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March 30, 2014

Reading Images, Seeing Texts:
Towards a Visual Hermeneutics for Biblical Studies

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ABSTRACT

Reading Images, Seeing Texts:
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By Ryan P. Bonfiglio

In the past several decades, biblical scholars have begun to turn to ancient Near Eastern art as an important resource in various avenues of research. Despite this increased interest in visual material, critical questions about visual theory and the nature of visual culture remain mostly unexplored in biblical scholarship. In response, this dissertation offers a sustained engagement of the field of visual culture studies in order to develop an interpretive framework, or "visual hermeneutics," that further informs how ancient art is utilized in the study of the Hebrew bible and Israelite religion.

The five main chapters of this dissertation explore how prominent themes in visual culture theory apply to particular questions in biblical scholarship, including: What is visual literacy and how does this concept clarify the importance of images as a language of communication in the ancient world? (ch. 2); How have scholars conceptualized the nature of the image-text relationship and in what ways do these theories inform our analysis of visual-verbal interactions, whether between discrete images and texts or within the same artifact? (ch. 3); What differences obtain between the way in which linguistic and non-linguistic sign systems generate meaning and how might these differences be accounted for through particular methods of image analysis? (ch. 4); How do theories about the power and agency of images help us better understand the nature of visual representation as well as the implications of visual response in the Hebrew Bible and the ANE world? (ch. 5); and How might a consideration of visual practices and religious ways of seeing influence our understanding of important topics in Israelite religion, including the study of aniconism and the search for Yahweh's image? (ch. 6). I synthesize my reflections in chapters 2-6 into nine clearly delineated interpretive principles that outline a visual hermeneutics for biblical studies (ch. 7).

The goal of this dissertation is to advance the methods and practices of the field of biblical iconography. In addition, it draws attention to the need for more critical reflection on visual culture studies in related areas of inquiry, including ANE art history, archaeology, and Israelite religion.

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CHAPTER 1

A CASE FOR VISUAL THEORY IN BIBLICAL STUDIES

Literary studies . . . have not exactly been transformed by the new discoveries in the study of visual culture. The notion of an "iconology of the text," of a thorough going rereading or reviewing of texts in light of visual culture is still only a hypothetical possibility.

- W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, 210

This [iconography] is perhaps the most promising direction taken in recent biblical scholarship's use of the comparative method. One can only hope that scholars will begin to give serious attention to non-epigraphic evidence in a more self-critical fashion.

- J. J. M. Roberts, "The Ancient Near Eastern Environment," 95

1.1. The (Partial) "Pictorial Turn" in Biblical Research

Whether they are classified as art or artifact, icon or idol, images are constitutive components of human culture in both ancient and modern contexts.¹ Yet, however ubiquitous images might be in everyday life and experience, it has only been in the closing decades of the twentieth century that the intellectual discourse of the humanities and social sciences has shifted more decisively toward foundational

¹ W. J. T. Mitchell makes a crucial point about the fundamental role images play in human culture in his essay, "Showing Seeing: A Critique of Visual Culture," *JVC* 1 (2002): 172. Mitchell disagrees with those who see the modern era as one uniquely dominated by visual media or who decry the "hegemony of the visible" as a function of new media technologies in Western cultures. For instance, Neil Postman's popular book *Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* (New York: Penguin, 1985) blames the supposed decay of American culture on the effect of the image-rich medium of television. Seeking an ethical basis for his critique, Postman appeals to the second commandment of the Decalogue, confident that the authors of this text "*assumed a connection between forms of human communication and the quality of a culture*" (9; emphasis his). For Postman, this particular interpretation of the second commandment not only applies to ancient Israelites in their historical context but also to his own readers. Postman concludes, "People like ourselves who are in the process of converting their culture from word-centered to image-centered might profit by reflecting on this Mosaic injunction" (9). The type of logo-centric perspective on display in Postman's work is neither uncommon nor recent. The long history of iconoclastic tendencies and the fear of images more broadly are the subject of David Freedberg's *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991). Freedberg's analysis—and the manifestation of Postman-like attitudes in biblical scholarship—will be scrutinized more fully later in this study.

questions about the nature of visual representation and the place of visual experience in cultural theory. Accordingly, visual cultural theorist W. J. T. Mitchell has described the current groundswell of academic and popular interest in all things visual as a "pictorial turn."² While Mitchell notes that the beginning of such a turn can be traced to the work of Charles Sanders Peirce, Ludwig Wittgenstein, and Nelson Goodman earlier in the twentieth century, a concern for visual materials and visual theories have garnered considerable attention more recently from art historians, visual cultural theorists, and a host of scholars from a diverse array of disciplines ranging from film studies to anthropology to cognitive science.³ In light of the exceptionally wide arc of this pictorial turn in academic circles, it is fitting to wonder whether a similar shift in intellectual discourse is discernible in biblical studies, and more specifically, the interpretation of the Hebrew Bible.

At first glance, such a turn appears to be readily apparent. Especially in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, when a renewed interest in classical antiquity led to the discovery of a wealth of archaeological materials, biblical scholars showed

² Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 11. In describing a shift in intellectual discourse as a "turn," Mitchell draws on the language of Richard Rorty, who explains the history of philosophy as a series of intellectual turns (see Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979], 263; and idem, *The Linguistic Turn: Recent Essays in Philosophical Method* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967]). Others have described this same phenomenon as a "visual turn" or a "visualistic turn" (see Martin Jay, "That Visual Turn," *JVC* 1 [2002]: 87-92; and Klaus Sachs-Hombach, *Bildtheorien: Anthropologische und kulturelle Grundlagen des Visualistic Turn* [Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2009]). This broader terminology is perhaps preferable since the shift in academic discourse is not only toward the study of material objects (i.e., "pictures") but also toward the analysis of visual practices and routines that rely on those objects. It should also be noted that other "turns" are commonly identified in the broader area of cultural studies, including "the ritualistic turn," "the performative turn," and so forth.

³ See for instance, Charles Sanders Peirce, *Elements of Logic* (vol. 2 of *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*; ed. Charles E. Hartshorne and Paul Weiss; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1932); Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (trans. G. E. M. Anscombe; New York: Macmillan, 1953); and Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1968).

heightened interest in the study of ancient art as a critical resource for understanding the historical and cultural background of the Hebrew Bible.⁴ Even though this influx of artifacts piqued the interest of many a biblical scholar, the advent of a more prominent turn to images in biblical studies would not emerge until the early 1970s with the work of Othmar Keel and the network of his students, often known as the "Fribourg School."⁵ Through the numerous contributions of these scholars, the "iconographic-biblical approach," or biblical iconography, became an increasingly common method for studying the history of ancient Israelite religion and the meaning of figurative language in biblical texts.⁶ Since the turn of the century, the pioneering work of the Fribourg School has been further advanced by a second generation of scholars. One of the

⁴ It should be noted that the term "iconography" can be used to refer to at least four different things: 1) a field or study (i.e., biblical *iconography*); 2) an art object (i.e., ancient Near Eastern *iconography*); 3) the visual content of an art object (i.e., an *iconographic* motif); and 4) an approach to analyzing images (i.e., the *iconographic* method). As in other scholarly literature, all four of these connotations are used in this study. However, in order to avoid confusion I generally use the term "iconography" to refer to a field of study or a method of analysis (for the latter, see especially ch. 4). I use the term "art" or "artifact" to refer to seal impressions, monumental reliefs, or other types of objects that display images. Thus, for the purposes of this study an "image" generally refers to the non-textual content of specific visual materials or art objects. While it is somewhat impractical—and at least potentially confusing—to parse these terminological differences too finely, it is nevertheless helpful to strive for a general level of consistency in how certain terms are employed.

⁵ Despite its name, the Fribourg School does not explicitly refer to a locality-based tradition. Rather, it is best understood as a widespread network of scholars, centered around Keel and his students and colleagues, such as Izaak Cornelius, Christian Hermann, Karl Jaroš, Silvia Schroer, Thomas Staubli, Urs Winter, Max Küchler, Jürg Egger, and Christoph Uehlinger, who are interested in drawing upon ANE art to help inform the study of the history of religion. For a helpful survey of the historical development and scholarly contributions of Keel and the Fribourg School, see Izaak J. de Hulster, "Illuminating Images: An Iconographic Method of Old Testament Exegesis with Three Case Studies from Third Isaiah" (Ph.D. diss., Utrecht University, 2008).

⁶ In his categorization of studies of ANE art, Joel M. LeMon distinguishes "iconographic-biblical" approaches from "iconographic-historical" and "iconographic-artistic" approaches based on the questions and goals that motivate and guide the research (LeMon, *Yahweh's Winged Form in the Psalms: Exploring Congruent Iconography and Texts* [OBO 242; Fribourg: Academic Press; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2010], 7-16; and idem, "Iconographic Approaches: The Iconic Structure of Psalm 17," in *Method Matters* [ed. LeMon and Kent Harold Richards; SBLRBS 56; Boston: Brill, 2010], 146-52). While these three methods are closely related and often overlap, iconographic-biblical approaches look to ANE art "for the express purpose of interpreting the Bible's literary imagery and figurative language" (LeMon, "Iconographic Approaches," 150). Throughout this study, I will opt to use "biblical iconography" as a simplified way of referring to what LeMon calls "iconographic-biblical approaches."

hallmarks of this "second wave" of biblical iconographers is their increased attention to and revision of interpretive methods. Brent A. Strawn, Joel M. LeMon, Izaak J. de Hulster, Martin Klingbeil, and numerous others have made substantial contributions to biblical iconography by not only categorizing various methodological procedures evident in past research but also reformulating those procedures for future use.⁷ Due in no small part to these efforts, at the outset of the twenty-first century, biblical iconography has gained a seat at the table of well-accepted methods for studying the Hebrew Bible.⁸

With contributions to biblical iconography on the rise in the scholarly literature in recent decades, it is tempting to announce a pictorial turn in biblical studies in a way that echoes Mitchell's description of the heightened concern for images in the intellectual discourse of other disciplines. Nevertheless, there remain good reasons to suspect that this visual turn in biblical studies has only been a partial one. While biblical scholars have increasingly turned to visual materials as objects of study, far less attention has been given to questions pertaining to the nature of visual culture, and with it, critical theories about visual representation, the relationship between images

⁷ See especially, LeMon, *Yahweh's Winged Form*; and de Hulster, *Iconographic Exegesis and Third Isaiah* (FAT 2/36; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009). In reference to the use of ancient art in New Testament studies, see also Annette Weissenrieder and Friederike Wendt, "Images as Communication: The Methods of Iconography," in *Picturing the New Testament: Studies in Ancient Visual Images* (ed. Weissenrieder, Wendt, and Petra von Gemünden; WUNT 193; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), 1-59.

⁸ That biblical iconography has become a well-accepted method within biblical studies is evident not only in the proliferation of journal articles and monographs in this field, but also its inclusion as a standard method of exegesis in handbooks and surveys of interpretive approaches. For instance, the 2010 volume, *Method Matters*, includes an essay about biblical iconography in its extensive survey of methods of exegesis in the study of the Hebrew Bible. Brent A. Strawn also reflects on the importance of biblical iconography to comparative methods in the same volume ("Comparative Approaches: History Theory and the Image of God," *Method Matters*, 117-42) and elsewhere, to the history of Israelite religion ("Whence Leonine Yahweh? Iconography and the History of Israelite Religion" in *Images and Prophecy in the Ancient Eastern Mediterranean* [ed. Martti Nissinen and Charles E. Carter; FRLANT 233; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2009], 51-85).

and texts, and the effects of religious ways of seeing.⁹ In fact, sustained reflection on theories of visual representation *per se*—that is, questions concerning the nature, function, power, and prevalence of images—have rarely surfaced in biblical iconography, be it in the work of the Fribourg School or in the more recent second wave of scholarship.¹⁰ Put differently, while biblical iconography has been widely practiced, it remains minimally theorized.

In adjudicating matters in this fashion, an important distinction must be made between contributions to biblical iconography that take up questions of *method* and those that take up questions of *theory*, even as the two can readily intersect and overlap. Whereas methodological concerns typically focus on a set of organized and delineated procedures that guide *how* interpretation is carried out, theoretical interests tend to focus on preliminary considerations, or a system of underlying principles, that provide an epistemological rationale for *why* given methods are practiced. In his own

⁹ The term "visual culture" is variously defined and widely debated. When used in reference to a field of study (i.e., visual culture studies), this term generally indicates an interdisciplinary field that emerged in the early 1990s and examines various popular visual practices (photography, advertisements, animation, computer graphics, crafts, fashion, graffiti, tattoos, films, TV, etc.) with specific attention to new theoretical perspectives on image analysis, the relationship of images and culture, and the socially and culturally constructed processes of seeing. For a helpful and concise survey of the historical development of this field see James Elkins, *Visual Studies: A Skeptical Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 1-30. At other times, visual culture tends to refer to the objects of study themselves, usually connoting "low" art or everyday "nonart" images in contradistinction to "high" art, which is the traditional subject of art history (Elkins, *The Domain of Images* [Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1999], 3-5). However, Mitchell (and others) prefer to use visual culture to refer not only to the object of study (i.e., the sum total of visual practices and materials) but also the ways in which visual materials are socially and culturally constructed and, conversely, how visual materials construct the social and cultural (Mitchell, "Showing Seeing," 171). In this sense, visual culture entails both the visual materials produced by a given culture as well as the ways of seeing (or visibility) generated by those materials. This understanding is evident in Whitney Davis's recent volume, *A General Theory of Visual Culture* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2011).

¹⁰ At the outset of his recent volume, de Hulster offers a similar assessment when he points out "the lack of explicit theoretical reflection in studies linking texts with images" (*Iconographic Exegesis*, 2). However, in my estimation the aim of de Hulster's project is far more focused on questions of biblical iconographic method rather than underlying theories of visual representation.

treatment of the relationship of methods and theories in biblical iconography, de Hulster contends that "theory shapes the framework (approach) and supports the construction of tools whereas method puts a theory into practice."¹¹ If, as de Hulster contends, a method (μέθοδος) can be described as a way or path of investigation, then theory (θεωρία) is a way of looking at or contemplating the methodological paths taken in a course of study. While both methods and theories are operative in all forms of interpretation, in the case of biblical iconography, questions concerning interpretive method have garnered much more attention than those pertaining to visual theory.

This tendency to concentrate on method rather than theory is especially evident in two recent contributions from second wave biblical iconographers. One such example is LeMon's *Yahweh's Winged Form in the Psalms*. In his opening chapter, LeMon critically analyzes methods of biblical iconography and how they establish congruency between certain ancient Near Eastern images and biblical texts.¹² As an example, LeMon calls into question the way in which William P. Brown draws upon the work of Jan Assmann to assert that metaphors in the Psalter and ANE art, like text and image in Egyptian solar hymns, share an iconic content that can be said to be so closely related as to express equivalent thoughts.¹³ However, as LeMon rightly points out, in making this claim Brown might overgeneralize the relationship of ANE images and biblical texts in part because he fails to adequately account for the cultural particularity and contextual

¹¹ De Hulster, *Iconographic Exegesis*, 39.

¹² LeMon's discussion focuses primarily on William P. Brown's use of ancient iconography in his study of various metaphors in the Psalms (Brown, *Seeing the Psalms: A Theology of Metaphor* [Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2002]).

¹³ Brown, *Seeing the Psalms*, 14. See also Jan Assmann, *Egyptian Solar Religion in the New Kingdom: Re, Amun and the Crisis of Polytheism* (trans. Anthony Alcock; New York: Kegan Paul International, 1995).

specificity of both objects of study.¹⁴ Whereas text and image are organically bound together in the hieroglyphic script of Egyptian solar hymns, such is not the case with respect to textual materials from ancient Israel and art objects from Egypt, Mesopotamia, Persia, or even Canaan. In LeMon's estimation, Brown's methodology treats the diverse repertoire of ANE images as reflecting something of a homogenous system of thought and as such does not provide a way to evaluate the relative—and sometimes contrasting—influence of different regional iconographies on the metaphors evident in the Psalter. By way of response, LeMon offers a five-step interpretive procedure that provides a more judicious way of establishing a level of congruency between ANE art and figurative language in the Hebrew Bible.¹⁵

While LeMon's interpretive procedure makes an important contribution to biblical iconography, his methodological recommendations might be further advanced through a more explicit and sustained engagement with relevant issues in visual theory. For instance, even though LeMon offers a sophisticated treatment of issues related to the cultural and contextual particularity of images and texts, his methodology is far less concerned with what I believe are equally important questions about the nature of visual-verbal interactions, whether on a particular artifact or between images and texts from the same cultural and geographical context. Such considerations have long since attracted the scrutiny of philosophers, art historians, literary critics, and visual culture theorists alike. A parade example is found in Mitchell's extensive treatment of approaches to the text-image relationship in his companion volumes, *Iconology* (1986)

¹⁴ LeMon, *Yahweh's Winged Form*, 16-22.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 24.

and *Picture Theory* (1994).¹⁶ In both of these volumes, Mitchell raises important questions about visual-verbal interactions in contemporary visual media that, in my estimation, might also be asked about ancient artifacts. These include: Do visual and verbal forms of representation operate under the same system of signification in the ANE world? Would a text and an image that ostensibly describe the same thing, even if on a single artifact, necessarily have the same impact on or convey the same meaning to its viewers? What sorts of relationship (dependent, independent, inter-dependent, etc.) might obtain between corresponding visual and verbal data and how might the dynamics of this relationship shift depending on the type of text (captions, epigraphs, historical annals) or type of image (monumental reliefs, seals, coins) at hand? To what extent does textuality enter into the logic of visual display, and, conversely, visibility into the function of written materials? That these and others questions about the image-text relationship remain mostly unasked in LeMon's otherwise insightful volume does not suggest that his methodology lacks insight or rigor.¹⁷ Nevertheless, engaging theories about the text-image relationship might serve to further nuance future studies that attempt to read the Hebrew Bible in light of ANE art.

A similar assessment can be offered with respect to de Hulster's recently revised dissertation, *Iconographic Exegesis and Third Isaiah*. Unlike LeMon, de Hulster explicitly foregrounds the need for theoretical reflection about visual representation. In fact, in

¹⁶ Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986); and idem, *Picture Theory*.

¹⁷ It should be noted that LeMon does cite Mitchell's *Picture Theory* in one instance (*Yahweh's Winged Form*, 192). However, in this case LeMon draws on Mitchell in order to explain the "multistability" of meaning in Yahweh's winged form in Ps 17 (*Yahweh's Winged Form*, 192), not the image-text relationship *per se*, which is Mitchell's central focus in *Picture Theory*. For further discussion, see §3.4 below.

his opening pages de Hulster promises "a thorough theoretical basis for iconographic exegesis."¹⁸ From here, de Hulster goes on to direct several sub-sections of his third chapter to key theoretical issues, such as why images are important objects of study (§3.1), what images are (§3.4.1), and in what disciplines images are typically studied (§3.7.1). However, while the inclusion of such issues raises crucial questions that typically go unasked in biblical studies, the discussions themselves are in need of further development, especially as they relate to visual theory. To be fair, de Hulster acknowledges the limited scope of his theoretical reflections for the purpose of his project. Instead he focuses more of his attention on *procedures* for image analysis (so, again, *method*), as is evident in the extended discussion in §3.7.2-5.¹⁹ In this way, while de Hulster does more to surface questions of theory than most biblical iconographers, the largest contribution of his study lies in its refinements of methodological procedure.

However sophisticated de Hulster's method might be, it still would be fruitful to apply pressure to the theoretical principles that underlie these procedures. As an example, de Hulster devotes only one paragraph to the question of "What is an image?" and does little more than establish that an image is a "mediated representation."²⁰ Though such a description is fitting in a general sense, much more might be said not only about what an image is but also how images mean and what images do. In fact, as was the case with theories concerning the text-image relationship in the example above, numerous art historians and visual culture theorists have looked more closely at the

¹⁸ de Hulster, *Iconographic Exegesis*, 2.

¹⁹ For de Hulster's appraisal of the theoretical scope of his project, see *Iconographic Exegesis*, 40, n. 63; 48.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 48-49. I treat this question in more detail in §5.1.

nature of visual signs, the function of images in religious culture, and the implications of visual response in specific social and historical contexts.²¹ For instance, through a series of recent publications, visual culture theorist David Morgan explores the dynamics of visual representation with regard to contemporary religious imagery.²² By exploring how popular religious art, such as Warner Sallman's famous twentieth-century depictions of Jesus, shapes the beliefs, practices, and attitudes of viewers, Morgan does more than just decode the symbolic meaning of specific pieces of art. Instead, Morgan's interpretive analysis exhibits a shift from the study of images as an artist- or object-centered discourse to what he calls a "practice-centered discourse" that looks at "the social apparatus that creates and deploys the object, the gaze that apprehends the image in the social operation of seeing."²³ While Morgan still attends closely to traditional iconographical and iconological concerns, he also explores how "the rituals, epistemologies, tastes, sensibilities, and cognitive frameworks that inform visual experience help construct the worlds people live in and care about."²⁴ In my estimation, similar questions might just as well be asked about ancient images and ancient viewers. As such, Morgan's analysis might be re-deployed toward better understanding the

²¹ While not engaging biblical materials, Zainab Bahrani's work with ancient Mesopotamian art represents an insightful treatment of the semiotics of ancient Near Eastern visual representation. As will be more fully discussed in subsequent chapters, Bahrani's work is invaluable for biblical iconographic research that is sensitive to the sorts of questions raised above. See for instance, Bahrani, *The Graven Image: Representation in Babylonia and Assyria* (Archaeology, Culture, and Society; Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003); eadem, *Rituals of War: The Body and Violence in Mesopotamia* (New York: Zone Books, 2008).

²² See especially David Morgan, *Visual Piety: A History and Theory of Popular Religious Imagery* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998) and idem, *The Sacred Gaze: Religious Visual Cultural in Theory and Practice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

²³ Morgan, *The Sacred Gaze*, 32.

²⁴ Ibid., 25.

power and meaning of ancient visual artifacts as well as their impact on ancient Israelite viewers.²⁵

What is evident from this brief survey of recent contributions from both LeMon and de Hulster is this: even the most methodologically advanced treatments of biblical iconography only sparingly draw on visual theory to frame and inform their research. In contrast, Mitchell, Morgan, and numerous others more explicitly anchor their interpretive work in critical theories about visual culture. Their research is characterized not only by analyses of specific visual objects but also a concern for "the practices and habits that rely on images as well as the attitudes and preconceptions that inform vision as a cultural act."²⁶ In other words, beyond elucidating what images "say" (i.e., their content), visual culture theorists tend to explore what images do, how they are put to use, and why they solicit from their viewers such powerful responses of devotion and hatred, fascination and fear. This is not to say that biblical iconographers are uninterested in such matters or are unaware of recent developments in the study of visual culture. I simply mean to suggest that up to this point visual theory has only played a minor role in the scholarly discourse about images in biblical studies. In view of this observation, the next step in the advancement of this field would be for scholars to

²⁵ However, it should be noted that if biblical iconographers have been relatively uninterested in visual theory, visual culture theorists have been equally inattentive to ancient art. In fact, visual culture theorist James Elkins contends that the diverse field of visual culture studies is united by its *lack* of interest in older cultures and ancient pictorial materials (*Visual Studies*, 17). Nevertheless, a consideration of visual semiotics and image analysis with respect to biblical iconography is not without precedent. Eleanor Ferris Beach's dissertation critically engages the work of Panofsky and Susanne K. Langer in developing a nuanced procedure for interpreting pictorial artifacts in the study of the Hebrew Bible ("Image and Word: Iconology in the Interpretation of Hebrew Scriptures [Ph.D. diss.; Claremont Graduate School, 1991]).

²⁶ Morgan, *The Sacred Gaze*, 3.

attend more closely to visual theories as a critical lens for interpreting the Hebrew Bible in light of ANE art. This would involve a critical exploration of how theories about visual representation and visual culture can further refine methodological procedures and enhance interpretive practices when it comes to the study of Israelite religion, the figurative language of the Hebrew Bible, and various other aspects of biblical scholarship.

1.2. Prospects and Possibilities for a Visual Hermeneutics

If something of a scholarly lacuna has been left in biblical studies with regards to critical reflection on visual theory, then what might be potentially gained by attempting to fill this gap? Why not just "get to work" on analyzing ANE images and interpreting biblical texts? The primary purpose of this study is not to present a comprehensive theory of ancient visual culture for specialists in art history—though I hope such scholars might benefit from my attempt to apply contemporary visual theory to ancient artifacts. Neither do I wish to enter into an abstract discussion of theory for theory's sake—though I intend to offer a much more sustained reflection on theory than is found in most other contributions to biblical iconography. Nor is my main intention to develop a step-by-step procedure that applies in the same way to every biblical studies project that engages ancient art—though I am expressly interested in issues of method and application throughout this study. Rather, my primary interest has to do with hermeneutics, and in particular *visual* hermeneutics.

In my use of the term "hermeneutics," I follow Hans-Georg Gadamer—and thus Friedrich Schleiermacher—in referring to "the art of understanding" texts (or images). This "art" not only entails rules or procedures for interpretation (i.e., methods) but also a critical consideration of the preliminary principles and epistemological rationale upon which interpretive procedures are based (i.e., theory).²⁷ In focusing on the issue of hermeneutics and not just method, my research attempts to chart a different course than most second wave biblical iconographers. While these scholars have done much to describe the methodological "hats" (i.e., interpretive procedures) worn by biblical scholars interested in ancient art, I attempt to lift these hats, so to speak, in order to look more closely at the heads (i.e., mental processes and epistemological reasoning) upon which certain methods rest.²⁸ As a result, through a sustained reflection on a number of key issues in visual theory, I hope to surface a hermeneutical framework that can draw attention to and make a revision of the sorts of questions scholars ask and issues scholars raise about how one reads (ANE) images and sees (biblical) texts in light of those images.²⁹

²⁷ See, for instance, the helpful discussion of a definition of hermeneutics found in Anthony C. Thiselton's *Hermeneutics: An Introduction* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2009) 1-4.

²⁸ In other words, noticing that an individual is wearing a baseball hat as opposed to a chef's hat tells us something about what sort of job that person does and how he goes about doing it (i.e., method). However, hats tend to rest upon heads, and it is in knowing how those heads, or brains, conceptualize the rules of their respective work (i.e., theory) that we can better understand why different hats are worn and how they differ. Or, to flex the analogy further, one needs to know about more than just hats (and perhaps heads) to understand the embodied and contextual nature of performance. For instance, gestures by differently-"hatted" people might be identical for, say, a dancer and someone directing an airplane landing, even as both acts mean something quite different in their respective social and cultural contexts.

²⁹ Something analogous might be said about the value of considering any number of other hermeneutical perspectives, be they feminist/womanist, postcolonial, or the like. While I do not mean to suggest that visual hermeneutics and, say, womanist hermeneutics are completely parallel concepts, they both involve the consideration of reading strategies that are attentive to theories about how "texts" (be

In developing a more explicit notion of visual hermeneutics, the present study seeks to uniquely contribute to biblical iconographic research—and the field of biblical studies more broadly—in at least three distinct ways.

(1) First, I hope to prompt biblical iconography *to become a more self-critical discipline in both its methods and practices*. Such an endeavor can be understood as responding to the challenge Old Testament scholar J. J. M. Roberts put forth to biblical iconography nearly three decades ago when he said: "This [iconography] is perhaps the most promising direction taken in recent biblical scholarship's use of the comparative method. One can only hope that scholars will begin to give serious attention to non-epigraphic evidence in a more self-critical fashion."³⁰ In my estimation, theory plays an indispensable role in fostering this self-critical attitude insofar as it creates, as Morgan puts it, a "critical distance between what scholars see and what they think about what they see" when considering specific objects of study.³¹ As such, the challenge Roberts puts forth demands that scholars refine certain practices and perspectives as they apply to the interpretation of visual and verbal data in the ancient (and modern) world.

Towards this end, each of the next five chapters attempts to relate a critical question in visual theory to specific issues in biblical scholarship and religio-historical research. For instance: What is visual literacy and how does this concept clarify the importance of images as a language of communication in the ancient world? (ch. 2); How have scholars conceptualized the nature of the image-text relationship and in what

they verbal or visual) construct meaning and the active role readers/viewers play in encountering such meaning.

³⁰ J. J. M. Roberts, "The Ancient Near Eastern Environment," in *The Hebrew Bible and Its Modern Interpreters* (ed. Douglas A. Knight and Gene M. Tucker; Chico, Calif.: Scholars Press, 1985), 95.

³¹ Morgan, *The Sacred Gaze*, 26.

ways do these theories inform our interpretation of objects that combine visual and verbal data? (ch. 3); How do linguistic and non-linguistic signs convey meaning in different ways and what are the implications for methods of image analysis? (ch. 4); How does the history and theory of visual response shed new light on the nature, power, and agency of ancient art objects? (ch. 5); and How might a consideration of visual practices and ways of seeing influence our understanding of important topics in Israelite religion, such as the study of Israelite aniconism and the search for Yahweh's image (ch. 6)? In addressing each of these questions, I not only offer a critical engagement with visual theory but I also show how such theories can raise new questions and open up new avenues of research in biblical studies as well as archaeology, ancient art history, and other related fields. In some cases, this reflect involves critiquing certain aspects of previous contributions to biblical iconography. My intention, however, is not to dismiss the value of these studies nor to suggest that their many fruitful insights are invalidated by my hermeneutical framework. Rather, in these cases I wish to demonstrate how taking visual theory seriously can complement and further nuance the ground-breaking work of scholars associated with the Fribourg School and the second wave of biblical iconography.

(2) The second major goal of this study is to prompt biblical scholars interested in ANE art to be *more attentive to insights and ideas generated in other disciplines*. As already indicated, crucial conversations about the nature of visual representation have long since surfaced in the realm of art history and now are increasingly being taken up in

the field of visual culture studies.³² I consistently argue throughout this study that biblical studies has much to gain by explicitly engaging in interdisciplinary research that draws upon insights from other fields in the humanities and social sciences. Although such interdisciplinary "border crossings" are promising, they also can be fraught with difficulty and can occasionally feel more like hostile raids than cultural-exchange programs. As a result, it is imperative that this sort of research is carried out in careful and conscientious ways, judicious in its attempt to show how and where bridges might be constructed between the questions and concerns of biblical scholarship and those of visual theory.

In order to do so, each of the five theory chapters mentioned above (chs. 2-6) focuses on what is only a narrow slice of visual theory. These chapters do not attempt to offer an extensive literature review of visual culture studies nor do they provide an exhaustive discussion of any single topic in theory. Rather, they attempt to identify persistent concerns in visual theory that seem most relevant to the interpretive interests of biblical scholars. In each of these chapters, I situate the topic at hand with respect to the work of one or two theorists: James Elkins, visual literacy (ch. 2); Mitchell, the image-text relationship (ch. 3); Nelson Goodman, visual semiotics (ch. 4); David Freedberg and Alfred Gell, the power and agency of images (ch. 5); and David Morgan,

³² Much ink has been spilt on introductory volumes and general readers on visual culture. Some of the most helpful contributions include the following: Margarita Dikovitskaya, *Visual Culture: The Study of the Visual After the Cultural Turn* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2005); Elkins, *Visual Studies* (2003); Michael Ann Holly and Keith P. F. Moxey, *Art History, Aesthetics, Visual Studies* (Williamstown, Mass.: Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 2002); Nicholas Mirzoeff, *An Introduction to Visual Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1999); and idem, *The Visual Culture Reader* (New York: Routledge, 1998); and Norman Bryson, Holly, and Moxey, *Visual Culture: Images and Interpretations* (Hanover, N.H.: Published by University Press of New England for Wesleyan University Press, 1994).

religious visual culture (ch. 6). While these topics are treated by a host of other scholars as well, the theorists I have chosen to focus on are widely regarded as leading figures in that specific area of study. By concentrating on the work of a small set of theorists, I hope to make these theory-related discussions more accessible for the general reader and more conducive to focused and productive interdisciplinary inquiries.

(3) This study also intends *to make a persuasive case for the role and importance of images in the field of biblical studies*. In this sense, my case for theory in biblical iconography doubles as a case for images in biblical scholarship. Among other things, I hope to convince scholars who have not already made a pictorial turn in their own research of why images matter in text-based disciplines in the first place. I emphasize throughout this study how ANE art offers a data set that is at least as valuable as comparative written sources when it comes to understanding the conceptual world that lies behind the Hebrew Bible and Israelite religion. This hermeneutical perspective is summed up poignantly by Keel and Uehlinger when they suggest that "[a]nyone who systematically ignores the pictorial evidence that a culture has produced can hardly expect to recreate even a minimally adequate description of the culture itself."³³ In my estimation, biblical scholars should receive Keel and Uehlinger's comment as a type of "altar call" to the study of images. This need not mean that every biblical scholar should be as interested in images (or theory, for that matter) as I am. Nor do I mean to imply that ancient art is equally relevant to every avenue of biblical scholarship. Yet, by highlighting the role and importance of images in the ancient world, I hope to raise

³³ Othmar Keel and Christoph Uehlinger, *Gods, Goddesses, and Images of God in Ancient Israel* (trans. Thomas H. Trapp; Minneapolis, Fortress, 1998 [German original: 1992]), 11.

greater awareness about how and why images should matter in contemporary work in the field of biblical studies. While text-alone approaches might still have a role to play in biblical scholarship, the visual hermeneutics that I offer in this study attempts to challenge the *a priori* assumption that textual materials are the only—or even the most important—data source when it comes to analyzing the language and conceptual background of the Hebrew Bible. Put differently, I hope to further the pictorial turn in biblical scholarship not only by prompting biblical iconographers to think more about visual theory but also by urging other biblical scholars to think more about how ancient visual materials might contribute to their research on a host of topics and themes.

1.3. The Theory Applied

Throughout this study, I develop a visual hermeneutics through three distinct but interrelated analytical approaches, each of which attempts to apply visual theory to biblical research.

First, throughout this study I utilize *inductive surveys* of several widely appropriated methods in biblical iconography in order to more clearly discern the operative assumptions and perspectives that have guided this field of study. In contrast to other past surveys of biblical iconographic methods, the purpose of this analysis is neither to trace the historical development of the field nor to provide a novel typology of iconographic approaches.³⁴ Rather, the inductive surveys employed in this study aim

³⁴ Such analyses have been fruitfully carried out in other recent volumes. For instance, de Hulster's dissertation, "Illuminating Images," offers a thorough assessment of the historical development of the Fribourg School, with special attention paid to changes in methodological procedure. LeMon's

to demonstrate how methods of biblical iconography rely upon certain presuppositions about visual representation and visual culture, even though these ideas often remain unstated or under-scrutinized. In most cases, these inductive surveys introduce each of the theory related chapters. While not exhaustive in scope, these surveys demonstrate how and why theory is already and always present in the interpretive methods and practices of biblical iconographic research. As a result, my research does not so much introduce theory into biblical iconography as it attempts to highlight the theories that are already there. The inferences drawn from these inductive surveys bring into sharper relief some of the interpretive goals and intellectual presuppositions that have guided the development of this field of study in the past several decades. In addition, these surveys also draw attention to the need for more critical reflection on visual theory in related areas of inquiry, including ANE art history, archaeology, metaphor theory, and Israelite religion. In this sense, while my "visual hermeneutics" is primarily geared toward scholars interested in biblical iconography, the questions and issues it raises have the potential to advance literary, art-historical, and religio-historical research more broadly.

The second method of analysis that I employ consists of putting forward *constructive proposals* for how visual theory might revise interpretive methods. I suspect that one of the reasons why scholars remain somewhat skeptical about the role of theory in biblical research is that theoretical reflection is often carried out as an

revised dissertation, *Yahweh's Winged Form*, provides an insightful typology of approaches to ancient iconography (see n. 6 above). Weissenrieder and Wendt ("Images as Communication") catalogue four fundamental approaches, or intellectual orientations, to methodologies of image analysis more broadly.

abstract intellectual exercise whose primary purpose is to problematize and/or deconstruct past approaches to a given discipline. In contrast, my own approach to theory strives to be more constructive in its aims. Toward this end, I conclude each of my chapters with several specific suggestions concerning how visual theory might revise, expand, and/or further nuance widely utilized approaches in biblical iconography and other related areas of religio-historical research. These proposals do not by any means do away with insights generated in past contributions offered by members of the Fribourg School or the second wave biblical iconographers. Rather, I intend for my methodological suggestions to continue, and in some cases, slightly redirect, how these scholars study the Hebrew Bible in light of ANE art and visual culture.

Finally, throughout my study I attempt to provide a series of *generative examples* that demonstrate how my visual hermeneutics might shed new light on important interpretive issues in biblical exegesis and/or the study of Israelite religion. Thus, at every point possible, I endeavor to avoid a type of "theory-wonking" in which critical reflection is disconnected from a consideration of concrete examples.³⁵ In order to do so, in each chapter I explore how insights from visual theory might apply to a particular question in biblical research or to the analysis of specific art objects from the ancient Near Eastern world. In this way, practical considerations motivate and direct each of my theory-related chapters. For instance, chapter 2, "Visualizing Literacy: The Importance of Images as a Language of Communication," draws on theories about visual

³⁵ I borrow the term "theory-wonking" from David Morgan, who is also suspicious of projects that pursue theory for its own sake ("Introduction: The Matter of Belief," in *Religion and Material Culture: The Matter of Belief* [ed. David Morgan; New York: Routledge, 2010], 12). For further discussion, see Morgan's cautionary remarks about the role of theory in religious visual culture research in *The Sacred Gaze*, 25-27.

literacy in order to reassess recent research on textual literacy in ancient Israel. In doing so, this chapter also raises important questions about how scholars incorporate ANE art into the study of figurative language in the Hebrew Bible. Chapter 3, "Drawing Distinctions: The Nature of the Relationship Between Images and Texts" explores how Mitchell's theories about the image-text dialectic and the metapicture might apply to the interpretation of certain ancient artifacts, including those that incorporate image and text in the same visual frame. The goal of chapter 4, "Picturing Representation: The Meaning of Images and Approaches to Visual Analysis," is to suggest several ways in which theories about the semiotics of non-linguistic signs can be incorporated into methods of visual analysis. Through a series of test cases, I explore how ancient art objects can potentially generate meaning that goes beyond what is typically accounted for by most iconographic methods. Chapter 5, "Animating Art: The Life of Images and the Implications of Visual Response," uses theories about the power and agency of images to better understand the nature of the *šalmu* in ANE visual culture. I then use these theories as a critical lens for analyzing the significance of a fascinating example of visual response in the ancient world: the theft and destruction of divine and royal images in the context of war. Chapter 6, "Seeing is Believing: The Study of Visual Culture and the 'Matter' of Israelite Religion," applies theories about visual practices and religious ways of seeing to the study of Israelite aniconism and the search for Yahweh's image, respectively. Finally, in chapter 7, "Towards a Visual Hermeneutics: Perspectives and Principles for Biblical Interpretation," I synthesize my reflections on visual theory into nine clearly delineated interpretive principles. Taken together, these principles

outline a visual hermeneutics for biblical studies, and therefore offer scholars a more self-critical framework for reading images and seeing texts.

CHAPTER 2

VISUALIZING LITERACY: THE IMPORTANCE OF IMAGES AS A LANGUAGE OF COMMUNICATION

I want to read you a painting.
I want to tell you the
Mesh of colors woven
Speak the colors you create
And, transposing evidence
Against the space of art,
Ask you to draw me a poem.

- Brian J. Tessier, "The Poet and the Painter"

2.1. Encountering Images in a Text-Based Discipline

Prior to its recent (though partial) turn toward images, the study of the Hebrew Bible had been—and perhaps still is—a discipline characterized by a rather singular focus on textual materials. Be it through the examination of various ANE literary works or diverse epigraphic remains, biblical scholars, especially those interested in comparative approaches, have often utilized textual data as their primary, if not only, object of study.¹ These methodological tendencies have persisted in spite of the fact that art

¹ Text-alone methodological approaches are not unique to biblical scholarship. Visual cultural theorist Martin E. Jay highlights logocentric biases throughout Western intellectual discourse, especially in the twentieth century (*Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993]). Numerous other scholars have explored similar trends within other academic disciplines. See for instance, Chris Jenks, ed., *Visual Culture* (New York: Routledge, 1995); Stephen W. Melville and Bill Readings, eds., *Vision and Textuality* (London: Macmillan, 1995); and David Michael Kleinberg-Levin, ed., *Modernity and the Hegemony of Vision* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993]). However, as a result of the emergence of visual cultural studies, a growing number of scholars in the humanities and social sciences are calling for increased attention to visual materials in their own fields. As just one recent example, Anna Grimshaw criticizes the scarcity of interest in visuality and visual materials in much modern anthropological field work (*The Ethnographer's Eye: Ways of Seeing in Anthropology* [New York: Cambridge University Press, 2001]). In contrast to some past work in her field, Grimshaw advocates new ways of thinking about the importance of images in anthropological methods and practice.

objects outnumber textual materials in the archaeological record of Syria-Palestine and the rest of the ancient Near East.² In fact, while a wealth of visual materials have been discovered in the past two centuries, interest in ancient images has been relatively slow to develop among most biblical scholars.³ As a result, "text-alone" paradigms of research continue to hold sway in many areas of biblical studies.

However entrenched these logocentric tendencies have been, biblical iconographers are now increasingly calling into question the validity of approaches to the study of the Hebrew Bible that rely exclusively on comparative textual materials. One poignant example is found in Keel and Uehlinger's influential volume, *Gods, Goddesses, and Images of God* (1992; Eng. trans. 1998). In their study of ancient Israelite religion in light of iconographic data, Keel and Uehlinger contend that any reconstruction of the historical and cultural background of the Hebrew Bible must take into account not only non-biblical sources but also non-textual ones. Indeed, their conviction that visual materials are indispensable to the study of religio-historical matters is unequivocal: "Anyone who prefers to work exclusively with texts (e.g., to reconstruct 'Canaanite' religion using nothing but textual sources from Ugarit) ought to get little or no hearing."⁴ Such a view is now being taken up by a growing number of

² Othmar Keel and Christoph Uehlinger, *Gods, Goddesses, and Images of God in Ancient Israel* (trans. Thomas H. Trapp; Minneapolis, Fortress, 1998 [German original: 1992]), 4.

³ In their surveys of the history of biblical iconography, both LeMon ("Iconographic Approaches: The Iconic Structure of Psalm 17," in *Method Matters* [ed. LeMon and Kent Harold Richards; SBLRBS 56; Boston: Brill, 2010], 143) and Keel ("Iconography and the Bible," in *ABD* 3:359) implicitly acknowledge the slow development of interest in visual materials among biblical scholars. In fact, more concerted iconographic research did not arise until the emergence of the Fribourg School in the last quarter of the twentieth century. For a helpful analysis of these developments, see de Hulster, "Illuminating Images," Ph.D. diss., Utrecht University, 2008.

⁴ Keel and Uehlinger, *GGG*, 11.

biblical scholars, and as a result, text-alone approaches to the study of ancient Israelite religion and the conceptual background of the Hebrew Bible are gradually losing currency.⁵

Yet, *why* exactly are images so important? Although biblical iconographers rarely discuss this question at length, its answer is crucial to the conviction held by Keel, Uehlinger, and numerous others that iconographic data ought to be utilized as more than just "nice pictures" that accompany text-based studies of the Hebrew Bible. Put differently, if images are to matter to contemporary biblical scholars, then a more

⁵ Mark S. Smith describes text-alone approaches to religio-historical matters as "working with a puzzle that is missing many or most of its pieces" (*The Early History of God: Yahweh and the Other Deities in Ancient Israel* [San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990], xxix). In the preface to the second edition of this volume (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2002), Smith elaborates on the growing trend to use iconography in the study of ancient Israelite religion. See also, Uehlinger, ed. *Images as Media: Sources for the Cultural History of the Near East and the Eastern Mediterranean: 1st Millennium BCE* (OBO 175; Fribourg: University Press; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2000); Karel van der Toorn, ed., *The Image and the Book: Iconic Cults, Aniconism, and the Rise of Book Religion in Israel and the Ancient Near East* (CBET 21; Leuven: Peeters, 1997); Tryggve N. D. Mettinger, *No Graven Image? Israelite Aniconism in Its Ancient Near Eastern Context* (ConBOT 42; Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1995); Izak Cornelius, *The Iconography of the Canaanite Gods Reshef and Ba'al: Late Bronze Age I Periods (c. 1500-1000 BCE)* (OBO 140; Fribourg: University Press; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1994); Benjamin Sass and Christoph Uehlinger, eds., *Studies in the Iconography of Northwest Semitic Inscribed Seals: Proceedings of a Symposium Held in Fribourg on April 17-20, 1991* (OBO 125; Fribourg: University Press; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1993); and Pierre Amiet, *Corpus des cylindres de Ras Shamra – Ougarit II: Sceaux-cylindres en hématite et pierres diverses, RSO IX* (Paris: Éditions Recherche sur les Civilisations, 1992).

The most exhaustive (and most recent) use of iconography in religio-historical research of Israel-Palestine is on display in the four volume compendium edited by Silvia Schroer and Keel that covers the time period from the twelfth century through the Persian period (*Die Ikonographie Palästinas/Israels und der Alte Orient: Eine Religionsgeschichte in Bildern* [4 vols.; Fribourg: Academic Press, 2005-2011]). A similar tendency to draw on iconographic data is evident in recent studies of figurative language in the Hebrew Bible. For instance, numerous biblical scholars have investigated biblical metaphors in light of corresponding ANE art in order to better understand the conceptual background of certain literary imagery. See for instance, Joel M. LeMon, *Yahweh's Winged Form in the Psalms: Exploring Congruent Iconography and Texts* (OBO 242; Fribourg: Academic Press; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2010); Izaak J. de Hulster, *Iconographic Exegesis and Third Isaiah* (Forschungen zum Alten Testament 2/36; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009); Brent A. Strawn, *What is Stronger Than a Lion?: Leonine Image and Metaphor in the Hebrew Bible and the Ancient Near East* (OBO 212; Fribourg: Academic Press; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2005); William P. Brown, *Seeing the Psalms: A Theology of Metaphor* (Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 2002); and Martin G. Klingbeil, *Yahweh Fighting from Heaven: God as Warrior and as God of Heaven in the Hebrew Psalter and Ancient Near Eastern Iconography* (OBO 169; Fribourg: University Press; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1999).

thorough account must be made of how and why images mattered to ancient Israelite viewers in the first place.

Recent contributions to biblical iconography have only begun to address this issue in an explicit manner. The operative, though often unspoken, premise is that all material remains, whether textual or visual, are a constitutive part of a given culture's symbol system. Human cultures express themselves and negotiate meaning through both text-based and image-based symbols, not to mention a variety of embodied practices and rituals. As a result, it is necessary to work (at least) with both literary and iconographic materials when deciphering the complex symbol system of a given culture.⁶ In this way, images, like texts, function as a type of language, and as such, provide a window into the sign context of ancient biblical writers and readers. As a result, biblical iconographers sometimes speak of textual and iconographic data as dual reflexes—one verbal, the other visual—of the conceptual world behind the Hebrew Bible.⁷

This understanding about why images matter informs Keel and Uehlinger's critique of text-alone approaches to religio-historical research:

Conclusions drawn from an interpretation of Bronze Age texts discovered in northern Syria, and the religio-historical hypotheses developed from such

⁶ Keel and Uehlinger make this crucial point with respect to religious culture when they assert that "Religious concepts are expressed not only in texts but can be given a pictorial form on items found in the material culture as well" (*GGG*, 10). More recently, a similar idea is echoed in de Hulster's work with biblical iconographic methods. De Hulster asserts, "Images as part of the archaeological record constitute an important source, which the historical approach can employ to get more information about the act of communication (of which the text is part) and its background" (*Iconographic Exegesis*, 24).

⁷ Strawn, "'A World Under Control': Isaiah 60 and the Apadana Reliefs from Persepolis," in *Approaching Yehud: New Approaches to the Study of the Persian Period* (ed. Jon L. Berquist; SemeiaSt 50; Atlanta: SBL, 2007), 114. See also Strawn's discussion of the importance of iconographic data in his treatment of the origins and development of leonine imagery and its use in metaphors about Yahweh (*What is Stronger than a Lion*, 19-20).

evidence, cannot be used uncritically to explain the religious history of Canaan during the second millennium and, though it has happened repeatedly, certainly not to clarify what happened in Israel during the first millennium.⁸

The essence of Keel and Uehlinger's appraisal is that when reconstructing the historical background of Israelite religion or interpreting literary imagery in the Hebrew Bible, scholars should give the greatest consideration to material remains, regardless of whether they are textual or visual, that are most geographically and chronologically proximate to the cultural context of the biblical texts under investigation. In this view, Syro-Palestinian glyptic art from Iron Age III would be a more pertinent source of comparative data for understanding the cultural and religious context of a post-exilic prophetic text such as Second Zechariah than, say, thirteenth-century texts from Ras Shamra.⁹ What Keel and Uehlinger are calling into question, then, are methodologies that *a priori* assume biblical texts are best understood in light of other textual data or written documents, regardless of their geographical and chronological proximity to the

⁸ Keel and Uehlinger, *GGG*, 11.

⁹ Yet this has not been the practice of much previous research on Second Zechariah. To name but one example, Eric and Carol Meyers follow Paul Hanson in claiming that Zechariah 9 draws upon ancient Canaanite textual materials in order to inform its description of Yahweh as Divine Warrior. In their view, the fact that Zechariah 9 borrows ancient mythic elements "should be viewed as part of Second Zechariah's general tendency to echo the language of authoritative literature" (Meyers and Meyers, *Zechariah 9-14: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* [Anchor Bible 25c. New York: Doubleday, 1993], 150). While Hanson and the Meyers are certainly right to suggest that the Divine Warrior motif is present in ancient mythic literature, their explanation of *how* Zechariah 9 is textually dependent upon these sources lacks specificity. For instance, what sort of mechanism of textual dependency must be at work in order to assume that ancient mythic imagery from thirteenth-century Ugarit is "quite appropriate" to Second Zechariah at the beginning of the fifth century? In addition to conflict myth texts, are there other sources, perhaps non-textual, that might also inform the figurative language of Zechariah 9? For further discussion of this issue, see for instance, Ryan P. Bonfiglio, "Archer Imagery in Zechariah 9:11-17 in Light of Achaemenid Iconography," *JBL* 131 (2012): 507-27.

readers and writers of the Hebrew Bible itself. These types of approaches, in Keel and Uehlinger's opinion, "ought to get little or no hearing" in scholarly circles.¹⁰

Keel and Uehlinger's methodological remarks are insightful and offer a necessary corrective to comparative studies that rely exclusively on textual materials. However, what Keel and Uehlinger do not explicitly address are crucial questions about the relative importance of images *within* a given cultural context or even on an artifact that combines both image and text. For instance: Do visual and textual data from the same geographical and chronological context—or indeed, from the *same artifact*—function in the same way or to the same degree as vehicles of communication? In what ways were images intended to be "read" and how did they function as a language in their own right? To what extent does the visual culture of ancient Israel provide the most relevant comparative data for understanding the conceptual background of the Hebrew Bible and the figurative language integral to its religious beliefs and theological imagination?

The aim of this chapter is to address these and related questions about how and why images mattered in ancient Israel. This research proceeds along several related lines of inquiry. First, this chapter attempts to "visualize" recent debates about literacy in ancient Israel by reassessing the role and importance of textual and oral modes of communication from the vantage point of biblical iconography (§2.2). Second, this chapter develops the concept of visual literacy by utilizing contemporary theories from visual culture studies as a new conceptual framework for understanding the importance of ancient iconography as a language of communication (§2.3). This analysis not only

¹⁰ Keel and Uehlinger, *GGG*, 11.

highlights the ways in which visual objects—especially in the form of minor art—would have functioned as the "mass media" or *lingua franca* of the ancient world but also how visual and textual literacies interacted as complementary modes of communication on specific material remains. In exploring the methodological implications of these insights, I suggest in the final section of this chapter some ways in which the text-based discipline of biblical studies might more fully account for the importance of images in ancient Israel (§2.4).

2.2. Visualizing Literacy in Ancient Israel

It is rather axiomatic for most contemporary readers of the Hebrew Bible to believe that ancient Israelites formed, expressed, and transmitted ideas through words and texts.¹¹ At the level of popular religious culture, these assumptions can be detected in references to Jews as a "people of the book" and to Christianity as a "religion of the book."¹² In scholarly circles, interest in textual materials has dominated the academic

¹¹ However, in recent years many religion scholars have radically challenged the idea that religious communities express their faith primarily through written doctrines and creeds. As will be discussed later in this study (§6.1), faith happens not only in what people say but also in what they see and do. Recent efforts to "materialize" or "visualize" the study of religion have provided a promising way of analyzing the role and importance of visual materials and practices in the expression of religion.

¹² Such designations have functioned as a meaningful source of identity and belonging for many Jews and Christians. See for instance, David L. Jeffrey, *People of the Book: Christian Identity and Literary Culture* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans with The Institute for Advanced Christian Studies, 1996); and Jeffrey Rubin-Dorsky et al., eds., *People of the Book: Thirty Scholars Reflect on Their Jewish Identity* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996). Whatever these terms have come to mean for Jews and Christians today, conceptions about what books are and how they are produced, transmitted, used, and valued, have changed considerably over time. This is especially true in the wake of the emergence of a print culture beginning in the fifteenth century C.E. and, much more recently, the explosion of various internet technologies including electronic books, blogs, and countless forms of social media. While Judaism and Christianity might still be regarded as religions of the book, the texts so central to these traditions are now accessed, searched, read, and distributed in a variety of formats that hardly resemble the traditional printed-and-bound book. See for instance, Timothy K. Beal, *The Rise and Fall of the Bible: The Unexpected History of an Accidental Book* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2011).

study of the Hebrew Bible and related areas of religious and theological research in part because scholars have presumed that writing and reading are the principle mechanisms of preserving and communicating religious thought, whether in ancient or modern contexts.¹³ Neither are these presuppositions completely absent from biblical iconography. As will be discussed in the conclusion to this chapter (§2.4), many scholars interested in the study of ancient art still utilize methodological procedures that presume that the most relevant comparative data for understanding the conceptual background of the Hebrew Bible come from other texts. Thus, while biblical iconographers tend to look to images for *additional* comparative evidence, few explicitly have called into question the crucial importance of texts as vehicles of communication in the ancient world. Put simply, much biblical scholarship persists in seeing texts in and through unquestioned assumptions about the prominence of textual literacy in the ancient world.

However, in the last several decades a growing number of scholars have begun to critically reassess the importance of reading and writing in ancient Israel, especially as it pertains to the evaluation of textual literacy rates.¹⁴ While a sizeable bibliography is

¹³ Logocentric tendencies in biblical scholarship underlie several classic theories about the composition of the Hebrew Bible. For instance, Julius Wellhausen's formulation of the Documentary Hypothesis posited the existence of early and continuous literary sources for the Pentateuch (*Prolegomena to the History of Israel* [Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1994 [German original: 1878]]). Similarly, Martin Noth's theory of the Deuteronomistic History imagined the author of Joshua–Kings as a type of historiographer who selectively drew on and arranged various sources and traditions, many of which were textual (*Überlieferungsgeschichtliche Studien* [Halle Saale: M. Niemeyer, 1943]). Even though both of these theories have been extensively revised and reformulated, the underlying assumptions about the role and importance of written records remain largely in tact.

¹⁴ For a helpful review of several recent contributions to this research, see William M. Schniedewind, "Orality and Literacy in Ancient Literature," *ReISRev* 26 (2000): 327-32. A more thorough appraisal of the significance of specific epigraphic data is offered by Chris A. Rollston, *Writing and Literacy*

now available on this topic, this research is rarely put in conversation with the theory, methods, and practices of biblical iconography. Nevertheless, evaluating the issue of textual literacy can make an important contribution to the development of a visual hermeneutics for biblical iconography by calling into question the extent to which reading and writing were the only, or even the primary, vehicles for transmitting and receiving religious beliefs and other forms of cultural knowledge.

2.2.1. Textual Literacy as a "Minority Phenomenon"

In his study of the emergence and development of written languages in human history, Jack Goody, a Cambridge University social anthropologist, contends that prior to the nineteenth century textual literacy would have been a "minority phenomenon" in any society.¹⁵ Although Goody's research does not address in detail the circumstances of ancient Israel, a growing number of biblical scholars echo his conclusions by challenging the assumption that ancient Israel was a text-based culture. In fact, there is now considerable debate concerning the role and importance of textual literacy in ancient Israel. In general, two opposing positions are evident. Scholars who maintain a "high-literacy" position posit that knowledge of writing and reading was a widespread phenomenon in ancient Israel from at least the tenth century B.C.E. onwards.¹⁶ In this

in the World of Ancient Israel: Epigraphic Evidence from the Iron Age (Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2010).

¹⁵ Jack Goody, *The Power of the Written Tradition* (Washington: Smithsonian Institution Press, 2000), 134.

¹⁶ Representative of the "high-literacy" perspective are William F. Albright, "Discussion," in *City Invincible: A Symposium on Urbanization and Cultural Development in the Ancient Near East* (ed. C. H. Kraeling and R. M. Adams; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), 94-123; Gabriel Barkay, "The Iron Age II-III," in *The Archaeology of Ancient Israel* (ed. Amnon Ben-Tor; New Haven: Yale University Press,

view, literacy is understood to play an important role not only in scribal activity in the temple and palace but also in the everyday life and communication of the general populace. In contrast, scholars who favor a "low-literacy" position conclude that textual literacy was limited to a very small group of scribes and upper class elites.¹⁷ Even if, as David W. Jamieson-Drake has argued, the use and production of texts increased with the rise of the Judean monarchy in the seventh and early-sixth centuries, the low-literacy camp contends that written materials continued to play a relatively minor role as a vehicle of communication for vast segments of Israelite society.¹⁸ While space prohibits a lengthy review of this research, it will be instructive for the purposes of this project to highlight several of the most significant reasons why Goody's general conclusions about the dearth of textual literacy throughout history apply equally well to the specific context of ancient Israel.

One of the chief problems that besets the high-literacy position is the fact that the archaeological record of ancient Israel, unlike some of its ANE neighbors, lacks evidence of massive textual archives, great libraries, royal monuments, or other signs

1992), 302-73; Richard Hess, "Literacy in Iron Age Israel," in *Windows into Old Testament History: Evidence, Argument, and the Crisis of "Biblical Israel"* (ed. V. Philips Long, David W. Baker, and Gordon J. Wenham; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2002), 82-102; idem, "Writing about Writing: Abecedaries and Evidence for Literacy in Ancient Israel," *VT* 56 (2006): 342-46; idem, "Questions of Reading and Writing in Ancient Israel," *BBR* 19 (2009): 1-9; Alan Millard, "An Assessment of the Evidence for Writing in Ancient Israel," in *Biblical Archaeology Today: Proceedings of the International Congress on Biblical Archaeology, Jerusalem, April 1984* (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1985), 301-12; idem, "The Knowledge of Writing in Iron Age Palestine," *TynBul* 46 (1995): 206-17; and William M. Schniedewind, *How the Bible Became a Book* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

¹⁷ The "low-literacy" camp is represented by James L. Crenshaw, *Education in Ancient Israel: Across the Deadening Silence* (New York: Doubleday, 1998); Philip R. Davies, *Scribes and Schools: The Canonization of the Hebrew Scriptures* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998); William V. Harris, *Ancient Literacy* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989); Rollston, *Writing and Literacy*; and Ian M. Young, "Israelite Literacy: Interpreting the Evidence (Parts 1-2)" *VT* 48 (1998): 239-53, 408-22; idem, "Israelite Literacy and Inscriptions: A Response to Richard Hess," *VT* 55 (2005): 565-68.

¹⁸ David W. Jamieson-Drake, *Scribes and Schools in Monarchic Judah: A Socio-Archeological Approach* (Sheffield: Almond, 1991).

that would suggest that the production and preservation of written documents was a defining characteristic of this culture. However, as many high-literacy proponents would argue, this absence of evidence need not signal evidence of absence. Alan Millard, for instance, explains the lack of royal monuments as a mere "archaeological accident," and as a result, he finds it methodologically acceptable to "adduce scribal practices well-attested in one area [i.e., Assyria] to help reconstruct the situation in another [i.e., Israel] where the evidence is poorer."¹⁹ While not implausible, Millard's analogical approach is problematic on several levels. First, the comparative data that Millard cites does not unambiguously affirm the presence of high literacy rates in adjacent cuneiform cultures. Peter Machinist makes this same point when he contends that the ability to access and read archived texts in Assyria would have been limited to a very small group of trained scribes and officials.²⁰ In other words, large archives of texts were not intended to be consumed by large portions of the general public. Second, even in cultures where archives are plentiful, texts were often written and collected for reasons other than conveying information, even to a small segment of scribal officials. Studies of Neo-Assyrian archives indicate that some texts functioned as a type of votive offering to a deity or even as a memorial intended to preserve a king's name, or perhaps his

¹⁹ Millard, "Knowledge of Writing," 213-14. Of course, if parchment was used as the chief medium for writing, it would not be surprising to find such a dearth of textual remains in the archaeological record. However, this, too, is an argument from silence. In contrast to Millard "archaeological accident" defense, Kenneth A. Kitchen proposes how specific political, cultural, ideological, and environmental factors help explain the lack of monumental writing in ancient Israel, as well as other nations along an east-west belt from the Aegean Sea through the Levant ("Now You See It, Now You Don't! The Monumental Use and Non-use of Writing in the Ancient Near East," in *Writing and Ancient Near Eastern Society* [ed. Piotr Bienkowski, Christopher Mee, and Elizabeth Slater; LHBOTS 426; London: T & T Clark International, 2005], 175-87).

²⁰ Peter Machinist, "Assyrians on Assyria in the First Millennium B.C.," in *Anfänge politischen Denkens in der Antike: Die nahöstlichen Kulturen und die Griechen* (ed. Kurt Raaflaub; Munich: R. Oldenbourg, 1993), 101.

military victory, for posterity.²¹ In both examples, the texts were not written primarily in order to be read—or at least, not to be read by humans.²² In fact, the assumption that texts function as a widely utilized language of communication is far more reflective of the practices of modern cultures than ancient ones.

Even in the few cases that might suggest ancient Israel had something akin to an archive of texts, it is far from evident that Israel possessed an "archival mentality."²³ For instance, a horde of sixth-century clay bullae, likely used to seal rolled-up scrolls have been discovered well within the remains of an Iron Age IIC residential building in southeastern Jerusalem.²⁴ Though the documents themselves no longer exist, these bullae might well provide indirect evidence of some sort of collection of written materials. Yet, evidence of a collection of texts does not necessarily imply that these texts were accessed and read by the general public. In fact, the practice of sealing

²¹ See for instance, Mogens Weitemeyer, "Archives and Library Technique in Ancient Mesopotamia," *Libri* 6 (1956): 229-31; and Stephen J. Lieberman, "Canonical and Official Cuneiform Texts: Towards an Understanding of Assurbanipal's Personal Tablet Collection," in *Lingering Over Words: Studies in Ancient Near Eastern Literature in Honor of William L. Moran* (ed. Tzvi Abusch, John Huehnergard, and Piotr Steinkeller; Atlanta: Scholars, 1990), 305-36.

²² Even Schniedewind, who generally affirms higher literacy rates, admits that writing was not always, or even primarily, used for person-to-person communication. Instead, he underscores the fact that writing had a numinous power in the ancient world and in fact "was used to communicate with the divine realm by ritual actions or formulaic recitations in order to affect the course of present or future events" (*How the Bible Became a Book*, 25).

²³ Susan Niditch, *Oral World and Written Word: Ancient Israelite Literature* (LAI; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 62-63.

²⁴ For an introduction to this collection of clay bullae, see Yigal Shiloh and David Tarler, "Bullae from the City of David: A Hoard of Seal Impressions from the Israelite Period," *BA* 49 (1986): 196-209. A larger horde of 255 inscribed clay bullae, most likely from the early postexilic period, provides similar data (cf. Nahman Avigad, *Bullae and Seals from a Post-Exilic Judean Archive* [Qedem 4; Jerusalem: Institute of Archaeology, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1976]), although the utility of this collection is limited by the fact that it was obtained on the antiquities market.

rolled-up scrolls with clay bullae would have made it logistically impractical to consult the textual data on the documents with any regularity.²⁵

One might object to this conclusion noting that in some cases a copy of a sealed document might have been made available on the outside of the scroll in order to make the contents more publically accessible. A practice similar to this seems to be implied in Jer 32:10-15 where a sealed deed of purchase is accompanied by an "open copy" or "open deed" (ספר הגלוי, v. 14). Even if this reference suggests that written documents could be read without breaking their seals, it is important to note that at least in Jeremiah 32, no mention is made of the "open deed" being read or publically scrutinized.²⁶ Instead, emphasis is placed on the fact that, in the presence of witnesses, Jeremiah instructs Baruch to store the documents in a clay jar so that "they [the documents] may last for a long time" (למען יעמדו ימים רבים, v. 14). In this sense, it is the public *preservation* of the documents, not their public reading that is important. In this context, the preservation of this deed of purchase might be understood as a type of sign-act that conveys the message that God will preserve the Israelites so that they once again can possess land in Judah. Thus, Jeremiah 32 hardly provides evidence that ancient Israelites collected and utilized texts in ways that are analogous to how literate

²⁵ In order to be read, the seal would be broken and the scrolled unfolded, before being subsequently refolded and resealed. Put differently, while this data does affirm that textual archives were produced and, at least to some extent, valued by ancient Israelite communities, it does not necessarily clarify how many people could read or write in those communities. As will be discussed more below, a larger quantity of texts need not indicate a large quantity of literate individuals.

²⁶ Furthermore, Jeremiah 32 does not provide any evidence that Jeremiah or the other witnesses did anything more than sign the document. A scribe such as Baruch might well have written the document itself. As will be discussed below (cf. § 2.2.2), the level of skill required to sign one's name on a document is hardly evidence of a high level of literacy.

societies today archive and access various types of legal records, historical documents, or literary works.

Despite this relative lack of evidence for either archives of texts or archival mentalities, the material record of Syria-Palestine does bear witness to a continuous presence of writing throughout the Iron Age. Numerous abecedaries, inscribed seals, graffiti-like inscriptions, administrative ostraca, and at least some literary compositions have been discovered, though what they indicate about textual literacy is widely debated. The high-literacy position assumes that a culture's quantity of writing is directly proportional to its rate of literacy.²⁷ For instance, in reference to the relative abundance of inscribed seal impressions discovered in Palestine, Richard Hess concludes: "When taken together with hundreds of additional pieces of writing, there is evidence that throughout Iron Age 2, and extending back to Iron Age 1 (c. 1200-1000 BCE), every region and every level of society had its writers and readers."²⁸

Perhaps so, but how *many* writers and readers were there, and which segments of Israelite society did such writers and readers come from? Rather than affirming widespread literacy, it is quite possible, as Ian Young has argued, that a large quantity of written materials might well originate from a small number of literate people.²⁹ William

²⁷ The assumption that evidence of writing is tantamount to evidence of widespread literacy is apparent in numerous works from the high-literacy camp. A recent example of this is Phaswane Simon Makuwa's dissertation, "Pre-Exilic Writing in Israel: An Archaeological Study of Signs of Literacy and Literary Activity in Pre-Monarchical and Monarchical Israel" (Ph.D. diss., University of South Africa, 2008).

²⁸ Hess, "Writing about Writing," 345. Schniedewind is also optimistic about high literacy rates in ancient Israel, but concludes that a "textual revolution" of sorts did not occur until the seventh century. In his view, this rise in literacy was in response to the rapid development of the Judean state, especially under Josiah. The result was that "basic literacy became commonplace, so much so that the illiterate could be socially stigmatized" (*How the Bible Became a Book*, 91).

²⁹ Young, "Israelite Literacy," 240. Rollston offers a similar assessment of the evidence when he says, "a small coterie of professional scribes during any chronological horizon could produce very large

V. Harris, who studies textual literacy rates in the Greco-Roman world, has also addressed this issue. Harris's argument, which is not only concerned with the quantity of literacy but also its "social range," contends that even though both ancient Greece and Rome had linear alphabets as well as a growing body of written documents, no more than 5-15% of their general population was literate.³⁰ Harris notes that providing numerical estimates of ancient literacy is a "risky task."³¹ Nevertheless, he attempts to establish his own conclusions through an extensive analysis of the nature and function of written materials in these cultures as well as through a comparative method. Specifically, Harris notes that in studies of literacy rates in early-modern and modern Europe, all but the most elementary writing and reading skills are limited to a small group of professional or social elites unless certain preconditions are filled, such as the existence of an extensive network of schools, the technology to mass produce inexpensive texts, and an ideology that sees literacy as a worthwhile goal for political,

numbers of inscriptions without much difficulty" (*Writing and Literacy*, 133). While this sort of critique is often aimed at the type of conclusions Hess and Millard draw, it might also serve as a pertinent response to the argument forwarded in Jamieson-Drake's *Scribes and Schools*. In noting the increased amount of epigraphical evidence in sites dependent on Jerusalem in the eighth and seventh centuries B.C.E., Jamieson-Drake concludes that literacy rates significantly increased as the state of Judah rose in prominence. Thus Jamieson-Drake, not unlike Hess and Millard, makes a rather straightforward connection between quantities of writing and rates of literacy. The more relevant question, however, concerns the contexts in which these writings were located. In my estimation, while Jamieson-Drake is right to conclude that the development of the Judean monarchy led to increased scribal and administrative activities, including the production of written records, it does not follow that significant portions of the *general populace* would have acquired the ability to read and write. This is a possible, but not necessary, conclusion.

³⁰ Harris, *Ancient Literacy*, 12-24, 114, 267. This is not to deny that in many ways linear alphabets make language acquisition easier. However, as Goody points out, pictographic or ideographic languages tend to have a *lower* threshold for partial literacy since viewers with little to no training might be able to recognize, say, a pictogram of a bird as having some semantic connection with the concept of a bird. In this sense, an alphabet represents a more abstract symbol system insofar as its individual components represent phonemes, not individual words or concepts (Goody, *The Power of the Written Traditions*, 132-51).

³¹ Harris, *Ancient Literacy*, 7, 11-12.

religious, or other reasons.³² In Harris's view, many of these conditions were not met in ancient Greece and Rome, and even less so, the ancient Near Eastern world.³³ Thus, in view of Harris's findings, it would be highly implausible to conclude that literacy was widespread in ancient Israel on the basis of the existence of abecedaries or other simple inscriptions.³⁴ In fact, in his research on ancient literacy, Michael C. A. MacDonald contends that even within societies that relied on texts for various economic or administrative purposes, large "oral enclaves" of illiterate people most likely still existed.³⁵ As a result, while evidence of writing is undeniable in ancient Israel, it does

³² Harris, *Ancient Literacy*, 11-12. Elsewhere, Harris puts the matter succinctly: "Literacy on a large scale is the product of forces such as did not exist in antiquity" (327). Even still, determining whether these preconditions are met might also be considered a "risky task." For instance, questions pertaining to the prevalence of schools in ancient Israel is widely debated among biblical scholars. Some in the low-literacy camp, such as James Crenshaw (*Education in Ancient Israel*), detect a notable absence of references both to schools and to a widespread system of education in the biblical evidence. As a result, he strongly challenges André Lemaire's earlier suggestion that a large system of "state schools" came into existence under Solomon's administration (see Lemaire, *Les écoles et la formation de la Bible dans l'ancien Israël* [OBO 39; Fribourg: University Press; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1981]). In contrast to Crenshaw, Eric William Heaton cautions against seeing this absence of evidence as concrete proof that schools did not exist (*The School Tradition of The Old Testament: The Bampton Lectures for 1994* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1994]). Yet, even if Lemaire, Heaton, and others are correct in their suggestion that ancient Israel possessed a sophisticated and widespread network of schools, this would only satisfy one of the conditions Harris believes is necessary to produce a highly literate society. For instance, while the presence of a robust educational system is not in doubt for ancient Greece and Rome, most agree that literacy rates remained quite low in these cultures.

³³ As such, Harris believes that the classical world achieved a "much higher level of literacy than the [ancient] Near East" (*Ancient Literacy*, 331).

³⁴ Rollston, *Writing and Literacy*, 128. See also Rollston's evaluation of the Tel Zayit abecedary and how it contributes to questions about Israelite literacy ("The Phoenician Script of the Tel Zayit Abecedary and Putative Evidence for Israelite Literacy," in *Literate Culture and Tenth-Century Canaan: The Tel Zayit Abecedary in Context* (ed. Ron E. Tappy and P. Kyle McCarter, Jr.; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2008), 61-96.

³⁵ Michael C. A. MacDonald, "Literacy in an Oral Environment," in *Writing and Ancient Near Eastern Society*, 49-118. By way of a modern analogy, if one were to discover in a lecture hall of a university a large amount of sheet music or a musical score, one need not conclude that a high portion of the students in that university were musically literate—i.e., able to read musical notation, let alone compose musical scores. Rather, it is more likely the case that those musical compositions reflect the work of a relatively small segment of students who are majoring in music or attending a Conservatory within the larger university system.

not suggest that written texts were the primary vehicle of communication for the vast majority of people.³⁶

Moreover, the picture that obtains from the epigraphic remains of Syria-Palestine is one in which only a small segment of Israelite society was able to read and write. The quality of script and consistency of orthography found on these artifacts, but especially the administrative ostraca from Arad and Samaria are suggestive of the work of highly trained professionals.³⁷ Furthermore, the inscriptions themselves almost exclusively refer to scribes or elite officials as being able to read and write. It should be noted that some scholars in the high-literacy camp adduce several more ambiguous examples (typically the Mešad Ḥashavyahu letter, Lachish Letter 3, and inscriptions from Kuntillet 'Ajrud and Khirbet el-Qom) in order to suggest that non-scribes were textually literate. For instance, Hess contends that there is no evidence that knowledge of reading and writing was "restricted to one class and not available to another level of society."³⁸ However, evidence for non-elite or non-professional readers and writers is far from conclusive and has been convincingly refuted elsewhere.³⁹

³⁶ In fact, it is quite possible that literacy rates were even lower than 5-15% during the Persian period. Noting that the conditions in which textual literacy might flourish diminished along with the population of Yehud, Jon Berquist argues that "literacy rates were so low that written law made little sense for most people" (*Judaism in Persia's Shadow: A Social and Historical Approach* [Minneapolis: Fortress, 1995], 137).

³⁷ Rollston, *Writing and Literacy*, 129-32. For a discussion of Arad Ostrakon no. 24 (also known as the Ramath-Negeb Ostrakon), see Yohanan Aharoni, "Three Hebrew Ostraca from Arad," *BASOR* 197 (1970): 16-42. For a discussion of the ostrakon from Samaria, see G. A. Reisner et al., *Harvard Excavations at Samaria I* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1924), 239.

³⁸ Hess, "Literacy in the Iron Age," 92.

³⁹ See especially Rollson, *Writing and Literacy*, 128-32. Of the several oft-mentioned counter-examples, two are of note. The first of these is the Mešad Ḥashavyahu letter (also known as Yavneh Yam Ostrakon 1). Hess and Schniedewind understand the ostrakon to have been written by a peasant reaper who in the letter makes an appeal to the fortress's governor concerning what he perceives to be the unjust confiscation of his cloak (cf. Hess, "Literacy in Iron Age Israel," 93; Schniedewind, *How the Bible*

The Hebrew Bible also primarily associates textual literacy with a small segment of Israelite society. For instance, in his 1998 article on Israelite literacy, Young catalogues the various types of people who are said to read and/or write in the biblical text. The vast majority of these individuals are scribes, priests, prophets, officials, and kings.⁴⁰ While these references should not be accepted uncritically as straightforward proof of who could read and write, the Hebrew Bible generally mirrors the epigraphical remains: the skills associated with textual literacy are primarily associated with scribes and other elite officials.

Became a Book, 103). While not implausible, other interpretations are possible. For instance, Rollston notes that the reaper may not have been a peasant but might have been a supervisor who was in charge of overseeing the reaping process in general (*Writing and Literacy*, 130). Alternatively, since Yavneh Yam was a Judean fortress, it is also possible that the ostrakon was written by an army scribe on behalf of the reaper (cf. Joseph Naveh, "A Hebrew Letter from the Seventh Century B.C.," *IEJ* 10 [1962]: 136). In both scenarios, the actual writer of the letter would not have been a lower class peasant. The second frequently mentioned example of literacy possibly extending beyond elite circles is the Lachish Letter 3. In that letter, Ya'ush, a senior army officer, chides the lower-ranking Hosha'yahu for not properly handling a previous missive by asking, "Don't you know how to read a letter?" (*l' yd'th / qr' spr*). While this translation is widely accepted (see, for instance, J. C. L. Gibson, *Textbook of Syrian Semitic Inscriptions I: Hebrew and Moabite Inscriptions* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973], 39; Lemaire, *Inscriptions Hébraïques I* [Paris: Cerf, 1977], 100-1; and Dennis Pardee, *Handbook of Ancient Hebrew Letters* [Missoula, Mont.: Scholars Press, 1982], 84), Frank Moore Cross instead reads, "You did not understand it. Call a scribe!" (Cross, "A Literate Soldier: Lachish Letter III," in *Biblical and Related Studies Presented to Samuel Iwry* [ed. A. Kort and S. Morschauser; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1985], 43). Cross reads the final *h* in *yd'th* as an object suffix rather than the *plene* spelling of the second person masculine singular perfect suffix *-tā*. He also vocalizes *spr* as *sōpēr* ("scribe") not *sēper* ("letter"). In favor of the more common translation, the idiom *yd' spr* ("to know book") in Isa 29:11-12 seems to refer to being literate, thus making it more plausible that *l' yd'th / qr' spr* in Lac 3:8b-9a refers to someone being illiterate, albeit through the addition of another word for reading, *qr'* (Young, "Israelite Literacy," 410). Nevertheless, both translations indicate that Ya'ush was accusing Hosha'yahu of being illiterate. In defense of his ability to read, Hosha'yahu counters that he has never needed the services of a professional scribe. Rollston argues that this is quite plausible, since a military officer such as Hosha'yahu, who was of high enough rank to have received proprietary information about the military expedition of his commander, Konyahu son of 'Elnathan, might well have found it advantageous to his military position to have obtained some formal training in reading and writing (*Writing and Literacy*, 130). Thus, if Lachish Letter 3 is an example of non-scribal literacy, it almost certainly is not proof that literacy extended to anyone outside of an elite level of society.

⁴⁰ Interestingly, God is also said to write (Exod 31:18; 34:1) and might indeed be seen as "the writer *par excellence*" (Young, "Israelite Literacy," 244-53).

Nevertheless, as with the epigraphical materials there are a few ambiguous references in the Hebrew Bible that leave some room for supposing that literacy existed beyond scribal or elite circles. In several instances, the Hebrew Bible depicts members of the general populace, or even "all Israel," reading and writing (cf. Deut 6:9; 11:20; 21:1, 3; Neh 9:3). However, the semantic range of the verbs "to read" (*vqr'*) and "to write" (*vktb*) leave considerable doubt that the subjects of these verbs are always the ones engaging in the processes of reading and writing. For instance, the verb *vktb* includes the notion of having someone write on one's behalf (as in dictation). This connotation might well be in view in Jer 36:2 where God instructs Jeremiah to "take a scroll and write on it all the words I have spoken." But without any concern that he has deviated from God's instruction, Jeremiah later calls upon his scribe Baruch to write the words God had spoken (36:4). Likewise, the verb *vqr'* can mean to have something read for/to someone. This appears to be the case in 2 Kgs 22:16 where Josiah is credited with having read "the words of the book" even though it is Shaphan who reads aloud to the king from this document (22:10). In light of the wider semantic range of *vktb* and *vqr'*, it would be difficult to agree with Roland de Vaux's view that the instructions to "write [the commandments] on the doorposts of your houses and on your gates" (Deut 6:9; 11:20) presumed that at least one member of every family possessed the ability to write.⁴¹ On the whole, it is tenuous to assume that references to the general population—or even prophets and kings—writing or reading in the Hebrew Bible support notions about widespread literacy in ancient Israel.

⁴¹ Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions* (trans. John McHugh; New York: McGraw-Hill, 1961), 49.

Similar caution should also be used with respect to the two instances in the Hebrew Bible in which a *na'ar* is said to write (Judg 8:14; Isa 10:19). Drawing on translations of *na'ar* as "young man" (Judg 8:14) or "child" (Isa 10:19), some scholars contend that these passages support the idea that most Israelites were literate since even their youth knew how to write.⁴² However, the term *na'ar* can also refer to a class of officials who were high ranking administrators or private stewards.⁴³ Neither does *na'ar* always refer to a young person. In 2 Sam 9:9-10, Saul's *na'ar*, Zibna, is said to have 15 sons! Even in Isa 10:19, where *na'ar* seems to be rightly translated as "child," the rhetorical point of the passage hardly can be used to support the idea of widespread literacy. Specifically, when the prophet says that "the remnant of the trees of his forest will be so few that a child (*na'ar*) can write them down" his message is clear: while a fully literate scribe would be needed to record the countless number of trees in a healthy forest, the remnant of Israel's "forest" will be so meager that even a mere (and perhaps illiterate) child could record them.

⁴² Carl H. Kraeling and Robert M. Adams, eds., *City Invincible: A Symposium on Urbanization and Cultural Development in the Ancient Near East held at the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, December 47, 1958* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960), 119.

⁴³ The term *na'ar*, not unlike other age terms used in the Hebrew Bible, is rather imprecise. See the important discussions in Joseph Blenkinsopp, "The Family Tree in First Temple Israel," in *Families in Ancient Israel* (ed. Leo G. Perdue, et. al; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997) and John MacDonald, "The Status and Role of the *Na'ar* in Israelite Society," *JNES* 35 (1976): 147-70. In addition, while this term may indicate age, it is also used in the Hebrew Bible for other purposes. This is the position taken in the two most extensive works on *na'ar* in the Hebrew Bible: Hans-Peter Stähli, *Knabe, Jüngling, Knecht: Untersuchungen zum Begriff [na'ar] im Alten Testament* (BBET 7; Frankfurt am Main: Lang, 1978); and Carolyn S. Leeb, *Away from the Father's House: The Social Location of na'ar and na'arah in Ancient Israel* (JSOTSup 301; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2000). For a more recent discussion see, Strawn, "Jeremiah's in/Effective Plea: Another Look at na'ar in Jeremiah I 6," *VT* 55 (2005): 366-77. On Hebrew seals, *na'ar* can refer to a servant or steward, as is argued by Avigad in "New Light on the *Na'ar* Seals," in *Magnalia Dei: The Mighty Acts of God: Essays on the Bible and Archaeology in Memory of G. Ernest Wright* (ed. Frank Moore Cross, Werner E. Lemke, and Patrick D. Miller Jr.; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1976), 294-300.

2.2.2. Types of Textual Literacy

Assessing textual literacy rates entails determining not only *how many* people were literate in ancient Israel but also *what* type of literacy those people possessed. In both modern and ancient contexts, the notion of literacy can be understood to encompass a wide spectrum of reading and writing skills, ranging from the most rudimentary understandings of written statements and the practice of writing to a more sophisticated knowledge of grammar, syntax, and composition.⁴⁴ In modern contexts, the recognition of various "levels" of literacy is commonplace, especially in elementary and secondary education where a student's reading comprehension skills are often described in terms of what "grade level" he or she is reading at. These assessments attempt to chart different stages or degrees of literacy according to expected outcomes associated with various levels of training.⁴⁵

Different levels or types of literacy were likely operative in the ancient world as well. In his work on ancient literacy, Rollston defines literacy as "the ability to write and read, using and understanding a standard script, a standard orthography, a standard numeric system, conventional formatting and terminology, and with minimal errors of

⁴⁴ In a 2004 position paper, the United Nations Educational Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) offered the following definition of literacy: "Literacy is the ability to identify, understand, interpret, create, communicate and compute, using printed and written materials associated with varying contexts" ("The Plurality of Literacy and Its Implications for Policies and Programs," UNESCO Education Sector Position Paper 13, 2004; online at: <http://unesdoc.unesco.org/images/0013/001362/136246e.pdf>; accessed: 4/14/2012). While the UNESCO definition of literacy should not be uncritically applied to ancient Israel, it does underscore the importance of identifying which particular skills are implied by the notion of literacy.

⁴⁵ However it is possible—and perhaps all too common—that students move on to higher levels of education while still reading at a much lower reading level. In fact, James L. Mursell has shown that up to fifth and sixth grade, reading skills in America steadily improve, but after that, the rate of improvement flattens out considerably. According to Mursell, the reason for this is not that students reach their natural limit of reading effectiveness but that they no longer are trained or challenged to improve. See James L. Mursell, "The Defeat of the Schools," *The Atlantic Monthly* 163 (1939): 353-61.

composition or comprehension."⁴⁶ According to this understanding, the skills required to read a *lmlk* seal or sign one's name to a contract would hardly constitute literacy, or alternatively, would only constitute "semi-literacy" or a certain type of "functional literacy." Even if literacy is defined so as to include a lower threshold of skills than is evident in Rollston's definition, it would nevertheless remain the case that being able to read or even just recognize a name, patronymic, or brief phrase would require a skill level that differs markedly from the type of literacy needed to read a contract or more sophisticated literary composition such as a biblical scroll. Thus, even if the presence of inscribed seals suggests that many Israelites possessed some rudimentary form of functional literacy, it need not imply that the majority of Israelites would have been able to read legal codes, religious poetry, or historical records.

2.2.3. Conclusions on Textual Literacy

Although this brief survey does not address every facet of the scholarly literature on textual literacy, it has surfaced several significant challenges to the view that reading and writing were the only, or even the primary, vehicles of mass communication in ancient Israel. To be specific, the archaeological remains of Syria-Palestine do not support the picture of a culture in which a diverse amount of textual materials were either carefully archived or regularly accessed by non-scribes or non-elite officials. Neither does the extant epigraphic data suggest that the vast majority of ancient Israelites possessed anything more than the most rudimentary skills in reading and

⁴⁶ Rollston, *Writing and Literacy*, 127.

writing. If, as argued above, textual literacy rates in ancient Israel were on par with other ancient cultures with linear alphabets such as ancient Greece, then it would be untenable to conclude that texts were an important vehicle of communication for much more than approximately 10% of the general population. Such conclusions are not meant to suggest that textual materials were entirely arcane or that writing and reading played an inconsequential role in ancient Israelite religious culture. Textual materials, no doubt, did play a role in transmitting religious beliefs and ideologies among certain segments of Israelite society, and references to book finding (as in 2 Kgs 22-23) and book writing/copying motifs (as in Deut 10:1-4; 27:3; Josh 4:20-24; 8:30-35; 24:25-27) function rhetorically, if not historically, to affirm the authority and antiquity of certain beliefs in Israelite religion.⁴⁷ Nevertheless, for the vast majority of ancient Israelites from the early Iron Age down into the late Persian period, literacy remained a "minority phenomenon"—that is, reading and writing texts represented only one mechanism, and perhaps a sparsely used one, for communicating ideas, be they religious or otherwise.⁴⁸

⁴⁷ It might also be noted along with Schniedewind that the Torah, and even the concept of revelation itself, became increasingly "textualized" in the centuries during and after the Persian period. For instance, in the Book of Jubilees, written in the mid-second century, writing plays an important role in God's revelation to Moses at Sinai. Not only is Moses commanded to write a book (Jub 1:5), but he is given angelic helpers who bring divine tablets to Moses (Jub 1:29), thus making it the case that Moses copies that which was written in heaven. For a more detailed discussion of the "textualization" of the Torah, see Schniedewind, *How the Bible Became a Book*, 118-38.

⁴⁸ Echoing a similar assessment, albeit in a far more provocative manner, John Dominic Crossan and Jonathan Reed suggest that Jesus was an illiterate peasant (Crossan and Reed, *Excavating Jesus: Beneath the Stones, Behind the Texts* [San Francisco: Harper, 2001], 30-31). In making this claim, Crossan and Reed attempt to underscore the point that literacy rates would have been quite low in Palestine even in the first century C.E. Catherine Hezser likewise argues for low literacy rates among Jewish males in Roman Palestine (*Jewish Literacy in Roman Palestine* [TSAJ 81; Tübingen: Mohr-Siebeck, 2001]).

2.2.4. Alternatives to Textual Literacy: Oral Literacy?

Drawing on similar conclusions about the relative *unimportance* of reading and writing in ancient Israel, a number of Hebrew Bible scholars have turned their attention to what might have been alternative vehicles of communication in ancient Israel. Chief among these suggestions is the idea that orality or spoken forms of communication played a critical role in the preservation and transmission of religious belief and other forms of cultural knowledge.

While interest in the oral background of the Hebrew Bible emerged with the pioneering work of Hermann Gunkel in the early-twentieth century, most form critics since have tended to concentrate on identifying and analyzing the genre and social settings of certain literary (i.e., *textual*) units.⁴⁹ However, several recent Hebrew Bible scholars, including Susan Niditch, have shown a renewed concern for the importance and influence of orality as a cultural phenomenon.⁵⁰ Niditch suggests that "large, perhaps dominant, threads in Israelite culture were oral, and . . . literacy in ancient Israel must be understood in terms of its continuity and interaction with the oral world."⁵¹ Niditch not only argues that verbal communication was the primary vehicle of transmitting religious traditions but also that elements of an oral mentality or "oral

⁴⁹ The innovative form critical work of Herman Gunkel in the early twentieth century examined the relationship of oral forms to their social settings. However, while Gunkel did draw attention to the importance of orality and oral traditions, he tended to associate Israel's oral culture with an unsophisticated period in history prior to the formation of biblical literature. In this sense, Gunkel persisted in seeing the Hebrew Bible emerging from, and perhaps as a result of, a time in Israelite history in which scribes, schools, and literate authors/readers played a predominant role.

⁵⁰ Likewise, in the mid-twentieth century, a group of Scandinavian scholars, including Ivan Engnell, Eduard Nielson, and H. S. Nyberg, explored parallels between features of biblical literature and Icelandic oral traditions. While their work did not have a far-reaching impact, their emphasis on the importance of oral traditions and oral culture is echoed by more recent scholars.

⁵¹ Niditch, *Oral World*, 1.

register" left a mark on the stylistic features of the Hebrew Bible itself.⁵² In this perspective, the various oral traditions and oral practices operative in ancient Israel function as a type of oral literacy that displaces, or at least accompanies, textual literacy as a primary vehicle of communication in ancient Israel.⁵³

This emphasis on oral literacy offers a much-needed corrective to theories that uncritically assume that ancient Israel was predominantly a text-based culture. Nonetheless, Niditch's research still reflects a rather word-centered outlook. Even though she shifts attention from textuality to orality, Niditch still sees words (not images) as the main currency for transmitting religious belief and cultural knowledge. While twentieth-century linguists and philosophers are right to point to differences between written and spoken language, from the perspective of biblical iconography, oral and textual literacies might be seen as two sides of a rather logocentric coin.⁵⁴ As a result, while oral literacy likely played a critical role in Israelite society and the

⁵² In her use of the term "oral register," Niditch draws on the work of John Foley who notes the way in which various features of a culture's oral mentality can influence how texts are structured and styled (John Foley, *Oral Tradition in Literature: Interpretation in Context* [Columbia, Mo.: University of Missouri Press, 1986]). As a result, Niditch explores the interplay between orality and literacy in various texts in the Hebrew Bible. Simon Parker likewise explores the effect of orality on how texts are written, but his focus is primarily on epigraphic data from Syria-Palestine (*Stories in Scripture and Inscriptions: Comparative Studies on Narratives in Northwest Semitic Inscriptions and the Hebrew Bible* [New York: Oxford University Press, 1997]).

⁵³ In *Oral World and Written Word*, Niditch approaches the relationship of orality and literacy as a type of continuum. In a similar fashion, sociolinguist Deborah Tanner rejects earlier perspectives that presumed that orality and literacy were competing forces and instead affirms that they are complementary vehicles of communication. See Deborah Tannen, "The Myth of Orality and Literacy," in *Linguistics and Literacy* (ed. William Frawley; New York: Plenum, 1982), 37-50.

⁵⁴ Beginning with Ignace Gelb in 1952, the term "grammatology," which has gained traction among linguists, literacy critics, and philosophers, has been used to broadly refer to the analysis of writing systems, and more specifically, the relationship between spoken and written language. Perhaps most famous among these is Jacques Derrida's *Of Grammatology* (trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University, 1976 [1967]).

transmission of certain religious beliefs, it does little to challenge the assumption that words were the *sine qua non* in ancient Israelite communication.⁵⁵

2.3. Visual Literacy and/in Biblical Iconography

As already noted, words, whether written or oral, represent only one aspect of the symbol system of most cultures. Images can likewise express beliefs, transmit ideologies, and provoke the imagination. Rather than being understood as a type of decorative "folk art," the images that are so abundant in the archaeological record of Syria-Palestine function as a type of communicative media that actively shapes the ways of seeing or thinking of their viewers.⁵⁶ In other words, images constitute a language in their own right. In this sense, if images mattered as a type of language in ancient Israel, then it might be fruitful to speak of *how* they mattered in terms of *visual literacy*—i.e., the extent to which ancient viewers looked to, read, and utilized images as a symbol system capable of conveying political, cultural, or religious knowledge.

⁵⁵ Neither does the idea of oral literacy address the ways in which religious beliefs and practices are expressed through embodied actions and ritual performances.

⁵⁶ Unfortunately, prior to the rise of the Fribourg School in the 1970s, biblical scholars often treated visual artifacts as decorative elements that either accompanied or illustrated textual materials. There are, however, some exceptions. For instance, James B. Pritchard's *The Ancient Near East in Pictures Relating to the Old Testament* (2d ed. with suppl.; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969 [1954]) and Hugo Gressmann's *Altorientalische Bilder zum Alten Testament* (2d ed.; Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 1927 [1909]) both catalogue a great variety of visual materials from the archaeological record of the ancient Near Eastern world. Nevertheless, while these studies take great interest in visual materials, neither offers a nuanced analysis and appropriation of such imagery for the interpretation of the Hebrew Bible.

2.3.1. Visual Literacy: Definitions and Relevance

What, then, is visual literacy? Most basically, the notion of visual literacy draws on a common trope of reading in order to talk about the process of communicating through visual data. This perspective is perhaps most prominently on display in James Elkins's edited volume, *Visual Literacy* (2008). In his contribution to this volume, W. J. T. Mitchell notes that visual literacy compares "the acquisition of skills, competence, and expertise [in reading images] . . . to the mastery of language and literature."⁵⁷ Like other scholars in Elkins's *Visual Literacy*, Mitchell approaches images as a type of language that exhibits a system of (visual) vocabulary, (compositional) syntax, and (pictorial) grammar.

Mitchell notes how the concept of visual literacy might be understood as an intentional category error, an attempt to transcend the boundaries of both poetry and painting by speaking of the "language" of images or the linguistic power of the visual arts. From Horace's dictum *ut pictura poesis* to Tessier's reference to reading a painting in the opening line of the poem cited in the epigraph to this chapter, the concept of visual literacy allows one to talk about images not only in terms of language, but also *as* a language that can be parsed, read, taught, and translated.⁵⁸ Seen in this light, visual literacy can be flexed in several different ways and for several different purposes.

⁵⁷ Mitchell, "Visual Literacy or Literary Visualcy?" in *Visual Literacy* (ed. James Elkins; New York: Routledge, 2008), 11. A similar trope is operative in Alois Riegl's *Historical Grammar of the Visual Arts* (trans. Jacqueline E. Jung; New York: Zone Books, 2004 [German original: 1966]). Riegl, a representative of the Vienna School of art history, utilizes a linguistic approach in order to describe the formal features of art and the driving forces behind the evolution of artistic principles. In this sense, Riegl is not unlike a linguist in his interest in identifying root elements (or visual phonemes) in and behind artistic style and development.

⁵⁸ See especially W. J. T. Mitchell, ed., *The Language of Images* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980).

Most commonly, visual literacy is used to refer to the presence of minimal competencies related to the recognition of or appreciation for famous works of art. As Elkins points out, this understanding of visual literacy is often on display in introductory art history courses whose broad pedagogical scope is not unlike a "Physics for Poets" class insofar as it seeks to provide a basic survey of a topic to students from other disciplines.⁵⁹ As a valuation of one's capacity to recognize and remember commonly shared lists or corpora of images, this understanding of visual literacy is often closely associated with human memory and cognitive psychology.⁶⁰ However, acquiring this type of visual literacy does not entail any detailed knowledge of visual interpretation or art historical theory and thus might be considered a type of semi (visual) literacy or functional (visual) literacy (cf. §2.2.2). A related sense of visual literacy is evident in popular cultural criticism. In this understanding, a general familiarity with the visual arts contributes to a broader sense of what Eric Donald Hirsch calls "cultural literacy"—i.e., the possession of a cursory knowledge of things that any educated adult should know in order to be considered culturally refined.⁶¹ Thus, visual literacy, not unlike biblical, computer, musical, or mathematical "literacies," functions as a way of describing an

⁵⁹ James Elkins, *Visual Studies: A Skeptical Introduction* (New York: Routledge, 2003), 126. In a fascinating example of this sense of "visual literacy," Elkins (ibid., 125-26) notes how a 2001 *Vancouver Sun* article describes the goal of Prince William's course in art history at the University of St. Andrews in terms of achieving "visual literacy" (Stewart Muir, "No Easy Ride in Ancient School: Prince Must Achieve 'Visual Literacy' in Four-Year Arts Degree Program," *Vancouver Sun*, September 24, 2001, A8).

⁶⁰ See for instance, Lionel Standing, "Learning 10,000 Pictures," *Quarterly Journal for Experimental Psychology* 25 (1973): 207-22; Stephen Madigan, "Picture Memory," in *Imagery, Memory, and Cognition* (ed. John C. Yuile; Hillsdale, N.J.: Erlbaum, 1983), 65-90; and Johannes Engelkamp, "Gedächtnis für Bilder," in *Bild-Bildwahrnehmung-Bildverarbeitung: Interdisziplinäre Beiträge zur Bildwissenschaft* (ed. Klaus Rehkämper; Studien zur Kognitionswissenschaft; Wiesbaden: Deutscher Universitäts-Verlag, 1998), 227-42.

⁶¹ See for instance, Eric Donald Hirsch, *What Your Second-Grader Needs to Know: Fundamentals of a Good First-Grade Education* (Core Knowledge Series 2; New York: Doubleday, 1991) and Hirsch, Joseph Kett, and James Trefil, eds., *The Dictionary of Cultural Literacy* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1988).

individual's general understanding of certain subjects, topics, or skills, especially as they relate to a sense of "cultured" refinement.⁶² While it might be useful to talk about ancient Israelites possessing a basic competency in or working familiarity with visual materials, it seems unlikely that "art appreciation" or cultural refinement were the primary lenses through which they utilized or encountered the art of Syria-Palestine. As a result, these more colloquial understandings of "visual literacy" hold little significance for the purposes of biblical iconographic research.

More promising are the ways in which visual culture studies has recently developed visual literacy as one of its key theoretical concepts.⁶³ Rather than seeing visual literacy in terms of one's familiarity with great works of art history, visual culture theorists Roberts Braden and John Hortin (among others) describe visual literacy more broadly as "the ability to think, learn, and express oneself in terms of images."⁶⁴ By approaching images as a language of communication, this perspective not only underscores how images are able to "encode messages, tell stories, express ideas and emotions, raise questions, and 'speak' to [its viewers]," but also how viewers attempt to decode, interpret, and respond to the symbolic meanings, social functions, and political

⁶² However, in most cases, the depth of knowledge required to appear "culturally literate" is more akin to the type of semi-literacy or function literacy as discussed in §2.2.2.

⁶³ Visual literacy, along with several related concepts such as visual culture and visuality, have garnered enormous attention by scholars from a wide range of disciplines related to visual culture studies. Several books have appeared with "visual literacy" in their titles, such as James Elkins' edited volume, *Visual Literacy*; and Paul Messaris's *Visual Literacy: Image, Mind, and Reality* (San Francisco: Westview, 1994). Numerous other conferences, symposia, associations, and publications also utilize the language of visual literacy to describe their research interests (cf. Elkins, *Visual Literacy*, 2-3).

⁶⁴ Roberts Braden and John Hortin, "Identifying the Theoretical Foundations of Visual Literacy," in *Television and Visual Literacy: Readings from the 13th Annual Conference of the International Visual Literacy Association* (ed. Braden and A. D. Walker; Bloomington: International Visual Literacy Association, 1982), 169.

dimensions conveyed by visual materials and practices.⁶⁵ Since the 1990s, this understanding of visual literacy has spawned a diverse array of interdisciplinary inquiries into the languages of art, the nature of visual culture, the "techniques of the observer" (to borrow a phrase from Jonathan Crary), and various new perspectives on *Bildwissenschaft*, or "image science."⁶⁶

Due to its concern for how images participate in and give shape to the meaningful exchange of cultural knowledge, political ideologies, and religious beliefs, this view of visual literacy would seem to offer a helpful conceptual framework for understanding the role and importance of images in the ancient world. However, few only a few exceptions, scholars interested in visual culture studies have ignored ancient visual artifacts in favor of present-day visual materials, such as photography, advertisements, animation, crafts, fashion, graffiti, tattoos, films, and television.⁶⁷ In part, this tendency stems from a methodological commitment within visual culture studies to challenge traditional conventions of art history, including its interest in analyzing Western canons of "high" art in terms of stylistic traditions or aesthetic value. Instead, visual culture theorists have preferred to explore the meaning and function of "low art," everyday visual objects, or avant-garde art. As a result, very little attention is

⁶⁵ Mitchell, *The Language of Images*, 3.

