Religion and the Visual

Edited by Ronald A. Simkins and Wendy M. Wright

Visual Ambiguity in the Biblical Tradition

The Word and Image of God

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Introduction

[1] Although the Ten Commandments clearly state that the God of Israel should not be represented with an image “in the form of anything that is in the heavens above, or that is on the earth below, or that is in the waters under the earth” (Exodus 20:4), God does not escape visual representation in the biblical tradition. Numerous biblical texts refer to Yhwh’s bodily parts – face, hands, feet, back, loins – and images of fire and light are used to describe Yhwh’s body, which is usually wrapped in a cloudy mantle. Ezekiel’s visual description of God is the most developed and detailed (Ezekiel 1:4-28). Whereas material representations of God are prohibited, literary representations of God’s visual appearance are apparently not problematic. The issue underlying the prohibition of images of God is not that Yhwh’s appearance or presence has no visual representation, but only that a material representation is not appropriate or suitable for Yhwh. This distinction between material and literary
representations of Yhwh’s visual appearance, however, cannot be sustained in other contexts. Instead, the biblical tradition and archaeological remains give multiple and contradictory understandings on whether Yhwh’s appearance can be represented visually, either materially or literarily.

[2] Let me give a literary example from two similar biblical stories. One story is the visual appearance of God to Moses and the Israelites on Mount Sinai in Exodus. When the Israelites arrive at Mount Sinai following their release from Egypt, Yhwh had already taken up residence on the mountain so that “there was thunder and lightning, as well as a thick cloud on the mountain, and a blast of a trumpet so loud that all the people who were in the camp trembled” (Exodus 19:16). A couple of verses later, the theophany of Yhwh is made explicit: “Now Mount Sinai was wrapped in smoke, because Yhwh had descended on it as fire; his smoke went up like the smoke of a kiln, and the whole mountain shook violently” (Exodus 19:18). In this episode, Yhwh’s appearance or body is represented visually as fire, and he is accompanied with phenomena associated with a thunderstorm and earthquake. In a later episode of this story (Exodus 33:8–34:7), Moses requests to see the “glory” or body of God. (The Hebrew term kabod can simply mean “body” or “substance” as it does here, see Weinfeld: 202; Sommer: 60-61.) Yhwh consents to Moses’ request, but warns him against looking upon his face, which will result in his death. To shield Moses from the deadly radiance of his body, Yhwh will cover Moses with his hand as he stands in a cleft of the rock, so that Moses will only glimpse the back of God after he passes by him. Moses does indeed see the body of Yhwh, but God’s visual appearance is not reported. Instead of the pyrotechnics of Yhwh’s earlier appearance, here Yhwh’s appearance results only in Yhwh’s own speech: “Yhwh, Yhwh, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness . . .” (Exodus 34:6–7) – a verbal description of Yhwh’s own character. Yhwh’s visual appearance is not represented.

[3] The second story takes place at the same location (though here it is called Mount Horeb), but with very different results. In 1 Kings 19 we find Elijah fleeing to the mount of God because Jezebel was seeking to kill him. Upon arriving at the mount of God, Elijah seeks refuge in a cave on the mountain, where the word (dabar) of Yhwh comes to him. Yhwh instructs him to stand before him on the mountain as Yhwh passes by. “There was a great wind, so strong that it was splitting the mountains and shattering rocks to pieces before Yhwh, but Yhwh was not in the wind; and after the wind, an earthquake, but Yhwh was not in the earthquake; and after the fire, a still quiet sound (qol)” (1 Kings 19:11-12). The meaning of the last expression is uncertain in the Hebrew. It is either an ever so faint sound, or it is the “sound” of sheer silence. In either case, it stands in stark contrast to the preceding visual phenomenon. Unlike Yhwh’s earlier appearance on the mountain, Yhwh’s appearance for Elijah is visually empty. Yhwh’s appearance had been represented visually with fire, smoke, and the trembling of the mountain, but now Yhwh is explicitly not visibly manifest in these phenomena. Thus, when Elijah goes out of the cave to stand before Yhwh, he does not see anything. Instead, Yhwh is only present in a voice (qol) that provides instruction to Elijah.

