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Book review: Friedhelm Hartenstein/Michael Moxter, Hermeneutik des Bilderverbots. Exegetische und systematisch-theologische Annäherungen

**Leipzig: Evangelische Verlagsanstalt 2016,
360 pages, ISBN: 978-3-374-03060-6**

The representability of the divine, as well as the therewith-coherent power over the represented deity, is raised as an issue throughout the Old Testament, culminating in the explicit image ban of the Decalogue, in Exodus 20 and Deuteronomy 5. This issue has not only theological implications, but also anthropological significance, in, for example, the belief that humankind is made in the image of God. In the current age of ubiquitous virtualization, questions concerning the essence of icons and iconic media arise anew, above all in the context of philosophical discussion about corporeality and in media theory. Therefore, in this work the two authors, Friedhelm Hartenstein and Michael Moxter, seek to develop a hermeneutic of the biblical image ban, to which end they adopt first a religio-historical and exegetical approach and secondly a systematic-theological approach. From a Protestant point of view, they unfold exemplarily the diverse layers of interpretation and reception of the ban and, further, show how every hermeneutic of the ban operates with a specific understanding of images and icons.

FORMAL ASPECTS

With this book, the publishing company *Evangelische Verlagsanstalt*, based in Leipzig, has produced a paperback publication of some 360 pages, a very handy format, with an attractive cover image. The work was launched as the 26th volume of the series “Forum Theologische Literaturzeitung” (ThLZ.F), in which issues of contemporary society are addressed in scholarly studies that have an interdisciplinary theological perspective. This text is well suited to the series for it provides interested readers (also from outside the subject area) with an over-

view of and insight into discussions that are part of a dialogue with Europe's biblical and Jewish-Christian heritage.

Friedhelm Hartenstein, who holds the Chair of Old Testament in the Faculty of Protestant Theology at the Ludwig Maximilian University Munich, has already edited and published a range of articles and books that have addressed topics such as the development of a theological aesthetics of the Old Testament, the metaphorical language of the Psalms, the religious history of Israel and its background, and the image ban itself. By contrast, Michael Moxter, Professor of Systematic Theology at the University of Hamburg, is a specialist in religious philosophy. He managed dedicated projects and edited volumes to cultural theology in connection with Ernst Cassirer and to hermeneutical studies on imagery and aesthetics. Hartenstein and Moxter's co-operation on the topic addressed in this book began in seminars held in Hamburg. In the preface the two authors note that the writings published here have therefore been generated over an extended period (5). They invite readers to understand the two parts of the book as forming a dialogical whole.

As the book introduces the reader to Iron Age cultic sites and artifacts and addresses works by modern artists, it includes several pictures – which in view of the topic seems only appropriate. Whereas the drawings of the first part are integrated, placed within the running text, the color paintings and photographs that illustrate the second part appear on additional white pages toward the end of the article. Only two illustrations are slightly lacking in quality (326–327), and all the illustrations are helpful and well chosen.

The footnotes list literature for reference and exploration. Unfortunately, the book does not include the bibliography that could have assisted readers by offering an overview of literature that might be useful for further research.

CONTENT

In a jointly authored introduction, Hartenstein and Moxter pose questions that will frame the analysis that follows, noting, in particular, the role of the image ban in the evolution of Israel's monotheism and the role of images in general for human cognition and human–world interaction (12). Further, the authors point to how biblical interpretation is enriched by engagement with a philosophical and cultural hermeneutic of the image, particularly through the insights generated by the “iconic turn” (while acknowledging the limitations of this concept), which serves as an essential source throughout the book.

In part 1, Friedhelm Hartenstein undertakes religio-historical and exegetical analysis of the image ban. He first contextualizes the probable pre-exilic cultic practice in the Temple at Jerusalem by illustrating the cultic customs of previous and isochronic eastern societies and their varied integration of iconic as well as

symbolic or even aniconic religious objects. Here, an interesting designation of icons as a “verge” (Schwelle) between the divine and human spheres is introduced. The author emphasizes that interpretation of such images as “portraits” of an original, in a paradigm of similarity, does not correspond with cultic intention in the ancient east. The cultic object must instead be regarded as the privileged “place of the divine’s presence” (36), which is why it can function as a medium of communication with deities and of direct veneration of deities. The author’s reference to a “mental iconography” (49, 66–71) is particularly striking, highlighting a common conception of a divine world where gods are pictured as mostly corporeal and human (even if no anthropomorphic icons are integrated into cultic practice), which makes them, together with their individual names, able to be addressed by human beings.

