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**SAUL M. OLYAN,
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STIGMATIZING STRATEGY IN BIBLICAL ICONIC
POLEMICS**

THE ASCRIPTION OF PHYSICAL DISABILITY AS A STIGMATIZING STRATEGY IN BIBLICAL ICONIC POLEMICS

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As will be obvious to any reader of the Hebrew Bible, biblical polemics against iconic cult employ a variety of stigmatizing strategies.¹ “Idols”² are condemned as powerless, material in nature,

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¹ I want to emphasize from the outset that such polemics are selective rather than general. Icons such as the cherubim of the Jerusalem temple, icons that biblical writers approve of, are never denigrated or attacked, yet they possess physical characteristics not unlike those of the stigmatized icons (e.g., the cherubs are made of wood, and plated with gold [1 Kgs 7:23, 28]; alternatively, they are made of solid gold [Exod 25:18; 37:7]). Favored icons are also thought to possess animation and abilities that stigmatized icons are denied by biblical polemics (e.g., the cherubs fly [Ezek 10:5; Ps 18:11], manipulate items with their hands [Ezek 10:7], and stand on guard at the entry to Eden [Gen 3:24]). On the selective nature of biblical iconic polemic, see further S. M. Olyan, *Asberah and the Cult of Yabneh in Israel* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1988), 73, n. 10 and recently, N. B. Levtow, *Images of Others: Iconic Politics in Ancient Israel* (Winona Lake, IN.: Eisenbrauns, 2008), 12, n. 27. I would like to thank Jordan Rosenblum for reminding me of the assumed abilities of favored icons (oral communication).

² As “idol” is a derogatory term in English, I place it within quotation marks.

manufactured, and lifeless; they are called abominations, despicable things, even dung balls; they are associated with foreignness, falseness, illegitimate profanation and pollution (both “moral” and “ritual”). Though a number of these strategies of vilification have been explored in some depth by scholars (e.g., the emphasis on the material and manufactured nature of icons), specialists have not investigated the attribution of physical disability to icons as a means to devalue them.³ It is my purpose in this paper to do just that. I shall consider the ascription of physical disability to icons as one of a number of stigmatizing strategies attested in biblical “idol” polemics, exploring how it is utilized by polemicists to denigrate iconic worship, and why. I am particularly interested in what the attribu-

³ I use the term “disability” rather than “inability” purposefully. Several scholars have questioned my choice of “disability,” since they presume that from the polemicists’ perspective, the “idols” are not living beings, and could therefore not possess ability in the first place. As disability implies potential ability, why not speak of “inability” instead? It is true that disability suggests potential ability and therefore, an animate nature. Yet implicit in the polemic is a Judean audience which understands the “idols” to be animated and powerful, and must be convinced of their powerlessness and non-living status. If this were not the case, why make the argument in the first place, and in such a vociferous way? By ascribing disabilities to “idols,” the polemicists challenge their audience’s assumptions regarding the abilities of “idols” presumed by the audience to be living. Thus, I refer to the physical *disabilities* ascribed to icons in these polemical texts, because the polemic’s audience understands the “idols” to have the abilities that the polemic seeks to deny them. This assumption is buttressed by the observation that biblical texts represent sanctioned icons such as the cherubs of the Jerusalem temple as animate and able, suggesting that such a notion is not at all foreign to Judean authors and their audiences (see previously, n. 1). Finally, the same vocabulary of disability used of human beings is sometimes used of the “idols,” suggesting the appropriateness of speaking of “disability” rather than “inability” with respect to icons (e.g., *ʿēlīlīm ʿillēmīm*, “mute idols,” Hab 2:18). On the assumption that the Judean audience could have understood the Babylonian “idols” to be animate and powerful, and even victorious over Yhwh, see the comments of Levtow, *Images of Others*, 70, 83. That the audience for the polemic must have been Judean, see *ibid.*, 34, 80, 170.

Scholars who have explored the polemical emphasis on the material and manufactured nature of “idols” include M. B. Dick, “Prophetic Parodies of Making the Cult Image,” in M. B. Dick (ed.), *Born in Heaven, Made on Earth: The Making of the Cult Image in the Ancient Near East* (Winona Lake, IN.: Eisenbrauns, 1999), 1–53, esp. 34–44; and A. Berlejung, *Die Theologie der Bilder: Herstellung und Einweihung von Kultbildern in Mesopotamien und die alttestamentliche Bilderpolemik* (Freiburg: Universitätsverlag; Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1998), esp. 357–411, and *idem.*, “Ikonophobie oder Ikonolatrie. Zur Auseinandersetzung um die Bilder im Alten Testament,” in B. Janowski and M. Köckert (eds.), *Religionsgeschichte Israels. Formale und materiale Aspekte* (Gütersloh: Chr. Kaiser Gütersloher Verlagshaus, 1999), 221, 228–32.

tion of physical disability contributes to iconic polemic that might be lacking in other strategies of disparagement.⁴

Ascribing physical disability to “idols” is one of a number of strategies deployed by biblical writers to deride iconic worship.⁵ These stigmatizing strategies can be broken down into three types: (1) strategies that attribute to the icon characteristics generally understood to be undesirable; (2) strategies that bring into relief the manufactured and/or material nature of icons; and (3) the strategy of vilification through the use of denigrating epithets. I shall discuss each type of attack strategy before I attempt to determine where the ascription of physical disability fits among them. (Here I am theorizing the stigmatizing strategies as a whole.)

