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## Religion and the Visual

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### Israelite Aniconism and the Visualization of the Tabernacle

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#### Introduction

[1] The Dome of the Rock in Jerusalem is one of the earliest examples of Muslim architecture still remaining. Considered the third holiest site in Islam, this octagonal building houses two internal ambulatories around a rock outcropping that has a tall, cylindrical space, covered with a dome. The decorations of this structure, both external and internal, are important contributions to its importance and significance. Mosaics cover most of the exterior and interior walls, depicting natural images (trees, plants, fruit) and other objects (vases, chalices, crowns, and jewels); neither anthropomorphic (human) nor theriomorphic (animal) images are found on it. Along the top of the inner octagon is a band of Arabic running almost 250 meters (over 800 feet). This band is comprised primarily of texts from the Qur'an; the exceptions are the name of the patron (the Umayyad caliph 'Abd al-Malik, whose name was later replaced by the Abbasid caliph al-Ma'mun) and the date of construction (692 C.E.). The Arabic is written in a highly stylized calligraphy. The avoidance

of anthropomorphic and theriomorphic images on this religious structure foreshadowed an ornamental practice that became characteristic of Islam and its religious structures in succeeding centuries.

[2] A strong tradition of aniconism developed in Islam relatively early, although the formal ban on anthropomorphic and theriomorphic images on religious structures was not promulgated until 721 C.E. by caliph Yazid II. That recognition, however, had antecedents extending back to the construction of the Dome of the Rock, if not before. In addition to being the patron of the Dome of the Rock, caliph ‘Abd al-Malik instituted numismatic reforms during his caliphate in which anthropomorphic images were abandoned in favor of Arabic script and non-figurative representations (Grabar: 90-91; Mettinger: 77). Scholars argue that caliph ‘Abd al-Malik’s avoidance of anthropomorphic or theriomorphic decorations on both the Dome of the Rock and coins was a response to Christianity in Jerusalem and Byzantium in the seventh and eighth centuries, with its highly developed and sophisticated use of figural imagery in its art (Grabar: 92-94).<sup>1</sup> The inscription from the Qur’an in the Dome of the Rock also was a response to Christianity. It reminded Muslims that Islam was the final revelation by Allah, and thus provided the faithful with responses to Christian attempts at conversion of the new Muslim rulers of Jerusalem (Dodd and Khairallah: 1.21-26; Grabar: 62, 128; Dodd provides a translation of the entire inscription). The Dome of the Rock was an early statement of what would become standard ornamental practice on religious structures in Islam, and how such ornamentation would differ from Christian art, ornamentation, and structures.

[3] The use and development of calligraphy for the ornamentation of religious structures had an added importance in Islam. The Qur’an is the Revelation of Allah to the prophet Muhammad. What was delivered orally to Muhammad is reproduced in the words and script of the Qur’an; the Arabic letters of the Qur’an are considered to be the Divine Word, through which Allah is revealed (Dodd and Khairallah: 1.3). The close association between the Qur’an’s words and Allah encouraged the development of calligraphy; writing those words as beautifully as possible was a matter of some importance in Islam, an act of pious devotion (Schimmel: 81). In the face of the ban on anthropomorphic and theriomorphic images on religious structures, representing and visualizing the Qur’an through calligraphy provided Muslims with a viable alternative for materially expressing religious devotion and understanding. Calligraphy, in other words, serves (at least) a simultaneous purpose, that of avoiding figural images while visualizing the words through which Allah was revealed to humanity.

[4] Islam’s response to the ban on figural images on religious structures is an elegant one in the sense that it permits artistic expression and representation in visual arts even while remaining true to its legal and theological commitments. Calligraphy of Qur’anic verses functions as a synecdoche, whereby a verse or verses of the Qur’an evoke the entire Qur’an and the one who spoke it, Allah. The calligraphy used to write those verses develops into an elaborate, highly stylized and structured script (or scripts) that then is adapted to particular

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<sup>1</sup> Erica Cruikshank Dodd argues a move away from figurative decoration also was present in Christianity of the time and region (1.19-20).

locations on the walls and surfaces of structures according to careful determinations of style, proportion, and other matters (Schimmel: 18-19). For all the beauty of the calligraphy, the representation and visualization of these words does not violate the prohibition on figural images in the ornamentation and decoration of Islamic religious structures.