[4] Does Yhwh have a visible appearance and can it be represented, whether materially or literarily? The biblical tradition gives an ambiguous answer to both parts of this question. In some contexts, Yhwh does have a visible appearance and in others he does not. Moreover,
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Yhwh’s appearance may be represented both materially and literarily, but his material representation is also prohibited. This essay will attempt to sort out this visual ambiguity in regard to Yhwh’s appearance by placing different conceptions of Yhwh’s appearance in historical context. The primary catalyst for historical changes in the visual representation of Yhwh’s appearance is reform, and this essay will trace some of the social and theological dynamics of reform.

Traditional and Royal Images of God

[5] The Ten Commandments and other biblical texts that prohibit the manufacturing and worshipping of images of God have their origin in the reforming traditions of the Bible and date no earlier than the Deuteronomic reform of the seventh century B.C.E. (Mettinger 1997: 175-78; on the origin of Israel’s aniconism, see Hendel; Evans). The formulation of these texts implies that the Israelites and Judahites had been making images of Yhwh. In Judges 17, for example, Micah uses silver to make a cast-metal image and puts it in his family shrine. We are not explicitly told that he makes an image of Yhwh, but the context clearly indicates that Micah is a worshipper of Yhwh and so this would be a reasonable conclusion. Some scholars have argued that the temple in Jerusalem housed an image of Yhwh, but their argument is largely circumstantial and the biblical texts they cite need not be interpreted as referring to an actual image (Niehr; Uehlinger). Although there is no shortage of texts in the biblical tradition that mention the Israelites making divine images (e.g., 2 Kings 17: 12, 15-16), the texts often attribute this activity to the worship of gods other than Yhwh. Furthermore, extensive archaeology in Israel has not uncovered any definitive images of Yhwh – anthropomorphic or theriomorphic – and it attests to a gradual diminishment of images generally (for a history and interpretation of the iconographic evidence, see Keel and Uehlinger). Thus, following the distinction of Tryggve Mettinger, the period before the Deuteronomic reform may be characterized by a de facto aniconism, a common and tolerant aversion to using images of the deity. The prohibitions of the Deuteronomic reform, however, introduced a programmatic aniconism that was based on theological reflection and resulted in an iconoclasm (see Mettinger 1994: 159; 1997: 174-75).

[6] Prior to the Deuteronomic reform, the representation of Yhwh’s presence took on many visual and aniconic forms. One common literary representation of Yhwh is that of a man of high status, usually as the mal’akh Yhwh, which is often translated as “angel of the LORD.” Scholars have long recognized, as the context of the expression makes clear, that the mal’akh Yhwh is not a distinct being from Yhwh, but rather a manifestation of Yhwh in part (see the fuller discussion in Sommer: 40-44). In Exodus 3, for example, it is the mal’akh Yhwh who appears to Moses as a flame of fire in the bush on Horeb, the mountain of God, yet it is Yhwh who sees Moses turn aside to the bush and it is Yhwh who speaks to him. In other contexts, the mal’akh Yhwh is simply human in appearance. So, in Judges 6, the mal’akh Yhwh, sitting under a tree, appears to Gideon. Gideon addresses the mal’akh as “my lord” and offers him food, but he does not recognize the stranger as the mal’akh Yhwh until the mal’akh consumes the food with fire. Throughout the story, however, the mal’akh Yhwh and Yhwh alternate in talking to Gideon, indicating the common identity of the two figures. The human representation of Yhwh is most clear in Genesis 18, where the text begins by noting that “Yhwh appeared to Abraham by the oaks of Mamre.” But what Abraham sees is simply
three noble men, to whom he offers hospitality. Throughout the story, it is Yhwh who speaks to Abraham, but the narrator always refers to the divine visitors as “men.” Midway through the story, two of the men split off and go toward Sodom, while Abraham remains standing, the text tells us, “before Yhwh.” Finally, the story ends with Yhwh going away and the next story begins with two mal’akim entering Sodom.

