



THE SIN OF THE CALF
THE RISE OF THE BIBLE'S
NEGATIVE ATTITUDE TOWARD
THE GOLDEN CALF

YOUN HO CHUNG

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The Rise of the Bible's Negative Attitude Toward the Golden Calf

Youn Ho Chung

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ABBREVIATIONS

AB	Anchor Bible
ABD	<i>Anchor Bible Dictionary</i> . Edited by D. N. Freedman. 6 vols. New York, 1992
<i>AbrN</i>	<i>Abr-Nahrain</i>
AJBI	<i>Annual of the Japanese Biblical Institute</i>
AJSL	<i>American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures</i>
AJSR	<i>Association for Jewish Studies Review</i>
ANEP	<i>The Ancient Near East in Pictures Relating to the Old Testament</i> . Edited by J. B. Pritchard. Princeton, 1954
ANET	<i>Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament</i> . Edited by J. B. Pritchard. 3d ed. Princeton, 1969
AOAT	Alter Orient and Altes Testament
ASV	American Standard Version
ATD	Das Alte Testament Deutsch
<i>AuOr</i>	<i>Aula orientalis</i>
BA	<i>Biblical Archaeologist</i>
BAR	<i>Biblical Archaeology Review</i>
BASOR	<i>Bulletin of the American Schools of Oriental Research</i>
BDB	Brown, F., S. R. Driver, and C. A. Briggs. <i>A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament</i> . Oxford, 1907
BHS	<i>Biblia Hebraica Stuttgartensia</i>
<i>Bib</i>	<i>Biblica</i>
BN	<i>Biblische Notizen</i>
BR	<i>Biblical Review</i>
BTB	<i>Biblical Theology Bulletin</i>
BWANT	Beiträge zur Wissenschaft vom Alten und Neuen Testament
BZAW	Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft
CBC	Cambridge Bible Commentary
CBQ	<i>Catholic Biblical Quarterly</i>
CC	Continental Commentary
<i>CurBS</i>	<i>Currents in Research: Biblical Studies</i>
DBAT	<i>Dielheimer Blätter zum Alten Testament und seiner Rezeption in der Alten Kirche</i>
DDD	<i>Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible</i> . Edited by K. van der Toorn, B. Becking, and P. W. van der Horst. Leiden, 1995
EAEHL	<i>Encyclopedia of Archaeological Excavations in the Holy Land</i> . Edited by M. Avi-Yonah. 4 vols. Jerusalem, 1975
<i>EncJud</i>	<i>Encyclopaedia Judaica</i> . 16 vols. Jerusalem, 1972

<i>EvQ</i>	<i>Evangelical Quarterly</i>
<i>ETL</i>	<i>Ephemerides theologicae lovanienses</i>
ESV	English Standard Version
EV	English Bible verse numbering
<i>EvQ</i>	<i>Evangelical Quarterly</i>
GKC	<i>Gesenius' Hebrew Grammar</i> . Edited by E. Kautzsch. Translated by A. E. Cowley. 2d. ed. Oxford, 1910
<i>HeyJ</i>	<i>Heythrop Journal</i>
<i>HS</i>	<i>Hebrew Studies</i>
<i>HTR</i>	<i>Harvard Theological Review</i>
<i>HUCA</i>	<i>Hebrew Union College Annual</i>
ICC	International Critical Commentary
<i>IEJ</i>	<i>Israel Exploration Journal</i>
<i>Int</i>	<i>Interpretation</i>
<i>JAOS</i>	<i>Journal of the American Oriental Society</i>
<i>JARCE</i>	<i>Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt</i>
<i>JBL</i>	<i>Journal of Biblical Literature</i>
<i>JNES</i>	<i>Journal of Near Eastern Studies</i>
JPS	Jewish Publication Society of America, Translations to the Holy Scriptures
<i>JQR</i>	<i>Jewish Quarterly Review</i>
<i>JSOT</i>	<i>Journal for the Study of the Old Testament</i>
JSOTSup	Journal for the Study of the Old Testament: Supplement Series
<i>JSS</i>	<i>Journal of Semitic Studies</i>
<i>JTS</i>	<i>Journal of Theological Studies</i>
<i>KAR</i>	<i>Keilschrifttexte aus Assur religiösen Inhalts</i> . Edited by E. Ebeling. Leipzig, 1919–23
KJV	King James Version
<i>KTU</i>	<i>Die keilalphabetischen Texte aus Ugarit</i> . Edited by M. Dietrich, O. Loretz, and J. Sanmartín. AOAT 24/1. Neukirchen–Vluyn, 1976. 2d enlarged ed. of <i>KTU: The Cuneiform Alphanumeric Texts from Ugarit, Ras Ibn Hani, and Other Places</i> . Edited by M. Dietrich, O. Loretz, and J. Sanmartín. Münster, 1995
LXX	Septuagint
MDB	<i>Mercer Dictionary of the Bible</i> . Edited by W. E. Mills. Macon, 1990
MT	Masoretic text
NAS	New American Standard Bible with Codes (1977)
NAU	New American Standard Bible with Codes (1995)
NIB	New International Version (BR)
NIV	New International Version (1984) (US)
NEB	The New English Bible
NCBC	The New Century Bible Commentary
<i>OLP</i>	<i>Oriental lovaniensia periodica</i>
OTL	Old Testament Library
<i>OTWSA</i>	<i>Oudtestamentiese Werkgemeenskap van Suid-Africa</i>
<i>RevExp</i>	<i>Review and Expositor</i>