[5] It is the ability of Islam to use calligraphy as a means to observe the ban on divine images that I want to use in this paper as a point of comparison for thinking about Israel's tabernacle narratives. The tabernacle narratives are long, the longest for any of the divine dwellings (or almost anything else, for that matter) in the Hebrew Bible.<sup>2</sup> Scholars give various reasons for the length of these narratives, such as that the instructions section was original and the fulfillment section was later, or that the Priestly writers were particularly concerned that Israel have the proper ritual space within which to perform the rituals of the Israelite cult (see Childs: 529-30; Propp: 365-71). Recently, Amy H. C. Robertson argued the reading of these texts is comparable to that of a person who participates in a ritual. I have argued elsewhere that these narratives reveal the social nature of tabernacle space and that they articulate Priestly ideas about Israel and its social organization (George). Reexamining the narratives in light of the "Religion and the Visual" symposium, I want to propose an additional explanation for these narratives: they function as a substitute for visualizing Israel's deity. The prohibition on figural depictions of the deity – what I define in this paper as aniconism – is not, of course, restricted to Islam. Ancient Israel also was aniconic, or at least had aniconic tendencies, at both the official state and local levels (Mettinger: 167).<sup>3</sup> By comparing the tabernacle narratives to the functions of calligraphy on religious structures in Islam, it is possible to see that the narratives about the tabernacle expand on something closely associated with the deity in order to avoid creating an image or visualization of that deity. Whereas calligraphy on Islamic religious structures functions as a synecdoche, the tabernacle described in the biblical narratives functioned metonymically for the Priestly writers, that is, as a substitute for YHWH. The Priestly writers could, and did, give elaborate descriptions of the tabernacle and its constitutive parts because it provided them a means of talking about YHWH without violating Israel's prohibition on divine images.

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<sup>2</sup> Two sections of text are required to provide the instructions (Exodus 25-31) and fulfillment of those instructions (Exodus 35-40). In addition to these two long narrative blocks are additional texts in which the tabernacle figures prominently. Aaron and his sons are ordained to the service of YHWH in Leviticus (Leviticus 8-9), two chapters in Numbers describe the arrangement of the Israelite camp around the tabernacle (Numbers 2-3) and a third details the marching order of the camp when the tabernacle is moved (with the disassembled tabernacle pieces in the middle; Numbers 4), and a final chapter describes the consecration of the Levites to their special service with the tabernacle (Numbers 8). This accounting for texts in which the tabernacle figures prominently arguably is incomplete. The entire book of Leviticus is set in the context of it, because YHWH speaks the contents of Leviticus to Moses "from the tent of meeting" (Leviticus 1:1), that is, the tabernacle proper. For this paper, "tabernacle proper" means the tabernacle structure within the court, whereas "tabernacle" or "tabernacle complex" refers to the entire complex (both the tabernacle proper and the court).

<sup>3</sup> Mettinger further classifies Israel's aniconic tradition as "material aniconism" and "empty space aniconism" (19). By "material aniconism," Mettinger means iconic, material objects used as the central cultic symbol that do not represent the deity in either anthropomorphic or theriomorphic ways, and by "empty space" aniconism, he means both completely empty rooms and empty thrones (19-20).

### Israel's Prohibition on Imagery

[6] The clearest textual evidence of Israelite aniconism is found in the Decalogue:

You shall not make for yourself an idol, whether in the form of anything that is in heaven above, or that is on the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth. You shall not bow down to them or worship them; for I the LORD your God am a jealous God, punishing children for the iniquity of parents, to the third and the fourth generation of those who reject me, but showing steadfast love to the thousandth generation of those who love me and keep my commandments (Exodus 20:4-6; cf. Deuteronomy 5:8-10; quotations from the NRSV unless otherwise noted).

[7] While this text is relatively late (the sixth century B.C.E.), Tryggve N. D. Mettinger's review of the archaeological record demonstrates Israel had an aniconic tradition dating much earlier. At no point in that record is there clear evidence of iconic representations of the deity, whether anthropomorphic or theriomorphic, being used as the dominant cultic symbol. This is so despite the fact that a large amount of material imagery (including such things as male and female figurines and theriomorphic and zoomorphic figurines and representations) has been found in archaeological sites (Lewis). Rather, Mettinger, citing the evidence of *masseboth* (large, unhewn, standing stones), suggests material aniconism with respect to Israel's deity was practiced in Israel from early in its history (193-95).<sup>4</sup> The later textual formulations in Israelite literature come after aniconism had been established in Israel's life and practice.

[8] Mettinger's work on Israelite aniconism is helpful and important, addressing as it does questions of history, archaeological evidence, and practice. It also provides an answer to the question of what practices took the place of iconographic representations of the deity. But was this the only answer in Israel? Mettinger observes that art was not the only medium in which Israel manifested notions of its God. Both texts (language) and rites (gestures and body language) also were used by Israel for this purpose (15). Mettinger thus appropriately recognizes the presence of other ways by which Israel could express its ideas about the deity, even while observing the prohibition on iconographic representations and visualizations.

