Introduction: Othmar Keel, Iconography, and the Old Testament

Brent A. Strawn

In order to fully appreciate the contributions of Othmar Keel, one must set him and his work in context. Prior to Keel, there were, of course, archaeologists at work throughout the ancient Near East, as well as art historians who specialized in the most ancient periods, and also biblical scholars, a goodly number of whom paid attention to archaeology, at least on general matters if not also on specific artifactual and artistic remains. Indeed, no fewer than two collections were published in the twentieth century that attempted to integrate ancient Near Eastern images (iconography) and the Bible: Hugo Gressmann’s *Altorientalische Bilder zum Alten Testament* (ABAT2) and James B. Pritchard’s *The Ancient Near East in Pictures Relating to the Old Testament* (ANEP). And yet,

1. Part of this introduction was given as a lecture at the University of Zürich in January 2017. I thank Konrad Schmid for inviting me to Zürich and for his gracious hospitality. I was helpfully instructed by the feedback I received there from Schmid as well as from Thomas Staubli and Florian Lippke. I thank Joel M. LeMon, Ryan P. Bonfiglio, Collin Cornell, and above all, Othmar Keel, for comments on an earlier draft.

despite their titles and their organization, both of these volumes did not go nearly as far as they might have in “relating” the visual data of the ancient world to the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament.

That all changed, and a new field was inaugurated single-handedly by Othmar Keel in 1972.

**The Symbolism of the Biblical World**

That was the date of the publication of Keel’s groundbreaking work, *Die Welt der altorientalischen Bildsymbolik und das Alte Testament: Am Beispiel der Psalmen*, translated into English six years later as *The Symbolism of the Biblical World: Ancient Near Eastern Iconography and the Psalms*.

Keel’s dissertation, written under the great textual critic, Dominique Barthélemy, dealt with the psalms and the image of the enemies therein, but the image in question in that work was strictly a literary one.

In *SBW*, however, Keel studied ancient Near Eastern visual imagery (iconography) and applied it to the Book of Psalms. This was a truly innovative approach that went beyond the more general, “cultural” connections drawn by Gressmann and Pritchard and that of necessity had Keel paying close attention to “symbols” found in the art and in the literature. In my judgment, the breakthrough nature of *SBW* was not due solely to the fact that it was the first of its kind, but also due to its breathtaking scope: Keel exhibited masterful control of both the biblical psalms and a vast range of iconographic sources. Images from far and wide, from the earliest periods to the latest, are included, categorized, and then discussed with reference to six large subjects within the Psalter:

- conceptions of the cosmos,
- destructive forces,
- the temple,
conceptions of God,
the king, and
the human before God

each with numerous subcategories. This twofold contribution, the collection of over five hundred and fifty illustrations (not to mention twenty-eight plates in the English edition) and their application to the Book of Psalms, has ensured an enduring place for SBW in subsequent scholarship on both the Psalter and on iconography.

It bears repeating that nothing on ancient Near Eastern art and the Bible published prior to SBW had come close to Keel’s work in truly relating the visual record to the Old Testament. Furthermore, insofar as the six subjects Keel focused on were not limited to the Psalter, SBW proved itself to be widely applicable beyond the study of the psalms themselves. Indeed, many researchers to this day continue to use SBW as a collection like unto ANEP, even if they are not working on the Book of Psalms directly. It is not surprising, then, but a noteworthy achievement nevertheless, that SBW remains in print, with the English translation reprinted most recently in 1997 and the German version reaching a 5th edition in 1996. Further testimony to SBW’s enduring value is found in the fact that it has been translated into Dutch (1984), Spanish (2007), and, most recently, Japanese (2010), almost forty years after its initial publication!

