Shall we say that they came into being … in any other way than through God’s workmanship?

Plato (*Sophist* 265C)

Moses, now determined to build a tabernacle, a most holy edifice, the furniture of which he was instructed how to supply by precise commands from God.

Philo (*On Moses* 2:15:74)

No one can deny that the vast majority of the Hebrew Bible’s texts have a stringent aversion to both figurative imagery and the plastic arts. Grounding their perspective on the authority of the second commandment,1 various biblical books condemn both statuary and the figurative arts as “detestable”2 and “false images without any breath in them,”3 images that put people “to shame and confusion”4 and which shall “utterly pass away.”5 However, notwithstanding the stringency of the second commandment, is art—and especially figurative art—really condemned in an absolute and unconditional manner by the Torah? If it is, then how does one explain the “two cherubim of gold,”6 a clearly figurative artwork, that the Israelites are told to craft for the Ark of the Covenant? Moreover, how does one explain the presence of “all the artisans, who were doing every sort of task on the sanctuary”?7 If true

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1 “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” (*Exodus* 20:4). Almost all biblical citations are taken from the New Revised Standard Version translation.


3 Jeremiah 10:14.

4 Isaiah 45:16. The context of this particular passage conveys that “those who make idols will be put to shame” (*Harper Collins*, 971). As “those who make idols” are precisely the “the artisan and…the goldsmith” (Jeremiah 10:9), it is evident that the aversion to figurative art is especially stringent here.

5 Isaiah 2:18. Several deuterocanonical works, such as the Letter of Jeremiah, are even more emphatically averse to idolatry.

6 Exodus 25:18. It is evident from the context of the passage that the cherubim are to be “the work of a designer” (*Harper Collins*, 128) whose precise purpose is to “devise artistic designs, to work in gold, silver, and bronze” (Exodus 31:4). We shall return to this theme of the “designer” later on, but what is important to recognize is that the ability to “devise artistic designs” is sometimes treated in a wholly positive manner by the Hebrew texts.

7 Exodus 36:4. “Task” may also be rendered as “work” (*Harper Collins*, 145), in which case the entire artistic “task on the sanctuary” is seen as constituting “work for the service of the house of God” (1 Chronicles 9:13, 23:28).
“idols,” in the sense that the Torah interprets this term, are “man-made” images of “the gods of the peoples,” what, then, of art that is in principle not “the work of human hands” but rather crafted “according to the pattern that the Lord had shown to Moses” on the mount? This essay, therefore, will look into whether there really is a positive opening onto the arts in the Torah, and it will do this by using the tabernacle narrative of Exodus 25-30 as its principal scriptural example. Will we be able to agree, in the final conclusion of our study, with Dr. Melissa Raphael that there is the possibility of an Israelite “theology of art because of the Second Commandant, not in spite of it”?

In the book of Exodus, the tabernacle (mishkan) built by the Hebrews serves as the portable dwelling-place for the divine presence (shekinah) of Yahweh, serving its function from the time of their flight from Egypt through their conquering of the land of Canaan. The construction of the tabernacle, described in detail for a second time in Exodus 35-40, is one of the most important events in the entire Exodus narrative, for this new sacred structure is “seen to stand over and against all forms of idolatry.” Unlike the “graven images” of the second commandment, this inspired sanctuary—both “precisely designed [and] externally beautiful”—is not condemned but rather commanded by Yahweh; this work of art is accepted precisely because it conforms to the “pattern that the Lord had shown to Moses,” its entire form and design having been modeled on a divine prototype. Far from being a human and empirical creation, this work of art is understood to be a “sanctum...[that Yahweh’s own] hands have founded,” “a firm place for dwelling that [he has] wrought for himself.”

The Hebrew word tabnit (“build”)—used in both Exodus 25:40 and Numbers 8:4—essentially conveys a “beautiful arrangement [or] creation.” Now, quite apart from whether this “arrangement” given to Moses is held to connote a large-scale prototype, a small architect’s model, or a written set of plans, what is clearly conveyed is that the tabernacle

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8 Deuteronomy 6:14. The commandment to forsake the “gods of the peoples” is certainly “the perennial injunction and threat” (Harper Collins, 267) in the Hebrew texts: indeed, as we shall see, all positive openings onto the arts in the Hebrew Bible involve, on the one hand, an absolute condemnation of foreign deities and, inversely, an absolute glorification of Israel’s personal god Yahweh.

