic Biblical Quarterly 50, 1988), 37

[9] Ibid., 141-142

[10] J.M. Kennedy "The Social Background of Early Israel's Rejection of Cultic Images," (Biblical Theology Bulletin 17, 1987), 143

[11] Hendel, "The Social Origins", 380

Yahweh was now no longer the wandering God. He was the God of a unified people and, as such, needed to be placed within a permanent abode, a beautiful structure like that of the king. . .".[12]

Not only was the erection of a permanent abode for God unparalleled in Israelite history, so too was the later Josianic reform. Josiah's goal was to make sure that Jerusalem was *the* center of the cult—religiously, politically, and economically. This meant that all other places of worship—*bamot, massebot*, and others—had to be abolished so that economic and religious focus was on Jerusalem. The economic goal was to ensure that all taxes, tithes, and contributions were directed to one place. The religious ideal was to make Jerusalem the only true spiritual center. The religious aspiration was achieved with the building of the Temple, and the placement of the ark within. The ark became the only acceptable holy symbol of God. With the ark were the cherubim, acceptable images creating a throne for God. The empty throne, from as late as the 7th century, proves that anthropomorphic images of God were not allowed; yet it does provide one with a 'mental image' of God by providing God's seat.

Hendel believes that the Israelites also provided a throne for God in the ark and its cherubim. On the ark, one did not see God. "The ark with its two cherubim constitutes Yaweh's throne; it is the earthly image of the heavenly throne".[13] While God was not represented, the throne helped to evoke and concentrate efforts to connect with the transcendent God. Hendel claims that the cherub throne is two images—God and king.

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[12] *No Graven Images: Studies in Art and Hebrew Bible.* Joseph Gutmann, ed. (New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1971),5

[13] Hendel, "The Social Origins",75

The image of the king was rejected, therefore the King (God) is imageless.[14] The equation negates not God, but only the image.

These two theories, anti-monarchy and the nomadic heritage, play significantly into almost all other theories concerning the rise of aniconism. One other theory does have effect on the rise of aniconism, although scholars do not count it among their most persuasive arguments: the imageless cult. From recalling the saga of the burning bush, God was considered to be imageless. How does one create form to that which defines itself only as *"ehyeh asher ehyeh"*: I am what I am? This is the "name theory": if the name of God is so ambiguous—the Hebrew translates " to be"-- how does one characterize God? This is another argument for why Yahweh is not represented in an image: because the theophany was intangible.[15]

There are many theories about the origins of aniconism. These theories range from von Rad, who argues that aniconism is a commentary of Yahweh's transcendance over the world, to the theory that aniconism stems from a bias against kingship. It is my opinion that all these theories can be placed into one overarching rubric: historical context. The differences in theories center around the aspects of history each believe most influenced the development of aniconism as a prevailing theological symbol. Mettinger, for example, believes that comparative evidence of the use of images in non-Israelite cultural worship practices offers the most promising data when considering the rise of aniconism. [16]

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[14] Ibid., 378
[15] Theodore J. Lewis, "Divine Images and Aniconism in Ancient Israel," (Journal American Oriental Society 118,1998),52
[16] Ibid., 36

Yet, the discussions concerning the rise of aniconism remain quite complicated, because the Israelites did create images. Some scholars will assume that the images made were not idols, but symbols. "For the prohibition against images was never understood to be a blanket rejection of iconic representation, but only a ban on representation of the deity or deities".[17] Further, scholars believed that the Israelites used symbols to connect themselves with God. A symbol is, as defined by Goodenough, "an image or design with a significance, to the one who uses it, quite beyond its manifest content... an object or pattern which, whatever the reason may be, operates upon men and causes effect in them, beyond the mere recognition of what is literally presented in the given form".[18] For example, the ark was considered the chief symbol of early Israelites, and was believed to have been placed in both the Tabernacle and the first Temple. As a symbol, it evoked memories of the desert traditions, and created a tangible connection to the covenant with God.

The study of the rise of aniconism looks at the ban on images that symbolize God, not at the creation of all images. It is important "... to stress the obvious fact that Israelite aniconism by no means excludes iconography. Israel felt free to cultivate pictorial art"[19]. Chapter 5: Archaelogy in Ancient Jewish Art explores further ornamentation and representation. The question, then, brought up explicitly by Mettinger, is: what were these symbols? When did the Israelites stop using symbols? And why?

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[17] R. Carroll, " The Aniconic God and the Cult of Images, " (Studia Theologica 31 1997),52
[18] E.R. Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period* (New York, Bollingen, 1953), xxvi

Mettinger argues the ascendance of aniconism creatively. His main task is a systematic effort to place Israelite aniconism in a comparative perspective with other similar developments in ancient Near East.[20] Believing that Israelite aniconism was at first de facto and only later ascribed to programmatic aniconism, he studies standing stones (*massebot*) and high places (*bamoth*) to prove this theory. A *massebah* is a "standing stone which served as a focal point of worship"(see Figure 1) and was often found on, or near, ritual *bamoth*.[21]

Figure 1 *Massebot* in small temple, 13th BCE in lower city of Hazor.

He believes that the *massebot* were aniconic representations of the deity, which is why they were banned. *Massebot*, according to Mettinger, could have four functions.

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[19] Mettinger, "No Graven Image", 27
[20] Ibid., 36
[21] Ibid., 23

The first is as a memorial; the second is concerned with legal relationships between two parties. The third is that the *massebah* was erected in commemoration of an event, and the fourth cites the *massebah's* function as a cultic marker of sacred space.[22] These four divisions can easily be divided into two main categories: cultic stelae and memorial stones.[23] Mettinger argues that the reason for studying *massebot* is because they were eventually banned from the Israelite cult. Because they became illegal, they were, assumes Mettinger, representing something potentially iconic. Religious high places, or *bamot*, often contained the *massebot,* which were the most prominent objects on them. The *massebot* "simply belonged to the normal cultic paraphernalia of such shrines".[24] When the *bamot* came to be considered by the Deuteronomic thinkers as idolatrous, the ban also included the *massebot.* We must not underestimate the Dueteronomic reform in the role of the Second Commandment; its impact on the history of the Israelite cult and later Judaism is immeasurable. The Deuteronomic reform also effected the *massebot* because of the pagan connection. Since other cults also used *massebot*, they were condemned due to potential association with alien gods, known as *avodah zarah.*[25] The *massebot,* therefore, present an interesting methodology with which to examine Israelite roots of aniconsim.

It is difficult to clearly determine if archaelogical finds are indeed the ancient *massebot* or not; it is also difficult to determine if a *massebah* is cultic image or not. This difficulty arises because the position it is found in is often ambiguous; if it is knocked over, it could be an altar or even a simple table top. "Scholars often disagree precisely on

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[22] Ibid., 32
[23] Ibid.,32
[24] Ibid.,140
[25] Ibid.,25

the essential point: whether or not the context is cultic or not."[26] "Could it be that behind

Israelite iconophobia, as documented around the time of the exile, there is a prior

tradition of cult with *massebot* as a central divine symbol?"[27] "In the history of

aniconism in Palestine they simply belong to an earlier stage (material aniconism) than

the empty-space aniconism which is initially evidenced by the empty cherubim throne in

the Solomonic temple and then explicitly demanded by later theologians in the veto

against images".[28]

Mettinger does elicit textual support from the bible, citing texts with direct

attestations of the role of *massebot*. The texts he cites are Genesis 28, which has Jacob

worshipping at Bethel; Judges 17:5, where we find Micah with a *bet elohim*. Mettinger

claims that a *bet elohim* is a close connection to a betyl.[29] Hosea 3:4 gives some

indication that *massebot* were standard, and Isaiah 19:19 describes the creation of a

massebah as a positive act.[30]

Mettinger also relies (predominantly) on archaeology to buttress his argument.

