The Talmud Yerushalmi
and Graeco-Roman Culture

Edited by
Peter Schäfer

III

Mohr Siebeck
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Viewing the Sculptural Environment: Shaping the Second Commandment*

by

Yaron Z. Eliav

Modern students of Judaism in the Graeco-Roman world have been instilled with the generally accepted idea that "conflict" between Judaism and Hellenism was inherent within the Roman realm. Even those scholars whose research helped to unveil the deep impact of Graeco-Roman culture (both in its early stages and its Roman manifestation) on diverse aspects of Jewish life, persisted in portraying these two entities as "hostile." Thus, for example, in a book dedicated to revealing the Greek influence on the rabbis, Saal Lieberman maintains that "The learned and pious rabbis did their utmost to prevent the people from becoming thoroughly Hellenized," and Louis Ginzberg, his senior contemporary, asserts that "...Judaism and Paganism were locked in combat for many centuries." These views are part of a broader conceptual outlook that posits an abyssal, everlasting separation between Jews (and, in particular, the rabbis) and pagans. Gedaliah Alon provided the "classical" statement for such an approach when he depicted a "latent animosity between Jews and Gentiles" that "inhibited Jews from taking part in civic functions ...". Much of the current scholarship that deals with Judaism in the Roman world, despite its...

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* The Final version of this paper has greatly benefited from my ongoing discussions with Elie A. Friedland, a colleague and a dear friend. The following is stamped with her erudition, vast knowledge in art history, and sharp critique, for which I am deeply grateful. Any remaining mistakes and jarring arguments are to be blamed on my stubbornness or ignorance.


2 Saal Lieberman, Greek in Jewish Palestine (1941; reprinted New York and Jerusalem: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1994) 91.


sophistication and complex picture it strives to present, maintains at its core the same notion of antagonism. In a recent study, John North labelled the situation prevailing in the Mediterranean during the Roman period as “a system of interacting competing religions”;

5 Moshe Hal bertal published an essay titled “Coexisting with the Enemy: Jews and Pagans in the Mishnah,”6 and Seth Schwartz, in a paper delivered in the first conference of this series, concluded that “It must finally be admitted that the culture of the Graeco-Roman city and the Judaism of the rabbis contradicted each other both essentially and in superficial detail.”

However, the term “conflict” can be deceptive and misleading. In describing two cultures as “conflicting,” one must specify the facets of society where this hostility is manifested. Who in fact are the opposing parties? Are their ideologies inimical to each other, or are their leaders (or, for that matter, the elite) inflaming the hostility? Using enmity as a means of defining identity, retaining power or strengthening unity has been a well-known phenomenon throughout history, and it makes scepticism conditio sine qua non for studying literary depictions of conflict. Just as caution is required when examining the actual situation behind schismatic declarations such as Tertullian’s categories castra tenebrarum and castra lucis (“camp of darkness” and “camp of light”); or the predicament underling the bitterness with which rabbinic sources treat the minim (presumably the early Jewish believers in Jesus) or the malkhut ha-resha’a (“the evil kingdom”, i.e., Rome), it is needed in a study of the reaction toward Hellenism.8 Generally speaking, literary compositions are inclined to exaggerate hostility and tension, if only because of the everlasting marketing verity that conflict sells better than peace. Conversely, when characterizing the “multicultural atmosphere” in a particular time and place, awareness to the divergent, even seemingly contradictory, attitudes that each group had toward

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However, the term “conflict” can be deceptive and misleading. In describing two cultures as “conflicting,” one must specify the facets of society where this hostility is manifested. Who in fact are the opposing parties? Are their ideologies inimical to each other, or are their leaders (or, for that matter, the elite) inflaming the hostility? Using emnity as a means of defining identity, retaining power or strengthening unity has been a well-known phenomenon throughout history, and it makes asceticism conditional sine qua non for studying literary depictions of conflict. Just as caution is required when examining the actual situation behind schismatic declarations such as Tertullian’s categories castra tenebrorum and castra lucis (“camp of darkness” and “camp of light”); or the predicament underlying the bitterness with which rabbinic sources treat the minim (presumably the early Jewish believers in Jesus) or the malakh ha-resha’a (“the evil kingdom”, i.e., Rome), it is needed in a study of the reaction toward Hellenism. Generally speaking, literary compositions are inclined to exaggerate hostility and tension, if only because of the everlasting marketing verity that conflict sells better than peace. Conversely, when characterizing the “multicultural atmosphere” in a particular time and place, awareness to the divergent, even seemingly contradictory, attitudes that each group had toward the others is mandatory. In the sphere of culture and religion, conflict and amity both coexist and intertwine.

The study of daily life—that is, people’s encounters with the physical reality in which they live may therefore be able to contribute an alternative, less ideologically fraught, perspective on the relationship between Judaism and Hellenism. In the past, I have examined the way Jews became involved in the Roman baths and integrated them into their own culture. The current study tackles another important feature of daily life in the Roman world—the encounter with statues and sculpture that were omnipresent in this civilization. By characterizing this phenomenon as a “sculptural environment,” I mean to embrace not only the outward appearance (subject matter and style) and physical reality (materials and display context) of the statues, but also the political, religious, and social implications, interactions and tensions associated with them in the diversified milieu of the Roman East. Statuary functioned in different spheres of Roman reality, each conceiving its own set of definitions to delineate the essence of these artifacts and providing a whole range of symbolism, statements and perceptions about their appearance. This paper will explore one of these spheres: the Jewish, or rather rabbinic, interaction with the sculptural environment of Roman Palestine.

It is important to realize at the outset that in contrast to the impression created by books such as Daniel Sperber’s The Roman City in Palestine—In which the author devotes neither a chapter nor a substantial discussion to statues, although the book is organized as an inclusive description of the urban environment of those days, with chapters on the markets, bathhouses and other public buildings—statues were a dominant element of the cityscape in Palestine.

Viewing the Sculptural Environment: Shaping the Second Commandment

inferior, than in the overriding and prosperous centers of the Eastern Empire, such as Antioch, Alexandria or Ephesus and later Constantinople, or, for that matter, the ancient cities of the Greek world, such as Athens or Rhodes. Even Aphrodisias, which was smaller and less pivotal than these metropolises, probably had a greater number of statues than an average Palestinian city, because it was wealthy, close to the sculpture centers of the Roman East, and enjoyed relative tranquility during the years of the Pax Romana. The number of statues in a typical Palestinian setting could not compare to what was described, for example, in the hexametrical elphounos of the Egyptian visitor Christodorus of Kopais, who reported about 80 statues just in the Zeuxippos, the main bathhouse-gymnasium of Constantinople in the fifth or sixth century, or to what was conveyed by Pliny the Elder five centuries earlier that thousands of statues were standing in Rhodes as well as in other Greek cities.

But even if the number of statues in Palestine was relatively modest, it is clear that the urban layout of its cities was not significantly different from that of other eastern cities throughout the empire (which, as many scholars have noticed, were designed fairly uniformly) and this included the sculptures adorning them. Anyone walking in a typical city in Palestine during this period – such as Caesarea Maritima, Scythopolis, Samaria, Paneas and Eleutheropolis – would encounter Roman sculpture every step of the way, and there is no reason to believe that major cities in regions heavily populated by Jews, such as Sepphoris or Tiberias, were any different. The archaeological evidence, the varied sources in rabbinical literature dealing with statues – some of which will be discussed below – and even bits of information about statues in Palestine mentioned incidentally in non-Jewish sources, all support this claim.

