

The Sublime Object(s) of Idolatry

Prophetic Aniconism and the Ideological Formation of the Subject

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Abstract

In the prophetic corpus of the Hebrew Bible, a number of passages decry the creation and worship of physical representations of deities. While previous studies have examined the diachronic development of aniconism and the possibility that the Israelites did possess cult images of YHWH, this topic can be explored further, specifically as it relates to its ideological dimension. Slavoj Žižek's psychoanalytic resuscitation of Hegel produces an ontology in which the "subject" is a conceptual vassal of the condition of lack in the Other. Žižek's discussion of the effects of the removal of "sublime" elements from the symbolic order is a helpful lens for reading the prophetic polemics against cult statues. It is the intention of the present study to utilize this theory to contribute a new understanding of the ideological role these aniconic texts play in the construction of the subject.

Key Words

Žižek, ideology, aniconism, idolatry, Hebrew Bible, prophets

Introduction

In the prophetic corpus of the Hebrew Bible, a number of passages mock the creation and worship of physical representations of deities. While these texts have been studied from a number of different angles, their role in shaping the nature of the reading and hearing subject has not yet been addressed. Towards this end, Slavoj Žižek's philosophical perspective found in *The Sublime Object of Ideology* ([1989] 2008) will be adopted in order to ascertain what kind of insights into the text his framework facilitates. It is the contention of this study that the prophetic polemics against idols, when read through Žižek's lens, do not simply mandate the transfer of allegiance from foreign gods to YHWH and identify YHWH as the sole creator; they also force the subject to face the terror of YHWH's holiness without any means of domesticating it, and serve to encourage the subject to identify with this mysterious void in YHWH's nature.

Overview of Applicable Texts

The key texts that fit this category are Isa. 40:18-20; 41:5-7, 21-24; 44:9-20; 46:6-7; Jer. 10:1-16; Hab. 2:18-19 (their title, “polemic against the idols” will be abbreviated to PAI throughout).¹ Some of the common features of their attacks on idols should be identified. These include (1) the details of the idols’ materials and construction;² (2) their consequent fragility and inevitable destruction;³ (3) the inability of idols to act or receive sensory input;⁴ and (4) the stupidity of those who make them.⁵ Additionally, these passages either integrate or occur alongside comparative assertions about YHWH. The most important recurring themes in these statements are: (1) YHWH’s uniqueness;⁶ (2) YHWH’s power over the earth/nations;⁷ and (similarly) (3) YHWH’s power over the natural world.⁸

Literature Review

Middlemas (2014) has capably summarized the most significant streams of research into aniconism in the Hebrew Bible.⁹ The first grouping of studies she surveys deals with the diachronic development of negative views towards cultic images in Israel and its sacred writings.¹⁰ Another branch of scholarship deals with aniconism in its ancient Near Eastern environment, including the various beliefs about representations of deities in neighbouring cultures as well as the accuracy of the Israelite prophets’ mocking portrayal of the surrounding religions. Some scholars have found fault in the Hebrew prophets at this point. Sekine (2014) states:

Recent scholarship on the Near East, however, has demonstrated that this ridicule missed the mark ... If this is the case, then Second Isaiah’s ridicule of these idol gods was based on fiction-based insults against pagans and was not actually valid. It becomes evident, then,

¹ This list was developed from the narrative, prophetic, and apocryphal texts provided by Lundberg (2007, 210), as well as the prophetic texts listed in Middlemas (2014, 23). For reasons of space, this study omitted explicit consideration of Hos. 8:4-6; 13:2-3; and Mic. 5:12-13, as they merely note that idols are the work of craftsmen, and thus do not contribute anything unique to the corpus under examination.

² Isa. 40:19-20; 41:7; 44:12-17; 46:6; Jer. 10:3-4, 9.

³ Jer. 10:15; 51:18.

⁴ Isa. 46:7; Jer. 10:5, 11, 14; 51:17.

⁵ Isa. 44:11, 15-20; Jer. 10:3, 8, 14; 51:17.

⁶ Isa. 40:18; 44:8; 46:5, 9; Jer. 10:6-7.

⁷ Isa. 41:4, 8-9; Jer. 10:10.

⁸ Jer. 10:12-13; 51:15-16.

⁹ The topical survey in this section is drawn from Middlemas (2014, 5-18).

¹⁰ Examples would be Tsevet (1988), Feder (2013), and Mettinger (1997). A purely redactional approach that studies the growth of these texts from a primitive pro-Yahwism through a gradual fusion of anti-idol polemics with wisdom from the exilic to Hellenistic periods is taken by Ammann (2015).

that this fictionally based, enthusiastic confidence in Yahweh as the only true God stood, in fact, on very weak ground. (2014, 106)¹¹

In contrast, Middlemas (2014, 52-53) and others have argued that the prophetic descriptions of Babylonian idols actually evince a high level of understanding of the competing faith. Middlemas reads the polemics as carefully fashioned satire that deliberately mocks the Babylonian mouth-opening rituals, rather than reading them in a wooden way that would dismiss them as simply containing incorrect information.

Finally, other studies examine the co-existence of aniconism and the extensive descriptions of YHWH drawn from humanity and the natural world, including the topic of the “image of God.”¹² Some scholars have posited that there is a contradictory element in the apparent coexistence of prohibitions of statues alongside rich, detailed metaphors drawn from the features of humans and animals that are used to describe YHWH (Sommer 2009). Middlemas understands these multiple metaphors to actually promote aniconism, as “A rich and varied vocabulary of the divine being destabilizes a fixed Yahwistic image ... The deity attested to by these images—these multiple images—defies a fixed interpretation and form” (2014, 151-152). The concern that metaphor is incongruous with the prohibition of making images of God is largely alleviated when one considers the insight from current metaphor theory that metaphors are a highly selective and dynamic “mapping” between two different domains, in which the brain can automatically process the sophisticated continuities and discontinuities between the source and target arenas. Thus, metaphors themselves are highly local and specific, used to convey a particular truth about a deity, and are not monolithic in the sense of an image (Fauconnier and Turner 2002).

While these studies have made valuable contributions regarding the growth of this textual corpora, as well as its accuracy regarding Babylonian ritual and beliefs and its theological integration with the broader range of descriptions of YHWH, the full ideological import of these texts has yet gone unexplored.

Methodology

Any exercise in ideological criticism should begin by identifying its understanding of the nature of ideology.¹³ The term “ideology” generally

¹¹ However, the source footnoted by Sekine as representative of “recent scholarship” (Schmidt 1968) is nearly half a century old. Similar arguments are made by Carroll (1986, 258).

