

## 5. ETHIC AND ESTHETIC VALENCES OF IMAGE IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

### Abstract

The multitude of images that invade human life nowadays casts off their aprioristic rejection. The last stronghold is the possibility of subjective choice, a real challenge for the contemporary man. But the force of image and the eventual need to protect the mind/heart cannot be truly sighted in its wholeness unless we see it in the perspective of foretimes. The present research points to a return in the Old Testament areal, where the place/purpose of image is controversial, swinging permanently between fragile existence and idolatrous worship. Today, when we talk about image, we automatically refer to its esthetic valence. But, if we refer to image inside the Jewish culture, then we have to mind the fact that this culture stands at the antipode of Greek esthetic tradition, because Jews thought image was not limited to a simple expression of the esthetics, but had deeper, spiritual and ethic dimensions. This explains the rejection of image, determined by the commandment that echoes on Mount Sinai: „Thou shalt have no other gods before me. Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of any thing that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth.” (Ex 20,3-4). The shyness towards image is not synonymous to a complete and definitive rejection, the image is credited with the possibility to express the presence of the divine, in which case not only is it indulged but it is rather a commandment, becoming a sign of eternity in time: the cherubims on the tabernacle (Ex 25,18) marked the epiphanic core in the middle of Israel and the brass serpent (Nm 21,4-9) mediated the blessed works of „The One Who is”. Thus, we aim to identify certain connections between the importance of image in the Old Testament and its importance nowadays through various frameworks and hypothesis.



PAULA BUD

Faculty of Orthodox Theology  
"Babeş-Bolyai"  
University in Cluj-Napoca

### Keywords

Image, spirituality, ethics, sacredness, idolatry

Our endeavour begins with an analysis of the creation rescript (Gn 1:4.10.12.18.21.25.31). The juxtaposition of the two texts, the Hebrew and Greek will shed light on two different traditions, each with its own perception on the created things. Before we analyze the two words בֹּטַח *ṣi* καλός, we shall explore the structure of the book's first chapter: the account of the six days of creation shows a remarkable simetry (Roop 1987, 23), in which the approval of the created things recurs seven times (Chirilă 2003, 26-31) in the Hebrew text through the expression: „and God saw that it was good/beautiful”. So, *good* or *beautiful*? The Hebrew version uses the word בֹּטַח, a word of manifold meanings, that are not part of the the esthetic areal (Strong 1996, 2896). In the Jewish culture, this word is deeply connected with the idea of God: He is the only one good, and His goodness is reflected by His works (Gordon, 2002, 18). Although it appears multiple times in the first chapter, the word reccurs strongly in verse 31, where it is used as an attribute for the entire creation דָּאֵם בֹּטַח (tob meod) (Gn 1:31) is the superlative expression of goodness/beauty, the created things are named by the Creator not only good, but also „very good”. And that which God, as the Creator, calls „good”/”beautiful”, is not the compromise between good and evil (as the human thinking and expression would render), but the reaching of the highest good, in other words, the fulfillment of the divine plan (Spence-Jones 2004,34).

### **The dialogue between the Hebrew בֹּטַח (tob) and the Greek word καλός**

Exploring the LXX text, we observe the translation of בֹּטַח with καλός (Strong 1996, 2570), a word which, besides its primary esthetic meaning, has a secondary meaning, that defines the attributes and qualities tha make something adequate and correspond to its purpose. But here comes the question: if Hebrew has a specific word that designates beauty, יָפִי (iafah) (Strong 1996, 3302), that does not appear in the first chapter of Genesis, why does LXX still uses καλός, a word with immediate esthetic resonance? An analysis of Greek culture is recommended here. Influenced by Platonism, Greeks thought creation itself was a work of beauty, κοσμος. The Creator was perceived as an Architect, idea that has been developed in the biblical theology of Edmond Jacob: the author of the biblical account of creation portrays God as an Architect who puts the elements of world in place as someone who wants to build a house inside which the dwellers shall feel good and cozy; this building has to be solid, cozy, pleasant, out of dangers. At the completion of His works, God shows contentment: “And God saw every thing that he had made, and, behold, it was very good. And the evening and the morning

were the sixth day.” (Gn 1:31) (Jacob 1955, 111). Philo of Alexandria, influenced himself by the thinking of Plato, adhere to the same conception, describing in details how the ideal plan of the world that exists in the mint of the Architect precedes and controls its materialization (*De Opificiis Mundi* 4, 5). But the influence of Plato’s thinking in LXX is also manifested in other fragments: in Gn 2,1 LXX translates the Hebrew zeba’am by κόσμος, and in Gn 1:2 renders the Hebrew *tohu vabohu* by ἀόρατος καὶ ἀκτασκεύατος, a translation that is influenced by Platonic philosophy (*De Opificiis Mundi* 4, 5).