A number of texts ascribe to icons characteristics considered generally objectionable by the writers of biblical texts. An addition to Jer 8:19 associates “idols” with foreignness, a stigmatizing trait according to many circles that produced biblical texts, including the Deuteronomists who were very likely responsible for this gloss: “Why do they provoke me with their idols,” // “with their alien empty things (*bēhablê nekār*)?” To this one might compare other texts of a similar Deuteronomistic provenance that speak pejoratively of things alien, including “alien gods” (*‘ēlohê nekār*, e.g., Jer 5:19 and Deut 31:16; see also Jer 2:21; 19:4).⁶ Another undesirable trait ascribed to “idols” is the power to pollute. This is commonplace throughout the book of Ezekiel.⁷ Ezek 36:25 serves to illustrate the polluting nature of “idols”: “I shall toss upon you purifying waters and you shall be purified of all your pollution and from all your ‘idols’ (*qillālīm*) I shall purify you.” Here, the imagery of purification rites from the universe of “ritual” impurity is utilized to suggest the possibility of the removal of “moral” impurity—pollution that results from sin—caused by the worship of divine images understood to be offensive to Yhwh.⁸ Other undesirable

⁴ It is worth noting that mental disability is never attributed to “idols” by biblical polemic. This is interesting given that the ascription of blindness and deafness to “idols” is intended to suggest ignorance, and mental disability may also have this association in some West Asian texts (e.g., Prov 14:15; 22:3; Babylonian *kudurrū* inscriptions [L. W. King (ed.), *Babylonian Boundary-Stones and Memorial-Tablets in the British Museum* (London: British Museum, 1912), iii 5 41–42; iv 3 6; v 3 10–12; vi 2 34; etc.]).

⁵ The following biblical texts ascribe physical disabilities to “idols”: Deut 4:28; Isa 46:7; Jer 10:5; Hab 2:18; Ps 115:5–7.

⁶ On the stigmatization of select foreign groups in Deuteronomy, see, e.g., 7:1–6; 12:1–3; 23:4–9. On biblical representations of the alien and things alien, see S. M. Olyan, *Rites and Rank: Hierarchy in Biblical Representations of Cult* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), 63–102, 150–69.

⁷ See Ezek 20:7, 18; 22:3, 4; 23:30; 36:18, 25; 37:23.

⁸ Lev 19:31, a text of the “Holiness Code,” a collection that shares affinities with Ezekiel, is similar in its suggestion that turning to necromancers and mediums causes one to become “morally” polluted. Lev 19:4,

characteristics attributed to icons include “emptiness” (*hebel*) (Jer 10:15 [cf. 2:5, 10:3]); “falseness” (*šeger*) (Jer 10:14 [= 51:17]; Hab 2:18); “mockery” (Jer 10:15); a lack of profit (*lō’ yô’illî*) (Isa 44:9, 10; Hab 2:18 [cf. Jer 2:8, 11 regarding other gods in general]) and, in Ezekiel, the power to profane Yhwh’s holy name (Ezek 20:39).⁹ Icons are also associated with shame (Jer 10:14), lifelessness (Jer 10:14, “there is no spirit in them”), and a lack of agency, including the inability to save (Isa 46:7; Jer 10:5) or create (Jer 10:11).

Emphasizing the material and/or manufactured nature of “idols” is a second, and exceedingly common, way in which iconic worship is devalued in biblical polemics. This approach differs from the first strategy discussed in that to be material or manufactured in nature is not intrinsically objectionable in the biblical context, though it is thought to be so in the particular case of icons representing disapproved deities. In other words, for an item to be made of gold or of stone is not in itself stigmatizing, as many texts show; in contrast, items that are characterized as shameful, false, empty, polluting, or foreign (in a xenophobic cultural setting), qualities that are always objectionable, are stigmatized as a result. “Idols,” in contrast to Yhwh, are manufactured: they are made by human agents from materials such as stone, wood, and/or precious metals. Psalm 115:4 mentions precious metals and human manufacture in its critique of icons: “Their idols are silver and gold,” // “the work of the hands of a craftsman.”¹⁰ 2 Kgs 19:18 pairs human manufacture with wood and stone materials: “For they are not gods, but the work of the hands of a craftsman, wood and stone...”¹¹ Many other texts adopt this approach to the disparage-