¹² McDowell (2015) argues that the Genesis creation accounts deliberately reference Mesopotamian animation rituals in order to “offer a new framework for understanding the divine-human relationship: humankind was designed to dwell in the divine presence, that is, with God in his most holy place” (2015, 208).

¹³ Surveying the field of ideological criticism throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Pippin (1996, 51-78) grouped the relevant sources in the categories of the identification of: (1) an

evokes contexts where a specific agent is guilty of carrying out some kind of nefarious scheme, and the analyst thus performs the role of “exposing” this particular hidden plan. However, this framework is limited to cases in which conscious intention can be attributed to a given entity. Cases in which such a simplistic value judgment is inappropriate, or in which multiple opposed parties interpret their existence within a shared narrative, require a more universally applicable and nuanced theoretical apparatus.¹⁴ As a result, it is helpful to turn to the work of Slavoj Žižek in *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (2008).¹⁵ In contrast to much popular usage, in which it is pejorative or agenda-laden, for Žižek¹⁶ ideology is the large-scale social reality that is universally unquestioned, and that evaporates when examined.¹⁷ In Žižek’s ontology, the Real (see definition below) is structured around a traumatic void.¹⁸ The symbolic order occurs at the juncture of the controlling ideology and a given signifier, resulting in the “subject” being both an artefact of this interpellation and a conceptual vassal of the condition of lack in the Other.¹⁹

ideological field in the text; (2) reading strategies with an orientation towards liberation; and (3) the then-novel exploration of ideology as the variegated fabrication of meaning. The goals of this study would be closest to Pippin’s third definition.

¹⁴ This point is made by Žižek, as he addresses the intuitive critique that the nature of ideological analysis is incoherent since it would require a kind of omniscient vantage point (1994, 3). He works through multiple examples of how opposing interpretations of social phenomena are equally “ideological,” such as how both right- and left-wing approaches to criminality, with their respective focuses on “personal responsibility” and “circumstances,” equally serve to effectively mask the underlying procedure of the articulation of the context and significance of various acts (1994, 5). Žižek thus concludes here that “*ideology has nothing to do with ‘illusion,’ with a mistaken, distorted representation of its social content*” (1994, 7) and that “*the stepping out of (what we experience as) ideology is the very form of our enslavement to it*” (1994, 6) (emphasis original). A further implication of this last point is that ideologies can only be identified and articulated by way of contrast to other ideologies (1994, 19).

¹⁵ While Žižek’s voluminous corpus includes other relevant texts, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* provides a usable, self-contained work that helpfully articulates a theoretical grammar adequate for the purposes of this project. The bulk of the analysis is accordingly drawn from this volume and constitutes an effort to test its utility for textual application without extensive supplication. For this reason, reference to Žižek’s other works will be minimal.

¹⁶ For a helpful introduction to Žižek that focuses on his use of Hegel, Lacan, and Marx, see Parker (2004).

¹⁷ Žižek (2008, 15-16) states that “ideology is not simply a ‘false consciousness,’ an illusory representation of reality, it is rather this reality itself which is already to be conceived as ‘ideological’—*ideological’ is a social reality whose very existence implies the non-knowledge of its participants as to its essence*—that is, the social effectivity, the very reproduction of which implies that the individuals ‘do not know what they are doing.’ *Ideological’ is not the ‘false consciousness’ of a (social) being but this being itself in so far as it is supported by ‘false consciousness*” (emphasis original). For further discussion, see Felluga (2015, 146-151). See also the foundational work of Althusser (1971).

¹⁸ For a somewhat more developed account of his ontology, see Žižek (2006a, 15-123). See also Parker (2004, 64-68 for the Real; 61-62 for the symbolic order).

¹⁹ For an introduction to the background of the concept of the Other, see Felluga (2015, 201-203).

This void at the centre of the big Other, which is identified with the symbolic order, requires some clarification. The subject and Other are not rigid entities, but rather effects of the process as a whole (Žižek 2008, 77). At the core of the big Other is another void, that of the Real: “it is the lack around which the symbolic order is structured” (2008, 191).²⁰ Žižek defines the Real as “that which resists symbolization: the traumatic point which is always missed but none the less always returns” (2008, 74).²¹ This elusive traumatic point is concretized in the concept of the Symptom, or “a particular element which subverts its own universal foundation” (2008, 16). Within the field of ideology, it is “a point of breakdown heterogeneous to a given ideological field and at the same time necessary for that field to achieve its closure, its accomplished form” (2008, 16). The Symptom is thus the only element that “actually” exists. For the subject, it is “the element which gives consistency to [its] being” (2008, 81). Within a given instantiation of this process, enjoyment keeps the symptom from being identified and dissolved.²² An example of this unmasking would be the fact that many “revolutionary” efforts fail, but nonetheless have the by-product of instilling a strong group identity. In these cases, if the devotees were to be informed that the real point of their attempts was solidarity, the movement would utterly fail. This apparent lack of purpose is a form of enjoyment, and must remain

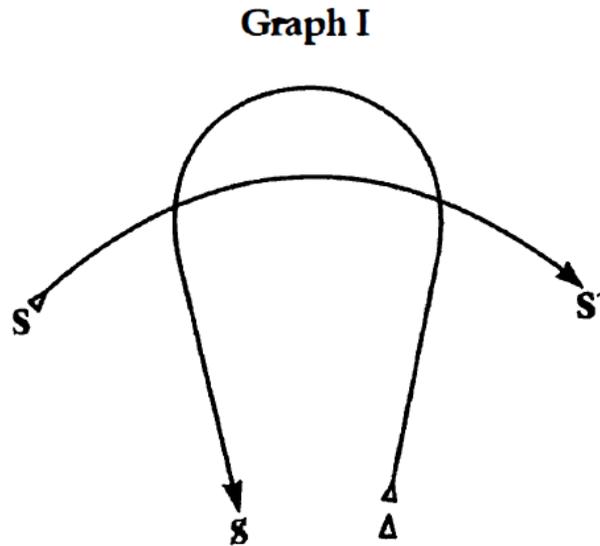
²⁰ Žižek (1994, 21-22) points to a memorable example of this phenomenon in the case of the traditional Marxist notion of class struggle, in that it serves as an authoritative grid for interpreting discord within society as a whole, but by its nature prevents any harmonious account of society. Nor would an objective condition of “peace” erase it, since this would simply mean that one side conquered the other (1994, 23). Returning to the question of whether or not his system is epistemologically able to account for itself, he states “what matters is that the very constitution of social reality involves the ‘primordial repression’ of an antagonism, so that the ultimate support of the critique of ideology—the extra-ideological point of reference that authorizes us to denounce the content of our immediate experience as ‘ideological’—is not ‘reality’ but the ‘repressed’ real of antagonism” (1994, 25).