Like other Jews in Palestine, especially those living in urban centers, the sages who produced the tannaitic and amoraimic literature were well aware of the "sculptural environment," and alluded to it quite freely in their writings. Not only did the rabbis repeatedly mention statues by name, such as Aphrodite, Mercury, the figures (icons) of kings and emperors or, on a different note, the "Faces which
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15 These were collected in book 2 of the so-called Anthologia Palatina; see: Anthologia Graeca 2 (Beckley 1.186-211). See also: Reinhart Stepperich, "Das Statuenprogramm in den Zeuxippus-Thermen," Zeitschr. des Aegyptologischen Verbandes 6 (1982) 211–35.
18 Meade L. Fischer, Marble Studies: Roman Palestine and Marble Trade (Xenia: Konstnärskiftes förlag 60; Konstnär: UVK, 1998), provides the most comprehensive survey of statuary in Roman Palestine, although this monograph focuses solely on marble.
Graeco-Roman sculpture — and not only in a negative tone. The engraved inscription that accompanied a statue, for example, which was an indispensable part of the work and a crucial factor in the way the statue was perceived by onlookers, is referred to in second-century rabbinic terminology as: "an inscription that runs under figures (translating the Hebrew "ד" and "כ") and icons."

Tanumitic halakhah forbids Jews to inspect it on the Sabbath, apparently as part of the general prohibition against reading texts other than Scripture on that day. Another example relates to the importance of personal statues in the estate of a deceased — a subject which comes up occasionally in Roman law as well — and is discussed by the rabbis in regard to the case of a convert who inherited them from his father. Rather unexpectedly, even more spiritual aspects of sculpture, such as the animistic beliefs associated with them, or the aesthetic appreciation of their beauty, some of which will be discussed further below, are occasionally mentioned by the sages as well.

In general, the rabbis' close acquaintance with these constituents of Roman culture should not be startling. After all, like their fellow Jews, they did not disengage themselves from the Graeco-Roman domain, and so it is natural that the world they lived in should be reflected in their literary work. The important question is therefore not whether they were familiar with the Roman world but how they assessed it. Cyril Mango, in his influential paper about Byzantine perspectives on statuary, claims that the Byzantines' position regarding statuary can be used as a test case for investigating that society's overall approach to antiquity and Graeco-Roman culture in general. It seems that this is true of the Jews as well.

Any discussion of the manner in which the Jews viewed or perceived statues and of the ideological or legal (halakhic) stance they took toward them must

notes: ibid., tractate Bethalulah 8 (Horowitz and Rabin 144). On these types of statues see Kleinro, Roman Sculpture, 14 and the bibliography she offers for this topic on p. 19; Harriet Flower, Ancestor Masks and Aristocratic Power in Roman Culture (Oxford and New York: Clarendon Press and Oxford University Press, 1996).


22 There are not yet any comprehensive collections of rabbinic references and allusions to Roman sculpture. However, many of the sources mentioning the "icons of Kings" were gathered and discussed in Ignaz Zingerle, Die Königsnachsicht des Midrash beleuchtet durch die römische Kaiserzeit (Wiesbaden: S. Schottlander, 1900) 17-29. References to other types of statuary can be found in the various entries in Samuel Krauss, Griechische und römische Lehnwörter im Midrash, Midrash and Targum (2 vols.; 1890; reprinted Hildesheim: Georg Olms, 1964). 2:114 s. v. "棰"; 2:35-35 s. v. "棰"; 2:12.

23 Mehillata de Rabbi Ishmael, tractate Beshallah 8 (Horowitz and Rabin 233); translation with slight changes based on Jacob Z. Lautenbach, Mehillah de Rabbi Ishmael (3 vols.; Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1935) 2:262. For an earlier associate of this text with the damnnatio memoriae see: Saul Lieberman, Tosafot Kifshahah. A Comprehensive Commentary on the Tosafot (6 vols.; Jerusalem: Jewish Theological Semi­ nary, 1935-1940): 3:285 n. 3; (Lev. Rab. 23:12 (Margaritis 547). Here and throughout the paper, if not otherwise noted, the translations are mine. I regularly translate the mishnaic Hebrew "and" as "name", and the loaned word "כ" as "icon." For other versions of this last parl by where the "replaced" kings is instead the one who died, see: Samuel Krauss, Parus ve­ reni he-nanim v-samikaniyya (Jerusalem: Misad ha-ev rook, 1948) 52.

24 The best study on this topic (although not focused on the East) is still Friedrich Vittinghoff, Der Staatsmahl in der römischen Kaiserzeit: Untersuchungen zur "damnnatio memoriae" (Berlin: Junker and Duncker, 1936).

25 Mehillah de Rabbi Ishmael, tractate Piska 13 (Horowitz and Rabin 44). References to other instances in rabbinic literature where this passage appears can be found in Horowitz's
spout out water in the towns,"24 they were also aware of the social and political dynamics associated with the positioning of statues and the cultural milieu, i.e., the customs, myths and emotions, that revolved around them. For example, the use of statues for imperial propaganda and the procedures of damnatio memoriae which stemmed from it provided the context for the following rabbinic parable:

"A king of flesh-and-blood entered a province and [the people] set up icons [of him], made statues [of him] and struck coins in his honor. Later on they upset his portraits, broke his statues and defaced his coins, thus diminishing the likeness of the king."

It likewise supplied the background for the story about the artisan who [started to] fashion the icon of the king but the king was "replaced" by another before he had a chance to complete his work.25 Frequent changes of rule in the third century undoubtedly provided many opportunities to see such events occurring in real life, whether at a formal declaration of the former emperor as hostis or simply when such actions transpired spontaneously in the heat of events.26

Elsewhere, the rabbis mention the customs of family statuary; for example, "[A person] goes to a sculptor and says to him, 'Make me a likeness of my father' or "When the eldest [son] of one of them died they made an icon of him and placed it in his house." As is well-known, although less emphasized by scholars, private statues and masks of family leaders (imagines maiorum) or children who died prematurely were extremely popular with affluent families at that time.27 Rabbinic literature mentions many other details distinctive of 

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26 Mehillat de rabbi Ishmael, tractate Piddu 13 (Horovitz and Rabin 233); translation with slight changes based on Jacob Z. Lauterbach, Meilhilat de Rabbi Ishmael (3 vols.; Philadelphia: The Jewish Publication Society of America, 1933) 2.282. For an earlier association of this text with the damnatio memoriae see: Saul Lieberman, Tosefta Kilathah. A Comprehensive Commentary on the Tosefta (10 vols.; Jerusalem: Jewish Theological Seminary, 1935-48) 2.281 n. 3; Lev. Rab. 23.12 (Margulies 547). Here and throughout the paper, if not otherwise noted, the translations are mine. I generally translate the mishnaic Hebrew "היה" as "statue", and the loaned word "מליח" as "icon." For other versions of this last parable where the "replaced" king is instead the one who died, see: Samuel Krauss, Parsa ve-ramzi he-tradim u-sanatization (Jerusalem: Mosad ha-ivri kook, 1948) 52.
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28 Mehillat de rabbi Ishmael, tractate Piddu 13 (Horovitz and Rabin 44). References to other instances in rabbinic literature where this passage appears can be found in Horovitz's notes: ibid., tractate Beullah 8 (Horovitz and Rabin 144). On these types of statue see Klein, Roman Sculpture, 14 and the bibliography she offers for this topic on p. 19; Harris Rovner, "Ancestor Masks and Archaistic Power in Roman Culture" (Oxford and New York: Clarendon Press and Oxford University Press, 1996).
29 t. Shab. 17.1 (Lieberman 89). The particular meaning of "טיבד" in this case, which in Talmudic literature has a variety of denotations, is not clear. Its complete absence from the second part of the halakha, which shifts the subject from Shabbat to halakha and instructs people to refrain from looking at icons, i.e. the second item in the halakha, seems to suggest that "טיבד" does not refer here to a human figure. But this conclusion is without certainty. For the general halakhic background about the decree concerning reading on the Sabbath, see: m. Shab. 23.2; t. Shab. 14a; Lieberman, Tosefta Kilathah 5.282. Lieberman also discusses the various versions of the word מַכָּר in its relation to the Greek kleros.
30 m. Demai 6.10; t. Demai 6.13 (Lieberman 96); Dib. 34.2.1, 14 (Mommsen and Krueger 522-3).
31 Plan to devote a separate study to these issues.