Like Jens Kamla, Hartenstein does not understand Israel’s cultic tradition as contrasting with other practices in the pluralistic eastern context. Israel’s empty throne in the Temple and the Ark of the Covenant can therefore be categorized as “iconic cult symbols”, which, Kamla notes, “represented a deity without depicting the deity’s image. Though they avoided depicting the (anthropomorphic, theriomorphic or hybrid) figure of the deity, they were decorated with figures or figurative elements” (57). Although Israel probably did not venerate an anthropomorphic icon, its iconic symbols were embedded in a mental iconography, as is evident in the metaphoric language of the Psalms. Hartenstein records such anthropomorphisms in speech and prayer as “social metaphors” that regulate and reflect the relationship between God and the people.

In his second chapter, Hartenstein turns to ancient written Judaic and non-Judaic sources that reflect the extraordinary absence of iconic divine representation in the tradition of Israel and the significant biblical criticism of idols. The author thus paves the way for inquiry into the genesis of and preconditions for the biblical image ban, formulated explicitly in the Decalogue and at other points in the Scriptures. Starting with later biblical and non-biblical texts, Hartenstein “archeologically” works his way back to older, less “secure” layers of the Scriptures. Assuming that the Decalogue was formulated during or shortly after the Babylonian exile, he highlights the concurrence of the image ban and developing monotheism. The author emphasizes the role of emergent creation theology in which God and world – the creator and the creation – were clearly separated. Within this context, Hartenstein analyses the slight shifts in biblical idol-critical argumentation. His central thesis is that something that in ancient eastern cultic practice was certainly not extraordinary – the absence of cultic iconic representation – became a fundamental distinction as a result of Israel’s struggle for identity during and after the Babylonian exile.

This first part of the book ends by considering the implications of a hermeneutic of the image ban from an exegetical perspective (chapter 3). Whereas

biblical texts like the Psalms bear witness to “visions” of God as pluriform aesthetical experiences, other passages, as at Exodus 33:18–23, reflect the temporal dynamic of the presence and absence of God (and God’s abiding hiddenness), which Hartenstein and Moxter’s thesis holds also to be the intention of the image ban. In place of dead idols, narrations and metaphors lead the reader of the Bible to the limits of what can be said and thus function as symbolic icons that may help verbalize religious experience as well as opening up language for the vivid and dynamic God (and therefore also for new symbolic icons). In a final step, Hartenstein links the image ban to the doctrine of humankind as *imago dei* and shows that in the exilic and post-exilic periods of scriptural development, humankind takes the place of divine representation in the world, contrasting with the hand-made icons of Babylon.

The combination of the religio-historical approach with exact historical-critical exegesis, enhanced by the perceptions of contemporary hermeneutics of images, offers illuminating insight. It is especially interesting to see how Hartenstein traces theological development and its argumentation through accurate historical-critical exegesis. Topics touched on only briefly – for example, idol critique by the Presocratics (72–73) or even the crucial issue of humankind as *imago dei* (found primarily on the last few pages of the section, 174–182) – are taken up again in the second part; perhaps even their brief mention here was therefore unnecessary.

In part 2, across ten chapters Michael Moxter examines the image ban from a systematic-theological point of view. Rather than exploring the genesis and meaning of the ban in its original context, he presents and discusses its varied reception and emphasizes that a theological reading must be complemented by anthropological analysis. The diverse approaches are grouped thematically under broader headings such as “Images of Power” (*Bilder der Macht*), “Image and Corporeality” (*Bild und Leiblichkeit*) or “Image Ban, Monotheism and Negative Theology” (*Bilderverbot, Monotheismus und negative Theologie*). Thus, Moxter first considers icons and their eminent role in the context of political power. In ancient societies, statues really represented (royal) rulers and their dignity in their domain, and they were venerated accordingly. When Jews and Christians refused to bow down before such statues, the image ban functioned as an “iconoclastic critique of power” (197).

Moxter’s second chapter addresses images and their immanent corporeal dimension, concluding that everything that/only what is corporeal can be represented as an image. If the corporeality of God and the heavenly beings is denied, the image ban is intended to preserve God in his spiritual transcendence in order that God is not identified with limited, ephemeral materiality. However, are images as such evil? Is it only the power of imagination that leads back to chaos and disorder? Asking these questions, Moxter explores the argumenta-

tion of Plato, Descartes and the Protestant/Reformed tradition, which considers the body, images and the imagination in general to be inferior. Finally, he addresses the role that corporeality has played so far in the anthropological discussion of humankind as *imago dei* and in Christology.

