"Make yourself no graven image": The Second Commandment and Judaism*

Carl S. Ehrlich, York University

I entered the University of Massachusetts at Amherst in 1972, the same year that the Judaic Studies Program was introduced. Following my first trip to Israel a couple of years later and desiring to compensate for my own perceived lack of Jewish knowledge, I decided to major in Judaic Studies. Ultimately, I was to become one of the first four-year graduates of the Program. Although my intention had been to go to law school after receiving my BA, at the beginning of my senior year my undergraduate advisor, Dr. Charles D. Isbell, managed to convince me to forego law school and continue my studies of Judaism at the graduate level. It is a decision that I have rarely regretted. In gratitude for providing me with direction for my studies and career, I would like to dedicate this essay to Dr. Isbell, who first introduced me to the study of the Bible and the ancient Near East.

* * * * * * * * * * * *

In their systematization of the Pentateuchal commandments, the ancient rabbis deduced that there were 613 divine laws in the Torah. According to the standard Hebrew system of numeration, they are referred to as the *taryag mitsvot*, the "613 commandments." These are further subdivided into a collection of 248 negative commandments, which can be subsumed under the rubric of "thou shalt not," and into a collection of 365 positive commandments, which fall into the "thou shalt" pattern. Since, according to the tenets of traditional Jewish biblical interpretation, nothing in the Torah is accidental, these numbers have been imbued with a deeper meaning. As should be readily apparent in the case of the latter, the number 365 is understood as a reference to the solar year, in spite of the fact that a modified lunar calendar of unequal year lengths is operative in Judaism. In the case of the former, the rabbis understood the number 248 as a reference to the number of bones in the human body.[1] In this manner, the commandments are understood to distribute themselves

* Abbreviations used in this essay include: b. (before tractates from the Babylonian Talmud); y. (before tractates from the Jerusalem Talmud). Unless otherwise noted, biblical quotations are taken from *Tanakh: A New Translation of the Holy Scriptures According to the Traditional Hebrew Text* (Philadelphia – New York – Jerusalem: Jewish Publication Society, 1985). For the most part, transcriptions from the Hebrew follow the norms of the Society of Biblical Literature's "General-Purpose Style." See Patrick H. Alexander et al., eds., *The SBL Handbook of Style for Ancient Near Eastern, Biblical, and Early Christian Studies* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999). This essay was originally held as a lecture at the Karl-Rahner-Akademie in Cologne, Germany, in April 1996. It was subsequently published as "'Du sollst dir kein Gottesbildnis machen.' Das zweite Wort vom Sinai im Rahmen der jüdischen Auslegung des Dekalogs," pp. 40-55 in: Albrecht Grözinger and Johannes von Lüpke, eds., *Im Anfang war das Wort: Interdisziplinäre theologische Perspektiven* (Veröffentlichungen der Kirchlichen Hochschule Wuppertal, Neue Folge 1; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag/Wuppertal: Foedus Verlag, 1998). I am grateful to the editors of that volume for permission to translate and revise this essay for publication here.

symbolically over the year, in other words they are to be omnipresent throughout one's life, and they are to be internalized as the essence of Jewish existence.

Out of this collection of 613 commandments, ten have been the object of special attention. These Ten Commandments, however, have not been referred to as such in Jewish sources. Rather, they are the Ten Words, *'aseret haddevarim* (Exod 34:28) or *'aseret haddibberot*, which God spoke to Israel at Mount Sinai. According to some commentators, these ten words or Decalogue include the substance of all remaining 603 commandments. Their centrality as a symbol for all the commandments that characterize the covenant between God and Israel is brought to the fore through their iconographic importance in Judaism. Over the course of the centuries, the custom of placing a Torah shrine in or against the wall of the synagogue facing Jerusalem has developed. These Torah "arks," whose presence indicates the direction of prayer, contain the oftentimes richly decorated Torah scrolls of the community. In most cases, these Torah shrines are decorated with representations of the two tablets upon which the Ten Commandments were inscribed, the most common form of which are squared at the bottom and rounded at the top. Generally, these artistic representations include either the first ten letters of the Hebrew alphabet or the first words of the Ten Commandments. In contrast to common Christian depictions of the Decalogue, in which there are two tablets with an unequal distribution of commandments, synagogal representations of these commandments divide them into two equal collections of five on each tablet.[2] In this manner, these artistic representations of the Ten Commandments symbolize the totality of the Torah and its commandments. Similar artistic depictions of the Decalogue often adorn the outer walls of synagogues. After the Magen David, the Star of David, the Ten Commandments are arguably the most recognizable Jewish symbol.[3]

The importance of the Ten Commandments is also reflected in Jewish liturgy. They are read aloud three times during the course of the synagogal year. The first two times are during the normal weekly readings from the Torah, when the cycle of readings reaches Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5. The third time is on the holiday of Shavuot or Pentecost, which commemorates the giving of the commandments on Mount Sinai seven weeks after Passover and the Exodus from Egypt. Since the tradition claims ignorance concerning the exact date of the revelation on Mount Sinai, one can deduce that the commandments are not time-bound, but eternally relevant.[4] In order to accentuate the significance of the Decalogue, it is customary among Ashkenazi Jews to stand when they are read.[5] Sephardi Jews, on the other hand, remain seated when the Ten Commandments are read, in this manner treating them as no more significant than the other 603 commandments.

The fact that the Ten Commandments exist in two versions (Exod 20:2-14 and Deut 5:6-18), which differ slightly from one another, has been understood in a traditional context as evidence of their divine origin.[6] As the beloved and mystical Sabbath song *Lekha Dodi* argues in reference to the fourth or Sabbath commandment:

> *shamor vezakhor bedibbur ekhad*
> *hishmiyanu 'el hamme'ukhad*
> "Observe" (Deut 5:12) and "remember" (Exod 20:8) [the Sabbath] in one utterance// did the one God let us hear.

