

“You Shall Not Make Yourself an Image”

The Intention and Implications of the Second Commandment

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A. Introduction

Few phenomena have influenced so profoundly and consistently the history of art (especially religious visual art) as the biblical tradition which forbids making images of God. In areas where the culture was formed or influenced by Judaism, Christianity or Islam, this tradition has always been one of the strongest formative forces (both positively: stimulating the creation of metaphors and symbols; and negatively: iconoclastic purges). The various ways in which this tradition was interpreted in different periods and milieus limited the space available for the emergence and application of the visual arts in the respective domains of culture.

In my presentation I would first of all like to formulate what I see as the basic intention behind the biblical injunction against making images of God, and then to illustrate by using the example of the floor mosaic of the Beth-Alpha Synagogue, how this intention is carried out in a case where the artistic treatment of a subject at first sight appears to go well beyond the normative boundaries laid down by the tradition of the law.

B. The Prohibition of Images in the Hebrew Bible

1. The significance of the Decalogue

From the point of view of the historical effect of the biblical tradition, the most significant influence on the phenomenon of the lack of representations of God is undoubtedly exercised by what is known as the Second Commandment of the Decalogue:

“You shall not make yourself an image”... (Exo. 20,4–6; Deut. 5,8–10).

The Decalogue is a very specific context for this statement and has given it exceptional weight. In order to deal with the intention of the Second Commandment, then I must first, at least briefly, characterize the Decalogue as a whole.

The Decalogue is found in the Bible in two places (Exod. 20,2–17 and Deut. 5,6–21). This *repetition* (within the Torah!) in itself lends particular weight to the Decalogue as a whole. In addition, on both occasions the Decalogue is placed in the literary context in such a way that it reads like an *introduction in outline* to the normative regulations which follow; what comes after it takes on the form of an expansion of that introduction (in Exodus, the Decalogue introduces what is known as the Book of the Covenant [Exod. 20,22–23,33]; in Deuteronomy it comes before the so-called Second Introductory Speech of Moses [Deut. 5,2–11,32]). Special significance is further added to the words of the Decalogue by the fact that they are to be found in the context of the Sinai/Horeb pericope, where Moses receives the Law on behalf of Israel, and are thus perceived to an exceptional extent as being the direct, unmediated words of YHWH to the people of Israel (Deut. 5,4.22ff; cf. Exo. 20,1.19). It is therefore not surprising that biblical and post-biblical tradition treat the words of the Decalogue as fundamental statements, words of supreme weight and authority.

2. What is an image—the word *pesel* (and *t^emuna*)

The second statement of the Decalogue, known as the Second Commandment, forbids Israel (either as an individual or as a collective) to make an image or any form of likeness of God.

“You shall not make yourself an image or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth”... (Exo. 20,4; Deut. 5,8).¹

The key Hebrew term פֶּסֶל (*pesel*; usually translated as “image”) denotes a statue carved from wood or hewn from stone (in later

¹ Similarly Exo. 20,23; Lev. 26,1; Deut. 4,16ff. and 27,15.

biblical texts [e.g. Isa. 40,19; 44,10] it may also be of metal) which is to serve as an *object of cult*.²

In the ancient Eastern milieu, such objects formed part of the basic furnishing of a sanctuary. The figure depicting the deity is generally not regarded as being the deity itself (identification with the subject), but through it the deity becomes fully present in the sanctuary (representation of the divine subject). Sacrifices are brought before the image of the deity, which is the object of adoration, and it is expected that it will function as a power bringing blessing or protection (it may also be used, for example, as a palladium carried in front of the army or as a guardian at the city gates). This object may have reverence and all possible care lavished upon it, or it may be exposed to punishment or dishonour.³ The effect is always the same: whatever is done to the image affects the subject of the deity itself.⁴

The quality of *artistic elaboration* is not of primary importance. It is true that it is possible to trace a development from primitive, unformed images (standing stones or posts) through symbolic signs (ephods) to the full use of artistic forms (animal and human figures), but these changes in no way alter the basic function of the object. Its purpose is not to capture the external appearance of the divine subject, but simply to provide a clear expression of the *identity* of that subject, or of the way it is currently acting. (This is why so much use is made of symbols, schematic depictions, and signs which have become standardised through tradition—cf. e. g. the iconographic signs and symbols of Jesus as Christ, Saviour, Judge, King, Victorious Lord, suffering Redeemer, and so on). The function of the image is to express the identity of the deity as a concrete subject which is present and active. The external presentation (whether it is primitive, the artistic standard) is not essential so far as this basic function is concerned.