RSV	Revised Standard Version
RV	Revised Version
SEÅ	<i>Svensk exegetisk årsbok</i>
SEL	<i>Studi epigrafici e linguistici</i>
SBLSP	<i>Society of Biblical Literature: Seminar Papers</i>
SJOT	<i>Scandinavian Journal of the Old Testament Studia Theologica</i>
StudBib	<i>Studia Biblica</i>
TDOT	<i>Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament</i> . Edited by G. J. Botterweck and H. Ringgren. Translated by J. T. Willis, G. W. Bromiley, and D. E. Green. 8 vols. Grand Rapids, 1974–
TLOT	<i>Theological Lexicon of the Old Testament</i> . Edited by E. Jenni, with assistance from C. Westermann. Translated by M. E. Biddle. 3 vols. Peabody, Mass., 1997
TRev	<i>Theologische Revue</i>
UF	<i>Ugaritic-Forschungen</i>
VAS	<i>Vorderasiatische Schriftdenkmäler der königlichen Museen zu Berlin</i>
VT	<i>Vetus Testamentum</i>
VTSup	Vetus Testamentum Supplements
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary
ZAW	<i>Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft</i>
ZTK	<i>Zeitschrift für wissenschaftliche Theologie</i>

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

1. *The Aim of the Study*

The relationship of the biblical tradition to golden calf worship seems to be entirely negative. In the Torah and the books of Kings, harsh criticism is wielded against the golden calf the Israelites made in the wilderness (Exod 32; Deut 9:7–10:11) and the calves erected by Jeroboam ben Nebat (1 Kgs 12:26–33) at Dan and Bethel during his reign over the northern kingdom of Israel. The book of Hosea contains a polemic against the calf at Samaria, which is perceived as the object of idolatrous worship (and is rejected by YHWH) (8:5; 10:5; 13:2). The calf is also referred to derogatorily in the book of Psalms (Ps 106:19) and in the sermonizing historical survey in the book of Nehemiah (Neh 9:18).

The antiquity of calf worship in Israel is confirmed by a bronze icon found in the region of the tribe of Manasseh, and dated to the Judges period (Iron Age I).¹ This discovery may support the hypothesis that calf worship was practiced in Jeroboam's northern kingdom of Israel, as related in the story in 1 Kgs 12:26–33. And even if this narrative, in its current version, is certainly a Deuteronomistic work, it apparently relies on an ancient, pre-Deuteronomistic version of the story, based on a reliable historical tradition.