The option of LXX can be understood if we mind the fact that *kalonkagathon*, a formula foreseen by Plato, considered goodness and beauty in an endless fusion. That means that in the Greek thinking the two notions imply each other. Therefore, when LXX names light (v. 4), the dry land and sea (v. 10), grass (v. 12), luminaries (v. 18), living beings (v. 21:25) and, lastly, creation as a whole (v. 31) *beautiful*, it refers not only to esthetic attributes but also to the capacity of the created things to fulfill the purpose they were created. In the *Homilies to Hexaemeron*, Saint Basil the Great observes this fact: “Through these words (*And God saw it was good/beautiful* Gn 1:8), the Holy Scripture did not intend to say that God’s eyes were delighted by His creatures, nor that God looks at the beauty of creatures as we do; but that beauty, in its biblical understanding, it’s what is perfectly made and serves to the purpose it was designed for”. (St. Basil the Great 1986, 108). The same idea is present in Saint Ambrosius the Great: God calls each stage of His creation good/beautiful, seizing its immaculate being and perfection: “God, as the judge of the entire work, foreseeing how the work would come to completion, praises His work from its very early stages, knowing from the beginning its finalization... He praises each part as worthy of what comes next” (St. Ambrosius 2001, 65). However, the Hebrew word בָּרוּךְ LXX translates with καλός is an adjective with various meanings denoting, as Strong suggests, both external and internal characteristics (especially moral ones), and not necessarily esthetic ones. The real meaning of the words of the creation account, in which God is content with His creation, is that the creation is perfect, is complete. This resonates with the general setting of the Old Testament and with the fact that beauty did not play any role at all in both the culture and religion of Israel (Tatarkiewicz 1978, 12).

### **The ethic/esthetic consistency of image in the Jewish culture**

The diminishing of esthetic needs among the Jewish people, consequence of rejection of any depiction of God, was naturally followed by moving the center

of interest from the beauty of shape to the depth and richness of matter, which was valued by Jews as the highest beauty (Tatarkiewicz 1978, 19). The lack of interest for the esthetic aspect is noticeable in the descriptions Jews made to buildings, that were not described by their exterior design, but by their functionality. Moreover, the biblical text tells us that Joseph, David and Absalom were beautiful, but does not describe their beauty and that because the Jewish culture did not settle on the exterior aspects. If they did pay attention to the exterior aspect of human beings, they accounted only for those which expressed spiritual experience (Tatarkiewicz 1978, 15). The wisdom books show their Greek influence however: „...but Thou ordered everything with measure, with number and balance” (Sol 11:20b). This genuine Pitagoreic and Platonic idea is different from the fragments mentioned above in which the esthetic aspect is not granted any importance at all. Therefore, one must take into consideration when reading the text, the Hellenization phenomenon of the writing's background in order to discern whether we are faced with a genuine Jewish conception or not.

Although apparently not preoccupied by esthetics, Jews have a vocabulary that is comprised of many words that describe beauty, both physical and moral. This shows the fact that Jews, being in a permanent search of God, couldn't have ignored that the entire creation moves/works in a perfect harmony that originates in the divine beauty and perfection. Thus, *iafe* applied to humans, animals things and countries means „beautiful in the most general respect”, *nehmad* means *charming*, or *strong desire* of a certain thing (Gn 2:9), *hemed*, the corresponding noun being used in many ways (Is 32:12; Iez 23:6; Am 11); *nave* derived from *iwa<sup>h</sup>* means *worthy of desire*; lastly, *tob mareh* expresses *beautiful appearance*. There is no basis to assert the fact that Jews were refractory to art and esthetics. The Scripture portrays them as skilled workers with craftsmanship abilities, for example referring to the construction of the holy tent and then of the Jerusalem Temple. Rabbinic sources mention the obligation each man had to ensure that any liturgic service or act of cult is performed best, and thus becomes worthy to be consecrated to God (*Beshallah, Shirah*, 3).