He begins by attempting to methodically prove that the archeological evidence supports

his argument that material aniconism existed until quite late—probably until the Josianic

Reform, approximately the middle of the 7th century. Mettinger's archaeological

evidence also attempts to prove that aniconism was not unique to Israelite culture.

An example of his archaeological evidence comes from Arad during Iron Age II, (

see Figure 2) where stones were found in the holy of holies of a sanctuary. Arad was

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[26] Ibid,141
[27] Ibid.,37
[28] Ibid.,168
[29] Ibid.,35: "The word betyl has established itself in modern studies as a designation for cultic stones, especially in discussions pertaining to Phoenicia, Syria and Arabia." A betyl is a widely used term, from the Semitic byt'l.
[30] Ibid., 141

definitely an official shrine. "An interesting issue is of course to what extent the history

of the sanctuary at Arad can be correlated with what is known from the Bible about the

reforms of Hezekiah and Josiah".[31] Also, it is important to note that the site had cultic

continuity—there is archaeological evidence to suggest that the site was probably used as

an open air high place in Iron Age I as well.[32] At some stage in the existence of this holy

site, there were multiple *massebot*. "It is worthy of note that the finds at Arad witness a

development from several *massebot* to a single, central symbol of the divine".[33] For

Mettinger, the archeological evidence leaves him sure that " . . . the cult at Iron Age Arad

attests, beyond a reasonable doubt, to the important role of *massebot* at the official level

of religion.".[34] Once again, Mettinger is asserting that the *massebot* were actually serving

as symbols of the deity.

Figure 2. The holy of holies as it was originally found at Arad.

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[31] Ibid., 146
[32] Ibid., 147
[33] Ibid., 148
[34] Ibid., 149

Further archaeological data found in a room at Lachish, stratum V, suggest objects that could have cultic functions.[35] Aharoni suggests the object found in the room is a combination of *ashera* and *massebah*.[36] Aharoni gathers proof for this statement from the fact that the stones were deliberately defaced and broken but were carefully buried.[37]

Mettinger also cites evidence found at Beth Shemesh. In the stratum, ending around 701 BCE, five betyl like pillars were found on their side in an area about 30 meters north of south city gate.[38] While the cultic nature is in question, the indications towards cultic activity should be mentioned, especially as it shape fits in with other *massebot* and the absence of any walls points to an open air sanctuary.[39]

Mettinger offers many other examples describing *massebot* cultic sites in Bronze Age Palestine. His study attempts to prove that "the adduced examples of standing stones in cultic contexts as representations of deities in Bronze Age Palestine are sufficient to show that *massebot* were not just a random phenomenon".[40] His end result is to prove that the Israelite *massebot* cult was not unique.[41] Mettinger has worked backwards in time, beginning with the Iron age and then moving to the Bronze age. The Iron age, the later study, shows one major difference in cultic sites: the ascendance from multiple *massebot* to a single one.[42]

These examples of archeological finds attest to the significant role of *massebot* in cultic Israel; ". . . the above survey of material commends the view that cultic activities involving *massebot* were practiced by the population of Iron Age Palestine including the

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[35] Ibid., 150
[36] Ibid., 151
[37] Ibid., 151
[38] Ibid., 153
[39] Ibid., 153
[40] Ibid., 190
[41] Ibid., 191

Israelites."[43] Mettinger also believes that during Iron Age II the temple cult, with its

empty space cherubim throne, existed simultaneously with various local cults which used

massebot.

Mettinger's methodology is comparative; he chooses to ally Israelite history with

other "tribal groups coming from outside of the arable zone, groups that were

worshippers of Yhwh, who was an "immigrant to Canaan. . . ".[44] Mettinger asserts

another important point: that these early Yahwistic cults were not the only ones to

worship at an open air cult in Palestine. "On the contrary, this type of open-air cult with

massebot is a common West Semitic phenonomen"[45] He turns to other groups to

determine if any of these original cultic groups were aniconic. He studies a number of

archaeological sites, of which the Uvda Valley and Timna provide the best data.[46]

In the Uvda Valley, (see Figure 3) more than 40 *massebot* have been recorded.

They are found through the Nabatean period.[47] The stones are usually found erect and

facing east, with an enclosure of benches and a low housing surrounding the *massebot.*

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[42] Ibid., 191
[43] Ibid., 166
[44] Ibid., 168
[45] Ibid., 174
[46] Ibid., 168
[47] Ibid., 169
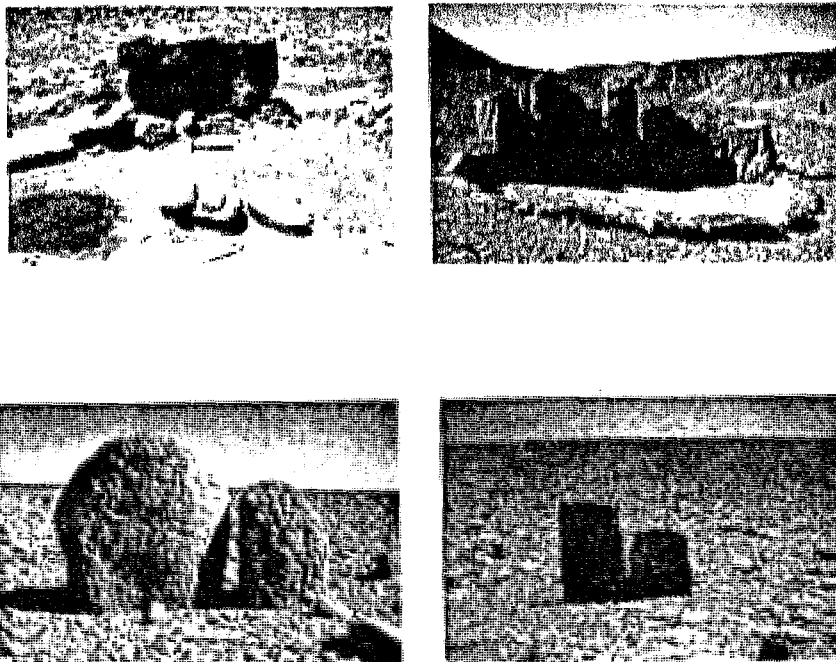
Figure 3. From top left, clockwise: broad massebah with grinding stones, found at Uvda Valley, end of 3rd BCE. *Top right:* seven massebot, Uvda Valley, 4th BCE. *Bottom left:* pair of massebot, southwest Uvda Valley, 4th BCE. *Bottom right:* pair of small Nabatean massebot, from Uvda Valley.