which forbids turning to “idols,” is stylistically similar to 19:31, but does not suggest directly that such worship is polluting. On “moral” impurity and “idol” worship, see J. Klawans, *Impurity and Sin in Ancient Judaism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 26–31; and “Idolatry, Incest, and Impurity: Moral Defilement in Ancient Judaism,” *JSJ* 29 (1998): 392–401. For examples of the combination of elements from the discourses of “moral” and “ritual” impurity, see Olyan, “Purity Ideology in Ezra-Nehemiah as a Tool to Reconstitute the Community,” *Journal for the Study of Judaism* 35 (2004):1–16. Berlejung has emphasized the “ritual” pollution suggested by the term *gillūlim*—which likely means “dung balls”—in light of the emphasis on the importance of the “ritual” purity of icons in Mesopotamian sources. (Dung is “ritually” polluting in Ezekiel and several other biblical texts [Deut 23:13–15; Ezek 4:12–15; Zech 3:3–5].) On this, see *Theologie der Bilder*, 350–51, 405, 418, and “Ikonophobie oder Ikonolatrie,” 227.

⁹ On profanation of Yhwh’s name in the Holiness Source and Ezekiel, see, e.g., Lev 18:21; 19:12; 20:3; 21:6; 22:2, 32; Ezek 20:39; 36:20, 21, 22, 23. For other kinds of illegitimate profanation in H, see Lev 19:7; 21:9, 12, 15, 23; 22:9, 15. Illegitimate profanation is a serious offense in H and Ezekiel.

¹⁰ Ps 135:15 is identical.

¹¹ M. Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomist School* (1972; Winona

ment of icons. Isa 40:18–20 condemns the “idol” as something manufactured by craftsmen of wood and precious metals. Jer 10:3–4 emphasizes human production of icons with attention to the materials out of which they are made (wood and precious metals); 10:9 mentions precious metals, skilled human craftsmen, and the icon’s fancy clothing. The focus of Isa 44:12–17 is mainly on the role of craftsmen in the manufacturing process (see also 2 Chr 32:19). In many of these examples, the manufactured and material nature of icons is compared unfavorably to Yhwh’s nature, either directly or implicitly. Where Yhwh creates humanity, the “idols” are themselves human creations.¹²

A third strategy utilized to deride icons is to speak of them using insulting epithets. Biblical texts routinely refer to “idols” as *gillûlîm*, likely “dung balls,”¹³ as in 1 Kgs 15:12 and Ezek 36:25; *’ēlîlîm*, “worthless things,”¹⁴ as in Lev 19:4; 26:1; and Isa 2:8; *hābālîm*, “empty things,” as in Jer 8:19; 10:8; *šiqqûšîm*, “despicable things,” as in Deut 29:16 and Jer 7:30; and *tô’ēbôt*, “abominations,” as in Deut 27:15; and Isa 44:19.¹⁵ A number of these terms are used of gods other than Yhwh as well as divine images (e.g., *šiqqûš*, used of Kemosh of Moab in MT 1 Kgs 11:7, and *tô’ēbâ*, used of Milkom of Ammon in 2 Kgs 23:13). Sometimes, two such terms are paired, producing a doubly denigrating combination epithet, e.g., *gillûlê tô’ēbôtayik*, “your dung ball abominations” (Ezek 16:36). Such name calling with the intent to vilify might be compared to the biblical practice of referring to the Philistines as “the(se) uncircumcised” (*’ārelîm*), a stigmatizing nickname common in 1 Samuel and other texts (e.g., Judg 15:18; 1 Sam 14:6).¹⁶ In each case, an insulting epithet is substituted for a proper noun (e.g.,

Lake, IN.: Eisenbrauns, 1992), 324, 367, lists Deuteronomic and Hoseanic texts that speak of “idols” as human products. My thanks to Nathaniel Levtow for this reference.

¹² My thanks to Nathaniel Levtow for helping me to sharpen this point (oral communication).

¹³ On the probable connection of *gillûlîm* and dung, see the discussion of H. D. Preuss, “*gillûlîm*,” *TDOT* 3:2. On dung as a source of “ritual” impurity, see the discussion in n. 8. Berlejung and others have emphasized the association of the *gillûlîm* and “ritual” pollution, referring to the *gillûlîm* as “personifizierte Unreinheit” (“personified uncleanness”; e.g., Berlejung, *Theologie der Bilder*, 314, n. 1516; 405).

¹⁴ Cf. Ps 96:5//1 Chr 16:26 regarding the gods of the peoples, and Job 13:4; Jer 14:14, where *’ēlîl* // *šeqer*, “falseness.”