Graeco-Roman sculpture -- and not only in a negative tone. The engraved inscription that accompanied a statue, for example, which was an indispensable part of the work and a crucial factor in the way the statue was perceived by onlookers, is referred to in second-century rabbinic terminology as: "an inscription that runs under figures (translating the Hebraic בְּלִי עֲנָיָּת and icons.)" Tannaitic halakha forbids Jews to inspect it on the Sabbath, apparently as part of the general prohibition against reading texts other than Scripture on that day.32 Another example relates to the importance of personal statues in the estate of a deceased -- a subject which comes up occasionally in Roman law as well -- and is discussed by the rabbis in regard to the case of a convert who inherited them from his father.33 Rather unexpectedly, even more spiritual aspects of sculpture, such as the animistic beliefs associated with them, or the aesthetic appreciation of their beauty, some of which will be discussed further below, are occasionally mentioned by the sages as well.34

In general, the rabbis' close acquaintance with these constituents of Roman culture should not be startling. After all, like their fellow Jews, they did not disengage themselves from the Graeco-Roman domain, and so it is natural that the world they lived in should be reflected in their literary work. The important question is therefore not whether they were familiar with the Roman world but how they assessed it. Cyril Mango, in his influential paper about Byzantine perspectives on statuary, claims that the Byzantines' position regarding statuary can be used as a test case for investigating that society's overall approach to antiquity and Graeco-Roman culture in general.35 It seems that this is true of the Jews as well.

Any discussion of the manner in which the Jews viewed or perceived statues and of the ideological or legal (halakhic) stance they took toward them must

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begin with the biblical command concerning idolatry. The Bible—and the Pentateuch at its core, which by the late Roman period had long constituted the foundation of life for all Jews—is extremely stringent in its opposition to idolatry. The pivot of this concept lies in the first four verses of the Ten Commandments (Exod 20:2–5; Deuteronomy 5:6–9). After a declarative prelude “I am the Lord your God,” the passage specifies three prohibitions seemingly deriving from the recognition that the Lord is God: 1) “You shall have no other gods instead of me” (Deut 5:7); 2) “You shall not make for yourself a statue” (Deut 5:8); 3) “You shall not bow to them or worship them.”82. In general, even though this is far from being the only possible interpretation of the above verses, the sages tied these three restrictions together as three aspects of the ban on “idolatry.”83. The biblical line of thought, or at least what was thought by Jews in the Graeco-Roman world to be the biblical concept, which is expressed in countless warnings and in the prophets’ persistent struggle against any manifestation of worshipping other gods,84. was applied fairly rigorously by the Jews of the Second Temple period.85. The rabbis, too, considered the repudiation of idol worship one of the foundation stones of their worldview. They counted idolatry among the three prohibitions which, if transgressed, merited the death penalty86. They asserted that “whoever confuses [belief] in idolatry denies the Ten Commandments.”87. It deemed any form of idolatry to be ritually impure and the major reason for exile,88. and amassed remarks and regulations forbidding all aspects of idol worship.89.

From the close connection established by the Torah (in the verses mentioned above) between worshipping other gods and making statues, it is but a short leap to the assumption that the Jews should abhor all statues, consider them an essential contradiction to their way of life, and thus rigorously avoid any contact or association with them. Therefore, all expressions of even partial acceptance of this aspect of the surrounding culture, such as the famous story about Rabban Gamaliel attending the “Aphrodite bathhouse” (m. Avoda Zara 3:4), were seen by scholars as rabbinical innovations that were intended, for whatever reason, to create a compromise between the fundamental principles that guided Jewish life and the non-Jewish environment. This is the rationale behind the repeated attempts by modern scholars to find reasons that led the rabbis to create such compromises. At the hub of these scholarly efforts was a basic agreement about the underlying incongruity between Roman sculpture and the Jewish way of life.27. The question is whether such incompatibility was really the whole case.

In what follows, I focus on the halakhic debate concerning the scope of the biblical prohibition against idolatry in order to reevaluate the nature of the encounter of the rabbis, and perhaps, to some degree, of the Jews in general, with the statues in their environment. In order to clarify how the rabbis understood the biblical commandment against idolatry, and, even more importantly, to what sculptural objects did they apply it, we must pay attention to a fundamental distinction in rabbinic literature regarding statues. The rest of this paper is devoted to a discussion of this distinction and its cultural context.

Most scholars who have discussed the rabbinic attitude toward pagan culture in general and statues in particular have acknowledged that the sages made distinctions between various aspects of gentile reality. This conclusion is justified by __________________________.
idolatry denies the Ten Commandments,"34 deemed any form of idolatry to be ritually impure and the major reason for exile.35 and amassed remarks and regulations forbidding all aspects of idol worship.36

From the close connection established by the Torah (in the verses mentioned above) between worshipping other gods and making statues, it is but a short leap to the assumption that the Jews should abhor all statues, consider them an essential contradiction to their way of life, and thus rigorously avoid any contact or association with them. Therefore, all expressions of even partial acceptance of this aspect of the surrounding culture, such as the famous story about Rabban Gamaliel attending the "Aphrodite bathhouse" (m. 'Avoda Zar. 3.4), were seen by scholars as rabbinical innovations that were intended, for whatever reason, to create a compromise between the fundamental principles that guided Jewish life and the non-Jewish environment. This is the rationale behind the repeated attempts by modern scholars to find reasons that led the rabbis to create such compromises. At the hub of these scholarly efforts was a basic agreement about the underlying incongruity between Roman sculpture and the Jewish way of life.37 The question is whether such incompatibility was really the whole case.

In what follows, I focus on the halakhic debate concerning the scope of the biblical prohibition against idolatry in order to reevaluate the nature of the encounter of the rabbis, and perhaps, to some degree, of the the Jews in general, with the statues in their environment. In order to clarify how the rabbis understood the biblical commandment against idolatry, and, even more importantly, to what sculptural objects did they apply it, we must pay attention to a fundamental distinction in rabbinic literature regarding statues. The rest of this paper is devoted to a discussion of this distinction and its cultural context.

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34 Sifré to Numbers 111 (Horovitz 116); trans. Jacob Neusner, Sifré to Numbers: An American Translation and Explanation (Brown Judaic Studies 118–9; 2 vols.; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1986) 2.160
35 m. Shab. 9.1; m. 'Avoda Zar. 3.6; t. 'Avoda Zar. 6.3 (Zuckerman 469); t. Zav. 5.6–7 (Zuckerman 680); m. Avot 5.9.
36 E.g.: m. Ber 8.6; m. Sanh. 7.6. On the latter see: Schwartz, "Gamaliel," 208–10.
37 Interestingly, scholars who have opposite opinions regarding both the rabbis' role in society and the objectives of their halakhic initiative regarding statues share this assumption. See, e.g.: Ephraim E. Urbach, "The Rabbinical Laws of Idolatry in the Second and Third Centuries in the Light of Archaeological and Historical Facts," IEJ 9 (1959) 149–65, Gerald Beldstein, "Nullification of Idolatry in Rabbinic Law," PAAJR 41–2 (1973–4) 5–6 (and the earlier scholarship he refers to in n. 13); Mireille Hadas-Lebel, "Le paganisme à travers les sources rabbiniques des IIe et IIIe siècles: Contribution à l'étude du syncrétisme dans l'empire romain" ANRW II 19.2 (1979) 398; Schwartz, "Gamaliel," 206; Halbertal, "Coexisting," esp. 163. And see also the studies mentioned above ns. 1–7.
mainly by the fact that rabbinic sources do not present statues as a homogene-
ous entity, but rather separate them in categories of “forbidden” and “permitted.” One of the famous sources suggesting this division is the above-men-
tioned story about Rabban Gamaliel, who did not forbid being in the presence
of the statue of Aphrodite. The question is: on what grounds?