[9] It is not the goal of this article to engage the range of materials to be considered in discussing Israel's aniconism. Rather, I am interested in the textual expressions, specifically Israel's tabernacle narratives. Written words typically are not considered to fall under the prohibition on divine images because they are neither anthropomorphic nor theriomorphic, nor are they understood as images.<sup>5</sup> As evidence of this view of texts, Benjamin D. Sommer

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<sup>4</sup> "Empty space" aniconism also is attested, according to Mettinger, in instances such as the cherubim in Solomon's Temple (1 Kings 6:23-28) (16-17, 139). The cherubim of the mercy seat in the tabernacle, over which the deity is said to meet Moses (Exodus 25:22), is another example of this phenomenon. Lewis challenges Mettinger's claims about the *masseboth* in light of the many other representations attested in the archaeological record, even though he agrees with Mettinger's claims about the prevalence of aniconism and aniconistic tendencies in Israel.

<sup>5</sup> It is debatable, at least theoretically, whether or not this understanding of the written word is correct. W. J. T. Mitchell argues that written letters and words are images of sounds and mental imagery. Therefore, they are part of a continuum of imagery that extends to other material representations and images, such as paintings,

recently made clear that the various writers of the Hebrew Bible were not shy about representing the divine body in their texts.<sup>6</sup> He argues the biblical writers regularly depict God as having a body or bodies, albeit incomplete, shifting (“fluid” in Sommer’s terminology), and with different conceptions about this body standing in tension with one another. While these written descriptions and depictions of the divine body do not violate the ban on divine images, Sommer rightly notes there is a certain circumspection about how the divine body is represented and visualized in the texts, particularly in the Deuteronomic and Priestly traditions (62).

[10] In Priestly texts the deity repeatedly is referred to by means of the divine *kabod* or glory. Sommer argues the Priestly writers’ use of *kabod* has in view a single divine body, and thus the very divine self, even if those writers are not specific about the substance out of which that body is made or its size (68-78). Such hedging about the divine body appears to be consistent with the history of aniconism in the practice of Israel’s religion in the sense that the Priestly writers acknowledge there is a divine person or self, one manifested singularly, yet textual descriptions of that manifestation are not very precise or detailed. The prohibition on anthropomorphic and theriomorphic images is operative in the Priestly texts since the *kabod* is not explicitly a human or animal body.

#### Tabernacle Narratives as an Expression of the Divine

[11] Writing about the divine body, circumspectly or not, is but one way in which the biblical writers, and the Priestly writers in particular, manifested notions about God in Israel. Four divine dwellings receive extended narrative attention in the Hebrew Bible: the tabernacle, Solomon’s temple (1 Kings 5-6; 7:13-51 [MT 5:15–6:38; 7:13-51]), Ezekiel’s temple (Ezekiel 40-48), and the Second temple (Ezra 1-6). By contrast, Solomon’s palace and other buildings are described in twelve verses (1 Kings 7:1-12). Construction and description of the Tower of Babel encompasses a mere three verses (Genesis 11:3-5). Baasha’s rebuilding of Ramah is mentioned in only part of one verse (1 Kings 15:17, 21). No other structures, whether described by the Priestly writers or others, receive as much narrative attention as does the tabernacle.<sup>7</sup>

[12] Independent of its historical existence, the tabernacle narratives are a visualization of this space. The tabernacle is visualized both *within* the narratives and *by* the narratives, in a manner comparable to the ways in which, in the words of Richard Wollheim, “not only does a painter paint *with* the eyes, she also paints *for* the eyes” (quoted in Harrison: 204, emphasis

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icons, statues, and calligraphy. The letters and words of texts are but another image, and thus equally open to the charge of being an image or icon. Granted, they are not anthropomorphic or theriomorphic, but the commandment in Exodus (and its parallel in Deuteronomy) says no idol shall be made, of anything in the heavens, on the earth, or in the water under the earth. Because letters and words are on a continuum of imagery with other material representations, including idols, icons, and statues, the narratives can be considered idols, images of God “on the earth beneath.”

<sup>6</sup> Other scholars also have written on representations of God’s body in the Hebrew Bible, notably Howard Eilberg-Schwartz (1994, 1992, 1990); see the bibliography in Sommer for others.

<sup>7</sup> I agree with Victor (Avigdor) Hurowitz’s arguments that the instruction and fulfillment sections are integral to the tabernacle narratives as a whole, rather than earlier and later sources (1992, 1985).

in original). The visualization of the tabernacle occurs *within* the narratives themselves, because they tell the reader or listener just what *is* the tabernacle. In this sense, the narratives are *for* the eyes, because they are what the readers' or listeners' eyes see and understand about the tabernacle as a result of reading the texts. Using both the divine perspective (the instructions section, Exodus 25-31), and Moses' and the builders' perspective (the fulfillment section, Exodus 35-40), the narratives direct and focus the readers' or listeners' attention to what is visualized, the particular objects, features, and details of the tabernacle, and to how they are visualized. Visualization within the narratives creates a representation (or re-representation) of the tabernacle to the reader or listener by providing a literary image of it. Calligraphy, by comparison, is *for* the eyes in the sense that the beautiful, expressive script is a visualization of a verse or verses from the Qur'an. The importance of writing verses from the Qur'an beautifully became a duty for the pious.<sup>8</sup> The Qur'an in Islam is so important that writing it became highly valued. Doing so by means of calligraphy drew attention to the Qur'an, to what it says and what is contained within it.<sup>9</sup>