To make the first basic statement: It is precisely this basic func-

² Karl-Heinz Bernhardt, *Gott und Bild*, Berlin 1956, 113; W. Zimmerli, Das zweite Gebot, in: *Theologische Bücherei* 19, 1969², 234–248; Chr. Dohmen, *Das Bilderverbot, seine Entstehung und seine Entwicklung im AT*, (BBB) Bonn 1987², 41ff.

³ H. D. Preuß, *Verspottung fremder Religionen im AT*, (BWANT 92) 1971.

⁴ O. Keel, *Die Welt der altorientalischen Bildsymbolik und das AT*, 1977², 210–220.

tion of the *pesel*—making the deity present—which is the basic reason for rejecting the *pesel* in the religious tradition of Israel.

Why? Because YHWH, the God of Israel, cannot be “made present” in this way. His identity transcends any attempt to grasp its subject in this way.

To avoid misunderstanding, the term *pesel* is specified even more precisely in the Second Commandment: “you shall not make yourself a *pesel* or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth”. This more exact definition is of great importance for tradition.

The term *likeness* (*temuna*) designates the outward shape of an object in general (cf. Num. 12,8; Deut. 4,15) and is found in association with *pesel*, particularly in the later (deuteronomistical) texts, in order to broaden the meaning (Deut. 4,16.23.25). It has this same function in the formulation of the Decalogue. No subject in any area of all the imaginable spheres of the universe can be made the object of reverence and religious adoration—this is already expressed as a fundamental principle in the first Commandment of the Decalogue (*You shall have no other gods before me*) and here it is presented in concrete form (*For I—YHWH—I am a jealous God*).

3. The interrelationship of the First and Second Commandments

From what has been said it is evident that in order to understand the Second Commandment it is very important to take into account its relationship to the First Commandment, and particularly the function of the introduction or preamble to the Decalogue.

The relationship between the First and Second Commandments has for a long time been an extremely controversial issue, the subject of much discussion. It is no coincidence that historical tradition is divided into two schools of thought on this point: on the one hand the Jewish tradition and the Reformed branch of Protestantism, which consider the forbidding of other gods and the forbidding of images to be two separate commandments (the First and the Second); and on the other hand Catholicism and Lutheranism, which take this text to be just one commandment (the First; they then divide the tenth one into two separate parts).⁵

The close connection between the two statements can be seen in a number of features in the way they are formulated.

They are the only two commandments to be expressed in the first person, as direct statements from the mouth of YHWH (while the Third, Fourth, and Fifth speak of YHWH in the third person, and the rest do not explicitly express a relationship to God at all). Moreover, it is only in the context of the first two commandments that we find the self-introductory formula “*I am YHWH, your God*” (Exo. 20,2a.5aα; Deut. 5,6a.9aα), which reminds us of the basic relationship between YHWH and his people, which is the fundamental precondition of these binding words (i.e. the “covenantal” relation; which is mentioned in the narrow context both in Exo. 19,5ff. and in Deut. 4,23f.).

4. The matter: image of YHWH or images of *other gods*?

The major problem of interpretation with the Second Commandment, and one that can lead to considerable controversy, concerns the question of which subject the prohibition on making images actually applies to. The formulation of the Hebrew text contains several points of tension which are open to a number of different interpretations. Here I will outline some of the more cogent ones:

Although the words *pesel* (image) and *temuna* (likeness) are in the singular, the pronouns forming the objects of the verbs “bow down” and “serve” are in the plural.⁶ However, from the grammatical point of view, we are not dealing here with a multiple object, but with apposition (in Deut. 5 the word *temuna* [likeness] is clearly attached asyndetically, without the conjunction “and”).⁷ This formulation with the pronouns in the plural—“*you shall not bow down to them or serve them*”—could very well refer

⁵ See B. Reicke, *Die zehn Worte in Geschichte und Gegenwart. Zählung und Bedeutung der Gebote in den verschiedenen Konfessionen*, 1973, 8ff.