The attribution of the establishment of calf worship to Jeroboam is credible therefore, but given the evidence of the antiquity of the practice in Israel, it becomes clear that Jeroboam did not invent it, but rather merely breathed new life into it. Hence, the question arises as to whether Jeroboam in truth set up the golden calves in order to buck the postulates of the Israelite religion of his time; that is: Was Jeroboam's golden calf really meant to lure Israel into worship of other gods or idolatry? This question is also raised from another direction: the scathing criticism of Jeroboam in the books of Kings for committing the "sin" of the golden

1. A. Mazar, "The 'Bull Site'—An Iron Age I Open Cult Place," *BASOR* 247 (1982): 27–42.

calf belongs entirely to its Deuteronomistic editing layer. This layer includes, as aforementioned, the narrative attributing the establishment of calf worship to Jeroboam (1 Kgs 12:26–32), and the same applies to the story of the prophet from Judah who comes to Bethel (1 Kgs 13), in the characterization of Jehu’s sins (2 Kgs 10:29), and in the typical Deuteronomistic concluding remarks (1 Kgs 14:16; 16:2; 2 Kgs 10:28; 17:16). Yet this layer is merely reflective of the position of the Deuteronomistic editor of the books of Kings in the middle of the sixth century B.C.E., while in the pre-Deuteronomistic layer of 1 Kgs 12 there is no indication that this act on the part of Jeroboam was considered deserving of repudiation from the perspective of Israelite religion in his day.

Similarly, the polemic against calf worship in the Torah merely reflects the attitude of the composers of the documents, which postdate Jeroboam’s time: the Elohist narrative dates at the earliest to the second half of the eighth century B.C.E., while Deuteronomy was composed no earlier than the seventh century B.C.E.

Hence, the most ancient source in which the calf cult in the northern kingdom meets with condemnation is a collection of prophecies preserved in the book of Hosea (8:4–5; 10:5–6; 13:2), which have been dated to the middle of the eighth century B.C.E. Before that, at least as far as we know, even the greatest zealots in the kingdom of Israel—Elijah, Elisha, and King Jehu—neither spoke out nor acted against it. Moreover, it appears, based on a close examination of 1 Kgs 12, that the motives of Jeroboam himself were purely Yahwistic in nature. Jeroboam’s aim was to win the loyalty of those who supported belief in YHWH but opposed the religious policies of Solomon. It can be deduced from such that Jeroboam’s golden calves were not designed to entice Israel into the worship of other gods but rather to serve the God of Israel himself.

Seeing that calf worship was an age-old practice, and that Hosea was probably the first to criticize it, it becomes clear that up until his time calf worship was considered a legitimate practice. The golden calf, therefore, met with negative treatment only at a later stage in the history of the Israelite faith.

If this is the case, what were the factors involved in calf worship being rendered taboo in Israelite religion? The aim of the present study is to explore these factors. To this purpose, I will begin with a review of the existing research on the subject.

2. Survey of the Research

The opinions of researchers as to the motive behind the polemic against the golden calf are normally divided into two categories. On the one

hand, there are those who contend that the golden calf was, *a priori*, an idol, that is, a molten image of a pagan god, and that criticism of it arose naturally (§2.1). On the other hand, there are those who suggest that opposition to calf worship actually resulted from external circumstances (§2.2).

2.1. *The Calf as Idol*

Most of the traditional commentators and some modern researchers are of the opinion that the golden calf was an idol, namely, the iconic representation of a pagan god. As to just which god, the views are divided. Three possibilities have been suggested: (1) Egyptian gods (§2.1.1), (2) Mesopotamian gods (§2.1.2), and (3) Canaanite gods (§2.1.3).

2.1.1. *Egyptian Gods.* In Egypt, rites associated with bulls (the god Apis in Memphis, and later Mnevis in Heliopolis) and cows (Hathor) were widespread. Accordingly, up until the middle of the nineteenth century, most researchers held the view that the golden calf comprised an imitation of the bull god Apis, or was related to Mnevis, the sacred bull deity whose worship was centered in Heliopolis.² Even today, there are scholars who adhere to this stance.³ They attempt to back this position by citing evidence of bull worship as far as the Nile Delta region, where the Israelites dwelled, and where Shishaq provided refuge to Jeroboam I until Solomon's death, as recounted in 1 Kgs 11:40.