There are two explanations that are prevalent in scholarly literature, both of
which appear as early as the traditional medieval commentaries on the Talmud.
One claims that the sages classified statues as “religious” and “non-religious,”
—“secular,” while the other posits a division between “decorative” and “non-
decorative.”38 The weakness of these opinions is their inconsistency with the
predominant worldview in Roman civilization, thus creating an artificial model
that would have seemed strange and even incomprehensible to the people who
lived at that time. Using the categories “religious” and “secular” as clear-cut
classifications is based on notions that predominated the post-medieval period,
and are therefore anachronistic when applied to antiquity. Many have pointed
that in the Graeco-Roman world, just as in all previous eras, what we call
religious experience intermingled in a seamless melange with most aspects of
daily life that today would be considered “secular”, making the delineation of
a borderline practically an impossible task.39 In the same vein, regarding the

38 For the first set of categories see, e.g., Halbertal, “Coexisting,” 167. In his discussion
of Rabban Gamaliel’s position he differentiates between “religious” and “neutral” realms.
Later in the article he contrasts the terms “cultic” and “esthetic.” This last set of terms brings
to mind the problem I am pointing to as well, since in the ancient world “cultic” and “non-
cultic” were two distinctions within the “religious realm.” A good example of the application
of the second set of categories occurs in Schwartz’s “Gamaliel,” when he defines the concept
underlying the Rabban Gamaliel story as one of “mere decoration” (p. 213ff.). This same
category is also applied by: Elias J. Bickerman, ‘Sur la théologie de l’art figuratif: A propos
That Know Thee Not: Ancient Jewish Attitudes towards Other Religions (New York: New
lege,” JSJ 5 (1974) 154–61) presents a third set of distinctions, that of “public privilege”; see

39 A most successful attempt to reconstruct the all-encompassing religious orientation of
the Late Roman world, without overlooking the distinctions that did exist (for example,
between the sacred and the profane, Christians and pagans, etc.), has been made by Peter
Brown in his various studies. See, for example, his chapter on religion in Peter Brown, The
World of Late Antiquity (London: Thames and Hudson, 1971) 49–112. And just recently his
“Christianization and Religious conflict,” in Averil Cameron and Peter Garnsey, eds., The
Cambridge Ancient History XIII: The Late Empire, A.D. 337–425 (Cambridge: Cambridge
University Press, 1998) 632–664, where he characterizes the “religious common sense” of the
age as a perception of “a spiritual landscape rustling with invisible presences — with countless
divine beings and their ethereal ministers” (632). See also Jaś Elsner, Art and the Roman
Viewer: The Transformation of Art from the Pagan World to Christianity (Cambridge: Cam-
bridge University Press, 1995) 243, for his assertion that what we would consider “secular”
space never really existed in the Roman realm. This is why I feel that when Halbertal defines
the moment of Rabban Gamaliel’s encounter with Aphrodite as creating a “neutral realm” (see
the previous note), he is projecting a modern model into a world that was unaware of it.
second distinction between “decorative” and “non-decorative,” Cyril Mango points out in the above-mentioned paper on statues in the Byzantine world: “It would be a mistake. I think, to suggest— as some modern scholars have done—that these statues (erected by Constantin in Constantinople YZ6) were used simply for decoration.” Any sculptural representation was perceived in the Roman world through religious lenses (what Jai Elsner, following Eric R. Dodds, calls “mythic viewing”) and therefore the category “mere decoration” as we define it today did not really exist.

I would like to propose a different distinction: that the statues differentiated between statues on the basis of those that were the objects of pagan worship and those that were not. Before proceeding to substantiate this argument, a word about the rabbinic practical definition of pagan worship is in order. Although not in agreement regarding specific details, the rabbis took a very clear position on the question of what constituted idol worship, and listed the various acts that were encompassed by this designation: sacrificing animals, burning incense, pouring wine, prostrating oneself, and any distinctive act that was considered worship of a particular god (such as “exposing oneself to Baal Pe’or,” even though this was not a Graeco-Roman form of worship). On the basis of these accepted grounds, Chapter 3 of the Mishna tractate Avoda Zara (“Idolatry”) presents the sages’ “working assumptions,” which seem to form the basis of all discussions about statues in rabbinic literature. It reads as follows:

“All statues (בָּרוֹשָׁא) are forbidden because they are worshipped once a year;” such is the statement of R. Meir. [But the [other] sages say, “[a statue] is not forbidden except one that has a stick or a bird or a bull.”] Samson b. Gamaliel says, “[a statue] which bears anything in its hand [is forbidden].”

Mango, “Antique Slavics,” 56; Elsner, Art, 88–99. Indeed, Schwartz is well aware of all this (see Schwartz, “Gamaliel,” 215–64), and thus his inclination to see the rabbinic view presented in the Rabbah Gamaliel case as a concept of “mere decoration” leads him to portray the rabbinic position as artificial (“misprision” in his words—203) and alienated from the common notions that were widely held in that milieu. He explains that the rabbin’s position stemmed from their desire to stay in the cities and grapple for support and leadership in Jewish society (207). Ironically, this model coincides with the argument of Urban (to which Schwartz strongly, and justifiably, objects [208 n. 13]), at least in terms of their underlying agreement that the rabbis were willing to jeopardize what seemed to them to be right for a higher cause (Urban—to solve the economic difficulties of their followers; Schwartz—to allow them to stay in the city).

In a recent study Sachi Stern has also raised this interpretation, and to some degree our conclusions, esp. about the centrality of the “worship” criteria, are quite compatible, but we go in separate ways in understanding the rabbinic sources and in reconstituting their cultural context and significance. See: Sachi Stern, “Figurative Art and Halsakha in the Mishnaic-Talmudic Period,” Zion 65 (1999) 397–419 (Heb.).

The most explicit expression of this is in. Sama. 7:6. For a good cultural analysis of this passage see Schwartz, “Gamaliel,” 208–16.

In my view, I find that when Halbertal defines the moment of Rabban Gamaliel’s encounter with Aphrodite as creating a “neutral realm” (see the previous note), he is projecting a modern model into a world that was unaware of it.
The halakha adjacent to this passage in the mishna mentions "fragments of statues," and thus it makes clear that the word "talesem" is being used here, as in most instances in rabbinic literature, to denote a three-dimensional statue, rather than any other sort of image such as the figures woven into cloth or painted on walls or in mosaics. Evidently, R. Meir and the sages are in disagreement about the extent of the idolatry prohibition in regard to statues — whether "all (72) are included or only some.\textsuperscript{44} The problem arises with the causative clause adjacent to R. Meir's statement that provides the reason for his position. The link it creates between the noun "statues (אשתמ)" and the verb "are worshiped" (in the passive "אשתמ") makes it apparent that the issue at the root of R. Meir's view is the actual practice of idol worship, probably carried out in formal and conventional ways similar to those that were listed above (sacrifice, libation etc.). It explains R. Meir's inclusive rejection of statues with the "fact" that they are all worshiped.