¹⁵ I contrast the apparent epithet *hābālîm*, “empty things,” (e.g., Jer 8:19; 10:8) with the use of singular *hebel*, “emptiness,” in a verse such as Jer 10:15 (“They are emptiness, works of mockery”).

¹⁶ On the stigmatizing of the foreskin in biblical texts, see, e.g., Olyan, *Rites and Rank*, 64–68.

Philistine) or a common noun (e.g., *tēmûnâ*, “likeness”) which is not in itself denigrating.¹⁷

Where does the attribution of physical disability fit among the three types of stigmatizing strategy? Like foreignness, falseness, or the power to pollute “morally,” physical disability is a characteristic understood by the text to be generally objectionable, and therefore stigmatizing. Physical disabilities such as blindness, lameness, deafness, and muteness are frequently denigrated in biblical and cognate literatures. The blind, lame, deaf and mute are often associated with devalued qualities such as weakness, dependency, helplessness, ineffectuality and ignorance (e.g., Isa 6:9–10; 56:10; Ps 38:14–15); with divine curse, rejection and punishment (e.g., Deut 28:28–29); and with social marginality (e.g., Deut 23:2; 2 Sam 5:8b; Isa 29:17–21). Some biblical writers imagine a utopian future in which disability is eliminated by Yhwh, suggesting its undesirability (Isa 29:17–21). Many texts associate disabled persons with other devalued and marginalized social groups (e.g., the poor and the afflicted, as in Job 29:15–16), and one text implicitly compares disabled persons to an arid desert (Isa 35:4–10). Even passages that appear to challenge the stigmatization of persons with physical disabilities by suggesting that they are of special interest to the deity or the powerful nevertheless function to reinforce their stigma by affirming their vulnerability and dependence (e.g., Ps 146:5–9; Job 29:12–16).¹⁸

In a number of anti-iconic texts, “idols” are denigrated for their inability to see, hear, speak, feel with their hands, smell, and/or move independently. Psalm 115 lists the disabilities of “idols” as part of its argument that these gods are inferior to Yhwh, who resides in the heavens, and can do anything he wishes (v. 3):

They have mouths, but cannot speak;
they have eyes, but cannot see;
they have ears, but cannot hear;
they have noses, but cannot smell;
they have hands, but cannot feel;
they have feet, but cannot walk;
nor can they utter a sound in their throats.(vv. 5–7)¹⁹

¹⁷ Though Yhwh is said to have no “likeness” (*tēmûnâ*) according to Deut 4:12, and Israelites are forbidden to make a cultic “likeness” of Yhwh according to texts such as Exod 20:4/Deut 5:8; and Deut 4:23, 25, other biblical texts speak naturally and without disapprobation of Yhwh’s “likeness” (Num 12:8; Ps 17:15), suggesting that the word in itself is not pejorative in biblical usage.

¹⁸ On the stigmatizing of physical disability, see further my study *Disability in the Hebrew Bible: Interpreting Mental and Physical Differences* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

¹⁹ Ps 135:16–17 contains identical material regarding the mouth, eyes, and ears of “idols”; the statement in Ps 115:6 regarding their noses (*‘ap lâhem wēlō’ yērihūn*) has apparently been transformed in Ps 135:17 into

Though “idols” possess the anthropomorphic form typical of many a divine being in ancient West Asia, their sensory organs (mouth, eyes, ears, nose, hands) do not function, and they lack the ability to move independently. Jer 10:5 compares icons to a scarecrow in a cucumber patch, that which has an anthropomorphic appearance, but is artificial: “They cannot speak, they must be carried for they cannot walk. Do not reverence them, for they can do no harm. Nor is it in their power to do good.” The text implies that a real god, in contrast, can speak and move independently, can act (doing harm or good), and is therefore worthy of reverence. Because of their disabilities, “idols” cannot act or communicate, and are therefore undeserving of worship. Several other texts attribute disabilities to icons. Hab 2:18 speaks of “mute idols” (*’ēlīlīm ’il-lēmīm*) in the context of a critique suggesting that divine images do not profit because they are manufactured. As in Psalm 115:5 and Jer 10:5, the fact that icons are unable to communicate is brought into relief. Isa 46:7 highlights the dependence of the “idol” on human worshipers to move it around, not unlike Jer 10:5 and Psalm 115:7, as well as the fact that it is incapable of answering or saving. Finally, Deut 4:28 lists the disabilities of “idols” in a manner comparable to Psalm 115:5–7, with the intent of suggesting their inability to act as well as their lifelessness. To the usual disabilities (e.g., blindness, deafness) it adds the inability to eat and to smell. These incapacities suggest a lack of animation, since living beings, including deities, are thought to eat food and possess the ability to smell and enjoy aromatics such as incense. Other polemical texts speak directly of the lifelessness of “idols” (e.g., Jer 10:14, *lō’ rūah bām*; Hab 2:19, *kol rūah ’en bēqirbō*). Claims of lifelessness, the inability to eat, and the inability to smell, are likely a direct response to Mesopotamian iconic animation rites and ideology, as several scholars have suggested.²⁰ After all, these rites mention specifically

another remark on their mouths: “Indeed, there is no breath in their mouths” (*’ap ’en [yēš] rūah bēpīhem*, with *’ap*, “nose,” misconstrued at some point as *’ap*, “indeed”). The statements in Ps 115:7 regarding the hands, feet, and throat of the “idols” are missing in Ps 135:16–17.