The important feature that enables one to label these stones as *massebot* was noted by the archaeologist Avner: "These standing stones appear in constant groupings of a certain number (2,3, 5 and 7 stones) and Avner most appropriately points out that the same numbers are found in textual and iconographical material relating to the deities of the Ancient Near East. He is therefore able to argue with renewed force for the conclusion that these *massebot* had a cultic function".[48] There is also the suggestion that the coupling of the broad stones with narrow stones represents both masculine and feminine deities.[49]

The site at Timna also attests to *massebot* and their role in of the cult. Timna is a large site, with many loci. Mettinger relies on 2 sites, 2 and site 200. Site 2 will provide an interesting example. In site 2, a structure was found with a low bench in the right interior. In the center of the room stood a monolith, surrounded by broken animal bones,

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[48] Ibid., 170
[49] Ibid., 170

ashes and pottery.[50] From the site at Uvda and the brief information provided from Timna, some conclusions can be drawn, as were drawn by Mettinger. Mettinger believes that these sites help prove that the Yahwistic cult was materially aniconic from the beginning, due to the cultural influences that 'cousin' cults had similar practices.[51]

Mettinger comes to the conclusion that there are a number of features the West Semitic cults which he studied had in common. The observations he makes strengthen the argument that early Israelite worship is a variant of the West Semitic cult.[52] "Now if the early Israelite cultic symbols are of the same type as in other West Semitic cults, then it becomes natural to see Israelite aniconism as part of this wider panorama. Israelite aniconism is just another case in point of the wider phenomenon traced in the previous parts of this study: ancient West Semitic aniconism in the form of cults centered on standing stones".[53]

Mettinger summarizes the similarities found among the West Semitic cults he studied. The first was that the sanctuary was an open air worship room, with the central function being the standing stones which were placed as representatives of the divine. The second commonality is that sacrifices were mostly animal sacrifices in form of ritual slaughter, resulting in a communal meat meal by all. It is important to note that the communal meal and ritual aspect is central to the meaning of West Semitic sacrifice.[54] Mettinger also believes that the blood of the ritual sacrificial animal, the sheep, is a factor in common. While there may be more common instances, he is unsure of their ability to be proven. Mettinger believed that the Israelites had much in common with other cults,

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[50] Ibid., 172
[51] Ibid., 174
[52] Ibid., 193
[53] Ibid., 194

and borrowed from their cultic systems, as can be seen in the above comparison with the West Semitic cult. In fact, he writes; "ancient Israel is a form of West Semitic aniconism.[55]

Mettinger has launched an exciting method for studying the rise of aniconism. By comparing Israelite culture to other surrounding and presumably influential cultures, Mettinger has set out to prove that the roots of aniconism were not unique. While Mettinger's work is powerful, it is not without criticism. There are a number of areas where Mettinger's theory appears to be lacking. Importantly, Mettinger seems to dismiss the image of the *asherah*. The *asherah* is often considered a cultic statue, and potentially a fertility goddess, and has been the subject of much debate. In fact, Lewis notes in his review of the work that Mettinger seems to gloss over their potential importance.[56] There is debate as to the function of the *ahsera,* with some scholars arguing that they likely served as "iconography which points to the worship of a great mother goddess. . .".[57] Other scholars conservatively argue that *asherot* represent only votive offerings, or talismen.[58] Scholarly debate concerning these highly stylized figurines prove that consideration of the *ashera* does belong within the discussion concerning the rise of aniconism.

Lewis, critiquing Mettingers' work, believes that the scholar relies too heavily upon a limited interpretation of the *massebot*. Lewis notes this especially as he proves that the biblical support texts used by Mettinger are inconclusive at best. "Mettinger's

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[54] Ibid., 192
[55] Ibid., 195
[56] Lewis, "Divine Images and Aniconism,"44
[57] Ibid., 45
[58] Lewis, "Divine Images and Aniconism",45

treatment of *massebot* passages in the Bible is far too brief . . . ".[59] "By not looking at how the term *massebot* is used universally, he fails to notice that the term was applied to standing stone that did not mark the deity's presence."[60]

Lewis's critique of Mettinger continues with other biblical texts. He believes that Mettinger not only 'hedges' with regard to biblical texts, but omits crucial comparative texts, such as Esarhaddons' *Renewal of the Gods'* which describes the remaking of cult images, including listing artists and materials, so that the god could be born.[61] The idea of a god being 'born' is an important concept. It was called 'the washing, or cleaning of the mouth'. Before this ritual the idol was not alive. The most significant Israelite example of bringing an idol to life is the golden calf. An idol might be consecrated through libation, as the Golden Calf was. The Esarhaddon text is important because it points to a weakness in Mettinger's arguments: the texts that speak of the efficaciousness of the image.

Mettinger tends to regard all *massebot* as cultic.[62] Lewis believes that the conclusion Mettinger makes that "cultic *massebot* must be regarded as aniconic representations of the divine" is too strong.[63] As support for this conclusion, Lewis cites that Mettinger did not look at all the uses of the word *massebot* in text. Well known passages such as Genesis 35:19-20, which discusses Rachel's grave and the marker for it, and Genesis 31:44-49, in which a *massebah* is placed as a boundary marker between Jacob and Laban are not considered "In none of these passages is a *massebah* symbolic

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[59] Ibid., 41
[60] Ibid., 41
[61] Ibid., 38
[62] Ibid., 41
[63] Ibid., 41

of a deity".[64] Shalom M. Paul also attests to the fact that not all references to *massebot* are cultic: "the erection of pillars, *massebot*, in the cult of God (not to be confused with the commemorative *massebot*, such as in Genesis 31:45-52; Exodus 24:4; Joshua 4:40-9) was considered legitimate by the Patriarchs. This use of *massebot* in worship was proscribed by Deuteronomy (16:22) and the Prophets (Ezekiel 26:11; Hosea 3:4; 10:1-3; Micah 5:12)."[65]

Lewis continues: "To judge from the literary evidence, Israelite *massebot* (material aniconism) were used in a variety of ways with only two clear examples of a *massebah* representing a divine symbol".[66] These two examples, both from Deuteronomic material, are found in 2 Kings 3:2, and 2 Kings 10:26-27.   The first selection, from 2 Kings 3:2, reads: "And he did evil in the sight of the Lord; but not like his father, and like his mother: for he put away the pillar of the Ba'al that his father had made." The second selection, 2 Kings 10:26-27, reads: "And they brought out the pillars of Ba'al and burned them. And they pulled down the pillar of the Ba'al and pulled down the house of the Ba'al, and made it into a latrine unto this day." From these two texts, Lewis's conclusion is that he must categorize Mettingers work as an important study of one small part of the aniconic question: West Semitic cults of standing stones, and not as a completed study.[67]

Still, Mettinger's study remains important for the study of the rise of aniconism. Understanding the rise of aniconism through cross cultural study is a powerful methodological tool. The theological justifications against representing a deity

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[64] Ibid., 41
[65] Shalom M. Paul, "Massebot", in Encyclopedia Judaica, 1228
[66] Lewis, "Divine Images and Aniconism", 50
[67] Ibid., 42

developed over time. There was not, according to Mettinger, a direct path from de facto aniconism to programmatic aniconism. It is believed that programmatic aniconism came into full swing between the 8th and the 6th centuries BCE, and it is likely that material and empty-space aniconism—subcateogries of de facto aniconism—existed side by side, easing the Israelite path into the more absoluate programmatic aniconism. It is possible to believe that the Yahwistic cult was aniconic from the beginning, especially as no anthropomorphic image of God has been uncovered. The difficult question that Mettinger attempts to answer is *how* the Israelites came to embrace a strict regime of programmatic aniconicism. He purports that the Israelites were not unique in the nascent stage, as he has proven from West Semitic data. Rather, what makes the Israelites unique is their strict adherence to, and development of, aniconism to its most radical degree.