[7] A common material representation of Yhwh’s presence is the massebah, a stone that is neither structural nor functional and is erected upright in a conspicuous place. The massebah is well attested in the archaeological record – both in and out of the land of Israel, and throughout most archaeological periods. In the Bible, the massebah is attested in conjunction with the worship of Yhwh in numerous pre-Deuteronomic contexts, but in the later reforming traditions, the massebah is banned as idolatrous with other images. Not all masseboth in the Bible or uncovered in archaeological excavations functioned as representations of Yhwh (see Block-Smith). Some served commemorative or memorial purposes, much like our monuments and tombstones, and others perhaps served legal purposes such as boundary stones. But in cultic contexts, the massebah visually represented the deity’s presence. In Genesis 28, Jacob has a dream in which he encounters Yhwh and sees Yhwh’s mal’akim ascending to and descending from heaven. When he awakes, he sets up the stone on which he had rested his head as a massebah, anoints it with oil, and calls the place Bethel, the “house of God.” In a later text, Jacob reports another dream in which God appears to him saying, “I am the God Bethel, whose massebah you anointed there” (Genesis 31:13). In both texts, the massebah functions as a visible representation of God’s presence. One might argue further from the conjunction of God’s presence, the massebah, and the identification of beth-el that the massebah itself is a beth-el – a house for the deity to inhabit. This would appear to be the function of the one or two masseboth found in the inner sanctum of the eighth-century Judean temple at Arad (see figure 1). They were aniconic, material receptacles for Yhwh’s presence, before which one would offer incense and perhaps other offerings.

Figure 1. Cultic niche in the Judean temple at Arad.

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1 One erect stone identified as a massebah was embedded in the back wall of the temple’s cultic niche, and thus may not have been visible once the temple walls were covered with plaster (see Herzog: 63). The other massebah was found lying on the floor of the cult niche, as it was intentionally covered with dirt when the temple was taken out of service. Thus, it is not certain whether one or two stones functioned as a massebah in this temple.
The Book of Kings reports that the Judahites would build *bamoth* – shrines of some sort – with *masseboth* and *asherim* on every high hill and under every green tree (1 Kings 14:23). The *masseboth* are the visible representations of Yhwh, but what are the *'asherim*? The term itself is peculiar because it is a masculine plural form of the feminine noun *'asherah*. In some contexts, the singular form refers to the principle female deity of the Canaanite pantheon. Asherah was the wife of El and mother of the gods, and her symbol was the tree, which could also be represented by a trunk or a wooden pole. Archaeological excavations have uncovered numerous female figurines and seal impressions with trees, some of which may represent Asherah (see Keel and Uehlinger; Keel: 16-57). There is even evidence to suggest that in early Israel Asherah was associated with Yhwh, perhaps as his consort (e.g., the Taanach cult stand), and a few biblical texts indicate that Asherah was worshipped in the temple of Jerusalem along side of Yhwh (2 Kings 21:7; 23:4). Most of the biblical references to *'asherab*, however, are to the *'asheraha*-pole, which functions within the cult of Yhwh. It is a symbol that often occurs with a *massebah* or next to an altar where Yhwh was worshipped.

The relationship between Yhwh and the *'asherah*-pole is made explicit in a number of inscriptions that refer to Yhwh and “his asherah.” One inscription from Kuntillet ‘Ajrud reads: “Thus says Amaryaw: Say to my lord: Is it well with you? I bless you to/before Yhwh of Teman and his *'asherah*. May he bless (you) and keep you and be with my lord . . .” The expression “his *'asherah*” cannot refer to the female deity as it is usually vocalized in the Hebrew; it must refer to the *'asherah*-pole.² And in this context, the *'asherah*-pole is attributed to Yhwh. It is a visual representation of Yhwh’s presence before or to whom Amaryaw blessed his lord.

