

Texts and Interpretation

The essays in this section deal with interpretations of a wide range of texts ranging from the Bible to modern theology. We begin with **Carl S. Ehrlich**'s contextualizations of the meanings of the Second Commandment. The Jewish, as opposed to Christian, division of the commandments "conveys the message that worshipping any other being or deity, other than the God who saved Israel from Egyptian slavery, is equivalent to idolatry." This, Ehrlich reminds us, is not equivalent to a uniform prohibition on images. There was a rich Jewish iconography until the cultic reforms of Hezekiah in the late 8th century B.C.E. Only during times understood by Jews as idolatrous was there a distancing from iconographic representations. In the absence of perceived religious threat, interpretations of the Second Commandment tended to be more liberal.

By reading the issue of iconographic display within its historico-religious contexts, Ehrlich shows that it was accommodation to Islam, "with its strict cultic aniconic tradition," that occluded relative freedom of artistic expression. He then surveys a number of interpretations of the prohibition on images. In the traditional Jewish view, God acts in history, not as a being in human form. In the contemporary world, the Second Commandment can be understood as a call "to resist the apotheosis of the transient."

Ruth Birnbaum probes a different tension within Jewish interpretive history, the tension between the synthesizers of religion and philosophy and the devout believers who felt no such synthetic need. In the twelfth century work of Abraham ibn Daud, Neoplatonism gives way to Aristotelianism, which now derives God from the principle of motion, which demands a prime mover. Daud anticipates Maimonides, for whom "the truth of the rational virtues is prior and anterior to the truth of tradition." Birnbaum explores the relations of reason, religion and revelation in Maimonides's thought. "With the dissemination of the *Guide of the Perplexed*," she writes, "the rational spirit was firmly entrenched in Judaism." In opening Judaism to rationalist discourse, and arguing through and with Aristotle, however, the new philosophy challenged the "sacred beliefs of the devout masses who cherished their naive faith and resisted the deanthropomorphization and rationalization of the Bible."

Birnbaum then considers the critique of Maimonides by Levi ben Gerson (Gersonides), who carried the rational explication of religious questions further than his precursor while remaining Aristotelian in outlook. Man's free will is understood to derive from his faculty of reason. Prophecy is understood as influenced by the Active Intellect. Reason distances God from direct relation to man; this is opposed to Maimonides' faith in the power of miracles to bring God closer to man.

Finally, in a reaction to these philosophic developments, Hasdai Crescas sought to refute Maimonides and to restore religious dogma and the power of love over the force of intellect. The Aristotelian moment had "passed its zenith," and philosophy "independent of

the problems of religion,” merely “flourished as an academic discipline.”

With **Judith Romney Wegner**’s essay we move from the interaction of religion and philosophy to the “cross-fertilization” of Jewish and Arab thinkers. Wegner adopts an interdisciplinary and comparative perspective to explore ways in which Arab scholars strove to avoid conceding that the source of Islamic terms was an extraneous culture. During the eighth century C.E. classical Islam declared that the Qur’an was purely Arabic, despite evidence of the influence of other languages. Wegner provides numerous examples, including “qur’anic incorporation of a midrashic embellishment to a biblical text. Her illustrations underscore how Jacob Lassner demonstrated that borrowings are “consistent with the perceived needs of those who borrow.”

Wegner ends her essay with a brief comment on “the monumental work of qur’anic exegesis known as Tabaris Tafsir, and a methodological caution as to who borrowed from whom and when. Cross-cultural influence can work both ways. Further research is needed into the history of the “intertwined worlds” of Jewish and Islamic exegesis.

In the next essay, **Judith Baskin** focuses on the rules governing ritual immersion within medieval Ashkenazic culture. Baskin explores “the extent to which [medieval rabbis] have written their own piety on the bodies of their wives.” In other words, the rules governing ritual immersion, written by men, serve primarily to guarantee men’s purity by regulating the timely obedience of women in their visits to the mikveh. These rules are meant to reconcile purity and passion, and women need to observe timely immersion to protect men both from sin and from their own fantasies of uncontrolled women’s sexuality.

The rules, however, can cut both ways. Women can exhibit certain powers by refusing ritual immersion in order, for example, to extricate themselves from an untenable marriage. Alternatively, the claim of the wife’s violations could also support a husband’s desire to avoid returning his wife’s ketubah payment. Baskin points to the tensions revealed in the use of these rules, and reminds us that, although piety was “gendered as male,” between the eleventh and thirteenth centuries, women in Askenaz enjoyed high status and economic importance.

Philip Cohen concludes this section with an essay on the theology of David Einhorn (1809-1879), one of the developers of the Reform Movement. Einhorn’s thought is directed against what he called “paganism” in European philosophy, and which he saw as taking two forms, “idealism” and “pantheism.” “Idealism” is a monotheism that places God totally out of the world, while “pantheism” locates God totally in the world. For Einhorn, a synthesis was required, “where real and ideal meet.” He sought this synthesis in a law of “centralization”, where opposites are “mutually relative” and neither overwhelms the other. “Centralization” is “the mutuality which exists between each of the contrasting dyads.”

Einhorn's "centralization" is derived from Schelling's "identity principle," in which "all polar opposites find their unity in the absolute, in what Schelling eventually calls God." Einhorn finds in "centralization" the unification and balance that is the essence of Mosaism. This is his version of Maimonides' "Golden Mean," the moral dimension of which differentiates Judaism from its philosophical sources.

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