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JUDAHITE ANICONISM:
A DETERMINING FACTOR IN TENSIONS
BETWEEN THE *AM HĀ'ĀREŠ* AND THE *HAGGŌLĀH*

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Abstract: Judahites' attitudes toward and observance of aniconism developed and intensified over time, particularly after their exile. When they returned to their homeland around 538 BCE to rebuild the temple per the mandate of Cyrus of Persia, the repatriates (*haggōlāh*) were challenged by the people who had remained in the land (*am hā'āreš*). By examining the encounters between the repatriated exiles and the people of the land, the aniconic tendencies of the returning exiles emerges as the underlying reason for that tension.

JUDAHITE ANICONISM

Jill Middlemas argues that aniconism “is the technical term . . . [for] the phenomenon whereby no images are employed or permitted in the worship of a deity.”¹ This precludes the use of anthropomorphic or theriomorphic (animal-like) representations. Judahite aversion to the use of idols was an exception in the broader religious culture of the ancient Near East.² Aniconism is a broad subject,³ and cannot be covered fully within the scope of this paper. Instead, focus will be given to depictions of deity as anthropomorphic statuary during

1. Jill Middlemas, *The Divine Image: Prophetic Aniconic Rhetoric and Its Contribution to the Aniconism Debate*, FAT 2/74 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2015), 1.

2. Patrick D. Miller, *The Religion of Ancient Israel*, LAI (London: SPCK; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000), 24.

3. For other topics regarding aniconism, see the compiled and wide-ranging essays of 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). Some prominent entries include an effort to understand the role of iconographic representations of deity in an aniconic framework (see Izak Cornelius, “The Many Faces of God: Divine Images and Symbols in Ancient Near Eastern Religions,” in *The Image and the Book*, 21–43), and whether the Jerusalem Yahwist cult ever used a graven image in the temple’s holy of holies (see Herbert Niehr, “In Search of YHWH’s Cult Statue in the First Temple,” in *The Image and the Book*, 73–95).

the Iron Age and Persian period in Judah, though much of what is said here is true regarding iconic depictions in general.⁴

Scholars have defined essentially two different types of aniconism, *de facto* and programmatic aniconism. *De facto* aniconism refers to the refusal to use images within a religion, whereas programmatic aniconism (also known as iconoclasm) refers to systematically and actively seeking to destroy images.⁵ The Judahite shift from *de facto* aniconism to programmatic aniconism began in the reign of Hezekiah. By the time he was king, idol worship had crept into the Yahwist cult. To return to what he felt was the true religion, he practiced programmatic aniconism and destroyed these images, including the bronze serpent of Num 21 (2 Kgs 18).⁶ King Josiah went further and destroyed Phoenician, Moabite, and Ammonite idols found in temples throughout the land (2 Kgs 23). Both of these reforms were meant to bring Judah's cult in line with the commandment to not "make . . . an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is . . . on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth" (Exod 20:4). A few decades after Josiah's reign, the Babylonians conquered Judah and deported its upper-class citizens, leaving behind "the poorest people of the land" (2 Kgs 24:14). This paper will explore

4. Iconic depictions could include anthropomorphic statuary, cylinder seals with depictions of animal-like figures, clay jars with human faces or animals etched into them, and so forth. An icon has essentially come to mean anything that resembles a human or animal figure, whether heavenly or earthly. See Cornelius, "The Many Faces of God," 21–22; Ronald S. Hendel, "Aniconism and Anthropomorphism in Ancient Israel," in *The Image and the Book*, 205–28; and Karel van der Toorn, "The Iconic Book: Analogies between the Babylonian Cult of Images and the Veneration of the Torah," in *The Image and the Book*, 229–48.