In this manner Jewish tradition has explained the difference between the two versions of this commandment in Exodus and Deuteronomy as attempts to convey in human language the multivalence and richness of divine speech.[7]

It is striking that the Ten Commandments appear neither in the daily nor in the weekly liturgy, in spite of their great theological importance. The recitation of the Decalogue did belong to the daily routine of the Second Temple. However, the rabbis outlawed its daily recitation outside of the Temple in order to counter the arguments of "sectarians" (*minim*)[8] that only the Ten Commandments were of divine origin, or perhaps also to demonstrate that all parts of the Torah were of equal importance.[9] Rabbi Levi claimed that the Decalogue is not recited on a daily basis because that would be redundant. According to him, all of the Ten Commandments are contained in the *Shema*-Prayer (Deut 6:4), the central Jewish declaration of faith. In the case under consideration, the essence of the Second Commandment and its prohibition of the worship of other gods, would be conveyed by the Shema's declaration that God is one.[10]

Among the Ten Commandments, the first two assume a special place within Judaism. When one reads the Decalogue, it is evident that the first two speak of God in the first person, while the remainder do so in the third person. One attempt to account for this divergence is aided by recourse to *gematriyah*, Jewish numerology. This mystical method bases itself on the investigation of the numerical worth of words and phrases found in textual sources. Before the invention and diffusion of Arabic numerals, the Jews developed a system of marking numbers by assigning numerical values to the letters of the alphabet. In traditional contexts, this is still the system employed to mark, e.g., years, chapters of the Bible, and pages of books. The first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, *'alef*, represents one, the second letter, *bet*, is two, and so on throughout the twenty-two letters of the alphabet. The word Torah, consisting of the letters *tav* (400), *vav* (6), *resh* (200), and *heh* (5), has a numerical value of 611, two less than the total number of commandments in the Torah according to the rabbis. Why, they asked, should two commandments be missing from the word Torah? They deduced an answer from the observation that of all the commandments in the Torah only two, namely the first two of the Decalogue, were given directly by God to Israel. The rest were transmitted from God to Israel through the mediation of Moses. Only in the case of the first two commandments was all Israel privy to God's direct revelation and spoken word.[11]

But, what is the Second Commandment? And what does it say?

It should come as no surprise that Judaism and Christianity differ in their enumeration and demarcation of the individual commandments. Even amongst themselves there are differences of opinion in this regard.[12] As far as I am informed, the verse "You

shall have no other gods besides Me" (Exod 20:3) is not part of the Second Commandment in any of the Christian traditions. On the contrary, this verse is generally read in conjunction with "I the LORD am your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage" (Exod 20:2). According to this logical interpretation, the verse just cited serves as the introduction to the Decalogue, which then truly begins with the prohibition of worshiping other gods.

This understanding is also reflected in a number of Jewish sources. Both Flavius Josephus, the famous first century C.E. Jewish historian, and his about-a-generation older contemporary, the philosopher Philo of Alexandria, understood the division of the commandments in this manner.[13] *Sifre Bemidbar*, a collection of *midrashim* or homiletic tales to the Book of Numbers, reflects a similar understanding.[14] More recently, leading Jewish biblical scholars such as Moshe Greenberg, Jeffrey Tigay and Moshe Weinfeld have come to a similar conclusion using historical, form-critical, and comparative methodologies.[15]

Nonetheless, a different division of the commandments has become normative in Judaism. According to this understanding, the divine declaration "I the LORD am your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, the house of bondage" (Exod 20:2) stands alone as the First Commandment. "You shall have no other gods besides Me" (Exod 20:3) serves as the introduction to the Second Commandment, which continues with the prohibition of idolatry in vv. 4-6. This is the division that has established itself in the Jewish tradition and is reflected on the tablets of the covenant in Jewish art. These two passages are not, therefore, to be read following each other, but in conjunction with each other. Hence, they form one unit in Jewish tradition. The fact that they are not to be read individually is extremely important in determining their interpretative history within Judaism. The prohibition of worshiping foreign gods is read as part and parcel of the prohibition of idolatry. This juxtaposition thus conveys the message that worshiping any other being or deity, other than the God who saved Israel from Egyptian slavery, is equivalent to idolatry.

Let us now examine how the Second Commandment is interpreted within Judaism, using as the basis of discussion the text of the commandments as they appear in Exodus 20 in the hebraicizing translation of Everett Fox:[16]

> (3) "You are not to have
> any other gods
> before my presence.
> (4) You are not to make yourself a carved-image
> or any figure
> that is in the heavens above, that is on the earth beneath, that is in the waters
> beneath the Earth;
> (5) you are not to bow down to them,
> you are not to serve them,
> for I, YHWH your God,
> am a jealous God,
> calling-to-account the iniquity of the fathers upon the sons, to the third and fourth
> (generation)

of those that hate me,
(6) but showing loyalty to the thousandth
of those that love me,
of those that keep my commandments."

"You are not to have any other gods before my presence."

As many commentators have pointed out, in the Hebrew version of this commandment the verb appears in the singular, while its subject is a plural form. The word that is translated here as "gods" is the Hebrew word *'elohim*, a plural form of the noun *'el* or *'eloah* ("god"), which, however, often appears as a plural of majesty for the singular God. Hence, *'elohim* can be used either as a singular noun referring to "God" or as a designation for "gods" in the plural, even though there are alternate forms for both the singular and the plural. Although it is quite within the realm of the possible in biblical Hebrew syntax for a singular verb to be followed by a subject in the plural,[17] traditional Jewish biblical commentators asked why this type of grammatical construction should appear in this of all cases. One of the basic hermeneutic principles of Jewish biblical interpretation is that no letter, no word, no form in the Torah appears coincidentally. There must be a deeper meaning behind the simple morphology of the text. In the case of the text under discussion, the mixing of singular and plural in this verse leads to the conclusion that even the worship of just *one* other god leads to polytheism,[18] or that both the worship of *one* other god as well as that of *many* other gods is forbidden.[19] The text could also be claiming that the worship of one other entity *as* God or *in place of* God is strictly prohibited.