⁶⁶ Jonathan Crary, *Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990). Mitchell's trilogy of volumes—*Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), and *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005)—have made a substantial contribution to the development of visual cultural studies. For a very brief but helpful overview of four fundamental concepts of image science, see Mitchell's essay, "Visual Literacy or Literary Visualcy?" in *Visual Literacy*, 14-21.

⁶⁷ A notable and important exception is John Baines's *Visual and Written Culture in Ancient Egypt* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2007).

given either to certain types of art (painting, sculpture, or architecture) or to certain chronological periods (pre-1950s). Citing Mitchell's pronouncement of a "pictorial turn," many visual culture theorists even contend that visibility is a unique characteristic of the modern world in contrast to the ancient one.⁶⁸ Nevertheless, Mitchell himself clarifies that the notion of a pictorial turn refers not to the increased use or production of images in contemporary contexts, but rather to a period of intense interest in (and/or fear of) visual materials and their socio-political effects within the intellectual discourse of the humanities and social sciences.⁶⁹ Since visual materials are no less relevant to or important for ancient cultures, Elkins has advocated for visual culture studies to incorporate a wider array of pre-modern and non-Western images into its field of analysis.⁷⁰

In view of these possibilities, it remains potentially fruitful to utilize the concept of visual literacy for the purposes of developing a visual hermeneutics for biblical iconography. Specifically, the various concepts and implications associated with visual literacy can shed new light on the issues that Keel and Uehlinger's earlier work (*GGG*) left mostly unresolved—i.e., the relative importance of images and texts as vehicles of communication *within* the same cultural context or indeed on the same artifact. The present analysis proceeds on two levels. First, I show how visual literacy can help clarify how, especially in the case of minor arts (i.e., seals, amulets, ivories, coins, etc.), images functioned as a coherent system of language in their own right (§2.3.2). Second and

⁶⁸ See Mirzoeff, *An Introduction to Visual Culture*, 6.

⁶⁹ Mitchell, "Showing Seeing," 171.

⁷⁰ Elkins, *Visual Studies*, 39, 83, and *passim*.

more specifically, I also examine and draw conclusions about the interaction of visual and textual literacies within several representative corpora of visual objects (§2.3.3).

2.3.2. Ancient "Mass Media" and the Languages of (Minor) Art

Biblical iconographers have long recognized that glyptic materials and other forms of minor art functioned as important vehicles of communication in ancient Israel. Such understandings underlie numerous recent contributions to the field, especially those that attempt to either catalogue or categorize Syro-Palestinian art.⁷¹ However, the most explicit engagement of the role and importance of minor art is found in Uehlinger's edited volume, *Images as Media*. In his introductory essay, which was written eight years after the publication of *GGG*, Uehlinger underscores the importance of approaching minor art as *media*. He emphasizes that iconographic data found on minor art functions as a:

means of communication between producers (ideal and real, i.e. the workshops where the objects originated, but also their official or private patrons and clients), distributors (itinerant craftsmen, traders, official functionaries or others) and recipients in a chain of communication which involved economical, political, and ideological factors alike (including religious belief).⁷²

Due both to the abundance of these materials and their compactness of size, Uehlinger suggests that minor art is particularly adept at circulating messages to large

⁷¹ The parade example is Othmar Keel's *Corpus der Stempelsiegel-Amulette aus Palästina/Israel: Von den Anfängen bis zur Perserzeit* (4 vols. to date; OBO.SA; Fribourg: Universitätsverlag; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1995-present), which catalogues approximately 8,500 extant Syro-Palestinian seals. See also Jürg Egger and Othmar Keel, eds., *Corpus der Siegel-Amulette aus Jordanien: Vom Neolithikum bis zur Perserzeit* (OBO.SA 25; Fribourg: Academic Press; Göttingen, Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2006). More explicitly related to biblical interpretation, LeMon offers a typology of wing iconography in glyptic materials ranging from the Late Bronze Age through the Persian Period (*Yahweh's Winged Form*).

⁷² Uehlinger, "Introduction," in *Images as Media*, xv.

communities across vast territories.⁷³ The potential for this wide diffusion of iconographic data was likely enhanced in the early first millennium when growing economic integration in and beyond the Levant opened new markets and facilitated trade with new audiences.⁷⁴ However, the wide distribution of minor art is not merely the result of the mass media strategies of the "powerful peripheries" (i.e., Egypt, Phoenicia, Anatolia, Mesopotamia, etc.) surrounding ancient Israel. Rather, ancient Syria-Palestine had its own incipient "iconographic infrastructure" or visual vocabulary.⁷⁵ As a result of these observations, Uehlinger concludes that the iconographic data on minor art "provides a historical source *at least as valuable as texts and literature* for studying local or regional symbol systems, their diffusion, and interaction."⁷⁶

What Uehlinger and the other contributors to this volume powerfully demonstrate—that iconographic data should be deemed as valuable as textual data to contemporary scholars of ancient Israelite religion and the Hebrew Bible—might even be made more explicit if seen from the vantage point of visual literacy. For instance, while *Images as Media's* focus is primarily on how images work (i.e., how they function as media), viewing the same research through the lens of visual literacy would underscore *how viewers work with images* (i.e., how they read and interpret images as a

⁷³ Uehlinger, "Introduction," in *Images as Media*, xv.

⁷⁴ See for instance, Susan and Andrew Sherratt, "The Growth of the Mediterranean Economy in the Early First Millennium BC," *World Archaeology* 24 (1993): 361-78.

⁷⁵ Pirhiya Beck, "The Art of Palestine During the Iron Age II: Local Traditions and External Influences," in *Images as Media*, 167.

⁷⁶ Uehlinger, "Introduction," xxv (emphasis mine). For further discussion of the "media" aspect of ancient art, see idem, "'Medien' in der Lebenswelt des antiken Palästina?" in *Medien im antiken Palästina: Materielle Kommunikation und Medialität als Thema der Palästinaarchäologie* (ed. Chrisitan Frevel; FAT 2/10; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), 31-61; and Frevel and Henner von Hesberg, eds., *Kult und Kommunikation: Medien in Heiligtümern der Antike* (Schriften des Lehr- und Forschungszentrums für die Antiken Kulturen des Mittelmeerraumes--Centre for Mediterranean Cultures 4; Wiesbaden: Reichert, 2007).

kind of language). Though subtle, shifting attention from "images as media" to "images as language" is not insignificant for developing a visual hermeneutics. From the perspective of visual literacy, it becomes increasingly possible (to borrow—and slightly adapt—a phrase from Nelson Goodman) to think in terms of the "languages of (minor) art."⁷⁷ While Uehlinger and the other contributors to *Images as Media* implicitly treat images as a type of language, explicitly describing them as such helps to clarify that both images *and* texts, rather than being inherently dissimilar objects are actually complementary components of one cognitive symbol system that is produced and consumed for the purposes of conveying information.⁷⁸ Without diminishing what are very real differences between images and texts (see ch. 4), the payoff of stressing their similarity as types of language is to facilitate a more ready comparison between these two types of media, especially with respect to: (1) the extent of their use; (2) the nature of their interaction; and (3) the manner in which they signify.

(1) To begin with, it should be noted that images would have functioned as the "mass media" of the ancient world only to the extent that a vast number of people from diverse segments of Israelite society would have possessed the skills needed to read and understand minor art as a language of communication. Though it is not possible to quantitatively calculate visual literacy rates in the ancient world (nor perhaps even in the modern world), it seems likely that visual literacy, unlike textual literacy, would have

⁷⁷ Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols* (New York: Bobbs-Merrill, 1968), 9.

⁷⁸ However, Uehlinger also recognizes that in addition to being "transmitters of messages," images had other diverse functions ("Introduction," xvi-ii). Though in ways often less obvious to modern observers, texts likewise were utilized for non-communicative purposes, including decoration or magic (cf. §2.2.1.).

been a "majority phenomenon" in ancient Israel.⁷⁹ Put differently, the language of images might well have been the *lingua franca* of the Levant, if not the whole of the ANE world.⁸⁰ Though his research does not engage the concept of visual literacy, Uehlinger offers similar conclusions about the extent to which images would have been used as a type of language when he says, "in the context of largely illiterate societies, minor arts had a much greater impact and larger diffusion than texts could ever achieve."⁸¹ At one level, such conclusions follow directly from the fact that visual materials far outnumber textual materials in the archaeological record of Syria-Palestine. However, as was discussed with respect to textual materials (cf. §2.2.1), large quantities of visual materials might well have been produced and utilized by a relatively small portion of society. Yet, the archaeological record suggests that minor art was not only produced in great numbers, but it was also widely distributed and locally adapted. For instance, in her contribution to *Images as Media*, Pirhiya Beck demonstrates that while Israelite and Judahite glyptic art show signs of influence by and interaction with themes and compositions of Egypt, Phoenicia, and Mesopotamia, it also exhibits its own distinct regional styles.⁸² Local deities and other figures, including animals, kings, heroes, etc., often appear in an egyptianized guise even as they still possess what Beck

⁷⁹ In offering this suggestion, I primarily refer to the ability to read images, not create them. Indeed, we have few examples of visual figurations that might have been produced by non-specialists, except perhaps the Khirbet el-Qom "hand" drawing or some clay figurines. This seems to suggest that the active production of images depended on specialists as much as—or even more than—the active production of texts.

⁸⁰ However, in the case of business transactions and economic records, words very likely remained the primary vehicle of communication.

⁸¹ Uehlinger, "Introduction," xxv.

⁸² Beck, "Local Traditions and External Influences," 165-83.

describes as a distinct "life of their own" in their new cultural context (**figs. 2.1-2**).⁸³ The presence of distinct regional styles or "visual dialects" suggests that images were being widely used—and regularly adapted—as a language of communication at a local level. These developments, which are comparable to linguistic phenomenon such as language growth, contact, and change, further justify speaking of the possibility of images being widely read and utilized as a language. In this sense, everyday objects, including seals, amulets, and later, coins, become an essential part of the visual culture of the ancient world, conveying messages through artistic motifs that are uniquely shaped and refined in particular contextual environments.



Figures 2.1-2. Left: Seal with egyptianized motifs, including two winged sun disks and ostrich feather representing *Maat*, Shechem, Iron Age IIB. After Keel and Uehlinger, *GGG*, 258 fig. 258c; and LeMon, *Yahweh's Winged Form*, 52 fig. 2.22c. Right: Seal with egyptianized motifs, including two winged uraei and a reclining winged sphinx, Megiddo, 8th c. After Keel and Uehlinger, *GGG*, 253 fig. 246. Images used with permission by Christoph Uehlinger.

⁸³ Beck, "Local Traditions and External Influences," 165. Recognizing that foreign elements were integrated and adapted by local workshops is an important consideration when it comes to interpreting the place of origin of glyptic materials. For instance, it was once thought that seals found in Northern Israel with egyptianized tendencies in style and motif were made in Phoenicia, imported, and later inscribed by Hebrew artisans. However, as Beck argues, these seals were more likely produced in local Israelite workshops in a manner that intentionally drew upon the well-known visual vocabulary of ancient Egypt.

Yet, to suggest that images functioned as a widely utilized language of communication in the ANE world is not to imply that all viewers were equally literate. As is the case with textual literacy, varying levels or degrees of visual literacy were likely at play with different viewers or in different contexts. An individual with moderate levels of visual literacy might have been able to read and interact with a simple iconographic design on a seal in a meaningful way even though he might not be able to fully comprehend all aspects of the complex visual design of, say, the Apadana relief. Though she does not speak in terms of visual literacy, ANE art historian Irene Winter makes a similar point in her discussion of the design of Neo-Assyrian palace wall reliefs.⁸⁴ Winter claims that the ability to receive the intended message of a given artistic program depends on the "cognitive competence of the audience: the stored knowledge brought to the situation, ability to understand signs and signals, and skill in decoding."⁸⁵

Prior to the reign of Assurnasirpal II (885-856 B.C.E.), palace reliefs primarily featured mythological scenes and cultic symbols, both of which would have required a considerable deal of prior knowledge about cultural ideas and customs in order to discern their meaning. However, in the ninth and eighth centuries, there was a decided shift in the design of Neo-Assyrian wall reliefs toward historical narratives—i.e., visual displays that attempt to depict realistic events (battles, tribute processions, etc.) through a sequential arrangement of action and a careful selection of specific elements

⁸⁴ Irene Winter, "Royal Rhetoric and the Development of Historical Narrative in Neo-Assyrian Reliefs," *Studies in Visual Communication* 7 (1981): 1-38.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 29.

that reinforce the particularity of a historical place and moment.⁸⁶ Winter contends that these scenes were more "readable" insofar as they demand less prior knowledge and competence from the viewer.⁸⁷ In other words, the shift toward historical narrative scenes in Neo-Assyrian reliefs effectively lowered the "common denominator of decoding" that would have been required for receiving the message conveyed by the art.⁸⁸

Winter suggests that this trend is understandable when viewed in light of the rapid geopolitical expansion of the Neo-Assyrian empire during the eighth and early-seventh centuries. As the Empire came to include a more ethnically and culturally heterogeneous population, a form of visual display was needed that could effectively communicate to prospective audiences that were less versed in the language of Neo-Assyrian art. Since the historical narratives could be read with less prior cultural knowledge and experience, they were increasingly used in order to foster a common political consciousness among a more diverse array of subjects. To put the matter in terms of the present discussion, the artistic program of these palace wall reliefs shifted toward more easily readable forms of representation as a way of communicating with viewers who might have possessed a lower level of visual literacy with regard to the

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, 29. Winter explains that historical narratives were more readable because their sequential arrangement reflects linear human experience and/or because the addition of specific visual details (topographical features, characteristic style of dress, etc.) made it easier to identify recognizable places, people, and events (*ibid.*, 30). However, these reliefs should not be regarded as "a message without a code." Rather, the apparent realism of the historical narratives, to borrow the language of Roland Barthes, "innocents the semantic artifice of connotation" ("Rhetoric of the Image," in *Image, Music, Text* [trans. Stephen Heath; New York: Hill and Wang, 1977], 45). In other words, the realistic features of these wall reliefs function to naturalize or mask the underlying rhetoric of these scenes (see Winter, "Royal Rhetoric," 18).

⁸⁸ Irene Winter, "Royal Rhetoric," 31.

language of Neo-Assyrian art. While Winter does not draw this conclusion, her research offers further evidence of the fact that ancient viewers were acutely aware of the potential of images to function as a vehicle of mass communication that was accessible to audiences with varying degrees of visual competency.

(2) Discussing images as language would also draw attention to the ways in which images might relate to and interact with written materials as a type of loosely-construed cognate language. While it would be going too far to speak of ANE minor art as a Semitic language, it nevertheless would be appropriate to raise questions about the ways in which the languages of both art and text might have influenced one another. Building on a tradition in biblical scholarship of comparing written languages through the study of philology and intertextuality, biblical iconographers might examine the "textuality of images"—i.e., how texts come to bear on the formation and interpretation of images—and conversely, the "visuality of texts"—i.e., how images come to bear on the formation and interpretation of texts. This sort of perspective is already partially evident in the field of reception history, where biblical scholars study how subsequent readers interpret biblical texts in and through a variety of media, including paintings, sculpture, film, etc. In this approach, various forms of visual art, such as Renaissance paintings, are understood to reflect a stage of interpretive reception of the written language and ideas of the Bible.

However, from the vantage point of biblical iconography, it is equally possible to think about how biblical authors interpreted visual materials in and through the language of the Hebrew Bible. In this view, the literary imagery in the Hebrew Bible

could be understood to reflect the reception of the visual language of ancient iconography, much of which had been widely circulated and known long before the earliest texts of the Bible would have been written. In other words, suggesting that images and texts both function as language would open a variety of new avenues of research related to how these languages mutually influenced one another and/or how they might interact in complex and intriguing ways.

(3) Finally, the notion that minor art constitutes a type of language raises important questions about how visual signs represent the reality to which they refer. A simplistic—but often followed—view of visual semiotics is that images primarily signify by means of natural resemblance. That is, visual representation is thought to be characterized by mimesis. This assumption is at work in much past scholarship that looks to ancient iconography either as a type of historical photograph or an illustration of biblical texts. However, as will be discussed much more extensively in chapter 4, this view of visual semiotics has been widely challenged by art historians and philosophers alike. Erwin Panofsky, Ernst Hans Gombrich, and Nelson Goodman (among others) argue that visual representation is configured by and activated through historically and culturally variable conventions. As Goodman puts it, "a picture never merely represents *x*, but rather represents *x as*" or through a mediated form.⁸⁹ In fact, Goodman argues that the correspondence between an image and its referent is no less arbitrary than is the correspondence between written language and its referent.⁹⁰

⁸⁹ Goodman, *Languages of Art*, 9.

⁹⁰ Goodman might overstate his case since some degree of natural resemblance seems to be at work in at least some types of art. For instance, even though portraits and perspectival drawings of

As a result, talking about images as language would not only reinforce the idea that images, like other forms of language, convey information through mediated conventions of representation, but that viewers of images—whether ancient Israelite or modern scholar—must be "literate" in the culturally conditioned symbolic conventions in order to understand the languages of minor art. Looking at images more as a language than as an illustration should alert biblical iconographers to the need for a more critical assessment of what images do and how images function. Put simply, if images constitute a visual language, then biblical iconographers must carefully attend to the study of how that language works—i.e., the nature of visual culture and how it might function in the formation of ancient Israelite religion and theology.

2.3.3. Visual and Textual Literacies in Interaction

In addition to shedding light on the relative importance of images as a coherent system of language in its own right, the concept of visual literacy also offers a critical lens for evaluating how textual and visual elements interact on the same artifact or within the same corpora of minor art. For the purposes of this study, it will be helpful to briefly examine the interaction of textual and verbal literacies in two particular corpora of glyptic materials: late-sixth-century seals from the Persepolis Fortification Archive and seventh-century Judahite seals.

buildings or landscape rely on conventional codes, they nevertheless resemble their referents more than, say, a surrealist painting or, for that matter, a word. As will be discussed more in ch. 4, perceptual and conceptual modes of art are probably best thought of as existing on a continuum of mimesis (Zainab Bahrani, *The Graven Image: Representation in Babylonia and Assyria* (Archaeology, Culture, and Society; Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 87-89.

2.3.3.1. *Seals of the Persepolis Fortification Archive*

The Persepolis Fortification Archive consists of thousands of administrative tablets found at the Achaemenid imperial capital (*Parša*, or Persepolis) located in the heartland of Persia and dating from 509–494 B.C.E. (during the reign of Darius I).⁹¹ Initial interest in the Persepolis Fortification (PF) archive, carried out by Richard T. Hallock in the late 1960s, focused almost exclusively on the textual data, much of it in Elamite, which is found inscribed on many of these small, lozenge-shaped tablets.⁹² Despite the focus of Hallock's study, *non*-textual information appears to be the dominant feature of the archive as a whole. In their study of the 1,162 legible seal impressions preserved on the tablets published by Hallock, Mark Garrison and Margaret Cool Root indicate that whereas only half of the recovered tablets are inscribed, the vast majority (86.9%) bear seal impressions.⁹³ What is more, in light of the seal impressions left on the tablets, it is possible to infer that most of the cylinder seals themselves (91.8%) were anepigraphic, consisting only of iconographic scenes.⁹⁴ In this sense, the Persepolis Fortification Seals (PFS) convey messages and meaning through images as much, if not more than, they do

⁹¹ These tablets were recovered in the 1930s through excavations carried out by the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago. See for instance, Ernst Herzfeld, "Recent Discoveries at Persepolis," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* (1934): 226-232. In terms of content, these tablets primarily record numerous types of transactions involving the procurement, storage, and disbursement of food commodities (Mark Garrison and Margaret Cool Root, *Seals on the Persepolis Fortification Tablets, Volume 1: Images of Heroic Encounter* [OIP 117; Chicago: Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago Press, 2001], 9).

⁹² Richard T. Hallock, *The Persepolis Fortification Tablets* (OIP 92; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969). Hallock studied a representative sampling of 2,087 tablets, though it is estimated that there are upwards of 30,000 extant clay tablets or tablet fragments.

⁹³ Specifically, 273 of the 2,087 tablets in Hallock's study (13.1%) are unsealed (Garrison and Root, *Seals on the Persepolis Fortification Tablets*, 1 n. 2). However, the percentage of unsealed tablets might be even lower, since in many of these cases, the surfaces on which seals would typically appear have been severely damaged.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

words. This observation has led Garrison and Root to offer the following conclusion about the nature of the PF archive:

The archival system itself was not logocentric. It incorporated seal application as a meaningful part of the communication process of record production and ultimate record product. Thus, it is important that scholarship embrace even the sealed but uninscribed tablets as "documents"—whether they were appended originally to bundles or containers of texts or to non-text commodities.⁹⁵

Rephrased in the language of visual theory, Garrison and Root's analysis suggests that visuality was the primary mechanism by which the archive recorded and conveyed information.

The archive's preference for images as vehicles of communication is not only evident in the quantity of visual materials discovered. Rather, the archive bears evidence of certain visual practices that further indicate that the images, not the texts, were the primary reading materials on these tablets. A particularly interesting example involves the way in which "mixed-media" seals—that is, seals that contained both an inscription and an image—were applied to the tablets. Examination of the impressions left by these mixed-media seals, many of which bear royal name inscriptions, reveals a peculiar sealing practice. Rather than making a complete rolling of the seal such that its entire surface area came into contact with the tablet, officials would often use these cylinder seals somewhat like a stamp seal, pressing only a small portion of the seal's carved surface into the wet clay. Since multiple surfaces of a tablet were often sealed, including one or more of its narrow edges, it is likely the case that practical considerations, such as limited space on a sealing surface, can account for these partial

⁹⁵ Ibid., 3.

applications. However, given these practical limitations, the choice of which part of the seal to apply to the tablet—and thus what part of the seal most needed to be read by its viewers—was all the more important. In the vast majority of cases, the application of these mixed-media seals privileged the presentation of the iconographic data. The result is that little to no portion of the inscription is visible in many of the seal impressions.⁹⁶

The royal name seal PFS 0007* (**fig. 2.3**) offers a compelling example of this practice.⁹⁷ This seal presents a classic heroic encounter scene in Court Style along with a standard trilingual (Old Persian, Elamite, Babylonian) inscription that reads: "I am Darius . . .".⁹⁸ Within the archive, PFS 0007* is the most frequently occurring seal of the heroic encounter scene.⁹⁹ Due in part to the large size of the seal, few impressions preserve the complete seal design.¹⁰⁰ Of the 115 impressions of this seal found in the archive, 38 (33%) leave no trace of the inscription.¹⁰¹ A complete rolling of the inscription is evident in a mere 18 impressions (15.7%), and only in a portion of these is the inscription centered in the impression.¹⁰² In this regard, PFS 0007* is not unique in

⁹⁶ Garrison and Root, *Seals on the Persepolis Fortification Tablets*, 13.

⁹⁷ A raised asterisk after the catalogue number of a Persepolis Fortification Seal (i.e., PFS 0007*) indicates that the seal is inscribed. Anepigraphic seals are indicated by a four-digit number without an asterisk.

⁹⁸ The inscriptions, enclosed in vertical registers, are read from top to bottom, with Old Persian furthest to the right, Elamite in the middle, and Babylonian closest to the image. There are no known seal impressions that preserve the beginnings and ends of the lines (for a discussion, see Garrison and Root, *Seals on the Persepolis Fortification Tablets*, 69). Following Garrison and Root, the transliteration is as follows:

Old Persian	[a-]da-ma : da-a-ra-ya-va-[...]
Elamite	[v.ú] v.Da-ri-ya-ma-u-iš [...]
Babylonian	[ana-ku]Da-ri-ia-muš [...]

Further commentary and bibliography on the inscription can found in *ibid.*, 68-70.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 69.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 70. The original height of the seal was 3cm and the length of a full impression of the scene would have been approximately 5cm.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 70.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 70.

the PFS archive. Garrison and Root note that the "incorporation of the inscription (in full or in part) was not an essential feature of the sealing protocol even for these very special [royal name] seals."¹⁰³ In contrast, 105 impressions (91.3%) include some portion of the image, including 45 impressions with the hero (39.1%) and 77 impressions with one of the two creatures (67.0%). As a result, it appears that the PF archive, at least in terms of the design and use of seals, is rather "iconocentric," privileging the presentation of images over texts as a communicative language.

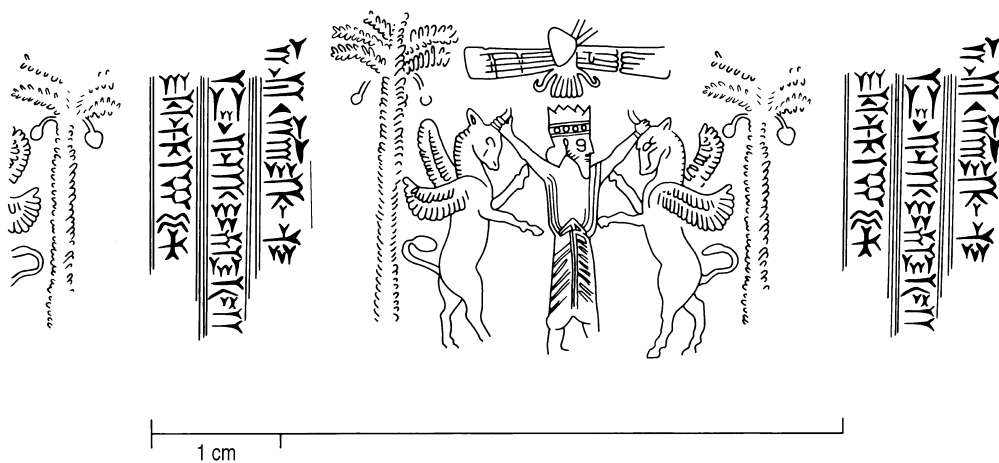


Figure 2.3. PFS 0007* Composite line drawing of a royal name seal from the Persepolis Fortification archive, late 6th / early 5th c. After Garrison and Root, *Seals on the Persepolis Fortification Tablets*, 68. Image used with permission by Mark Garrison.

However, it is also important to note that the nature of this sealing practice is not readily evident in the presentation of the research on the PFS. The line drawings of these (and other) mixed-media seals reflect a composite rendering from numerous photographs of actual seal impressions. Several examples of actual seal impressions of PFS 0007* are provided in **figs. 2.4-7**. While these composite line drawings facilitate the analysis of iconographic motifs by presenting the seals impressions in an easily

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 31.

accessible and coherent form, they obscure the fact that the seal impressions themselves would have been rarely seen (or read) in their entirety.



Figures 2.4-7. Four impressions of PFS 0007* on different PF tablets (clockwise from top left: PF 719, PF 709, PF 698, and PF 702). After Garrison and Root, *Seals on the Persepolis Fortification Tablets* (vol. 2), pl. 4. Photographs used with permission by Mark Garrison.

What, then, do these observations suggest about the interaction of visual and textual literacies within this archive? On the one hand, the amount of iconographic data and nature of sealing practices in the PF archive corroborates the notion that visual literacy was an essential component of communication. However, even though the PF archive is not logocentric, texts nevertheless conveyed important information about certain administrative transactions, including the procurement and distribution of food commodities. As Garrison and Root contend, while the archive bears clear evidence of both visual and verbal languages being in use, various aspects of the interaction

between the two are poorly understood.¹⁰⁴ For instance: How does the language of the seal inscriptions relate to the iconographic style of the image? How might the iconographic motifs of the seals relate to the administrative purpose of the tablet on which it appears or the socio-economic status or nationality of the individual who possesses the seal? In what ways were the seal impressions or the cylinder seals themselves used in order to verify the textual data or the identity of the sealer? These and related questions are in need of further thought and investigation.

On the other hand, additional questions emerge with respect to whether seal designs and uses at Persepolis are reflective of broader trends throughout the ANE world, let alone Syria-Palestine. In many ways, the prevalence of visual literacy in the PF archive is not unique. The vast majority of ANE glyptic materials from at least the mid-fourth millennium through the end of the Iron Age are anepigraphic.¹⁰⁵ Likewise, there is evidence that Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian cylinder seals were also used as a type of stamp seal so as to selectively feature certain iconographic motifs in the application of the seal.¹⁰⁶ Nevertheless, the specific sealing practices on display in the Persepolis archive cannot uncritically be assumed for all corpora of ANE glyptic

¹⁰⁴ Garrison and Root, *Seals on the Persepolis Fortification Tablets*, 8.

¹⁰⁵ In his study of Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian cylinder seals, Samuel M. Paley asserts the following: "Inscribed seals and sealings are rare and tablets impressed with inscribed cylinder seals are even more exceptional" (Paley, "Inscribed Neo-Assyrian and Neo-Babylonian Cylinder Seals and Impressions," in *Insight Through Images: Studies in Honor of Edith Porada* (ed. Marilyn Kelly-Buccellati; Bibliotheca Mesopotamica 21; Malibu, Calif.: Undena, 1986), 209.

¹⁰⁶ Paley, "Cylinder Seals and Impressions," 210. Although it is not certain that these seals were inscribed, the impressions clearly indicate that seals were applied in such a way as to leave only the central figure of the design visible in the impression.

materials.¹⁰⁷ In fact, in an article on sealing practices from the Mari period, Marilyn Kelly-Buccellati points to some instances in which cylinder seals are applied so as to highlight the inscription portion of the design.¹⁰⁸ Nor, as will be discussed momentarily (cf. §2.3.3.2), do different seal technologies (such as the stamp seals of ancient Israel) allow for the same type of selective privileging of one design component over another. As a result, in order to account for variations that might obtain in visual materials across time and space, a thorough assessment of the interaction of textual and visual literacies ideally proceeds on a case-by-case basis.¹⁰⁹ Nonetheless, since both texts and images were used to convey information (though perhaps to varying degrees) in and through glyptic materials, it is possible to conclude that textual and visual literacies were complementary—not competing—languages of communication. In other words, the PF archive might be said to exhibit a type of "multilingualism" insofar as it utilizes both textual and visual languages as a means of communication.

¹⁰⁷ A systematic assessment of the interaction between inscriptions and imagery in sealing practices of different ANE archives has not yet been carried out but would be extremely valuable. There is at least some evidence that the iconocentric practices at Persepolis were not universally followed.

¹⁰⁸ Marilyn Kelly-Buccellati, "Sealing Practices at Terqa," in *Insight Through Images*, 138. Garrison and Root (*Seals on the Persepolis Fortification Tablets*, 13) cite two studies of Ur III seal impressions in which the seal rolling preserved the coherence of the inscription at the expense of the figural imagery. See, Giovanni Bergamini, "Neo-Sumerian 'Vignettes'? A Methodological Approach," *Mesopotamia* 26 (1991): 101-18; and Robert M. Whiting, "Sealing Practices on House and Land Sale Documents at Eshnunna in the Isin-Larsa Period," in *Seals and Sealing in the Ancient Near East* (ed. McGuire Gibson and Robert D. Biggs; Bibliotheca Mesopotamica 6; Malibu, Calif.: Undena, 1977), 167-80. Considering the significant time gap between Ur III and Achaemenid Persia, a more thorough diachronic analysis of sealing practices would be required in order to comment more broadly on the interplay of images and texts in ANE seal impressions.

¹⁰⁹ Questions pertaining to the nature and dynamics of the text-image relationship will be taken up more extensively in chapter 3.

2.3.3.2. *Judahite Seals from the Seventh Century*

As alluded to in the previous section, an examination of the interaction between textual and visual literacies in Israelite glyptic materials must account for the fact that ancient Israel, likely under Egyptian influence, almost exclusively used stamp seals in contrast to the more popular cylinder seals of Mesopotamia and Persia.¹¹⁰ Since the application technique required with a stamp seal—pressing a single, flat surface into wet clay—would have made it quite difficult to privilege iconographic over epigraphic elements (or vice versa) in any given mixed-media seal impression, one must turn to broader trends in the design of Syro-Palestinian seals themselves to better understand the interaction between visual and textual literacies.¹¹¹

Interest in trends in Israelite seal design is nothing new. In the 1980s, Nahman Avigad demonstrated that iconic seals far outnumbered aniconic ones in ancient Israel up through the eighth century.¹¹² However, in a later study, Benjamin Sass notes that there is a major shift toward epigraphic seal designs in Judahite seals in the seventh century.¹¹³ Of the 700 known seals from this period, 370 are exclusively epigraphic while another 130 contain an inscription with some form of floral register divider or stylized border.¹¹⁴ Sass, following Joseph Naveh, associates this rise of epigraphic seals with

¹¹⁰ Generally speaking, by the second half of the eighth century, stamp seals replaced cylinder seals throughout Mesopotamia as well. Stamp seals became more prevalent at this time at least in part due to the increased use of papyrus and parchment as a writing surface, especially as Aramaic became a more international language (Paley, "Cylinder Seals and Impressions," 210).

¹¹¹ The only way certain elements of a stamp seal can be excluded from an impression is if the seal is applied near the edge of a tablet or wax dripping.

¹¹² Avigad, *Hebrew Bullae from the Time of Jeremiah: Remnants of a Burnt Archive* (Jerusalem: Israel Exploration Society, 1986).

¹¹³ Sass, "The Pre-Exilic Hebrew Seals: Iconism vs. Aniconism," in *Studies in the Iconography of Northwest Semitic Inscribed Seals*, 194-256.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 197-98.

increasing literacy rates in seventh-century Judah.¹¹⁵ In Sass's view, as more and more people were able to read written materials (a conclusion that might well be challenged in its own right—cf. §2.2), "seal pictures became less necessary from the practical point of view."¹¹⁶ By assuming that textual literacy and visual literacy relate to one another as inversely proportional phenomena, Sass implies that visual materials only function as a vehicle of communication to those who are textually illiterate.

However, Sass's conclusions are unwarranted for several reasons. For one, it is not necessarily the case that images only function as vehicles of communication to those who are textually illiterate.¹¹⁷ While this line of reasoning is central to Sass's explanation of trends in Judahite seal design, it is also evident in and through a long history of Christian theology. For example, medieval theologians, ever suspicious of the dangerous power of images, specified that edification of the illiterate was one of the few valid uses of religious imagery in the church.¹¹⁸ This is why Thomas Aquinas claimed that images are only useful for "the instruction of the unlettered" and Gregory the Great concluded that "Images are to be employed in churches, so that those who are illiterate

¹¹⁵ Sass, "Iconism vs. Aniconism," 243. See also Joseph Naveh, *The Early History of the Alphabet* (Leiden: Brill; Jerusalem: Magnes, 1982), 71.

¹¹⁶ Sass, "Iconism vs. Aniconism," 243.

¹¹⁷ While Uehlinger disagrees with Sass on this very point, he nevertheless seems to imply that purely iconographic materials, such as the imported Egyptian and Phoenician seal amulets, had "taken over, in part or almost completely, the amuletic, i.e. apotropaic and life-promoting functions" (Uehlinger, "Conclusions," 286). While amulets might well have functioned apotropaically, it need not mean that they ceased transmitting messages or identifying the individuals that used them. Indeed, it is precisely the iconographical "message" of the image in question that permits, facilitates, or enables its apotropaic use. Thus, Sass's conclusion here belies what Uehlinger so clearly emphasizes elsewhere: images, even apart from texts, can function as vehicles of communication in and of themselves.

¹¹⁸ Freedberg, *The Power of Images*, 4.

might at least read by seeing on the walls what they cannot read in books."¹¹⁹ In other words, in the view of these and many other Christian theologians, pictures should be read only when texts cannot be understood.¹²⁰

However, what Aquinas, Gregory, Sass, and others apparently fail to reckon with is the fact that images also function as a meaningful form of communication to those who can (and do) read texts. This point is abundantly clear in the recent emergence of visual culture studies, which emphasizes the role and importance of contemporary visual materials *despite* the fact that textual literacy rates are now higher than at any point in history.¹²¹ Thus, even if textual literacy was widespread in the ancient world, it would not follow that the visual arts were any less important when it came to expressing and transmitting information for the vast majority of individuals—indeed, everyone with sight. As a result, the rise of Judahite inscribed seals in the seventh century does not necessary imply that images were falling out of use or that visual literacy was any less important as a vehicle of communication.

In a response essay that appears in the same volume as Sass's research, Uehlinger offers an alternative explanation of these trends in Judahite seal production. Uehlinger notes that during this same time there was a massive influx of Egyptian and

¹¹⁹ As cited in Freedberg, *The Power of Images*, 162-63 (cf. Aquinas, *Commentarium super libros sententiarum: Commentum in librum III*, dist. 9, art. 2, qu. 2; and Gregory the Great, *Lib. IX, Epistola IX Ad Serenum Episcopum Massiliensem*, PL 77, cols. 1128-29). Note especially how Gregory describes what the illiterate do with images—i.e., they "read" them.

¹²⁰ Implicit in this assessment is the notion that the skills required to successfully read an image are inherently more basic, or even more natural, than those required to read texts. Such notions about visual literacy and picture-processing skills are on display in Messaris's *Visual Literacy*.

¹²¹ According to a 2009 UNESCO report, approximately 83.7% of the global population is literate (UNESCO Institute for Statistics Fact Sheet, September 2011, No. 16).

Phoenician faïence and glass anepigraphic amulets in Syria-Palestine.¹²² Perhaps indicating an emergent distinction between seal and amulet functions, Uehlinger contends that these amulets might have taken over the "apotropaic and life-promoting functions" of earlier iconic seals.¹²³ This functional distinction between image and inscription might also be on display in a small number of bifacial seals, such as in **fig. 2.8**, in which one side is purely iconographic and the other is purely epigraphic.¹²⁴

The presence of bifacial seals and the proliferation of amulet imports during the seventh century indicate that while the majority of seals produced in Judah were aniconic, the full repertoire of minor art circulating in Judah at this time was still significantly characterized by iconographic data. As a result, rather than suggesting that images were falling out of use during this period, it appears that textual and visual literacies were functioning side-by-side, even on the same objects (as is the case on the bifacial seals) or within the same corpora of artifacts (as is the case with iconic amulet imports and aniconic domestic seals).

¹²² Uehlinger, "Northwest Semitic Inscribed Seals, Iconography, and Syro-Palestinian Religions of Iron Age II: Some Afterthoughts and Conclusions," in *Studies in the Iconography of Northwest Semitic Inscribed Seals*, 284-86.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 286.

¹²⁴ For a full discussion of this seal, see Sibylle Mähner, "Ein Namen- und Bildsiegel aus 'Ēn Šems (Beth Schemesch)," *ZDPV* 108 (1992): 68–81. However, it is important to note that other layouts of bifacial seals are evident, such as text-text and image-image designs. Thus, bifacial seals might simply reflect the desire of seal cutters to utilize more of the available surface area for engraving (cf. Uehlinger, "Conclusions," 286 n. 91).

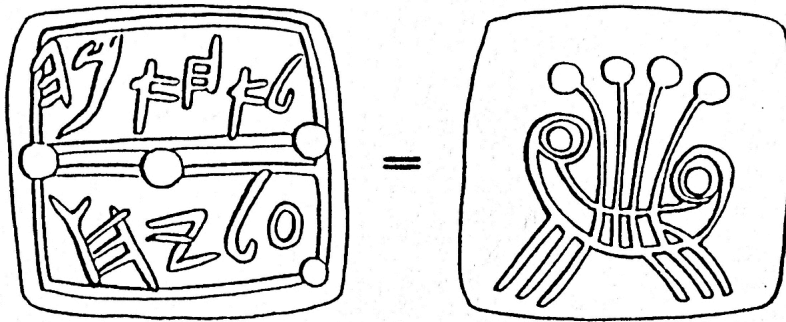


Figure 2.8. Bifacial seal impression in limestone, Beth Shemesh, 7th c B.C.E. The seal belongs to 'h'mh (bn) 'lyhw. After Uehlinger, "Northwest Semitic Inscribed Seals," 286 fig. 23; and Mähner, "Ein Namen- und Bildsiegel aus 'Ēn Šems," Abb. 1f. Image used with permission by Christoph Uehlinger.

These considerations aside, there still remains the issue of *why* seals produced in Judah during the seventh century were increasingly aniconic. As early as the 1950s, Adolf Reifenberg connected this rise in aniconic seals to the emergence of a theologically motivated ban on images, perhaps instituted by Josiah.¹²⁵ However, Sass challenges this straightforward connection between the glyptic evidence and deuteronomic reforms and instead suggests that these trends reflect growing aniconic ideological tendencies present throughout the ancient Near Eastern world.¹²⁶ While Uehlinger also contends that biblical texts and glyptic aniconic trends should not too readily be seen as reflecting the same underlying causes, he acknowledges that non-religious factors cannot be considered the sole reason for the decrease in Judahite iconic seals.¹²⁷ Uehlinger tentatively proposes that these trends in aniconic seal design might correspond, at least in part, with the emergence of the deuteronomistic "name theology" which specified that Yahweh's presence in the temple was mediated by his

¹²⁵ Adolf Reifenberg, *Ancient Hebrew Seals* (London: East and West Library, 1950), 17.

¹²⁶ Sass, "Iconism vs. Aniconism," 245. A more recent treatment of ANE aniconic tendencies and their potential relationship to the image-ban in ancient Israel can be found in Tallay Ornan, *The Triumph of the Symbol: Pictorial Representation of Deities in Mesopotamia and the Biblical Image Ban* (OBO 213; Fribourg: Academic Press; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2005).

¹²⁷ Uehlinger, "Conclusions," 287.

name alone.¹²⁸ Uehlinger suspects that "this new fervor for God's name might have been influenced by the growing insistence of Judaeans seal-cutters and their customers on what could aptly be termed 'name-alone' seals."¹²⁹ However, even if the production of aniconic seals was partially, or even fully, motivated by iconoclastic theologies, it need not imply that images ceased functioning as vehicles of communication more broadly. Thus, while the second commandment of the Decalogue seems to place strictures on making images of the deity, it remains clear, at least from an archaeological perspective, that (to borrow a phrase from Silvia Schroer) "*in Israel gab es Bilder*."¹³⁰ In fact, art historian David Freedberg claims that it is a myth that certain cultures, even monotheistic ones, were purely aniconic, or in other words, relied solely on textual literacy to express and transmit religious (or other) knowledge.¹³¹ Freedberg concludes, "Abstinence from figuring the deity does occasionally occur, but for the rest the notion of aniconism is wholly untenable."¹³² Put simply, even if aniconism is taken to be a valuation of the degree of spirituality or purity of monotheistic religious (a problematic assumption in its own right), supposedly aniconic cultures like ancient Israel nevertheless relied on and utilized images as a language of communication, and even more specifically, *religious* communication. "Aniconism," then—at least as that term is understood to apply globally—simply does not fit (cf. §6.3 for further discussion).

¹²⁸ Uehlinger, "Conclusions," 288.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 288.

¹³⁰ Silvia Schroer, *In Israel gab es Bilder: Nachrichten von darstellender Kunst im Alten Testament* (OBO 74; Fribourg: Universitätsverlag; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1987).

¹³¹ See especially Freedberg's chapter "The Myth of Aniconism," in *The Power of Images*, 54-81.

¹³² Freedberg, *The Power of Images*, 54.

2.3.4. Conclusions on Visual Literacy

In light of these findings, it is increasingly evident that iconographic materials, especially in the form of minor art, functioned as a widely utilized language of communication in ancient Israel. If images were as commonly used and read as Uehlinger and others have argued, then long-held views about the hegemony of texts and textual literacy in biblical scholarship must be challenged. By "visualizing" literacy in the ancient world, the present study not only furthers the theoretical basis of those scholars who have called into question text-alone approaches to the study of the Hebrew Bible but it also clarifies the relative importance of texts and images within a given cultural context or even on individual artifacts.

Two central conclusions emerge. First, the notion that ancient Israel was a text-based culture that primarily communicated through aniconic media must be regarded as a myth that is far more motivated by logocentric perspectives in western philosophy and Judeo-Christian theology than it is by an understanding of either the archaeological record of Syria-Palestine or the operative symbol system of this ancient culture.¹³³ Second, while both textual and visual literacies would have been operative in ancient Israel, visual literacy was more likely to have been a "majority phenomenon" than textual literacy. However, it should be noted that it is rather difficult to access with any precision what portion of the population would have been visually literate. This is not my intention. Rather, I simply mean to underscore the fact that there is ample evidence to suggest that the degree of visual literacy in ancient Israel was higher than that of

¹³³ The development of much of this ideology or theology took place without the benefit of access to the archaeological record.

textual literacy. In this sense, I use the term "majority phenomenon" not as a valuation of a specific rate of visual literacy (i.e., > 50% of the population) but rather to contrast the prominence of visual literacy with Goody's previously mentioned notion that textual literacy was a "minority phenomenon." In other words, images seems to have been the *primus inter inaequales* of ancient Israelite communicative media. Put simply, visual literacy mattered more, and to more people, than textual literacy as a means of transmitting and negotiating religious belief and other forms of cultural knowledge.

2.4. Whither Images in Biblical Studies?

These reflections on the theory of visual literacy do more than just provide biblical iconographers with a familiar and convenient linguistic trope for talking about the process of "reading" images. Rather, by shedding light on the importance of iconographic data as a language of communication, the concept of visual literacy brings into clearer focus how and why images mattered in ancient Israel. Conversely, "visualizing" literacy in the manner forwarded in this chapter also bears practical implications for how and why images should matter for contemporary biblical scholarship. If images, especially in the form of the minor arts, functioned as something of a *lingua franca* in Israel as it did throughout the ancient world then biblical scholars must revise and reformulate the sorts of questions they ask and issues they raise about how—not *if*—biblical texts should be studied in light of ANE images. By way of conclusion, this section sketches the most basic tenets of a visual hermeneutics for

biblical studies that emerge from the insights gleaned from this study of visual literacy.

Three facets of this visual hermeneutics are of note.

(1) First, to reiterate and reinforce a point already made by Keel and Uehlinger in the opening pages of *GGG*, it is imperative that biblical scholars *utilize images as a crucial source for the study of ancient religion*. This sort of "altar call" to the study of images is needed in light of the fact that, as already indicated at the outset of this chapter, visual data has so often been ignored by biblical scholars in favor of textual materials.¹³⁴ A parade example of these logocentric tendencies is evident in past biblical research on seals. Despite the fact that iconographic data is the most dominant feature of the total corpus of ANE stamp and cylinder seals, the study of this material has long been dominated by epigraphic and paleographic concerns, as is evident in both Nahman Avigad's research on west Semitic stamp seals and Jeffrey H. Tigay's important work on Hebrew onomastica.¹³⁵ In these and other studies, images are either mostly ignored or treated as little more than decorative features, and as such, whatever religio-historical conclusions are made derive almost exclusively from textual data. Yet, as has been made clear in the present chapter, the iconography of minor art functions as a form of

¹³⁴ As will be discussed in chapter 6 of this study, Christian and Jewish theological traditions long have been suspicious of the utility and value of images. As but one example, Calvin proclaimed that "whatever men learn of God from images is futile, indeed false. . . . In short, if it were not true that whatever knowledge of God is sought from images is fallacious and counterfeit, the prophets would not so generally have condemned it (*Institutes of the Christian Religion* [ed. John T. McNeill; trans. Ford Lewis Battle; LCC; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960], 1.11.5 [p. 105]).

¹³⁵ Avigad, *Corpus of West Semitic Stamp Seals* (ed. and rev. by Benjamin Sass; Jerusalem: The Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities, The Israel Exploration Society, and the Institute of Archaeology, the Hebrew University of Jerusalem, 1997); and Jeffrey H. Tigay, *You shall Have No Other Gods: Israelite Religion in the Light of Hebrew Inscriptions* (HSS 31; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986). One might also note similar trends in the work of Larry G. Herr, *The Scripts of Ancient Northwest Semitic Seals* (HSM 18; Missoula, Mont.: Scholars Press, 1978) or F. W. Dobbs-Allsopp et al., eds., *Hebrew Inscriptions: Texts from the Biblical Period of the Monarchy with Concordance* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005).

mass media that was widely read and utilized as a coherent vehicle of communication.¹³⁶ To put the matter most simply, the methods and practices of contemporary biblical scholarship should more fully account for the fact that images, perhaps far more than texts, played a central role in expressing and transmitting religious beliefs and other forms of cultural knowledge. More explicitly forwarding the study of images in the text-based discipline of biblical studies would not only further the pictorial turn already at work in the humanities and social sciences but it also would enrich and expand the interpretive insights generated from the interpretation of biblical literature.

(2) Second and closely related, a visual hermeneutics for biblical studies would also prompt scholars *to study images on their own terms*. That is, the fact that images functioned as a coherent language of communication in the ancient world has important implications for *how* contemporary scholars analyze iconographic data. Specifically, as has already been argued persuasively by Keel and Uehlinger, ANE images need not always be interpreted in light of textual data.¹³⁷ Rather, images, like texts, can and

¹³⁶ One of the earliest examples of this methodological shift in biblical research on seals is Kurt Galling's 1941 (!) investigation of iconographic motifs and styles in ANE glyptic materials ("Beschriftete Bildsiegel des ersten Jahrtausends v. Chr. vornehmlich aus Syrien und Palästina: Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte der phönizischen Kunst," *ZDPV* 64 [1941]: 121-202). While Galling's work was truly ahead of its time, it did not have a lasting influence on the field. More recently, numerous detailed iconographic studies have surfaced. With respect to west Semitic stamp seals, the following volumes have made especially important contributions: Keel and Schroer, *Studien zu den Stempelsiegeln aus Palästina/Israel* (4 vols.; Fribourg; Universitätsverlag; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1985-1994); Sass and Uehlinger's *Studies in the Iconography of Northwest Semitic Inscribed Seals*; and Egger and Keel, eds., *Corpus der Siegel-Amulette aus Jordanien*. Perhaps most significantly, the five-volume *Corpus der Stempelsiegel-Amulette aus Palästina/Israel: Von den Anfängen bis zur Perserzeit*, when complete, will offer a comprehensive analysis of the approximately 8,500 extant Syro-Palestinian seals.

¹³⁷ See especially Keel, *Das Recht der Bilder gesehen zu werden: Drei Fallstudien zur Methode der Interpretation altorientalischer Bilder* (OBO 122; Fribourg; Universitätsverlag; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1992) and Uehlinger, "Clio in a World of Pictures – Another Look at the Lachish Reliefs from

should be studied on their own terms. Thus, while cultural context and historical background are vital to understanding an image, this knowledge does not always (or only) come from written documents.¹³⁸ Writing in the mid-1990s, Irene Winter, an art historian who specializes in ANE art, offers a similar assessment:

What has been amply demonstrated over the past 25 years, and especially in the past ten, is, on the one hand, that one simply cannot look at the verbal domains of information and not include the visual in the larger universe of cultural communication; and, on the other hand, that one cannot restrict study of the visual to merely establishing chronology and articulating formal properties. Rather, the visual domain contains within it primary information, as well as unique structures of knowledge— oftentimes in parallel or complementary with, occasionally even quite distinct from, the textual record. Consequently, the visual needs to be studied with the full analytical arsenal available to us—art historical, archaeological, anthropological, and textual—and *on its own terms*.¹³⁹

What Keel and Winter make clear is that it is no longer tenable for biblical scholars to think of ancient iconography as "nice pictures" that merely illustrate what are otherwise text-alone approaches to biblical interpretation. Neither would a visual hermeneutics for biblical studies endorse a type of "cut-and-paste" methodology in which small fragments of iconographic data are extracted out of a larger visual context only to be juxtaposed next to a biblical phrase or verse reference as "proof" of a given interpretation.¹⁴⁰ Rather, images are to be thoroughly analyzed according to the stylistic

Sennacherib's Southwest Palace at Nineveh," in *Like a Bird in a Cage: The Invasion of Sennacherib in 701 BCE* (ed. Lester L. Grabbe; JSOTSup 363; ESHM 4; London: Sheffield Academic, 2003), 221-305.

¹³⁸ *Ibid.*, 45.

¹³⁹ Irene Winter, "Art in Empire: The Royal Image and the Visual Dimensions of Assyrian Ideology," in *Assyria 1995: Proceedings of the 10th Anniversary Symposium of the Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, Helsinki, September 7-11, 1995* (ed. Simo Parpola and Robert M. Whiting; Helsinki: The Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 1997), 359; emphasis hers.

¹⁴⁰ Such procedures are evident in what is often considered the earliest work of the Fribourg School—Keel's *The Symbolism of the Biblical World: Ancient Near Eastern Iconography and the Book of Psalms* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1997 [1978]). In this otherwise insightful volume, isolated fragments of ANE images are provided with little analysis except for the biblical quotes or references

principles and symbolic conventions of their own particular artistic and cultural contexts.

While Keel and Winter are undoubtedly correct in asserting that images should be studied on their own terms, this need not imply that images should be studied *for their own sake* alone. Yet, in the latter stages of the development of the Fribourg School, these two trends often go hand-in-hand. For instance, after the publication of *Das Recht* in 1992, many contributions to the Fribourg School began to shift away from biblical iconography (i.e., interpreting biblical texts in light of ANE art) toward the cataloguing and publication of primary iconographic materials. These latter contributions are of enormous value and significantly advance our access to and understanding of the meaning and significance of ANE images in their original contexts. Even still, this work seems to be motivated by a different set of questions than is found in more exegetically oriented studies. It is for this reason that LeMon draws distinctions between varying approaches to the study of ancient art.¹⁴¹ Whereas interpreting ANE images for their own sake might constitute a distinct approach in LeMon's typology (i.e., iconographic-artistic or iconographic-historical), interpreting ANE images on their own terms can represent a stage *within* an iconographic-biblical approach. Although LeMon does not specifically make this point, his own work in *Yahweh's Winged Form* offers an insightful example of how images might be studied on their own terms within a project ultimately and explicitly geared toward biblical exegesis. In a similar way, a visual

placed beneath them. The different methodological approaches between *Symbolism* and *Das Recht* are indicative of the development of the Fribourg School over time.

¹⁴¹ LeMon offers a typology of three approaches to the study of ancient iconography: (1) the iconographic-artistic approach; (2) the iconographic-historical approach; and (3) the iconographic-biblical approach (*Yahweh's Winged Form*, 7-16). See also idem, "Iconographic Approaches," 146-51.

hermeneutics for biblical studies would underscore the need to study images as a coherent, culturally-conditioned language of communication in its own right without foregoing interest in how those images come to bear on an interpretation of the Hebrew Bible.

(3) Finally, by emphasizing the importance of images as a language of communication in the ancient world, a visual hermeneutics would position biblical scholars *to study images as one of the most relevant sources for interpreting the meaning and significance of figurative language and other imagery in the Hebrew Bible.* As noted at the outset of this study, biblical scholars have traditionally read and interpreted the Hebrew Bible in light of other written documents from the ancient world. However, since textual literacy rates were quite low, it seems more likely the case that imagery conveyed by minor art would have informed how the vast majority of ancient Israelites came to understand the meaning and significance of their sacred texts. In a broader sense, images provide a window into the thought world or cognitive processes that lie behind the biblical text and its figurative language. As a result, ancient images can shed light on the conceptual world that informs and guides how scholars understand biblical literature.¹⁴²

Furthermore, while biblical iconographers widely acknowledge that iconography provides a critical source of data for interpreting the Hebrew Bible, their methodological procedures have not always sufficiently challenged traditional assumptions about the importance of texts in ancient Israel. For instance, in his commentary on the Song of

¹⁴² That biblical iconography can be understood to "illuminate" the conceptual world behind the Hebrew Bible will be discussed further in §3.2.2.

Songs, Keel lays out a procedure for reading biblical texts in light of ANE images.¹⁴³ In Keel's "concentric circles" approach, which is now widely followed by biblical iconographers, one seeks to interpret ambiguous literary imagery in the Bible by consulting other comparative data, beginning with the most relevant context in terms of geographical and chronological proximity.¹⁴⁴ Specifically, one begins with the immediate literary context of the biblical text and then proceeds to broader literary settings, including a wider range of biblical materials as well as literary texts from other ANE cultural settings. Finally, and only after exhausting the textual data, does Keel suggest engaging non-textual sources, including iconography.¹⁴⁵ Even though Keel's concentric circles method provides a helpful way of organizing or presenting biblical iconographic research, it does not fully account for the relative importance of images and texts within Israelite culture. That is, his methodology still presumes that textual data would have functioned for most ancient Israelites as the most relevant and accessible source of background knowledge for understanding the Hebrew Bible. Though I do not mean to suggest that familiarity with texts and written traditions was irrelevant, it seems highly unlikely that the vast majority of ancient Israelites, many of whom were illiterate, would have turned to visual materials only *after* their knowledge of textual sources was exhausted. Or, to put the matter in a slightly different way, the average Israelite would have turned to visual materials quite quickly since their knowledge of texts would have been easily exhausted!

¹⁴³ Keel, *The Song of Songs* (trans. Frederick J. Gaiser; CC; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994).

¹⁴⁴ See for instance, LeMon, "Iconographic Approaches," 150-51. However, in many other contributions, Keel himself does not strictly follow the concentric circles approach.

¹⁴⁵ Keel, *The Song of Songs*, 27. However, for Keel and others who follow the concentric circles methods, it is rarely the case that an analysis of textual data is fully exhausted before turning to images.

In brief, Keel's concentric circle methodology, while insightful and influential, does not go far enough in terms of "visualizing" the sorts of literacies that would have informed the conceptual background of the ancient world. If visual literacy was a majority phenomenon in ancient Israel and if the images on minor art functioned as a widespread language of communication throughout the Levant—a point which seems irrefutable—then it follows that the comparative study of ancient art should be one of the inner-most "concentric circles" of biblical interpretation, not the last consulted when all else fails. While this need not mean that images are always consulted first or that they must always be considered the most important piece of comparative data in every interpretive project, it does require more critical reflection on the ways in which ancient visual culture might have informed and shaped how Israelites would have come to see and understand their written texts.

However one chooses to prioritize textual and iconographic data within Keel's schema, his circles of data remain concentric—that is, they not only share the same center, but they also share contiguous borders. In other words, images and texts are juxtaposed in relationship to one another, both in the ancient world as well as in contemporary biblical scholarship. Questions pertaining to the nature of this juxtaposition (which is to say, the image-text relationship) are essential to the development of a visual hermeneutics for biblical studies and are the subject of the next chapter.

CHAPTER 3

DRAWING DISTINCTIONS: THE NATURE OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN IMAGES AND TEXTS

Heard melodies are sweet, but those unheard
Are sweeter: therefore, ye soft pipes, play on;
Not to the sensual ear, but, more endear'd,
Pipe to the spirit ditties of no tone.
- John Keats, "Ode to a Grecian Urn"

The dialectic of word and image seems to be a constant in the fabric of signs that a culture weaves around itself. What varies is the precise nature of the weave, the relation of warp and woof.
- W. J. T. Mitchell, *Iconology*, 43

3.1. Relating (ANE) Images and (Biblical) Texts: A Persistent Problem

Whether in contemporary art or ancient artifacts, images and texts relate to and interact with one another as complementary languages of communication.¹ In fact, the impulse to couple depiction with description—to show *and* tell—is, as the epigraph from W. J. T. Mitchell above claims, "a constant in the fabric of signs that a culture weaves around itself."² The sorts of interactions that occur between visual and verbal data are a point of great interest within biblical iconography as well. In its most basic definition, biblical iconography seeks to analyze the nature of the relationship between specific ANE images and corresponding biblical texts.³ Thus, even as biblical

¹ Chapter 2 of this study addressed the relationship between images and texts in its broadest terms, arguing that a type of visual-verbal "multilingualism" existed in the ancient Near Eastern world not only between discrete forms of media (i.e., iconic seals and inscribed tablets) but also on the same artifacts (i.e., epigraphic seals).

² W. J. T. Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1986), 43.

³ For instance, Joel M. LeMon explains that the "iconographic-biblical approach" is an interpretive method that attempts to answer the question, "How can [ANE] images inform readings of particular biblical texts?" (*Yahweh's Winged Form in the Psalms: Exploring Congruent Iconography and Texts* [OBO 242; Fribourg: Academic Press; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2010], 9). Likewise, Izaak J. de

iconographers employ a variety of methods and pursue a range of topics, the shared starting point for their research is the belief that images and texts *do* relate and that ancient visual materials have something valuable to say about the meaning and significance of the Hebrew Bible. As a result, biblical iconography can be understood as an interpretive method that attempts to listen in on this conversation between image and text, to hear (as Keats's epigraph intimates) the melodies of mute images and to give voice to the inaudible insights of ancient art in service of enhancing and enriching biblical interpretation.

Yet, what is the nature of this conversation and how have the interactions between images and texts been conceptualized within biblical iconography? Prior to the rise of the Fribourg School in the 1970s, the nature of the relationship between ancient art and the Bible was rarely scrutinized in any detail. Scholars and casual observers alike tended to presume that ANE art depicted in visual form something similar to what the Bible described in written language. As but one example, this sort of perspective is on display in early efforts to relate the Persian period Behistun relief (**fig. 3.1**) to biblical literature.⁴ When the nineteenth-century English nobleman Sir Robert Ker Porter first saw the relief, he readily concluded that this late-sixth century B.C.E. image, which

Hulster defines "iconographic exegesis" as "the explanation of [biblical] texts with the help of [ANE] pictorial material" (*Iconographic Exegesis and Third Isaiah* [FAT 2/36; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck], 18). Although they use different terminology, LeMon's "iconographic-biblical approach" and de Hulster's "iconographic exegesis" both refer to an interpretive method that uses ancient visual artifacts to gain added insight into the background, meaning, and significance of biblical texts.

⁴ This relief is carved into a sheer rock face some 500 feet above the plain, just off the main caravan route that connected Ectbatana to Babylon. The relief was likely commissioned in the early years of Darius I's reign over Achaemenid Persia (around 522-520 B.C.E.). It includes a 10-by-18 foot sculptured panel along with various trilingual inscriptions (Elamite, Babylonian, and Old Persian). Both image and text represent Darius I's rise to power over rival claimants to the throne, albeit in slightly different ways. The name of this relief, which is derived from the small village of Bisitun (or Bisutun) at the base of the mountain, was Anglicized as "Behistun" in the early-nineteenth century.

depicts Darius I's rise to power over 10 subjugated rivals, illustrated the deportation of the 10 tribes of Israel by King Shalmaneser as narrated in 2 Kgs 17:3-6.⁵ The nineteenth-century French explorer, Paul Ange Louis de Gardane, also seemed to interpret the content of the Behistun relief in light of biblical literature—indeed, he believed that the scene depicted Jesus's twelve disciples!⁶ Admittedly, historical-critical concerns drove neither Porter nor Gardane and their reflections were likely more influenced by local knowledge than art-historical insights. Thus, my point is not to criticize Porter and Gardane for misapprehending the intended subject matter of the Behistun iconography. Rather, I believe that their interpretations reflect a broader tendency to read ANE art as a type of illustration of texts, whether biblical or otherwise.

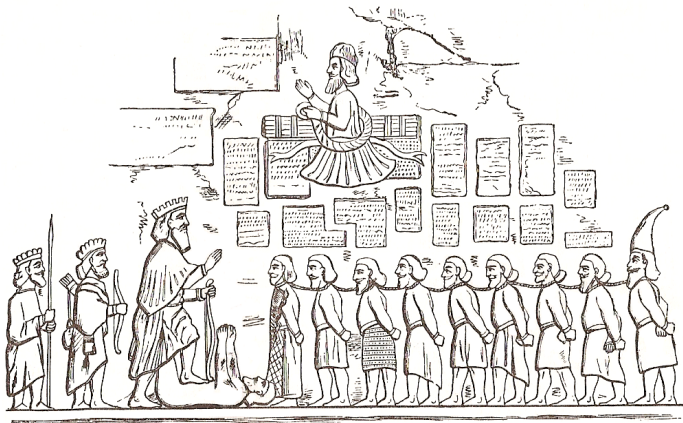


Figure 3.1. The Behistun relief, near the modern-day city of Kermanshah in western Iran, late 6th c. B.C.E. After Strawn, "A World Under Control," 114 fig. 15; cf. Porada, *The Art of Ancient Iran*, 147 fig. 77; Root, *King and Kingship*, pl. 6. This image is in the public domain. See: http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/b/bd/Behistun_Inscription_Eger.png

⁵ Robert Ker Porter, *Travels in Georgia, Persia, Armenia, Ancient Babylonia, etc.* (2 vols.; London: Longman, 1821), 2:149-63. For instance, Porter conjectured that the pointed hat of the figure on the far right was an "exaggerated representation of the mitre worn by the sacerdotal tribe of Levi" (163).

⁶ Paul Ange Louis de Gardane, *Journal d'un Voyage dans la Turquie d'Asie et la Perse, Fait en 1807 et 1808* (Paris: Le Nourmant, 1809), 83.

More recent contributions to biblical iconography have called into question the sorts of perspectives about the image-text relationship that are on display in examples like these. For instance, Othmar Keel, in his oft-cited entry on "Iconography and the Bible" in the *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, contends that "the relationship between biblical texts and pictures contemporaneous to them remains neglected, in that it has never been studied in a systematically thought-out way, as is normal in the other disciplines of biblical research."⁷ Brent A. Strawn offers a similar assessment when he notes that an understanding of "the iconographic-biblical type of text-art correlation is still in its infancy in biblical studies."⁸ In response to these concerns, a growing number of second-wave biblical iconographers (cf. §1.1) have begun to give more attention to the complexity and importance of the image-text relationship. By raising new questions and revising methodological procedures, these scholars are attempting to refine how the field of biblical iconography talks about and describes the relationship between visual and verbal data.⁹

Yet, despite the significant advances won through this work, understandings of the image-text relationship are still in need of further development, especially as they pertain to two related lines of inquiry. First, within biblical iconography past discussions about the image-text relationship have generally developed in an *ad hoc* fashion and have mainly addressed isolated exegetical questions. As a result, the scholarly literature

⁷ Othmar Keel, "Iconography and the Bible," *ABD* 3:358.

⁸ Brent Strawn, "Imagery," in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry and Writings* (ed. Tremper Longman and Peter Enns; Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2008), 311.

⁹ In fact, it might be said that one of the characteristic features of second-wave biblical iconography is its increased awareness about the complexity and importance of the image-text relationship.

that deals with the image-text relationship evinces a diversity of concerns and positions, many of which remain methodologically diffuse and/or conceptually disconnected from one another. While it would be difficult, if not impossible, to settle or resolve how images and texts relate to one another with a single, comprehensive theory, it remains possible to further advance the methods and practices of biblical iconography by identifying, categorizing, and evaluating the various ways in which past research has attempted to talk about and describe the relationship between ANE iconography and the Hebrew Bible.¹⁰ This line of inquiry would prompt biblical iconography not only to be increasingly aware of its own interpretive procedures and underlying perspectives but also to be more reflective about why discussions about the image-text relationship matter to the development of a visual hermeneutics for biblical studies.

Second, much of the attention paid to the image-text relationship in biblical iconography has addressed practical issues related to interpretive procedure—that is, How does one find, research, and incorporate ANE images when studying the Hebrew Bible?¹¹ However important these considerations are, de Hulster is right to note that

¹⁰ Even within visual culture studies, a discipline that has dealt extensively with the image-text relationship, scholars are reticent to presume that any one theory can adequately account for the complex interactions that obtain between images and texts. W. J. T. Mitchell, a scholar who has perhaps contributed more to the advancement of image-text theory than any other in the past several decades, admits that he is not necessarily interested in solving or settling how images and texts relate to one another with an all-embracing theory (*Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994], 7). Rather, Mitchell attempts "to historicize [the image-text relationship], to see how the struggle reflects historical and intellectual settings" and "to see what interests and powers it serves" (*Iconology*, 44). Following Mitchell's lead, §3.2 of this chapter might be understood as a way of historicizing the image-text relationship in past contributions to biblical iconography.

¹¹ For instance, de Hulster's *Iconographic Exegesis* addresses several practical issues related to the image-text relationship, including how one researches images (§§3.6-7) and how one incorporates them into biblical interpretation (§3.8). Likewise, Strawn's treatment of the image-text relationship is heavily focused on the question of image analysis, as is especially evident in his review of Panofsky's three-step iconographical method ("Imagery," 309-11).

questions associated with the image-text relationship are not just a matter of method but also of theory.¹² While biblical iconographers have rarely turned to visual theory to inform their work (cf. §1.1), the image-text relationship is one of the most widely discussed topics within the ever-growing body of literature from visual culture studies and certain forms of art history and literary criticism. As a result, a second way of advancing the discussion about the image-text relationship would involve introducing biblical iconography to important theories generated in other disciplines. By seeking to raise and answer questions that often go unasked in biblical iconography, this line of inquiry would help demonstrate how certain insights from visual theory might help biblical scholars better conceptualize the image-text relationship, or more clearly discern, as Mitchell puts it, "the precise nature of [its] weave, the relation of warp and woof."¹³

The purpose of this chapter is to address these two lines of inquiry, both of which might be broadly construed as ways of *drawing distinctions* about the image-text relationship. First, this chapter aims to characterize or draw distinctions *between* how the image-text relationship has been talked about and described within past approaches to biblical iconography (§3.2). Specifically, this section will delineate three main issues—image-text *congruence*, *correlation*, and *contiguity*—that have directed the study of the image-text relationship in biblical iconography, giving careful attention to how methodological perspectives have developed over time. Second, this chapter surveys past approaches to the image-text relationship in visual theory with a view toward how

¹² De Hulster, *Iconographic Exegesis*, 31.

¹³ Mitchell, *Iconology*, 43.

this research might help biblical scholars and ancient art historians better conceptualize or draw distinctions *about* the interaction between images and texts in ancient visual culture (§3.3). Toward this end, I will outline and evaluate two theories that are central to Mitchell's innovative work on the image-text relationship—namely, the "image-text dialectic" and the "metapicture." The final section will integrate the two previous discussions by demonstrating how recent insights from Mitchell's visual theory might further advance the ways in which biblical scholars approach the relationship between ANE art and the Hebrew Bible, especially with respect to issues concerning image-text congruence, correlation, and contiguity (§3.4).

3.2. The Image-Text Relationship in Biblical Iconography

In an important essay, Joel LeMon has delineated three related subfields of iconographic studies, each motivated by a different set of underlying questions.¹⁴ Within his typology, only the "iconographic-biblical approach" is expressly concerned with the relationship between ANE art and biblical texts.¹⁵ However, within the iconographic-biblical approach itself, the image-text relationship has been talked about and described in a variety of different ways. Each approach addresses a different aspect of what it means

¹⁴ According to LeMon, the three subfields of iconographic study, along with their orienting questions, are as follows: 1) The iconographic-artistic approach—How does one discern the meaning(s)/significance of an ancient Near Eastern image? 2) The iconographic-historical approach—How does one reconstruct ancient Near Eastern history and religion with the help of images? and 3) The iconographic-biblical approach—How can ANE images inform readings of particular biblical texts? For further discussion, see Joel M. LeMon, "Iconographic Approaches: The Iconic Structure of Psalm 17," in *Method Matters: Essays on the Interpretation of the Hebrew Bible in Honor of David L. Petersen* (ed. Joel M. LeMon and Kent Harold Richards; SBLRBS 56; Boston: Brill, 2010), 146-51; and idem, *Yahweh's Winged Form*, 9-16.

¹⁵ It should be noted that LeMon's "iconographic-historical" approach is interested in the image-text relationship as it pertains to how ANE monumental reliefs relate to captions, inscriptions, and historical annals.

for an image and text to be "related," and as such, each approach seeks to answer a different set of questions about the interaction between visual and verbal data. These approaches have yet to be studied in a systematic manner, and in many cases, the methodological perspectives on display in this research remain disconnected from one another.¹⁶ As a result, it is possible to further characterize the iconographic-biblical approach, or biblical iconography, by delineating three main issues or perspectives that have directed past discussions about the image-text relationship:

- (1) image-text *congruence*: Which images and texts can be thought of as being related and to what extent do they share similar themes, motifs, or subject matter?
- (2) image-text *correlation*: At what level are images and texts related and how have scholars understood both the type and direction of interaction that occurs between these two media?
- (3) image-text *contiguity*: To what extent does the presence of historical lines of influence and/or mechanisms of contact determine whether a given image and text are considered related and what are the implications for comparative methodologies?

While I treat image-text congruence, correlation, and contiguity as discrete issues, they are in fact conceptually related with one another, even if these connections are not always evident in past contributions to biblical iconography. The inter-relationship between these three concepts is set out in summary form in **fig. 3.2**. In what follows, I explore past approaches to these three issues with the goal of not only elucidating how

¹⁶ One possible exception is Keel's previously mentioned entry on "Iconography and the Bible" in the *Anchor Bible Dictionary*. Keel offers critical insight into how past scholars have tried to study the Hebrew Bible in light of ANE art. As helpful as this historical survey is, Keel offers little explicit reflection on the nature of the image-text relationship. He only briefly enumerates three ways in which a biblical text might relate to a work of art: (1) a text can explicitly describe a work of art; (2) a text can implicitly draw on or elude to pictorial representations; and (3) a text and image can independently represent the same concept, motif, or subject matter (3:358). However, in my view, Keel's analysis primarily deals with only one of the three issues addressed below (i.e., image-text correlation).

biblical iconographers have construed the nature of the image-text relationship but also highlighting how underlying methodological perspectives have developed over time.

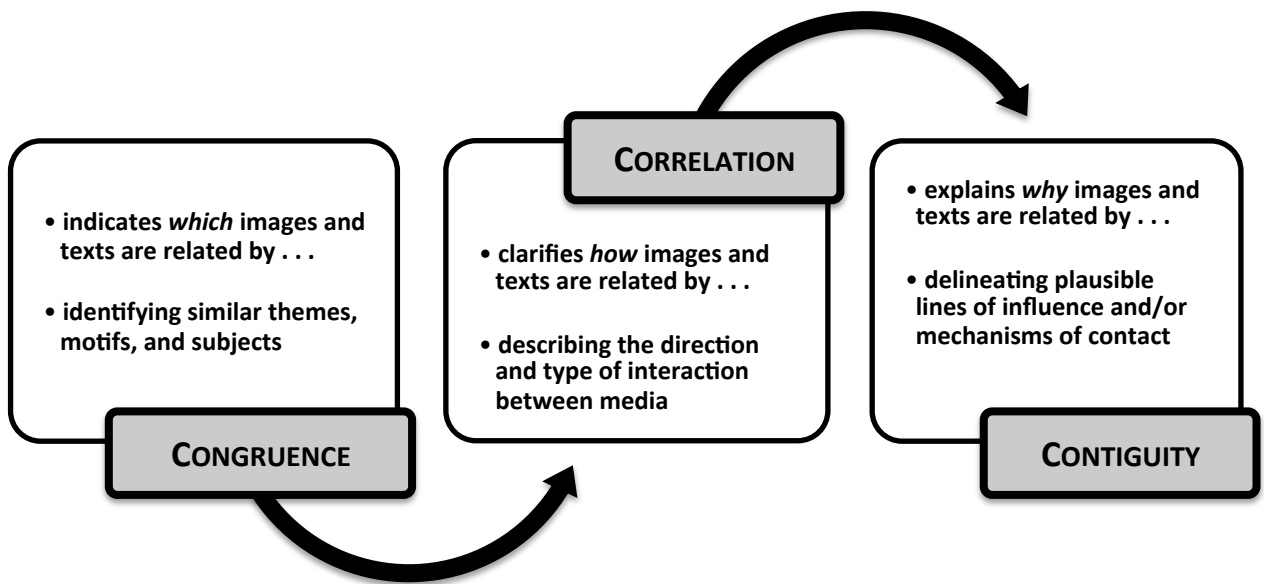


Figure 3.2. The inter-relationship between image-text *congruence*, *correlation*, and *contiguity*.

3.2.1. Approaches to Image-Text Congruence

Within biblical iconography, perhaps the most common way of construing the image-text relationship is in terms of similarity or *congruence*.¹⁷ In this view, to say that a given image and text are related is to assert that they share similar themes, motifs, or subject matter. In fact, the presence of some degree of congruence is often taken as warrant for comparing specific visual and verbal data in the first place.¹⁸ Yet, as is the case in other comparative methods, similarity is a matter of degree and adjudicating whether an

¹⁷ LeMon's utilizes this terminology through his study, *Yahweh's Winged Form in the Psalms*. See especially the summary table in this concluding chapter, which compares literary representations of Yahweh in the Psalter with "congruent iconographic motifs in Syro-Palestinian art" (190).

¹⁸ However, while some degree of similarity may be a necessary condition for comparative analysis, it is not always a sufficient condition. For further discussion, see §3.2.3 below.

image and a text (or any other two objects) are congruent is subject to interpretation, and occasionally, considerable debate. As a result, within past research in biblical iconography, scholars have disagreed not only about which images and texts are related, but also about how similar related materials are to one another.

Throughout the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, biblical scholars were especially eager to identify points of similarity between newly unearthed visual artifacts and the Hebrew Bible. Working with a rather low threshold for what constitutes congruence, these scholars tended to compare images and texts on the basis of very general similarities. For the most part, their studies left the precise nature of the congruence implicit, if not all together ambiguous. This approach is especially evident in the catalogues of ANE art produced in the first half of the twentieth century, such as Hugo Gressmann's *Altorientalische Texte und Bilder zum Alten Testament* (1909) and James B. Pritchard's *The Ancient Near East in Pictures Relating to the Old Testament* (1954).¹⁹ While these volumes succeed in making a large corpus of ancient art available to biblical scholars, they do little to explain how certain images and texts are similar or why such congruence might aid biblical interpretation. Furthermore, Gressmann and Pritchard work almost exclusively with isolated fragments of both images and texts.²⁰ By selectively comparing only small portions of what are larger artistic and literary

¹⁹ Hugo Gressmann, *Altorientalische Texte und Bilder zum Alten Testament* (2d ed.; Berlin: W. de Gruyter, 1926 [1909]) = *ABAT2*; James B. Pritchard, *The Ancient Near East in Pictures Relating to the Old Testament* (2d ed. with suppl.; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969 [1954]) = *ANEP*.

²⁰ This way of relating ANE art and the Bible is often referred to as "fragmentation" (LeMon, *Yahweh's Winged Form*, 14; cf. Keel, "Iconography and the Bible," *ABD* 3:367-69). Fragmentation is already evident in the nineteenth century, as is the case with John Wilkinson's work on Egyptian art and Austen Henry Layard's work on Assyrian art. See for instance Wilkinson, *The Manners and Customs of Ancient Egyptians* (3 vols.; London: John Murray, 1837); and Layard, *Nineveh and its Remains* (2 vols.; London: John Murray, 1849).

compositions, these scholars often seem to stack the comparative deck so as to give the impression that certain images and texts are more closely related than their larger contexts might allow. Thus, in the earliest stages of biblical iconography, image-text congruence was presumed as much as it was established, and as a result, little effort was made to evaluate the precise nature of the similarity or the broader context in which the comparison took place.

This rather facile approach to image-text congruence was widely challenged during the early stages of the Fribourg School. In fact, Keel critiques Pritchard on this very point when he argues in the introduction to *Symbolism* that "A noticeable shortcoming of *ANEP*, however, is its failure to fully live up to the second part of its title," that is, how ANE pictures relate to the Old Testament.²¹ Maybe so. But Keel's own work in *Symbolism* rarely offers a more rigorous discussion of issues concerning image-text congruence. For example, in his discussion of music and song in the Psalter and ANE art, Keel uses the words of Ps 22:3 ("Yet you are holy, enthroned on the praises of Israel") as a type of label or caption for a line drawing of a Persepolis wall relief that depicts the throne of the king being lifted up by 14 individuals, who, according to their distinctive dress and head coverings, represent the diverse peoples of the empire (**fig. 3.3**). Regarding the congruence of image and text, Keel concludes, "Just as the Persian king is enthroned on the loyalty of his subjects, so Yahweh is enthroned on the recognition and praise of Israel."²² Thus in Keel's estimation, Ps 22:3 and this

²¹ Keel, *The Symbolism of the Biblical World: Ancient Near Eastern Iconography and the Book of Psalms* (repr. ed. Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1997 [1978]), 11.

²² *Ibid.*, 351 (see the caption that accompanies fig. 476a).

Achaemenid relief are related insofar as they seem to reflect similar themes or concepts—that is, the enthronement of the king/deity upon the willing support of his subject people.

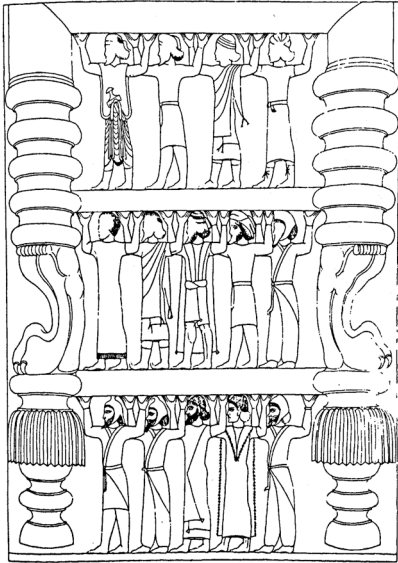


Figure 3.3. Relief from the south door of the Hundred Column Hall at Persepolis, late 6th c. B.C.E. After Strawn, "A World Under Control," 97 fig. 8; Walser, *Die Völkerschaften auf den Reliefs von Persepolis*, 62 Abb. 5; Keel, *Symbolism*, 351 fig. 476a. Image used with permission by Jim Eisenbrauns.

While Keel is right to apprehend a level of similarity between Ps 22:3 and this "king on high" motif in Achaemenid art, he offers a rather sparse treatment of the artistic and literary contexts at hand, and he does not analyze the image (or, for that matter, the text) in any detail. Not only does Keel fail to specify *why* he chose this particular relief in comparison to other Achaemenid monuments that display a similar scene, but he also neglects the important matter of how Achaemenid versions of this motif differ from earlier Egyptian and Mesopotamian prototypes.²³ As a result, in her

²³ Representations of the "king on high" motif are evident in other monumental art from Achaemenid Persia including: the statue of Darius from Susa, the tomb facades at Naqsh-e Rostam, and the east doorjamb of the Central Building of Darius at Persepolis. In addition, earlier prototypes of the king on high motif are present throughout Egyptian and Mesopotamian iconography. However, in most of these instances, imperial hierarchy is portrayed as an adversarial relationship between the king and his

extensive treatment of the king on high motif in Achaemenid iconography, ANE art historian Margaret Cool Root cautions that even though Keel makes a potentially fruitful connection between this motif and the Hebrew Bible, his comparison is carried out "without perhaps ever realizing the full symbolic value of the Achaemenid representations."²⁴ In this way, Keel's treatment of image-text congruence suffers from a lack of contextualization and precision, much like *ANEP* and *ABAT2*. Yet, perhaps unlike Pritchard and Gressmann, Keel is not unaware of these methodological shortcomings.²⁵ At the outset of *Symbolism*, Keel readily admits that he is not primarily concerned with clarifying the finer points of the relationships between certain images and texts. Rather, he intends "to exhibit identical, similar, or even diametrically opposed apprehensions of the same phenomenon."²⁶ That is to say, Keel is interested in image-text congruence in its broadest and most general terms.

Nevertheless, being able to identify the level of congruence between a given text and image—if they are identical, similar, or diametrically opposed—is not always self-evident, and occasionally presents a significant exegetical challenge. For instance, in his comparative research on the literary imagery of Yahweh's winged form in the Psalter, LeMon notes how this language, which is found in six psalms, might draw upon several

subject people. For a discussion of both issues, see Margaret Cool Root, *The King and Kingship in Achaemenid Art: Essays on the Creation of an Iconography of Empire* (Acta Iranica 19; Textes et mémoires 9; Leiden: Brill, 1979), 131-61.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 161.

²⁵ Specifically, Keel acknowledges that the survey-like style of *Symbolism* is designed to make "easily accessible . . . the broadest possible range of pictorial materials, and of indicating, in the text, similarities between the problems and conceptions presented by the pictures and those presented by the psalms" (*Symbolism*, 12). Keel's qualified remarks are often overlooked in otherwise insightful critiques of his methodology. See for instance, LeMon, *Yahweh's Winged Form*, 15.

²⁶ Keel, *Symbolism*, 12-13. It should be noted that Keel's approach in *Symbolism* was phenomenological and not, strictly speaking, historical-critical.

different background concepts, including: representations of the deity as a winged sun god, the winged cherubim as a metonym for the ark or Jerusalem temple, or common avian imagery as a source domain for the metaphor YAHWEH IS A BIRD.²⁷ In this particular case, ANE art seems to raise as many questions as it answers about the meaning of the biblical imagery since there are visual artifacts that depict each one of these possible referents. In fact, the well-known Megiddo ivory (**fig. 3.4**) depicts a winged sun disk, a winged cherub adorning a throne, and several birds—all on the same object.²⁸ As a result, it is unclear which, if any, of these images might be said to be congruent with Yahweh's winged form in the Psalter.



Figure 3.4. Ivory plaque, Megiddo, Late Bronze Age. After LeMon, *Yahweh's Winged Form*, 6 fig. 1.2; cf. Loud, *The Megiddo Ivories*, pl. 4, 2a, and 2b. Image used with permission by Christoph Uehlinger.

In response to this exegetical problem, LeMon offers a more thorough assessment of image-text congruence. Specifically, he analyzes how the arrangement of literary imagery, or "iconic structure," in each of these six psalms compares with specific sets, or constellations, of related iconographic motifs. Through a careful consideration of the literary and artistic contexts, LeMon attempts to establish "distinct patterns of congruency between the literary portrayals of Yahweh with wings and the iconography

²⁷ LeMon, *Yahweh's Winged Form*, 1-5. Not unlike LeMon, de Hulster is also interested in the issue of image-text congruence. He, too, raises the question of which images should be selected given a certain biblical text (*Iconographic Exegesis*, 30).

²⁸ LeMon, *Yahweh's Winged Form*, 6-7.

of Syria-Palestine.²⁹ What LeMon finds is that while the primary point of congruence is with visual imagery of the winged sun disk, each of the six psalms analyzed exhibits a certain degree of "multistability" insofar as it relates to several similar but distinct iconographic motifs.³⁰ Thus, by establishing points of congruence between a larger network of images and texts, LeMon not only avoids the type of fragmentation common in previous work but is also better able to account for which visual artifacts are congruent with the description of Yahweh's winged form(s) in the book of Psalms.

LeMon's research represents a significant methodological advance in how biblical iconographers approach the issue of image-text congruence. Rather than juxtaposing isolated or fragmented images and texts on the basis of very general, and at times superficial, points of similarity, LeMon demonstrates the need to establish patterns of congruence between ever-larger constellations of literary imagery and iconographic motifs.³¹ Further, since LeMon provides a more detailed analysis of both the artistic and literary contexts at hand, he is better able to explain the extent of the congruence that obtains between certain ANE images and the Hebrew Bible. In this way, LeMon's work is representative of a growing trend in biblical iconography to give more attention to questions concerning which images and texts should be thought of as being related and how closely this relationship should be scrutinized.

²⁹ LeMon, *Yahweh's Winged Form*, 189.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 192-93.

³¹ Specifically, LeMon notes the following: "The next potential advancement of the iconographic-biblical approach is for scholars to bring ever-larger constellations of literary imagery into conversation with congruent constellations of iconographic motifs" (*ibid.*, 16). In many ways, LeMon's research models this non-fragmentary approach to image-text congruence. However, it is possible to take his approach one step further by focusing on a larger literary unit as opposed to discrete psalms.

3.2.2. Approaches to Image-Text Correlation

Second and closely related, biblical iconography also has frequently construed the image-text relationship in terms of questions surrounding *correlation*—that is, at what level are images and texts related? In its most basic form, the question of image-text correlation seeks to clarify the presence of image-text congruence. Put differently, image-correlation explores what sort of interaction or level of dependence must exist between visual and verbal media in order to account for the fact that certain ANE images seem to represent in pictorial form themes or motifs that are also evident in the Hebrew Bible. That biblical iconographers have approached this question in different ways is due in large part to the fact that scholars often operate with conflicting assumptions about both the type and direction of interaction that is evident between certain images and texts.

Before the emergence of the Fribourg School, scholars often presumed that a thematic similarity between an ANE image and biblical text resulted from a specific type of interaction between these two forms of media: namely, one of the two representations was directly dependent on, or genetically derived from, the other. In this view, either ancient art is thought of as illustrating the biblical text much like a drawing in a "picture Bible," or the Hebrew Bible is understood as describing ANE visual artifacts in the manner of ekphrastic poetry. Although something akin to ekphrasis might be evident in Ezek 23:14-15, which appears to offer a brief description of a

Chaldean wall relief, most early biblical iconographers assumed that the direction of interaction worked in the reverse—that is, images illustrated texts.³²

A well-documented example of this approach comes from the late-nineteenth century when British Assyriologist George Smith proposed that a Mesopotamian cylinder seal (**fig. 3.5**) depicted the story of the Fall in Gen 3:1-24.³³ Smith, who believed that the seal represented "two figures sitting one on each side of a tree, holding out their hands to the fruit, while at the back of one is stretched a serpent," readily presumed that the iconography was directly related to the biblical text.³⁴ Several biblical scholars, including Friedrich Delitzsch and Jason Nelson Fradenburgh, followed Smith's lead in concluding that this biblical story—or some form of it—was known by the Mesopotamian seal maker.³⁵ Fradenburgh is unequivocal on the matter, concluding that the seal "*illustrates* the story of Genesis, and admits of no other satisfactory explanation."³⁶

³² This approach is also evident in Porter and Gardane's view of the Behistun relief (§3.1).

³³ Both LeMon ("Iconographic Approaches," 143-45) and Keel ("Iconography and the Bible," 3:369-70) critique Smith's reading of this seal as an example of the need for further methodological development in biblical iconography.

³⁴ George Smith, *The Chaldean Account of Genesis* (London: Sampson Low, Marston, Searle & Rivington, 1876), 90-91.

³⁵ Friedrich Delitzsch, *Babel and Bible: Two Lectures on the Significance of Research in Religion, Embodying the Most Important Criticisms and the Author's Replies* (trans. Thomas J. McCormack and W. H. Carruth; Chicago: Open Court, 1903), 48; and Jason Nelson Fradenburgh, *Witnesses from the Dust, or The Bible: Illustrated from the Monuments* (Cincinnati: Cranston & Stowe, 1886), 50-51.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 51; emphasis mine.

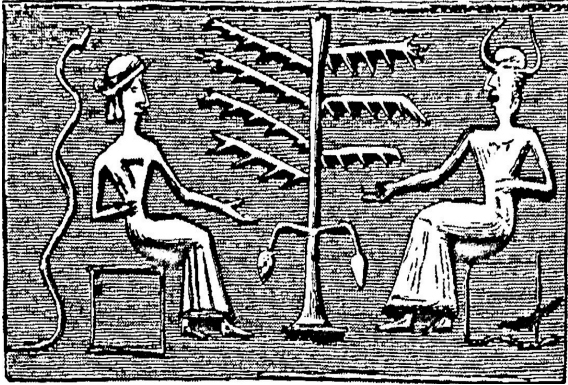


Figure 3.5. Cylinder seal with banquet scene, Mesopotamia, 2192–2004 B.C.E. After LeMon, *Yahweh's Winged Form*, 144 fig. 1; Smith, *The Chaldean Account of Genesis*, 91. Used with permission by Christoph Uehlinger.

Although this "illustration" approach to image-text correlation is not uncommon, it is problematic on at least two levels. For one, in assuming that the apparent similarity between these two objects is the result of direct dependence, this approach might be said to suffer from a type of "parallelomania."³⁷ Samuel Sandmel introduced this term—and many others have used it since—to critique comparative studies that overestimate the degree of dependence that exists between different phenomena.³⁸ In the case of the "Adam and Eve" seal, Smith, Delitzsch, and Fradenburgh were so eager to establish a parallel between the seal and Genesis 3 that they made little effort to understand the content and meaning of the image in its proper art-historical context. In contrast, Dominique Collon offers a more judicious assessment when she notes that this seal actually depicts a traditional Mesopotamian banquet scene in which a worshipper (on

³⁷ Samuel Sandmel, "Parallelomania," *JBL* 81 (1962): 1-13.

³⁸ Mark W. Chavalas rightly notes that "parallelomania" often increases sharply after important archaeological discoveries, as is evident in the pan-Babylonian movement in the second half of the nineteenth century and the pan-Ugaritic movement in the second half of the twentieth century. See Chavalas, "Assyriology and Biblical Studies: A Century and a Half of Tension," in *Mesopotamia and the Bible: Comparative Explorations* (ed. Mark W. Chavalas and K. Lawson Younger Jr.; JSOTSup 341; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 2002), 43-45.

the left) and a god (on the right) are seated facing a date palm tree.³⁹ From this vantage point, the seal appears to share little in common with the scene described in Genesis 3, and thus the image can hardly be understood to illustrate the text. Thus, Smith, Delitzsch, and Fradenbrugh misconstrue the question of image-text *correlation* at least in part because they fail to adequately analyze issues pertaining to image-text *congruence*. That is to say, because these scholars do not accurately analyze the themes and content of the image itself, they are unable to properly apprehend the type or direction of interaction between these two media.

Second, the impulse to discover a text lurking behind every image also misconstrues the direction of interaction between ANE art and the Hebrew Bible. For instance, the previously mentioned Mesopotamian banquet seal predates the book of Genesis by well over a millennium making it all but impossible to talk about how the image is derived from or even directly relates to this biblical text.⁴⁰ Furthermore, *even if* a seal maker had access to a biblical text and wished to depict one of its scenes, it is far from certain that he would have attempted to do so by means of a literalistic illustration.⁴¹ In fact, as Keel and others rightly note, ANE iconography is more

³⁹ Dominique Collon, *First Impressions: Cylinder Seals in the Ancient Near East* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 36. In their edited volume, Jeremy Black and Anthony Green note that the snake is likely a symbol of regeneration or fertility (*Gods, Demons, and Symbols of Ancient Mesopotamia: An Illustrated Dictionary* [Austin: University of Text Press, 1992], 166-67).

⁴⁰ However, this does not preclude the possibility that a non-biblical text would have influenced the production of the seal.

⁴¹ In his survey of past contributions to biblical iconography, Keel connects the tendency to understand ANE visual artifacts as illustrations of the Hebrew Bible with the long tradition of literal exegesis present in both Jewish and Christian biblical interpretation ("Iconography and the Bible," 3:359-64). Interestingly, biblical scholars are not the only ones connecting image and text in this manner. Art historian Julian E. Reade contends that written documents and sculptures in Neo-Assyria are "like print and picture in an illustrated book" ("Ideology and Propaganda in Assyrian Art," in *Power and Propaganda: A Symposium on Ancient Empires* [ed. Mogens Trolle Larsen; Copenhagen: Akademisk Forlag, 1979], 329).

conceptual than it is perceptual, and therefore it rarely aims to provide "historical photographs" of past events or naturalistic illustrations of written texts, whether biblical or otherwise.⁴² As a result, this view of image-text correlation seems to rest on the mistaken notion that visual materials, whether ancient or modern, copy or reproduce the objects they signify in a direct and unmediated fashion.⁴³ Or, to put the matter differently, perhaps this view of image-text correlation rests upon a mistaken notion of what an illustration is in the first place. After all, there are various different ways of illustrating something, many of which do not rely on sameness, verisimilitude, or mimeticism. In fact, a good deal of illustrations attempt to clarify or demonstrate an idea through analogies, evocative examples, or object lessons. If biblical iconographers were to understand the idea of illustration in this manner, it perhaps would still serve as a useful way of talking about the relationship between some images and texts in the ancient world. However, like Fradenburgh, many biblical scholars have not thusly qualified their use of the term illustration, and as a result, they have tended to conceptualize the idea of image-text correlation in a rather simplistic fashion.

⁴² Keel, "Iconography and the Bible," *ABD* 3:360. To press this matter further, one should note the ways in which contemporary theorists have even questioned the nature of visual representation in photographs. Traditionally, the photograph has been thought of as the literalistic illustration *par excellence* in that it functions as "a message without a code." However, this view is now rejected by at least some scholars. For instance, Roland Barthes's book, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (trans. Richard Howard; London: Vintage, 1993 [1981]), consistently challenges, as Mitchell puts it, "the textual strategies that tend to incorporate photographs as 'illustrative' or evidentiary examples" (Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, 302). Instead, Barthes underscores the ways in which photographs resist the language of texts, and come to speak on their own terms. Thus, even when a photograph is incorporated into a story in a newspaper or magazine, one can speak of the correlation between image and text as "illustration" only in a highly qualified way.

⁴³ The "mimesis" view of visual representation has been widely critiqued by literary critics and visual culture theorists in the last several decades. This and other issues related to the nature of visual representation are discussed in more detail in chapter 4 of this study.

Thus, while neither illustration nor ekphrasis are implausible ways of accounting for the presence of image-text congruence in general, they are not typically the best ways of explaining the relationship between ANE iconography and the Hebrew Bible.⁴⁴ In fact, recent biblical iconographers have come to explain the similarity of certain images and texts as the result of a more indirect relationship. Rather than seeing image and text as genetically derived from one another, many scholars in and beyond the Fribourg School now understand images and texts to be mutually dependent on an underlying mental concept.⁴⁵ Strawn advocates this sort of perspective in his study of the correlation between the Apadana reliefs and Isaiah 60.⁴⁶ While he does not preclude the possibility that the biblical authors had direct contact with Persian art, Strawn contends that "the notion of direct dependence is not the best way to discuss the relationship between Isa 60 and the Apadana."⁴⁷ Instead, Strawn suggests that images

⁴⁴ However, there are some exceptions. For instance, the sixth century C.E. *Topographia Christiana* provides a blueprint-like rendition of the Tent of Meeting based on literal reading of Exod 25-31 (Wanda Wolska-Conus, *La topographie chrétienne de Cosmas Indicopleustes* [Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 1962]). Likewise, one of the first printed Bible commentaries, written in the sixteenth century by the Franciscan monk Nicholas of Lyra, included thirty technical drawings based on literal readings of biblical texts. Conversely, as indicated above, some biblical texts might well be understood as a type of ekphrastic poetry (i.e., Ezek 23:14-15). Nevertheless, as is discussed further below, illustration and ekphrasis do not exhaust the types of relationships that obtain between the Hebrew Bible and most ANE visual artifacts.

⁴⁵ This type of perspective seems to be present, though in a less-developed form, in several contributions to biblical iconography that predate Keel's *Symbolism*. For instance, Hermann Gunkel, Alfred Jeremias, and Hugo Gressmann all look to ANE art as a potential resource for understanding the conceptual background of the Hebrew Bible. See for instance, Gunkel, *Ausgewählte Psalmen* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1904); Jeremias, *The Old Testament in the Light of the Ancient East: Manual of Biblical Archaeology* (trans. from the 2d German ed. by C.L. Beaumont; ed. C.H.W. Johns; New York: Putnam, 1911 [1904]); and Gressmann, *ABAT2*.

⁴⁶ Brent A. Strawn, "'A World Under Control': Isaiah 60 and the Apadana Reliefs from Persepolis," in *Approaching Yehud: New Approaches to the Study of the Persian Period* (ed. Jon L. Berquist; SemeiaSt 50; Atlanta: Society of Biblical Literature, 2007), esp. 111-14.

⁴⁷ Strawn, "A World Under Control," 114. Questions concerning mechanisms of contact between image and text is further explored under the heading "image-text contiguity" in §3.2.3 below.

and texts can function as dual "reflexes" of the same underlying message.⁴⁸ As a result, whether reflecting religious beliefs or political ideologies, these underlying mental concepts (what Jan Assmann calls an "icon") can be mutually expressed through either visual or verbal media.⁴⁹

A similar view of image-text correlation is also evident outside of biblical iconography. In her comparison of Neo-Assyrian wall reliefs with historical annals and standard inscriptions, Irene Winter argues that written materials should be understood as existing *alongside*, not behind, visual artifacts.⁵⁰ In Winter's view, Neo-Assyrian images and texts comprise two independent, though parallel, vehicles of communication that together function as "powerful and reinforcing statements, linguistic and visual, that both carry the same message."⁵¹ Winter's conclusions are suggestive of the ways in which biblical iconographers have come to see the correlation between ANE iconography and the Hebrew Bible—that is, less in terms of a picture book or an ekphrastic poem, and more as two books, one of pictures and the other of text, both of which relate to a similar concept.⁵²

⁴⁸ Strawn, "A World Under Control," 114.

⁴⁹ Jan Assmann, *Egyptian Solar Religion in the New Kingdom: Re, Amun and the Crisis of Polytheism* (Studies in Egyptology; trans. Anthony Alcock; London: Kegan Paul International, 1995), 38. For a helpful discussion of Assmann's work on Egyptian New Kingdom solar hymns, see LeMon, *Yahweh's Winged Form*, 18-20.

⁵⁰ Irene Winter, "Royal Rhetoric and the Development of Historical Narrative in Neo-Assyrian Reliefs," *Studies in Visual Communication* 7 (1981): 2.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 21. While I generally agree with Winter's claim, it is perhaps more judicious to say that images and texts carry "similar" messages rather than the "same" message. As I discuss in more detail in chapter 4, visual and verbal signs operate according to different semiotic principles, thus making it difficult to say that they communicate the same exact thing or in the same exact way.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 18. That images and texts have the *capacity* to relate similar concepts does not necessarily imply that they always do so. The issue of which images and texts are related (i.e., congruence) is a somewhat different matter (cf. §3.2.1).

