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IMAGES OF YAHWEH

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STUDENTS of the religion and of the records of the Israelites are practically unanimous in asserting that Yahweh was at various times represented in the form of a sacred image. The Hebrew Scriptures, with their descriptions of specific instances of image worship and with their condemnation of such practices, bear witness to the idolatry of the Israelites, but never identify, in unequivocal terms, any image with the national deity. This argument from silence carries no weight with the critics who, when they do not regard the existence of images of Yahweh as axiomatic, prove their contention by a very simple syllogism: A certain Israelite is a worshipper of Yahweh; he makes an image; therefore the image represents Yahweh. The argument is perfectly valid if we assume that no worshipper of Yahweh ever served other gods, a proposition which not only cannot be demonstrated, but which is contrary to the historical facts known to us; there is not the slightest evidence that a Jew, who never worshipped any other god than Yahweh, ever made an idol. The first and second commandments were never observed separately in Judaism, but neither of them was consistently observed in ancient Israel.

The existence of idols of Yahweh cannot be regarded as a known fact nor is it susceptible of irrefutable proof, as I hope to show; it is merely a working hypothesis. Conjecture has a legitimate place in historical investigation, when our information is fragmentary and open to various interpretations, but it should

never be mistaken for a demonstrable fact. We need not adopt the rigid principle of J. S. Mill, namely that a hypothesis, if it is "destined always to remain a hypothesis" is not "genuinely scientific"; nevertheless it is legitimate to test the validity of a conjecture by inquiring whether it rests on a sound interpretation of known facts and whether it furnishes a plausible solution of historical problems. The purpose of this article is to find out whether the physical representation of Yahweh can be inferred from a study of the sources, and whether it contributes to our understanding of the development of the religion of the Israelites. A hypothesis which fails to pass these tests is useless and misleading, and therefore deserves to be discarded.

I

An unbiased examination of the evidence produced to prove that images of Yahweh were not unknown to the Israelites must take into account all the references to idolatry contained in the Old Testament, but need not concern itself with those unrecorded cases of iconic worship that modern scholars have read between the lines of the ancient sources, lest the argument move in a circle. Thus the idols that have been discovered in the adytum of the Solomonic temple by Schneider¹ and inside the ark of Yahweh Šebaoth by Gressmann² may be regarded as irrelevant in this connection.

Equally questionable is the evidence furnished by the Pentateuchal laws prohibiting idolatry and by the prophetic polemic against images. The identification of the condemned idols with Yahweh is accomplished either by means of drastic

¹ H. Schneider, *Zwei Aufsätze zur Religionsgeschichte Vorderasiens*, pp. 20 ff.; cf. *Kultur und Denken der Babylonier und Juden*, p. 270. His assertion that in the days of Solomon the old serpent idol was substituted with an anthropomorphic statue of Yahweh is based on Is. 6 and 2 Ki. 16 14.

² *Die Schriften des A. T. in Auswahl*, 2nd. edition, II/1, p. 213: the ark contained a statue of Baal and one of Astarte-Anathjahu; cf. *Die Lade Jahwes*.

textual emendation³ or by a mysterious divination of the unexpressed thoughts of the ancient writers.⁴

Since all general references to idols in the Old Testament can be plausibly understood as allusions to foreign gods, none of them being an unmistakable record of images of Yahweh, the evidence for the physical representation of the god of the Israelites can be sought only in specific sacred objects. As a matter of fact, the graven image of Micah, the ephod, the teraphim, the brazen serpent, and the bull images have been regarded by a number of scholars as images of Yahweh. Of these, only the bulls deserve serious consideration.

The story of Micah's graven image is related in Judg. 17²⁻⁴. The passage was recognized to be corrupt and secondary by the commentators, until Professor Arnold (*Ephod and Ark*, p. 105) proved convincingly that it is a marginal interpolation. Any attempt to base an argument on the historicity of this narrative can be classed with the labors of Sisyphus.