Such a reality — that all statues were worshiped as idols — already seemed inaccurate to the amoraim sage R. Hyya b. Abb. who was therefore forced to interpret it in the Yerushalmi as follows: "Since they were worshiped in the big city of Rome twice in seven years.\textsuperscript{45} But this explanation did not satisfy another talmudic sage, who asked logically, "and where are they not worshiped they are permitted?" To solve this problem he employed R. Jose's principle that "... since they were worshiped in one place they are forbidden everywhere.\textsuperscript{46} Apparently, these amoraim had difficulties with this halakha because of their awareness that some statues were not worshiped, which made it hard for them to accept R. Meir's generalization that all statues are "worshiped" and are therefore forbidden. In their attempt to preserve R. Meir's position in its exact formulation, a common maneuver in rabbinic hermeneutics, they were forced to substitute it from a faraway, almost mythological, place — Rome — where people worshiped all statues.

It is nevertheless quite possible that R. Meir's halakha does not describe the actual reality, but rather presents a position about it, i.e., sets out to shape the way in which reality is to be perceived. This interpretation of R. Meir's state-

\textsuperscript{44} The question in dispute here — i.e., the extent of the prohibition against idolatry (which statues are included) — should not be confused with another issue that the rabbinics discuss and disagree about, namely the manner of implementing the ban (i.e., how to behave with a status that is considered an idol), although, the same criterion — whether the status is worshiped — plays an essential role in that discussion as well. Consider for example the rabbinic dispute in Šifra Kadoshah 1 (Beres 87a): "Do not turn to idols" — do not turn aside to worship them; R. Y. Z. says: certainly do not turn aside even to look at them"; trans. Jacob Neusner, Šifra: An Analytical Translation (Brown Judaic Studies 138–140; 3 vols.; Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988; 1:388. This issue of "looking at statues" has to do with the broader topic of aesthetics, to which, as mentioned above, I plan to devote a separate study.

\textsuperscript{45} I. A. Amda Zir 5.1 (Zuckerman) 468). The position of the third tanna in the Mishnah, R. Simon b. Gamaliel, could be explained as expanding the boundaries of the prohibition to include any kind of attribute. Cf. Goldberg, The Nations, 94. Goldberg, following Urbach, identifies the signs in the Mishnah with the imperial cult. However, there is no hint that this is the intention of the halakha, which if it were, the rabbis would probably have said so explicitly (as they do elsewhere). The halakhic logic behind this suggestion is difficult to grasp; if indeed this is part of the polemics against the emperor's cult, why ban only statues with these particular signs? Furthermore, if at all, the logic works backwards, and the emperors adopted the iconography of deity statues in order to represent themselves as such to the public. Thus, I join Mireille Haas-Lebel in rejecting the limited interpretation of the signs and seeing them as general attributes of pagan deities. See: Lebel, "Le paganisme," 423–5.

\textsuperscript{46} An alternative way to construe R. Meir's position is that by applying the term "אשתמ" he already restricted the discussion to defiled statues only. According to this interpretation, the collective modifier "all" does not encompass all statues, including those that are not worshiped, but only defiled statues, and brings R. Meir to oppose the view of the other rabbis who sanctioned some defiled statues if lacking certain attributes. Such an explanation of the debate falls short not only in accounting for the causal clause in the Mishnah (verse 3:22), but also in lacking of "looking at the amulets" has to do with the broader issue in making sense of the term (op. cit., n. 45). R. Hyya b. Abb. and his anonymous partner, who question the inexcusability of R. Meir's position, and therefore, evidently, do understand his position in this way, but as referring to all statues.
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art historians call a "cultic context," i.e., a statue that was part of a particular pagan cult (mainly in sanctuaries), since the passage under discussion does not make any reference to the location of the statues. Rather the designation presented by the rabbis supplied the "language" to classify the statues they saw around them by differentiating between divine figures, even if not in a cultic context, and non-divine figures. R. Meir and the rabbis did not dispute the actual situation, but presented two views on how to perceive and evaluate it.

The anecdote of Rabban Gamaliel in the "Aphrodite bathhouse" is a direct continuation of the halakhic issues under discussion. It reads as follows:

Proklos the son of Plaslos asked Rabban Gamaliel in Acre while he was bathing in the bath of Aphrodite [and] he said to him "it is written in your law 'and nothing of the herem shall stick to your hand (Deut. 13.17)' why [then] are you bathing in the bath of Aphrodite? He [R. Gamaliel] replied: "it is not allowed to answer in the bath." When he came out he said to him: I did not come within her limits; she came with in my limits. [People] do not say "let us make a bath for Aphrodite," but [rather] she, Aphrodite, is made an ornament for the bath. Furthermore, [even] if you are given a large sum of money, [would] you enter in to your idolatry naked, [or] polluted from semen, [or would you] urinate in front of her?! And she [Aphrodite] is standing by the drainage and all the people are urinating in front of her. It is said only "their gods," [i.e.] that which he treats as a god is prohibited, [but] that which he does not treat as god is permitted.⁴⁹

Rabban Gamaliel's position takes the above-mentioned distinction of the rabbis a step further, adding the practical function of a statue to the previous criterion of identifying signs. Even though Aphrodite was surely a "worshipped deity" (in the sense defined by the sages above), with other statues of her kind enjoying rituals, temples and so on, the position presented by Rabban Gamaliel is that a statue in a given location is forbidden only if that particular one has a function in ritual worship. The two explanations that the Mishnah ascribes to Rabban Gamaliel to justify his visit to the "Aphrodite bathhouse" support this interpretation. The first is that "[People] do not say 'let us make a bath for Aphrodite,' but [rather] she, Aphrodite, is made an ornament for the bath." Here Rabban Gamaliel is appealing to the general opinion, to the view on the street, to prove that the particular statue of Aphrodite that was standing in the bathhouse was not perceived as a worshipped idol. The basis for this reasoning was not that Aphrodite and the other statues for that matter were "mere decorations," as some scholars believe, but rather the ritual status of this particular statue. And the fact that it was considered an adornment was used only as an indicator of its lack of ritual status. The second justification lists the debased acts that people performed before the statue of Aphrodite in the bathhouse – urinating, walking around naked, and the like – linking this with a midrash on the verse in Deuteronomy (12:3), "cut down the images of their gods," which

⁴⁹ m. ʿAvoda Zarah 3.4–5; based on MS. Kaufmann.
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asserts "that which he treats as a god is prohibited, [but] that which he does not treat as a god is permitted."

Rabban Gamaliel's position is clear: even a statue of a deity like Aphrodite is not forbidden if people do not treat it with the respect reserved for the gods. Here too, it is not the particular conduct of people - urinating or exposing themselves - which "secularized" the statues, but rather what these actions reflected about the way these statues were perceived by the public.49 Significantly, the same verse is used in the Tosafot to reach the opposite conclusion: "Whether one treats it as a deity or whether one does not treat it as a deity, it is forbidden."50 These are two opposite views on the question of what determines the ritual nature of a statue - whether it is the objective identity or the subjective function of the particular statue.

Along the same line, another well-known and much debated tradition in the Yerushalmi can be explained. In the passage describing this incident, the famous third-century amora, R. Simeon b. Lakish, encountered a group of people sprinkling liquids in honor of a statue of Aphrodite in the bathhouse of Bostra. According to the talmudic report, after relating this incident to his great master R. Yohanan, the latter permitted it (retroactively, i.e., he ruled that the act did not turn the statue into an idol and consequently the bath into a prohibited location), and asserted, "A thing of the public is not forbidden."51 It seems to me that this anecdote takes the halakhic principal developed in the above Rabban Gamaliel story up, or down, a notch; in the same vein that the Rabban Gamaliel story advanced one phase beyond the legal regulations of the tannaitic sages in their dispute with R. Meir. According to the position presented in the anecdote here, not only is a statue of a deity that is standing outside of a ritual context not considered a forbidden idol (R. Gamaliel's position), but even the actual performance of a liturgical action in its honor does not revoke its previous non-idolatrous status. The explanation provided for this ruling - "A thing of the public is not forbidden" - delineates the reasoning behind R. Yohanan's interdiction. According to his view (as I interpret it), if a statue of a god is

48 M. "Avoda Zet 3:4-5"; based on MS. Kaufmann.
49 This distinction is instrumental in waging off the repeatedly asked question (e.g., Hillel, "Nullification," 32) about the apparent discrepancy between R. Gamaliel's position in the Aphrodite case and the mishnaic halakha that urinating in front of a statue counts for nullification (m. "Avoda Zet 4:5"). According to the explanation presented here, R. Gamaliel's reference to urinating is not for the sake of nullification but rather to demonstrate that this statue is not considered an idol at all, and therefore does not need to be nullified. This is the difference between constant and repeated actions in front of a statue as occurs in the bathhouse which proves that the statue under discussion was not considered idolatrous in the first place, and a forritous urination in front of an idolatrous statue that does not effect its status.
50 "Avoda Zet 5:6" (Zackermandel 488).
51 T. "Avoda Zet 5:6" (Zackermandel 488).
erected in a public non-cultic context and considered non-idolatrous, the actions of individuals cannot change its sanctioned status. This statement should be seen against the background of the ancient world, where informal veneration of statues, including processions, semi-pagan games, and celebrations were very common.