[13] The tabernacle also is visualized *by* the narratives themselves in a manner comparable to a painter painting *with* the eyes. What I mean by this is that the tabernacle narratives reflect the perspective of the author(s) of those narratives, the Priestly writers. The distinction of perspectives is important. *Within* the narratives of the tabernacle are two perspectives, that of the deity speaking to Moses (the instructions, Exodus 25-31), and that of Moses and the builders (since this narrative voice describes the fulfillment of the instructions to build the tabernacle, Exodus 35-40). The narratives as a whole, however, are the product of the Priestly writers, and assume the perspective of a priest in tabernacle space, for reasons I argue below. As a Priestly product, they reflect and express certain social ideas and serve social functions, one of which was to observe Israel's aniconistic practices, even while manifesting an understanding of Israel's God in the texts. Analogously to a painter painting *with* the eyes, the Priestly writers expressed an understanding of YHWH by means of the texts, that is, by writing thirteen chapters about this structure. Balancing two social concerns, that of avoiding anthropomorphic or theriomorphic representations of their God, and yet articulating their understandings of that God in some way, the tabernacle texts provided a means whereby both concerns could be observed. Returning to the comparison with calligraphy, reproducing verses of the Qur'an on the walls of religious structures is a means of observing and complying with aniconistic strictures. Indeed, because of the synecdochical quality of Qur'anic verses, no figural imagery was necessary. Verses written in calligraphy evoked the whole Qur'an, which, in turn, evoked Allah. The mechanism by which YHWH was evoked in the tabernacle narratives is different, since the tabernacle described therein operates as a metonym for YHWH. But the function of the narratives as a whole is comparable: no figural image is necessary because expounding on the tabernacle substitutes for creating a figural image of YHWH.

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<sup>8</sup> Schimmel states that it "became incumbent upon the pious to write the Divine Word as beautifully as possible . . ." (81).

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Dodd and Khairallah, especially volume 2, which catalogues, by Sura, published inscriptions of Qur'anic verses on Islamic religious structures up to 1974. Dodd argues the content of these inscriptions is as important to the decoration of Islamic religious structures as is sculpture to medieval Christian religious structures (1.4).

*Visualization within the Narratives: Painting for the Eyes*

[14] Like a painter creating a canvas of the tabernacle, or perhaps even like a museum guide of a museum's galleries, the tabernacle narratives identify, describe, and attend to what constitutes the tabernacle. One of the painters in the narratives is identified as no less than YHWH, whose instructions (Exodus 25-31) for the tabernacle are that it be made "[i]n accordance with all that I show you [Moses] concerning the pattern of the tabernacle and all of its furniture" (25:9). What follows in those instructions takes the divine perspective as its starting point by originating in most holy space with the two items (ark and mercy seat) most closely associated with YHWH. From there the instructions move eastward through tabernacle space.<sup>10</sup> In the fulfillment section, Exodus 35-40, the perspective shifts, to that of Moses and the human builders, who begin not with the ark and mercy seat, but rather with what the people must do first to build this space: observe the Sabbath, learn what materials they need for the tabernacle, then take up an offering for those materials and prepare them, identify the two master builders and others who will participate. This is followed by creating the tabernacle proper.

[15] These two perspectives within the narratives direct the readers' or listeners' attention (i.e., paint for the eyes) in three distinct ways. First, they define what the tabernacle is and the items that constitute it: ark, mercy seat, table for the Bread of the Presence, lampstand, incense altar, tabernacle proper (its coverings, screen, curtain, frames, bars, and bases), the bronze basin, altar of burnt offerings, the court (hangings, screen, frames, bars, bases), priestly vestments, and ordination procedures. These items, with the exception of the priestly ordination (which is recounted in Leviticus 8-9), are repeated in the fulfillment section. Items not crucial to the construction and performance of tabernacle space, such as the bronze utensils for the tabernacle (Exodus 27:19), forks, pots, basins, and firepans of bronze (Exodus 27:3; 38:3), are noted as being in this space and as being made from particular materials, but specifics about them are absent. The list of such items is more than what Umberto Eco calls a "list of things" (a collection of objects); it is a practical list because it specifies that *these* are the items that constitute the tabernacle (113, 116).