⁶ לֹא־תִשְׁתַּחֲוּהוּ לָהֶם וְלֹא תַעֲבֹדֵם
(You shall not bow down to *them*, nor serve *them*).

⁷ The conjunction is to be interpreted as *waw explicativum*; see B. J. Diebner, Anmerkungen zum sogenannten “Bilderverbot” in der Torah, in: *Dielheimer Blätter zum Alten Testament und seiner Rezeption in der Alten Kirche* 27 (1991), 52.

to “the *other gods*”, which were mentioned in the previous sentence of the First Commandment. This interpretation can also be supported by a number of linguistic arguments. The phrase ‘*bow down and serve*’ is a stereotyped Deuteronomistic expression which refers (without exception!) to worshipping strange gods, and never has an image as its object.⁸ Furthermore, the reason for the prohibition of an image which is offered would much better fit the prohibition of serving other gods. Again, the formula “*jealous god* (אֱלֹהִים קַנָּזִים)” is in parallel biblical passages connected with the worship of false gods (Exo. 34,14; Deut. 6,14; Josh. 24,19). In addition, it is possible to add an argument *ad sensum*: why should YHWH be *jealous* of his own image?

These arguments, all of them convincing in themselves, are usually advanced in support of the thesis that the original intention of the Second Commandment was only to prohibit making images of other gods, and does not refer to making images of YHWH.⁹ I don’t think that this use of these arguments appears correct and plausible when applied to the logic of the text of the Second Commandment.

On the level of linguistic argumentation we can point particularly to the formulation of the basic prohibition: the word *pesel* is here used in an absolute way: לֹא תַעֲשֶׂה לְךָ פֶסֶל – “*you shall not make yourself (any) graven image*”. This formulation forbids any form of *pesel*, absolutely, not just a *pesel* of other gods.

5. The form of YHWH’s presence in worship and the witness about YHWH in the biblical tradition

Here we are faced with the basic question of how YHWH’s presence in Israel’s worship can be depicted.

The biblical materials are primarily a literary tradition. They therefore make particular use of linguistic devices and speak

⁸ W. Zimmerli, *Das zweite Gebot*, in: *Gottes Offenbarung*, 237f.

⁹ S. Schroer, *In Israel gab es Bilder*, (OBO 74) 1987, 301ff; for the pre-hasmonean period also B. J. Diebner, *Op. cit.* 48ff. From a comparative perspective very different view offers Tryggve N. D. Mettinger, *No Graven Image? Israelite Aniconism in Its Ancient Near Eastern Context*, (CB OTS 42) Stockholm 1995.

metaphorically, using images. This can either be abstract—for example God’s “glory” (*kabod*; Exo. 24,17; 33,18.22), or God’s “name” (*šem*)—or more concrete—such as the “pillar of fire” (*‘ammud ’eš*) or the “pillar of cloud” (*‘ammud he‘anan*; Exo. 13,21)—or even completely anthropomorphic.

From the point of view of our theme it is certainly the anthropomorphic metaphors which are the most interesting. In my judgement, the most important metaphor for expressing God’s presence is that of God’s “face” (*p^enê YHWH / ’elohîm*).

This expression is used in a whole range of circumstances to clearly express the effective presence of the God of Israel: if the Lord “lifts up his face over you” (*ns’ p^enê YHWH*) or “makes his face shine upon you” (*hē’ir ’et p^enê YHWH*), this is a way of expressing God’s blessing (Num. 6,25.26; Ps. 80,4.8); if he “turns his face against someone (*nātan pānîm b-*)” or “hides his face” (*histartî pānaj mēhem*), then it means judgement or anger (Lev. 17,10; Jer. 21,10; Deut. 31,17; Isa. 54,8 etc.). “Seeking God’s face” (*biqqeš ’et p^enê YHWH*) means turning to God in repentance (II Sam. 21,1; Hos. 5,15). In the context of God’s presence in cult, we find the phrase “showing oneself before God’s face” (*nir’ê lifnê YHWH*), which means bringing a sacrifice (Exo. 23,15.17; Isa. 1,12), and particularly the derived technical terms „the bread of the presence“ (literally “the bread of the face”—*lechem happānîm* Exo. 35,13; ISam 21,7) and “the table of the presence” (literally “the table of the face”—*šulchan happānîm* Num. 4,7).