²⁰ See Dick, “Prophetic Parodies,” 42, who states that polemical arguments “against the crafting of the divine statue probably refer to the ceremony by which the statue was enlivened, the Babylonian *mis pī* ritual.” Dick makes this statement in the context of a discussion of the “profane construction materials” out of which the “idol” is made; he does not refer directly to eating and smelling. See also C. Walker and Dick, “The Induction of the Cult Image in Ancient Mesopotamia: The Mesopotamian *Mis Pī* Ritual,” in *Born in Heaven, Made on Earth*, 114, who note generally a connection between the claims of Psalm 135 and Jer 10:5, on the one hand, and *mis pī* animation claims, on the other. Berlejung, *Theologie der Bilder*, 412–13 claims in passing that biblical anti-iconic polemic makes explicit reference to the *mis pī/pī pī* rites, but does not provide particular examples. In contrast, Levtow is of the opinion that the writers of the

the capacity of the animated image to eat food, drink water, and smell incense, behaviors that constitute its divinity.²¹

Texts that disparage iconic worship by attributing physical disabilities to icons tend to combine this strategy with others that I have reviewed; interestingly, devaluing “idols” through the ascription of disabilities alone is never attested. Thus, Psalm 115 attacks icons by highlighting their material and manufactured nature (“their ‘idols’ are silver and gold,” // “the work of the hands of a craftsman”) and by attributing physical disabilities such as blindness, deafness, and lameness to them. Deut 4:28 is similar, stigmatizing “idols” by emphasizing the fact that they are made by human hands, the materials out of which they are made (wood and stone), and their disabilities (they are “gods. . .that cannot see, cannot hear, cannot eat, and cannot smell”). Hab 2:18 speaks of their lack of profit, the fact that they are made of cast metal, that they are false teachers, and that they are characterized by a physical disability (muteness). Isa 46:5–7 vilifies icons by focusing on their material and manufactured nature, their inability to move independently, and their inability to answer or to save. Finally, Jer 10:1–16 combines a great number of stigmatizing strategies in its polemic: “idols” are manufactured, made of silver and gold, empty, cannot do harm or good, did not create the heavens and earth, cause shame, are false, are lifeless, and are characterized by physical disabilities. To be sure, a multi-pronged attack strategy probably has more potential for success than does a strategy that focuses on one or two perceived deficiencies, and this may explain the frequent recourse of biblical polemical texts to strategic combinations, including those that incorporate the ascription of physical disabilities to icons.

Yet one should also note that many examples of anti-iconic polemic are extant that do not make use of the ascription of physical disabilities as a way to denigrate “idols.” Among these are the curse in Deut 27:15, which speaks of the “idol” as an abomination and as the work of the hands of a craftsman; Isa 40:18–20 and 2 Kgs 19:18, which attack the icon by pointing to its material and manufactured nature; and Deut 29:16, which combines name calling (“despicable things,” “dung balls”) with an emphasis on the

“idol” polemics do not allude directly to *mīs pī* rites per se, which were secret, but nonetheless allude to the animation ideology and its claims (*Images of Others*, 57, 90 n. 8, 129). On Mesopotamian iconic animation rites in general, see especially Walker and Dick, *The Induction of the Cult Image in Ancient Mesopotamia: The Mesopotamian Mīs Pī Ritual* (State Archives of Assyria Literary Texts 1; Helsinki: University of Helsinki, 2001); their lengthy essay of the same title in Dick (ed.), *Born in Heaven, Made on Earth*, 55–121; and Berlejung, *ibid.*, 178–283.

²¹ E.g., *Mīs Pī* Incantation 3:36–37, 70ab–71ab; 4:19(A)ab, 48ab (Walker and Dick, *The Induction of the Cult Image*, 134, 141, 149, 151, 163, 166–67, 184, 185).

material nature of icons (wood and stone, silver and gold).²² Though stigmatizing by attributing physical disabilities is not uncommon in biblical “idol” polemics, the strategy is frequently not attested. Furthermore, as a way to attack icons, the ascription of physical disabilities occurs less frequently than do other stigmatizing strategies, such as emphasizing the material and/or manufactured nature of “idols,” or calling them insulting names.