²¹ At the same time, the Real has significant repercussions for subjects (2008, 183). Žižek (1994, 25-26) helpfully illustrates this by turning to Lévi-Strauss’s example of how inhabitants of a village would draw very different diagrams of the layout of the same village based on their respective social locations. Their mutual deviations from the objective geography of the village are unimportant; what is significant is the emerging principle that there is a “traumatic kernel, a fundamental antagonism the inhabitants of the village were not able to symbolize ... an imbalance in social relations that prevented the community from stabilizing itself into a harmonious whole,” and thus “what emerges via distortions of the accurate representation of reality is the real—that is, the trauma around which social reality is structured” (1994, 26).

²² This is the point where Lacan used the term *sinthome*, which is “a certain signifying formation penetrated with enjoyment: it is a signifier as a bearer of *jouis-sense*, enjoyment-in-sense” (2008, 81).

undetected.²³ It can often take the form of a prohibition of something that doesn't exist.²⁴

Within this system, the relation between the subject and the symbolic order can be understood through Jacques Lacan's four-stage "graph of desire" (Lacan 1977, 292-325).²⁵ In its first form, the graph simply shows the chain of a "mythical-real-intention" intersecting the chain of the signifier.



As a result, at the end of the chain of the "intention" is the split subject (in the lower left-hand corner). The intention "quilts" (Žižek 2008, 95)²⁶ the meaning of the signifier and interpellates (hails) the subject (Parker 2004, 122).²⁷ Crucially, this effect of meaning is retroactive, as its effect is to make it apparent that this certain meaning of the signifier was present all along (Žižek 2008, 111-113).²⁸

In the second form of the graph, Žižek looks more closely at the points where the intention cuts across the chain of the signifier.

²³ Žižek (2008, 92) states that the purpose of this hiddenness so fundamental to the existence of the symptom is "the enjoyment which is at work in ideology, in the ideological renunciation itself. In other words, it would reveal that ideology serves only its own purpose, that it does not serve anything—which is precisely the Lacanian definition of *jouissance*." For further discussion of *jouissance*, see Felluga (2015, 158) and Parker (2004, 61).

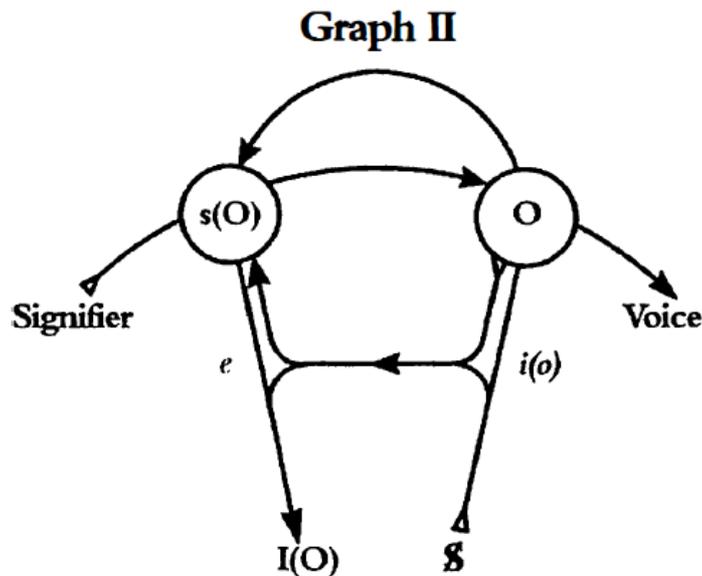
²⁴ One example would be Kant's mandate against uncovering the foundations of the power of the state because such a task would be impossible (Žižek 2008, 184-85).

²⁵ For a survey of Lacan's life and work, see Lee (1990). For Žižek's particular usage of Lacan, see Žižek (2006b).

²⁶ "Quilting" is when a certain "nodal point" provides a fixed meaning for a given group of signifiers, such as when "communism" redefines a concept like "freedom" (2008, 112).

²⁷ Althusser (1971, 176) notes that individuals have been ideologically transformed into subjects while still in the womb due to the intense social expectations surrounding the event of childbirth and placement within a family unit.

²⁸ Žižek refers to this "illusion" as "transference."

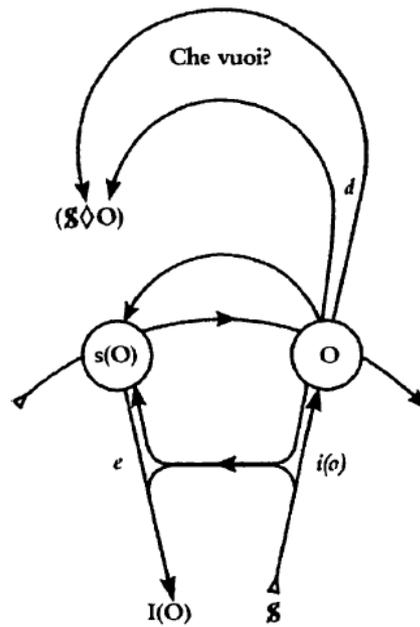


At the first intersection (the “quilting point”) Žižek locates the “big Other,” as this point is determinate for the signifier (and subject), “it retroactively submits them to some code” (2008, 114). The second intersection holds the signified, which, as it is fashioned in reverse, should be properly understood as “a function of the big Other” (2008, 114). The remainder of the right side of the signifier’s chain is the leftover, empty “voice,” or the signifier minus its meaning granted by the quilting point (2008, 114). The subject has migrated to the bottom right side of this graph to reflect the perceived primacy of the meaning injected by the intention (2008, 115). Taking its former place in the bottom left corner is “symbolic identification,” in which the subject understands itself in terms of a characteristic in the big Other. Paradoxically, this means that a kind of alienation is basic to self-understanding (2008, 116). Another way of understanding symbolic identification is that it adopts the vantage point of where the subject is being observed from; Žižek contrasts this with “imaginary identification,” which is “identification with the image in which we appear likable to ourselves” (2008, 116).²⁹ The final new feature in the second form of the graph is the line connecting the imaginary ego and its imaginary other.

The third form of the graph introduces the “leftover” of quilting: the question of “what do you want?” or the difference between locution and illocution in the operation of quilting (2008, 123-124).

²⁹ Žižek (2008, 120) also stresses that symbolic identification always overpowers imaginary identification.