This perspective significantly reorients the ways in which image-text correlation is talked about and described within biblical iconography. Specifically, rather than suggesting that ANE images *illustrate* biblical texts, most biblical iconographers look to ancient iconography as a resource that *illuminates* the background of the Bible by helping contemporary readers, as Keel puts it, "to see [the Hebrew Bible] through the eyes of the ancient Near East."⁵³ Said differently, images provide "a way to share in the mental map of a culture," including the cognitive processes that inform the production of figurative language.⁵⁴ As an example, biblical iconographers have been increasingly interested in utilizing ANE art to clarify the meaning of biblical metaphors. Drawing upon metaphor theory from Paul Ricoeur, Max Black, Mark Johnson, George Lakoff, and Mark Turner, numerous scholars have argued that adequately understanding the full significance of a metaphor, including its system of associated implications, is contingent on understanding the original user's sign-context.⁵⁵ Specifically, ANE iconography can help contemporary readers visualize the conceptual source domains that give rise to figurative language, especially when it comes to ambiguous, idiosyncratic, or "dead"

⁵³ Keel, *Symbolism*, 8. This perspective reverses the interpretive gaze of previous biblical scholars who often saw ANE art through the eyes of the Bible.

⁵⁴ De Hulster, *Iconographic Exegesis*, 21.

⁵⁵ The scholarly literature on metaphor theory has expanded rapidly in the past several decades, and is now being appropriated by a variety of academic disciplines including biblical studies. While theories from Max Black (*Models and Metaphors: Studies in Language and Philosophy* [Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1962]) and Paul Ricoeur (*The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-disciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language* [Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977]) are still cited by some biblical iconographers, most attention has shifted to conceptual or cognitive metaphor theory, which was initiated by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson's influential volume, *Metaphors We Live By* (rev. ed.; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003 [1980]). Since then, publications that explore the intersection between metaphor theory and cognitive studies has grown exponentially. See for instance, Mark Turner, *Death is the Mother of Beauty: Mind, Metaphor, Criticism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987); Raymond W. Gibbs, *The Poetics of Mind: Figurative Thought, Language, and Understanding* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Gilles Fauconnier and Mark Turner, *The Way We Think: Conceptual Blending and the Mind's Hidden Complexities* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), and Zoltán Kövecses, *Language, Mind, and Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

metaphors. For instance, Martin Klingbeil explores how figurative language about God as a Divine Warrior in the Psalter might draw on "cognitive imagery" that is also evident in ANE iconography.⁵⁶ What Klingbeil and others indicate is that since image and text are correlated at the conceptual level, ancient art can provide a window into the world (or the mind) behind a metaphor.

These approaches to the image-text relationship reflect a new way of understanding both the type and direction of correlation that occurs between ANE iconography and the Hebrew Bible. Since most biblical iconographers are now inclined to think of images and texts as being mutually dependent on a common concept, there is a greater tendency to read visual data without recourse (at least initially) to written texts.⁵⁷ Likewise, by focusing predominantly on how the figurative language in the Hebrew Bible draws on or reflects concepts that are also evident in ANE art, there is now an increasing concern for how ancient visual culture might have come to influence the production and reception of the figurative language of biblical texts.

⁵⁶ Martin Klingbeil, *Yahweh Fighting From Heaven: God as Warrior and as God of Heaven in the Hebrew Psalter and Ancient Near Eastern Iconography* (OBO 169; Fribourg: University Press; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1999), 158. Likewise, in his analysis of leonine imagery in both ANE art and the Hebrew Bible, Strawn demonstrates that the various instantiations of the literary metaphor GOD IS A LION (i.e., "the LORD roars from Zion," Amos 1:2), should be understood in light of how the lion was a trope of power and threat in the ancient Near Eastern world. See Strawn, *What is Stronger Than a Lion*.

⁵⁷ In biblical iconography, this methodological practice is perhaps first clearly articulated in Keel's *Das Recht der Bilder gesehen zu werden: Drei Fallstudien zur Methode der Interpretation altorientalischer Bilder* (OBO 122; Fribourg: Universitätsverlag; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1992). De Hulster claims that this shift toward dealing with ANE iconography in its own right is characteristic of the third stage of development (ca. 1986-1992) of the Fribourg School ("Illuminating Images: An Iconographic Method of Old Testament Exegesis with Three Case Studies from Third Isaiah" [Ph.D. diss., Utrecht University, 2008], 73-85).

3.2.3. Approaches to Image-Text Contiguity

The third major issue that has surfaced in biblical iconography has to do with the question of image-text contiguity. To put the matter in terms of the previous discussions, if image-text *congruence* identifies the existence of common motifs, themes, and subjects between images and texts and if image-text *correlation* seeks to explain the level and degree of interaction between images and texts that scholars relate to one another, then image-text *contiguity* seeks to historicize the interactions between visual and verbal data through discernable lines of influence and/or plausible mechanisms of contact. This issue touches upon a broader question about the nature of comparative methods—namely, must two objects of study come from the same (or similar) geographical, chronological, or even social contexts in order to be considered related?⁵⁸ Past research in biblical iconography has answered this question in different ways, and as a result, it is possible to identify both contiguous and non-contiguous approaches to the comparison of ANE art and the Hebrew Bible.

The vast majority of recent research in biblical iconography has attempted to establish a historical-critical basis for comparing ANE art and the Hebrew Bible. As a result, most biblical iconographers have implicitly followed William W. Hallo's "contextual approach" to comparative studies.⁵⁹ This approach mainly pursues intra-

⁵⁸ Strawn provides a lucid survey of recent debates about comparative method within biblical studies in his essay, "Comparative Approaches: History, Theory, and the Image of God," in *Method Matters*, 117-42.

⁵⁹ William W. Hallo, "Compare and Contrast: The Contextual Approach to Biblical Literature," in *The Bible in the Light of Cuneiform Literature: Scripture in Context III* (ed. William W. Hallo, Bruce William Jones, and Gerald L. Mattingly; ANETS 8; Lewiston, N.Y.: Mellen, 1990), 1-30; and idem, "Biblical History in Its Near Eastern Setting: The Contextual Approach," in *Scripture in Context* (ed. Carl D. Evans, William W. Hallo, and John B. White; PTMS 34; Pittsburgh: Pickwick, 1980), 1-26.

cultural comparisons that are delimited by what Shemaryahu Talmon calls "geographical proximity" and "historical propinquity."⁶⁰ When biblical iconographers pursue this sort of comparative study, they not only attempt to identify thematic similarities between certain images and texts but they also seek to explain how specific visual artifacts might have been accessible to or known by the original authors and readers of the Hebrew Bible.

This issue can be addressed in one of two ways. Many biblical iconographers choose to work primarily with visual and textual materials that are historically contiguous with one another. This strategy is especially evident in Keel and Uehlinger's *GGG*, which offers a diachronic study of Syro-Palestinian art from the Middle Bronze Age through the Persian period. Since Keel and Uehlinger utilize images to study the history of religious imagination, it is essential that they work with visual materials that might well have been seen (and used) by the original authors and readers of the Hebrew Bible. Yet, interest in historical contiguity does not necessary preclude the possibility of working with visual materials found outside of Syria-Palestine or from time periods that predate biblical literature. In fact, recent research by Uehlinger and others has underscored the fact that the minor arts enabled the diffusion and preservation of iconographic data across vast territories and time periods.⁶¹ As a result, the minor arts functioned as a type of "mobile media" insofar they provided a means of inter-cultural contact.

⁶⁰ Shemaryahu Talmon, "The 'Comparative Method' in Biblical Interpretation: Principles and Problems," in *Essential Papers on Israel and the Ancient Near East* (ed. Frederick E. Greenspahn; New York: New York University Press, 1991 [1978]), 386.

⁶¹ For a discussion of the role of minor arts as media, see §2.3.2 above.

Concerns with "contiguity" and "contact" play an important role in Strawn's iconographic study of the motif of Yahweh's outstretched arm (יהזרוע נטו) in the Hebrew Bible.⁶² Through a careful analysis of both iconographic and textual data, Strawn establishes that biblical language concerning Yahweh's outstretched arm shares many points of similarity with Amarna Age iconography that depicts the life-giving rays of Aten outstretched toward worshippers (often Akhenaten or one of his family members) and delivering the *ankh* as an expression of life or blessing (**fig. 3.6**).⁶³ However, in Strawn's view, image-text congruence only tells part of the comparative story. In order to make a case for contiguity, Strawn explores how the iconography of the relatively short-lived Aten cult from fourteenth-century Egypt might have come to influence biblical language about Yahweh's outstretched arm, most of which appears to be Deuteronomistic or Deuteronomistic in origin.⁶⁴ Although there is a considerable gap in time between the Amarna period and even the earliest date for this biblical material, it is widely noted that Amarna theology came to influence the production of texts and images in later periods and places.⁶⁵ As a result, Strawn believes that both his visual and verbal data might indeed reflect "the presence of the right motifs in the right areas at about the

⁶² Strawn, "Yahweh's Outstretched Arm Revisited Iconographically," in *Iconography and Biblical Studies: Proceedings of the Iconography Sessions at the Joint EABS/SBL Conference, 22-26 July 2007, Vienna, Austria* (ed. Izaak J. de Hulster and Rüdiger Schmitt; Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2009), 163-211.

⁶³ In contrast to the mighty arm of pharaoh imagery, Strawn notes that the outstretched arm of Aten more closely corresponds to the biblical usage, since the latter speaks of a deity and is often associated with benevolence, not violence.

⁶⁴ While Strawn places this discussion under the heading of "connection," the issues he addresses are identical to those that I refer to in terms of "contiguity."

⁶⁵ Strawn, "Yahweh's Outstretched Arm," 185-88. For instance, Henrietta A. Groenewegen-Frankfurt argues that the Amarna iconographical program continued to influence Egyptian art for at least two centuries after the death of Akhenaten (*Arrest and Movement: An Essay on Space and Time in the Representational Art of the Ancient Near East* (London: Faber and Faber, 1951), 110).

right times," even if the specific mechanisms of contact remain unclear.⁶⁶ Thus, it is only by establishing both image-text congruence *and* contiguity that Strawn is able to venture the following conclusion: "Perhaps, then, Yahweh's outstretched arm in the Hebrew Bible is simply another instance or reflex of this kind of New Kingdom Egyptian—even Amarnan—influence."⁶⁷

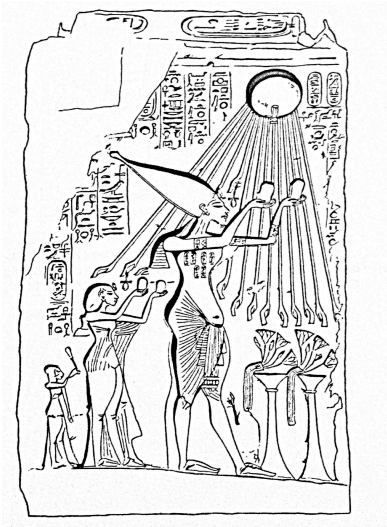


Figure 3.6. Limestone relief of Akhenaten, Nefertiti, and daughter, Amarna, 14th c. B.C.E. After Strawn, "Yahweh's Outstretched Arm," 202 fig. 7; cf. Keel, *Symbolism*, 210 fig. 288. Image used with permission by Jim Eisenbrauns.

Strawn is not alone in his interest in carrying out biblical iconographic research that carefully attends to questions about image-text contiguity. While non-contiguous comparisons have been employed in some areas of biblical scholarship—and even more outside of this field—this approach is relatively rare within recent contributions to biblical iconography. Indeed, it is almost impossible to find biblical iconographic research that compares non-ANE images (say, eighth-century c.e. Mayan art) with texts from the Hebrew Bible. Or, if such a study were to exist, it most likely would not be

⁶⁶ Strawn, "Yahweh's Outstretched Arm," 188.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 188.

referred to as "biblical iconography."⁶⁸ Even Porter's reading of the Behistun relief and Smith's analysis of the Mesopotamian banquet seal might best be thought of as creative non-contiguous comparisons, not poorly executed analyses of image-text congruency.

However, a number of recent scholars have challenged the notion that comparative work should be limited to contiguous phenomena, and as a result, they have acknowledged that comparative research can serve less contextually-specific ends.⁶⁹ For instance, Jonathan Z. Smith notes that the very process of comparison is a hermeneutical endeavor, "the result of mental operations undertaken by scholars in the interest of their intellectual goals."⁷⁰ In other words, different comparative methods can serve different interpretive goals. Analogical comparisons—those based on perceived similarities that do not derive from a direct or genetic dependence—might well stand alongside studies that seek to uncover historical mechanisms of contact and direct lines of influence.⁷¹ It might even be the case that widening the scope of the comparison can prompt new and fruitful ways of envisioning both objects of study.⁷²

⁶⁸ Terms such as "biblical art history" or even "visual exegesis" are sometimes used to describe wider, inter-cultural comparisons of images and biblical texts.

⁶⁹ Specifically, Smith notes that rigidly excluding the comparison of non-contiguous data has functioned as a type of "smug excuse for jettisoning the comparative enterprise and for purging scholarship of all but the most limited comparisons" (Smith, "In Comparison a Magic Dwells," in *A Magic Still Dwells: Comparative Religion in the Postmodern Age* [ed. Kimberley C. Patton and Benjamin C. Ray; Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000], 29).

⁷⁰ Idem, "The 'End' of Comparison: Redescription and Rectification," in *A Magic Still Dwells: Comparative Religion in the Postmodern Age* (ed. Kimberley C. Patton and Benjamin C. Ray; Berkeley: University of California Press, 2000), 239.

⁷¹ See Smith's discussion in *Drudgery Divine: On the Comparison of Early Christianities and the Religions of Late Antiquity* (Jordan Lectures in Comparative Religion 14; Chicago Studies in the History of Judaism; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 47-51.

⁷² This approach to comparative methods is more evident outside of biblical scholarship. For instance, in his survey of comparative methods, Strawn notes the work of Earl Roy Miner, a scholar from the field of comparative literature who emphasizes that real comparison involves the study of objects from multiple cultural traditions (Strawn, "Comparative Approaches," 127-29). See Earl Roy Miner,

An example of what might qualify as a non-contiguous study in biblical iconography is William P. Brown's *Seeing the Psalms*. While Brown admits that the psalms maintain "points of contact with the surrounding culture through the use of shared images," he nevertheless moves quickly between images from different historical and geographical contexts with little interest in establishing how specific visual artifacts might have become accessible to or known by the original authors or readers of the psalms.⁷³ Thus, instead of only drawing on Syro-Palestinian visual materials from a specific time period, Brown works with a wider, inter-cultural network of ANE art. His interpretive goal, so it seems, is not to demonstrate clear lines of influence or plausible mechanisms of contact between Syro-Palestinian art and the Psalter. Instead, he utilizes an extensive network of ANE visual materials as a type of evocative context through which his readers can more fully encounter the theology of the Psalter.⁷⁴ This is not to say that Brown is uninterested in historical analysis. Indeed, he takes seriously the fact that the language of the psalms—and thus its theological imagination—is "fraught with background, both visual and discursive."⁷⁵ Gaining access to that background, whether through ANE iconography or any other means, is a matter of historical analysis. Nevertheless, Brown's primary goal is not to provide a rigorous evaluation of the historical context of either the images or texts he studies. Rather, through a comparison of non-contiguous (or at least not explicitly contiguous) images and texts, Brown

Comparative Poetics: An Intercultural Essay on Theories of Literature (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).

⁷³ Brown, *Seeing the Psalms*, 13.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 12-13.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 14. Elsewhere, Brown contends that a metaphor is a figure of speech that "cavorts with the visual" (*ibid.*, 8).

prompts his readers to visualize the figurative language of the psalms as a way of more fully appreciating its poetry and more fully engaging their own theological imagination.⁷⁶ In other words, Brown is as much concerned with what images do for his contemporary readers as he is with what images did for the Psalter's ancient authors.

It is with this in mind that a word of caution must be registered against LeMon's critique of Brown's method. As previously discussed (§1.1), LeMon contends that Brown has not "dealt adequately with the issue of cultural particularity" and that his methodology "presumes too easy a correspondence between biblical image and ancient Near Eastern art."⁷⁷ Though cogent, LeMon's analysis seems to presume that the goals of Brown's comparative study are the same as his own—that is, the historical-critical analysis of contiguous images and texts. But this does not seem to be the case. LeMon sets out to demonstrate how a specific constellation of Syro-Palestinian wing iconography influenced the development of the Psalter's language concerning Yahweh's winged form(s), and so his argument depends closely on matters of contiguity (i.e., geographical and chronological proximity). However, Brown rarely offers explicit arguments about influence. Instead, he evokes ANE art as an analogous phenomenon, a way of sparking the contemporary reader's ability to imagine, or visualize, a concept in fresh and new ways. As a result, in many cases he transitions from discussions of images

⁷⁶ Brown describes metaphorical language as the work of imagination on the part of the author (*Seeing the Psalms*, 8). However, Brown also notes that "what is written with imagination must also be read with imagination" (ibid., 9). It seems that Brown is chiefly concerned with this latter issue, and as such, he uses ANE art as a means of spurring on the imagination of his contemporary reader.

⁷⁷ LeMon, *Yahweh's Winged Form*, 21.

to discussions of texts by simply saying, "So also in the psalms."⁷⁸ Thus, it is not so much that Brown fails to deal with the issue of cultural particularity as it is that his method of comparison traffics in wider, inter-cultural comparisons for the purposes of contemporary theological reflection. Put simply, Brown and LeMon seem to have a different sense of what constitutes a "relationship" between ANE images and the Hebrew Bible.

Recognizing that Brown's comparative method differs from that of LeMon should not exempt Brown from critique. In fact, one of the chief weaknesses of his otherwise insightful study is Brown's failure to sufficiently clarify the nature of his comparative method.⁷⁹ Nevertheless, what is clear is that Brown and LeMon approach the questions of image-text contiguity from two different perspectives. While the contextual approach remains the dominant comparative paradigm within biblical iconography, it is important to note that non-contiguous comparisons of ANE art and the Hebrew Bible remain viable ways of talking about the image-text relationship.

3.2.4. Conclusions

The preceding discussion has attempted to delineate how biblical iconographers have talked about and described the image-text relationship in past research. These discussions primarily address one (or more) of three issues: image-text congruence,

⁷⁸ See for instance, Brown, *Seeing the Psalms*, 21. In this sense, Brown's approach seems to share much in common with Keel's interests in *The Symbolism of the Biblical World*.

⁷⁹ Contributing to this lack of methodological clarity is Brown's inconsistent use of terms such as "icon," "iconic," "image," "imagery," "iconography," and "iconic metaphor." This issue is noted in LeMon's study (*Yahweh's Winged Form*, 17) as well as number of reviews. See, Timothy Saleska, review of William P. Brown, *Seeing the Psalms: A Theology of Metaphor*, *CBQ* 65 (2003): 600-1; and James Crenshaw, review of William P. Brown, *Seeing the Psalms: A Theology of Metaphor*, *Int* 57 (2003): 303-4.

correlation, or contiguity. These three issues reflect different ways in which biblical iconographers have conceptualized what it means for an image and text to be "related," and accordingly, each seeks to answer a different set of interpretive questions.

Approaches that focus on the issue of image-text *congruence* typically seek to identify not only which images and texts are similar but also the extent to which they are similar. The issue of image-text *correlation* involves analyzing both the type and direction of interaction that obtains between visual and verbal data. Finally, the issue of image-text *contiguity* raises important questions about whether images and texts must come from the same historical context in order to be considered related to one another. Although each of these issues reflects a different way of approaching the image-text relationship, they are not unrelated: while image-text correlation seeks to explain the presence of similarities between certain images and texts (i.e., congruence), image-text contiguity seeks to historicize the interactions between visual and verbal data (i.e., correlation) through discernable lines of influence and/or plausible mechanisms of contact.

This typology of approaches not only provides a framework for understanding the major lines of inquiry that have characterized biblical iconographic methods but it also clarifies how approaches to the image-text relationship have shifted over time. In summary, several trends are evident: (1) In terms of image-text *congruence*, by carefully considering both the literary and artistic contexts at hand, biblical iconographers are now offering more precise analyses of the similarities that obtain between ever-larger constellations of literary imagery and iconographic motifs; (2) with respect to image-text *correlation*, the dominant paradigm has shifted from illustration to illumination, with

the latter focusing on how images and texts are mutually dependent on a common mental concept; and (3) in terms of image-text *contiguity*, while the majority of biblical iconographers work with contiguous images and texts, it is also possible to compare non-contiguous data in service of interpretive goals that are less historical-critical in orientation.

How might a greater awareness of these trends help inform the development of a visual hermeneutics? First, rather than advocating for a uniform method of dealing with the image-text relationship, the above typology reveals the need for biblical iconographers to be more explicit about which aspects of the image-text relationship they are addressing and how these decisions inform their methodological procedures. Doing so would not only entail a more consistent use of terminology throughout the field but would also involve a more careful appraisal of how certain approaches relate to one another. Second, while past approaches to biblical iconography can be characterized according to how they treat issues related to congruence, correlation, and continuity, these concerns hardly begin to exhaust what can be said about the interactions that obtain between images and texts. Despite the significant advances made within each of these issues, certain methodological problems concerning the image-text relationship remain unresolved in biblical iconography. What is needed in these cases is a fresh engagement with theories about the image-text relationship generated in other disciplines, especially visual culture studies. By providing new ways of conceptualizing the relationship between visual and verbal data, these theories can

further refine a visual hermeneutics for biblical studies. Such issues will occupy the remainder of this chapter.

3.3. The Image-Text Relationship in Visual Theory

Biblical iconography, of course, is not the only discipline interested in the image-text relationship. Visual culture studies and certain forms of art history and literary criticism also routinely explore this topic, often under the heading "word and image."⁸⁰ While this terminology is commonly found in the literature of these fields, it often carries different connotations. In some instances, word and image refers to a highly schematic way of structuring either diverse fields of academic inquiry (literary theory and art history) or distinct approaches to representation more broadly (semiotics and aesthetics, discourse and display, the sayable and the seeable).⁸¹ Thus construed, word and image becomes a shorthand way of designating broader categories of intellectual discourse. Closely related but even wider in scope, word and image occasionally functions as a basic cultural trope that evokes differences between what are perceived to be opposite kinds of things: poetry and painting, books and television, elite and popular, orthodoxy and

⁸⁰ While "word and image" seems to be the most common way of referring to visual and verbal forms of representation in these fields, other terms are often employed interchangeably, such as: picture and text, icon and logos, art and language. For the sake of consistency, I primarily use "image and text" throughout this study. It also should be noted that Mitchell develops unique typographical conventions for representing different perspectives on the image-text relationship: "image/text" designates the problematic gap between how these two media signify; "imagetext" refers to composite or hybrid works that blend visual and verbal media; and "image-text" draws attention to the specific structure of relations between visual and verbal data (see *Picture Theory*, 89 n. 9). In light of the concerns of this present study, I follow Mitchell in using the hyphen (image-text) to refer to the relationship between visual and verbal media.

⁸¹ Mitchell, "Word and Image," in *Critical Terms for Art History* (2d ed.; eds. Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 47.

idolatry.⁸² From this vantage point, word and image is, as Mitchell contends, "a deceptively simple label" that refers not only to two different forms of representation but also to a site of deeply contested cultural and religious values.⁸³ Finally, in its most specific form, word and image serves as an apt description of the subject matter of a variety of interartistic comparisons, especially those that study the relationship between certain visual and verbal materials (i.e., a poem and a painting) or the conjunction of word and image within the same object (i.e., film, cartoons, advertisements, graffiti, etc.). This latter conceptualization of word and image most closely adheres to the sorts of interests on display in biblical iconography (i.e., the relationship between ANE art and the Hebrew Bible) and is the main focus of the following discussion.

3.3.1. Past Approaches: Image versus Text and Image as Text

Interartistic comparisons of visual and verbal media feature prominently in recent contributions to visual culture studies, not to mention a host of other interdisciplinary departments and programs. Yet, while interest in the image-text relationship seems to be "trending" in contemporary academic discourse, Mitchell is right to note that this issue constitutes an "extraordinarily ancient problem" in Western thought, one which

⁸² Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, 4. Elsewhere, Mitchell says, "We imagine the gulf between words and images to be as wide as the one between words and things, between (in the largest sense) culture and nature" (*Iconology*, 43).

⁸³ Idem, *Picture Theory*, 3. One might recall here the popular work of Neil Postman (*Amusing Ourselves to Death: Public Discourse in the Age of Show Business* [New York: Penguin, 1985]) and his belief that the image-rich medium of television has led to the downfall of American culture. In a similar fashion, Mitchell cites a 1988 NEH report titled "Humanities in America" that decries the hours Americans spend watching TV on the basis, at least in part, that images "compose a medium quite distinct from print, one that communicates differently, one that achieves excellence differently" (Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, 1). The logocentric tendencies of biblical scholarship have already been noted in chapter 2 of this study.

can be traced back at least to classical Greek philosophy.⁸⁴ Since space prohibits a lengthy review of the history of scholarship, it will be helpful for the purposes of the present study to identify two polarities, or opposite ends of a continuum, that characterize past approaches to the image-text relationship in visual theory: "image versus text" and "image as text." In the former approach, scholars conceptualize the image-text relationship in terms of opposition, difference, or even incompatibility. In the latter approach, an effort is made to heal the divide between the two media by drawing attention to how these forms of representation might be mutually compatible with one another. While one can surely identify mediating approaches to the image-text relationship (i.e., "image and text," "image with text," etc.), these two more extreme positions tend to garner the most attention, or at least generate the sharpest debates.

Of these two approaches, the most ancient, if not the most persistent, is the one that underscores conflict, opposition, and difference between visual and verbal representation. In fact, French philosopher Gilles Deleuze considers the antimony of word and image to be something of a historical *a priori*.⁸⁵ From Plato's *Cratylus* to Leonardo's *paragone*, it has often been asserted that images and texts are distinct types of media that signify in fundamentally different ways: images, as natural signs, illustrate, copy, exemplify, and document the world in an unmediated fashion; words, in contrast, are purely conventional and function as unmotivated signs.⁸⁶ Although this perspective

⁸⁴ Mitchell, "Word and Image," 49.

⁸⁵ Gilles Deleuze, *Foucault* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 60.

⁸⁶ In Plato's *Cratylus*, as in many other places, the issue at stake has to do with how words (not images) signify. Commenting on Plato's *Cratylus* in his own discussion of the conventionality of words and images, Ernst Gombrich contends that "What matters is that the participants in Plato's dialogue take it for granted that—whatever may hold for words—pictures [and] visual images are natural signs" (Gombrich,

can take on various forms, it is possible to trace a long history of scholars who construct boundary lines between visual and verbal materials or who, like Rorty and the later Wittgenstein, are determined to "get the visual, and in particular the mirroring, metaphor out of our speech altogether."⁸⁷ But the "images versus word" approach does more than just engender a disciplinary divide between literary criticism and art history, linguistic philosophy and visual representation. This approach tends to reify ethical judgments about the value of different forms of media. As Mitchell aptly puts it, images are often seen as a type of foil to texts, its (less) "significant other."⁸⁸ Put simply, in this "war of signs," scholars have often chosen the side of words.⁸⁹

The "image versus text" approach to visual-verbal interactions is especially evident in research that attempts to define what separates images from texts and to allocate to each type of medium its proper role and essence. In fact, one of the central aims of Mitchell's *Iconology*, the first of his influential volumes on the image-text relationship, is to examine how four prominent figures—Nelson Goodman, Ernst

"Image and Code: Scope and Limits of Conventionalism in Pictorial Representations," in *The Image and the Eye* [Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1982], 278. However, as Mitchell points out, Socrates also begins to undermine the mimetic view of images as well (Mitchell, *Iconology*, 92). Noting that images cannot possibly reproduce all the qualities of that which they refer (*Cratylus*, 432c-d; 165), Socrates concludes that images signify by both likeness and unlikeness and thus they, like words, work by custom and convention (*Cratylus*, 435a-b; 173).

⁸⁷ Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979), 371. See also Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Philosophical Investigations* (trans G. E. M. Anscombe; New York: Macmillan, 1953).

⁸⁸ Mitchell, *Iconology*, 47. The assumed superiority of word over image has already been noted in the history of biblical scholarship. Yet on this point, it should be noted that images and words are often evaluated according to a different set of rules. For instance, some thinkers, such as Leonardo, perceive painting to be superior to poetry because the former imitates, or more directly mirrors, the natural world. In other cases, the exact opposite point is made: word is superior to image because it is independent from the natural world and thus more objectively tied to thought and reason. For a helpful discussion of this point, see Zainab Bahrani, *The Graven Image: Representation in Babylonia and Assyria* (Archaeology, Culture, and Society; Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003), 89-95.

⁸⁹ Mitchell, *Iconology*, 47.

Gombrich, G. E. Lessing, and Edmund Burke—exemplify the various ways in which boundary lines have been drawn between images and texts. Such borders are often constructed around distinctions between seeing and hearing (Burke), space and time (Lessing), nature and convention (Gombrich), and the density of symbolic systems (Goodman). While Mitchell attempts to call into question the adequacy of each of these distinctions as general, theoretical solutions to the problem of image-text difference, what is evident throughout *Iconology* is that the impulse to separate, oppose, and differentiate between images and texts is a prominent theme in Western thought, even among scholars who are otherwise known to push the boundaries of traditional distinctions between these two forms of media.⁹⁰

In spite of these trends—or perhaps because of them—numerous art historians, literary critics, and visual culture theorists have come to question this divide and, conversely, have drawn attention to points of connection and exchange between these two media. Rather than understanding the relationship in terms of a conflict or contest, these scholars might be said to think about images and texts as "two just and friendly neighbors, neither of whom indeed is allowed to take unseemly liberties in the heart of the other's domain, but who exercise mutual forbearance on the borders."⁹¹ This

⁹⁰ This latter statement applies especially well to Goodman and Gombrich. For instance, while Gombrich is well known for challenging the notion that images are natural signs, he nevertheless acknowledges a limit to pictorial conventionalism and, especially in his later work, maintains some distinctions between how images and texts signify. See Gombrich, "Image and Code" in *The Image and the Eye*, 278-97. Goodman asserts an even more radical version of pictorial conventionalism. However, he too still falls back on ways of distinguishing between images and texts, and as a result, he differentiates between the type of convention evident in each form of representation. In this view, an image, unlike a word, is a dense or replete sign insofar as every compositional difference in an image is filled with semantic potential. See especially the final chapter in Goodman, *The Languages of Art*, 225-66.

⁹¹ G. E. Lessing, *Laocoon: An Essay upon the Limits of Painting and Poetry* (trans. Ellen Frothingham; Boston: Roberts Brother, 1877 [1776]), 116.

impulse to broker a peaceful settlement between images and texts is central to Horace's dictum *ut pictura poesis* (as is painting, so is poetry) and undergirds the various types of interartistic comparisons that emerge out of the "Sister Arts" tradition.⁹² Rather than relegating images and texts to different disciplines of study, this tradition orchestrates a conversation between these two media, the results of which are of interest to both art historians and literary scholars. Yet, in its most developed form, the "image as text" approach moves beyond interartistic comparisons and seeks to establish an indissociable relationship between the two media. This suturing is often accomplished by means of a semiotic theory that affirms that images, like texts, are conventional signs and that everything from paintings to photographs, modern art to monumental architecture is, as Mitchell would say, "fraught with 'textuality' and 'discourse.'"⁹³

One outcome of this "image as text" approach is that it is now rather commonplace to think of images as a type of language that can be read, and conversely, to regard texts as a type of art that can be seen. While the field of art history has typically been far more receptive to the idea of semiotics than literary criticism has been to the insights of visual culture studies, it is nevertheless the case that texts and images are increasingly thought of as mutually interchangeable signs, each being able to stand

⁹² The term "Sister Arts" is most commonly associated with Victorian interest in comparing various art forms, mainly painting and poetry. Interartistic comparisons have also been the subject of much recent research at the intersection of literary studies and art history. See for instance, Jean Hagstrum, *The Sister Arts: The Tradition of Literary Pictorialism and English Poetry from Dryden to Gray* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1958); Mario Praz, *Mnemosyne: The Parallel between Literature and the Visual Arts* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1970); Chauncey Brewster Tinker, *Painter and Poet: Studies in the Literary Relations of English Painting* (repr. ed.; Freeport, N.Y.: Books for Libraries, 1969 [1938]); and Wendy Steiner, *The Colors of Rhetoric* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982).

⁹³ Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, 14. See especially the work of Gombrich (*Art and Illusion*) and Goodman (*The Languages of Art*), as well as the important article by Mieke Bal and Norman Bryson, "Semiotics and Art History," *Art Bulletin* 73 (1991): 174-208.

in as a surrogate for the other.⁹⁴ As a result, in spite of Marshall McLuhan's widely accepted dictum "the medium is the message," this approach to the image-text relationship affirms quite the opposite. As Mitchell puts it, "communicative, expressive acts, narration, argument, description, exposition and other so-called 'speech acts' are not medium-specific, are not 'proper' to some medium or other."⁹⁵ In other words, there is a reciprocity of image and text such that data can be freely exchanged and easily translated from one medium to the other.⁹⁶

These two approaches—"images versus texts" and "image as text"—are no less evident in past approaches to biblical studies. On the one hand, fueled by a long history of iconoclastic perspectives in Jewish and Christian theological traditions, many biblical scholars have dismissed ancient visual artifacts as mere decorations or have denigrated them as evidence of unorthodox, or even idolatrous, practices. One of the results of this "image versus text" approach in the study of the Hebrew Bible is that most interpreters have turned to textual materials as their primary, if not only, source for understanding the religious beliefs and practices of ancient Israel. Yet on the other hand, a shift toward the "image as text" approach has been evident at least since the rise of the Fribourg School in the 1970s.⁹⁷ In these past several decades, biblical scholars have not only come to recognize the ways in which ANE art can be read as a language of

⁹⁴ Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, 210.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 160.

⁹⁶ François Meltzer, *Salome and the Dance of Writing: Portraits of Mimesis in Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), 21. As referenced by Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, 155.

⁹⁷ Much of the same might be said of ancient Near Eastern research more broadly. Art historian Zainab Bahrani notes that an effort to bridge the disciplinary divide between visual and verbal studies is evident in the work of Anthony Green, Julian E. Reade, Franz Wiggerman, and Irene Winter, not to mention her own scholarship (*The Graven Image*, 99).

communication but they also have begun to acknowledge the important role visual culture played in the formation of the Hebrew Bible and ancient Israelite religion. Even so, as previously mentioned (§1.1) this "pictorial turn" is by no means complete. Both the "image as text" and "image versus text" approaches continue to co-exist in biblical studies as they do in other disciplines within the humanities.

3.3.2. New Approaches from W. J. T. Mitchell

In the past several decades, Mitchell has emerged as arguably the most influential figure in contemporary discussions about the image-text relationship. Two of Mitchell's major works, *Iconology* (1986) and *Picture Theory* (1994) offer a sustained, theoretically-nuanced examination of the relationship between visual and verbal data, especially in contemporary art and everyday nonart objects. In these volumes, Mitchell wrestles with the essential nature of images and pictures, including how they relate to texts.⁹⁸ While Mitchell frequently reflects on aspects of the two approaches discussed above, his own treatment of the image-text relationship is unique. Specifically, Mitchell develops two new theories—the image-text dialectic and the metapicture—as a way of further conceptualizing the relationship between visual and verbal data. While these theories have made an important contribution to visual theory, they have yet to be explored within the methods and practices of biblical iconography, and for that matter, ANE art history. Thus, in the remainder of this chapter, I briefly outline these two theories

⁹⁸ In Mitchell's view, *Picture Theory* attempts to raise questions about pictures that *Iconology* raises about images (*Picture Theory*, 5). In making this distinction between his two volumes, Mitchell draws on a subtle difference in his understanding of "image" and "picture." For Mitchell, image refers to the whole realm of iconicity while "picture" designates a specific kind of visual representation. For further discussion, see *ibid.*, 4 n. 5.

(§§3.3.2.1-2) before evaluating how they might apply to ancient visual culture (§3.3.3).

In the final section (§3.4), I reflect more specifically on how Mitchell's theories might further inform the way in which scholars understand the nature of the relationship between ANE art and the Hebrew Bible, especially as it pertains to image-text congruency, correlation, and contiguity.

3.3.2.1. *The Image-Text Dialectic*

One unique characteristic of Mitchell's work on the image-text relationship is how he attempts to chart a middle course between the "image versus text" and "image as text" approaches discussed above. Instead of either reifying or collapsing differences between images and texts, Mitchell maintains that these two forms of representation exhibit a dialectical tension between similarity and difference, rupture and union. In Mitchell's view, this dialectical interaction between image and text occurs not only between discrete forms of media but also within individual objects that combine visual and verbal data. Thus oriented, Mitchell's work consistently seeks to explore the structure of this dialectic, to interrogate its borders, and to inspect possible crossings and mergers.

In terms of the dialectic between discrete images and texts, much of Mitchell's interest is focused on the interplay of different "moments" or phases in a viewer's response to the phenomenon of ekphrasis, or the verbal description of visual representation.⁹⁹ On the one hand, Mitchell speaks of a viewer's experience of

⁹⁹ From its legendary origins in the "Shield of Achilles" in Homer's *Iliad* to its place in ancient rhetoric, the idea of ekphrasis has captured the attention of poets and critics alike. Mitchell offers an insightful analysis of the image-text dialectic in several well-known examples of ekphrastic poetry (*Picture Theory*, esp. 165-81). For a broader introduction to scholarship on ekphrasis, see Grant F. Scott, "The

"ekphrastic indifference"—that is, the realization that words can never fully describe what images depict. Mitchell puts it this way:

No amount of description . . . adds up to a depiction. A verbal representation cannot represent—that is, make present—its object in the same way a visual representation can. It may refer to an object, describe it, invoke it, but it can never bring its visual presence before us in the way pictures do. Words can 'cite,' but never 'sight' their objects.¹⁰⁰

The recognition of the impossibility of ekphrastic reproduction can readily give way to a more charged sense of "ekphrastic fear." This transition occurs when "the difference between verbal and visual mediation becomes a moral, aesthetic imperative rather than (as in the first, 'indifferent' phrase of ekphrasis) a natural fact."¹⁰¹ In this moment of response, the potential reciprocity between image and text is no longer seen as a mere impossibility, but rather is treated as a "dangerous promiscuity" that threatens to dissolve the borders between visual and verbal signs.¹⁰² To give voice to the mute image is to endow it with a type of life, agency, and power that verges on the idolatrous or fetishistic.¹⁰³ And yet, in spite of the experience of both indifference and fear, Mitchell maintains that a viewer's encounter with the image-text relationship is also imbued with "ekphrastic hope." In this phase of response, the viewer acknowledges that "the impossibility of ekphrasis can be overcome in imagination and metaphor, when we discover a 'sense' in which language can do what so many writers have wanted it to do:

Rhetoric of Dilation: Ekphrasis and Ideology," *Word & Image* 7 (1991): 301-10; Shahar Bram, "Ekphrasis as a Shield: Ekphrasis and the Mimetic Tradition," *Word & Image* 22 (2006): 372-78; Michael Squire, "Ekphrasis at the Forge and the Forging of Ekphrasis: The 'Shield of Achilles' in Graeco-Roman Word and Image," *Word & Image* 29 (2013): 157-91.

¹⁰⁰ Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, 152.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 154.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 155.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 156.

'to make us see.'"¹⁰⁴ If ekphrastic indifference and fear try to deny and denounce, respectively, the possibility that images and texts signify in the same way, ekphrastic hope affirms that these two media can communicate very similar messages.¹⁰⁵

In Mitchell's theory, ekphrastic indifference, fear, and hope do not describe different interartistic philosophies or distinct semiotic strategies. Rather, they are moments or stages *within a single viewer's response to the image-text relationship*. They reflect the "pervasive sense of ambivalence" that a viewer experiences as she tries to negotiate her impulse to affirm, deny, or denounce the belief that texts can reliably translate the language of images, or conversely, that images can sufficiently illustrate the content of texts. Understood in this way, Mitchell's dialectic not only refers to the interplay of similarity and difference between discrete forms of media but also characterizes a way of seeing, or a visual hermeneutics, in which a viewer's commitment to an "image versus text" or "image as text" perspective continually shifts and dissolves, never fully or finally settling on any one manner of conceptualizing the relationship. As a result, Mitchell is less interested in defining the difference between images and texts (i.e., how they signify, what they do) than he is in exploring what difference this dialectic makes in how a viewer responds to or engages with the image-text relationship. By redirecting his analysis from the nature of images and texts to the nature of visuality and visual response more broadly, Mitchell seeks to expose "a struggle that carries the fundamental contradictions of our culture into the heart of theoretical discourse."¹⁰⁶

¹⁰⁴ Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, 152.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 160-1. This idea is nuanced and challenged in further detail below (§4.2).

¹⁰⁶ *Idem*, *Iconology*, 44.

At the same time, Mitchell also maintains that a dialectic occurs within particular objects. Specifically, Mitchell problematizes the simple resolution of word and image into isolated categories of signs, insisting that "pure" forms of both media are elusive. Instead, he regards every medium as "a heterogeneous field of representational practices."¹⁰⁷ Put simply, in Mitchell's view all art is composite and all media is mixed. For instance, in his treatment of the question "What is an Image?" Mitchell sketches genealogical lines of connection between various types of "images," including literary, pictorial, and mental ones.¹⁰⁸ In this "family tree," divisions between visual and verbal representations are neither static nor stable, and as a result, the categories of word and image become twisted together, more like vines than branches.¹⁰⁹ In this view, various media exist along a continuum of representational practices that exhibit both visual and verbal characteristics at one and the same time.

Along these same lines, Mitchell's image-text dialectic recognizes the ways in which it is difficult to keep discourse out of the graphic arts and visuality out of the written word. For instance, the two central sections of Mitchell's *Picture Theory* explore in turn "Textual Pictures" and "Pictorial Texts." In speaking about the visuality of texts, Mitchell emphasizes that writing itself is a way of making language visible. In its origins, writing is closely connected to images (i.e., pictograms), and in their use, words (especially of the figurative variety) are closely tied to cognitive processes that derive

¹⁰⁷ Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, 100.

¹⁰⁸ Idem, "What is an Image?" *New Literary History* 15 (1984): 503-37

¹⁰⁹ A similar approach is offered by James Elkins, *The Domain of Images* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1999), esp. 82-94. However, instead of using a family tree to categorize different forms of representation, Elkins speaks of overlapping "domains."

from visual experiences.¹¹⁰ At the same time, Mitchell notes the ways in which images are "contaminated" with text. He argues that the pictorial field is "a complex medium that is always already mixed and heterogeneous, situated within institutions, histories, and discourses: the image understood, in short, as an imagetext."¹¹¹ Thus, more than just indicating that images can be read as a type of language, Mitchell contends that the texts with which we compare an image might already reside in the image itself, even if they are not readily visible.¹¹² Even abstract art—a style which is often understood to suppress language—is predicated on a discourse of criticism and philosophy: *ut pictura theoria*.¹¹³

Thus, Mitchell's visual theory attempts to account for the complex ways in which images and texts interact not only between discrete forms of media but also within countless varieties of "imagetexts." These tensions are neither fully resolvable nor completely avoidable. In fact, as noted in the epigraph to this chapter, Mitchell

¹¹⁰ In his edited volume on the origins of written language, Christopher Woods takes up a similar perspective, though without reference to Mitchell's visual theory (*Visible Language: Inventions of Writing in the Ancient Middle East and Beyond* [ed. Christopher Woods, with Emily Teeter and Geoff Emberling; Oriental Institute Museum Publications 32; Chicago: Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, 2010]). For instance, Woods points out that the earliest writing systems all are rooted in the visible realm, retaining a type of ancestry with symbols, icons, or other pictorial signs (19-21). It is only through time that pictograms become increasingly symbolic and thus "they become bleached of their iconicity and lose the visual similarity that they once shared with the referents" (22). Woods continues: "The degree to which iconicity is lost depends in part upon the medium of writing and the relationship between art and text. In Mesopotamia, where writing was done on clay, graphs became less iconic and more symbolic once they were no longer drawn with curvilinear lines but rather pressed into the clay in wedge-like strokes. But in Egypt and Mesoamerica, where the bond between art and writing was greater, in part owing to the use of the pen and the brush, iconicity was retained to a much higher degree" (22). Bahrani makes a similar argument about the pictorial origins and development of cuneiform in *The Graven Image*, 100-20.

¹¹¹ Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, 98.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 98.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 98, 220. In support of the notion of *ut pictura theoria*, Mitchell cites Tom Wolfe who says, "these days, without a theory to go with it, I can't see a painting" (*Picture Theory*, 220; see Wolfe, *The Painted Word* [New York: Bantam Books, 1976], 4). Furthermore, even the term theory itself is derived from the Greek word *theōros*, meaning "spectator."

contends that "The dialectic of word and image seems to be a constant in the fabric of signs that a culture weaves around itself. What varies is the precise nature of the weave, the relation of warp and woof."¹¹⁴ In this way, rather than trying to solve the image-text relationship with a master theory, Mitchell attempts to historicize it, to see what "interests and powers" it serves in different historical and intellectual settings.¹¹⁵ Or, to put the matter differently, if there *is* a master theory, it seems that it would consist of a persistent set of questions about the dialectical nature of visual-verbal interactions in various artifacts and diverse historical contexts.

3.3.2.2. *The Metapicture*

The second important characteristic of Mitchell's work is the way in which he attempts to anchor his theoretical reflection on the nature of visual and verbal representation to his analysis of particular works of art. Specifically, in both *Picture Theory* and *Iconology*, Mitchell introduces the notion of the metapicture or hypericon—that is, a picture or image that comments on or refers to other pictures or images.¹¹⁶ In developing the idea of a metapicture, Mitchell intends to do more than just reiterate the point that art can and should be used to interpret other art, or that specific iconographic motifs emerge from and relate to a long history of prototypes. Rather, through this concept Mitchell aims to explore "the notion that pictures might be capable of reflection on themselves, capable of providing second-order discourse that tells us—or at least shows us—

¹¹⁴ Mitchell, *Iconology*, 43.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 44.

¹¹⁶ *Idem*, *Picture Theory*, 65. Strictly speaking, a "metapicture" is a picture about a picture, while a "hypericon" is an image about an image. However, in this study I use the term "metapicture" for both phenomena so as to limit—even if slightly!—the proliferation of technical terms.

something about pictures."¹¹⁷ While the formal features or subject matter of certain images (i.e., pictures of artists drawing pictures, images with mirrors, multiple images in a single gestalt, etc.) lend themselves to being construed as a metapicture, self-referentiality is "a pragmatic, functional feature, a matter of use and context."¹¹⁸ That is to say, the idea of a metapicture is not only an intrinsic property of certain types of images, but it is also part of an interpretive strategy, a way of grounding visual theory in more pragmatic discussions about how artists and viewers think about representation and the viewer's gaze.

Mitchell's most sustained treatment of this concept comes in the second chapter of *Picture Theory* where he analyzes several examples of metapictures, most of which come from modern art or popular culture.¹¹⁹ In his analysis, Mitchell identifies three main types of metapictures according to the form of self-referentiality on display: that is, whether the picture refers to itself, other pictures, or the nature of visual representation more broadly.¹²⁰ Mitchell notes that this last category can also include metapictures that function as "a representation of the relation between discourse and representation, a picture about the gap between words and pictures."¹²¹ In other words,

¹¹⁷ Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, 38.

¹¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 57.

¹¹⁹ For instance, one of the metapictures that Mitchell analyzes is the famous duck-rabbit, which uses a single gestalt to shift from one image (the duck) to another (the rabbit). The history of scholarship on the duck-rabbit is itself a fascinating topic. Since its first appearance in the satirical German magazine *Fliegende Blätter* in 1892, the duck-rabbit has featured prominently in the work of Ernst Gombrich, Joseph Jastrow, and Ludwig Wittgenstein. Interestingly, LeMon also references the duck-rabbit as a way of explaining the "multistability" he perceives in the imagery of Yahweh's winged form(s) in the psalms (*Yahweh's Winged Form*, 192).

¹²⁰ Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, 56.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 65.

there are visual-verbal metapictures that might be used to gain insight into the nature of the image-text relationship.

As an example of this type of metapicture, Mitchell analyzes the surrealist painter René Magritte's famous *La trahison des images* ("The Treachery of Images"; **fig. 3.7**).¹²² Mitchell, like numerous other critics including Foucault, seizes upon this provocative image as an occasion to put pressure on how we understand the relationship between what words say and what images show.¹²³ Namely, while image and text are closely linked in the visual frame of this picture, the statement itself ("Ceci n'est pas une pipe") refuses to play the part of indexical label or descriptive caption.¹²⁴ There is an incommensurability of image and text, a contradiction between what is seen and what is read. The narrow strip of space that separates image from text in *La trahison des images* becomes, as Foucault would have it, "a crevasse—an uncertain, foggy region" that aims to diffuse the viewer's impulse to make this picture play according to the rules of illustration or to make the text conform to the goals of ekphrasis.¹²⁵ By severing the link that binds the image and the text, this metapicture invites the viewer to return to the scene, to contemplate further the purpose of the drawing and writing in this visual frame, and to question again whether the "treachery" actually belongs to the image (i.e., a deceptive illustration) or the text (a misleading

¹²² Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, 64-76.

¹²³ Michel Foucault, *This is Not a Pipe* (trans. and rev. by James Harkness; Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983 [French original: 1973]).

¹²⁴ Foucault claims that in comparison to the traditional use of legends, the image-text relationship in Magritte's picture is doubly paradoxical: not only does the text set out to name something that likely needs no such identification (the realistic pipe is easy to recognize) but it denies or negates the very name the viewer would want to give to the image (*This is Not a Pipe*, 23-24).

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 28.

label). It is in this mode of contemplation that Mitchell notes: "It isn't simply that the words contradict the image, and vice versa, but that the very identities of the words and images, the sayable and the seeable, begin to shimmer and shift in the composition, as if the image could speak and the words were on display." By creating a fissure between image and text, Magritte's picture causes the viewer's handle on the image-text relationship to come undone, or, perhaps more appropriately, to go up in smoke.

Figure 3.7. René Magritte, *La trahison des images*, 1929. After Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, 65 fig. 12. Image removed due to copyright restrictions. The image can be viewed at: <http://collections.lacma.org/node/239578>

Much more might be said about *La trahison des images* and the sustained attention it has received by art critics. Yet, it is important to note that for Mitchell, Magritte's picture is not just a curious work of art. It is a metapicture of the image-text relationship, a commentary on our ways of seeing the interaction between visual and verbal representation. By juxtaposing a realistically drawn pipe with a simple declarative statement, the picture activates the viewer's ekphrastic hope that texts can describe, label, or name what images depict in a straightforward manner. And yet, by a slight change in the expected label, this hope is dashed, replaced by ekphrastic indifference and fear. Thus, *La trahison des images* not only materializes Mitchell's image-text dialectic in a concrete object but also mobilizes it for the sake of analyzing other images. In this sense, Magritte's picture seems to be the perfect vehicle for Mitchell's visual theory.¹²⁶ Ultimately, what makes Magritte's *La trahison des images* such a compelling

¹²⁶ Mitchell even sees a connection between the image-text dialect and the subject of Magritte's painting. He comments: "Metapictures are all like pipes: they are instruments of reverie, provocations to idle conversation, pipe-dreams, and abstruse speculations. Like pipes, metapictures are 'smoked' or

metapicture is not that it settles the nature of visual-verbal representation writ large nor even that it offers the final word on how to read other image-text relationships, whether modern or ancient. Rather, the power of the metapicture resides in how it invites the viewer to engage the object, to look again at the text and to re-read the image—in short, to examine her expectations about how images and texts relate to one another.

3.3.3. The Image-Text Relationship in Antiquity: Re-examining the Behistun Monument

Like others in the field of visual culture studies, Mitchell primarily deals with modern and postmodern art, whether museum pieces or everyday "nonart" objects. Conversely, the study of ancient iconography, whether by biblical scholars or experts in the field of ancient art history, has only rarely turned to contemporary theory to inform its methods of analysis.¹²⁷ Yet, despite what seems to be a yawning gap between contemporary

'smoked out' and then put back in the rack. They encourage introspection, reflection, meditations on visual experience" (*Picture Theory*, 72).

¹²⁷ Biblical iconographers have occasionally made some mention of visual theorists. For instance, Mitchell is briefly referenced by LeMon (*Yahweh's Winged Form*, 192-93) and Strawn ("Imagery," 311) while at one point Keel cites David Freedberg's *The Power of Images (Das Recht)*, 61). However, a more substantive engagement with contemporary visual theory can be found in two studies of ancient art outside of the field of biblical iconography. First, Whitney Davis, a professor of art history and theory at U.C. Berkeley, has made significant contributions to both ancient and modern art. While his most recent work offers an in-depth analysis of visual culture theory (*A General Theory of Visual Culture* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2010]), he has also offered theoretical reflection on ancient art. Specifically, in *Masking the Blow: The Scene of Representation in Late Prehistoric Egyptian Art* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), Davis applies a complex theory of visual narrative to various carved cosmetic palettes from around the end of the fourth or early-third millennium B.C.E. For instance, Davis draws on Mitchell's theory of a "hypericon" to support his idea that certain images on the palettes can function as a cipher for how to read the iconography (*ibid.*, 83, 147). Similarly, Bahrani, a professor of Ancient Near Eastern Art and Archaeology at Columbia University, also draws on contemporary visual theory, including Mitchell's notion of the image-text dialectic, in her work on Babylonian and Assyrian art. See especially Bahrani, *The Graven Image*; and eadem, *Rituals of War: The Body and Violence in Mesopotamia* (New York, Zone Books, 2008).

theory and ancient visual culture, the nature of the image-text relationship in the ancient world is as much in need of theoretical reflection as it is in contemporary contexts.¹²⁸ Thus, it would be potentially fruitful to consider how Mitchell's theories might further inform the analysis of ancient art, such as monumental reliefs, that juxtapose iconography with inscriptions. One such example (among many) is the previously mentioned Behistun relief.¹²⁹ Applying Mitchell's theories concerning the image-text dialectic and metapicture to this ancient monument would prompt several new lines of inquiry.

First and most generally, Mitchell's dialectic would direct more scholarly attention to the interaction between visual and verbal data within the relief itself. While past research on the Behistun relief has rarely combined analysis of its visual and verbal components, I contend that the most compelling aspects of the monument are the various types of interactions that occur between the 10-by-18 foot sculptured panel and the trilingual inscriptions that flank it (**fig. 3.8**).¹³⁰ In fact, on the whole the Behistun

¹²⁸ While Mitchell rarely works with ancient art, he contends that issues pertaining to visibility and visual culture (including the image-text relationship) are not unique characteristics of the modern era. See for instance, Mitchell, "Showing Seeing: A Critique of Visual Culture," *JVC* 1 (2002): 174.

¹²⁹ The Behistun relief is one of two monuments from the time of Darius I that incorporates extensive imagery and written texts (the other is the Naqš-i Rostam tomb façade).

¹³⁰ Two notable exceptions come from Margaret Cool Root and Cindy Nimchuk, both of whom have studied the interplay of text and image in the Behistun relief. See Root, *The King and Kingship*, 186-92; and Cindy Nimchuk, "Darius and the Formation of the Achaemenid Empire: Communicating the Creation of an Empire" (Ph.D. diss., University of Toronto, 2001), 10-40. Nevertheless, the scholarly literature on the Behistun relief has been dominated by interest in its textual data. For instance, initial scholarly interest was directed almost exclusively toward deciphering the cuneiform of the Old Persian texts. While Georg Friedrich Grotefend deciphered a portion of the Persian alphabetic symbols by 1802, it was Sir Henry Rawlinson who first produced a full translation of the Persian text by 1838 (*The Persian Cuneiform Inscription at Behistun, Decyphered and Translated; with a Memoir on Persian Cuneiform Inscriptions in General* [Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society 10-11; London: The Royal Asiatic Society, 1846-1849]). The translation of the Persian text paved the way for the subsequent deciphering of the Elamite and Babylonian versions, and in many ways, the development of modern Assyriology more broadly. In this way, the Behistun relief is the Rosetta Stone of cuneiform studies. Leonard William King and Reginald

relief reflects a heterogeneous field of representational practices, and as a result, it might well be considered an "imagetext" in which visual and verbal data interact in complex ways.¹³¹ For instance, the main texts (DB), which are arranged in columns and organized to the left (Babylonian), bottom left (Elamite supplement), bottom center (Persian), and right (Elamite) of the relief, provide lengthy narrative histories of Darius's lineage and rise to power (522–521 B.C.E.) over nine rival claimants to the throne after the death of Cambyses II. Rather than illustrate any one of the events described in the main portion of the narrative histories (DB I-III), the image functions as a type of "visual précis" that illuminates the text by compressing various discrete episodes into one visual tableau.¹³² In other words, the image on the relief is best understood not as a snapshot of a particular historical moment or as a straightforward illustration of a specific section of the written text. Rather, the image function as a conceptual summary of the key events in and the underlying message of Darius's rise to power.¹³³ Thus, while the image

Campbell Thompson later provided a revision of Rawlinson's Persian translation (*The Sculptures and Inscriptions of Darius the Great on the Rock of Behistûn* [London: British Museum, 1907]). The most recent critical translation of the Persian text is from Rüdiger Schmitt, *The Bisitun Inscription of Darius the Great: Old Persian Text* (Corpus Inscriptionum Iranicarum, Part I: Inscriptions of Ancient Iran 1—the Old Persian Inscriptions; London: School of Oriental and African Studies, 1991). For a brief overview of some of the issues and controversies in the decipherment of this monument, see Mogens T. Larsen, "Hincks versus Rawlinson: The Decipherment of the Cuneiform System of Writing," in *Ultra terminum vagari: Scritti in onore di Carl Nylander* (ed. Börje Magnusson et al.; Rome: Quasar, 1997), 339-356. Beyond the question of translation, scholars have also focused on various other issues pertaining to the texts, including its historical reliability, genre, and history of construction. See for instance, Jack Balcer, *Herodotus and Bisitun: Problems in Ancient Persian Historiography* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 1987); idem, "Ancient Epic Conventions in the Bisitun Text," in *Continuity and Change: Proceedings of the last Achaemenid History Workshop* (ed. H. Sancisi-Werdenburg, Amelia Kuhrt, and Margaret Cool Root; Leiden: Nederlands Instituut voor het Nabije Oosten, 1994), 257-64; Rykle Borger, *Die Chronologie des Darius-Denkmal am Behistun-Felsen* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1982); and Gernot Windfuhr, "Saith Darius: Dialectic, Numbers, Time and Space at Behistun (DB, Old Persian Version)," in *Continuity and Change*, 265-81.

¹³¹ See Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, 100 (but not with reference to Behistun).

¹³² Root, *The King and Kingship*, 187; see also, Nimchuk, "The Creation of an Empire," 13.

¹³³ Neither did this one scene ever take place in history. See Root, *The King and Kingship*, 187-88.

and text on the Behistun monument are clearly related, no amount of description in the main text adds up to the iconographic depiction in the relief itself.

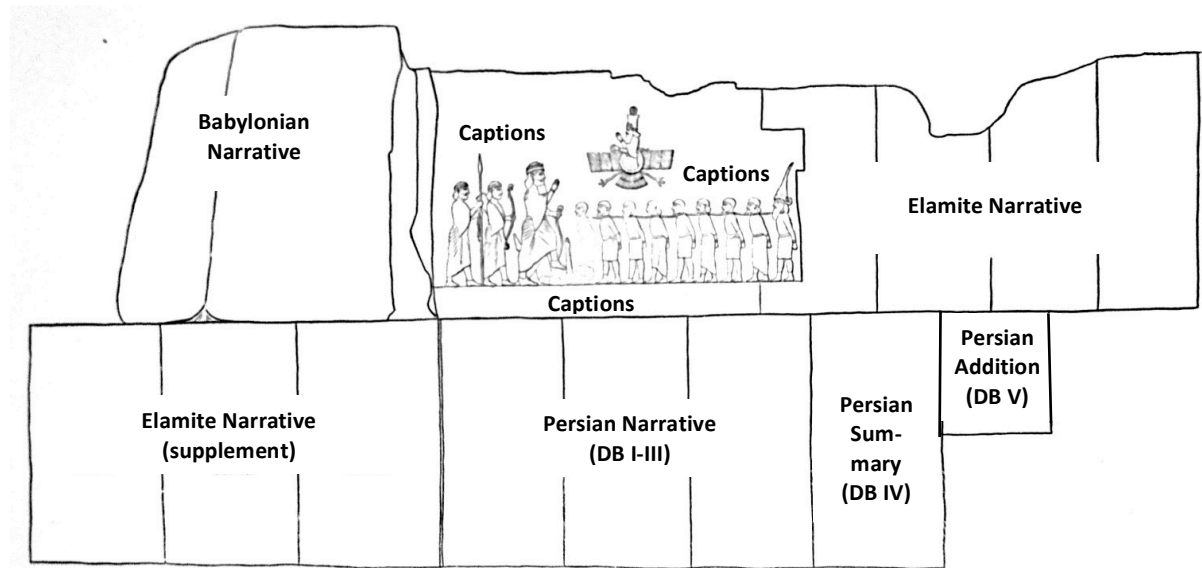


Figure 3.8. The Behistun monument with relief and trilingual inscriptions. After King and Thompson, *The Sculptures and Inscriptions of Darius*, pl. VI; corrected by Borger, *Die Chronologie des Darius-Denkmal am Behistun-Felsen*, fig. 2. Image adapted from fig. 3.1 by author.

However, the image does appear to parallel more closely another textual element on the monument: the short narrative summary (DB IV) that appears to the bottom right of the sculptured panel. Like the image itself, this section of text summarizes the historical narrative, providing a type of snapshot of the political message of DB I-III—Darius, with the help of Ahuramazda, overthrew the usurper Gaumata and subdued various rebellions throughout the land, bringing peace and stability to the empire.¹³⁴ Yet even here, differences between image and text obtain. The summary text, like DB I-III, describes the rival claimants according to a geographical

¹³⁴ Root, *The King and Kingship*, 187. For the full translation of DB IV, see Schmitt, *The Bisitun Inscription of Darius the Great*.

scheme.¹³⁵ The image, in contrast, arranges the rebel captives in the chronological order in which they were subdued.¹³⁶ Thus, while the relief and DB IV might both function as a type of précis of the main text, they nevertheless tell the story of Darius's rise to power in slightly different ways.

A third type of visual-verbal interaction is evident in the relationship between the image and the short, caption-like inscriptions (DBa-k) that appear in the immediate vicinity of specific figures in the relief. These captions have an indexical function in that they primarily identify the name of the figures next to which they appear.¹³⁷ In its own right, the iconography also attempts to identify the figures according to their unique dress, facial features, beard, and hair.¹³⁸ Nevertheless, there are important differences. For one, the captions identify figures who, in the main narrative, are not just taken captive but are impaled, mutilated, and killed. The image, however, withholds an explicit sense of violence.¹³⁹ In fact, the captives almost maintain a sense of dignity insofar as they walk upright, only slightly bent at the waist. Second, by identifying these

¹³⁵ Ibid., 191. See Arno Poebel, "Chronology of Darius' First Year of Reign," *AJSL* 55 (1938): 149, 150 n. 13, 143; Richard Hallock, "The 'One Year' of Darius I," *JNES* 19 (1960): 36; Windfuhr, "Saith Darius," 271; James Bowick, "Characters in Stone: Royal Ideology and Yehudite Identity in the Behistun Inscription and the Book of Haggai," in *Community Identity in Judean Historiography: Biblical and Comparative Perspectives* (ed. Gary N. Knoppers and Kenneth A. Ristau; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2009), 98.

¹³⁶ Root, *The King and Kingship*, 191; Poebel, "Darius' First Year," 162. For instance, the ninth figure, Skunkha the Scythian, was added later and reflects Darius's defeat of a subsequent rebellion (519 B.C.E.). This episode is described in the Persian Addition (DB V). When this ninth figure was added to the relief, it protruded into the left-most column of the Elamite narrative. As a result, an Elamite narrative supplement was added to the bottom left of the image.

¹³⁷ All of the characters but Ahuramazda and the two attendants are identified by these shorter inscriptions. The caption that accompanies Darius (DBa) is the most extensive and appears only in Persian and Elamite. Gaumata is identified with a trilingual caption (DBb) at the bottom of the relief. Each of the bound captives are accompanied by a caption (DBc-k); the Persian and Elamite appear above the figure while the Babylonian appears below. The sole exception is the last figure, where no Babylonian text exists (see Nimchuk, "Creation of an Empire," 12).

¹³⁸ Nimchuk, "Creation of an Empire," 12; Root, *The King and Kingship*, 193-94.

¹³⁹ Nimchuk, "Creation of an Empire," 14.

historical figures, the captions transform a timeless, symbolic scene of the victorious king into a more historical narrative about a specific ruler (Darius) and certain victories (the subjugation of nine rebels).¹⁴⁰ Thus, even here, the interaction between visual and verbal data is complex and seems to hint at the type of dialectical tension that Mitchell claims is characteristic of the image-text relationship more broadly.

At a second level, Mitchell's image-text dialectic would underscore the ways in which textuality enters into the iconography and visuality enters into the inscriptions. On the one hand, the compositional arrangement of the image displays a certain type of "textual syntax." That is, if the image is read from left to right and from top to bottom as a type of visual sentence, it seems to follow the Subject-Object-Verb word order that is common to each of the three languages on the monument: The subject (Darius), appears close to the left edge of the image, the object (the nine rebel captives) appear to the right, and the verb (to defeat or subdue) is visually depicted in the bottom register where Gaumata lies prone, begging for mercy, under Darius's foot.¹⁴¹ To press the issue further, it might also be possible to say that the subject is fronted with a dependent clause—the attendants to the left and Ahuramazda above are the means by which Darius carries out his triumph.¹⁴² In this sense, the image reflects a certain degree

¹⁴⁰ Nimchuk, "Creation of an Empire," 36.

¹⁴¹ Nimchuk, "The Creation of an Empire," 24. In addition, it might be said that in the picture, the object and verb are morphed together visually, yielding a syntax of subject → object/verb. This observation might reiterate the point that rebels and usurpers will always be subjugated by the righteous king.

¹⁴² The resulting visual sentence would read something like this: With the aid of my forces and under the protection of Ahuramazda, I, Darius the King, these nine rebels defeated. For a similar analysis, see Nimchuk, *The Creation of an Empire*, 24.

of textuality, or at least it "reads" much like a typical sentence in written Persian, Elamite, or Babylonian.

On the other hand, the placement of the written captions also seems to play a significant role in the visual display of the relief. These captions, like the rest of the inscriptions on the relief, would hardly have been readable from the vantage point of an observer some 300 feet below.¹⁴³ What, then, is the function of these clearly visible but highly illegible inscriptions? Apart from the information they contain, the placement of these inscriptions within the visual frame of the paneled sculpture functions to direct the gaze of the viewer, to anchor visual attention on the most important figures in the image.¹⁴⁴ That is, the captions indicate whom to look at, or more generally, how to look at the relief itself. Thus, these texts signify not only through the written code of their language but also through the visual code of their placement within the frame of the relief. Put simply, what these captions *show* is just as important as what they *tell*.

Third, Mitchell's visual theory might also prompt one to reflect on the nature of the image-text relationship in the ancient Near Eastern world more broadly. Specifically, what difference would it make to think about the Behistun relief as a type of metapicture for visual-verbal representation? First, this relief reinforces the idea introduced in chapter 2 of this study that image and text function as complementary languages of communication throughout the ancient Near Eastern world. In fact, since

¹⁴³ While the relief is 300 feet above the base of the mountain, it is 500 feet above the plain where the main caravan route passed.

¹⁴⁴ Nimchuk, "The Creation of an Empire," 25. A more extensive discussion about the relationship between Neo-Assyrian inscribed captions and wall reliefs is taken up by John Malcolm Russell, *Sennacherib's Palace Without Rival at Nineveh* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991); and Pamela Gerardi, "Epigraphs and Assyrian Palace Reliefs: The Development of the Epigraphic Text," *JCS* 40 (1988): 1-35.

both image and text articulate Darius's words in the Behistun relief, Cindy Nimchuk speaks of the iconography as a "fourth language" that accompanies the trilingual inscriptions.¹⁴⁵ Second, as a metapicture the Behistun relief reminds us that while images and text both function as languages of communication, they do not always say the same thing or convey information in the same ways. The relief cannot be readily construed as a literalistic illustration of any of the various inscriptions on the monument, and no straightforward parallel can be established between the image and the text. While the fissure between image and text in this relief is surely not as extreme as it is in Magritte's *La trahison des images*, the Behistun relief nevertheless bears witness to the incommensurability of discourse and display, even within the same object. Finally, scholars might use the Behistun relief as a type of metapicture in discussions of the role of texts in a society that was highly illiterate. As already mentioned, for all intents and purposes the inscriptions on the monument would have been visible but yet not legible to any ancient observer. Much of the same might be said about textual materials more generally in the ancient Near East. In light of extremely low literacy rates in the ancient world (cf. §2.2), it is very likely that when the general populace encountered texts, whether on public monuments, administrative records, or inscribed seals, they would not have been able to read them—that is, for the vast majority of people, texts would have been visible but illegible. Thus, what makes the written material on the Behistun relief ultimately illegible is not only its placement 300 feet above the nearest vantage point but also the fact that most viewers would have

¹⁴⁵ Nimchuk, "The Creation of an Empire," 7.

been unable to read (let alone understand) the cuneiform in the first place. Thus, one conclusion that can be drawn from seeing the Behistun relief as a metapicture is that textual materials most likely played an important role in ancient visual culture insofar as they, like images, were *visual* objects designed to be seen, looked at, and gazed upon, even if their linguistic content could not be read by most observers.

These brief reflections have attempted to indicate several ways in which Mitchell's work on visual theory might come to bear on the analysis of a specific work of ancient art. In sum, Mitchell's theories would not only direct more attention to monuments like the Behistun relief but they also would prompt new ways of conceptualizing the interactions that occur between visual and verbal data within these artifacts. On the whole, the application of contemporary theory to ancient visual culture is still in its infancy, and as a result, is in need of more sustained attention. This type of cross-disciplinary work would not only prompt visual culture theorists to expand their research to include non-contemporary materials, but it also would give scholars interested in ancient iconography access to more theoretically refined tools of analysis. By linking contemporary theory to ancient art, scholars in both fields of study would be challenged to raise new questions about their disciplines and pursue new ways of talking about the image-text relationship.

3.4. Drawing Conclusions about the Iconographic Method

By way of conclusion, this final section aims to integrate the two previous discussions (§§3.2-3) by exploring the implications of contemporary visual theory for the methods and practices of biblical iconography.¹⁴⁶ Specifically, how might Mitchell's theories about the image-text dialectic and the metapicture come to bear on the ways in which biblical scholars talk about and describe the relationship between ANE iconography and the Hebrew Bible? In what ways and to what extent might these theories further advance how biblical iconographers approach issues pertaining to image-text congruence, correlation, and contiguity? While Mitchell's theories—not to mention visual culture studies more broadly—might further inform biblical iconography in numerous ways, I conclude by suggesting three specific points of application that might be especially relevant to biblical iconographic methods.

(1) What difference would it make to take up Mitchell's ideas about the metapicture, and specifically the type of metapicture that comments on or refers to the interaction of visual and verbal representation, within biblical research? As Mitchell himself has noted, the sort of referentiality on display in metapictures is not an intrinsic property of select images. Rather, every image, at least to some degree, combines visual and verbal data and thus could potentially be used for talking about the nature of the image-text relationship more broadly. In this sense, utilizing a metapicture is part of an interpretive strategy that would enable biblical iconographers to anchor their discussions about the relationship between ANE art and the Hebrew Bible to an analysis

¹⁴⁶ This integration of theory with practical analysis is also evident in §3.3.3.

of artifacts that combine image and text in explicit ways. Such an approach is almost never employed in biblical iconography. Nevertheless, Mitchell's theory about the metapicture has the potential to bring added clarity to contiguous and non-contiguous comparative methodologies.

As an example of how the metapicture might be employed in biblical research, it will be instructive to return to the previous discussion about LeMon's critique of Brown's iconographic method (§3.2.3). It was noted that while LeMon critiques Brown for not closely attending to questions of cultural particularity, LeMon fails to acknowledge explicitly the ways in which he and Brown pursue different types of comparative approaches. LeMon, strictly speaking, focuses on contiguous images and texts whereas Brown is more open to comparing non-contiguous data. However, "agreeing to disagree" about contiguous and non-contiguous comparisons in biblical iconography is not the only way of brokering a peaceful settlement between LeMon's and Brown's studies. In this regard, the metapicture might provide a new way forward.

At the outset of his study, Brown assumes that what Jan Assmann says about Egyptian New Kingdom solar hymns—that "image and text are equivalent"—also holds true for the relationship between ANE art and the Psalter.¹⁴⁷ Thus Brown essentially uses New Kingdom solar hymns as a type of metapicture for understanding the image-text relationship in biblical iconography. However, while there is an organic union between image and text in these Egyptian hymns,¹⁴⁸ LeMon is right to note that the

¹⁴⁷ Assmann, *Egyptian Solar Religion*, 65. For the related discussion in Brown, see *Seeing the Psalms*, 5.

¹⁴⁸ Not only are hieroglyphic signs pictographic in nature but also painted images in reliefs can often function as hieroglyphic determinatives writ large.

same cannot be said of the relationship between ANE iconography and the Hebrew

Bible:

Unlike Egyptian hieroglyphs, the alphabetic script of even the oldest manuscripts of the Psalms is far removed from any ideographic sense. And, obviously, no pictures (i.e., illustrations) accompany the Psalms. So when Brown adopts Assmann's terminology to speak of "iconic metaphors" and claims that ancient Near Eastern images and biblical texts mutually refer to a single 'thought' or 'content' lying outside both image and text, Brown has not dealt adequately with the issue of cultural particularity.¹⁴⁹

While LeMon's critique is certainly well directed, it would perhaps be better to conclude that the underlying problem is not *just* about cultural particularity but also about the type of metapicture Brown relies upon. The image-text relationship in Egyptian solar hymns reflects a different set of visual-verbal interactions than is evident between, say, images of the winged sun disk and solar language used for Yahweh in the Psalter. Yet, for his own part, LeMon does not provide an alternative metapicture to guide his iconographic method. Rather, his solution to the problem he sees in Brown's work involves advocating a methodological approach that pays more careful attention to both the chronological and geographic context of the artifacts at hand.¹⁵⁰ Thus, while LeMon's research is far more attentive to questions of historical context, he does not base his broader reflections on the image-text relationship on the analysis of a specific artifact that juxtaposes visual and verbal data.

Thus, in the end, neither Brown nor LeMon attempt to address what I think is a critical methodological question: What are suitable metapictures for biblical iconography? While there is certainly no one answer to this question (i.e., a meta-

¹⁴⁹ LeMon, *Yahweh's Winged Form*, 21

¹⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 21.

metapicture), it seems to be a question worth asking nonetheless. Anchoring reflections on the relationship between ANE art and the Hebrew Bible in actual objects that combine image and text, such as the Behistun relief (§3.3.3), would be productive for at least two reasons.

For one, it would help discussions about the image-text relationship to become more concrete, more material than abstract. That is to say, analyzing the diverse ways in which visual and verbal data interact with one another in an object such as the Behistun relief would offer a heuristic guide for thinking through how ancient viewers might have construed the relationship between other ANE images and texts. Although there is no guarantee that the image-text relationship on display in the Behistun relief is a reliable indicator of how Israelites in, say, the Persian period (or at any other time) would have understood the relationship between the Hebrew Bible and Achaemenid (or any other) iconography, it would provide a contextually-specific point of reference, or at least a set of evocative object lessons, that then could be employed in biblical iconographic research. For instance, LeMon argues that there is not a one-to-one relationship between literary imagery of Yahweh's winged form in the Psalter and any single iconographic motif in Syro-Palestinian art. Rather, each literary context draws on and even blends together a unique constellation of iconographic motifs. This important point potentially could be strengthened by noting that even in ANE artifacts that combine image and text in the same visual frame, the relationship between the two media is rarely if ever a matter of one-to-one congruence or straightforward illustration. Not unlike the imagery in the Psalter, the main text in the Behistun relief also displays a

certain type "multistability" insofar as it draws on a set of ideas that cannot be captured by any single image, let alone the image on the relief itself. As a result, if, as LeMon suggests, "the employment of the multistable image of Yahweh's wings reveals the psalmist's fascination with this mysterious divine image," then it also might be said to reveal the psalmist's familiarity with the nature of visual-verbal interactions in his own historical context. In other words, the ambiguity of referentially that LeMon discovers with respect to Yahweh's winged form in the Psalter is also true, if not generally at least in specific cases, about other visual-verbal interactions in the ancient world.

Conversely, in studies such as Brown's, identifying a metapicture would introduce a third element to the comparison that might function as a type of historical relay between what are non-contiguous images and texts. Instead of describing the image-text relationship in rather vague analogical terms ("so also in the psalms"), introducing a sustained analysis of a metapicture would enable Brown and other biblical iconographers to speak in more specific ways about how images and texts relate to one another, even if these are not from the same chronological or geographical context. While the idea of a metapicture would not dissolve the differences between contiguous and non-contiguous comparisons in biblical iconography, it could help further clarify the goals and starting points of each approach.

(2) Mitchell's theories about the image-text dialectic may also make several important contributions to how biblical iconographers think about the issue of image-text congruence. Mitchell's dialectic would caution against an easy accommodation of visual and verbal data, and in doing so, it would remind biblical iconographers that any

image-text relationship is characterized by a tension of similarity *and* difference. While recent contributions to biblical iconography have been able to talk about and analyze similarities between ANE images and biblical texts with increasing precision and contextualization, they have seldom given the same careful attention to points of difference. A possible exception is LeMon's previously mentioned study of Yahweh's winged forms in the book of Psalms. LeMon acknowledges that "no single iconographic trope provides the key to interpreting the images of Yahweh's wings."¹⁵¹ Instead, each image reflects a certain type of multistability insofar as it draws on and combines various iconographic motifs. To put the matter in Mitchell's terms, no single image shows exactly what a given psalm says.

Yet, one might press this point even further. As already noted, LeMon suggests that the literary imagery in the Psalter exhibits a certain degree of "multistability." Interestingly, LeMon borrows this terminology from none other than Mitchell himself, who uses this concept to refer to the co-existence of different images in the same gestalt, such as in the famous "duck-rabbit."¹⁵² For LeMon, the most salient feature of Mitchell's theory is the "secondary effect" of multistability—that is, its ability to invite "the spectator to return with fascination to the mysterious object."¹⁵³ However, within Mitchell's visual theory, the notion of multistability is intimately connected to his theory of the image-text dialectic. Mitchell contends that the ambiguity on display in a multistable image is, in the words of Walter Benjamin, "the pictorial image of dialectics,

¹⁵¹ LeMon, *Yahweh's Winged Form*, 190.

¹⁵² In fact, multistability is a specific characteristic of a certain type of metapicture. See Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, 45-57.

¹⁵³ LeMon, *Yahweh's Winged Form*, 192.

the law of dialects seen at a standstill."¹⁵⁴ As a result, whatever secondary effect the multistable image might have, its *primary* effect is to highlight the dialectical tension between difference and similarity, ekphrastic hope and ekphrastic fear.¹⁵⁵ Thus, while I agree with LeMon that the multistability of the imagery in the Psalter is "what makes the literary picture so compelling," it is also what makes it so difficult to tie down, so resistant to any straightforward account of image-text congruence or correlation.

Thus construed, Mitchell's notion of multistability might have greater purchase in biblical iconography than LeMon's brief analysis would seem to suggest. On the one hand, Mitchell's theory prompts biblical iconographers to recognize that multistability is not the unique characteristic of a particular set of images and texts, but rather is, as Mitchell contends, "constitutive of representation as such."¹⁵⁶ In other words, when studying a given text in the Hebrew Bible in light of ANE art, biblical scholars should be attentive not only to *ambiguity* in the relationship, but also to *multiplicity*—that is, the way in which literary imagery typically draws on and combines multiple iconographic motifs. As such, the proper subject of biblical iconography is not the image-text relationship as much as it is a network of image-text relationships. On the other hand, and closely related, Mitchell's dialectic reminds us that the Hebrew Bible—or any other text—never simply "employs" or "adopts" visual imagery, but rather "redeploys" and "adapts" it for the purposes of written discourse. To say that biblical texts redeploy or adapt iconographic motifs is not to deny the presence of image-text congruence.

¹⁵⁴ LeMon, *Yahweh's Winged Form*, 45.

¹⁵⁵ Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, 56.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 5.

Rather, it simply acknowledges that one of the implications of Mitchell's image-text dialectic is that images are often repurposed or "revised" in order to meet the needs of new theological contexts. I will return to this specific issue in more detail later in this study (§6.4.2).

(3) Finally, Mitchell's dialectic might also affect how biblical iconographers approach the issue of image-text correlation. As previously noted (§3.2.2), most recent contributions to biblical iconography have emphasized the way in which biblical language is "fraught with background, both visual and discursive."¹⁵⁷ By focusing predominantly on how the figurative language in the Hebrew Bible draws on or reflects concepts that are also evident in ANE art, there is now an increasing concern for how ancient visual culture might have come to influence the production and reception of the figurative language of biblical texts. While this line of inquiry is consistent with Mitchell's dialectic (i.e., the visuality of texts), his theory would also prompt biblical iconographers to look at the issue of image-text correlation in the other direction (i.e., the textuality of vision). Namely, if seeing images affected how ancient Israelites read (or wrote) the Hebrew Bible, then did reading the Hebrew Bible (or texts of whatever sort) also affect how ancient Israelites would have seen (or used) ancient images?¹⁵⁸

A brief example demonstrates the methodological potential of this question. In a previous study, I have explored the relationship between literary descriptions of Yahweh as an armed archer in Zech 9:11-17 and archer imagery in Persian period art, especially

¹⁵⁷ Brown, *Seeing the Psalms*, 14.

¹⁵⁸ Most past research in biblical studies would answer this question in the affirmative, though from a vantage point quite at odds with Mitchell's theory. Fueled by iconoclastic theological perspectives, biblical scholars have assumed that reading the Hebrew Bible, especially the second commandment of the Decalogue, should (and did) lead to the *disuse—and destruction—*of images, at least by the faithful.

in a series of coins (called Darics) and a variety of seals, many of which are found in the previously mentioned Persepolis Fortification Archive (§2.3.3.1).¹⁵⁹ **Figs. 3.9-10** are two representative examples of this imagery. While space prohibits a full review of the nature of the image-text relationship in this case, this study demonstrates that Second Zechariah adapts the Achaemenid archer motif and its associated royal ideology for its own rhetorical purposes. Namely, I contend that by portraying the Divine Warrior as an archer ready for battle, the figurative language of Zechariah 9 might well recall the visual vocabulary of Achaemenid archers, and with it, the royal connotations implied by this artistic motif. That is, Achaemenid royal archer iconography might evoke a conceptual frame of reference for imagining Yahweh's intervention on behalf of Yehud. Depicted as an archer, Yahweh ushers in a reign of peace, stability, and prosperity on a cosmic level that the Achaemenid king sought to establish in his earthly empire.



Figures 3.9-10. Left: Type II Archer coin in line drawing, late-6th / early-5th c. B.C.E. After Stronach, "Early Achaemenid Coinage," fig. 1 [2]; cf. Garrison, "Archers at Persepolis," 338 fig. 32.1. Right: Seal of Darius, Thebes, late-6th / early-5th c. B.C.E. The Old Persian inscription reads, "Darius, the great king." After Strawn, *What is Stronger than a Lion?*, fig. 4.152; cf. Porada, *Art of Ancient Iran*, fig. 89.

However, in light of Mitchell's theory about the image-text dialectic, this argument can be further extended. Namely, just as it is possible to think about how

¹⁵⁹ Bonfiglio, "Archer Imagery in Zechariah 9:11-17 in Light of Achaemenid Iconography," *JBL* 131 (2012): 509-29.

Achaemenid art might have come to influence the production and/or reception of the literary description of Yahweh in Zechariah 9, it is also possible to reflect on how literary metaphors might have come to shape how viewers interpreted visual data. If this were the case, images of the Persian archer might well have appeared Yahweh-like to ancient Israelites viewers in the Persian period who were familiar with some form of Second Zechariah. In other words, if a picture of the Persian royal archer (as in **fig. 3.9**) is seen in light of textual traditions that describe Yahweh as an armed archer, then it might take on a certain degree of multistability in the eyes of the viewer. That is, images of the Persian hero and Israelite God shift back forth in the same gestalt making it possible to see or recognize Yahweh in what is otherwise a picture of a Persian archer. That this actually occurred in the visual experience of ancient Israelites would be difficult, if not impossible, to prove, though as I show in §6.4, there are good reasons to believe that religious beliefs and knowledge played a significant role in shaping and structuring how ancient viewers processed visual data. In either case, Mitchell's dialectic underscores the point that the interaction between images and texts is not unidirectional, and instead, texts influence how we see as much as images influence how we read.

What this final section hopefully makes clear—and what this whole chapter has attempted to show—is that the image-text relationship in biblical iconography involves more than just identifying similar themes in certain images and texts or juxtaposing visual and verbal data that share the same subject matter. Rather, examining the image-text relationship entails a careful consideration of a variety of methodological issues (i.e., congruence, correlation, and contiguity) and might be informed and directed

by numerous theoretical frameworks (i.e., Mitchell's image-text dialectic and metapicture). Yet, as important as it is to better understand the image-text relationship from both methodological and theoretical vantage points, this is not the only relationship that should matter to biblical iconography. Rather, as is evident in the last example discussed above, it also important to consider the relationship that obtains between images and their viewers. That is, how did ancient viewers come to understand visual materials and what can we infer from the way in which viewers talked about or treated art objects? Both of these issues—that is, visual analysis and visual response—are addressed in the next two chapters of this study.

CHAPTER 4

PICTURING REPRESENTATION: THE MEANING OF IMAGES AND APPROACHES TO VISUAL ANALYSIS

Painting's creations stand there as though they were alive, but if you ask them anything, they maintain a quite solemn silence. [Written] speeches are the same way. You might expect them to speak like intelligent beings, but if you question them with the intention of learning something about what they're saying, they always just continue saying the same thing.

- Plato, *Phaedrus*, §275d

Pictures in perspective, like any others, have to be read; and the ability to read has to be acquired.

- Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art*, 14

4.1. The Aims and Limits of Iconography as a Method of Image Analysis

In Plato's *Phaedrus*, Socrates engages in a dialogue that champions the virtues of oral speech over written communication. He cinches his argument by comparing writing to painting, suggesting that both forms of representation "stand there as though they were alive, but if you ask them anything, they maintain a quite solemn silence."¹ For Plato, the difficulties involved in discerning what images or texts "say" or mean primarily have to do with the techniques (or lack thereof) of the observer. Since neither visual nor verbal media can speak on their own behalf, Plato worried that they might be "ill-treated and unfairly abused" by those viewers unskilled at understanding their language of communication.² In voicing these concerns, Plato partially anticipates what

¹ Plato, *Phaedr.*, §275d (Cobb, Plato's Erotic Dialogues).

² *Ibid.*, §275e.

contemporary visual theorist Nelson Goodman succinctly affirms in the epigraph above: pictures, much like texts, "have to be read; and the ability to read has to be acquired."³

Not unlike Plato, many recent scholars have noted that reading images is no easy task. Roland Barthes, for instance, suggests that images display a certain "resistance to meaning" insofar as their underlying messages and connotations are open to a wide variety of interpretations.⁴ Likewise, art historian Margaret Miles contends that determining the meaning of images is open to considerable ambiguity, and in contrast to texts, they neither yield "precise information" nor a "detachable conclusion."⁵ In fact, Miles believes that while visual data is essential for understanding the history of Christian thought, "the multivalence of an image means that we can never definitely interpret it."⁶ One need not fully agree with Miles's rather dour assessment of our ability to locate meaning in the visual arts to appreciate her underlying point: being able to read images requires critical reflection on the methods of analysis that one employs. This very point is underscored by Christoph Uehlinger, who, in commenting on the role of images in biblical research, notes that: "In order to correctly use and evaluate a pictorial source in historical terms, the modern interpreter not only has to learn the

³ Nelson Goodman, *Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1968), 14.

⁴ Roland Barthes, "Rhetoric of the Image," in *Image, Music, Text* (trans. Stephen Heath; New York: Hill and Wang; 1977), 32. In the same volume, see also Barthes's essay, "The Third Meaning," 52-68.

⁵ Margaret R. Miles, *Image as Insight: Visual Understanding in Western Christianity and Secular Culture* (Boston: Beacon, 1985), 30, 33.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 32.

pictorial 'language' of images . . . but also to inquire into the rules which governed their commissioning, production, and display in antiquity."⁷

In the fields of biblical iconography and ANE art history, scholars almost uniformly employ a method of image analysis known as iconography.⁸ In general, iconography is defined as the branch of art history interested in identifying or describing the subject matter of an image as opposed to its formal composition or stylistic features.⁹ While the roots of iconography as a method of image analysis reach back into the nineteenth century, it is most widely associated with Erwin Panofsky (1892-1968).¹⁰ In his classic 1939 *Studies in Iconology*, Panofsky pioneers a methodological approach that seeks to elucidate three levels of meaning in an image, each determined through a different analytical operation.¹¹ (1) At the "pre-iconographic" level, one draws on

⁷ Christoph Uehlinger, "Clio in a World of Pictures: Another Look at the Lachish Reliefs from Sennacherib's Southwest Palace at Nineveh," in *Like a Bird in a Cage: The Invasion of Sennacherib in 701 BCE* (ed. Lester L. Grabbe; JSOTSup 363; ESHM 4; New York: Sheffield Academic, 2003), 224-25.

⁸ The iconographic method has been widely adopted in numerous fields, including (at times) contemporary visual culture studies. In describing analytical approaches in visual culture studies, James Elkins notes that "the method that does the most interpretive work is typically a very conservative kind of iconography derived from Panofsky" (*Visual Studies: A Skeptical Introduction* [New York: Routledge, 2003], 105). Thus, despite their interest in considerably different "canons" of art, visual culture studies and ancient Near Eastern art history often utilize similar methods of visual interpretation.

⁹ See for instance, Erwin Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology: Humanistic Themes in the Art of the Renaissance* (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1972 [1939]), 3.

¹⁰ Many early contributions to the field of iconography in the nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries were focused on Christian religious art. See for instance Adolphe Napoléon Didron, *Christian Iconography: The History of Christian Art in the Middle Ages* (trans. E.J. Millington; 2 vols.; New York: F. Ungar, 1965 [French original: 1843]; Émile Mâle, *The Gothic Image: Religious Art in France of the Thirteenth Century* (trans. from 3d ed. by Dora Nussey; New York: Harper, 1958 [1899]; idem., *Religious Art in France, The Thirteenth Century: A Study of Medieval Iconography and Its Sources* (Bollingen Series 90/2; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984 [1908]); and Anton Springer, *Die Baukunst des christlichen Mittelalters: Ein Leitfaden* (Bonn: Henry & Cohen, 1854).

¹¹ Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology*, 3-17. While Panofsky's schema clearly outlines three levels of meaning, some later interpreters have sub-divided his third level into "iconographic interpretation" (the deeper meaning expressed by the image) and "iconological interpretation" (why this image was created just so). See for instance, Roelof van Straten, *An Introduction to Iconography: Symbols, Allusions, and Meaning in the Visual Arts* (trans. Patricia de Man; rev. Eng. ed.; Documenting the Image 1; Yverden: Gordon and Breach, 1994 [1985]), 3-24.

practical experience in order to *describe* the primary or natural subject matter as expressed in certain forms and motifs. (2) At the "iconographic" level, one utilizes knowledge gleaned from literary sources to *analyze* the secondary or conventional subject matter which is articulated through specific pictorial themes or concepts. (3) At the "iconological" level, one applies an understanding of culturally conditioned concepts in order to *interpret* the symbolic meaning(s) communicated by a given image.¹² For each level, Panofsky identifies a corrective principle that guides analysis in light of knowledge about the history of style, types, and symbols, respectively. Panofsky's schema of interpretation is summarized in the following chart (**fig. 4.1**).

¹² It should be understood that Panofsky distinguishes between "iconography" and "iconology." The former concerns the identification of content while the latter explains the underlying principles or socio-religious movements that give rise to the image's intrinsic meaning. Othmar Keel aptly explains the relationship between iconography and iconology as being similar to that of geography and geology ("Iconography and the Bible," *ABD* 3:358). However, this distinction in terminology is not often retained in later appropriations of Panofsky's work. For instance, in his overview of the iconographic method, van Straten refers to the three levels in Panofsky's schema as pre-iconographic description, iconographic description, and iconographic interpretation (*An Introduction to Iconography*, 4). Van Straten does, however, identify a fourth level of meaning: iconological interpretation. Thus for van Straten and numerous others, iconology is a phase or level of investigation within the broader method of iconography. This general preference for the term iconography over iconology is perhaps due to some sense that *graphein* (writing) is more suitable than *logos* (speech, discourse) when it comes to the *eikon*. The tendency to treat images as (a form of) writing is addressed in more detail below. In either case, I consistently use the term "iconography" (not iconology) to refer to the Panofsky's process of visual interpretation, including the identification of content and the explanation of culturally conditioned principles.

Level of interpretation	Object of interpretation	Instrument of interpretation	Corrective principle of interpretation
pre-iconographic <i>description</i>	primary or natural subject matter (forms and motifs)	recognition of forms through practical experience	history of style (how forms and motifs are expressed)
iconographic <i>analysis</i>	secondary or conventional subject matter (themes and concepts)	knowledge of themes through literary sources	history of types (how themes or concepts are expressed)
iconological (or iconographic) <i>interpretation</i>	intrinsic content and symbolic value	understanding of meaning through culturally conditional principles	history of symbols (how "the essential tendencies of the human mind" are expressed)

Figure 4.1. Summary of Panofsky's iconographic method. Adapted by the author from Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology*, 14-15.

Although Panofsky is particularly focused on analyzing visual materials, cultural historian Peter Burke contends that his method applies to images "a distinctly German tradition of interpreting *texts*."¹³ Nearly a century before the publication of Panofsky's *Studies in Iconology*, the German philologist Georg Anton Friedrich Ast (1778-1841) had pioneered a hermeneutical method that sought to distinguish three levels of meaning in literature—the grammatical, the historical, and the cultural. A similar approach to meaning was taken up by Panofsky's predecessors, including the early-twentieth-century art historians associated with the Warburg School at Hamburg and the Vienna School.¹⁴ Under the influences of these scholars, Panofsky's method came to reflect a type of "philological" approach to meaning in the visual arts. Panofsky, in fact, was

¹³ Peter Burke, *Eyewitnessing: The Uses of Images as Historical Evidence* (Picturing History Series; Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2001), 36 emphasis mine. ANE art historian Zainab Bahrani offers a similar observation when she comments that Panofsky's method operates "according to a linguistic rationality" (*Women of Babylon: Gender and Representation in Mesopotamia* [New York: Routledge, 2001], 131). For further discussion, see §4.2 below.

¹⁴ Burke, *Eyewitnessing*, 35. For a discussion of the Vienna School and its art historical methods, see Christopher S. Wood, ed., *The Vienna School Reader: Politics and Art Historical Method in the 1930s* (New York: Zone Books, 2000). See also, Alois Riegl, *Late Roman Art Industry* (trans. with foreword and annotations by Rolf Winkes; Series Archaeologica 36; Roma: Giorgio Bretschneider, 1985 [1901]).

trained in historical linguistics and viewed himself as much as a philologist as an art historian.¹⁵ Believing that philology was the foundation for all humanistic inquiry, Panofsky developed a method that effectively bracketed out issues pertaining to aesthetics, formal composition, function, ideology, and the viewer's response. As such, iconography tends to reduce a work of art to a collection of signs that express a one-to-one relationship between the subject matter and a specific message or idea intended by the original producer. In this sense, the principal aim of the iconographic method is to read a painting as a text, to identify its vocabulary (forms and motifs), to parse its structure (themes and concepts), and to uncover the etymological roots of its culturally conditioned meaning (symbolic value). In brief, iconography offers a putative science of images (*Kunstwissenschaft*) in which, as W. J. T. Mitchell puts it, "the 'icon' is thoroughly absorbed by [a concern for] the 'logos.'"¹⁶

Understood in this way, it is perhaps not surprising that iconography has become the method of choice for image analysis in text-based fields such as biblical studies. For many biblical scholars, Panofsky's method not only offers a way of interpreting images that is familiar to how they already read texts but it also seeks to uncover the sort of information—that is, subject matter and intrinsic historical or symbolic content—that they are most eager to glean from visual sources. As a result, Panofsky's method has been widely appropriated in and beyond the Fribourg School and often features

¹⁵ Dieter Wuttke, *Erwin Panofsky: Korrespondenz 1910 bis 1968* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2003), 434.

¹⁶ W. J. T. Mitchell, *Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 28.

prominently in discussions about biblical iconographic methods.¹⁷ For instance, while Izaak J. de Hulster acknowledges that pictures can be studied in a variety of different ways, he contends that Panofsky's method "remains the most important starting point for methodological reflections" in biblical iconography.¹⁸ In a similar manner, Brent A. Strawn admits that the study of meaning in the visual arts is "a vast area," but in his own work he underscores the way in which Panofsky "has proven foundational for subsequent thinking" in the study of ancient Near Eastern art.¹⁹

Despite its far-reaching influence, certain details about Panofsky's method of image analysis have come under scrutiny.²⁰ In biblical iconographic circles, this critique is especially evident in the methodological appendix of Keel's *Das Recht der Bilder gesehen zu werden*.²¹ One of the main issues raised by Keel is that the second level of interpretation in Panofsky's method relies too heavily on texts to inform its analysis.

Keel comments: "Richtig aber ist, dass das Methodenschema Panofskys der

¹⁷ This is especially evident in Annette Weissenrieder and Friederike Wendt's essay, "Images as Communication: The Methods of Iconography," in *Picturing the New Testament: Studies in Ancient Visual Images* (ed. Annette Weissenrieder, Friederike Wendt, and Petra von Gemünden; WUNT 193; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2005), 1-49. They begin their survey of methods of image analysis with a review of Panofsky's work, noting that he "presented a method of unpacking and interpreting images which has resonated with many in the art sciences and which promoted a continuing discourse" (10).

¹⁸ Izaak J. de Hulster, *Iconographic Exegesis and Third Isaiah* (FAT 2/36; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), 70. Though de Hulster draws on other contributions to image analysis, his method of "researching images" essentially follows Panofsky's three levels of meaning.

¹⁹ Brent A. Strawn, "Imagery," in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry and Writings* (ed. Tremper Longman and Peter Enns; Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2008), 309. It is telling that even when scholars intentionally bracket out discussions about methods of image analysis from their studies, references to Panofsky can nevertheless be found in the footnotes. See for instance, Izaak Cornelius, *The Many Faces of the Goddess: The Iconography of the Syro-Palestinian Goddesses Anat, Astarte, Qedeshet, and Asherah c. 1500-1000 BCE* (OBO 204; Fribourg: Academic Press; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2004), 16 n. 50.

²⁰ Every level of Panofsky's schema has come under scrutiny and several aspects of his method have been reworked. For representative discussions of this critique, see Weissenrieder and Wendt, "Images as Communication," 10-12; and de Hulster, *Iconographic Exegesis*, 73-77.

²¹ Keel, *Das Recht der Bilder gesehen zu werden: drie Fallstudien zur Methode der Interpretation altorientalischer Bilder* (OBO 122; Fribourg: Universitätsverlag; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1993), 267-73.

Komposition, der Syntax nicht das nötige Gewicht gibt und im Anschluss an die Identifizierung der einzelnen 'Vokabeln' gleich nach dem zugrundeliegenden (literarischen) Text sucht."²² In Keel's estimation, images should be interpreted in light of other images without turning (or at least prior to turning) to texts. Nevertheless, Keel stops short of calling into question the place of iconography as the *de facto* method of image analysis in his field of study. In fact, Keel's approach to image analysis is still an iconographic one insofar as its primary aim is to identify the intrinsic content and symbolic meaning of a given image. Even the summary of interpretation that Keel offers (**fig. 4.2**) shares much in common with the schema produced by Panofsky. Thus, while past contributions to biblical iconography have offered a critical assessment of *particular aspects* of the iconographic method, they have done little to explore *alternative approaches* to analyzing the meaning of images.²³

²² Keel, *Das Recht*, 269.

²³ A possible exception is the introductory essay of Weissenrieder and Wendt's edited volume, *Picturing the New Testament*. They review various methods of image analysis, including iconography, motif analysis, and semiotic approaches. While insightful, they do not go on to elucidate how these approaches might come to bear on the methods and practices of biblical iconography. Neither does their brief review offer a sustained engagement of visual theory, especially as it pertains to pictorial representation.