Which disabilities are the focus of iconic polemic? Interestingly, the disability that occurs most frequently in biblical attacks on “idols” is the inability to speak or answer queries. This particular deficiency is mentioned in four of the five polemical texts that make use of the ascription of physical disability as a way to denigrate icons, suggesting the central importance of communication with worshipers as a characteristic of the divine (Isa 46:7; Jer 10:5; Hab 2:18; Psalm 115:5; the exception is Deut 4:28). An inability to answer queries or make intentions known suggests, according to these texts, that the “idol” is not a god.²³ Contrast Yhwh, who “tells his thoughts to humanity” (Amos 4:13), routinely communicating with his worshipers by means of oracles delivered through prophets, priests, diviners, and others, in a fashion typical of ancient West Asian deities.²⁴ A lack of independent ambulation is a second theme present in a number of anti-iconic polemics (Isa 46:7; Jer 10:5; and Psalm 115:7). Texts emphasize the need to carry the “idol” from place to place as an example of its inferiority and non-divine status (e.g., Jer 10:5: “It must be carried for it cannot walk”). In contrast, a true god such as Yhwh moves freely and independently, treading on his foes.²⁵ A third theme, sensory deficits such as an inability to see or hear, are mentioned in two texts (Deut 4:28; Psalm 115:5–6). Seeing and hearing, tied frequently to knowledge in biblical discourse, are often mentioned as characteristics of deity. To lack the ability to see and hear suggests a lack of knowledge, wisdom, and understanding, much in contrast to Yhwh.²⁶ In addition to these deficits, an inability to eat, smell, or

²² Interestingly, the fact that icons are manufactured is not highlighted in this particular text.

²³ Similarly, a lack of divine response to the entreaties of Baal’s votaries is construed in 1 Kings 18 as indicative of the non-existence of Baal.

²⁴ Oracular functions, denied to “idols” by biblical polemicists, are indeed a component of *mis pi* rites, as others have pointed out.

²⁵ E.g., Isa 14:25; 63:3, 6; Am 4:13; Ps 60:14; Job 9:8; Lam 1:15. The inability to move freely suggests indirectly the inability to fight wars and win victories over enemies. Dick notes that *mis pi* texts “stress the statue’s ability to ‘walk!’” (“Prophetic Parodies,” 19 n. g).

²⁶ For the connection of seeing and hearing with knowledge and understanding, as well as the association of blindness and deafness with ignorance, see, e.g., Isa 6:9–10; 56:10; Ps 38:14. Knowledge and understanding are frequently credited to the deity, as in Jer 10:7, 12, 14, even familiarity with the innermost thoughts of human beings (e.g., 1 Kgs 8:39;

feel with the hands is mentioned in Deut 4:28 and Psalm 115:6–7. I have already discussed eating and smelling as emblematic of living beings, whether divine or non-divine; the ability to feel is probably to be understood similarly.

Why incorporate physical disabilities into polemics against icons? Casting “idols” as blind, deaf, mute, and lame functions to deny them knowledge, independent agency, and the ability to communicate. If they cannot know as a result of their blindness and deafness, they are ignorant, and therefore hardly divine; if they cannot communicate because they are mute, they cannot be deities, because deities speak to their worshipers (typically through oracles); and if they cannot move independently and act decisively, they cannot possibly save or be responsible for creation, in contrast to a “real” divine being. The inability of “idols” to eat, smell, or feel with their hands suggests that they lack animation: they cannot be alive, in contrast to “the living god,” Yhwh (Jer 10:10).

The ascription of blindness and lameness in particular to “idols” also has other negative resonances worthy of our attention. Unlike deafness and muteness, blindness and lameness are constructed as “defects” (*mūmīm*) in various biblical sources.²⁷ “Defective” priests, including priests who are blind or lame, may not offer sacrifices according to Lev 21:17–23; “defective” sacrificial animals are generally excluded from the cult, said to be rejected by Yhwh, and, in one text, labeled “abominations” (Lev 22:18–25; Deut 15:21; 17:1).²⁸ Blind and lame worshipers are likely proscribed from entering the sanctuary sphere according to the saying in 2 Sam 5:8b (“Anyone blind or lame shall not enter the house”). Similarly, male worshipers with genital damage (another class of “defect”) are banned from “the assembly of Yhwh” (*qēhal yhwh*)—likely a reference to the sanctuary sphere—according to Deut 23:2.²⁹ The ascription of “defects” such as blindness and lameness to “idols” in biblical iconic polemic is striking given Yhwh’s rejection of that

Ps 139:1–6, 23).

²⁷ On “defects,” see my treatment in *Disability in the Hebrew Bible*, 26–46, 140–48.

²⁸ Where Lev 22:23 allows for the sacrifice of certain “defective” animals as free-will offerings, Deut 17:1 makes no exceptions. The rhetoric of abomination is found in Deut 17:1, but not in Lev 22:18–25 or Deut 15:19–23.