However, moral beauty is by far the most important in the Jewish culture. Spiritual qualities and virtues made someone beautiful, due to the balance between virtue and beauty, the latter is not limited however to the exterior esthetical aspect, but goes beyond, to its essence. Thus, the use of בּוֹט in the creation account: the created things are the reflection of their Creator, crowned with the highest attributes, grandeur and magnificence, but not beauty (Tatarkiewicz 1978, 12). Thus, the interest of a Jew is

focused on the moral and ethic aspect of beauty, but we cannot be ignorant of a certain preoccupation for esthetic that is visible later in artistic manifestations.

In this respect, we seize the medieval practice of decoration/ornamentation of the synagogue's doorposts with representations of certain animals (among which the lion was common – a symbol of Judah), birds and sometimes plants (flowers, vine, etc.). This type of ornamentation was accepted by rabbis when the idolatrous danger was abolished, but some rabbis, more rigorist, forbid them entirely (Abrahams 1958, 29). In spite of these Rabbinic rigors, the cups and lamps used in the liturgic service of Shabbat and other celebrations were decorated with various representations: birds, fish, boats, etc. Moreover, even the walls of wealthy Jews' houses had decorations with Old Testament scenery, while the exterior walls were decorated with common scenes of everyday life (Abrahams 1958, 146). The portraiture art although rare, was known among the Jews from Italy since the 15th century, and in Germany from the 18th century. However, they were specialists in manuscripts and artistic bookbindings, arts and crafts that they probably learned from monks (Abrahams 1958, 220). Still, synagogues prohibited art because it could distract attention during prayer, thus the Rabbis were unanimously against artistic representations including of those four beings from the vision of Ezekiel.

Returning to the Old Testament background, we distinguish three fundamental aspects of beauty and esthetics: the beauty of the universe as a reflection of the Creator: „For out of the grandeur and beauty of beings knoweth you better the One Who made them” (Sol 13:5), the deriving of beauty from the relation between „measure, number and weight” (Sol 11:20) and the futility or inherent peril of beauty, that can lead to moral desecration. The latter is the only one which resonates with the Judaic culture and thinking, the only genuine one, while the other two are consequences of the Greek culture influence.

### **Idolatry between historical reality and actual danger**

The dialogal structure of nature opens the way for man towards knowing the spiritual realities: the intelligible cosmos shows mystically in the physical cosmos through symbols and the physical cosmos exists in the intelligible one, eased by the senses of mind. These two are intertwined, and their connection is mediated by symbols. Their work is one (St. Maximus the Confessor 2000, 9). But, after the fall of sin, the dialogal perspective of creation is replaced by a more desecrated overview, with man being dominated by pride and disobedience, looking towards what he can conquer and

subdue and permanently seeking to satisfy his carnal needs, that progressively grow into passions. This new perspective shows a denaturated vision over nature, through which man no longer seeks for realities beyond the physical realm. This perspective humiliates man among the creatures that, by their nature, should be subdued by him (Chirila 2000, 59). The images that harass ourselves nowadays, are they a serious danger for us?

To answer this question, we first have to determine the meaning of symbol/idol concepts, from the perspective of history and religious phenomenology. In the human history, the religious image did not limit to intellectual or affective *commemoratio* of faith, but was thought as a real *participatio*, objective, to the divine realities it depicted. The shift from its symbolic function to the damnable idolatric dimension emerges when the relation between image and divine reality is lost, and the attention is drawn by exterior representation. Trying to understand the actual mechanism that makes the shift from contemplation to idolatry, we ask ourselves: if all the elements of nature lead to contemplation of their Creator (St. Basil the Great 1986, 166. St. Clement of Alexandria 1982, 121), and the luminaries of sky are by their grandeur the most adequate to express contemplation, why did their contemplation brought so often error? Origen's approach reveals us the way in which a wrong perspective on nature can grant it with extraneous characteristics, transforming it into an object of worship. St. Clement of Alexandria thought that the most critical error is to think of nature as something that is animated, is living, thus making no difference between it and the human being, which ultimately casts man out of heaven and into abyss (St. Clement of Alexandria 1982, 87). As a measure of protection against this transformation of cultic images in idols, as it often happened in the Oriental polytheistic religions, the Hebrew Semitic culture enforced interdictions against any kind of representation of Divinity (Ex 20:1; Dt 5:8).