The *Mekilta*, a collection of midrashim to Exodus, poses the question why the text speaks of "other gods," when, as the prophet Isaiah designated them, they were "not gods" (Isa 37:19).[20] The answer to this apparent contradiction in the text is found by taking the reference to "other gods" not as an acknowledgment of the existence of other gods, but as a reference to those whom others view as gods.[21]

The meaning of the phrase that Fox has translated as "before my presence" (*'al-panay*) is also an object of contention. It is often understood in the sense of "except for" or "besides me."[22] The famous German Protestant theologian, Martin Noth, claimed that *'al-panay*, which he translated as "before me," had a cultic meaning in this passage.[23] According to Noth, only God could be worshiped in the context of the Israelite cult, and since God could only be worshiped within the framework of the cult, the worship of other deities was *de facto* excluded. The medieval Jewish commentators Abraham ibn-Ezra and Moshe ben Nachman (aka Ramban or Nachmanides) also understood *'al-panay* in a geographical sense. In distinction to Noth, who limited the geographical range of "before my presence" to the cult, ibn-Ezra and Nachmanides understood *'al-panay* as meaning anywhere in the world, since God is omnipresent. The *Mekilta*, which is followed in this instance by Rabbi Shelomo ben Yitshaq (aka Rashi), the most famous of the medieval commentators, interpreted "before my presence" in a temporal sense, i.e., "as long as God exists," in other words "for ever and ever."[24]

"You are not to make yourself a carved-image or any figure that is in the heavens above, that is on the earth beneath, that is in the waters beneath the Earth"

It has long been a widespread platitude that Judaism – on account of this verse – has always been an aniconic religion. For this reason, many have argued by extension over the course of the centuries that Jews have no artistic aptitude. Indeed, even the great Jewish philosopher of religion, Martin Buber, claimed that the ancient Jews were more "ear people" than "eye people."[25] Yet, one can raise the question how this prohibition on images was indeed understood within the Jewish community over the course of time.

The first answers to this question are provided by a number of biblical passages, of which I would like to mention the following few:[26]

According to the Hebrew Bible, Moses the Lawgiver should have been more aware than anyone else of the dangers inherent in idolatry. Let us not forget how strong his reaction to the sin of the Golden Calf was (Exod 32).[27] Nevertheless, he had a bronze serpent, called Nehushtan, made at God's command as a remedy for snakebite (Num 21:6-9). It was only the radical reformer, Hezekiah, who had the serpent destroyed toward the end of the eighth century B.C.E. because of its idolatrous implications (2 Kgs 18:4).

Indeed, the Torah presents artistic ability as a divine gift. In Exodus 31 Bezalel, after whom the famous Israeli art institute is named, was "endowed … with a divine spirit of skill, ability, and knowledge in every kind of craft" (v. 3) as he set out to make the implements for the Tent of Meeting, including the Ark of the Covenant. How ironic it must seem to the biblical reader to discover that Solomon was forced to call upon the services of a Phoenician artisan when he began to build and decorate his temple, since there were no qualified candidates among the Israelites (1 Kgs 7:13-14).

As a modern critical scholar, I would not want to claim that these biblical accounts are reflective of *historical* reality. Yet, the fact that these passages are to be found in the same Hebrew Bible that includes the prohibition on images is evidence of a certain tension in the practice of Israelite religion and in its interpretative tradition.

According to the description of the construction of the First (Solomonic) Temple in Jerusalem in 1 Kings 7, the Temple was decorated with a plethora of figurative images: columns topped with pomegranates; a large basin that was supported by twelve oxen; depictions of lions, oxen, cherubs, and palms; and in the Holy of Holies the Ark of the Covenant rested between two large cherubs. Solomon is criticized at least twice in the Hebrew Bible: the first time somewhat obliquely in the so-called Law of the King (Deut 17:14-20), and the second time openly on account of his foreign or exogamous marriages (1 Kgs 11:1-8). The first criticism is political, the second religious in nature. In order to accommodate his wives and their religious practices, he let shrines to their various deities be erected in Jerusalem. At no point is he criticized on account of the iconography of the temple that he built in honor of Israel's God. The only cultic crime of which he was accused is the introduction of foreign cults into Israel.[28]

Archaeology provides us with a varied picture of the iconography of the biblical period.[29] On stamp-seals and seal impressions (bullae) one find beautiful depictions of animals, plants, and various other objects. Clay figurines of horses and naked women, among others, were quite popular, particularly in Jerusalem. In Samaria, the capital of the northern kingdom of Israel, archaeologists found one of the largest and most lavish collections of ivory engravings ever found in the ancient Near East. In a fortress/way-station at Kuntillet 'Ajrud in the eastern Sinai Peninsula a team of archaeologists from Tel-Aviv University found pottery vessels covered with graffiti, which may include a depiction of the God of Israel.[30] And at Arad, a site in the Negev desert, archaeologists have excavated the only known Israelite temple from biblical times, in which cult pillars were found in the Holy of Holies.[31]

This age in Israelite history, which was characterized by a rich iconographic artistic tradition, presumably came to an end with the cultic reforms of Hezekiah in the late eighth and Josiah in the late seventh century B.C.E. The extent of the changes is dramatically realized in the following two passages from the book of Deuteronomy, which are generally ascribed to the Josianic reforms:

> For your sake, therefore, be most careful – since you saw no shape when the LORD your God spoke to you at Horeb out of the fire – not to act wickedly and make for yourselves a sculptured image in any likeness whatever: the form of a man or a woman, the form of any beast on earth, the form of any winged bird that flies in the sky, the form of anything that creeps on the ground, the form of any fish that is in the waters below the earth (Deut 4:15-18).
>
> You shall not set up a sacred post – any kind of pole beside the altar of the LORD your God that you may make – or erect a stone pillar; for such the LORD your God detests (Deut 16:21-22).

In light of such passages, Moshe Greenberg has drawn attention to the fact that in the Temple cult neither decoration with plants and animals, nor the pictorial representation of God's retinue, such as the cherubs, was forbidden.[32] Be that as it may, the Josianic reforms were short-lived, a state of affairs that gave the prophets Jeremiah, Ezekiel, and Deutero-Isaiah more than enough reason to castigate Israelite idolatry in the strongest possible terms.[33] Their consensus was that there exists only one invisible and non-anthropomorphic God, who can neither be visualized nor conceptualized by mere human beings.[34]

The situation became aggravated a few centuries later, when Judaism came into conflict with Hellenism.[35] The Jewish community was divided between those who advocated acculturation to Hellenism and those who rejected the Greek world and its ideology. Ironically, the successful revolt of the iconoclastic Maccabees led to the Hasmonean kingdom, a paragon of Hellenistic culture.

