

REVIEW

THE ANCIENT NEAR EAST

STEPHEN L. HERRING:

Divine Substitution: Humanity as the Manifestation of Deity in the Hebrew Bible and the Ancient Near East.

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The present volume consists of a PhD dissertation that examines (one could say: “re-examines”) long-standing questions regarding the meaning and function of cult objects in ancient Israelite religion against the background of the Mesopotamian religions. Stephen Herring suggests that notwithstanding vocal condemnations of idolatry in the Hebrew Bible, the cult of Yahweh was not entirely aniconic from the start. More to the point, he concludes that the Biblical Israelite authors, like their Mesopotamian counterparts, understood the phenomenology of cult objects in a certain way; namely, that the cult object was a substitute for the deity being worshipped, hence the title “Divine Substitution”. The most dramatic reflection of this conception, if accepted, is to be found in the first chapter of Genesis, a priestly composition which describes the manner in which the human being was fashioned, and then charged to exercise dominion over the earth. The human creature resembles the Creator and, according to Herring, substitutes for the Creator.

The study begins with a discussion of a fundamental question: how real is the power of a cult image or symbol, and what is its relation to the deity who is being represented, or symbolized by it? Herring is to be commended for coming down solidly on the side of those scholars who affirm the close relationship of object to deity, as against those who hedge on this question by denying that the cult object exercised real power. Herring proceeds to examine what he considers to be paradigmatic Biblical and Mesopotamian sources, in each case offering a summary of current views, so that this dissertation qualifies as a comparative inquiry, in addition to being an in-depth Biblical study. Herring identifies other “substitutes” who, in his view, bear the image of God: Moses is the image of God by virtue of being the mediator who brings down the divine commandments, whereas the so-called “golden calf” is an illicit image of God (Exodus 32–4). Israel is the image of God, to be restored, or more precisely, revived by God, who will animate the people with his spirit (Ezekiel 36–7).

Notwithstanding Herring’s diligence in researching the theme of iconic representation in ancient Israel, and his informative treatment of relevant redactional issues in the Hebrew Bible, there is reason to question his understanding of substitution in phenomenological terms. When we think of substitution we normally reference the human-to-divine encounter. Thus, a sin-offering substitutes for sinful humans (Leviticus 4–5), just as sacrificial blood on the altar substitutes for the life-blood of the worshipper (Lev. 17: 11). In some cases, ransom (Hebrew *koper*), may substitute for the life of a homicide, but never for that of a murderer (Num. 35: 31).

The point is that the original is taken out of the process, relieved of its role by the substitute, thereby engendering a new agency.

To say that God (or “the gods”) accepted prescribed substitutes is different from saying that, in the divine-to-human encounter, iconic manifestations of the divine substitute for the divine. Herring cites Thorkind Jacobsen’s seminal interpretation of the sanctification of a cult object in the Mesopotamian cults as resembling transubstantiation in some Christian communions, an analysis that would apply as well to processes of sanctification referred to in the Hebrew Bible. The spirit, or power of the deity, animates the cult object so that the divinity remains present and connected. Manifestation and representation are not the same as substitution; and in effect, a contradiction comes to light as between the title and subtitle of the dissertation: The icon “houses” a present divinity, and yet is understood by Herring. Herring’s dissertation is rich in sources and information, making it difficult to cover its broad scope in a brief review. It is interesting that, as noted above, Herring is of the view that the Israelite cult was not aniconic from the start, and that the so-called “golden calf” was intended to represent Yahweh. It is also possible that Exodus 32 is a condemnation of El worship, and that this episode describes what might be termed “polytheist regression”. The Israelites are being urged to consider El as the deity who emancipated them from Egypt, which used to be acceptable in ancient Israel, an idea actually expressed in one of Balaam’s orations. Thus, Num. 23: 22: “El who brought them out of Egypt has horns like those of a wild ox” (cf. Num. 24: 8).

This introduces the message of the first chapter of Genesis. God created the human being in his image and likeness, and breathed his spirit into him. This is, of course, how anthropomorphic cult images were formed and sanctified. However, Elohim does not desire to be depicted in such cult images, relying rather on humankind to be reminded of the omnipresent Creator. If you want to know how the Creator looks and where he is manifest, either look in the mirror (they had mirrors in antiquity), or better yet, look at your fellow human being, but worship an invisible God.

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SYLVIE VANSÉVEREN:

Nisili. Manuel de langue Hittite. Volume II. Le système verbal hittite. (Lettres Orientales et Classiques 19.) x, 251 pp. Leuven: Peeters, 2014. €34. ISBN 978 90 429 3018 6.
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Hittite verbal morphology is one of the most complex parts of the Hittite grammar owing to the diversity of inflectional types and ongoing changes throughout the attested period of Hittite. The classic description was provided by N. Oettinger, *Die Stammbildung des hethitischen Verbums* (Nuremberg, 1979, reprinted Dresden, 2002 with slight revisions), which was superseded only by A. Kloekhorst’s treatment (*Etymological Dictionary of the Hittite Inherited Lexicon*, Leiden, 2008, esp. pp. 117–52). Unfortunately, the latter description was published too late to be incorporated into the standard Hittite grammar (H.A. Hoffner and H.C. Melchert, *A Grammar of the Hittite Language I. Reference Grammar*, Winona Lake, 2008), which led to the current, confusing, situation where the best synchronic description is not to be found in the most detailed grammar, but in an etymological dictionary. Thus the author’s project, a thorough Hittite grammar in French, the