[16] Second, not only is the tabernacle defined in terms of particular items, details about these items are provided. The narratives revel in these details: the particular materials, craftsmanship, dimensions, and ornamentations of these items; the types of materials required to construct them; the people who are involved in their construction; their relative placements and orientations; and the priests and their attire. There are, for example, four coverings for the tabernacle proper. The innermost covering is created out of ten curtains, each made from fine linen, with blue, purple, and crimson yarn, decorated with cherubim worked into them, and each curtain measuring twenty-eight cubits long by four cubits wide. They are joined in two sets of five curtains. The ends of each set have fifty loops of blue at the edge, opposite one another, through which gold clasps are used to bind the two sets

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<sup>10</sup> This perspective also is found in Exodus 30, the description of the incense altar, the half shekel tax, bronze basin, and anointing oil and incense, which follow the instructions for the priestly vestments and ordination of the priests. Although these items are not found at the point in the narratives where scholars think they should be described, the order within the chapter does follow the descriptive pattern of moving from objects closest to the deity to those further away.

together (Exodus 26:1-6; 36:8-13). The second covering is made of goats' hair. Consisting of a total of eleven curtains, it is divided into two sets (one of five curtains joined together, the other of six), and each curtain measures thirty cubits in length by four cubits wide. Fifty loops are made on the edge of the outermost curtains of each set, so they can be joined together by bronze loops (Exodus 26:7-11; 36:14-18). Two additional coverings are made, one fashioned out of tanned rams' skin and the other out of fine leather (Exodus 26:14; 36:19).<sup>11</sup> By providing such details, the narrative focuses the readers' or listeners' attention to these aspects.

[17] Third, as if identifying the constitutive objects of the tabernacle and then providing details of them were insufficient, the narrative provides both summary lists of them and repeats their descriptions. The specific items constituting the tabernacle and the details about them appear in both the instruction section (Exodus 25-31) and fulfillment section (Exodus 35-40). This repetition is intensified by the inventory lists, which not only list these items (Exodus 31:7-11; 35:10-19; 39:33-41; cf. also the listing of priestly vestments, 28:4), but also the raw materials (Exodus 25:1-7; 35:4-9) and the skills (Exodus 31:1-6; 35:30-35) required to make them. The inventory lists themselves are repeated in the narratives, appearing in both the instruction and fulfillment sections. The various repetitions of these items stress that they *are* the tabernacle, that they have characteristics and qualities that set them apart from one another, and that they merit the readers' or listeners' attention.

[18] While the descriptions of the tabernacle provided by the two narrative perspectives are abundant to the point of excess, they also are selective. As already noted, not all items associated with the tabernacle receive equal attention. Some items are named by category (e.g., fork, pot) and material, but their numbers are not given, nor are their sizes, dimensions, or other characteristics. The descriptions are selective even with the items constituting the tabernacle. No details are given for the thickness of the walls of the ark, or the length of the poles used to carry it. The sides of the ark along which those poles run, length or width, are not specified. The means by which the mercy seat is fastened to the ark is not revealed. The pattern (if there is one) by which the cherubim are fashioned on the innermost covering of the tabernacle is not provided, nor is there information on the size of those cherubim. The precise placement of the tabernacle proper within the court is not specified. There is no information concerning how a person navigates getting into, or out of, the most holy space, the tabernacle proper, or the court. No words are recorded about what is said by participants in ritual actions, such as during Aaron's yearly performance of atonement on the horns of the incense altar (Exodus 30:10). These are questions later readers, interpreters, and scholars raised about the tabernacle, but the two perspectives in the texts provide no answers. Instead, the emphasis within the narratives is on the tabernacle itself and delighting in it.

[19] The selectivity by which the tabernacle is visualized within the narratives (i.e., for the eyes) creates an idealized image of it. If the narratives were understood on analogy to a museum guide for visitors, it is important to note they do not explain practicalities of the tabernacle, such as how wood is brought in for the altar, or people get around or through entrances. This is what makes it comparable to a museum guide that extols the glories of the

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<sup>11</sup> The identity of the fourth covering is uncertain and debated. For more on that debate, see Propp: 374-75.

collection, relates information about artists and their art, describes theories of art, and other such matters. Certain particular details about individual pieces of art may be provided, such as dimensions, materials (e.g., oil on canvas), or the artist's name and dates, but it does not explain how paintings are hung on the walls, who comes in and cleans the galleries at night, how the heating and plumbing work. The tabernacle narratives also extol the tabernacle and the glories of its constitutive parts, certain dimensions and materials, the lead artists, and so on. These details help the reader or listener identify important objects within the tabernacle and to learn something about them, but it leaves much unsaid that might be relevant if the space actually existed or, more to the point, the narratives were understood to be a practical guide to the space and its use. Instead, the narratives are idealized; they celebrate the tabernacle itself, as the divine dwelling, rather than practicalities such as how to get into or out of it.<sup>12</sup>

[20] The ways in which the tabernacle is visualized within the narratives is helpfully contrasted with calligraphy. Calligraphy used in the ornamentation of religious structures does not reproduce the entire Qur'an. Instead, selected verses from the Qur'an from various Suras are represented as part of the structure's ornamentation. The selected verses and where they are placed on the structure focus the attention of viewers to certain ideas, phrases, and parts of the Revelation. Erica Cruikshank Dodd argues that artists, builders, and patrons appear to have chosen particular Qur'anic verses because they had intelligible associations for those who entered and occupied these spaces (1.63).<sup>13</sup> She also argues, however, that the mere presence of a verse from the Qur'an has inherent value for a Muslim because it has the power to evoke the Qur'an in its entirety while giving the religious structure with which it is associated "content and meaning" (Dodd and Khairallah: 1.24). Although she does not refer to this evocative power as synecdoche, I think that is the phenomenon she describes. The ability of a verse to evoke the entire Qur'an – its synecdochical quality – therefore renders the selection of a particular verse of less importance than that of the Qur'an itself. Only after the social process at work in calligraphy (i.e., synecdoche) is recognized does it make sense to speak of the particular verse(s) used in the calligraphy ornamenting a religious structure as giving that structure "content and meaning."