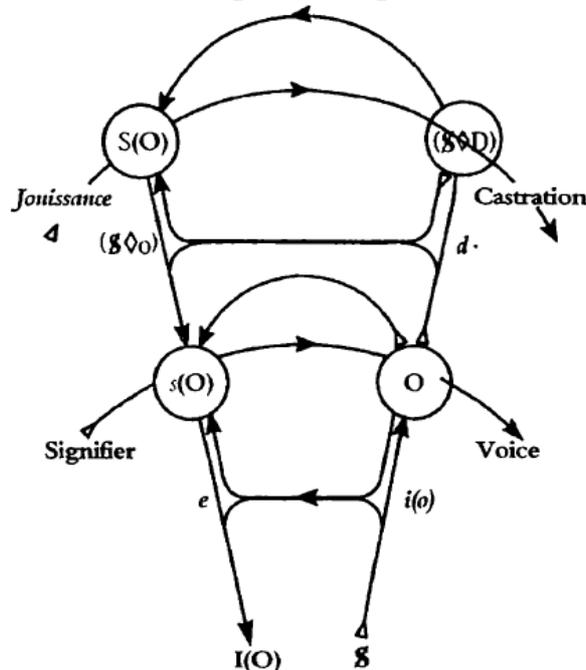
Graph III



The upper curve representing this question terminates with the “fantasy” of the “desire of the other” (2008, 128).³⁰

The fourth form of the graph adds an additional level of “enjoyment” to complement the lower level of meaning (2008, 136).

Completed Graph



³⁰ For example, racism operates by posing a suspicious question towards a certain ethnic group and fantasizing that this given group always has some ulterior motive. This process also works backwards, as the subject’s desire can be itself a protection against the desire of the other (Žižek 2008, 132).

It addresses the problem of what happens when the big Other encounters physical enjoyment. At this point, Žižek (2008, 137) states that “the big Other, the symbolic order itself, is also *barré*, crossed out, by a fundamental impossibility, structured around an impossible/traumatic kernel, around a central lack.” This creates an opportunity for the subject to use this void in the Other as a marker of self. Three points appear on the upper left side of this graph: (1) “the mark of the lack of the other”; (2) “the formula of fantasy”; and (3) “the effect of the signification as dominated by fantasy” (2008, 137-38). The last key point on the graph is in the upper right-hand side, and the symbol ($\$ \leftrightarrow D$) of fantasy signifies where it meets desire (a juxtaposition filled with enjoyment); fantasy fills the void in the Other,³¹ concealing the fact that the Other is organized “around some traumatic impossibility, around something which cannot be symbolized—i.e. the real of *jouissance*” (Žižek 2008, 138). With this structure in place, Žižek (2008, 140-44) articulates his process of analyzing ideology: after isolating the nodal point, the specific summoning of enjoyment is found.

The analysis of this study will begin with Mesopotamian animation rituals, and will proceed to work through the aniconic texts using the graph of desire. The analysis will conclude with a reading of idols (and their rejection) using the concept of “sublime objects.”³²

Mesopotamian Idols as Sublime Objects

While the very intangibility of Žižek’s sublime objects may initially make their comparison with idols seem futile, the detailed steps taken in the Mesopotamian mouth-opening/washing rituals to detract from their human craftsmanship leave the divine element of the idols ready for analysis.³³

The first crucial point regarding sublime objects is that they possess a significance that transcends their physical properties. Žižek (2008, 162) describes this significance by using the illustration of Stalin’s description of the communist subject, who is “made of special stuff.” This substance is the sublime object that exists posterior to natural death, as the communist subject is, in a sense, beyond the trials that plague average people, or, as Žižek (2008, 163) states, “[it is] as if ... they possess another body, the sublime body beyond their ordinary physical body.” This “sublime body” is also described using the Lacanian term *objet petit a*, or “a pure void that functions as the object-cause of desire” (2008, 184). Another illustration of this concept provided by Žižek (2008, 149) is that of the victims of the

³¹ Pippin (1996, 68) notes that fantasy is thus the underlying support of reality.

³² Parker (2004, 86) defines the “sublime object” by noting it is responsible for the fragmentation of the subject, that it is the “object cause of desire ... [which] holds the subject in place in fantasy.” Additionally, it is involved in “pulling us back to something that feels deeper and earlier and more authentic to us” (2004, 107).

³³ For extensive background and exposition of the mouth-washing rituals, see Berlejung (1997) and Berlejung (1998). For a broader analysis of the diversity of divine representations in the ancient Near East, see Cornelius (1997).

Marquis de Sade, who retain an eternal beauty despite undergoing physical destruction.³⁴

A parallel to the above concept is found in the Mesopotamian animation rituals. Despite the fact that gods were obviously built by human craftsmen, idols were believed to be “born of the gods” (Walker and Dick 1999, 116). Regarding the *mīs pī/pīt pī* ritual, Dick (1999, 40) states, “the ritual traces the statue back to its origin in the orchard and then witnesses its ‘rebirth’ as a divine product.” This birth was symbolized using a trough of tamarisk wood to symbolize the womb of the mother, filling it with water to symbolize the life-giving power of Ea, and setting this trough on a brick foundation like that used by women in labour (1999, 43-44). After the elaborate process of setting up this display, which included prior divination for guidance, a reed hut, offering tables, thrones, and food offerings, came the pronouncement of the incantation: “Born in heaven by his own power ... Shamash, Lord of heaven and earth” (Walker and Dick 1999, 79).³⁵ Thus, the craftsmen who built the god were demoted to being viewed as mere “midwives” (Dick 1999, 44). At the conclusion of this process and the crucial mouth-washing, the idol indeed contained the presence of the deity. As Winter (1992, 13) states, “the material form [of the statue] was animated, the representation not standing for but actually manifesting the presence of the subject represented. The image was then indeed empowered to speak, or to see, or to act, through various culturally subscribed channels.”³⁶ These rituals designate the lengths to which the Babylonians and other peoples went to imbue their idols with the aura of the divine. The intricate ceremonies and incantations functioned to bestow this *desire* upon the idols. The final impact was that these images were perceived as being much more than mere images; that they were able to, in spite of their “emptiness,” embody the attributes of divinity.

As noted above, these sublime objects are intrinsically fragile due to being structured around a lack. This is a central characteristic of the Real. As Žižek (2008, 192) states, “It cannot be negated because it is already in itself, in its positivity, nothing but an embodiment of a pure negative, emptiness.” This leads to an important point about the sublime object: its ability to disappear when viewed in the wrong way. Close inspection will inevitably reveal it in all its mundanity, and its allure will vanish. Therefore, its survival is only possible “in an interspace, in an intermediate state, viewed from a certain perspective, half-seen” (2008, 192). Here it is insightful to invoke Hegel’s formula (2018, 56-71; quoted in Žižek 2008, 219): “the supersensible is therefore appearance *qua* appearance.” However, this is not a simple denouncing of the reality underpinning the phenomena; Hegel’s far more subtle point is that the very being of the subject depends upon one’s expectation of a presence underlying materiality, or that what is uncovered

³⁴ He also uses the example of coins retaining their value even if their physical substance is eroded (Žižek 2008, 13).

