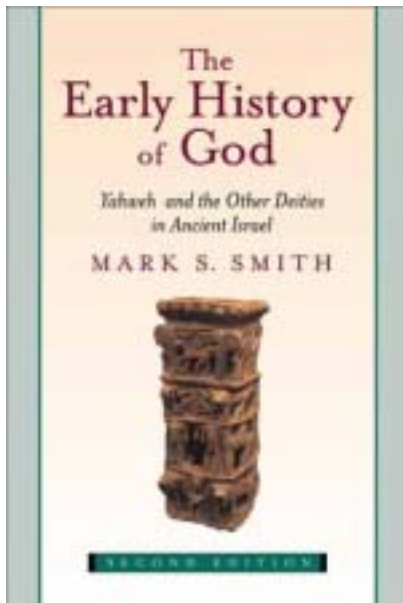


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Smith, Mark S.

The Early History of God: Yahweh and the Other Deities in Ancient Israel

Second edition with a foreword by Patrick D. Miller

Biblical Resource Series

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This is the second edition, thoroughly updated and partly revised, of a book first published in 1990. The author, Skirball Professor of Bible and Ancient Near Eastern Studies at New York University, is a recognized expert in ancient West Semitic languages and literature and well known for his numerous writings in the fields of Ugaritic literature and religion, Israelite religious history, and biblical studies. The first edition of the book under review was rightly welcomed a decade ago as a major synthesis on the history of ancient Israelite religion in general and the relationship between Yahweh and other deities in particular.

This review (1) briefly summarizes the general structure and major arguments of the book; (2) exposes salient features of the new edition; and (3) offers the reviewer's appreciation on the book's place in the ongoing scholarly debate on the development of Yahwism from the nonexclusive worship of a primary deity through exclusive monolatry to monotheism during the first millennium B.C.E.

1. The book's argument is developed in an introduction and seven chapters along a well-reflected path: The introduction (1–18) demonstrates how the perception

of ancient Israelite religion during the twentieth century has been shaped by the study of "Canaanite" deities, particularly in the wake of Ugaritic myth. Smith's initial reference to W. F. Albright's *Yahweh and the Gods of Canaan* (1968) is not accidental. In terms of scholarly genealogy, Smith can be considered a grandson of Albright's. I do not know whether his book was meant to replace Albright's or not, but it has probably achieved that purpose, alongside John Day's *Yahweh and the Gods and Goddesses of Canaan* (JSOTSup 265; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001). Essential to the new model developed by Smith on the basis of new epigraphical and archaeological evidence *and* new ways of interpreting the evidence is the redefinition of ancient Israel's cultural identity, which according to present knowledge must have largely overlapped with and developed within "Canaanite" culture during the earlier periods. While Albright insisted on the essential otherness of Yahweh in comparison to "Canaanite" deities from the beginning, Smith and a large majority of scholars consider Yahwism and the biblical concept of God to have emerged *gradually* out of a West Semitic or "Canaanite" matrix. According to Smith, this process was shaped by two major lines of development, which he calls *convergence* and *differentiation*. "Convergence involves the coalescence of various deities and/or some of their features into the figure of Yahweh," while differentiation points to the fact that "numerous features of early Israelite cult were later rejected as 'Canaanite' and non-Yahwistic."

Chapter 1, "Deities in Israel in the Period of the Judges" (19–64), reads like the preliminary presentation of the main characters of a play to be developed subsequently. "Yahweh and El," "Yahweh and Baal," "Yahweh and Asherah" are main headings of a chapter that demonstrates Israel's roots in its "Canaanite" heritage and the essential validity of the convergence model: "according to the available evidence, Israelite religion in its earliest form did not contrast markedly with the religions of its Levantine neighbors in either number or configuration of deities." However, while the coalescence of Yahweh and El did not pose a major problem to Israelite religion, the relationship of Yahweh and Baal (ch. 2 [65–107]) and Yahweh and Asherah (ch. 3 [108–47]) developed in a different direction. In the main text of his book, notwithstanding minor amendments, Smith keeps a rather conservative, if well-argued position in the debate on Asherah's status as an "Israelite goddess" versus a cultic symbol. To him, "the evidence for Asherah as an Israelite goddess during the monarchy is minimal at best." A balanced excursus on "gender language for Yahweh" gives further thought even to those who would, at this point, take another option or even regret the lack of a goddess alongside Yahweh.