9 Psalm 115:4.

10 Numbers 8:4.


13 Ibid., 270.

14 Exodus 25:9, 40.

15 Archaeological evidence has shown that “ascribing a temple’s blueprint to its god is attested too in Mesopotamia and Egypt” (Harper Collins, 126). See also V. Hurowitz, I Have Built You An Exalted House (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1992), 168-70.

16 D. N. Freedman, cited in “Exodus 19-40,” Anchor Bible Commentary, ed. W. H. C. Propp (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 376. All further references to this particular volume of the Anchor Bible Commentary will be denoted simply as Anchor, followed by the page number.


18 Anchor, 379.

19 See Ibid., 376.
“is designed not by humans but by God.” Moreover, if we keep in mind that the word *tabnit* is “evocative of Creation” and recognize that “the Bible’s supreme artisan is Yahweh himself,” it becomes clear that the creation of the tabernacle reflects the act of the creation itself. In both instances, the divinity is presented as a *demiurge*, the great artisan of the universe. The “wisdom” by which Yahweh ordains the tabernacle is understood, therefore, to be the same “wisdom or word by which [he] founded the earth,” the same “understanding by which He established the heavens.” It is evident from several later texts of the Hebrew Bible, which we shall discuss later, that Yahweh assumed for Israel the role of the “Divine Craftsman,” assigned in other ancient religions to Ptah, Hephaestus, and Kothar. As with those deities, he serves as both the principle that bestows beauty on material things as well as the divinity that ordains art and “construction…by divine inspiration.” But if Yahweh is considered to be the artist of the tabernacle, then what purpose do the human artisans of the structure serve?

It has been stated previously by scholars that the tabernacle narrative of Exodus portrays the “artisan [as] a type of theologian” and that the “heroes” of the chronicle are neither “kings nor prophets” but rather “priests and artisans.” Why? It is precisely because the story portrays the divinity as having “put wisdom and skill” in the “hearts of all the

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20 Ibid., 377.
21 Ibid., 377.
22 Ibid., 389.
24 See Psalm 33:6: “By the Word [Wisdom, Intellect] of the Lord the heavens were made.” *Cf.* John 1:10 (“The world was made through him [the logos is “word or wisdom of the Father” according to Christian thought]”); *Shepherd of Hermes* 1:1:3 (“the God of powers, who by His …great wisdom has created the world … by His strong word … laid the foundations of the earth upon the waters”); St. Athanasius, *De Decretis* 19; St. Gregory of Nyssa, *On the Making of Man* 2:2 (“All are brought into being with a Word”); Qur’an 16:40 (“And Our Word unto a thing, when We intend it, is only that We say unto it: ‘Be!’ And so it is”); Nifflari, *Book of Spiritual Addresses* 55:10.
26 See *Anchor*, 389.
28 See *Anchor*, 389: “The Bible’s supreme artisan is [Yahweh] himself.”
30 *Anchor*, 533.
artisans." Consequently, Yahweh gives the artisans the ability to practice their craft so they may glorify him in return, or, as the Anchor Bible Commentary elucidates the point, “that which Yahweh gives them—their skill— the craftsman will give back to God.” It is, therefore, a reciprocal relationship of the arts between divinity and man. Although craftsmen such as Bezalel and Oholiab “and every skillful one to whom the Lord has given skill” are renowned and talented men, even they “surpass themselves” under Yahweh’s guidance, as their “hearts are stirred to do the work” on the sanctuary in a manner that they have never done before. It is indeed remarkable how much emphasis is paid in the entire narrative to the importance of the artisan, whose function here, like the priest, is to “transform inert, profane matter” such as stones and wood into a celestial center where Yahweh can “come down” and live among his people. In this sense, therefore, the artisans of Exodus really are theologians: they make the divine perceivable to the human, albeit through material construction rather than scriptural exposition.

According to the Interpreters Dictionary of the Bible, when the Hebrews established their rule in Canaan they “had no artistic tradition of their own.” It was only after the flight from Egypt, therefore, that the Israelites were finally free to work for themselves and their god, which is perhaps why they immediately “exploded into artistic endeavors as if to rival their Egyptian contemporaries.” Although we cannot necessarily say that this was because Israel “probably suffered from a cultural inferiority complex,” one can imagine the artistic qualities of the tabernacle serving, at some level, a political purpose. With the arts of the Egyptians flourishing, it was only natural that Israel gave the arts a new dimension among its people, both in terms of quality and in “the number of items produced.” According to Zaccagnini, it was very probable that soon “a class of specialized craftsmen existed who worked full time in the temple.” While we do not know the absolute historical truth of the matter, it is clearly evident from the Exodus narrative that the arts served a very important role in the lives of the Israelites post-Egypt. As for the figurative arts specifically, we know that practically all cultures surrounding the Israelites, including the Egyptians, bore many examples of it. What, then, of the Israelites? Did not they need a figurative art?