Object of interpretation	Main question	Methodological procedure	Control and evaluation
Motif	Which phenomena represent a motif and how do image details relate to the referent?	Motif-criticism, analysis of convention	Technical quality (state of preservation of image, skill of artist, type of technique)
Scene	How are individual motifs combined into meaningful units and what is the relationship of those units to the referent?	Theme-criticism, analysis of synchronic and diachronic parallels, composition (size, scale, colors, etc.)	Image quality (original or copy, compositional unity, later additions or multiple artists)
Decoration	How and why are decorations added to motifs and scenes? What is the meaning of an image in its historical context?	Decoration-criticism, analysis of overall decoration, <i>Sitz im Leben</i> of image	Decoration quality (feasibility of a certain decoration for a specific location)

Figure 4.2. Summary of Keel's iconographic method. Adapted by the author from Keel, *Das Recht*, 273; cf. Klingbeil, *Yahweh Fighting from Heaven*, 162 table 23.

Further complicating the matter of image analysis—and Panofsky's schema in particular—is the fact that viewers often approach art with very different interpretive goals in view. Biblical iconographers and art historians typically attempt to read an image in order to answer historical-critical questions about how, why, and for whom it was originally produced. These concerns, which are evident in Uehlinger's comment above, often play a central role in biblical iconographic and art historical research and, in my estimation, are crucial to the analysis of the visual arts. Nevertheless, other scholars, including those from the fine arts, gender studies, political science, psychology, radiology, marketing research, and so forth, approach images with a different set of interpretive interests in view. These fields tend to be focused not only on questions concerning the production of images (though this often remains important), but also on issues related to the ways in which images signify, including how they are received and responded to by specific viewing communities. While these latter concerns are often

thought to have an ambiguous relationship with historical or contextual studies, as is sometimes the case with semiotic approaches, this need not be the case. In fact, the study of visual response, reception, and signification can function as a way of anchoring production-oriented studies to contextual concerns about how specific viewing communities processed visual data. In either case, determining what an image means—that is, learning the languages of art—involves more than just understanding the rules that governed its production. Rather, it also entails a more nuanced appreciation for visual response and reception as well as the rules that govern how images signify. In shifting attention to issues about visual signification (ch. 4), visual response (ch. 5), and visual reception (ch. 6), I do not mean to suggest that production-oriented concerns should be any less important to methods of image analysis. However, since questions about production have been treated more extensively (and, in my estimation, effectively) in past contributions to biblical iconography and art history, my visual hermeneutics attempts to shift attention to questions about images that typically receive less airtime in the scholarly literature, and as a result, are in need of further scrutiny when it comes to biblical interpretation and religio-historical research.

Therefore, as a way of redirecting critical reflection on methods of image analysis, my intention in this chapter is to present theories about the nature of visual representation that apply pressure to certain aspects of Panofsky's widely-accepted schema. While I do not wish to call into question the overall utility of Panofsky's method, the following reflections challenge the way in which this approach is often applied. Namely, I want to stress that deciphering an image's meaning cannot be

reduced to determining its iconographic content—that is, identifying whether a bronze figurine represents Anat or Astarte or if the raised arm of a deity is a symbol of blessing or smiting. While such information is surely essential, meaning in the visual arts is a far more complex matter than suggested above. In particular, this chapter seeks to raise questions about the meaning of images that often go unasked in iconographic approaches, such as: What are the differences between how images and texts signify? Which visual features in an image contribute to the expression of its meaning and which, if any, are merely a control for assessing other features? To what extent do the perspectives and concerns of Panofsky's method reflect how ancient viewers processed pictorial signs? While it would be impossible to offer an exhaustive treatment of all these questions, by addressing such concerns in this chapter I hope to prompt scholars to examine the languages of art in ways that further nuance Panofsky's schema.²⁴

Toward this end, this chapter seeks to reflect on, or "picture," the meaning of images and the nature of image analysis from the specific vantage point of visual theories about the nature of visual and verbal sign systems. First, I explore what assumptions different approaches to image analysis make about the nature of pictorial signs (§4.2). While the iconographic method often presumes a linguistically oriented understanding of images, I draw upon the visual theory of Nelson Goodman to suggest that images, unlike texts, are best understood to be a type of "dense" or "replete" sign

²⁴ On this point, however, a word of caution must be offered. Panofsky's schema was likely never intended to serve as an exhaustive method that could account for every aspect of visual meaning. It seems to have a more limited concern related to iconographic analysis and iconological interpretation. Thus, my remarks in this chapter tend to challenge how Panofsky's method is employed rather than the thoroughness of its original design. Furthermore, my critique involves placing more emphasis on certain aspects of Panofsky's schema (such as the concern for style) than is typically done as opposed to suggesting that Panofsky's approach is misguided in its aims.

in which every compositional element has the potential to express meaning. Second, I examine how Goodman's theory of pictorial signs can shed light on the meaning of ANE art beyond the level of iconographic content (§4.3). Specifically, I explore three aspects of visual representational—compositional design, rhetoric of display, and the mode of signification—that are not always readily accounted for in iconographic methods, or are primarily treated at the level of Panofsky's pre-iconographic description.²⁵ In each case, I demonstrate how these aspects of visual representation actively participate in the construction of meaning and thus should be analyzed as an object of interpretation in their own right, not just a "corrective principle." Rather than solely reflecting the interests and perspectives of contemporary visual theory, I contend that this approach to image analysis resonates with some of the ways in which ancient Near Eastern viewers customarily looked at and understood pictorial signs. In conclusion, I enumerate several specific ways in which these theoretical reflections can further inform a visual hermeneutics for biblical studies (§4.4).

²⁵ As will be discussed below (§4.3.3), by "mode of signification" I mean to refer to the extent to which art aims to "match" the actual appearance of the external world. Until quite recently, scholars commonly evaluated the level of mimesis or resemblance that obtains between an image and its referent in terms of either "perceptual" or "conceptual" modes of signification. While perceptual art is thought to imitate nature through an accurate record of human perception, conceptual art is seen as portraying the external world through conventional or unmotivated signs. The binary distinction between perceptual/and conceptual art is an overly simplistic way of conceptualizing visual signification and therefore must be considered in a more nuanced way.

4.2. Picturing Signs: The Languages of Art

Semiotics (or semiology)²⁶ refers to the study of signs, especially as it relates to processes of signification and communication.²⁷ Though often associated with linguistics, semiotics can also be used to study a wide array of representational practices and cultural phenomena.²⁸ When applied more specifically to the visual arts, semiotic theory analyzes images as a system of signs rather than as a straightforward record of sensory perception. For instance, Charles Sanders Peirce is well known for distinguishing between three types of signs based on the way in which they structure the relationship between the signifier and signified: iconic signs resemble what they signify (i.e., a portrait); indexical signs are linked to what they signify through causal connections or gestures (i.e., smoke is an index of fire); and conventional signs refer to their referent through a culturally conditioned code (i.e., a red octagon traffic sign [even without writing] means "stop"; the symbol ∞ signifies the abstract concept "infinity"). Though Peirce's work continues to be important to scholars interested in image analysis,²⁹ more

²⁶ Historically, the term semiology is often associated with a study of linguistic signs and is connected with the work of Ferdinand de Saussure (*Cours de linguistique générale* [ed. Charles Bally and Albert Sechehaye, with Albert Riedlinger; Lausanne and Paris: Payot, 1916]; English trans. by Wade Baskin, *Course in General Linguistics* [Glasgow: Fontana/Collins, 1977]) while semiotics is used to refer to the philosophical tradition linked with Charles Sanders Peirce. However, these distinctions are rarely maintained in contemporary discussions. Instead, semiotics has come to be used as a synonym for, or even in place of, semiology.

²⁷ While the description of semiotics as a "study of signs" is generally accepted, many scholars nuance and/or elaborate the definition of semiotics to reflect the particular interests of their discipline.

²⁸ Charles Sanders Peirce once argued that, "the entire universe is perfused with signs" (*Pragmaticism and Pragmatics* [ed. Charles E. Hartshorne and Paul Weiss; vol. 5 of *Collected Papers of Charles Sanders Peirce*; Cambridge: Harvard University Press; 1934], 302). To be sure, the analytical scope of semiotic theory is enormous. It would be all but impossible to provide an adequate survey of its principal viewpoints in any single volume, let alone this brief discussion. For a helpful overview, see Winfried Nöth, ed., *Handbook of Semiotics* (Advances in Semiotics; Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1990).

²⁹ Gillian Rose offers an insightful discussion of how the work of Peirce applies to image analysis. See Gillian Rose, *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to the Interpretation of Visual Materials* (3d ed;

recent contributions to visual theory, including Ernst Gombrich's *Art and Illusion*, Nelson Goodman's *Languages of Art*, and Umberto Eco's *A Theory of Semiotics*, have limited or even excluded the role of iconicity as a characteristic of visual signification.³⁰ What Gombrich, Goodman, Eco, and numerous other visual theorists have argued (though to varying degrees) is that all images function as a system of pictorial communication in which visual signs denote things or ideas in the world according to a conventional code.³¹

While contemporary applications of art history and visual culture studies widely pursue semiotic approaches to visual interpretation, it is less clear if or how the iconographic method itself reflects similar perspectives.³² On the one hand, Panofsky neither situates his work within a semiotic tradition nor explicitly adopts its

Thousand Oaks, Calif: Sage, 2012), esp. 105-148. Weissenrieder and Wendt also discuss Peirce in their introduction to the methods of iconography ("Images as Communication," 29-30).

³⁰ Ernest Gombrich's *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* (Bollingen Series 35; A. W. Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts 5; New York: Pantheon Books, 1960) offers one of the first serious challenges to the notion of mimeticism in visual signification. Nelson Goodman extends and intensifies Gombrich's critique in *Languages of Art: An Approach to a Theory of Symbols* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1968). In the opening chapter of this volume, Goodman argues that resemblance is neither a necessary nor sufficient conditional for visual signification. Umberto Eco is equally concerned about the problem of iconicity in semiotics (*A Theory of Semiotics* [Advances in Semiotics; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976]).

³¹ Goodman sums up the matter well in the opening pages of his *Languages of Art*: "The plain fact is that a picture, to represent an object, must be a symbol for it, stand for it, refer to it; and that no degree of resemblance is sufficient to establish that requisite relationship of reference; almost anything may stand for almost anything else. A picture that represents—like a passage that describes—an object refers to and, more particularly, *denotes* it. Denotation is the core of representation and is independent of resemblance" (5).

³² A helpful review of the intersection between semiotics and art history can be found in Mieke Bal and Norman Bryson's article, "Semiotics and Art History," *The Art Bulletin* 73 (1991): 174-208. See also Bryson, "Semiology and Visual Interpretation," in *Visual Theory: Painting and Interpretation* (ed. Norman Bryson, Michael Ann Holly, and Keith Moxey; New York: Harper Collins, 1991), 61-73. Nevertheless, it is still possible to find some art historians and philosophers who defend mimetic views of art, at least to a certain degree. See for instance, David Blinder, "The Controversy over Conventionalism," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 41 (1983): 253-64; Randal Dipert, "Reflections on Iconicity, Representation, and Resemblance: Peirce's Theory of Signs, Goodman on Resemblance, and Modern Philosophies of Language and Mind," *Synthese* 106 (1996): 373-397; and Michael T. Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

characteristic terminology. This observation has led scholars such as Annette Weissenrieder and Friederike Wendt to conclude that semiotic theory "has yet to find a central place within iconography."³³ To be sure, in appropriating Panofsky's iconographic method, members of the Fribourg School do not explicitly draw on semiotic theory to inform their study of ANE art. On the whole, these scholars seem far more interested in explaining what an image represents rather than on questions about the nature of visual sign systems. Yet on the other hand, art historian Giulio Argan once hailed Panofsky as "the Saussure of Art History."³⁴ While Argan's claim is somewhat overstated, Christine Hasenmueller has shown that it is not completely unwarranted.³⁵ At several key points, the underlying logic of Panofsky's method reflects semiotic principles. For instance, at the second level of his schema, Panofsky tends to view the image as a type of conventional sign in which systematic associations link the signifier (in the form of artistic motifs) with its signified (in the form of themes or concepts from literary sources).³⁶ Furthermore, like most semioticians, Panofsky emphasizes that art is fundamentally communicative and that the analysis of visual meaning primarily involves identifying what an image denotes—its conventional subject matter and/or symbolic meaning.³⁷ Likewise, Keel, Uehlinger, and other biblical scholars who take up Panofsky's

³³ Weissenrieder and Wendt, "Images as Communication," 28. However, these scholars note that some archaeologists, such as Tonio Hölscher, have attempted to utilize semiotics in their analysis of material culture. See for instance, Tonio Hölscher, *The Language of Images in Roman Art: Art as a Semantic System in the Roman World* (trans. Anthony Snodgrass and Anne-Marie Künzl-Snodgrass; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

³⁴ Giulio Carlo Argan, "Ideology and Iconology," in *The Language of Images* (ed. W. J. T. Mitchell; trans. Rebecca West; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 17.

³⁵ Christine Hasenmueller, "Panofsky, Iconography, and Semiotics," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 36 (1978): 289-301.

³⁶ Hasenmueller, "Panofsky, Iconography, and Semiotics," 291.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 294.

method readily acknowledge that ancient images do not directly reflect reality but rather signify through culturally conditioned patterns or "constellations" of artistic motifs.³⁸ In fact, most biblical iconographers believe that ANE images function far more like linguistic determinatives than they do "historical photographs"—that is, they represent sociologically and ideologically constructed concepts (i.e., Achaemenid kingship) or classes of objects (i.e., vassal kings paying homage to an overlord) rather than the actual physical likeness of individual people (i.e., the portraiture of Darius the Great) or events (the subjugation of Jehu).³⁹ Thus, even as Panofsky's method does not reflect a purely semiotic approach to image analysis, the general approach of iconography seems to be tinged with certain aspects of semiotic theory.⁴⁰

Regardless of how "semiotic" Panofsky's method might be, the relationship between iconography and semiotic theory is in need of further scrutiny. Specifically, what exactly is "Saussurean" about the iconographic method and what assumptions does it make about the nature of images as conventional signs? How might the aims of iconography be further revised in light of theories about the semantic potential of an

³⁸ For Keel and Uehlinger, visual sign systems are conventional and thus differ between specific cultural contexts (*GGG*, 7).

³⁹ In these examples, I mean to refer to the representations of Darius I on the Behistun relief and representations of Jehu on the Black Obelisk.

⁴⁰ In her analysis of Panofsky's method, Hasenmueller admits that not every aspect of iconography can be readily translated into semiotic terms. Indeed, there are certain problems with considering Panofsky's method as a semiotic approach to image analysis. For instance, it is less clear how (or even if) Panofsky's first (pre-iconographic) and third (iconological) levels of analysis correspond to traditional semiotic concerns with sign functions and sign processes. For instance, at the pre-iconographical level of analysis, art forms are thought to carry "primary" or "natural" meaning, both of which are difficult to assimilate into semiotic theory (Hasenmueller, "Panofsky, Iconography, and Semiotics," 290). Nevertheless, it might be argued that Panofsky's corrective principle of the "history of style" accounts for a type of representational convention that mediates the relationship between artistic forms and experiential knowledge of the world (*ibid.*, 292). The third level (iconology) is even less tied to semiotic theory, though in the most general terms, it shares with semiology a concern for deep meanings and their associated symbol systems (*ibid.*, 297).

image's visual features? And in what way does the nature of visual signs in the ancient world intersect with, or even anticipate, some of the questions and concerns of contemporary visual theory? Addressing these questions will shed light on how different ways of conceptualizing or "picturing" the nature of visual signs might further inform methods of image analysis in biblical studies.

4.2.1. The Iconographic Method and the Linguistic Sign

At a conceptual level, linguistics (especially of the Saussurean variety) has often provided an orientating framework for many applications of semiotic theory, including its use in the visual arts. For instance, many theorists who acknowledge the conventionality of images, such as Gombrich and Goodman, tend to look to the paradigm of language as an adequate way of explaining meaning in artistic representation.⁴¹ In this view, images in representational art, much like words in verbal language, are understood to be a type of linguistic sign that relays a culturally coded message between a sender and receiver. Even a "naturalistic" visual feature such as perspective is regarded as a conventional symbol that can be decoded only when the viewer has been inculcated in a given system of representational practices. Thus, many contributions to visual semiotics seem to offer what might be called a "language theory" of pictures.⁴² This perspective presumes that there is a deep analogy, or even interchangeability, between visual and verbal signs. As such, pictures are treated much

⁴¹ Mitchell, *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 56 and 64. See also, David Summers, "Real Metaphor: Towards a Definition of the 'Conceptual' Image," in *Visual Theory: Painting and Interpretation* (ed. Norman Bryson, Michael Ann Holly, and Keith Moxey; New York: Harper Collins, 1991), 235.

⁴² Mitchell, *Iconology*, 64.

like paragraphs: both consist of conventional signs that can be read by a viewer according to an acquired code. Such a view is evident in Roland Barthes's account of semiotics:

Though working at the outset on non-linguistic substances, semiology is required, sooner or later, to find language (in the ordinary sense of the term) in its path, not only as a model, but also a component. . . . [T]o perceive what a substance signifies is inevitably to fall back on the individuation of language; there is no meaning which is not designated, and the world of signifieds is none other than that of language.⁴³

What Barthes's comments make explicit is that linguistics often provides an overarching way of understanding all symbolic systems, including pictorial ones.⁴⁴ Therefore, what is potentially "Saussurean" about Panofsky's iconographic method is the way in which it tends to treat images as a type of linguistic sign that can be read and analyzed in the same manner as a word or text. By extending this "language theory" to the realm of the visual arts, Panofsky and others exhibit a type of linguistic orientation or textual rationality in their methods of image analysis.

While this perspective is common, it is not universally accepted. Mitchell derides it for exhibiting a type of "linguistic imperialism" and Eco laments the fact that semiotics has often been "dominated by a dangerous verbocentric dogmatism."⁴⁵ Yet despite Mitchell and Eco's reprisals, the linguistic approach to image analysis is not without merit. The painting-picture analogy often functions to elevate the visual sign from the realm of "mere" aesthetics, and as a result, bestows on it a communicative capacity that the Western intellectual tradition typically reserves for linguistic sign systems.

⁴³ Roland Barthes, *Elements of Semiology* (trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith; repr. ed.; New York: Hill and Wang, 1977 [1967]), 10-11.

⁴⁴ Mitchell, *Iconology*, 55.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 56; Eco, *A Theory of Semiotics*, 228.

Furthermore, in acknowledging that conventional signs are everywhere, semiotics makes visual-verbal comparisons both more possible and more compelling.⁴⁶ Even Mitchell notes that the linguistic orientation to semiotics functions as a type of "promotional strategy for elevating the dignity of all sorts of signs and communicative activities."⁴⁷

There are also advantages to applying a linguistic understanding of images in the field of biblical studies. The deep analogy between visual and verbal signs provides a meta-language of discourse in which biblical scholars can map concepts and terminology from the domain of written texts onto the domain of artistic representation. This enables biblical iconographers not only to talk about visual interpretation in terms of "reading images," but also to describe ancient viewers' access to the language of art as a type of "literacy" (ch. 2). In addition, a linguistic orientation to image analysis also influences the questions biblical scholars ask and the conclusions they draw when interpreting ANE art. As was suggested at the outset of this chapter, iconography can be said to reflect a philological interest in images insofar as its primary goals are to identify the conventional subject matter and to account for its history of development, both morphologically and semantically.

A representative example of this approach to image analysis is Izak Cornelius' recent study of the iconography of Syro-Palestinian goddesses.⁴⁸ Cornelius's goals are

⁴⁶ See chapter 3 of this study for a more detailed discussion of the nature of the image-text relationship.

⁴⁷ Mitchell, *Iconology*, 62.

⁴⁸ Cornelius, *The Many Faces of the Goddess: The Iconography of the Syro-Palestinian Goddesses Anat, Astarte, Qedeshet, and Asherah c. 1500-1000 BCE*. OBO 204; Fribourg: Academic Press; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2004.

clearly iconographic in that he attempts to differentiate between artistic representations of Anat, Astarte, Qedeshet,⁴⁹ and Asherah through a close analysis of the manner in which they are characteristically represented.⁵⁰ This endeavor is made difficult by the fact that these deities seem to share overlapping iconographic profiles and because a single deity can be represented in numerous iconographic forms. In addition, a single image (such as **fig. 4.3**) can sometimes be labeled with an inscription that lists several goddess names.⁵¹ Nevertheless, Cornelius seems to presume that ancient viewers would have been able to clearly identify which goddess a specific image represented, and thus he sets out to help modern researchers do the same. Toward this end, Cornelius constructs a provisional typology of goddess imagery that is based on a careful assessment of specific representational features such as posture (standing or seated), accoutrements (crown, weaponry, ankh), physical appearance (hair style, clothing or lack of clothing), and other associated elements (plants, animals, astral symbols). Based on this mode of analysis, Cornelius is able to identify images as one of several ANE goddesses (in the case of **fig. 4.3**, *qdšt* = *qedešet/qadištu/qadišat*).

Cornelius's iconographic analysis generates several important insights that would not be otherwise evident in studies that focus exclusively on textual materials.⁵²

⁴⁹ Cornelius's vocalization of the consonants *qdšt* is far from certain. Also possible—and perhaps more likely—are *qadištu* or *qadišat*.

⁵⁰ Cornelius admits that his research is more interested in iconography than it is in iconology insofar as it gives greater attention to "that manner in which a concept is characteristically represented" as opposed to its religio-historical significance (*The Many Faces of the Goddess*, 16).

⁵¹ The accompanying inscription on fig. 4.3 reads "Qedeshet, Astarte, Anat." However, Cornelius interprets this image as Qedeshet based on several visual attributes, including the Hathor-style hairdo, the lotus flower in her right hand, and the crouching lion underfoot (*ibid.*, 96).

⁵² Specifically, since there is no textual evidence that Qedeshet existed as an independent deity in Syro-Palestine or Ugarit, some scholars have speculated that *qdš/qdš.t* is merely an epithet of El or



Figure 4.3 The Winchester relief. Painted limestone of a naked goddess, likely *qdšt*, probably 12th c. After Cornelius, *The Many Faces of the Goddess*, pl. 5.16; cf. Keel, *Das Recht der Bilder*, Abb. 206; Line drawing used with permission by Stéphane Beaulieu, <http://www.matrifocus.com/LAM07/spotlight.htm>.

Nevertheless, Cornelius's application of the iconographic method is not without its drawbacks. Three particular problems can be noted. First, Cornelius seems to treat images as a type of linguistic sign. Though both images and texts are culturally coded, important differences obtain between non-linguistic and linguistic sign systems, at least some of which can affect how these materials are interpreted. Second, the iconographic method, at least as it is appropriated by Cornelius, tends to carefully scrutinize only those visual elements that are essential for identifying an image's referent. For instance, Cornelius closely analyzes certain representational features of goddess imagery (i.e., posture, accoutrements, clothing, hair style, etc.) even as he gives little attention to others, such as the size, style, compositional design, rhetoric of display, and mode of signification. As a result, Cornelius, like many biblical iconographers, implicitly characterizes certain visual features as being semiotically uninteresting, or at least as primarily being of interest because they serve as a "corrective principle" at the level of

Asherah. But when visual representations are taken into account, Cornelius is able to conclude that there is a relatively unique iconographic profile for Qedeshet (ibid., 94-99).

pre-iconographic description. Third, iconographic research tends to place a great deal of emphasis on categorizing images into discrete typologies. Though typologies can offer the researcher helpful classification schema, if too rigidly employed, they also can overestimate the extent to which clear differentiation exists between various visual forms within a given set of images. For example, even as Cornelius admits that there is a certain degree of overlap between iconographic profiles of Syro-Palestinian goddesses, he nonetheless believes that certain images represent Anat *or* Astarte, Qedeshet *or* Asherah.⁵³ While this might well be true in certain instances, the iconographic method can potentially overlook the way in which artistic representation entails the blending of artistic motifs and the merging of distinct subject matters into hybrid visual forms.⁵⁴ Even as discrete typologies can be helpful for the purposes of contemporary research, they are sometimes motivated by underlying assumptions that are more suited to linguistic sign systems rather than non-linguistic ones.

I contend that each of these three difficulties with the application of the iconographic method is a direct consequence of treating images as a type of linguistic sign. By assuming that images signify in the same way as words, those using the iconographic method tend to focus on what is a somewhat narrow range of meaning in

⁵³ However, Cornelius admits that there are points of representational overlap in this typology and cautions against too easily labeling an image with a specific name of a deity (*The Many Faces of the Goddess*, 7). Nevertheless, these points of ambiguity do not lead Cornelius to conclude, as do some other scholars, that the goddesses were blended and merged into one another. For instance, in discussing Anat and Astarte, Cornelius suggests the following: "But even if their iconographies are sometimes similar (even identical), *this does not mean that they were syncretized or identified*" (ibid., 100; emphasis mine).

⁵⁴ Yet it is important to note that the identification of hybrid visual forms logically presupposes the existence of distinct typologies. In other words, hybridity requires a prior assessment of discrete types that are subsequently blended or merged in a specific visual form. Thus, while I contend that methods of image analysis must attend to hybrid visual forms, doing so necessarily follows after more traditional concerns with image typologies.

the visual arts. However, the solution to these problems is not to be found in abandoning visual theory in image analysis. To the contrary, I contend that the iconographic method does not go far enough in incorporating such theory, especially as it relates to the differentiation between how linguistic and non-linguistic media signify.

4.2.2. Nelson Goodman and the Non-Linguistic Sign

Despite its historical and conceptual ties to linguistics, semiotic theory does not necessarily affirm that images should be read in the same way as texts. In fact, some scholars interested in visual theory, such as Nelson Goodman, have attempted to differentiate between linguistic and non-linguistic systems from a semiotic perspective.⁵⁵ For instance, in *Languages of Art* Goodman draws a distinction between different types of sign systems in the following way:

Non-linguistic systems differ from languages, depiction from description, the representational from the verbal, painting from poems, primarily through lack of differentiation—indeed through density (and consequent total absence of articulation)—of the symbol system.⁵⁶

Throughout *Languages of Art*, Goodman develops these notions about "articulation" and "density" as a way of characterizing the difference between linguistic and non-linguistic sign systems, respectively. In Goodman's view, a notational system is

⁵⁵ The same can be said of James Elkins, who develops a complex classification schema for distinguishing between various forms or "domains" of representation. See for instance Elkins, *The Domain of Images* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1999), esp. Part II. As was discussed in chapter 3 of this study, W. J. T. Mitchell is also highly interested in questions about how images and texts might be classified. See especially his discussion in *Iconology*, 7-52.

⁵⁶ Goodman, *Languages of Art*, 226.

considered articulate if its signs are both syntactically disjoint and differentiated.⁵⁷

These requirements are met by a number of different sign systems, including most numerical, binary, musical, and linguistic notations.⁵⁸ However, the concepts of syntactic disjointness and differentiation are perhaps best explained with reference to what might be the simplest articulate sign system: the Roman alphabet.

According to Goodman, a notational system such as the Roman alphabet is considered disjoint if different inscriptions of the same sign (in this case, a letter) are syntactically equivalent.⁵⁹ As long as a certain inscription of a letter can be distinguished from other letters in the alphabet, it does not matter, semiotically speaking, how that letter is written. Thus, the letter "a" has the same denotative value regards of its stylistic features:

a = a =  =  =  =  = a

In this example, the font, style, and size of the various inscriptions of the letter "a" do not have a signifying function in the alphabetic system, even if one contends that they express slightly different connotations.⁶⁰ While visually distinct, these letters are syntactically disjoint—that is, they constitute interchangeable representations of the same sign.⁶¹ The main point is that in an articulate notational system, only certain

⁵⁷ While differentiation and disjointness are closely related concepts, Goodman notes that these syntactical requirements are independent of one another (ibid., 136).




⁵⁸ Goodman, *Languages of Art*, 140

⁵⁹ Ibid., 131.

⁶⁰ Goodman puts it this way: "Having the same shape, size, etc., is neither necessary nor sufficient for two marks to belong to the same letter" (ibid., 137).

⁶¹ Thus, while the words "aim," "aim," and "aim" are visually non-identical, they would carry the same meaning in a syntactically disjoint system.

representational features of a given sign are deemed necessary and sufficient for properly identifying its referent.

What is required of the competent reader is to be able to identify the denotative value of these different inscriptions without confusing them with other letters in the alphabet. The ability to make correct judgments in these matters is inculcated through tradition and habit, but in certain cases requires careful perception. For instance, it might not be readily apparent if the inscription  represents the letter "d" or "a". Yet, as Goodman points out, what distinguishes a disjoint system from a non-disjoint one "is not how easily correct judgments can be made but what their consequences are."⁶² Thus, in an articulate system, depending on how the identity of the letter  is deciphered, one arrives at two different denotative outcomes for the sign : either "aim" or "dim." Outside of this determination, the visual appearance of this sign is irrelevant when it comes to identifying its denotative value.

The second feature of an articulate notational system is syntactic differentiation. A differentiated symbolic system works by gaps and discontinuities between individual signs, meaning that for any character it is possible to assign one and only one distinct semiotic value.⁶³ Goodman contends that in the Roman alphabet, "we adopt a policy of admitting no mark as an inscription of a letter unless or until we can decide that the mark belongs to no other letter."⁶⁴ In other words, the alphabet is characterized by finite differentiation between its constitutive elements. Differentiation would be

⁶² Goodman, *Languages of Art*, 134.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 135-36.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 140.

violated if there existed some hybrid sign between *a* and *b* (such as *ab*) that represents a semiotically meaningful value within the alphabetic system.⁶⁵ In this way, by requiring the reader to assign one single value to every discrete sign, a differentiated notational system depends on a classification schema that admits of no composite forms between any of its individual components.

In contrast to the alphabet and other differentiated notations, non-linguistic sign systems are characterized by their *lack* of syntactic articulation. Goodman describes such systems as exhibiting "density"—that is, their signs are both syntactically non-disjoint and infinitely differentiated. Thus, a non-linguistic sign system, such as an artistic representation, is distinct from a linguistic system in at least two ways: (1) every difference in visual form carries with it the potential to express meaning; and (2) between any two existing marks in the system, there is a potentially continuous field of composite signs that meaningfully convey information.

Goodman illustrates the differences between a linguistic and non-linguistic sign system using the simple comparison between a graduated and ungraduated thermometer.⁶⁶ In the former case, the height of the mercury is assigned a determinate value according to its position with respect to differentiated lines on the graduated scale. Thus, with a graduated thermometer, one reads the mercury in a way much like one reads syntactically differentiated letters in the Roman alphabet—the temperature is either 80° or 81°, or, depending on how finely graded the scale is, 80.5° or 80.6°. Even if

⁶⁵ Goodman, *Languages of Art*, 136.

⁶⁶ For Goodman's discussion of several different examples of articulate and dense systems, see *Languages of Art*, 154-76. Mitchell provides a helpful summary of Goodman's argument about thermometers in *Iconology*, 67.

the mercury is between two marks on the graduated scale, it is only important from a semiotic perspective to be able to round up or down to the closest determinate reading. A graduated thermometer can also be said to be disjoint insofar as its appearance (the color of the mercury, the width of the column, or any distinguishing visual feature of the thermometer itself) is semiotically uninteresting apart from being able to identify the position of the mercury with respect to the graduated scale. However, with an ungraduated thermometer, every position on the mercury column has the potential to convey meaningful information about the current temperature. Since there is no scale included to provide finite differentiation, even the smallest variations in the position of the mercury can potentially make a difference in meaning. There is no need to round up or down—every reading is non-disjoint and unique.

To be sure, these characteristics often result in there being a certain degree of ambiguity in terms of ascribing a determinate value to any given position of the mercury. In many ways, a reading of an ungraduated thermometer might well sound somewhat impressionistic or vague (i.e., "it appears to be rather cold today" or "it must be quite hot outside") and might harken back to the concerns Plato, Barthes, and Miles have about the difficulty of reading images (§4.1). However, dense sign systems are not *inherently* indeterminate, though they do demand greater interpretive competency from their readers. For instance, consider another type of dense sign system: a Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) scan. Radiologists spend years of intense training in order to be able to discern what minute changes in the image indicate about a

patient's physiological condition.⁶⁷ Having an especially high level of competency in reading images, radiologists are able to determine whether or not the slightest shadows or changes in form indicate the presence of cancer nodules. Thus, while the difference in meaning that obtains from slight alterations in the position of the mercury in an ungraduated thermometer may seem rather trivial or indeterminate, in an MRI scan, the smallest variations in visual form can literally be a matter of life and death.

As these examples begin to suggest, Goodman's distinction between linguistic and non-linguistic sign systems raises several important implications for how biblical scholars study ANE art. First, Goodman's explanation of the differences between articulate and dense sign systems should caution biblical scholars against uncritically transferring notions about linguistic signs to the realm of artistic representation. While both visual and verbal signs are conventional, they do not necessarily operate according to the same underlying code. In other words, the problem with the iconographic method is not that it attempts to read images as a type of language, but that it assumes that the language of images operates more as an articulate notational system than as a dense one.⁶⁸

This, in fact, seems to be the case with Cornelius's previously mentioned study of Syro-Palestinian goddess imagery. Cornelius approaches images of the goddess as a type

⁶⁷ As discussed below, Goodman would likely consider the MRI scan to be a type of super-dense, or "replete," sign.

⁶⁸ While the Roman alphabet and an MRI scan are representative examples of articulate and dense notations, respectively, there are other sign systems that likely fall somewhere between these two examples. For instance, the cuneiform sign system used in Akkadian might best be described as a "semi-dense" or "partially articulate" system. As discussed below (§4.3.4), this writing system allows for a wide variety of interpretive possibilities due to a certain degree of density in its signifying structures. However, in practice these possibilities were limited and thus cuneiform is at least somewhat disjoint and differentiated.

of disjoint notational system: as long as a certain figure can be distinguished from other figures in the iconographic record, it does not matter (semiotically speaking) how a goddess is displayed. Thus, not unlike the font, style, or size of a given inscription of a letter, certain visual features of the goddess, such as whether she is depicted frontally or in profile, her size, the style or mode of display, etc., are regarded as semiotically uninteresting, at least for the purposes of Cornelius's study. Similarly, Cornelius's typology seems to assume that goddess imagery is finitely differentiated. As is the case with the Roman alphabet, for every given sign in the system, there is one and only one semiotic value (Anat *or* Astarte) that might be assigned—that is, no composite forms are admitted. Yet, in general, non-linguistic systems consist of a potentially continuous field of signs that regularly entail composite and hybrid forms.⁶⁹ This might be especially true of divine imagery. It is well attested that multiple goddesses, including Astarte, Anat, Asherah, and Ishtar, were often identified or merged with one another, both in terms of attributes and iconographic profiles.⁷⁰ As a result, even if some of the goddess imagery can be differentiated in the manner Cornelius describes, one still must caution against the tendency to assume that image analysis will *always* produce clearly demarcated

⁶⁹ Mitchell claims that in Goodman's notion of a dense sign system, "hybrid works are not only possible but are eminently describable" (*Iconology*, 70).

⁷⁰ Patrick D. Miller contends that the roles and functions of these goddesses often overlap and "exist in changing and sometimes ambiguous relationships" ("Aspects of the Religion of Ugarit," in idem, *Israelite Religion and Biblical Theology: Collected Essays* [JSOTSup 267; Sheffield: Sheffield 2000], 72, 76-77). See also Strawn, "Whence Leonine Imagery? Iconography and the History of Israelite Religion," in *Images and Prophecy in the Ancient Eastern Mediterranean* (ed. Martti Nissinen and Charles E. Carter; FRLANT 233; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2009), 64; Keel and Uehlinger, *GGG*, 339-40; Jeremy Black and Anthony Green, eds., *Gods, Demons and Symbols of Ancient Mesopotamia: An Illustrated Dictionary* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992), 108.

typologies or that *every* image can be placed within these categories.⁷¹ Though the impulse to create typologies can indeed be helpful, it can also fail to acknowledge the nature of images as dense signs.

Second, Goodman's theory should prompt biblical scholars to revise the aims of the iconographic method in order to account more fully for how images signify as a type of non-articulate sign system. Goodman's theory calls for increased analytical sensitivity concerning how a wide range of visual features can potentially convey meaning.⁷² In other words, what is true for the ungraduated thermometer would be all the more true for an artistic representation: every difference in form can, at least potentially, make a difference in meaning.⁷³ In fact, Goodman describes images as a type of super-dense or "replete" sign system. As Mitchell describes it, a replete sign is one in which "every mark, every modification, every curve or swelling of a line, every modification of texture or color is loaded with semantic potential."⁷⁴ In this view, an image contains a surplus of meaning that includes, but also extends beyond, the expression of its basic subject matter or symbolic content. As a result, visual features that are typically dismissed as being merely "decorative" or "stylistic" in some iconographic approaches would instead be thought to have a sign function that is structured by an underlying code. Determining how to decipher this code—that is, to derive actual semantic difference from the presence of syntactical density—would require an approach to image analysis that

⁷¹ One might also wonder if even the most visually literate ancient viewers were able to differentiate between different representations of the goddess as clearly as Cornelius seems to suppose.

⁷² Goodman, *Languages of Art*, 252.

⁷³ In this sense, the example of an MRI scan (or the like) is better suited for comparison with art objects.

⁷⁴ Mitchell, *Iconology*, 67.

attempts to subject a wide variety of visual features to close scrutiny. Instead of involving a step-by-step procedure that is applicable in the same way to all images, this approach would entail raising questions about how certain aspects of an image, such as its compositional design, rhetoric of display, and mode of signification, might function to shape how it conveys meaning. I present three brief case studies of these issues below (§§4.3.1-3).

4.2.3. Conclusions

Goodman's theory points to the possibility that a wide range of visual elements, many of which are not easily accounted for in Panofsky's schema, might participate in and contribute to the expression of an image's meaning. Rather than merely describing these features in terms of their aesthetic beauty or quality of craftsmanship, Goodman characterizes these more expressive visual elements as a type of non-linguistic sign system that exhibits both syntactic density and syntactic repleteness.⁷⁵ Though Goodman does not develop an explicit semiotic theory of aesthetics, his reflections on the nature of pictorial signs further support the notion that the meaning of an image cannot be reduced to the identification of its iconographic content.⁷⁶ However, in

⁷⁵ Goodman, *Languages of Art*, 252.

⁷⁶ Other semioticians, such as Eco, move more explicitly in the direction of developing a semiotically informed aesthetic. Eco's theory is most clearly expressed in §3.7 of *A Theory of Semiotics* (261-76). In contrast to many aesthetic theories, Eco does more than just describe the aesthetic effects of a given work of art according to an interpretive intuition (274). Rather, Eco contends that even though "expressive" features of an image can be semantically ambiguous and can seem to exhibit a certain indescribable quality, they are semiotically relevant insofar as they contribute to the expression of what he calls a "surplus of content" (266). As such, even the chromatic quality of an image or the material out of which it is constructed is thought to have a certain sign function that is organized and structured according to an underlying code or intentional design (271). Analyzing this "surplus" entails maintaining a balance between "fidelity to the author and to the historical environment in which the message was emitted" and "the inventive *freedom*" the addressee has in filling out the ambiguity of the aesthetic message (276). In a sense, what Eco tries to achieve by subjecting aesthetic features to semiotic analysis is

making the point that visual features such as an image's compositional design, rhetoric of display, and mode of signification can participate in the communication of a particular message, Goodman's visual theory demands that researchers think differently about the nature of visual representation and the methods required to read its pictorial "language." While Goodman primarily deals with contemporary or everyday visual objects, I suggest that his theory can apply equally well to ANE art. Specifically, my argument is that images in the ancient world are best thought of as a syntactically dense and replete sign system in which every variation in visual form can be thought to have a semiotic function. Even compositional features that do not directly contribute to the expression of an image's basic subject matter are relevant to an understanding of the image's overall meaning. To be sure, decoding the meaning of these visual details is a process that is fraught with ambiguity and open to multiple interpretations, as would be the case with reading an ungraduated thermometer or an MRI scan. Yet, the potential of ambiguity in image analysis does not give warrant to the present tendency in iconographic methods to rigidly distinguish between intrinsic content and decorative detail, or objects of interpretation and corrective principles.⁷⁷ Instead, what is needed in biblical studies is a method of image analysis that carefully considers how expressive or

to create a structured model for discerning the meaning of visual elements that are often thought to stimulate emotional reactions rather than communicate semantic content (276).

⁷⁷ For instance, Panofsky contends that not all created objects demand to be experienced aesthetically, such as images or texts that are designed to function as vehicles of communication ("The History of Art as a Humanistic Discipline," in idem, *Meaning in the Visual Arts* [Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday Anchor, 1955], 12). In contrast, Panofsky defines a "work of art" as an object which always demands to be experienced aesthetically, no matter what other purpose it might also serve (ibid., 11). For Panofsky, the distinction between practical objects and "art" not only depends on the intention of the author but also on a bifurcation of visual elements into those related to "idea" (content) and those related to "form" (style).

non-iconographic elements of a given artistic representation might shape and inform an image's communicative message.

4.3. ANE Art Beyond the Level of Iconography

To summarize my argument thus far, I have reasoned that the differences that obtain between Cornelius's and Goodman's approach to image analysis have much to do with their implicit assumptions about the nature of pictorial signs. Cornelius, like many other scholars who employ traditional iconographic methods, seems to read ANE art as a type of articulate sign system that signifies in much the same way as linguistic notations. This approach to image analysis is driven by two assumptions: (1) only visual features that directly pertain to an image's iconographic content have signifying value; and (2) for any given image, or element within an image, it is possible to assign to it one and only one distinct value. In contrast, Goodman's theory contends that most images function as a type of dense or replete sign system in which meaning is potentially encoded in a wide range of visual features, not just those that are directly related to the expression of the basic subject matter or intrinsic content. My argument is *not* that all scholars who use iconography as a method of image analysis ignore or are uninterested in closely examining visual features associated with an images' compositional design, rhetoric of display, or mode of signification. Indeed, some scholars, including both ANE art historians and biblical iconographers, offer a "close reading" of ancient images that implicitly treats images in the manner Goodman proposes. Rather, my point is that Panofsky's method, as typically appropriated, fails to *explicitly* account for images as a

dense or replete sign system. In other words, I contend that the instructions we give to scholars about *how* to analyze images (i.e., their methodological procedures), dramatically influences what they see or notice in an image (i.e., their interpretive practice) in the first place.⁷⁸ Thus, by revising methods of image analysis in light of critical reflection on visual theory, I intend to prompt biblical scholars to see and evaluate aspects of an image that are not systematically accounted for in Panofsky's widely appropriated schema.

What might it look like to apply Goodman's understanding of non-linguistic sign systems to the analysis of ancient Near Eastern art? While Goodman's theory has not been explicitly used to inform the study of ANE art, several art historians, including Zainab Bahrani, Irene Winter, and Margaret Cool Root, have analyzed the meaning of ancient images beyond the level of iconography. By bringing a type of "semiotic" awareness to visual analysis, these scholars demonstrate in practice what Goodman prescribes in theory: discerning the meaning of artistic representations not only involves identifying *what* an image represents (i.e., its basic subject matter) but also evaluating *how* it signifies. In particular, Bahrani, Winter, and Root direct attention to aspects of visual representation that are not readily accounted for in Panofsky's schema, including compositional design, the rhetoric of display, and the mode of signification. While some traditional iconographic studies take note of similar visual features, they typically do not analyze them in terms of their signifying structure or contribution to the overall

⁷⁸ For further discussion of this issue, see §4.4.

message of the image itself.⁷⁹ While not intended to be exhaustive art historical analyses, the following brief examples demonstrate how Goodman's theory might further inform the ways in which biblical scholars analyze the meaning of ANE art beyond the level of iconography.

4.3.1. Compositional Design

In most iconographic approaches to image analysis, various aspects of an image's compositional design (i.e., the specific use and arrangement of color, line, perspective, symmetry, profile, size, layout, etc.) are often regarded as corrective principles that help viewers properly identify artistic motifs or as decorative features that are non-essential when it comes to analyzing iconographic content. Such tendencies are at least partially evident in Keel's revision of Panofsky's schema. Although Keel seems to acknowledge that an image contains a surplus of meaning that goes beyond any of the levels specified in **fig. 4.1**, he nevertheless refers to these elements as "decoration" and is primarily concerned with evaluating their quality and suitability for a particular object.⁸⁰ Thus, even as Keel directs increased attention to what might be called elements of compositional design, he does not seem to fully pursue their semiotic potential. Put in terms of Goodman's theory, in most applications of Panofsky's method, an image's

⁷⁹ The history of style, for instance, is specifically identified in the first level of Panofsky's schema. However, as I argue throughout this chapter, the issue of style in Panofsky's schema is primarily geared toward the correct identification of artistic motifs. Panofsky describes it this way: "While we believe ourselves to identify the motifs on the basis of our practical experience pure and simple, we really read 'what we see' according to the manner in which *objects* and *events* were expressed by *forms under varying historical conditions*. In doing this, we subject our practical experience to a controlling principle which can be called the *history of style*" (*Studies in Iconology*, 11; emphasis his). Thus, in Panofsky's perspective, questions of style are mostly interesting insofar as they help to determine *what* an image depicts rather than *how* it constructs meaning (i.e., its signification).

⁸⁰ Keel, *Das Recht*, 273.

compositional design is conceived of in much the same way as the style or size of font used to print letters of the alphabet: while these elements might be visually interesting and perhaps even worth noting, they ultimately have no denotative value within the notational system. As long as a king or deity can be properly identified, it is relatively unimportant how they are displayed (i.e., their profile, size of the medium, etc.).⁸¹

Bahrani, however, takes a decidedly different approach to questions about the semiotic importance of an image's compositional design. In much of her research, Bahrani intends to offer a "close reading" of ANE art that takes seriously the semiotic density of non-linguistic sign systems. Such concerns are especially evident in her book, *Women of Babylon: Gender and Representation in Mesopotamia*. In this volume, Bahrani analyzes how ancient Mesopotamian notions about gender and sexuality are socially constructed in and through artistic representation. In order to do so, Bahrani gives "serious consideration to [the] visual and aesthetic aspects" of various images, but especially those depicting female figures, be they human or divine.⁸² Bahrani's analytical method sheds light on how subtle details of an image's compositional design make a difference in how that image signifies. In this sense, Bahrani's perspective diverges from traditional approaches to Mesopotamian goddess imagery, which have almost exclusively focused on classifying images into iconographic categories based on characteristic visual attributes.⁸³ While Bahrani admits that this can be of some value,

⁸¹ This perspective might contribute to why many biblical iconographers tend to focus on the line drawing rather than the plate.

⁸² Bahrani, *Women of Babylon*, 140.

⁸³ As is evident, for example, in Cornelius's *The Many Faces of the Goddess*.

she nevertheless is critical of its rather narrow conceptualization of meaning in the visual arts. She argues:

The focus [of these previous studies] is on iconographic taxonomies rather than style or composition. The point is to match up iconography and types on a one-to-one basis. In other words, iconographic meaning is assigned to specific attributes such as arm bands, headgear, and so on, in a scientific manner or according to a linguistic rationality derived from philology.⁸⁴

In contrast, Bahrani aims to analyze "a broader range of semiotic issues" in visual representation, including "how female figures function . . . beyond their iconographic meaning."⁸⁵

Bahrani's analysis of Ishtar imagery is particularly relevant in this regard. These images, which first appeared in the glyptic record during the Early Dynastic period, have garnered considerable attention in Mesopotamian studies, perhaps because many scholars have regarded Ishtar's dual nature as a goddess of love and war as an enigmatic confluence of masculine and feminine traits.⁸⁶ In trying to grapple with the iconographic meaning of Ishtar's beautiful and violent attributes, some scholars have referred to this deity as a type of bipolar, bisexual, or even androgynous figure.⁸⁷ Not only does Bahrani critique the way in which these conclusions are based on problematic and unstable constructions of gender and sexuality, but she also redirects analysis toward another visual feature of Ishtar imagery that often is under-scrutinized.⁸⁸ Specifically, Bahrani

⁸⁴ Bahrani, *Women of Babylon*, 130-31.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 131.

⁸⁶ See for instance, Gudrun Colbow, *Die kriegerische Ištar: Zu den Erscheinungsformen bewaffneter Gottheiten zwischen der Mitte des 3. und der 2. Jahrtausends* (Munich: Profil Verlag, 1991).

⁸⁷ Bahrani, *Women of Babylon*, 143.

⁸⁸ For further discussion of Bahrani's response to this interpretive perspective, see chapter 7 of *Women of Babylon* ("Ishtar: The Embodiment of Tropes," 141-60). In brief, Bahrani draws on semiotic theory to argue that Ishtar functions as a polyvalent, "floating" signifier which absorbs meanings within

notes that in many seals bearing Ishtar's image, such as is pictured in **fig. 4.4**, the goddess (on the far left of this line drawing)⁸⁹ appears in a mixed profile pose: the lower of her body faces to the side as her upper torso and face are twisted into a frontal position.⁹⁰ Although other scholars have recognized this curious feature, they have primarily discussed it in terms of its origins and distribution, both of which are traditional iconographic concerns.⁹¹



Figure 4.4. Akkadian seal with Ishtar (far left) in mixed profile pose, 2350–2150 B.C.E. After Collon, *Catalogue of the Western Asiatic Seals in the British Museum*, pl. XXXI. Line drawing used with permission by Stéphane Beaulieu, (<http://www.matrifocus.com/LAM08/spotlight.htm>).

However, Bahrani contends that Ishtar's mixed profile is not incidental to the meaning of the image itself. Bahrani points out that in many of these compositions,

the symbolic order. As such, certain cultural meanings and values are inscribed in visual representations of Ishtar. Namely, Bahrani contends that Ishtar is a figure who functions as "an embodiment of tropes of alterity who stands in for sexual otherness, excess, chaos, and even death" (150-51). Bahrani thus concludes that "Ishtar is the personification of all that is analogous to the feminine, all that is other, or falls in the realm of alterity, and, as such, she is the superlative figure of difference. . . . Read in semiotic terms, therefore, what has been perceived as a dichotomy of irreconcilable traits by traditional scholarship can be understood in terms of the figure of alterity and chaos" (*Women of Babylon*, 159).

⁸⁹ The line drawing in fig. 4.4 is somewhat curious insofar as it places Ishtar to the far left of the visual frame. It would be equally possible—and, in my estimation, more fitting—to cut the image between the two deities standing back-to-back. Doing so would bring the image of Ishtar and the inscription to the center.

⁹⁰ Other figures are occasionally found in a mixed profile pose as well, including a few male deities, heroic figures, and composite creatures (*Ibid.*, 133). Though Bahrani does not treat this issue, it is probable that the mixed profile pose of these figures also contributes to their overall meaning.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 131. For an example, see Colbow, *Die kriegerische Ištar*, 79-83, 95-99. However, Colbow does not distinguish between Ishtar imagery in which the goddess is in full frontal or mixed profile pose.

Ishtar's pose makes it seem as if the goddess is in the process of turning away from the other figures in the scene in order to face the viewer directly.⁹² This is particularly striking since the other figures in these compositions are typically isocephalic but in full profile, as is the case in **fig. 4.4**. In Bahrani's perspective, the sense of movement implied by Ishtar's pose becomes a point of focus within the image itself.⁹³ This aspect of the image's compositional design creates an act of "communication between the space of the pictorial scene and the space outside of it."⁹⁴ The mixed profile pose "lures the viewer's gaze into the scene" and provokes a direct encounter with the deity.⁹⁵ In coming face to face with the deity, the viewer not only encounters an iconographic problem (What is the basic subject depicted here?) but, perhaps more immediately, a relational one (How do I respond to the goddess's power and sexual allure?). Thus, in mixed profile, Ishtar is not simply an iconographic *symbol* of power, but she is *an agent* who exerts power over those who are confronted by her gaze.

Even if Ishtar's mixed profile might not be essential to her iconographic identity (i.e., images of Ishtar can still readily be identified even when the goddess appears in a full frontal or full profile pose), this aspect of the image's design nevertheless plays a role in how specific images shape the viewer's ways of looking at and relating to the goddess. This is especially evident when Ishtar's mixed-profile pose is compared with the compositional design of the other major type of female figure depicted in glyptic art: the naked woman. These latter figures, which often appear on a pedestal with hands

⁹² Bahrani, *Women of Babylon*, 133.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 131.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 133.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 133.

held together at the waist, are typically in full frontal pose and are isolated from other figures in the scene.⁹⁶ Bahrani interprets this compositional design as one that suggests passivity and non-movement. She concludes that the image of the naked woman is intended as "the object of visual consumption" by the male gaze.⁹⁷ In this sense, the difference in compositional design between the Ishtar imagery and that of the naked woman carries is significant. Namely, while in a mixed profile pose Ishtar seems to actively turn to confront the viewer, the full profile position of the naked woman suggests that she is the passive "object of (implicitly male) surveillance and desire."⁹⁸ Thus, even though the profiles in which these figures are depicted do not directly impinge upon one's ability to identify who they represent, this element of design nevertheless seems to have an important signifying value. Indeed, the full frontal profile of the naked woman enables or even invites a different way of relating to the image than does the mixed profile pose of Ishtar. In other words, what an image means is, at least in part, contingent on how its compositional design structures a viewer's way of seeing—or indeed, being seen.

Not unlike Bahrani, Irene Winter also draws attention to the importance of another aspect of an image's compositional design: the size of the representational medium.⁹⁹ Winter is especially interested in situations in which identical or nearly

⁹⁶ Bahrani, *Women of Babylon*, 133.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 133.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 133. Thus, the confrontation that Bahrani speaks of is not so much a product of the frontal profile but rather the "turn" that is implied by the mixed profile.

⁹⁹ Winter, "Le Palais imaginaire: Scale and Meaning in the Iconography of Neo-Assyrian Cylinder Seals," in *Images as Media: Sources for the Cultural History of the Near East and the Eastern Mediterranean (1st Millennium BCE)* (ed. Christoph Uehlinger; OBO 175; Göttingen: University Press; Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2000), 51-87.

identical motifs, such as the winged sun disk, the king in worship, or the king-and-lion combat scene, appear in both palace reliefs and miniature seals. In most iconographic approaches, the meanings of variously sized images are thought to be identical since they reflect the same, or nearly the same, subject matter and symbolic content.¹⁰⁰ Indeed, art historian Pierre Amiet once made this very point when, as the director of the Département des Antiquités Orientales at the Louvre, he set up an exhibit that juxtaposed enormous, free-standing photographic blow ups of ANE seal impressions with life-sized palace reliefs.¹⁰¹ While such a comparison is certainly justifiable on iconographic grounds, this approach tends to overlook scale as a design element, and in the process, renders seal impressions as nothing more than just "*monuments minuscule*."¹⁰² Winter, in contrast, is explicitly concerned with how and why the miniature scale of seal impressions might matter from a semiotic perspective. Winter argues that "the difference of scale, along with the contexts of use and experience these differences imply, must be kept in view if one is to capture particular aspects of reference and meaning within the originating tradition" of specific ANE art objects.¹⁰³ In other words, because the scale of an image directly impinges upon how it is used and what context it is viewed in, the same motif in a seal impression might have a different

¹⁰⁰ Panofsky's schema gives little explicit attention to questions about the scale of the visual object, even if certain scholars presuppose its importance. This is perhaps because Panofsky's primary object of study—Italian Renaissance paintings—were themselves somewhat uniform in size (Winter, *Le Palais imaginaire*, 77).

¹⁰¹ For further discussion, see *ibid.*, 52-53.

¹⁰² Pierre Amiet, *Bas-reliefs imaginaires de l'Ancien Orient d'après les cachets et les sceaux-cylindres* (Paris: Hôtel de la monnaie, 1973), xxi.

¹⁰³ Winter, "Le Palais imaginaire," 53.

signifying value—or at least a different impact on the viewer—when it is encountered on a monumental relief.

For instance, Winter notes the fact that numerous Neo-Assyrian seals replicate a very common theme found in Neo-Assyrian palace reliefs in which the king and a winged genii flank a central tree and deity in winged disk form. The palace relief versions of this motif are closely associated with the king (they are found immediately behind the throne or on the main doorway of the throne room or even on his garment) while the seals often belong to high-ranking officials. Even though this iconographic parallel has been recognized, Winter argues that scholars rarely consider what an official intends to signify by utilizing this sort of motif on a seal.¹⁰⁴ One possibility is that by utilizing a motif that is so closely tied to the person of the king, an official would signal to observers of the seal that he was acting for or as an instrument of the state. In other words, the image of the seal must be analyzed not only in terms of the content of what is represented but also the significance of how and why it references other images that exist in contexts quite different than those associated with the seal itself.¹⁰⁵ Even raising the question of how size (and also function) impinge on an image's meaning is, as Winter puts it, "to move beyond the merely iconographic, i.e., identification of a motif, to the semiotic."¹⁰⁶ To slightly adjust the well-known words of Marshall McLuhan, the scale of the medium is (part of) the message.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁴ Winter, "*Le Palais imaginaire*," 67.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 79.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 67.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 83.

Acknowledging that design elements such as a figure's profile or an image's size have semiotic potential does not imply that their meaning is easy to decode. As is the case in Bahrani's study, it is not always possible to establish a one-to-one relationship between a particular element of design (such as Ishtar's mixed profile pose) and a stable, clearly delineated message. Likewise, determining how an image's size impinges on the visual interpretation of different viewers is open to various explanations. Nonetheless, admitting that elements of compositional design are difficult to read is quite different than assuming that they have no signifying value. To be sure, there are various design elements that one might evaluate, and I do not mean to suggest that observations about compositional design in general are to be prioritized over traditional iconographic concerns about artistic motifs, conventional subject matter, or symbolic value. In addition, while similar conclusions might be arrived at without the aid of Goodman's theory about dense or replete sign systems, it is not readily apparent how or even if Panofsky's schema would account for the semiotic potential of compositional design.¹⁰⁸ The difference between these approaches might merely be a matter of emphasis and not fundamentally different views about the nature of non-linguistic signs. Nevertheless, the interpretive conclusions drawn by Bahrani and Winter are facilitated by an approach to meaning in the visual arts that more explicitly acknowledges the ways in which ANE images constitute a dense notational sign system.

¹⁰⁸ Although Bahrani does not explicitly draw on Goodman's notions about non-linguistic sign systems in any of her research, her interpretive perspectives seem to be consonant with Goodman's visual theory.

4.3.2. Rhetoric of Display

Second and closely related, the iconographic method, at least as it is traditionally conceived, often draws sharp distinctions between subject matter and style. While the former is thought to communicate an image's intrinsic meaning, the latter is often judged to reflect the unconscious expression of cultural or personal habits and tendencies. This is especially evident in Panofsky's schema. In his first (i.e., "pre-iconographic") level of meaning, a viewer's ability to identify artistic motifs from practical experience is corrected and controlled by knowledge of the history of style, which Panofsky defines as "the manner in which, under varying historical conditions, *objects* and *events* were expressed by *forms*."¹⁰⁹ As a result, when questions about an image's style are surfaced in iconographic studies, it is often done for the purpose of identifying the primary subject matter and determining the historical antecedents of particular forms or motifs—that is, whether a certain depiction of royal triumph reflects a Greek or Neo-Assyrian representational tradition. Such information can surely affect one's understanding of an image's meaning, but primarily from the vantage point of what it might reveal about the etymology of certain visual forms. In other words, an analysis of style typically only provides background information that can help the viewer better identify what an image is trying to represent.

In contrast, some ANE art historians, such as Winter and Root, utilize an approach to visual analysis that explores how stylistic features can play a more central role in constructing and conveying an image's meaning. For both of these scholars, style

¹⁰⁹ Panofsky, *Studies in Iconology*, 12; emphasis his.

is not merely an unconscious expression of cultural or personal tendencies in artistic representation. Rather, style is best seen as a representational strategy that can be intentionally mobilized and manipulated in order to structure a given message or shape a certain response. In other words, style is a visual form of rhetoric. Rather than only being interested in whence a given style is derived, Winter and Root carefully consider the function of style as a vehicle of persuasion. In this regard, Winter and Root anticipate the growing tendency in the field of rhetorical studies to pay closer attention to the role of images, not just texts. While a clear definition of "visual rhetoric" has yet to emerge, this mode of inquiry generally seeks to understand how images persuade or make arguments through the selection, arrangement, and manipulation of visual forms—that is, the rhetoric of display.¹¹⁰ Many studies in this area focus not only on how visual symbols are used for the purposes of communication and persuasion but also on how certain symbolic processes manipulate and/or mobilize specific messages.¹¹¹ Such perspectives are often taken up in reference to images found in contemporary advertisements, political campaigns, and popular culture. Nevertheless,

¹¹⁰ For instance, Sonja K. Foss describes visual rhetoric as "a mode of inquiry, defined as a critical theoretical orientation that makes issues of visibility relevant to rhetorical theory" ("Framing the Study of Visual Rhetoric: Toward a Transformation of Rhetorical Theory," in *Defining Visual Rhetorics* [ed. Charles A. Hill and Marguerite Helmers; Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 2004], 306). For further discussion, see the numerous other essays in the volume, *Defining Visual Rhetorics*, as well as Lawrence J. Prelli's essay "Rhetorics of Display: An Introduction," in idem, *Rhetorics of Display* (Studies in Rhetoric/Communication; Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2006), 1-38.

¹¹¹ Foss, "Framing the Study of Visual Rhetoric," 304. More specifically, Charles A. Hill suggests that "to ask how images work to influence viewers' beliefs, attitudes, and opinions is ultimately to ask about the very nature of images and about how people respond to them" ("The Psychology of Rhetorical Images," in *Defining Visual Rhetorics*, 26).

as Winter, Root, and others have shown, understanding style in terms of the rhetoric of display can likewise illuminate the meaning of ANE art.¹¹²

A brief example from the research of both Winter and Root illustrates how this "style-as-rhetoric" approach might shed new light on ancient artifacts. First, in an essay on the depiction of Naram-Sîn (ca. 2254-2218 B.C.E.) in his famous victory stele, Winter contends that the king is portrayed in what she calls a particularly "alluring" style, with muscled calves and arms, rounded buttocks, and full beard (**fig. 4.5**).¹¹³ According to Winter, this style was designed to construct an idealized sense of the royal body as one of "good conformation, auspiciousness, (male) vigor, and (sexual) allure."¹¹⁴ Since previous kings were not depicted in a similar fashion, Winter concludes that the style of Naram-Sîn's victory stele reflects a "conscious strategy of representation" designed to render the king in ways more typically reserved for gods or semi-divine heroes.¹¹⁵ In Winter's estimation, the blending of the sexually alluring body of the king with divine visual connotations provides a powerful form of visual rhetoric that functions on at least

¹¹² It should also be noted that the New Testament scholar Vernon K. Robbins has coined the term "rhetography" as a way of referring to a mode of argumentation that reasons by means of figurative imagery and cognitive picturing. Put simply, rhetography does visually what rhetoric (or perhaps better, "rhetology") does verbally. However, Robbins primarily employs rhetography in reference to *textual* imagery, not ancient visual objects. As such, this term would have to be nuanced slightly in order to be used for the purposes of biblical iconography. For further discussion of the concept of rhetography, see Robbins, "Rhetography: A New Way of Seeing the Familiar Text," in *Words Well Spoken: George Kennedy's Rhetoric of the New Testament* (ed. C. Clifton Black and Duane F. Watson; Waco: Baylor University Press, 2008), 81-106; and idem, "Enthymeme and Picture in the *Gospel of Thomas*," in *Thomasine Traditions in Antiquity: The Social and Cultural World of the Gospel of Thomas* (ed. Jón Ma Ásgeirsson, April D. DeConick, and Risto Uro; NHMS 59; Boston: Brill, 2006), 175-207.

¹¹³ Irene Winter, "Sex, Rhetoric, and the Public Monument: The Alluring Body of Naram-Sîn of Agade," in *Sexuality in Ancient Art: Near East, Egypt, Greece, and Italy* (ed. Natalie Boymel Kampen, et al.; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 11-26.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 15. For further discussion of these terms and why Winter considers the visual features of Naram-Sîn to be "alluring," see the brief discussion on 11-15.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 16.

two levels.¹¹⁶ On the one hand, this representational style coincides with other rhetorical strategies, such as depicting Naram-Sîn with divine headgear and using the divine determinative before the king's name in textual sources, that seek to affirm Naram-Sîn's elevated status as a god. On the other hand, Winter suggests that the combination of sexual allure and violence in Naram-Sîn's victory stele also creates a "locus of pleasurable engagement" that not only depicts the king's triumphal rise to power but also shapes the gaze of the viewer through a particular construction of gendered identity.¹¹⁷



Figures 4.5-6. Left: Close up of the Akkadian king Naram-Sîn from the Victory Stele of Naram-Sîn, 23rd c. B.C.E. After Feldman, "Darius I and the Heroes of Akkad," 293 fig. 7. Right: Close up of the Persian king Darius the Great from the Behistun relief, late-6th c. B.C.E. After Feldman, "Darius I and the Heroes of Akkad," 291 fig. 5. Images are in the public domain. See: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Stele_Naram_Sim_Louvre_Sb4.jpg; and http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Bisotun_Iran_Relief_Achamenid_Period.jpg

¹¹⁶ Winter, "Sex, Rhetoric, and the Public Monument," 22.

¹¹⁷ Specifically, Winter makes the following observation: "Viewed in this light, Naram-Sîn's display of male attributes on a public monument does more than just narrate his role as victorious potentate. By setting up active currents of positive value through seductive allure, the display also facilitates identificatory processes that elicit a series of vicarious associations and projections that have a socializing function: for women, their subordination to desire and by men: for men, their fusion with authority at the same time as they are subject to it" (*ibid.*, 21).

While Winter's observations raise important questions about the intersection of sexuality, gender, and politics in the ANE world, for our purposes it is more pertinent to underscore the implications of her approach to image analysis. In this example, questions of style are not separate from the determination of meaning. Rather, as was the case for Goodman and Mitchell, Winter's research seems to treat the image of Naram-Sîn as a dense or replete sign, in which "every mark, every modification, every curve or swelling of a line" is loaded with semiotic potential.¹¹⁸ Furthermore, and perhaps more importantly, for Winter these features are not merely a symptom of cultural or personal tendencies, but rather are intentionally deployed for rhetorical purposes. In this sense, Naram-Sîn's "alluring" body might be thought of as a symptom of a carefully constructed ideology of kingship, if not also gender and sexuality.

A similar approach is also on display in Margaret Cool Root's analysis of style and meaning in the Behistun relief.¹¹⁹ Root notes that certain aspects of how Darius the Great is depicted, including the drapery of his clothes, the plasticity of his physical features, and his posture with respect to the conquered foes (**fig. 4.6**), reflect an artistic style reminiscent of Naram-Sîn's victory stele. In Root's estimation, these similarities of style do not merely suggest that the artists who created the Behistun relief had unconsciously inherited an ancient Mesopotamian stylistic tradition of representing the triumphant king. While Root does not deny that personal or cultural tendencies can and are passed on through individual artists, she instead emphasizes the way in which

¹¹⁸ Mitchell, *Iconology*, 67.

¹¹⁹ Margaret Cool Root, *The King and Kingship in Achaemenid Art: Essays on the Creation of an Iconography of Empire* (Acta Iranica 19; Textes et mémoires 9; Leiden: Brill, 1979), esp. 182-226.

Achaemenid iconography was the product of an intentionally conceived artistic program designed to communicate a certain vision of kingship and imperial ideology.¹²⁰ In doing so, Root shifts attention from the style of artists to the rhetorical strategy of those who commissioned and controlled the entire artistic program of the Achaemenid empire. In fact, Root argues that Achaemenid kings, including Darius himself, would have played an active role in selecting and adapting specific styles and motifs for the purposes of communicating a well-crafted vision of kingship. Viewed from this perspective, the stylistic features of the Behistun relief constitute a strategy of visual rhetoric intended to link Darius with the great Mesopotamian rulers of the past. Through its stylistic details, the subject matter of the Behistun relief generates what Root calls "a series of calculated allusions to antique traditions," and in so doing, intentionally appropriates for Darius what Root believes to be the ideology of kingship once embodied in depictions of Naram-Sîn.¹²¹

That such allusions exist is not only interesting from the vantage point of identifying the historical antecedents of a long-standing representational tradition associated with ANE kings. Panofsky's methodology, after all, would likely lead a researcher to study the history of style that lies behind the depiction of Darius and how it might further inform her identification of certain forms and motifs. Yet, since Panofsky treats style primarily as a "corrective principle" for his first level of meaning (pre-iconographic), it is not as clear that his methodology would fully address how or why the particular style of depiction in this relief functions to shape or form a viewer's

¹²⁰ Root, *The King and Kingship*, 1-42.

¹²¹ *Ibid.*, 191.

understanding of Achaemenid kingship. Root, in contrast, understands style as having an affective purpose.¹²² In this view, the correspondences between the depictions of Darius and Naram-Sîn are best understood as an effort to construct a vision of Darius's kingship that references the tradition of conquest and expansion associated with Naram-Sîn's reign. Darius might be thought of as trying to bolster his own claim to power and legitimacy as the ascendant ruler by commissioning a monumental relief that explicitly alludes to or references what Root calls "associations with archetypal power."¹²³ In this way, it might be concluded that the Behistun relief is a type of dense non-linguistic sign system in which stylistic features encode information that is crucial to the image's rhetorical message.¹²⁴ In other words, to know what the depiction of Darius in the Behistun relief means, one must analyze how it argues.

In both of these examples, Winter and Root employ approaches to meaning in the visual arts that go beyond the level of iconographic content or at least conceptualize the relationship between style and meaning in ways that are slightly different than what is found in Panofsky's approach. While neither of these scholars makes explicit reference to the emerging field of visual rhetoric or even the visual theory of Nelson Goodman, they each tacitly assume that: (1) analyzing an image's "style" is not simply a matter of tracing historical antecedents of visual forms; and (2) images are dense with semiotic potential insofar as "stylistic" details can reference the signifying value of a

¹²² Root, *The King and Kingship*, 214.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 213.

¹²⁴ For further discussion about the question of style and meaning in the Behistun relief, see Marian H. Feldman, "Darius I and the Heroes of Akkad: Affect and Agency in the Bisitun Relief," in *Ancient Near Eastern Art in Context: Studies in honor of Irene J. Winter by Her Students* (ed. Jack Cheng and Marian H. Feldman; CHANE 26; Boston: Brill, 2007), 265-93.

wide range of other images. As a result, both scholars contend that an image's style constitutes a strategy of representation that seeks to construct and convey a certain ideological message through the subtle manipulation of visual features. Once again, it is important to note that those using Panofsky's schema might well raise questions that closely resemble those that are found in Winter's and Root's analysis. However, by framing these issues in terms of the "rhetoric of display" instead of style, a slightly revised method of image analysis would shift more attention to the persuasive power of subtle visual details. This sort of approach to image analysis would make the iconographic method more "ideologically aware," while at the same time, prompting rhetorical studies to be more "iconographically aware."¹²⁵

4.3.3. Mode of Signification

Biblical scholars have long been interested in how visual materials might be utilized for the purposes of historical research. While the scope and subject matter of these studies vary greatly, Christoph Uehlinger is right to note that "there is hardly any historical interpretation of visual documents that would currently not be based on iconography."¹²⁶ From this methodological vantage point, identifying an image's basic subject matter and intrinsic content can reveal valuable information about historical people, events, practices, and beliefs. There is much to recommend about this approach to image analysis, not to mention the growing trend to incorporate ANE art along with

¹²⁵ Mitchell makes a similar claim in his critique of Panofsky's method. See *Picture Theory*, 30.

¹²⁶ Uehlinger, "Neither Eyewitnesses, Nor Windows to the Past, but Valuable Testimony in its Own Right: Remarks on Iconography, Source Criticism and Ancient Data-Processing," in *Understanding the History of Ancient Israel* (ed. H. G. M. Williamson; Proceedings of the British Academy 143; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 186.

texts and other artifacts in the study of ancient Israelite religion. However, as has been the case in the previously discussed examples, the iconographic method can potentially overlook important questions regarding *how* images signify historical content and what sort of information they provide about the past.¹²⁷ Addressing these issues requires more careful reflection on what I am referring to as an image's "mode of signification"—that is, the level of correspondence that exists between a visual sign and the external world, an image and its referent—might come to bear not only on our understanding of the relationship between ANE art and history but also on the sorts of questions and issues we raise about the visual strategies employed in and through certain types of images.¹²⁸

Since at least the time of Aristotle, the Western intellectual tradition has been interested in questions concerning modes of signification in the visual arts. Much of the attention has focused on notions about mimesis, which refers to the extent to which art aims to "match" or copy the actual appearance of the external world. As noted earlier, scholars commonly have evaluated the level of mimesis or resemblance that obtains

¹²⁷ However, it should be noted that more critical reflection on the use of pictorial data in historical research has already begun to emerge. Within biblical iconography, two important articles by Uehlinger address these issues, including the previously mentioned essay "Neither Eyewitnesses, Nor Windows," as well as idem, "Clio in a World of Pictures: Another Look at the Lachish Reliefs from Sennacherib's Southwest Palace at Nineveh," in *Like a Bird in a Cage: The Invasion of Sennacherib in 701 BCE* (ed. Lester L. Grabbe; JSOTSup 363; ESHM 4; New York: Sheffield Academic, 2003), 223-305. Outside of biblical iconography, one should especially note the work of Peter Burke, *Eyewitnessing* (2001). While these studies develop more sophisticated understandings of how and to what extent images function as a "witness" to the past, they do not, on the whole, deal with questions about visual theory.

¹²⁸ Bahrani sums up the matter concisely: "Perceptual and conceptual art can thus be defined as terms for evaluating levels of correspondence between the mimetic image and what it represents or the proximity of resemblance between sign and referent" (*The Graven Image: Representation in Babylonia and Assyria* [Archaeology, Culture, and Society series; Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003], 88). In Bahrani's view, the terms perceptual and conceptual do not refer to separate categories of art but rather to different "polarities of mimesis" (ibid., 88).

between an image and its referent in terms of either "perceptual" or "conceptual" art. While perceptual art is thought to imitate nature through an accurate record of human perception, conceptual art is seen as portraying the external world through conventional or unmotivated signs. This traditional distinction between perceptual and conceptual art has functioned not only as a way of differentiating between different modes of signification (i.e., matching vs. making, mimetic vs. symbolic), but it has also been used to categorize images according to assumptions about their distribution geographically (West vs. East), chronologically (modern vs. ancient), culturally (civilized vs. primitive), or even politically (democratic vs. "despotic").¹²⁹ However, recent work in visual theory has challenged these binary oppositions. Rather than being stable or universally given, the categories of perceptual and conceptual are best thought of as culturally determined polarities along a continuum of representational practices.¹³⁰

How have these understandings about the semiotics of visual display implicitly influenced the way in which biblical scholars have interpreted ANE art for the purposes of historical research? Prior to the rise of the Fribourg School in 1970s and in certain cases thereafter, biblical scholars often presumed that ANE art provided a mimetic record of historical perception.¹³¹ As a type of historical photograph, images were thought to offer a somewhat unambiguous "window" to the way things were or how people or places looked. This approach to image analysis is evident in the work of David

¹²⁹ The mapping of perceptual and conceptual modes of representation onto the axes of time, space, culture, and political system is on display in Gombrich's *Art and Illusion*, especially in the chapter "Reflections on the Greek Revolution" (116-45). For a helpful discussion, see Bahrani, *The Graven Image*, 85-86.

¹³⁰ Bahrani, *The Graven Image*, 87-88.

¹³¹ For a discussion, see Keel, "Iconography and the Bible," *ABD* 3:358-60.

Ussishkin, who contends that the Lachish reliefs from Room XXXVI of Sennacherib's Southwest palace in Nineveh represent a type of perceptual account of the city's topography when viewed from a certain vantage point.¹³²

In Ussishkin's view, the subject matter of the Lachish reliefs is based on eyewitness evidence, and as a result, reflects exactly how the battle would have appeared to the Assyrian king, who looked on from a hill just southwest of the city.¹³³

However, in recent years, scholars such as Uehlinger have offered a more nuanced perspective that recognizes that ancient images "document ways of seeing or looking at and representing reality much more than that reality itself."¹³⁴ While images provide valuable testimony about history, they, like texts, do so through a conventional code that is both socially and ideologically constructed. Working from this perspective, Keel argues that ANE images function not unlike determinatives insofar as they strive to represent certain concepts or classes of objects rather than the actual physical likeness of individual people or events. Keel and Uehlinger effectively conceptualize iconographic content and subject matter in terms of how an image conveys certain views on society, social practices, political institutions, and so forth. To put the matter simply, as a form of

¹³² See David Ussishkin, "The 'Lachish Reliefs' and the City of Lachish," *IEJ* 30 (1980): 174-95; and idem, *The Conquest of Lachish by Sennacherib* (Publications of the Institute of Archaeology 6; Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University Institute of Archaeology, 1982); "The Assyrian Attack on Lachish: The Archaeological Evidence from the Southwest Corner of the Site," *TA* 17 (1990): 53-86; "Excavations and Restoration Work at Tel Lachish 1985-1994: Third Preliminary Report," *TA* 23 (1996): 3-60; and *The Renewed Archaeological Excavations at Lachish (1973-1994)* (PIA 22; Tel Aviv: Emery and Claire Yass Publications in Archaeology, 2004).

¹³³ For further discussion and critique, see Uehlinger, "Clio in a World of Pictures," esp. 249-62.

¹³⁴ Uehlinger, "Neither Eyewitnesses nor Windows," 181.

conceptual art, ancient images are not so much a window to the past as they are a witness to a culturally conditioned "gaze."¹³⁵

Nevertheless, to affirm that ANE art is more conceptual than it is perceptual does not fully resolve questions related to modes of signification. Even the more sophisticated approaches outlined above primarily seek to make judgments about *what* an image represents, such as whether an image depicts "real" history or "mere" ideology. While such distinctions are possible and helpful, both Bahrani and Winter press the matter further. At various points in their research, these scholars raise important questions about how the very notions of history and ideology, reality and rhetoric, are contingent on specific theories and strategies of visual representation. For instance, Bahrani suggests that "[r]eading images is no more direct or unproblematic than reading texts or material remains. If representation is at the heart of ideology, then discussions of ideology in the past must begin to address theories of representation."¹³⁶ In other words, when it comes to historical research, image analysis must not only address the levels of mimetic correspondence that exist between an image and what it represents but also how these modes of display are implemented in order to manipulate the observer's understanding of the past.¹³⁷

A particularly compelling example of this sort of analysis is found in Winter's research on "historical narratives" in Neo-Assyrian palace wall reliefs.¹³⁸ This form of art,

¹³⁵ Uehlinger, "Neither Eyewitnesses nor Windows," 181.

¹³⁶ Bahrani, *Rituals of War: The Body and Violence in Mesopotamia* (New York: Zone Books, 2008), 74.

¹³⁷ Uehlinger essentially offers a compatible perspective in his essay, "Clio in a World of Pictures."

¹³⁸ Winter, "Royal Rhetoric and the Development of Historical Narrative in Neo-Assyrian Reliefs," *Studies in Visual Communication* 7 (1981): 1-38.

which often depicts military battles, lion hunts, or tribute processions, increasingly appears on the alabaster and limestone lined walls of Neo-Assyrian palaces beginning during the reign of Assurnasirpal II (885-856 B.C.E.) and continuing through the seventh century. While space prohibits a full discussion of the concept of narrative in the visual arts,¹³⁹ it will suffice to note that Winter uses this term to refer "to the [visual] representation of a specific historical event—not generic emblem or hieroglyph, but individuals and elements presumed to have been associated with the actual spatio-temporal experience."¹⁴⁰ Narrative art typically implies action, suggests some coherent sequence of events, and is meant to display the particularity of a given place, person, or moment.¹⁴¹ Indeed, specific aspects of these narrative reliefs, such as topographical features, characteristic elements of dress, or recognizable events, might be understood to function as "verifiers of the [historical] 'truth' of the scene"¹⁴² or to provide what Barthes calls a "pure spectatorial consciousness of 'historical reality.'"¹⁴³ In comparison to the cultic or mythological scenes that are also present in Neo-Assyrian palaces, historical narratives are far more perceptual than they are conceptual, and as a result, it might be tempting to see these images as a type of message without a code or an

¹³⁹ A helpful, but rather imprecise definition of narrative in art is provided by Carl H. Kraeling: "Narrative art is identified as representations of a specific event, involving specific persons, where the action and persons *might* be historical, but not necessarily" ("Narration in Ancient Art: A Symposium—Introduction," *AJA* 61 [1957]: 43). For further discussion, see the proceedings of the symposium on this topic held at the University of Chicago (Carl H. Kraeling, et al., *Narration in Ancient Art: A Symposium, 57th General Meeting of the Archaeological Institute of America, Chicago, Illinois, December 29, 1955* [Chicago: Archaeological Institute of America, 1957]).

¹⁴⁰ Winter, "Royal Rhetoric," 2.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 2.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 2.

¹⁴³ Barthes, "Rhetoric of the Image," 45.

unambiguous window to the past, as seems to be the case with Ussishkin's analysis of the Lachish reliefs.

However, Winter contends that there is "an ideological 'end' to the apparent historicity of [these] representations."¹⁴⁴ Their mode of signification is carefully manipulated and the perception of realism is intentionally invoked not for the purposes of displaying verisimilitude but in order to "naturalize" its underlying rhetorical purpose. As Barthes puts it, the perceptual mode of signification employed in the image "innocents the semantic artifice of connotation," and therefore invites the viewer to receive the content of the image *as if* it reflected the reality of things in a naturalistic and un-manipulated way.¹⁴⁵ Rather than merely distinguishing between perceptual and conceptual modes of signification, Winter (following Barthes) analyzes the way in which mimetic representation can be used as a rhetorical strategy in Neo-Assyrian wall reliefs.

This perspective from visual theory might shed light on why historical narratives were increasingly used in Neo-Assyrian palaces in the first place. Winter notes that this form of art occurs during a time when rapid geo-political expansion would have produced a far more heterogeneous population in the Neo-Assyrian empire.¹⁴⁶ As was argued in §2.3, it is likely the case that, in comparison to more symbolic imagery, narrative scenes were easier to comprehend since they would have required less prior knowledge and shared experience.¹⁴⁷ In Winter's estimation, the proliferation of historical narratives "represents a lowering of the common denominator of what would

¹⁴⁴ Winter, "Royal Rhetoric," 3.

¹⁴⁵ Barthes, "Rhetoric of the Image," 45.

¹⁴⁶ Winter, "Royal Rhetoric," 29.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 30.

be intelligible to a heterogeneous audience, and that these developments were a direct response to the increased heterogeneity of the [Neo-Assyrian] Empire as it developed."¹⁴⁸ Yet, while this mode of signification might be more legible to a wider audience, its very readability "masks the constructed meaning under the appearance of the given."¹⁴⁹ The particularity and realism of the historical narratives belie the fact that they articulate an imperial ideology, which according to Jonathan Culler, "justifies particular economic, political, and intellectual practices by concealing their historical origins and making them the natural components of an interpreted world."¹⁵⁰ Put differently, one might conclude that Neo-Assyrian historical narratives employ a perceptual mode of signification not in order to provide an unambiguous window to the past but rather to subtly configure, and indeed justify, a particular vision (or version) of history.

What Winter's research demonstrates is that for the purposes of historical research, it is necessary to employ an approach to image analysis that directly engages questions about the semiotics of different modes of signification. This would entail not only recognizing the differences between perceptual and conceptual art, but also evaluating how and why aspects of visual representation such as realism might be employed for reasons other than displaying the past as it actually was. Thus, Winter's approach to image analysis once again moves beyond traditional iconographic concerns, even if only in emphasis. As is the case with the examples discussed above (§§4.3.1-2),

¹⁴⁸ Winter, "Royal Rhetoric," 30.

¹⁴⁹ Barthes, "Rhetoric of the Image," 47; as cited by Winter, "Royal Rhetoric," 29.

¹⁵⁰ Jonathan Culler, "Structure of Ideology and Ideology of Structure," *New Literary History* 4 (1973): 473.

this approach to image analysis, at least implicitly, reflects some degree of conceptual overlap with Nelson Goodman's visual theory. In particular, an image's mode of signification might be thought of as a characteristic of a dense or replete sign system. Particularity and realism in historical narrative are densely coded signs that not only communicate basic subject matter but also express meaning beyond the iconographic level. In addition, by raising questions about how certain types of images signify, Winter, like Goodman, brings a certain semiotic awareness to her understanding of the nature of pictorial representation and the meaning of the visual arts. In both of these ways, Winter's research implicitly reflects an understanding of ANE images as a type of non-linguistic sign system.

4.3.4. Caveats and Conclusions: Rethinking the Nature of ANE Art

Semiotic approaches to image analysis, whether derived from the visual theory of Nelson Goodman or the art historical research of Irene Winter, Zainab Bahrani, or Margaret Cool Root, can raise new questions and offer fresh insights into the meaning of ANE visual materials. However, at the same time, the integration of contemporary theory with the study of ancient art is subject to several lines of critique. For one, it might be suggested that Goodman's theory, being as it is a product of contemporary art criticism, should best (or only) be applied to modern art, particularly of the abstract or surrealist varieties. Since visual theory tends to reflect the interpretive perspectives of modern scholars—as critics might argue—it would be anachronistic to apply this perspective to the analysis of *ancient* art. Bahrani partially anticipates this objection

near the conclusion of *Women of Babylon*. In defense of her attempt to pursue a semiotic approach to the analysis of ANE art, Bahrani rightly notes that all scholarship is unavoidably dependent on contemporary epistemologies and theoretical frameworks.¹⁵¹ She asserts, "Many studies that are purported to be traditional or 'non-theoretical' simply continue to rely upon theories originally put forth by [earlier] scholars."¹⁵² In my estimation, the iconographic method reflects an approach to interpreting ancient art that is no less theoretical—and, indeed, no less anachronistic—than a semiotic one. The only question is how willing biblical scholars are to scrutinize the preliminary considerations and operative assumptions that lie behind these and other methods of interpretation.

However, even if contemporary semiotic theory provides a valid heuristic framework for interpreting ancient art, a second objection might be raised: Did ancient Near Eastern viewers *really* read images as a type of dense or replete notation? While previous research has not addressed this question explicitly, Goodman is aware of the contextual nature of sign systems. In *Languages of Art*, he acknowledges that the differences that obtain between linguistic and non-linguistic signs are not metaphysical but rather vary from culture to culture. "A picture in one system," Goodman notes, "may be a description in another."¹⁵³ In commenting on Goodman's approach to this issue, Mitchell contends that "What determines the mode of reading [in a given context]

¹⁵¹ Bahrani, *Women of Babylon*, 141.

¹⁵² *Ibid.*, 142.

¹⁵³ Goodman, *Languages of Art*, 226. Mitchell points to some interesting examples of this phenomenon: a paragraph might be turned 90° and read as a city skyline or a picture might be composed in such a fashion so as to be read from left to right (*Iconology*, 70; for the latter, see also the brief discussion in §3.3.3).

is the symbol system that happens to be in effect, and this is regularly a matter of habit, convention, and authorial stipulation—thus, a matter of choice, need, and interest."¹⁵⁴ One might press the issue further by asking if there is any reason to believe that a mode of reading was in effect in the ancient Near Eastern world that would have led viewers, by convention and habit, to analyze images beyond the level of iconography? Offering a definitive answer to this question would prove difficult. Not only is there limited direct evidence for how ancient viewers would have understood the nature of visual signs but it is also possible that viewing habits varied between different cultures throughout ANE history.¹⁵⁵ Nevertheless, several general observations suggest that ancient images were read and interpreted as a type of dense sign.

To begin with, while ANE cultures did not have a clearly defined sense of the "fine arts" or even the creation of art "for art's sake," Winter suggests that it was nevertheless the case that ancient viewers contemplated and wrote about images in ways that reflect an appreciation for aspects of artistic design, craftsmanship, and style that go beyond the level of iconography.¹⁵⁶ For instance, in Mesopotamian textual materials, scribes acknowledge that the construction of visual objects requires special skill (*nēmequ*) and ingenuity (*nikiltu*) and they customarily take note of how images are

¹⁵⁴ Mitchell, *Iconology*, 70.

¹⁵⁵ However, in her analysis of Mesopotamian responses to the visual arts, Winter contends that textual materials that discuss images, which span over two thousand years, display "a surprising degree of continuity in both vocabulary and modes of perception and valuation, despite historical and political change" (Winter, "Aesthetics in Ancient Mesopotamian Art," in *Civilizations of the Ancient Near East* [ed. Jack Sasson; 4 vols.; New York: Scribner, 1995], 2570). Thus, while one should exercise caution in speaking about a monolithic ANE semiotics or ANE visual culture, it is not necessarily the case that understandings of pictorial representation would have varied greatly in different times and places in the ancient world.

¹⁵⁶ Winter, "Aesthetics," 2569.

decorated (*za'ānu*) and made splendid (*šarāḥu*).¹⁵⁷ Likewise, a variety of terms in Akkadian are used to positively assess an image's physical qualities, such as *banū* ("well-formed"), *damqu* ("handsome, beautiful"), *kuzbu* ("alluring"), *nawru* ("radiant"), *napardû* ("shining brightly), and *simat tanādāti* ("praiseworthy").¹⁵⁸ Winter also points out that the Mesopotamian tradition "constantly reinforces the act of looking and seeing in the appreciation of the [visual] object" through its use of a nuanced set of verbs that describe how a viewer sees (*barû*), examines (*amāru*), experiences (*dagālu*), gazes at (*naṭālu*), and diverts attention to (*palāsu*) various types of images.¹⁵⁹ Furthermore, it was believed that images were more than just vehicles of communication—they could produce delight and joy on behalf of their divine audiences or inspire admiration and awe on behalf of human observers.¹⁶⁰ There is even evidence to suggest that Assyrian and Egyptian kings had the ability to choose between alternative representations of themselves based on subtle visual details, such as the depiction of their hands, chin, and hair.¹⁶¹ These observations suggest that, for at least some ancient viewers, image analysis entailed closely scrutinizing subtle details in the image's design and style. This is not to say that there were universal rules for how these

¹⁵⁷ Winter, "Aesthetics," 2571-72.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 2572-76. For a more specific discussion of how some of these terms apply to a given work of art, see Winter's previously discussed article, "Sex, Rhetoric, and the Public Monument," 11-26.

¹⁵⁹ Winter, "Aesthetics," 2576.

¹⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 2577.

¹⁶¹ For a brief discussion, see Winter, "Art in Empire: The Royal Image and the Visual Dimensions of Assyrian Ideology," in *Assyria 1995: Proceedings of the 10th Anniversary Symposium of the Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, Helsinki, September 7-11, 1995* (ed. Simo Parpola and Robert M. Whiting; Helsinki: The Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 1997), 376. These decisions were likely not made on the basis of the image resembling the king in any naturalistic way. Rather, the king's image was most likely constructed based on what were thought to be the ideal physical qualities of a divinely chosen king. Thus, rather than represent a *portrait* of the individual king, these images reflect a socially constructed *portrayal* of ideal kingship.

features were read nor even that all ancient images functioned as a type of dense or replete sign in the same way as Goodman describes.¹⁶² Nevertheless, Winter's research on Mesopotamian aesthetics raises the possibility that even in the ancient world, minor details in visual representation were not only noticed, but were thought to play an important role in how an image functioned.

Yet, beyond this evidence for a general "art appreciation" in the ancient world, there are more specific reasons to believe that the sorts of semiotic perspectives discussed above were not as foreign to ANE visual culture as one might initially think. In both *Rituals of War* and *The Graven Image*, Bahrani develops the thesis that ancient Mesopotamians "were the first to develop a rigorous system of reading visual signs according to a method we now call semiotics."¹⁶³ This is especially evident in how ancient Mesopotamian priests and scribes attempted to interpret mantic signs through divination and cuneiform signs through textual exegesis. In Bahrani's estimation, divination (*barûtu*) is not unlike textual exegesis (*pašāru*) insofar as both entail a hermeneutical process of interpreting signs according to a culturally-conditioned code.¹⁶⁴ In fact, Bahrani contends that mantic and cuneiform signs have a similar underlying semiotic structure insofar as they both are based on a system of signification

¹⁶² However, some modern semiotics do attempt to account more explicitly for how aesthetic features encode meaning. For instance, Eco uses the term "aesthetic idiolect" to describe "the unique diagram which makes all deviations [in a work] mutually functional" (*A Theory of Semiotics*, 272). As a result, image analysis entails detecting and describing this idiolect in a given work, inducing general rules from specific cases, and proposing tentative ways of decoding the aesthetic sign function. Despite Eco's previously mentioned resistance to "verbocentric dogmatism" in semiotic theory, it is interesting to note that he seems to revert to language theory when he describes this aesthetic code as an "idiolect."

¹⁶³ Bahrani, *Rituals of War*, 57. For further discussion, see especially the chapters in *Rituals of War* titled "Babylonian Semiotics," 57-74 and "The Mantic Body," 75-100; and, in *The Graven Image*, "Being in the Word: Of Grammatology and Mantic," 96-120.

¹⁶⁴ Bahrani, *Rituals of War*, 63.

in which there is an (almost) infinite play of possible meanings.¹⁶⁵ These observations are not necessarily generalizable to visual signs or visual culture. Nevertheless, the nexus between *barûtu/pašāru* and semiotics establishes that at least some types of signs were perceived to be what Goodman would call a dense or replete notational system.

In order to describe the nature of mantic signs, Bahrani draws on the work of historian Carlo Ginzburg.¹⁶⁶ In his essay on the history of semiotic analysis, Ginzburg contends that various methods of interpretation, including art historical connoisseurship, detective work, psychoanalysis, and medical diagnostics or "symptomatology," are all based upon a conjectural model of knowledge that is akin to semiotics—that is, it presumes that certain clues or signs (i.e., the details of a painting, a crime scene, a dream, a body) must be deciphered in order to reveal an encoded message.¹⁶⁷ In Ginzburg's view, the roots of this model of inquiry can be found in the ancient Mesopotamian practice of divination, which was based on the idea that the gods communicated with humanity by inscribing signs into the very fabric of the universe.¹⁶⁸ As such, physical features of the everyday world, including the position of the stars (astrology), the appearance of the human body (physiognomy), the form of animal entrails (extispicy and hepatoscopy), and so forth—were understood to function as a type of divinely coded mantic sign that, when properly deciphered, could reveal the will of the gods. What is important to note is that ancient viewers not only assumed that

¹⁶⁵ In practice, however, there were limits to the interpretation of cuneiform signs.

¹⁶⁶ Carlo Ginzburg, "Morelli, Freud, and Sherlock Holmes: Clues and Scientific Method," *History Workshop* 9 (1980): 5-36.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 11-12.

¹⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 22, 27.

the world was filled with these sorts of signs, but that these signs were themselves filled with enormous semiotic potential. In most cases, a special *barû* priest, who closely examined subtle details in the visual form of these "divine pictograms," was needed to unlock their encoded meaning.¹⁶⁹ In order to guide their interpretations, these priests relied on massive catalogues of pre-established codes that organized signs and their meaning in terms of a system of *protasis* and *apodosis* ("If X, then Y").¹⁷⁰ In many of these cases, the sign and its meaning were linked by certain tropes or rhetorical modes, such as metonymy, synecdoche, metaphor, synonym, or homophony.¹⁷¹ In either case, mantic signs of all varieties were read much like medical symptoms: each change in visual form signaled a change in the meaning communicated by the gods.¹⁷² Thus, it might be said that from the vantage point of Babylonian divination, the universe constituted a type of loosely construed dense sign system in which even the most mundane and minute details of the physical world could become semiotically relevant if exposed to the relevant analytical procedures.¹⁷³

The mantic sign was not the only form of representation that might have been read from a semiotic perspective. In fact, Assyriologist Jean Bottéro has argued that Babylonian divination is based on and even derived from the underlying logic of

¹⁶⁹ Bahrani, *The Rituals of War*, 81.

¹⁷⁰ Eadem, *The Graven Image*, 110. Interestingly, a similar system of logic also undergirds Mesopotamian medical texts and laws codes.

¹⁷¹ As an example of the latter, an omen in the Assyrian Dream Book reads as follows: "If a man in his dream eats a raven (*arbu*): income (*irbu*) will come in" See *ibid.*, 113.

¹⁷² In other words, the mantic and the semiotic (and one might add, the somatic) were closely linked in the thought world of ancient Mesopotamia. Bahrani notes that by the seventh century B.C.E., at least ten thousands omens had been catalogued (*Rituals of War*, 64).

¹⁷³ Neither Bahrani nor Ginzburg uses the language of "dense" or "replete" sign systems. However, Bahrani says something similar when she notes that "For the ancient Mesopotamians, the world was saturated with signs; the world was a text" (*ibid.*, 60).

cuneiform writing.¹⁷⁴ Cuneiform signs, much like mantic signs, constitute a type of multilayered symbol system that is "dense" with semiotic potential. In his analysis of the development of this script, Bottéro provides insights into the multiplicity of cuneiform sign functions.¹⁷⁵ For instance, while cuneiform was primarily pictographic in its earliest stages, it soon evolved in such a way that allowed signs to refer to things or ideas by means of synecdochic relationships or metonymic extensions. Eventually, cuneiform signs also came to take on syllabic values through total or partial phonetic transfer (homonymy) between the signifier and the name of the signified in Sumerian, and then later, Akkadian.¹⁷⁶ Thus, not only could one sign refer to multiple ideas or even multiple phonemes, but so too could the same phoneme be represented by multiple signs.¹⁷⁷ The polyvalence of this sign system increased even further when the cuneiform script was adapted for use with the Akkadian language. Since Akkadian utilized a number of phonemes that were unknown in Sumerian, such as laryngeals, sibilants, and emphatics, the same combination of signs could potentially refer to multiple Akkadian terms that were phonetically and semantically distinct.¹⁷⁸ Further still, there was some flexibility in terms of how scribes could divide and form syllables, thus making it possible to indicate

¹⁷⁴ Jean Bottéro, *Mesopotamia: Writing, Reasoning, and the Gods* (trans. Zainab Bahrani and M. Van De Mieroop; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992).

¹⁷⁵ For further discussion, see the following chapters in Bottéro's *Mesopotamia*: "From Mnemonic Device to Script," 67-86 and "Writing and Dialectics, or the Progress of Knowledge," 87-102. Bahrani briefly summarizes several of these observations in *The Graven Image*, 104-7.

¹⁷⁶ The shift toward phoneticization was likely the result of grammatical limitations, such as not being able to indicate parts of speech and/or difficulties involved with recording personal names.

¹⁷⁷ Bottéro, *Mesopotamia*, 90-91.

¹⁷⁸ For instance, the same signs *ka + pa + du* could be used to form the words *kapâdu* ("to plan"), *kabâtu* ("to be heavy"), and *kapâtu* ("to succeed"). See Bottéro, *Mesopotamia*, 92.

the same term with multiple combinations and types of cuneiform signs.¹⁷⁹ The point of these observations is to affirm what any student of Akkadian already knows: the cuneiform writing system is a complex notational system that is replete with almost "unlimited possibilities for signification."¹⁸⁰ As a result, cuneiform signs, much like mantic ones, were never simply read—they were always deciphered in order to discern an encoded message with rich semiotic potential.

The analogy that I am attempting to draw between Mesopotamian signs and Goodman's theory about non-linguistic notational systems is certainly more suggestive than it is precise. Because the cuneiform script operates in quite different ways than the Roman alphabet, the individual signs in this system do not fully meet the criteria of being syntactically disjoint and differentiated.¹⁸¹ Neither is it necessarily the case that ancient viewers saw mantic signs as containing the same type of "surplus of meaning" that Goodman assumes for works of art. Nevertheless, the underlying logic of Mesopotamian divination and textual exegesis suggests that it was customary for ancient viewers to approach some types of signs (though perhaps not all types) from what we might call a semiotic perspective. What I am suggesting is that the ability to read mantic and cuneiform signs, both of which might be said to be somewhat pictorial

¹⁷⁹ There also existed some measure of vocalic fluidity such that the same sign, *mad*, could also be used to indicate the syllables *mid* and *mud*. However, these ambiguities were somewhat restricted through scribal conventions, literary contexts, and massive lists of signs and their readings.

¹⁸⁰ Bahrani, *The Graven Image*, 114.

¹⁸¹ The polysemous nature of cuneiform signs is not the only thing that distinguishes this notational system from the Roman alphabet. As Bahrani rightly notes, an alphabetic script "depends on the conceptual breakup of the sign/referent" (*ibid.*, 119). Even though cuneiform signs became more stylized and took on phonetic values through time, this sign system never became fully dislodged from its pictographic origins. Thus, Bahrani concludes that "in Assyro-Babylonian thought, images and words were never completely separated" (*ibid.*, 118). Rather, image and text, sign and signifier existed in a dialectic tension that does not fully adhere to Western understandings about linguistic sign systems.

in nature, required a mode of analysis that was capable of discerning signifying structures that are replete with semiotic potential. In other words, these observations raise the possibility that a mode of reading (or seeing) was in effect in the ancient Near Eastern world that would have led viewers to read some images with a certain type of semiotic awareness.