Summing up, God’s face in these texts expresses the personal active and effective presence of YHWH and is the most significant metaphor from the point of view of our theme. In comparison with the expression *pesel* (image), however, there is one essential feature missing—nowhere do we find any indication or description of what “God’s face” looks like. Indeed, the biblical tradition on a number of occasions expressly rejects the possibility of man seeing (or shaping) “God’s face”. Describing or depicting YHWH, the God of Israel, is in principle not possible.

The story which expresses this fact is, because of its fundamental significance, once again linked with a central epiphanic scene (like the Decalogue)—YHWH’s appearance to Moses on Sinai. Moses does indeed meet with YHWH “face to face” when he receives the Law, but this does not mean that he can look God in the face (in the eyes); the biblical tradition devotes a separate

section to the express rejection of this possibility (Exo. 33,11 *contra* 33,20–23). From this direct encounter with God, Moses does not take away any knowledge of God's appearance, which might – if presented in cult – provide Israel with a guarantee of God's powerful presence (cf. ISam. 4,3ff.), but instead he takes with him God's message (the Torah, the words of the covenant) which is to serve his people on the journey to the Promised Land by enabling them to distinguish between good and evil (pure and impure, blessed and cursed) in their relationship with God and their relationships between people (Deut. 4,15f.). The summary of this message, this *debarim*, is then the Decalogue, the ten statements on the two stone tablets of the Covenant (Exo. 34,1.27ff; Deut. 4,13f – *'eseret hadd^ebārīm*).

6. Criteria for the legitimate employment of cultic objects

Does this mean that in the cult of Israel there were no objects pointing to the personal presence of YHWH or his identity? – Not at all. Plenty of such objects had their true place in the cult of ancient Israel.

Some of them could be used without any difficulty, such as for example the ark of YHWH (the ark of the covenant; Exo. 25,10ff.; Jos 4,5ff.; ISam 4,3ff.), which is even decorated with the figures of two golden *cherubs* (Exo. 25,18–20; 37,7–9; Num. 7,89 etc.). But others, in the biblical account, were clearly examples of heterodoxy or downright idolatry – in particular the *golden calf* (made by Aaron Exo. 32,4f., or rather by Jeroboam IKg. 12,32; IIKg. 17,16), but also, for example, Gideon's ephod (Judg. 8,27). Some objects demonstrate the nature of the problem in that they are evaluated differently – sometimes they can be used without any problems, at other times they are not tolerated and are removed. Examples of this are the sacred pillars and posts (*maššebot*, *'ašerîm*), or the bronze serpent (*naḥaš*, *Nehushtan*). In this ambivalence we can trace a clear rule.

The criterion of legitimacy of any object in Israel's cult is *the function* which it assumes in the given circumstances. Wherever it “only” refers to YHWH, where it serves as a reminder [anamnesis] (making present! [re-vocation]) of his deeds or words (or making present elements of the religious tradition), then it is le-

gitimate and may be used (like the Ark of the Covenant with the tablets of the Law [Deut. 10,1–5; IIKg. 8,9] or the bronze serpent in Num. 21,8). However, wherever such an object (it may be the same one) itself becomes the object of adoration (or there is the real danger of such a possibility), then it is illegitimate and must be removed (the bronze serpent *Nehushtan* in IIKg. 18,4).