One of the more original parts of Smith's research is presented in chapter 4, "Yahweh and the Sun" (148–59), where he studies the assimilation of solar imagery into Yahwist imagery. One major difficulty here is to distinguish between imagery particularly associated with the sun god(s) and a general tendency in first millennium West Semitic religions to enhance their imagery with luminous, particularly solar, features related to divine appearance, aura, and theophany. Chapter 5, "Yahwistic Cultic Practices" (160–81), then leaves behind the domain of deities and studies local sanctuaries and cult places, ancestor cult and the feeding of the dead, and the *mlk* or child sacrifices as features pertaining to the "Canaanite" heritage of ancient Israel's religion.

"The Origins and Development of Israelite Monotheism" is the topic of chapter 6 (182–99). Based on the foregoing, more detailed discussions, Smith offers an evolutionary outline of four major periods in the development of Israelite monotheism. The period of the judges may be called "the stage of convergence" par excellence. During stage two, the first half of the period of the monarchy, first attempts at centralizing cults in royal sanctuaries and the development of royal theology brought Yahweh to unprecedented power as a unifying national deity and patron deity of the monarchy. However, the kings also invested in the fostering of Baal language, the worship of Asherah, and the support of other deities and religious practices. Hence, this period may be considered a stage of crisis; during the ninth century, the role of Baal seems first to have been perceived as a threat to the dominant status of Yahweh. The crisis led prophets and authors of early legal codes to criticize Baal and increasingly promote the exclusive worship of Yahweh. Stage three, the second half of the monarchy, witnessed growing emphasis on differentiation, with more features traditionally considered as legitimate parts of "Canaanite" heritage and Israelite tradition (notably, cultic images to represent the deity) now being rejected as non-Yahwist features. Ultimately stage four, the period of the exile, would lead Deutero-Isaiah to unambiguous formulations of a monotheistic belief, relegating other deities not merely to an inferior status but to nonexistence altogether.

In a postscript on "Portraits of Yahweh" (200–207), Smith summarizes the processes leading to divine portraiture in Israel in the light of convergence and differentiation and lists a number of "Canaanite" divine roles that are absent from the biblical portrait of God (most notably, magnificent feasting and drinking, sexual activity, and relation with the netherworld). The book ends with several useful indexes (texts: biblical citations, intertestamental texts, post-biblical Jewish references, Ugarit, other Near Eastern inscriptions, classical;

authors; general index), which confirm the richness of knowledge and breadth of horizon of Smith's book.

2. That a book of this scope and written with such an admirable mastery of the many issues involved be reedited is in itself very laudable, especially since *The Early History of God* may be used as a fine standard textbook for students of ancient Israelite religion in graduate and postgraduate classes. Even more laudable is the author's attempt at updating his work by occasionally rephrasing a sentence or two, more often by adding a new bibliographic reference to the notes. If such small makeup alterations do not really change the argument—not even where an earlier-held opinion has in the meantime been criticized by other scholars—they allow the reader to confront Smith's judgments with other more recent opinions and stress the many points that are still open to debate. The notes, by the way, no longer appear at the end of the individual chapters but at the bottom of each page, which makes for much easier reading.