³⁵ This excerpt is taken from the Babylonian Ritual Tablet (British Museum 45749).

³⁶ Quoted in Walker and Dick (1999, 57).

is the structural purpose of the subject's belief (2008, 220). Žižek (2008, 220) notes that Hegel applies this to religious objects: "The supersensible Holy is thus first an empty place, a space devoid of all positive content, and only subsequently is this emptiness filled out with some content (taken, of course, from the very sensuous world that the supersensible is supposed to negate, to have left behind)." The key implication of this for the sublime object is that the object itself can be something quite banal, but it has by some mechanism become "the impossible-real object of desire," a designation based upon its "structure place—the fact that it occupies the sacred/forbidden place of *jouissance*" (2008, 221), as opposed anything else essentially distinctive.

This fragility can be seen in the elaborate measures taken to distance cult statues from the craftsmen who made them. In the *mīs pī* ritual discussed above, after the statue has been officially reborn as a god and is being brought into the temple, the priest pronounces incantations and wipes the mouth of the god. Lines 49-52 of the obverse side of the tablet read:

you whisper a whispering. You retire, and all of the craftsmen who approached that god // and their equipment [. before(?)] Ninkurra, Ninagal, Kusibanda // Ninildu (and) [Ninzadim you make them stand], and their hands with a "headband" // you bind and cut (them) with a knife of tamarisk wood. "I did not make him (the statue), Ninagal (who is) Ea (god) of the smith made him," you make (them) say. (Walker and Dick 1999, 81)

This is seen again in lines 67, 69, and 81 of the concluding incantation:

Bind their hands with bandages // With a tamarisk sword cut off the fists of the *qurqurru*-workers who touched him // This statue that the gods Ninkurra, Ninagal, Kusibanda, Ninildu, and Ninzadim have made // ... May this god become pure like heaven, clean like earth, as brilliant as the center of heaven. Let the evil tongue stand aside. (1999, 100)

The hands of the craftsmen who made the gods were symbolically cut off with knives of tamarisk wood in order to detach them as much as possible from the creation of the god. When applied to this scenario, Žižek's framework allows for the insight that the elaborate rituals did not merely imbue the statue with the perceived presence of the deity (although this is doubtlessly true), but that it placed the idol in a structural position where it functioned to represent the god. The "void" of the assertion of its divine creation is an empty space filled by the subject's expectation of presence; its real function is therefore the constitutive role it plays in the identity of the subject.

This leads into the final point of this section, the function of the idol, or sublime object as the impossible desire of the subject. Žižek (2008, 75-76) illustrates this principle by discussing the legacy of the *Titanic*. Far above and beyond the human and financial loss incurred in the wreck is the significance of how it embodies the traumatic fantasy of its age. After an 1898 novel by Morgan Robertson told an astonishingly similar story, it was

clear that there was a general expectation that the age of general prosperity prior to World War I was at its close. In such a society, luxurious ocean liners functioned as a sort of metonym for the cultural elite. At this level, as Žižek (2008, 76) states, “The wreck of the *Titanic* was a form in which society lived the experience of its own death.” However, far more significant is the fact that even today, this wreck (and the continued interest in it) is a certain embodiment of chilling enjoyment, or *jouissance*. It is a “forbidden domain ... a space that should be left unseen” (2008, 76) in a manner that far outstrips its historical and symbolic meanings. These traumatic meanings serve a crucial role in Žižek’s theory, as, “the subject’s entire ‘being’ consists in the fantasy-object filling out his void” (2008, 223). To flesh out this point somewhat further, Žižek (2008, 229) references Kant’s concept of the sublime (which corresponds with Lacan’s sublime objects): “an object (of nature) the representation of which determines the mind to regard the elevation of nature beyond our reach as equivalent to a presentation of ideas.” In other words, it facilitates the act of a physical object enabling contemplation of the supersensory world. The paradoxical nature of this representation is that it is precisely the failure of this object to properly depict the spiritual realm that awakens a yearning for this realm in the viewer. As Žižek (2008, 229) states, “It gives us displeasure because of its inadequacy to the Thing-Idea, but precisely through this inadequacy it gives us pleasure by indicating the true, incomparable greatness of the Thing, surpassing every possible phenomenal, empirical experience.” This basic principle is an effective explanation for idolatry: the very failure of physical objects to convey the greatness and terror appropriate for a deity is itself a means for lifting the mind of the observer to contemplate the qualities of the god. Furthermore, when Žižek (2008, 230) asserts that nature is the most apt entity for evoking the sublime, it should not be surprising that references to the natural world pervaded ancient Near Eastern religions. For example, the Babylonian *Akitu* festival ceremonially reenacted Marduk’s defeat of Tiamat, a return to chaos followed by the restoration of order (Sommer 2000, 81-82).³⁷

To flesh out the adaption and application of this theory, the relevant ancient Near Eastern background data supports the assertion that the idol was thought to be a real site of the god’s presence. Dick (2005) has in fact argued that the Roman Catholic doctrine of “transubstantiation” that occurs in the celebration of the Eucharist is a helpful means of understanding the role played by Mesopotamian cult statues. He reviews (2005, 47) certain textual descriptions of the gods that emphasize their “ineffable” nature (such as their possession of cosmically enormous body parts, or an unusual number of them), and such descriptions fit exceedingly well with the paradoxical failure of the sublime to evoke transcendence discussed above. More directly, he points towards the eighth-century BCE Babylonian text, the “Erra Epic,” for evidence that offerings placed before an idol are in fact truly before a deity, and that a god can choose to remove his or her presence from a statue if it is significantly damaged (2005, 57). Another piece of evidence links to

³⁷ For further details regarding the *Akitu* festival, see Cohen (1993, 400-453).

the above point about the “impossible-real desire” created by the sublime object (and the frequent link with nature in this process): the building materials of the idol. As Dick (2005, 59) states, “The statue is composed of sacred materials that already have a cosmic disposition towards manifesting the divine.” He further buttresses this claim by citing a description from the Assyrian *Sultantepe Tablets* in which the wood used for an idol is said to be connected to both Heaven and the Underworld. Therefore, the considerable cultural distance between Žižek’s immediate concerns and the ancient Near East notwithstanding, his theory is still helpful for understanding the significance of idolatry: as a sublime object connected to the full range of the attraction and repulsion of deity, it aroused the fantasy of the subject. Through a combination of traits and materials from the human and natural world, idols effectively made possible the imagining of the transcendent, the sublime, through their sheer physicality.