To understand the debate on the rise and growth of aniconism, an important fact is essential: "For early audiences, the wholesale denial of all material images of YHWH, whether man made or naturally occurring is nowhere in view".[68] Schmidt restates this idea later in his article for added emphasis: " . . .the conclusion to be drawn is that nowhere in the biblical traditions was the ban on images necessarily understood by its early readers/ hearers as an unqualified prohibition against all concrete representative forms of deity.[69] Konikoff argues for a broader understanding of the effect of aniconism's growth upon Israel in antiquity: "Indeed, a study of the art of Ancient Israel establishes that the Second Commandment conveyed various meanings to the Jews at different times of their history, and this not only to those inclined to compromise and

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[68] Schmidt, "The Aniconic Tradition", 86
[69] Ibid., 96

assimilation, but also to those who adhered with loyalty to their spiritual heritage."[70]

Scholarly opinion agrees that nowhere in ancient Israelite history was the ban on images complete.

In looking to the uniqueness of the Israelite aniconic heritage, Mettinger writes: "The development from West Semitic aniconism to Israelite aniconism, from de facto tradition to a programmatic stance, was of paramount importance for the future history of Judaism".[71] Lewis agrees when he states that: "Only ancient Israel developed and sustained a theological programme against representing a deity iconographically".[72]

The nuances of studying the rise of aniconism and cover a vast range of possibilities, ranging from nomadic heritage, to the imageless cult, to a negative view of monarchy. A close study of Mettinger's powerful work considered the possibility that some degree of aniconism existed all along. Therefore to the question, How did aniconism emerge, one must add also, *when* did Israelite aniconism come to be unique?

The rise of aniconism is an important study when contemplating the artistic tradition in antiquity. Understanding that the Israelites' roots were grounded so heavily in aniconism, as well as understanding the influences that led to the distinct anti-image program, allows the beginnings of a picture of the society in which the potential artist lived.

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[70] Carmel Konikoff, *The Second Commandment and Its Interpretation in the Art of Ancient Israel* (Geneve Imprimerie du Journal de Geneve, 1973), 90
[71] Mettinger, "No Graven Images", 197
[72] Lewis, "Divine Images and Aniconism", 50

CHAPTER 5

ARCHAEOLOGY AND THE ANCIENT ARTIST

"In the final analysis, however, archaeology is truly valuable only when its artifactual materials lead us closer to the people who produced them and give us a glimpse of the function that these artifacts performed in the lives and thoughts of their possessors".[1] This quote is quite pertinent in the study of the artistic tradition of the Biblical age. Finding the artists that created the artifacts-- "people who produced them"-- is the ultimate goal of this thesis. Archaeology offers another tool with which to open the window into the world of the biblical artist.

The use of archaeology as a rubric with which to determine the ancient artist is quite helpful. Through recent—and not so recent—research, one can better understand the materials the artist had to work with. Comparative archaeology offers scholars different cultural and regional avenues with which to study a piece of work; often, archaeologists are able to discern the provenance of a style, the sharing of technique, and perhaps even discern how a material came to reside in an artists palette. However, it is important to note that much of the research has uncovered more information on the works rather than the creator.

While archaeology is a vital area of study, one must be attuned to its pitfalls. Archaeological research offers only a glimpse into the ancient world, not an entire view. Because of this, archaeological research cannot be embraced as 'the' answer. In the end, archaeology often uncovers as many questions as it answers.

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[1] Carol L Meyers, *The Tabernacle Menorah: A Synthetic Study of a Symbol From the Biblical Cult.* (Missoula, Montana: Scholars Press, for The American Schools of Oriental Research, 1976), 2

This chapter will explore materials used by the artists, as well as important symbols in biblical archaeology. First, a discussion of some of materials the artists used is pertinent. A discussion of materials will be helpful as they provide an understanding of the limitations and advancements of the media, the technology available, as well as demonstrating cross-cultural influences upon the artisan. The materials to be discussed, copper and bronze, gold, and ivory, each play an important role in the development of motifs and cultic symbolism.

It must be noted that the materials included in this chapter offer only a brief overview—artisans worked in a host of media, from stone, to plaster, to pottery, to ivory, to various metals. The discussion below will be limited to a joint discussion of copper and bronze, gold and ivory. Understanding the materials that the artists used can help define "the extent to which early Israelite technology was dependent on the surrounding cultures."[2]

Secondly, this chapter will provide a brief overview of three important symbols from early antiquity to late antiquity. The first symbol, the menorah, needs little introduction. A household object today, its roots can be found in early antiquity. The second symbol is the oft-misunderstood cherubim, or cherub. Popular culture of today associates the cherub with plump babies floating in the sky, but this is not their origin. The third symbol will simply be called 'vegetation', for want of a better title. Vegetation is very important in biblical times—palm fronds, trees, vines, fruit, and other vegetation are common motifs found in biblical art and architecture. This area of study is quite large. A brief overview of the importance of vegetation as symbol will be offered, as

well as its assumed relationship to the sacred tree. These three symbols offer good examples of the symbolism and art of antiquity, as well as showing artistic caliber and expectations.

Copper has been proven to be used extensively. A study by Benno Rothenberg, in the Aravah, showed that there were copper mines in the area that dated from the Chalcolithic period.[3] It has also been shown that the use of copper was consistent; a copper mine was found on the east side of the Aravah valley in a much later period.[4] Interestingly, there is no evidence for the use of the mines after the 12th century.[5] The use of copper, from the research, proves its widespread early application. There have been many discoveries of copper; one important discovery was made at Teleilat Ghassul, where axeheads and mace heads were found.[6]

A most amazing discovery was found in 1961 in Nahal Mishmar, a remote cave in the Judean Desert. Known as the "Cave of the Treasure", 463 copper objects were found, all wrapped in a mat.[7] "The copper objects were very well made and illustrated a sophisticated technology of casting metal, including the earliest appearance of 'lost wax' process.[8] "The knowledge and skill of the smiths are quite astonishing for the fourth millenium BCE".[9] The only contemporaneous coppersmithing area was found in the Beer-sheba region. The possibility has been raised that "the Nahal Mishmar objects were produced by professional metalsmiths living this area. . . the artisans highly specialized

[2] *Biblical Archaeology*, Shalom M. Paul and William G. Dever, eds., (Jerusalem: Keter Publishing House, 1973), 193

[3] Ibid.,194

[4] Ibid.,194

[5] Ibid.,195

[6] Mazar, Amihai, *Archaeology of the Land of the Bible: 10,000-586 BCE.* (New York: Doubleday, 1990),73

[7] Ibid., 73

[8] Ibid.,73

metal industry may have been a significant economic factor contributing to the wealth of the Chalcolithic settlement of the northern Negev".[10]

The copper finds from Nahal Mishmar objects are typically ritual objects, and are indicative of early art. One object depicts four ibex heads, next to an ibex head, with twisted horns—"an interesting combination of wild and domesticated animals".[11] It is possible to see the artists' desire for aesthetic pleasure; from the stylized violin-shaped stone figurines, to daily objects. One daily object, a mace head, depicts the "extent of stylization and wish to achieve artistic harmony".[12] The mace head has two opposing blades; between the blades, two ibex heads with a single body are portrayed.[13]

Figure 4. From Nahal Mishmar; a copper ritual object consisting of a mace head, and a double edged horned animal.

