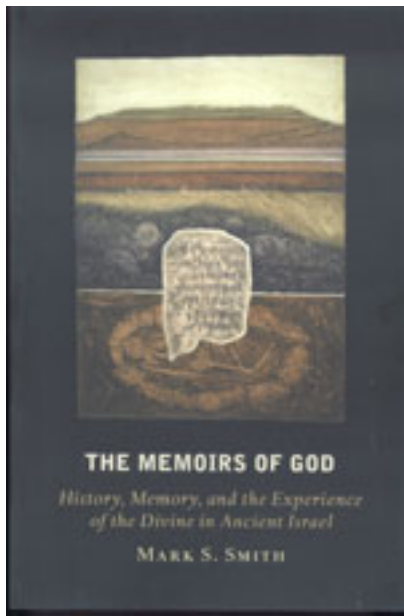


RBL 05/2005



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.

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I have read Mark Smith's work with admiration for many years, and in this latest volume he has outdone himself in producing a work that is among the most sophisticated and penetrating works of biblical scholarship. His book is studded with insights, an effective introduction for the educated reader and a highly useful volume for a scholar because of Smith's own insights and critique of recent literature.

Smith is an up-to-date reader in his field and ancillary fields who has plumbed the depths of what he has read and has thought through the ramifications of new evidence and methodological considerations. He views the Bible through the lens of the study of history and memory and highlights that it is the record of Israel's collective memory of how it worshiped, reflecting Israel's collective amnesia about its polytheistic past. The Bible does not record the past: it is a response to the past.

Smith first cuts a swath through biblical history to show how texts that purport to tell of an early period derive from a later period and, therefore, do not accurately contain information about the earlier period. At the same time, there are textual shards from earlier periods that show that biblical writers took seriously the power of Israel's other legitimate gods. Smith demands that we come to grips with that which the major

traditions of the Bible are criticizing, Baal worship and a pantheon with Yahweh heading a divine household in the Jerusalem temple, accepted as normative. He makes a powerful argument for the development of monotheism by the seventh and sixth centuries by demonstrating that the prophets were criticizing that which was considered normative by other Israelites. Smith then shows how ancient Israel responded to major crises and argues that by the end of the biblical period there was a shift from being Judean, based on family land and practices, to being Jewish, based on certain religious practices.

Smith's book contains an outstanding chapter on biblical monotheism and the structures of divinity. (This is not to belittle the rest of the book). He links it to historical challenges without being deterministic and offers a scheme of development without resorting to a simplistic view of evolution. He emphasizes that multiple pantheons overlapped and indeed were in competition throughout Israelite history. Smith's schemata reflect the complexity of Israel's configurations of deity. Smith offers a scheme of the development of Israelite religion from polytheism to monotheism and posits four historical periods, some with multiple, competing pantheons. In so doing he also offers a sympathetic and penetrating analysis of polytheism and understands the move to monotheism as more than inventory reduction. Polytheism expressed conceptual coherence as much as monotheism did. Smith distinguishes three levels of deities: central, peripheral, and beyond the periphery. Beneficial anthropomorphic deities, who generally have domesticated animals associated with them, are contrasted with monstrous deities, associated with undomesticated animals, who pose a threat. Certain deities cross boundaries, Yam because of Ugarit's seafaring and Anat because of her violence, which while generally against enemies is sometimes directed inward. Smith then shows how beneficial gods are linked in the structure of a divine assembly and in family relationships.

In the next-to-last chapter, on the formation of Israel's concepts of God, collective memory, and amnesia, Smith offers a fine summary of the results of scholarship on history and memory and makes it illuminate biblical tradition(s). He then discusses how the Bible is a record of Israel's cultural memory, not a record of Israel's history, how social groups shape memory, and how memory is transfigured by crisis. He argues that memory survives in inverse proportion to historical order and social location: what is older is submerged as new power structures emerge. There is collective amnesia about other/earlier structures of the Israelite pantheon in favor of monotheism. The divine in the Bible became monolithically monotheistic. There was a foundational reinterpretation of Israel's religion in a deliberate process of modifying the past: monotheism was recast so that Israelite religion appeared as always monotheistic; revelation at Sinai was refashioned to emphasize not the divine presence but the divine voice; and Sinai was exalted as the single greatest moment of revelation and became *the* foundational event. The vestiges of Israel's polytheistic past were reinterpreted.

At times the reader is left wanting more. For example, Smith identifies Gen 49 and Judg 5 as early texts based on identifying the Hebrew in them as early. Yet, as is well known, there are early forms in later material, such as Hab 3 or even Job. How do we know that these forms are not an expression of poetic style? Furthermore, while Exod 15 is identified as later, based presumably on its oblique reference to the Jerusalem temple, why would not the preeminence of Judah and Joseph reflect a monarchic date? In Smith's discussion of the levels of deities in the premonarchic period, especially in regard to the other gods on level two besides Baal and Yahweh, a number of questions are left unaddressed. Smith offers a more complete discussion in his analysis of the pantheon of the early monarchy. But these are only minor lacunae.

This volume represents a leap forward in understanding the complexities and nuances of the development and dimensions of Israelite religion and in illuminating how ancient Israel is remembered in biblical texts. This is another one of Smith's outstanding works, and this reader can only wait with anticipation for the next.