If the word ephod, where it is used for a sacred object placed conspicuously in a sanctuary, signifies an idol, there is no reason to doubt that it was an image of Yahweh. Un-

³ H. Schmidt (ΕΤΧΑΠΙΕΤΗΠΙΟΝ, *Studien . . . Hermann Gunkel dargebracht . . .*, 1923; vol. I, pp. 78 f.) rejects as a gloss the words of the second commandment ("any manner of likeness, of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or in the water under the earth") that identify the "graven image" with gods other than Yahweh, because the author of the Decalogue, who has already disposed of the other gods in the first commandment, "wished obviously to prohibit a representation of Yahweh in an image."

⁴ E. Kautzsch (*Biblische Theologie des Alten Testaments*, p. 216) knows that "elilim" is used by Isaiah five times for images of Yahweh, although twice in this prophet the word unquestionably means heathen idols; his only evidence seems to be that those objects were found in the territory of Judah and Samaria. On the same page he regards it as possible to find an allusion to images of Yahweh in Jer. 1 16; 25 4; 32 30, although on page 277 he says that Jeremiah "zwar gegen Götzenbilder, aber allem Anschein nach nirgends gegen Jahwebilder zu eifern Anlaß fand." Against such fluctuating opinions we must emphasize the fact, obvious though it be, that the polemic against idolatry in the Old Testament (on which cf. my paper in *JBL* 43, 229 ff.) does not explicitly refer to images of Yahweh.

fortunately for this common interpretation, the word ephod means a priestly garment, worn also by laymen participating in religious ceremonies. The riddle baffled the efforts of the critics until Arnold (*Ephod and Ark*) found the solution in the Septuagint text of 1 Sam. 14 18 (where we read "ark" instead of the "ephod" of the Masoretic text). "The reading **תִּדְמָן** [ephod], wherever in the Old Testament it stands for a solid object, has been deliberately substituted by Jewish scribes for a more troublesome word" (p. 10), namely **אָרְכָּה** (ark). This explanation is so simple and so plausible that one wonders at the reluctance of some critics to adopt it.⁵

That the mysterious teraphim were images of Yahweh is a mere guess; nothing is known about the meaning of the word. Even Kautzsch (*op. cit.*, pp. 97 f.), who adopts this view, admits that Gen. 31 19, 34 f. and especially Ez. 21 26 prove that this object was not necessarily an image of Yahweh, although in the other passages where the word occurs it may be such. The one fact that can be regarded as certain from the use of the word in the Old Testament is that the teraphim "did not represent Yahweh" (Stade, *Biblische Theologie des Alten Testaments*, p. 121). The conjecture of Arnold (*op. cit.*, p. 136) seems the most probable, namely that they may "represent collectively the lots employed in connection with the sacred box."

The brazen serpent that Moses made in the wilderness when poisonous snakes invaded the camp of the Israelites (Num. 21 4-9, E), if the event is historical, was not an idol but, like the five golden plague-boils and the five golden mice made by the Philistines afflicted with the plague (1 Sam. 6 4 f.),

⁵ Budde (*ZA W* 1921, pp. 1 ff.) suggests, without any such documentary basis as that furnished by the LXX of 1 Sam. 14, that "ephod" (when a solid object) is a surrogate for "abbir" which he translates with "bull," although the word means "the strong one" (cf. Torczyner, *ZA W* 1921, pp. 296 ff.). Schmidt (*op. cit.*, p. 97) adopts this view. The very admission that "ephod" stands for another word makes it necessary to discard this object as a piece of undisputed evidence for the existence of images of Yahweh; for though the object was used in the worship of Yahweh, it is by no means evident that it was an idol.

a votive gift presented to an angered deity to obtain relief (cf. Procksch, *Elohimquelle*, p. 108). The story of the destruction of Nehushtan by order of Hezekiah (2 Ki. 18 4) is much later, even if it was contained in a source of the Deuteronomistic Book of Kings.⁶ It is not inconceivable that incense was burned in the temple of Jerusalem to a serpent idol in the days of Hezekiah, although the only evidence is a single verse of doubtful authenticity; but even so, nothing indicates that the serpent was an image of Yahweh, as a few critics maintain.⁷ The fact that Nehushtan was housed in the Temple is irrelevant, since Assyrian gods were worshipped in the temple in the days of Manasseh. The identification of that idol with Yahweh would have some justification if, as some suppose,⁸ the serpent was the tribal god of Levi; but this conjecture rests chiefly on etymological speculations of questionable force. It may safely be said, with the majority of critics, that the serpent image did not represent Yahweh.