But which were the polytheistic practices that the son of Israel should have been protected from? It seems that these idolatric cults worshipped animals, plants, cosmic luminaries or other shapes/images made by the human imagination. The idols worshipped thus were no more than lifeless images of the visible world, apart from transcendent realities, and thus they came in contradiction with the religious idea itself. The idols do not have the power to raise the soul to transcendency but, on the contrary, bound it to the physical world. They are the expression of a pantheistic spiritual attitude and thinking, that rejects any reality that is transcendent to the immanent world, namely, it rejects God (Stăniloae 2005, 87). However, these cults were a common reality in Egypt, then they became part of the cult of Yahweh: while they were waiting for Moses



to descend Sinai with the Law of God, Jews made a gold calf that they worshipped as Yahweh (Negoița 2003, 100): „And he received *them* at their hand, and fashioned it with a graving tool, after he had made it a molten calf: and they said, These *be* thy gods, O Israel, which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt.” (Ex 32:5). We find this idol also in the books of Kings where Jeroboam who spent a lot of time in Egypt is noted to have raised two gold calves at the temples of Dan and Betel, placed at the two borders of his kingdom: “Whereupon the king took counsel, and made two calves of gold, and said unto them, It is too much for you to go up to Jerusalem: behold thy gods, O Israel, which brought thee up out of the land of Egypt” (1 Kgs 12:28-29). This was considered a great sin of Jeroboam, which had repercussions on the faith of Israel: „Howbeit *from* the sins of Jeroboam the son of Nebat, who made Israel to sin, Jehu departed not from after them, *to wit*, the golden calves that *were* in Bethel, and that *were* in Dan” (2 Kgs 10:29).

Apart from this manifestation of zoolatry, there were times in the history of Egyptians when the sun was the center of their religious worship. The Holy Scripture affirms the practice of worshipping the luminaries of sky among the people of Israel: „And they left all the commandments of the LORD their God, and made them molten images, *even* two calves, and made a grove, and worshipped all the host of heaven, and served Baal” (2 Kgs 17:16). From the account of Josiah’s reform we know that the worship to celestial luminaries was carried out on high: “And he put down the idolatrous priests, whom the kings of Judah had ordained to burn incense in the high places in the cities of Judah, and in the places round about Jerusalem; them also that burned incense unto Baal, to the sun, and to the moon, and to the planets, and to all the host of heaven” (2 Kgs 23:5). We also find statements about celestial worship in the books of prophets. Thus, foretelling the fall of Jerusalem, Jeremiah mentions the place where Jews brought incense to celestial luminaries – the roofs of the houses, an offer that desecrated their houses: “And the houses of Jerusalem, and the houses of the kings of Judah, shall be defiled as the place of Tophet, because of all the houses upon whose roofs they have burned incense unto all the host of heaven, and have poured out drink offerings unto other gods” (Jer 19:13). This cult became a common practice even in Jerusalem (Jer 7:17-18). Moreover, Jews became so fascinated of this celestial worship that they even brought it inside the temple. The second book of Kings features king Manasseh of Judah raising an altar for the celestial luminaries inside the temple: “For he built up again the high places which Hezekiah his father had destroyed; and he reared up altars for Baal, and made a grove, as did Ahab king of Israel; and worshipped all the

host of heaven, and served them. [...] And he built altars for all the host of heaven in the two courts of the house of the LORD.” (2Kg 21:3.5).

The book of Ezekiel also reveals idolatrous worship inside the temple of Jerusalem. Abducted by the spirit from Chaldea to Jerusalem, the prophet confesses what he saw: „And he brought me into the inner court of the LORD’S house, and, behold, at the door of the temple of the LORD, between the porch and the altar, *were* about five and twenty men, with their backs toward the temple of the LORD, and their faces toward the east; and they worshipped the sun toward the east.” (Ez 8:16). It is possible that the custom of raising to east had an Egyptian influence after all. Later, this type of prayer is found in the religious manifestations of Essenes and Therapists (Chirilă 2000, 114). About the latter, we find out that they whispered prayers to the east, *begging the sun to rise* (Josephus Flavius 2004, 159). These statements are justified because they prove the transfer of certain cultic elements from a religious tradition to another, a transfer due to the impact these elements had on religious practice and experience.

