The Origins of Biblical Monotheism

Israel’s Polytheistic Background and the Ugaritic Texts

MARK S. SMITH
The Origins of Biblical Monotheism: Israel's Polytheistic Background and the Ugaritic Texts, Mark S. Smith, Oxford University Press, 2003, 0195167686, 9780195167689, 352 pages. According to the Bible, ancient Israel's neighbors worshipped a wide variety of gods. In recent years, scholars have sought a better understanding of this early polytheistic milieu and its relation to Yahweh, the God of Israel. Drawing on ancient Ugaritic texts and looking closely at Ugaritic deities, Mark Smith examines the meaning of "divinity" in the ancient near East and considers how this concept applies to Yahweh.

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The Macmillan Bible atlas, Yôḥānān Aharônî, Michael Avi-Yonah, Kaâ®bîta (Firm), 1968, Bible, 184 pages.


Text and History Historiography and the Study of the Biblical Text, Jens Bruun Kofoed, Jan 1, 2005, Religion, 298 pages. Jens Bruun Kofoed addresses the methodological issues that must lie behind the use of the biblical text and its validation as a source for historical information. --from....

Asherah and the cult of Yahweh in Israel, Saul M. Olyan, 1988, 100 pages.

Untold stories the Bible and Ugaritic studies in the twentieth century, Mark S. Smith, 2001, Religion, 252 pages. This book traces the history of Ugaritic studies and their impact on the study of the Bible. From the first discoveries in the late 1920s through the end of the millennium.

The Personhood of God Biblical Theology, Human Faith and the Divine Image, Yochanan Muffs, Feb 1, 2009, Religion, 221 pages. The anthropomorphic nature of God in the Bible has been a delight to midrashists and mystics on the one hand and an outrage to philosophers and theologians on the other. Though....


No Other Gods Emergent Monotheism in Israel, Robert Karl Gnuse, May 1, 1997, Religion, 392 pages. This is the first full-scale assessment of the theological, social and ideational implications of our new understandings of ancient Israel's social and religious development.

The rise of Yahwism the roots of Israelite monotheism, Johannes Cornelis de Moor, 1990, Religion, 320 pages.


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According to the Bible, ancient Israel's neighbors worshipped a wide variety of gods. In recent years, scholars have sought a better understanding of this early polytheistic milieu and its relation to Yahweh, the God of Israel. Drawing on ancient Ugaritic texts and looking closely at Ugaritic deities, Mark Smith examines the meaning of "divinity" in the ancient near East and considers how this concept applies to Yahweh.

"Brilliant, well-documented, well-organized, and very discomforting. Biblical scholars now recognize that in the pre-exilic era Asherah worship, infant sacrifice, solar veneration, and other religious practices attacked by biblical authors represented normal Israelite worship, while monotheism was a late development in the Babylonian Exile and subsequent years. Smith and others led the charge in this new scholarly perception of Israelite religion. But with this volume Smith has thrown down a gauntlet to challenge our understandings even more. Smith has produced a seminal work with which scholars must come to grips for years."--Journal of Hebrew Scriptures

Mark S. Smith is Skirball Professor of Bible and Ancient Near Eastern Studies at New York University. His publications include The Pilgrimage Pattern in Exodus (1997), The Ugaritic Baal Cycle (1994), The Early History of God (1990), as well as several other books on the Hebrew Bible, the Dead Sea Scrolls, and West Semitic mythology and literature.

If you have read Smith's "Early History of God" and been intrigued by his conception of the development of our notion of God during the Biblical period, "The Origins Of Monotheism" delivers a significantly more detailed analysis of the ancient Bronze Age texts from Ugarit and their influence on the culture of ancient Palestine in general, and Biblical texts in particular. Mr. Smith examines conceptions of the divine family and council of the gods, more general notions of ancient aspects of divinity, and the roles of various divinity. Especially insightful is his critique of James Frazier's category of "dying and rising" gods in the Near East. In his analysis of Isaiah, he gives considerable background into Mesopotamian views on the divinity of statues of gods, without prejudice. There is a lot more than I can list here in this book, but if you're interested in how the idea of one, all-powerful god came about, this is really essential reading.

