Chapter One

Jewish Art in the Light of Jewish Tradition

Exod 20:3f, generally reckoned within the Elohist tradition, is the biblical text which seems to determine Judaism’s relationship to graphic depictions: ‘You shall not make for yourself a graven image (אֶת־הָעֵ trata, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth; you shall not bow down to them or serve them; for I the Lord your God am a jealous God.’ This stipulation, directed against the idolatry of the cultural environment surrounding ancient Israel, has often been exegeted and understood as though Israel had always and fundamentally been averse to every form of figurative representation. In fact, however, this verse means no more than that no images should be produced which, as idol statuary, could then serve as cultic images for the Israelites. The commandment was still not recognized even in this sense in the early period, the so-called period of the Judges. Jdg 17:3, 18:14-31 relates a quite unembarrassed account of a small shrine containing an idol (בַּעַר) and other objects of veneration owned by a certain Micah from the hill country of Ephraim; Israelites from the tribe of Dan were so interested in these that they stole them. Even Solomon’s Temple, the central sanctuary in Jerusalem, was not without its images. According to 1 Kgs 6:23 two olive-wood cherubim were found in the Holy of Holies in the Jerusalem Temple, and according to 1 Kgs 7:25 the ‘bronze sea’ rested upon twelve oxen, three each facing in the directions of the four winds. Even the erection of calf statues in the two national sanctuaries of the Northern Kingdom – first interpreted redactionally as the ‘sin of Jeroboam’ by the Deuteronomist – is proof that carved images were originally regarded neutrally insofar as they themselves were not the objects of divine veneration. The calf idols of Dan and Bethel were probably regarded as the bearers of the invisible divinity (whose invisibility thus admitted no possibility of representation), in the same way as the cherubim of the Temple in Jerusalem.

The proscription of images therefore referred from the very beginning only to such images as might become the objects of divine worship. Stemming from the Elohist source it bears the stamp of prophetic theology and can be dated to c. the eighth century BCE. The naive assumptions attested for the pre-national period by Jdg 18 no longer accorded with the standar-
dizing notions of the later period, when the cultic ideology of Jerusalem and prophetic teachings also determined the relationship to figurative representations. In popular religion, however, the older structures continued to exist, as can be seen by, among other things, the Canaanite and syncretistic elements in the cult of the Jewish emigrants to Elephantine in Egypt, still into the fifth century BCE.\(^1\) However, the standardizing movements reflected in Exod 20:3f led to the proscription of images being taken more and more seriously after the Babylonian exile in the sixth century BCE, in order to ensure Israel’s distinction from surrounding Paganism. The Priestly author of Gen 1 also showed his concern for this differentiation when he characterizes sun, moon and stars worshipped as gods in his surroundings as God’s creation. At a time and place in which the preservation of Jewish identity was only possible through a conscious distancing from the heathen environment, it was necessary for the leading circles to interpret the proscription of images ever more stringently. That even Herod permitted only geometric patterns in the finishing of his mosaic pavements in Masada is further evidence of this.\(^2\)

An examination of how Exod 20:3f was understood in the first century CE reveals a very narrow and strict interpretation of the proscription of images. This was in reference to the desecration of the Temple at Jerusalem by the erection of a statue of a Roman emperor, or to prevent the setting up of imperial emblems within the city. Thus Flavius Josephus reports (War 2:195 [10,4]) that the erection of Caligula’s statue in the Temple at Jerusalem was successfully hindered by appealing to the Jewish law against images. The narrow interpretation of this proscription led also to an infuriated crowd tearing down a large golden eagle that, by Herod’s order, had been fastened above the largest Temple gate during his renovation of the Temple (which amounted in fact to building a new temple). Josephus gives as the reason for this: ‘... the Law forbids those who propose to live in accordance with it to think of setting up images or to make dedications of (the likenesses of) any living creatures’ (Ant. 17:151 [6,2]).\(^3\)

Josephus was a typical representative of the trend of hostility towards images in the first century CE.\(^4\) Even King Solomon falls under his criticism, not only for marrying foreign women (Ant. 8:191 [7,5]) but also for fashioning bronze bulls for the bronze sea and lions for his throne. He also pursued this radically hostile attitude towards images during his tenure as commander-in-chief of the Galilean forces at the beginning of the rebellion against Rome (66-70 CE). He relates that he ordered the palace of Herod Antipas to be razed because it was decorated with animal figures, ‘such a style of

---

3. Cf also War 1:650 [1:33,2].