[21] Such is not the case with the tabernacle narratives. Because metonymy is key to how the narratives work, the Priestly writers must describe "the tabernacle" in the texts. By stressing that "the tabernacle" is constituted by a specific set of items (e.g., ark, mercy seat, lampstand, etc.), but not others (even though they are related, e.g., firepans and forks), the Priestly writers create and establish the metonymic quality of the tabernacle. The tabernacle, the structure in which YHWH dwells among the people of Israel, is *these* things, not other things. Remove the ark or lampstand, and the structure is no longer "the tabernacle." Add a piece of furniture to it, and that furniture changes the space from "the tabernacle" to something else (cf. George: 59-63). Metonymy is the means by which the tabernacle substitutes for the deity, but to do so, the Priestly writers have to be very clear just what is "the tabernacle." In

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<sup>12</sup> I consider the cultic and ritual actions that are described as occurring in tabernacle space also to be idealized, given the many practical matters about those actions omitted from the texts.

<sup>13</sup> Dodd argues the foundation inscription, IX:18, is the most frequent in her sample.

Islamic calligraphy, any and every verse of the Qur'an evokes the entire Qur'an. For the Priestly writers, only "the tabernacle" substitutes for the deity.

[22] Qur'anic verses are used ornamentally on Islamic religious structures, whereas the narratives are not ornamental but descriptive of the tabernacle and its constituent objects. Neither is the text of the Hebrew Bible written in a stylized hand, as is calligraphy. The style of the calligraphic script is part of the ornamental quality of these Qur'anic verses placed on religious structures. Great care and precision in the various calligraphic scripts developed over time, with schools or traditions of writing being established, and these schools or traditions developed guidelines for the measurements of letters, their relative proportions, and other details of writing (Schimmel: 1-33).<sup>14</sup> Such differences help bring analytical clarity to the ways in which the visualization of the tabernacle *within* the narratives functions metonymically as a response to aniconism. The close association between the tabernacle and the deity is established in several ways. First, the divine perspective of the instructions links the deity with descriptions about the tabernacle, so that reading or hearing them provides access to the deity's voice. Second, the statement that the objects described in the narratives *are* the very same tabernacle shown to Moses by YHWH on Mt. Sinai. Finally, it is *this* structure in which YHWH will dwell; and, the people build it just as YHWH instructed them. Sommer argues for an additional means whereby this relationship is expressed. He notes that, once the divine *kabod* descends Mt. Sinai and enters the tabernacle (Exodus 40:34-35), it remains there; "[n]o priestly narratives in the Pentateuch ever describe [the *kabod*'s] exit and return" (74).<sup>15</sup> All of these aspects of the relationship are expressed *within* the narratives describing the tabernacle.

*Visualization by the Narratives: Painting with the Eyes*

[23] The tabernacle not only is visualized *in* the narratives, but also *by* the narratives. What I mean is that the tabernacle narratives do more than describe this structure. Painting with the eyes, as it were, the Priestly writers produce the tabernacle narratives as a whole. They visualize the tabernacle within the narratives by using a divine perspective and that of Moses and the builders. They also have the perspective of a priest and this perspective operates throughout all the narratives. Their social understandings and concerns are expressed through the texts. As noted earlier, scholars make various proposals concerning the nature of

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<sup>14</sup> The precision with which calligraphy was practiced is perhaps best compared to the detailed descriptions of the items constituting the tabernacle, although this comparison also highlights an important difference. The precision and care with which calligraphy was practiced arose so others could learn and write calligraphy; the tabernacle details are incomplete and prevent recreating with confidence any of the constitutive items of the tabernacle.

<sup>15</sup> Sommer views this connection between body and dwelling to be comparable to that of what occurs in a Mesopotamian icon: both are built by human hands, are ritually dedicated ("activated") to become fit for the divine presence, and then the deity enters it (74-75). I am not clear, however, if by "comparison" he means genealogical comparison, and, therefore, that a genetic connection exists between conceptions of Mesopotamian icons and the tabernacle. If so, I do not consider this to be comparison, but rather influence. Given Israel's long tradition of aniconism, particularly during the period in which I understand the tabernacle narratives to be written (6<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E.), which is the same time period in which Second Isaiah's aniconism is articulated, I am skeptical the Priestly writers would have accepted such an influence. The care with which they describe the divine body also argues against their availing themselves of such an influence.

the Priestly perspective on the narratives and the ideas and understandings they encode within them. My concern is the ways in which the narratives function as a response to Israel's aniconism, one of the social concerns of the Priestly writers. This Priestly concern is coupled with another, that of talking about the deity that honors Israel's aniconism. Creating the tabernacle narratives was a means of meeting both concerns, because the Priestly writers used the tabernacle metonymically, so that expounding on this structure allowed them to express an understanding of YHWH without using a figural image.