The small bull images set up by Jeroboam I in the old sanctuaries of Dan and Bethel are regarded as symbols of Yahweh by practically all those who have written on the subject. The story as we have it (1 Ki. 12 26-29, 30 b) is written by the Deuteronomistic editor of the Book of Kings from the point of view of a Jew who regarded Deuteronomy as the Law of Moses and the Northern Kingdom as guilty of political sedition and religious apostasy (cf. Wellhausen, *Prolegomena zur Geschichte Israels*⁹, pp. 280 f.). According to this biased account, Jeroboam set up the bull images to

⁶ So Hölischer (*Eucharisterion* I, 210), who regards the first part of the verse as Deuteronomistic and the second old. It should be noted however that the verse is linguistically a unit and was written by a man whose vernacular was not Hebrew and who disregarded the idiomatic *consecutio temporum* in his use of the perfect. Verse 4 breaks the connection between v. 3 and v. 5, and may be a gloss; this would explain its omission by the Chronicler.

⁷ Benzinger (*Die Bücher der Könige*, p. 177; *Hebräische Archäologie*², p. 328); Schneider (*Zwei Aufsätze zur Religionsgeschichte Vorderasiens*, pp. 17 ff.); cf. Baentsch, *ad Num.* 21 4-9.

⁸ Meyer (*Die Israeliten*, p. 427); Skipwith (*JQR* 11, 264 f.); Meek (*AJSL* 37, 109).

prevent his subjects from going up to Jerusalem to worship in the temple, and said: "Here are thy gods, O Israel, which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt." These words do not mean: "Here is Yahweh!"; but they suggest that *those gods*, and not Yahweh, brought up Israel from the land of Egypt (cf. Baudissin, *Studien zur Semitischen Religionsgeschichte* I, 80); such is the interpretation of the words found in later passages of the Old Testament (1 Ki. 14 9; Ps. 106 19-21; 2 Chr. 11 13-15; 13 8-11). "The sin of Jeroboam" was, in the opinion of post-exilic writers, the introduction of the worship of "other gods" and not the physical representation of Yahweh. Polemizing with the declaration placed in the mouth of Jeroboam, the Deuteronomistic redactors assert insistently and repeatedly that Yahweh led Israel out of Egypt, and Deut. 32 12 says explicitly: "Yahweh alone did lead him, and there was no strange god with him." The story of Aaron's golden calf, likewise, shows that the bulls were not regarded, in the Southern kingdom at any rate, as images of Yahweh. Two entirely different stories are interwoven in Ex. 32. The oldest one (vv. 1 a, 5 b, 6, [9-14], 15-19, 25-29) relates that the children of Israel, during the absence of Moses, celebrated a festival of Yahweh with sacrifices, eating, drinking, orgiastic dances, and (according to the interpretation of 32 6 given by Luther [Meyer, *Israeliten*, p. 178]) immoral practices like those described in Hos. 4 13 f. The calf appears only in a gloss to v. 19. The other account (vv. 1 b-5 a, 7-8, 20-24, [30-34], 35), which is later than the Deuteronomistic Book of Kings, describes the making of the golden calf. In the first story Moses summons the Levites to punish the nation, in the second Yahweh himself "smote the people." We are only concerned with the second narrative; it is clearly based on the Deuteronomistic story of Jeroboam's bulls, for we read (vv. 4 and 8): "These are thy gods, O Israel, which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt," although Aaron had only made one image (cf. Neh. 9 18). This story is a piece of fiction written to vilify the sanctuaries of Dan and Bethel, but it is significant that its author regarded the bull images as pagan idols and not as representations of Yahweh: "Up, make us gods who shall go

before us" (vv. 1, 23). The verses in the book of Hosea denouncing the bull images (8 5 f., 10 5 f., 13 2) seem to be anti-Samaritan glosses; in any case it is unthinkable that a worshipper of Yahweh would have dared abuse a symbol of his god in such terms as these.