Aniconic Rhetoric and the Graph of Desire

This study will now use the stages of Lacan’s graph of desire as a lens through which to understand this strategy of comparing the idols and YHWH. Following the diagram of the first form, the subject (bottom left-hand corner) is produced when an intention (bottom right-hand corner) returns from the signifier (the horizontal line), and the subject is thereby “addressed,” or “interpellated,” by the energized (or “quilted”) signifier. This produces the effect that the subject “was already there” (Žižek 2008, xxv).³⁸ The “intention” is of course the regime of either YHWH or a foreign god, in which the range of beliefs implied by either would be determinate for the rest of the system as a whole. The precise content of the signifier is not important, as a number of different variables are at play when comparing the deities of the Israelites and their neighbours. However, in light of texts examined above, a useful “test case” would be *divine action in the world*, as this is the central issue raised by the aniconic passages in the prophets (as seen in Jer. 10:11-12) (Craigie, Kelley, and Drinkard, Jr. 1991, 160),³⁹ and it is certainly present in the Mesopotamian literature as well. Due to “transference,” for anyone existing within either of these systems, the presence of either deity as the cause and determinant of divine action would seem intrinsic to the concept or signifier, as “intention” works backwards. This is exactly what is seen in the second person imperatives throughout the PAI passages. The subject is commanded to “listen” (from *šm’*) (Isa. 46:3) and recall (Isa. 44:21; 46:8);⁴⁰ interestingly, both of these texts ground their argument in something that is said to be chronologically prior to their audience. The

³⁸ This process leaves a traumatic “leftover” providing enjoyment (Žižek 2008, 43).

³⁹ Extensive descriptions of God’s creative acts serve as a contrast to the uselessness of the idols.

⁴⁰ Isa. 44:21 and 46:8 both use imperative forms of the same form *zkr* (“remember”), although the former text refers to the Israelites as YHWH’s servants, and the latter as rebellious transgressors.

Israelite subject is one who is “called” by YHWH (Isa. 41:4, 9), or “made” (Isa. 44:21).⁴¹

Things get considerably more convoluted in the second graph. As the subject moves from the bottom left to the bottom right side of the graph, the item on the bottom left is symbolic identification, and an additional loop above represents imaginary identification. As the big Other is now placed at the intersection of the intention and the signifier, the subject’s identification happens through the interface of an aspect of the Other. Imaginary identification involves how the subject desires to be viewed, but this desire is never without an audience. As Žižek states, “imaginary identification is always identification *on behalf of a certain gaze in the Other*” (2008, 117; emphasis original).⁴² Such statements of identification abound in the PAI passages. The Israelite subjects are given a number of roles vis-à-vis the big Other of YHWH. While Jer. 10:16 refers to YHWH as the inheritance of Israel, on either side of this passage are warnings of punishment and devastation. Jeremiah 9:17-21 is a summons to lament, and Jer. 9:25-26 is a notice that the uncircumcised (including Israel) will be brought low by YHWH. Jer. 10:17-18 is a notice of the coming expulsion of the Israelites from the land (Craigie, Kelley, and Drinkard, Jr. 1991, 163). In the roughly parallel text of Jeremiah 51, however, Israel is a forgiven people (51:5, 10) that has become a weapon of war against Babylon as YHWH executes vengeance (51:20-23). Immediately surrounding Isa. 40:18-20 are descriptions of the ethereal nature of humanity.⁴³

This dependence of imaginary identification on a viewer means that it ultimately will be wiped out by symbolic identification—the view of the subject from the standpoint of the Other (Žižek 2008, 120). Significantly, this is accompanied by the area of identification shifting from the tangible to the ineffable. As Žižek (2008, 121) states, “in imaginary identification we imitate the other at the level of resemblance—we identify ourselves with the image of the other inasmuch as we are ‘like him,’ while in symbolic identification we identify ourselves with the other precisely at a point at which he is inimitable, at the point which eludes resemblance.”⁴⁴ Such a shift aptly characterizes the rhetorical contrast underway in the PAI passages. Rather than participating in (and identifying in some way with) the bespectacled decorated images of Mesopotamian deities (the materials of which are noted

⁴¹ Cf. the example of how the Christian religion hails and forms subjects in Althusser (1971, 177-78).

⁴² Althusser (1971, 178-79) similarly describes how subjects are dependents upon a capital-“S” Subject. When applied to the Hebrew Bible, he asserts that “God is thus the Subject, and Moses and the innumerable subjects of God’s people, the Subject’s interlocutors-interpellates: his *mirrors*, his *reflections*” (1971, 179).

⁴³ Regarding 40:17, Watts (1987, 91) states, “The argument here suggests that such nationalism is idolatry which fails to recognize that God has other instruments and other ways of doing his work. Nations, like idols, have no ultimate substance in God’s eyes.”

⁴⁴ Žižek illustrates this (2008, 122) by pointing to the movie *Play it Again, Sam*, in which the main character experiences a transformation of first identifying with the outwardly attractive, then the structural, “repellant” features of Humphrey Bogart.

again and again in the PAI texts), the Israelite subject is denied a visible reference point for identification, but instead is placed in a relationship with a deity who resists depiction.⁴⁵ Within this framework, it is little wonder that the Israelites are called to emulate YHWH precisely at his least tangible point—holiness (Lev. 20:26)—a feature that is here linked to their mysterious election, which features in the contexts of the PAI texts, such as Isa. 41:7-8.

As discussed above, the mechanism of symbolic identification overcoming imaginary identification is crucial for a subject being “integrated into a given socio-symbolic field” (2008, 123). However, at the top level of the third form of the graph, the subject encounters the leftover of the quilting process: the space between the demand and desire of the Other (or *Che vuoi?*—what do you want?). The subject is, as it were, asked by the Other the elusive question of why the subject occupies a certain field. As Žižek states,

The subject is always fastened, pinned, to a signifier which represents him for the other, and through this pinning he is loaded with a symbolic mandate, he is given a place in the intersubjective network of symbolic relations. The point is that this mandate is ultimately always arbitrary: since its nature is performative, it cannot be accounted for by reference to the “real” properties and capacities of the subject. (2008, 125-126)

At the end of the line designating the question, Lacan places “fantasy,” the inevitable answer (Žižek 2008, 128).