In particular, Oswalt claims that the Hebrews in Egypt identified YHWH with the sun god Amon-Re, the king of Egyptian gods, and represented YHWH with the image of a bull, a symbol also associated with Amon-Re.⁴ Danelius⁵ argues that the golden calf refers to the cow-goddess Hathor (who gave birth to the sun every morning as a calf), based on the fact that the Septuagint and Josephus Flavius use the term

2. H. Ewald, *Geschichte des Volkes Israel*. Bd. 2, *Geschichte Moses und der Gotterschaft in Israel* (Göttingen: Dieterichsches Buchhandlung, 1865), 275ff.; H. Graetz, *Geschichte der Israeliten*. Bd. 1, *von ihren Uranfängen (um 1500) bis zum Tode des Königs Salomo (um 977)* (Leipzig: Leiner, 1874), 11ff. (esp. 18). According to Graetz, "Abir" refers to "Apis" in Egypt. See also J. Robertson, *The Early Religion of Israel* (Edinburgh: Blackwood, 1892), 151.

3. R. Pfeiffer, "Images of Yahweh," *JBL* 45 (1926): 217ff.; M. Murray, *The Splendour that was Egypt* (London: Sidgwick & Jackson, 1964), 98–99; S. Morenz, *Egyptian Religion* (trans. A. E. Keep; Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1973), 20, 103, 143–44, 148, 157, 259, 265, 268.

4. J. N. Oswalt, "The Golden Calves and the Egyptian Concept of Deity," *EvQ* (1973): 13ff.

5. E. Danelius, "The Sins of Jeroboam ben-Nabat," *JQR* 58 (1967): 95–114.

δαμάλεις (“cow”) in reference to the calf in 1 Kgs 12, and the assumption that Nebat, Jeroboam’s father’s name, is derived from the Egyptian root NBT, which means “mistress,” a name used in connection with Hathor.

2.1.2. *Mesopotamian Gods.* Regarding the origin and nature of the golden calf as an object of idolatrous worship, there is another argument that claims that its worship in Israel was the product of Mesopotamian influence, Mesopotamia being the place of origin of the Hebrew Patriarchs.⁶ According to this view, the golden calf is associated with the bull, symbol of the moon god Sin, the worship of whom was adopted by the Patriarchs in the Mesopotamian cultural center of Harran, and passed down to their descendants, who perpetuated it in Egypt and later still, after their passage into Canaan.

2.1.3. *Canaanite Gods.* Since the beginning of the twentieth century, important archaeological excavations have been conducted whose findings support a Canaanite origin of the golden calf. As a result, many scholars tend to hold the view that the bull icon in Israel can be traced to the Canaan region,⁷ where the primary deities linked with the bull image are Hadad (or Hadad-Rimmon), El, and Baal.

2.2. *External Circumstances*

Views holding that censure of the golden calf derived from external circumstances are also divided into three categories: those who see it as resulting from a conflict between priesthoods, namely, between the Aaronic (Levitical) priesthood and a competing one (§2.2.1); a second group who believe that it primarily comprised an indictment of Jeroboam’s religious policies (§2.2.2); and a third group, which is of the opinion that it actually constituted a critical assault on Jeroboam’s system of government (§2.2.3).

6. J. Lewy, “The Late Assyro-Babylonian Cult of the Moon and Its Culmination at the Time of Nabonidus,” *HUCA* 19 (1945): 405–89; A. F. Key, “Traces of the Worship of the Moon God Sin among the Early Israelites,” *JBL* 84 (1965): 20–26; L. Bailey, “The Golden Calf,” *HUCA* 42 (1971): 97–115.

7. J. Hehn, *Die biblische und die babylonische Gottesidee* (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1913), 296ff.; W. F. Albright, *Archaeology and the Religion of Israel* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1946), 71ff., 84–87, 149, 156; E. L. Ehrlich, *Geschichte Israels von den Anfängen bis zur Zerstörung des Tempels (70 n. Chr)* (Berlin: de Gruyter, 1958), 44; H. Ringgren, *Israelite Religion* (trans. D. Green; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1966), 42ff.; R. E. Clements, *Exodus* (CBC; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1972), 206.