5. These two distinctions were put forth by Tryggve N.D. Mettinger in *No Graven Image? Israelite Aniconism in Its Ancient Near Eastern Context*, ConBOT 42 (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell International, 1995). Jill Middlemas (*The Divine Image*, 6), suggests three different theories regarding aniconism's development over time: (1) the classic stance—strict aniconism was practiced since the time Moses received the Decalogue, (2) an evolutionary perspective—a gradual rejection of images developed over time, and (3) a revolutionary position—a sudden and dramatic shift brought about the destruction of cultic images. Jacob Milgrom ("The Nature and Extent of Idolatry in Eighth-Seventh Century Judah," *HUCA* 69 [1998]: 1–13) would likely agree with Christoph Uehlinger's conclusions (see Christoph Uehlinger, "Anthropomorphic Cult Statuary in Iron Age Palestine and the Search for Yahweh's Cult Images," in *The Image and the Book*, 97–155) and would suggest that the reforms of Josiah and Hezekiah weren't successful at eradicating idols from the popular religion completely. The author of this work agrees with the conclusions of Uehlinger and Milgrom and reads their data as supportive of the evolutionary theory set forth by Middlemas. Hezekiah initiated reforms (2 Kgs 18) which, though largely reversed by Manasseh (2 Kgs 21:1–18), were later reinforced by Josiah (2 Kgs 23). Thus, the official cult grew progressively more aniconic with time.

6. All biblical quotations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version (NRSV). Thus, when this paper references the "Hebrew Bible," it refers to the Masoretic tradition as represented in the Leningrad codex.

how aniconic tendencies adopted before their captivity both differentiated the exiles from the “people of the land” and served as a primary factor that heightened tension between the two groups.

THE TIMING AND POPULARITY OF ANICONISM

The dating of various books within the Hebrew Bible presents an issue at the heart of aniconic studies. Mosaic authorship claims that the commandment to avoid icons and idols was received at Sinai by Moses before the Israelites even entered the promised land (see Exod 20). Archaeology suggests that Judahites did not tend to aniconism until around the time of Hezekiah’s reforms. This contradiction is resolved if we accept the work of many source critics who date the composition of Exodus and Deuteronomy anywhere from the reign of Hezekiah to the Babylonian exile (c. 716–587 BCE).⁷ Whether the Judahites received the commandment for aniconism at Sinai or during Hezekiah’s purge matters little for the purposes of this paper. That it happened prior to the exile, however, is of great concern. This dating of these works means that the Judahites had received the commandments of aniconism before the exile. By the time that the upper-class Judahites were exiled, there would already have been a policy of aniconism in place within the official cult of YHWH. This would have included the aniconic tendencies associated with the command to not marry foreign women or men. As cited by Nehemiah (Neh 13:23–29; Ezra 9–10), aniconism was an important reason to avoid marrying foreign women.

The aniconic shift in the popular religion of ancient Judahites is most readily seen through the disappearance of Judean pillar-figurines in the homes of Judah around the time of the exile. These clay figurines with exaggerated female reproductive features were previously found in abundance throughout the region.⁸ Judean pillar-figurines have been shown to have been used as representations of Asherah, a female fertility goddess, in the Iron Age,⁹ though

7. See Richard Elliott Friedman, *Who Wrote the Bible?*, rev. and enl. ed. (San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 1997); Martin Noth, *The Deuteronomistic History*, JSOTSup 15 (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1981), 79; Gerhard von Rad, *Deuteronomy: A Commentary*, OTL (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1966), 26.

8. For more on the intended use of these figurines, see Erin Darby, *Interpreting Judean Pillar Figurines: Gender and Empire in Judean Apotropaic Ritual*, FAT 2/69 (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2014); and Francesca Stavrakopoulou and John Barton, eds., *Religious Diversity in Ancient Israel and Judah* (London; New York: T&T Clark International, 2010).

9. See Raz Kletter, *The Judean Pillar-Figurines and the Archaeology of Asherah*, BARIS 636 (Oxford: Tempvs Reparatum, 1996); and Rainer Albertz and Rüdiger Schmitt, *Family and Household Religion in Ancient Israel and the Levant* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2012).

they nearly disappeared once the Judahites were exiled.¹⁰ These figurines were replaced by other cultic statuary during the Persian period, which implies that the “people of the land” utilized icons and idols. The Persian period saw an abundance of cultic statuary that has been found throughout the Levant.¹¹ Of note, however, is the fact that there has been no discovery of Persian period icons or idols at Jerusalem. This suggests that the returning Judahites were aniconic after the exile.

HAGGÔLĀH AND AM HĀ'ĀREṢ

In the opening verses of Ezra, King Cyrus of Persia commissions a group of those Judahites who were exiled to return to their native land and rebuild their temple (Ezra 1:1–5). Several waves of exiled people came over the following decades to work on the monumental project—though when they returned, they found their homeland inhabited by ethnic foreigners. The repatriates are called *haggôlāh*, while those they encountered in their homeland are labelled *am hā'āreṣ*.