The madness and lack of wisdom of those who worship the celestial luminaries is approached by Saint John Chrysostom: „But the pagans, marvelling and contemplating the sun, couldn’t understand and pervade its meaning and did not worship its Creator, but stumbled and worshipped it instead and divinized it [...] Is there a more foolish deed that this, for being unable to know the Creator from the creatures, to stumble on them and not raise the sight of your mind to He who brought them into being?” (St. John Chrysostom 1982, 81-2). And again: „What a great madness and lack of wisdom is to bound to the beauty of creatures, to stop and stumble on them and not raise your eyes to their Creator?” (St. John Chrysostom 1928, 85). The pagan gentiles considered the sun as the source of heat and universal life. In order to repel this conception, Saint John invokes the account of the six days of creation that clearly states that vegetations appeared before the sun was created (St. John Chrysostom 1982, 81). However, the sun was worshipped by many other pagan gentiles. In his strenuous effort to protect Israel from this king of idolatrous practice, Moses proclaimed: „And lest thou lift up thine eyes unto heaven, and when thou seest the sun, and the moon, and the stars, *even* all the host of heaven, shouldest be driven to worship them, and serve them, which the LORD thy God hath divided unto all nations under the whole heaven” (Dt 4:19). And the words of Saint Clement of Alexandria resonate with those of Moses: “Some were deceived by the sight of the firmament; trusting only their sight and following the path of stars, they marvelled the stars and deified them” (St. Clement of Alexandria 1982, 86).



The prophetic proclamation creates a relation between idolatrous worship and adultery. Religious decadence is closely followed by moral depravation, and this is expressed with severity (Chirilă 1999, 76): „Hear the word of the LORD, ye children of Israel: for the LORD hath a controversy with the inhabitants of the land, because *there is* no truth, nor mercy, nor knowledge of God in the land. By swearing, and lying, and killing, and stealing, and committing adultery, they break out, and blood toucheth blood. Therefore shall the land mourn, and every one that dwelleth therein shall languish, with the beasts of the field, and with the fowls of heaven; yea, the fishes of the sea also shall be taken away” (Hos 4:1-3). The prophet emphasizes the nonsense of the idolatrous cult that estranged Jews from the faith of their ancestors: “My people ask counsel at their stocks, and their staff declareth unto them: for the spirit of whoredoms hath caused *them* to err, and they have gone a whoring from under their God.” (Hos 4:12). The idolatrous worship does not quence the spiritual thirst but feeds the pleasures of flesh, not being redemptive at all (Chirilă 1999, 75): „Because Ephraim hath made many altars to sin, altars shall be unto him to sin. They sacrifice flesh *for* the sacrifices of mine offerings, and eat *it*; *but* the LORD accepteth them not; now will he remember their iniquity, and visit their sins: they shall return to Egypt.” (Hos 8:11.13). It seems that, in the idolatrous worship, there were actual orgies. The vine and stum were indispensable, stirring the passions of man (Chirilă 1999, 149) (Am 2:7-8; 6:6). At times, the idolatrous cult is associated with certain magical practices (Is 2,6; 8,19). The idolatrous cult gradually became a fundamental characteristic of the people. This reality is revealed by the multitude of names derived from the names of idols (Kohler and Blau, *Worship, Idol*).

I referred to this brief review of the idolatrous practices to point out the idolatrous phenomenon in its real amplitude and to demonstrate that the rejection of image among the people of Israel was fully justifiable for it endangered the monotheistic faith of Israel. The prohibition of images was also due to the fact that nature could not be the object of a sacred image because creature was estranged by its Creator through sin. In such a context, image was only capable of depicting a false reality. In the context of image prohibition, where only few symbolic decorations with a high level of stilization/abstractization were allowed in cult, the word became the only and the main element with revelational power among the people of Israel. However, the severe restrictions of the mozaic law against images will be then limited to idolatrous representations, thus opening the perspective of prefigurative images.