The *mal’akh* Yhwh, the *massebah*, and the *'asherah* were traditional ways of conceiving and representing Yhwh’s presence within the de facto aniconism of Israel and Judah prior to the Deuteronomic reforms. These representations of Yhwh express what Benjamin Sommer has called a fluid model of divine embodiment and self (12-24). Near Eastern deities may divide into multiple, discrete selves, or may overlap with other divine selves. They may take on characteristics of other deities while remaining distinct from them, and they may appear in objects or other bodily forms without limiting their presence elsewhere. Yhwh may thus appear as a *mal’akh* or as a man without compromising Yhwh’s presence in heaven or appearances elsewhere. Similarly, Yhwh may inhabit numerous *masseboth* and be present in multiple *'asherim*. Moreover, each of these appearances of Yhwh remains distinct, yet they also represent the same Yhwh. The Bible and inscriptions present at least five distinct manifestations of Yhwh: the Yhwh of Sinai (Judges 5:5; Psalm 68:9), the Yhwh of Samaria, the Yhwh of Teman (Kuntillet ‘Ajrud), the Yhwh in Hebron (1 Samuel 15:7), and the Yhwh in Zion (Psalm 99:2). These are not simply references to the same Yhwh who appears in multiple places, but to independent forms of Yhwh located at specific locations. They are

² At issue is the interpretation of the final he in *'šrth*. The he is usually interpreted as the third person masculine singular pronominal suffix -ô, “his.” Since personal names cannot carry a pronominal suffix in Hebrew, *'šrth* should refer to the *asherah*-pole rather than the goddess Asherah. On the *asherah*-pole being associated with Yhwh, see Olyan: 33-34; Smith: 16, 85-88. Hess has argued that the he should be vocalized as -â and that *'šrth* thus refers to the goddess “Asherata,” as Asherah’s name is often attested in inscriptions, but scholars are largely unconvinced.
distinct forms of the deity and the same deity at the same time; they are local embodiments of Yhwh, yet do not exhaust the being of Yhwh.

[11] Most of the pre-Deuteronomic traditions in the Bible share this fluid conception of deity so that Yhwh can reside in many places and Yhwh’s presence can be recognized through multiple and different representations. Two traditions that privilege one particular location for Yhwh, however, are the Sinai and Zion traditions. In the Sinai tradition, Yhwh dwells in the south (variously called Sinai, Seir, Paran, and Teman). He is a warrior, who marches out from his abode to fight the enemies of Israel. His appearance is that of a thunderstorm, with the quaking of thunder, the flash of lightening, and the downpour of rain:

    Yhwh, when you went out from Seir,  
    when you marched out from the fields of Edom,  
    the earth trembled, and the heavens poured,  
    indeed, the clouds poured water, the mountains quaked  
    before Yhwh, the one of Sinai, before Yhwh, the God of Israel (Judges 5:4-5).

The same representation of Yhwh’s appearance is found in the Sinai tradition of Exodus 19, discussed in the introduction, but rather than Yhwh marching from his earthly abode, the Israelites journeyed to him on his holy mountain. The thunderstorm theophany was also the basis for representing Yhwh’s appearance in the form of a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night, which led the Israelites in their journey to Mount Sinai (Exodus 13:21-22). After the tabernacle was constructed, Yhwh descended from heaven in a pillar of cloud and stood at its entrance where Yhwh would speak to Moses face to face (Exodus 33:7-11; cf. Numbers 12:5-8).

[12] The Zion tradition appropriated the earlier Sinai tradition as Yhwh moved his earthly residence from Sinai to the temple in Jerusalem (Levinson 1985: 89-96), and so Yhwh’s appearance continued to be represented with the thunderstorm:

    Clouds and thick darkness surround him;  
    righteousness and justice are the foundation of his throne.  
    Fire goes before him,  
    and consumes his adversaries all around.  
    His lightening lights up the world,  
    the earth sees and trembles.  
    The mountains melt like wax before Yhwh,  
    before the Lord of all the earth (Psalm 97:2-5).

The Zion tradition also uses solar imagery to represent Yhwh’s appearance. The physical sun in its course across the sky is presented as a theophany of God:

    You are clothed with honor and majesty,  
    wrapped with light as a garment . . .  
    who makes the clouds his chariot,  
    who rides on the wings of the wind;  
    who makes the winds his messengers,  
    fire and flame his attendants (Psalm 104:1-4).
From archaeological excavations, sealings with winged sun-discs and four-winged dung beetles are perhaps symbols that represent aspects of Yhwh’s appearance. Horse figurines and horse and rider figurines, some of which appear to have a small sun-disc on the horse’s head, perhaps represent the horses that pull Yhwh’s chariot across the sky (see Taylor).