2.2.1. *Power Struggle Between Priesthoods.* Numerous scholars hold the view that the Elohist's narrative in the Torah, which wholly repudiates the golden calf, reflects an attack on the Aaronic (Levitical) priesthood in Bethel. This approach was first suggested by Kennett,⁸ who hypothesized that Aaron established calf worship at Bethel, and was further advanced by Meek,⁹ Eissfeldt,¹⁰ and North.¹¹ However, these scholars failed to identify which competing priesthood initiated such an attack on the Aaronic priesthood. In the opinion of Aberbach and Smolar,¹² it is a Jerusalemite Zadokite priesthood of the First Temple period. Cross¹³ agrees that the narrative in Exod 32 was constructed as a polemic against the Aaronic priesthood at Bethel, but denies the suggestion that it was contrived by the Jerusalemite priesthood. He contends that the negative attitude toward the golden calf originated among one of the northern priesthoods. In his estimation, the Elohist's narrative reflects an attack launched by the Mushite priests—who considered the cherubs the only legitimate symbol of YHWH's presence—against the Aaronite priests, who backed the calf. Noth,¹⁴ Lehming,¹⁵ Beyerlin,¹⁶ Losa,¹⁷ and Childs,¹⁸ even while they may be divided on the matter of attributing the calf narrative in the Torah to an Elohist source, share the view that the Exod 32 narrative was produced as an assault on the Aaronite priesthood at Bethel.

2.2.2. *Jeroboam's Religious Policies.* A number of researchers, in pointing out the kinship between Exod 32 and 2 Kgs 12:26–33, hypothesize that the Exod 32 narrative was written after 2 Kgs 12 and that it was

8. R. H. Kennett, "The Origin of the Aaronite Priesthood," *JTS* 6 (1905): 161–68.
9. T. J. Meek, "Aaronites and Zadokites," *AJSLL* 45 (1929): 149–66.
10. O. Eissfeldt, "Lade und Stierbild," *ZAW* 58 (1940–41): 190–215.
11. F. S. North, "Aaron's Rise in Prestige," *ZAW* 66 (1954): 191–99.
12. M. Aberbach and L. Smolar, "Aaron, Jeroboam, and the Golden Calves," *JBL* 86 (1967): 129–40.
13. F. M. Cross, *Canaanite Myth and Hebrew Epic: Essays in the History of the Religion of Israel* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1973), 198–206.
14. M. Noth, *Überlieferungsgeschichte des Pentateuch* (Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1948), 195–97; *A History of Pentateuchal Traditions* (trans. B. W. Anderson; Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1972), 178–80; *Exodus* (OTL; trans. J. S. Bowden; Philadelphia: Westminster, 1962), 244–46.
15. S. Lehming, "Versuch zu Ex. xxxii," *VT* 19 (1960): 16–50.
16. W. Beyerlin, *Origins and History of the Oldest Sinaitic Traditions* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1965), 128–32.
17. J. Losa, "Exode xxxii et la Redaction JE," *VT* 23 (1973): 31–55.
18. B. S. Childs, *The Book of Exodus* (OTL; Louisville, Ky.: Westminster John Knox, 1976), 560–61.

meant to besmirch Jeroboam's name. In their judgment, the polemic nature of the golden calf narrative in the Torah emanates from a critique of Jeroboam's religious policies.¹⁹ Yet even those who assert that the Exod 32 narrative was composed prior to 2 Kgs 12 agree that the golden calf narrative in the Torah comprises a critical assault on the religious policies of Jeroboam.²⁰

2.2.3. *Jeroboam's Government System.* According to Jenks,²¹ the reason for the polemic against the golden calf was opposition to Jeroboam's system of government. Jeroboam, going against the prophetic group, which preferred a system of tribal confederacy, adopted a Jerusalemite (and Canaanite) model for his government. The ensuing struggle between Jeroboam and the prophets led, therefore, to the polemic against the golden calves erected by the king at Dan and Bethel.

2.3. *The Need for Reassessment*

The research to date on this matter, then, is insufficient, and there remains, in my view, a vital need to re-examine the factors behind the shift from an attitude that saw the golden calf as a legitimate appurtenance used in the worship of YHWH, the God of Israel, to an attitude that wholly rejected it.

The conception that the golden calf comprised an idol, a molten image of a pagan god, is not convincing. On the one hand, the assertion that the Israelite people adopted calf worship and identified the God who brought them out of Egypt with an Egyptian god appears unlikely, since it is hard to believe that the Israelites, who were enslaved and repressed by the Egyptians, would associate the God who liberated them precisely with an Egyptian god. This is reasonable to assume even in the absence of a discussion of the historical validity of the Exodus story. Furthermore, the