In Joseph Gutmann's formulation, many scholars somewhat facilely contrast Jewish with Hellenistic culture as the conflict between the search for the "beauty of holiness" and the search for the "holiness of beauty."[36] As Gutmann demonstrates, this contrasting

formulation oversimplifies the actual situation. In his opinion, Judaism of the Hellenistic-Roman period was not as aniconic as has been thought. Yes, Judaism of that age had an aversion to the use of art in the service of the cult, however, it did not have an aversion to pictorial representation in and of itself. In support of his argument, Gutmann cites the two most renowned Jewish authors of the age, Philo and Josephus, who are often cited as witnesses in support of the opposite contention, namely that there was a developed aniconic Jewish theology at the turn of the eras.[37]

In the case of the former, Gutmann argues that Philo's vaunted aniconography was more a function of his Platonic philosophy than of any supposed Jewish aversion to the visual arts. According to Plato, certain artistic pursuits were not to be encouraged in the ideal state, since they distracted from the search for truth. In like manner, the great medieval Jewish philosopher Maimonides opposed art in the synagogue, not because artistic representation transgressed the Second Commandment, but because beautiful pictures disturbed one's concentration while praying.[38]

In the case of the latter, Gutmann attempted to demonstrate that Josephus' claim that the Judaism of his time interpreted the Second Commandment in a strict manner was solely a function of his desire to present Jewish history and practice in a pro-Roman light. Hence, Josephus felt himself obliged to claim that an overtly anti-Roman action, such as the tearing down of the imperial eagle over the entrance to the Temple compound shortly before the death of Herod the Great in 4 B.C.E., was actually an expression of Jewish religious aniconism, and not an anti-Roman political statement. The fact that no Jewish religious authorities criticized the use of imagery in this case was conveniently ignored by Josephus. For the sake of consistency, Josephus had to raise his solitary voice in criticism of Solomon on account of the decorative iconography of his Temple in Jerusalem. On the other hand, when it suited his pro-Roman purposes, Josephus was prepared to overlook alleged Jewish aniconism, when listing artistic presents made by Jews to Romans, describing the decorations in Herod's palace or the statues of the daughters of the Jewish client-king Agrippa.

In the earliest identifiable synagogues,[39] from the period around the destruction of the Second Temple in 70 C.E., artistic motifs are restricted to geometric shapes and depictions of plants. Finds from a cave in which the last survivors of the doomed Bar-Kokhba revolt against Rome (132-135 C.E.) vainly attempted to hide indicate that even the strictest and most conservative Jews were able to use vessels decorated with human faces. Nonetheless, the possible interpretation and use of these vessels as idolatrous objects had been preemptively negated by poking or rubbing out their eyes.[40]

In their functional invalidation as possible idols lies the key to an understanding of the interpretation of the Second Commandment in Judaism over the course of the centuries. During idolatrous times or periods that are understood in Jewish eyes as idolatrous, Judaism has distanced itself from iconographic representation. When, however, the representational arts are no longer viewed as a religious threat, Jewish interpretations of the Second Commandment have tended to be much more liberal and accommodating. In addition, the

attitudes of the general societal environment in which the Jews have found themselves have also played an oftentimes determinative role in formulating Jewish responses to representational art. Thus, the threatened erection of a statue of the Roman emperor Caligula in the Jerusalem Temple in the first century C.E. was a cause of great concern to the Jewish leadership of the time, while the placement of a statue of the Parthian king in a third century synagogue in Nahardea was not. The reason for this difference in attitude is to be found in the fact that the statue of Caligula was meant to serve as an object of worship within the context of the imperial Roman cult. The Zoroastrian Parthians had no royal cult. The statue of the king in Nahardea was simply there to serve as a symbol of the state, in the same manner in which contemporary synagogues more often than not display the national flag in addition to the Israeli one.[41]

Once the polytheistic religions of the Hellenistic-Roman world were in decline, and Christianity and Judaism were more likely to pose threats to them than the other way around, the synagogue was able to adopt the previously despised iconography of the pagan world and adapt it to serve its own needs.[42] Stripped of their mythological contexts, one could now walk upon the most beautiful mosaic floors in certain synagogues, which were decorated with scenes and objects of Jewish origin, as well as motifs taken from the Hellenistic-Roman world, such as zodiac signs, anthropomorphic representations of the seasons, and even the sun god Helios in his chariot. The walls of the synagogue at Dura-Europos on the Euphrates River were lavishly covered with scenes taken from the Bible.[43] It needs to be emphasized that these were the synagogues in which the rabbis who produced the Talmud prayed.

This relative freedom of artistic expression came to an end in the seventh century C.E., when Islam with its strict *cultic* aniconic tradition conquered the ancient Orient. Once again the Jews accommodated themselves to the cultural sensibilities of the dominant culture in which they lived. Under Muslim rule, Jewish attitudes toward the interpretation of the Second Commandment fluctuated in consonance with the fluctuation of attitudes toward artistic representation in Muslim society. A parallel development can be observed in Christian Europe. Oftentimes the Jewish community interpreted the Second Commandment in reaction to the iconography of the Church, which in Jewish eyes contained more than a trace of idolatry. While plastic representations of the human form tended to be avoided, an impressive Jewish illuminated manuscript tradition evolved in Europe, as it did in the Muslim world, in which, however, Christian artists often had to supply the illustrations, since many Jewish communities simply did not possess artists trained for the task.[44] At the risk of oversimplification, it can be claimed that the Second Commandment tended to be interpreted somewhat more strictly in northern Europe than in the south. One well-known manuscript that illustrates the tension within the Jewish community regarding the interpretation of the Second Commandment is the so-called Bird's Head Haggadah. In this illuminated book that recounts the story of the Exodus from Egypt, the heads of all the human figures have been replaced by bird's heads in order to avoid the pictorial

representation of the being created in God's image. Nevertheless, God's *human* hand is depicted giving the tablets of the law to Moses.[45]