Methodology was not a primary concern of Keel’s in SBW, nor, indeed, in most of his work since—he has preferred to work more inductively, as it were. Even so, SBW obviously modelled a way of

6. See ibid., 11 for Keel’s assessment of prior works.
7. Keel notes that only about 130 of SBW’s 550 images are found in ANEP (SBW, 11).
9. But see Othmar Keel, Das Recht der Bilder gesehen zu werden: Drei Fallstudien zur Methode der Interpretation altorientalischer Bilder (OBO 122; Freiburg: Universitätsverlag and Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1992), esp. 267–73 (Appendix: Methoden-schemata); Keel’s remarks on “a concentric circle model” in idem, The Song of Songs: A Continental Commentary (trans. Frederick J. Gaiser; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1994), 27–28; and his essay, “Minima methodica und die Sonnengottheit von Jerusalem,” in Iconography and Biblical Studies: Proceeding of the Iconography Sessions at the Joint EABS/SBL Conference, 22–26 July 2007, Vienna, Austria (eds. Izaak J. de Hulster and Rüdiger Schmitt; AOAT 361; Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2009), 213–24, for some forays into theoretical and methodological reflection. Despite his reluctance to write extensively about method and theory, Keel is well read in both. A personal vignette makes the point: when visiting Othmar in Fribourg, he showed me his home office where he worked daily on his publication of the stamp seals excavated from ancient Israel/Palestine (see further below). He also showed me adjacent rooms where he kept additional books. One such room was full of books devoted to art history and theory. As a gift he handed
studying the Bible in light of ancient Near Eastern iconography—a way that can be analyzed and replicated—though it is also the case that SBW comes at the very beginning of a wave of iconographic studies from Keel, and, later, a whole host of students and admirers he inspired. What came after SBW, then, as a matter of course and necessity revised some of the practices of this pioneering work. Even so, SBW remains foundational for a number of reasons. One of the most important points made by Keel in that volume was simply this: that images have a right to be seen. Images deserve to be studied, therefore, and given their full weight as essential data in the interpretation of ancient Israel and, correlatively, ancient Israelite literature. As I will show below, Keel’s initial work was focused on the latter (iconography and biblical literature) but increasingly shifted to the former (iconography and the history/religion of ancient Israel).

Beyond this fundamental observation about how images deserve to be taken seriously, which grounds Keel’s entire iconographic project, the following are some of the more salient contributions of SBW:

- First, that ancient Near Eastern art is best understood and read as a “thought-image” (Denkbild) which is in some distinction, according to Keel, from later Western art—art produced for art’s sake—designed for viewing in galleries and the like (Sehbild). Already in SBW, then, one may trace the beginnings of what will come to fuller fruition in Keel’s later work in terms of the tradition history of images; the way images often function with

me his own personal copy of David Freedberg’s The Power of Images: Studies in the History and Theory of Response (Chicago: University of Chicago, 1989), commenting on its importance as he did so (he cites it frequently in Das Recht der Bilder gesehen zu werden). Keel’s copy is dated “Juni 1992” and is underlined and filled with copious marginalia throughout, with the end papers covered with page references and notes as to what he found especially important. On p. xix, the introduction to the book, Keel has written at the top, before Freedberg’s text, “visual culture.”

10. This is the title of his important 1992 monograph: Das Recht der Bilder gesehen zu werden (see previous note). For the biblical text as an image that can also be gazed at and seen, see Françoise Smyth’s introduction to Othmar Keel, Dieu Répond à Job: Une interprétation de Job 38-41 à la lumière de l'iconographie du Proche-Orient ancien (trans. Françoise Smyth; Paris: Éditions du Cerf, 1993), 8–10.
11. Note the epigraph to Das Recht der Bilder gesehen zu werden from John Berger, Ways of Seeing (London: British Broadcasting Corporation, 1972), 10: “No other kind of relic or text from the past can offer such a direct testimony [as an image] about the world which surrounded other people at other times.” See also, more recently, Christoph Uehlinger, “Neither Eyewitnesses, Nor Windows to the Past, but Valuable Testimony in its Own Right: Remarks on Iconography, Source Criticism and Ancient Data-processing,” in Understanding the History of Ancient Israel (ed. H. G. M. Williamson; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 173–228.
12. Keel, SBW, 7.
13. This is on display throughout Keel’s work, but for a convenient example in English, see Othmar Keel, Goddesses and Trees, New Moon and Yahweh: Ancient Near Eastern Art and the Hebrew Bible (JSOTSup 261; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1998).
others in an iconographic “constellation” to make larger tableaus, even arguments via iconographic grammar and syntax; and how cultures operate with symbol-systems that are manifested in various ways, but especially in artistic forms.