Significantly, at this point in his discussion, Žižek invokes Judaism as an illustration. He states, “is not the Jewish God the purest embodiment of this ‘*Che vuoi?*’, of the desire of the Other in its terrifying abyss, with the formal prohibition on ‘making an image of God’—on filling out the gap of the Other’s desire with a positive fantasy scenario?” (2008, 128). For Žižek, the end result for the Jewish subject is “incomprehension, perplexity, even horror” (2008, 128) as he reflects upon the enigmatic story of Abraham’s command to sacrifice Isaac. Their moment of being chosen by God was not from eternity past, but was a “traumatic flash,” a mystery both “impossible and prohibited” (2008, 129).⁴⁶ As opposed to the surrounding nations, for the Jews their deity subsumed and eclipsed the generic category of holiness itself. Being caught in the desire of YHWH creates “anxiety” for the subject, as their deity that cannot be physically represented is “the gap, the void in the Other concealed by the fascinating presence of the Holy” (2008, 129).

⁴⁵ Žižek’s predecessor Althusser describes a comparable relationship between “subject” and “Subject”: “all ideology is *centred*, that the Absolute Subject occupies the unique place of the Centre, and interpellates around it the infinity of individuals into subjects in a double mirror-connexion such that it *subjects* the subjects to the Subject” (Althusser 1971, 180; emphasis original).

⁴⁶ The use of this aspect of Žižek’s reading of election in the Hebrew Bible does not indicate endorsement of the contrast between Judaism and Christianity that he goes on to develop.

Fantasy both shapes the desire of the subject and enables it to elude the desire of the Other (2008, 132). Its relevance for the reading of the PAI texts—and the bolstering of support for the abyssal nature of YHWH asserted above—lies in the fact that this fantasy tends to fixate upon an empirical object. Just as with the “transcendental schematism” of Kant, which allowed things in the world to be understood through his transcendental categories, fantasy makes objects desirable by contextualizing them in such a way that they are imbued with extramundane significance. Crucially, though, only certain objects are appropriate to be desired in a given fantasy-space, as something that is “too close to the traumatic Thing” will simply break down the process. Fantasy equally functions to maintain a certain boundary between the subject and the Real around which the Other is structured. This crucial insight unlocks an important dimension of the PAI texts: the place of fear. Jer. 10:2, 5 commands the audience to not fear either the idols of the surrounding nations or the signs in the heavens (which the gods are relied upon to control).⁴⁷ This fear of the unpredictability and savagery of nature is surely one of the traumatic elements associated with the Real of divine action: the gods are expected to provide a measure of solace from the subject being at the mercy of nature, but in taking on this power over nature, the gods ultimately absorb much of this terror and fear into themselves. Predictably, Jer. 10:5 informs the reader that these gods are ultimately impotent. At a surface reading, the object of fear in the text is transferred from the idols to YHWH (Jer. 10:7, 10),⁴⁸ who is also the architect of nature in its most terrifying dimensions (Jer. 10:12-13). However, a Žižekian understanding of fantasy supplements this observation.

Fantasy, the response to the “*Che vuoi?*” of the Other, naturally involves projection onto objects of desire. Idols can naturally be understood as performing this role, and fostering a palatable understanding of the deity. However, the act of forbidding the use of such objects through mocking and exposure not only transfers the locale of the traumatic Real, but distances it even further from the subject, by denying the subject even a derivative means of referencing it. The fantasy, or answer to the question, is thus pushed even further into the dark: the subject is forced to stand mute before the Other, denied both the expression and the evasion enabled by the object of desire. Consultation of other texts lend further support to this model. In Hab. 2:18-19, the primary criticism of the idol is that it cannot speak or give guidance, and that its worshipper is delusional for ordering it to come to life;⁴⁹ this is surely illustrative of some part of the process of the Other posing

⁴⁷ Lundbom (1999, 587) states, “The idols need not be feared, just as the signs in the heavens need not be. These man-made wonders can do neither bad nor good.”

⁴⁸ Lundbom (1999, 588) notes that this fear is based in YHWH’s covenant which requires obedience, and his kingship over the nations.

⁴⁹ Roberts (1991) notes that the reference to the activity of teaching “probably alludes here to the use of idols in obtaining oracles” (1991, 126). Because idols were but human creations, “the real source of the oracle was not the idol at all, but the humans who made the idol and

a question and the subject issuing fantasy (based towards an object of desire) in response.⁵⁰ The inverse of this is observable in Isa. 41:21-24, where YHWH mockingly asks the “worthless” idols to explain the past or the future.

In Jer. 51:17-19, verse 19 immediately speaks of the people of YHWH’s inheritance, a move that asserts the question posed to the subject (and the subject’s identity) immediately after decrying the objects of idolatry.⁵¹ A similar act is performed with Isa. 41:8-10, which discusses the election of Israel immediately after exposing idols in 41:7 (Paul 2012, 164). Election is also the first topic to occur (Isa. 44:21-22) after the extended exposé of idols in Isa. 44:9-20.⁵² To recapitulate the above, in the PAI texts, the Israelite subject is confronted with the question of the desire (election) of the Other (YHWH), but specifically in the context of complete mockery and derision towards all attempts at creating a fantasy-space where some aspect of YHWH can be objectified (and his terrifying interpellation be softened).

Only one element of the fourth form of the graph will be utilized in this analysis. In the upper right-hand corner, drive occurs where enjoyment encounters the signifier (Žižek 2008, 138). Žižek (2008, 139) notes that fantasy serves to mask the void of the Other (as above), and proceeds to ask the question, “what happens with desire after we ‘traverse’ fantasy?” His answer is the “death drive,”⁵³ or the *sinthome*, which is, “a certain signifying formation penetrated with enjoyment,” or the point at which the subject recognizes himself or herself in the symptom (2008, 81). As the section above reflected on idolatry through the lens of fantasy, it is helpful here to use Žižek’s “drive” to understand the impact of aniconism. As fantasy has the effect of “taming” the internal trauma of the Other, it should not be surprising that the removal of this fantasy produces an encounter with something far more elemental and terrifying in this analysis the holy itself. Foundational to the fear that the holy inspired in the Hebrew Bible is the threat of death for those who fail to respect its sanctity.⁵⁴ Hendel (1997, 220-221) examines the traditions in the Hebrew Bible relating to the fatality of viewing (and sometimes even hearing) YHWH (and the exceptions to this principle). He states, “Israel’s *de facto* aniconism and the extreme danger of God’s holy presence provide a dual and complementary response to the

manipulated it” (1991, 127). Nogalski (2011, 674), notes the satire which mockingly points out that the worshippers of idols place their trust in things that do not exist.

⁵⁰ See also Isa. 44:17, where the idol-maker prays to his idol for deliverance.