[24] The narratives encode the social understandings, distinctions, conflicts, and hopes of the Priestly writers. As I have argued elsewhere, tabernacle space is organized and structured by a series of spatial boundaries that represent social distinctions (George: 89-135). The narratives in Numbers 2-4, describing the arrangement of the Israelite camp around the court's walls and the marching order of the camp when it is on the move, connect tabernacle space with the other spaces of creation. By doing so, the Priestly writers make a cosmological argument that the tabernacle was to be understood within the larger context of creation. Conceptually, this links both YHWH and Israel to the rest of creation. That linkage was not one of sameness; the different spatial zones of tabernacle space, from most holy space all the way out to space outside the camp, was socially differentiated space. Within the tabernacle complex, all the congregation of Israel could enter court space, male and female alike. As long as an individual was a member of the congregation, she or he could enter. Only male sons of Aaron, however, could enter the holy space of the tabernacle proper, and then only while wearing the appropriate garments (Exodus 28). Only Aaron, as high priest, on the Day of Atonement (Leviticus 16), could enter most holy space in the tabernacle proper, and then only while wearing his high priest's garments. Social taxonomic distinctions operate at the boundaries of each space within the tabernacle and determine who may enter which space.

[25] This conceptual organization of space (its conceptual spatial logic) is implicit in the perspective assumed throughout the tabernacle narratives. Although the divine instructions in Exodus 25-31 assume the divine perspective, only a priest would have the necessary social status, and therefore the necessary spatial access, to create the tabernacle narratives as a whole.<sup>16</sup> A priest may move in and through court space and tabernacle holy space, and the descriptions of objects in both spaces could be provided only by a priest with access to them. Objects within each space – the altar of burnt offering and the bronze basin in court space, the table of the Bread of the Presence, the lampstand, and the incense altar in tabernacle holy space – are given at least a relative position in those spaces. The bronze basin stands between the opening of the tabernacle proper and the altar of burnt offering in the court. The lampstand is on the south side of the tabernacle proper, in front of the curtain separating holy from most holy space, while the table is on the north and the incense altar is in front of that curtain (Exodus 26:35; 40:22-27). According to the conceptual spatial logic of the narratives, information about the locations of items in tabernacle holy space

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<sup>16</sup> A similar argument holds for the fulfillment section, Exodus 35-40, even though the perspective in that section is not the deity's, but that of Moses and the builders.

would be available only to a priest; a non-priest would not be permitted into holy space and therefore could not know it from personal experience.<sup>17</sup>

[26] Sommer's arguments about the Priestly writers' articulations of the divine body point to another way in which their ideas and social understandings are manifested in the narratives. Beyond being an idealized representation of the tabernacle, the Priestly perspective expresses the "official" religious position. The Priests' status in the official religion of Israel helps explain the perspective taken by the tabernacle narratives as a whole. Because aniconism was evident at both the state and local religious levels (Mettinger), and the Priestly writers are part of the official religion of Israel, it is not surprising that aniconism informs these texts. That aniconism is manifested in part by the circumspection with which the Priestly writers refer to the divine body occupying the tabernacle. It is, as noted above, the *kabod* or glory that inhabits it, not a physical body (i.e., neither an anthropomorphic nor a theriomorphic representation of the deity). Priestly circumspection about the divine body also is manifested by the tabernacle narratives, in which the tabernacle takes the place of (i.e., is a metonymy for) the divine body. As the structure closely associated with the deity (Sommer), the Priestly writers could elaborate upon the tabernacle without describing the deity (or the deity's body) directly. Therefore, they could identify each of the constitutive items of the tabernacle and give whatever details they wanted about them. They could give additional narrative attention to these items by collecting them into various lists: items, raw materials, and the skills required to create them. They could repeat all this information by providing descriptions of how Moses and the people obeyed the divine instructions. The Priestly writers, in other words, could revel in their ability to describe the tabernacle, because doing so avoided anthropomorphic or theriomorphic descriptions of the divine body. Indeed, no icon or divine body is to be found in tabernacle space. The *kabod* enters the tabernacle once it is set up (Exodus 40:34-35), but when YHWH meets with Moses from above the mercy seat, the text does not say it is YHWH's *kabod* which does so, only that YHWH does so (Exodus 25:22); no body or image, or even the *kabod*, is reported to be visible there. Taking Sommer's observation about the *kabod* not leaving the tabernacle one step further, I suggest the reason the *kabod* never leaves it is because the tabernacle has become YHWH's embodied presence on earth. The metonymical relationship between them is complete and seamless, that is, the tabernacle has become the substitute for a divine body. The Priestly writers, therefore, could be effusive about the tabernacle and its constituent parts, because they did not fear violating the ban on anthropomorphic or theriomorphic images of the divine while doing so.

