Sarah Pearce, ed.


The idea of ancient Judaism as an un-iconic religion has been abandoned long ago following the discovery of so many examples of ancient Jewish art during the past century. The image in Judaism has become a much studied subject in recent decades; but many aspects of the topic have not yet found a unanimously accepted explanation. Thus any serious study of the topic and its most important aspects is still highly welcome. The present volume is a collection of ten papers presented at the annual meeting of the British Association for Jewish Studies in 2010 at Southampton University. A succinct introduction by the editor of the volume, Sarah Pearce (pp. 1–9), briefly outlining the topic and summarizing the papers contained in the volume, is followed by a very dense essay by Philip Alexander, “Reflections on Word versus Image as Ways of Mediating the Divine Presence in Judaism” (pp. 10–27). He first discusses what exactly the biblical prohibition of images implies. Is it any image, even a reflected image on a shining surface? Does it distinguish between idols and images as ornament, facsimile or not, three- and two-dimensional representations, between public and private use, making and finding, etc. The ambiguity of the biblical laws leads to a wide range of Jewish attitudes. Alexander claims that aniconism reaches back to the period of the first temple and had an at least embryonic theological foundation already then. It was politically reinforced under the kings Hezekiah and Josiah and strengthened in exile as part of Jewish identity-building. Scribalism is directly related to aniconism and the insistence on the voice and the word (Deut. 4:15) as the only way God’s presence can be experienced. But verbal images of God (Dan. 7; Shi‘ur Qomah) are again problematic and lead to a sort of verbal aniconism of the mystics who realize “that words are no more satisfactory than material images for representing the divine” (p. 26). The only unproblematic way of referring to God is the fulfillment of the mitzvot.

After this highly sophisticated analysis of the basic problem, H.G.M. Williamson asks a historical question: “Was there an image of the deity in the first temple?” (pp. 28–37). Against a growing number of authors who claim that there must have been a representation of the Deity in the Salomonic temple, Williamson argues that the arrangement of the debir with the huge cherubim and the ark would hardly have left sufficient space for such an image. Biblical expressions as “ beholding God’s face” are metaphoric and derived from court language. The ark may have substituted for a divine image.
in some ceremonies, and there are texts that imply divine images in the temple (2 Kings 23:6 on Josiah who “brought out the Asherah from the house of the Lord,” and similar texts), but they may refer not to the center of the sanctuary but to its periphery (cf. Ezek. 8:5–9). “[T]here may well have been times when images of God, as well as of Asherah, were introduced, but we need to take more seriously into account than heretofore the location as well as the rationale for such developments” (p. 37).

Jane Heath, “Greek and Jewish Visual Piety: Ptolemy’s Gifts in the Letter of Aristeas” (pp. 38–48), offers a detailed analysis of the long description of the gifts Ptolemy sends to the high-priest Eleazar, among them a new Table of the Presence and a set of Tabernacle vessels for the Temple. This text is a fine example of the Graeco-Roman genre of ekphrasis, descriptions of artwork that traditionally emphasize the verisimilitude of plastic art and the emotional effect it had on the viewer. Aristeas takes over characteristically Greek elements in his ekphrasis, but gives them interesting Jewish twists. The making of the objects has to follow scripture (rather than phantasia), knowing that there are limits to what scripture can convey. Unusual in a Graeco-Roman context is also that non-figurative artworks are the subject of such a lengthy ekphrasis. Aristeas avoids any idea of deceit wrought by perfect mimesis; he rather emphasizes the amimeton, thus problematizing the concept of making images of things in any form. The text is thus “at the intersection of two cultures that have very different sensitivities to visuality and visual piety” (p. 48).

Sarah Pearce, “Philo of Alexandria on the Second Commandment” (pp. 49–76), again offers a close analysis of a text rather neglected in earlier studies. De decalogo is a commentary on Scripture, normally the Septuagint, although Philo uses also other translations or quotes from memory. In this tractate Philo only rarely quotes scriptural texts and offers no extended quotation of the second commandment. It is therefore difficult to see where Philo follows the biblical text or deviates from it; but there are interesting instances in his terminology regarding what exactly is forbidden in this commandment. Philo consciously uses none of the terms for the objects prohibited in the Septuagint, although he uses them in other contexts. He rather lists the materials to be fashioned into images and prefers standard Greek terms, thus actualizing the commandment for his generation, as he also does in his protracted polemic against animal worship, included in this context. The second commandment is not so much against images but rather against a mistaken conception of God: “in making gods of objects that owe their ‘existence’ to human hands, people have failed to recognize the true source of existence” (p. 74).