Noa Yuval-Hacham, *Figureless Art: Anti-Figural Trends in Jewish Art During the Late Byzantine and Early Islamic Periods*. Magnes Press: Jerusalem, 2021. 381 pp. ISBN: 978-965-7776-58-2.

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Noa Yuval-Hacham’s book explores a subject that has yet to be systematically analyzed, namely aniconism and iconoclasm in the Jewish art of late antiquity. Apart from the critical importance of this topic to any examination of late antiquity, the book also stands out for its judicious methodological decision to cross-reference the literary sources with material culture. This volume, which is based on Yuval-Hacham’s doctoral dissertation, deals with changes in the attitude of Jewish society towards figurative art during the late Byzantine and early Muslim period. Tolerance of figurative decorations declined sharply during this period, and the once-widespread use of figurative symbols ceased to be commonplace in synagogue art. In the two parts of this book, the author discusses two parallel phenomena: aniconism, the avoidance of figurative images, and iconoclasm, the destruction of figures. In each part, the author covers the topic from several different angles, including material culture, rabbinic literature, and the nearby cultures, namely Samaritans, Christians, and Muslims.

The book’s first chapter analyzes the artistic findings from several synagogues, thus showing the decline in the use of figurative images. Yuval-Hacham discusses the different ways the trend toward aniconism was implemented—from less frequent use of figurative images to the elimination of these images—to suggest that these approaches are indicative of the diversity of Jewish society. Since there is no surviving textual-historical documentation on these communities, the material finds are the only ones that can provide information about the people.

In the second chapter, the author examines Jewish written sources to determine whether echoes of the aniconic trend can be found. Her conclusion is that although certain tannaitic, amoraic, and post-Talmudic sources oppose the use of figurative images, they are few and far between, and no significant evolution appears to have emerged over different eras. Yuval-Hacham notes wisely that Jewish society was diverse, and it is quite possible that the synagogue communities were not rabbinic.

The third chapter takes an intercultural approach by comparing trends in aniconism between Jews and Samaritans, based on the supposition that the Samaritans’ avoidance of figurative art can be linked to the emergence of aniconism in Jewish art in the late Byzantine period. Material evidence reveals not only that the Samaritans did not combine human and animal figures, but that there are artistic and theological similarities between the Samaritans and the Jews. On the basis of this evidence, Yuval-Hacham suggests that the Samaritans played an important role in the aniconization of Jewish society. This conclusion may be somewhat overblown. The connection is certainly possible, but her claim of a transition of aniconic ideology from Second Temple Jewry to the Samaritans, and at the end of the Byzantine period from the Samaritans to the Jews, is insufficiently substantiated.

The fourth chapter, which begins the second part of the book, focuses on the vandalism of figurative images in synagogues. Yuval-Hacham describes the material findings and presents the people responsible for the destruction and their roles, as well as the eras, causes, and circumstances of the destruction. It is suggested that the vandals were members of Jewish groups who deliberately intended to modify the visual space of the synagogue, rather than external vandals. Most acts of vandalism occurred in rural synagogues in eastern Palestine, since many synagogues in other regions had already been abandoned before the iconoclastic trend. This chronological analysis may account for the difference between the extensive damage to stone reliefs and the merely sporadic damage to mosaics; many mosaics were damaged or left untended well before the emergence of iconoclasm. At the same time, the author stresses the halakhic difference between sculpture, which is three-dimensional, and painting or mosaics, which is two-dimensional, to explain why sculptures were most often destroyed. Yuval-Hacham situates the period of greatest destruction in the late seventh century and the eighth century.

In the fifth chapter, the author discusses the Jewish literary sources that deal with iconoclasm in attempt to identify a possible halakhic basis for the phenomenon. However, as in her attempt to trace the halakhic origins of the aniconic trend, the findings are meager. It should be noted that throughout the chapter, the author does not distinguish fully enough between the various sources, especially with regard to their time and location.

The sixth chapter compares iconoclasm in synagogues and churches. As in synagogues, only human and animal figures were destroyed in churches. At times, figurative images were replaced with other motifs, but the mosaic or relief often remained damaged. Restoration efforts of these works show that destruction was deliberate and controlled, strongly suggesting that these acts were not committed by Muslim fanatics but by an internal group that scrupulously avoided damaging ritual objects. This comparison, which indicates a virtually identical trend in the two religions, is important; however, the major contribution pertains to the date of destruction. The author concludes that most acts of vandalism in churches and synagogues took place during the eighth century. This is supported by the fact that during the seventh century, under total Muslim conquest, a new-old cultural conception of the problematics of a figurative image emerged.

In the seventh chapter, the author confirms her previous conclusion regarding the association between the Muslim conquest and the rise in iconoclastic trends, arguing that during the eighth century an aniconic ideology became dominant in Islamic thought. Hence, it would be erroneous to associate the edict of Caliph Yazid II with trends in Jewish and Christian iconoclasm. Rather, Yuval-Hacham suggests that iconoclasm was driven by internal processes that were influenced by their changing cultural environment, but should not be linked to religious persecution by Muslim rulers.

This book is undoubtedly an important contribution to the study of Palestine in late antiquity. Its panoramic scope affords readers a broad grasp of the period and highlights the cultural connections between different religions. Methodologically, it innovates by examining the intersection of material culture and written sources, a direction that should be adopted in future studies.