There is, of course, no guarantee that *all* Mesopotamian viewers read images in this fashion. And these observations about mantic and cuneiform signs in Mesopotamian do not automatically apply to conventions of reading images in Northwest Semitic cultures and the Southern Levant. Yet, in the absence of more explicit evidence concerning how Israelites would have understood the nature of non-linguistic signs, the perspective offered by Bahrani at least raises the possibility that some ancient viewers read some images beyond the level of iconography. In fact, if images did function anything like mantic or cuneiform signs, then it is conceivable to think that they, too, were thought of as polyvalent signs that were characterized by density or repleteness. By convention and habit, it might well have been the case that ancient viewers would have recognized and responded to elements of the visual arts that are not always explicitly addressed in contemporary (biblical) iconographic studies. In this way, rather than being an anachronistic construct of contemporary visual theory, Goodman's understanding of non-linguistic systems might help biblical scholars better be able to picture how images signified in the ancient world. While it would be difficult to know for sure if Mesopotamian Ishtar seals, Neo-Assyrian historical narratives, or the Persian period Behistun relief would have been understood by native viewers in the

same ways as Bahrani, Winter, and Root suggest, the general orientation of their approach to image analysis represents a plausible way of conceptualizing how images were read in ANE visual culture.

4.4. The End of Biblical Iconography (as We Know it)

Throughout the course of this chapter, I have attempted to conduct a series of theoretical inquiries concerning the nature of visual representation and methods of image analysis. From the outset, my goal has been to prompt biblical scholars to cultivate a more critical awareness of contemporary visual theory concerning how images signify and why non-linguistic sign systems express meaning in ways that are both like and not like linguistic notations. In doing so, I have not only tried to destabilize some of the assumptions that are operative in Panofsky's widely accepted iconographic method but I have also aimed to call into question if this approach to image analysis—at least as we have come to know it through Panofsky and his followers—is fully adequate for discerning meaning in the visual arts. As an example of how a more semiotically-oriented approach to image analysis might shed new light on the meaning of ANE visual artifacts, I have explored how three aspects of visual representation—compositional design, the rhetoric of display, and the mode of signification—contribute to the construction of meaning, even though these visual features are not always emphasized in Panofsky's schema. While the intersection of contemporary visual theory and the study of ancient art can be a fruitful area, this endeavor is beset with difficulties, not least of which are questions about whether it is anachronistic to apply twentieth-

century semiotic theory to first-millennium B.C.E. visual culture. Though caution should certainly be used in this regard, I have attempted to show that at least some ancient Near Eastern viewers looked at and understood mantic and cuneiform signs in ways that share something in common with the sort of perspectives and concerns of Goodman, Winter, Baharani, and Root. The above reflections are by no means exhaustive in nature and neither do they address every possible issue in visual theory that might be relevant to methods of image analysis. Nevertheless, by staging these brief, but crucial, encounters between image analysis and visual theory, I hope to have initiated what will be an on-going conversation concerning the nature of meaning in the visual arts. By way of conclusion, I highlight three specific ways in which these reflections on the meaning of images might come to bear on a visual hermeneutics for biblical studies.

(1) It is important for biblical scholars to begin to see critical reflection on the nature of visual representation not as a parochial concern of the fine arts but rather as an integral component of biblical research. As has been demonstrated throughout this discussion, numerous issues in visual theory can directly impinge on the ways in which scholars understand how art was read and interpreted by ancient viewers. Toward this end, my analysis has attempted to surface what is only a small sampling of questions regarding the nature of visual representation. Each of the issues I raise above are intended to challenge the orienting perspectives and underlying assumptions that guide traditional approaches to image analysis in biblical studies. By underscoring the importance of visual theory in image analysis, I do not mean to suggest that every contribution to biblical iconography should include an extended discussion of these or

any other issues related to the nature of visual representation. Indeed, practical considerations limit the scope of most studies, and at least in some cases, theoretical issues might best be left implicit. As a result, a more modest—and perhaps more realistic—proposal would be for biblical scholars to begin to develop fluency in a broader and more interdisciplinary range of scholarship related to image analysis. While works by Keel, Uehlinger, and numerous other scholars associated with the Fribourg School should no doubt retain their canonical status within this field, much would be gained if biblical scholars also became conversant in the works of Goodman, Mitchell, Eco, Winter, Bahrani, and a host of others who scrutinize artistic representation from the vantage point of visual theory. In so doing, biblical scholars would not only be able to benefit from the critical insights of visual theory but they also would be able to contribute in fruitful ways to what is an increasingly prominent conversation about visual data in other areas of the humanities and social sciences.

(2) More specifically, the above reflections should signal the need for biblical scholars to revise the aims and expand the limits of iconography as a method of image analysis. Here again, the extent of this proposal is quite modest. I do not mean to suggest that Panofsky's method should be altogether abandoned. In fact, identifying an image's basic subject matter or intrinsic content remains an invaluable part of many aspects of the comparative study of ANE art and biblical literature, including questions concerning image-text correlation, congruence, and contiguity (§3.2). Neither do I propose to offer a ready-made template of image analysis that can apply universally to all visual artifacts. Indeed, the sorts of theoretical concerns surfaced above do not apply

equally well or in the same way to all images from within the same cultural context. In other words, while close scrutiny of an image's design, style, or mode of signification might yield fruitful results in certain cases, these aspects of visual representation might be less important—or at least less interesting—in other cases.¹⁸² Instead, the goal of a visual hermeneutics is to reconsider operative assumptions and to raise new questions about how scholars think about, use, and analyze ANE art for the purposes of biblical interpretation.

Specifically, this chapter has surfaced the need to update certain aspects of Panofsky's method in light of critical reflection on how it is that images create meaning beyond the level of iconography. In order to more fully account for the nature of images as a type of dense or replete sign system, I contend that at least one additional level of meaning should be included in Panofsky's schema. As a way of partially adopting Panofsky's terminology, I am inclined to call this level of interpretation "meta-iconographic analysis" insofar as it represents a stage of interpretation that should exist "alongside" or "with" traditional iconographic concerns.¹⁸³ Regardless of where this step is inserted in Panofsky's schema (I choose to place it before "iconological interpretation"), at this level one would consider issues related to the semiotic potential of an image's compositional design, rhetoric of display, and mode of signification. While

¹⁸² Indeed, the validity of any theoretical reflection is not contingent on it being fully relevant to every conceivable application. The proof of visual theory is in the eating of the pudding, as the saying goes, but there is much to prove, and not every batch of pudding can provide all the necessary evidence one might desire.

¹⁸³ In this sense, I draw on the meaning of the Greek preposition *μετα* when used with the genitive case. In these situations, *μετα* typically functions as a marker of placement ("among, beside"), association ("with"), or attendant circumstances ("alongside"). In contrast, when *μετα* is used with the accusative case, it often functions as a marker of time ("after"). I do not wish to draw on this latter connotation since this additional level of analysis need not come *after* other steps have been taken.

each of these issues need not be fully addressed in any given application of image analysis, by intentionally incorporating such concerns into this widely accepted schema, I hope to challenge biblical scholars to raise and address issues of interpretation that are often underemphasized in Panofsky's method. A revised and expanded version of Panofsky's schema might be conceptualized as in **fig. 4.7**. To reiterate a point that I have tried to stress throughout this chapter, it is not so much that these visual elements are completely absent from Panofsky's schema—indeed, they tend to be found in the right-most column as "corrective principles." By shifting these elements to the left-most column and by adding an additional level of interpretive analysis, my revised method attempts to highlight how these features might be more systematically studied as objects of interpretation in their own right.

Object of interpretation	Level of interpretation	Instrument of interpretation	Corrective principle of interpretation
primary or natural subject matter (forms and motifs)	pre-iconographic description	recognition of forms through practical experience	history of style (how forms and motifs are expressed)
secondary or conventional subject matter (themes and concepts)	iconographic analysis	knowledge of themes through literary sources	history of types (how themes or concepts are expressed)
tertiary or non-linguistic subject matter (compositional design, rhetoric of display, and mode of signification)	meta-iconographic analysis	understanding of visual representation through semiotic theory	history of pictorial signs (how non-linguistic elements are thought to signify)
intrinsic content and symbolic value	iconological interpretation	understanding of meaning through culturally-conditional principles	history of symbols (how "the essential tendencies of the human mind" are expressed)

Figure 4.7. Summary of a revised and expanded version of Panofsky's method of image analysis.

Practically speaking, the purpose of adding a new level of meaning to Panofsky's schema is to draw attention to aspects of visual representation that often go unnoticed or under-scrutinized in many other (but certainly not all) contributions to biblical iconography. To illustrate why this is so important it will be instructive to consider recent research in cognition and perception. Cognitive researchers have demonstrated that what we are thinking about—or indeed, what we are looking for—determines to a great degree what we actually see. For instance, Harvard medical researcher Trafton Drew recently conducted an experiment in which he superimposed a one-inch tall picture of a gorilla on MRI scans that radiologists look at when diagnosing cancer patients.¹⁸⁴ The radiologists, who are highly trained at detecting and interpreting even the subtlest details of these images, were asked to look at the MRI scans in order to determine if cancer nodules were present. Afterward, the doctors were asked if they saw the picture of the gorilla superimposed on the MRI scan. Surprisingly, 83% of the radiologists had not. What this and other experiments like it suggest is that what researchers—even the mostly highly trained ones—are asked to look for or pay attention to dramatically influences what they see and do not see.¹⁸⁵

¹⁸⁴ Trafton Drew, Melissa Le-Hoa Vo, and Jeremy M. Wolfe, "The Invisible Gorilla Strikes Again: Sustained Inattentional Blindness in Expert Observers," *Psychological Science* (July 17, 2013): 1-6.

¹⁸⁵ Drew's experiment is based on an earlier study in which subjects are asked to watch a video of two teams of kids (half in white uniforms, the other half in dark uniforms) passing basketballs back and forth while weaving around each other. Before seeing the video, the subjects are asked to count how many times the white team passes the basketball (this is actually quite difficult due to the movement of the various players). Half way through the video, a person dressed in a gorilla suit walks onto the stage, pounds his chest, and leaves. Afterward, only 50% of the subjects report having seen the gorilla in the video, even though most of them accurately identify how many times the basketball had been passed by the white team. For further discussion of this and related experiments, see Christopher F. Chabris and Daniel J. Simons, *The Invisible Gorilla: And Other Ways Our Intuitions Deceive Us* (New York: Crown, 2010).

I think an analogy can be made between these experiments and Panofsky's method. As an approach to image analysis, iconography directs researchers to focus on and look for particular aspects of an image: forms, motifs, basic subject matter, intrinsic content, etc. But, in narrowing a researcher's attention on these elements of visual representation, the iconographic method can potentially filter, or de-emphasize, other visual features. Subtle details in an image's design are not exactly hairy gorillas and some biblical iconographers have certainly noted these and other "non-linguistic" aspects of visual representation. Nevertheless, it matters what instructions—or methods—we give to researchers interested in visual data precisely because these instructions dramatically affect what they see, and thus what they think a given image means. By proposing a "meta-iconographic" level of image analysis, I simply wish to revise what biblical scholars are asked to look for when they examine ANE art.

(3) Finally, it would be instructive to consider some of the broader implications of the proposed theories and revised methods that I have offered above. At the most basic level, questions should be raised about the very terms used to describe the field of study that seeks to interpret the Hebrew Bible in light of ANE art. In recent scholarship, "biblical iconography" has been widely employed as a way of characterizing research that integrates a particular mode of art historical analysis with more traditional approaches to biblical interpretation. In many ways, this terminology offers a more than adequate description of the orientation of image analysis within most contributions to biblical studies. However, as suggested throughout this discussion, image analysis should not be reduced to the identification of iconographic content, and furthermore,

numerous other methods can fruitfully contribute to how scholars understand meaning in the visual arts. Using the term "iconography" to describe this area of biblical studies might unnecessarily or even unwittingly imply that Panofsky's method is the *only* mode of analysis that a biblical scholar might employ. As a result, one wonders if a shift in vocabulary is in order.

One possible alternative is "visual culture exegesis." This terminology has the advantage of being more non-committal in terms of naming a specific method of image analysis, and as such, it leaves open the question of what orientating interpretive approach a scholar might draw on when analyzing works of art. In comparison to the term "iconography," visual culture exegesis also has the advantage of suggesting a broader field of study, one that includes the analysis of specific art objects (i.e., ancient *iconography*) as well as visibility and visual culture. In chapter 6 of this study, I consider how the field of biblical iconography might more explicitly incorporate these latter two concepts into its scope of research. Despite these potential advantages, the term "visual culture exegesis" is not without its own problems. Most notably, this term lacks any reference to the specific type of text being interpreted, and indeed it might apply equally well to the use of images in the study of non-biblical materials. In a similar way, the related term "visual exegesis" is sometimes used in reference to the study of art objects that come long after the Hebrew Bible and that attempt to interpret biblical themes in and through visual media.¹⁸⁶ Moreover, changing the terms we use to describe a field of study does not automatically lead to concomitant changes in

¹⁸⁶ This type of analysis is often carried out in studies concerned with "reception history."

methodological procedure or interpretive practice. Nevertheless, if biblical scholars are to take seriously the notion that the meaning of ANE art is not exhausted once its iconographic content has been determined, then it will become increasingly expedient to talk about, describe, and conceptualize this field of study in ways that move away from a singular focus on Panofsky's method. In this way, the primary purpose of my reflections on the nature of visual representation has been to announce—and indeed, advocate for—the end of iconography, at least as we have come to know it in biblical studies. This would not result in the return to the "solemn silence" of Plato's view of paintings, but rather the beginning of new, more critically engaged approaches to reading images and seeing texts.

CHAPTER 5

ANIMATING ART: THE LIFE OF IMAGES AND THE IMPLICATIONS OF VISUAL RESPONSE

Why do [people] behave as if pictures were alive, as if works of art had minds of their own, as if images had a power to influence human beings, demanding things from us, persuading, seducing, and leading us astray?

- W. J. T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?*, 7

Indeed, it seems to me that we should now be prepared to remove the evidence of phenomena like the animism of images from discussions of "magic," and that we should confront more squarely the extent to which such phenomena tell us about the use and function of images themselves and of responses to them.

- David Freedberg, *The Power of Images*, xxii

5.1. What is an Image? – Reviving the Question

What, exactly, is an image? Though philosophers, art historians, and even a few theologians have entertained this question, it is not often explicitly addressed in biblical iconographic research. And perhaps for good reason. This question might be regarded as being overly speculative, or conversely, too self-evident, to warrant inclusion in many studies.¹ Admittedly, I have yet to address this question in my own work. Nevertheless, I maintain that specifying what an image is plays a crucial role in the formation of a visual hermeneutics for biblical studies. In fact, in other areas of biblical research, comparable questions are routinely raised about the nature of *texts*. For instance, in handbooks on biblical exegesis and textual hermeneutics, biblical scholars typically ask "What is a

¹ For a helpful survey of past approaches to related questions in art historical discourse, see David Summers, "Representation," in *Critical Terms for Art History* (ed. Richard S. Nelson and Robert Shiff; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), 3-19; and W. J. T. Mitchell, "What is an Image?" *New Literary History* 15 (1984): 503-37.

text?" or at least implicitly acknowledge that how one answers this question has important implications for biblical research.² Much of the same might be said about the definition of images. If images are to be taken seriously as a primary source for biblical interpretation, then scholars must begin to revive questions about what images are and how viewers conceive of and respond to them.

Yet, answering these questions is not easy. The terms "image" and "imagery" are quite slippery and scholars often use them to refer to a wide range of phenomena, including the graphic arts, mental thought, visual perception, or even verbal language.³ Even if one adheres to the narrower understanding of an image as a created material object that uses lines, planes, dimensions, color, etc., to depict some real or imagined entity, the term still encompasses a rather broad array of representational practices.⁴ Thus, it is hardly surprising that biblical iconographers who actually define what an

² However, it should be noted that these handbooks often conceptualize the nature of a "text" in vastly different ways. For instance, Robert B. Chisholm, Jr., considers the question "What is the text?" as the main concern of text criticism insofar as it tries to establish the most original or authentic textual witness (*From Exegesis to Exposition: A Practical Guide to Using Biblical Hebrew* [Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 1998]), 19-30. Anthony C. Thiselton raises this same question, but chooses instead to address it from the vantage point of literary and hermeneutical theory (*New Horizons in Hermeneutics: The Theory and Practice of Transforming Biblical Reading* [Grand Rapids, Mich.: Zondervan, 1992], 55-79). A more theologically oriented approach is employed by Sandra M. Schneiders, who explores the meaning of the text as "Word of God" (*The Revelatory Text: Interpreting the New Testament as Sacred Scripture* [2d. ed.; Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical, 1999], 27-63). Within the field of biblical iconography, one might also note that Izaak de Hulster begins his treatment of biblical hermeneutics with an explicit discussion of "What is a text?" (*Iconographic Exegesis and Third Isaiah* [FAT 2/36; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009], 8-10).

³ Among biblical scholars, Brent A. Strawn explicitly notes the problematic ambiguity of terms such as image and imagery (Strawn, "Imagery," in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry and Writings* [ed. Tremper Longman and Peter Enns; Downers Grove, Ill.: IVP Academic, 2008], 306). For a more thorough appraisal of the various uses of terms such as "mental imagery," "perceptual imagery," and "verbal imagery," see Mitchell's essay, "What is an Image?"

⁴ It should be noted that Mitchell prefers to use the term "picture" to refer to a specific kind of visual representation. In contrast, Mitchell reserves the term "image" for "the whole realm of iconicity," including non-pictorial imagery. For further discussion, see *Picture Theory*, 4 n. 5. While Mitchell's distinction between image and picture can be helpful, I do not rigidly employ it throughout this study, in part because "picture" and "image" are used quite interchangeably in the English language.

image is do so only in the most general of terms. As a case in point, Izaak J. de Hulster describes an image as a form of "mediated representation."⁵ By casting his net broadly, de Hulster offers a definition that can effectively enmesh a great variety of visual artifacts, including those constructed out of different media (canvas, clay, stone, paper, metal), designed for various functions ("high" art, language of communication, apotropaic magic), and instantiated in diverse formats (monumental statuary, clay figurines, miniature seals, painted facades). In general, de Hulster's definition occasions little controversy. As such, I am tempted to stop here, leaving more theoretical speculation about the nature of images to philosophers and theologians. But doing so would only further the sort of disciplinary sequestration that can isolate biblical scholarship from insights generated in other fields of study.

From the vantage point of visual theory, what becomes most interesting—and perhaps most problematic—is how de Hulster and many others construe the relationship between an image and its referent. In the course of his brief discussion about the nature of images, de Hulster explicitly affirms what most causal observers tacitly assume: what one encounters in an image (i.e., representation) is ontologically distinct from what one encounters in the thing or person an image depicts (i.e., reality).⁶ This is even true in situations where an image is made to naturalistically resemble its referent. For instance, legend has it that the ancient Greek artist Zeuxis painted a

⁵ De Hulster, *Iconographic Exegesis*, 48.

⁶ By "reality" I primarily mean that which exists outside of representation, though as will be seen later in this discussion (§5.2), this distinction is somewhat problematic. Though I am aware that the term "reality" might be no less slippery than "image" or "representation," I occasionally employ it throughout this chapter as a shorthand way of referring to the entity that is pictured in a given art object, even if one might properly say that the picture does not provide a purely mimetic or historically accurate version of that reality. For further discussion of these latter issues, see §4.3.3.

picture of grapes that was so realistic that birds would fly down to pick at the canvas. While this sort of painting might be lifelike enough to trick unsuspecting animals, the rational and astute human observer (presumably) knows that it is nothing more than a *trompe-l'oeil*, the product of an art technique used to construct an illusion of reality. In terms of their ontological status, Zeuxis's grapes are no more similar to real grapes than is the canvas upon which they are painted. De Hulster's definition is based on a similar assumption. Whatever their form or function, images readily can be recognized as representation, and as such, are not typically confused with the real presence of the things they depict.⁷ In fact, the operative belief in this definition of images is that the very act of representation is predicated on the *absence* of the thing represented.⁸ A viewer might read, analyze, contemplate, or admire a particular work of art, but she does so knowing full well that what she encounters is a representation of a thing that is somehow *not there*—i.e., not present, but absent.⁹ In this view, representation and reality are ontologically distinct categories whose boundaries are stable and well defined.

Despite the rather commonsensical nature of this understanding, the history of visual response tells a slightly different story. Throughout time and across cultures, one finds countless examples of viewers who, on occasion, talk about and treat images as if they were something more than just works of art. Statues are fed and clothed, icons are

⁷ De Hulster, *Iconographic Exegesis*, 49.

⁸ De Hulster contends that "an image exists in the tension of not being the thing represented and often, exactly because of its absence, representing it" (*ibid.*, 50).

⁹ De Hulster is certainly not alone in drawing these conclusions about what an image is. Almost any form of visual analysis—whether driven by iconographic, semiotic, or aesthetic concerns—regards images as a form of communication that conveys information about its referent, but does not embody the presence of the thing it represents.

prayed to and adored, paintings are wept over and worshipped, and symbols are used to ward off demons and manifest the presence of the gods. The modern reader might be inclined to dismiss such responses as the exclusive product of some ancient time and place. Yet, similar impulses persist today. In Iraq, soldiers stage dramatic iconoclastic spectacles against statues of political leaders. In Italy, firefighters risk their lives to save the mysterious Shroud of Turin. And just about everywhere, even the most hardened rationalists would have some qualms about tearing up a photograph of a loved one. What do we make of the strange ways people behave around images? These responses would be difficult to explain if the viewers in question assumed that images were only or merely a form of mediated representation of a thing or person that was absent. What is striking about these and numerous other instances of image response is that people seem compelled to talk about and react to images as if they were living things. At least in the eyes of some observers, images come to possess a type of subjectivity and agency that enables them to act on their own, to influence the world, and to transgress the divide between representation and reality.

W. J. T. Mitchell is particularly interested in this variety of visual response. In his volume *What Do Pictures Want?* (2005), Mitchell revives the basic question about the nature of images not only by reconsidering its underlying premises, but also—and more literally—by restoring a sense of life to its answers.¹⁰ Through a series of case studies, Mitchell sets out to examine why images not only seem to produce "imitations of life"

¹⁰ W. J. T. Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

but also appear to take on "lives of their own." Mitchell sums up the goal of his study in the following way:

The aim here is look at the varieties of animation or vitality that are attributed to images, the agency, motivation, autonomy, aura, fecundity, or other symptoms that make pictures into 'vital signs,' by which I mean not merely signs *for* living things but *as* living things. If the question, what do pictures want? makes any sense at all, it must be because we assume that pictures are something like life-forms, driven by desire and appetites.¹¹

Mitchell is certainly not the first to draw attention to the strange power that images seem to possess, but he, unlike most others, is unwilling to dismiss belief in this power as reflecting a type of primitive or naïve (and as some might add, non-Western) "superstition" or "magic."¹²

One of the central claims Mitchell makes throughout his research is that the tendency to attribute a lifelike status or power to images is "not something that we 'get over' when we grow up, become modern, or acquire critical consciousness."¹³ In challenging this idea, Mitchell insists that most people exhibit a type of "double consciousness" with respect to images that causes them to vacillate "between magical beliefs and skeptical doubts, naïve animism and hardheaded materialism, mystical and critical attitudes."¹⁴ Thus, Mitchell wishes neither to defend nor discredit instances of visual response that attribute the status, power, and agency of living beings to works of art. Instead, he seeks to understand where these impulses come from, why they persist,

¹¹ Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?*, 6-7.

¹² *Ibid.*, 7. This perspective is also evident in the epigraph cited at the beginning of this chapter.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 8. As an example, Mitchell recounts how one of his colleagues, when faced with students who were skeptical of the lifelike power of contemporary images, simply asked the class to cut out the eyes of a photograph of their mothers. Their reluctance to do so proved, at least in part, that these images were more than just artistic representations in the mind of the students (*ibid.*, 9).

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 7.

and what they "tell us about the use and function of images themselves and of responses to them."¹⁵ Thus, what makes Mitchell's approach potentially helpful to biblical scholars is that it refuses to limit the study of images to the analysis of how pictorial signs function as a language of communication. Instead, Mitchell opens art criticism to the broader implications of how images structure human relationships, beliefs, and behaviors not only as works of art, but as living beings and social agents. For Mitchell, what pictures want—and, I should add, what many biblical scholars have failed to give them—is to be defined and analyzed in ways that are "adequate to their ontology."¹⁶

Following Mitchell's lead, I want to revive fundamental questions about the life of images in the ancient Near Eastern world and to integrate more fully the implications of visual response into biblical research. In order to do so, I aim to expand and redirect Mitchell's work in at least two ways. First, as provocative as Mitchell's case studies are, he does not develop terms and concepts that adequately account for the mechanisms by which images obtain their lifelike status. As a way of more fully explaining this phenomenon, I draw on the work of visual theorists David Freedberg and Alfred Gell, two of the most important figures in the study of the history and theory of visual response (§5.2). By more closely analyzing the power and agency of images, Freedberg and Gell significantly advance our understanding about how and why images seem to take on lives of their own in the eyes of so many observers.

¹⁵ Mitchell, *What Do Pictures Want?*, xxii; see also 30.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 47.

Second, Mitchell, like many other visual theorists, is primarily interested in contemporary art objects and modern day visual response. While his analytical perspective is compelling, an intentional effort must be made to demonstrate how—or even if—theories about the animation of art can apply to the study of ancient images and their relation to biblical texts. In order to begin to bridge this gap, I assess how Freedberg's and Gell's theories might shed new light on a certain type of image in ancient Near Eastern visual culture—namely, the *šalmu* (§5.3). In addition, I examine how a well-known type of visual response from ancient Mesopotamia—the theft and destruction of images in the context of war—might be predicated on an intellectual tradition that presumes that representation and reality interact and intermingle on the same ontological plane.

Finally, I consider some of the practical implications of these theories, including how they might prompt biblical scholars to think differently not only about the analysis of specific art objects but also about the various types of image response found in the Hebrew Bible (§5.4). As in the previous chapters of this study, my research here is not so much intended to settle once and for all complex theoretical matters related to visual culture or ancient Israelite religion. My aim, in fact, is quite the opposite. In this chapter, I hope to raise new questions and to open up new avenues of research at the intersection of biblical interpretation and the study of ancient Near Eastern art.

5.2. Visual Theory and the Animation of Art

In recent work in visual theory, two scholars—art historian David Freedberg and social anthropologist Alfred Gell—have made important contributions to how we understand the animation of art.¹⁷ Both Freedberg and Gell effectively call into question the tendency in Western art theory and philosophy to consider representation and reality as ontologically disparate categories. Like Mitchell, they also acknowledge that the history of visual response implies that viewers often treat images as if they were living things, capable of exerting their own power and agency over the realm of the real. However, unlike Mitchell, Freedberg and Gell attempt to more thoroughly explain the cognitive processes and social mechanisms that are responsible for prompting certain visual responses. Although the underlying premises behind their scholarship overlap considerably, Freedberg and Gell describe the animation of art from different theoretical vantage points. Specifically, while Freedberg addresses the power of images from an ontological perspective, Gell employs an anthropological approach in order to better describe the social agency many images seem to exert. Taken together, these theories provide a more robust conceptual framework for describing the animation of art and its implications for visual response. In the course of this brief discussion, I highlight the most relevant concepts from these theories, and whenever possible, I illustrate key points with examples from ANE visual culture.¹⁸

¹⁷ David Freedberg, *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989); and Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency: An Anthropological Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1998).

¹⁸ It should be noted, however, that Freedberg and Gell only make occasional reference to ancient visual materials and practices.

5.2.1. David Freedberg and the Power of Images

In his provocative study, *The Power of Images* David Freedberg explores a topic that is often overlooked in art historical research: the history and theory of visual response. In Freedberg's view, a critical examination of visual response would do more than just survey the history of aesthetic criticism or the development of art historical discourse.¹⁹ Rather, Freedberg is interested in how everyday viewers and non-experts treat art objects and what their responses might imply about the power images have, both socially and psychologically. In particular, Freedberg is concerned with instances of visual response that seem to be predicated on a belief that what is represented *by* an image is actually present *in* the image itself. Without either resorting to vague discussions of "magic" or retreating to a position that acknowledges the power of images only as a particular symptom of some past time and place, Freedberg tries to provide adequate terms for thinking about and explaining the fact that throughout history, "our responses to images may be of the same order as our response to reality."²⁰ Thus, Freedberg brings an ontological awareness to what images are and how they function in the register of the real.

Freedberg constructs his theoretical perspective from a series of inductive investigations of visual response. Of particular interest to Freedberg are instances in which viewers describe works of art as being capable of moving, hearing, seeing, touching, bleeding, and manifesting the presence of a deity or ancestor. Accounts such

¹⁹ For instance, Freedberg cautions that "to limit the description of response in these severely historicizing ways and thus to define the 'causes' of response (for that is what is implicit in the endeavor) is often to restrict the audience of art in a manner unsupported by historical fact" (ibid., 431).

²⁰ Freedberg, *The Power of Images*, 438.

as these tend to strain the credulity of many modern observers. However, one of Freedberg's central claims is that these responses cannot be dismissed as evidence of a viewer's simpleminded belief in animism or lack of scientific rationality.²¹ Nor is it the case that such descriptions are only a literary construct, the effect of using conventional metaphors and rhetorical tropes to talk about a realistic looking image "as if" it were a living thing. Rather, Freedberg regards these ways of talking about images as a "historical testimony to a cognitive fact."²² In other words, it is in and through these strange responses to images that one can discern the contours of a particular way of conceptualizing the relationship between representation and reality. To ask if certain images are *really* alive is to miss the point. What Freedberg attempts to show is that how people *really* act around images belies any rational assertion they might otherwise make about images being nothing more than artistic representations. Thus construed, visual responses become a type of primary source for understanding how it is that certain observers conceive of the nature and status of artistic representation.

Perhaps the most persistent question that emerges in Freedberg's study is how art obtains its lifelike status in the first place. How does the signifier become "the living embodiment of what it signifies" and what processes inaugurate the transition from inanimate art to living presence?²³ In raising these issues, Freedberg recognizes that the animation of art is neither automatic nor indiscriminate. In fact, not all images are understood to manifest the presence of what they represent and even those that do are

²¹ Freedberg describes animism as a catchall phrase used to refer to the belief that inert objects could be invested with life (ibid., 284).

²² Ibid., 291-92.

²³ Ibid., 28, 82.

typically thought to possess this power on the basis of exhibiting specific characteristics or going through certain processes of transformation.²⁴ While the finer points of these mechanisms surely vary from culture to culture and perhaps also from viewer to viewer, Freedberg identifies several underlying notions about what enables images to function as something more than just a mediated representation.

One widely recurring tendency among viewers is to attribute an ontological status to images that closely resemble the thing or person they represent. In these cases, the potential of an image to manifest the living presence of its referent is dependent on a mimetic form of representation. This association between ontological status and realistic appearance is often evident in religious imagery in which the desire to make the divine accessible to worshippers leads to the creation of particularly lifelike works of art. For instance, throughout the Late Middle Ages artists made crucifixes in which the figure of Jesus was given a moveable head and arms, real hair, and even a bleeding wound (by means of connecting a vessel of fluid to the back of the statue).²⁵ The purpose of this manner of depiction was not simply to make an image that looked like the crucified Christ, but rather to prompt viewers to talk about and use the image as, or indeed in place of, a real person. During liturgical dramas associated with the Passion, participants would carry these types of crucifixes in procession before taking the statue of Jesus down from the cross and placing his arms at his side. The participants would then wrap the statue in a shroud and/or lay it in the lap of an actor playing the

²⁴ See especially the following chapters in *The Power of Images*: "The God in the Image," 27-40; "Consecration: Making Images Work," 82-98; and "Live Images: The Worth of Visions and Tales," 283-316.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 286.

part of the Virgin Mary. What is important to note is that the ability to manipulate the statue in a realistic fashion enabled it to take the place of a human actor who otherwise would play the role of Jesus in the liturgical drama.²⁶ In these situations, the realistic way in which the Christ figure is depicted plays no small part in shaping the belief that the statue somehow transcended its status as an inanimate representation. Freedberg's point is not just that these statues looked real, but that they effectively served as substitutes for human actors by virtue of their lifelike appearance.

Another curious example of this phenomenon involves classical legends about Daedalus. Numerous Greek writers contend that this mythical figure, who was considered to be an exceptionally skilled artisan (Δαίδαλος means "clever worker"), was able to produce statues that were so realistic in appearance that they were considered to have a lifelike status.²⁷ Particularly revealing in this regard are the comments of the first century B.C.E. Greek historian, Diodorus Siculus:

In the production of statues, [Daedalus] so excelled all other men that later generations preserved a story to the effect that the statues he created were exactly like living beings: for they say that they could see and walk, and preserved so completely the disposition of the entire body that the statue which was produced by art seemed to be a living being. Having been the first to render the eyes open, and the legs separately, as they are in walking, and also the arms and hands as if stretched out.²⁸

²⁶ Freedberg, *The Power of Images*, 286-88.

²⁷ Philostratus of Lemnos in *Immagines* (1.16) wrote the following about Daedalus: "This is the workshop of Daedalus and about it are statues, some with forms blocked out, others in a quite complete state in that they are already stepping forward and give promise of walking about. Before the time of Daedalus, you know, the art of making statues had not yet conceived such a thing."

²⁸ Diodorus Siculus 4.76.1-3; translated in J. T. Pollitt, *The Art of Greece, 1400-1431 B.C.* (Sources and Documents in the History of Art; Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1965), 5; as cited in Freedberg, *The Power of Images*, 36-37.

Even though Daedalus himself is not a historical figure, Diodorus's remarks reflect a common way of thinking about how images obtain their ontological status. What is true of Diodorus's perspective is also true of those who created and used lifelike statues of Jesus in the Late Middle Ages: realism in art is not simply understood to be a means of imitating reality, but rather is a way of manifesting the presence of the thing or person represented.

Hebrew Bible scholars occasionally express similar understandings about how idols come to life. In their research on idolatry, Moshe Halbertal and Avishai Margalit argue that the Hebrew Bible only prohibits what semiotician Charles Sanders Peirce would classify as "iconic" or "similarity-based" images—that is, those that are made to resemble their referent in a naturalistic fashion.²⁹ Although Halbertal and Margalit do not address the thorny issue of how one could verify if an image of Yahweh was indeed made in his likeness, they nevertheless seem to assume that any anthropomorphic representation would fall into this category. In either case, they speculate that these types of "similarity-based" images are problematic precisely because they introduce "the possibility of a substitutive error, in which the idol ceases to be the representation or symbol of God and comes to be seen as God himself."³⁰ Thus, not unlike Freedberg, Halbertal and Margalit connect lifelike appearance with ontological status. It follows that these scholars suggest that non-mimetic forms of representation, such as Yahweh's cherubim throne or the ark of the covenant, are permitted because they are related to

²⁹ Moshe Halbertal and Avishai Margalit, *Idolatry* (trans. Naomi Goldblum; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992), esp. 37-66. I discuss the work of Halbertal and Margalit in more detail in §6.3.1.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 41-42.

their referent not by resemblance, but by associative or metonymic inference—for instance, the cherubim throne implies the presence of Yahweh without explicitly depicting his likeness. In other words, Halbertal and Margalit conclude that the Hebrew Bible offers no strictures against these images based on the supposition that "God is not revealed in a metonymic representation to the degree that he is in one based on similarity."³¹ It is only when metonymic representations are misconstrued as iconic ones that they become idols.

This sort of confusion might be evident in the controversy surrounding the golden calves that Jeroboam sets up in the sanctuaries at Dan and Bethel (1 Kings 12). Hebrew Bible scholars have long suggested that Jeroboam's golden calves were originally understood to be acceptable representations insofar as they were meant to depict Yahweh's pedestal in much the same fashion as the ark or cherubim throne in the Jerusalem temple.³² However, when seen through the theological lens of the Deuteronomistic History, Jeroboam's golden calves are described as unacceptable idols because they are misconstrued as a type of similarity-based image that effectively took the place of Yahweh as the object of worship.³³ As will become more evident in the next chapter, similar assumptions underlie a good deal of recent scholarship on why "aniconic" representations of Yahweh were acceptable in ancient Israelite religion. Thus, even without referencing Freedberg, many Hebrew Bible scholars assume that an image's ontological status is closely associated with its anthropomorphic form. Whether

³¹ Halbertal and Margalit, *Idolatry*, 48.

³² See for instance, Moses Aberbach and Leivy Smolar, "Aaron, Jeroboam, and the Golden Calves," *JBL* 86 (1967): 129-40.

³³ Halbertal and Margalit, *Idolatry*, 49.

or not ancient Israelite viewers would have made similar assumptions is another matter.³⁴

Nevertheless, an image's lifelike status is not always contingent on mimetic representation. Freedberg provides numerous examples in which the presence of a deity is thought to inhabit abstract art objects that are anything but anthropomorphic in form. For instance, in ancient Greece, unshaped meteoric stones known as *baitulia* often functioned as cult objects in which the real presence of the deity was thought to dwell.³⁵ Similarly, *xoanon*, which are carved, plank-like statues made of wood or stone, likewise seem to have functioned as cult objects even though they were minimally figured.³⁶ Freedberg's examples also include more contemporary objects, such as the abstractly shaped *ndakó gboyá* masks, which the Nupe people of Nigeria believe manifest the presence of the ancestors.³⁷ I would also add to this list two other items not explicitly mentioned by Freedberg: the unshaped standing stones, or *maṣṣēbōt*, and the ark of the covenant, both of which are mentioned throughout the Hebrew Bible. Since I evaluate the nature of "aniconic" visual artifacts in greater detail later in this study (§6.3.2), it will suffice for now to note that I agree with those biblical scholars who point out that these objects were thought to manifest the deity's presence in ways quite

³⁴ In §6.3, I critique the widely attested view that aniconic and iconic forms of representation function in drastically different ways in religious visual culture.

³⁵ Freedberg, *The Power of Images*, 37. The Greek word *baitulia* is derived from the story in Genesis 35:14-15 where Jacob sets up a pillar, or *maṣṣēbā(h)*, at the place where God had spoken with him. Jacob pours out a drink offering upon the pillar, anoints it with oil, and calls the place Bethel, or βαιθηλ in Greek (see also Gen 28:17-18). For further discussion of aniconism in ancient Greece, see Milette Gaifman, *Aniconism in Greek Antiquity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

³⁶ See for instance Freedberg, *The Power of Images*, 34-35, esp. n. 22.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 31.

similar to more iconic images, such as cult statues.³⁸ In each of these examples, the belief that the object could embody or even substitute for the real presence of the thing it represents is not predicated on mimetic representation, let alone an anthropomorphic form.

How, then, do such images come alive? Freedberg points to the important role of consecration ceremonies in making an image "work" regardless of its mode of representation. These rituals are evident in contexts ranging from the neo-Platonist practice of theurgy to the modern day *nētra pinkama* ("eye-ceremony") of the Theravada Buddhists of Ceylon.³⁹ While particular aspects of these ceremonies vary, they all seem to be viewed as the means by which an image is transformed into the living embodiment of what it signifies.⁴⁰ Most interestingly for our purposes is Freedberg's brief discussion of the Washing of the Mouth, or *mīs pî* ceremony, which is widely attested in ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia.⁴¹ While space prohibits an extensive discussion of this ritual, it is important to note that this complex ceremony was believed

³⁸ See for instance, Mathias Delcor, "Jahweh et Dagon: ou le Jahwisme face à la religion des Philistins, d'après 1 Sam. V," *VT* 14 (1964): 136-154; and Patrick D. Miller and J. J. M. Roberts, *The Hand of the LORD: A Reassessment of the "Ark Narrative" of 1 Samuel* (JHNES; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977).

³⁹ Freedberg, *The Power of Images*, 84-86.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 28.

⁴¹ The Hebrew Bible does not explicitly mention the *mīs pî* ceremony. However, three texts—Judg 17:3, Dan 3:1-7, and Gen 35:14—reference what seem to be consecration rituals associated with the construction of divine images. Also potentially relevant is the second creation story (Genesis 2) in which God forms the adam from dust on the ground and then "breathed into his nostrils the breath of life; and the man [הָאָדָם] became a living being" (Gen 2:7). Although these rituals—if they indeed are called such—are not nearly as elaborate as the *mīs pî* ceremony, it is possible that a similar understanding about the animation of art is tacitly present in these descriptions. Furthermore, as I argue later in this chapter (§5.4), the idol parodies in Second Isaiah and Jeremiah seem to presuppose knowledge of the underlying logic of the *mīs pî* ceremony.

to effect a change in the ontological status of the image itself.⁴² Ancient viewers—or at least, the ritual specialists who carried out the ceremony—looked upon the *mīs pî* ceremony as a ritual of transition in which an image, typically in the form of a cult statue, was transformed into a "pure epiphany" of the deity.⁴³ In order to emphasize this ontological transition, numerous aspects of the ceremony were designed to annul the earthly origins of the cult statue and affirm that it was the product of the gods. For instance, the ceremony itself includes a ritual performance in which the priests would symbolically bind and cut off the hands of the craftsmen in order to signify that the statue was not made by humans. Later in the ceremony, Mesopotamian scribes claim that the image was born in heaven.⁴⁴ The cult statue ceases to be called an "image" and instead is called an *ilu* (god) and/or is addressed by the name of the deity it represents.

⁴² For a more extensive discussion of the *mīs pî* ceremony, see: Angelika Berlejung, "Washing the Mouth: The Consecration of Divine Images in Mesopotamia," in *The Image and the Book: Iconic Cults, Aniconism, and the Rise of Book Religion in Israel and the Ancient Near East* (ed. Karel van der Toorn; ConBOT 21; Leuven: Peeters, 1997), 45-72; and eadem, *Die Theologie der Bilder: Herstellung und Einweihung von Kultbildern in Mesopotamien und die alttestamentliche Bilderpolemik* (OBO 162; Fribourg: Universitätsverlag; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1998); Aylward M. Blackman, "The Rite of Opening the Mouth in Ancient Egypt and Babylonia," *Journal of Egyptian Archaeology* 10 (1924): 47-59; Peggy Jean Boden, "The Mesopotamian Washing of the Mouth (Mis Pi) Ritual: An Examination of Some of the Social and Communication Strategies which Guided the Development and Performance of the Ritual which Transferred the Essence of the Deity Into the Temple Statue" (Ph.D. diss., Johns Hopkins University, 1998); Michael B. Dick, "The Mesopotamia Cult Statue: A Sacramental Encounter with Divinity," in *Cult Image and Divine Representation in the Ancient Near East* (ed. Neal H. Walls; ASOR 10; Boston: American Schools of Oriental Research, 2005), 43-67; Michael B. Dick and Christopher Walker, *Born in Heaven, Made on Earth: The Creation of the Cult Image* (ed. Michael B. Dick; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1999); and idem, *The Induction of the Cult Image in Ancient Mesopotamia: The Mesopotamian Mīs Pî Ritual* (SAA 1; Helsinki: Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, Institute for Asian and African Studies, University of Helsinki, 2001); and Thorkild Jacobsen, "The Graven Image," in *Ancient Israelite Religion: Essays in Honor of Frank Moore Cross* (ed. Patrick D. Miller, Paul D. Hanson, and S. Dean McBride; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 15-32.

⁴³ Berlejung, "Washing the Mouth," 72.

⁴⁴ In Mesopotamian texts, the verb (*w*)*alādu* is used to refer to the creation of the cult statue. While this verb can mean to "make or craft," its more literal sense ("to give birth") seems to be in view in light of the mythical perspectives that undergird this ritual. For further discussion of this point, see Benno Landsberger, ed., *Brief des Bischofs von Esagila an König Asarhaddon* (Amsterdam: Noord-Hollandsche, 1965), 24-25 n. 38.

The priests secure the image's perfect purity through a mouth-washing procedure and then "activate" the statue's senses by opening its mouth. Only at this point is the image ready to be set up in its rightful place in the temple. Thereafter, the image is treated as an animate being—it is regularly bathed, fed, dressed, crowned, anointed, and prayed to. It is, in a sense, afforded full status as a social being.⁴⁵ In this way, the humanly created statue is transformed into, or indeed, birthed as, a living deity—that is, one that embodied the real presence or essence of the god itself.⁴⁶

Despite the important role that these ceremonies play in vivifying images in ancient Egypt and Mesopotamia, Freedberg also notes examples in which images seem to exhibit life *prior to* or even *apart from* their consecration.⁴⁷ In elaborating on this point, Freedberg draws upon the work of Hans Georg Gadamer, who also comments on the ontological status of art, though not in reference to the *mīs pî* ceremony. Gadamer contends that "the public act of consecration or unveiling which assigns to [a work of art] its purpose does not give it its significance. Rather it is already a structure with a

⁴⁵ Freedberg, *The Power of Images*, 83.

⁴⁶ Terms such as "real presence" and "essence" are, admittedly, slippery philosophical terms, and as such, their application to ANE visual representation is somewhat tenuous. The term "real" is particularly problematic because, as I mentioned earlier, modern Western notions surrounding the bifurcation of representation and reality do not apply to ANE ontology. In a similar way, there seems to be no clear concept of "essence" in ANE anthropology, or at least their sense of a person's or deity's essence is far more pluridimensional and fluid than what is typically implied by this term in English. Thus, in using the terms "real presence" and "essence" to talk about the animation of art in ANE visual culture I urge caution in too readily transferring modern Western notions of these terms to ANE contexts. Nevertheless, given these limitations, "real presence" and "essence" still seem to be apt terms for describing ANE beliefs about how the deity came to indwell a cult statue. Indeed, these terms are used by many scholars who have advanced research on the *mīs pî* ceremony, including Boden who uses "essence" ("The Mesopotamian Washing of the Mouth (Mis Pi) Ritual"), Dick who uses "real presence" ("A Sacramental Encounter with Divinity"), and Bahrani who uses both "real" and "essence" (*The Graven Image; Rituals of War*). Whatever terms are used to describe this phenomenon, it is clear that ancient Mesopotamians believed that the *mīs pî* ceremony transformed an inert statute into a living god.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 83.

signifying-function of its own."⁴⁸ Gadamer seems to imply that rather than simply endowing an image with life, consecration ceremonies recognize, sanctify, or even enhance a potentiality already inherent in the image itself.⁴⁹ Something similar is true in the case of the *mīs pî* ceremony. Although the mouth-opening procedure is crucial, it does not provide the first link between the deity and the image. The image, in fact, seems to have a certain "god potential" from the outset insofar as the gods are said to have controlled the choice of the workers involved and ordained the specific time and place for the image to be born. Furthermore, the materials used to construct the cult statue were thought to have an intimate connection with the heavenly realm. The preferred material for making cult statues, wood from the *mēsu*-tree, is sometimes referred to as "the flesh of the gods" (*šīr ilī*).⁵⁰ Thus, in a certain sense, the wood of the statue embodies the divine essence even before it is fashioned into a cult statue.⁵¹ In light of this further insight into the *mīs pî* ceremony, I follow Freedberg in understanding

⁴⁸ Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method* (repr. ed.; New York: Continuum, 2006 [1960]), 137.

⁴⁹ Freedberg, *The Power of Images*, 92. It should be noted that Gadamer's theory effectively draws a distinction between how relics and images work. Though both are visual objects, only images obtain their ontological status by virtue of being figured or shaped, even if in an abstract or non-anthropomorphic manner. However, it should be noted that the efficaciousness of images and relics are, in many cases, closely tied together. For instance, in addition to discussing consecration ceremonies, Freedberg also notes that the animation of an image is sometimes achieved by concealing symbols, tokens, or relics of the deity within the image itself. This practice, which is based on the logic of sympathetic magic, is often on display in instances where relics of Christ, the Virgin, or the saints are placed within other images. Freedberg contends that this practice is based on "a fundamental sense of the peculiar and specific effectiveness of a substance or object placed within an image and believed to be in sympathy with what it represents" (*The Power of Images*, 94). Thus, even if Gadamer is right to suggest that images and relics work in different ways, it is nevertheless the case that they are often thought to work together to animate a given art object.

⁵⁰ Victor Avigdor Hurowitz, "What Goes in is What Comes Out: Materials for Creating Cult Statues," in *Text, Artifact and Image: Revealing Ancient Israelite Religion* (ed. Gary M. Beckman and Theodore J. Lewis; BJS 346; Providence: Brown University Press, 2006), 6.

⁵¹ Hurowitz contends that "When made into a statue [the *mēsu*-tree] does not change its essence in the least. The new statue is not a new entity but a transformation or metamorphosis of a previously existing divinity. The statue, which we might consider a new god, was in fact always a god and it remains one" (*ibid.*, 13).

consecration ceremonies as demonstrating, and to a certain extent actualizing, the ontological potential of certain images or materials to function as the real presence of the thing or person they represent.⁵²

My point in engaging this aspect of Freedberg's visual theory is not to establish any one single mechanism by which images come to embody the power and presence of their referent. In fact, in some of the examples discussed above, it is clear that multiple explanations can be at play at the same time. Rather, the more important point I want to stress is the tendency of images to come to life for their viewers. This, after all, is Freedberg's central claim. By examining the history of visual response, it is clear that viewers not only look to images as a language of communication but they also relate to them as living beings, capable of structuring human responses and ordering social interactions. In the end, Freedberg provides the biblical scholar less with an exhaustive theory of the animation of art and more with an analytical method for how one might evaluate the implications of visual response, whether in ancient or modern contexts.⁵³ In this brief discussion, I have already begun to highlight points of connection between Freedberg's theoretical interests and various aspects of ANE visual culture. I will return to this latter topic in more detail momentarily, but for now it is necessary to expand

⁵² Freedberg sums up the matter this way: "Images work *because* they are consecrated, but at the same time they work *before* they are consecrated" (*The Power of Images*, 98; emphasis his).

⁵³ Freedberg disavows any interest in providing an overarching theory of visual response. He contends that "if readers expect a specific theory of response to emerge by the end of the book, they will be disappointed, especially if by 'theory' is meant a fully explanatory theory, one that will in principle take care of all cases. The aim, instead, has been to develop adequate terms, and to set out the possibilities for the ways in which cognitive theory may be nourished by the evidence of history" (*The Power of Images*, xxii).

Freedberg's theoretical framework by taking up a related, but conceptually distinct, approach to explaining the animation of art.

5.2.2. Alfred Gell and the Agency of Art

In his posthumously published volume, *Art and Agency*, Alfred Gell moves away from traditional approaches to the meaning of images, but in ways that are slightly different than Freedberg.⁵⁴ Instead of stressing the ontological status images are afforded in and through visual response, Gell seeks to develop what he calls an "anthropology of art." What makes Gell's approach "anthropological" is not that he simply acknowledges the fact that aesthetic responses and visibility are culturally constructed phenomena, though he agrees with other scholars who endeavor to make this very point.⁵⁵ Rather, Gell wishes to put forward a theory about art that is itself anthropological in nature—that is, one that considers art objects as social agents within a network of relationships.⁵⁶ In this view, works of art are treated much like human beings, though not so much because they are endowed with a lifelike status (which is closer to Freedberg's position), but rather because viewers attribute causality and intentionality

⁵⁴ Gell prepared a full draft of this book and left notes that described revisions, which he unfortunately never had time to implement himself. As a result, the present version of the book can only be said to approximate what Gell might have intended for the final form of his research. For further discussion, see the foreword offered by Nicholas Thomas in *Art and Agency*, vii-xiii.

⁵⁵ See for instance Lee Baxendall, ed., *Radical Perspectives in the Arts* (Harmondsworth: Pelican, 1972); Sally Price, *Primitive Art in Civilized Places* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989); Jeremy Coote, "Marvels of Everyday Vision: The Anthropology of Aesthetics and the Cattle Keeping Nilotes," in *Anthropology, Art and Aesthetics* (ed. Jeremy Coote and Anthony Shelton; New York: Routledge, 1992), 266-75; Howard Morphy, "Aesthetics is a Cross-Cultural Category," in *Key Debates in Anthropology* (ed. Tim Ingold; New York: Routledge, 1996), 255-60; and Anna Grimshaw and Amanda Ravetz, eds., *Visualizing Anthropology* (Bristol, Eng.: Intellect, 2005).

⁵⁶ Gell, *Art and Agency*, 4.

to them.⁵⁷ What this means is that Gell conceives of art objects as occupying positions within social systems that are typically reserved for human agents.⁵⁸ Seen from this vantage point, an anthropology of art can help make sense of the strange ways people respond to images by positing that material objects can participate in and structure interactions between other agents.⁵⁹ Thus, while images are not strictly speaking alive, they can function as and substitute for living things within certain social contexts.

Critical to Gell's anthropological approach to art is his understanding of two key concepts: "index" and "agency." Throughout his work, Gell uses index as a technical term for a variety of art objects and images. He adapts this terminology from the semiotics of Charles Sanders Peirce. For Peirce, an index is a "natural sign" from which the viewer can make a causal inference, or abduction, about the thing signified. This inference is not based on either iconic resemblance or symbolic convention. Rather, the index is a gestural mode, a way of signaling the presence of an otherwise absent signified. The classic example involves the relationship of smoke and fire. Peirce considers smoke to be an index of fire because in most cases, one can plausibly infer that smoke is a natural outcome of fire. As suggested above (§5.2.1), some biblical scholars also consider Yahweh's cherubim throne to be an index insofar as it indirectly signals Yahweh's presence.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Gell, *Art and Agency*, 122.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 11.

⁶⁰ See for instance Halbertal and Margalit, *Idolatry*, 48-49. Tryggve N.D. Mettinger seems to maintain a similar understanding of the indexical nature of so-called "aniconic iconography," including the cherubim throne or ark (*No Graven Image? Israelite Aniconism in Its Ancient Near Eastern Context* [ConBOT 42; Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1995], 20-24.

But in *Art and Agency*, Gell slightly reworks Peirce's semiotic understanding of the index to make it more compatible with his anthropological approach. Rather than being a natural outcome of a physical phenomenon or an indirect signal of an absent referent, Gell defines an index in social terms. In this sense, an index is a *social* outcome of a pattern of behaviors and perspectives generated within a certain anthropological system. In Gell's view, any type of image, even those based on natural resemblance or cultural convention, can function as an index of social relationships.⁶¹ For example, most scholars would categorize an anthropomorphic cult statue as a type of "icon" in Peirce's system. However for Gell, when such an image is worshipped and cared for in a temple setting, it not only serves as an index of the deity's agency (i.e., it signals the deity's ability to bless, curse, cause famines, initiate wars, abandon cities, etc.) but it also signals real social interactions among its worshippers (i.e., the effort humans make to interact with the deity by clothing, feeding, washing, and protecting the cult object). Gell's use of the term index is at times uneven and in general he does not sufficiently delineate its parameters. Nevertheless, it is clear that Gell develops this term as a shorthand way of referencing how an anthropological approach to art makes inferences about the status of images from the nature of visual response. To put the matter simply, just as a semiotician (or anyone else, for that matter) would infer the existence of fire from the appearance of smoke, a social anthropologist would infer the existence of social agency from observing how viewers respond to and talk about a material object.

⁶¹ Gell, *Art and Agency*, 15.

Gell's notion of the art index is closely linked to his understanding of agency. For Gell, agency is an attribute of persons or things who/which are seen as "initiating causal sequences of a particular type, that is, events caused by acts of mind or will or intention, rather than the mere concatenation of physical events."⁶² In Gell's view, agency is simply a culturally prescribed way of talking about causation and intentionality within a network of social relationships.⁶³ While agents are most often human beings, this need not be the case. Social anthropologist Bruno Latour argues that it is possible to conceive of sacred beings such as gods, spirits, and ancestors as social agents if humans attribute to them the power to alter a state of affairs in the world or to influence real interactions between human actors.⁶⁴ Gell extends this idea to material objects. In this way, dolls, cars, relics, sculptures, paintings, or any other host of inanimate objects can function as agents as long as they are understood to be the source or origins of causal events.⁶⁵

A very basic example of this phenomenon can be seen in the way in which people talk about (or to) their automobiles. It is not uncommon to hear someone say something to the effect of "My car just didn't want to start this morning" or "It (or even he/she) let me down again." In these cases, while the speaker does not actually believe that her car is a living thing, she nevertheless speaks and acts in ways that suggest that the car has a human-like mind, will, or intention. To use Gell's terminology, the car is thought to have social agency insofar as it is treated as the cause of specific events or circumstances.

⁶² Gell, *Art and Agency*, 16.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, 17.

⁶⁴ For further discussion, see Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory* (Oxford: Clarendon, 2005).

⁶⁵ For further discussion, see Gell, *Art and Agency*, 16-23.

Gell emphasizes that there is no "as if" in such examples—the car *does* have real agency in terms of how it structures and motivates human speech and responses. To be sure, this agency is initially bestowed by human actors and thus is not an inherent property of the car (or any other object). Nor is the agency of objects of the same order or of the same kind as human agency.⁶⁶ Nevertheless, one of the central notions of Gell's theory is that from a strictly anthropological point of view, a work of art and a human being can both exhibit a type of functional social agency in a network of relationships. This means that the agency of art is never self-sufficient or independent of social contexts or other social agents. In order for any object to function as an agent, it must act with respect to a human associate, or "patient," that is causally affected by the agent's action.⁶⁷ In the examples above, a car does not have agency apart from those people who respond to it as a type of social agent. As a result, the type of agency Gell has in mind is an inferential category that attempts to describe the social function of an inanimate object in light of human responses and behaviors. Even though Gell would admit that an object's agency is a projected or imputed agency that ultimately originates with human actors, it is nevertheless the case that how those human actors interact with the object implies that it has the capacity to induce certain effects or responses that are typically associated with other human actors. Saying that an art object has agency is simply a way of describing an anthropological situation in which humans talk about, interact with, and respond to inanimate objects as they would with other human

⁶⁶ Gell readily admits that the agency of humans and the agency of (art) objects are different. He refers to them as primary and secondary agents, respectively, so as to recognize the obvious fact that art objects are not agents in the sense of being morally responsible or cognitively sentient beings (*Art and Agency*, 20-21).

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 22.

actors. In Gell's theory, agency is not an ontological category but rather a social or relational one. Thus, Gell ultimately is more concerned with analyzing an image's social effects rather than its status or essence.⁶⁸

Nevertheless, much like Freedberg, Gell is interested in how art gains its agency in the first place. He contends that there are two mechanisms or strategies by which an image is converted into a social agent. In the first means of deriving agency, which Gell calls the "externalist strategy," an image becomes endowed with agency when human patients "simply stipulat[e] for it a role as a social other" in a relational network.⁶⁹ This mechanism of agency is said to be "external" since the object's agency is not a function of the internal properties of the image itself—that is, its physical form or substance. Rather, the externalist strategy requires that an art object obtains agency by means of being inserted into a particular social milieu. For instance, when a statue of a deity is set up in a temple and procedures are established for taking care of it like a living being, the statue effectively enmeshes human participants in a social exchange that both implies and confers agency on both the deity and the worshippers. By virtue of installing the statue within the cultic operation of the temple and its personnel, the statue becomes an agent that can generate and structure real, physical interactions with various patients (the worshipper, priests, etc.).⁷⁰ If the cult image is removed from this social

⁶⁸ This qualification is important because it potentially mitigates the implausibility of seeing an image as an independent form of life—a point one might criticize with respect to Freedberg's or Mitchell's theories.

⁶⁹ Gell, *Art and Agency*, 133.

⁷⁰ In this sense, Gell's externalist strategy of agency might be said to overlap with certain aspects of Freedberg's theory, especially his emphasis on the role of consecration ceremonies in the attribution of life to images. For instance, these ceremonies might be thought of as initiating a process by which an image takes on the role as a social being within a network of relationships. However, Freedberg does not

context, say by theft or cultic reform, its agency, at least of the externalist variety, would be defused.

However, since neither the material nor the form of the cult statue is an essential component of its agency in the externalist strategy, cultic operations easily can be restored if a replacement statue is provided. There is some evidence that this in fact happened in ancient Mesopotamia. When Sennacherib removed the statue of Nanā from Uruk, it seems that the priests of the local cult soon after fashioned a replacement statue, effectively restoring the cult to its normal operation. In fact, the statue stolen by Sennacherib was itself a replacement, since the original statue had been in exile in Elam for over 1600 years according to the annals of Ashurbanipal.⁷¹ Even though there continued to be a strong desire among the conquered people for the repatriation of the original statue, perhaps for historical or sentimental reasons, the effective operation of its religious cult was not contingent on the return of the stolen object. The fact that the new statue could take on the same role in the social matrix of temple worship as the original statue suggests that its agency is strictly (or mostly) a function of an externalist strategy.

In addition, Gell contends that the agency of art also can be achieved by means of an "internalist strategy." This mechanism stipulates that the form and shape of an image matters in terms of how it is perceived to function as a social agent. Gell explains that the internalist strategy depends on a general analogy between the array of intra-

explicitly make this point. In fact, Freedberg's point seems to be that the consecration ceremonies effect a change in an image's ontological status, not its social function.

⁷¹ Mordechai Cogan, *Imperialism and Religion: Assyria, Judah, and Israel in the Eighth and Seventh Centuries B.C.E.* (SBLMS 19; Missoula, Mont.: Scholars Press, 1974), 34.

subjective relationships assumed for human beings (i.e., an exterior body implies an internal mind/self) and the physical form of an art object. As the logic goes, while the internal mind/self of an art object, such as a statue, cannot be seen, its presence is implied by the existence of certain external features that are analogous to the human body.⁷² While this mind/body analogy is not contingent on any strict sense of mimetic realism in terms of how the art object is rendered, the internalist strategy does require that the image exhibit certain anthropomorphic features, such as eyes, ears, a nose, and a mouth.⁷³ Gell especially focuses on the importance of the eyes as an index of "interiority"—that is, the possession of a mind or soul that is capable of causation and intentionality. For instance, Gell concludes that "the particular attention paid to the eyes of [cult statues] arises, not from the need to represent the body realistically, but from the need to represent the body in such a way as to imply that the body is *only* a body, and that a much more important entity, the mind, is immured within it."⁷⁴ Thus, from the vantage point of the internalist strategy, an image's eyes are an outward manifestation of an implied internal mind/self.⁷⁵

A similar perspective might be at work in the consecration ceremonies mentioned above. While the particulars of these ceremonies vary over time and place, they almost always entail the manipulation of a statue's facial features—washing the

⁷² Gell, *Art and Agency*, 136.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, 135.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 136.

⁷⁵ A similar notion is evident in the Hebrew Bible as well. Since biblical authors (and many of their ANE counterparts) did not have a fully developed sense of the human brain, they tended to associate the eye with the capacity of thought and knowledge (cf. Jer 5:21; Num 15:24). In addition, the eye can be used to talk about an individual's inner being and spiritual faculties, including character (Ps 22:9), arrogance (Isa 2:11), humility (Job 22:29), mockery (Prov 30:17), desire (Deut 12:8), temptation (Job 31:1), and so forth. In this sense, the eye is closely connected to the heart/mind/self.

mouth, opening the eyes, or even fashioning pupils (which is often accomplished by inserting a precious stone or dot of black ink in the middle of the eye). In the Mesopotamian *mīs pî* ceremony, the opening of the statue's mouth represents the decisive moment in the process by which the deity comes to animate the image's material form. In fact, the incantation texts associated with this ceremony make it clear that the opening of the mouth is essential to the image coming to life: "This statue without its mouth opened cannot smell incense, cannot eat food nor drink water."⁷⁶ The logic here seems to be consistent with Gell's internalist strategy insofar as the cult statue's subjectivity and agency is inferred on the basis of the existence and activation of certain external features. Quite literally, the statue's eyes and mouth function as a window (or index) to its soul.

Gell's internalist and externalist strategies are not mutually exclusive mechanisms for conferring social agency. In fact, both processes seem to work together with anthropomorphic cult statues in the ancient Near Eastern world. While these statues are activated or enlivened through ceremonies that focus on the eyes and mouth (a process reflective of an internalist strategy), the agency conferred in this fashion is not permanent. As discussed above, if such a statue is removed from its social matrix, its agency can be reassigned to a replacement statue (a process reflective of an externalist strategy). Neither is the internalist strategy always a sufficient condition for conferring agency. As I discuss in chapter 6, there is ample evidence that non-

⁷⁶ This part of the incantation is best preserved in the Sultantepe tablet STT 200, lines 43-44. See Dick and Walker, "The Induction of the Cult Image," 99. See also idem, *The Induction of the Cult Image in Ancient Mesopotamia*.

anthropomorphic symbols associated with the deities (such as a winged sun disk, a spade, etc.) could also be objects of worship in ancient Mesopotamia. In these cases, it seems that social agency is strictly a product of an externalist mechanism since, in the absence of anthropomorphic features such as eyes, ears, a mouth, etc., it would be more difficult to imply the presence of an internal mind/self. One might conclude from this observation that the externalist strategy can apply to any type of art object while the internalist strategy only applies to perceptual art—that is, images that attempt to represent their referent in a more naturalistic (or in the case of ANE cult statues, anthropomorphic) fashion. Although Gell does not explicitly make this point, the association of the internalist strategy with perceptual art seems to follow logically from his theory. However, ANE visual practices suggest a more complicated situation. In certain cases, mouth-washing (*mīs pî*) and mouth-opening (*pīt pî*) consecration ceremonies were performed on abstract symbols, such as in the case of the *uskāru* crescent of the moon god.⁷⁷ These situations might suggest that the *mīs pî* ceremonies also play a role in the externalist mechanism insofar as they inaugurate/affirm the role of the symbol as an actor in the social network of temple worship. Alternatively, these situations might imply that the internalist strategy is not strictly contingent on a certain mode of artistic representation since even abstract symbols can be thought to have an internal mind/self. In either case, ANE visual practices suggest that internalist and externalist strategies overlap in complex—and sometimes complementary—ways.

⁷⁷ Tallay Ornan, *The Triumph of the Symbol: Pictorial Representation of Deities in Mesopotamia and the Biblical Image-ban* (OBO 213; Fribourg: University Press; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2005), 109. cf. Dick and Walker, *Born in Heaven, Made on Earth*, 71.

On the whole, Gell offers useful terms and concepts that can help shed new light on how and why art objects obtain subjectivity and agency in the eyes of many observers. However, Gell's theory is often difficult to penetrate and, perhaps for this reason, is far less often cited than Freedberg's *The Power of Images*. Nevertheless, Gell's anthropological approach has certain advantages. By framing the power of images in terms of social agency and actor-network theories, Gell connects his theoretical framework with a broader body of literature in the field of social anthropology. In addition, Gell's theory seems to apply to a wider-range of material artifacts than does Freedberg's theory, especially since the external strategy of agency is not contingent on a specific mode of signification (i.e., perceptual art). In this respect, Gell's externalist and internalist strategies might prove to offer a more useful explanatory mechanism when it comes to analyzing the various aniconic representations mentioned in the Hebrew Bible.

5.2.3. Conclusions

Through this brief discussion, I have attempted to elucidate how Freedberg and Gell approach questions surrounding the life of images and the implications of visual response in slightly different ways. On the one hand, Freedberg contends that the animation of art is predicated on a belief that signifier and signified can become ontologically fused in the mind of the viewer. The result is that an image is not merely believed to symbolically represent its referent but is actually thought to manifest the presence or essence of the person/thing it represents. On the other hand, Gell explains the lifelike quality of images not in terms of art's ontological status but rather its

anthropological function. In Gell's perspective, an image comes "alive" when it generates and structures social interactions in much the same way as human agents. Despite these different approaches, Freedberg and Gell ultimately share the same goal: explaining why it is that viewers so often talk about and treat images as if they were animate beings. In this way, these scholars not only bring increased attention to the history and theory of visual response but they also directly respond to the question posed at the beginning of this chapter about the nature and status of images.

Despite their potential relevance, these theories have yet to be appropriated for the methods and practices of biblical iconography or other areas of religio-historical research. To some degree, this is understandable. Neither Freedberg nor Gell deal extensively with ancient Near Eastern art, and only on occasion do they explore the implications of visual response for religious belief and practice. But I suspect that even if Freedberg and Gell dealt more explicitly with ANE religious visual culture, some scholars might still be reticent to engage their work. In my view, the disconnect occurs at the level of methodology. For the most part, Freedberg and Gell downplay traditional iconographic concerns (at least in the two volumes mentioned above) and, as a result, devote little attention to identifying the subject matter, symbolic meaning, and historical precedents of given images—that is, question about the original production of visual artifacts. Instead, they focus on the implications of how images mediate social relationships and structure various types of responses in certain viewers. While I admit that these issues are occasionally more difficult to track when dealing with ancient visual artifacts, questions about visual response and reception are nevertheless

germane to biblical iconography and religio-historical research more broadly. As noted earlier (§4.1), matters about production have been treated more extensively in past contributions to biblical iconography and art history, and my goal here is not to retrace these discussions, however important they might be. Rather, my purpose in engaging theories from Freedberg and Gell is to prompt scholars to expand their analytic perspective beyond traditional concerns with production and to study images in a way that takes more seriously the implications of visual response, including what these responses might imply about the ontology and social agency of art in specific historical contexts.⁷⁸ In the next two sections of this chapter (§§5.3-4), I more explicitly demonstrate how Freedberg's and Gell's theories can shed new light on—and be further informed by—an analysis of ANE visual artifacts and their potential relation to Israelite religion and the Hebrew Bible.

5.3. The Status and Function of Ancient Near Eastern Art

My discussion thus far has attempted to reevaluate issues surrounding the fundamental question, *what is an image?* While it is helpful to generally understand an image as a form of mediated representation, some contemporary visual theorists, such as Mitchell, Freedberg, and Gell, contend that this sort of definition does not adequately account for

⁷⁸ As noted in §4.1, interest in visual response is often thought to have an ambiguous relationship with historical or contextual studies. While this might be the case in certain circumstances, I remain skeptical of those who imply that historical-critical approaches to ancient art would only be interested in questions about production. In fact, the study of visual response, reception, and signification can function as a way of anchoring production-oriented studies to contextual concerns about how specific viewing communities processed visual data. Questions about historical acts of seeing are no less historical-critical than are questions about historical modes of production. In other words, a concern for authors/producers is not inherently more historical (or critical, for that matter) than a concern for readers/viewers.

the history of visual response. In numerous different contexts both past and present, viewers have tended to talk about and treat visual representation in ways that suggest that images are thought to be more like living beings than inanimate works of art. Rather than dismissing these responses as reflecting only naïve superstitions or primitive beliefs in magic, visual theorists attempt to more closely scrutinize intellectual traditions that do not presuppose that there exists a clear ontological distinction between representation and the realm of the real. In particular, Freedberg and Gell reconceptualize what an image is by developing theories that explain how images are afforded the status of living entities and the function of social agents. Though neither of these scholars deals extensively with ancient images, their perspectives can potentially shed new light on certain aspects of ANE visual culture.

A compelling example of how contemporary theory and the study of ancient art might be integrated together is once again found in the work of ANE art historian Zainab Bahrani. Throughout much of her research, but especially in *The Graven Image*, Bahrani raises critical questions about the status of images and the implications of visual response in ancient Mesopotamia.⁷⁹ While Bahrani does not offer a sustained engagement of the work of Mitchell, Freedberg, or Gell, she does subject fundamental aspects of Assyro-Babylonian visual culture to rigorous theoretical reflection. Her primary argument is that in the ancient Mesopotamian world, notions about the status and function of images "developed quite apart from post-Greek metaphysics and ideas

⁷⁹ Bahrani, *The Graven Image: Representation in Babylonia and Assyria* (Archaeology, Culture, and Society series; Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003). See especially chapter 5, "Šalmu: Representation in the Real," 121-48.

of presentation as mimesis."⁸⁰ As a result, not unlike the theorists discussed above (§§5.2.1-2), Bahrani attempts to develop an approach to visual representation that adequately accounts for the power and agency of images in various social contexts. While at certain points Bahrani does draw on the work of recent theorists, including Derrida, Lacan, Deleuze, and Baudrillard, her conclusions mostly emerge from an inductive analysis of primary materials from ancient Mesopotamia, including both images and texts. Thus, rather than merely applying contemporary theory to ancient artifacts, Bahrani's research seeks to uncover aspects of Mesopotamian visual culture that resonate with—and indeed, anticipate—perspectives on display in more recent theoretical reflections. The intersection of contemporary theory and ancient art is especially evident in how Bahrani understands two particular issues: (1) ancient Mesopotamian perspectives on the nature of the *šalmu* (§5.3.1); and (2) the common practice in the ancient Mesopotamian warfare of stealing and/or defacing royal monuments and divine statuary (§5.3.2). In both of these cases, the connection between contemporary theory and ancient art is not unidirectional.⁸¹ Rather, just as Freedberg and Gell's theories may help us better understand aspects of Assyro-Babylonian visual culture, so too can practices and perspectives on display in the ancient world further refine and inform contemporary theories about the life of images and the implications of visual response.

⁸⁰ Bahrani, *The Graven Image*, 1.

⁸¹ Bahrani emphasizes this same point (*ibid*, 10).

5.3.1. Embodying Presence: The *ṣalmu* in Theory and Response

Perhaps most significant for the purposes of my discussion is Bahrani's reassessment of the nature and status of the *ṣalmu* in Assyro-Babylonian visual culture. This Akkadian term can be variously translated as relief, statue, monument, or painting, though a more general term, such as image, is perhaps the best option since Mesopotamian scribes apply *ṣalmu* to a variety of different kinds of representation, typically of kings and deities.⁸² Regardless of how it is rendered in English, the term *ṣalmu* has often been studied from the perspective of the Western aesthetic tradition's concern with different modes of signification—that is, the extent of mimetic correspondence between an image and its referent. While discussions surrounding such matters have important implications for methods of image analysis,⁸³ Bahrani presses the issue further by suggesting that the relationship between a *ṣalmu* and its referent "functioned according to a system unrelated to mimesis or perceptualism."⁸⁴ In making this claim, Bahrani intends to do more than just reiterate the now widely accepted notion that realism in

⁸² For further discussion, see Irene Winter, "Art in Empire: The Royal Image and the Visual Dimensions of Assyrian Ideology," in *Assyria 1995: Proceedings of the 10th Anniversary Symposium of the Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, Helsinki, September 7-11, 1995* (ed. Simo Parpola and Robert M. Whiting; Helsinki: The Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, 1997), 364-65; and Bahrani, "Assault and Abduction: The Fate of the Royal Image in the Ancient Near East," *Art History* 18 (1995): 378-79 n. 46. See also my earlier discussion about the mode of signification (§4.3.3).

⁸³ For instance, Winter has argued that the *ṣalmu* of the king is not a portrait in the modern sense of the term. Rather, the king's image was not primarily designed to resemble the king in a strictly naturalistic or mimetic way. Rather, the king's *ṣalmu* constituted a culturally mediated sign that encoded social and political ideals about kingship in a specific representation of the royal body. That the image of the king reflects social and political ideals does not necessarily rule out there being some degree of resemblance between the appearance of the *ṣalmu* and the king's physical body. Indeed, at certain time periods and in different media, these representations did display varying levels of realism. Even still, it is perhaps best to think of the *ṣalmu* as a portrayal of kingship rather than as a portrait (at least in the modern sense of the term) of the king. For further discussion, see Winter, "Art in Empire" and eadem, "Idols of the King: Royal Images as Recipients of Ritual Action in Ancient Mesopotamia," *Journal of Ritual Studies* 6 (1992): 13-42.

⁸⁴ Bahrani, *The Graven Image*, 122.

art varies greatly from culture to culture.⁸⁵ Instead, Bahrani more provocatively suggests that how viewers negotiate the difference between reality and representation is itself culturally determined.⁸⁶ Within the context of Assyro-Babylonian visual culture in particular, viewers did not maintain a rigid, ontological distinction between signifier and signified. In this tradition, the signifier itself was thought to have a nature and status that made it "an integral part of the real."⁸⁷ In Bahrani's view, the *şalmu* had "the potential of becoming an entity in its own right, a being rather than a copy of a being."⁸⁸ In other words, the *şalmu* was not simply a form of mediated representation. Rather, it functioned as a mode of embodiment such that the image itself "takes the place of the real or is conceived as a real essence."⁸⁹ Bahrani's perspective, which echoes many of the ideas expressed by Freedberg, radically challenges the notion in the Western aesthetic tradition that there exists a clearly defined dichotomy between reality and artifice, original and reproduction.

From the vantage point of Bahrani's research, none of Peirce's categories of visual representation—icon, symbol, and index—quite captures the nature of the *şalmu* within the context of Assyro-Babylonian visual culture.⁹⁰ Instead, Bahrani contends that

⁸⁵ The *locus classicus* on this issue is Ernst Gombrich's *Art and Illusion: A Study in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* (Bollingen Series 35; A. W. Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts 5; New York: Pantheon Books, 1960) which argues, among other things, that there is no normative sense of realism in art history and that variations in style are, at least in part, based on different modes of seeing the world.

⁸⁶ Bahrani, *The Graven Image*, 88. A similar claim is made in Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (trans. Brian Massumi; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

⁸⁷ Bahrani, *The Graven Image*, 122.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 125.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 137. Bahrani does draw upon Peirce's language at one point when she suggests that ANE viewers saw the *şalmu* as a type of "indexically linked image" (*ibid.*, 88). However, Bahrani neither elaborates on this point nor relies on this language throughout the rest of her study (though see 147). In

the *şalmu* is more akin to a simulacrum. In philosophical reflection on the visual arts, the term simulacrum is often used to refer to a kind of image without a model, a form of virtual reality or "hyperreality" that parades as an independent being.⁹¹ Many art historians and philosophers throughout history have regarded simulacra as dangerous or deceptive entities since they subvert the stable dichotomy between representation and reality. Perhaps most famously, in Plato's *Sophists* the simulacrum is sharply contrasted with the icon (*eidos*), which represents the real in a mimetic fashion. According to Plato, the simulacrum is a phantasm that, in making a false claim to being, perverts the true (mimetic) purpose of the arts.⁹² Biblical scholarship also tends to cast simulacra in a negative light. Idolatry in the Hebrew Bible is often characterized in terms of a simulated reality—that is, idols deceive their viewers by masquerading as lifelike manifestations of the gods they represent. Not unlike Plato's *Sophists*, the idol parodies in Second Isaiah might be understood as emphasizing the fact that idols make false claims to being and are really nothing more than lifeless, senseless, thoughtless creations of ironsmiths and carpenters (see esp. Isa 44:9-20). When the author of Second Isaiah describes an idol as a "fraud" (שקר, Isa 44:20), he seems to anticipate the widely accepted philosophical notion that idols, like simulacra, are deceptive entities that make a false claim to being and agency.

fact, it seems that Bahrani understands the relationship between the signifier and its referent not only as one of contiguity (as is the case with Peirce's index) but also as one of essence.

⁹¹ Bahrani, *The Graven Image*, 125. For a fuller discussion of concepts surrounding the simulacrum, see Michael Camille, "Simulacrum," in *Critical Terms for Art History* (ed. Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff; 2d. ed.; Chicago: University of Chicago, 2003), 35-50.

⁹² See especially, Plato's *Sophists* §236 a-d.

However, more recent philosophical discourse has challenged this negative characterization of the simulacrum. Among others, French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Jean Baudrillard argue that simulacra constitute neither failed imitations nor degraded copies.⁹³ Rather, as Deleuze puts it, the simulacrum "harbors a positive power which denies [the distinction between] the original and the copy, the model and the reproduction."⁹⁴ Likewise, Baudrillard contends that in the concept of the simulacrum one comes to terms not just with the power of images to manifest reality, but conversely, with the fact that the realm of the real is replete with representation. As Baudrillard puts it, "art is everywhere, since artifice is at the very heart of reality."⁹⁵ In fact, not only is it sometimes difficult to recognize that an image is a form of representation (*contra* de Hulster), but so too is it possible to define the real as "*that of which it is possible to give equivalent reproduction.*"⁹⁶ Thus, reality and representation are fully entangled in a web of ontological meaning.⁹⁷ Put simply, for Baudrillard images

⁹³ Jean Baudrillard, "The Precession of Simulacra," in *Simulacra and Simulation* (trans. Sheila Faria Glaser; *Body in Theory*; Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994 [1981]), 1-42; and Gilles Deleuze, "The Simulacrum and Ancient Philosophy," in *The Logic of Sense* (ed. by Constance V. Boundas; trans. Mark Lester and Charles Stivale; *European Perspectives: A Series in Social Thought and Cultural Criticism*; New York: Columbia University Press, 1990 [1969]), 253-79.

⁹⁴ Deleuze, "The Simulacrum and Ancient Philosophy," 262.

⁹⁵ Baudrillard, *Simulations* (trans. Paul Foss, Paul Patton, and Philip Beitchman; *Semiotext[e] Foreign Agents Series*; New York: Semiotext[e], 1983 [1981]), 131.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 146; emphasis his.

⁹⁷ It should be noted that notions surrounding the simulacrum are not only of interest to philosophers and visual theorists but are also prevalent in the world of science fiction literature. Perhaps most notable are Phillip K. Dick's many short stories that deal with simulacra, virtual reality, and the realm of the hyperreal. Particularly interesting is Dick's 1956 short story, "Pay for the Printer," in *The Father Thing* (vol. 3 of *The Complete Stories of Philip K. Dick*; London: Underwood-Miller, 1987), 239-52. In this story, Dick describes a post-nuclear holocaust world in which people have become completely dependent not on real things but on copies of real things that are made by a benign alien being named Biltong. This creature can make copies of every physical object (cars, toasters, clothes, etc.) that the people bring to it. Eventually, these copies of reality begin to fall apart and disintegrate on their own and the Biltong is no longer able to produce further copies. In the end, the people are left having to relearn how to produce real objects, such as a simple cup. Dick's story becomes all the more chilling—and realistic—in light of the

embody the presence of reality even as reality is densely embedded with representation.

Baudrillard's understanding of the simulacrum provides Bahrani with the vocabulary and conceptual framework for explaining how the *şalmu* was understood in ancient Assyro-Babylonian visual culture. Bahrani contends that in ancient Mesopotamian thought, representation and reality "could never be separated according to the ontological categories in which we believe."⁹⁸ Following Bahrani, I contend that the *şalmu*, not unlike the simulacrum, can be conceived of as a type of hyperreality in which the real presence of a thing or person could be embodied in and through representation. In the Assyro-Babylonian world, images could function as substitutes for, not just representations of, the things or people they signify. For Bahrani, this conclusion emerges not from a simplistic projection of contemporary theory onto ancient artifacts but rather a careful assessment of Mesopotamian perspectives on the nature and status of images. In particular, in the Assyro-Babylonian intellectual tradition it was believed that a person's presence could be experienced through his organic body as well as through a pluridimensional constellation of signifiers associated with that person—his name, offspring, hair, fingernails, garments, image, body double, and so forth.⁹⁹ Each of these signifiers were thought to manifest the presence or function of the person in question by means of an underlying connection between signifier and

recent development of 3-D printers that literally can make copies of almost any conceivable object. In addition to science fiction, the simulacrum has figured in analyses of social politics and culture criticism, including issues related to the virtual reality staged by Disneyland and rhetorical strategies of presidential campaigns. For further discussion, see especially Baudrillard's *Simulations*.

⁹⁸ Bahrani, *The Graven Image*, 12.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 132.

signified. In a sense, each of these signifiers repeats, rather than merely represents, its referent in ways that imply that representation and reality are not (always, at least) rigidly distinguished. As such, when an image stands in as a substitute for the thing it represents, "a sublation of the signified into the signifier occurs, and the effacement of the distinction between them allows the representation to take on the full meanings of what it represents."¹⁰⁰

Before proceeding to several examples of this phenomenon, a brief word of caution is in order. In my estimation the idea of the *šalmu* as a type of hyperreality or simulacrum does not imply that there is *no difference* between signifier and signified. On this account, Bahrani may seem to overstate her case when she suggests, "In ancient Iraq such distinctions [between reality and representation] are not simply blurred by invalid."¹⁰¹ Consider, for instance, a situation in which a Neo-Assyrian king was standing next to his own image, whether in the form of a statue or wall relief. An ancient viewer most certainly would have distinguished between the king and his *šalmu* and therefore would not have been confused about which was which. Thus, it would be taking Barhani's—or, for that matter, Freedberg's and Gell's—theory of representation too far to suggest that the distinction between signifier and signified was *always* and *completely* invalid in ANE (or any other) visual culture. Rather, it is better to say that there were certain circumstances and contexts that required this distinction to be invalidated in the eyes of the observer. In fact, Bahrani herself makes this very point. Instead of developing a general or universal rule about *all* forms of representation in the

¹⁰⁰ Bahrani, *The Graven Image*, 183.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 183.

ANE world, Bahrani limits her comments to "instances and cultures where the image came to stand in as a valid substitute for the thing represented and where there is a need for the distinction between the two to be blurred or even effaced."¹⁰² This did not always happen, and even when it did, some semblance of difference remained. As a result, Bahrani's point is to emphasize that in ancient Mesopotamia and perhaps other cultures in the ANE world, the *šalmu* had the potential to take the place of, or substitute for, the thing it represented.

This phenomenon is perhaps nowhere more evident than in the previously discussed *mīs pî* ceremony (§5.2.1). Although it is clear that the *mīs pî* ceremony plays a critical role in transforming the status of the cult image, scholars disagree somewhat about how ancient viewers would have understood the resulting relationship between the image and the deity. For instance, Robert Carroll and Richard Elliott Friedman independently argue that ancient Near Eastern viewers never fully equated the image and the deity and instead saw the image primarily as a reminder of the deity's presence.¹⁰³ In contrast, Edward M. Curtis argues that the deity's presence is unequivocally embodied in the statue itself.¹⁰⁴ Still others, such as Michael B. Dick, take what might be considered a mediating position. Dick suggests that the cult image is best understood on analogy with the Roman Catholic sacramental theology of transubstantiation insofar as the statue becomes a conduit for divine self-disclosure—

¹⁰² Bahrani, *The Graven Image*, 183.

¹⁰³ See for instance, Robert Carroll, "The Aniconic God and the Cult of Images," *ST* 31 (1977): 53; and Richard Elliott Friedman, *Who Wrote the Bible?* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall, 1987), 35.

¹⁰⁴ Edward M. Curtis, "Images in Mesopotamia and the Bible: A Comparative Study," in *The Bible in the Light of Cuneiform Literature* (ed. William W. Hallo, Bruce W. Jones, Gerald L. Mattingly; vol. 3 of *Scripture in Context*; ANETS 3; Lewiston: Mellen, 1990), 42.

indeed, the real presence of the deity.¹⁰⁵ Most likely, there was no single way of understanding this relationship in the ancient Near East, and perspectives probably varied across time and place. What is more, even though ancient viewers generally saw the *mīs pî* as conferring some degree of divine power, presence, or life on the image, they did not necessarily assume that there was a simple, one-to-one relationship between signifier and signified. In fact, the "real presence" conferred on the image was not permanent. The deity could abandon the image if it was neglected by its worshippers or put in danger by enemy forces.¹⁰⁶ Likewise, the presence and power of the deity was not confined to a single representation but was simultaneously accessible through multiple objects, including other cult statues and various attributes and symbols associated with the deity. Thorkild Jacobsen captures the interplay between identity and difference in the relationship between the cult image and deity in the following manner:

The god—or rather the specific form of him that was represented in this particular image—was born in heaven, not on earth. In the birth the craftsmen-gods that form the embryo in the womb gave it form. When born in heaven it consented to descend and to "participate" . . . in the image, thus transubstantiating it. The image as such remains a promise, a potential, and an incentive to theophany, to a divine presence, no more.¹⁰⁷

In light of these ambiguities, I think it is best to conclude that an image that went through the *mīs pî* ceremony was capable of making the deity's power and efficacy available to the viewer even as it never became fully coterminous with the deity in any simplistic or permanent fashion.

¹⁰⁵ Dick, "A Sacramental Encounter with Divinity," 43.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 57.

¹⁰⁷ Jacobsen, "The Graven Image," 29.

While the *mīs pî* ceremony nicely illustrates Bahrani's perspective, the sublation of signified and signifier is not constrained to divine images. For example, when an inauspicious omen was given for a king, officials would prepare a substitute king (*šar pūḫi*) as a type of body double to take his place. In Mesopotamian texts, the substitute is initially referred to as a *šalmu*, but after an elaborate ceremony in which the body double is, among other things, named as king and made to wear the king's garments, he simply becomes the king—not another king, but a repetition of the real king.¹⁰⁸ As in Gell's theory, there is no "as if" with regard to how the substitute king functions as a social (or better yet, political) agent. The logic of this practice of substitution is predicated on the belief that, as a signifier for the king, the body double embodies the presence of its referent, and as such, obtains the ontological status and social agency of the king himself. In fact, there is at least one example from the nineteenth century B.C.E. in which a substitute king, named Enlil-bani, retains the throne after the original king, Erra-imitti, died, even though he had been a mere gardener prior to the ceremony.¹⁰⁹ However, in this process the original (or real) king does not entirely lose claim to his royal status. During the period of substitution, which could last as long as a hundred days, the real king took on the guise of a farmer in the palace gardens. At the end of this period, the substitute king was put to death and given a royal funeral. Only at that point could the original king be restored, often through the repetition of enthronement

¹⁰⁸ Bahrani, *The Graven Image*, 130. This substitution does not seem to require physical resemblance, though it does seem to require a correspondence of social rank. Bahrani notes that in some cases, an individual was "fictitiously promoted to the rank of royal official solely for the purpose of being a possible candidate as substitute king" (*ibid.*, 130).

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 130.

rites.¹¹⁰ Thus, while the royal status of the original king seems to go underground during the reign of the substitute, it can be reactivated—that is, the "king potential" is never lost, though it seems that it can only be fully manifested in one individual at a time.

Another example involves ritual battle enactments. In anticipation of a military operation, officials would use tallow figurines in what amounted to a type of role-playing game of war.¹¹¹ At the broadest level, the ritual enactment itself can be understood as a simulacrum since the officials believed that what they did with the figurines would determine the real events on the battlefield. As a result, it was not enough simply to replace the king with his *šalmu* (the tallow figurine) since damage done to the one was thought to directly affect the other. Instead, through a secondary act of representational displacement, the tallow figurine of one of the king's officers was used as a type of miniature body double of the king's *šalmu*. The officials assured that the organic body of the king was twice removed from any potential harm in the ritual enactment. As in the previous example, Bahrani (following Deleuze) contends that the *šalmu* repeats the presence or essence of the king not unlike a fractal, and in so doing, creates, at least to a certain degree, "an indiscernibility of the original real and the unreal reproduction."¹¹² This notion suggests that reality itself is "made up of endless signs," each of which is part of a semantic constellation through one's identity (in this case, the king's) is expressed.¹¹³ Thus the web of interchangeability between

¹¹⁰ For further discussion of the "substitute king ritual" in Assyria, see Simo Parpola, *Letters from Assyrian and Babylonian Scholars to the Kings Esarhaddon and Assurbanipal* (Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1983; repr., Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1997), xxii-xxxii.

¹¹¹ For a brief discussion, see Bahrani, *The Graven Image*, 130-31.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 132.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 132-33.

representation and reality extends not only between a person and his *šalmu* but also between a multitude of signifiers, including an individual's garment, fingernails, seed, shadow, and so forth. This is why the king's presence can be encountered in the realm of the real through various signifiers, whether in the form of an organic body double or a tallow figurine.

If ancient Mesopotamians understood the *šalmu* as "enabl[ing] presence through reproduction," then it becomes necessary to reconsider the function of certain types of images in Assyro-Babylonian visual culture.¹¹⁴ Scholars have long recognized that some ANE images were believed to have an apotropaic power that extended beyond their iconographic content or propagandistic message. For instance, protective clay figurines, known as *lahmu* and *apkallu*, were often buried under palace floors and courtyards. Similarly, colossal winged bulls and lions called *lamassu* often flanked the entrance of a city or palace gate in order to guard them from attack.¹¹⁵ Bahrani describes these and other types of apotropaic objects as examples of "performative imagery" in that they do not as much present a mimetic copy of a preexisting reality as they create reality itself through an act of representation.¹¹⁶ As Bahrani puts it, "representation was thought to make things happen, not simply to depict."¹¹⁷ Thus, rather than explain the apotropaic function of certain images in terms of a primitive belief in animism, Bahrani conceptualizes this phenomenon in terms of a complex

¹¹⁴ Bahrani, *Rituals of War*, 52.

¹¹⁵ The *lamassu* often bear inscriptions that speak of them as animate objects that were capable of walking away (ibid., 52).

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 53.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 53.

metaphysical linkage between representation and reality.¹¹⁸ This linkage, however, moves in both directions. Just as the creation of a performative image can bring about an intended effect on reality, so too can the destruction of the same image defuse its power and agency (see §5.3.2). In either case, Bahrani's point is that images can have a performative function to the extent that they participate in and are affected by events in reality as a type of animate object.

5.3.1.1. Evaluation

How does Bahrani's understanding of the *šalmu* correspond with Freedberg's and Gell's approaches to the power and agency of the visual representation? On the one hand, I understand Bahrani's research as a way of historicizing contemporary theories about the animation of art for the specific context of Assyro-Babylonian visual culture.¹¹⁹ Broadly speaking, the idea of the simulacrum is a philosophical concept that enables Bahrani to talk about the ways in which the *šalmu* transcends the divide between representation and reality in a manner that closely adheres to the perspectives on display in these contemporary theorists. More specifically, like Freedberg, Bahrani argues that the *šalmu* is an ontological category rather than an aesthetic one.¹²⁰ As a mode of presencing the real, images in the ancient Mesopotamian world had the power to participate in, or even create, the very reality they sought to represent. As was the case with many of the examples Freedberg provides, ANE viewers responded to images in much the same way

¹¹⁸ Bahrani, *Rituals of War*, 59-60.

¹¹⁹ Eadem, *The Graven Image*, 10. Thus, as was the case in the previous discussion about the nature of visual representation (§4.2.4), Bahrani shows in practice what other contemporary scholars suggest in theory.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 133.

as they would to a living being. Thus, the *şalmu* is a concrete, contextually situated example of what Freedberg contends is a widely attested phenomenon in the history of visual response.

However, in my view, the linkage between Bahrani's research and Gell's theory is less clear. Bahrani's approach is not necessarily anthropological and she does not explicitly discuss the *şalmu* in terms of its influence on social networks. Even when Bahrani refers to the *şalmu* as an "indexically linked image," she does not exactly have in mind Gell's notion of art as an index of social agency.¹²¹ Nevertheless, Bahrani does acknowledge that a *şalmu* can function as a substitute for the person it represents, and therefore one can infer that Assyro-Babylonian images were in fact treated as a type of social agent that could structure and motivate networks of relationships in a variety of different circumstances. That the *şalmu* can occupy a position within a social system typically reserved for human beings will become especially evident in the next section (§5.3.2), which addresses the way in which ANE images were treated as enemy combatants in the context of war. Thus, while Bahrani does not make extensive use of either Freedberg or Gell, her research overlaps in important ways with their theories. In my estimation, Bahrani's fruitful insights about the nature and status of ANE visual representation could be further strengthened by incorporating a more explicit engagement with *The Power of Images* and/or *Art and Agency*.

¹²¹ For Gell, index is a technical term that attempts to account for the way in which art signals social agency. In this sense, art is an index of a network of social interactions more than it is an index of its referent's essence or presence. That is to say, Gell's interest is anthropological in nature, not ontological (so Bahrani) nor even semiotic (so Peirce).

Even still, Bahrani is also aware of the ways in which Assyro-Babylonian visual materials and practices can critique or challenge contemporary visual theory.¹²² In this sense, Bahrani can be seen not only as historicizing the work of Freedberg and Gell, but also as expanding and revising their interpretive framework with regard to the power and agency of ANE images. For example, while both Freedberg and Bahrani affirm that a semantic overlap, or interchangeability, exists between reality and representation, Freedberg is primarily concerned with how a signifier "retained something of the original within it and could even take the place of the represented."¹²³ However, by drawing a parallel between the ANE *šalmu* and the philosophical idea of the simulacrum, Bahrani also attempts to shed light on the other side of this linkage—that is, how reality itself is replete with, or even replaced by, representation. Indeed, in Baudrillard's view, reality is "no longer anything but a gigantic simulacrum: not unreal, but a simulacrum, never again exchanging for what is real, but exchanging in itself, in an uninterrupted circuit without reference or circumference."¹²⁴ Bahrani's conclusions about the ANE view of reality may not be as provocative or extreme as Baudrillard's description of the simulacrum. Nevertheless, Bahrani does underscore the fact that ancient viewers were "acutely aware of the play of signs within the real" not just the embodiment of the real within visual signs.¹²⁵ As was previously discussed (§4.2.4), Bahrani contends that in ancient Mesopotamian thought, the cosmos itself was considered to be a dense sign system in which everyday phenomena, from weather

¹²² Bahrani, *The Graven Image*, 10.

¹²³ *Ibid.*, 183.

¹²⁴ Baudrillard, "The Precession of Simulacra," 6.

¹²⁵ Bahrani, *The Graven Image*, 146.

events to dreams to body parts, had the potential to be read as coded messages from the gods if subjected to certain analytical procedures. In my view, it is far clearer in Bahrani's work than in Freedberg's that the relationship between reality and representation is dialectical in nature. Thus, Bahrani's research on ancient Mesopotamian visual culture should remind contemporary visual theorists to attend not only to the ways in which representation embodies the real but also how reality itself is replete with representation. Perhaps Freedberg would not disagree with this conclusion. But in any event, Bahrani draws more attention to the dialectical interdependence of reality and representation than is evident in Freedberg's *The Power of Images*. And in doing so, Bahrani's work has the potential to prompt contemporary visual theorists to attend more closely to how ancient art objects demonstrate and occasionally challenge/nuance their theories.

Similarly, Bahrani's research also surfaces a potential limitation regarding Gell's concept of agency. From an anthropological perspective, to say that art has agency is to acknowledge the ways in which a given image can substitute for a human being within a network of social relationships. For Gell, this substitution is one of function. Art acquires agency by functioning like, or playing the role of, a human actor in a given social system. A similar idea is evident in Ernst Gombrich's famous essay, "Meditations on a Hobby Horse, or the Roots of Artistic Form."¹²⁶ In this essay, Gombrich essentially argues that a hobby horse becomes a substitute for a real horse (at least in a child's imagination)

¹²⁶ Gombrich's essay first appeared in 1951 as part of a symposium entitled "Aspects of Form: A Symposium on Form in Nature and Art," but he later published it as part of a larger collection of essays in the volume, *Meditations on a Hobby Horse and Other Essays on the Theory of Art* (London: Phaidon, 1963), 1-11.

through an analogy of function—both types of horses share the quality of ridability. In the case of the *šar pūḫi*, a similar substitution seems to take place: a commoner becomes a substitute for the real king through an analogy of function. However, Bahrani argues that the *šar pūḫi* does more than just play the role of king.¹²⁷ Bahrani contends that "Unlike Gombrich's hobby horse, it is not through function that the representation [i.e., the *šalmu*] can become a substitute."¹²⁸ Rather, in ancient Mesopotamia, the *šalmu* works "on the basis of the belief in the possibility of appearance or presence through the semantic constellation that makes up an identity." In other words, the substitution implies the repetition of presence not just a similarity of function.

I find Bahrani's understanding persuasive on this point, but I wonder if such a sharp distinction needs to be made between function and presence. One might say that the substitution of presence itself enables the *šar pūḫi* to function analogously with the actual king. Presencing, in this view, is a function. Or conversely, one might say that a similarity of function makes it easier for the viewer to come to terms with the idea of the *šar pūḫi* as a repetition of the king's presence. In either case, it seems that the *šar pūḫi* functions like the king even as he is also part of a semantic constellation that signifies the king's presence. Thus in my reading, it seems best to understand the nature and status of the *šalmu* in terms that include Gell's theory of social agency as well as Bahrani's notions about the repetition of presence in and through representation (i.e., the simulacrum).

¹²⁷ Bahrani, *The Graven Image*, 132.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, 133.

5.3.2. Assault and Abduction: The Life (and Death) of Images in the Context of War

As a test case for these theories about the nature and status of the *šalmu*, I want to consider the implications of one particular type of visual response known throughout the ANE world: the theft and destruction of images in the context of war. It is widely attested that monumental art and statues, especially those bearing the image of the king or the deity, were frequently defaced or stolen by soldiers of invading armies. However, this phenomenon has rarely been scrutinized from the vantage point of visual theory. What might these acts of violence against images suggest about the nature and status of ANE art? How can one interpret this form of visual response in light of either Freedberg's or Gell's theories about the "life" of images or Bahrani's understanding about the *šalmu* as a type of simulacrum?

The destruction of art objects, especially royal and divine images, is widely attested in Middle and Neo-Assyrian royal inscriptions and is even referenced in the Hebrew Bible (see §5.4).¹²⁹ Archaeologists have likewise discovered a wealth of art objects that seem to have been damaged in the context of ANE war. For instance, when a combined force of Medes and Babylonians overthrew the Neo-Assyrian capital in 612 B.C.E., they defaced certain wall reliefs and other visual artifacts in the royal palaces at Nineveh. The famous Lachish reliefs, which are located in Sennacherib's Southwest Palace, show signs of deliberate damage. In a panel depicting an enthroned Sennacherib receiving tribute after having laid siege to the city (ca. 701 B.C.E.), attackers appear to

¹²⁹ Something similar might be said about the elimination of divine images in the Amarna period, as well as the removal of images of Akhenaten and the Aten afterward.

have used a sharp tool to gouge out the king's face (**fig. 5.1**). Also in the Southwest Palace, the same forces targeted a series of reliefs that depict Ashurbanipal's defeat of the Elamites at the battle of Til-Tuba in 653 B.C.E. After the Elamite king Teumman had been executed, the Assyrians appointed a puppet ruler in his place. In a scene that depicts an Assyrian presenting this new king, the head of the ruler is almost completely scratched out.¹³⁰ Likewise, in the North Palace, a wall relief portrays Ashurbanipal and his queen Ashur-Sharrat feasting in a garden where Teumman's severed head hangs from a nearby tree. Here again, the faces of both royal figures, and perhaps also the king's hand, appear to have been gouged out (**fig. 5.2**). Other images of the king at Nineveh, including the bronze head of an Akkadian ruler, perhaps Sargon (**fig. 5.3**), have also been found in damaged condition.¹³¹ In all of these instances, while the image of the king is partly destroyed, most other visual elements in the scenes are left unharmed. This fact suggests that the soldiers who carried out the attack either possessed some degree of visual literacy or were accompanied by scribes/artists who were familiar with iconographic conventions. In either case, the specificity of the damage done to these images strongly suggests that these acts were not random.