Nowadays, we live in an era dominated by image, one might say, of invasive images. If we refer to posters, television, computer images, each one of them imperceptibly surround us from all sides. When it does not show provocative or sensual images, mass-media points out the so called idols (we understand the meaning of this word when we refer it to celebrities that earned our admiration?!), models of behaviour, most of which are rebel. We observe here a virtual relation with the Old Testament realities, where idolatrous cults determined immoral manifestations. We do not intend to reject the need for image, for visual, that exists in every person. But it all resumes to how much they seize us and how they are conveyed – these are the major differences. All these images carve the personality of the modern man, that is a consumer par excellence who takes over a consumist behaviour and allows the invasion of image. The modern man is an essence threatened by form (Chirilă, *Gestul suprapus – eseu*); he risks his interior consistency by letting in so much stimulus which have no authentic or positive value. Isn't this rush to imitate mass-media models, a rush after *modern idols*? Pope John II spoke about the man who worships a thousand idols and ends by getting disunited in himself, a slave of objects. And which are these thousand idols if not the contemporary realities of our days, that when deified are perceived as ultimate purposes that have to be reached to no matter what? Moreover, by the exaggerated care of oneself, man tends to make an idol out of himself, as Adam strived to become like God, but without God (Bitiurcă, *Turnul Eurobabel*). And if we accept that the essence of idolatry is deifying the ungodly than we can assert that our times are profoundly idolatrous. Mankind, that is in a desperate chase of freedom, is offered a simulacrum of freedom conveyed by the rich offer of consumism. The contemporary man can only escape this illusion by returning to authentic values, to the elements that transpire a greater and higher reality, that raise the human soul in this spiritual quest. In the context of this study, these elements are bound with a symbolic power, that have a revelational potentiality in the contemporary world.

### **Image – the sign of sacredness**

In the history of Israel, the image did not always fall short under the incidence of Exodus 20,3-4. Some representations/depictions were not only allowed, but requested as sign of eternity inside history. A first example is the commandment Moses received on Mount Sinai to build the Holy Tent and its insides, including the cherubims carved and cast of metal (Ex 25:18; 26:1.31), by the exact model he was revealed by God. On one side, this commandment pointed out the possibility to express spiritual realities through

artistic means. On the other side, this commandment did not refer to cherubims in general, that could easily draw Jews into idolatry as they could worship other creatures too, but it referred to the depiction of cherubims as servants of God, in the place and posture that could emphasize this dignity the best.

This exception from the general commandment showed that it did not have an absolute character, but the visible reality was important for Jews as long as it was a sign of the invisible, spiritual realities. And for the same reason – Saint John of Damascus tells us (PG 94, 1252) – „Solomon, who received the gift of wisdom, represented the heavens, ruling cherubims, lions and bulls to be made”. The fact that these creatures are depicted in the proximity of the temple – where the true worship to God was carried out – was certainly a guarantee against idolatry. At the time the temple of Jerusalem was built according to the model revealed on the mountain, God Himself chose certain people for this. We observe that the Old Testament rescript regards art as a form of wisdom reserved only to those who are chosen and inspired by God (Ex 31:1-6; 35:30-35; 36:4). It does not refer to certain persons that due to their innate gifts, could complete the rules of Moses, but to an act of divine inspiration: „The LORD thy God, he will go over before thee, *and* he will destroy these nations from before thee, and thou shalt possess them: *and* Joshua, he shall go over before thee, as the LORD hath said. Be strong and of a good courage, fear not, nor be afraid of them: for the LORD thy God, he *it is* that doth go with thee; he will not fail thee, nor forsake thee.” (Dt 31:3.6). It is the clear testimony that divine inspiration is the main criteria of liturgic art, the only art allowed among the Jewish people, which the Holy Scripture distinguishes from general art.

An exceptional situation is the copper serpent (Nm 21,4-9) erected by Moses in the desert at the word of God, for the healing of Jews and as a sign of the presence and work of God among His people. Firstly envisioned by Moses as a symbolic image and empowered by the realities it symbolized (Christ raised on Cross), it seemingly degenerates as an object of idolatrous manifestation, later developing a cult dedicated to the serpent erected by Moses in the desert. (Negoița 2003, 101), thus nullifying its symbolic/prefigurative meaning.