Further support for the argument that the key factor for the rabbinists in judging the status of statues was whether or not they were the objects of ritual worship can be derived from the history of the term "idolatry." Surprising as it may seem, the Hebrew term for "idolatry" – *avoda zara* which literally means "foreign worship" – does not appear at all in the Bible.33 Separately, each of the two words that constitute this appellation appear quite often in the biblical lexicon – "avoda" in ritual contexts, mostly in relation to the God of Israel but occasionally with reference to other gods as well (as in the Ten Commandment phrase: "You shall not bow down to them or worship them [‘evideni’]"); and "zara" as an adjective describing an act opposing the biblical laws of ritual worship. Nevertheless, it was only in the Roman period that the two words were combined into one phrase which became the commonly used designation for the prohibition of idolatry.

The earliest source in which this combination appears is Paul’s epistles, which contain many diatribes against *eiselen* *kleistorot.*34 Clearly, although the Hebrew and Greek are not literally exactly alike, since *zara* – "foreign" – is not identical with *eiselen,* both terms underwent the same linguistic process. Jewish sources prior to Paul that are written in Greek (such as the Septuagint and Philo) used both the verb *leipsei* and the noun *leptesia* to denote ritual worship, and such usage has parallels in classical literature (non-Jewish) as well.35 Similarly, the use of the noun *eiselen* to translate a variety of Hebrew words signifying idols (teraphim, pesel, tselaem, and the like) is also very prevalent in the Septuagint.36 At times, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible even has *leptesia* and *eiselen* appearing one next to each other in the same passage or literary context (such as the verses of the Ten Commandments cited above). But only in Paul’s epistles do they first emerge combined together as two segments of one term that epitomizes the negative essence of idol worship. The Hebrew phrase *avoda zara,* which is widely used throughout rabbinic literature, underwent a similar process as its Greek counterpart. The two biblical Hebrew words were combined into one appellation to create a new term which had not been in use previously.37

The halakhic and linguistic phenomena are thus mutually compatible, even though the latter is much broader, not being confined to rabbinic circles. The common denominator of the two is the idea that *avoda or leptesia,* i.e., the formal practice of idol worship, is the decisive factor in shaping Jewish attitudes toward pagan culture in general and sculpture in particular. As far as statues are concerned, such an exposition creates two clearly distinguishable categories – statues that are worshipped and those that are not. In the process of instituting these classifications, rabbinic literature preserved some of the terminology that was used to differentiate between the two, namely the "worshipped statues" in Mishnah *Avoda Zara* 3:1 and "statues that are treated as gods" in the Rabbinic Gemara story. These phrases inevitably imply their inverses as well: "statues that are not worshipped" and "statues that are not treated as gods."

The above distinction between these two types of statues should not be surprising, since it was deeply rooted in the common worldview of the time and was widespread throughout the Graeco-Roman world. As is well-known, the repertoire of sculpture in Graeco-Roman civilization was both variegated and kaleidoscopic. Greek gods of the pantheon, legendary heroes and other mythological figures, who either acquired Roman identity or were syncretized with Near Eastern deities, accounted for a large share of the sculpture industry along with statues of the emperors and their families, who were deified in the process of emperor worship. These figures were placed both in temples and in the public domain. At the same time, a ramified system of other statues existed which represented almost every possible aspect of life in antiquity. The streets were filled with visual expressions of the various elements that shaped people’s lives: images of local public figures, sports and culture heroes (orators, philosophers, historians, and poets), battle scenes, and artistic depictions of all stages of life, expressing almost every familiar human emotion, joy and pain, elation and innocence. Spectators were not indifferent to these scenes, and this resulted in an interactive system integrating emotional and spiritual symbolism and fostering a plastic language rich in themes and nuances.38

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33 A fact that has not received the appropriate attention. See, e.g., Charles A. Kennedy, *The Semantic Field of the Term ‘Idolatry’.* In: Hohf (ed.), *Uncovering 193-208*. Except for this drawback, this is a good review of the biblical terminology signifying worship of idols and its mutations in the Septuagint, accompanied by bibliographical references to earlier scholarship. Cf. Schwartz, "Gemara", 308 a. 15.
35 Ibid., IV, 58-65
36 Ibid., II, 373-9; Kennedy, "The Semantic."
37 Elsewhere I have shown a similar process in relation to the term "avoda zara," which was not a common appellation throughout the Biblical and Second Temple periods, but became widespread in Jewish and Early Christian circles during the first century CE. There, too, the linguistic innovation points to a wider cultural and religious change. See: Eliss, "A ‘Mo.e without a Temple’.
38 The secondary literature on Roman statuary is too vast to present even a partial bibliographical list. An up-dated dissertation covering the physical and technical aspects is
erected in a public non-cultic context and considered non-idolatrous, the actions of individuals cannot change its sanctioned status. This statement should be seen against the background of the ancient world, where informal veneration of statues, including processions, semi-pagan games, and celebrations were very common.

Further support for the argument that the key factor for the rabbis in judging the status of statues was whether or not they were the objects of ritual worship can be derived from the history of the term "idolatry." Surprising as it may seem, the Hebrew term for "idolatry" - avoda zara which literally means "foreign worship" - does not appear at all in the Bible.32 Separately, each of the two words that constitute this appellation appear quite often in the biblical lexicon - "avoda" in ritual contexts, mostly in relation to the God of Israel but occasionally with reference to other gods as well (as in the Ten Commandment phrase: "You shall not bow down to them or worship them [ye eviden]); and "zara" as an adjective describing an act opposing the biblical laws of ritual worship. Nevertheless, it was only in the Roman period that the two words were combined into one phrase which became the commonly used designation for the prohibition of idolatry.

The earliest source in which this combination appears appears is Paul's epistles, which contain many instances against εἰδωλολατρεία, both terms underwent the same linguistic process. Jewish sources prior to Paul that are written in Greek (such as the Septuagint and Philo) used both the verb λατρεύω and the noun λατρεία to denote ritual worship, and such usage has parallels in classical literature (non-Jewish) as well.33 Similarly, the use of the noun εἰδωλολατρεία to translate a variety of Hebrew words signifying idols (teraphim, pesel, telesm, and the like) is also very prevalent in the Septuagint.34 At times, the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible even has λατρεία and εἰδωλολατρεία appearing one next to each other in the same passage or literary context (such as the verses of the Ten Commandments cited above). But only in Paul's epistles do they first emerge combined together as two segments of one term that epitomizes the negative essence of idol worship. The Hebrew phrase avoda zara, which is widely used throughout rabbinic literature, underwent a similar process as its Greek counterpart: the two biblical Hebrew words were combined into one appellation to create a new term that had not been in use previously.35

The halakhic and linguistic phenomena are thus mutually compatible, even though the latter is much broader, not being confined to rabbinic circles. The common denominator of the two is the idea that Avoda or larkeia, i.e., the formal practice of idol worship, is the decisive factor in shaping Jewish attitudes toward pagan culture in general and sculpture in particular. As far as statues are concerned, such an exposition creates two clearly distinguishable categories - statues that are worshipped and those that are not. In the process of instituting these classifications, rabbinic literature preserved some of the terminology that was used to differentiate between the two, mainly the "worshipped statues" in Mishnah Avoda Zara 3:1 and "statues that are treated as gods" in the Rabban Gamaliel story. These phrases inevitably imply their inverses as well: "statues that are not worshipped" and "statues that are not treated as gods."