A certain reluctance to employ human figures in synagogal art can still be observed. Human figures in the round tend to be avoided, since their resemblance to idolatrous figurines and statuary has generally been interpreted as a flagrant violation of the Second Commandment. Nonetheless, many synagogues have illustrations of important Jewish figures on their walls, particularly in their stained-glass windows. In spite of this, the representation of human figures at the front of the synagogue or on the *bimah* ("podium") is more often than not avoided. In an age in which Judaism does not view itself as threatened by idolatry, the representation of the human form even within a Jewish religious context is not completely out of the question.[46]

"you are not to bow down to them, you are not to serve them"

The story is told about Rav, the founder of the illustrious Talmud academy in Sura in Babylonia, that he was once a guest in a synagogue in which there was a beautifully decorated mosaic floor. Rav participated actively in the synagogue service and even read out of the Torah. Yet, when the congregation bowed down in worship, Rav remained standing. His erect attitude was attributable to the figural representations on the mosaic floor. The fact that such pictures were to be found in a synagogue did not disturb him. After all, they did not keep him from praying there. Were he, however, to bow down in prayer, it could appear as if he were bowing down to the figures depicted on the floor, instead of before the invisible God. It was in order to avoid even the possible semblance of idolatry that Rav chose to remain standing. The context of his actions determined his attitude in prayer and toward the interpretation of the Second Commandment.[47]

A story with a similar conclusion is related about Rabbi Gamliel, who visited a public bath in the city of Akko (Acre) in which a statue of the goddess Aphrodite stood. When he was asked whether it wasn't an infraction of the Second Commandment to go to this bathhouse, he replied that the image of Aphrodite did not serve as an idolatrous object of worship. After all, no one who worshiped Aphrodite, no matter how much one paid him, would consent to bath in the nude before her or urinate in her presence. Gamliel viewed the statue of Aphrodite simply as a decorative object with no religious meaning. Since the statue possessed no possible religious function in his eyes, it did not pose a threat to his own religious sensibilities nor to his understanding of the prohibition of images. Once again, the context of the object in question determined the rabbi's treatment of it.[48]

"for I, YHWH your God, am a jealous God"

Since the time of the prophet Hosea in the eighth century B.C.E., one of the most powerful and widespread metaphors used for the relationship between God and Israel is that of husband and wife. The *Mekilta* preserves a tradition that divides the Ten Commandments into two groups of five and then juxtaposes the individual commandments with one

another.[49] In this manner, the First Commandment is read in conjunction with the Sixth, the Second with the Seventh, etc. According to the standard Jewish enumeration of the commandments, the Seventh Commandment is the prohibition of adultery. If one follows the *Mekilta* in reading the Second Commandment together with the Seventh, idolatry is equated with adultery. To serve other gods means breaking the covenant of marriage with God.[50] No wonder God is a "jealous" God!

The medieval biblical commentator Joseph Bekhor Shor claimed that the prohibition on images was promulgated because God has no form, but only that which we in English may term spirit. One is not allowed to bow down before a statue in case an idolater had fashioned it as an object of veneration. The one follows from the other in order to avoid any possible semblance of idolatrous activity, even if unintentional and unknowing.[51]

"calling-to-account the iniquity of the fathers upon the sons, to the third and fourth (generation) of those that hate me, but showing loyalty to the thousandth of those that love me, of those that keep my commandments."
Those who would contrast the "Old Testament" God of justice with the "New Testament" God of love, as if there were more than one God, find in this passage an important proof-text. By taking the text out of context, they are able to claim that this passage is indicative of the overwrought and brutal justice of the "Old Testament." After all, don't the innocent sons have to suffer the punishments of their fathers according to this text? What these interpreters neglect to do, however, is to try to understand the text both within its biblical and within its societal contexts. The Hebrew Bible is a product of its patriarchal society, in which all members of a family (*bet 'av*) were part of a self-contained household defined by its relationship to the patriarch. According to this passage, God would *only* punish those who were a part of the household at that time and, hence, guilty according to the laws operative *at the time the text was written*. [52] God's righteous and *temporary* anger at the breach of the divine covenant[53] is to be contrasted with the *eternal* blessing that would accrue to the righteous and their descendents; for that is how the expression "to the thousandth" should be understood.[54]

Philip Hyatt argued that there were two distinctive and unique thoughts expressed in the Decalogue. The first was that one should worship only *one* God, and the second was the prohibition of idolatry.[55] Whether or not his contention can be sustained, it is significant that both of these elements are to be found in the Second Commandment, as defined by Jewish tradition. However, this does not answer the question *why* there are prohibitions on idolatry and on the depiction of images in the cult.

There are many answers that have been given to this question of why. Martin Noth gave a magical answer to the question. According to Noth, ancient Israel prohibited the use of images of God in order to prevent people from gaining power over God through the manipulation of the divine image.[56] Umberto Cassuto argued on the contrary that the prohibition of images was not a reflection of a primitive aniconism. Rather, he argued that it

was a reflection of the transcendence of God and a reaction against the theriomorphic or animal-shaped religious iconography of Egypt at the time of the Exodus.[57] Ronald Hendel proposed that the aniconism of the Israelite cult was linked to early Israel's rejection of kingship.[58] More recently Howard Eilberg-Schwartz has proposed a provocative Freudian interpretation of the prohibition of images, linking it to a male heterosexual priesthood's fear of dealing with God's body and sexuality in light of Hosea's influential metaphor of God as husband and Israel as wife.[59] And Brian Schmidt has argued that contrary to common interpretations of the prohibition on images, the prohibition only extended to certain types of images of God and did not include, for example, the image on the pithos from Kuntillet 'Ajrud.[60]

Be that as it may, the traditional Jewish answer to the question has already been given by Joseph Bekhor Shor. There is only one God, and this God is so-to-say spirit and not human. Although people must employ their limited human linguistic capabilities to describe God, this does not mean that the essence of God can be captured in this manner. In order to avoid possible misunderstandings, the corporeal depiction of God is strictly forbidden. God is to be seen acting in history, not as a being in human form. God stands above the world that God has created, and is not bound by it. Other religions have worshiped natural phenomena, people and the work of their own hands. These actions are effectively made impossible in a Jewish context.[61]