31 See Exodus 28:3.
32 Anchor, 431.
33 Exodus 36:1.
34 Anchor, 431.
35 Exodus 36: 2.
36 Anchor, 487-488.
37 Exodus 19:11.
38 See Anchor, 533: “No less than sacrifice, construction is indispensable to bringing Yahweh to Earth and keeping him here. Like the burnt offering, tabernacle-building is literally…making the profane Holy.”
40 Anchor, 533.
41 Ibid.
42 Ibid.
In Exodus’ chronicle of the tabernacle’s creation, the narrative’s detail pertaining to the sculpting of the cherubim\textsuperscript{44} is exceptional in the sense that it is an \textit{explicit} promotion of figurative artwork. The artisans are told “to make two cherubim of gold” which are to be placed “at the two ends of the mercy seat.”\textsuperscript{45} Moreover, the craftsmen are told to make “ten curtains of fine linen ... with cherubim skillfully worked into them.”\textsuperscript{46} Does not this depiction of cherubim, however, oppose the second commandment, which forbade the portrayal of “anything that is in heaven above, or that is on earth beneath”?\textsuperscript{47} Now, if we keep in mind that the purpose of the cherubim is specifically to flank Yahweh—who promises to “meet with [Israel]...from between the cherubim that are on the Ark”\textsuperscript{48}—it becomes clear that figurative art is allowed, provided that it plays an active role in Israel’s contact with Yahweh. As with the tabernacle itself, the sculpting of the cherubim is an instance of an artistic transformation of “profane matter,” in the shape of gold, “into a semblance of the celestial”\textsuperscript{49} in the finished product of the cherubim.

We had earlier paralleled the construction of the tabernacle with the divinity’s act of creation. Whilst commentating upon this analogy, Fretheim has stated that the craftsman “Bezalel executes \textit{in miniature} the divine creative role of Genesis 1 in the building of the tabernacle” for “the spirit of God with which the craftsman are filled...lies behind the completing of the project just as it [lay] behind the Creation.”\textsuperscript{50} Indeed, we can agree with Fretheim that “the importance given to shape, order, design, [and] intricacy...corresponds to the orderly, colorful, artful, and intricate creation of Genesis 1.”\textsuperscript{51} From a purely aesthetic standpoint, it is evident from the biblical descriptions of both artistic events—the creation and the construction of the tabernacle—that a tremendous emphasis is made by both narratives to the relationship between form and function, the final products of both artistic endeavors serving a very specific function whilst being both “precisely designed” as well as “externally beautiful”\textsuperscript{52} in their form.\textsuperscript{53} Moreover, this intrinsic relationship between the tabernacle and the notions of form, function, beauty, and order are by no means coincidental, for, as the late Ananda Coomaraswamy elucidated, the arts of many ancient civilizations had “a [very specific] theory of beauty, where beauty was regarded as [consisting of the form’s] order and the harmony of parts...[and] ugliness [was perceived as constituting of a form’s]...

\textsuperscript{44} The cherubim are “hybrid creatures [that] represent the various animal powers of which God has control” (Harper Collins, 127). As to their appearance, we may assume that they were portrayed as “winged sphinxes with the body of a bull or lion and a human head,” the representations of such creatures being “abundant in archaeological evidence” (Ibid., 126-8).

\textsuperscript{45} Exodus 25:18.

\textsuperscript{46} Exodus 26:1.

\textsuperscript{47} Exodus 20:4.

\textsuperscript{48} Exodus 25:22.

\textsuperscript{49} Anchor, 487-88.

\textsuperscript{50} Fretheim, \textit{op. cit.}, 269.

\textsuperscript{51} Ibid., 270.

\textsuperscript{52} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{53} It is significant, moreover, that it is for “six days that [the artisans] shall labor and do all [their] work [i.e. crafts]” (Exodus 20:9), which is the same time frame allotted to God in the event of the creation in Genesis 1.
FOLLOWING THE DIVINE PATTERN

disorder.”54 In the geometric precision of the tabernacle, therefore, the craftsmen do indeed “renew and complete the Creation,”55 for this is an ordered sanctuary that is borne out of the same orderly “fruits of Yahweh’s ruah”56 that were used to make the universe.