[13] The central focus of the Zion tradition is that Yhwh is enthroned on the cherubim (Psalm 99:1) in the temple of Jerusalem. Although Yhwh continues to dwell in heaven, Yhwh takes up his earthly abode especially in the temple. The relationship between Yhwh and the temple is similar to Yhwh’s relationship with masseboth. The temple becomes a visual representation of Yhwh’s appearance, and as such it is inviolable so that the very sight of the temple sends terror into foreign armies that would attack Jerusalem. Moreover, the presence of Yhwh and the inviolability of the temple extend to the entire city built on Mount Zion. Thus, the psalmist can say:

Encircle Zion, go all around it, count its towers,  
consider well its rampart, examine its citadels,  
that you may tell the next generation  
that this is God, our God forever and ever (Psalm 48:12-14).

The mountain city as a whole has become a representation of the greatness and might of Yhwh’s appearance.

The Deuteronomic Reform

[14] Although the Zion tradition privileged the temple in Jerusalem as Yhwh’s dwelling place, the tradition still reflects the fluid conception of deity. Yhwh resided both in the temple and in heaven, and the tradition does not seem to have been intolerant of representations of Yhwh outside of the temple and Jerusalem. Nevertheless, one can detect a gradual process of centralization, both in the biblical tradition and in the material remains, beginning in the eighth century. This process had political, economic, and theological dimensions, and challenged and undermined traditional social formations and theological conceptions. The political economy of the Jerusalem monarchy, for example, undermined the traditional political economy of the kinship-based tribal society. Loyalty and prestige given to the king and his clients subverted one’s relationship with fellow kin. Similarly, the exchange of wealth and resources was with one’s patron and social superiors rather than with one’s own kin (Simkins). Theologically, the process of centralization reinforced the uniqueness of Yhwh’s appearance in Jerusalem. If Yhwh’s dwelling in Jerusalem was different in degree from all other dwellings of Yhwh, then Jerusalem should be the place where Yhwh was worshipped.

[15] The first glimpse of the process of centralization can be detected during the reign of Hezekiah. Demographically, the population was centered in Jerusalem, which exploded to 60 hectares in size (Lachish, the next largest city was only 8 hectares, with all other cities and villages 3 hectares or smaller). Centralization is also detected with the lamelech seals (“belonging to the king”), which are stamped on the handles of wine and olive oil jars and attest to a centralized distribution, and perhaps also production, of the staples. Theologically, the process of centralization is evident in Hezekiah’s reform in which he “removed the bamoth, broke the masseboth, and cut down the ’asherah” (2 Kings 18:4). It is often difficult to
correlate historical and archaeological events – each deals with the past in different ways – but the temple at Arad with its massebah was also dismantled and covered over during the second half of the eighth century, perhaps during the reform of Hezekiah (see Herzog: 65-67). Whether the massebah and ’asherah were viewed as illegitimate representations of Yhwh, or simply in unacceptable locations – namely, outside of Jerusalem – cannot be determined from the evidence at hand. Nevertheless, the biblical text also records that Hezekiah “broke the bronze snake that Moses had made into pieces, for until those days the Israelites were makings offerings to it” (2 Kings 18:4). Evidently, this ancient representation of Yhwh, with a prestigious pedigree, was no longer deemed appropriate.

[16] Hezekiah’s centralization and reform came to an end with his rebellion against the Assyrians and the consequences Judah suffered as a result. Sennacherib and his army laid waste to Lachish, many of the villages, and much of the countryside of Judah (Sennacherib claims to have destroyed 46 towns). He exiled some of the population (Sennacherib’s own figure of 200,150 is far too large unless it also includes the many animals he took as booty) and besieged Jerusalem until Hezekiah paid a large tribute. During the long, largely peaceful reign of Manasseh, the traditional practices of representing Yhwh with a massebah and ’asherah resumed. What forces of centralization of the political economy that continued to exist largely served Assyrian interests. Yhwh’s unique relationship to Jerusalem, however, went unchallenged. Indeed, Jerusalem had not fallen to the Assyrians; Yhwh’s temple had remained inviolable and the mighty Assyrian army had had to return to the east to deal with other pressing matters. The Zôn tradition undoubtedly continued to flourish in Jerusalem, and by the end of Manasseh’s reign the forces of centralization are once again evident.