The above distinction between these two types of statues should not be surprising, since it was deeply rooted in the common worldview of the time and was widespread throughout the Graeco-Roman world. As is well-known, the repertoire of sculpture in Graeco-Roman civilization was both variegated and kaleidoscopic. Greek gods of the pantheon, legendary heroes and other mythological figures, who either acquired Roman identity or were syncretized with Near Eastern deities, accounted for a large share of the sculpture industry along with statues of the emperors and their families, who were deified in the process of emperor worship. These figures were placed both in temples and in the public domain. At the same time, a ramified system of other statues existed which represented almost every possible aspect of life in antiquity. The streets were filled with visual expressions of the various elements that shaped people's lives: images of local public figures, sports and culture heroes (orators, philosophers, historians, and poets), battle scenes, and artistic depictions of all stages of life, expressing almost every familiar human emotion, joy and pain, elation and innocence. Spectators were not indifferent to these scenes, and this resulted in an interactive system integrating emotional and spiritual symbolism and fostering a plastic language rich in themes and nuances.36
In order to understand this system somewhat better, one ought not to confine himself/herself to modern encounters with these figures, which usually take place in museums as "art" (in the modern sense), but should consider their broader function in the context of the Roman world. In that milieu statues could be many things at the same time: they were declarations and promoters of power, they marked human status just as they symbolized the ineffable, they were commemorators as well as "memories," and they functioned as beckoners as well as trumpeters. In a world that did not distinguish between "religious" and "secular," every sort of artistic expression, even the most "neutral," was perceived within a conceptual system that we now call "religious." For the people of antiquity this was the only language they knew. Thus, for example, even the vegetal reliefs on the exterior of the Ara pax Augusti were seen as representing...

"... images of abundance and fruitfulness intended to evoke the blessings of the pax August" and also a...

"... visual embodiment of the returning Golden Age, a new era of blessedness in which the limitless flourishing of the earth is contingent upon the efficacious presence of a divinely appointed sovereign, Augustus himself." 49

Natural outcomes of such a cultural environment were the popular beliefs—and what are sometimes referred to as the superstitions of antiquity (but in whose eyes are they such?)—that greatly esteemed statues of all kinds. People emotionally interacted with statues, attributed animacy to them, and pinned both hopes and fears on them. 49 However, all this does not imply that the statues of the Graeco-Roman world were all of the same type—quite the contrary. Within the plethora of existing statues several varieties could be distinguished, and two of the major categories were statues that were "worshipped" and those that were not.

On the most basic level this division was expressed in language. Over time, the meaning of dysnyaktos evolved from signifying a statue (or some other object) that was erected "in honor of the gods" to simply denoting "the statue of a god." If it was a prestigious old statue, often but not exclusively, made out of wood, Kleiner, Roman Sculpature. For the spiritual-cultural aspects, see: Spykev, Understanding (although focusing on a wider and slightly earlier chronological range than discussed here); E. Kleiner, Art.


and usually with a higher status than ordinary statues of gods, it was sometimes called "dysnyaktos." 49 On the other hand, "dysnyaktos" and to some degree "elastos" were commonly referred to statues and portraits of deified human beings. Although the development of the latter's usage was complicated and characterized by inconsistency, especially due to an intermediate category of people who had been turned into gods or those whom other people sought to present as gods, 50

On a more practical level, although not totally congruent with the expression in language, actual rituals and liturgy might have also determined the dividing line between statues. While the numerous statues of gods and deified emperors enjoyed an orderly ceremonial system including sacrifices, libations, gifts and processions, and sometimes even special priests or priestesses, the non-worshiped statues did not merit these privileges. If we use this criterion, statues of divine figures were also not all equal, since there were clear differences between a statue placed in a temple and one that was placed in a town square or bathhouse. In many cases, although not always (see below), the latter were not venerated by formal ritual actions (as seems to have been true of the statue of Aphrodite in the bathhouse in the Rabban Gamaliel story). 51

Finally, the stataries of gods and non-gods was also separated on the conceptual level, as reflected in the writings of contemporary authors of Antiquity. In the first century BCE, Cicero furnished an explicit expression of this division. In an essay discussing the various methods prevalent in his day for understanding the divine nature (De natura deorum), he maintains that...

"... from our childhood Jupiter, Jove, Minerva, Neptune, Vulcan and Apollo have been known to us by the appearance (facies) with which painters and sculptors have chosen to represent them; and not with that appearance only, but having that equipment, age and dress." 52

The literary context of this passage is illuminating, since Cicero's argument is that precisely because the gods are presented in human form (anthropomor-

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49 For other names used for godly statuary in Greek culture and for the argument about the necessity of differentiation that these terms facilitated see Schaepp, "Arte Imagines," esp. p. 41. A comprehensive study of the term Xoonos, is Alice A. Donohue, Xoonos and the Origins of Greek Sculpture (American Classical Studies 15; Atlantic: Scholars Press, 1987).

50 A good discussion on this elusive topic of terminology can be found in Simon R. Price, Rituals and Power: The Roman Imperial Cult in Asia Minor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984): 176-80.


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Viewing the Sculptural Environment: Shaping the Second Commandment

...and usually with a higher status than ordinary statues of gods, it was sometimes called ἡσσως.62 On the other hand, ἡ στηριξις, and to some degree ἐνοικια, commonly referred to statues and portraits of nondeified human beings. Although the development of the latter's usage was complicated and characterized by inconsistency, especially due to an intermediate category of people who had been turned into gods or those whom other people sought to present as gods.63 On a more practical level, although not totally congruent with the expression in language, actual rituals and liturgy might have also determined the dividing line between statues. While the numerous statues of gods and deified emperors enjoyed an orderly ceremonial system including sacrifices, libations, gifts and processions, and sometimes even special priests or priestesses, the non-worshiped statues did not merit these privileges. If we use this criterion, statues of divine figures were also not all equal, since there were clear differences between a statue placed in a temple and one that was placed in a town square or bathehouse. In many cases, although not always (see below), the latter were not venerated by formal ritual actions (as seems to have been true of the statue of Aphrodite in the bathhouse in the Rabban Gamaliel story).64

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The literary context of this passage is illuminating, since Cicero's argument is that precisely because the gods are presented in human form (anthropomorphic-

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view of the sculptural environment reveals two ways of looking at statues that are essentially incompatible and which can be seen as parallel to the above two positions in rabbinic literature. This variance becomes particularly transparent when we compare the accounts of Pliny the Elder, the first-century author and encyclopedist, with those of Pausanias, the second-century traveler and geographer. Despite their different cultural backgrounds, literary agendas, and the gap in time that separates them, what is significant for the present discussion is their shared, thorough and firsthand, acquaintance with the Roman Mediterranean basin and its realities.