When Rabbi Gamliel was asked why God only gave laws against idolatry, rather then excising it from the world, he answered that people worship the sun, the moon, the stars, the planets, signs of the zodiac, mountains, hills, and even other people. Should God therefore destroy them all?[62]

At the end of her remarks concerning the Second Commandment, Nehama Leibowitz posed the question whether this text has any relevance in the modern world.[63] In her opinion, idolatry in the sense of polytheism is no longer a threat.[64] The issue is no longer of any pressing importance. How is one then to make the Second Commandment relevant? In order to find an answer to this question, Leibowitz had recourse to the writings of Franz Rosenzweig. In his book about the poet Judah Halevi, Rosenzweig came to the conclusion that the definition of polytheism in the modern world implies the worship of "culture and civilization, people and state, nation and race, art and science, economics and class, morality and religiosity,"[65] etc. For Rosenzweig, therefore, idolatry meant the worship and apotheosis of transient values and objects, all of which should be subordinate to the true God. In order to resist the apotheosis of the transient, we can conclude with Leibowitz that the Second Commandment has not come close to losing its relevance in the modern world.

Notes

[1] Concerning the number of bones, see, e.g., *Midrash Tehillim* 104:2.

[2] For a Protestant division of the Decalogue into four "theological" and six "ethical" commandments, see, e.g., the Table of Contents in W. H. Schmidt et al., *Die Zehn Gebote im Rahmen alttestamentlicher Ethik* (Erträge der Forschung 281; Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1993) v-vi. Following St. Augustine, who divided the Ten Commandments into two groups of unequal length, the Catholic Church has standardized depictions of the Decalogue with three commandments on the first tablet and seven on the second. In the opinion of the Church, the first three deal with the relationship between God and humanity, and the final seven with the relationships between human beings. See G. B. Sarfatti, "The Tablets of the Law as a Symbol of Judaism," in: Ben-Zion Segal, ed., *The Ten Commandments in History and Tradition* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1990) 410-11. In the Jewish tradition, the fifth commandment to honor one's father and mother has been included with the first four, which deal with the relationship between God and humanity, with the justification that the parents are the ones who convey reverence of God to and are God's partners in the raising of their children. In this sense, they stand *in loco dei*, figuratively in God's shoes, when raising their children. See *Mekilta Bakhodesh* 8. See also Moshe Greenberg, "Decalogue," *Encyclopedia Judaica* 5.1442, 1444, and literature there; Gunther Plaut, ed., *The Torah: A Modern Commentary* (New York: UAHC Press, 1981) 537, 556-57, 559.

[3] Which is ironic, since the basic artistic motif is borrowed from Christian art, which itself took over the diptych form from Roman writing tablets. See Sarfatti, "Tablets of the Law," 397-407.

[4] See *b. Shabbat* 86b; Amos Chacham, *Sefer Shemot* (Hebrew; Da'at Miqra'; Jerusalem: Mossad Harav Kuk, 1991) 399; Nahum Sarna, *Exploring Exodus* (New York: Schocken, 1986) 141-42.

[5] See, e.g., Plaut, *Torah*, 538.

[6] Obviously, critical biblical scholars would have a different explanation for the textual variants based upon source-critical criteria.

[7] See Ezra Z. Melammed, " 'Observe' and 'Remember' Spoken in One Utterance," pp. 191-217 in: Ben-Zion Segal, ed., *The Ten Commandments in History and Tradition* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1990). In a similar vein, one can also cite the example of the traditional Jewish interpretation of Ps 62:12a: "One thing God has spoken, two things have I heard."

[8] Arguably, the reference here is to adherents of the nascent Christian Church, which in its Pauline version rejected the obligatory nature of Pentateuchal legislation and, hence, rabbinic law.

[9] See *b. Berakhot* 12a; as well as Jonathan Magonet, "Dekalog II," *Theologische Realenzyklopädie* 8.413-15; Ephraim E. Urbach, "The Role of the Ten Commandments in Jewish Worship," pp. 161-90 in: Ben-Zion Segal, ed., *The Ten Commandments in History and Tradition* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1990).

[10] See *y. Berakhot* 1, 8/3, 3c; Urbach, "Ten Commandments," 167.

[11] See *b. Makkot* 23b-24a; Plaut, *Torah*, 544.

[12] See the very helpful presentation of the differences in Ronald Youngblood, "Counting the Ten Commandments," *Bible Review* 10/6 (1994) 30-35, 50-52, esp. 34-35.

[13] Flavius Josephus, *Judean Antiquities* 3.91; Philo Judaeus, *De Decalogo* 14.65; Louis H. Feldman, trans., *Judean Antiquities 1-4* (Flavius Josephus: Translation and Commentary 3; Leiden-Boston-Cologne: Brill, 2000) 252-53.

[14] See *Sifre Bemidbar* to Num 15:31; Umberto (Moshe David) Cassuto, *A Commentary on the Book of Exodus* (translated from the Hebrew by Israel Abrahams; Jerusalem: Magnes, 1967) 251.

[15] See Moshe Greenberg, "The Decalogue Tradition Critically Examined," in: Ben-Zion Segal, ed., *The Ten Commandments in History and Tradition* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1990) 99; Jeffrey H. Tigay, *Deuteronomy* (The JPS Torah Commentary; Philadelphia-Jerusalem: Jewish Publication Society, 1996) 63; Moshe Weinfeld, "The Uniqueness of the Decalogue," in: Ben-Zion Segal, ed., *The Ten Commandments in History and Tradition* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1990) 6-7 and n. 20.

[16] Everett Fox, *The Five Books of Moses* (The Schocken Bible 1; New York: Schocken Books, 1995. Following the example of Martin Buber and Franz Rosenzweig, Fox's aim is to translate the Hebrew Bible in a manner more faithful to the cadences of the biblical language than other translations have been. For a synoptic presentation of the text of both the Exodus and Deuteronomy versions, see Schmidt, *Zehn Gebote*, 34-35.