19. Noth, *Exodus*, 243–47, and *Pentateuchal Traditions*, 142–45; Lehming, "Versuch," 16–50; J. Gray, *I and II Kings* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1970), 289; G. W. Coats, *Rebellion in the Wilderness: The Murmuring Motif in the Wilderness Tradition of the Old Testament* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1968), 184–86; B. S. Childs, "The Etiological Tale Re-Examined," *VT* 24 (1974): 386–97, and *The Book of Exodus*, 566; H. D. Hoffmann, *Reform und Reformen* (Zurich: Theologischer Verlag, 1980), 62–70; J. P. Hyatt, *Exodus* (NCBC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983), 305; J. Van Seters, "The Golden Calf: Exodus 32," in *The Life of Moses: The Yahwist as Historian in Exodus–Numbers* (Kampen: Kok, 1994), 290–318.

20. Aberbach and Smolar, "Aaron, Jeroboam," 129–40; Beyerlin, *Origins*, 128–29.

21. A. W. Jenks, *The Elohistic and North Israelite Traditions* (Missoula, Mont.: Scholars Press, 1977), 101–4.

Egyptians only worshipped the living bull, and not a sculpture or icon of it. Hence, the view that traces the origin of the golden calf to an Egyptian god is unconvincing. On the other hand, the hypothesis that links the golden calf with the bull, symbol of the moon god Sin, in Mesopotamia, birthplace of the Hebrew Patriarchs, and suggests that bull worship persisted among the Israelites even in the monarchic times, also appears to lack foundation. If the golden calf were related to some Mesopotamian god, why is it that not a single polemic against calf idols can be found among the zealous Yahwists, such as Elijah, Elisha, Jehu, and the like, in the time of kingdom.

It appears that the range of views cited above (§2.2) regarding the polemic against the golden calf stem, to a certain extent, from the tendency to examine the biblical story through sociological lenses, and to assume that it was the product of power struggles between priesthoods or between Jeroboam and the prophets. However, scholars who attempt to locate the motive for the polemic in such circumstances are unable to explain why it only appears during a later period,²² when according to these same researchers, the struggles began even before Jeroboam's reign²³ or immediately after his enthronement.²⁴ If this is the case, we would expect to find a polemic against the calf from this period. However, as aforementioned, none exists.

3. *Aniconism in the Israelite Religion and the Nature of the Calf Image*

As indicated above, the proposition that the golden calf was originally associated with a pagan god is implausible. This is because the aforementioned view does not provide a clear answer to the question why a polemic against the calf does not emerge prior to Hosea in the middle of the eighth century B.C.E., even though there were zealots for YHWH, who vocally opposed idolatry before that time. Hence, one can deduce that from the very beginning the golden calf was associated with the worship of YHWH. From this deduction a question arises: What, then, was the nature of the golden calf? Was it a symbol or an image of YHWH? If the answer is affirmative, another question arises: Was it permissible within the Israelite religion to use an image of YHWH in worship prior to the

22. The polemic cannot be found in Elijah, Elisha, or even Jehu, but only in Hosea during the eighth century B.C.E.

23. See Cross, *Canaanite Myth*, 197–99.

24. See Jenks, *Traditions*, 104–5.

iconoclastic events of the second half of the eighth century B.C.E.²⁵ And if the golden calf was not originally considered an image of YHWH, what was its essential character? In order to provide answers to these questions, one should, first of all, take into account the aniconism of Israelite religion. If in Israelite religion an “aniconic practice” predominated, that is, anthropomorphic images of YHWH were not produced, even prior to the active opposition to religious symbols or images in the eighth century B.C.E., then there is a greater probability that the golden calf originally was not considered an image or symbol of YHWH.

There is no clear reference in the Bible to the existence of anthropomorphic images of YHWH in the temples of the kingdom of Judah²⁶ or the northern kingdom of Israel (if we ignore momentarily the image of the calf and the question of whether it comprised a theriomorphic representation of YHWH). The majority of biblical scholars agree that during the First Temple period in the kingdom of Judah, and specifically the Jerusalem Temple, YHWH was represented in worship by the empty throne flanked by two cherubs, and not by an anthropomorphic or theriomorphic form.²⁷ This type of worship, in which an icon of YHWH is

25. The iconoclastic reforms of Hezekiah and Josiah follow Hosea’s polemic in the eighth century B.C.E. This can be inferred on the basis of the associations between Hosea and Deuteronomy, which are also linked to the reforms of Josiah. These connections lead us to assume a flow of northern traditions into Judah after the fall of Israel in 722/21 B.C.E. (see M. Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic School* [Oxford: Clarendon, 1972], 366ff.); one connection is the polemic around the figures mentioned in the books of Hosea and Deuteronomy.

