

Sarah Pearce (ed.), *The Image and its Prohibition in Jewish Antiquity* (Journal of Jewish Studies Supplement Series 2). Journal of Jewish Studies, Oxford, 2013. viii, 273 pp. £55.00. ISBN 978 0 9575228 0 0.

The second commandment solemnly sets out the famed prohibition against the carving of graven images, a prohibition repeated several times in the Pentateuch (Exod. 20:4–5, 20:23; Lev. 26:1; Deut. 4:15–19, 5:8–9). On each occasion it is linked closely with idolatry, with the worship of false gods portrayed in wood or stone. That linkage is hardly coincidental. Aniconism occupied a central place in ancient Judaism, one of its defining features. Yet, as is well known, Jews did indulge in the creation and display of images, most notably in the synagogues of Late Antiquity. How is that to be reconciled with the biblical ban? A common answer, and one with considerable merit, is that imagery need not entail idolatry. Figural representations, even those of divinities, were tolerable if they did not imply worship. Perhaps so. Yet that answer fails to explain the very long stretch of time, from the Exile through the whole of the Second Temple period at least, when images were scrupulously and consistently avoided. How does one account for the contrast with Late Antiquity?

That question runs as a motif, even when unexpressed, through most of the fine essays assembled by Sarah Pearce. The assemblage addresses this intriguing issue in diverse ways, directly or indirectly. As a collection, the essays demonstrate that no simple answer will be forthcoming – and probably none should be expected.

What emerges is the complexity of the subject and the variety of ways it can be approached, all of which offer illumination, even though the paradox (if such it be) remains unresolved.

The excellent essay of Philip Alexander poses a critical question: just when did Judaism become aniconic – and why? He eschews the easy answer of the Exile as prodding Jews to assert their special identity and cultural independence, preferring instead an earlier date and a political explanation in which aniconism expressed Yahweh's superiority over other gods. And he sees the practice less as a rejection of images than as a positive turn to the word as more appropriate than material objects for the depiction of God. Whether or not one buys the argument, this is a thoughtful and stimulating contribution.

A more striking proposition has it that aniconism was a radical departure from the past and that an image of the deity actually existed in the First Temple. The idea, seemingly counter-intuitive and largely dismissed in the past, has had a growing number of supporters in more recent years, stressing the point that prohibitions on images suggest that there must have been some images to prohibit. H.G.M. Williamson, in a sober and careful essay, puts the matter properly to rest. The weight of the evidence, both linguistic and material, as he rightly observes, leans heavily in the other direction. But he does not

dismiss the textual testimony cited by proponents of imagery in the First Temple, acknowledging instead that it might have existed at the periphery rather than in the centre of the Temple. If he is right, however, what period and circumstances are we to imagine for the introduction of rigorous aniconism?

Sacha Stern's learned essay questions even the most fundamental presumption, namely that the second commandment was the source of Jewish avoidance of images in the Second Temple era. One would wish for some pursuance of that intriguing idea and its possible consequences. But Stern's focus is upon Late Antiquity and the explosion of pictorial representations in Palestine. The effect (or lack thereof) of the second commandment is not discussed. Disappointingly, he also refrains from considering the possible causes of the proliferation of human and animal images in the fourth to sixth centuries CE. He rightly questions the degree to which this development can be attributed to 'Hellenism' (it had been around for a very long time before) or to the influence of Christianity. He stresses instead the variety of choices made by Jewish communities, artists (whether Jewish or not), and even those who respected the second commandment (they were comfortable with mosaic floors but not sculptures in the round). And Stern makes the important point that rabbinic sources, on the whole, neither denounced nor tolerated synagogue images, but were largely indifferent to them. Why? That too would have been an insight worth following up.

Zeev Weiss also underscores the dramatic emergence of Jewish figural art after the close of the Second Temple period. The evidence from Sepphoris, an area of special expertise for Weiss, illustrates the shift quite unequivocally in coinage, mosaics, statues and architectural design. Nor need this reflect simply the taste of wealthy Roman grandees. Weiss proposes that these aesthetic inclinations had pervaded the Jewish population of the region, suggesting even that the famed House of Dionysus may have been owned by R. Judah the Patriarch himself. If, indeed, the change came about through the Jews themselves rather than the pagans, how should one understand this striking turn? Weiss sees it as a desire of the Jewish residents of Sepphoris to emulate and thus to participate in Roman urban culture. That, however, seems a bit counter-intuitive. Did the frustration and anger at the destruction of the Temple and the crushing of the Bar-Kokhba revolt really give way so quickly to 'a certain appreciation of Rome and its culture'?