[27] The extent to which the Priestly writers used the tabernacle narratives as a means of religious expression about their deity is made clearer by briefly comparing Israel's tabernacle narratives with temple building accounts from the ancient Near East. Temple building was

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<sup>17</sup> Despite being charged with carrying the disassembled pieces of the tabernacle, the Levites would not know these details, since Aaron and his sons are responsible for the disassembly process (and, presumably, the reassembly process; Numbers 4:5-15). That the perspective is that of one of Aaron's sons and not the high priest Aaron himself is clear from the descriptions of most holy space. The locations of the ark and mercy seat are described as being behind the separating curtain of the tabernacle proper, in most holy space (Exodus 26:34; 40:21). The high priest presumably would be able to visualize a more precise location behind the curtain (against the back wall of the tabernacle? up against the curtain?). The lack of such details thus argues against the Priestly writers assuming the perspective of the high priest throughout the tabernacle narratives.

the prerogative of kings and deities. There are many extant accounts of kings throughout the ancient Near East reporting on their efforts to build or rebuild temples for various deities. While these texts can be quite long (such as the Cylinders of Gudea), they generally focus details on matters other than that of the furnishings and their materials, dimensions, and ornamentations, as do the tabernacle narratives (for descriptions of these building accounts, see Hurowitz 1992: 32-128). Ancient Near Eastern building accounts are more concerned with the actions of the king in the process of building a temple, the materials used and from where they were obtained, and the involvement of the gods in the process of building, than with either visualizing these structures within the building accounts themselves or with visualizing a deity by means of the accounts. Thus, while the Priestly writers are drawing on a literary form common throughout the ancient Near East, they alter and adapt it to serve their own ends and needs. For them, this meant making the tabernacle itself the focus of their attention, because its role as the divine dwelling served as a substitute, a metonym, for the deity. By expanding on the description of the tabernacle (i.e., visualizing the tabernacle *by* the narratives), the Priestly writers could provide a manifestation of their understanding of their God.

[28] By focusing on something closely related to the deity, the Priestly writers gave expression to an understanding of their God in a manner analogous to the use of calligraphy on Islamic religious structures. Within Islam, calligraphy of Qur'anic verses is an ornamentation on these structures that is capable of evoking the entire Qur'an for worshippers. As the divine word of Allah to Muhammad, the Qur'an contains the Revelation of Allah to humanity. Its use on religious structures respects and observes the strict aniconism of Islam. Allah can be evoked without the use of anthropomorphic or theriomorphic images. In the place of such images are the words of Allah, who is ever-present in those words. By analogy, so too is YHWH ever-present in the tabernacle. To speak of the tabernacle is, for the Priestly writers, to speak of YHWH, the God who dwells within that space, without creating an anthropomorphic or theriomorphic image of that God.

### **The Tabernacle as a Means of Observing Aniconism**

[29] The Priestly writers provided an extended description of the tabernacle as a means of observing and abiding by Israel's long-standing aniconism and aniconistic practices. They worked *within* the narratives to provide a visualization of the tabernacle, which they achieved by means of detailed descriptions, repetitions, and two different perspectives. In these ways the Priestly writers managed to create an image or visualization of the tabernacle, the space YHWH commanded be built for him by Israel. After the tabernacle was built, the divine *kabod* came to earth, inhabited the tabernacle, and dwelt on earth in the midst of the Israelites. The tabernacle described within the narratives established a close link with YHWH and became a metonym for the deity. The narratives provide a priest's view of this (imagined? historical?) space, and articulate the official religious perspective. No icons or divine images are found within the tabernacle. Figural images were not necessary once the tabernacle became a metonymy for YHWH. The deity was visualized by the narratives.

[30] By shifting their attention from a divine body – anthropomorphic, theriomorphic, or otherwise – to the tabernacle narratives, the Priestly writers were able to manifest their

understandings of God while remaining aniconistic. In this respect, the tabernacle narratives are comparable to Islam's solution (or, one of its solutions) to its own ban on anthropomorphic and theriomorphic images. Verses from the Qur'an written in calligraphy evoked Allah without the use of figural images. The development of an elaborate, ornate, beautiful set of scripts for reproducing the Qur'an on religious structures functioned synecdochically to evoke the divine word given Muhammad, thereby evoking the One who gave that Revelation to him. Although the tabernacle narratives functioned metonymically rather than synecdochically, comparison between them provides a means of understanding how the tabernacle narratives are a response to Israel's aniconism.

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