¹³⁰ Another scene depicts the beheading of the Elamite king Teumman. In this case, the face of the Assyrian soldier who carries out the execution is marred.

¹³¹ In the case of "Sargon's" head (**fig. 5.3**), it might be argued that the damage done was simply a result of soldiers trying to extract precious stones that were inset in the eye sockets. However, Carl Nylander has shown that this object was intentionally mutilated in three other places as well: 1) the end of the nose was flattened by a blunt tool such as a hammer, both ears were cut off, and the tips of the king's forked beard were broken off. For further discussion, see Carl Nylander, "Earless in Nineveh," *AJA* 48 (1980): 329-30.



Figures 5.1-3. Left: Close up of Sennacherib from the Lachish relief, Southwest Palace at Nineveh, early 7th c. B.C.E. After Bahrani, *The Graven Image*, 153 fig. 11. Center: Close up of Ashurbanipal's banquet scene, Southwest Palace at Nineveh, mid-7th c. B.C.E. After Bahrani, *The Graven Image*, 155 fig. 13. Right: Bronze head of an Akkadian ruler, perhaps Sargon the Great, Nineveh, 23rd c. B.C.E. After Bahrani, *The Graven Image* 161 fig. 19. Images used with permission by the British Museum.

There is also ample evidence that certain royal monuments and divine statuary were captured and deported during the course of military operations. This practice is often cited in Middle- and Neo-Assyrian literature, especially in letters about military campaigns. These reports use a variety of terms to describe the theft of these images, including "to count as spoil" (*ana šallati/šallatiš manū*), "to carry off" (*našū*), "to bring out" (*šūšū*), "to deport" (*nasāḥu*), "to lead away" (*abāku*), "to rob" (*ḥabātu*), "to take

away by force" (*ekēmu*), and "to lead to Assryia" (*ana māt Aššur warū*).¹³² For instance, a letter describing Sargon's eighth campaign describes how his soldiers deported Urartu's chief deities, *Haldia* and *Bagbartu*, from the Mušašir temple to Assyria.¹³³ Likewise, reports of Sennacherib's attack on Babylon refer to the deportation of numerous objects, including the statue of Marduk, his throne, and his ritual bed.¹³⁴

In addition to this textual evidence, starting from the time of Tiglath-Pileser III, wall reliefs depict Assyrian soldiers carrying off cult statues from conquered towns. Similarly, in the aftermath of his successful campaign against Babylon in 1158 B.C.E., the Elamite King Shutruk-Nahunte uprooted several prominent royal monuments and transported these massive objects some 250 miles back to the ancient city of Susa. The most well known of these stolen artifacts is the Law Code of Hammurabi. This seven-foot tall diorite stele, which had stood in public display in the marketplace of Sippar since the eighteenth century B.C.E., includes an image of King Hammurabi before Šamaš (**fig. 5.4**).¹³⁵ Also among the booty at Susa are: the famous victory stele of Naram-Sîn, which portrays the king (who wears the horned crown of the gods) triumphing over the Lullubi people (**fig. 5.5**); and a bust of a Babylonian king, perhaps Hammurabi. As with the artifacts found at Nineveh, invading forces seem to have deliberately damaged or

¹³² Cogan, *Imperialism and Religion*, 23.

¹³³ TCL 3, 368, and 423.

¹³⁴ Daniel David Luckenbill, *The Annals of Sennacherib* (OIP 2; Chicago: Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago Press, 1924), 83.43-54.

¹³⁵ The bulk of past scholarship on the Hammurabi Code has directed attention, perhaps rightly so, to the meaning and significance of the textual data. Nevertheless, the images themselves would have been the most prominent visual elements for observers, *even if* they possessed the ability to read the written materials.

altered some of these objects.¹³⁶ It is not entirely clear why some deported images were damaged and others were not, though perhaps different policies were used depending on the importance of the deities represented.¹³⁷ In many cases, the original inscriptions were erased and then replaced with new inscriptions that boast of Shutruk-Nahunte's victory and successful removal of the images from their native context.¹³⁸ However, on the whole there is little evidence to suggest exactly how these statues were treated once they were brought into enemy territory. During the Neo-Assyrian period, captured statues were sometimes dedicated to the Assyrian gods, but in most cases it seems that the statues were simply kept in storage, far removed from public view.¹³⁹ After a period of time, most stolen images were returned to their original shrines, but often only after the defeated ruler made a plea for their return and pledged his loyalty. In other cases, the captors returned the image as a way of garnering support from the conquered people and/or their gods.

¹³⁶ One should especially note the colossal freestanding statue of Darius the Great that was found in a severely damaged state at Susa. While most scholars agree that this statute was originally located in Heliopolis, Egypt, it most likely was transported to Susa at some later time, perhaps even during the reign of Darius himself. For further discussion of this artifact, including the motivations behind its damage, see Shahrokh Razmjou, "Assessing the Damage: Notes on the Life and Demise of the Statue of Darius from Susa," *Ars Orientalis* 32 (2002): 81-104.

¹³⁷ In general, it seems that divine images from small shrines were destroyed in the course of military operations while cult statues from major temples were deported. However, a rigid distinction was not maintained.

¹³⁸ Bahrani, *The Graven Image*, 162.

¹³⁹ For further discussion, see Cogan, *Imperialism and Religion*, 24-30.



Figures 5.4-5. Left: The Law Code of Hammurabi, Susa, 18th c. B.C.E. After Bahrani, *The Graven Image*, 157 fig. 14. Right: The Victory Stele of the Akkadian king Naram-Sîn, Susa, 23rd c. B.C.E. After Bahrani, *The Graven Image*, 161 fig. 18.

Much more might be said about the destruction and theft of images in Mesopotamian warfare. But for the purposes of this discussion, I am most interested in how scholars have attempted to characterize the motivations that lie behind this type of response to images. There are only a few articles that have attempted to explain the implications of these practices in ancient Mesopotamia.¹⁴⁰ For the most part, they all

¹⁴⁰ In *The Graven Image* (162), Bahrani suggests that the scholarship on violence against images in the ANE is limited to three brief articles: Carl Nylander, "Earless in Nineveh;" Thomas Beran, "Leben und Tod der Bilder," in *Ad bene et fideliter seminandum: Festgabe für Karlheinz Deller zum 21. Februar 1987* (ed. Gerlinde Mauer, Ursula Magen, and Karlheinz Deller; AOAT 220; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1988), 55-60; and Prudence Oliver Harper, Joan Aruz, and Françoise Tallon, eds., *The Royal City of Susa: Treasures from the Louvre Museum* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1992). However, several other articles should be noted, most of which appeared after Bahrani's *The Graven Image*: Natalie Naomi May, "Decapitation of Statues and Mutilation of the Image's Facial Features," in *A Woman of Valor: Jerusalem Studies in the Ancient Near East in Honor of Joan Goodnick Westenholz* (ed. Wayne Horowitz, Uri Gabbay, and Filip Vukosavović; Biblioteca del Proximó Oriente Antiguo 8; Madrid: Consejo Superior de Investigaciones Científicas, 2010), 105-18; Nylander, "Breaking the Cup of Kingship, an Elamite Coup in Nineveh?" *Iranica Antiqua* 34 (1999): 71-83; Barbara N. Porter, "Noseless in Nimrud: More Figurative Responses to Assyrian Domination," in *Of God(s), Trees, Kings, and Scholars: Neo-Assyrian and Related Studies in Honour of Simo Parpola* (ed. Mikko Luuko, Saana Svärd, and Raija Mattila; Helsinki: Finnish Oriental Society, 2009), 201-20; Marc A. Brandes, "Destruction et mutilation de statues en Mesopotamie," *Akkadica* 16 (1980): 28-41; and the previously mentioned article by Razmjou, "Assessing the Damage." Most significantly, a 2008 seminar at the Oriental Institute focused on specific examples of and reasons behind text and image destruction in the ancient Near East. The papers presented at this seminar were recently published in a volume edited by Eleanor Guralnick and Natalie Naomi May, *Iconoclasm and Text Destruction in the Ancient Near East and Beyond* (OIS 8; Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012). In addition, one should also note several volumes that treat the defacing of images

tend to explain acts of violence against images in terms of either vandalism or politically motivated iconoclasm. For instance, in his analysis of the colossal statue of Darius the Great at Susa, Achaemenid historian Shahrokh Razmjou contends that at least some of the damage done can be attributed to Macedonian soldiers who used the statue for target practice.¹⁴¹ Razmjou characterizes these acts as "episodes of wanton casual violence" that reflect little more than "public irreverence."¹⁴² Though Razmjou does admit that a portion of the damage was intentionally inflicted in order to "erase the statue's meaning and identity," he only attributes this motivation to the destruction done to the hieroglyphic inscriptions on the statue (i.e., the royal name and title of Darius).¹⁴³ However, in light of the pictorial nature of Egyptian hieroglyphs, it might well be argued that defacing the inscription is itself a form of violence against images. But curiously, when Razmjou discusses the deliberate hack marks to the image itself (behind the left arm and to the right wrist), he reverts to the language of "symbolic acts of vandalism" and does not explicitly connect this damage to an assault on the statue's identity or meaning.¹⁴⁴ Yet, in light of Bahrani's conceptualization of the *şalmu*, it would seem that an attack on the body of the image would constitute no less an attack on the identity and meaning of the statue (or indeed, Darius himself) than the royal name inscriptions.

in other ancient contexts. See for instance, David Frankfurter, "The Vitality of Egyptian Images in Late Antiquity: Christian Memory and Response," in *The Sculptural Environment of the Roman Near East: Reflections on Culture, Ideology, and Power* (ed. by Yaron Z. Eliav, Elise A. Friedland, and Sharon Herbert; Interdisciplinary Studies in Ancient Culture and Religion 9; Dudley, Mass.: Peeters, 2008), 659-78.

¹⁴¹ Razmjou, "Assessing the Damage," 94.

¹⁴² *Ibid.*, 94, 97.

¹⁴³ *Ibid.*, 94.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 92.

Likewise, in his consideration of the mutilated head of "Sargon" (**fig. 5.3**), Carl Nylander argues that the damage done to the left eye, both ears, nose, and beard are intended as a form of political iconoclasm. In other words, the selective defacement of images was designed to send a propagandistic message that all could see: the political power of the enemy, as symbolized in the image of the king, had been defeated and humiliated. What happens to the king's statue is a type of metaphor for what has happened to the king himself. Nylander contends that the effectiveness of this spectacle depends on a linkage between representation and reality: "The closer the correspondence between the practices of real life and the treatment of the image the more effective the message of overthrow and humiliation."¹⁴⁵ Specifically, Nylander notes that sanction systems in the ancient Near East often prescribed corporeal punishments and that "such mutilations could easily be extended symbolically to inanimate objects."¹⁴⁶ In my estimation, there is little doubt that such a connection exists, though in light of Bahrani's discussion of the nature and status of the *šalmu*, it seems unnecessary to follow Nylander in concluding that the mutilation of images is merely symbolic. In other words, Nylander does not seem to address the possibility that viewers saw the statue as having an ontological status not unlike the king himself. In this sense, the mutilation of enemy combatants and their images both might constitute deliberate acts of corporeal punishment.

It is not difficult to imagine that various objects might have been the target of vandalism, looting, theft, or politically motivated iconoclasm in the context of ANE

¹⁴⁵ Nylander, "Earless in Nineveh," 331.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 331.

warfare. While such motivations were surely present, they do not seem to tell the whole story. It is also possible to understand these instances of visual response in the broader context of theories about the ontological nature and status of the *şalmu*. Once again, Bahrani's research is instructive. Building upon her theory that the *şalmu* functions as a repetition of the real presence of the thing or person depicted, Bahrani contends that violence against images was more than just a symbolic or propagandistic act in the context of war. Rather, defacing and stealing images were "distinctive military strategies" akin to assaulting and abducting enemy combatants.¹⁴⁷ Bahrani concludes as follows:

Thus, royal images were not stolen and mutilated in a moment of barbaric looting. They were taken into captivity and punished as if live beings because of a complex religious and philosophical worldview in which representation by image was a real, not a symbolic, substitution, and having control of a person's image was one more way of having control of that person.¹⁴⁸

Closer scrutiny of the damaged artifacts themselves corroborates the notion that ANE viewers understood there to be a certain type of ontological overlap, or interchangeability, between the *şalmu* and the person it signified. First, it is evident that the damage done to the king's image tended to specifically target certain body parts, such as the eyes, ears, nose, and mouth. It is possible that this was done in order to render the king symbolically blind, deaf, dumb, etc. However, from the perspective of Gell's "internalist" strategy of imparting agency, I think that the targeting of facial features is potentially more significant. For Gell, the presence of external features such as the eyes implies that an image has a certain type of "interiority" by analogy with the

¹⁴⁷ Bahrani, *Rituals of War*, 163.

¹⁴⁸ Eadem, *The Graven Image*, 182.

array of intra-subjective relationships assumed for human beings (i.e., exterior body, internal mind/self). I suspect that a similar notion might underlie the pattern of destruction that is found on certain ANE artifacts. Specifically, ANE soldiers might have targeted the eyes and other facial features precisely because they, more than any other parts of the body, signaled the existence of a type of internal social agency. In this way, scratching out the eyes and mouth of an image might have been the logical converse of the consecration ceremonies in which an image obtains its life and agency through the ritual washing or opening of these same features. If this is the case, invading soldiers might be understood as attempting to reverse the very mechanism by which the image became animated in the first place. Thus, rather than being an expression of political vandalism, the destruction of images in the context of war was a deliberate attempt to extract from an image its internal agency and lifelike status.

Second and closely related, epigraphic evidence from some monumental reliefs suggests that ancient viewers perceived acts of violence against the king's image as a type of assault on the real body of the king himself. For instance, Ashurbanipal adds the following inscription to a mutilated statue of the Elamite king Hallusu, which had been stolen from Susa:

The statue of Hallusu, King of Elam, the one who plotted evil against Assyria and engaged in hostilities against Sennacherib, King of Assyria, my grandfather, his tongue, which had been slandering, I cut off, his lips, which had spoken insolence, I pierced, his hands, which had grasped the bow against Assyria, I chopped off.¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁹ Translation by Rykle Borger, *Beiträge zum Inschriftenwerk Assurbanipals* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1996), 54. As cited in Bahrani, *Rituals of War*, 164.

In this inscription, it is somewhat unclear—and perhaps intentionally so—if the third person masculine pronouns used throughout refer to the king or the king's image. The effacement of this distinction encourages the reader to understand this ekphrastic account of image violence as referring to a type of corporeal punishment exacted on the king himself. The fate of the king is tied to the fate of his *šalmu*.¹⁵⁰

A similar logic is implied by the curses that are often inscribed on royal images. These inscriptions, which appear since at least the middle of the third millennium, describe the severe consequences that would befall anyone who dared to attack the image of the king:

Whosoever should deface my statue
And put his name on it and say
"It is my statue" let Enlil, the lord of this statue,
and Šamaš tear out his genitals and drain out
his semen. Let them not give him any heir.¹⁵¹

In curses like this one, it is clear that the damage done to the image was perceived as constituting something more than just a political act that brought disgrace to the ruler. In light of the particular punishment mentioned here—the ending of the attacker's progeny—it seems that the act of defacing the image is thought to be much closer to murder or physical assault than it was to vandalism. In fact, the nature of the punishment described here seems to adhere to the eye-for-an-eye paradigm in the ANE

¹⁵⁰ For instance, Bahrani notes that various omens make it clear that damage done to the king's image is understood to do physical harm to the king himself: "If the image of the king of the country in question, or the image of his father, or the image of his grandfather falls over and breaks, or if its shape warps, (this means that) the days of the king of that country will be few in number" (James B. Pritchard, *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* [3d ed. with suppl.; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1969], 340). As cited by Bahrani, *The Graven Image*, 182.

¹⁵¹ Translation by Giorgio Buccellati, "Through a Tablet Darkly," in *The Tablet and the Scroll: Near Eastern Studies in Honor of William W. Hallo* (ed. Mark E. Cohen, Daniel C. Snell, and David B. Weisberg; Bethesda, Md.: CDL, 1993), 70; as cited by Bahrani, *The Graven Image*, 169.

legal tradition. In this case, sterilization was considered to be an appropriate punishment for destroying the king's image precisely because it was believed that erecting an image constituted one of the ways in which a king could secure his posterity.¹⁵² The punishment fits the crime.

These observations resonate with the conclusions Freedberg draws about the implications of acts of violence against images more broadly. What sets Freedberg's work apart from other studies of extreme forms of iconoclasm is the way in which he attempts to link the psychological, cognitive, political, and even theological underpinnings of this form of visual response to critical reflection about the ontology of images. He contends that the impulse to destroy works of art is:

predicated in one way or another on the attribution of life to the figure represented, or on the related assumption that the sign is in fact the signified, that image is prototype, that the dishonor paid to the image—to invert Saint Basil's famous dictum—does not simply pass to its prototype, but actually damages the prototype. The evident corollary is that we respond to the image as if it were alive, real.¹⁵³

Thus the iconoclast, no less than the iconodule, is motivated by an underlying belief that certain images are more than just works of art. Rather than being just a symbolic or political act, violence against images operates at the level of the real insofar as its effects are often thought to carry over to the thing or person signified.¹⁵⁴ In this regard, Freedberg's theoretical perspective anticipates the more practical conclusions Bahrani offers concerning the destruction of images in the context of ancient Mesopotamian war.

¹⁵² The other ways of securing posterity included having children and recording great deeds.

¹⁵³ Freedberg, *The Power of Images*, 415.

¹⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 392.

There is also evidence to affirm that in ancient Assyro-Babylonian warfare, viewers understood stolen images more as human captives than as pillaged goods. To begin with, economic motives alone cannot fully account for why invading armies would have gone to such pains (and, no doubt, expense) to transport partly mutilated visual artifacts hundreds of miles back to their homeland.¹⁵⁵ Neither should it be concluded that image theft was merely a by-product of the frenzy of war, on par with the unconscionable looting of the National Museum of Iraq during the spring of 2003.¹⁵⁶ Instead, Bahrani contends that stealing images should be understood as a "productive operation of war."¹⁵⁷ As a strategy of dislocation, the abduction of images is analogous to the capture and deportation of human populations, a practice especially well known in Neo-Assyrian imperial policy in the early-first millennium. For instance, from the inscriptions found on victory stelae, we know that kings often would boast of having abducted the images of a foreign ruler. In fact, these images were occasionally put on public display at the city gates, much like the mutilated bodies of defeated royal enemies.¹⁵⁸

Similar arguments can be made with respect to the abduction of cult images. In ancient Mesopotamia, rather than being a mere work of art, the cult image "was the manifestation of the god in the realm of human beings."¹⁵⁹ Although not employed in every case, the removal of the cult statuary of a conquered enemy became a common

¹⁵⁵ Bahrani, *Rituals of War*, 162.

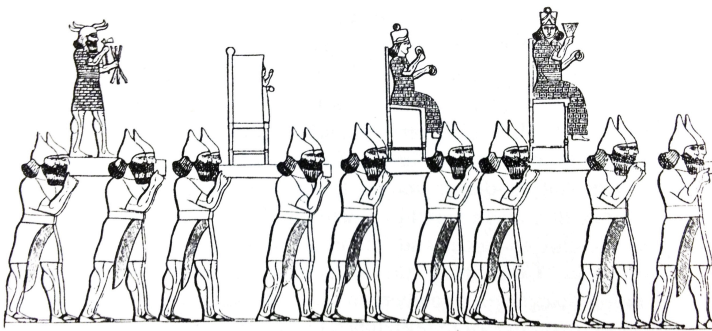
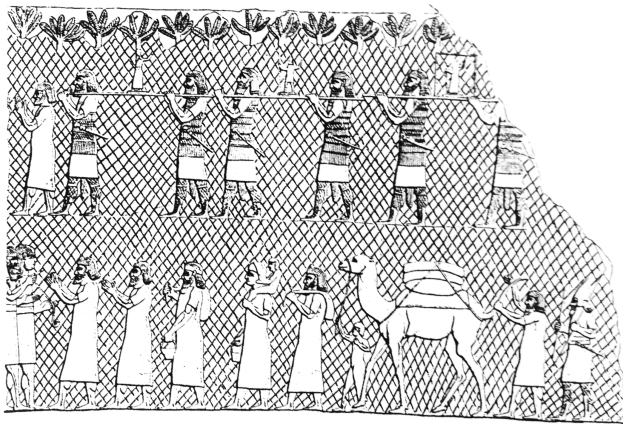
¹⁵⁶ During the course of several days in the spring of 2003, thousands of excavation site pieces and many other valuable artifacts were stolen (including the Uruk Vase) from exhibition halls. Fortunately, some—but certainly not all—of these artifacts have since been recovered.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 163.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 174.

¹⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 163.

strategy of war by the early second millennium. This practice is evident in the wall reliefs from Sennacherib's Southwest Palace at Nineveh and Tiglath-pileser III's Palace at Nimrud (figs. 5.7-8). In these cases, statues and other art objects are shown along with human captives being brought before the enthroned king. In light of Bahrani's understanding of the *šalmu*, I believe it is better to understand the cult statues in this relief as prisoners of war, not just stolen goods.



Figures 5.6-7. Reliefs depicting the deportation of divine images. Top: Sennacherib's SW Palace at Nineveh, Room X slab 11, ca. 701 B.C.E. After Uehlinger, "Anthropomorphic Cult Statuary," 126 fig. 46; cf. Layard, *A Second Series of Monuments of Nineveh*, pl. 50. Bottom: Tiglath-pileser III's Palace at Nimrud, slab r-36-lower, ca. 734 B.C.E. After Uehlinger, "Anthropomorphic Cult Statuary," 126 fig. 45; cf. Layard, *Monuments of Nineveh*, pl. 65; cf. Richard David Barnett & Margarete Falkner, *Sculptures*, 29 pls. 88, 92f.

Likewise, the cult statue of Marduk was often a target of deportation. On several occasions, foreign armies abducted Marduk's cult image from Esagila, his temple in Babylon. As Bahrani argues, the cult statue was believed to be part of a constellation of

signifiers that could manifest the real presence of the deity, and therefore taking it captive as a type of prisoner attempted to weaken the enemy by removing from its land the protective presence of the deity.¹⁶⁰ In many cases, the cult statue would be held hostage until oaths of loyalty and submission could be extracted from the rulers of the defeated land. Thus, in the mind's eye of ancient viewers, loss of the cult statue was tantamount to the deity being imprisoned or exiled. As such, it is hardly surprising to find out that great effort was made to return the image to its rightful place. Bahrani points out that in certain instances, "wars were fought specifically for images, to acquire royal monument and the cult statue of a god, or to recover a divine statue that had been carried off by an enemy in an earlier battle."¹⁶¹ Today, we might refer to such military operations as "extractions" or "exfiltrations" since their primary objective was to ensure the safe return of the captured deity. In other cases, Assyrian rulers returned the statue on their own accord. But even in these instances, it was assumed that what was being returned was something far more valuable than a work of art. By repatriating the god to its native land, the captors sought to curry good favor with the conquered foes, and more importantly, their deity.

¹⁶⁰ However, there was not a one-to-one relationship between the deity and its image. As discussed earlier, the presence or essence of a deity (or person) could be expressed through a pluridimensional network of signifiers. Thus, while a cult statue manifested the real presence of the deity, the deity was not inextricably bound to that object and neither did the destruction or deportation of that object completely vanquish the deity's presence. In fact, there is evidence to suggest that after a divine image was stolen from a temple, new statues were fashioned to take their place, which allowed the cult to resume.

¹⁶¹ Bahrani, *Rituals of War*, 160. For instance, Neo-Assyrian textual records suggest that Nebuchadnezzar I (who ruled from 1123-1103 B.C.E.), carried out military operations against Elam for the sole purpose of returning the cult image of Marduk to its rightful place in Babylon (eadem, *The Graven Image*, 177).

Thus, whether it involves royal monuments or divine statuary, the abduction of art is best understood as an extension of a military practice that was common throughout ANE history, but was especially evident in Neo-Assyria. Specifically, this strategy was designed to limit opposition to further incursions not through mass killings, but rather through the reorganization of land and populace.¹⁶² Bahrani contends that this strategy of deportation might also involve the movement of images. In this regard, deporting people and abducting images are analogous acts of war designed to reorganize geopolitical space. To put this notion in Gell's anthropological terms, within the network of relationships surrounding ANE war, images functioned as social agents in ways that are normally reserved for enemy combatants. Deporting and relocating images was thus an attempt to disrupt or reorganize previously existing social networks. In this sense, to say that an abducted image has agency is a culturally prescribed way of talking about causation and intentionality within the network of social relationships generated by war.

5.3.2.1. Evaluation

The evidence above suggests that the destruction and theft of images in the context of war cannot simply be explained in terms of politically motivated vandalism or senseless acts of looting. These forms of visual response seem to be predicated on an underlying notion in the Mesopotamian intellectual tradition that visual representations could embody the real presence of the thing or person it depicted. Seen in this light, when

¹⁶² Bahrani, *Rituals of War*, 180.

invading forces came across the royal monuments and divine statuary of their foes, they acted as if they were encountering the kings and deities themselves. Thus, the theft and destruction of images in the context of war might best be understood as a type of military strategy that is akin to the abduction and attack of enemy combatants. In capturing or defacing works of art, military forces sought to effect real damage on the bodies of their enemy's kings and deities. Therefore, these curious examples about the life (or indeed, death) of ANE images in the context of war not only provide explicit evidence for Bahrani's understanding of the nature and status of the *šalmu* in Assyro-Babylonian visual culture, but they also clarify how the theoretical perspectives of Freedberg and Gell might further inform the ways in which contemporary scholars understand responses to images that seem to blur the lines between representation and reality.

However, the conclusions drawn from the previous sections cannot be uncritically extrapolated to all forms of images and every variety of visual response. The examples discussed in §5.3.2 specifically involve royal and divine images, and Bahrani's discussion focuses on a particular type of image—the *šalmu* (§5.3.1). It is conceivable, and indeed likely, that other types of images functioned as a means of conveying information or representing symbolic concepts without being thought of as a pluridimensional manifestation of its referent's presence. Furthermore, even in cases where the king or deity is depicted, ancient viewers did not necessarily believe that the image possessed *all* the qualities of a living being. The lines between reality and representation were not always, nor even completely, effaced. Similarly, while the

mutilation and theft of royal and divine images is certainly not unique to the ancient Near East or even pre-modern societies in general, it should be acknowledged that specific forms of visual response vary somewhat across cultural and historical contexts.¹⁶³ Thus, even though it is reasonable to speculate that ancient Israelites exhibited similar (though perhaps not identical) understandings about the power and agency of images as did ancient Mesopotamians, ideally it would be best to constrain the analysis of visual response to a more narrow cultural and historical context. Indeed, the next advancement in biblical iconography would be to particularize the findings of this and other topics in the present study for specific periods within the history of ancient Israel or for specific categories of visual representation found in Syria-Palestine. Nevertheless, despite the potential difficulties of any cross-cultural comparison, it remains possible to draw on Bahrani's research, as well as Freedberg's and Gell's theories, to further inform a visual hermeneutics for biblical studies.

5.4. The Implications of Visual Response

As was suggested at the outset of this chapter, theoretical inquires into the life of images and the implications of visual response touch upon issues and concerns that seem to lie far afield from most work in biblical scholarship, even those that deal with ANE art. In fact, I suspect that most of my readers will find it more readily apparent how iconographic research relates to and is dependent upon hermeneutical issues addressed

¹⁶³ Bahrani, *The Graven Image*, 150. Yet, Bahrani seems to think that her theory of Mesopotamian images might apply more broadly. She argues as follows: "For the Assyrians, Babylonians, Elamites, and perhaps others in the ancient Near East, the image always retained something of the original with it and could even take the place of the represented, occulting it to an extent but at the same time being its presence" (ibid., 183; emphasis mine).

in other parts of this study, including the role of images as a language of communication (ch. 2), the nature of the relationship between visual and verbal representation (ch. 3), and approaches to image analysis and meaning in the visual arts (ch. 4). Nevertheless, the sorts of issues that Mitchell, Freedberg, Gell, and Bahrani raise should challenge biblical scholars, not to mention those interested in ANE art history, archaeology, or religio-historical research, to think in new ways about the nature and status of ancient images. Put simply, if ancient Near Eastern viewers commonly talked about, related to, and acted upon images as if they were something more than just works of art, then contemporary scholars should not limit their research to identifying an image's iconographic content or semiotic meaning. These latter issues, no doubt, can and should remain central to various avenues of research that engage ancient (or modern) art. But at the same time, the role of the ancient viewer—and thus the implications of ancient visual response—should not remain under-theorized. To borrow Mitchell's language, what ancient images (no less than modern ones) want is to be studied in a way that is adequate to their ontological status and social agency. Implementing such an approach would not only enrich and expand the analytical horizon of biblical iconography, but it also would establish fruitful points of connection between Hebrew Bible scholarship and recent advancements in the study of religious visual culture. I explore this latter issue in more detail in the next chapter of my study. But for now, I want to highlight two specific ways in which theories about the animation of art might directly come to bear on the methods and practices of biblical iconography.

(1) At a broad level, I suspect that many scholars interested in ancient art—including Izaak de Hulster, whose definition of images I addressed earlier in this chapter—would agree with many of the above observations about the nature and status of the *šalmu*. In this sense, my above reflections are not so much designed to introduce a completely new perspective on ANE images. Rather, my goal from the start has been to nuance, develop, and reframe these understandings in light of important contributions to visual theory. That is to say, I am once again interested in orchestrating conversations between contemporary visual culture studies on the one hand and ANE art history and biblical iconography on the other. In my estimation, these conversations can give rise to important implications in terms of methodology. For instance, one of the weaknesses of the iconographic method, at least as it is traditionally conceived, is that it directs very little attention to the role of the observer and, more generally, the notion of visuality or spectatorship.¹⁶⁴ Mitchell contends that Panofsky sometimes treats visuality as a type of "natural, physiological mechanism" that is independent of historical and cultural contexts, and at others points, he seems to conceptualize the nature of visual response as something which "can be read directly from the pictorial conventions that express it in 'symbolic forms.'"¹⁶⁵ In other words, for Panofsky—and perhaps some of those who rely on his method—the question of visual response is reduced either to a function of biological vision (i.e., optical perception) or to a description of symbolic content (i.e., iconographic interpretation). In both cases, images, not visuality or visual response, are considered to be the proper subject matter of the iconographic method.

¹⁶⁴ Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, 18.

¹⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 18.

The role of the observer is thought to be unrecoverable if not uninteresting from a historical-critical perspective.¹⁶⁶

Yet, as Mitchell, Freedberg, Gell, and Bahrani have shown, the nature of visual response is not unrelated to questions regarding what images are and how they function. In fact, the study of visuality and visual response remains a chief concern within visual theory and the growing field of visual culture studies. It would be possible—and potentially fruitful, in my estimation—for biblical scholars to pursue such questions as well. This would involve not only analyzing the content of certain ANE images but, whenever possible, seeking to evaluate the meaning and significance of visual response—that is, what people did to/with images, how they described what they saw, and why their visual experiences seemed to motivate and structure social interactions. Attending to such issues does not require one to assume an ideal ancient Israelite observer whose perspective and response were unaffected by matters related to gender, class, ideology, or education. Even though it is far more difficult to directly observe the phenomenon of spectatorship in the ancient world than it is in contemporary culture, Bahrani's research shows that it is possible to access examples of ancient visual response, especially those that are recorded in textual materials.¹⁶⁷ As a result, by underscoring the importance of spectatorship and visual response, a visual

¹⁶⁶ The former position is evident in the work of Jonathan Crary, who in discussing the role of the observer in nineteenth century Europe, remarks as follows: "Obviously, there was no single nineteenth century observer, no example that can be located empirically" (*Techniques of the Observer: On Vision and Modernity in the Nineteenth Century* [Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990], 7). As Mitchell points out, while Crary is right to suggest that there is no such thing as an ideal observer whose vision is unaffected by issues related to class, gender, ethnicity, and so forth, it is possible to locate actual examples of spectatorship in the historical record (Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, 21).

¹⁶⁷ Thus, while images can be interpreted in light of other images, textual data often provides valuable information about the nature of visual response. In this regard, I at least somewhat affirm Erwin Panofsky's reliance on textual materials in the second level of his image analysis.

hermeneutics for biblical studies would attend more closely to what Mitchell calls the "unfinished business" of the iconographic method.¹⁶⁸

(2) Second, the sorts of perspectives on display in the work of Mitchell, Freedberg, Gell, and Bahrani might also provide a helpful conceptual framework for interpreting certain responses to images found in the Hebrew Bible. I am particularly interested in those cases where biblical authors describe images being destroyed in the context of cultic reform or prophetic discourse. My purpose at this point is not to comment on what these texts might suggest about the nature of Israelite religion or the meaning of the so-called image-ban. For now, I simply want to raise several possibilities regarding what iconoclastic responses to images might suggest about how ancient Israelite viewers (or at least biblical authors) thought about the nature and status of visual representation.

Perhaps the most explicit examples of image violence come from the Deuteronomistic History. As part of their cultic reforms, both Hezekiah (2 Kings 18:1-6) and Josiah (2 Kings 23:4-20) are said to have removed from the temple various cultic paraphernalia, including pillars (מצבת), altars (מזבחות), the sacred pole (האשרה), the bronze serpent (נהוש הנחשת), the horses (הסוסים), the chariots of the sun (מרכבות השמש), and the vessels (הכלים) made for Baal, Asherah, and all the host of heaven. To be sure, not all of these objects were thought to be divine images, and it is likely that some of them were deemed to be inappropriate for different theological reasons. Whatever the case, both of these texts from 2 Kings make it clear that Hezekiah's and Josiah's

¹⁶⁸ Mitchell, *Picture Theory*, 18.

responses reflect single-minded devotion to Yahweh and his commandments (see esp. 2 Kgs 18:5-6; 23:1-3, 24-25).

Perhaps so. But what *else* might these responses suggest? Seen from the vantage point of Gell's anthropology of art, removing cultic objects from the temple might be construed as a way of defusing the externalist aspect of their social agency. Recall that in the externalist strategy, images and other objects obtain agency when humans stipulate for them a role as a social other within a particular network of relationships. In this view, the agency of these objects is not contingent on their visual form, which might account for the fact that Hezekiah and Josiah remove cultic paraphernalia regardless of whether they are iconic or aniconic representations.¹⁶⁹ Furthermore, the externalist mechanism implies that if an object is removed from its social network, it will no longer generate and structure real, physical interactions between an agent (the art object) and a patient (the worshipper). Thus, by removing various objects from the temple, Hezekiah and Josiah would have effectively disrupted a system of social exchange in which inanimate objects were attributed the power and agency of living things.

But of course, Hezekiah and Josiah do more than just remove these objects from the temple. Hezekiah smashes (Piel of *všbr*) the pillars, cuts down (Qal of *vkrt*) the sacred pole, and breaks in pieces (Piel of *vktt*) the bronze serpent while Josiah burns

¹⁶⁹ However, certain visual objects associated with the cult of Yahweh, such as the cherubim throne and the ark, are conspicuously *not* removed. Many biblical scholars have explained this situation by noting that the cherubim throne and ark are examples of aniconic representations. In chapter 6 of this study, I evaluate traditional distinctions between iconic and aniconic art in light of more recent approaches to the study of religious visual culture.

(Qal of *všrp*) numerous objects taken out of the temple.¹⁷⁰ From the perspective of 2 Kings, the destruction of these objects is the natural consequence of cult reform and specifically responds to the instruction given in Deut 7:5. Yet, if removing these objects from the temple could, as Gell would suggest, diffuse their social agency, what motivated such violent acts? What did image violence accomplish that image removal did not? In his treatment of the history and theory of iconoclastic responses, Freedberg contends that violence toward images is not only fueled by theological, political, or psychological motivations, but also is "predicated in one way or another on the attribution of life to the figure represented."¹⁷¹ The author of 2 Kings seems to anticipate this very implication. In 2 Kgs 19:17-18, Hezekiah prays as follows: "Truly, O LORD, the kings of Assyria have laid waste the nations and their lands, and have hurled their gods into the fire, though they were no gods but the work of human hands—wood and stone—and so they were destroyed." The concessive clause offered in v. 18 (ידי־אדם) seems to explicitly deny belief in the animation of art. But, as indicated above, the actions of both Hezekiah and Josiah suggest otherwise. These Judahite kings responded to images in ways that were no less violent than their Neo-Assyrian counterparts. While there are some differences between how images are treated in Israelite cult reform and Mesopotamia warfare, it seems likely that both forms of visual response are predicated on the deep-seated belief that art objects are

¹⁷⁰ Other texts might be noted here as well: David carries off Philistine idols in 2 Sam 5:21; Joram and Jehu burn (Qal of *všrp*) and demolish (Qal of *vntš*) the pillar associated with Baal in 2 Kgs 10:26-27; and all of the people break into pieces (Piel of *všbr*) Baal's altars and images in 2 Kgs 11:18. In addition, the head and hands of the statue of Dagon were cut off while (Qal pass. of *vkrt*) in the presence of the ark of God (1 Sam 5:1-5).

¹⁷¹ Freedberg, *The Power of Images*, 415.

far more than mediated representations—they are living things that can and must be killed when they perceived to be a threat.¹⁷²

Other intriguing examples of visual response found in the Hebrew Bible are the so-called idol parodies in Second Isaiah (40:19-20; 41:5-14; 44:6-22) and Jeremiah 10:1-16.¹⁷³ Though these texts vary in their specific details, the overarching argument is especially clear in Jeremiah 10. Rather than being gods, cult images are merely the work of human artisans ("worked with an ax by the hands of an artisan," v. 3; cf. v. 9), made from inanimate materials (wood, silver, gold, nails, cf. vv. 3-4, 8-9), and incapable of speaking, seeing, moving, breathing and doing good or evil (vv. 5, 14).¹⁷⁴ Put simply, they are the ontological antithesis of the living God (אלהים חיים, v. 10). Interestingly, the idol parodies do not seem to draw on the various legal traditions that prohibit the making of cult images (cf. Exod 20:4, 23; 34:17; Lev 19:4; 26:1; Deut 4:15-19; 5:8-9; 27:15). Instead, several biblical scholars, including Michael B. Dick and Robert Carroll, suggest that the idol parodies show knowledge of the ancient Mesopotamian *mīs pî* ceremony.¹⁷⁵ However, Dick and Carroll argue that for polemical reasons the biblical authors deliberately distort Mesopotamian religion and its understanding of the animation of art. Carroll puts it this way:

¹⁷² Interestingly, several of the verbs used to describe the destruction of images in 2 Kings 18 and 23 are used elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible to describe violence against human agents. See for instance the use of *vkrt* in Jer 11:19, *všbr* in Isa 63:6, and *všrp* in Judg 15:6. The flexibility of these verbs might further indicate a tendency of biblical authors to conceptualize material objects as animate beings.

¹⁷³ One might potentially add to this list several texts from the minor prophets, including Hosea 8:4-6, 13:2-3, Micah 5:12-13, and Habakkuk 2:18-19, as well as Ps 115:4-11 (cf. Ps 135:15-20).

¹⁷⁴ Michael B. Dick notes that similar arguments against the conflation of cult image and deity are found in ancient Hellenistic literature. For a discussion, see Dick's essay, "Prophetic Parodies of Making the Cult Image," in *Born in Heaven Made on Earth*, esp. 30-45.

¹⁷⁵ Dick, "Prophetic Parodies," in *Born in Heaven Made on Earth*, 1-53; and Carroll, "The Aniconic God," 51-64.

On any reading of the relevant [idol parody] passages it is quite clear that the Old Testament writers did not understand the nature of their neighbours' religions. Few, if any, groups imaged their cult images to be gods, or even representatives of their gods. . . . Lacking any appreciation of the symbolic value of images, and without realizing that the cult of images belonged to a belief in personal gods, Israel entirely failed to come to grips with the essence of polytheism.¹⁷⁶

To be sure, the idol parodies do not fully capture the nuance and subtlety with which ancient Mesopotamian texts describe the relationship between cult image and deity. Nevertheless, in light of Bahrani's research on the nature and status of the *šalmu*, I think Carroll, and to a lesser extent, Dick, overstate the matter when they conclude that the idol parodies reflect an inadequate understanding of Mesopotamian image theology. In fact, it might well be the case that the idol parodies are responding directly to the belief in ANE visual culture that the boundaries between representation and reality could become blurred, if not effaced, when it came to divine images. In other words, the biblical authors go to such great lengths to lampoon the nature and status of idols precisely because it was quite common in the ancient world to see images as not only "imitations of life" but as having lives of their own.

Furthermore, certain aspects of Gell's visual theory can generate new insight into the underlying logic of the idol parodies. For instance, in reference to idols, Isa 44:18 states, "They do not know, nor do they comprehend; for their eyes are shut, so that they cannot see, and their minds as well, so that they cannot understand." Such statements might simply underscore the notion that idols, as mere inanimate objects, lack various sense perceptions and thus should be considered inept and ineffective. This logic is also evident in Ps 115:5-7, which says of idols: "They have mouths, but do not

¹⁷⁶ Carroll, "The Aniconic God," 53.

speak; eyes, but do not see. They have ears, but do not hear; noses, but do not smell." However, what is curious to note in these examples is that even though idols are described as being mute, blind, deaf, and anosmic, they nevertheless have the external features associated with these sense perceptions. This might suggest that ancient viewers, not unlike Gell, recognized that certain parts of an image imply a sense of interiority, and with it, social agency. Thus, to say that "[idols] have eyes, but they do not see" (Ps 115:5; cf. Ps 135:16, Isa 44:18) might be understood as a way of "targeting" the eyes of ancient images. In other words, to claim that an image is blind not only parodies its lack of perception but also disassociates the analogical link between the external body of the image and its internal mind/self. By "blinding" idols through these literary descriptions, the biblical authors treat images in a manner that is not altogether different than—and indeed, is remarkably similar to—what ANE soldiers do when they deliberately gouged out the eyes of their enemy's royal monuments and divine statues.

The examples of visual response discussed thus far primarily deal with instances of image destruction. Though less common, the Hebrew Bible also gives some evidence of the practice of image theft.¹⁷⁷ In Judges 18, six hundred men of the Danite clan armed with the weapons of war set out to reclaim land in the hill country of Ephraim. In the process, they steal Micah's cult image (vv. 16-17) and set it up for themselves in another city (v. 31). Another possible example is the account of Amaziah's military campaign in 2 Chr 25:5-16. In this story, Amaziah captures the gods of the people of Seir and sets them

¹⁷⁷ While there is no clear archaeological evidence from the Levant of this phenomenon, the Amarna letters make several references to foreign troops seizing the gods of certain cities. For further discussion, see Theodore J. Lewis, "Syro-Palestinian Iconography and Divine Images," in *Cult Image and Divine Representation in the Ancient Near East* (ed. Neal H. Walls; American Schools of Oriental Research 10; Boston: American Schools of Oriental Research, 2005), 100.

up as his own (v. 14). Also potentially relevant is the story of Rachel stealing Laban's household gods (תרפים) in Genesis 31.¹⁷⁸ Yet, the clearest example of this practice is found in 1 Samuel 4, where the Philistines defeat the Israelites, capture the ark of God, bring it back to Ashdod, and set it up in the temple of Dagon. In light of the evidence discussed above, I believe it is best to interpret these instances of image theft not in terms of vandalism or looting, but rather as a distinct operation of war somewhat akin to the abduction of enemy combatants.

A final example involves the oracle against Moab in Jeremiah 48. In describing how the land of Moab and its people will be laid waste, the prophet proclaims that "Chemosh shall go out into exile, with his priests and attendants" (ויצא כמיש בגולה כהניו) (Jer 48:7, v. 7). What is striking here is that the author of Jeremiah 48 uses language associated with human deportation (יצא גולה, cf. Jer 29:16; Zech 14:2) to describe the removal of the cult statue of Chemosh from the land. Drawing on Bahrani's previously discussed theory, one might understand the punishment aimed at Moab as involving the reorganization of geopolitical space in ways that required the deportation of both human agents and material objects. While it is not clear if the exile of Chemosh's statute constitutes a distinct military strategy, it is evident that in this description of visual response, a work of art is treated in a very similar manner as human captives.

These reflections hardly provide an exhaustive theory of visual response in the Hebrew Bible. They do, however, suggest several ways in which visual theory might begin to shed light on how ancient Israelite viewers understood the nature of visual

¹⁷⁸ For further discussion about the nature of these household gods see Theodore J. Lewis, "תרפים," *TDOT* 15:777-89.

representation, and with it, the very question with which I began this chapter: *What is an image?* In addition, this brief analysis raises a set of questions about the role and function of images in ancient Israelite religion. For instance: Why were some images associated with Yahweh, such as the cherubim throne or the ark, deemed acceptable while others were disallowed or even destroyed? How did ancient Israelites attempt to "visualize" Yahweh in spite of legal traditions that banned the production of divine images? And, more broadly, how might religio-historical research incorporate insights from the study of religious visual culture? These matters will be taken in up in the final theory related chapter of this study.

CHAPTER 6

SEEING IS BELIEVING: THE STUDY OF VISUAL CULTURE AND THE MATTER OF ISRAELITE RELIGION

Even in cultures (such as Islam and Judaism) with prevailing interdicts against anthropomorphic representation, and an apparent emphasizing of word over image, of the written over the figured, the will to image figuratively—even anthropomorphically—cannot be suppressed.

- David Freedberg, *The Power of Images*, 55

My overarching argument is that the study of religious images is best undertaken as the study of ways of seeing. This means that visual practice is the primary datum alongside images themselves and that the two, together, insofar as religion happens visually, constitute the visual medium of belief. Belief is not a proposition or a claim or an act of will prior to what people see or do as believers. Or, if that is all that belief is, it has little to tell us about visual piety, which is the constructive operation of seeing that looks for, makes room for, the transcendent in daily life.

- David Morgan, *The Sacred Gaze*, 6

6.1. The Conviction of Things Seen? A Visual Culture Approach to Biblical Iconography

What Luther once said about the nature of right faith—that "it goes right on with its eyes closed"—can also describe how some scholars have approached the study of religion, especially Judaism and Christianity.¹ This presupposition surfaces when historians attempt to trace the development of Christian thought exclusively through creedal statements or insist that there is no such thing as early Jewish art. The same impulse is also evident in biblical studies, where text-alone methods are the primary means by which scholars have traditionally engaged questions about biblical theology and Israelite religion. The disassociation of genuine belief from visual experience is also palpable in Protestant theological traditions that downplay or even denounce the use of

¹ Martin Luther, *Lectures on the Minor Prophets II: Jonah and Habakkuk* (vol. 19 of *Luther's Works*; ed. Jaroslav Pelikan, et. al; St. Louis: Concordia, 1974), 1.1.

images in liturgical practice and private devotion.² Even in cases where scholars talk about religion as a *worldview*, they typically have in mind only a figurative sense of seeing. These trends are no doubt fueled by numerous and complex factors, not least of which is the Bible's somewhat skeptical view of images and sight.³

However, in recent years biblical iconographers have participated in a growing movement to give sight to the study of religion. As already discussed in chapter 2, scholars in and beyond the Fribourg School have increasingly recognized that images in art, much like words in a text, give voice to underlying beliefs and religious attitudes. Images, in other words, are thought to function as a visual expression of religious ideas and beliefs. When analyzed according to certain art historical principles and iconographic conventions, works of ancient art can provide biblical scholars with vital information about the history of Israelite religion and the conceptual background of the Hebrew Bible. For these reasons, ancient art is now increasingly seen as an important primary source in various avenues of religio-historical research. Some scholars have gone so far as to describe text-alone approaches to the study of Israelite religion as

² For a helpful survey of perspectives on images during the Protestant Reformation, see Serguiz Michalski, *The Reformation and the Visual Arts: The Protestant Image Question in Western and Eastern Europe* (Christianity and Society in the Modern World; New York: Routledge, 2011 [1993]).

³ For instance, the Epistle to the Hebrews describes faith as "the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen" (Heb 11:1). The Gospel of John conveys a similar message when it records Jesus's post-resurrection words to Thomas: "Blessed are those who have not seen and yet have come to believe" (John 20:29). The Hebrew Bible tends to be no less skeptical about the role of images and sight in the matter of faith. Not only do certain legal texts ban the production of visual representations of the deity, but hearing—not seeing—is the sense perception most often tied to the idea of faithful obedience. Other parts of Scripture, however, have a more positive view of the visual realm. This is especially evident in Ps 34:9 [Eng. 8]: "Taste and *see* that the LORD is good" and Ps 17:15: "As for me, I shall *behold* your face in righteousness; when I awake I shall be satisfied, *beholding* your likeness." The biblical witness is not the only factor that has led some theologians to downplay the role of visual materials and visual perception in matters of faith. Neo-platonic philosophy, for instance, is also responsible for spurring a long tradition of logocentrism that establishes a hierarchy of word over image, hearing over seeing, and spirit over matter.

working with a puzzle that is missing many of its pieces or journeying through the ancient Levant without the capacity of sight.⁴ Whether it is through the analysis of a large corpus of images, a certain pictorial motif, or even an individual art object, biblical scholars have begun to integrate visual evidence into their research.⁵

Despite the significant steps biblical iconographers have made toward "visualizing" the study of Israelite religion, their singular focus on analyzing images as an indicator or symptom of underlying religious ideas is not the only way one might go about studying the relationship between seeing and believing. In fact, since the early 1990s, a growing number of religion scholars have shifted their analytical focus toward the broader realm of visual culture—that is, the sum total of materials, practices, habits, gazes, and expectations that structure what images do as cultural artifacts and how they are responded to in certain social settings. In this view, images are only one aspect of visual culture, and as a result, the study of visual culture tends to encompass a much wider range of issues than is typically addressed in most art historical or iconographic research. Put in broad terms, while these latter two approaches tend to be rather object- or artist-centered, the study of visual culture is typically practice-centered.⁶

Within the context of religious studies this means that the investigation of visual culture

⁴ See, for instance, the preface to the first edition of Mark S. Smith's *The Early History of God: Yahweh and the Other Deities in Ancient Israel* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1990), xxix, as well as the introduction and conclusion to Othmar Keel and Christoph Uehlinger's *Gods, Goddesses, and Images of God in Ancient Israel* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998 [1992]).

⁵ Smith claims that one of the most prominent trends in recent research on Israelite religion is the use of iconographic materials. For instance, data gleaned from art objects have made a significant contribution to recent research on the emergence of monotheism, the role of the goddess, and numerous other topics. For further discussion, see the preface to the second edition of Smith's *The Early History of God* (2d ed.; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2002), xvi-xvii.

⁶ David Morgan, *The Sacred Gaze: Religious Visual Culture in Theory and Practice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 32.

includes, but ultimately moves beyond, the analysis of works of art that portray either religiously significant concepts (e.g., the resurrection in Eastern Orthodox iconography) or a particular interpretation of a biblical story (e.g., Poussin's *Dance Round the Golden Calf*).⁷ Instead, the study of religious visual culture also would entail scrutinizing how faith is materialized through what people *do* with images, and conversely, how certain modes of processing visual data are mobilized and activated by prior beliefs. While I will return to these two topics in more detail below (§6.2), my central point at this juncture is that when it comes to the study of religion, and perhaps ancient Israelite religion in particular, analyzing visual culture—not just certain images and their underlying religious symptoms—would open up new possibilities for thinking about the intersection of seeing and believing.

These observations bring me to the central question of this chapter: *What would it look like if scholars of religious antiquity—including those interested in archaeology, art history, biblical studies, Israelite religion, and so forth—came to see ancient visual culture, not just ancient visual materials, as the primary subject matter of their research?*

In raising this issue, I attempt to chart a slightly different course than what is found in most of my other theory-related discussions. Instead of trying to revise how biblical iconographers approach issues that are already central to their research (such as the importance of images, the image-text relationship, or approaches to image analysis),

⁷ To be sure, insightful analyses of both Poussin's *Dance Round the Golden Calf* and the resurrection in Eastern Orthodox iconography make important contributions to the study of the intersection between religion and the visual arts. See W. J. T. Mitchell's brief reflection on Poussin's painting in *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 102-5; and John Dominic Crossan's essay, "A Vision of Divine Justice: The Resurrection of Jesus in Eastern Christian Iconography," *JBL* (2013): 5-32.

here I aim to expand the analytical scope of this field by drawing attention to a different set of questions than is typically addressed.⁸ In order to do so, I first highlight two of the most persist concerns within the study of religious visual culture: the *visual medium of belief* (§6.2.1) and the *religious apparatus of sight* (§6.2.2). These topics are most clearly developed in the work of David Morgan, who, among other things, analyzes the role of visual practices and religious ways of seeing in the formation and expression of various faith traditions. Since these theories are typically applied to the study of *contemporary* religion, my goal in the remainder of the chapter is to offer an initial exploration of how a visual culture approach might help shed new light on—or better yet, give sight to—two very closely related topics in research on Israelite religion: the study of Israelite aniconism (§6.3) and the search for Yahweh's image (§6.4). In taking up these two test cases, I demonstrate how a concern for visual practices and religious ways of seeing, respectively, could possibly reframe the way in which scholars analyze and evaluate these often-debated topics. Thus, the overarching goal of this investigation is to more explicitly integrate religious visual culture theory into how scholars study the "matter" of Israelite religion.

6.2. Analyzing Religious Visual Culture

Both religion and visual culture represent vast areas of study in their own right. Combined, they engender an even wider array of interdisciplinary interests and perspectives. Rather than being unified around a single analytical strategy, the study of

⁸ Something similar might also be said about my approach in chapter 5.

religious visual culture draws heavily upon insights generated by numerous other disciplines, including anthropology, sociology, memory studies, art history, and neurobiology, to name just a few. As such, my intention here is not to try to cover the field of religious visual culture in any exhaustive matter. Nor do I hope to offer an exhaustive survey of the ever-growing body of literature that explores the intersection of religion and the visual arts.⁹ Instead, I aim to describe some of the persistent concerns of this field, especially as they emerge through the work of David Morgan.

In his many articles, books, and edited volumes, Morgan investigates how materiality and visuality constitute "a compelling register in which to examine belief."¹⁰ He does so by examining a fascinating assortment of art objects, ranging from Warner Sallman's popular paintings of Jesus to illustrated Sunday School primers from Protestant churches. Like most visual culture theorists, Morgan also consistently looks beyond images themselves to the religious performances, rituals, spaces, feelings,

⁹ For a representative example of what is now a rather large body of literature, see for instance: Joseph Sciorra, "Yard Shrines and Sidewalk Altars of New York's Italian Americans," in *Perspectives in Vernacular Architecture* (ed. Tomas Carter and Bernard L. Herman; Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 1989), 185-99; Gregor T. Goethals, "Ritual and the Representation of Power in High and Popular Art," *JRitSt* 4 (1990): 149-77; Ewa Kuryluk, *Veronica and Her Cloth: History, Symbolism, and Structure of a 'True' Image* (Cambridge: Basil Blackwell, 1991); Sally M. Promey, *Spiritual Spectacles: Vision and Image in Mid-Nineteenth Century Shakerism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993); Colleen McDannell, *Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in America* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995); S. Brent Plate, *Religion, Art, and Visual Culture: A Cross-Cultural Reader* (New York: Palgrave, 2002); and William Arweck and Elisabeth Keenan, *Materializing Religion: Expression, Performance, and Ritual* (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2006); and numerous books and edited volumes by David Morgan (see below).

¹⁰ David Morgan, "Introduction: The Matter of Belief," in *Religion and Material Culture: The Matter of Belief* (ed. David Morgan; New York: Routledge, 2010), 8. See also, idem, *Icons of American Protestantism: The Art of Warner Sallman* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996); and idem, *Visual Piety: A History and Theory of Popular Religious Images* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); *Protestants and Pictures: Religion, Visual Culture, and the Age of American Mass Production* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999); *The Sacred Gaze* (2005); *The Lure of Images: A History of Religion and Visual Media in American* (New York: Routledge, 2007); and *The Embodied Eye: Religious Visual Culture and the Social Life of Feeling* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012). Morgan has also co-edited volumes with Sally M. Promey (*The Visual Culture of American Religions* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001]) and James Elkins (*Re-Enchantment* [New York: Routledge, 2009]).

effects, and responses that emerge from and rely on the visual arts. In this sense, Morgan's research differs somewhat from traditional art historical approaches to Christian or Jewish images, which primarily have focused on identifying the theologies conveyed by certain pictures or evaluating how specific artistic styles (such as abstract expressionism) are capable of accessing the sublime or evoking a sense of divine mystery.¹¹ While such considerations intersect with some aspects of religious visual culture, Morgan pursues a slightly different path. The unifying thread that runs throughout his research is his interest in two closely related topics: (1) the *visual medium of belief*—that is, how religious faith is mediated, mobilized, and maintained in and through visual materials and visual practices; and (2) the *religious apparatus of sight*—that is, how visual perception and ways of seeing are conditioned by prior religious beliefs and moral frameworks. Taken together, these two areas of research attempt to organize and describe the various ways in which seeing and believing are inextricably linked in and through religious visual culture.

6.2.1. The Visual Medium of Belief

Throughout his research, but especially in the introduction to *The Sacred Gaze*, Morgan challenges the tendency to think about belief strictly in terms of propositional

¹¹ These perspectives are especially evident in religious approaches to the visual arts prior to the early 1990s. For representative examples, see John Dillenberger's 1987 presidential address at the annual meeting of the American Academic of Religion ("Visual Arts and Religion," *JAAR* 61 [1988]: 199-212, as well as Doug Adam's helpful review article, "Recent Religion and Visual Arts Scholarship," *Re/SRev* 11 (1985): 159-65.

statements or verbal assent to theological doctrines.¹² In Morgan's estimation, this "creedal" understanding of belief reflects a distinctly Christian or even Protestant way of thinking about religion, and as such it does not offer an adequate framework for investigating how religion is actually experienced in most circumstances.¹³ Belief, in Morgan's opinion, "does not exist in an abstract, discursive space, in an empyrean realm of pure proclamation, 'I Believe.'"¹⁴ Rather, even in Protestant communities, belief routinely happens not only through what people *say* (i.e., words and creeds) but also through what they *see*—paintings and photographs, architecture and landscapes, performances and rituals, liturgical garments and illuminated manuscripts. Morgan describes these and other material objects as the *visual medium of belief*, the created matter through which people explore the meaning of the spiritual world and negotiate their relationship with the divine.

In stressing the point that belief is a mediated phenomenon, Morgan underscores the ways in which religion takes shape and is expressed through a broad

¹² Morgan, *The Sacred Gaze*, 6-15. For a related discussion, see idem, "Introduction: The Matter of Belief," in *Religion and Material Culture*, 1-18.

¹³ Idem, *The Sacred Gaze*, 7. In his effort to call into question more creedal or doctrine-centered approaches to the study of religion, Morgan follows the previous work of other historians and anthropologists. For instance, Rodney Needham argues that the Christian concept of belief does not provide a universally applicable framework for the study of other religious systems (*Belief, Language and Experience* [Oxford: Blackwell, 1972]). Likewise, Malcolm Ruel and Wilfred Cantwell Smith have both attempted to trace the linguistic history of the word "believe" from its original meaning ("to love" or "to hold dear") to the more recent notion of holding an opinion or set of ideas. See for instance, Malcolm Ruel, *Belief, Ritual, and the Securing of Life: Reflexive Essays on a Bantu Religion* [Leiden: Brill, 1997]; and Wilfred Cantwell Smith, *Faith and Belief* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979]). More specifically, Jon Butler has argued that Protestant (and especially Puritan) theologies have unduly influenced scholarly conceptions of religious belief. In Butler's estimation, a "Puritan model" of religious research tends to dismiss aspects of other faith traditions, including Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, and Judaism, that do not explicitly reflect the Protestant preference for words and creeds over images and embodied practices. For further discussion, see Jon Butler, "Historiographic Heresy: Catholicism as a Model for American Religious History," in *Belief in History: Innovative Approaches to European and American Religion* (Thomas Kselman, ed.; South Bend, Ind.: University of Notre Dame Press, 1991), 286-309.

¹⁴ Morgan, *The Sacred Gaze*, 8.

array of material objects, embodied practices, and sensory experiences.¹⁵ These visual articulations of faith are often produced and consumed apart from the official sanction of ecclesial bodies, and they are as likely to take the form of mass-produced kitsch or roadside billboards as they are finely carved sculptures or ornate altarpieces. Regardless of their form, these materials have the capacity to facilitate belief by cultivating religious feelings and sensibilities, bringing the mind into a deeper awareness of the person or place which is depicted, activating shared memories and collective identities, and absorbing one's consciousness in a meditative state of prayer or self-reflection.

While present-day religious communities often visualize their beliefs through a host of modern digital technologies (videos, computer generated graphics, mass produced images, etc.), the fact that belief happens in and through visual media is not a unique characteristic of contemporary Western culture. In her book *Material Christianity*, historian Colleen McDannell cogently argues that "'genuine' religion has always been expressed and made real with objects, architecture, art, and landscapes."¹⁶ Religion scholars William Arweck and Elisabeth Keenan strike a similar chord when they

¹⁵ Ibid., 8. In describing belief as an embodied practice and sensory experience, Morgan draws on the philosophy of David Hume and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. Though in varying ways, these philosophers contend that there is a close connection between abstract cognition and religious belief on the one hand, and the human body and physical experience on the other. This perspective, which is latent in much of Morgan's work, has been further substantiated by more recent work in neurobiology. Antonio Damasio, for instance, affirms that all levels of consciousness are grounded in the brain's physical arrangement of synapses and neural pathways. For further discussion, see Damasio's *The Feeling of What Happens: Body and Emotion in the Making of Human Consciousness* (San Diego: Harcourt, 1999). Likewise, the connection between vision and cognition is explored by V. S. Ramachandran (*A Brief Tour of Human Consciousness: From Imposter Poodles to Purple Numbers* [New York: Pi, 2004]) and, though much earlier, Rudolf Arnheim (*Visual Thinking* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969]). A more specific treatment of the connection between the brain and belief can also be found in Michael R. Trimble's *The Soul in the Brain: The Cerebral Basis of Language, Art, and Belief* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2007) and Mark Turner's *The Artful Mind: Cognitive Science and the Riddle of Human Creativity* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

¹⁶ McDannell, *Material Christianity*, 272.

remark, "The human mind and hand . . . are turned doggedly down the generations to the creation of countless material modes of expressing religious sensibility, identity, and belonging."¹⁷ In other words, "When dealing with the things of the spirit, matter matters inordinately."¹⁸

While Morgan would fully agree with Arweck and Keenan's assessment, he develops their argument one step further. Morgan begins with the assumption that visual data cannot be isolated from questions about the liturgical settings, everyday spaces, and embodied performances in which images function.¹⁹ As a result, the analysis of religious visual culture is interested not only in material objects but also in the routines, customs, habits, and responses that give those objects their spiritual meaning, power, and efficacy.²⁰ In this way, Morgan believes that "visual practice is the primary datum alongside images themselves and that the two, together, insofar as religion happens visually, constitute the visual medium of belief."²¹

This dual emphasis on visual data *and* visual practices is especially evident in the general description of *Material Religion*, one of the leading peer-reviewed academic journals in the area of religious visual culture:

Material Religion . . . seeks to explore how religion happens in material culture—images, devotional and liturgical objects, architecture and sacred space, works of art and mass-produced artifacts. No less important than these material forms are the many different practices that put them to work. Ritual, communication, ceremony, instruction, meditation, propaganda, pilgrimage, display, magic,

¹⁷ Arweck and Keenan, *Materializing Religion*, 1.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 1.

¹⁹ Morgan, *The Sacred Gaze*, 32, 33, 52

²⁰ Morgan, *The Sacred Gaze*, 3.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 6.

liturgy and interpretation constitute many of the practices whereby religious material culture constructs the worlds of belief.²²

While not uninterested in art historical or iconographic approaches, this journal also attends to important issues concerning how images participate in the social and cultural construction of reality.²³ By stressing the social function and effect of images, the editors of *Material Religion* (one of whom is Morgan) emphasize the cultural work images do to consolidate national and spiritual identities, shape a sense of piety and devotion, organize religious rituals and ceremonies, and so forth. In doing so, this journal does not by any means dismiss more traditional concerns with an image's production, material characteristics, or iconographic content. Rather, it seeks to cultivate a form of scholarly discourse that is centered on visual *practices* as well as visual *objects*. Morgan sums up this perspective well when he describes a visual culture approach as one that "wishes to scrutinize the social apparatus that creates and deploys the object, the gaze that apprehends the image in the social operation of seeing."²⁴

Morgan offers several examples of what it might look like to analyze the visual medium of belief. For instance, in the second chapter of *The Sacred Gaze*, Morgan attempts to delineate some of the particular ways in which images are put to use in religious contexts.²⁵ Specifically, he constructs a typology of image use that aims to

²² See <http://www.bloomsbury.com/us/journal/material-religion/> (accessed 4/2/2013).

²³ Morgan, *The Sacred Gaze*, 30.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, To a certain degree, I have anticipated some of Morgan's practice-oriented concerns in chapter 5 of this study. There I analyzed how ancient viewers talked about and responded to ancient art, especially in the context of war. As a type of visual practice, these patterns of response function as a primary source for understanding what ancient viewers believed about the nature, power, and agency of visual representation. As I demonstrate in §§6.3-4, questions about visual practices are not only germane to the study of contemporary religion but ancient religion as well.

²⁵ For further discussion, see *ibid.*, 48-74.

capture "everything that a [religious] person or community does with and by means of an image."²⁶ In doing so, Morgan enumerates seven different categories that account for how visual practices structure relations among human beings, material objects, and the spiritual world. In brief, religious images and visual practices function together in order to:

- (1) *order space and time* by identifying certain locations as sacred (temples, pilgrimage sites, spaces within the home; see **fig. 6.1**) and marking specific occasions as spiritually significant (birth, death, baptism, ordination);
- (2) *imagine community* by cultivating a shared sense of identity through the display of common emblems (the cross, the star of David) and well known pictorial narratives (the Last Supper, the ascension of Elijah);
- (3) *communicate with the divine* as when statues or other cult objects are prayed to, offered gifts, fed, and consulted through practices of divination;
- (4) *embody forms of communion with the divine* as when icons of a saint are believed to confer blessings or when a consecration ceremony is thought to enable an image to manifest the living presence of a deity or ancestor (cf. §5.2.1);
- (5) *collaborate with other forms of representation* especially in the form of objects that blend word and image, such as illuminated Bibles, amulets with biblical inscriptions, or ornate calligrams (a type of imagetext in which written words are arranged to form various artistic representations; see **fig. 6.2**);
- (6) *influence thought and behavior* whether through the instructional use of illustrations in children's literature or the apotropaic function of certain images when worn on the body as a charm, displayed in the home in the form of a hamsa (a hand-shaped amulet; see **fig. 6.3**), or carried into battle as a protective emblem; and
- (7) *displace rival images* as is the case when certain visual signs are damaged, destroyed, or removed in the context of cult reforms, theological controversies, or even military operations (cf. §5.3.2).

²⁶ Morgan, *The Sacred Gaze*, 32, 55.



Figures 6.1-3. Left: An ornamental plaque that is traditionally hung on the eastern wall of Jewish homes (thus the inscription: *mizrah* = "east") to indicate the direction of daily prayer. Center: Islamic Bismillah calligram in the shape of a pear. The body of the pear reads: *bismillāhi raḥmāni raḥīm* ("In the name of God, the Most Gracious, the Most Merciful"); the right leaf reads: *qāla allāh ta'ālā* ("The sublime God said"); the left leaf reads: *wa innahu min Sulaymān* ("And it is from Solomon"). Right: a hamsa, also known as the "hand of Miriam" in Jewish use. The Hebrew letters ח are found encircled in the upper center of the palm (referring to the Hebrew word for "life"). The three downward pointing fingers are thought to double as the Hebrew letter ש, the first letter of the divine name Shaddai.

Much more could be said about these particular categories, not to mention how they might be adjusted in order to reflect the specific practices of ancient Israelite religion.²⁷ But for now, I want to highlight three of its broader implications, especially as they relate to Morgan's analysis of the visual medium of belief. First, Morgan contends that there is no one-to-one correspondence between visual materials and the practices that employ them. A given image can be used in a variety of different ways by different religious communities and it even can be used in numerous different ways within the same community. As Morgan puts it, "Images do what their users require of them, which may involve many things at once."²⁸ For instance, hamsas (**fig. 6.3**) blend word and image (category #5) but in Jewish, Christian, and Islamic traditions, they also are

²⁷ Morgan stresses that the particular categories enumerated in his typology are derived from inductive observations, not philosophical speculation. As a result, Morgan admits that "the list is incomplete and will need to expand as evidence requires," or as I might add, contexts change (*The Sacred Gaze*, 36).

²⁸ Morgan, *The Sacred Gaze*, 73.

thought to provide protection (#6) by warding off the evil eye and/or to confer blessings (#4) by boosting the fertility and health of pregnant women and mothers.²⁹ In other contexts, the hamsa can symbolize national identity (#2) as is the case in the national emblem of the Republic of Algeria, which depicts a simple hamsa that is surrounded by other images and an inscription in Arabic. As a result, when analyzing the visual medium of belief, scholars not only must enumerate discrete functional categories of image use but they must also attend to the ways in which multiple visual practices can apply to the same image.

Conversely, the same visual practice can utilize various different types of images. While Morgan's typology specifically focuses on how religious images are put to use, many of his categories could apply equally well to nonreligious images. Morgan admits, "If one were to replace *divine* in the third and fourth [categories] with *tradition* or *civilization* or *nation* or *the past*, there would be no difference between the range of functions ascribed to religious images and those ascribed to a great variety of nonreligious images."³⁰ Therefore, scholars should not *a priori* assume that different types of images are always utilized in different ways or that certain iconographic themes or subject matter rigidly determine whether an image is "religious." In fact, it is often the case that worshippers respond to and deploy a wide variety of visual representations in a very similar fashion. As I discuss below, if a similar situation can be shown to obtain in the ancient world, then it will become imperative for biblical scholars

²⁹ Although the general form of the hamsa is relatively consistent across religious communities, it is known by different names: the hand of Miriam (in Judaism), the hand of Fatima (in Islam), and the Hand of Mary (in Christianity). Use of the hamsa predates each of these traditions and can be traced to ancient Mesopotamia.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 55.

to assess not only *what* types of images existed in ancient Israel but *how* various forms of representation were put to use in and responded to.

Second, one of the main contributions of Morgan's typology is the way in which it stresses that what makes a particular image religious is not only, or even primarily, its subject matter or iconographic content. Equally important in this determination are the social, cultural, and intellectual practices that put an image to use.³¹ Of course, an individual might consider the content of a certain image to be inherently religious apart from any consideration of visual practice. And, at least in some cases, how an image is used is keyed to what it depicts.³² Nevertheless, through ethnographic studies of visual practices and/or literary analyses of how communities describe art objects in written records, it is evident that images are sometimes used and responded to in ways that are not directly related to their intrinsic content or intended purpose. This happens, for instance, in situations in which the imagery of indigenous religions is taken over by missionaries and redeployed for the purposes of Christian worship and devotion.³³ As a result, one of the principle goals of Morgan's typology is "to suggest how much the meaning of an image depends on the ritual or practice that employs it in the temple, home, or community."³⁴ Extrapolating from this point, I later argue (§6.3.2) that what makes a religion aniconic or iconic is not only its artistic preferences but also the nature of its religious practices. In this way, while Morgan primarily deals with contemporary

³¹ Morgan, *The Sacred Gaze*, 31, 55.

³² *Ibid.*, 73.

³³ The opposite phenomenon can also occur—i.e., indigenous communities can repurpose Christian imagery for use in other religious traditions. For more on both of these situations, see the following chapters in Morgan's *The Sacred Gaze*: "The Violence of Seeing: Idolatry and Iconoclasm," 115-46; and "The Circulation of Images in Mission History," 147-187.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 73.

visual culture, his analytical perspective may also be fruitfully applied to the study of ANE art and religion.

Finally, what is clearly evident in Morgan's typology is that "[t]he idea of religion itself is largely unintelligible outside its incarnation in material expressions."³⁵ This observation is significant, especially in light of the repeated efforts made by Christians (and to a certain extent, Jews) to do violence to images whether through physically destroying images, proscribing their place in worship, or punishing those who use them.³⁶ Although iconoclastic efforts have been quite extreme at various points throughout history, they have never completely eliminated the impulse to materialize religion in and through visual media. To anticipate my argument in §6.3, I think much of the same can be said about Israelite religion. However one comes to understand the image ban in the Hebrew Bible, ancient Israelites persisted in "the will to image" through a wide variety of visual media and material objects.³⁷

6.2.2. The Religious Apparatus of Sight

If the first defining characteristic of Morgan's research challenges certain assumptions about the nature of belief—that it is primarily expressed through words and creeds—then the second seeks to reorient perspectives concerning the nature of sight. Like other visual culture theorists, Morgan insists that seeing entails more than just laying

³⁵ Arweck and Keenan, *Materializing Religion*, 2-3.

³⁶ For further discussion of violent responses to images in Mesopotamian warfare and the Hebrew Bible, see §5.3.2 and §5.4, respectively.

³⁷ A similar view is reflected in the epigraph to this chapter from David Freedberg's *The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 55.

one's eyes on something or passively receiving sensory data.³⁸ Rather, seeing is a thoroughly engaged, purposeful, and constructive activity. As Morgan puts it, seeing is "a way of making order, of remembering, and of engaging people and the material world in relationships."³⁹ Another way of saying this is that visual experiences are always structured and organized by a system of epistemological lenses, cultural knowledge, and social experiences that constitute what I refer to as the "apparatus of sight." I prefer this term primarily because "apparatus" has the potential to capture three different aspects of sight: (1) the *optical*—that is, the eye as the bodily apparatus of perception; (2) the *cultural*—that is, the habits and customs that structure the mechanisms of visual interpretation; and (3) the *social*—that is, the complex network of relationships in which specific acts of seeing take place.⁴⁰ Though Morgan does not explicitly use the phrase "apparatus of sight," he likewise affirms that visual experiences are selectively filtered and arranged according to certain underlying social and cultural assumptions. In this sense, seeing images—or anything else for that matter—is never simply a function of biological perception, nor is it always rigidly governed by knowledge of iconographic conventions or art historical contexts. As Morgan contends, seeing is a means by which

³⁸ Morgan, *The Embodied Eye*, 70.

³⁹ Idem, *The Sacred Gaze*, 48.

⁴⁰ As someone who works closely with biblical texts, I am also tempted to think of the apparatus of sight in terms of the *critical apparatus* of variant readings and other textual notes that accompany scholarly editions of the Hebrew Bible and New Testament. In bringing into focus the social history and effects of images, the idea of an apparatus of sight would be a way to account for the fact that later viewers often attribute meanings to images that diverge from what was intended by its original producers. If these meanings are thought of as "variant readings" of an image's message (a point which would need to be further debated), then scholars interested in religious visual culture might conceive of the reception history of an image's meaning as part of the *critical apparatus* of sight.

viewers, whether consciously or unconsciously, search for what they hope to see or have been trained to look for.⁴¹

In applying this perspective to the study of religion, Morgan stresses that devout viewers not only materialize belief in and through what they see but they also are predisposed to see in an image what they already believe. In other words, religious ideas routinely condition how people process visual data and can even enable them to recognize the presence of certain numinous qualities in an image that others fail to perceive.⁴² As a result, Morgan attempts to analyze how "the structure and operation of vision [is] a religious act" and how seeing itself is a "proactive gesture" that is deeply inflected by prior beliefs, values, and theological commitments.⁴³ Among other things, this means that a visual culture approach is as interested in *how* one sees—that is, the repeated procedures, learned routines, and social practices that condition historical acts of looking—as it is in *what* one sees.⁴⁴ With this in mind, one of the central arguments that surfaces in Morgan's research is that the study of religious visual culture is best undertaken as an analysis of ways of seeing.⁴⁵ These ways of seeing might be considered

⁴¹ Morgan, *The Embodied Eye*, 68. I made a similar point about the selective nature of seeing in my earlier discussion of cognitive research and the iconographic method (§4.4).

⁴² Idem, *The Sacred Gaze*, 8. The same might also be said about how people come to see religiously meaningful things in dreams, apparitions, cloud formations, shadows, rock formations, etc. While a study of religious visual culture would include these types of phenomena, they generally lie outside the scope of my current project.

⁴³ Ibid., 6. However, one possible difficulty with this concept is that it is not always self evident how to determine what makes a particular instance of vision a *religious* act as opposed to a non-religious act. This determination might be particularly difficult when dealing with ancient images and their viewers. While this issue requires further explication, it will suffice for the purposes of this project to note that vision is not a neutral act and that seeing is influenced by and participates in the construction of religious beliefs and knowledge, even if the idea of religion is variously construed. (at least

⁴⁴ In this sense, ways of seeing might be considered as a specific type of visual practice (see Morgan's comments in *The Sacred Gaze*, 2-3).

⁴⁵ Ibid., 6; See also, idem, *The Embodied Eye*, 69; and *Visual Piety*, 1-3.

as a specific type of visual practice, though I choose to treat these topics separately for several reasons. Seeing is certainly a practice that relies on visual materials, but not necessarily in the same way as the practices enumerated in the functional typology described above. Conversely, while almost all visual practices entail distinct ways of seeing, they also depend on other actions, routines, and/or responses. Though closely related, visual practices primarily address how people put images to use while ways of seeing focus on how people process visual data.

Throughout his work, Morgan develops a variety of different concepts that describe the ways in which believing comes to bear on seeing, including: visual piety, image covenants, and the embodied eye.⁴⁶ However, Morgan most commonly frames his analysis of religious ways of seeing in terms of the "sacred gaze." According to Morgan, this term

designates the particular configuration of ideas, attitudes, and customs that informs a religious act of seeing as it occurs within a given cultural and historical setting. A sacred gaze is the manner in which a way of seeing invests an image, a viewer, or an act of viewing with spiritual significance. . . . [T]he term signals that the entire visual field that constitutes seeing is the framework of analysis, not just the image itself.⁴⁷

As is evident in this description, Morgan's notion of a "gaze" is not something that is simply a bit longer than a glance or glimpse. Neither is it as encompassing as what

⁴⁶ Morgan describes visual piety as "the visual formation and practice of religious belief" (*Visual Piety*, 1). An image covenant refers to "an agreement that sets out the conditions under which an image may deliver what the viewer expects from or seeks in it" (*The Sacred Gaze*, 105). The term embodied eye attempts to account for the way in which "seeing in one form or another is a practice that integrates two corporeal registers: the body of the individual and the body of the group" (*The Embodied Eye*, 14). Morgan uses many of these terms interchangeably, though in some cases it seems as if different terms have the potential to describe slightly different aspects of the religious apparatus of sight. For instance, visual piety seems to be the product or outcome of image covenants, which in turn reflect a powerful form of social embodiment.

⁴⁷ Morgan, *The Sacred Gaze*, 3. As is evident from this description, there is much overlap between how Morgan understands the sacred gaze and what I am calling the religious apparatus of sight.

Martin Jay means by "scopic regime" or as enduring (and negative) as what most feminist critics mean by "the male gaze."⁴⁸ Rather, Morgan uses the notion of a gaze to refer to a particular viewing situation that "enables certain possibilities of meaning, certain forms of experience, and certain relations among participants."⁴⁹ A gaze offers a way of conceptualizing how certain conventions of seeing and specific religio-historical contexts condition visual experience not only by structuring the way in which people interpret visual data but also by "open[ing] up the possibility of seeing what nonparticipants miss or fail to recognize."⁵⁰ In other words, visibility, not just visual interpretation, is (at least partly) the product of a gaze.⁵¹

Gazes are generated by a specific pattern of relationships between the viewer, an object, and the social, cultural, and religious contexts in which certain historical acts of seeing take place.⁵² These elements can be variously configured and tend to exist in different forms not only throughout history and across cultures but also within the same religious community. As a result, Morgan is able to describe numerous types of gazes, including:⁵³

- (1) the *unilateral gaze*, which is the manipulative, objectifying, and asymmetrical gaze of the powerful over the powerless (as in Foucault's idea of panopticism or the Eye of Sauron in J. R. R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*);
- (2) the *occlusive gaze*, which is an attempt to render oneself invisible to, or protected from, the gaze of other people or other things, such as the evil eye or a look of shameful judgment;

⁴⁸ For further discussion, see *ibid.*, 3-4; and *idem*, *The Embodied Eye*, 67-70.

⁴⁹ *Idem*, *The Sacred Gaze*, 4.

⁵⁰ Morgan, *The Sacred Gaze*, 69.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 69.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 32; and *idem*, *The Embodied Eye*, 68.

⁵³ For further discussion of Morgan's "morphology of visual fields," see *ibid.*, 70-83.

- (3) the *aversive gaze*, which is a deliberate act of *not* seeing, as when viewers, out of respect or fear, divert their eyes from an authority figure (casting one's eyes down before a king) or conceive of the deity as being formless, invisible, and/or utterly transcendent;
- (4) the *reciprocal gaze*, which describes viewing situations where images seem to look back at their spectators, as with Christian icons of saints or with the previously discussed depictions of Ishtar in some Mesopotamian seals (cf. §4.3.1);
- (5) the *devotional gaze*, which is a mode of visuality or bodily engagement in which a worshipper's mind becomes fully absorbed in prayer, meditation, and adoration through certain visualization techniques or the contemplation of a specific image;
- (6) the *virtual gaze*, which generates a viewing situation in which the observer or actor can vicariously participate in past events (e.g., Passion plays, Nativity scenes) or can actively project herself into other spaces (e.g., grottos, "Holy Land" exhibits, re-creations of the Tabernacle);
- (7) the *communal gaze*, which involves envisioning the social body of belief through architecture, the physical arrangement of sanctuaries, or the public display of processions and rituals; and
- (8) the *liminal gaze*, which constructs a viewing situation in which other people, places, and social realities are visualized as being chaotic, uncivilized, deviant, or anathema.

In each of these cases, the particular gaze or way of seeing that is in effect has the capacity to orient social relationships, inform a viewer's sense of identity or belonging in a community, and enable a worshipper to experience or sense the presence of the deity in or even beyond an image.⁵⁴ Thus, by analyzing the role and function of gazes in religious visual culture, Morgan brings into focus "the powerful and pervasive ways in which the devout see the world, organize and evaluate it, and infuse into the appearance of things the feelings and ideas that make the world intelligible and familiar

⁵⁴ Morgan, *The Embodied Eye*, 70.

to them."⁵⁵ Morgan's understanding of these various gazes could be further elaborated, especially as they come to bear on the study of religious ways of seeing in Israelite religion. For the time being, however, I want to once again press a more practical point: What difference would it make to approach the relationship between seeing and believing in terms of the religious apparatus of sight? Is the sacred gaze useful as an analytical strategy when studying religious visual culture in ancient as well as modern contexts?

First, by highlighting the fact that seeing is a constructive and religious activity, Morgan shifts greater attention to the role viewers play in receiving and processing visual data. Morgan regards the meaning of an image as a function of both its production *and* its reception, the intentions of the original producers *and* the interpretations of later viewers.⁵⁶ Though most art historians and biblical scholars would not dispute this point, traditional iconographic methods tend to give less attention to questions about the spectator and historical acts of seeing more broadly.⁵⁷ Instead, their efforts crystal around explaining why images look the way they do or what message they were originally meant to convey, both of which are primarily questions about production. While such information is surely essential, visual culture theorists recognize that the on-going meanings an image receives is generated through a complex

⁵⁵ Morgan, *The Sacred Gaze*, 260.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 30. By "later viewers" I mean those audiences who would have interacted with images in specific historical contexts after the image was originally created or commissioned. Though my interest lies primary with ancient audiences, contemporary scholars would likewise constitute a group of "later viewers."

⁵⁷ For instance, W. J. T. Mitchell claims that the "unfinished business" of Panofsky's iconographic method is its failure to account for the role of the spectator (*Picture Theory: Essays on Verbal and Visual Representation* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994]), 18. For further discussion, see §5.4.

interaction between the image, its viewers, and the social, cultural, and religious contexts in which subsequent acts of seeing take place.⁵⁸ In other words, knowledge about the production of an image does not rigidly predict how viewers process, interact with, or respond to visual materials. This does not imply that images are inherently ambiguous or that the meaning of a visual object is hopelessly indeterminate.⁵⁹ Rather, it simply raises the possibility that viewers of images, not unlike readers of texts, are capable of accepting, opposing, negotiating, or reimagining the original meaning or predominant interpretation of a given image based on the epistemological or moral lenses that condition their gaze.⁶⁰ One of the more practical outcomes of analyzing religious ways of seeing is that it acknowledges that "[v]iewers enter into a relation with the image in which they are expected to participate imaginatively, contributing what the image itself may not provide but must presuppose if it is to touch the viewer."⁶¹ Thus, iconographic modes of analysis, even if they are nuanced in the ways I describe in chapter 4, cannot always account for what images come to mean in the eyes of certain

⁵⁸ For a more general discussion of how visual culture theorists talk about the role of the viewer in the meaning-making process, see Marita Sturken and Lisa Cartwright, *Practices of Looking: An Introduction to Visual Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001), 45-71.

⁵⁹ In this sense, I disagree with the hermeneutical perspective of historian Margaret Miles (see §4.1). While Miles acknowledges that visual interpretation is conditioned by the social, cultural, and political contexts of certain viewing audiences, she at times seems to suggest that this leads to a type of interpretive nihilism when it comes to processing visual data: "The multivalence of an image means that we can never definitively interpret it" (*Image as Insight*, 32). To a certain extent, Miles might be right—without training in the visual arts, historians often find images more difficult to read than texts. But Miles seems to overstate the case when she concludes that images do not yield a clearly defined "detachable conclusion" (*ibid.*, 33). To be fair, Miles's larger point is that images can function as something other than a language of communication, and as such, they were not always or even primarily "read" in the context of Christian worship and devotional practices. On this point, I fully agree. However, even if one acknowledges that images express meaning in ways that are different than texts (§4.2) or that images are occasionally responded to as something other than just a medium for communicating information (§5.2), it does not necessarily follow that visual meaning is hopelessly indeterminate or ambiguous.

⁶⁰ Sturken and Cartwright, *Practices of Looking*, 57.

⁶¹ Morgan, *The Sacred Gaze*, 75.

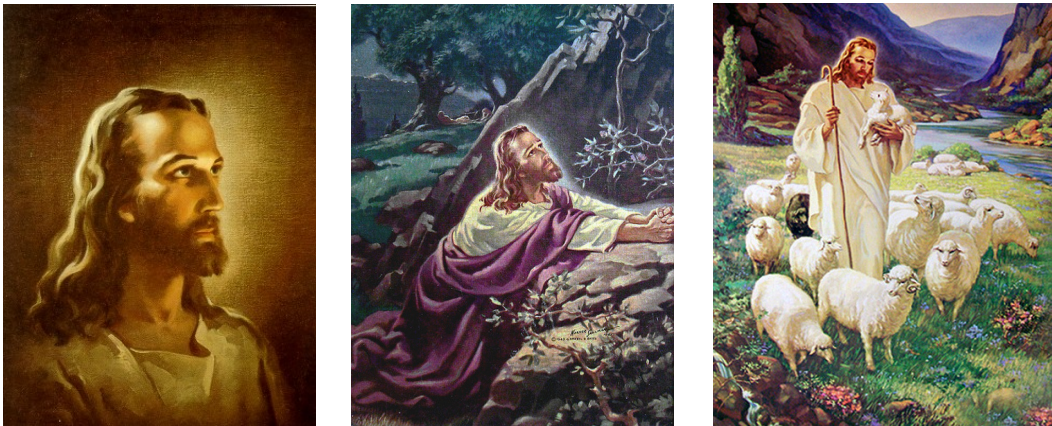
viewing audiences.⁶²

These concerns are especially evident in Morgan's study of popular religious imagery in *Visual Piety*. Throughout this work, Morgan examines how Warner Sallman's famous mid-twentieth-century depictions of Christ (**figs. 6.4-6**) have been interpreted as powerful symbols of American Protestant and Catholic religious faith. Among other things, Morgan explores the sometimes peculiar ways Sallman's images are *believed in*—that is, how they contribute to the social construction of reality and why they help make concrete the shared feelings, memories, beliefs, and values that define religious communities.⁶³ In order to do so, Morgan solicited over 500 letters from devout viewers explaining how—or indeed, what—they see in Sallman's art. Two particular observations are instructive for the purposes of this discussion. First, despite the fact that Sallman's pale-skinned, light-haired Jesus hardly reflects what someone born in Palestine some 2000 years ago would have looked like, countless viewers attest that they "recognize" Jesus in these paintings. What they recognize, as Morgan points out, is not a realistic portraiture of Jesus, but a spiritual essence behind the image, a vision of Jesus learned and cultivated through Sunday School education and popular American

⁶² Morgan sums up the issue in this way: "The study of visual culture will regard the image as part of a cultural system of production and reception, in which original intention does not eclipse the use to which images are put by those who are not their makers" (*ibid.*, 30).

⁶³ Though beyond the scope of this discussion, another central argument that runs throughout Morgan's research is that material things, including images, contribute to the social, intellectual, and perceptual construction of reality. The work of several social thinkers are important to Morgan in this regard, including: Peter Berger and Thomas Luckman, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1966); Pierre Bourdieu, *Outline of a Theory of Practice* (trans. Richard Nice; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977); Grant McCracken, *Culture and Consumption: New Approaches to the Symbolic Character of Consumer Goods and Activities* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990); and Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, "Why We Need Things," in *History from Things: Essays on Material Culture* (ed. Steven Lubar and W. David Kingery; Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1993). For further discussion, see Morgan, *Visual Piety*, 2-12.

Christian culture. What results is a type of visual piety or devotional gaze that effectively "enhanc[es] the immanence of the spiritual referent through the image, reifying it, and merging it with a concept of the historical Jesus."⁶⁴ Through the eyes of faith, these paintings of Jesus become an icon of his spiritual presence despite the fact that they do not constitute a naturalistic portrait. Devout viewers see Jesus *in* or perhaps *beyond* these paintings because they reinforce what the viewers already have been trained to believe.⁶⁵ This is why the image seems so much like Jesus, and this is why so many viewers see Sallman's *Head of Christ* and cannot help but exclaim: "That's Jesus!"⁶⁶



Figures 6.4-6. Paintings of Jesus by Warner Sallman. Left: *Head of Christ*, oil on canvas. © 1941, 1968 Warner Press, Inc., Anderson, Indiana. Used with permission. Center: *Christ in Gethsemane*, oil on canvas. © 1942, 1969 Warner Press, Inc., Anderson, Indiana. Used with permission. Right: *The Lord is My Shepherd*, oil on canvas. © 1943, 1970 Warner Press, Inc., Anderson, Indiana. Used with permission.

But the sacred gaze does more than just shape how viewers interpret the subject matter of Sallman's paintings. It also conditions them to see things in the art that the author did not originally intend to depict. For instance, numerous viewers in Morgan's study indicate that they were able to discern religious symbols within Sallman's *Head of*

⁶⁴ Morgan, *Visual Piety*, 43. Though Morgan uses the term "the historical Jesus" I prefer "the real/actual Jesus" so as to avoid confusion with the term used in New Testament scholarship regarding reconstructions of the life of Jesus of Nazareth based on historical-critical methods.

⁶⁵ The same can be said of the popular (and more recent) religious paintings of Thomas Kinkade.

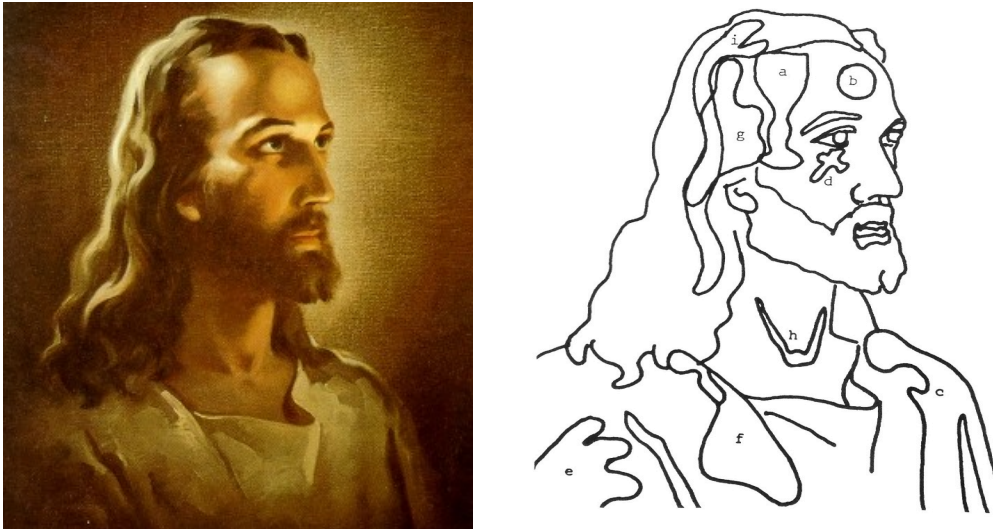
⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 43, 122.

Christ, as if this painting functioned as a "spiritual Rorschach blot" (**fig. 6.8**).⁶⁷ To reiterate an earlier point, these observations are not based on knowledge of iconographic conventions nor even the artist's original intentions—indeed, Sallman explicitly claimed *not* to have painted these symbols into the *Head of Christ*.⁶⁸ Rather, they are the product of the sacred gaze, a religious way of seeing that has led viewers "to textualize images, to treat them as the illustration of devotional or theological discourse."⁶⁹ The result is that spiritually significant symbols emerge as a type of apparition on the surface of the artwork itself.

⁶⁷ Morgan, *Visual Piety*, 125.

⁶⁸ Sallman seems to have been influenced by the religious ways of seeing embodied in later viewers. When Sallman spoke about this painting in talks to Christian communities throughout America, he clarified that he did not *consciously* place these symbols into his art. Rather, he claimed that they appeared to him in the process of drawing (*ibid.*, 128-32). This is an interesting case of reverse reception history—that is, the religious ways of seeing of later viewers prompted the author to reassess his own understanding about the original production of the painting!

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 140.



Figures 6.7-8. Left: Warner Sallman's *Head of Christ*, cropped. Right: Diagram of symbols identified by viewers: a) communion chalice; b) the Eucharist; c) a prophet or priest; d) a cross; e) three nuns in prayer; f) an angel in prayer; g) the Blessed Mother kneeling in prayer; h) a dove; and i) a serpent.⁷⁰ After Morgan, *Visual Piety*, 128 fig. 42. Image used with permission by David Morgan.

Morgan's point is that not every viewer would see or recognize these images. In fact, the visibility of these symbols is contingent on prior beliefs, many of which seem to follow specific ecclesial affiliations. For instance, Catholic viewers reported seeing the shape on Jesus's left shoulder (labeled "c" in fig. 6.8) as a priest or monk saying the *Confiteor* while Lutheran observers recognized in this same shape a prophet from the Hebrew Bible.⁷¹ Though disagreeing on what these symbols represent, both Catholic and Lutheran viewers effectively insert the painting "into a mode of discourse built on the primary language of the Bible."⁷² That is to say, what some religious viewers are able to see in the painting is conditioned by what they have come to believe as a result of certain theological traditions. In this way, religious ways of seeing corroborate biblical

⁷⁰ These observations were made by 22 Catholic and Lutheran respondents who sent letters to Morgan about their responses to Sallman's *Head of Christ*. For further discussion, see Morgan, *Visual Piety*, 126-28.

⁷¹ Morgan, *Visual Piety*, 131.

⁷² *Ibid.*, 140.

interpretation.⁷³ As such, the symbols enumerated in fig. 6.8 would not likely be visible to viewers who lacked the theological knowledge needed to give these rather ambiguous shapes a spiritually significant meaning. It seems to me that a similar line of reasoning might also be applied to research pertaining to the search for Yahweh's image. As I discuss below (§6.4), there is little direct evidence on iconographic grounds that Israel had anthropomorphic images of Yahweh. However, when the situation is viewed from the vantage point of Morgan's work on religious ways of seeing, it remains possible that deeply held beliefs and expectations would have led ancient Israelite viewers to look for and even "recognize" Yahweh in images that were not originally intended to represent their deity.

Second, Morgan's research tends to closely scrutinize the mechanisms that govern religious ways of seeing. In more recent work in art history, it is not uncommon for scholars to explore how issues related to class, race, gender, sexual orientation, political beliefs, and so forth condition a viewer's interpretation of an image. Morgan is interested in all of these factors as well. However, he moves one step further by arguing that codes of interpretation are based not only on a viewer's social location but also on "a tacit agreement, a compact or a covenant, that a viewer observes when viewing an image in order to be engaged by it, in order to believe what the image reveals or says or means or makes one feel—indeed, in order to believe there is something to believe, some legitimate claim to truth to be affirmed."⁷⁴ Image covenants, then, describe the epistemological and moral conditions that shape what viewers expect from an image.

⁷³ Morgan, *Visual Piety*, 140.

⁷⁴ Idem, *The Sacred Gaze*, 76.

Though Morgan's understanding of an image covenant does not precisely correspond to the biblical concept of covenant, both terms imply a certain type of relationship that is based on prior agreements and expectations. Thus, while image covenants do not rigidly determine how one interprets visual data, they do have, as Morgan puts it, a "portentous significance in determining what the image is seen to show."⁷⁵ In this way, image covenants provide a way of talking about visual response and experience that acknowledges that seeing is a social (and, indeed, religious) act that operates according to trust, obeys certain agreed upon stipulations, and implies certain outcomes.

In the third chapter of *The Sacred Gaze*, Morgan identifies nine image covenants and divides them into two groups: one based on the particular mode of representation evident in the image and the other based on the religious context in which an image is encountered.⁷⁶ For instance, Morgan suggests that while a *mimetic covenant* assures viewers that what they see is a reliable and straightforward portrayal of the actual appearance of a person or object (as in a photograph or portrait), other covenants prompt the viewer to construe the relationship between image and referent in different ways: the *allegorical covenant* establishes that what one sees is a type of visual code that must be deciphered (as in a hieroglyph or emblem of a deity); the *exemplary covenant* encourages viewers to see an image as an ideal or formulaic representation of a subject (as in advertisements or fairy tales); the *expressivist covenant* assures viewers that the thing represented reflects the spirit or essence of the subject, not its natural form (as in impressionism); and the *deconstructive covenant* encourages a skeptical gaze

⁷⁵ Morgan, *The Sacred Gaze*, 76.

⁷⁶ For further discussion, see *ibid.*, 105-112.

that prompts the viewer to question the conventions of meaning-making or the relationship between image and text (as in M. C. Escher drawings or Magritte's previously discussed *La trahison des images*; cf. **fig. 3.7**). In each of these cases, how a viewer understands an image depends on prior expectations about what (or how) that type of representation is designed to signify. A similar situation obtains with respect to a viewer's understanding of an image's relation to ecclesial authority and orthodox belief. For instance, while an *orthodox covenant* would assure viewers that what they see is ideologically correct and suitable for consumption, the *communal* and *authoritarian covenants* affirm, respectively, that what is seen reflects shared feelings and beliefs or bears the approval of an ecclesial authority. Finally, the *open covenant* invites creative acts of seeing and imaginative interpretations that are free from restraint. Here again, prior expectations condition how viewers come to interact with the meaning of an image in a religious context.

It might be said that each of these image covenants functions as an interpretive key or legend for how the viewer negotiates a range of potential meanings.⁷⁷ Just as a legend is essential for reading a map, so too is an understanding of image covenants an important component of analyzing how religious ways of seeing condition visual interpretation. Not surprisingly, the mechanisms that govern ways of seeing can be quite complex. Multiple covenants can be at play at the same time, as when a mimetic covenant is reinforced with communal and orthodox covenants, as might be the case when a viewer recognizes in Sallman's paintings the actual Jesus. Conversely, revoking

⁷⁷ Morgan, *The Sacred Gaze*, 106-7.

one covenant and replacing it with another can generate starkly different interpretations of the same exact object.⁷⁸ My particular interest, however, is in how Morgan's idea of image covenants might shed new light on religious ways of seeing in ancient Israel. Specifically, in §6.4 I raise the possibility that the oft-debated search for Yahweh's image should not only involve careful archaeological and iconographic analysis but also critical reflection on how image covenants establish the epistemological and moral conditions under which a viewer comes to believe that a given image contains religiously meaningful information.