This is an impressive piece of scholarship to contribute to the study of the emergence of monotheism. What sets Smith apart is a sociological study on how Israel developed from a henotheistic society to monotheism during the period just prior to the exile. What I appreciate about Smith is that he defines his terms very carefully. He shows how scholars in the past have had different definitions of monotheism, and he strives for precision. What is a little confusing about his work is that some of it is very speculative. The vestiges of (orthodox) henotheistic belief in ancient Israel are very sparse (Ps 82, Deut 32:8, 9 LXX and DSS). And Israelite religion did not become monotheistic for all Israelites everywhere at the same time. As he says, the prophets record the existence of polytheistic and ditheistic Israelite worship by their critique of it. Another thing I appreciate about it is the annotation. This book is 200 pages of text and 100 pages of footnotes. If you are looking to dive into a topic (such as, YHWH and his asherah), this is a great place to start because he talks about it briefly, then cites about 20-30 source on the topic. The footnotes are a goldmine. What is annoying about this book is the lack of editing and the print. First the print is not necessarily Smith's fault, but it is very poor. I would think Oxford University Press could do better, but maybe this is their way of punishing people for not buying their expensive hardbacks. The other problem is the editing. Smith's theory about Ps 82 and Deut 32 come up about 4 times in the book. There are grammatical mistakes and paragraphs that just go on....and on....and on. This book needs some serious editing. All in all it's a good work. I don't necessarily agree with all his theories, but I learn a lot from his work, and what fun is it if you agree with everything you read?

Mark Smith has arranged his materials such that his critiques are easy to follow with the aid of a tanach [I don't have an Ugaritic text]. Thought provoking and thorough. Smith tells you the relative probabilities of different critical hypothesis' & it is apparent when he is positing his own opinions.
A fascinating look into the origins of monotheism from its polytheistic roots. There is no better book that I know of that explains the Ugaritic texts and what they mean for biblical scholarship. Emergent Israelite religion represents a movement from the Canaanite traditions from which it came, and so one will not find it odd when similar stories, gods, and poetry can be seen. Highly recommended.

Mark Smith has generated a volume to complement his earlier work, The Early History of God (San Francisco, 1990) which has become a landmark study on the development of Israelite religion. In this volume his point of departure is an investigation of the understanding of the gods in the Ugaritic texts in order to perceive the conceptual unity of West-Semitic polytheism, so that Israelite monotheism may be envisioned more accurately in its cultural context. He believes that it is most important to understand what biblical monotheism was seeking to address when it emerged.

The first half of the book considers the religious understandings of the Ugaritic texts concerning the gods, and he specifically evaluates anthropomorphic deities and divine monsters (chap 1), the divine council (chap 2), the divine family (chap 3), the question of dying and rising deities, especially Baal (chap 6). In the second half of the book he turns to Israelite religious belief, and topics include the relationship of El and Yahweh (chap 7), monotheistic rhetoric (chap 8), monotheism in the biblical literature (chap 9), and Second Isaiah (chap 10).

Smith proposes a number of challenging and suggestive conclusions for historians of Israelite religion to consider. 1) Our terms "monotheism" and "polytheism" are modern artificial creations which do not reflect the complexity of belief in the ancient world. 2) Polytheism, such as that encountered in Ugaritic texts, can speak of the divine in a unified fashion, anticipating monotheistic language. 3) Polytheism in Ugaritic texts was built upon the image of the "divine family" and not so much the metaphor of "divine council" or "divine bureaucracy." 4) Insufficient evidence exists to speak of dying and rising gods in the ancient world, especially in regard to Baal. 5) Various polytheisms existed in ancient Israel, and their assumptions can be reconstructed to some extent by consideration of texts such as Psalm 82 and Deut 32. 6) El may have been the original deity worshiped by Israelites and associated with the exodus, but Yahweh emerged and absorbed El. 7) Israelites de-emphasized the other deities in the pantheon under Yahweh, and Yahweh increasingly appeared as the divine bureaucratic lord over the other gods. Israel thus used "divine council" imagery more than is found in Ugaritic texts. 8) Israelite monotheism was rhetoric designed to describe Israel's exclusive relationship with Yahweh, it was not pure monotheism (for such pure monotheism is really our modern intellectual construct). Monotheism was an "inner community discourse," not a "new cultural step" (p. 154) or a new stage in religious evolution. 9) Changes in Judean society (breakdown of the kinship system, Assyrian imperialism, the decline of Judah's political status, and exile) caused the emergence of monotheistic rhetoric for a world in which Jews found themselves without the old familial or political boundaries. These are the major arguments presented by Smith, but the reader will discover other insights and observations well-defended by the author which are worthy of serious consideration also.