The term *haggôlāh* (הגולה) is largely free from the confusion and ambiguity associated with *am hā'āreṣ* (עַם הָאָרֶץ; see below)—its root word “*galah*” (גלה) refers to being exiled, and the term itself means “those that were exiled.” The first attestation of *haggôlāh* in the Hebrew Bible is found in 2 Kings, when the Judahites, the “elite of the land,” were taken “into captivity from Jerusalem to Babylon” (2 Kgs 24:15). It is always used in reference to those Judahites who were in Babylon or had come from Babylon.¹²

The term *am hā'āreṣ* (עַם הָאָרֶץ) is used quite broadly in the biblical text.¹³ Literally it means “people of the land.” The interpretation has for almost a century centered on the idea of a governing body of landowners. This is problematic, though, because there are only a few contexts within which the word is used that could possibly fit this presumed meaning. Even within those limited contexts, there is no conclusive evidence that such instances would allow for

10. Uehlinger, “Anthropomorphic Cult Statuary,” 173–204.

11. Ephraim Stern, *Material Culture of the Land of the Bible in the Persian Period, 538–332 B.C.* (Jerusalem: Bialik Institute and Israel Exploration Society, 1973; repr., Warminster, UK: Aris & Phillips, 1982), 141.

12. Peter R. Bedford, “Diaspora: Homeland Relations in Ezra-Nehemiah,” *VT* 52 (2002): 147–65, esp. 149. For *haggôlāh* in its various forms, see Ezra 1:11; 2:1; 3:8; 4:1; 6:16; 19–21; 8:35; 9:4; 10:6–8, 16; and Neh 7:6; 8:17 (cf. Bedford, “Diaspora,” 149).

13. For other attestations of *am hā'āreṣ* in the Hebrew Bible, see Gen 23:7, 12–13; 42:6; Exod 5:5; Lev 20:2, 4; Num 14:9; 2 Kgs 11:14, 18–20; 15:5; 16:15; 21:24; 23:30, 35; 24:14; 25:3, 19; 1 Chr 5:25; 2 Chr 23:13, 20–21; 26:21; 33:25; 36:1; Ezra 4:4; 10:2, 11; Neh 9:24; 10:30–31; Esth 8:17; Jer 1:18; 34:19; 37:2; 44:21; 52:6, 25; Ezek 7:27; 12:19; 22:29; 33:2; 39:13; 45:16, 22; 46:3, 9; Dan 9:6; Hag 2:4; and Zech 7:5.

this interpretation.¹⁴ In rabbinic understanding the term refers to the uneducated poor farmers throughout the land of Judah; this definition, however, does not fit the context of this paper.¹⁵ The “people of the land” explain their own origins to the returning exiles, stating that they had “been sacrificing to [YHWH] ever since the days of King Esar-haddon of Assyria *who brought us here*” (Ezra 4:2; emphasis added).

In 2 Kgs 17:24 the citizens of the Northern Kingdom were deported and replaced with foreigners, people from “Babylon, Cuthah, Avva, Hamath, and Sepharvaim, and placed them in the cities of Samaria. . .” We later see in 2 Kgs 24:14 that when the Judahites were exiled to Babylon, only the upper class was taken, leaving behind “the poorest people of the land.” It is unknown whether the ethnically diverse northern imports and the remaining lower-class Judahites in the south intermarried and mixed. Such uncertainty leaves unclear which group is to be considered the “people of the land.” For the purposes of this paper, what is most important to remember is that the *am hā`āreš*, whether northern foreigners or southern lower classes, continued to use icons and idols while the Judahite elites were in exile.