26. To the best of my knowledge, there are virtually no scholars who claim that “Nehushtan,” the copper serpent mentioned in Num 21:8–9; 2 Kgs 18:4, was a theriomorphic image of God. Olyan’s interpretation of “Nehushtan” as a ritual symbol of the goddess Asherah is based on inadequate evidence, as suggested by S. Wiggins (“The Myth of Asherah: Lion Lady and Serpent Goddess,” *UF* 23 [1991]: 386). It seems that “Nehushtan” is related to a traditional symbol indicating the healing power of God (see R. Hendel, “Nehushtan,” *DDD*, 1159).

27. R. Albertz, *A History of Israelite Religion in the Old Testament Period*, vol. 1 (trans. J. Bowden; London: SCM, 1994), 131; T. N. D. Mettinger, *No Graven Image? Israelite Aniconism in Its Ancient Near Eastern Context* (Stockholm: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1995), 16ff., 139, 167ff.; Th. Podella, *Das Lichtkleid JHWHs* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 1996), 2, 37, 88, 160, 164, 186, 267. Attempts have been made by a few researchers (B. B. Schmidt, “The Aniconic Tradition: On Reading Images and Viewing Texts,” in *The Triumph of Elohim: From Yahwisms to Judaism* [ed. D. V. Edelman; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996], 75–105; H. Niehr, “In Search of YHWH’s Cult Statue in the First Temple,” in *The Image and the Book: Iconic Cults, Aniconism, and the Rise of Book Religion in Israel and the Ancient Near East* [ed. K. van der Toorn; Leuven: Peeters, 1997], 73–95, and, in the same volume, C. Uehlinger, “Anthropomorphic Cult Statuary in Iron Age Palestine and the Search

absent, seems to be compatible with ancient Israelite aniconic practice, and is supported by archaeological findings from the Iron Age I.

Archaeological excavations point to discontinuity in the presence of anthropological images between the Late Bronze Age and the Iron Age I in the ancient settlements throughout Israel prior to the division of the kingdom. Male and female statuettes dating to the late Bronze Age are common,²⁸ while no male representations of deities from the Iron Age I were found at Israelite sites. There are two exceptions to the rule: a bronze figurine from the twelfth century B.C.E. found at Hazor, and an engraving on a miniature altar from the tenth century B.C.E., found at Gezer. And yet neither of these is necessarily Israelite.²⁹ There is no example of a bronze male icon from an Israelite site that can be dated with absolute certainty to the Bronze Age.³⁰ Even the primary female

for Yahweh's Cult Images," 97–155) to prove that there were ritual anthropomorphic images of YHWH, based on the assumption that worship in the time of the First Temple was not unlike that in the rest of the ancient Near East. However, these attempts were refuted by Na'aman, who showed, through a comparison of ritual objects, which were suggested as representations of YHWH, with examples from Mesopotamia, that there is no clear evidence of the existence of an anthropomorphic image of YHWH in the Second Temple period (N. Na'aman, "No Anthropomorphic Graven Image: Nots on the Assumed Anthropomorphic Cult Statues in the Temples of YHWH in the Pre-Exilic Period," *UF* 31 [1999]: 391–415).