6.2.3. Conclusions

By drawing on the work of David Morgan, I have briefly outlined two of the defining characteristics of the study of religious visual culture: the visual medium of belief and the religious apparatus of sight. The point of this reflection is not to enter into an abstract discussion of theory but rather to develop an interpretive framework that can potentially reorient how biblical scholars approach the study of—among other things—Israelite aniconism and the search for Yahweh's image. Before turning to these two test cases, it will be important to pause in order to consider some of the potential challenges and objections that might arise when applying a visual culture approach to the study of ancient Israelite religion.

In certain respects, it could be argued that biblical iconographic research *already* reflects a visual culture approach to Israelite religion. Even though the genealogy of this

⁷⁸ Morgan puts it this way: "Renegotiating the prevailing covenant can be an activity of creative, critical, and even revolutionary significance in the history of visual production and reception" (ibid., 107).

field is almost exclusively traced through the Fribourg School, some of its orienting interests share a close family resemblance with the work of David Morgan, Margaret Miles, Colleen McDannell, and a host of other scholars who diverge from text-alone approaches to the study of religion.⁷⁹ To be sure, biblical iconographers clearly regard ancient art as a "compelling register" in which to examine Israelite religion. By showing how visual materials came to inform some of the figurative language found in the Hebrew Bible, these scholars have demonstrated, not unlike Morgan, that Israelite beliefs were mediated and mobilized by what people saw. And, in a very general sense, biblical iconographers would likely affirm that religious beliefs structure a certain way of seeing the world. Nevertheless, I contend that the field of biblical iconography is still in a nascent and pioneering stage of exploring ancient Israelite visual culture.⁸⁰ As of yet, biblical iconographers do not typically analyze the role of visual practices or the effect of religious ways of seeing when studying Israelite religion. Even if the study of religious visual culture and biblical iconography only differ in terms of their degree of interest in these topics, they nonetheless give rise to somewhat different interpretive perspectives

⁷⁹ I do not mean to suggest that the Fribourg School played anything but a central role in the development of biblical iconography. However, I believe that the way in which scholars trace the intellectual lineage of a field contributes in no small way to their research agendas and methodologies. Though beyond the scope of this study, it would be a worthwhile project to retell the history of biblical iconography in a way that includes the Fribourg School but also more explicitly situates this field within a broader network of trends within the academic study of religion (for a partial exception, see Uehlinger, "Das Buch und die Bilder: 25 Jahre ikonographischer Forschung am Biblischen Institut der Universität Freiburg Schweiz – Dank an Othmar Keel," in *Images as Media*, 399-408). I suspect that this historiographic account would prompt a broader range of research interests and a more diverse set of interpretive approaches.

⁸⁰ Though they rarely if ever cite Morgan or other visual culture theories, some past contributions to biblical iconography have begun to explore what might be considered "visual culture" issues. As just one example, numerous contributors to Uehlinger's edited volume, *Images as Media*, have explored the social function of minor art in the ancient Near Eastern world (Uehlinger, ed., *Images as Media: Sources for the Cultural History of the Near East and the Eastern Mediterranean, 1st Millennium BCE* [OBO 175; Fribourg: University Press; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2000]).

and research agendas.

What might account for the apparent disconnect between these two fields? I suspect that this has something to do with the relative lack of interest in ancient art within visual culture studies (cf. §2.3.1), and conversely, the general reluctance to take up contemporary visual theory in biblical scholarship (cf. §1.1; §7.1). In addition, a visual culture approach to the study of religion faces a particular challenge when applied to ancient contexts. Biblical scholars do not have the same sort of access to Israelite viewers as Morgan does to contemporary American Christian communities.⁸¹ In fact, evidence of ancient Israelite visual practices and ways of seeing can only be indirectly inferred from archaeological data, textual materials, and/or a broader understanding of the nature, role, and function of images in the ANE world. Therefore, investigations of ancient visual culture are bound to be somewhat speculative in nature, though I should be quick to add, not any more so than studies that focus on *textual* materials. The study of ancient visual culture, at least in my estimation, is no more dependent on theory—or indeed, speculation—than more traditional research that is focused on source or redaction criticism. The best way forward in *any* study of Israelite religion is to construct working hypotheses that are based on multiple lines of evidence and that take up careful reflection on hermeneutical assumptions. With this in mind, it remains possible—and in my estimation, potentially fruitful—to broaden the analytical scope of biblical iconography to include some of the persistent concerns that arise in the study of religious visual culture.

⁸¹ Morgan himself notes the difficulty of studying ancient visual culture ("Visual Religion," *Religion* 30 [2000]: 44).

6.3. Visual Practices and the Study of Israelite Aniconism

In the last several decades, the study of Israelite aniconism has garnered considerable attention.⁸² While a consensus has yet to emerge with regard to the interpretation of either the archaeological evidence or the complex literary development of the image ban texts in the Hebrew Bible, at least three trends are evident in recent research on this topic. First, since the publication of Tryggve N. D. Mettinger's influential volume *No Graven Image? Israelite Aniconism in its Ancient Near Eastern Context* (1995), it has become increasingly common to approach the study of Israelite aniconism from a

⁸² For a representative list of some important contributions to the study of Israelite aniconism, see: Robert P. Carroll, "The Aniconic God and the Cult of Images," *ST* 31 (1977): 51-64; William W. Hallo, *Cult Statue and Divine Image: A Preliminary Study* (Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1982); Jeffrey Tigay, *You Shall Have No Other Gods* (HSS 31; Atlanta, Scholars Press, 1986); Thorkild Jacobsen, "The Graven Image," in *Ancient Israelite Religion: Essays in Honor of Frank Moore Cross* (ed. Patrick D. Miller, Paul D. Hanson, and S. Dean McBride; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1987), 15-32; Moshe Halbertal and Avishai Margalit, *Idolatry* (trans. Naomi Goldblum; Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1992); Benjamin Sass, "The Pre-exilic Hebrew Seals: Iconism vs. Aniconism," in *Studies in the Iconography of Northwest Semitic Inscribed Seals* (ed. Benjamin Sass and Christoph Uehlinger; OBO 125; Fribourg: University Press; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1993), 194-256; Tryggve N. D. Mettinger, *No Graven Image? Israelite Aniconism in its Ancient Near Eastern Context* (ConBOT 42; repr. ed.; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2013 [1995]); Brian B. Schmidt, "The Aniconic Tradition: On Reading Images and Viewing Texts," in *The Triumph of Elohim: From Yahwisms to Judaisms* (ed. Diana V. Edelman; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1995), 75-105; Christoph Uehlinger, "Israelite Aniconism in Context," *Bib* 77 (1996): 540-49; Mettinger, "Israelite Aniconism: Developments and Origins," in *The Image and the Book*, 173-204; idem, "The Roots of Aniconism: An Israelite Phenomenon in Comparative Perspective," in *Congress Volume: Cambridge 1995* (ed. John A. Emerton; VTSup 66; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 219-234; Theodore J. Lewis, "Divine Images: Aniconism in Ancient Israel," *JAOS* 118 (1998): 36-53; Michael B. Dick, "Prophetic Parodies Against Making the Cult Image," in *Born in Heaven, Made on Earth: The Making of the Cult Image* (ed. Michael B. Dick; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1999), 1-53; Tallay Ornan, *The Triumph of the Symbol: Pictorial Representation of Deities in Mesopotamia and the Biblical Image Ban* (OBO 213; Fribourg: University Press; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2005); Uehlinger, "Arad, Qitmit—Judahite Aniconism vs. Edomite Iconic Cult? Questioning the Evidence," in *Text, Artifact, and Image: Revealing Ancient Israelite Religion* (ed. Gary Beckman and Theodore J. Lewis; BJS 346; Providence: Brown University Press, 2006), 80-112; Jill Middlemas, "Exclusively Yahweh: Aniconism and Anthropomorphism in Ezekiel," in *Prophecy and Prophets in Ancient Israel: Proceedings from the Oxford Old Testament Seminar* (ed. John Day; LHBOTS 531; New York: T&T Clark, 2010), 309-24; Mark K. George, "Israelite Aniconism and the Visualization of the Tabernacle," *Journal of Religion & Society Supplement* 8 (2012): 40-54. On the development of the image ban texts from an iconography-informed perspective, see Uehlinger, "Exodus, Stierbild und biblisches Kultbildverbot: Religionsgeschichtliche Voraussetzungen eines biblisch-theologischen Spezifikums," in *Freiheit und Recht: Festschrift für Frank Crüsemann zum 65. Geburtstag* (ed. Christof Hardmeier, Rainer Kessler, and Andreas Ruwe; Gütersloh: Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 2003), 42-77; and idem, "Prohibition of Images," in *Religion Past and Present: Encyclopedia of Theology and Religion* (ed. Hans Dieter Betz et al.; vol. 10; Leiden: Brill, 2011), 420-422.

comparative perspective, especially with respect to West Semitic, Mesopotamian, and Egyptian religio-historical contexts. What is clear is that while Israel's predilection for aniconic images of their deity—at least as expressed in the canonical texts—is certainly pronounced, it is not completely without precedent among other religious traditions in the ancient Near East. Second, many biblical scholars have been interested in exploring how the image ban in Israelite religion developed over time, progressing from a non-exclusive preference for aniconic representations of Yahweh in the pre-exilic period (what Mettinger calls "*de facto* aniconism") to more explicit strictures that demand an imageless cult in the exilic or post-exilic period (i.e., "programmatically aniconism").⁸³ Most of the legal texts in the Hebrew Bible that ban the production of cult images (Exod 20:3-6; 20:22-23; 34:17; Lev 19:4; 26:1; Deut 4:15-19; 5:8-10, etc.) seem to reflect this latter type of aniconism and are judged by a majority of scholars to be rather late, at least as they appear in their current literary form.⁸⁴ Third, while theological motivations certainly played a significant role in the development of prohibitions against images of

⁸³ For a brief discussion of these terms, see Mettinger, *No Graven Image*, 18. In Mettinger's view, *de facto* aniconism reflects a general preference for aniconic representations of Yahweh and thus would not have explicitly prohibited the use of iconic objects, such as anthropomorphic statuary. However, there is still considerable debate concerning the extent to which such objects were part of the early Yahwistic cult. For more on this latter issue, see Christoph Uehlinger's essay, "Anthropomorphic Cult Statuary in Iron Age Palestine and the Search for Yahweh's Cult Images," in *The Image and the Book*, 97-156. I will discuss this matter further in §6.4.

⁸⁴ Christoph Dohmen argues that none of the legal prohibitions against the worship of images in the Hebrew Bible can be dated prior to the fall of the Northern Kingdom. For further discussion, see Dohmen's *Das Bilderverbot: Seine Entstehung und seine Entwicklung im alten Testament* (2d ed.; BBB 62; Frankfurt am Main: Athenäum, 1987 [1985]), esp. 236-77. However, the earliest date of these prohibitions is not easy to establish due in part to differing perspectives on the date of various sources within the Pentateuch. For a perspective different than Dohmen's, see Edward M. Curtis, "The Theological Basis for the Prohibition of Images in the Old Testament," *JETS* 28 (1985): 277-87.

Yahweh, an increasing number of scholars have suggested that sociological and political issues also factored into the emergence of this policy.⁸⁵

My goal in this discussion is neither to rehash the details of these important avenues of research nor to offer a new hypothesis concerning the origins and development of Israel's aniconic tradition. Instead, I want explore how a visual culture approach in general and a focus on visual practices in particular might raise new questions and perspectives about the nature of Israelite worship. To begin with, one might ask: To what extent do "aniconic" objects such as the cherubim throne, the ark, standing stones, or various divine symbols still constitute a visual medium of belief? Did Israelites utilize and respond to these so-called aniconic objects in ways that were fundamentally different than how other ANE worshippers treated anthropomorphic cult statuary? In what ways would evidence about ancient visual practices challenge how scholars characterize the differences between Israelite religion and that of its neighbors? In order to address these and related questions, I draw on visual culture theory as well as various lines of evidence concerning visual practices in the ancient world. The overarching goal of this investigation is to reframe how biblical iconographers define aniconism (§6.3.1) and characterize the nature of Israelite worship (§6.3.2).

⁸⁵ See, for instance, Ronald S. Hendel, "The Social Origins of the Aniconic Tradition in Early Israel," *CBQ* 50 (1988): 365-82; idem, "Aniconism and Anthropomorphism in Ancient Israel," in *The Image and the Book*, 205-28; Craig D. Evans, "Cult Images, Royal Policies and the Origins of Aniconism," in *The Pitcher is Broken: Memorial Essays for Gösta W. Ahlström* (ed. Steven W. Holloway and Lowell K. Handy; JSOTSup 190; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1995), 192-212; and James M. Kennedy, "The Social Background of Early Israel's Rejection of Cultic Images," *BTB* 17 (1987): 138-44.

6.3.1. The Meaning of Aniconism: Definitions and Problems

Aniconism is not always consistently defined in biblical scholarship. In certain instances, this term is used in a general sense in order to refer to a culture or religion that lacks visual imagery completely. This definition takes aniconism in its broadest and most literal sense (i.e., ἀν = "without, wanting"; εἰκωνικ = "of or relating to an image"). When applied to Israelite religion, this view suggests that the second commandment and other image ban texts not only prohibited the making of certain types of images of Yahweh but also effectively marginalized the artistic tradition of the Jewish people, and later, of Christianity and Islam. This perspective is evident as early as the writings of the Roman historian Tacitus, who describes the uniqueness of Israelite faith in terms of their belief that Yahweh was incapable of being represented in visual or material form.⁸⁶ A similar view persisted in some academic circles well into the twentieth century. A telling example is related by history of religion scholar Erwin R. Goodenough. As a graduate student at Oxford in the 1920s, Goodenough set out to study early Jewish symbolism and its relationship to Hellenistic art.⁸⁷ However, when he brought this idea to his dissertation advisors, they reminded him that there was no such thing as Jewish art.⁸⁸ Several years later as a junior professor at Yale, Goodenough considered returning to the topic of Jewish symbolism but once again was dissuaded, this time by his senior

⁸⁶ Tacitus remarks: "The Jews conceive of one god only, and that with the mind alone: they regard as impious those who make from perishable materials representations of gods in man's image; that supreme and eternal being is to them incapable of representation and without end. Therefore they set up no statues in their cities, still less in their temples" (*Hist.* V, 5).

⁸⁷ For a fuller account of Goodenough's emerging interest in Jewish art and the obstacles he faced along the way, see vol. 1 of his *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period* (Bollingen Series 37; 13 vols.; New York: Pantheon, 1953), 1.3-32.

⁸⁸ As a result, Goodenough went on to write a more traditional text-based dissertation that focused on Hellenized Judaism. This research was eventually revised and published under the title *By Light, Light: The Mystic Gospel of Hellenistic Judaism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1935).

colleagues who pointed out that any Jewish community that was loyal to Scripture would have had nothing to do with images. However common this understanding of aniconism once was, it is based on what art historian David Freedberg calls "a deep and persistent historiographic myth."⁸⁹ Freedberg's research demonstrates at a broad level that "the idea of a culture without material images runs counter to both experience and history."⁹⁰ As a result, Freedberg contends that an understanding of aniconism as the elimination of all imagery must be abandoned.

A similar point can be argued about Israelite religion more specifically. As many archaeologists have shown, the material record of the Levant leaves little doubt that Israel's ban on images was far more limited in its scope and influence. Not only did the ancient Israelites widely use the visual arts in various capacities but so too did early Jewish and Christian communities incorporate images into their homes, sanctuaries, and everyday practices. In fact, it was the discovery of an array of art objects at the Dura-Europos synagogue in the mid 1930s that ultimately compelled Goodenough to begin his extensive study of Jewish symbolism, which was later published in thirteen volumes under the title *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period*.⁹¹ In light of the evidence that Goodenough and other historians and archaeologists have put forth in the past century, it is now wholly untenable to conclude that Israel's aniconic tradition entailed a sweeping prohibition of the visual arts.

⁸⁹ Freedberg, *The Power of Images*, 54.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 59.

⁹¹ See also Jacob Neusner's abridged edition of Goodenough's work, *Jewish Symbols in the Greco-Roman Period* (Bollingen Series; Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988).

Most biblical scholars would not disagree with this conclusion. At the outset of *No Graven Image*, Mettinger stresses "the obvious fact that Israelite aniconism by no means excludes iconography."⁹² As a result, Mettinger offers a definition of aniconism that attempts to delineate between acceptable and unacceptable ways of depicting the deity. Specifically, Mettinger claims that aniconism refers to a type of religion in which "*there is no iconic representation of the deity (anthropomorphic or theriomorphic) serving as the dominant or central cultic symbol, that is, where we are concerned with either (a) an aniconic symbol or (b) sacred emptiness.*"⁹³

Generally speaking, this definition is consistent with the biblical image ban, which seems to have in mind a particular type of representation. For instance, the second commandment is not aimed against art in general but rather the making of an idol or cult image (פסל; Deut 5:8; cf. Exod 20:4).⁹⁴ This prohibition might have been expanded at a later point, as is perhaps evident in Deut 4:16-18, to include the making of "the representation of any statue" (תמונה כל סמל) as well as various types of "likeness"

⁹² Mettinger, *No Graven Image*, 27.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 19; emphasis his.

⁹⁴ Michael B. Dick contends that an early form of Deut 5:8 only included the phrase לא תעשה לך פסל ("You shall not make for yourself an idol"). When the phrase כל תמונה ("form of anything") was later added, it was done so without a conjunctive waw, suggesting that כל תמונה was originally intended to modify פסל in some fashion. However, the version of this commandment found in Exod 20:4 adds a conjunctive waw (פסל וכל תמונה) thus creating two direct objects of the verb. This subtle changes affects how the third person plural pronouns found in the subsequent verse are understood (לא תשתחוה להם ולא תעבדם; Deut 5:9, Exod 20:5). In Exod 20:5, "you shall not bow down to *them* or worship *them*" may be understood to refer back to the פסל וכל תמונה in v. 4. In contrast, the third person plural pronouns found in Deut 5:9 do not likely refer back to the grammatically singular פסל but rather to the most proximate plural antecedent—the אלהים אחרים ("other gods") mentioned in v. 7. Since the version without the conjunctive waw seems to reflect a more difficult reading, most scholars agree that Deut 5:8 reflects an earlier literary form than Exod 20:3-4. For further discussion, see Dick, "Prophetic Parodies," 6-17. See also Robert Henry Pfeiffer, "The Polemic Against Idolatry in the Old Testament," *JBL* 43 (1924): 229-40; Dohmen, *Bilderverbot*, 154-80, 237-77; Schmidt, "The Aniconic Tradition," 78-96; and Moshe Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy 1-11: A New Translation with Introduction and Commentary* (AB 5; New York: Doubleday, 1991), 205-7, 242-319.

(תבנית). Similarly, while unadorned standing stones/pillars (מצבות) were once permitted in cultic contexts, they are later banned along with cult images in Deuteronomistic literature perhaps because of their association with high places. In either case, the Hebrew Bible does not seem to place a blanket prohibition on every form of representation, even when they are associated with the temple or the cult. In fact, Mettinger argues that two types of visual objects, which he calls "material aniconism" and "empty-space aniconism," were acceptable forms of representation throughout Israelite history. Thus, rather than reflecting a general aversion to figurative imagery, Israelite aniconism is best understood as a "strategy of replacement" in which certain visual depictions of the deity are prohibited and/or destroyed in favor of rival iconographies.⁹⁵ In this way, Israelite aniconism is as much about the *presence* of some types of images as it is about the *absence* of others.

While this general understanding of Israelite aniconism is not uncommon in biblical scholarship,⁹⁶ what is relatively unique about Mettinger's approach is the way in which he uses Charles Sanders Peirce's semiotic theory in order to differentiate between acceptable and unacceptable forms of representation.⁹⁷ As discussed earlier in this study (§4.2), Peirce distinguishes between three types of signs based on the

⁹⁵ The idea of iconoclasm as a "strategy of replacement" comes from Morgan, *The Sacred Gaze*, 117.

⁹⁶ See Schmidt, "The Aniconic Tradition," 77; Burkhard Gladigow, "Anikonische Kulte," in *Handbuch religionswissenschaftlicher Grundbegriffe* (ed. Hubert Cancik, Burkhard Gladigow, and Matthias Samuel Laubscher; 5 vols.; Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1988), 1:472; Carroll, "The Aniconic God and the Cult of Images," 52; and (among others), Joseph Gutmann, "The 'Second Commandment' and the Image in Judaism," *HUCA* 32 (1961): 174.

⁹⁷ In his review of *No Graven Image*, Lewis suggests that one of the distinctive contributions of Mettinger's work is his "awareness of Peircean semiotics" ("Divine Images and Aniconism in Ancient Israel," 37-38). Halbertal and Margalit (*Idolatry*, 37-66) and Evans ("Origins of Aniconism," 194-95) also draw upon Peirce's theory of signs in their discussions of Israelite aniconism.

referential relationship that exists between the signifier and that which is signified: *iconic* signs are similarity-based representations that naturalistically resemble their referent; *indexical* signs indicate their referent through causal associations or metonymic extensions; and *conventional* signs, whether visual or verbal, signify by means of a culturally conditioned code. Based on these categories, Mettinger clarifies that the only forms of representation that are prohibited in Israelite religion are iconic signs—that is, those images that aim to resemble, or copy, the deity's appearance in a naturalistic fashion, typically in anthropomorphic form. Conversely, representations of the deity that operate as either indexical or conventional signs are permitted. The two types of aniconism that Mettinger identifies do not map neatly onto Peirce's categories, though in general material forms of aniconism tend to signify through symbolic convention (as with Marduk's spade or the horned crown of ANE deities) while empty-space forms of aniconism are often indexical signs, which signify through metonymic extension or implication (as with the cherubim throne, the ark, and perhaps Jeroboam's bulls).⁹⁸ In either case, it is important to note that in Mettinger's definition, acceptable forms of representation in ancient Israel were *not* iconic in a Peircian sense. Mettinger consistently describes these signs as "aniconic," though in my view it is preferable to

⁹⁸ Mettinger, *No Graven Image*, 21-22. However, if Jeroboam's bulls are understood not as pedestals for the deity but rather as symbolic representations of the deity, then they would be classified as a type of conventional sign, or in Mettinger's system, a form of "material aniconism." Likewise, the spade, which is commonly understood as a divine symbol for Marduk, might also be understood indexically insofar as this weapon is a metonymic extension of the deity. Mettinger tends to consider *maṣṣēbôt* as a form of material aniconism, but he admits that they can operate as either conventional or indexical signs.

refer to them as "non-iconic" in order to underscore the fact that these types of images do not function by means of iconicity in a Peircian sense.⁹⁹

However, this distinction raises an important question: Why, from a semiotic perspective, were iconic signs avoided or even explicitly banned in Israelite religion? While Mettinger only briefly treats this issue, Moshe Halbertal and Avishai Margalit elaborate on two possibilities.¹⁰⁰ First, they argue that strictures against similarity-based representations may have emerged from a fear that the signifier would come to displace that which it signifies in the context of worship.¹⁰¹ By virtue of appearing lifelike, an iconic sign such as an anthropomorphic statue would be more apt to be seen as a manifestation of Yahweh's presence, not just his mediated representation. This view supposes a causal connection between an image's mimetic quality and its capacity to take on the power and status of its referent (cf. §5.2.1). In this perspective, the image ban is motivated by a desire to avoid a substitution error that blurs the ontological distinction between representation and reality.¹⁰²

A second potential problem with similarity-based representations is that they can cause an error in one's conception of God.¹⁰³ It is often thought that the basis of this

⁹⁹ The prevailing tendency in biblical scholarship is to use the term aniconic to refer to all signs that are *not* iconic. However in some instances, scholars have used the term "anti-iconic" in place of aniconic. See for instance Gutmann, "The Image in Judaism," 174 and Uehlinger, "Anthropomorphic Cult Statuary," 154. Throughout this chapter, I primarily use "non-iconic" in a more technical sense to refer to visual signs that do not function by means of iconicity. In contrast, I reserve the term "aniconism" to refer more generally to a type of religion that tends to prefer non-anthropomorphic and non-theriomorphic divine images.

¹⁰⁰ Halbertal and Margalit, *Idolatry*, 37-66; see also Mettinger, *No Graven Image*, 24-25.

¹⁰¹ Halbertal and Margalit, *Idolatry*, 40-41.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 42. This fear of substitution informs much of the discourse in iconoclastic controversies throughout Jewish and Christian history. A similar logic might also be evident in the Decalogue, where the prohibitions against making cult images and worshipping other gods are closely linked.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 45-46.

idea is rooted in the metaphysical claim that God has no image.¹⁰⁴ In this view, any representation of God would necessarily be a false image since God is inherently immaterial and invisible. However, the Hebrew Bible itself does not explicitly make this claim, and at least in a few instances it implies that Yahweh could indeed be seen.¹⁰⁵ Therefore, Halbertal and Margalit instead argue that iconic signs can lead to an error in one's conception of God because they offer either an *incorrect representation* of the deity (i.e., while God is visible, no human has seen him and thus they cannot know how to truly represent the divine form) or an *inappropriate representation* of the deity (i.e., they threaten to diminish God's transcendence and uniqueness by making his image widely available).¹⁰⁶ In contrast, non-iconic representations signify by means of more indirect and conventional associations between signifier and signified, thus making it less likely that they would cause an error of substitution or an error in one's understanding of the deity.¹⁰⁷ As a result, while God's image can be implied through metonymic extension and even described with anthropomorphic language, it cannot be depicted by a similarity-based image.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 45.

¹⁰⁵ For instance, Num 12:8 claims that Moses "beholds the form of the LORD" and similarly the elders of Israel are said to have "beheld God" in Exod 24:11. Isaiah has a vision of the LORD in the temple (Isa 6:1) and Ezekiel describes the appearance of God as "something that seemed like a human form" (Ezek 1:26). However, Deut 4:15-16 might give some credence to the idea that the prohibitions against making images of Yahweh are rooted in the fact that the deity has no form: "Since you saw no form when the LORD spoke to you at Horeb out of the fire, take care and watch yourself closely, so that you do not act corruptly by making an idol for yourselves, in the form of any figure . . . ". Yet even here, it is unclear whether the point of v. 15 is to assert that Yahweh has no form or rather that the Israelites did not see Yahweh's form on this occasion (Halbertal and Margalit, *Idolatry*, 46).

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 47.

¹⁰⁷ It should be noted, however, that Halbertal and Margalit recognize that substitution errors are not impossible with non-iconic signs (ibid., 48). This possibility will be discussed in more detail below (§6.3.2).

On the whole, Mettinger and Halbertal and Margalit have shown how Peirce's theory of signs can help provide a more precise understanding of certain aspects of Israelite aniconism. On this score I agree with Theodore J. Lewis who, in his review of Mettinger's *No Graven Image*, contends that a greater awareness of Peircean semiotics, which is "all too rare among philologically oriented [biblical] scholars," could help advance the study of Israelite aniconism.¹⁰⁸ However, when evaluated from a visual culture perspective, this semiotic understanding faces a number of problems. First, even though Mettinger and Halbertal and Margalit classify anthropomorphic and theriomorphic divine images as iconic signs, it remains unclear how or even if these forms of representation can actually be said to "resemble" a deity in any mimetic or naturalistic fashion.¹⁰⁹ The problem, of course, is that deities don't tend to sit for portraits. Without having access to what the gods *really* looked like, it would be difficult to assess the level of correspondence that exists between the image and its referent. To be sure, worshippers *imagined* their deities in human terms, and so one might conclude that a certain anthropomorphic form resembles the "mental iconography" an artist or viewer associates with that god. But this is not exactly the type of referential relationship that Peirce has in mind when he talks about iconicity. Or if it were, one would need to greatly expand what is included in Peirce's category of iconic signs since

¹⁰⁸ Lewis, "Divine Images and Aniconism in Ancient Israel," 37-38.

¹⁰⁹ Early in their study, Halbertal and Margalit partially acknowledge this problem when they note the fact that Nelson Goodman rejects the possibility of a purely iconic sign that is free of convention. Yet, for the purposes of their study, Halbertal and Margalit maintain Peirce's threefold division of signs (*Idolatry*, 39).

ancient viewers likely imagined their deities in non-anthropomorphic and non-theriomorphic forms as well.¹¹⁰

Furthermore, Peirce's understanding of similarity-based representation does not do justice to native ANE understandings of the relationship between images and their referents, whether gods or otherwise.¹¹¹ For one, in contrast to Peirce's theory, perceptual and conceptual art (i.e., icons and symbols) are not clearly delineated categories in ancient art. Rather, they seem to reflect polarities along a continuum of representational strategies. In addition, what counts as mimetic correspondence is culturally and historically conditioned, and as a result, western notions of mimesis do not easily map onto modes of signification in ANE art, including the depiction of deities.¹¹² For instance, most of the divine images that Mettinger would classify as iconic signs do not seem to have been intended by ANE artists to capture the physical appearance of a deity. In fact, at least some ANE divine images cannot easily be differentiated based on how the deity's bodily traits or facial features are depicted, as is the case with the three gods pictured in **figs. 6.9-11**. What often distinguishes one deity from another—or indeed, a god from a human—is the presence of certain symbols, such as an emblem, a weapon, a type of garment, an attribute animal, or a particular type of

¹¹⁰ Mettinger himself makes some overtures in this direction, but he never directly addresses this matter. See for instance, *No Graven Image*, 20 and 38, esp. n. 114.

¹¹¹ Mettinger raises the question about whether a Peircean distinction between iconic and aniconic signs would apply to ANE visual materials. Mettinger affirms that "such a distinction seems to be made by the Israelites when the prohibition of images was formulated" (ibid., 20). However, Mettinger does not elaborate on this point. Even if one understands the Hebrew term תמונה in the second commandment as referring to appearance or external shape (see Silvia Schroer, *In Israel gab es Bilder: Nachrichten von darstellender Kunst im Alten Testament* [OBO 74; Fribourg: Universitätsverlag; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1987], 335), it does not necessarily follow that a תמונה connotes a Peircean understanding of iconicity.

¹¹² Zainab Bahrani, *The Graven Image: Representation In Babylonia and Assyria* (Archaeology, Culture, and Society. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania, 2003), 87-89.

pedestal. As a result, rather than functioning as an iconic portrait of the deity, it is perhaps better to understand anthropomorphic images as a type of divine determinative that signifies by means of convention rather than resemblance.¹¹³



Figures 6.9-11. Left: Stamp seal of Sîn in crescent above stylized tree, 7th c. B.C.E. After Ornan, *The Triumph of the Symbol*, 243 fig. 76; cf. Delaporte, *Catalogue des cylindres orientaux*, no. 538. Center: Stela of Ishtar of Arbela on lion, Til Barsip, 8th c. B.C.E. After Ornan, *The Triumph of the Symbol*, 249 fig. 90; cf. Ornan, "Ištar as Depicted on Finds from Israel," fig. 9.10. Right: Stela of storm god on a bull, Arslan-Tash, 8th c. B.C.E. After Ornan, *The Triumph of the Symbol*, 249 fig. 91; cf. Black and Green, *Gods, Demons, and Symbols of Ancient Mesopotamia*, fig. 89. Images used with permission by Christoph Uehlinger.

Equally problematic is the fact that ancient Near Eastern practices allowed for a certain degree of fluidity in divine embodiment. In his recent volume, *The Bodies of God and the World of Ancient Israel*, Benjamin D. Sommer argues that in ANE religious imagination a particular god could manifest himself in a multiplicity of bodies or forms.¹¹⁴ For instance, a single god could be simultaneously incarnate in non-identical cult statues at different geographical locations. In a similar way, a god could also be

¹¹³ See Keel's comments about royal images in "Iconography and the Bible," *ABD* 3:360. Henri Frankfort makes a similar point about Egyptian divine images in *Ancient Egyptian Religion* (Harper Torchbooks: The Cloister Library; New York: Harper, 1961 [1948]), 12.

¹¹⁴ Benjamin D. Sommer, *The Bodies of God and the World of Ancient Israel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

thought to inhabit multiple "aniconic" objects, such as a pillar or stone.¹¹⁵ What is clear in Sommer's research is that ANE image theology (or theory) allowed for "multiplicity in unity" when it comes to the divine body.¹¹⁶ In my estimation, Sommer's notion about the fluidity of divine embodiment is not easily accounted for by Peircian semiotics.

A similar idea is evident in how Mettinger attempts to deal with fluidity in Egyptian art. Erik Hornung has shown that Egyptian artists could depict the same god in various different forms side-by-side with one another. In one artifact from the Louvre, the goddess Hathor is represented by four types of figures: a woman, a cow, a serpent, and a lion-headed female.¹¹⁷ In discussing this example, Mettinger acknowledges that these individual representations of Hathor only partially qualify as iconic signs since each merely "hints at essential features of [Hathor's] character and function."¹¹⁸ As a result, Mettinger concludes that one should "allow for the possibility that an anthropomorphic or theriomorphic idol sometimes expresses some essential *aspect* of the deity in question so that we are only allowed to speak of a *degree* of resemblance or motivation."¹¹⁹ Perhaps so, but even if Hathor was thought to have multiple physical forms, it is still doubtful if these representations of her "essential features" are best described in terms of Peirce's understanding of iconicity. Or at the very least, if ancient viewers thought each of these images of Hathor simultaneously resembled the goddess,

¹¹⁵ The converse is also possible. Divine identities can overlap and couple together, making it possible that a single name (such as Baal/Hadad/Haddu) could refer to multiple deities.

¹¹⁶ Sommer, *The Bodies of God*, 16.

¹¹⁷ Erik Hornung, *Conceptions of God in Ancient Egypt* (trans. John Baines; Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1982), 113. As Philippe Derchain points out, Hathor is sometimes depicted with multiple faces (*Hathor Quadrifrons: Recherches sur la Syntaxe d'un Mythe Égyptien* [Istanbul: Nederlands Historisch-Archaeologisch Instituut in het Nabije Oosten, 1972], Pls. 1-2).

¹¹⁸ Mettinger, *No Graven Image*, 22.

¹¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 22; emphasis his.

it was likely because they operated with a very different understanding of iconicity than Peirce.

A final problem with Mettinger's definition of aniconism is that he reserves the term "image" exclusively for iconic signs.¹²⁰ Objects such as the cherubim throne, Jeroboam's bulls, and a wide variety of divine emblems would not qualify as images in Mettinger's perspective since they signify by means of an indexical or conventional relationship with their referents. Perhaps little should be made of Mettinger's terminological decisions—indeed, it is often advisable not to split hairs about the usage of a word as slippery as "image." However, his insistence that only iconic signs are images is somewhat curious since Mesopotamian literature uses the term *šalmu* to refer to anthropomorphic cult statues as well as non-iconic stelae.¹²¹

From a visual culture perspective, what is even more problematic about Mettinger's rather narrow definition of an image is the fact that it seems to display one of the symptoms of the historiographic myth of aniconism. Specifically, Freedberg points out that when confronted with the fact that supposedly aniconic cultures do in fact have images, scholars often go to great lengths to deny the power and relevance of those images.¹²² This is often accomplished by dismissing certain images as being "merely decorative" or failing to acknowledge the way in which they exhibit figurative, or even anthropomorphic, characteristics. Thus, in an effort to sustain the myth that some cultures and religions are essentially imageless, certain forms of visual representation

¹²⁰ Mettinger, *No Graven Image*, 22, 27.

¹²¹ Stephanie Dalley, "The God Salmu and the Winged Disc," *Iraq* 48 (1986): 88.

¹²² Freedberg, *The Power of Images*, 59-60.

are reclassified in a way that makes it clear that they should not be regarded as images in the first place. A similar tendency might be at work for Mettinger. He marks off non-iconic representations of the deity as a type of pseudo-image, a visual form that is thought to be fundamentally different from anthropomorphic cult statuary. In this way, Mettinger is able to maintain that Israelite worship was, strictly speaking, imageless despite the fact that a variety of visual objects, albeit non-iconic in nature, were used in connection with the temple and cult. My point is not that Mettinger's use of semiotic theory is misguided or that iconic and non-iconic signs operate in the same way. Rather, I simply mean to suggest that how one defines terms such as "image" and "aniconism" can, whether intentionally or unintentionally, perpetuate the mistaken notion that Israelite religion was a rather artless or visionless affair.

I want to press this matter further by suggesting that semiotic distinctions between iconic and non-iconic representations are somewhat beside the point when it comes to evaluating Israelite religion from a visual culture perspective. Despite the fact that the Hebrew Bible prohibits the production of certain types of images, Israelite religion clearly relied upon what Morgan would call a visual medium of belief. Entering the temple would have been a visually stimulating experience and the everyday function of the cult would have been inextricably bound to a host of material objects. Even though some parts of the temple were restricted, great care is taken to describe—or visualize—its appearance. The temple was said to be adorned with ornate columns, latticework, precious metals, floral designs, and animal figures (1 Kgs 6:14-36). The cherubim throne, an ark, a golden menorah, an altar, the table for the bread of

Presence, basins, bowls, and various other instruments could be found within the walls of the sanctuary (1 Kgs 7:13-51). Furthermore, the priests wore elaborately embroidered garments (Exod 28:1-43) and the prophets describe spectacular visions of the deity (Isa 6:1-5; Ezek 1:4-28). Even the most programmatic stages of aniconism in Israelite history did not completely reduce religion to the realm of words and creeds. Many aspects of Israelite religion continued to be experienced with the eyes and absorbed through the senses even long after the image ban was firmly in place.

In light of these observations, I contend that a visual culture approach to the study of Israelite aniconism would prompt biblical scholars to define the image ban in a more narrow sense—that is, as a restriction on certain types of images, not artistic representation more broadly. In addition, a visual culture approach would also clarify that a so-called aniconic cult was still "largely unintelligible outside its incarnation in material expressions."¹²³ In other words, matter—and I should add, seeing—still mattered greatly to Israelite religion even after more programmatic forms of the image ban had emerged. In making this claim, I want to underscore the fact that iconographic and semiotic considerations do not tell the whole story about the nature of Israelite worship. As I discuss in the next section, information gleaned from visual practices is equally important.

¹²³ Arweck and Keenan, *Materializing Religion*, 2-3.

6.3.2. Rethinking the Nature of Israelite Worship

While questions about visual practices are critical to the study of religious visual culture, they have not often played a central role in discussions about Israelite aniconism. As is evident in Mettinger's definition of aniconism, a religion is deemed to be aniconic or iconic based primarily on what its images look like or how those images signify. While this approach is not without merit, I suspect that a scholar such as David Morgan would counter that what makes a religion iconic or aniconic has just as much to do with how its worshippers utilize, rely on, and respond to a wide variety of objects as a visual medium of belief. In other words, when seen from the vantage point of visual culture theory, the study of Israelite aniconism should entail a close analysis of the ways in which all sorts of images, including non-iconic ones, were put to use. In the following discussion, I briefly develop two arguments concerning ancient visual practices, noting in each case how they relate to the main ideas behind Morgan's functional typology of religious imagery.

6.3.2.1. *The Correlation of Art and Practice*

In some studies of Israelite aniconism, an absence of iconic images of the deity in certain media is taken as general proof that ancient Israelites did not relate to their deity in visual form. This methodological assumption underlies some of the central conclusions that Keel and Uehlinger draw about Israelite religion in *GGG*. As mentioned earlier (§2.1), Keel and Uehlinger regard minor art as an invaluable resource in religio-historical research since it provides a record of artistic preferences across different time periods

and regions.¹²⁴ Because of this, the information gleaned from glyptic materials often can provide vital information about the nature and development of Israelite religion, including its aniconic tradition. Seen from this perspective, one of the most important observations made in *GGG* is that beginning in Iron Age IIA there is a general recession of anthropomorphic divine images on Syro-Palestinian seals and amulets.¹²⁵ In place of this type of iconography, attribute animals and various symbols are increasingly used to represent deities. Since Keel and Uehlinger suppose that the nature of Israel's cultic practices directly correlates with trends in its iconographic repertoire, they infer from this data that pre-exilic worship in Israel and Judah made little use of iconic objects for their deity.

This conclusion is certainly not without warrant. In almost every respect, *GGG* should be praised for its detailed analysis of glyptic art as well as its use of pictorial materials in religio-historical research. However in this particular case, the findings of *GGG* are in need of further refinement as Uehlinger himself argues in a later study.¹²⁶ In his contribution to the volume *The Image and the Book*, Uehlinger suggests that some of the conclusions arrived at in *GGG* were unduly influenced by the nature of its source materials. Without diminishing the importance of glyptic materials in religio-historical research, Uehlinger wonders if they are always the most pertinent source when it comes to understanding developments in the cultic sphere.¹²⁷ In particular, Uehlinger recognizes that "The worship of certain deities, anthropomorphically or not, does not

¹²⁴ Keel and Uehlinger, *GGG*, 10-11.

¹²⁵ See especially, *ibid.*, 133-75.

¹²⁶ Uehlinger, "Anthropomorphic Cult Statuary," in *The Image and the Book*, 97-155

¹²⁷ *Ibid.*, 102.

necessarily leave a trace in seal iconography."¹²⁸ Conversely, a change in preferences in glyptic iconography need not indicate concomitant trends in cultic practices "unless similar changes are observed in other media and/or [are] confirmed by the archaeological record."¹²⁹ As a result, Uehlinger evaluates archaeological evidence that does *not* play a central role in *GGG*, such as metal and stone statuary, terracotta and pillar figurines, cult stands, and shrine models.¹³⁰

On the whole, this evidence supports the notion that anthropomorphic cult statuary and other related paraphernalia continued to be produced and used in Syria-Palestine long after the end of the Late Bronze Age. Admittedly, the archaeological record does not give us decisive proof that even these materials were incorporated into the worship of pre-exilic Israel or Judah. However, since objects such as statuary, figures, cult stands, and so forth were far more likely to be associated with cultic contexts than glyptic materials, Uehlinger cautions against using trends in seal iconography to draw general conclusions about the prominence of aniconism in Israelite worship. In fact, Uehlinger proposes that despite the trends in seal iconography, "during Iron Age II major cults and temples attached to royal sponsorship were centred upon iconic statuary and that the latter was generally anthropomorphic."¹³¹ Uehlinger does not overlook the fact that at least some aniconic practices, such as the worship of standing stones, are also attested during this same time period.¹³² Nevertheless, Uehlinger stresses that evidence of aniconic objects should be understood as indicating

¹²⁸ Uehlinger, "Anthropomorphic Cult Statuary," 102 n. 27.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, 102 n. 27.

¹³⁰ For an overview of these materials, see *ibid.*, 102-39.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, 139.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 139.

one of many forms of worship in Iron Age Syria-Palestine, not as general proof that Israelite religion was essentially or exclusively aniconic prior to the exile.¹³³

Not everyone would agree with Uehlinger's conclusions about the nature of pre-exilic worship in Israel and Judah. However, on methodological grounds, Uehlinger is not alone in questioning whether a culture's iconographic preferences directly correlate with its cultic practices, or for that matter, its cognitive perceptions of the deity.

Archaeologist Tallay Ornan arrives at a similar conclusion in her study of divine imagery in ancient Mesopotamia. In *The Triumph of the Symbol*, Ornan offers a diachronic survey of trends in Mesopotamian art during the Late Bronze and Iron Ages (ca. 1500–500 B.C.E.). Ornan notes that worshippers throughout the ancient Near Eastern world routinely talked about and imagined their deities in human form, as is evident in the fact that anthropomorphisms abound in Mesopotamian literary and pictorial sources from a very early point. Based on this data, many scholars conclude that Babylonian and Assyrian religions were primarily iconic in nature.

However, Ornan's analysis suggests a more complicated picture. As early as the end of the fourth millennium, non-anthropomorphic divine images are also evident in Mesopotamian iconography, suggesting that iconic art was not the only acceptable way of depicting divine figures. In fact, during the last half of the second millennium and continuing throughout the first half of the first millennium, there was a decisive shift away from representing deities in anthropomorphic forms in cylinder and stamp seals,

¹³³ Uehlinger, "Anthropomorphic Cult Statuary," 140.

palace wall decorations, rock reliefs, stelae, and *kudurrus*.¹³⁴ Instead, it became increasingly common to signify deities through non-iconic symbols such as emblems, weapons, attribute animals, composite creatures, and so forth. Thus, throughout the Iron Age, non-iconic representations had come to (mostly) replace iconic ones as the preferred way of depicting the deity in virtually every form of Mesopotamian art. While this preference for divine symbols never developed into a programmatic law in ancient Mesopotamia, it was still the case that non-iconic depictions of the deity played a substantial role in ancient Mesopotamian religions.

Like Uehlinger, Ornan recognizes some degree of slippage between art, practice, and perception in ancient Mesopotamian religion. During the time period in which non-anthropomorphic divine symbols were prevalent in Mesopotamian art, anthropomorphic cult statuary continued to be used in temple contexts, and furthermore anthropomorphic descriptions of the deity were still regularly deployed in literary sources. In other words, even though there was a clear preference for non-iconic depictions of the deity in certain periods of ancient Mesopotamian art, Assyro-Babylonian religions nevertheless utilized so-called iconic objects (i.e., anthropomorphic statuary) in cultic practices and conceptualized their deity in human-like terms.¹³⁵

A similar discrepancy between artistic preferences on the one hand and cultic practices and mental perceptions on the other hand obtains in other ANE contexts. As

¹³⁴ There are, however, some notable exceptions. During the reign of Sennacherib, anthropomorphic deities can be found on various rock reliefs, stelae, and other artifacts. The general resurgence of anthropomorphic divine images during this time period was likely motivated by numerous factors, including the influence of Syrian iconography, which is known to favor humanlike depictions of its gods. For further discussion, see Ornan, *The Triumph of the Symbol*, 75-86.

¹³⁵ *Ibid.*, 176.

Mettinger has shown in *No Graven Image*, various West Semitic cultures maintained anthropomorphic images of the deity in the temple even as they concurrently used symbols, standing stones, and other non-iconic objects outside the shrine.¹³⁶

Furthermore, anthropomorphic metaphors and similes for the deities continued to be widely utilized in literary texts. Though space prohibits an extensive review of these data, it will suffice to note that in both East and West Semitic contexts, a preference for non-anthropomorphic divine images did not necessarily imply that worship practices or mental perceptions were exclusively—or even primarily—focused on non-iconic depictions of the deity.

Unfortunately, Mesopotamian texts provide very little insight into this phenomenon, and as a result, scholars are left to speculate as to its underlying motivations and rationale. For instance, Wilfred Lambert has suggested that divine symbols might have been favored because they could more clearly indicate the difference between human and divine subjects or because emblems were simply easier to render than human forms.¹³⁷ However, as Ornan points out both of these suggestions are insufficient.¹³⁸ Instead, it is more likely the case that the reluctance to render the deity in anthropomorphic forms outside the temple was the result of complex political, religious, and social factors. For instance, the exclusion of anthropomorphic depictions

¹³⁶ Mettinger, *No Graven Image*, 28-32, 79-113, 115-34. See also Ornan, *The Triumph of the Symbol*, 112-13; and idem, "The Goddess Gula and Her Dog," *Israel Museum Studies in Archaeology* 3 (2004): 13-30.

¹³⁷ Wilfred George Lambert, "Ancient Mesopotamian Gods: Superstition, Philosophy, Theology," *RHR* 207 (1990): 123-24.

¹³⁸ Specifically, if symbols helped artists and viewers to differentiate between gods and humans, it is unclear why symbolic representations would have been favored only in certain periods. In addition, the fact that human worshippers and royal figures were often depicted on the same artifacts as divine symbols makes it difficult to conclude that ease of execution was the driving force behind the proliferation of non-iconic representations of the deity. See Ornan, *The Triumph of the Symbol*, 173-74.

of the deity from palace decorations, rock reliefs, and stelae might reflect a concerted effort to elevate the status of the king as the chief protagonist in Assyrian royal ideology.¹³⁹ Alternatively, the deity's anthropomorphic form may have come to be seen as an especially sacred manifestation of the god that was exclusively tied to its abode in the temple.¹⁴⁰ When the image of the deity needed to be rendered outside the context of the shrine, it had to be translated into a type of "visual metaphor" that was less sacred, and thus presumably more appropriate, for public consumption.¹⁴¹ A similar argument about controlling access to the human form of the deity could be made in terms of visual and textual literacies. Since the ability to read cuneiform was surely a minority phenomenon in ancient Mesopotamia, written anthropomorphic descriptions of the deities were essentially reserved for the privileged few while the general populace was left to experience the deity through symbolic representations in the visual arts. In either case, my point in drawing attention to these general observations is to suggest that from a visual culture perspective, few (if any) ANE religions were consistently aniconic in terms of their artistic preferences, worship practices, and mental perceptions of the deity. In each case, genuine religious experience, as McDannell so aptly puts it, was "expressed and made real" in and through visual media.¹⁴²

¹³⁹ Ornan, *The Triumph of the Symbol*, 172-73.

¹⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 174.

¹⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 178.

¹⁴² McDannell, *Material Christianity*, 272

Something similar might also be said about Israelite religion. The Bible, of course, is replete with anthropomorphic language about God.¹⁴³ And as Uehlinger has shown, numerous anthropomorphic objects seem to have been used in connection with the cult throughout the pre-exilic period, if not later. This latter argument is strengthened even further if, as Uehlinger contends, worship at the Ḥorvat Qitmit sanctuary in the northern Negev, which was centered on cult statues, was not exclusively Edomite but rather fell within the administrative reach of Judah.¹⁴⁴ Thus, even as the Israelites generally abstained from and eventually prohibited the anthropomorphic depiction of Yahweh in the visual arts, they continued to think of their deity in human terms and to negotiate their religious experience of the divine through material objects.¹⁴⁵

Ornan suggests that the reluctance to produce anthropomorphic divine images in ancient Israel was not solely the result of internal theological developments. Rather, the prohibition on iconic depictions of Yahweh "is to be perceived as a world view basically inspired by contemporary tendencies in Babylonia and Assyria, and not, as commonly suggested, as one that opposes Mesopotamian perceptions."¹⁴⁶ However, an important difference arises during the time of the exile. Since anthropomorphic depictions of the deity were only permitted within the context of the deity's earthly abode, the loss of the Jerusalem temple led to an intensification of the non-iconic tendencies in Syro-Palestinian art. Without a shrine for their deity, the Judahite

¹⁴³ God is often described as having human features, including a face, hands, feet, and back (cf. Gen 33:10; Exod 24:9-11, 33:20-23; Num 12:8; 1 Sam 7:13; Ps 75:8; etc.) and in Gen 1:26-27 humanity is said to be made in the image of God. Even in the prophetic idol parodies what seems to be at issue is the incomparability of God's form, not the fact that God had no form (cf. Isa 40:18, 25; 46:4).

¹⁴⁴ Uehlinger, "Judahite Aniconism vs. Iconic Cult," 80-112.

¹⁴⁵ Ornan, *The Triumph of the Image*, 178.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 182.

deportees "turned the pictorial cultic reality surrounding them—the non-written Babylonian custom—into a clearly articulated rigid written law, prohibiting the presentation of God."¹⁴⁷ In this view, the development of programmatic aniconism was one of necessity, at least initially. Only later when the exiles returned to Judah and encountered more traditional forms of iconic cult practices did it become theologically and politically expedient to implement a sharper and more sweeping critique of divine imagery in both art *and* practice.¹⁴⁸ It was likely in this context that new concepts of divine presence, such as the Priestly *kābôd* and Deuteronomistic *šēm* theologies, developed in order to compensate for what was a new and more extreme version of aniconism. In either case, it is important to note that iconic conceptions of God were not rejected until much later. In fact, what might be called "mental aniconism"—that is, the explicit refusal to conceptualize or imagine the deity in human-like form—is first evident in tenth-century C.E. Jewish thinkers such as Sa'adyā Gaon (al-Fayyūmī) and only became prominent in Christian circles through the iconoclastic theologies of some still later Protestant reformers.¹⁴⁹

In sum, there seems to be clear evidence from the ancient world that iconographic preferences do not directly correlate with the nature of worship practices, let alone mental perceptions about the deity. These findings are consistent with Morgan's previously discussed functional typology of image use, which establishes that what makes an image religious—and I should add, what makes a religion iconic—is not

¹⁴⁷ Ornan, *The Triumph of the Image*, 182.

¹⁴⁸ Uehlinger, "Anthropomorphic Cult Statuary," 155.

¹⁴⁹ Ornan, *The Triumph of the Symbol*, 180.

only the presence of certain types of images but rather how visual materials are put to use in cultic settings and everyday religious experiences. I suspect that most biblical scholars would not disagree with this point in principle, though to my knowledge very few have explicitly incorporated this type of visual culture perspective into their research on Israelite aniconism. Doing so would reframe how scholars study ancient religions in general and Israelite religion in particular in at least two ways.

First, this perspective would complicate the criteria scholars use to decide if a given religion is aniconic or iconic in the first place—indeed, it would even question if any religion is aniconic or iconic as such. In my estimation, the nature of worship practices in the ancient (or modern) world should be characterized with respect to two intersecting coordinates: one which describes their iconographic preferences with respect to the deity and the other which accounts for the extent to which they incorporate iconic images (or visual materials in general) into their worship practices.¹⁵⁰ This approach would enable scholars to characterize ancient religions with more nuance. For instance, pre-exilic Israelite religion might best be described as exhibiting a visual medium of belief that was aniconic with respect to artistic representations of Yahweh in certain media (though see §6.4 for further qualification) but was otherwise functionally and conceptually iconic.¹⁵¹ By explicitly characterizing Israelite religion in

¹⁵⁰ One might also include a third coordinate that accounts for how a given religion talks about and describes deities in theological texts. However, since all ANE religions seem to use anthropomorphic language in reference to its gods, the first two coordinates seem to be most relevant for my purposes here.

¹⁵¹ In passing, Mettinger acknowledges that aniconic iconography does not necessarily indicate an underlying aniconic theology (*No Graven Image*, 22). Yet, throughout his work he primarily describes ANE religions as either aniconic or iconic, or as exhibiting either *de facto* aniconism or programmatic aniconism based on their iconographic preferences.

these terms, biblical scholars would be able to offer a mediating position between the perspective offered in *GGG* and the perspective offered in Uehlinger's contribution to *The Image and the Book*.

Second, the perspective mentioned above would allow for a clear description of the diachronic changes that occur in ANE religions. For instance, the primary difference between Assyro-Babylonian religions from the beginning of the second millennium to the beginning of the first millennium lies not so much in their cultic practices or mental perceptions about the gods, but rather the way in which they preferred to represent their deities in visual form. Conversely, the difference between pre-exilic and post-exilic Israelite religion—or perhaps even the religion of the exiles and those who remained in the land—had more to do with changes in their cultic context (i.e., the loss of the temple, geographical displacement, etc.) than with the appearance of their glyptic materials, which remained generally non-iconic throughout the Iron Age. While making these subtle distinctions between art, practice, and perception does not resolve every question about the nature of Israelite worship, it does acknowledge that even in cases where anthropomorphic images are generally lacking in a particular media (as in Iron Age II Syro-Palestinian glyptics) or throughout a larger artistic repertoire (as in early first millennium Mesopotamia), religious belief was still routinely negotiated through visual practices and mental iconographies—that is, perceptions of the deity as a visible, and often anthropomorphic, being. In other words, the biblical ban on images, even in its most programmatic forms, did not do away with a visual medium of belief in Israelite religion.

6.3.2.2. *The Iconic Function of Non-Iconic Art*

A visual culture perspective would also call into question a second assumption about the nature of Israelite worship: that there is a one-to-one correspondence between an image's semiotic character (i.e. how it signifies) and the way in which it is put to use (i.e., its function). As previously indicated (§6.3.1), Halbertal and Margalit imply that ancient worshippers were only tempted into idolatrous practices when dealing with similarity-based representations. Their reason for this is that the error of substitution—the replacement of the signified with the signifier—is more acute with images that attempt to capture or copy the appearance of their referent in a naturalistic or mimetic fashion. Thus, Halbertal and Margalit suppose that ancient viewers were far less apt to direct their devotion or adoration to non-iconic signs since they signify the deity indirectly through indexical associations or symbolic conventions. Or at the very least, it is assumed that when non-iconic signs were encountered in religious settings, they did not manifest the deity's presence and power in the same way or to the same degree as iconic signs. In this view, material and empty-space forms of aniconism might be associated with the deity's blessing, symbolize one of its attributes, or even imply a general sense of divine presence, but in the mind of the worshipper they were considered less real, less powerful, and indeed, less divine than anthropomorphic statuary. In other words, a religion without anthropomorphic images of the deity would have operated in fundamentally different ways than a religion with such images.

However, this conclusion is not supported by either visual culture theory or religio-historical observations. As already mentioned, Morgan's functional typology of

image use emphasizes that the same image can be deployed in and through a variety of visual practices, and conversely, that very different types of images can be utilized in an analogous fashion. In fact, a religious visual culture perspective would affirm that what makes an image religiously significant—or indeed, susceptible to idolatry—is not only or even primarily its subject matter or mode of signification but rather how it is relied upon and responded in religious experience. David Freedberg makes a similar point in his study of the history and theory of visual response. He notes that iconicity is not always a prerequisite for believing that an image could manifest the power and presence of a deity (cf. §5.2.1). Freedberg points out numerous examples from ancient Greece in which gods were thought to inhabit abstract or non-anthropomorphic art objects such as unshaped meteoric stones known as *baitulia* or minimally shaped plank-like statues called *xoanan*.¹⁵² Similarly, Zainab Bahrani argues that in Assyro-Babylonian artistic traditions, "an image can be conceived of as an essential copy [of a deity] without resemblance at the level of *eidōs*, or what in Peirce's terminology would be the icon."¹⁵³ What Freedberg and Bahrani both affirm is that ancient viewers sometimes treated images that might be classified as non-iconic signs in a Peircian sense in the exact same (or very similar) ways as they did anthropomorphic cult statuary. That is to say, in the psychology of at least some observers, iconic *and* non-iconic signs could both embody or even substitute for the deity itself.

This observation is also supported by evidence from the ancient Near Eastern world. For instance, mouth-washing (*mīs pī*) and mouth-opening (*pīt pī*) consecration

¹⁵² For further discussion and references, see Freedberg, *The Power of Images*, 33-37.

¹⁵³ Bahrani, *The Graven Image*, 89.

ceremonies, which were used to enliven anthropomorphic cult statues with the presence of the deity (§5.2.1), could be performed on divine symbols, such as in the case of the *uskāru* crescent of the moon god.¹⁵⁴ In other instances, standing stones without any markings or depictions came to be identified in name and essence with a particular god. In his study of this phenomenon, Karel van der Toorn suggests that the unhewn stone does not just symbolically represent a god but is actually thought to be a deified object, the god in material form.¹⁵⁵ Thus, some (though by no means all) standing stones could function as an object of devotion even though in Mettinger's perspective they constitute a form of material aniconism.¹⁵⁶

Further evidence of this phenomenon comes from Assyro-Babylonian devotion scenes in which divine symbols take the place of anthropomorphic statues as an object of worship. For instance, many Late Babylonian (7th–5th c.) cylinder and stamp seals depict individuals standing before a divine symbol, such as the triangular-headed spade of Marduk, the stylus of Nabu, Nusku's lamp, the moon crescent, the star, theriomorphic pedestals, and so forth.¹⁵⁷ The worshipper is shown with the forearm raised slightly with an open palm (cf. **figs. 6.12-13**), which reflects a formal salutation in

¹⁵⁴ Ornan, *The Triumph of the Symbol*, 109; see also, Michael B. Dick and Christopher Walker, *The Induction of the Cult Image in Ancient Mesopotamia: The Mesopotamian Miš Pi Ritual* (SAA 1; Helsinki: Neo-Assyrian Text Corpus Project, Institute for Asian and African Studies, University of Helsinki, 2001), 71.

¹⁵⁵ Karel van der Toorn, "Worshipping Stones: On the Deification of Cult Symbols," *JNSL* 23 (1997): 1-14.

¹⁵⁶ Van der Toorn, "Worshipping Stones," 2.

¹⁵⁷ Ornan, *The Triumph of the Symbol*, 115. The depiction of symbol worship on stamp seals became prominent during the reign of Nebuchadnezzar II and continued into the early Achaemenid period. This motif seems to no longer have been in use in the fourth century, as is suggested by the absence of this type of scene in bullae discovered in Wadi ed-Daliyeh north of Jericho or Daskyleion in Phrygia (*ibid.*, 117).

an audience with a deity.¹⁵⁸ Similar scenes are also found on many first-millennium Babylonian monuments and *kudurrus*.¹⁵⁹ Beginning in the ninth century, divine symbol worship is also depicted on Neo-Assyrian monumental reliefs and freestanding stelae, and by the seventh century, this imagery became prominent on Assyrian glyptics as well.¹⁶⁰ In the Assyrian versions of these scenes, the worshipper is often a royal figure and is shown in the corresponding Assyrian worship gesture called *ubana taraṣu* ("finger pointing"; cf. **fig. 6.14**).¹⁶¹ Admittedly, it is not always possible to conclude that images of worship provide a straightforward "illustration" of what actual worship practices looked like. Nevertheless, these and numerous other depictions of divine symbol worship strongly suggest that ancient Mesopotamian worshippers conceived of and responded to non-iconic representations of the deity in much the same way as they did to iconic ones.

¹⁵⁸ In a closely related gesture, the worshipper sometimes is shown grasping a date-palm shoot as a way of indicating supplication or adoration (ibid., 118).

¹⁵⁹ For further discussion see ibid., 119-29.

¹⁶⁰ The divine emblems in the Assyrian versions of these worship scenes include the horned mitre, the star and rosette, the winged disc, a crescent moon, the scorpion, the suckling cow, the stylus of Nabu, and various floral elements. For further discussion, see ibid., 149-67.

¹⁶¹ Ibid., 133-35.



Figures 6.12-14. Left: Late Babylonian stamp seal of a worshipper before symbols of Marduk and Nabu mounted on a mušḫuššu pedestal. After Ornan, *The Triumph of the Symbol*, 267 fig. 153. Center: Late Babylonian cylinder seal of a worshipper before divine symbols. After Ornan, *The Triumph of the Symbols*, 267 fig. 154. Right: Stele of Adad-nirari III before divine symbols, Tell Rimah, 9th c. B.C.E. After Ornan, *The Triumph of the Symbol*, 272 fig. 175. Images used with permission by Christoph Uehlinger.

Two other well-known artifacts also suggest that conventional signs could function in the place of cult statuary in the mind of ANE worshippers. One such object is the ninth-century Sippar Tablet of Nabu-apla-iddina II. The inscription on the bottom two-thirds of this artifact (especially I.1-IV.34) recounts that when the anthropomorphic cult image of Šamaš was taken away and destroyed by the Suteans in the eleventh century, a new statue was not immediately commissioned to replace it. Instead, a sun disk emblem was installed as a manifestation of the deity's cultic presence. It was only when a priest serving under Nabu-apla-iddina II miraculously "found" a model of Šamaš's image some two hundred years later that a new anthropomorphic statue was fashioned.¹⁶²

The installation of this new cult statue is depicted above the monument's inscription (**fig. 6.15**). At the center of the composition is a large sun disk emblem, which

¹⁶² Ornan, *The Triumph of the Symbol*, 63-64; 111-12. See also Dick and Walker, *The Induction of the Cult Image in Ancient Mesopotamia*, 58-63.

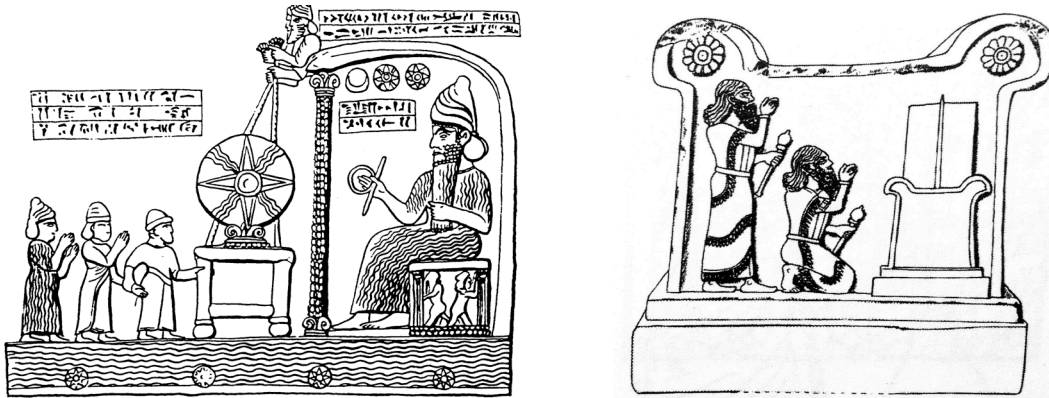
is positioned on a low bench or socle. On the left, three small figures, likely the priest, the king, and an interceding goddess, approach the sun disk. On the right and facing the divine symbol is the sun god Šamaš, enthroned under a canopy in anthropomorphic form.¹⁶³ Two figures in half profile appear near the top of the arched canopy and appear to be hoisting up the sun disk with ropes, perhaps indicating the removal of the divine symbol prior to the reinstallation of the new cult statue.¹⁶⁴ The very fact that the divine symbol was being replaced by an anthropomorphic image might imply, as Mettinger supposes, "that the cult statute (*šalmu*) enjoyed preferential status over against the sun-disk emblem (*nipḫu*)."¹⁶⁵ Be that as it may, the Sippar Tablet itself gives no indication that the divine symbol was treated any differently than either the old or new cult statue. In fact, once the sun disk emblem was initially installed, the cult offerings of Šamaš resumed (I.11-14).¹⁶⁶ Thus, even if the anthropomorphic image was preferred over the symbol, these objects seem to be interchangeable from the perspective of visual practices.

¹⁶³ Ornan, *The Triumph of the Symbol*, 111.

¹⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, 112.

¹⁶⁵ Mettinger, *No Graven Image*, 48.

¹⁶⁶ However, at some time later, the cult declined and offerings and sacrifices ceased (I.23-II.17). There is no indication in the inscription that this development had to do with the semiotic nature of the cult object.



Figures 6.15-16. Left: Sun disk emblem from the Sippar Tablet, Abu Habba, mid-9th c. B.C.E. After Ornan *The Triumph of the Symbol*, 241 fig. 65; cf. Mettinger, *No Graven Image*, 48 fig. 2.7. Right: Tukulti-Ninurta I worshipping before a symbol socle, Ishtar temple at Aššur, 13th c. B.C.E. After Ornan *Triumph of the Symbol*, 238 fig. 51; cf. Mettinger, *No Graven Image*, 43 fig 2.2. Images used with permission by Christoph Uehlinger.

A second example comes from an inscribed cult socle found in the Ishtar temple in Aššur (**fig. 6.16**). On this object, Tukulti-Ninurta I is represented twice, once standing and once kneeling, before a cult socle that looks very similar to the artifact upon which the image is displayed. Mounted on the socle is a rectangular object with a vertical line at its center. This object has been interpreted as the double door of the temple or as a stylus and tablet. In light of the king's posture and finger pointing gesture, it is clear that these symbols represent the deity whom Tukulti-Ninurta is worshipping.¹⁶⁷ In fact, it is likely the case that the divine symbols pictured in this scene were at one point actually mounted upon this artifact, thus suggesting that the image mirrors or repeats what the king would do in the presence of these divine symbols. Here again, we cannot be sure

¹⁶⁷ The identity of this deity represented by these symbols is somewhat disputed. The partially preserved inscription at the bottom of the socle says that the image was made for the god Nusku. Yet, as Bahrani points out, Nusku is typically represented with a lamp symbol since he is known as the god of light (*The Graven Image*, 190). The object that appears on the socle more closely resembles the stylus and tablet, which are symbols of the god Nabu. In light of this observation, Bahrani offers the following conclusion: "[T]hough the scene depicted is described art historically as a narrative, recording a movement in time, the text in the inscription does not narrate the event in the scene. Text and image are incompatible" (ibid., 90). Regardless of the identity of the god, it is clear that the individual is depicted in an act of worship due to the finger point gesture.

that this was the case—the divine symbols, after all, were not found *in situ* with the socle. And for the most part, Mesopotamian written records have very little to say about the role of divine symbols as objects of worship.¹⁶⁸ However, in light of the evidence discussed above, it seems highly likely that non-iconic signs were used in place of or perhaps along with anthropomorphic statues in worship settings and that both forms of representation could manifest the real presence and power of the deity.

Though the evidence is less extensive, a similar argument can be made about the nature of Israelite worship. First, despite Halbertal and Margalit's assumption that idolatry is primarily associated with similarity-based representations, various texts in the Hebrew Bible imply that non-iconic symbols could also be the object of inappropriate worship. One possible example involves solar imagery. In Iron Age IIB glyptics, this imagery was prominent especially in the form of the two- or four-winged scarab who pushes the ball of the sun and the solar disk with wings and/or uraei.¹⁶⁹ Regardless of whether the bulk of these materials were produced locally or imported, they nevertheless draw on a widespread artistic tradition in the ancient Near East and Egypt of associating solar or celestial attributes with a particular deity, such as Ra, Aten, Aššur, Ahura Mazda, Baalshamem, etc. This imagery likely influenced the solar language associated with Yahweh in the book of Psalms and numerous other places in the Hebrew Bible.¹⁷⁰ More to the point, Ezek 8:16 and 2 Kgs 23:11 both imply that some

¹⁶⁸ A few texts do, however, indicate that divine symbols served as cult objects. See Ornan, *The Triumph of the Symbol*, 176; Lambert, "Ancient Mesopotamian Gods," 123-24.

¹⁶⁹ Keel and Uehlinger, *GGG*, 256.

¹⁷⁰ A prominent example is Psalm 84, which applies solar language to God as a way of developing the concept of seeing Yahweh's presumably luminescent presence in the Jerusalem temple. Though not necessarily in a cultic context, other texts use the verbal root for the rising of the sun (*vzrh*) to describe

form of solar worship was actually taking place in connection with the Jerusalem temple near the end of the seventh century.¹⁷¹ Among the various cultic "abominations" that Ezekiel sees in and around the temple precincts are twenty-five individuals, presumably priests, who stand between the porch and the altar "prostrating themselves to the sun toward the east" (משתחויתם קדמה לשמש). It is unclear if their worship is being directed toward the sun itself (a possibility in light of the eastern orientation of the Jerusalem temple) or toward some type of sun disk emblem that was installed within the temple. In either case, Ezekiel 8:16 seems to indicate a situation in which inappropriate worship was being directed toward a non-iconic object.

Likewise, in 2 Kings 23 Josiah removes from the temple and burns numerous cult objects including "the chariots of the sun" (מרכבות השמש; v. 11). Though sparse in details, the reference here might suggest an image of a horse-led chariot that carries the sun on its daytime journey across the sky.¹⁷² Related iconography in which a sun disk appears above the head of a horse or occasionally a bull is found on several archaeological artifacts, including a number of clay figurines from Iron Age Lachish, Hazor, and Jerusalem, the upper register of the Taanach cult stand, and two Persian period seals

Yahweh (Deut 33:2; Isa 60:1; Hos 6:3; see also the Kuntillet 'Ajrūd inscription). Job 31:26-28 might also reflect a ritual practice centered on the sun. For a concise review of this evidence, see Mark S. Smith's chapter "Yahweh and the Sun" in *The Early History of God*, 148-59. For a fuller treatment, see Hans-Peter Stähli, *Solare Elemente im Jahweglauben des Alten Testaments* (OBO 66; Fribourg: Universitätsverlag; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1985) and Glen Taylor, *Yahweh and the Sun: Biblical and Archaeological Worship in Ancient Israel* (JSOTSup 111; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1993).

¹⁷¹ The origins of this practice may be traced either through foreign influence under the Mesopotamians or Arameans, or alternatively it might reflect an indigenous form of the Yahwistic cult. Smith has also proposed that solar imagery became assimilated to Yahweh under the impetus of the monarchy (*The Early History of God*, 153-58). See also Michael Cogan, *Imperialism and Religion: Assyria, Judah, and Israel in the 8th and 7th Centuries B.C.E.* (SBLDS 19; Missoula, MT: Scholars Press, 1974), 84-87.

¹⁷² Smith, *The Early History of God*, 150.

from Ramat Raḥel.¹⁷³ If these artifacts give any indication of what sort of object is in view in 2 Kgs 23:11, then it seems to be the case that, at least from the perspective of the Deuteronomistic Historian, the worship of non-iconic symbols was as problematic as the worship of anthropomorphic ones.

The same might be said with respect to the asherah (האשרה).¹⁷⁴ In light of biblical and inscriptional evidence, it is not altogether certain whether this cult object represented a goddess in pre-exilic Israel (possibly a consort to Yahweh), or alternatively, if it was a symbol within the cult of Yahweh that was no longer associated with the goddess.¹⁷⁵ For the purposes of my particular argument here, I do not wish to enter into, let alone try to resolve, the on-going debate concerning what this cult object signified. Instead, I simply want to emphasize two rather uncontroversial points about the nature and function of the asherah that, taken together, render the specific (goddess?) identification of the a/Asherah in Israelite religion—especially its possibly polytheistic nature—effectively moot. On the one hand, there is almost no evidence to suggest that the asherah mentioned in the Hebrew Bible was anthropomorphic in form.¹⁷⁶ The texts give every impression that it was a non-iconic symbol, likely a wooden

¹⁷³ Ibid., 150-51; cf. Cogan, *Imperialism and Religion*, 87-88.

¹⁷⁴ See, for instance, references to האשרה in narratives (Judg 3:7: 6:25-30; 1 Kgs 14:23; 16:33; 2 Kgs 13:6; 17:10; 21:7; 23:4, 6-7, 15; 2 Chron 24:18), in legal prohibitions (Exod. 34:13; Deut 7:5; 12:3; 16:21) and in prophetic critiques (Isa 17:8; 27:9; Jer 17:2; Micah 5:13).

¹⁷⁵ For a helpful survey of these two positions and the relevant biblical, epigraphic, and iconographic data, see Smith, *The Early History of God*, 125-33; and Keel and Uehlinger, *GGG*, 210-48.

¹⁷⁶ One possible exception is 2 Kgs 23:7, which mentions weavings or clothes (בתים) in association with this object. The word בתים, which is somewhat unusual in this context, has been understood in light of other translations (Lucianic *stolās* = "garments" and Targumic *mkwlyn* = "coverings") as well the Arabic word *batt*, meaning "woven garments." For further discussion see Smith, *The Early History of God*, 114. Some scholars have drawn a connection between 2 Kgs 23:7 and the common ancient practice of clothing anthropomorphic cult statues in Mesopotamia and Ugarit (A. Leo Oppenheim, "The Golden Garments of the Gods," *JNES* 8 [1949]: 172-93). Smith also suggests that between the asherah and בתים might

pole or living tree that was itself derived from a stylized depiction of a tree, which in Canaanite iconography commonly symbolized, or even substituted for, the presence of the fertile and nurturing goddess Asherah.¹⁷⁷ On the other hand, most scholars agree that the asherah symbol (whether in the form of a pole or a stylized tree) was a regular feature of local shrines in both the northern and southern kingdoms up through the eighth century.¹⁷⁸ While worship of this symbol was at one point tolerated, it comes under sweeping attack in later literature, where it is denounced and destroyed alongside other cult objects, including *pěsîlîm* ("idols") and *maşşēbôt* (cf. Deut 7:5; 12:3; 2 Chron 33:19; 34:3, 4, 7). Thus, whatever else might be said about the asherah, it seems to clearly represent a non-iconic object that was susceptible to what Halbertal and Margalit would describe as an "error of substitution" in the mind of the worshipper (or at least the Deuteronomistic Historian). This brief observation reiterates the point that non-iconic objects can sometimes be treated—and more specifically, worshipped—in the same way as iconic objects, contrary to what Halbertal and Margalit would suggest.

Second, the Hebrew Bible also implies that some non-iconic signs, even when they did not explicitly function as objects of worship, could still manifest the deity's power and presence in much the same way as anthropomorphic statues. This is

alternatively be understood in light of a much later Palestinian custom of hanging clothes on trees or on Christ's crown of thorns (*The Early History of God*, 114).

¹⁷⁷ Smith, *The Early History of God*, 233.

¹⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 108-10; For further discussion of this and other matters related to the asherah in Israelite religion, see especially, Saul Olyan, *Asherah and the Cult of Yahweh in Israel* (SBLMS 34; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988) and Judith M. Hadley, *The Cult of Asherah in Ancient Israel and Judah: Evidence for a Hebrew Goddess* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000).

especially evident with respect to the ark of Yahweh/God.¹⁷⁹ On semiotic grounds, if the ark is understood as a footstool of the invisibly enthroned deity (1 Chr 28:2; cf. Ps 99:5; 132:7), it would qualify as an empty-space form of aniconism—that is, an indexical sign that implies but does not depict Yahweh's presence through metonymic extension.¹⁸⁰ Nevertheless, as Patrick D. Miller and J. J. M. Roberts have observed, 1 Samuel 4-6 seems to treat the ark as the functional equivalent of a cult image in ancient Mesopotamian religions.¹⁸¹ For example, when the Philistines learn that the ark of the LORD had come into the Israelite camp, they respond as if Yahweh himself had entered into their midst (cf. 1 Sam 4:7-8).¹⁸² In a similar way, after they routed the Israelites in battle, the Philistines capture the ark of God and bring it back to the temple of Dagon in Ashdod (1 Sam 4:11; 5:1) in a manner that recalls the common practice of carrying off divine statuary in the context of Mesopotamian warfare (cf. §5.3.2).¹⁸³ Furthermore, in the on-going conflict between the Israelites and the Philistines, the ark functions as a manifestation of Yahweh's power: not only is the cult statue of Dagon knocked over and beheaded in the presence of the ark (1 Sam 5:1-5) but so too does this non-iconic symbol help tilt the conflict in favor of the Israelites (1 Sam 5:6-12). Eventually, the

¹⁷⁹ This object is variously referred to as "the ark of the covenant" (with various forms of the divine name) or "the ark of the testimony."

¹⁸⁰ Other cherubim thrones in Syria-Palestine, including that which is depicted on an ivory plaque from LBA Megiddo and the sarcophagus of Aḥiram, show boxlike footstools near the base of a throne. Written sources also attest that West Semitic deities, such as El, had a footstool upon which he placed his feet.

¹⁸¹ Patrick D. Miller and J. J. M. Roberts, *The Hand of the Lord: A Reassessment of the "Ark Narrative" of 1 Samuel* (JHNES; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1977). This argument was first put forth by Mathias Delcor ("Jahweh et Dagon: ou le Jahwisme face à la religion des Philistines, d'après 1 Sam. V," *VT* 14 [1964]: 136-54) and was also addressed by Franz Schicklberger, *Die Ladeerzählungen des ersten Samuel-Buches: Eine literaturwissenschaftliche und theologiegeschichtliche Untersuchung* (FB 7; Würzburg: Echter Verlag, 1973).

¹⁸² Miller and Roberts, *The Hand of the Lord*, 64.

¹⁸³ *Ibid.*, 10.

Philistines return the ark to Israel, a gesture that is also paralleled in Mesopotamian literature insofar as divine images are often sent back to their native land after a period of forced captivity.¹⁸⁴ In light of these observations, Miller and Roberts conclude that in 1 Samuel 4-6 the ark is not merely a cultic symbol but rather is a material realization of Yahweh's presence, status, and agency.¹⁸⁵

The ark seems to play a similar role in other biblical texts. For instance, after defeating the Philistines, David brings the ark back to Jerusalem in what appears to be a dramatization of the return of Yahweh, the Divine Warrior, to his rightful abode. David's actions might be understood in light of Mesopotamian royal inscriptions that describe the legitimate king as one who restores the neglected cult.¹⁸⁶ Elsewhere, the ark appears to be an extension of Yahweh's essence or agency: it led the Israelites in their wilderness wanderings (Num 10:33); it was used as a war palladium (Num 14:44; 1 Sam 4:2-9); it entered the Jordan ahead of the Israelites when the waters were held back (Josh 3:11); and it was likely displayed in cultic processions (2 Sam 6; 1 Kgs 8; Pss 24, 47, 68, 132). It might even be the case that references to Yahweh dwelling in the temple or a worshipper standing before Yahweh actually allude to the presence of the ark itself.¹⁸⁷ This conclusion is somewhat speculative, though in Mesopotamian literature cultic images or statues were often called gods or indicated by the names of specific deities. While it is unclear when or how the ark was lost, both Deuteronomy and P limit its role and importance by primarily describing it as a box (אָרֹן) in which the stone tablets of the

¹⁸⁴ Miller and Roberts, *The Hand of the Lord*, 10-16.

¹⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 66.

¹⁸⁶ C. L. Seow, "Ark of the Covenant," *ABD* 1.392. For a fuller treatment, see also Seow's *Myth, Drama, and the Politics of David's Dance* (HSM 44; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1989).

¹⁸⁷ Seow, "Ark of the Covenant," in *ABD* 1.387.

covenant are stored (Deut 10:1-5; cf. Exod 25:10-22; 37:1-9). In fact, as Choon Leong Seow has shown, the fact that P disassociates God from the ark might reflect a reaction to an earlier view in which the ark was intrinsically tied to the divine presence. In either case, my point once again is that from the perspective of visual practices, the ark often functioned in ways that were broadly analogous to how anthropomorphic cult statues were used in other ANE cultures.

One final observation underscores the iconic function of non-iconic art in Israelite religion. In his contribution to *The Image and the Book*, van der Toorn suggests that there was a functional correspondence between the cult of divine images in ANE religions and the veneration of the Torah in ancient Israel.¹⁸⁸ In van der Toorn's estimation, the Torah was more than just an archive of written stories and religious principles—in a more material sense, it also functioned as a sacred object that was endowed with a spiritual power in its own right. Van der Toorn argues that as a type of "icon" the Torah was seen as much as it was read in Israelite society, and as a result, it could take the place of images in certain religious practices.¹⁸⁹ For instance, van der Toorn points out that the Israelites were commanded to display the Shema on their doorposts and gates (Deut 11:20) perhaps in place of images.¹⁹⁰ Similarly, they were told to bind God's word upon the body (Deut 11:18), whereas it was customary to wear images as amulets often for apotropaic purposes. Furthermore, van der Toorn suggests

¹⁸⁸ Van der Toorn, "The Iconic Book," 229-48.

¹⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 231.

¹⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 241. In the ancient Near Eastern world, images were often found on the gates of prominent buildings, such as the famous Balawat gates of Ashurbanipal II's Northwest palace at Nimrud. One should also note the practice of Egyptian pharaohs having their names written on gates and doorposts as well as stelae being placed in gateways such as at Bethsaida/et-Tell.

that a functional analogy exists between the cult image and the Torah in numerous other customs in early Judaism: (1) while the Babylonian army brought divine statues into battle, the Mishnah says that the king should carry a copy of the Torah on military expeditions (*Sanh.* 2:4); (2) when a new Torah scroll was made, it was carried in procession from the workshop to its new home, not unlike the type of rituals that occurred along with the mouth-washing ceremony; (3) solemn oaths were often made by touching a statue of a deity in ANE religions but in Judaism oaths were made by laying one's hands upon the holy book; and (4) Jewish theology about the pre-existent origins and divine nature of the Torah closely mirrors the Babylonian mythology of the origins and nature of cult statues.¹⁹¹ In light of van der Toorn's observations, it seems that even texts—the polar opposite of an icon in Peircian semiotics—can function in ways that are remarkably similar to anthropomorphic cult statues.¹⁹²

Each of these examples from ANE visual culture confirm what is implied in Morgan's functional typology: namely, that there is no one-to-one correspondence between how an image signifies and the way in which it is put to use. Morgan's perspective can shed light on the iconic function of non-iconic objects such as divine symbols, the ark, or even the Torah. In addition, it also highlights the fact that when seen from the perspective of visual practices, Israelite religion was not as different from other ANE religions as is sometimes thought.¹⁹³ Instead of seeing Israelite religion as an entirely aniconic "religion of the book" and other ANE religions as being image centered,

¹⁹¹ Van der Toorn, "The Iconic Book," 243-47.

¹⁹² For further discussion of the "material culture" of the book, see James W. Watts, *Iconic Books and Texts* (Bristol, Conn.: Equinox, 2013).

¹⁹³ This is not to say that Israelite religion had no distinctive features or that its relationship with divine images was identical to that found in Mesopotamian religions.

I want to emphasize the fact that both types of religions rely on a broadly analogous set of visual practices and visual responses. In this sense, it would be helpful to approach the comparative study of ANE religions in terms of the seventh category in Morgan's functional typology: rival iconographies. In other words, the primary difference between ANE religions is not so much the presence or absence of a visual medium of belief, but rather how experiences of the divine—and different deities—are visually negotiated and structured by a competing set of images and material objects. In my estimation, this perspective would lead scholars to characterize the history of Israelite religion not in terms of a unidirectional movement from iconism to aniconism (or even *de facto* aniconism to programmatic aniconism) but rather as an on-going tension between competing iconographies. In this sense, one of the main themes that emerges in Israelite religion is not its aversion to images *tout court* but the way in which different types of visual materials come to displace one another because of what are likely complex religious, political, and social reasons.

6.3.3. Conclusions

The goal of this section was to explore how the definition of aniconism and the characterization of Israelite worship might be reframed in light of evidence concerning ancient visual practices. Two broad conclusions emerge from my analysis, both of which attempt to expand the analytic scope of research on Israelite religion in light of theories and perspectives from religious visual culture. First, despite the fact that iconic forms of representation signify in somewhat different ways than non-iconic ones, the latter still

functioned as an important part of the visual medium of belief in Israelite religion. That is to say, indexical and conventional signs are no less material, and indeed no less visual, than similarity-based (i.e., "iconic") images. All types of visual representation are experienced through the apparatus of sight and thus might be characterized as a visual medium of belief. In my estimation, this point is not adequately emphasized in past research on Israel's aniconic tradition. As a result, I believe that the study of Israelite religion would be advanced in fruitful ways if researchers—be they art historians, archaeologists, biblical iconographers, or history of religion scholars—began to move beyond traditional questions about what types of images the biblical text prohibits or what sorts of materials have been found in the archaeological record and instead focused more attention on the role of visual practices in Israelite religion.

Second, when seen from the perspective of the visual medium of belief, Israelite religion seems far less aniconic than some have supposed. On this score, I largely agree with Uehlinger and a growing number of other scholars (though still a minority) who believe that Israelite religion, especially in the pre-exilic period, was generally iconic. However, I come to this conclusion for different reasons—and with regard to different referents—than these other scholars. My argument does not hinge on proving that certain material artifacts represent iconic depictions of the deity or that the mere presence of an image ban presupposes the use of divine images by some portion of the

population.¹⁹⁴ Rather, my conclusion emerges from a reconsideration of what counts as evidence for iconic cults in the first place. Throughout Israelite history, worshippers consistently relied upon visual materials in their experience of the divine, and they often responded to non-iconic art objects in ways that are at least analogous to—and at times identical with—how its neighbors treated anthropomorphic statuary. Thus, even if it could be proven that ancient Israelites never had anthropomorphic images of their deity, a visual culture perspective would still question whether Israelite religion should be classified as an aniconic tradition without further qualification. In my estimation, one of these "further qualifications" would address how the second major concern of Morgan's research—religious ways of seeing—affected the way in which Israelite viewers interpreted religious visual imagery in the first place.

6.4. Religious Ways of Seeing and the Search for Yahweh's Image

Arguably the most debated issue in the study of Israelite religion is whether (or perhaps *when*) ancient Israel had images of Yahweh. This question has generated considerable interest—and a good deal of controversy—within biblical scholarship in the past several decades. Numerous studies have attempted to evaluate both direct and indirect evidence for the existence of Yahweh's image during the pre-monarchic, monarchic, and even post-exilic periods. While these studies often employ sophisticated archaeological,

¹⁹⁴ For his part, Mettinger argues that the second commandment is based on an already existing convention of *not* using images of the deity in worship (*No Graven Image*, 16). However, some scholars conclude quite the opposite. Uehlinger contends that the prohibitions against images in the Decalogue imply that images were, in fact, being worshipped—that is, the image ban targets a current practice ("Judahite Aniconism vs. Edomite Iconic Cult," 84). While not specifically addressing Israelite aniconism, Freedberg also maintains that strictures against images presuppose an already existing belief in the power and agency of certain art objects (*The Power of Images*, 60).

textual, and iconographic modes of analysis, for the most part they have yet to make use of the theories and perspectives that guide the study of religious visual culture. However, just as I have argued with respect to visual practices and the study of Israelite aniconism (§6.3), I contend that some of the analytical strategies on display in David Morgan's research also can contribute to the search for Yahweh's image. In this section I explore the effects of *religious ways of seeing* in the ancient world, including how religious knowledge and beliefs might have come to shape the way in which Israelite viewers processed visual data and/or came to visualize their deity in specific art objects. In order to do so, I first briefly review some of the commonly cited evidence in the search for Yahweh's image, noting some of the possibilities and problems involved in determining whether a given artifact depicts Israel's God (§6.4.1). Second, I draw on several lines of evidence that, taken together, make a case that ancient Israelites likely repurposed or "revised" artistic imagery in light of underlying religious perspectives (§6.4.2).

6.4.1. Reviewing the Evidence for Yahweh's Image

While space prohibits an extensive review of even the most widely discussed evidence for Yahweh's image, it will be instructive to highlight several potentially compelling candidates in the search process. My goal in doing so is not to argue that certain material artifacts or textual references prove beyond doubt that ancient Israel had images of its deity. But neither do I aim to dismiss this possibility outright simply because some of these artifacts cannot be unambiguously identified as representing

Yahweh. Rather, I want to offer a mediating position that on the one hand acknowledges the lack of conclusive material or textual evidence for the existence of Yahweh's image and on the other hand allows for the possibility that certain religious ways of seeing might have led Israelite viewers to see their deity even in images that may not have been originally intended to depict Yahweh. In other words, I want to suggest that iconographic and archaeological considerations are *not the only point*—and might even be somewhat *beyond the point*—when it comes to determining whether ancient Israelite viewers encountered Yahweh in the visual arts.

The search for Yahweh's image traditionally has entailed the close analysis of diverse material realia from Iron Age Syria-Palestine. For instance, scholars as Christoph Uehlinger and Theodore J. Lewis have recently looked for traces of Yahweh's image in a wide variety of artifacts, including male and female statuary, pillar figurines, goddess imagery, theriomorphic and zoomorphic representations, astral and solar imagery, cult stands, shrine models, *maṣṣēbôt*, and "empty-space" iconographies.¹⁹⁵ While many of these objects seem to have played an important role in the cultic sphere and at least a few of them are thought to be closely associated with the deity, it is not possible to establish irrefutably that any of these objects were originally meant to depict Yahweh.¹⁹⁶ For instance, in the oft-discussed case of pithos A from Kuntillet 'Ajrud (**fig. 6.17**), art historical and iconographic considerations have led most scholars to conclude that: (1) the various figures in his scene do not constitute a coherent composition in

¹⁹⁵ Uehlinger, "Anthropomorphic Cult Statuary," esp. 102-39; Lewis, "Divine Images and Aniconism in Ancient Israel," esp. 42-50.

¹⁹⁶ Uehlinger, "Anthropomorphic Cult Statuary," 152; Lewis, "Divine Images and Aniconism," 51.

their own right; and (2) the two figures at the center of the drawing are best understood as Bes-like *Mischwesen* and *not* as Yahweh and his Asherah, despite the overlapping inscription, which reads "Yahweh of Samaria and his Asherah..." (though see §6.4.2 for further discussion).¹⁹⁷ Another intriguing, but ultimately unsuccessful, candidate is the Munich terracotta (**fig. 6.18**), which was acquired by Jörg Jeremias in 1990 at a Jerusalem antiquities market.¹⁹⁸ Uehlinger is quite optimistic that this artifact might represent "precisely what scholars have tried, in vain, to find for so long: an 8th-century Judahite figural representation of 'Yahweh and his Asherah.'" ¹⁹⁹ However, in light of its damaged condition and overall lack of detail, it would be difficult to conclude with any degree of confidence that this object depicts Yahweh and his consort seated upon a throne, flanked by attendant sphinxes.²⁰⁰ In addition, ambiguities regarding an object's function can complicate matters further. As one example, even though some ANE deities could be shown in theriomorphic form, it is possible that the animal figurines found in ancient Israel were not utilized as images *of* Yahweh, but rather were presented *to* Yahweh as a votive offering or alternatively functioned as pedestals *for* the invisible deity (i.e., a form of empty-space aniconism).²⁰¹ Finally, even in cases where

¹⁹⁷ For further discussion and references, see Keel and Uehlinger, *GGG*, 210-224; Pirhiya Beck, "The Drawings from Horvat Teimen (Kuntillet 'Ajrud), *TA* 9 (1982): 3-58.

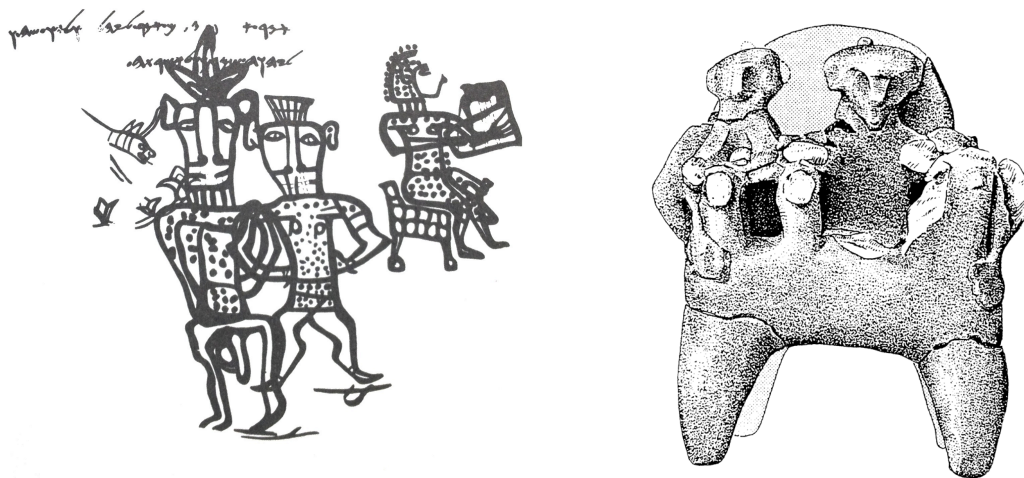
¹⁹⁸ Jörg Jeremias, "Thron oder Wagen? Eine außergewöhnliche Terrakotte aus der späten Eisenzeit in Judah," *Biblische Welten: Festschrift für Martin Metzger zu seinem 65. Geburtstag* (ed. Martin Metzger and Wolfgang Zwickel; OBO 123; Fribourg: University Press; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1993), 40-59. This artifact now resides in Fribourg.

¹⁹⁹ Uehlinger, "Anthropomorphic Cult Statuary," 151.

²⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 151-52.

²⁰¹ Lewis, "Divine Images and Aniconism," 47-48; for the possibility of animal figures as pedestals for the deity, see Mettinger, *No Graven Image*, 137. See also Roger Moorey's discussion of terracotta figurines in Israel and Judah in, *Idols of the People: Miniature Images of Clay in the Ancient Near East* (Schweich lectures 2001; New York: Published by the British Academy by Oxford University Press, 2003), esp. 47-68.

divine statues are found in cultic contexts, such as with the Ḥorvat Qiṭmīt sanctuary in the northern Negev, the extent to which those sites reflect officially sanctioned Israelite religion (as opposed to Edomite religion in the case of Ḥorvat Qiṭmīt) remains somewhat unclear.²⁰² Thus for all of these reasons, the material evidence for the existence of divine images in pre-exilic Israel is promising, but ultimately inconclusive from a strictly iconographic perspective.²⁰³



Figs. 6.17-18. Left: Close up of Pithos A from Kuntillet 'Ajrud, northeastern Sinai, early-9th / late-8th c. After Coogan, *The Oxford History of the Biblical World*, 309; cf. Keel and Uehlinger, *GGG*, 213 fig. 220. Right: Munich Terracotta, Judah, likely late 8th or early 7th century. After Uehlinger, "Anthropomorphic Cult Statuary," 150 fig. 61. Jeremias, "Thron oder Wagen?," 41-59. Image used with permission of Christoph Uehlinger.

²⁰² Pace Uehlinger, "Judahite Aniconism vs. Edomite Iconic Cult," 80-112.

²⁰³ In my estimation, one of the difficulties encountered in the search for Yahweh's image is establishing what would constitute conclusive iconographical evidence in the first place. For instance, in discussions of pithos A from Kuntillet 'Ajrud, it is often suggested that the two central figures reflect Egyptian Bes iconography and thus cannot represent Yahweh and his Asherah. Perhaps so, but this does not directly address the question of what northern Sinai Yahweh/Asherah iconography would actually look like or how one would recognize Yahweh imagery if she saw it. Likewise, even if one knew that the Munich terracotta was intended to represent Yahweh and his Asherah (perhaps through an inscription?), the poorly preserved images on this object hardly would establish a precise iconographic profile that could be used to evaluate other images. Nevertheless, one might reasonably suppose that Yahweh's iconography would reflect characteristics known about Israel's God from textual data, such as Yahweh's association with a cherubim throne, lion imagery, solar imagery, wings, archers, and so forth. In addition, one would also need to consider information about the context in which an image is found, its function, its relation to the cult, and as I argue in the remainder of this section, how ancient viewers might have interpreted the object in light of their prior religious beliefs and knowledge.

Nevertheless, this observation does not by itself prove that ancient Israel lacked divine images. In fact, in other ANE cultures, divine statues, which were often made from precious metals, were often the target of theft and looting and thus are only infrequently attested in the archaeological record. If a similar situation obtained in ancient Israel—and it did, if the ark narrative is to be believed—then the absence of archaeological evidence of Yahweh's image should not necessarily be seen as evidence of its historical absence. In fact, some biblical scholars have attempted to infer the existence of Israelite divine images *apart from* concrete archaeological data. For instance, van der Toorn reasons that while in Deuteronomy and P the ark is consistently described as a receptacle for the covenant tablets, at an earlier—and less iconoclastic—point in Israelite history the ark actually was used to store an image or symbol of Yahweh.²⁰⁴ Likewise, some scholars have suggested that the holy of holies in the Second Temple period was not, as Josephus suggests (*J.W.* 5.219), completely empty but rather was occupied by a divine image until the Hasmonean period at which point it was removed during the re-dedication of the temple.²⁰⁵ The mention of Hezekiah's removal of the bronze serpent (called Nehushtan in 2 Kgs 18:4) from the temple might also imply the presence of a Yahweh-related image. Though intriguing, these suggestions remain largely unsubstantiated. Much of the same can be said of Herbert Niehr's belief that certain expressions in the Hebrew Bible, such as references to seeing Yahweh's face, the procession of God into the sanctuary, and the enthronement of the deity in the temple,

²⁰⁴ Van der Toorn, "The Iconic Book," 242.

²⁰⁵ For further discussion and references, see Herbert Niehr, "In Search of YHWH's Cult Statue," in *The Image and the Book*, 95.

are most naturally understood as implying the existence of Yahweh's cult statue.²⁰⁶

While I agree that the nature of Israelite worship during the pre-exilic period was far less aniconic than many scholars have suggested, this does not require that anthropomorphic language about God directly emerges from an experience with an anthropomorphic cult object.

Still others have looked to Assyrian royal inscriptions and palace wall reliefs (cf. **figs. 5.6-7**) for indirect evidence that the Israelites had divine cult statues.²⁰⁷ In both written and pictorial accounts of Neo-Assyrian military campaigns, references are made to soldiers removing cult statuary as booty (or more accurately, as prisoners of war; cf. §5.3.2) from Syro-Palestinian cities.²⁰⁸ Though it is certainly plausible that these materials bear witness to the existence of anthropomorphic divine images in Israel, one cannot fully rule out the possibility that the spoliation of cult statues was a stock element in the iconography of Assyrian conquest or a literary topos in Assyrian royal inscriptions.²⁰⁹ Thus, while ANE sources should be taken seriously in the study of

²⁰⁶ Niehr, "In Search of YHWH's Cult Statue," 81-90.

²⁰⁷ See for instance, several contributions to *The Image and the Book*, including Uehlinger, "Anthropomorphic Cult Statuary," 123-38; Niehr, "In Search of YHWH's Cult Statue," 79; and Bob Becking, "Assyrian Evidence for Iconic Polytheism in Ancient Israel?" in *The Image and the Book*, 157-71.

²⁰⁸ The most prominent written accounts come from several inscriptions related to Tiglath-pileser III's campaign against Gaza (ca. 734 B.C.E.), Sargon II's campaigns against Samaria (as mentioned in the Nimrud Prism, ca. 722/720) and Ashdod (ca. 711), and Sennacherib's campaign against Ashkelon (ca. 701). Iconographic evidence is found on reliefs from Tiglath-pileser III's palace at Nimrud (slab r-36-lower), Sargon II's palace at Khorsabad (Room V, slabs 5.4.3-upper), and Sennacherib's palace at Nineveh (Room X slab 11).