⁵¹ Kessler (2003, 114) states, “Babylon the idol maker is here shown as an apparent exception to YHWH’s universal lordship. Instead of gratefully acknowledging YHWH’s creation and care, as Israel is called to do, she opts for idolatry. The two significant foci of the doxology are God, who directs the affairs of the world and his elect people of Israel, in contrast to other nations who will be destroyed with their idols in which they trusted, a motif which finds even clearer expression in the context in which 10:12-16 is imbedded.”

⁵² Paul (2012, 243) notes the connection implied between the idolater’s cry “You are my God” (44:17) and YHWH’s words “You are my servant” (44:21).

⁵³ Žižek (2008, 139) states, “‘beyond fantasy’ we find only drive, its pulsation around the *sinthome*.”

⁵⁴ Goldingay (2006, 20-26) sees YHWH’s majesty as the vehicle of the terrifying expression of the holy.

problem of divine representation. It represents an anthropomorphism charged with a maximal degree of purity and danger” (1997, 223). This theme occurs in Exod. 19:12-13, where anyone who touched Mount Sinai was to be executed. It manifests itself even more vividly in 2 Sam. 6:6-7, as Uzzah’s contact with the Ark of the Covenant resulted in YHWH immediately striking him dead. The prophetic exposure of the banal physicality of cultic statues created this effect of removing barriers that softened the contemplation of the trauma of the divine.

At this point some comparison with Mesopotamian sources is instructive. Akkadian sources record similar concerns that the mishandling of cultic objects posed risks. Lambert (1974, 283) notes that incantations for the purpose of “appeasement” existed for the situation when someone was struck by disease or misfortune as punishment for coming into contact with a purified object.⁵⁵ However, some significant disparities exist between the Babylonian and Israelite perspectives on this issue. Wilson’s (1994, 74) study of the nature of holiness in Mesopotamia found that the gods themselves were not intrinsically holy or pure, and could have these capacities diminished or taken away. Additionally, he concluded that Akkadian religion underwent a diachronic shift of emphasis away from holiness (found in its Sumerian roots) towards purity as the dominating category (1994, 82-83). Most significantly, he argues that there is no lexical item in Akkadian that is synonymous with the Hebrew *qdš* (1994, 95). Thus, this exposure of the uselessness of images was coupled with a much weightier sense of the divine. Regarding this contrast with Babylonian sources, Hendel states:

Like the bodies of Marduk, Ninurtu, Ningirsu, and Aten, Yahweh’s body was believed to be incommensurate with mundane human existence: it has a different degree of being than human bodies. But this belief is manifested differently than in the Ancient Near Eastern texts discussed above. God’s sublimity is expressed by his extremely holy and dangerous presence, not by his bodily form *per se*. (1997, 223)

As the subject rejects idols (fantasy), the subject will be more likely to identify with the far more traumatic Real underlying the divine: the Holy.

The Eclipse of the Sublime Objects

As this concludes the use of the graph of desire in the present study, it is now appropriate to look at idols and their disavowal in the broader context of their function as sublime objects, or physical objects that somehow evoke the

⁵⁵ Lines 140-145 of the prayer read, “140 I did an abomination, ever doing evil. 141 I coveted your abundant property, 142 I desired your precious silver. 143 I raised my hand and desecrated what should not be so treated. 144 In a state of impurity I entered the temple. 145 Constantly I committed a terrible abomination against you” (Lambert 1974, 283). Van der Toorn (1985, 37) likewise observes: “One [stipulation] was not to touch the sacred objects, nor to disarrange the cultic table that had been set up. An Akkadian medical text diagnoses a specific foot disease as the result of inadvertently stepping on a cultic socle [a base supporting a column or wall].”

Real. Their significance transcends their physical properties (which is attested to in the Babylonian rituals that portrayed the cult statues being born by the gods). Sublime objects are also liable to lose their aura of mystique when examined too closely, a principle seen in the Babylonian rituals that symbolically cut off the hands of their craftsmen to sever their ties to human creators. Also, the very failure of the object to accurately depict the supernatural functions to enable yearning in the subject. Hendel (1997) notes that some Babylonian texts describe Marduk's body in "incomprehensible" terms. He states, "Marduk's sublimity and the body that manifests his presence are equally 'impossible to understand'" (1997, 207). With Babylonian gods, various features from the natural world and the use of "sacred materials" aroused a primal dread, oriented towards the statue in which a god could choose to manifest its presence. The prophets told their audience that idols are nothing, and that they have no connection to the supernatural whatsoever (Jer. 10:5). However, the recognition of this fact does not merely entail demystification. Žižek (2008, 222) states, "To 'unmask the illusion' does not mean that 'there is nothing to see behind it': what we must be able to see is precisely this nothing as such—beyond the phenomena, there is nothing but this nothing itself, 'nothing' which is the subject."⁵⁶ Thus, the subject is the lack of the Other (2008, 223). The nature of the Israelite subject is radically contingent on the nature of YHWH. The entire identity of the Israelite subject is wrapped up in and determined by the mysterious, fearful, and loving nature of YHWH. YHWH defies all attempts to simplify or encapsulate his nature, rejecting all fantasies and sublime objects. Žižek (2008, 226) summarizes these consequences for the subject, stating, "the subject must recognize, in the figure embodying the 'alienated' substantial power ... not only a foreign force opposed to him—that is, his other—but himself in his otherness, and thus 'reconcile' himself with it." The Israelite subject begins in position of being interpellated by YHWH, but this election is never far from the traumatic Real so central to his being. It is thus not surprising that Deut. 4:23-24 juxtaposes the ban on images with a reminder of YHWH's terrifying nature: "So be careful ... not to make for yourselves an idol in the form of anything that the Lord your God has forbidden you. For the Lord your God is a devouring fire, a jealous God" (NRSV).

Conclusion

This analysis has been fruitful for unpacking the way the PAI passages function to form the subject. The subject is interpellated by the "intention" of YHWH, creating the effect that she or he has "always already" been hailed. The Israelite subject is forced to view himself or herself from the perspective of a mysterious deity who prohibits the physical depiction of himself. While

⁵⁶ Žižek (2008, 222) also adds, "To conceive the appearance as 'mere appearance' the subject effectively has to go beyond it, to 'pass over' it, but what he finds there is his own act of passage."

the creation of idols can be understood as a “fantasy” that allows the subject to resist the trauma of the other’s beckoning question, the PAI texts both mock this kind of discourse with the idol and prohibit the subject from exercising fantasy. This rejection of fantasy leads to the “death drive,” which this study correlated with the unapproachable holiness of YHWH, and the subject’s consequent identification with this aspect of the divine. When the idols, the “sublime objects” are exposed as frauds, the consequence is not to dwell on their emptiness but instead to reinforce the subject’s dependence on the lack in the Other.

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