²⁹ For this interpretation of 2 Sam 5:8b, see *ibid.*, 142–43 n. 7, with citations. For “the assembly of Yhwh” in Deut 23:2 as a reference to the sanctuary sphere, see the text’s earliest interpreters (Lam 1:10; Isa 56:3–5; Ezek 44:7, 9) and the discussion in *ibid.*, 141–42 n. 5. In contrast to 2 Sam 5:8b and Deut 23:2, Priestly and Holiness texts do not speak of any exclusion of “defective” worshipers from the sanctuary. Note that Lev 21:17–23 allows defective priests to remain in the sanctuary and continue to have access to the holy foods, suggesting no general incompatibility with holiness.

which is “defective” according to a number of biblical texts. Where the allegedly authentic god is portrayed as wanting no part of these “defects,” whether they be in sacrificial animals, in priests, or—according to several texts—in worshipers, the bodies of the allegedly false gods are themselves characterized by these very conditions according to biblical polemic! By casting the disapproved icons as “defective,” the biblical polemicists find yet another way to ascribe stigma to “idols,” and suggest their illegitimacy in a cultic setting, for the very qualities that the “true” god rejects characterize the “false” gods. This move is not unlike ascribing “ritual” pollution to the “idols” by calling them “dung balls,” for in this case too, a quality incompatible with divinity and the cult is said to characterize the “idols” themselves.³⁰

Each of the physical disabilities ascribed to “idols” functions to deny them divine status or cultic legitimacy, often in ways that differ from other stigmatizing strategies, sometimes in ways that resemble them. To say that such icons are manufactured, to emphasize their material nature, or to call them abominations or dung balls does not address directly—or at all in the case of the insulting epithets—their presumed sensory deficits, inability to communicate, lack of independent movement and action, and non-living status, as the ascription of physical disabilities does. What might be implied by underscoring the manufactured nature of “idols” or the materials out of which they are produced is made explicit through the attribution of physical disabilities to them. Biblical polemicists who underscore the manufactured or material nature of icons argue implicitly that a manufactured wooden object cannot speak; to say explicitly that it cannot makes the point directly and unambiguously, as in Hab 2:18, which speaks of “mute idols” (*’ēlîlîm ’illēmîm*). Thus, to emphasize the disabilities of “idols” helps to make explicit what may be lacking or only implicit in other strategies of disparagement, thereby enriching and buttressing anti-iconic polemics. Furthermore, to attribute dysfunction to icons, as the ascription of physical disabilities does, points to their inferiority in a way that differs from other approaches to their denigration. Dysfunction is not a theme in discourses that emphasize the material and manufactured nature of “idols,” or that vilify them through name-calling. Yet to ascribe dysfunction to icons is an effective way to attack them and contrast them with Yhwh. In fact, stigmatizing rival gods through the employment of metaphors of dysfunction is not unknown outside of iconic polemics, as Jer 2:13 demonstrates. Though Jer 2:13 does not mention icons or their alleged disabilities, it compares the other gods, described as “shattered cisterns that hold no water,” to Yhwh, “the fount of living waters.”³¹ Finally, as

³⁰ As mentioned, Berlejung, among others, has underscored the association of the *gillîlîm* and “ritual” impurity. On this, see notes 8 and 13.

³¹ It is possible that Jer 2:13 alludes to the making of icons when it

mentioned, ascribing “defects” such as blindness and lameness to “idols” functions in a manner comparable to the ascription of “ritual” impurity to them. In each case, the cultic illegitimacy of disapproved icons is brought into relief, and the icons are stigmatized as a result.

Some of the rhetoric of the iconic polemics enjoys a range of usage larger than the polemics themselves. Specifically, several of the sensory disabilities attributed to “idols” are also ascribed to a disobedient Israel in a strikingly similar fashion. An example of this is Jer 5:21, where a “foolish people without sense” is said to “have eyes but cannot see,” // “ears but cannot hear.” This is the rhetoric of Ps 115:5–6 word for word, and is very close to that of Ps 135:16–17, but Jer 5:21 does not include the other disabilities listed in Ps 115:5–6 (muteness, an inability to smell, feel with the hands, or walk) or in Ps 135:16–17 (muteness, lack of animation).³² The focus of Jer 5:21 is exclusively two specific sensory disabilities—blindness and deafness—which are commonly associated with ignorance and transgression in biblical literature (e.g., Isa 6:9–10; 42:18–19).³³ Contrast “idol” polemics such as Psalms 115, 135 or Jer 10:5, which not only attribute ignorance to icons by ascribing sensory disabilities to them, but also deny them independent agency, the ability to communicate, and status as living beings. As Nathaniel Levtow argues in his recent monograph *Images of Others*, the central goal of the biblical “idol” polemics is to deny power to Babylonian deities and icons.³⁴ This is not a concern of texts seeking to censure the people of Israel, for they do not compete with Yhwh for power. In the case of the people, it is their disobedience that is of concern, and this disobedience is attributed to their ignorance, communicated through the ascription of blindness and deafness to them. Thus, the sensory disabilities, which are associated with a lack of knowledge and understanding, are attributed to the people in a text such as Jer 5:21, while other physical disabilities, which relate to issues of communication, independent agency or status as animate beings, are not. The rhetoric of the “idol” polemics finds a larger usage in Jer 5:21 probably on account of the author’s perception of a common ignorance shared by both the