[17] See Ronald J. Williams, *Hebrew Syntax: An Outline* (Second edition; Toronto-Buffalo-London: University of Toronto, 1976) 41. In spite of this, Rachel Mikva has suggested that a more literal translation of the verse may be "Other gods isn't for you." See Rachel S. Mikva, ed., *Broken Tablets: Restoring the Ten Commandments and Ourselves* (Woodstock, VT: Jewish Lights, 1999) 19.

[18] See Nehama Leibowitz, *Studies in Shemot* (Jerusalem: World Zionist Organization, 1976) 315, who cites Or Ha-hayyim in this regard.

[19] Cassuto, *Exodus*, 241.

[20] *Mekilta Bakhodesh* 6. This is an example of the rabbinic dictum that "there is neither early nor late in the Torah." Even taking the narrative structure at face value, the book of Isaiah postdates the revelation at Mount Sinai by half a millennium. In addition, these words are spoken not by Isaiah, but by King Hezekiah, in a passage quoted more or less directly from 2 Kgs 19:18.

[21] From the perspective of modern scholarship, the *Mekilta's* attempt to harmonize the tradition obscures the actual thrust of the text, which is to demand exclusive allegiance to God, while not denying the existence of other gods (i.e., monolatry or henotheism, and not monotheism). See Schmidt, *Zehn Gebote*, 39-58.

[22] See, e.g., the New Jewish Version and the Revised Standard Version ad loc.

[23] Martin Noth, *Exodus: A Commentary* (Translated from the German 1959 by John S. Bowden; Old Testament Library; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1962) 162.

[24] See *Mekilta Bakhodesh* 6; Leibowitz, *Shemot*, 316-18.

[25] Martin Buber, *Jüdische Künstler* (Berlin, 1903) 7. The German terms in question are *Ohrenmenschen* and *Augenmenschen*, which could also be translated as "aural people" and "visual people." See also Jon D. Levenson, *Sinai and Zion: An Entry into the Jewish Bible* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1985) 147-48, who identifies a certain truth behind this general statement.

[26] Concerning the Bezalel tradition and the Solomonic Temple, see Joseph Gutmann, "Prolegomenon," in idem, ed., *No Graven Images: Studies in Art and the Hebrew Bible* (New York: Ktav, 1971) xxi-xxiii. On the prohibition of images in the Hebrew Bible, see Christoph Dohmen, *Das Bilderverbot: Seine Entstehung und seine Entwicklung im Alten Testament* (Bonner biblische Beiträge 62; Königstein/Ts.-Bonn: Peter Hanstein, 1985); Schmidt, *Zehn Gebote*, 69-77.

[27] See Carl S. Ehrlich, "Moses, Torah, and Judaism," in: David Noel Freedman & Michael J. McClymond, eds., *The Rivers of Paradise* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, forthcoming 2000).

[28] For a discussion of the Jewish interpretative history of the question of Solomon's foreign marriages, see Shaye J. D. Cohen, "Solomon and the Daughter of Pharaoh: Intermarriage, Conversion, and the Impurity of Women," *Journal of the Ancient Near Eastern Society at Columbia University* 16-17 (1984-1985) 23-37.

[29] On the archaeology of the biblical period, see Amnon Ben-Tor, ed., *The Archaeology of Ancient Israel* (Translated from the Hebrew by Raphael Greenberg; New Haven: Yale University, 1992); Thomas E. Levy, ed., *The Archaeology of Society in the Holy Land* (New York: Facts on File, 1995); Amihai Mazar, *Archaeology of the Land of the Bible 10,000-586 BCE* (New York: Doubleday, 1992); Neal A. Silberman and David Small, eds., *The Archaeology of Israel: Constructing the Past, Interpreting the Present* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1997).

[30] See, e.g., Zeev Meshel, "Kuntillet 'Ajrud," *Anchor Bible Dictionary* 4.103-109.

[31] On the other hand, Tryggve Mettinger has argued that cult pillars are early examples of an aniconic tendency in Israelite art, which is characteristic of the whole west Semitic world. See Tryggve. N. D. Mettinger, *No Graven Image? Israelite Aniconism in Its Ancient Near Eastern Context* (Coniectanea Biblica Old Testament Series 42, Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1995).

[32] Greenberg, "Decalogue Tradition," 100.

[33] For a balanced evaluation of the religious significance of cultic images in the ancient world, see Thorkild Jacobsen, "The Graven Image," pp. 15-32 in: Patrick D. Miller, Paul D. Hanson, and S. Dean McBride, eds., *Ancient Israelite Religion: Essays in Honor of Frank Moore Cross* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987).

[34] On the basis of her examination of the early coinage of Judea in the Persian and Hellenistic periods, Diana Edelman has come to the conclusion that aniconism first became official religious policy in the late Persian period (fourth century B.C.E.). See Diana Vikander Edelman, "Tracking Observance of the Aniconic Tradition Through Numismatics," in: idem, ed., *The Triumph of Elohim: From Yahwisms to Judaisms* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996) 185-225.

[35] The classic work on this subject is Victor Tcherikover, *Hellenistic Civilization and the Jews* (Translated from the Hebrew by Shimon Applebaum; New York: Atheneum, 1970. See also Elias J. Bickerman, *The Jews in the Greek Age* (Cambridge, MA-London: Harvard University, 1988); Peter Schäfer, *Judeophobia: Attitudes toward the Jews in the Ancient World* (Cambridge, MA-London: Harvard University, 1997). Shemaryahu Talmon, ed., *Jewish Civilization in the Hellenistic-Roman Period* (Philadelphia: Trinity Press International, 1991).

[36] Joseph Gutmann, "The 'Second Commandment' and the Image in Judaism," in: idem, ed., *No Graven Images: Studies in Art and the Hebrew Bible* (New York: Ktav, 1971) 3.

[37] Gutmann, "Second Commandment," 12-15.

[38] See Gutmann, "Prolegomenon," xx.