Even more important than occasional alterations and updates, the preface to the second edition (xii–xxxviii) offers much food for thought and highlights again, through dozens of bibliographic references pointing to new source material and further studies, the intensity of the ongoing scholarly debate on many of the topics discussed in this book. In brief but extremely informative and well-balanced sections, Smith summarizes "Recent Research on Deities"; "Important Trends since 1990" (among which the call for the systematic consideration of iconography in the study of Levantine religious history, but also an ever-increasing need for anthropological and sociological, hence sociohistorical differentiation); and "Theoretical Challenges" (where Smith admits that our knowledge on premonarchic Israel may be more fragmentary and less confidently recovered from biblical sources than what he earlier thought and that the use of Ugaritic texts for the study of Israelite religion has evolved from a kind of "pan-Ugariticism" toward a more nuanced perception of Ugarit representing one or several subsets of West-Semitic religion of the Bronze age among others, but not necessarily *the* model for "Canaanite," i.e., southern Levantine religions). In "Asherah/asherah Revisited," Smith now allows for the "possibility that Asherah was an Israelite goddess during the monarchy" and that "It may be only a matter of time before superior evidence attesting to Asherah's cult in monarchic Israel is discovered," although the case is, for the time being, far from proven. In the section titled "In Retrospect," readers are invited to consult

Smith's complementary monograph, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism*, which in many ways reads as a sequel to the book under review.

3. "No single study of Israelite religion during this period of time has contributed more informatively and constructively to the discussion of the issues than Mark Smith's volume," P. D. Miller writes in his preface to the second edition. This is indeed an excellent synthesis and textbook for intermediary students, though many details may, upon closer look, appear to be more complicated and open to other interpretations than those preferred by Smith. It ranges well alongside Miller's own presentation of *The Religion of Ancient Israel* (Library of Ancient Israel; Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2000), which could be regarded as a thematic companion to Smith's historical discussion, and John Day's monograph mentioned above. All along the way, Smith is astoundingly informed on the research some of his colleagues are presently undertaking to better understand this or that aspect of ancient Israelite religion. One senses the many dimensions of a fascinating and complex field as well as Smith's own commitment to offer his own original contribution to the discussion. *The Early History of God* may seem "conservative" to some; in my opinion, it is sound to have this kind of synthesis that does not simply follow the latest fashion or dare the most radical explanations but acknowledges both its debt to and convergence with earlier research and necessary differentiation in the light of new data that define a threshold of knowledge and modeling behind which modern scholarship cannot step back.

If there is anything to regret, it is perhaps the following. (1) Much in the wake of earlier scholarship, this book starts in the Bronze Age and leads the reader to the "exile" of Judah, as if *The Early History of God* had ended with Deutero-Isaiah. In order to obtain a more balanced view, future studies should follow the relevant developments through the Persian period down to the Hellenistic age. (2) In spite of all the details of argument, the book's general tendency is to consider convergence an earlier feature and differentiation a later feature, as if the latter eventually replaced the former completely. I suspect that convergence did not stop in the ninth century but continued right down to the Hasmonean period (and probably beyond). On the other hand, I rather doubt that the history of differentiation started early in the ninth century in the way told by the Elijah stories. I also doubt that Deutero-Isaiah should be interpreted only in terms of differentiation and not also in terms of convergence, since "he" presupposes so much knowledge of contemporary Babylonian theology. Smith is sensitive to

intellectual history and the history of his own field; he knows that even such categories as "convergence" and "differentiation" owe as much to nineteenth- and twentieth-century systematic theology as to historical research. To be sure, these disciplines, which have long been in mutual conversation, should not be disconnected one from the other. Still, in terms of methodology and hermeneutics, they must be kept apart. It is my conviction that biblical theology will benefit from the history of ancient Israelite religion to the extent that it practices the latter as a strictly historical discipline.

In conclusion, I would subscribe to another remark in P. D. Miller's preface: "By a careful reading of this book, historians and theologians alike will learn much that they need to know in order to understand the biblical God and the religious world that brought forth the Jewish and Christian scriptures." Because of the subsequent "career" of the biblical god in the history of Judaism, Christianity, and to some extent Islam, this book is not simply a study of the early history of *Yahweh* but indeed essential reading for who wants to understand the early history of *God*.

For further reading: Mark S. Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism: Israel's Polytheistic Background and the Ugaritic Texts* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).