- Second, that the visual data can control erroneous preunderstandings of abstract words or texts, which is to say wrong (pre)conceptions of language and text that are derived solely from literary and linguistic realms. To quote Keel’s memorable formulation: “Iconography compels us to see through the eyes of the ancient Near East.”

  14. Keel, SBW, 8.

Third, that images function not primarily to explain what they portray but to “re-present it.”


- Fourth, that the study of iconography should not be conducted exclusively “from a perspective of objective, historical knowledge” and, therefore, does not exist solely for historical purposes or historiographic pursuits. Researchers should not try “merely to present objective facts, but to make every effort to explore fundamental orders and religious propositions.”

  18. Keel, SBW, 11.

  19. Ibid., 12.
Other readers of SBW would add to this list of contributions, no doubt, or offer a revised set, but these are among the most important points in my judgment because they continue to operate in iconographic work up to the present day, thus underscoring once more the field-defining nature of SBW. Even so, the fourth item on the list, and SBW as a whole, definitely represents what might be called “the early Keel”: at this point Keel’s work is almost a phenomenological approach to the study of iconography and the Bible. To be sure, Keel was well aware of the problems of such an approach; he explicitly mentioned the issue of “double fragmentation,” in which only one part or theme of a psalm that is a larger whole with its own integrity is investigated piecemeal, and where just one bit of a larger artistic tableau is examined apart from its context.20 Keel criticized the problem of artistic fragmentation in an important article published later in The Anchor Bible Dictionary.21 In the much earlier SBW, however, Keel is willing to run the risks of the occasionally fragmentary approach that he employs there because, in his view, the advantages to such an approach are “obvious: in a thematic arrangement, one picture or one psalm verse can illustrate another, and a positive overall impression can be obtained.”22 The problem, of course, is if the “positive overall impression” is somehow false, historically inaccurate, or otherwise insecure.

Keel and his students went on to address this problem (among others) in subsequent publications, which I take up in greater detail in the next section. And yet, despite later refinements and advances, SBW remains foundational forty-plus years after its initial publication. It inaugurated a field, or, rather, its author did. SBW was pioneering and remains a classic work, but its status is entirely the result of Keel himself, whose talents for image-text correlation—or what Panofsky would call “synthetic intuition”23—are repeatedly and everywhere on display throughout the book. A personal vignette underscores the point: a decade ago Joel M. LeMon and I coauthored a paper for a special volume in Keel’s honor. Our essay argued that the idea of animal praise

20. Ibid.
22. Keel, SBW, 12.
and music-making, especially as attested in iconography, might lie behind the phrase “everything with breath” (kōl hannēšāmāh) in Psalm 150:6. Only at the very end of our research did we come (back) again to SBW to (re)discover that Keel had anticipated our entire argument with just one figure and one caption (Fig. 0)!

Fig. 0. Papyrus of Anhai, 1200–1085 BCE (after Keel, SBW, 60 Fig. 63). The caption in SBW reads: “‘Let everything that breathes praise the LORD!’ (Ps 150:6).”

The Later Keel: Post-SBW Developments

While SBW has attained to the status of a classic in the field, it is equally true that Keel quickly abandoned the more phenomenological approach found there in subsequent studies. That was no doubt due to an attempt, conscious or not, to counter the problems that he himself had identified in SBW. Whatever the case, it was as if the publication of SBW opened the floodgates of Keel’s iconographic mind as a host of monograph-length publications flowed from his pen in immedi-

ate succession. These include his treatments of the idea of personified Wisdom playing before God in Proverbs 8 (1974); symbols of victory in the Old Testament (1974); visions of YHWH and seal art (1977); YHWH’s answer to Job (1978); the boiling of a kid in its mother’s milk (1980); the metaphorical speech of the Song of Songs (1984); and a full-blown commentary on the Song of Songs (1986). These studies and still others that could be mentioned show Keel focusing on text units that are considerably smaller than the lengthy Book of Psalms—indeed, sometimes on just one single image in a small text unit—which effectively counters the problem of literary fragmentation he faced in the case of the Psalter. SBW’s more phenomenological approach, which connected artistic images and themes (“symbolism”) to comparable items within a large and diverse collection (the Psalter) can thus be seen as just the first “stage” in Keel’s iconographic thought. The succession of monographs that followed hard on the heels of SBW can then be considered together as a second stage. In this stage, Keel is moving away from the phenomenology of SBW to more fulsome and extended exegetical


26. See the selected bibliography of Keel’s work in the present volume and note also the extensive review of Keel’s published works in de Hulster, Illuminating Images, 21–125.

