



Smith, Mark S.

The Origins of Biblical Monotheism: Israel's Polytheistic Background and the Ugaritic Texts

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Steve A. Wiggins

Nashotah House Episcopal Seminary
Nashotah, Wisconsin 53058

Beginning at the beginning, Smith's book opens with the question of God's existence. Rather than pursuing an answer to this question, the study moves on to the historical origins of the question, quickly moving back to the biblical period with the question of the origin of monotheism and beyond that to ancient Ugarit. The specific issue Smith addresses is "the conceptual unity of West Semitic polytheisms" (6) and, in particular, Israel's polytheism and monotheism as well as Ugarit's polytheism.

The book comprises three parts. The first part is concerned with the structures by which divinity is described and examines the concept of deities as various collectives in ancient Ugarit, with an eye toward "interrelationality" within divinity. Part 2 is concerned with the characteristics of deities, and part 3 focuses on the development of monotheism within Israelite religion. Prior to these three parts, the introduction wrestles with issues raised by the monotheism-polytheism distinction, the use of the term *Canaanite*, and how the category of myth applies to both the biblical and Ugaritic texts. Smith's approach to the material involves a literary analysis from a history of religions viewpoint.

Part 1 opens with the first chapter distinguishing anthropomorphic deities from divine monsters, both of which may fit the category of gods. This division, according to Smith,

represents “the most basic structural division in divinity in the Ugaritic texts” (27). To make this distinction Smith applies the anthropological concepts of “periphery” and “center,” as well as the category of “beyond the periphery,” to Ugaritic perceptions of place and space. These concepts also apply to divine blessing versus destruction; the blessings may come from domestic or foreign deities. Furthermore, benevolent deities are generally anthropomorphic, while destructive deities are portrayed as monsters. Interestingly, in the Ugaritic material the “monsters” are presented as being beloved by El, the head god. In contrast to these perceptions, Smith suggests that the biblical perceptions demonstrate that these cosmic forces are either denied or tamed. The creation account of Gen 1, for example, domesticated and depersonalized the primordial forces. Smith asserts that the biblical view finds in this order “a source of blessing, or at least it expresses hope for blessing as of yet unknown, of things unseen” (40), as opposed to a dualistic political order.

The discussion then moves on to divine collectives, the assembly of the gods at Ugarit. Smith suggests that the pantheon had more than one subdivision, each gathered around a major deity such as El or Baal. Furthermore, the pantheon had four tiers: the highest level held by El and Athirat; the second (into which Baal is placed), populated by the royal children; the third, occupied by crafts-deities; and the fourth, representing minor gods. The upper two tiers at least reflect a family dynamic in their assemblages. Smith moves on to address Israel’s perception of these tiers, which essentially collapses the middle layers into one. Although there are reflexes of an earlier high god, Yahweh has come to take that position, and the other deities eventually became nonentities or expressions of various aspects of Yahweh’s power.

It remains questionable whether the associations laid out by Smith are really this systematic. The role of Baal in El’s family remains problematic, and the four-tiers model has been questioned by other analysts of the texts.

Another attempt to organize the pantheon of Ugarit involves the exploration of the deities as a reflection of a family (chap. 3). Smith finds the four tiers of the pantheon also represented in the family, with the royal patriarchal household serving as the primary model for the families of gods. El is the head of the family, with other major deities being heads of households. The possible astral character of this family is also examined. Smith suggests that El and Athirat’s household were astral deities, whereas Baal was a storm god of separate lineage. This scenario would explain the hostility between Baal and the other deities; however, it involves considerable speculation.

Chapter 4 examines other collections of deities: Baal, Resheph, Yahweh, and their retinues, or retainers, the *mlkm* and Rephaim, or the cult of the royal dead, and the

Kotharat. These latter groups each have a connection with death as a part of life or life as a part of death. Divine pairings are also analyzed, with a consideration of the role of Asherah as a possible spouse of Yahweh. Various characteristics of deities are also considered as divine in Ugarit, such as Athtart being called the “name of Baal” and the divinization of El’s characteristics of mercy, constancy, and well-being. Sacred cultic sites and objects could also take on an aura of divinity. Smith concludes the chapter by presenting a “Conceptual Unity of Ugaritic Polytheism” (77), in which the divine family provides such unity as distinct from the Mesopotamian hierarchy of gods or Israel’s henotheistic polytheism. The familial relations between Baal and El presented by Smith are somewhat ambivalent here (68), as compared to earlier discussions of their separate families.