A modern reader following Pliny’s writing on statues might compare the way he relates his knowledge to the jargon of an art dealer. He is familiar with their historical backgrounds, aware of the minute details of gossip about the artists and acknowledges with respect (not to say veneration) the statues’ monetary values. The focus of his interest is the beauty of the statues, and this aesthetic point of view allows him to mix all types, whether gods or not, into the same pot. Even though Pliny, in accordance with the literary standards of the Roman world (which were described above) applied different terminology for the two types of statues, he did not concentrate on either of the groups and he definitely did not show a preference for one or the other. Reading through Pliny’s vast discussions on statues, one gets the impression that what is important for him are their monetary worth (premia), their fame (claritas) and the talent of the sculptor, and of course their beauty (pulchritudo) and artistic value (gratia artist). In this regard the question of whether a statue was worshipped or not was irrelevant.

In contrast, Pausanias’ periegesis creates the impression that the great majority, if not all, of the statues standing throughout the Graeco-Roman world were those of gods or such that were placed in their sanctuaries. Consistently, although not definitively, Pausanias neglects most of non-deity statuary and focuses his attention either on sculpture located in consecrated enclosures and temples or on divine figures placed along the streets. This is the case, for example, when he directs the reader along the streets of Corinth and depicts, in the typical jargon of the ciceroni (the tour guides), spiced with legends and myths, a visual panorama of the route. It winds along from the eastern port...
plastic) those artistic attributes attributed to differentiate deities and humans are so essential. Later on, statues of gods and of human beings as clearly defined categories are repeatedly referred to, for example, in the segments, which Pliny the Elder devoted to statues in his first-century CE encyclopedia work *Naturalis Historia*. Similarly, references to such language reappear some 150 years later throughout Philostratus' *Essay on Images*. In echoing the commonly held conventions of his time that were used to evaluate works of art, he mentions the artists' techniques for endowing their works with the identity of a god. As noticed by many art historians, these details are not mere *schema*, but rather meant to convey meaning, thus forming the "plastic language" that I mentioned above, and consequently shaping the public's perception of statues.

It needs to be emphasized that these three aspects—the terminology used to identify statues, the practical actions associated with them, and the manner in which they were perceived—all of which were entrenched in the daily life interaction between people and statues, are far from being either uniform or definite criteria for differentiation. As is always the case with daily life, reality produces a whole range of variations. Thus, in the streets of Antiquity, it was not uncommon to find a simple statue elevated by the populace to the status of a kind of deity or even more commonly for such a statue to be linked to magic (or "superstition")—*μυθιζομένοι*, while at times the opposite, i.e., the masses stripping a statue of its sacred rank, occurred as well. Nevertheless, this, does not negate the fact that ancient people recognized different categories among the statues that they encountered in their day-to-day lives.

Finally, an understanding of the various perspectives on statues that were prevalent in the Roman world, beyond the light it sheds on the general rabbinc approach that divides statues into "worshipped" and "non worshipped," might also assist in clarifying some particular details of the rabbinc debate, namely the difference between R. Meir, who deemed all statues to be idols, and the sages who classified them more specifically. Close reading of Graeco-Roman descriptions of their sculptural environment reveals two ways of looking at statues that are essentially incompatible and which can be seen as parallel to the above two positions in rabbinic literature. This variance becomes particularly transparent when we compare the accounts of Pliny the Elder, the first-century author and encyclopedist, with those of Pausanias, the second-century traveler and geographer. Despite their different cultural backgrounds, literary agendas, and the gap in time that separates them, what is significant for the present discussion is their shared, thorough and firsthand, acquaintance with the Roman Mediterranean basin and its realities.

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(Kenchreai – Kyregeion) through the city gates until the agora, and then twists back and forth along the main streets of the city. However, despite the realistic impression created by Pausanias’ writing, it is hard to accept his description at face value – to believe that the center of second-century Corinth held only statues such as those of Artemis, Dionysus, Athena, and the like. Results of intensive archaeological excavations in the area show that at the time Pausanias was strolling in that section of town it was crowded with dozens of statues of a diverse nature. This is not to say (like Willamowitz and his followers in the nineteenth century) that he is unreliable or that he distorts the picture, but only to claim that he does not give the whole picture. As Pausanias himself states explicitly at the outset of the above passage about Corinth, he is describing only the things worth mentioning (Looy tē Íēōs). Despite the multitude of statues he saw, his gaze, and consequently his narrative, were transfixed only on those of the gods or those that were in the context of sanctuaries. Rather then reflecting the actual situation his description expresses his perspective. Nigel Spiro and E. "Pausanias’ interest is almost obsessively (though not exclusively) in things religious." They polychromatic scenario painted by Pinsky, in which statues of gods and of humans are found side by side, is reduced to a one-sided, although lively and charming, picture by Pausanias, with the statues of the gods and those located in sanctuaries dominating the entire stage. In this regard, Pausanias and Paul, who “saw” in Athens nothing but a forest of idols, shared a similar “view”, in the sense that they were looking at reality in the same way, although, obviously, evaluating the scene in opposite terms.

Without delving into the reasons that led Pinsky to see the situation one way and Pausanias (and Paul) to see the same thing in such a different way, we can draw parallels between these two viewpoints and the two rabbinic approaches that were analyzed above. R. Meir’s perception of the “sculptural environment,” which led him to the conclusion that all statues were “worshipped,” even though the actual facts were quite different, is similar to that of Pausanias walking in Corinth and “seeing” only statues of gods and goddesses. In contrast, the sages’ distinction between a statue that was an idol and one that was not is similar to Cicero’s and Pliny’s perspective of the situation, in which they used the “plastic language” to distinguish the various types of statues.

Summary: The advantage of differentiating between the various statues on the basis of whether they were worshipped or not over other distinctions that have been suggested in the past (religious/non-religious, decorative/non-decorative) is that such an understanding is anchored in the conceptual framework of the Roman world. As such, it avoids the anachronisms embodied in some scholarly proposals. Characterizing sculpture in such terms was not an invention of the sages that would have sounded peculiar and even ridiculous to the people of the time, whether Jewish or not, but a halakhic formulation of accepted, widespread conceptions stemming from the various ways of “viewing” statues.

Furthermore, seeing this distinction in the broad cultural context presented here obviates the necessity to characterize the attitudes of the sages, and of the Jews in general, toward the Greco-Roman culture as unrelentingly hostile, and overwhelmingly confrontational. At least from the standpoint of their daily contact with the statues of Roman cities, it seems that the sages did not have a single, fixed position but a complex, wide range of ideas that were based on the accepted ways of looking at statues in those days. Alongside the position that perceived the entire sculptural environment as homogeneous – as solely made up of idols (R. Meir’s view) – there was another position that classified the statues into different categories, distinguishing between what was opposed to the Jewish way of life and what did not constitute a problem for it.

This halakhic device allowed those who accepted it to live a “normal” Jewish life in the presence of Roman sculpture. By ruling that statues which were not worshipped did not invoke the prohibition against idolatry, the sages were not expressing their position on all the popular beliefs that were attached to the statues or of the larger culture that produced them. It was not that these issues did not interest them, but rather that they considered them irrelevant to the serious prohibition against idolatry. The rabbis’ ruling on Roman statues, far from expressing hostility against all manifestations of the culture that produced it, instead reflects the discerning attitude of a minority group within the Roman world that forged its own way of life out of a profound awareness of the environment in which it was living, defining its own uniqueness within this environment.

73 Paus. 2.2.6ff. (Jones [LCL] 1.256ff.)
75 Spiro, Understanding, 13–4; Elsser, Art, 130 (I would change Elsser’s phrasing a bit into “things that we now consider religious”).
76 Many scholars have noticed the difference between the two, but interpreted it rather differently. See, for example: K. W. Arndt, “Pausanias’ Attitude to Antiquities, The Annual of the British School at Athens 87 (1992) 387–409; Elsser, Art, 129–32.
77 The practical issue of how was all this implemented in real (or fictional) life is a fascinating question that deserves a separate study. I also left out a discussion of the Early Christian Parallels.
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