The most controversial sign of sacredness in this age is, without doubt, the icon. But what differentiates the icon from other images, and protects it from degenerating in a random idol? Understanding the place of the icon among the endless number of invasive images requires a correct approach of the concept. Saint John of Damascus claims that the icon is not identical to the original and builds on this idea in the third tractate against iconoclasts: „The icon is a resemblance (*ὁμοίωμα*), a model (*παραδειγμα*),

an imprinting (εκτύπωμα) of someone, which shows the one who is presented in it (τό είκονιζόμενον)” (St. John of Damascus 1937, 113). Therefore, the icon points to a different reality, it does not mean anything by itself, as object unless it facilitate the relation with an invisible reality. Motivating the existence of the icon, John of Damascus emphasizes its revelational character: „Every icon reveals what it is unseen, hidden. For example: because man does not posses knowledge of the unseen, because his spirit is covered by flesh, nor does he know the future, or the distant realities in space, as one who is limited by space and time, the icon was made up for leading one’s conscience, for showing and pointing out the hidden things” (St. John of Damascus 1937, 113).

But the image potentiality to become a sign of the sacred lies in our perception about it. I began with the example of the icon because it is contemporary, and also it easily conveys its revelational dimension. We are also aware of the recent offenses againts it and the attempt to eliminate it from public spaces. But, the surrounding nature itself is a sign of the sacred for me, if I become capable enough to understand reality in this perspective. Saint John Chrysostom says that things themselves cry out the existence of God (St. John Chrysostom, *On fate and providence*, 17). Therefore, not only do they confess, but they *cry out*, the word showing the obviousness of revelation through nature. In other words, all the elements of nature and the whole creation are witnessing their Creator: „Behold, I see the heaven and the earth and they shout out they were created [...]. Also they cry out that they did not create themselves: „We exist because we were created, we did not exist before so that we could not cause ourselves.” (St. Augustine 1985, 244-5). Saint Paul would write in the Epistle to Romans about the possibility of all mankind to understand the nature’s enunciation about God’s power: „For the invisible things of him from the creation of the world are clearly seen, being understood by the things that are made, *even* his eternal power and Godhead; so that they are without excuse.” (Rom 1:20). Saint Dionysius the Areopagite claims the same thing (St. Dionysius the Areopagite 1994, 82).

I referred to this testimonies (we can find a great variety of patristic writings that approach the revelational character of creation) to support the idea that nature has indeed a revelational potentiality. The idea is fundamental: it does mean anything else apart from the fact that the world we live in, even in the present moment, is a sign of the sacred. Apart from us the pantheistic understanding of nature! We are suggesting a perception on nature based on the Holy Fathers’ thinking, who see nature as a permanenet revelation of the living God: “Thus, you have the dight sky and earth, the sea with its marin creatures, the skyes with all the birds that fly throught. All have been brought from nothingness to being at the word of God, [...] Thou, who love knowledge

and wisdom, contemplate all these things; and, *finding in every one of them the wisdom fo God*, do not cease to admire and praise the Creator for His creature.” (St. Basil the Great 1986, 165). In this context, the ecologic issues (eg. Global warming) must not bring us fear, but meditation on our relation with nature and on how can we harness the power nature has to express the sacred in the tumult of our century.

### Conclusions

The sinthetic exposition points out the essential aspects of the Old Testament image in its ethic and esthetic dimensions, but not restricting the research field to the Old Testament but attempting to create connections with contemporary realities, of which someone stated: „Le XXI siècle sera t-il spirituel ou ne sera pas”. We do not claim that we found the ultimate answer for the topics approached, instead we try to provoke our conscience by interrogations to recent issues like the agresivity of image conveyed by mass-media or the need of an objective appraisal of image through a profound understanding of its multiple valences. I began this study with an analysis on the creation rescript in order to clear out the divergences between the Greek and the Hebrew text concerning the meaning of beautiful/goodness in those radically diferent cultures. The correct understanding of these two concepts in their biblical setting are fundamental for any approach to image. I observed some connections between the Jewish understanding and the Greek one expressed by the relation of the Hebrew word פֶּה and the Greek word καλος, the primary meaning of the words is slightly different but the present study features common points and junctures between the two cultural traditions. Using various bibliographic sources: patristic theology, biblical theology, philosophy and esthetics, we reached to the conclusion that one cannot afford to make judgements about the actual threat of idolatry or the symbolic potentiality of contemporary image. Our research is motivated, on a certain level, by the desire to raise awareness and avoid the threats from the society we live in, through the treasure of the Old Testament rescript which, far from being obsolete, might be more important and actual than ever. In this context, the words of H.D. Thoreau have the power to generate a further research on this topic: „The perception of beauty is a moral test!”