Our oldest source for the knowledge of Jeroboam's religious policy is dated nearly four centuries after his time and patently misunderstands his motives. Even granting that the Deuteronomistic editor of the Book of Kings used an older source (Hölscher, *Eucharisterion*, I, 183), and granting that it was substantially reliable, all we know about the matter is that Jeroboam set up a golden calf at Bethel and another one at Dan. There seems to be no reason to doubt the historicity of these royal gifts to two ancient sanctuaries; but when we attempt to read the king's mind declaring that the two bull images were intended to represent Yahweh, we simply make a guess that is at variance with our sources, for they unanimously identify those idols with other gods. This conjecture rests entirely on a questionable interpretation of the words: "These are thy gods, O Israel, which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt." It must assume that Yahweh was conceived as a bull (which is unwarranted) or that the bull was worshipped in Canaan (for which the evidence is very scanty, cf. Wood, *JBL* 35, 240 f.) and that this Palestinian worship was adopted by the Israelites (e. g. Waterman, *AJSL* 31, 235 ff.). We know that the worship of the Baalim had a profound influence on the religion of the Israelites, but what proves that one of them was represented as a bull? We hear of no bull-image in any of the sanctuaries of Canaan, other than Dan and Bethel; the closest parallel is furnished by the twelve bulls supporting the laver in Solomon's temple. After all, the bulls of Jeroboam may have been purely ornamental. If the idea of the bulls did not come from Solomon, which seems doubtful, it is not unlikely that, as Ezekiel believed (23 8; cf. 20 7 f., 16, 18, 24), Jeroboam was influenced by the religion of Egypt; he had recently returned from that country and was probably allied with Sheshonk I (Shishak) (cf. Lehmann-Haupt, *Israel*, pp. 68-72). On the whole, it seems more probable that the bulls

were of Egyptian origin rather than that they were Israelitish, Palestinian, or (according to J. Hehn, *Die Biblische und die Babylonische Gottesidee*, p. 364) Babylonian (Hadad-Rammān). That at any time the bulls of Dan and Bethel were identified with Yahweh is a hypothesis that is neither necessary nor probable.⁹

II

The current assumption that Yahweh was not infrequently represented by idols placed in the sanctuaries of the Israelites is thus shown to be a mountain hanging on a thread, a conjecture resting on the current interpretation of 1 Ki. 12 28 b. Nevertheless, a hypothesis, even unsupported by the facts, may be useful if it furnishes a plausible solution to baffling problems; is this the case? The crucial problem in the history of the religion of Israel is the transformation of the tribal god Yahweh into the sole deity of the world. Habitual iconic representation of Yahweh not only does not help us to understand this process, but renders it well nigh inconceivable; if, on the contrary, through historical circumstances Yahweh was never pictured in any physical form, the process leading to monotheism and the instinctive horror of Judaism for all idols becomes intelligible. The view that Yahweh's worship was imageless is supported not only by an argument from silence, for the sources contain not a single clear reference to an idol of this god, but by the historical development of the religion of the Israelites as we know it from the Old Testament.