Gold has long been cherished as a precious object. Its malleability and beauty combined to make its use for cultic objects and jewelry quite popular. Gold is the most frequently mentioned metal in the Bible, leading biblical archaeologists to discover if its

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[9] Ibid.,75
[10] Ibid.,75
[11] Ibid.,81
[12] Ibid.,81
[13] Ibid., 81

predominance in the Bible is in balance with the evidence from antiquity.[14] One is

reminded that Bezalel, the noted artisan, is a worker of gold.

The Bible contains many different terms denoting gold, such as *paz* and *zahav*.

Another term, *zahav tahor,* or pure gold, is of great curiosity. The word *tahor* has been a

source of study for scholars: "This word exhibits a number of special connotations,

ranging from the notion of 'brightness' to the concept of ritual 'purity'.[15] An interesting

textual comparison reveals that while the Tabernacle uses *zahav tahor* (when discussing

the gold work), Kings, when speaking of the Temple, does not. Instead, the term *zahav*

sagur is used, also denoting a pure form of gold.[16] ". . . *Zahav sagur* is intimately

connected with Solomon's building projects, which are carried out with material and

technical assistance from the north (via Hiram of Tyre)".[17]

Also noted is the fact that much of the ancient obscure vocabulary "is firmly

rooted in ancient technology".[18] " Although the terms used to describe gold are not

nearly so varied as in the more technologically oriented societies of Egypt and

Mesopotamia, the Bible nonetheless preserves a variety of words for gold which can only

be seen as precise terms. . . .".[19]

While the exact meaning of such terms as *zahav tahor* and *zahav sagur* are

unclear, it is possible to understand, by comparing with other cultures, how the metal was

worked. Since no gold deposits in Israel have been found, it is clear that the metal was

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[14] *Biblical Archaeology,* 199
[15] Meyers, "The Tabernacle Menorah", 27
[16] I Kings 7:49-50;6:20-21;Meyer, *The Tabernacle Menorah,* 30
[17] Meyers, *The Tabernacle Menorah,* 30; The chronicler describes gold by a variety of terms. He uses also *zahav tov, zahav sagur, zahav tahor,* and *zahav mufaz*
[18] Meyers, 28
[19] Ibid., 28

imported from other regions, such as Egypt.[20] This simple fact teaches that trade and

importing was in place, making it probably that other regions, such as in Egypt, where

gold was mined extensively, and probably heavily influenced Israelite metal work.[21]

Multiple methods for working with gold have been discovered. One common

method was to melt gold in order to cast it into a solid figure. In another method, gold

was worked into thin sheets, and the gold applied to other objects as decorations, much

like gold leafing of today.[22] Gold overlay, or gold leafing, was said to be used in the

Tabernacle; finds in Egypt attest to the fact that this skill was practiced.[23] "Very often

the gold sheets were used to make gold wire or thread. This method is mentioned in the

Bible for use in the Tabernacle: 'And they did beat the gold into thin plates, and cut it

into threads to work it into the blue, and the purple, and in the scarlet, and in the fine

linen, the work of the skillful workmen'".[24]

The third method is simply to beat the gold into a desired form. Exodus 25:17-19

offers textual evidence of the use of this method, teaching that the cherubim and the gold

candelabrum of the Tabernacle were of "beaten gold".[25]

Understanding the way the gold was worked is an important insight into the

image of the artist. The artist, according to Dever, would use these three methods of

working the gold to create objects in four categories:

1. art objects, with or without practical use
2. jewelry
3. architectural decoration
4. cultic purposes[26]

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[20] *Biblical Archaeology*, 200
[21] Ibid., 200
[22] Ibid., 200
[23] Ibid., 204
[24] Ibid., 200; Exodus 39:3
[25] *Biblical Archaeology*, 200
[26] Ibid., 201

These four categories show the range of work that the artist could be called upon to create. From jewelry for a family, to an architectural installment, to a cultic object, all fell into the domain of the trained artisan.

For example, an unknown artisan created a cultic ram, which was found in Ur. The dating of the figure is most likely before 2500 BCE, an early piece.[27] This ram, about 20 inches high, was made with gold, shell, and lapis lazuli. It is believed that this ram is cultic because of the interesting position of the ram. The figure is found standing on its hind legs, with its head caught in the branches of a bush.[28] The gold ram recalls, according to Dever and Paul, "the biblical episode recounted in Genesis, where Abraham, who was preparing to sacrifice his son Isaac on the altar on Mount Mariah, was held back by a heavenly voice at the last minute."[29] While nothing is known about the artist who created the ram, painstaking craftsmanship and skill is exhibited.
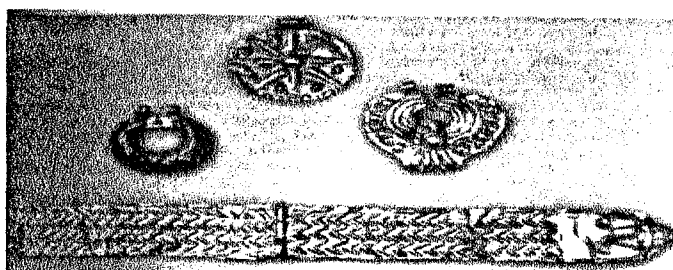
Figure 5. Three gold pendants and a gem from Tell el-Ajjul. Jewelry made by fine granulation, engraving, and repousse techniques.

Concerning the decorative purpose of gold, jewelry was found at Tell al-'Ajjul, which is southwest of Gaza.[30] The find includes earrings, signet rings, bracelets, pendants and crescents.[31] These finds, containing the most variety, date "from the early

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[27] Ibid., 201
[28] Ibid., 201
[29] Ibid., 201
[30] Ibid., 201
[31] Ibid., 203

part of the 2nd millenium, to about the 15th century BCE".[32] These early finds exhibit the craftsman's flexibility—such as the delicate beaten work that jewelry most likely requires.

Tracing the influences of Israelite art is quite fascinating. It has become clear that the Mycenaean culture exerted considerable cultural influence on the Near East during the Bronze period.[33] One interesting find at Mycenae, probably from the 16th century BCE, was of gold discs found in a woman's grave.[34] It has been surmised that these discs were golden sequins for a dress.[35] Comparing this find to the Bible results in a remarkable parallel with Saul, who is said to have clothed the women with golden ornaments.[36] What exactly the golden ornaments were was unclear; the discs found at Mycenae offer a clue towards the style. While the dating is problematic—500 years separate the two—the evidence at least proves that the style and possibility for such a garment was eminent.

While gold was cherished and used abundantly, ivory was a rare and precious commodity. "The impression gained from both the Bible and modern research is that the use of ivory was reserved for royalty and the aristocracy."[37] Interestingly, while ivory appears to be such a treasure, the biblical information is considerably less than what is found concerning gold. First mentioned in Kings, in conjunction with Solomon whose fleet brought back ivory with its other treasures.[38] The next mention of ivory is found concerning Ahab, who built a house of ivory, as is found in I Kings 22:39.