²⁰⁹ However see Uehlinger ("Anthropomorphic Cult Statuary," 128), who contends that the motif of Assyrian soldiers carrying away cult statues from a conquered town, whether in text or image, is best understood as relating to an actual historical event and are *not* mere stock elements in iconography or literary topos in royal inscriptions. See also Uehlinger, "'Und wo sind die Götter von Samarien?' Die Wegführung syrisch-palästinischer Kultstatuen auf einem Relief Sargons II in Khorsabad/Dür-Sarrukin," in *Und Mose Schrieb dieses Lied auf: Studien zum Alten Testament und zum Alten Orient: Festschrift für Oswald Loretz zur Vollendung seines 70. Lebensjahres mit Beiträgen von Freunden, Schülern und Kollegen* (ed. Oswald Loretz,

Israelite religion, even these materials do not provide decisive evidence for the existence of an image of Yahweh.

In light of this and other data, one must provisionally conclude that the search for Yahweh's image, at least as it has been traditionally pursued, has come up somewhat empty. However, this observation need not imply that Israelite religion was exclusively or essentially aniconic. As I have already argued, a consideration of *the visual medium of belief* can draw attention to the fact that ancient Israelites materialized faith in a variety of visual forms (§6.3.1) and often responded to non-iconic objects in ways that are remarkably similar to how anthropomorphic cult statues are treated in other ANE religions (§6.3.2.2). I now want to press this point further, this time by returning to the second defining characteristic of the study of religious visual culture—that is, *the religious apparatus of sight*.

Visual culture theorists such as Morgan emphasize that seeing is never simply a function of biological perception, nor is it always rigidly governed by knowledge of iconographic conventions or art historical contexts (§6.2.2). Rather, seeing is a thoroughly engaged, purposeful, and constructive activity that is deeply informed by underlying beliefs, values, and religious knowledge. As a result, viewers play an active role in the meaning-making process and are capable of accepting, opposing, or reimagining predominant interpretations of an image based on the unique set of epistemological lenses or "covenants" that condition their gaze. In this view, religious ways of seeing not only structure how the viewers interpret visual data but also open up

Manfried Dietrich, and Ingo Kottsieper; AOAT 250; Kevelaer: Butzon & Bercker; Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener, 1998), 739-776.

the possibility that they came to look for or even recognize religiously meaningful content in art objects in ways that do not fully reflect their intended purpose or original meaning.

However, the potential effects of religious ways of seeing are rarely if ever taken into account in the search for Yahweh's image. In practice, a rather straight connection is often assumed between the meaning intended by an image's original producers and the meaning received by its subsequent viewers. Thus, in order to conclude that an Israelite saw their deity in a given art object, it would have to be proven that the image represented Yahweh on iconographic grounds. While this supposition is not unreasonable, it faces several difficulties. As discussed in §6.3.1, the notion of "iconic" representations of Yahweh or any other deity is problematized in at least three ways: (1) our inability to assess whether a divine image resembles its referent; (2) the non-mimetic nature of much ANE art; and (3) the coexistence of multiple bodies or "iconic" forms of the same deity. However, what is even more problematic is the fact that this perspective fails to acknowledge that the on-going meaning an image receives is generated through a complex interaction between the image, its viewers, and the social, cultural, and religious contexts in which subsequent acts of seeing take place. In other words, religious beliefs and theological commitments can substantially influence not only how one processes visual data but also what one thinks one sees in an image in the first place.

Throughout his research, Morgan presents numerous examples of how religious viewers ascribe new meanings to existing art objects in light of their unique theological

contexts and beliefs. This phenomenon often occurs in cross-cultural religious encounters, such as when missionaries appropriate indigenous art, symbols, rituals, and holy sites for use in Christian worship.²¹⁰ An interesting example is offered by nineteenth-century religion scholar F. C. Conybeare, who recounts how a Jesuit priest once urged the inhabitants of a Pacific island to ascribe the name "Francis of Assisi" to one of their tribal statues.²¹¹ If this community came to believe that their statue depicted the Italian saint it was only because their Christian belief (they were said to be converts) fostered a new way of seeing in which they apprehended this image not through a mimetic covenant but through what Morgan would call an expressivist or allegorical covenant. That is, they came to see the statue as a visual emblem for Francis of Assisi's spirit or essence even though it did not in any way resemble his actual appearance.²¹² Numerous other examples might be cited of how the meaning of a religious image is transformed when it migrates between different theological or political contexts. I describe this phenomenon as a type of repurposing or "revisioning" of religious imagery—that is, the ascription of new meaning to already existing art objects.

While Morgan's research tends to focus on more contemporary faith communities and art objects, there is no reason to suppose that religious ways of seeing had any less of an effect in the ancient world. Israelite viewers, not unlike the subjects in

²¹⁰ For further discussion, see Morgan's chapter "The Circulation of Images in Mission History," in *The Sacred Gaze*, 147-87.

²¹¹ Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols*, 4.36.

²¹² In other instances, religious imagery can be detached from its original theological context and used to symbolize a concept that is at cross-purposes with the moral vision of the religion from which it came. Morgan refers to the application of images to religious or political ends other than those sought by the missionary as a form of "expropriation" (*The Sacred Gaze*, 163-65).

Morgan's *Visual Piety*, might well have looked with a devotional gaze upon a variety of different images, even those known to depict other ANE deities, and thought to themselves "That's Yahweh!"²¹³ Or they might have attempted to make pictures of foreign kings or drawings of non-anthropomorphic creatures more familiar and meaningful by seeing in them a type of visual metaphor that conveyed the essence of spirit of their deity (as in the above example of Francis of Assisi). In either case, if scholars interested in Israelite religion were to take Morgan's understanding of religious ways of seeing seriously, they would need to rethink some of their conclusions regarding the (non)existence of Yahweh's image. For instance, several of the artifacts discussed above as possible candidates for Yahweh's image probably would need to be dismissed from the search process on strictly iconographic grounds, or at least, would need to be retained in a possible-but-not-certain state of limbo. Nevertheless, when seen from the perspective of visual culture theory, it would still be possible to conclude that these same objects may have appeared quite Yahweh-like to ancient viewers who may have seen them in light of particular sacred gazes or image covenants.

This perspective would reframe some of the observations Keel and Uehlinger have made in *GGG* regarding the interpretation of divine symbols. While these (and other) scholars often draw close parallels between Israel's theological conception of Yahweh and prominent motifs in Syro-Palestinian art, they ultimately stop short of concluding that certain images depict Yahweh. For instance, Keel and Uehlinger acknowledge the pronounced solar orientation of religious imagery in eighth-century

²¹³ See Morgan, *Visual Piety*, 43, 122 for the corresponding discussion about reactions to Warner Sallman's *Head of Christ*.

Judah, and they recognize that literary metaphors that speak of Yahweh shining forth or having other luminous properties are congruent with the visual motifs found on winged scarabs or other types of sun disk imagery.²¹⁴ They even go so far as to suggest that in Judah, Yahweh was principally conceived of as the actual sun god.²¹⁵ And yet, while Yahweh might be described in literary texts in the role of a solar deity, to my knowledge Keel and Uehlinger never suggest that something similar might be said of the visual arts—that is, that a sun disk scarab was understood by Israelites to represent Yahweh in an explicit manner. However, in light of the many conceptual links that exist between solar imagery and Israel's God, it is at least plausible, if not highly likely, that an Israelite viewer would have come to believe that the real power and presence of Yahweh was manifest in and through a variety of solar images in Syro-Palestinian art. In fact, the theoretical insights from religious ways of seeing indicate that Israelite viewers may have been led to see or recognize their deity in a variety of art objects *even if those objects were originally intended to display a different subject matter, or indeed, a different god*. This possibility is entirely consistent with visual culture theory—indeed, it is derived from it—but, of course, its viability in religio-historical research hinges on whether there is any evidence to suggest that this type of repurposing of religious imagery actually occurred in ancient Israelite religion. I turn to this issue now.

²¹⁴ Keel and Uehlinger, *GGG*, 265-77.

²¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 277.

6.4.2. Repurposing Religious Imagery

Definitely proving that ancient viewers experienced Yahweh in non-Yahwistic art is, to say the least, an extremely difficult task, and may well be impossible. After all, scholars do not have access to the type of ethnographic data (letters, surveys, etc.) that are so crucial to, for example, Morgan's study of Christian responses to Warner Sallman's paintings of Christ. Nevertheless, an investigation of the effects of religious ways of seeing in the ancient world need not devolve into wild speculation or "anything goes" suggestions about visual interpretation and/or viewer response. Though somewhat circumstantial, three lines of evidence can be adduced to support the notion that Israelite viewers came to see and interpret religious imagery in light of their underlying beliefs and religious knowledge.

6.4.2.1. *The Image-Text Dialectic*

First and most generally, there is good reason to believe that written texts, whether religious or otherwise, influenced how ancient viewers read and interpreted images. This idea emerges out of my previous discussion regarding the nature of the image-text relationship. In chapter 3, I noted how W. J. T. Mitchell emphasizes that the interaction between visual and verbal data is always (at least potentially) dialectical in nature. From this vantage point, Mitchell not only problematizes the simple resolution of word and image into discrete categories of signs, but he also tends to describe the mutual interaction between visual and verbal media in terms of the visuality of texts and the textuality of vision (§3.3.1). In speaking of this latter issue, Mitchell contends that every

form of art, whether ancient or modern, abstract or mimetic, depends at least in part on knowledge of the content of written materials, the logic of textuality, and/or an underlying discourse of literary criticism and philosophy. Thus, in addition to suggesting that images can be read as a type of language, Mitchell also highlights the fact that visual experiences can be fraught with a verbal or textual background.

As I have shown with respect to the Behistun relief, Mitchell's theory of the image-text dialectic can shed new light on visual-verbal interactions in ancient art objects (§3.3.3). For instance, textual data can potentially inform and direct an observer's visual experience of the imagery on the Behistun relief in numerous ways: (1) when read from left to right, the compositional arrangement of the central scene displays a Subject → Object/Verb syntax that is roughly parallel to the word order found in each of the three languages on the monument; (2) the placement of the captions within the visual frame of the paneled sculpture functions to direct the gaze of the viewer toward the most important figures in the image;²¹⁶ and (3) knowledge of the summary text, which was widely distributed throughout Darius's empire, would have enabled viewers to understand the highly symbolic "visual précis" pictured on the monument in terms of more historically-specific events associated with the ascension of Darius. Thus, even though the content of the inscriptions would not have been legible to observers who peered up at the monument from some 300 feet below, it is still possible to conclude that the Behistun iconography was seen by ancient viewers in light of the

²¹⁶ The captions themselves, of course, would not have been legible. However, it would have most likely been possible to detect that the captions did exist. That is to say, while the captions were visible (i.e., their presence would have been noticed) they were not legible. As an example, it is often possible to detect the presence of a road sign at some great distance ahead even though the particular content of that sign is not yet discernable.

placement, logic, and content of textual materials, at least at some times and some places.

The potential for visual-verbal interactions is not limited to ancient monumental reliefs and may in fact come to bear on artifacts that pertain to the search for Yahweh's image. One particularly important example is pithos A from Kuntillet 'Ajrud (**fig. 6.17**). As previously mentioned, scholars generally agree that on iconographic grounds the two central figures should *not* be identified as Yahweh and his Asherah despite the accompanying inscription. In fact, much of the secondary literature argues that the image and overlapping inscription should be disassociated from one another since the ink of the inscription goes over the drawing and thus was most likely added at a later point and by a different person.²¹⁷ However, Brian B. Schmidt offers a different perspective.²¹⁸ He believes that prior research on pithos A has been characterized by an "overly simplistic separation of the depictions and the accompanying inscriptional references . . . solely on the basis of what has been deemed as the presence of Bes iconography."²¹⁹ That is, scholars tend to believe that the inscription cannot refer to the image since the iconography of the two figures is not congruent with the textual data. In contrast, Schmidt imagines the image-text relationship from the vantage point of what might be called the "final redactor" of the artifact. When seen in this light, Schmidt contends that:

²¹⁷ Beck, "The Drawings From Horvat Teiman," 36, 43; Walter A. Maier, *Asherah: Extrabiblical Evidence* (HSM 37; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986); Judith M. Hadley, "Some Drawings and Inscriptions on Two Pithoi from Kuntillet 'Ajrud," *VT* 37 (1987): 180-213; Keel and Uehlinger, *GGG*, 210-40.

²¹⁸ Brian B. Schmidt, "The Aniconic Tradition: On Reading Images and Viewing Texts," in *The Triumph of Elohim: From Yahwisms to Judaisms* (ed. Diana V. Edelman; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1995), 75-105, esp. 96-105.

²¹⁹ Schmidt, "The Aniconic Tradition," 99.

“the confluence of figures and inscription may have in fact conveyed a significant, unified field of meaning! Assuming that the parts comprising the final scene are to be related as a single unit . . . it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that by recording the inscription, someone consciously sought to interpret the drawings as a depiction of Yahweh and his Asherah.”²²⁰

Like Schmidt, I also think that past research on pithos A has too readily downplayed the possibility of visual-verbal interaction on this artifact. However, my line of reasoning ultimately proceeds in a different direction.

First, Schmidt's argument seems to depend on establishing a historical-critical point about the object's production: namely, that by adding the inscription in such close proximity to the drawing the inscriber *consciously* sought to interpret the image in light of the text. In my view, this is possible, but far from certain—and more importantly, this point is not critical to my overall argument about the implications of the image-text dialectic. Mitchell's theory of visual-verbal interactions does not hinge on establishing the intention of the original author or even the "final redactor." Texts can and do influence how later viewers interpret images even in cases where the two forms of media were not created at the same time or were not originally intended to be read together. Thus, whether or not the inscription and image overlap by "pure coincidence" (as Uehlinger argues) or because the inscriber wanted to create "a significant, unified field of meaning" (as Schmidt argues) is somewhat beside the point for the purposes of my argument, which in essence is about the reception of visual imagery not its production.²²¹ When seen from the perspective of Mitchell's image-text dialect, later viewers (provided they could read) might well have come to understand the image of

²²⁰ Schmidt, "The Aniconic Tradition," 97-98.

²²¹ Uehlinger, "Anthropomorphic Cult Statuary," 146.

the two Bes figures as Yahweh and his Asherah in light of the words of the inscription, regardless of the circumstances surrounding the production of the object, or more specifically, the addition of the inscription. It would be difficult, of course, to prove that this happened. However, when one considers the nature of the image-text dialectic, it would only be surprising if the majority of ancient viewers—who were likely unfamiliar with the composition history of this artifact and/or the distinctive features of Bes iconography—disassociated the visual and verbal data on this artifact in the way that many scholars do today. At the very least, arguments about the artifact's composition history and iconographic conventions should not be the *only* considerations that impinge on how scholars assess whether this object constitutes an image of Yahweh.

The second problem with Schmidt's reasoning has to do with why he believes it was possible for the inscriber to interpret the drawings as a depiction of Yahweh and his Asherah in the first place. Schmidt argues that while the biblical texts prohibit the production of anthropomorphic and theriomorphic images of Yahweh, they do *not* explicitly ban images of *Mischwesen*—that is, composite entities that include a mixture of anthropomorphic and theriomorphic forms.²²² Schmidt proposes that the Bes-like *Mischwesen* on pithos A would have represented a legitimate Yahwistic iconography in the eyes of the inscriber, thus making the inscription "Yahweh of Samaria and his Asherah" an acceptable label for the image. Though interesting, Schmidt's proposal is not persuasive. As Uehlinger points out, Deut 4:15-16 does not seem to allow for *Mischwesen* imagery since it bases its prohibition against making an idol "in the form of

²²² Schmidt, "The Aniconic Tradition," 95.

any figure" (תמונת כל סמל) on the idea that the people saw "no form" (לא ראיתם כל תמונה) when the Lord spoke to them at Horeb.²²³ In addition, Uehlinger rightly points out that the lack of an explicit ban on *Mischwesen* in the biblical texts might be due to the fact that such imagery was only rarely associated with deities in Syro-Palestinian art.²²⁴

Despite these important critiques, there might be another way to argue the point. Every formulation of the biblical image ban prohibits the *making* (*V'sh*) of images of Yahweh (cf. Exod 20:4, 23; 34:17; Lev 19:4; 26:1; Deut 4:16; 5:8). What is not clear is whether the spirit of the law also extended to *seeing* images *as* Yahweh. Did the image ban allow room for Israelites to recognize Yahweh in the visual arts as long as they did not make or worship such imagery? Would the interpretation of a non-Yahwistic image (such as Bes-like *Mischwesen*) as Yahweh constitute a mode of production? The biblical texts do not provide clear answers to these questions, and so I merely wish to raise the possibility—admittedly, a speculative one—that the image ban focused primarily on the production of idols and less on their "reception" by later viewers. Or at the very least, it is worth noting that it would have been far more difficult to *enforce* a commandment that prohibited seeing Yahweh in non-Yahwistic art than one that prohibited making images that were intended to be Yahweh in the first place.

Nevertheless, unlike Schmidt, my argument does not hinge on establishing the scope of the biblical image ban. In this sense, I agree with Uehlinger's skepticism about Schmidt's line of reasoning when he says: "I would concede that the Bes identification cannot rule out *per se* a correlation of the drawing with 'Yahweh and his Asherah' but it

²²³ Uehlinger, "Anthropomorphic Cult Statuary," 144.

²²⁴ *Ibid.*, 144.

must be part of a broader argument."²²⁵ In my estimation, this broader argument—which neither Schmidt nor Uehlinger ultimately provide—emerges from theories about the image-text dialectic. As already noted, Mitchell stresses the idea that it is difficult to keep discourse out of the visual arts. Viewers tend to see in light of what they read or know from textual materials. Thus, even if the biblical texts do explicitly prohibit *Mischwesen* imagery and even if the image ban extends to seeing and not just making divine images, it might still have been the case that some ancient viewers (again, provided that they were literate) would have interpreted the image in light of information gleaned from the inscription. Again, I do not mean to suggest that the central figures were originally intended to represent Yahweh and his Asherah or even that the inscription was added in order to create a "unified field of meaning." Instead, I merely want to press the point that visual-verbal interactions may occur *regardless of iconographic conventions or religious commandments*. Put simply, the impulse to see Yahweh in pithos A in light of the inscription is consistent with the theory of the image-text dialectic.

Though I admit that this conclusion is somewhat difficult to prove, it generally seems to reflect the type of visual-verbal interaction that Mitchell argues is present on both ancient and modern artifacts. Furthermore, the idea that texts influence visual processing is consistent with Morgan's understanding of the effects of religious ways of seeing. As discussed above, seeing is a thoroughly engaged, purposeful, and constructive activity that is deeply informed by underlying religious knowledge, at least

²²⁵ Uehlinger, "Anthropomorphic Cult Statuary," 145.

some of which is derived from reading (or hearing) texts. If I am correct in drawing these connections, then the search for Yahweh's image would need to reconsider how knowledge of written texts, whether from the inscription on pithos A or from the metaphors and similes used to characterize Yahweh in Israelite religion, might have led viewers to identify Yahweh in images that, on (art) historical grounds, were never meant to depict their deity. I return to this point below, but for now, it will be necessary to consider a second line of evidence concerning the effects of religious ways of seeing in the ancient world.

6.4.2.2. *Reinterpreting Divine Imagery*

My second argument about religious ways of seeing proceeds by way of analogy with a well-known literary phenomenon. Specifically, there is ample evidence to suggest that biblical authors often reinterpreted religious *literary* imagery in light of new theological perspectives. This point is hardly controversial and is documented in several areas of biblical scholarship. For instance, the study of intertextuality or inner-biblical exegesis seeks to understand the way in which a given text draws on explicit citations and latent allusions in other literature with the aim of not only preserving prior traditions but also transforming them.²²⁶ This is especially evident when the Gospel writers reinterpret prophecies in light of the life and ministry of Jesus or when the New Testament letters leverage imagery associated with Israel, the temple, priests, and so forth in order to

²²⁶ There is considerable debate among biblical scholars about whether intertextuality and inner-biblical exegesis refer to the same phenomenon. Definitions of these terms vary, though it is sometimes suggested that intertextuality is a synchronic discipline while inner-biblical exegesis is more diachronic, focusing on how a historical author interprets or evokes an earlier text. While this distinction might prove helpful in some cases, there is nevertheless substantial overlap in these concepts.

visualize the identify and function of the church.²²⁷ The Hebrew Bible is also filled with intertextual references, many of which draw on either earlier biblical traditions or various ancient Near Eastern texts.²²⁸ Furthermore, the Hebrew Bible itself can function as an intertext for a variety of different non-canonical writings from the Second Temple period and beyond.²²⁹ In all of these cases, intertextuality involves detaching ideas and imagery from their original literary settings and investing them with new meanings and explanations. While biblical scholars typically describe this phenomenon in terms of “rereading” or “reinterpreting,” it also might be understood as a type of repurposing of religious imagery, albeit in textual form. In making these observations, I intend to draw a broad analogy between what is known to regularly happen in religious literature and what may possibly happen with respect to ways of seeing the visual arts. That is, if biblical authors could re-deploy literary texts in ways that go beyond their original meaning or intended purpose, then it is not unthinkable, and indeed hardly credulous, to posit that viewers could likewise imaginatively enter into the meaning-making process by interpreting existing artistic imagery in light of new theological perspectives.

²²⁷ See, for instance, Richard B. Hays, *Echoes of Scripture in the Letters of Paul* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1989); J. Ross Wagner, *Heralds of the Good News: Isaiah and Paul in Concert in the Letter to the Romans* (NovTSup 101; Leiden: Brill, 2002); Craig A. Evans and James A. Sanders, eds., *Paul and the Scriptures of Israel* (JSNTSup 83; SSEJC 1; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic, 1993); Vernon K. Robbins, *The Invention of Christian Discourse* (Blandford Forum, Eng.: Deo, 2009).

²²⁸ See, for instance, Rex A. Mason, "The Use of Earlier Biblical Material in Zechariah IX-XIV: A Study in Inter Biblical Exegesis" (Ph.D. diss., University of London, 1973); Danna Nolan Fewell, eds., *Reading Between Texts: Intertextuality and the Hebrew Bible* (Literary Currents in Biblical Interpretation; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1992); John S. Vassar, *Recalling a Story Once Told: An Intertextual Reading of the Psalter and the Pentateuch* (Macon, Ga.: Mercer University Press, 2007); and Christopher B. Hays, "Echoes of the Ancient Near East? Intertextuality and the Comparative Study of the Old Testament," in *The Word Leaps the Gap: Essays on Scripture and Theology in Honor of Richard B. Hays* (ed. J. Ross Wagner, C. Kavin Rowe, and A. Katherine Grieb; Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 2008), 20-43.

²²⁹ See, for instance, Daniel Boyarin, *Intertextuality and the Reading of Midrash* (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1994).

A similar point can be made about portrayals of Yahweh. It is widely believed that the attributes, characteristics, and epithets associated with El and Baal in Northwest Semitic literature were assimilated into the repertoire of literary descriptions for Yahweh early in Israelite history. Like El, Yahweh is described in the Hebrew Bible as an elderly, bearded patriarch (Ps 102:28; Job 36:26; Isa 40:28) who is enthroned in the presence of the heavenly hosts / divine council (1 Kgs 22:19; Isa 6:1-8; Dan 7:9-14, 22) and who is thought to have a compassionate disposition toward humanity (Exod 34:6; Ps 86:15).²³⁰ Likewise, various attributes of Baal are also reinterpreted as applying to Yahweh, including his theophany in the storm (1 Sam 12:18; Psalm 29; Job 38:25-27), his role as a divine warrior (Pss 50:1-3; 97:1-6; 98:1-2; 104:1-4; Deut 33:2; Jud 4-5; Job 26:11-13), and his cosmic defeat of Leviathan, Yamm, and Mot (Pss 65:8 [Eng. 7]; 74:13-14; 89:10-11 [Eng. 9-10]; Job 3:8; 7:12; 26:11-13; 38:8, 10; Isa 11:15; 27:1; 51:9-10; etc.). Many more examples could surely be cited with respect to El and Baal (as well as other deities), and biblical scholars generally agree that this evidence suggests a Canaanite background to Israelite religion. Yet, as was the case with intertextuality, these data can also potentially be applied to religious ways of seeing. Specifically, while there is a general continuity in divine imagery between LBA Canaanite religions and early forms of Yahwism, over the course of time this imagery came to be understood as referring to different deities. That is, while literary depictions of an elderly, enthroned deity or a smiting god of the storm were once intended to signify El and Baal, respectively, in the theological perspective of early Israel, they became divine portraits of Yahweh instead.

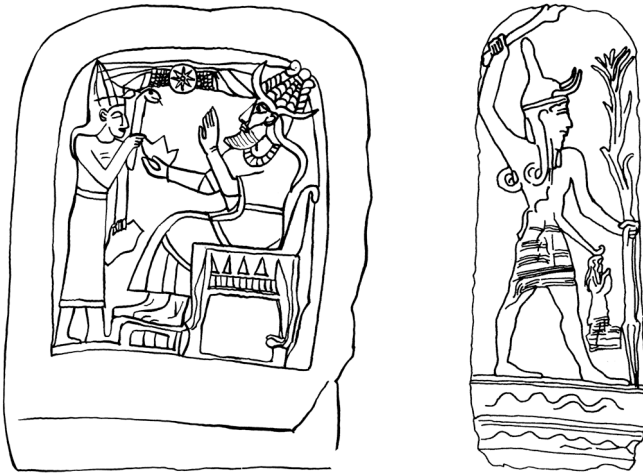
²³⁰ For further discussion and references to Canaanite literature, see Smith, *The Early History of God*, 32-42.

In my estimation, the attribution to Yahweh of titles and characteristics of Canaanite deities is no less an example of users repurposing religious imagery than is giving the name "Francis of Assisi" to an indigenous tribal statue. In both cases, the new meaning that is infused into existing religious imagery adheres more closely to the theological beliefs of subsequent audiences than it does to the intentions of its original producers.²³¹ If I am right in drawing this analogy between the reinterpretation of literary descriptions of deities and the repurposing of artistic imagery, then it at least raises the possibility that Israelite viewers might have seen or recognized Yahweh in art objects that were originally intended to serve as images of El or Baal.

Consider, for instance, the deities represented on two flat stelae found near a temple site in LBA Ugarit (**figs. 6.19-20**). The figure on the left is bearded and seated upon a throne and the figure on the right is in a smiting pose with what appears to be a thunderbolt in his left hand. On iconographic grounds, these figures almost certainly represent El and Baal, respectively. However, if ancient Israelites *readers* came to understand Yahweh in light of literary descriptions of El and Baal, then it is also possible that ancient Israelite *viewers* may have come to see Yahweh in these two images (or others like them). That is to say, any Israelite who was familiar with early literary descriptions of Yahweh might well have been inclined to recognize their deity in iconic images of El and Baal. In this way, an image such as **fig. 6.20** would constitute in the mind of the viewer a type of visual interpretation of Psalm 29 or Ps 68:4, both of which

²³¹ In this sense, it is also possible to talk about the "depurposing" of religious imagery, such as when the cross of Christ is used as a piece of jewelry or when Byzantine icons of saints are printed on fabrics used in collections by modern day fashion designers such as Dolce & Gabbana and Alexander McQueen.

reapply textual materials once belonging to Baal to Yahweh.



Figures 6.19-20. Left: Bearded deity, most likely El, seated upon a throne, Ugarit, Late Bronze Age. After Mettinger, *No Graven Image*, 124 fig. 6.4. Right: Standing deity in a smiting pose, most likely Baal, Ugarit, Late Bronze Age. After Mettinger *No Graven Image*, 124 fig. 6.5.

Again, I want to stress that these images were by no means originally intended to depict Yahweh and that they were certainly seen as images of El and Baal in ancient Ugarit. Nevertheless, I think that it is quite possible—if not very likely—that ancient Israelites would have been able to visualize Yahweh in the iconography of El and Baal precisely because many of the characteristics of El and Baal had already converged with *literary* descriptions of Yahweh in Israelite religion. If correct, this proposal would reframe what "counts" as credible evidence in the search for Yahweh's image. Rather than relying solely on iconographic and archaeological analysis, scholars would also need to consider how religious ways of seeing—and in particular, knowledge gleaned from literary depictions of Yahweh, or at least the mechanism of reinterpreting or repurposing religious imagery—might have led Israelite viewers to identify their deity in the characteristic iconography of other ANE gods.

6.4.2.3. Repurposing Art in Early Judaism

As I have noted throughout this section, it is difficult to find direct evidence of the effect of religious ways of seeing in ancient cultures. We do not have, for instance, an Iron Age IIC image of Baal that is re-inscribed with Yahweh's name. And despite the interesting case of pithos A at Kuntillet 'Ajrud, we do not have unambiguous examples of non-Yahwistic art being re-interpreted as Yahweh in light of extant textual data. But neither must one rely solely on visual culture theory to make a case for the effects of religious ways of seeing in the ancient world.

More concrete evidence of this phenomenon can be found in adjacent historical periods. For instance, Goodenough's previously mentioned study of early Jewish symbolism (§6.3.1) demonstrates that much of the imagery that is employed in Jewish synagogues and tombs during this time was borrowed from Greco-Roman (i.e., "pagan") artistic traditions. Goodenough argues that the visual vocabulary of early Judaism drew heavily upon common motifs in Greco-Roman art, including eagles, lions, masks, victory wreaths, trees, cupids, cornucopias, the centaur, the Seasons, zodiac signs, and so forth. Goodenough insists that the use of this imagery in Jewish contexts was not merely for decorative purposes. Rather, Goodenough suggests that there was "a symbolic adaptation of pagan figures to Judaism," and later, to early Christianity as well.²³² In taking over common themes from Greco-Roman art, early Jewish communities "rejected the old explanations" given for these images and instead reinterpreted them in light of

²³² Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols*, 4.27. In fact, Goodenough argues that one of things that enabled Jesus's teaching to be so quickly accommodated to the Hellenistic world was the presence of non-rabbinic Judaism that relied upon imagery already well known in the Greco-Roman world.

their own belief systems.²³³ While Goodenough's research has been critiqued on numerous fronts (mostly having to do with his interpretation of specific symbols and his understanding of mystic Judaism), his reviewers have widely affirmed this central point.²³⁴

Goodenough's hypothesis hinges on a subtle but important distinction between a symbol's connotative "value" on the one hand and its denotative "explanation" or interpretation on the other hand.²³⁵ In Goodenough's estimation, the connotation of an image has to do with its underlying symbolic associations as well as its power to evoke certain feelings, emotions, ideas, or impressions that lie beyond the object's literal or primary meaning. In contrast, denotation refers to the precise explanation viewers give concerning what an image signifies (its external referent) or how its primary meaning is to be understood in a particular theological context. When a symbol migrates between religions or even from one context to another within the same religion it tends to keep its connotative values even as its original explanation is reinterpreted by subsequent users.²³⁶ For instance, in the case of Jews in the Greco-Roman period, Goodenough argues that the values associated with pagan symbols were intentionally adopted but, in order to remain faithful to Torah, new Jewish interpretations were imposed on these symbols. In light of this reinterpretation, or what I earlier referred to as "repurposing,"

²³³ Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols*, 42.

²³⁴ For instance, in his comprehensive review of *Jewish Symbols*, Morton Smith comments as follows: "Goodenough's supposition that the Jews gave their own interpretations to the symbols they borrowed is plausible and has been commonly accepted" ("Goodenough's Jewish Symbols in Retrospect," *JBL* 86 (1967): 61). For an extensive list of reviews of Goodenough's study, see Neusner, *Jewish Symbols*, xxxv-xxxvii.

²³⁵ Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols*, 4.33. Goodenough sometimes uses the term "meaning" interchangeably with "value" or "power." However, he specifies that meaning refers strictly to an image's symbolic connotation, not its explanation.

²³⁶ *Ibid.*, 4.42.

Goodenough claims that the inclusion of Greco-Roman symbols in Jewish synagogues did not constitute "a real invasion of Hellenistic thought into common Jewish thinking."²³⁷ In other words, the incorporation of pagan art within Jewish contexts was not, in Goodenough's view, a form of syncretism.²³⁸

A brief example demonstrates the general trajectory of Goodenough's findings. Astronomical symbols constitute one of the most prominent themes in Greco-Roman religious art and seemed to have had a great impact on the symbolism found in early Jewish synagogues and tombs. In fact, one of the most prominent designs in Jewish religious art from the late Roman Empire through the Byzantine period is the circle of the zodiac with its twelve signs, at the center of which is Helios driving his four-horse chariot.²³⁹ The zodiac is typically enclosed in a larger square that has a symbol of one of the Seasons in each of its corners. This design is best preserved in an ornate mosaic from Beit Alpha (**fig. 6.21**).²⁴⁰ In less well-preserved forms, zodiac-related imagery also

²³⁷ Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols*, 4.25.

²³⁸ While I believe that Goodenough is correct to distinguish between syncretism and the repurposing of religious imagery, there might only be a fine line between these two phenomena. In fact, the Jewish symbolism that Goodenough talks about might be thought of as a "soft" form of syncretism insofar as it involves the incorporation of pagan elements into Jewish worship. Indeed, the use of such images in Jewish synagogues might have been regarded as objectionable—or even syncretistic—from the vantage point of certain strands of rabbinic Judaism. Nevertheless, I suspect that Goodenough would argue that what one encounters in Jewish synagogues of the Greco-Roman period was somewhat different—if only in degree and not in kind—from the worship practices on display in the Elephantine temple. The key difference seems to lie in the imposition of Jewish meanings on pagan objects, which effectively would render those symbols no longer truly pagan but Jewish. That is to say, when Jewish worshippers looked upon an image of Helios at Beit Alpha they did not, so Goodenough would argue, think that they were encountering a pagan god. Rather, they believed that they were seeing Yahweh—or at least a symbol of Yahweh's essence or character—through iconographic motifs that were once associated with Greco-Roman imagery.

²³⁹ *Ibid.*, 8.166.

²⁴⁰ The fact that the Seasons are placed opposite the wrong astronomical signs indicates that the Jewish artists and their viewers were not primarily interested in this imagery for use in astrology (*ibid.*, 8.168). For a list of further studies of the Beit Alpha mosaic, see *ibid.*, 1.248-51.

appears in other Palestinian synagogues, including those at Yafa, Naaran, and Dura.²⁴¹

Other astral symbols such as the sun, moon, stars, and Seasons can likewise be found on Jewish synagogue ceilings, stone friezes, amulets, sarcophagi, and catacombs.²⁴² Astral symbols were often juxtaposed alongside or blended with more traditional Jewish imagery, such as in the Dura synagogue, where the figure of Moses takes the place of Helios at the center of the zodiac. Another example comes from Beit Alpha, where the previously mentioned Helios/zodiac motif is positioned between panels that represent the Akedah sacrifice on the one side and various Jewish cult objects on the other. Many other examples can be adduced, but in each case, Goodenough contends that when Jewish communities adapted these Greco-Roman images for use in their synagogues and tombs, they gave them a new "Judaized" explanation that, in essence, obscured the original meaning of this imagery.²⁴³ In other words, Jewish observers visualized their deity and other religiously meaningful content in symbols that were initially meant for a very different purpose.

²⁴¹ For a review of some of these artifacts, see *ibid.*, 8.169-71.

²⁴² *Ibid.*, 171-77.

²⁴³ Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols*, 8.177.



Figures 6.21. Left: Zodiac with Helios at the center, Beit Alpha (northern Israel), 6th c. C.E. After Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols*, fig. 640. Image is in the public domain.

In order to support this hypothesis, Goodenough analyzes early Jewish art and literature for evidence that early Jewish communities repurposed Greco-Roman concepts. While space prohibits an extensive review of this data, a few examples are instructive. For instance, some Jewish charms mention "Helios on the Cherubim" or numerous paintings in Jewish catacombs utilize astral imagery, the zodiac, and the Seasons in ways that, in Goodenough's estimation, were combatable with Jewish thought.²⁴⁴ In addition, there are Jewish amulets that have astral symbols on the obverse and have the label *laō* on the reverse. While it is not entirely clear how image and text correlate with one another in this case, Goodenough claims that these symbols "must be understood as being if not a representation of God for Jews at least a manifestation of Deity, a sign of Deity, and, because of the potency to which the amulets attest, a symbol of Deity."²⁴⁵

A similar fusion is also evident in many examples from the literature of

²⁴⁴ Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols*, 8.174.

²⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 8.172.

Hellenized Judaism and early forms of Jewish mysticism.²⁴⁶ Though in different ways, each of these literary sources keeps astral imagery alive, but attempts to repurpose its meaning, often through allegorical explanations, in ways that square with the Torah. For example, the twelve signs of the zodiac become visual metaphors of the twelve stones in the high priest's breastplate or the twelve tribes of Israel; stars are understood to symbolize the righteous; the seven planets are reminders of the seven martyred Maccabean brothers; and the spring and fall Seasons are associated with the timing of the Jewish festivals. The most vivid example once again involves the image of Helios within the zodiac. Within Greco-Roman religions, this imagery symbolized "the supremacy of the law of nature, the orderly cosmos, under the direction of Sol Invictus. . . . The astral system promised immortality, as the soul returned to its cosmic, or hypercosmic, origin."²⁴⁷ When Jewish communities took over this imagery, they retained its general connotation regarding astral mysticism, celestial immortality, and the cosmic order. But, in a more specific sense, the image of Helios driving his chariot through the zodiac came to represent Yahweh, the cosmic deity of early Judaism.²⁴⁸ Philo corroborates this view when he describes God as the shepherd of the flock of the stars or as a charioteer who controls the universe.²⁴⁹ Goodenough sums up the matter in this way: "The zodiac in the synagogues, with Helios in the center . . . seems to me to proclaim that the God worshiped in the synagogue was the God who had made the stars, and revealed himself through them in cosmic law and order and right, but who

²⁴⁶ Goodenough, *Jewish Symbols*, 8.196-214.

²⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 8.214.

²⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 4.37.

²⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 8.215.

was himself the Charioteer guiding the universe and all its order and law."²⁵⁰ To put the matter in slightly different terms, one might say that in places of worship, Jewish viewers would have been encouraged to see Helios imagery in light of orthodox, communitarian, or authoritarian covenants—that is, to trust that the image was an acceptable way of depicting certain aspects of Jewish faith, if not Yahweh himself. To reiterate the point I have been trying to make throughout this whole section, Goodenough's conclusion is not a product of "anything goes" speculation or imaginative viewer (or reader) response criticism. Rather, Goodenough roots his conclusions about how viewers might have processed artistic imagery in what we know to be true about the repurposing of textual imagery in early Jewish literary sources. In these cases, religious beliefs inform the hermeneutical perspective through which observers interpret both visual and verbal language.

If religious ways of seeing could have this type of effect on early Jewish viewers, is it possible that the same might be true of earlier periods as well? An intriguing example comes in the form of a Persian period coin, which on one side features the inscription *yhd* in archaic Aramaic script above a bearded god, seated on a throne with wings and wheels, and holding a bird (perhaps an eagle) with his outstretched left hand (**fig. 6.22**).²⁵¹ The precise identify of the seated deity is disputed, but the majority of scholars believe that it represents Zeus. On iconographic grounds, this argument is well supported since Zeus is often depicted as a bearded deity, seated on a throne, with an

²⁵⁰ Ibid., 8.215.

²⁵¹ The other side of the coin features a bearded human head, facing right, with a crested helmet. For an analysis of this side of the coin, see Diana V. Edelman, "Tracking Observance of the Aniconic Tradition Through Numismatics," in *The Triumph of Elohim*, 194-98.

eagle on his hand and with an outer garment as seen in this image. However, since the coin was minted in Yehud, some scholars have suggested that this figure may actually represent Yahweh.²⁵² For instance, Diana V. Edelman, argues that the reason Yahweh ends up looking so Zeus-like is either because a Greek engraver made the die cast or because the Judahite artist consciously imitated the well-known imagery associated with Zeus.²⁵³



Figure 6.22. Silver drachma or quarter shekel, provenance unknown, Persian period. After Edelman, "Tracking Observance of the Aniconic Tradition," 225 fig.2; cf. Meshorer, *Ancient Jewish Coinage*, 1.21 pl. 1.1.

Perhaps so, but the simpler explanation is that the figure looks so Zeus-like because it was actually meant to depict Zeus! Yet, even if this were the case, it is still possible that at least some ancient viewers might have recognized Yahweh in this image,

²⁵² See for instance, Ya'akov Meshorer, *Ancient Jewish Coinage* (2 vols; Dix Hills, N.Y.: Amphora Books, 1982), 1.25; Martin J. Price, *Coins and the Bible* (London: V. C. Vecchi & Sons, 1975), 10; Helmut Kienle, *Der Gott auf dem Flügelrad: Zu den ungelösten Fragen der "synkretistischen" Münze BMC Palestine S. 181, Nr. 29* (Göttinger Orientforschungen VI, 7; Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1975), 68-74; Charles T. Seltman, *Greek Coins: A History of Metallic Currency and Coinage Down to the Fall of the Hellenistic Kingdoms* (2d ed.; Methuen's Handbooks of Archaeology; London: Methuen & Co., 1965), 154; and Arthur Bernard Cook, *Zeus: A Study in Ancient Religion* (2 vols; New York: Biblio and Tannen, 1964 [1914]), 1.232-7.

²⁵³ Edelman, "Tracking Observance," 193.

especially in light of the preceding discussion concerning the repurposing of art in the Greco-Roman period. This suggestion gains credence from the fact that magical texts from the Hellenistic era equate Yahweh with Zeus much like Jewish charms equate Yahweh with Helios.²⁵⁴ Likewise, Arthur Cook discusses an onyx of unknown provenance that features a beardless Zeus, enthroned with a scepter, thunderbolt, and eagle, with the inscription $\text{IA}\Omega\ \Sigma\text{ABA}\Omega$ on its reverse.²⁵⁵ And perhaps more to the point for devout Jewish viewers, the imagery on this coin—especially its winged and wheeled throne—might have been interpreted in light of the visions of Yahweh's mobile throne found in Ezekiel 1 and 10. Thus, as was the case in early Jewish synagogues, it once again seems that conclusions about whether or not ancient viewers encountered Yahweh in the visual arts cannot be based solely on art historical or iconographic considerations. Or at least when they are, the iconographic analysis needed to prove this point is not entirely convincing.²⁵⁶ In contrast, a visual culture perspective reminds us that a Jewish observer would not have looked upon this coin as a highly trained art historian but rather as a devout worshipper who might well have been inclined to recognize Yahweh within the familiar contours of a bearded deity who sits upon a winged throne.

²⁵⁴ Edelman, "Tracking Observance," 191.

²⁵⁵ Cook, *Zeus*, 1.232-7.

²⁵⁶ I believe that this is especially true of Schmidt's explanation of Bes imagery from Kuntillet 'Ajrud and Edelman's explanation of the Zeus-like quality of Yahweh's image on the Persian period coin.

6.4.3. Conclusions

Throughout this section, I have evaluated how a visual culture approach might come to bear on the on-going search for Yahweh's image. While it is difficult to recover direct evidence of the effects of religious ways of seeing in the ancient world, the three arguments I developed above strongly suggest that Israelites viewers may well have repurposed religious imagery in light of their underlying religious knowledge and beliefs. As a result, I believe it is necessary for scholars to reconsider how ancient viewers might have come to look for or visualize Yahweh in images that were not originally intended to depict their deity.

In making this argument, I am essentially arguing that what Morgan has shown to be true about the effects of religious ways of seeing on contemporary faith communities was also true of ancient Israelite religion. In both contexts, certain gazes or image covenants might have been in place that would have led viewers to recognize things in an image that others fail to perceive. In Morgan's previously mentioned study, some Lutheran and Catholic observers claimed to see hidden religious symbols in Sallman's *Head of Christ*, even though the author himself did not intend to depict such objects. In Morgan's estimation, Sallman's painting becomes textualized insofar as it is inserted "into a mode of discourse built on the primary language of the Bible."²⁵⁷ In other words, viewers read images in light of their knowledge of texts and theological traditions. As I suggest throughout this section, a similar process might have taken place in the ancient world. Though it is sometimes difficult to establish who had access to

²⁵⁷ Morgan, *Visual Piety*, 140.

biblical texts and when their current literary form was finalized, it is plausible that ancient Israelites, especially after the exile, were at least somewhat familiar with figurative descriptions of Yahweh as a divine warrior, an armed archer, a lion, a bull, a luminous presence, and so forth. In light of Morgan's theory about religious ways of seeing (not to mention Mitchell's theory about the image-text dialectic), it is possible that this knowledge conditioned how Israelite viewers interpreted visual objects that depicted warriors, archers, lions, bulls, solar objects, and so forth. In other words, knowledge of divine metaphors (whether from the Hebrew Bible, pre-biblical sources, or oral traditions) might have come to shape visual experience. This is the very point I made at the end of chapter 3. There I argued that images of the Persian royal archer might well have appeared Yahweh-like to early-fifth-century Israelite viewers who were familiar with the language of Zechariah 9:13-17. That is to say, if an image of the Persian archer is seen in light of descriptions of Yahweh as an armed archer shooting forth arrows from above (Zech 9:13-14), it might take on a certain degree of multistability—images of the Persian royal hero and Israelite God shift back forth in the same gestalt making it possible to see or recognize Yahweh in what is otherwise a picture of the Persian king. Even if it is difficult to prove beyond all doubt that this happened, I believe that the effects of religious ways of seeing must not be ignored in biblical research in general and that they should play a significant role in any study that endeavors to evaluate evidence in the on-going search for Yahweh's image.

6.5. Furthering the Turn: Religious Visual Culture and/in Biblical Studies

I want to bring this chapter to a close by once again returning to the central interest of my study as a whole: visual hermeneutics. Specifically, how does the study of religious visual culture potentially interest with methods of biblical research? As a way of further advancing research on images in biblical studies I have explored how a visual culture approach might reframe two closely related topics in religio-historical research: the study of Israelite aniconism and the search for Yahweh's image. These two cases studies certainly do not exhaust the range of possible applications of religious visual culture to biblical studies. Instead, these reflections are intended to initiate a longer and more detailed conversation about the role and function of visual culture in the matter of Israelite religion. While scholars who take up this discussion will likely address a diverse set of questions, I believe that future research in this area will be characterized by several persistent concerns:

(1) An approach to religio-historical research that is more informed by the study of religious visual culture will increasingly shift from an artist- and object-oriented discourse to a practice-centered discourse. The study of ancient visual practices could take a variety of different forms. In addition to further addressing some of the issues I have already raised about Israelite aniconism, scholars also might take a cue from Morgan by developing a functional typology of image use in the Hebrew Bible, a project which would nicely complement many of the already available surveys of image content in Syria-Palestine. Alternatively, biblical scholars might follow the lead of journals such as *Material Religion* by focusing more explicitly on the social function and effect of

religious visual culture, including how visual data and visual practices work together to structure and mediate religious experiences. Or biblical scholars might more closely scrutinize a broader range of visual practices and experiences including: visions, theophanies, divination, symbolic acts by the prophets, detailed descriptions of worship spaces (i.e., the tabernacle and temple), the use of material objects to mark important times and places, and the ritual destruction of rival images in moments of cultic reform. Taking up these and any number of other topics related to visual practices would prompt biblical scholars to address more fully questions about the role of the visual medium of belief in the matter of Israelite religion.

(2) A visual culture approach would also prompt biblical scholars to attend more closely to the role of the viewer in the meaning-making process. This shift in focus, which is common among visual culture theorists, might be understood to parallel the recent increase of interest in the role of the reader within literary approaches to biblical interpretation. However, in making this suggestion, I do not mean to imply that issues related to an image's provenance, mode of production, iconographic style, symbolic meaning, or intended function should be downplayed. Indeed, these matters are absolutely essential and thus should not be abandoned. Nevertheless, interest in an object's original production need not preclude a concern for its subsequent reception. For instance, biblical scholars might analyze specific cases in which ancient viewers repurposed religious imagery in light of new religio-historical contexts. Or more generally, biblical scholars might consider how different viewing contexts—be it a certain time period, a specific religious setting, or a particular social location (gender,

class, etc.)—might have influenced how ancient Israelites processed or responded to visual data. In both cases, a more detailed understanding of ancient Israelite religious experience might be gained by focusing not only on the historical context surrounding an image's original production but also on the historical circumstances, influences, and ideas that inform an image's on-going reception. This argument would have to be worked out on a case-by-case basis, and in this regard, I hope that the reflections offered in this chapter provide a helpful starting point, not a conclusion, for further studies in biblical iconography.

In sum, incorporating a concern for religious ways of seeing and visual practices into the study of Israelite religion would be one way—and potentially the most fruitful way—of furthering the pictorial turn in biblical studies.

CHAPTER 7

TOWARDS A VISUAL HERMENEUTICS: PERSPECTIVES AND PRINCIPLES FOR BIBLICAL INTERPRETATION

It has rightly been said that theory, if not received at the door of an empirical discipline, comes in through the chimney like a ghost and upsets the furniture.

- Erwin Panofsky, "The History of Art as a Humanistic Discipline," 22

Che lascia la via vecchia e prende la nuova sa che lascia ma no sa che trova.

He who leaves the old way for the new knows what he leaves, but does not know what he will find.

- Italian proverb in the Abruzzi dialect¹

7.1. A Case for Theory, Revisited

In recent years, it has become somewhat customary for scholars in the humanities and social sciences to begin books with a brief chapter on theory. This project takes a similar interest in theory, though I have upped the ante considerably since the vast majority of my work—five chapters in all—is devoted to examining the preliminary considerations and epistemological rationale upon which biblical iconographic research is based. Is this lengthy treatment of theory *really* necessary? Why not just "get to work" on analyzing ancient Near Eastern art and interpreting biblical literature? What is the point of spending so much time engaging the research of Nelson Goodman, David Freedberg, Alfred Gell, W. J. T. Mitchell, David Morgan, and Zainab Bahrani when the "real" work of biblical iconography is being done by Hebrew Bible scholars in and beyond the Fribourg School? And should a book that aims to apply visual theory to ancient art even be

¹ As my family remembers it, my great grandfather, Antonio Giangiacomo, frequently used this proverb.

shelved in the same section of a library as more traditional biblical studies volumes? I suspect that these and related questions might arise for some of my readers. As a result, I want to conclude my study by once again making a case for the importance of theory not only for the specific field of biblical iconography but also for biblical research more broadly construed

As I argued in the introduction (§1.1), the particular need for visual theory in biblical iconography emerges from a rather straightforward observation about a gap in the scholarly literature of this field. While an increasing number of scholars have turned to ancient art as a critical resource for interpreting the Hebrew Bible, they have given far less attention to questions pertaining to the nature of visual culture, and with it, critical theories about visual representation, the image-text relationship, the implications of visual response, and the importance of religious ways of seeing and visual practices. In response to this situation, my study aims to: (1) offer a sustained engagement of visual theory that directly addresses issues relevant to methods and practices of biblical iconography; and (2) synthesize these theoretical reflections into a set of clearly delineated interpretive principles that, when taken together, constitute a visual hermeneutics for biblical studies (§7.2). In this sense, I chart a different course than many other contributors to the field of biblical iconography. Instead of trying to solve a specific exegetical problem in the Hebrew Bible, I critically assess the tacit assumptions that inform how scholars utilize, interpret, and relate ancient visual and verbal data in a wide variety of research endeavors. As a result, these reflections are not only designed to refine interpretive approaches within the emerging field of biblical iconography but

also to raise new questions and issues about the intersection of biblical interpretation, art historical analysis, archaeology, Israelite religion, and other related areas of inquiry.

Yet, even though there is need for theory in the specific case of biblical iconography, at least some scholars remain skeptical about the role of theory in biblical scholarship and/or religio-historical research more broadly. And perhaps for good reason. Theoretical reflection, especially as it is carried out in the humanities, often functions as a self-contained, abstract intellectual exercise. Its primary purpose, so it seems, is to problematize and/or deconstruct meaning-making in the areas of textual, visual, and historical analysis. While this approach to theory might help to destabilize certain problematic assumptions in scholarship, it often fails to offer constructive proposals or alternative methods. Many biblical scholars and historians of religion have been slow to welcome this approach. Studies that do theory for theory's sake can be tedious, if not altogether tangential, when it comes to illuminating biblical meaning, enriching theological reflection, or clarifying the historical development of Israelite religion.

My own approach to theory strives to be more constructive in its aims. At every point possible, I endeavor to avoid a type of "theory-wonking" in which critical reflection is disconnected from practical analysis and concrete examples.² Nevertheless, I empathize with those readers who still might be wary of (or wearied by) my insistence on the need for theory. Rather than dismissing these concerns, I want to invite and

² I borrow the term "theory-wonking" from David Morgan, who is also suspicious of projects that pursue theory for its own sake (*Religion and Material Culture: The Matter of Belief* [New York: Routledge, 2010], 12). For further discussion, see Morgan's cautionary remarks about the role of theory in religious visual culture research in *The Sacred Gaze: Religious Visual Culture in Theory and Practice* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 25-27.

encourage a healthy dose of skepticism about why theory is necessary and how it works. That is to say, I think theory is most helpful in biblical scholarship (or any other discipline) when it, too, is closely scrutinized—that is, when its pitfalls are honestly acknowledged and its practical applications are plainly delineated. Thus, in the remainder of this section, I want to briefly respond to three possible objections concerning the use of theory in biblical scholarship and religio-historical research. While not exhaustive in scope, I hope that these remarks further reinforce why my sustained reflection on visual theory was worth reading—or, for those who have skipped to this point from the introduction, why it might be beneficial to read chapters 2-6 in the first place.

One of the more common objections about theory is not so much that it is an unnecessary endeavor but that it can end up playing too central of a role in a given study. A senior New Testament scholar once put it this way: “Theory should be everywhere operative, but seldom explicit.” The reasoning here seems to be that theory is best treated as an implicit conversation partner, tacitly assumed and occasionally gestured toward but ultimately left in the background of both academic research and classroom teaching. To a certain extent, I agree. Not every biblical scholar or ancient Near Eastern art historian needs to wear theoretical interests on their sleeves. And for practical reasons, it might be advisable for most journal articles or chapter-length contributions to leave aside lengthy theoretical reflection in favor of more direct and straightforward exegetical or art-historical analyses. Nevertheless, for theory to be of any use in the background of a particular study, it must at some point be dealt with in

the foreground of that field's scholarly literature. The prominent art historian Erwin Panofsky makes this very point when he comments that "theory, if not received at the door of an empirical discipline, comes in through the chimney like a ghost and upsets the furniture."³ I think Panofsky's imagery provides a helpful metaphor—or metapicture, to use Mitchell's term—for why theoretical reflection is so essential. Theory *is* everywhere operative. The only question is, how will it be greeted by fields such as biblical studies, archaeology, ANE art history, and so forth? Whatever the discipline might be, visual theory can make quite a mess of the methodological furniture if left in the background too long. This is why I have attempted to engage visual theory more directly. To press Panofsky's metapicture further, my research aims to encourage and equip other scholars to meet visual theory at the threshold of their own research projects.

These encounters with theory need not be exhaustive or even extensive. Nevertheless, a meaningful greeting would entail a thoughtful and self-critical reflection about the epistemological rationale upon which interpretive methods are based. Although there is no one single way to "do" theory, Panofsky once again provides a helpful metaphor for conceptualizing this area of research. In his *Studies in Iconology*, Panofsky famously illustrates the three stages of his iconographic method by analyzing a simple scene in which two gentlemen greet one another in the street by removing their hats.⁴ To my knowledge, Panofsky never intended to connect the primal scene of his

³ Erwin Panofsky, "The History of a Art as a Humanistic Discipline," in *Meaning in the Visual Arts* (ed. Erwin Panofsky; Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday Anchor, 1955), 22.

⁴ Panofsky describes three aspects of this scene, each of which corresponds to one of the levels of meaning in his iconographic method: 1) the formal features of this scene, including the configuration of

methodological schema to the metaphor he employs to describe the importance of theory. Yet, it is hard to miss the fact that in both cases Panofsky relies on the imagery of a greeting. I think this correspondence is potentially instructive. If methods are thought of as interpretive "hats" that scholars wear when analyzing biblical texts, then theoretical reflection might well be conceived of as a type of hat-removing gesture. That is to say, theoretical reflection not only involves greeting theory at the door but it also entails lifting one's hat to examine more closely the heads (or brains) upon which certain interpretive procedures rest. By employing this gesture of greeting in their academic research, biblical scholars would generate a greater awareness of their intellectual presuppositions and underlying perspectives. Seen in this light, theoretical reflection is not inherently an abstract or deconstructive endeavor. Rather, it can be an expression of intellectual curiosity, or perhaps better yet, interdisciplinary hospitality. In either case, the goal of my project is to stage a greeting with visual theory, and in so doing, to prompt other scholars interested in religious antiquity to be more willing to doff their own caps when it comes to reading images and seeing texts.

A second major concern about theory—and visual theory in particular—is that it threatens to become, as Derrida might put it, a "dangerous supplement" to other fields of study.⁵ Mitchell appropriates Derrida's notion of the dangerous supplement to

the figures and the hat-removing movement (pre-iconographic level); its conventional subject matter of polite greeting (iconographic level); and the underlying national, social, and cultural beliefs that give symbolic meaning and value to this gesture (the iconological level). For further discussion, see §4.1.

⁵ In *Of Grammatology*, Jacques Derrida uses this term to refer to the phenomenon of writing, which as Derrida sees it, threatens to infiltrate or breach (*entamer*) the domain of speech, replacing the authentic presence of the voice with an endless series of repetitions, re-citations, and deferrals. For further discussion, see Jacques Derrida, "The Dangerous Supplement," in *Of Grammatology* (trans. Gayatri Spivak; Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978 [1967]), 141-64.

describe the skepticism and defensiveness that visual theory tends to provoke in other fields.⁶ When scholars outside of the fine arts raise questions about what images are and how they function, they can often be seen as venturing into—or perhaps invading—territory that has traditionally been patrolled by art historians or philosophers. Furthermore, the insights of visual theory can also apply pressure to the stability of traditional disciplinary boundaries, especially when they seem to rely on sharp distinctions between visual and verbal representation.⁷ I suspect that at least some biblical scholars might see visual theory as a dangerous supplement to their own field of study—and perhaps for very similar reasons. For instance, there sometimes seems to be a concern that it is anachronistic (and thus dangerous) to apply contemporary visual theory to historical-critical research. In this view, applying contemporary theories about visual culture to the ANE world is thought to constitute a type of temporal breach or intrusion of modern epistemologies into the study of ancient visual materials and practices. Such objections might not only be leveled against my study but also any other project that draws on recent theory in order to better understand ancient materials. In fact, Zainab Bahrani anticipates this objection to her own research. In defense of her application of semiotic theory to the analysis of Mesopotamian art, Bahrani rightly notes that all scholarship is unavoidably dependent on contemporary epistemologies and theoretical frameworks. She argues, "Many studies that are purported to be traditional

⁶ W. J. T. Mitchell, "Showing Seeing: A Critique of Visual Culture," *Journal of Visual Culture* (2002): 165-181.

⁷ Mitchell, "Showing Seeing," 167.

or 'non-theoretical' simply continue to rely upon theories originally put forth by [earlier] scholars."⁸

This perspective applies especially well to the iconographic method. Even though iconography is widely accepted as the *de facto* method of image analysis in a variety of fields, it represents an approach to interpreting ancient art that is no less theoretical—and, indeed, no less anachronistic—than a semiotic one. As was already discussed (§4.1), Panofsky's interpretive perspective was itself heavily influenced by the theory of its day—namely, a philological model of German literary criticism that was prominent in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries. What is more, textual evidence from the ANE world implies that ancient viewers, by convention and habit, sometimes analyzed images according to an intellectual tradition that might share more in common with modern day semiotics than it does with "traditional" iconographic perspectives (cf. §4.3.4). In this sense, visual theory can provide conceptual frameworks that enable scholars to describe more clearly certain ancient practices and beliefs. Thus, if visual theory is in any way "dangerous," it is primarily because it threatens to reveal the limitations of more traditional approaches to religio-historical research.

Third, the integration of visual theory into biblical studies or other text-based fields can also be seen as an unwanted threat insofar as it potentially raises anxieties about disciplinary boundaries: At academic conferences, should theory-oriented approaches to ancient art be included in program units associated with ANE Iconography or Religious Visual Culture? Within graduate programs and theological

⁸ Zainab Bahrani, *Women of Babylon: Gender and Representation in Mesopotamia* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 141-42.

education, should the study of images be integrated into more traditional courses (i.e., Introduction to the Hebrew Bible, Methods of Biblical Exegesis, Israelite Religion, etc.) or should it be framed as its own subject and perhaps co-taught with scholars in Art History, Visual Studies, or Ancient Near Eastern Languages and Culture? In terms of institutional decisions about hiring faculty and organizing departments, where do biblical scholars interested in visual culture best fit, or, conversely, where do visual theorists interested in ancient images or texts find a home? These questions can raise a variety of practical and pedagogical concerns, and in my estimation, a solution is not to be found in completely doing away with traditional disciplinary boundaries.⁹

Nevertheless, an intentional movement toward interdisciplinarity in the areas of biblical studies, ANE art history, archaeology, and visual culture theory can foster the type of creativity and collaboration that will lead to new and fruitful insights. To be sure, these disciplinary "border crossings" must be approached in careful and conscientious way. Scholars in all of these fields must be ever mindful of the need to build accessible and helpful bridges between the realm of theory and the practice of literary, visual, and historical analysis.

Theory-oriented research can also come under fire for promising more than it can deliver. Many studies that purport to offer "a theory of X" tend to be rather eclectic when it comes to which theorists they discuss and which issues they engage. Almost

⁹ In his discussion of similar issues, Mitchell perceives certain political issues lurking behind these questions. He speculates that the idea of incorporating visual theory into other fields can provoke "defensive postures and territorial anxieties . . . in the bureaucratic battlegrounds of academic institutions" ("Showing Seeing," 169). While Mitchell might be right to a certain extent, I think that there is good reason to believe that since the turn of the century, creative, cross-disciplinary research has gained increasing acceptance in the humanities and social sciences.

without exception, such studies neither cover the topic at hand in an exhaustive manner nor provide a coherent epistemological framework for all future work. My project is no exception. Indeed, there are a number of visual theorists that I could have chosen to engage other than Mitchell, Goodman, Freedberg, Gell, and Morgan.¹⁰ Furthermore, anyone who expects to find in this book a *fully* explanatory theory of ancient visual culture will surely be disappointed. Yet from the outset, my goal has not been to provide an all-encompassing master theory for the use of images in biblical studies or any other field. Rather, I have attempted to introduce the most pressing questions and debates of visual theory to scholars interested in biblical texts and ancient art. In addition, I have tried to probe some of the most salient problems and possibilities of applying contemporary theories to ancient cultures. In each of these ways, I have tried to make the emerging field of biblical iconography more *difficult*—that is, more aware of its presuppositions, more self-critical about its methods, and more interdisciplinary in its aims and conclusions.

Toward this end, I have raised a series of critical questions throughout this study about visual theory and how it relates to biblical interpretation and other areas of religio-historical research. These inquiries have included: What is visual literacy and how does this concept clarify the importance of images as a language of communication in the ancient world? (ch. 2); How have scholars conceptualized the nature of the image-text relationship and in what ways do these theories inform our interpretation of

¹⁰ Other theorists are cited in footnotes throughout this study but could have been given more of a starring role. Some of these include: Umberto Eco, Norman Bryson, Michael Baxandall, Michael Ann Holly, Keith Moxey, Roland Barthes, Charles Sanders Peirce, Jonathan Culler, Julia Kristeva, Nicholas Mirzoeff, Gillian Rose, Lisa Cartwright, Marita Sturken, William Arweck, and Elisabeth Keenan.

objects that combine visual and verbal data? (ch. 3); How do linguistic and non-linguistic signs convey meaning in different ways and what are the implications for methods of image analysis? (ch. 4); How does the history and theory of visual response shed new light on the nature, power, and agency of ancient art objects? (ch. 5); and How might a consideration of visual practices and ways of seeing influence our understanding of important topics in Israelite religion, including the study of Israelite aniconism and the search for Yahweh's image? (ch. 6). Admittedly, at the outset of my research I did not know exactly what sort of answers I might find to these questions. At many points along the way, I have been far more certain of what sort of scholarship I was leaving behind than what new path I would discover. In this sense, the words of the Italian proverb cited in the epigraph to this chapter—*He who leaves the old way for the new knows what he leaves, but does not know what he will find*—deeply resonate with my experience trying to explore how visual theory might be integrated into a visual hermeneutics for biblical studies.

When my great grandfather, Antonio Giangiacomo, uttered these words he most likely would have had in mind his own experience as an Italian immigrant in the early-twentieth century. The eldest son of relatively poor Italian farmers, Antonio left his native town of Fresagrandinaria (in the Abruzzi region, just off the Adriatic coast) to move to America in 1922. Though he left behind a familiar land and a large family (including his wife and five children, who would not be able to join him until several years later) he hoped to find a new and more abundant life in the States. Though the analogy here is merely suggestive, my great grandfather's words, and perhaps more so

his life experience, provide something of an orienting perspective to my own work with theory. And so maybe the best case I can make for theory is this: I remain hopeful that what is gained by entering the world of visual theory will ultimately far outweigh the risk and uncertainties of leaving the more familiar path of traditional work in biblical studies. Whether or not this is the case hinges, at least in part, on how the above reflections on theory can be distilled into a specific principles that can guide and inform the use of images in religio-historical research.

7.2. Hermeneutical Principles for Method and Practice

As a way of synthesizing my reflections on visual theory in chapters 2-6, I offer in this section a set of clearly delineated interpretive principles. For each principle, I briefly recapitulate its underlying theory as well as its most salient implications for method and practice. I envision these principles functioning less as a set of rules or a series of step-by-step procedures and more as an orienting framework that can inform the questions scholars ask and issues they raise when interpreting the Hebrew Bible or aspects of Israelite religion in light of ANE art. Or to put the matter in more visual terms, if theory (from the Greek θεωρία) is a way of looking at, viewing, or contemplating a given topic, then the hermeneutical perspectives it generates might be thought of as an *art of understanding*. As with much art, certain aspects of this visual hermeneutics will not appeal to every study in the same way or to the same extent. Nevertheless, I believe that the field as a whole can neither sidestep the following issues nor treat visual theory as a matter of secondary importance. Instead, by addressing this orienting framework

head-on, biblical scholars and others interested in ANE art and religion will be challenged to further revise, and in certain cases redirect, how they go about reading images and seeing texts.

Taken together, these nine interpretive principles outline a visual hermeneutics for biblical studies:

- (1) Because images were a vital component of ancient Israel's symbol system, they should be seen as an indispensable resource for studying the Hebrew Bible and Israelite religion (ch. 2);
- (2) As the most widely utilized vehicle of communication in the ANE world, images can be described as a type of language and their importance can be characterized in terms of visual literacy (ch. 2);
- (3) When examining the relationship between ANE art and the Hebrew Bible (or any other set of visual and verbal data), researchers should clarify how they approach three interrelated but distinct comparative issues: image-text congruence, correlation, and contiguity (ch. 3);
- (4) By conceptualizing the image-text relationship in terms of dialectical tensions and metapictures, scholars can more precisely describe the nature of visual-verbal interactions in the ancient world (ch. 3);
- (5) Unlike linguistic signs, images function as a dense or replete notational system, and as a result, they should be understood according to somewhat different semiotic principles than most written languages (ch. 4);
- (6) Biblical scholars should analyze ANE art beyond the level of iconography by considering how aspects of compositional design, rhetoric of display, and mode of signification contribute to what (and how) an image means (ch. 4);
- (7) Since viewers often treat images as if they were capable of exerting power and agency over the realm of the real, scholars should carefully examine the nature of visual representation and the implications of visual response in the Hebrew Bible and the ANE world (ch. 5);
- (8) When studying Israelite religion, biblical scholars should focus not only on specific images and their iconographic content but also on what people do with images—that is, the practices that rely on and employ material objects as the visual medium of belief (ch. 6); and

- (9) Because visual experiences are deeply informed by underlying beliefs, values, and knowledge, it is important to consider the effects of religious ways of seeing on how ancient viewers might have processed visual data (ch. 6).

7.2.1. Principles Derived from Chapter 2: The Importance of Images

The first principle is perhaps the most basic, and yet also the most imperative: *Because images were a vital component of ancient Israel's symbol system, they should be seen as an indispensable resource for studying the Hebrew Bible and Israelite religion.* This principle recognizes that while visual materials were occasionally used for decorative purposes or aesthetic contemplation in the ancient world, they also had the capacity to convey complex ideas and messages, whether religious or otherwise (§2.1). In fact, in light of their widespread use in administrative, political, royal, and cultic settings, it is possible to conclude that images, no less than texts, participated in the meaningful exchange of various forms of cultural knowledge. Thus construed, ancient iconography offers a data set that is at least as valuable as written materials when it comes to understanding the conceptual world that lies behind the Hebrew Bible and Israelite religion. This hermeneutical perspective is summed up poignantly by Keel and Uehlinger when they suggest: "Anyone who systematically ignores the pictorial evidence that a culture has produced can hardly expect to recreate even a minimally adequate description of the culture itself."¹¹

In my estimation, biblical scholars should receive this interpretive principle as a type of "altar call" to the study of images. At a practical level, heeding this call would

¹¹ Othmar Keel and Christoph Uehlinger, *Gods, Goddesses, and Images of God in Ancient Israel* (trans. Thomas H. Trapp; Minneapolis, Fortress, 1998 [German original: 1992]), 11.

redirect traditional approaches to biblical studies in at least two ways. First, if ancient images routinely conveyed religious ideas and other forms of cultural knowledge, then contemporary scholars should increasingly call into question text-alone approaches to biblical interpretation and the study of Israelite religion. In light of the evidence presented in chapter two of this study, it is no longer tenable to *a priori* assume that the Hebrew Bible is best understood in light of other written documents or epigraphic remains regardless of their geographical and chronological proximity to ancient Israel (§2.2). In many cases, images from the Levant will provide the most relevant comparative data set for interpreting the language of the Hebrew Bible and the history of Israelite religion.

Second, since images themselves constitute a coherent, culturally conditioned symbol system, biblical scholars should examine ancient iconography on its own terms (§2.4). This would entail bringing a full array of analytical tools to bear on the study of images, including well-established art-historical principles, careful archaeological evaluation, and thoughtful reflection on visual theory. In addition, biblical scholars should strive to situate their studies with respect to larger iconographic and literary contexts, being careful not to use small fragments of visual data to illustrate an isolated biblical verse in a simplistic fashion. In this sense, when relating biblical texts to ANE art, scholars should employ careful, independent analyses of both visual and verbal data sets, recognizing that these two forms of media can function as dual reflexes of the same (or similar) underlying concepts. Among other things, this hermeneutical perspective underscores the need for biblical scholars to intentionally pursue training in

the area of visual analysis and visual culture studies along with more traditional preparation in Semitic languages, historical criticism, literary analysis, and so forth. To put the matter plainly, if images played a meaningful role in the symbol system used by ancient Israelites, then they should also play a meaningful role in the training, methods, and research agendas of contemporary biblical scholars.

The second principle emerges from the first, but makes even more explicit how and why images mattered to ancient Israelite viewers: *As the most widely utilized vehicle of communication in the ANE world, images can be described as a type of language and their importance can be characterized in terms of visual literacy.* Since the inception of the Fribourg School, biblical iconographers have highlighted the communicative capacity of ancient art (§2.3; §4.1). This is especially true of seals, coins, and other types of minor art, which as a type of mobile media, were able to circulate messages across vast territories and to diverse audiences (§2.3.2). Not only do these types of images far outnumber textual remains in the archaeological record, but even on objects with both visual and verbal elements, artists and users routinely privileged the presentation of iconographic forms over epigraphic data (§2.3.3.1). Thus, whether it is within the same cultural context or even on the same artifact, images often functioned as the preferred language of communication.

This conclusion is further strengthened by recent research on textual literacy rates in ancient Israel (§2.2). Though not without some debate, the majority of scholars suggest that no more than 10-15% of the general population would have possessed the ability to read or write with any degree of sophistication. In light of this datum, it is

almost impossible to conclude that written materials were the only—or even the primary—way in which the vast majority of Israelites conveyed or received information. Rather, visual materials mattered more, and to more people, as a viable means of communication (§2.3.4). Even those who possessed the ability to read and write likely relied on images as a type of a *lingua franca* that could augment, or at times replace, written language (§2.3.3.2). If so, then it is reasonable to hypothesize that levels or rates of visual literacy—that is, the ability to read and process iconographic data with some degree of competency—far outstripped textual literacy in most levels of Israelite society.¹²

What is the payoff of talking about ancient art in terms of language and literacy? On the one hand, conceptualizing images as a type of language provides a discursive framework in which concepts and terminology from the domain of written texts can be mapped onto the domain of artistic representation. This would enable biblical scholars not only to talk about visual interpretation in terms of "reading images" but also to describe distinct regional styles as "visual dialects" or complex compositions as having "pictorial syntax." While it might go too far to refer to the iconography of ANE minor art as a type of Semitic language, it is certainly the case that visual and verbal data closely interacted with one another within the broader symbol system of ancient Near Eastern cultures. Therefore, biblical scholars can develop more sophisticated ways of describing the complex interaction, or "inter-mediality," that can arise between visual and verbal

¹² A similar situation might be said to obtain today. Most individuals, especially in America, consume television, movies, computer-generated graphics, and other sorts of images at unprecedented rates even as they often (though not always) read at grade levels that are not commensurate with their educational progress.

languages in the ancient world (§2.3.2).¹³ In this regard, it would be helpful to talk about the literary imagery in the Hebrew Bible as a textual medium through which biblical authors interpreted the languages of ANE art. In addition, if images constitute a visual language, then biblical scholars must also closely examine the extent to which viewers were able to process, or read, this language (§2.3.1). Though levels or rates of visual literacy likely varied among different viewers in the ancient world (and for that matter, the modern world), it seems likely that visual literacy would have been a "majority phenomenon" in ancient Israel (§2.3.2).¹⁴ This conclusion calls into question biblical iconographic methods, such as Keel's "concentric circles" approach, in which visual data is only consulted after exhausting relevant textual data (§2.4).¹⁵ Even if this methodology provides a helpful way of organizing certain research projects, it is not necessarily the case that the vast majority of ancient Israelites would have turned to visual materials only *after* their knowledge of textual sources was exhausted. Or to put the matter differently, the average Israelite would have quickly turned to visual materials since their ability to read texts was so limited. In sum, if visual literacy was a majority phenomenon in ancient Israel, and if the images on minor art functioned as a widespread language of communication throughout the Levant, then it follows that the

¹³ See principles 3 and 4 below for further discussion about hermeneutical perspectives on the image-text relationship.

¹⁴ As noted in chapter 2, I primarily discuss visual literacy in terms of the ability to read images, not create them. In all probability, the active production of images depended on specialists as much as—or even more than—the active production of texts.

¹⁵ It should be noted, however, that while Keel introduces this concentric circle model in his commentary on the Song of Songs, he does not strictly follow this methodology in his other studies. However, other biblical scholars have more or less appropriated this approach. See for instance, LeMon, "Iconographic Approaches: The Iconic Structure of Psalm 17," in *Method Matters* (ed. LeMon and Kent Harold Richards; SBLRBS 56; Boston: Brill, 2010), 150-51.

comparative study of ancient iconography should be one of the inner-most "concentric circles" of contemporary biblical research.

7.2.2. Principles Derived from Chapter 3: The Image-Text Relationship

In its most basic definition, biblical iconography seeks to explore the relationship between ANE art and literary imagery in the Hebrew Bible. However, in past research the precise nature of this relationship has been somewhat neglected, or at least has been dealt with in ways that are methodologically diffuse and/or conceptually disconnected (§3.1). My third exegetical principle begins to address this situation: *When examining the relationship between ANE art and the Hebrew Bible (or any other set of visual and verbal data), scholars should clarify how they approach three interrelated but distinct comparative issues: image-text congruence, correlation, and contiguity.* These issues reflect different ways one can conceptualize what it means for an image and text to be related, and as such, each seeks to answer a different type of question about the nature of the image-text relationship. For instance, when pursuing the issue of image-text congruence, scholars should attempt to establish the extent to which certain images and texts can be said to share similar themes, motifs, or subject matter (§3.2.1). Alternatively, image-text correlation seeks to explain the type and direction of interaction that obtains between a given image and text (§3.2.2). Finally, image-text contiguity raises important questions about the nature of comparative methodologies, including whether historical lines of influence and/or mechanisms of contact need to be present in order for scholars to compare visual and verbal data sets (§3.2.3). Although

each of these issues is somewhat discrete, they are not unrelated to one another. If congruence indicates *which* images and texts are related in the first place, then correlation and contiguity seek to explain, respectively, *how* and *why* those specific images and texts are related to one another.

By delineating these issues and showing how they are conceptually related, this typology of image-text approaches contributes to a visual hermeneutics at two levels (§3.2.4). First, it provides a heuristic device that can help scholars categorize and evaluate how methodological approaches to the image-text relationship have evolved in and through past contributions to biblical scholarship as well as the study of ANE visual and verbal representation more broadly. As suggested in chapter 3, several trends are evident: (1) in terms of image-text congruence, biblical scholars have mostly abandoned the practice of juxtaposing images and texts in a fragmentary manner and instead are offering more precise analyses of ever-larger constellations of literary imagery and iconographic motifs; (2) with respect to image-text correlation, rather than thinking about visual-verbal relationships simply in terms of illustration or ekphrasis, most biblical scholars have come to focus on how images and texts are mutually dependent on a common mental concept; and (3) in terms of image-text contiguity, while the majority of biblical scholars choose to work with images and texts from the same cultural context, it remains possible to compare non-contiguous data in service of less historical-critical goals. Second, the above typology reveals the need for biblical scholars to be more explicit about which aspects of the image-text relationship they are addressing and how their approach to these issues comes to bear on their interpretive

procedures. While I do not intend to advocate for a uniform way of dealing with the relationship between ANE art and the Hebrew Bible, I contend that a more consistent use of terminology would help biblical scholars be more aware of how their diverse approaches relate to one another.

The fourth principle recognizes that any consideration of the image-text relationship must not only address questions about method but also issues concerning theory. Art historians and literary critics traditionally have characterized interartistic comparisons in terms of either opposition and difference ("image versus text") or mutuality and likeness ("image as text"; §3.3.1). More recently, however, visual theorists have proposed new conceptual frameworks for examining visual-verbal interactions (§3.3.2). For instance, through his notion of the image-text dialectic, Mitchell attempts to account for the complex ways in which images and texts interact with and mutually influence one another (§3.3.2.1). In Mitchell's estimation, a tension of similarity and difference, visuality and textuality can emerge not only between discrete forms of media but also within the same art object. Mitchell also develops the idea of a metapicture, which refers to the way in which certain images can be understood to "picture" other pictures or to reflect on the nature of visual and verbal representation more broadly (§3.3.2.2). This concept provides Mitchell with a way of anchoring theoretical reflection on the image-text relationship to an analysis of particular works of art that juxtapose visual and verbal data. While Mitchell's theories are often utilized in the study of contemporary visual culture, they can also be applied to ancient images and texts (§3.3.3; §3.4). Thus, *by conceptualizing the image-text relationship in terms of*

dialectic tensions and metapictures, scholars can more precisely describe the nature of visual-verbal interactions in the ancient world.

Insofar as Mitchell moves beyond rather simplistic notions of ekphrasis and illustration, description and depiction, his theories can challenge biblical scholars and ANE art historians alike to think in more sophisticated ways about the nature of interartistic comparisons. For instance, one of the implications of the image-text dialectic is that all media are mixed media and all art is composite art—that is, there are no pure images or texts but only a continuum of "imagetexts." As a result, instead of simply comparing images with texts, scholars might analyze how visuality informs the use and function of written materials, and conversely, how textuality enters into the logic and arrangement of pictorial compositions (§3.3.3). In addition, the image-text dialectic implies a bi-directional, mutual interaction between visual and verbal data. This perspective would prompt biblical scholars to explore not only how ANE art influenced the production and reception of the Hebrew Bible, but also how ancient literature, whether biblical or otherwise, might have shaped how Israelite viewers saw and interpreted iconographic data (§3.4; §6.4.2). Mitchell's theories also suggest that one could study an ancient art object that combines visual and verbal media, such as the Behistun relief, as a type of metapicture of the image-text relationship for a given time and place (§3.3.3; §3.4). Among other things, this approach would help situate broader discussions about the relationship between ANE art and the Hebrew Bible with respect to contextually specific artifactual remains that weave together word and image in unique representational patterns. These suggestions do not by any means exhaust the

analytical possibilities that could be generated by applying theories about the image-text dialectic and metapicture to studies of visual and verbal representation in the ancient world. Rather, this principle suggests that various new lines of inquiry would be opened up if Mitchell's theories are applied to ancient images and texts.

7.2.3. Principles Derived from Chapter 4: The Meaning of Images

To varying degrees, many scholars presuppose a deep analogy between how visual and verbal signs work.¹⁶ Images in representational art, much like words in written language, are thought to convey information by means of conventional signs that can be read according to an acquired code. I have argued that this "linguistic" approach to the visual arts is especially evident in Panofsky's iconographic method (§4.1). Based upon a textual or philological rationality, this widely utilized approach aims to read a painting like a paragraph by identifying its vocabulary (forms and motifs), parsing its structure (themes and concepts), and uncovering the etymological roots of its culturally conditioned meaning (symbolic value). While there is much to recommend about this method, my fifth interpretive principle highlights the limitations of this type of approach to image analysis (§4.2.1). Namely, *unlike linguistic signs, images function as a dense or replete notational system, and as such, they should be understood according to somewhat different semiotic principles than most written languages.* Among visual theorists, Nelson Goodman makes this point most forcibly (§4.2.2.). In brief, Goodman claims that

¹⁶ This perspective is also operative in the first four principles of my visual hermeneutics. Images, no less than texts, are part of a given culture's symbol system, have a communicative capacity, can be read as a type of language, and interact with written materials by means of interartistic relationships.

linguistic notations, such as the Roman alphabet, exhibit semiotic articulation—that is, their signs are both syntactically disjoint (i.e., non-identical inscriptions of the same sign are considered equivalent) and syntactically differentiated (i.e., their symbolic systems work by gaps and discontinuities between discrete signs). In contrast, non-linguistic notational systems, including most images, exhibit semiotic density or repleteness—that is, their signs are non-disjoint (i.e., every difference in visual form carries with it the potential to express meaning) and non-differentiated (i.e., between any two existing marks in the system, there is a potentially continuous field of composite signs that are semiotically meaningful). Thus, while Goodman recognizes that both linguistic and non-linguistic systems consist of conventional signs, he maintains that these signs express meaning through different signifying structures. Seen from this vantage point, the problem with the iconographic method is not that it attempts to read images as a type of language but that it assumes that the language of images operates as an articulate notational system as opposed to a dense one.

Two trends in iconographic research (whether appropriated in biblical scholarship or other fields) reflect an uncritical transfer of notions about linguistic signs to the realm of artistic representation (§4.2.3). First, many biblical scholars tend to carefully scrutinize only those visual elements that are essential for identifying what an image represents—that is, its artistic motifs or intrinsic subject matter. Other artistic details, including size, color, layout, the profile of figures, style, and so forth are either given little attention or are treated as "corrective principles" at the level of pre-iconographic analysis. However, for images and other sign systems that exhibit semiotic

density, every difference in visual form carries with it the potential to express meaning. In this view, an image contains a surplus of meaning that includes, but also extends beyond, the expression of its basic subject matter or symbolic content.

Second, biblical scholars also tend to place a great deal of emphasis on categorizing visual motifs into clearly demarcated typologies. This approach is not without warrant and in many cases yields helpful classification schema. Nevertheless, iconographic typologies can too readily presume that ANE art operates according to clearly defined gaps and discontinuities between individual signs within the notational system. In general, non-linguistic signs consist of a potentially continuous field of visual forms, each of which is capable of expressing a unique value. ANE art is no exception, and in fact, composite and hybrid forms are quite common in the archaeological record. With this in mind, one must caution against the tendency to assume that image analysis will *always* produce clearly demarcated typologies or that *every* image can be placed within the categories that do exist.

The sixth principle spells out more explicitly how biblical scholars might revise their methods of analysis in light of critical reflection on the languages of art. One of the practical implications of seeing images as a dense notational system is that every detail or variation in visual form can be thought to have a signifying function. Even visual features that do not directly contribute to the expression of the intrinsic subject matter are potentially relevant when it comes to decoding an image's underlying meaning or message. As a result, *biblical scholars should analyze ANE art beyond the level of iconography by considering how aspects of compositional design, rhetoric of display, and*

mode of signification contribute to what (and how) an image means. Since these visual features are not readily accounted for in Panofsky's schema, I have laid out specific proposals for what it might look like to analyze several non-iconographic elements of artistic representation, including: (1) how issues of compositional design, such as profile and scale, affect how images are seen and responded by certain viewers (§4.3.1); (2) how certain artistic traditions, styles, and subjects are referenced in order to construct rhetorically persuasive visual message (§4.3.2); and (3) how modes of signification, such as perceptual and conceptual forms of art, are used to manipulate an observer's view of reality and understanding of history (§4.3.3). To be sure, decoding the meaning of these visual details is a process that is open to multiple interpretations and is contingent on habits and conventions that vary from culture to culture (§4.3.4). Yet, the potential of ambiguity in this form of image analysis does not give warrant to the tendency to rigidly distinguish between subject matter and style, intrinsic content and decorative detail. Instead, what this hermeneutical perspective attempts to do is to prompt scholars, especially those who primarily work with texts, to think more critically about the nature of visual representation and the methods required to read its pictorial language.

Three broader implications emerge from this interpretive strategy. First, rather than being a parochial concern of the fine arts, visual theory is relevant to biblical scholarship, and therefore its most salient conclusions should be integrated into the methods and practices of biblical iconography. While not every biblical scholar needs to explicitly address the nature of dense notational systems, they should nevertheless strive to develop greater fluency in literature that scrutinizes artistic representation

from the vantage point of visual theory (§4.4). Second, in order to more fully account for the nature of images as a dense notational system, biblical scholars may slightly revise certain aspects of Panofsky's method. In particular, at least one additional level of meaning should be included in Panofsky's tripartite schema. This level, which I am inclined to call "meta-iconographic analysis," would represent a stage of interpretation in which one more explicitly considers issues related to style—compositional design, rhetoric of display, and mode of signification—as an object of interpretation in its own right and not merely as a corrective principle. The purpose of highlighting these aspects of visual representation is to draw attention to aspects of an image that often (though not always) go under-scrutinized in iconographic methodologies. Finally, this interpretive principle raises important questions about whether "iconography" is a suitable name for the field of scholarship that seeks to interpret the Hebrew Bible in light of ANE art. While useful in some respects, this terminology might unnecessarily imply that Panofsky's method is the *only* approach to image analysis that a biblical scholar (or anyone else) might employ or that determining the meaning of an image is tantamount to identifying its iconographic content. An alternative term such as "visual culture exegesis" is not without its own limitations, and moreover, renaming a field does not automatically lead to concomitant changes in methodological procedure or interpretive practice. Nevertheless, this interpretive principle makes it clear that it would be more productive to talk about, describe, and conceptualize biblical iconography in ways that move away from a singular focus on the iconographic method.

7.2.4. Principles Derived from Chapters 5-6: The Nature and Function of Images

My first six principles aim to reevaluate how scholars approach topics that have traditionally played a central role in biblical iconographic research—that is, the importance and meaning of ANE images as well as their relationship to the Hebrew Bible. My final three principles have a slightly different purpose. Rather than revising existing methods, these principles attempt to expand the analytical scope of this field of study, at least as it has been traditionally pursued. Toward this end, the remaining principles engage topics that are not typically explored in most contributions to biblical iconography or other avenues of religio-historical research, including: the history and theory of visual response (principle 7); the role of visual practice as a medium of belief (principle 8); and the effects of religious ways of seeing on visual experience (principle 9). While each of these issues demand the close analysis of visual materials, they also entail broader questions about the nature of visual culture, and with it, the beliefs, attitudes, and epistemologies that structure and generate the ways in which images are used and responded to in specific socio-culture and religious contexts.

The seventh interpretive principle addresses what seems to be a rather straightforward question about what an image is, or more precisely, how one should construe the relationship between a picture and its referent. Whether dealing with conceptual or perceptual art, scholars and casual observers alike tend to believe that images are a form of mediated representation in which what one encounters in an image (i.e., representation) is ontologically distinct from what one encounters in the thing or person an image depicts (i.e., reality). Despite the rather commonsensical

nature of this understanding, the history of visual response tells a different story (§5.1). Throughout time and across cultures, one finds countless examples of viewers who talk about and react to images as if they were living things rather than just works of art. Instead of dismissing such responses as reflecting naïve or primitive superstitions, a visual hermeneutics would seek to understand where these impulses come from, why they persist, and what they reveal about culturally conditioned perceptions concerning the relationship between representation and reality. In particular, my visual hermeneutics affirms the following: *Since viewers often treat images as if they are capable of exerting power and agency over the realm of the real, scholars should carefully examine the nature of visual representation and the implications of visual response in the Hebrew Bible and the ANE world.* As discussed in chapter 5, art historian David Freedberg and social anthropologist Alfred Gell each offer theoretical frameworks for understanding how and why images seem to take on lives of their own in the eyes of certain observers. From an ontological perspective, Freedberg contends that the power of images is predicated on a belief that signifier and signified can become fused. The result is that certain images are believed not only to symbolically represent their referent but to manifest their presence (§5.2.1). Gell's approach is more anthropological in nature. By framing the animation of art in terms of social agency and actor-network theories, Gell is able to describe how images generate and structure social interactions in much the same way as human beings (§5.2.2).

What makes the work of Freedberg and Gell valuable to biblical scholars and others interested in ANE art is that it highlights the fact that the meaning of an image

cannot be fully accounted for by iconographic modes of analysis, even when nuanced in the ways I describe in principles 5 and 6. Rather, by raising important questions about the cognitive processes and social mechanisms that lie behind these strange forms of visual response, Freedberg and Gell offer hermeneutical perspectives that can expand and enrich the ways in which scholars study ANE visual culture (§5.2.3). Two points of application are of note. First, it is important not to uncritically describe the nature and status of the *šalmu* in the ANE world in terms of Western notions of mimesis. As ANE art historian Zainab Bahrani has shown, the *šalmu* was often conceived of as a type of hyperreality in which the presence of a thing or person could be embodied in and through representation (§5.3.1). Not unlike a simulacrum, the *šalmu* could function as a substitute for, not just a representation of, the thing or person it signified. This belief in the lifelike status of the *šalmu* can be inferred from a variety of different Assyro-Babylonian practices, including the *mīs pî* ceremony, the preparation of a substitute king (*šar pūḫi*), ritual battle enactments, and the use of certain apotropaic objects. However, the blurring of ontological distinctions between reality and representation is perhaps most evident in the theft and destruction of images in the context of war (§5.3.2). The motivations behind this form of visual response cannot fully be accounted for in terms of vandalism or looting. Given the fact that images of the king or deity were thought to embody or repeat their presence, these acts of violence against images should be seen as a distinctive military strategy akin to assaulting and abducting enemy combatants.

Second, this interpretive principle should prompt biblical scholars to focus more explicitly on the implications of visual response in the Hebrew Bible and throughout the

ANE world. Of particular interest in this regard are instances in which images are described as being destroyed or disparaged in the context of cultic reform or prophetic discourse (§5.4). Instead of merely concluding that these responses are evidence of religiously motivated iconoclasm, biblical scholars might draw on the work of Freedberg, Gell, and Bahrani to address ancient Israelite attitudes and beliefs about what images are, how they function, and why they tend to elicit from their viewers both fear and fascination, violence and devotion.

Broadly construed, the eighth principle attempts to reimagine what constitutes the proper subject matter of biblical iconographic research. Traditionally, this field has focused primarily on ancient art, including how, why, and for whom images were produced. While this object- or author-centered focus can provide important insights, it is not the only way to approach the intersection of visual culture and Israelite religion, or for that matter, seeing and believing. In fact, one of the orienting assumptions of the study of religious visual culture is that visual data cannot be isolated from questions about the practices that put images to use (§6.2.1). Thus, *when studying Israelite religion, biblical scholars should focus not only on images but also on what people do with images—that is, the practices that rely on and employ materials objects as the visual medium of belief*. As a result, I contend that religio-historical research would be advanced in fruitful ways if scholars began to move beyond traditional questions about what types of images the biblical text prohibits and instead focused on how all sorts of images—both aniconic and iconic—were used and responded to in Israelite religion. To be sure, there is not always a wealth of direct evidence concerning ancient visual

practices, and as a result, scholars interested in religious antiquity rarely have access to the same amount of data as David Morgan or others who study contemporary religious visual culture. Yet it is on this point that theory—and in particular, theory based on findings from cognitive science and/or the social sciences—can be rather helpful. Even when hard contextual data is sparse, inferences about visual practices can be made from insights about mental processes, anthropological systems, and comparative textual and archaeological data.

In particular, a focus on visual practices can offer new insight into how scholars study Israel's aniconic tradition. As discussed in chapter 6, semiotic distinctions between iconic and non-iconic signs are somewhat beyond the point when it comes to evaluating Israelite aniconism from a visual culture perspective. In fact, however the image-ban is understood and whenever it was thought to first emerge, Israelite religion clearly relied upon what David Morgan would call a visual medium of belief (§6.3.1). Thus, biblical scholars should not only define Israelite aniconism in a more narrow sense (i.e., as a ban on certain types of images, not artistic representation more broadly), but they should also clarify that a so-called aniconic cult was still "largely unintelligible outside its incarnation in material expressions."¹⁷

Furthermore, a study of ancient visual culture suggests that what makes a given image "religious"—or conversely, what makes a religion "iconic"—has as much to do with visual practices as it does with visual content or the lack thereof (§6.3.2.1). This perspective would prompt biblical scholars to characterize the nature of ancient

¹⁷ William Arweck and Elisabeth Keenan, *Materializing Religion: Expression, Performance, and Ritual* (Burlington, Vt.: Ashgate, 2006), 2-3.

religions with respect to two intersecting coordinates: one which describes their iconographic preferences with respect to the deity and the other which accounts for the extent to which they incorporate iconic images (or visual materials in general) into their worship practices.

Finally, evidence of ancient visual practices reveals that there is not necessarily a one-on-one correspondence between what an image looks like or how it signifies and the way in which it is put to use (§6.3.2.2). Taking up this point of view would not only shed light on the iconic function of non-iconic objects but it would also more clearly highlight the fact that when seen from the perspective of visual practices, Israelite religion was not as different from other ANE religions as many have supposed.

My ninth and final interpretive principle takes up issues surrounding the socio-cultural and religious construction of visual experience. The dominant perspective in visual culture theory is that what people see in an image is never simply a function of biological perception, nor is it ever rigidly determined by knowledge of iconographic conventions or art historical contexts. Rather, viewers actively process visual data in light of a distinctive set of epistemological and moral lenses, or ways of seeing. These lenses, in turn, not only shape how viewers interpret what a given image means, but in an even more basic way, they condition what viewers see or recognize in an image in the first place. When applied more specifically to the study of religion, ways of seeing can be said to structure and generate a "sacred gaze"—that is, a specific mode of visibility in which a viewer interprets pictorial data from the vantage point of certain religious beliefs, values, experiences, or knowledge (§6.2.2). Thus, a study of religious

ways of seeing can potentially shed light on how belief is mediated through visual experience, and conversely, how seeing itself is a thoroughly engaged, purposeful, constructive, and indeed, religious activity. This hermeneutical perspective can be summed up as follows: *Because visual experiences are deeply informed by underlying beliefs, values, and knowledge, it is important to consider the effects of religious ways of seeing on how ancient viewers might have processed visual data.*

By studying religious ways of seeing in ancient Israel, scholars would help redirect traditional approaches to biblical iconographic research in several ways. At a methodological level, this approach would draw more attention to the role of viewers in the meaning-making process, including how they may repurpose or reimagine existing religious imagery in light of new theological contexts and beliefs. In other words, particular beliefs and religious knowledge actually might lead religious viewers to look for or even recognize things in an image, such as religiously meaningful symbols or other numinous qualities, that nonbelievers might fail to perceive. This methodological perspective would especially influence how biblical scholars approach the search for Yahweh's image. Although most past contributions to this area of research have relied upon sophisticated archaeological, textual, and iconographic modes of analysis, they have yet to consider how underlying beliefs and religious knowledge might have come to shape the way in which Israelite viewers processed visual data and/or visualized their deity in specific art objects (§6.4.1) From the perspective of religious visual culture, even if it could be proven that ancient Israel never had images of its deity (a point which is itself open to debate), it would still be possible to suggest that some Israelite viewers

may have visualized Yahweh in images that were not otherwise intended to depict their deity.

While it is difficult to determine beyond doubt how specific historical audiences reacted to or interpreted a given image, there is nevertheless several lines of evidence that suggest that ancient viewers repurposed religious imagery in light of their underlying beliefs (§6.4.2). Among other things, this evidence suggests that literary descriptions of Yahweh as a god of the storm, an enthroned patriarch, a divine warrior, an armed archer, a lion, and so forth might have conditioned how ancient viewers interpreted visual data that reflects similar motifs. If this were the case, then biblical scholars would need to reevaluate how certain non-Yahwistic images might have come to appear very Yahweh-like to the casual (and devout) Israelite observer. The search for Yahweh's image (even if not his "one" cult image) may be, in this view, at an end—though not in the way that many archaeologists would have it.

7.3. Of Purpose and Use: The Application of a Visual Hermeneutics

What is the purpose of this visual hermeneutics and how might it be put to use? As stated at the outset, these nine principles are intended to distill critical reflection on visual theory into a more concise and practical resource that can guide and information how one reads images and sees texts. With this goal in view, I have designed this interpretive framework to be as user-friendly as possible. The nine principles articulated above offer a brief summary of the lengthy theoretical discussions in chapters 2-6, and furthermore focus on specific implications for method and practice.

While potentially advantageous, the usability, or at least brevity, of these nine principles might also be their Achilles heel. In such a distilled format, they run the risk of either over-simplifying complex theories or under-representing the full range of hermeneutical issues that might arise in biblical iconographic research. Thus, I must reiterate that the hermeneutical perspectives outlined in this chapter cannot adequately substitute for the more sustained engagement of theory in the previous five. Nor is my list meant to be exhaustive in nature—indeed, I suspect that other principles might be added (and some taken away) in light of additional work in visual culture studies or the particular needs of certain research projects. As a result, these nine principles represent talking points for what is a much longer and more nuanced conversation with visual theory.

But for whom is this conversation intended? I imagine that the above discussions will be most relevant for biblical scholars who are already interested in interpreting the Hebrew Bible in light of ancient art. For these readers, I hope that the case I have made for theory was a convincing one insofar as it prompts them to engage issues pertaining to visual representation and the image-text relationship in a more self-critical and sophisticated fashion. While I have directly addressed biblical iconographers throughout this study, I also hope that my research will persuade a few "text-based" scholars to be more inclined toward ANE images in the first place. In this sense, my case for theory in biblical iconography doubles as a case for images in biblical scholarship more broadly. In addition, many aspects of this visual hermeneutics is geared toward interpretive issues and methods that are particularly germane to the field of biblical studies. Yet here again, I

hope that these reflections on visual theory and ancient art will also be valuable to a broader audience, including other fields in the humanities and social sciences.

Therefore, the ultimate goal of my study is not only to further the pictorial turn in biblical scholarship but also to advance knowledge at the intersection of visual culture theory and religio-historical research more broadly.

The viability of this visual hermeneutics depends in no small measure on what happens when it is put to use. What sort of fruit does it produce when applied to certain images and texts and how can it advance interpretive methods in general or a certain exegetical topic in particular? Throughout this study, I have attempted to pursue questions about the use (or usefulness) of my visual hermeneutics in two ways. First, I have set forth a series of constructive proposals that address how visual theory might revise, expand, and nuance widely utilized interpretive methods in biblical iconography and related areas of religio-historical research. The goal of these proposals is to provide scholars interested in the intersection between ANE art and the Hebrew Bible / Israelite religion with concrete and practical suggestions about how theory can further inform their interpretive work. Second, throughout my study I have attempted to provide a series of generative examples that demonstrate how my hermeneutical framework can shed light on important issues in Israelite religion and biblical interpretation, including the nature of Israel's aniconic tradition, the search for Yahweh's image, idol parodies in prophetic literature, the conceptual background of divine metaphors, the nature of the *šalmu*, the image-text relationship on ancient artifacts, and the relative importance of textual literacy as a vehicle of communication. By covering a wide range of interpretive

questions, I have intended to provide through these examples a representative—and, hopefully, generative—set of applications that demonstrate how visual culture theory can advance religio-historical research.

These issues addressed above surely do not exhaust the possible ways in which my visual hermeneutics can be put to use. To be sure, other topics might have just as easily been chosen. In fact, I did *not* select the above issues because they uniquely illustrate the theory outlined above. To the contrary, some aspects of my visual hermeneutics will prove to be far less relevant to certain topics than they would be to others. This should come as no surprise and does not by any means count against the value or effectiveness of the theory as a whole. The purpose of my hermeneutical framework, after all, is not to establish universally applicable rules of interpretation but rather to surface new ways of thinking about how ancient visual materials and practices might come to bear on the study of the Hebrew Bible and Israelite religion. Thus, while the proof might be in the eating of the pudding as the saying goes, not every batch of pudding needs to provide *all* the proof. My visual hermeneutics—or any other interpretive framework for that matter—is best judged in light of multiple applications, each of which might creatively use and refine these ideas to meet the needs of specific interpretive contexts and questions.

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