The oldest shrines devoted to the worship of Yahweh of which there is record were not in Canaan, but in the region of the Sinai peninsula and of Edom (Moore, *Judges*, pp. 134, 139 f.). There is reason to believe that the Israelite tribes did not all adopt the worship of this god at the same moment, although in the days of Deborah Yahweh was already the god of a confederation comprising ten tribes. Prior to the settle-

⁹ Luther and Meyer (Meyer, *Die Israeliten*, pp. 130, 282 ff.) followed by Meek (*AJSL* 37, 119 f.) assert that the tribal god of Joseph (Ephraim) was a bull-god, but their arguments are by no means convincing.

ment in Canaan there can be no question of images of Yahweh; apparently there were no idols in the ancient shrines of Sinai and Horeb, and the nomads lacked the technical skill required for their manufacture, even if they had been inclined to carry with them a likeness of their god. "Images of the gods belong to a comparatively advanced state in the history of religion" (Moore, *Encyclopaedia Biblica* II, 2155).

In Canaan the Israelites appropriated the local shrines. Most of them were open air "high places" with an altar of rude stones; a pillar of stone and a wooden post symbolized the presence of the local numen. Temples housing an image were rare; the Baalim were not, so far as we know, represented by idols.¹⁰ The Hebrew literature earlier than 621 B. C. contains no mention of idols of the Canaanites, and it is perhaps no accident that the patriarchal stories, which are, on the whole, of Palestinian origin, never refer to idols (if the teraphim of Laban were not iconic objects). Even the Deuteronomic Code, wherein all Canaanitish sacred objects are doomed to destruction, contains but one reference to idols.¹¹

It seems unlikely that a god whose worship was originally aniconic, transplanted into a country where native idols housed in temples were practically unknown, should become the object of an idolatrous cult. As a matter of fact, before the mysterious bulls of Jeroboam, there is no record of a sanctuary of the Israelites containing an image. The temple of Solomon is the only one described in detail; in the adytum, where the ancient sanctuaries had a statue of the patron god, only the ark of Yahweh Šebaoth stood to symbolize the presence of the deity, although Solomon could command the best talent

¹⁰ Kittel, *Geschichte des Volkes Israel*², I, 160 f.; 560; Wood, *JBL* 35, 231.

¹¹ Deut. 12 s may be an interpolation from 7 s (just as part of this verse was inserted in Ex. 34 13 [LXX]) and seems to disturb the connection between v. 2 and v. 4. It may be worth noting that when the Chronicler uses this verse (2 Chr. 14 s; 31 1: elsewhere in Chron. *Asmanim* is used for *masseboth*) he leaves out the idols. Hos. 11 s and Mic. 5 13 f., which contain references to the idols of Canaan, are unquestionably spurious.

of Tyre and set up twelve bulls in the court of the temple. Likewise in the sanctuaries of Ophrah, Dan, Bethel, Nob, and Shiloh, an ark, and no statue, was the visible token of the presence of Yahweh. This sacred box was "a sort of shrine or refuge within which the numen could work its mysterious spell upon the lots while shielded from the scrutiny of the human eye" (Arnold, *Ephod and Ark*, p. 133). Like the pillars and posts, the ark was a domicile of the deity. It was not identified with Yahweh himself (1 Sam. 2 28) as Wellhausen (*Israelitische und Jüdische Geschichte*⁷, p. 31) says. To see the face of Yahweh meant to approach the sacred box (1 Sam. 1 22) and not, as Kautzsch (*Biblische Theologie des Alten Testaments*, p. 94) believes, to look at an idol, even though this may have been the original meaning of the phrase (cf. the Assyrian *amāru pan īli*).

Idolatry was never an integral part of the religion of Yahweh; among the Israelites it was sporadic in the public worship and always due to foreign influence, if we may judge from the extant Hebrew literature prior to 621 B. C. (cf. *JBL* 43, 229—233). It cannot be fortuitous that the Old Testament, with its exhaustive denunciation of the worship of foreign gods and of idols (the first two of the ten commandments being correlative), contains no condemnation of images of Yahweh. The sweeping polemic against idolatry after 621 B. C. is to be explained by two factors: a misunderstanding of the real character of the religion of the Israelites in Canaan in the pre-exilic period, and a growing horror of heathenism. The religion of Canaan was regarded, after 621, as essentially idolatrous: the "high places" are said to contain images,¹² the baalim are confused with idols,¹³ the Canaanites become habitual idolaters,¹⁴ and the *asherah* (wooden post) is conceived as a goddess represented by images (Moore, *Judges*, pp. 86 f.). Even the priestly instruments of ancient Israel, the sacred box

¹² Lev. 26 30; Num. 33 52; Deut. 7 5; 12 2; Ez. 6 4, 6, 13; 44 10, 12; Mic. 5 13 f.; Ps. 78 58; 2 Chr. 33 19; 34 2, 4, 7.