I find Smith's presentation to be brilliant, well-documented, well-organized, and very discomforting. Biblical scholars now recognize that in the pre-exilic era Asherah worship, infant sacrifice, solar veneration, and other religious practices attacked by biblical authors represented normal Israelite worship, while monotheism was a late development in the Babylonian Exile and subsequent years. Smith and others led the charge in this new scholarly perception of Israelite religion. But with this volume Smith has thrown down a gauntlet to challenge our understandings even more. Most notably he suggests that emergent monotheism was not a new stage in religious evolution but rather a new rhetorical strategy prompted by changed social and cultural circumstances. He further suggests that words like polytheism and monotheism are modern intellectual creations which we have imposed upon the ancients and their texts. He may be correct, but intellectually this is frightening, for it calls upon us to reconfigure our scholarly and pedagogical language even more radically. I personally would have to rewrite past (No Other Gods, Sheffield, 1997; The Old Testament and Process Theology, St. Louis, 2001) and future manuscripts in process, for I view "emergent monotheism" as an intellectual breakthrough during and after the exile along the lines of a biological mutation which...
surfaces after years of genetic preparation has laid the groundwork. On most issues Smith and I agree, but we diverge in characterizing Israelite and Jewish religious development as a “new stage” in human intellectual evolution. I would submit that if you distance yourself from the biblical period and look at the greater religious developments across Asia during the “Axial Age,” you become increasingly tempted to speak of a new step forward in human intellectual development. At some point in human history we got from polytheism to monotheism, and the biblical era and its concomitant literature looks like one of those seminal stages of evolution to me. I am sure, however, that Smith would respond admirably to my argument. Smith probably diverges from most scholars with his thesis, but his arguments will be heeded seriously by those in this field of study. Regardless of whether you consider his conclusions to be valid, Smith has produced a seminal work with which scholars must come to grips for years.

Smith does a nice job of setting forth the context of his study, and various stimuli from other scholars, in his introduction. His purpose is to investigate “the conceptual unity of West Semitic polytheisms,” (actually “Ugaritic and Israelite polytheism”) and he seeks to answer questions about the “ancient circumstances of biblical monotheism.” The work was occasioned in part by a colleague’s question: “what is an ilu?” (Akkadian for “god”). What is divinity? (p. 6). Smith notes that such a question can be approached by asking what is not human, on the basis of etymology, and by compiling a list of all the deities. But he defines his approach as that of a typology of divinity that includes a cosmic typology and a social typology that examines “the major indigenous conceptual structures that ancient Ugaritic and Israelite societies used to construct their religious reality” (p. 8).

The book is divided into three major sections. Smith first examines the structure of divinity, starting with anthropomorphic deities and divine monsters. He then characterizes the divine council (four tiers), the divine family (as compared to four levels in the household), and finally pluralities, pairings and other divine relationships (“divine intersections or interrelations”). He suggests that “oneness” in what moderns call the “godhead” would come from within the “multiple levels and types of interrelationality within divinity” (p. 8). A family model would make the polytheism of a divine family more fitting than a monotheistic picture. Monotheism would be more fitting within the context of “a royal organization headed by an absolute monarch” (pp. 8f.).

The second major section discusses characteristics of divinity, focusing first on the traits of deities (strength, size, body and gender, holiness and life [deathlessness]), then identifying what terms the texts use to express what deities are, and then dealing finally with the odd circumstance of the (life and) death of Baal (with a strong denial of Frazer’s views on the dying and rising god motif as being normative) (p. 9).

The third major section shifts the focus to the origins of monotheism in the Bible. It first observes usage of the words El and Yahweh (“deep impact on Yahweh of the god El”), though admitting that the formative traditions of Israel are now lost. It examines the God of IsraEL and the exodus, which many scholars assume suggests that El, not Yahweh, was linked to that early event. Smith then examines the emergence of monotheistic “rhetoric” in ancient Judah in light of ancient polytheisms, denying that this is a separate stage in Israel ’s development. He suggests instead that “monotheism is a kind of inner community discourse,” “a kind of ancient rhetoric reinforcing Israel’s exclusive relationship with its deity,” which would have been elevated to worldwide importance as it saw its worldly position diminishing (p. 9) Smith then identifies the formation of various monotheistic theologies in Genesis 1, Proverbs 1—9, and Daniel 7 (priestly, wisdom, apocalyptic). He concludes with a survey of the full-blown monotheism of Second Isaiah, to be seen as much more than religious, but rather as a strategy to persuade hearers that Yahweh was the absolute power who even controlled foreign powers (p. 10).

As always, Smith is deeply engaged in dialogue with others. The final third of the volume consists of footnotes, and one is amazed at the number of recent works cited and the number of references to personal correspondence with other scholars. The level of detail and discussion with other scholars on the intricacies of individual texts and readings is overwhelming and amazing. One is aware of being involved in a discussion that has been ongoing and will likely continue. Smith is careful to note how difficult it is to deal with issues surrounding monotheism, the paucity of evidence about the
connections, and the challenge to ground the study in historical data.