Part 2, “Characteristics of Divinity,” comprises two chapters. The first, the traits of deities, explores “what a deity was considered to be” (83) in Ugarit and Israel by discussing divine strength and size, body and gender, holiness, and immortality. In discussing size and strength, Smith notes that the divine hand (with its various connotations) is representative of the strength of the deity. Gods were represented in the texts as much larger than humans, yet they were generally conceived anthropomorphically. As anthropomorphic beings, they also possessed gender, both in Ugaritic and Israelite material. Smith’s extended discussion of anthropomorphism in ancient Israel concludes, “These ancients did not develop abstract metaphysical systems involving philosophical logic. Instead, they represented their theology, their religious reality, through pictures of divinity in narratives and poetry” (93). While undoubtedly correct in this summation, it has to be wondered whether this assertion undermines the kinds of systematic categorization Smith used to describe the pantheons of ancient Israel and Ugarit. It seems problematic to have it both ways. Smith next discusses various nuances of holiness and immortality as divine aspects. His discussion of these topics tends toward the theoretical, and as the chapter concludes he notes that these reflections are offered “only tentatively” (102).

Chapter 6 concerns the dying and living of Baal. In this chapter Smith challenges the category of “dying and rising gods,” especially in the case of Ugarit. His critique of the category begins with a review of Sir James Frazer’s initiation of the category, pointing out the difficulties of this classification. He then investigates the differences between deities generally grouped into this category (Osiris, Damuzi/Tammuz, Melqart, Herakles, Adonis, and an unknown Phoenician deity), with a suggestion for an alternate category, that of the “disappearing god” rather than the dying and rising god. Specifically, this involves a consideration of Baal’s role in Ugaritic thought, namely, that his death and appearance on earth are an encoding of the death of the king of Ugarit and the reign of his successor. This is contrasted with Israel’s perception of Yahweh, for it seems that Iron

Age Israel never developed a mythology of death. Smith's challenging of categories is very useful, as history of religions approaches have long been stifled by unchallenged constructs of the past. The systematization that arises from such schemes often ignores the cultural differences with ancient West Asia.

Part 3 turns to the title of the book, the origins of Israelite monotheism, with chapter 7 comparing El, Yahweh, and the original god of Israel. Smith briefly surveys the Bronze Age, largely Ugaritic, portrait of El before asking whether the worship of this deity continued into the Iron Age. Iron Age material from Phoenicia, Aram, the Transjordan, and Israel is examined. Given the similarities of El and Yahweh, Smith suggests a convergence of El and Yahweh in which El was the original god of Israel as well as the god of the exodus. Yahweh, originally a southern deity from the region of Edom, was understood later to have been the same as El. Although the previous chapter challenged constructs that compile separate deities into a type, this chapter does seem to hold to a steady character for El across several cultures and centuries.

Next Smith considers monotheism from the perspective of rhetoric. After defining monotheism, he argues persuasively that "Monotheistic statements do not herald a new age of religion but explain Yahwistic monolatry in absolute terms" (154). This represents a change in perspective from many treatments of the subject. This discussion includes a consideration of how the royal ideology of Israel related to monotheistic thought, especially when several parallels attest to the similar functions of God and king. Included in this chapter is a discussion of why monotheistic statements emerged when they did.

Chapter 9 addresses the monotheistic adaptations of three older Israelite constructs: a priestly model (especially as reflected in ideas of creation, paradise, and priesthood), the hypostatization of wisdom in female form, and apocalyptic imagery. These differ, Smith asserts, in considerable ways from Ugaritic mythical literature, while retaining some continuity with that tradition. He closes the chapter by seeking various reasons for this "reduction of myth" (176) in the Hebrew Bible.

Smith opens his final chapter on monotheism in Second Isaiah by investigating how the prophet modified the old royal theology that Smith discusses at points throughout the book. Noting the polemical outlook of Isa 40–55, Smith first discusses idols and idol-making from the outsider context, particularly the well-attested Mesopotamian outlook on divine statues. Smith then turns to "Insider Referentiality" (188) to consider the viewpoint of Isa 44 concerning cultic statues. The book concludes with an indication of how current readerships (and those since the postexilic period) read the text with an expectation of monotheism.

Smith has certainly done a service to scholars interested in the background to Israel's monotheistic thought. His notes are characteristically encyclopedic, demonstrating the breadth of his research. Several noteworthy ideas are presented in a new light. The reader is left sensing that this book reads more like a collection of essays than a monograph, but, despite the potential disjointedness of the method, much is to be learned from its contents.