28. See O. Negbi, *Canaanite Gods in Metal* (Tel Aviv: Tel Aviv University, 1976), 112ff.

29. See W. G. Dever, "Material Remains and the Cult in Ancient Israel: An Essay in Archeological Systematics," in *The Word of the Lord Shall Go Forth* (ed. C. L. Meyers and M. C. O'Connor; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1983), 573–74; R. Hendel, "The Social Origins of the Aniconic Tradition in Early Israel," *CBQ* 50 (1988): 367. Regarding the bronze figurine from Hazor, Ahlström offers a different interpretation, suggesting that it represents an Israelite god (G. W. Ahlström, "An Israelite God Figurine from Hazor," *Orientalia Suecana* 19–20 [1970–71]: 54–62, and "An Israelite God Figurine, Once More," *VT* 25 [1975]: 106–9). However, as O. Keel ("Das Vergraben der 'fremden Götter' in Genesis XXXV 4b," *VT* 23 [1973]: 305–36 [esp. 325f.]) and W. W. Hallo ("Cult Statue and Divine Image: A Preliminary Study," in *Scripture in Context II: More Essays on the Comparative Method* [ed. L. G. Perdue; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1983], 1–16 [esp. 1–4]) have pointed out, a close reading of the findings of the archaeological excavation shows that Ahlström was incorrect. According to Dever ("Material Remains," 583), Layer XI (in which the figurine was discovered) can be properly dated to the twelfth century B.C.E., but what Ahlström terms "foundation level" is actually a collection of utensils from the Late Bronze Age (thirteenth century B.C.E.) and, of course, is representative of the material culture that preceded Israelite settlement.

30. T. J. Lewis, "Divine Images and Aniconism in Ancient Israel," *JAOS* 118 (1998): 43. A few bronze objects were mistakenly dated to Iron Age I–II by Negbi

cultic icon form of the Bronze Age, namely, a tablet depicting a standing goddess, seems to be entirely absent.³¹ Furthermore, Israelite aniconism can possibly be linked to aniconism among the nomads of the Sinai and Arabian deserts.³² Excavations at Timna, north of the Bay of Eilat, show that Midianites, who built the “Tent Shrine” on the ruins of the Egyptian temple on the site, deliberately broke the images of the goddess Hathor and effaced the stone pillars bearing her face.³³

It appears, therefore, that the lack of an anthropomorphic representation of YHWH, at least during the First Temple period, can be explained by the general lack of anthropomorphic images of deities in the Israelite settlements of Iron Age I. This can be viewed as confirmation of the argument that Israelite religion had a tradition of aniconism since at least Iron Age I. Yet this does not mean that due to this tradition or aniconic custom, no images were used in the worship of YHWH. Actually, “legitimate” ritual images, which were neither anthropomorphic nor theriomorphic, were employed.³⁴ At this point, in order to understand the relationship between aniconism and “legitimate” representations, the concept of aniconism should be defined.

The term aniconism is simply defined as the absence of representations; more specifically, those of living or divine beings, and more generally, any type of human representation. Aniconism also sometimes refers, as it does here, to the religious prohibition of the ritual use of idols and images depicting a deity. However, this does not mean that

(*Gods*, 49, 57). Among them were icons from Beit Shemesh, Megiddo, Beit Shean, and perhaps also Shechem. All should be properly dated to the Late Bronze Age (see T. J. Lewis, “The Identity and Function of El/Baal Berith,” *JBL* 115 [1996]: 418–22).

31. See M. Tadmor, “Female Cult Figurines in Late Canaan and Early Israel: Archaeological Evidence,” in *Studies in the Period of David and Solomon and Other Essays* (ed. T. Ishida; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 1982), 139–40, 157, 161, 171ff.

32. See Mettinger, *No Graven Image*, 57–79. Regarding the nomadic character of the Israelite people prior to the Iron Age, see A. Rainey, “Israel in Merneptah’s Inscription and Reliefs,” *IEJ* 51 (2001): 57–75; T. E. Levy et al., “Archaeology and the Shasu Nomads: Recent Excavations in the Jabal Hamrat Fidan, Jordan,” in “*Le-David Maskil*”: *A Birthday Tribute for David Noel Friedman* (ed. R. E. Friedman and W. H. C. Propp; Winona Lake, Ind.: Eisenbrauns, 2004), 63–89.

33. See B. Rothenberg, “Timna,” *NEAEHL* 4:1475–85 (esp. 1482ff.).

34. For example, images of cherubs were woven into “curtains” (יְרִיעוֹת), Exod 26:1; 36:8) and a partition (פְּרָכֶת) placed in front of the Ark (Exod 26:31; 32:35) in the Tabernacle (2 Chr 3:14). They were also engraved on the walls (1 Kgs 6:29; 2 Chr 3:7), doors (1 Kgs 6:32, 35), and bronze stands (1 Kgs 7:29, 36) in Solomon’s Temple. There were two golden cherubs in the Tabernacle (Exod 26:18–22; 37:7–9) and in Solomon’s Temple (1 Kgs 6:21–28; 8:5–9; 2 Chr 3:10–13).