27. My categorization of Keel’s work into four “stages” here might be compared to and contrasted with other treatments offered by Izaak J. de Hulster and Christoph Uehlinger. De Hulster, Illuminating Images, 21-125 follows Keel’s works in chronological order, grouping them as follows: (1) publications prior to SBW, (2) SBW, (3) works published between SBW and Keel’s Song of Songs commentary, (4) the Song of Songs commentary, (5) Das Recht der Bilder gesehen zu werden, (6) other publications that appeared between SBW and Das Recht, (7) the appearance of Göttinnen, Götter and Gottessymbole (see note 32 below) and publications after 1992. Christoph Uehlinger, “Das Buch und die Bilder: 25 Jahre ikonographischer Forschung am Biblišcher Institute der Universität Freiburg Schweiz—Dank an Othmar Keel,” in Images as media: Sources for the cultural history of the Near East and the Eastern Mediterranean (1st millennium BCE) (ed. Christoph Uehlinger; OBO 175; Fribourg: University Press and Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2000), 399-408, also mentions four stages, but identifies them differently: (1) the starting point with SBW, (2) motif correlations, (3) documentation/publication, and (4) interdisciplinarity and networking. My use of “stage,” initially with scare quotation marks, is meant to signal that these are conceptual steps in Keel’s method/practice. As will be seen below, Keel’s ability to work in more than one mode across his career shows that these “stages” should not be understood as linear, non-overlapping, or chronologically discrete moments.
probes with the help of iconography. Not to be missed in this second stage is Keel’s increased attention to minor art, particularly seals.

Joel M. LeMon has offered a typology for iconographic approaches to the study of the Hebrew Bible which may be profitably deployed in assessing Keel’s work. LeMon delineates three kinds of iconographic approaches:

- The *iconographic-artistic* approach, which focuses on the meaning and significance of ancient Near Eastern art as such;

- The *iconographic-historical* approach, which uses images in the reconstruction of ancient history and/or religion; and

- The *iconographic-biblical* approach, which utilizes iconography to inform the reading of biblical texts.

There can, of course, be overlap between these three, especially in the actual practice of any one particular scholar across the course of a career. Keel himself is just such an example, as will be seen below. Nevertheless, using LeMon’s typology, the “early, first-stage Keel” of SBW clearly belongs to the last type. The “second-stage Keel,” too, seems particularly concerned with the relationship between texts from the Hebrew Bible and ancient Near Eastern iconography and thus can safely be categorized as *iconographic-biblical* in nature.

A third stage of Keel’s thought may be identified. Despite the criticism Keel leveled in SBW against the “one-sided,” overly-historicizing approaches found in collections like ANEP, Keel’s subsequent publications become ever more precise historically. This historicizing tendency in Keel’s post-SBW work makes SBW appear even more phenomenological, perhaps, than might otherwise be the case. Be that as it may, the move toward more detailed and accurate historical correlations between the art and text(s) in question becomes a major trend, not only in Keel’s work, but also among that of the students he inspired (not to mention admirers beyond Switzerland) that have been called, in the aggregate, “the Fribourg School.”

So, alongside Keel’s writings, mention should be made of Thomas Staubli’s dissertation on nomads

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and Silvia Schroer’s dissertation on representational art in the Old Testament—both, perhaps, iconographic-biblical in LeMon’s typology, but with more attention to matters of history and chronology than SBW—alongside Urs Winter’s dissertation on goddesses, which devotes the majority of its pages to the female deities without extensive reference to the Bible proper.  