[17] When Manasseh’s son Amon was murdered in a palace coup, and the people of the land killed the conspirators and put his young son Josiah on the throne, the conditions for reform were ripe and the Deuteronomic school emerged as the intellectual proponents of reform. The Deuteronomic reformers advocated for the centralization of the political economy, but their primary contribution was in their reformulation of a theology of divine presence. For the reformers, Yhwh should be worshipped only in Jerusalem, not because Yhwh dwells in the temple as the Zôn tradition held, but because Yhwh chose Jerusalem as the place to put his name. Yhwh dwells in heaven, while his name dwells in Jerusalem. The name is not a hypostasis of Yhwh; it is not an embodiment of Yhwh’s presence. In Solomon’s speech at the dedication of the temple, the Deuteronomist emphasized that the temple is the dwelling place for Yhwh’s name and for the ark that holds the tablets of the covenant, but Yhwh “hears in heaven, his dwelling place” (1 Kings 8:14-53). Yhwh’s name is not Yhwh’s presence; “it refers to a token of divine attention” (Sommer: 63; contra MacDonald: 33).

[18] The Deuteronomic understanding of Yhwh’s presence was the result of the reformers’ rejection of the fluid conception of deity. Yhwh was not present in multiple forms; Yhwh did not fragment himself in multiple manifestations. Instead, the reformers proclaimed the unity of Yhwh in form and self: “Hear, O Israel: Yhwh is our God, Yhwh is one” (Deuteronomy 6:4; see Sommer: 67). Moreover, they explicitly ban all material representations of Yhwh, including the massebah and ’asherah, and give a theological rationale. On the one hand, when Yhwh delivered his commandments to the people on the mountain of God, the people saw no form when Yhwh spoke to them. Yhwh was in heaven, while his words came out of the fire on the mountain. On the other hand, Yhwh is a jealous God and
the use of images is part and parcel of worshipping other gods (see Deuteronomy 4:9-40). Instead of material representations, Yhwh’s presence among his people is manifest through his words:

Keep these words that I am commanding you today in your heart. Repeat them to your children and speak about them when you sit at home, or travel, or lie down, or rise. Bind them as a sign on your hand, fix them as an emblem on your forehead, and write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates (Deuteronomy 6:6-9).

Yhwh’s words, both on the tablets of the covenant housed in the ark in the temple and in the phylacteries and the mezuzoth, are the only legitimate visual representations of Yhwh’s presence in the community (on the Torah as a substitution for Yhwh’s image, see van der Toorn).

The Priestly Counter-Reform

[19] The Priestly tradition represents a counter-reform in relation to the Deuteronomic reform. Whereas the Priestly tradition embraced the non-fluid conception of the deity, and thus likewise rejected all use of material images to represent Yhwh (Leviticus 26:1), and recognized the theological minefield inherent in the Zion tradition’s insistence on the inviolability of Zion, the Priestly reformers were nevertheless strongly influenced by the Zion tradition (cf. Strong). In particular, they rejected the Deuteronomic name-theology and restored Yhwh to his place in the temple. For the Priestly tradition, Yhwh dwelt above the cherubim in the holy of holies in the temple in Jerusalem, but Yhwh was not bound to the temple.

[20] Ezekiel, who was a Jerusalem priest and demonstrates many affinities with the Priestly tradition, gives the most elaborate description of Yhwh’s appearance. According to Ezekiel, Yhwh has a body that is like that of a human being, but it appears to be fire and is exceedingly bright (Ezekiel 1:26-27; 8:2). He sits on a chariot throne, supported by four cherubim, each with a different face and with four wings (Ezekiel 1:4-25). Yhwh’s body is his kabod, usually translated “glory,” and is covered with a cloudy mantel in order to dwell among mortals. In a vision, Ezekiel sees the kabod of Yhwh leave the temple in Jerusalem and travel east toward the exilic community in Babylon (Ezekiel 8-11). Then in a later vision, Ezekiel sees a restored Israel with a new temple. The kabod of Yhwh then returns from the east and enters and fills the temple (Ezekiel 43:1-5).