POSTEXILIC ANICONIC TENSION

The friction between the *am hā`āreš* and *haggōlāh* is largely expressed through religious contention. The repatriates began their work on the temple and were met by local resistance (Ezra 4:1–4).¹⁶ That there was a distinction between the locals and the exiles is clear by the latter’s declaration: “You shall have no part with us . . . but *we alone* will build to the Lord” (Ezra 4:3; emphasis added). The *am hā`āreš* were trying to interrupt the temple building of the repatriates. Once the temple was completed, it began to function as it did prior to the exile (Ezra 3:2; 6:18). The same teachings that inspired Hezekiah and Josiah’s aniconic reforms were directing the worship of the *haggōlāh* and were resisted by the *am hā`āreš*.¹⁷

This argument is not without its challenges. Though the *am hā`āreš* were trying to interrupt the exiles’ reconstruction of the temple, this does not equate

14. John Tracy Thames, Jr., “A New Discussion of the Meaning of the Phrase ‘*am hā`āreš* in the Hebrew Bible,” *JBL* 130 (2011): 109–25, esp. 110.

15. For more on the use of the word in rabbinic literature, see Solomon Zeitlin, “The Am Haarez: A Study in the Social and Economic Life of the Jews before and after the Destruction of the Second Temple,” *JQR* 23 (1932): 45–61.

16. Bedford, “Diaspora,” 151.

17. The aniconic tendencies of the repatriates weren’t the only factors in the tension between them and the idolatrous people of the land. Nehemiah had to correct a problem with Sabbath observance (Neh 13:15–22), since the “people of the land” were trying to sell wares in Jerusalem on the Sabbath.

to a local fear that the *haggolah* were reinstating aniconic policy. However, the biblical authors call them “adversaries” (Ezra 4:1) and suggest that their attempts to halt the temple’s construction were really plots to keep correct religious practices from being restored. In the perspective of the repatriated temple builders, the *am hā’āreṣ* were their enemies because they were trying to thwart their efforts to bring back something that was crucial to Judahite identity (and threatening to that of the *am hā’āreṣ*): the aniconic cult.

Over time, those who had returned from exile and their posterity intermarried with the *am hā’āreṣ* (Ezra 9). In Ezra 9:11, Ezra laments the wickedness of the people in choosing to marry foreign wives, which had been prohibited “by your servants the prophets, saying, ‘The land that you are entering to possess is a land unclean with the pollutions of the peoples of the lands, with their abominations. They have filled it from end to end with their uncleanness.’” The word for “abominations” (תועבה) is also used in Deut 7:25–26, where YHWH promises the people that he will deliver the Israelites from the inhabitants of the land. He further exhorts them to destroy their idols (פסל) and “abhorrent thing[s]” (תועבה).

Part of Ezra’s teachings were centered on correcting this practice, trying to reclaim the people from the “abominations” (תועבה) of those that they married. He issued a call to the people that they “send away all these wives . . . according to the law” (Ezra 10:3), drawing on the commandment (Deut 7:1–6) to not marry foreign Canaanites. In this pericope, YHWH teaches that marrying these women would “turn away [their] children from following [him], to serve other gods” (Deut 7:4). This is followed by some of the most powerful aniconic language in the Hebrew Bible: “But this is how you must deal with them: break down their altars, smash their pillars, hew down their sacred poles, and burn their idols with fire” (Deut 7:5). This intense rhetoric recurs when YHWH repeats this instruction later in the same chapter: “The images of their gods you shall burn with fire . . . Do not bring an abhorrent thing (תועבה) into your house, or you will be set apart for destruction like it” (Deut 7:25–26). The construction of the temple and challenges with marrying foreign wives formed a focal point of contention between the returning exiles (*haggōlāh* הגולה) and the “people of the land” (*am hā’āreṣ* עמ הארץ).¹⁸

Central to the contention between the exiles and the “people of the land” was the concern of the *haggōlāh* to remain true to their aniconic practices

18. Nehemiah may also have been frustrated with the “people of the land,” whose children, as a result of their interethnic marriages, were losing the “language of Judah” (Neh 13:23–29, esp. 24). This issue of language loss is really centered on the prophetic encouragement to avoid idolatrous influences from foreign cultures. When he came to Jerusalem, Nehemiah again had to correct the people for yielding to marriage with foreign wives.

and thereby retain the purity of the Yahwist cult. Only by doing this would they receive the promised strength and deliverance from their enemies at the hand of YHWH (see Deut 7:12–24, which lists the very blessings which would have saved them from the threats of the Babylonian and Assyrian invasions). Aniconism was a proactive defensive policy against future invasion by foreign powers and cultures. This notion reinforces the thesis of this paper, which has shown that the aniconic tendencies of the Judahite exiles heightened tensions between them and the idol-worshipping “people of the land.”