Once again we are confronted with the problem which is dealt with in the first two commandments of the Decalogue. Wherever any object becomes an “idol” (worshipped *pesel*), then in the exclusivist worship of YHWH we have *per definitionem* to do with “another god” (*’el ’acher*).—Here is the argument for the nearness, and for the separation, of the formulations of the first and second injunctions of the Decalogue.¹⁰

If I might here return briefly to the problem of the relationship between the first and second injunctions of the Decalogue, and to the question of whether the prohibition on making images also refers to images of YHWH, then I would say that the last thesis which was put forward is a weighty argument for the inclusive interpretation. ‘*You shall not make yourself an image*’ means *eo ipso* any image; the image of YHWH either. Any image and any likeness (any *pesel* and / or any *temuna*) would be *per se* “a strange god” (*’el ’acher*)—and worship involving it would be idolatry, which, as a real existing “impossible possibility”, is in the Bible anthropomorphically referred to as “lewdness” or “harlotry” (*z^cnūt [zānâ; z^cnūnim]*) e.g. Ezek. 23,27; Hos. 4,11.15) and it is dealt with in many stories (e.g. Judg. 17f.) and pronouncements by the prophets (Ezek. 20,30ff.; Hos. 3).

7. The basic theological motif of the Image-Prohibition

Well, if it is true that the basis for the prohibition of images of God in the tradition of Israel is the essential nature of the phenomenon of making images, in other words the concept of representing a deity by means of an object; and if it is also true that this prohibition of images has such a major, fundamental signifi-

¹⁰ See M. Prudký, *Duo loci vel locus duplex unanimis. K literární a teologické integritě 1. a 2. výroku dekalogu*, in: *Ministerium Verbi Divini*, Praha 1996, 103–117.

cance in the religion of Israel (and, last but not least, if these facts have had such a major influence on the history of art); then we must ask what is the basic theological motif in the religion of Israel, what is the ultimate intention of this statement. Why is this theologumen so important for the biblical tradition?—In the history of religion, after all, this attitude is unique.

I believe that this question can once again be demonstrated in the formulation of the Decalogue, in the theological structure of the first two, or the first three, commandments.

As presented in the Bible, the Decalogue is meant to serve as a definition of the rules of the relationship between YHWH and Israel (it is the „*words of the Covenant*“ [דְּבַרֵי הַתְּרֵדָה – Exo. 34,28]). This relationship between YHWH and Israel, his people, is based on an unprecedented choice by God, on the protection which he establishes over Israel as a “people set apart”. Now a relationship defined by a unique act is per definitionem *exclusive*. Israel often acknowledges its understanding of this fact with the words “*Who is like you, YHWH, among the gods?*” (Exo. 15,11; similarly Exo. 8,6; ISam. 2,2; Ps. 113,5 etc.). As a vivid anthropomorphic metaphor, the comparison is often made here to the exclusive relationship between man and woman, an image of ardent and therefore jealous love.

We can perhaps say that the first three injunctions of the Decalogue express and define precisely this exclusive sovereignty of YHWH, the God of Israel, in his relationship to his people.

The motif is to be seen right at the beginning, in the self-introductory formulation אֲנֹכִי יְהוָה אֱלֹהֶיךָ – “I am YHWH, your God”. This is no general, metaphysical statement about God as such (about his essential nature), but a relational statement about a particular God who acts in a unique way. This preamble gives the following ten theses a clear sphere of definition, a specific meaning.

The First Commandment—‘*You shall have no other gods before me*’—clearly defines the exclusive nature of the relationship between God and his people. (Any service to ‘other gods’ is a harlot.)

The Second Commandment then defines the way in which YHWH, the God of Israel, differs from other gods. An image or depiction of any object for the purpose of worship (פֶּסֶל וְכָל תְּמוּנָה) is an attempt to represent the deity, an attempt to guarantee his

presence. But a deity which has been “objectivised” in this way is *open to manipulation*—the hidden intention behind this depiction as an object is to instrumentalise the deity. This is why, during worship where idols are used, it is usual—as is well known—not only to „care for“ the deity (feeding, washing, anointing, and clothing), but also to have various practices for demanding services (oracles, blessings), and, too, the possibility to humble (defile) or punish (beat) the deity and in this way demonstrate his powerlessness and worthlessness (and one’s own power and sovereignty over the deity). According to the witness of the Bible, YHWH, the God of Israel, cannot be manipulated in this way. He retains his sovereignty even in his relationship to his people.