The move toward historical precision, perhaps what might even be called iconography for its own sake with less overt or extended concern with the Bible proper or primarily, can be traced in several works and in more than one way, but a milestone in “the later Keel,” and a resolute example of the iconographic-historical approach, is his book, coauthored with Christoph Uehlinger, Göttinnen, Götter und Gottessymbole: Neue Erkenntnisse zur Religionsgeschichte Kanaans und Israels aufgrund bislang unerschlossener ikonographischer Quellen, first published in 1992, translated into English as Gods, Goddesses, and Images of God in Ancient Israel in 1998, into French as Dieux, Déesses et figures divines: Les sources iconographiques de l’histoire de la religion d’Israël in 2001, and which is now in a 7th German edition (2012).  In this volume Keel and Uehlinger attempt a history of ancient Israelite religion with minimal recourse to texts. Since Keel and Uehlinger do refer to the Hebrew Bible a good bit and to epigraphic remains as well, their strongly anti-text rhetoric in the book is at least slightly overstated.  Even so, they nevertheless make an important point against so much scholarship that has

31. Thomas Staubli, Das Image der Nomaden: im Alten Israel und in der ikonographie seiner sesshaften Nachbarn (OBO 107; Freiburg: Universitätsverlag Freiburg Schweiz und Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1991); Silvia Schroer, In Israel gab es Bilder: Nachrichten von darstellender Kunst im Alten Testament (OBO 74; Freiburg: Universitätsverlag Freiburg Schweiz und Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1987); Urs Winter, Frau und Göttin: Exegetische und ikonographische Studien zum weiblichen Gottesbild im Alten Israel und in dessen Umwelt (2nd ed.; OBO 53; Freiburg: Universitätsverlag Freiburg Schweiz und Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1987 [1st ed. = 1983]). A treatment of these works as well as other publications from various members of the Fribourg School may be found in JERUSALEM, Illuminating Images, 125–31. See further, ibid., 131–55, for iconographical work beyond Fribourg proper, some of which was conducted in close connection with Keel.


33. One example: “Since the biblical texts remain the same, and the inscriptive source material is not growing at the same rate as the scholarly essays and books that evaluate such evidence, the discussion has at times been reduced to a repetition of long-held opinions that do not seem to rise about the level of the term paper or beyond a wholesale recopying of the theses of others” (GGG, xi).
been myopically (!), overly, and exclusively preoccupied with textual remains. As they state: “Anyone who systematically ignores the pictorial evidence that a culture has produced can hardly expect to recreate even a minimally adequate description of the culture itself. Such a person will certainly not be able to describe the nature of the religious symbols by which such a culture oriented itself.”

So, again, the iconographic data deserve to be seen, and the fascinating story these largely untapped sources tell must be assessed and taken into consideration in any treatment of the religious history of ancient Israel/Palestine.

Given the nature of the archaeological remains that have survived from ancient Israel/Palestine, GGG drew heavily on the minor arts, especially stamp seals, in making its arguments. Keel’s interest in seals was manifested in pre-GGG publications (see above), but pronounced attention to the minor arts, especially the seals recovered from Israel/Palestine, represents a fourth stage in Keel’s thought. GGG is not yet reflective of that fourth stage, but a further word about this important book, as groundbreaking and pioneering as was SBW, is helpful to trace the stages in “the later Keel.”

So, as was the case with SBW, GGG also needed revision and supplementation after its initial publication in 1992. That work is something that the authors have done in successive editions of the German original and that Uehlinger did in an important solo-authored essay on anthropomorphic cult statuary. In that essay, Uehlinger breaks with some of the earlier conclusions of GGG on the matter of divine images (which suggested a decline in anthropomorphic representation of the gods in later periods of Israelite religious history), and does so precisely at the point of media: according to him, a slightly distorted picture has been produced by paying too much attention to the seals only, at the expense of other types of artistic remains. In Uehlinger’s opinion, anthropomorphic cult statuary represents a crucial example of the latter—one that nuances the conclusions of GGG at this point and on this point.

Keel published a formal response a few years later; among other

34. Ibid., xi.
35. Cf. ibid., ix: “This book is not a synthesis of the history of Syro-Palestinian religions, including the religion of Israel, but an attempt to give visual sources their due as a necessary element in any such undertaking.”
things, he remains convinced, contra Uehlinger, that there was likely no anthropomorphic cult statue of Yhwh in the Jerusalem temple.  