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[32] Ibid., 203
[33] Ibid., 203
[34] Ibid., 203
[35] Ibid., 203
[36] Ibid., 203
[37] Ibid., 204
[38] Ibid., 204

While biblical texts about ivory are scanty, ivory work has been found in abundance. It is clear, for example, that the Canaanites and the Phoenicians excelled at ivory work.[39] Ivory works mostly served as ornaments, mainly out of necessity because of the size of the raw material, which came from elephants, or more rarely, rhinoceroses.[40] The type of work was mainly small sculptures, carvings, or inlay.[41]
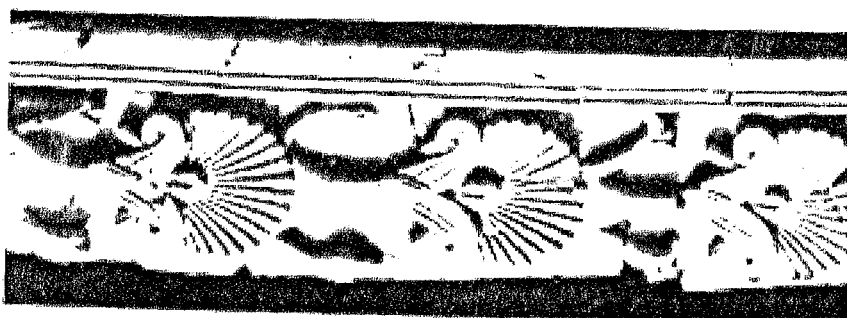

Figure 6. Ivory plaque from Ahab's palace at Samaria. It is decorated with palmettes.

Phoenicia and Canaan were not the only regions to use ivory extensively. There is evidence for ivory work in Egypt and Israel "as early as the Chalcolithic period, the craft flowered in the Late Bronze Age."[42] Despite the dearth of textual support, it is well attested that aside from a, that "well before the age of Solomon, ivory had become a medium for sophisticated art".[43] It is most likely that the Israelites learned to create beautiful ivory pieces from other cultures. The Israelite art was influenced by "Egyptian, Hittite and Mycenaean themes and forms were incorporated in what became the typical art of the region".[44] Once again, little is known concerning the artist as an individual; however, the art as a whole was greatly enhanced through cross-cultural contact.

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[39] Ibid., 204
[40] Ibid., 205
[41] Ibid., 205
[42] Ibid., 205
[43] Ibid., 205
[44] Ibid., 205

> "Barnett, one of the greatest authorities on ivories, states: 'The ivories of Ahab and the Phoenician art . . . can be seen to be intimately bound up with the early history of the Israelites. It was partly in reaction against the pagan symbolism of these works of art, related to the fertility cult of Astarte . . .that the prophets complained so bitterly. . . By studying these ivories the background of the Bible can be enlarged and illustrated and better understood."[45]

Many ivories of cherubim, i.e. mythological animal hybrid creatures, have been found at various excavations. As the material the Israelites embraced offer a window into their early world, so too do the motifs and symbols they embraced offer a glimpse of the Israelite's technological skills, and, importantly, their theology. The cherub presents an important case study when considering the interplay of material and motif in ancient Israel.

The cherubim, mentioned in conjunction with both the Tabernacle and the first Temple, are variously described as two winged and four winged creatures, as human and as animal. They were attested to quite often in the Bible, as in Genesis as guardians of the garden of Eden, and Ezekiel's parable about a cherub, referring to the King of Tyre. Theologically, I Samuel 4:4: "He who sitteth on the cherubim" offers insight as to the role of the cherubim: they serve as God's throne. Other texts also refer to the cherub as Gods' throne, such as I Sam 22:11, Ezekiel 10:20, and Psalm 18:11,which speak of God riding upon the flying cherubim. (The cherub as the throne of an invisible God had been mentioned Chapter 4 on aniconism as a precursor to the completely transcendent God.) Haran supports with this interpretation, citing II Kings 19:15, II Samuel 6:2, I Sam 4:4, and Isaiah 37:16 as further prooftexts for the cherub as the portrayal of God sitting on his

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[45] Ibid., 207

throne. "All of these confirm decisively that the cherubim were conceived as the supporters of God's seat, and hence that the ark was His throne".[46]

The etymology of the hebrew word for cherub, *keruv,* uncovers interesting cultural interplay. The word is most likely from Akkadian, closely resembling the word *karibu/kuribu,* "an intercessor who brings the prayers of humans to the gods".[47] The Near East contains many figures of winged creatures. For example, "two winged creatures flank the throne of Hiram, the king of Byblos, and winged bulls were placed at the entrance of Babylonian and Assyrian palaces and Temples".[48]

The cherubim are an important symbol from biblical texts to consider when looking at archaeology as a window into the ancient Israelite artists world. That the cherubim received so many contrasting descriptions in the Bible makes an archaeological search more challenging. Albright attests to this difficulty: "The actual appearance of the cherubim of the Old Testament was already forgotten by the time of Christ, and Josephus says that, 'no one can tell what they were like'.[49] Not having an exact picture of the biblical cherub creates difficulty when trying to uphold its biblical existence with archaeological research. Nonetheless, archaeologists and scholars alike have attempted to identify the nature of the cherub through archaeological research and historical analysis. The results of these careful studies show, that, "if, therefore, we study all known representations of animals and hybrid creatures, partly animal, we find one which is more common than any other winged creature, so much so that its identity is certain. . .

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[46] Menachem Haran, " The Ark and the Cherubim: Their symbolic significance in Biblical Ritual" Israel Exploration Journal, IX, no 1,1959 & IEJ IX no 2 (1959), 31
[47] SH.M.P, "Cherubim", in *Encyclopedia Judaica,* vol 5
[48] Ibid., 399
[49] W. F. Albright, " What Were the Cherubim?" in *The Biblical Archaeologist Reader, I.* G. Ernest Wright and David Noel Freedman, eds.(Garden City, New York: Anchor Books, Doubleday Inc.,196), 95

that is the winged sphinx or winged lion with human head."[50]The affinity of the biblical

cherubim to the sphinx was posed after careful study of the art of surrounding areas. In

Egypt, the wingless sphinx and griffin were popular motifs, while in Babylonia and

Assyria, the winged bull with the human head was most common. The overarching motif

of Syria and Palestine was the winged sphinx.[51]

It is clear that the cherubim represented a metaphysical, abstract form of

connection to the deity. They had both animal and human parts, and acted on behalf of

the deity. One find, in the Bible Lands Museum, represents a likely cherub. It is carved

ivory, about 5.5 inches high.[52] It probably comes from Arslan-Tash, in Syria. This ivory

is comprised of "a human face, the wings of an eagle, the forepart of a lion, and the hind-

part of an ox".[53] The face is human and was created in the Egyptian style, with profile.

The fact that this ivory work shows not only extraordinary craftsmanship, but also

affinity with biblical descriptions of the cherubim, makes it a rare find indeed.

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[50] Ibid., 95
[51] Ibid., 96
[52] Elie Borowski, " Cherubim: God's Throne?" Biblical Archaeology Review 21-22 (1995-1996),38
[53] Ibid., 38

Figure 7: Picture of Cherub from Bible Lands Museuem.

Our third symbol is the menorah. Today it is pictured as either a seven-branched candelabra, or, often, as the nine branched candelabrum used for Chanukah. These conceptions must be set aside when considering the ancient menorah, as its original appearance did not at all resemble contemporary images.