[21] For Ezekiel and for Jeremiah, a priest who stood in the Deuteronomic tradition, the sins of Jerusalem exposed the lie of the inviolability of Zion. Yhwh would not spare his city or his temple. The Deuteronomic tradition emphasized the transcendence of Yhwh: Yhwh dwelt in heaven and so Yhwh could use the Babylonians to destroy his temple without compromising his own abode. The Priestly tradition, in contrast, emphasized the immanence of Yhwh: Yhwh dwelt in the temple among his people. Although Yhwh could abandon the temple, it was the sins of the people that undermined Yhwh’s presence among his people. How could Yhwh dwell among a sinful people? In order to address this issue, the Priestly tradition reworked the earlier Sinai tradition and constructed a new charter for the people of God to ensure Yhwh’s presence among them.
[22] In reworking the Sinai tradition, the Priestly reformers, first, added numerous regulations and commandments to ensure the holiness of the Israelite community. By observing dietary and sexual restrictions, for example, the people would maintain their holiness. Regulations for sacrifices and the role of priests would ensure that any threat to the people's holiness was properly ameliorated. Second, the reformers moved the tabernacle (also known as the tent of meeting), which had been outside the camp in the earlier Sinai tradition (see Exodus 33:7), and placed it in the center of the camp. It would serve as the earthly abode of Yhwh, around which the people of Yhwh would orient themselves. Moreover, the Priestly tradition added lengthy descriptions of the make up and construction of the tabernacle and its furnishings, which were modeled in significant ways on the creation itself: as Yhwh constructed a world for humans to inhabit, so the Israelites would construct a dwelling for Yhwh to inhabit (see Levinson 1988: 78-99). Finally, the Priestly reformers describe how Yhwh takes up residence in the tabernacle. When Moses went up on Mount Sinai, “the kabod of Yhwh settled on Mount Sinai, and a cloud covered it . . . and the appearance of the kabod of Yhwh was like a devouring fire on the top of the mountain” (Exodus 24:16-17). Then, after the tabernacle was constructed and set up, “the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the kabod of Yhwh filled the tabernacle” (Exodus 40:34). Yhwh would dwell in the tabernacle, in the middle of the people, as long as they maintained their holiness.

[23] The relationship between the people’s holiness and Yhwh’s habitation among them is essential to the Priestly reform. Yhwh wants to dwell among his people, but their sins and uncleanness is incompatible with Yhwh’s presence. The balance depends on the people’s actions: they may maintain holiness or they may destroy holiness. The Priestly reformers thus placed a significant responsibility on humans for preserving Yhwh’s presence within the community, and this role of humans is rooted in the creation itself. Although the Priestly reformers appear to be as intolerant of material images of Yhwh as were the Deuteronomic reformers, they emphasized one notable exception. In the Priestly tradition, humans themselves were created in the “image of God,” and as representations of God they were given dominion over the other creatures. Moreover, the Priestly tradition emphasizes the importance of the Sabbath: humans should work six days and then rest on the seventh, just as God created for six days and rested on the seventh day. The Sabbath is an eternal sign of Yhwh’s covenant with Israel and the means by which Israel will know that Yhwh is the one who makes them holy (Exodus 31:12-17). Yhwh makes the Israelites holy by choosing them to be his people, but the Israelites should imitate Yhwh in their holiness: As Yhwh commands Israel, “You should be holy because I am holy” (Leviticus 11:45). Thus the Israelites, as visible representations, images of Yhwh, in their weekly cycles of observing the laws and Sabbath, replicate the creation of God in maintaining their holiness and so ensure Yhwh’s presence within their community.

[24] At the end of the biblical tradition, the legacy of the Deuteronomic and Priestly reforms is evident in the representation of Yhwh. Yhwh may be known, not through visual and material representations, but through God’s image as manifest in the character and actions of humans in general, and through the words of Yhwh, preserved in the Torah and other writings, in particular.
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