Sarah Pearce, ed.

*The Image and Its Prohibition in Jewish Antiquity*


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*The Image and its Prohibition in Jewish Antiquity* is a collection of ten essays that reflect upon issues of Jewish visuality and materiality from the Iron Age through late antiquity, with particular interests in the first Christian centuries. The unifying theme of this volume is the dialectic of “image” and “prohibition,” the starting point of this discussion being the so-called Second Commandment.

Focus upon supposed Jewish aniconism is a well established trope—almost obsession—in studies of Jewish visuality. This line of interpretation has deep roots in German Protestant constructions of Jews and Judaism, which the mainstream of modernizing Jews in the West of every “denominational” bent not only accepted but grafted to rabbinic texts that deal with idolatry, *avodah zarah*. Much of the study of these materials today is a piece with this tradition, whether the modernist if conservative philological Talmudism that is associated with the schools of E. E. Urbach and Saul Lieberman, or the sometimes overzealous use of archaeology to discover Judaism beyond the rabbis, an approach associated with E. R. Goodenough, Morton Smith, and many of Smith’s Jewish students. Insightful as it is rigorous, my sense is that the focus upon idolatry as the centerpiece of study on Jewish visuality gives precedence to the problematic and complicated in relations between Jews and their neighbors—the stuff that rabbis and their followers found difficult—rather than the shared and the ordinary. Scholars of postcolonialism have noted that emphasis upon difference is often a way to “other” the
native populations—and for once-colonized “natives” to maintain/construct their own distinctiveness. This is true of Jews in the modern world, and I would suggest no less so in Greco-Roman antiquity.

By contrast, culturists/Jewish nationalists in Eastern Europe, particularly in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, were far more interested in the description of culture and the creation of a cultural canon than in law and theology. The epicenter for this work was the rabbinical seminary in Budapest, where David Kaufmann set about creating the corpus of Jewish art and the interpretation of Jewish visual culture beyond the theological dichotomy of image and prohibition. This was the beginning of a mainly Eastern European movement to collect and interpret Jewish visual culture without the theological/nationalistic straightjacket that the “Artless Jew” frame created for it. Most modern scholarship on Jewish art is the beneficiary of this Eastern European project, from the Bezalel National Museum of Galician Mordechai Narkiss (Potash, b. Skala, today Poland), now the Israel Museum, to the Center for Jewish Art of his son Bezalel, or the study of Jewish archaeology as developed by Bialystoker Eleazar L. Sukenik (not to mention his son, Yigael Yadin), and the folklore approach of S. Anski institutionalized in Israel by Galicianer Dov Noy (Neuman, b. Kolomyia, then Poland, now Ukraine) and more recently by Shalom Sabar. In recent years, the study of Jewish visual culture has spawned two international journals and broadened both to include questions raised by postmodern scholarship and an expansive definition of “late antiquity.” “New” sources—particularly piyyut, liturgical poetry—and renewed interest in sources of Christian and Persian late antiquity have transformed the study of this period. New questions have entered the scholarly agenda, among them issues that bring the study of Jewish visual culture closer to themes current in the current study of Christian visual culture, including “vision,” polychromy, liturgical studies, and religious experience.

The Image and Its Prohibition in Jewish Antiquity returns to the Second Commandment paradigm with a selection of very useful and insightful essays. The volume opens with citation of the “Second Commandment,” which editor Sarah Pierce rightly problematizes in terms of the Artless Jew model. It thus reflects a step forward beyond most other corpora on this subject, even as it does not represent a paradigm shift. All but one of the essays is the work of a philologically focused historian and is a series of micro-histories of a specific themes that resides under the larger umbrella of the image/prohibition paradigm.

The Image and Its Prohibition offers a rich selection of studies, mainly dealing with literary themes. Philip Alexander opens with “Reflections on Word versus Image as Ways of Mediating the Divine Presence in Judaism,” in which he discusses a range of rabbinic sources to discuss rabbinic sources on idolatry and “aniconism.” In my own work, by
contrast, I have argued that “aniconism”—a term taken over from biblical studies—is a poor cipher for the Jewish experience in the classical world and that something like “anti-idolism” better describes this cultural proclivity. This study is followed by a survey of biblical sources on the question of “Was There an Image of the Deity in the First Temple,” by H. G. M. Williamson. The answer given is no, though there were lots of other places to find images in Iron Age Judah. The volume then jumps forward to Jane Heath’s “Greek and Jewish Visual Piety: Ptolemy’s Gifts in the Letter of Aristeas,” a text that has long needed thorough explication and that Heath rightly places within the context of ekphrasis. Similarly, Sarah Pierce’s “Philo of Alexandria on the Second Commandment” is a significant contribution on a source long discussed but seldom focused upon in scholarship on Jewish visual culture under Rome.

The volume then turns to late antiquity, with epigrapher Margaret H. Williams’s “The Menorah in a Sepulchral Context: A Protective Apotropaic Symbol?” The answer given is affirmative, though my sense is that, with a dearth of literary sources, it is hard to tell. Tessa Rajak nicely interprets “The Synagogue Paintings of Dura-Europos: Triumphalism and Competition” as a complex reflection of social relations in this Roman border city, bringing this important monument into the discussion. Next, Sacha Stern returns profitably to the question of “Images in Late Antique Palestine: Jewish and Greco-Roman Views.” Stern’s main concern is rabbinic attitudes, reflecting on more recent studies of these issues. He is completely correct that “this debate is indicative of how little we know” (123), which suggests to me at least that it may now be time to let this question rest for a while. The volume then changes tenor with “Images and Figural Representations in the Urban Galilee: Defining Limits in Times of Shifting Borders,” by Zeev Weiss. This essay surveys Weiss’s discoveries in Sepphoris, with the underlying sense—here unstated—that Sepphoris was the archetypical Jewish city. Weiss repeats his overreaching claim that the House of Dionysios, with its fine mosaic, may have been “owned by Rabbi Judah the Prince himself” (138). Laviv Clenman then returns to the rabbis with “The Faceless Idol and Images of Terror in Rabbinic Tradition on Molech,” an excellent case study of an understudied tradition. The volume concludes with Aron C. Stark’s “The Letter of Annas to Seneca: A Late Antique Jewish Exhortation in Dialogue with Paganism.” This essay discusses a text published only in the 1980s that associates Jewish and pagan “aniconic monotheism” in a common defense against triumphant Christianity.

*The Image and its Prohibition in Jewish Antiquity* is beautifully produced, with numerous color illustrations. It will be an important addition to all libraries that collect deeply in Jewish, Christian, Roman, and late antique culture and religion.