As a coda to our central discussion of the tabernacle, it would do us well to briefly highlight certain other verses of the Hebrew Bible that betray a clearly positive outlook on the arts. First and foremost, Yahweh’s capacity as an “artisan god” is clearly evident in the Psalms, which declare the heavens “the work of [Yahweh’s] fingers”57 and the “firmament [as proclaiming] His handiwork.”58 In both of these instances, as in the creation passage of Genesis 2, the divinity is portrayed in a very human manner: Yahweh is conceived not so much in a cosmic capacity as he is portrayed in the role of a celestial craftsman, fashioning the universe in much the same way that a potter fashions clay. The image of the “divine potter,” moreover, is explicitly outlined in Isaiah, which features the following art-centric hymn: “Lord, you are our Father; we are the clay, and you are our potter; we are all the work of your hand.”59 In the context of Isaiah, the art motif performs an important devotional purpose: Yahweh is invoked so that he does not destroy “the work of [his] hand” in the same manner that an artist is stopped before he attempts to destroy his own work after being unsatisfied with the finished product.60 Aside from these passages dealing with the divinity-as-artisan, one finds numerous other Hebrew Bible verses that portray human art in a very positive manner. For instance, we read of Yahweh telling the prophet Ezekiel to “take a brick and…portray on it a city, Jerusalem.”61 As Ezekiel here is “commanded to etch the city…into a still damp brick,”62 it is clearly evident that the arts, in exceptional circumstances, are actually acceptable for the prophets, provided that they convey some important parabolic function, as indeed Ezekiel’s etching does. This notion of divinely prescribed art, moreover, brings us to perhaps the most famous work of art in the entire Hebrew Bible, namely the Temple of Jerusalem, which was to be executed under the reign of King Solomon. The Temple of Solomon, which may be seen as constituting a “royal” version of the Exodus tabernacle, is described in overwhelming aesthetic detail in both the Book of Kings as well as the Book of Chronicles. Although entire books can be, and have been, written about this particular artistic object, one cannot help but be struck by how vehemently the text emphasizes that the Temple be built by “an abundance of workers: stonecutters, masons,

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55 *Anchor*, 488.
56 Ibid.
57 Psalm 8:3. According to the *Harper Collins* commentary, this psalm verse serves the specific function of raising “awareness of the awesome universe as God’s handiwork” and, moreover, of “human glory as a manifestation of the glory of God” (740). This brings us back to our earlier notion of “the Bible’s supreme artisan being Yahweh himself” (*Anchor*, 389) and all human artisans creating art only after “Yahweh fills [their] hearts with… wisdom” (Ibid., 643).
58 Psalm 19:1.
59 Isaiah 64:8. Cf. Job 10: 8-12: “Your hands fashioned and made me…you fashioned me like clay.”
60 Cf. *Harper Collins*, 994: “Since God fathered and fashioned Israel as his own people, why should he destroy the work of his own hand?”
61 Ezekiel 4:1.
carpenters, and all kinds of artisans without number, skilled in working with gold, silver, bronze, and iron...[who may] begin the work [with] the Lord with [them].”

As with the tabernacle, this Temple requires the work of the “theological” artisans, who again “transform inert, profane matter”—gold, silver, and bronze—into a Temple which “the glory of the Lord can fill.”

Thus, yet again, art is necessary in maintaining and further improving Israel’s connection with Yahweh.

Having discussed the Mosaic tabernacle and having highlighted certain other artistic instances in the Hebrew Bible, it is clear that art is by no means forbidden wholesale in the Torah. On the contrary, it is considered an absolute necessity, given that it takes place under the correct circumstances and for the right purposes. In the entire Exodus narrative, it is through crafting the ordained works of art—be they priestly vestments, the mercy seat, the tabernacle, the brazen serpent, or the cherubim—that Israel maintains its continuous contact with Yahweh. As we said at the beginning, while any art made for the “gods of [other] peoples” is naturally prohibited—for it is not crafted “in accordance with all that Yahweh has commanded”—any art commanded for Yahweh, or God, is not only accepted but revered. It is this rule of demarcation, therefore, that may rightfully be denoted as the “Israelite theology of art,” if ever there was one, and it is this faculty of discernment that has guided Jewish and Christian perspectives pertaining to their sacred arts through the centuries.

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63 1 Chronicles 22:15-16.

64 2 Chronicles 5:14.

65 A detailed discussion of the artistic qualities of the priestly vestments, the mercy seat and the cherubim, and the brazen serpent would require individual research essays.


67 Exodus 36:1.

68 Raphael, op. cit., 2.