There are different menorahs described in the Bible, from the menorah in the Tabernacle, to the First Temple, to the Second Temple. The archaeological roots of the menorah reveals a gradual development into the form and style so abundant today. This section will consider the development of the menorah from early antiquity, attempting to trace briefly its development into its seven-branched form.

Trying to reconstruct early menorot is quite difficult task, given the differing biblical descriptions and archaeological data. "If we tried to construct a real lampstand from the description of the exegetes, we would end up with a monstrosity such as the eye hath never seen in the Near East".[54]

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[54] Robert North, "Zechariah's Seven-Spouted Lampstand" Biblica 51 (1970), 188

Menorah is best translated from the Hebrew as "lampstand". The word menorah most likely is derived from *ner*, meaning to flame, or light. "Light is a deliberately vague term which like *ner* can signify either the flame itself, or the flame bearing vessel. . . ."[55] It is assumed, from the citations concerning the menorah in various places in the Bible, that the menorah is built with a freestanding column and a curving feature at the top.[56]

The Early Dynastic through the neo-Sumerian periods reveal a cylindrical object similar to the column described above. Galling, the noted scholar, titles this the 'vase altar'.[57] "This form, the high cylindrical vase with narrowed central portion, is by far the most prevalent cultic apparatus of this long era."[58] In Assyrian times, the high stand "is the most common form of Assyrian offering table".[59]

In Egypt, too, stands were excavated. What was found was a slender stand with flared lower portion, which was most likely used for bread offerings.[60] This basic form was used throughout the First Intermediate Period into the Middle Kingdom.[61] It is almost certain that this stand was cultic; it was often found with a bowl, or a platter for offerings on top. In later times, the bread offering plate developed into an offering plate for various foods.[62] In the New Kingdom, the stand becomes much taller, used for libation instead of food offerings. The libation stands show further affinity to the taller, slender stand that was likely used with the menorah. Another significant change is that the platter begins to adopt a slightly convex shape.[63]

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[55] Ibid., 183
[56] Ibid., 184
[57] Meyer, *The Tabernacle Menorah*, 61
[58] Ibid., 61
[59] Ibid., 64
[60] Ibid., 66
[61] Ibid., 66
[62] Meyer, *The Tabernacle Menorah*, 66
[63] Ibid., 67

Figure 8. Early lampstand, with rounded top.

Syro-Palestine, a region neighboring an encompassing the Israelites, is also important to

consider when researching the origins of the menorah. The predominant shape of the

stand found in this region is of a "cylindrical shaft flaring somewhat at the bottom and

again at the top, either as an attached bowl or as a receptacle for such. This shape

appears already in the Chalcolithic Period and continues relatively unchanged at least

until the end of the Iron Age, in the 6th century, when tripodal bonze or iron stands

predominate."[64] All of the stands were made of pottery, so they are often more squat, as

it is hard to make a slender stand of pottery. [65] The ornamentation found was a ring

molding. Interestingly, once in a while a stand is found with "downward-turned

leaves".[66] The floral motif occasionally found in Syro-Palestine stands can be traced to

the Aegean. "The cylindrically-shafted pedestal, from Minoan to Punic times, flares at

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[64] Ibid., 76
[65] Ibid., 76
[66] Ibid., 76

the bottom and is decorated by a floral capital or by a series of such "capitals' in petal form or as stylized projections".[67]

The stands studied above clarify that "the basic shape of a stand used for any of a variety of purposes in the ancient Near East is one which is quite consistent with the Exodus descriptions".[68] Meyer purports that the hebrew word *menorah* denotes not the entire lampstand, but at some level only the capital or the main part of the stand. "The validity of this impression becomes apparent with the realization that the *urform* for any lampstand would indeed be a stand that is simple in shape and outline, regardless of its decoration".[69] A specific function should not be assigned to the stands; functional fluidity is necessary when looking for the origins of the menorah.[70]

The secondary feature is the "bowl" shape, eventually the receptacle for the wicks and oil. The bowl shape represents the earliest form of the development of the menorah. On the top of the shaft, which flares at the bottom, rested a bowl. The only decoration on the bowl was a ring, or multiple rings. The basin almost always contained fire.[71] The development of the bowl shape is visible throughout Near Eastern archaeology. ". . . a basic form was established in the Early Dynastic period and continued relatively unchanged far into the first millenium".[72]

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[67] Ibid., 80
[68] Ibid., 81
[69] Ibid., 81
[70] Ibid., 77
[71] Ibid., 65
[72] Ibid., 65
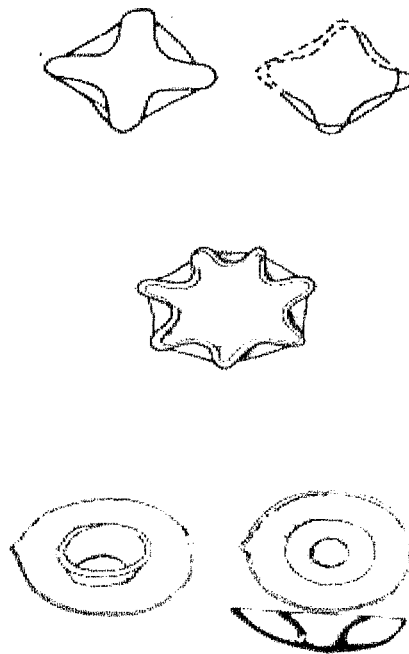
Figure 9. Images of early lamps, with 1, 4, and 7 pinches in the saucer.

It is widely believed that the *ner* is a saucer, with a pinch in the lip, which gradually became deeper, and eventually turned into a tube or a spout (more in line with our modern vision of the menorah).[73] They were more commonly found in a bowl-like form, or saucer, with up to seven pinches in the lip capable of holding the light, the *ner*.[74] An archaeological example of the "seven pinch saucer lip" was found at Taanach.[75] This piece is made of a single piece, and the cup is a shallow saucer. (North, 192) A similar find was excavated in 1969 at Dan.[76] The number seven is important for the biblical menorah. In fact, early lamps have one, two, or four spouts. These early lamps are not usually labeled as menorahs, but the similarity of shape and construction align them as direct relations to the menorah.

The word *kanah* is important to consider when studying the Tabernacle menorah, as well as the development of the menorah into its seven-branched form. According to

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[73] North, "Zechariah's Seven Spouted Lampstand", 188
[74] Ibid., 185
[75] Ibid., 190
[76] Ibid., 191

Meyers, it "generally refers to the tall, slender . . . Persian reed".[77] The reed was tall and very strong, and was used for many practical purposes. The word *kanah* is usually associated with the branches of the menorah.[78] "The choice of *kanah* to identify the branches of the menorah is quite reasonable. It certainly reflects a reed-like shape; it may even reflect a non-metallic prototype, made of actual reeds, which existed as a model in the mind of its designer."[79]

The research into the six branches of the menorah has long led researchers to the tree. The menorah is considered to be a stylized form of a tree. Picturing a simple drawing of a tree is not impossible when looking at a seven-branched form of a menorah. It is even more likely to associate the tree with the menorah when considering the sacred status of the tree- and all vegetation, in antiquity.

Vegetation is associated with the "generative power of the divinity".[80] Trees, flowers, and other vegetal life, are associated with restorative power and everlasting life. In fact, many cults associated the tree with their deity.[81] "The tree of life in the sense of immortal life becomes an inseparable aspect of the regenerative principle contained in plant life".[82] Even so, the tree was most often symbolic of the deity, not equated with it.