\*This study was published in  
*Studia Universitatis Babeş Bolyai –  
 Theologia Orthodoxa* 1 (2008): 281-94.

## References

„The beautiful in jewish literature.” In *Jewish Encyclopedia*. Accesed 27 May 2007, [www.jewishencyclopedia.com](http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com).

Abrahams, Israel. *Jewish Life in the Middle Ages*. New York: Meridian Books, 1958.

Bitiurcă, I. *Turnul Eurobabel*. Accesed 26 April 2007, [www.pagini.ortodoxe.ro/mold/archives/108](http://www.pagini.ortodoxe.ro/mold/archives/108).

Chirilă, Ioan. *Cartea profetului Osea. Breviarum al gnoseologiei Vechiului Testament*. Cluj-Napoca: Limes, 1999.

Chirilă, Ioan. *Fragmentarium exegetic filonian II. Nomothetica – repere exegetice la Decalog*. Cluj-Napoca: Limes, 2003.

Chirilă, Ioan. *Qumran și Mariotis – două sinteze ascetice – Locuri ale îmbogățirii duhovnicești*. Cluj: Presa Universitară Clujeană, 2000.

Chirilă, M. *Gestul suprapus – eseu*. Accesed 11 May 2007, [www.agonia.ro/index.php/essay/213228/index.html](http://www.agonia.ro/index.php/essay/213228/index.html).

Fer. Augustin. „Confessiones.” In *PSB* 64. București, IBMO, 1985.

Gordon, Wenham J. *Word Biblical Commentary: Genesis 1-15*. Dallas: Word Incorporated, 2002.

Jacob, Edmond. *Théologie de l'Ancien Testament*. Neuchatel: Delachaux&Niestlé, 1955.

Josephus Flavius. *Istoria războiului iudeilor împotriva romanilor*. București: Hasefer, 2004.

Kohler, Kauffmann and Ludwig Blau. „Worship, Idol,” In *Jewish Encyclopedia*. Accesed 27 Aprilie 2007, [www.jewishencyclopedia.com](http://www.jewishencyclopedia.com).

Maxim Mărturisitorul. *Mystagogia. Cosmosul si sufletul, chipuri ale Bisericii*, Tradusă de Dumitru Staniloae, Bucuresti: IBMO, 2000.

Roop, Eugene F. *Genesis*. Scottdale: Herald Press, 1987.

Rose, Seraphim. *Cartea Facerii, crearea lumii și omul începuturilor*. București: Sophia, 2001.

Sf. Clement Alexandrinul. „Cuvânt către elini.” In *PSB* 4. București: IBMO, 1982.

Sf. Dionisie Areopagitul. *Epistolele*. București: All, 1994).

Sf. Ioan Damaschin. *Cele trei tratate contra iconoclaștilor*. Translated by D. Fecioru. București: 1937.

Sf. Ioan Damaschinul. Primul tratat. In *PG* 94,1252

Sf. Ioan Hrisostom. *Omilii la Facere*, In *PSB* 21. Translated by Dumitru Fecioru. București: IBMO, 1983.



- Sf. Vasile cel Mare. „Omilii la Hexaemeron.” In *PSB* 17. București: IBMO, 1986.
- Spence-Jones, H.D.M. *The Pulpit Commentary: Genesis*. Bellingham: Logos Research Systems, 2004.
- Stăniloae, Dumitru. *O teologie a icoanei*. București, Anastasia, 2005.
- Strong, James. *The Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible: Showing Every Word of the Test of the Common English Version of the Canonical Books, and Every Occurrence of Each Word in Regular Order*. Ontario: Woodside Bible Fellowship, 1996.
- Tatarkiewicz, W. *Istoria esteticii*. Vol. 2. București: Meridiane, 1978.