Sepphoris is impressive. But nothing quite compares to the spectacular wall paintings in the synagogue of Dura-Europus. No pagan scenes here. The pictorial narratives all derive directly from the Hebrew Bible. They are extensive, colourful and elaborate. Aniconism has been left far behind. Tessa Rajak offers an interpretation of the pictorial programme. In her view, quite reasonably, it discloses a rich Jewish artistic tradition that must have lain in the background, and one that connected figural representation with biblical history. Further, as she

observes, the diverse languages and dress depicted in the synagogue indicate the active cultural interchange that the Jews of Dura enjoyed. Rajak may go a bit too far in this direction when she softens the impact of the triumphal scenes, claiming that the defeat of one god by another may simply be ‘business as usual in the divine sphere’. But the emphasis on the Dura synagogue in its broader context, both pagan and Christian, is welcome. The second commandment has by this time been thoroughly reinterpreted. How had this happened, and how representative was Dura? Rajak draws back from those questions.

The reinterpretation of the second commandment may have been going on for a very long time indeed. As Sarah Pearce shows in her contribution, Philo puts his own spin on the matter. His approach, as one might expect, likens false images to illusory ideas that divert the mind from right thinking and the truth. Pearce’s acute analysis of Philo’s language in the *De Decalogo* sets it in the discourse of Greco-Roman terminology for cult objects, thereby to contrast idolatry with the proper development of the rational soul. The philosophical grappling with the power of images suggests that the issue was a live one in the late Second Temple. But here again one must ask how representative a voice was that of Philo, or indeed his audience. We are still largely in the dark.

One might even interpret the effects of the second commandment in a still earlier text by a Hellenistic Jewish author. Jane Heath explores

the famous description of Ptolemy II’s gifts to the Temple in Jerusalem portrayed by the *Letter of Aristeas*. The vivid and detailed depiction of the material objects, of course, links this part of the text to the Hellenistic genre of *ekphrasis*. Heath points out, however, that certain Jewish elements do seep through. The fact that this lengthy *ekphrasis* avoids non-figurative art may, in her view, be a nod in the direction of the second commandment or at least the looser interpretation of it.

The remaining essays in the collection, while valuable in their own right, have other issues in view. Margaret H. Williams provides a characteristically provocative piece on the widespread use of the menorah, beginning in the Second Temple and expanding in Late Antiquity. She challenges the usual understanding of the phenomenon as an identity signifier to distinguish Jews from Christians who identified themselves via the cross. For Williams the menorah served primarily as an apotropaic symbol, drawing particularly upon pagan practices in the funerary sphere. Extensive evidence to that effect derives from the Jewish catacombs in Rome from Late Antiquity. The proposition certainly deserves consideration. But, if the apotropaic function is paramount, one wonders why menorahs do not appear in the large majority of the catacombs.

The final two articles in the volume stand somewhat apart. Laliv Clenman treats rabbinic texts on the molekh ritual, which has only marginal relevance to the rest of the volume. And Aron C. Sterk supplies the Latin

text and English translation of the spurious letter of Anna to Seneca, which seems even more remote from the main themes of the book. Both papers do touch on idolatry, but make no attempt to link with the issue of tension between the second commandment and the creation of Jewish images.

The collection as a whole provides more questions than answers. But nothing exceeds the importance of asking the right questions. Sarah Pearce deserves commendation for bringing together a set of highly intelligent essays that prompt thinking and probing even when they do not provide definitive solutions.

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Sylvie Honigman, *Tales of High Priests and Taxes: The Books of the Maccabees and the Judean Rebellion against Antiochus IV*. University of California Press, Berkeley, 2014. ix, 554 pp. \$95.00/£65.00. ISBN 978 0 52 027558 4.

Sylvie Honigman's ambitious study of the books of Maccabees and the Maccabean revolt is divided into three parts, preceded by a general introduction that anticipates her main conclusions.

The general introduction declares the paradigm of scholarship inherited from Bickerman and Tcherikover to be flawed and outdated, because of its positivistic reading of the source, its legalistic view of the institutions, an essentialist view of culture, an instrumentalist view of religion and overemphasis on comparative material from Greek cities. She also rejects any view of the books of Maccabees as 'theological' or 'temple propaganda'. The interpretative key to both books is the centrality of the rededication, in her terms 'refoundation', of the Temple, which she interprets in light of the tradition of temple foundations in the ancient Near East as a means to legitimate kings or rulers. Both books

are dynastic histories. 2 Maccabees, no less than 1 Maccabees, was written in Jerusalem. Both use the cultural and narrative codes that were commonly accepted in Judaeo-literate circles. Piety is a condition of a ruler's legitimacy. Illegitimate rulers are by definition impious. Events are only worth narrating in so far as they are related to the Temple. Consequently, much of their narratives should not be taken literally. The charge that Menelaus stole temple vessels is mere slander. There is no reason to think that he and Jason were not dutiful High Priests. *Ioudaismos* is simply the political order championed by Judas Maccabee and *Hellenismos* is the order championed by his opponents.

Part 1 begins with a polemic against the 'modernist' view of religion, as an optional belief system. Belief in and worship of the gods were simply a given in the ancient world. Accordingly, there was no need to