The development of the menorah's stem, and the six branches is inherently tied up with the power of the arboreal symbol. Egyptian artists treated plant life in an interesting way: they recreated trees, and other vegetal motifs in stonework, making them an enduring part of the cultic installation.[83] "A column became a tree or a plant rendered

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[77] Meyers, *The Tabernacle Menorah*, 19
[78] Ibid., 19
[79] Ibid., 20
[80] Ibid., 96
[81] Ibid., 96
[82] Ibid., 96
[83] Ibid., 110

eternal".[84] Syro-Palestine also offers insight into the development of the seven branched menorah as can be seen on seals and scarabs from the Hyksos period, which used plant designs in conjunction with animals.[85] According to Meyers,"It cannot be taken lightly, therefore, that whenever the local population undertook to produce depictive art of its own—albeit under influence of foreign cultural contacts—the motif that dominates, whether on seals, scarabs, or ceramics, is that of fructifying plant life".[86]

Figure 10. Drawing on a wall depicting a stylized tree.

The sacred tree provided a dominant motif for all the major cultures in the Near East.[87] "The basic stylized, branched form that recurs time and again contains within itself the possibility for representing a whole continuum of botanical species, from trees to floral forms, from branches to stalks of grain".[88] In other words, Meyer asserts that the connection between trees and the six-branched menorah is indelible.

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[84] Ibid., 110
[85] Ibid., 113
[86] Ibid., 115
[87] Ibid., 119
[88] Ibid., 120
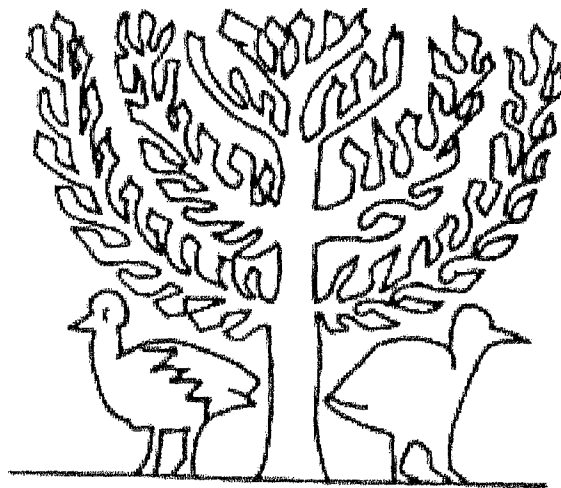
Figure 11 Stylized seven branched tree "menorah" with birds.

In Mesopotamian ritual art, the occurrence of a light motif in conjunction with the tree motif is potentially significant. It shows, perhaps for the first time, the light in combination with the six branches. Mesopotamian artwork also used the seven-fold motif. "The biblical combination of tree form with actual lamps, ie, the tabernacle menorah, must be seen against this background of continued association of plant life and celestial light."[89]

The menorah, according to many scholars and archaeologists, was adapted and borrowed from many other cultures. The bowl-shape and the stand eventually developed into the seven branched menorah of today, heavily influenced by the symbol of the tree.

The connection between the cultic symbol of the stand, combined with the celestial ties to light and the connection with the sacred power of nature, all combine to reveal a menorah enveloped in layers of meaning. Eventually, the lampstand comes to

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[89] Ibid., 121

serve as a cultic architetonic symbol in both temples, and continues to have a place of honor in contemporary Judaism.

In conclusion, the menorah, the cherubim, and vegetation served as important symbols throughout the Near Eastern world, from early antiquity forward; " . . . the migration of symbols from one culture to the next rarely is accompanied by the myth that originally surround it".[90] This means that the cherub-form ,the lampstand, and the tree, as they developed architectonically, eventually adopted their own cultic meaning for the Israelites. As a student of Goodenough, Meyer adopts his view of the migration of symbols. Goodenough believed that both 'dead' symbols—symbols without meaning, and 'alive' symbols—symbols embedded with meaning-- were adapted into other communities. "The new religion will give explanations of the symbol, precise verbalizations in the vocabulary of its own liberal thinking".[91]

These symbols, as well as a the brief overview of the materials used by early artisans, show that in order to understand the artist of antiquity, one must consider the larger region, as well as the development over time. Cultural cross-over and sharing influenced not only material, but general style, and even the symbols adopted by the Israelites.

This chapter begins to uncover the ancient artist as a skilled artisan. The artifacts, and their materials, open the window to the ancient artist—they portray an artist who was capable of producing aesthetically pleasing works for all walks of life, from decoration to cultic object, to daily implements.

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[90] Ibid., 133

[91] Goodenough, Erwin R. *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period* abridged edition. (Princeton: Bollingen Series, Princeton University Press,1988), 49

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it is important to understand that art as we understand it did not exist in antiquity. As the ancients loved beauty, so too do we. But they did not have the concept of 'art for art's sake"; rather most of their art served a purpose: to be worn, used for cultic purposes, used for cooking or storing, to communicate a message, or to denote power. The functionality of their art begs for the creator to be called "artisan" rather than artist. We do not know the artisan's names, nor can we imagine their day to day lives, but we do, hopefully, through this thesis, have the beginnings of their image.

The ancient Israelite artisan never created an image of God, although may have erected *masseboth* to honor God. Studying the rise of aniconism showed how the Israelites were both unique and ordinary among the ancients. The Israelites joined others in erecting standing stones, as was shown in Mettinger's comparative study. However, their uniqueness appears as the second commandment gained importance, and all image making was discouraged. It is possible that the second commandment grew out of the influences of aniconism, as well as internal influences as Jerusalem became the ritual center.

The ancient artisan created beautiful works of ivory and gold, of pottery and metal, with which to beautify their day to day existence—despite--and perhaps because of-- the second commandment. The artisan that lived during rabbinic times most likely lived within the boundaries proscribed by the rabbis, yet managing to create. While it is clear that the second commandment held significant status in ancient Jewish tradition, it

is also clear that artisans did produce works of beauty, as attested through archaeological studies.

Bezalel, Oholiab and Hiram, when juxtaposed against the rabbinic views of the second commandment, reveals an interesting pattern. As the rabbis worked to find ways to enforce the second commandment in their society, so too did they discourage an image of these three characters as artists. Art, for the rabbis, was a dangerous venture which could lead to assimilation and *avodah zarah*. As these were to be avoided, the rabbis downplayed their artistic talents, while emphasizing Bezalel, Oholiab, and Hiram's leadership skills and wisdom.

This thesis used many different genres of study to attempt to glimpse an image of the ancient artist. While it is hard to bring together a multi-faceted study, each rubric opened another window into the image of the ancient artist. Through the Bible, it was possible to see how the rabbis imagined Bezalel, Oholiab, and HiramThrough archaeology and historiography, a larger perspective of ancient life was obtained. Insights into materials, technology, and actual artifacts helped to garner an idea of the capabilities of the ancient artisan. A study of aniconism gave a clearer understanding of the development of the second commandment. The second commandment has had great influence on Jewish art; a better understanding of its' effect in ancient life was important to understanding the social situation of the Jewish artisan.

In the end, this study represents initial research into a fascinating and important study of the ancient artisan.

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APPENDIX A

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

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