

Immortal Combat: Iconoclasm and the Hebrew Bible

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Modern scholarship has failed to produce a comprehensive study of iconoclasm, largely because iconoclasm is ubiquitous and transhistorical. Earnest work on ancient Near Eastern iconoclasm (including that from ancient Israel) has only existed since the 1980's. The goal of ANE iconoclasm was to disrupt the relations of cultists and their divinities. Thus, ANE iconoclasm is a form of material violence that works on an ideological level to create divine absence. In addition, iconoclasm can be understood, socially and ritually, as attacking (sometimes even killing) deities. However, there was also a sense that iconoclasm did not exhaust the divine presence of a deity. The idea of the so-called immortality of divinity can be witnessed in perceptions of cult renewal as well as divine retribution for, and divine abandonment as a result of, iconoclasm. And, in the ANE the physical violence and the discursive aftermath was a political tool.

Levtow has coined the term “iconic politics” to describe this technique. Iconic politics is the use of cult materials – and especially divine bodies – for political purposes, often to legitimize one group and its god(s) over another and thereby produce & justify an unequal sociality between groups. Iconic politics encompasses physical engagement with cult materials as well as discursive engagement, including that found in scribal culture. In this way, iconic politics can be described as a kind of *immortal combat* since no matter how many divine bodies were killed or how many temples were razed, the vanquished could make the counter-claim that their deities were not really dead, just physically absent; poised to return. The complete annihilation of divinities had to be enacted on a number of different registers, material and discursive. Biblical iconoclasm is an example of the latter, but may well document, and surely promote, the former.

Biblical iconoclasm is any biblical text that describes the disruption of religious observances by physical violence against cult materials. This can include removing cult objects from their appointed places (e.g., in Gen 31), god-napping divine bodies (e.g., in 1 Sam 5), outright destruction (e.g., in Exo 34:13 or 2 Kgs 23:15-18), cult reform (e.g., 2 Kgs 16:10-16), etc. Biblical iconoclasm, understood this way, is one component of the Hebrew Bible's iconic politics. Other components of biblical iconic politics – like Idol Parodies, *Bildersverbot*, and aniconism – have been well studied in the past thirty years. Biblical iconoclasm has not shared the popularity of its collaborators in this respect.

So, this dissertation is necessary because no extended study of iconoclasm in the Hebrew Bible (henceforth HB) has yet been completed; even though iconoclasm is present throughout this corpus. This dissertation, about biblical iconoclasm, begins to fill that gap. The questions that will guide my work on biblical iconoclasm are: What is the literary contribution of biblical iconoclasm to the final form of the HB? Does biblical iconoclasm have a specific literary purpose in the HB? If so, what is it?

To summarize my conclusions, *biblical iconoclasm appears in a wide range of biblical texts and is used for various literary purposes within the iconic politics of these scrolls. It appears in various genres and sub-genres, is enacted by a host of characters, and occurs as a major plot point or a minor event, and everywhere in-between. Yet, while there are a variety of usages for the hundred-plus biblical iconoclasm, the majority of the instances of biblical iconoclasm attack Yahweh's divine rivals.* These attacks are not

all the same, and in this dissertation I explain how these attacks work within the iconic politics of a number of HB texts.

What is the overall, literary impact of biblical iconoclasm? Biblical iconoclasm is a form of iconic politics that can be used to champion Yahweh as the victorious, or un-rivaled, deity of the HB. For example, by using iconoclasms to attack Yahweh's divine rivals set in juxtaposition to intact, triumphant cult objects or cult places connected with Yahweh, Yahweh looks supreme. In this dissertation, then, I will provide a close-reading (i.e., synchronic criticism) of a selection of biblical iconoclasm texts to demonstrate how biblical iconoclasms attack Yahweh's divine rivals. Additionally, in some chapter I will highlight examples, in the same texts, where Yahweh's divine materiality is juxtaposed as intact and supreme. My overall analysis will explain how biblical iconoclasms and the HB's iconic politics are purposed to present Yahweh as an un-rivaled deity. And, I will discuss other uses of biblical iconoclasms, e.g., the use of severe iconoclasm, in these same texts. Thus, I will demonstrate both the dominant, literary purpose of biblical iconoclasms and some of its variety. This form of presentation, I hope, will provide the reader with a meaningful sample of biblical iconoclasm as a whole