I think it is important to stress here that the prohibition on making images is not derived from the philosophic recognition of the inappropriateness of the analogy of the image, nor from any sceptical or negative attitude to art in general, but from the basic theological postulates of the faith of Israel: any kind of image would be a threat to the freedom of YHWH, which he preserves in sovereign fashion even with regard to the worship of his own people.

In essence, the same intention lies behind the *Third Commandment* of the Decalogue, which forbids the magical use of God’s name (Exo. 20,7; Deut. 5,11). It is not possible to call upon the name of YHWH except for within the defined relationship of the covenant, nor contrary to the provisions of that covenant (e.g. to call upon the name of YHWH in swearing a false oath); the sovereign power of the God of Israel cannot be manipulated by the magical use of his name, by applying mantical practices.

The fact that the basic intentions are closely related is documented in the very similar history of the application of the second and third injunctions of the Decalogue. Just as the tendency to generalise in interpreting the prohibition on making images was taken to the point of rejecting any kind of figure images (*Mekhilta* 75a [Exo. 20,4]; *Aboda zara* 3,1/4; 4,1), in the same way the Third Commandment gradually came to be defined as a total ban on the pronouncement of God’s name (*Sanhedrin* 7,5 and 10,1), with the exception of the conferring of the blessing of Aaron by a priest (*Sifre Num.* 12a [6,23]; *Mekhilta* 80b [Exo. 20,24]; *Sota* 38a) and the acknowledgement of guilt by the high priest during the service of the Day of Atonement (*Joma* 3,8; 4,2 and 6,2).

8. A legitimate way of presenting YHWH

If it is not possible to make God present through the use of images, then we may ask what other method may be used to make YHWH present in the religion of Israel.

Once again, the formulation of the Decalogue can give us some orientation here. In the prologue we find the so-called self-presentation formulation: *'I am YHWH your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage'* (Exo. 20,2; Deut. 5,6). The unpronounced name of YHWH (the so-called tetragram), which, like every *nomen proprium* denotes the identity of the subject, is here specified not only by the relational apposition *'your God'*, but also by a further apposition formulated in narrative fashion. This is extremely characteristic for the tradition of the biblical "speaking about God" (Biblical Theology).

Giving an account of YHWH, the God of Israel, is done above all by *telling of his deeds*. This is why a biblical confession of faith (creed) does not make any speculative formulations about God's basic nature or qualities, does not attempt a descriptive definition of God (such as the later statements, influenced by Hellenism, about "God's omnipotence", etc.), but tells of God's fundamental saving actions, which are the basis of Israel's trust in this particular God.

For example, when bringing the first fruits of the earth, everyone should, according to Deut. 26,5–10, confess their faith with a formula which is a kind of summary of God's fundamental saving actions, a summary of the fundamental events in the "history of salvation" (known as the small historical creed). The exodus from Egypt has a central place in this history: YHWH is the one who led us out of the land of Egypt, out of slavery (cf. similarly the preamble to the Decalogue).

The confessions of faith found in such biblical texts as Josh. 24,2–13; Ps. 105 or 136; Neh. 9,5–37 are formulated in a similar way. The influence of this tradition of speaking about God can also be seen later in the early Christian creeds, which are also formulated in a narrative way: the backbone of the statements is created by verbs of action (e.g. the Christological statements known as the apostolicum: *he was conceived... was born, suffered...* etc.; cf. the later Nicaeno-Constantinopolitanum creed and its statements about the essential nature: Christ is $\alpha\mu\omicron\upsilon\sigma\iota\omicron\varsigma$ του θεου).

In sum, one could say that the very nature of YHWH, the God of Israel (the very nature of his revelation), means that an adequate expression of witness about him is not a visual depiction of his likeness, but an audial statement about his works. This is why the people of this God does not fashion specific graphic or plastic artistic objects, but instead develops a particularly rich literary tradition. If something is to be placed “before the eyes” of the faithful during worship, then it is symbols which refer to God’s works (such as the Ark of the Covenant) or to God’s word (such as inscriptions of the Law texts; Deut. 27,8). However, these symbols cannot be identical with God himself. Should there be any danger of such an identification, then the symbols are prohibited. Where this danger does not threaten, then artistic expression, even the use of figures, can be allowed with surprising freedom.