states that Yhwh’s people abandoned him “to hew out for themselves cisterns,” though this remains unclear. My preference is to understand Jer 2:13 as a text independent of the “idol” polemics that also makes use of the ascription of dysfunction to denigrate other gods.

³² The statement regarding the ears varies slightly in most manuscripts of Ps 135:17 (*’oṣṣayim labem wēlō’ ya’āzīnū*). Cf. Ps 115:6 and Jer 5:21: *’oṣṣayim labem wēlō’ yis̄ma’ū*.

³³ Ezek 12:2 displays a similar rhetoric and comparable focus. Here, the disobedient people are said to “have eyes to see but they do not see, ears to hear, but they do not hear, for they are a house of rebellion” (*’ēnayim labem lir’ōt wēlō’ rā’ū ’oṣṣayim labem lišmōa’ wēlō’ šame’ū kē bêt mēri hem*).

³⁴ *Images of Others*, 31–35 and passim.

disobedient people and the “false” gods. The use of the rhetoric of sensory deficit in a text such as Jer 5:21 may also be intended to allude to the “idol” polemics themselves, suggesting that the people’s disobedience has to do specifically with the worship of other gods.³⁵

Before concluding, I would like to comment briefly on the various rhetorical structures utilized to ascribe disability in the texts under consideration. As the passages I have reviewed and others make clear, disabilities such as blindness, deafness, and muteness might be ascribed to persons or to “idols” in one of several ways: with an adjective such as “blind,” “deaf,” or “mute”; by a non-adjectival construction such as “they have eyes, but cannot see,” // “ears, but cannot hear”; or by a combination of both of these approaches, as in Ps 38:14: “As for me, I was like a deaf person who could not hear,” // “And like a mute person who could not open his mouth.” Though “idol” polemics tend to be characterized by non-adjectival constructions such as “they have mouths, but cannot speak” (Ps 115:5), they sometimes evidence the use of adjectives instead, as in Hab 2:18, where the disapproved icons are referred to as “mute idols” (*’ēlîm ’illēmîm*). The use of both adjectives and non-adjectival constructions to ascribe disability to “idols” as well as persons suggests that they are interchangeable: each establishes disability as an attribute in its own way.

Ascribing physical disabilities to “idols” is one example of their stigmatization through the attribution of characteristics generally understood to be undesirable in the biblical context (e.g., foreign status, emptiness, falseness, the ability to pollute “morally”). That the physical disabilities of “idols” come to be a focus of iconic polemic is no surprise, given the denigration of such disabilities in biblical and other West Asian literatures, as demonstrated by their frequent association with divine curse, punishment, and rejection, as well as weakness, dependence, ignorance, and social marginality.³⁶ The attribution of physical disability to cultic icons opposed by the biblical writers is a strategy of disparagement used in combination with other approaches to the denigration of “idols”; it never occurs alone in biblical texts. Nor is it among the most common ways in which iconic cult is attacked and derided. When it is deployed, the ascription of physical disabilities to “idols” is evidently intended to suggest several deficiencies, most of which share dysfunction in common: a dearth of independent movement and

³⁵ Here I assume that Jer 5:21 is derived from a text such as Psalm 115. The notion that Jer 5:21 alludes to “idol” polemics is buttressed by Jer 5:22, which states that the people do not reverence Yhwh, though he is responsible for creation. The statements about creation recall hymnic praise of Yhwh typical of the “idol” polemics (e.g., Ps 135:7; Jer 10:10, 12–13, 16).

³⁶ On this, see my earlier discussion, and n. 18.

agency, a deficit of knowledge and understanding, inability to communicate with worshipers, a lack of animation, and cultic illegitimacy. These shortcomings are typically marshaled as evidence that the “idols” are not gods and should not receive cultic devotion from worshipers. Other stigmatizing strategies evidenced in biblical “idol” polemics may not suggest these deficiencies at all, may suggest them only implicitly, or may suggest them directly and explicitly, depending on the deficit in question. At all events, the ascription of physical disabilities to “idols” in biblical polemic is an effective polemical tool used strategically by our authors to denigrate and devalue iconic cult of which they disapprove.