[39] For a discussion of the early rabbinic attitude toward idolatry, see Ephraim E. Urbach, "The Rabbinical Laws of Idolatry in the Second and Third Centuries in the Light of Archaeological and Historical Fact," pp. 162-95 in: Harry M. Orlinsky, ed., *Israel Exploration Journal Reader I* (New York: Ktav, 1981), originally published in Hebrew in *Eretz-Israel* 5 (1958) 189-205 (the English translation does not include pp. 202-05). For a recent and comprehensive work on the origins and early history of the synagogue, see Lee I. Levine, *The Ancient Synagogue: The First Thousand Years* (New Haven-London: Yale University, 2000) esp. 561-79, and the bibliography at the end of the volume.

[40] Yigael Yadin, *Bar-Kokhba: The Rediscovery of the Legendary Hero of the Last Jewish Revolt against Imperial Rome* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1971) 86-111.

[41] See *b. Avodah Zarah* 43b; Gutmann, "Prolegomenon," xvi-xvii.

[42] For descriptions of individual synagogues and their art, see Levine, *Ancient Synagogue*, 194-287. Among the many additional studies on the ancient synagogue, see Steven Fine and Eric M. Meyers, "Synagogues," *The Oxford Encyclopedia of Archaeology in the Near East* 5.118-23; Joseph Gutmann, ed., *Ancient Synagogues: The State of Research* (Brown Judaic Studies 22; Ann Arbor: Scholars Press, 1981); Joseph Gutmann, ed., *The Synagogue: Studies in Origins, Archaeology and Architecture* (New York: Ktav, 1975); Rachel Hachlili, *Ancient Jewish Art and Archaeology in the Land of Israel* (Leiden: Brill, 1988); Leslie J. Hoppe, *The Synagogues and Churches of Ancient Palestine* (Collegeville, MN: Michael Glazier, 1994); Lee I. Levine, ed., *Ancient Synagogues Revealed* (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1981).

[43] On the Dura-Europos synagogue, see Jacob Neusner's abridgement of the monumental and controversial originally thirteen-volume Erwin R. Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period* (Mythos; Princeton, NJ: Princeton University, 1992) esp. 177-265; Carl H. Kraeling, *The Synagogue* (The Excavations at Dura-Europos Final Report 8/1; New Haven: Yale University, 1956).

[44] About the Hebrew manuscript tradition, see Leonard Singer Gold, ed., *A Sign and a Witness: 2,000 Years of Hebrew Books and Illuminated Manuscripts* (New York: New York Public Library and Oxford: Oxford University, 1988).

[45] God's hand is known from other medieval manuscripts, as well as in ancient synagogues, such as those of Beth-Alpha and Dura-Europos.

[46] Regarding Jewish art history, see among many others Grace Cohen Grossman, *Jewish Art* (China: Hugh Lauter Levin Associates, 1995); Hannelore Künzl, *Jüdische Kunst: Von der biblischen Zeit bis in die Gegenwart* (Munich, 1992); Cecil Roth, ed., *Jewish Art: An Illustrated History* (New York-Toronto-London: McGraw-Hill, 1961); Geoffrey Wigoder, ed., *Jewish Art and Civilization* (Fribourg, Switzerland: Chartwell, 1972).

[47] See *b. Megillah* 22b.

[48] See *b. Avodah Zarah* 44b; Daniel Krochmalnik, "Der 'Philosoph' in Talmud und Midrasch," *Trumah* 5 (1996) 146-47.

[49] *Mekilta Bakhodesh* 8.

[50] See Benno Jacob, *The Second Book of the Bible: Exodus* (Translated from the German by Walter Jacob; Hoboken: Ktav, 1992) 546-47, in whose opinion the prohibition of serving other gods "before my presence" (v. 3) already evokes a marital metaphor. See also Tigay, *Deuteronomy*, 65-66.

[51] See Shalom Albeck, "The Ten Commandments and the Essence of Religious Faith," in: Ben-Zion Segal, ed., *The Ten Commandments in History and Tradition* (Jerusalem: Magnes, 1990) 266.

[52] There was a change in attitude already at the time of the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel, who argued that only those who were personally guilty were to be punished for their own misdeeds and not other members of the extended family. See Jer 31:27-30; Ezek 18.

[53] Rabbi Shemuel ben Meir (Rashbam), the grandson of Rashi, understood the text to mean "If the children [continue to] hate me," i.e., continue in the evil ways of their parents. Quoted from Martin I. Lockshin, *Rashbam's Commentary on Exodus: An Annotated Translation* (Brown Judaic Studies 310; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1997) 213.

[54] See Göran Larsson, *Bound for Freedom: The Book of Exodus in Jewish and Christian Traditions* (Translated from the Swedish 1993; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999) 140, 144-45; Plaut, *Torah*, 542.

[55] J. Philip Hyatt, *Exodus* (Revised edition; New Century Bible; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans and London: Marshall Morgan & Scott, 1980) 209.

[56] Noth, *Exodus*, 162-63.

[57] Cassuto, *Exodus*, 242.

[58] Ronald S. Hendel, "The Social Origins of the Aniconic Tradition in Early Israel," *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 50 (1988) 365-82.

[59] Howard Eilberg-Schwartz, *God's Phallus and Other Problems for Men and Monotheism* (Boston: Beacon, 1994) esp. 116-21.

[60] Brian B. Schmidt, "The Aniconic Tradition: On Reading Images and Viewing Texts," in: Diana Vikander Edelman, ed., *The Triumph of Elohim: From Yahwisms to Judaisms* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996) 75-105.

[61] See Sarna, *Exploring Exodus*, 145.

[62] *Mekilta Bakhodesh* 6.

[63] Leibowitz, *Shemot*, 320-21.

[64] Obviously, Leibowitz did not take the "new paganism" seriously.

[65] Author's translation. See Franz Rosenzweig, *Jehuda Halevi. Fünfundneunzig Hymnen und Gedichte Deutsch und Hebräisch* (Franz Rosenzweig. Der Mensch und sein Werk: Gesammelte Schriften IV/1; The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff, 1983) 64-65. Rosenzweig is also followed by Mikva, *Broken Tablets*, 19-20. This is echoed in the same volume by mystic Zalman M. Schacter-Shalomi, "No Other," 21-24, who claims that "Real idolatry today is the worship of money, technology, addictions, absolute political systems – even of 'Judaism' and of the personal ego" (p. 23).