C. Example: The mosaic of Beth-Alpha Synagogue

One of the most notable examples which can be used to demonstrate the whole range of inconsistencies in the issues surrounding the influence of this biblical tradition is the floor mosaic in Beth-Alpha (9 km from Beth-She’an), which was discovered in 1928 in the ruins of a sixth-century synagogue.¹¹ I will limit myself here to a brief reference to some of the motifs from the mosaic. I do not wish—and, indeed, I am not able—to enter into an interpretation of the function of the various symbols used; I would simply like to demonstrate my thesis about the dynamic “image-making” of God by referring to one section of the mosaic, the third one.¹²

The rectangular floor mosaic, oriented towards Jerusalem, consists of three sections. The upper section has as its central motif the holy ark (ארון הקדש), containing the scrolls of the Torah), with next to it further symbols of Israelite worship—a lighted seven-branched candelabra (*menora*), shofar, lulab and etrog. These symbols used for rituals in the synagogue testify to the function of the place and do not present any problem so far as the prohibition of images is concerned.

¹¹ E. L. Sukenik, *The Ancient Synagogue at Beth Alpha*, Jerusalem 1932.

¹² See picture, page 50.



The central section is square, has a circular structure and is nearly twice as big as the first section. In the centre is a shining figure of the “divine sun” (of the type *Sol Invictus*) with a chariot. Surrounding this are the twelve signs of the zodiac represented as figures. The whole is completed by four female figures in the corners representing the four seasons. This central section of the mosaic, which has several parallels in remains of synagogues from the same period which have been uncovered in the region (for example in Hammath Tiberias), is surprising, not only because of the use of figures in the motifs, but particularly because of the use of pagan religious symbols in the central area of the synagogue (the central motif). The interpretation of this fact is still the subject of much discussion and controversy.¹³ I myself am not a specialist in this field, and I would be glad to hear some new ideas raised in the discussion.

The third section of the mosaic, which is very suitable to support my statement, represents a scene from the biblical story of the testing of Abraham (the sacrifice of Isaac—*Aqedat Jicchaq*; Gen. 22).

The intention of this third section is obvious—to depict a well-known story of how God acts (its culminating scene).

¹³ Cf. M. Avi-Yonah, *Art in Ancient Palestine*, Jerusalem 1981, 61ff; Lee I. Levine (ed.), *The Synagogue in Late Antiquity*, ASOR, Philadelphia 1986 (especially the contribution of Shaye J. D. Cohen and Bezalel Narkiss).

All the actors in the scene are depicted as figures—with the single exception of YHWH. He is represented by rays of light shining from behind a dark cloud, and by the symbol of a hand (*dextera dei*).

The individual actors are also characterised by explicit descriptions. The figures of Abraham and Isaac are denoted directly by their own names, while above the picture of the lamb is written the quotation “behold, the lamb!” These three figures are thus identified by name. The symbols of God’s active presence (the rays of light and the hand) are not accompanied by any nominal description (such as the Tetragramaton, which is found in Renaissance pictures), but by the active exclamation אֵל תְּשַׁלַּח (*‘don’t lay [your hand on]’*). This verbal phrase, which is a direct quotation from the Bible, does not only indicate the culmination of the story-plot and thus the topic of this mosaic; as the inscription, which, in the context of the other ones, designates God, it clearly testifies to the nature of the subject depicted: YHWH, the God of Israel, is represented in this scene as Somebody who acts, who calls out to rescue man. God is present in the scene in his calling out, in the words he addresses. He is not represented by a substantivum (nomen proprium), but by a verbum—by a verbal phras.

It can therefore be said that this third section of the mosaic, although it uses figures as motifs, and although it clearly also depicts YHWH,¹⁴ is not at variance with the basic intention of the prohibition on making images. On the contrary, it represents one of the rare ancient pieces of evidence where we can see, by following the artistic treatment of a biblical scene, the possible ways of interpreting the Second Commandment in the Jewish tradition.

¹⁴ The text Gen. 22,11f speaks of a messenger (*mal’ach*) of YHWH. The artistic symbols of the cloud, rays of light, and hands, however, indicate an attempt to depict God himself.