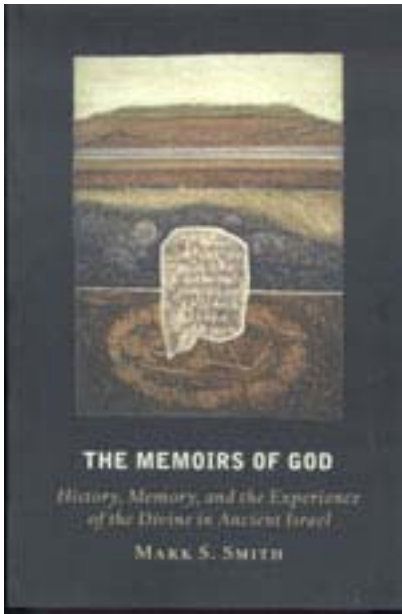


RBL 02/2005



Smith, Mark S.

The Memoirs of God: History, Memory, and the Experience of the Divine in Ancient Israel

Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004. Pp. xviii + 187. Paper.
\$21.00. ISBN 0800634853.

Bernhard Lang
University of Paderborn
Paderborn, Germany D-33098

In their publications, members of the Society of Biblical Literature usually offer the results of their most recent research to their colleagues in order to advance academic debates. I have always regretted the fact that they rarely report on how they teach, for most of the members of this distinguished society actually earn their living by teaching classes on the Bible. Mark Smith, Professor of Bible and Near Eastern Studies at New York University, is an exception, for his new book explains his approach to teaching and, implicitly, invites others to follow his syllabus. Presupposing (it seems) an elementary knowledge of what the Old Testament is about, he leads the reader through four stages of “initiation” to an increasingly deeper understanding. The four distinct stages correspond to the four chapters of *The Memoirs of God*.

Chapter 1, entitled “The Biblical Backdrop to the Story of Israel,” surveys how Israel’s past is narrated in the Pentateuch, the Deuteronomistic History, and Ezra-Nehemiah and discusses how these books may be dated and dissected into originally independent texts that were eventually collated by scribes. This most elementary lesson, known to all teachers and students, needs no further comment, though I note, in passing, that Smith dates the Yahwist conservatively to approximately 900–800 B.C.E. and the Elohist to roughly 800 B.C.E. (xii–xviii).

Things become more complex at the second stage in the chapter on “Challenges to Israel during the Biblical Period.” Once students have a firm grasp of the biblical record as explained in chapter 1, they are led in chapter 2 to reconsider the history of Israel from the perspective of the historian who critically reconstructs ancient events, rather than merely paraphrasing what the biblical books tell. The best way to do this is to define the historical challenges that confronted the ancient Israelites and to understand, on the basis of biblical literature, how they responded to them. The challenges were chiefly political, and among the responses the religious ones are the most conspicuous. All of ancient Israelite literature arose from these challenges and forms part of the response. Political challenges led to religious ones; for example, when the country divided into north and south, this led to separate religious developments. At this point Smith might have referred to Arnold Toynbee’s dictum that the history of nations is the result of “challenge and response.” That he does not mention, let alone discuss, Toynbee’s approach may have to do with the fact that he reserves forays into the field of theory until later.

Just as the second chapter takes a closer look at the subject discussed in chapter 1, so chapter 3 with its focus on religion—“Biblical Monotheism and the Structures of Divinity”—builds on chapter 2. The development of monotheism emerges as the central religious strategy for national survival in times of political and military decline. Smith, who can draw upon his unrivaled knowledge of Ugaritic mythology, offers a reconstruction of what ancient Hebrew polytheism may have looked like and explains how it metamorphosed into what we are familiar with from the Bible. “From polytheistic Ugarit through polytheistic Israel to monotheistic Judaism” could be a condensed paraphrase of his convincing argument. Only in postexilic times did the Israelites (anachronistically) claim that monotheism had been present throughout their history, at least as an ideal.

Most introductory classes on Old Testament history and religion seem to stop at this point, and if Smith had stopped there I would certainly not criticize him for having done so. I would have congratulated this exceptional teacher on his unique accomplishment. We can be grateful, however, that Smith pushes his students beyond this point as he introduces another, fourth stage, that of theory, an aspect that, to my knowledge, is not significantly present in Smith’s earlier published work. He seems to feel, as I do, that one should modernize and indeed revivify biblical criticism by making cultural theory part of its agenda. Thus Smith’s chapter 4—“The Formation of Israel’s Concept of God: Collective Memory and Amnesia in the Bible”—completes and extends his “initiation.” As the chapter heading indicates, Smith seeks to refine the analysis offered in chapter 3, but he also reconsiders the previous chapters from the vantage point of the French theory of “collective memory.” This theory departs from the traditional notion that history is remembered by individual participants and reconstructed by historians; history, it is

claimed, is also “collectively” remembered by social institutions, “the media,” and people. Some of the biblical authors sought to create a collective memory and, ultimately, to forge a national identity for Israel, just as some authors of French schoolbooks through their texts and French public authorities by erecting public monuments sought to create or at any rate strengthen national identity. I think that this essentially Durkheimian argument does advance our understanding of ancient Israelite literature, for it avoids the problematic perspective of those who have maintained, during much of the second half of the twentieth century, that ancient Israel’s most distinctive cultural feature was its historical consciousness. Today most would agree that ancient Israel’s historical consciousness was not particularly well developed; what was well developed, however, may be termed Israel’s “cultural memory,” or its body of common traditions and knowledge arising from a shared past. Unfortunately, Smith has not made use of the current German discussion of cultural memories. Unlike Smith’s French theorists, who have dealt solely with modern and contemporary situations, Jan Assmann and his German collaborators and colleagues (including myself) have discussed how in ancient times literary and religious canons were created to embody the collective consciousness of groups and communities; they have also commented on the intellectual rituals that were devised to transmit the cultural memory. Nevertheless, here, as in the other chapters, Smith has much of interest to say, and I would welcome further application of cultural theory in his future research.

To sum up, what we have here is a delightful textbook that, despite the somewhat tentative and exploratory character of its fourth chapter, will illuminate and educate student and academic teacher alike.