¹³ Hos. 2 10c; 11 2; cf. 1 Sam. 7 8 f.; 2 Ki. 11 18 (= 2 Chr. 23 17); 2 Chr. 24 7; 28 2.

¹⁴ Num. 23 52; Deut. 7 25; 29 16; 2 Ki. 17 12; Mic. 1 7; Ps. 106 37 f.

and, probably, the teraphim, were mistaken for idols in post-exilic days.¹⁵ By a similar process all religious practices of foreign nations were increasingly regarded as idolatrous, to the point that foreign gods were considered nothing more than mere objects of wood and stone.¹⁶ The Assyrian cults which were introduced into Judah in the days of Ahaz and Manasseh were in general aniconic (Stade, *Biblische Theologie des Alten Testaments* I, 236); later, however, such innovations were regarded as downright idolatry.¹⁷ Heathenism and idolatry became thus synonymous terms; in fact, 'abodah zarah (foreign worship) came to mean idolatrous worship. The caricatures of idolaters in Jer. 10 1-16 and especially in Is. 44 9-20 found many imitators, and some (like the author of the Epistle of Jeremiah) with notable literary skill. If these clever satires delighted the Jews and gave them a feeling of decided superiority over the gentiles, their biting irony was not the least of the reasons for the prevailing animosity against the Jews in the Hellenistic and Roman world.

Among the Greeks, some solitary thinkers, like Xenophanes, Heraclitus, and Zeno, derided and condemned the idols, as a

¹⁵ Although in the ancient records the ark and the teraphim are sometimes called "elohim" (Gen. 31 30, 32; Judg. 18 24; 1 Sam. 4 7), there is no evidence that the apparatus used for divination included an image. By the substitution of "ephod" for "ark" in a number of passages, which Arnold has proved in his book entitled *Ephod and Ark*, the original meaning of the context was obscured, and the solid "ephod" came to be regarded as an idol (Judg. 8 27; 18-19). This Jewish misapprehension has been sanctioned by modern critics, and Wellhausen himself (*Prolegomena*², p. 184) adds to the confusion when he declares that the ark of Yahweh "was in ancient times an idol." Laban's teraphim are already regarded as idols in Gen. 35 2, 4 (cf. Jubilees 31 2; Josephus, *Antiq.* I, XIX, 9-11).

¹⁶ On the identification of heathen gods with their idols, see Baudissin, *Studien zur Semitischen Religionsgeschichte*, I, 80-96.

¹⁷ For Ahaz, see 2 Chr. 28 2; for Manasseh, 2 Ki. 21 7, 11, 21; 2 Chr. 33 7, 15, 19, 22. Although no idols were mentioned in the Deuteronomistic account of the reforms of Josiah (2 Ki. 23), they were added by the Chronicler (2 Chr. 34 2, 4, 7), to whom we are also indebted for a fictitious description of the idolatry of Jehoash (2 Chr. 24 18) and of Amaziah (25 14).

result of philosophical speculations leading them to monotheism; but they made no lasting impression on the religion of the masses: polytheism and image-worship were rooted too deeply in the beliefs and practices of their contemporaries. In Israel, conversely, when the prophets proclaimed to their nation the unlimited power and the moral character of Yahweh, their message bore fruit. Their people was wicked, prone to seek the favor of other gods, and placed excessive trust in the efficacy of ritual and sacrifices, but it was not wholly unprepared for this religion of the spirit, for its only national god had never been pictured in the image of a serpent, of a bull, or even of a man.