While I am inclined to agree with Keel, Uehlinger’s essay remains important because, inter alia, it serves to underscore in its own way how important seals have been for “the later Keel” and the Fribourg School as a whole. The reasons for this focus on seals are several and include details about Fouad S. Matouk’s scarab and amulet collection that came into the possession of the Biblical Institute at the University of Fribourg, the establishment of a museum there, further acquisitions of antiquities for the collection, and so on and so forth. As some of that history goes back to the early 1980s, if not still earlier, one must emphasize that Keel’s interest in seals is not entirely novel, restricted only to the latest stages in his thought. Some seals are included already in SBW, after all, and I noted the increased attention to seals in the second stage that followed SBW. But seal art—especially seal art from ancient Israel/Palestine itself—takes on increased importance in the third stage of Keel’s work (exemplified above all in GGG), and this tendency comes to fullest fruition in the fourth stage described in greater detail below.

It is not difficult to see why this should be the case. Quite apart from various details surrounding the collections at Fribourg and the museum there, the seals are an absolutely essential methodological key in the work of Keel and the Fribourg School, especially as these move into more historically-precise (iconographic-historical) modes. There is very little monumental art from ancient Israel/Palestine, after all, especially when compared with Egypt and Mesopotamia. A focus on minor art then is, first and foremost, pragmatic: it is mostly what has survived in this particular area of the Levant. But a focus on minor art is also useful because minor art is mobile. Minor art can function,


40. Thanks to Thomas Staubli for discussions on this point. See also de Hulster, Illuminating Images, 27–30, who notes Keel began a private collection of archaeological study objects as a student already in the mid-1960s.
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...therefore, to borrow from the title of another volume by Keel and Uehlinger, as a tool of mass communication. Minor art, in the practice of Keel and the Fribourg School, is thus viewed as the primary means by which religious ideas were disseminated in antiquity across distant miles and long stretches of years. The kind of chronological and geographical transmission that is made possible by the mobility of the minor art, in turn, underscores yet once more the importance—indeed necessity—of studying iconography when researching ancient religion and history, not to mention ancient religious history. And so it is that the Fribourg monograph series, Orbis Biblicus et Orientalis (OBO) saw the publication of an important trilogy on seals and this very point: Studies in the Iconography of Northwest Semitic Inscribed Seals (1993), Images as media: Sources for the cultural history of the Near East and the Eastern Mediterranean (1st millennium BCE) (2000), and Crafts and Images in Contact: Studies on Eastern Mediterranean art of the first millennium BCE (2005). What one finds in this trilogy, and more generally at this point in Keel’s thought and the work of the Fribourg School, is not only increased historical precision, therefore, but increased historical precision specifically with reference to minor art. Keel’s earlier, more thematic use of minor art—not only in SBW, which includes much more than seals, but even in something like the book on visions of YHWH and seal art (Jahwe-Visionen und Siegelkunst)—becomes, in this later stage, far more historical, far more precise, and far more focused on minor art above and beyond all other datasets. Whenever possible, the attempt is are made to identify workshops and “significant series” of seals.

It is clear that GGG and the OBO seal trilogy represent significant methodological advances over SBW. But of course Keel himself was part of this progress. He coauthored GGG, after all, and the Images as media volume emerged from a symposium in his honor. In addition to a four-volume treatment on the stamp seals from Israel/Palestine that mostly predates the OBO trilogy just mentioned, Keel coauthored

41. Keel and Uehlinger, Altorientalische Miniaturkunst: Die ältesten visuellen Massenkommunikationsmittel.
43. See Uehlinger, ed., Images as media, vii.
44. Othmar Keel and Silvia Schroer, Studien zu den Stempelsiegeln aus Palästina/Israel (OBO 67; Freiburg: Universitätsverlag Freiburg Schweiz, 1985); Othmar Keel, Hildi Keel-Leu, and Silvia Schroer, Stu...
the first volume of Silvia Schroer’s Die Ikonographie Palästinas/Israels und der Alte Orient, which is subtitled “a religious history in images,” and which has been called a “summa iconographica.” But as the fullest example of the fourth stage in Keel’s thought, there can be no doubt that his crowning achievement is the massive Corpus der Stempelsiegel-Amulette aus Palästina/Israel. The first, introductory volume of the Corpus appeared in 1995. Including that volume, and a jointly-authored volume with Jürg Eggler on the seals from Jordan, the Corpus has published six, large, folio-sized volumes to date, which altogether catalogue 6,527 objects.\(^47\)