Among the observations that I, an outsider to the intricacies of this dispute and discussion, found particularly helpful: the category of identification of near and far spaces as being more or less safe, four tiers within the pantheon (El and Athirat, royal children, Kothar wa-Hasis to serve those above him in rank, and minor deities), the divine family being the same as the divine council and based on a family model, the critique of Frazer, and the discussion about the mouth-washing and mouth-opening rituals in Babylon, Nineveh, etc.

Among the questions the volume raises for me: The entire work seems to assume that all of what is written, both in Ugarit and in biblical materials, is nothing but human work and that changes toward monotheism are rooted in humans working with the traditions. One admittedly cannot easily argue presuppositions. But I wonder about the attractiveness of evolutionary model of development from an originally rooted Israelite polytheism to a later type of monotheism (when Israel was at its weakest), instead of the model, which seems much more prominent biblically, that sees one belief structure in opposition to another (the “new gods” whom their fathers did not know [Deut. 32:17]). I am still one of those “into denial” (see p. 248, note 54), who thinks that revelation did play a role and that one encounters a revealed mystery that cannot be resolved merely by adjusting traditions and eliminating what is no longer useful. Is there finally any reality behind all of the rhetoric? If there is, how is the deity known? If what we have in the biblical texts is simply humans at work, then is one’s belief hanging in the air? How might one distinguish between what is worth living for and false ideas that keep one going but that are really “no god” (Jer. 2:11, 28). Is there a real ilu? Or are all ilus merely rhetorical?

I initially thought to begin this review with the word “perhaps,” which Mark Smith uses so frequently. He has set forth a cogent argument for his position. And yet, he admits that many of the connections he makes are inferences. The raw data of a multiplicity of deities is obviously at hand. The data being used has been dug up after being locked in the ground for over 3000 years or passed down orally and later in written form. The validity of the connections and inferences are in the realm of reconstructions, about which there will always be dispute. I welcomed the chance to read this volume and to refresh myself on some Ugaritic materials that I have not studied in detail for quite some time.

As the bible tells us, ancient Israel's neighbours worshipped a wide variety of gods. It is now widely accepted that the Israelites' God, Yahweh, must have originated as one among these many, before assuming the role of the one true God of monotheism. Mark Smith here seeks to discover more precisely what was meant by "divinity" in the ancient near-East, and how these concepts apply to Yahweh. Part One of the book offers a detailed examination of the deities of ancient Ugarit, known to us from the largest surviving group of relevant extra-biblical texts. In Part Two, Smith looks closely at four classic problems associated with four Ugaritic deities, and considers how they affect our understanding of Yahweh. At the end of the book he returns to the question of Israelite monotheism, seeking to discover what religious issues it addressed and why it made sense at the time of its emergence. He argues that within the Bible, monotheism is not a separate "stage" of religion but rather represents a kind of rhetoric reinforcing Israel's exclusive relation with its deity.

If you want to get a grip on what on earth the Old Testament is talking about then this is a good place to start. It examines the texts unearthed at Ugarit which pre date the Bible. It looks at the similarities in what the Canaanites of Ugarit believed about the gods and what the writers of the Old Testament believed. This will give an appreciation of the realities that people in the Ancient Near East really did believe in El & Athirat, Yahweh & Asherah, Baal & Anat, etc. Yes, they had Mr & Mrs god back then, how else can you get sons of god? The Canaanites at Ugarit envisioned a pantheon/family tree of gods and really did have sculptures as a focus for their worship to the corresponding god in heaven. Probably most didn't think the sculpture was the god, just as the Hebrews didn't think the tabernacle was God. At Ugarit the people thought Baal was in control of the thunder & lightning & rains that fell at the end of the long hot summer which were crucial to the following growing season. Baal had to be appeased to get plenty of rain.
For decades, scholars have tried to penetrate the Bible's story about Israelite monotheism. According to traditional interpretations of the Bible, monotheism was part of Israel's original covenant with Yahweh on Mount Sinai, and the idolatry subsequently criticized by the prophets was due to Israel's backsliding from its own heritage and history with Yahweh. However, scholars have long noted that beneath this presentation lies a number of questions. Why do the Ten Commandments command that there should be no other gods “before Me” (the Lord), if there are no other gods as claimed by other biblical texts? Why should the Israelites sing at the crossing of the Red Sea that “there is no god like You, O Lord?” (Exodus 15:11). Such passages suggest that Israelites knew about other gods and did not simply reject them. It seems that Israelites may have known of other deities and perhaps various passages suggest that behind the Bible's broader picture of monotheism was a spectrum of polytheisms that centered on the worship of Yahweh as the pantheon's greatest figure.