By dedicating the next chapter to the image ban in conjunction with monotheism and negative theology, the author opens up the discourse of monotheism and violence, led most prominently by Jan Assmann, who views the image ban as an expression of religious intolerance. Moxter writes of a completely oppositional (unhistorical, apologetic) reception in the Jewish Enlightenment, when monotheism and the image ban were praised as the triumph of reason over the irrationality of polytheistic forms of religions. Following the Jewish phenomenologist Emmanuel Lévinas, who employs the monotheistic image ban at the core of his ethics, Moxter discloses his view of the long tradition of negative theology, with the image ban taken out of its original cultic context and turned into a paradigm of negative theological reasoning with regard to a special praxis (like Lévinas; the author refers also to Immanuel Kant and Søren Kierkegaard).

This discussion leads Moxter to his central chapter, entitled “Invisibility or Hiddenness of God?” (*Unsichtbarkeit oder Verborgenheit Gottes?*) (246–266). Here, he establishes the guiding thesis of the book – that the “image ban can be interpreted as a protection of God’s hiddenness” (251) – which will be developed in the following chapters. Accordingly, Moxter first elaborates Luther’s distinction between invisibility (*Unsichtbarkeit*) and hiddenness (*Verborgenheit*). God’s grace is not invisible but rather is hidden behind or in the folly of the cross. This has to be believed, it is nothing simply invisible which could be grasped by logical reasoning.

Moxter picks up this formulation of hiddenness for his own hermeneutic of the image ban (260) and accordingly interprets the doctrine of the human being as *imago dei* as a protection of humankind’s own openness. This makes possible the application of a hermeneutic of the image that adapts the insights of the “iconic turn”: the image’s function is not primarily “representation” but – in a tension of presence and absence – “giving to see/making present and concealing”. Moxter is viewing the other side of the coin: instead of interpreting the image ban with the help of a hermeneutic of the image, he sees the image ban itself as a paradigm for hermeneutics and thus notes its anthropological implications (266).

Consequently, the following chapter turns to the question of the inner power of images themselves. Moxter draws on Jean Paul Sartre and Ludwig Wittgenstein to bring greater depth to his thesis, noting “images even make present what is absent, which can be experienced as intensification of presence” (278).

Following this paradigm, as a final step the author analyses the relationship between image and sacrament.

The seventh chapter is very short and is dedicated to the question of how in the Protestant and Reformed traditions the senses of seeing and listening were viewed in relation to one another and how this influenced differing teachings on images. Similarly, chapter eight focuses on the history of theology. After illustrating the disputes over icons in the Eastern Church during the Middle Ages and the alternative path taken by the Western Church, the author depicts the hermeneutics of images in their strong relation with Christology.

In light of Theodor W. Adorno's and Max Horkheimer's criticisms of modernity and their reception of the image ban in their "negative dialectic", in chapter nine Moxter draws lines that connect with a possible contemporary aesthetics in negative theology. He ends by considering contemporary artists and their multiple receptions of aniconism and the negative philosophical and theological or even iconoclastic tradition. Chapter ten reviews the threads and results of the earlier chapters.

The systematic-theological section of the book offers many interesting perspectives on the topic of imagery and its intersection with other areas of anthropological relevance. Moxter refers to a wide range of modern and post-modern philosophers as well as to arguments made by the Church Fathers and by Luther and Calvin. The ninth chapter is of particular interest, with its consideration of contemporary aesthetics in the light of a negative dialectic and of the interpretation of modern art pieces.

The orientation and structure of the text are, however, confusing. The chapters differ vastly in length (compare chapters 4 and 7 for instance), leaving an impression of a lack of balance and unequal weighting. Furthermore, it appears that various purposes are intertwined. On one hand, the discussion provides an overview of elaborated receptions of the image ban, which illustrate the shift in hermeneutics together with transformed parameters in the history of thought and differing (implicit) hermeneutics of the image itself (341). On the other hand, it seems that the authors wanted to contribute to a Protestant hermeneutic of the image (ban) and also to a general cultural debate. All three aims are approached diligently and well argued. The confusion stems from their overlap, when it is not always clear how the information presented is to be positioned.

In a short conclusion, the two authors state clearly the guiding thesis of the entire work. A conception of the image that gives account of it as the portrait of an original in a paradigm of similarity does not provide an adequate basis for understanding the image ban. An image "gives to see" and "makes present" while also concealing and hiding, and therefore the biblical image ban served and serves not to protect God's invisibility (or the rejection of any mental im-

age), but to preserve God's hiddenness, even in connection with Revelation (353–355). Additionally, Hartenstein and Moxter reflect on the actuality of their topic with reference to recent incidents like the terror attacks on *Charlie Hebdo*.

CONCLUSION

The book offers a multi-perspective approach to a theologically and socially controversial issue. Their broad definition of the term “image” (21) allows the authors to explore the phenomenon of imagery and its manifold associated dimensions, which makes for a very enriching, and readable, study. Hartenstein and Moxter are working in a Protestant context. However, I recommend the book for all scholars of religion who are interested in visual studies!

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