The Corpus is Keel’s *magnum opus*, or, better, his *Lebenswerk*. With it, we have travelled a long path from SBW in 1972—through at least four identifiable “stages.” To be sure, there is overlap and interplay among these stages. Keel has continued to publish “big picture” synthetic work, some of which is attentive to biblical material, alongside his increased devotion to what might be seen as iconographic-historic, even iconographic-artistic study of the seal corpus itself. The present book on Jerusalem is proof of such synthetic study (see further below). Even so, the movement from “the early Keel” to “the later Keel” is worth pondering. As I have noted elsewhere: “The development from [SBW] to GGG to the Corpus could be seen as retrogressive in some way. Should

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not the foundations (i.e., the *Corpus*) be laid first before moving on to the big syntheses?" Or, to say it differently, scholars typically begin their careers with detailed, even minute analyses before they attempt grand visions of the whole. What one finds in Keel, though—echoed here and there elsewhere in the Fribourg School—is almost the *reverse* movement: from the large synthetic work of *SBW* (and *GGG*) to the foundational cataloguing work of the *Corpus*. And yet, in light of the stages that I’ve traced above, this movement is not retrogressive at all but entirely understandable and quite in line with the development of Keel’s thought and the practices of the Fribourg School writ large. Moreover, as Keel once remarked to me, the proper ordering of methodological steps is a perennial problem in the acquisition of knowledge: what should come first—the evidence itself or the questions, theories, and hypotheses about that evidence? In numerous ways the early Keel set the iconographic agenda for a generation, and for himself, and the publications that followed, from his own pen and from those he taught and inspired, have brought more data to bear so as to test and prove various theories, or to refine and revise them altogether, or to raise entirely new questions previously unimagined. Both parts—the data and ideas about the same—are necessary, of course, and what is perhaps most amazing about Keel’s mind and his published oeuvre is that he excels in *both*. The four stages I have identified in Keel’s work demonstrate that he recognized already at an early point in his career the massive importance of the minor arts and the kind of cataloging work that comes to full fruition only in his much later *Corpus*. It is also clear that Keel’s work in the last, fourth stage is even better than it might have otherwise been at some earlier time given his command of the whole field. Foundational presentations of important datasets, that is, are often written by scholars just beginning their careers, who are thus relatively new to their subjects, and/or by those with less wide-ranging, capacious, and synthetic minds. But Keel’s *Corpus* is decidedly otherwise: executed by the most mature of scholars, a true master of his craft in total command of the field. Indeed, in this specific case, the cataloguer in question is the very pioneer and leader of a field that he propagated himself!

The Present Volume

Keel retired from the University of Fribourg in 2002. Since then he has continued a very active research and writing schedule, not only via the massive Corpus project, but in the completion of an equally monumental, two-volume history of Jerusalem: Die Geschichte Jerusalems und der Entstehung der Monotheismus, which appeared in 2007. \(^49\) Coming in at over 1,300 pages with more than 700 illustrations, Die Geschichte is a remarkably comprehensive history of the city from the Middle Bronze Age IIB period to Pompey. \(^50\) As noted in the editorial preface, the present volume is an English translation of a German epitomization of this larger, two-volume work. \(^51\) The two-volume work is still essential, especially in matters of documentation, engagement with previous scholarship, fuller argumentation, and so forth, but the present volume is a useful distillation of the larger original. In his review of Die Geschichte, Ernst Axel Knauf identified no less than three books within that work: (1) a handbook for educated pilgrims to the Holy Land, (2) a history of Jerusalem from 1700–63 BCE, and (3) an argument about the development of monotheism. \(^52\) It is the latter two items that are on display here, especially the last mentioned, though in a greatly condensed and streamlined form. This type of presentation is obviously user-friendly; readers who are interested in learning more or who wish to see Keel’s argument laid out in greater detail and in interaction with prior scholarship will want to refer to Die Geschichte. To be sure, even the lengthy arguments of Die Geschichte, let alone the abbreviated treatment found here, will not convince all readers. I myself do not agree with all of Keel’s positions on, for example, YHWH’s solarization; nor do I share his strong and long-standing distaste for premodern reading strategies like allegory and typology. \(^53\) But, to return to LeMon’s typology, and to the stages of Keel’s thought that I have outlined here, what should not be missed is that even in the latest, fourth stage of Keel’s work, in which the cataloging work of the Corpus looms so large,
Keel is still producing synthetic work that is as wide-ranging and dexterous as his early SBW. If his work on Jerusalem is iconographic-historical—which it most certainly is—it is also not without a good dose of the iconographic-biblical.⁵⁴ This shows, once more, that the “stages” in question are not entirely discrete in Keel’s actual practice, even as it further underscores Keel’s remarkable capacity to work in more than one mode throughout a long and influential career.

