SUFFERING FROM FORMLESSNESS: THE BAN ON IMAGES IN EXILIC TIMES*

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For Othmar Keel (6th December 2007)

1. Introduction

Throughout the Ancient Near East the cultic statue is regarded as the “body of the deity” and represents its presence in the temple.1 Formlessness (Gestaltlosigkeit), therefore, is not a happy experience but rather an expression of divine anger. The deity leaves his or her earthly body. He or she retreats to the heavenly sphere and in doing so exposes the city to the mercy of its enemies. When the earthly body of the deity is destroyed or taken away to a foreign land a period of misery begins. The country suffers from mourning and affliction. The Bible, however, seems to depart from this common pattern. In deviation from its surrounding Ancient Near Eastern cultures, formlessness seems to be the trademark of the God of Israel. How did that happen? We will start our investigation by a brief look at current scholarly trends.

2. The Current State of Research

The second commandment of the Decalogue—the prohibition of any graven image (Bilderverbot)—is certainly an Israelite peculiarity that

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1 On the production and function of cultic images see A. Berlejung, Die Theologie der Bilder. Herstellung und Einweihung von Kultbildern in Mesopotamien und die alttestamentliche Bilderpolemik (OBO, 162), Freiburg, Göttingen 1998.
distinguishes Ancient Israel from its Ancient Near Eastern neighbours. So far the scholarly consensus. All other questions regarding the ban of images are highly controversial and a consensus is not in sight. Controversy starts with the question of the original intention of the prohibition. Did it refer simply to the images of foreign gods; or did it, from the beginning, ban any representation of the God of Israel? If that was the case, was it limited to figurative representations or did it include every cultic representation of God?

Even more controversial is the often heated debate about the how and why of the emergence of the second commandment. Some scholars argue that Yahweh was worshipped from the beginning in aniconic form. This is in a way the classical position. Currently, O. Keel—definitively no enemy of images—is possibly the most prolific proponent of such a view.2 These scholars, however, see the cradle of the second commandment surrounded by quite different godfathers: here we find the often proclaimed nomadic heritage of Israel (C. Dohmen and R. Albertz),3 so-called anti-monarchic impulses (W.W. Hallo and R. Hendel),4 or some typical West-Semitic de-facto-aniconism (T. Mettinger).5 All these views have in common that they do not regard the second commandment as an innovation but simply as a new statement—this time in form of a prohibition—of an old aspect.

Others, in contrast, argue for the existence of pictorial representations of Yahweh during the period of the monarchy and evoke the bull statue at Bethel as witness. This statue was without doubt the symbol of the presence of Yahweh as deity of the Northern Kingdom in Temple and royal sanctuary. The cultic exclamation quoted in 1 Kings 12:28 supports this fact.6 The circumstances at Bethel may allow us to argue

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6 On the questions surrounding Bethel see H. Pfeiffer, Das Heiligtum von Bethel im Spiegel des Hoseabuches (FRLANT, 183), Göttingen 1999, 26–64.