THE ROOTS OF ANICONISM: AN ISRAELITE PHENOMENON IN COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

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1. The problem

The Decalogue commandment in Exod. xx 4, "thou shalt not make unto thyself any graven image," seeks to enshrine a cult without images, worship that is exclusively aniconic. The problem I am going to discuss is this: where are we to look for the roots, the ultimate origin of Israelite aniconism?

There is now an emerging consensus that the express ban on images is fairly late and to be found only in literature from the period after 722 BCE. Studies by Zimmerli, Dohmen and myself point in this direction. This consensus gives rise to the question: what practices were followed prior to the express prohibition of images? Was the earlier Israelite cult a cult of images and therefore "iconic"? Or are we to reckon with a long-standing tradition of aniconism with truly ancient origins? Did Israelite aniconism emanate from theological reflection, perhaps on the nature of the deity and divine transcendence or on man as the image of God? Or is aniconism the cultic corollary of Israel’s bias against kingship? Or, again, is aniconism an inheritance from the putative nomadic past of ancient Israel?

There have been attempts to answer such questions and a great amount of serious research has been devoted to the prohibition on images by Bernhardt, Keel, Dohmen, Hendel, Uehlinger, Loretz and

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1 This problem is discussed in detail in my recent monograph (Mettinger 1995a), where the reader will find extensive documentation.

others. In one respect, however, one notes an alarming lack of scholarly attention: Israelite aniconism has never been properly studied in the light of the comparative material from the surrounding cultures. One simple observation demonstrates that comparative data do merit attention: in addition to the religion of Israel another major Semitic religion has developed a prohibition on images. I refer, of course, to Islam, where a prohibition on images was clearly promulgated in the edict of the Caliph Yazid II in 721 CE. The Hadith and numismatic evidence take us back in time to the 690s CE (see Mettinger 1995a, p. 77). Though this is admittedly rather late, we must ask: is it mere coincidence that two major Semitic religions attest the same attitude toward images? What, then, do the comparative data indicate concerning the roots of aniconism?

The difficulty of the problem is clearly pronounced by two distinguished biblical scholars. One of them, Gerhard von Rad, states it in the following way:

"Here becomes manifest something of the mystery of Israel, something of her nature as a stranger and a sojourner among the religions. Anyone who seriously devotes himself to a study of religions as they appear and their worship of images can find absolutely no way of transition from them to Israel's prohibition of images... (1962, pp. 214–15 = German, pp. 227–8).

The other, Werner H. Schmidt, writes that,

"Since once again any real analogy is lacking, the prohibition of idols cannot be derived from the surrounding world. Religio-historical inquiry keeps on running up against the first and second commandments in the Old Testament, but the two also form the boundary beyond which historical research has not hitherto been able to pass (p. 77 = German, p. 83).

What I shall make here is, indeed, nothing less than an attempt to reconstruct the situation prevailing in periods prior to the express formulation found in the Decalogue. The tool that I shall use to penetrate this barrier is the material from the surrounding cultures.

Before we proceed any further, I must define the term "aniconism". I shall use it to refer to cults where there is no iconic representation.

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4 For definitions and terminology, see Mettinger 1995a, pp. 18–27.