The Future of Keel and Iconography

A happy serendipity associated with the publication of this brief volume on Jerusalem in English is the fact that Keel has just finished work on the Corpus volume that includes all the seals from Jerusalem. He is now working on a major museum exhibit that will be held in Fribourg and after that plans on publishing his own personal collection of over 700 scarabs. And of course the work on the Corpus will go on, especially as Keel has continued to enlist others to assist in that work. What Keel initiated in 1972, therefore, continues across the globe, with iconographers hard at work not only in the homeland of Switzerland, but also in Germany, France, North America, Israel, and elsewhere. Indeed, in the forty-five years since SBW’s appearance, enough has been published in the field of iconography that several dissertations have been produced in an attempt to clarify iconographic methodology.⁵⁵ Several edited collections on iconography have appeared, not only within OBO series but even outside it; an introductory textbook of sorts has been published,⁵⁶ and a forthcoming issue in the thematically-oriented journal, Hebrew Bible and Ancient Israel, will be devoted to iconography and the Hebrew Bible. Iconography is thus a robust (sub)field, with the essays contained in the last two mentioned works,

⁵⁴. Note that Die Geschichte contains a seventeen-page long, triple-columned index of Scripture references.

⁵⁵. I consider my own dissertation one such attempt, though it is mostly implicit in this regard. Keel was on my dissertation committee and, happily, present at the defense. That work was revised and published as Brent A. Strawn, What Is Stronger than a Lion? Leonine Image and Metaphor in the Hebrew Bible and the Ancient Near East (OBO 212; Fribourg: Academic Press and Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2005). Joel M. LeMon’s dissertation turned monograph, Yahweh’s Winged Form, is more explicit about methodological matters. Izaak J. de Hulster’s Illuminating Images, revised and published without the extensive literature review as idem, Iconographic Exegesis and Third Isaiah (FAT II/36; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2009), is still more thorough and detailed. In my judgment, Ryan P. Bonfiglio’s 2014 Emory dissertation, which has appeared as idem, Reading Images, Seeing Texts (see note 15 above) represents the state of the art and is by far the most sophisticated and articulate attempt to set biblical iconography on a firm theoretical basis.

in particular, demonstrating a healthy diversity among iconographers and showcasing the various ways iconography can be correlated with standard exegetical approaches like tradition history, redaction history, comparative method, and the like. It is clear, then, that much of what has been practiced in the past and that is currently practiced in the present will continue into the future—all, again, thanks to Othmar Keel.

I could add further to what I’ve said in this introduction, which has been as much a celebration of Keel’s work as it has been a review of it. But I have already said enough to establish the extraordinary contributions Keel has made to the study of ancient Near Eastern iconography, the archaeology of Israel/Palestine, ancient Israelite religion, and the exegesis of the Hebrew Bible. These achievements are widely known in scholarly circles but were recognized in a remarkable way when Keel was awarded the Marcel Benoist Prize in 2005, the most prestigious prize given by the Swiss government for outstanding scientific achievement. At the time, Keel was only the third or fourth scholar of the humanities to win that esteemed award, which is referred to in some circles as “the Swiss Nobel Prize.”

In conclusion, then, I content myself with one final remark—this one quite personal, as it arises from my own encounters with Keel and his work, my deep admiration for him and his many writings, and my learning at his feet in contexts near and far. I simply wish to revisit and revise Keel’s famous statement in SBW, that iconography compels us to see through the eyes of the ancient Near East. That remains quite true—now, no less than in 1972—and we know that this is so in large part due to Othmar Keel. It is that latter fact that leads me to revise his earlier statement by observing that Othmar Keel has compelled us to see through the eyes of iconography. It is Keel’s own remarkable set of eyes that began that work years ago. Ever since, he has, quite literally, been opening the rest of our eyes to the worlds he has seen, and, as a result, we will never see things the same way again.

57. See further the list of selected works included at the end of this volume.