

MARK S. SMITH. *Untold Stories: The Bible and Ugaritic Studies in the Twentieth Century*. Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 2001. Pp. xix + 252. Photos.

This is a book I personally relished reading; but I cannot unreservedly praise. If I recommend it at all, it would be to Ugarit wonks and hard-core biblicists. The subtitle, *The Bible and Ugaritic Studies in the Twentieth Century*, defines the range of topics it covers, although at this date it is hard to imagine any century but the 20th to be applicable (Ugarit was discovered in 1928). “Ugaritic Studies” is taken narrowly, the focus remaining largely on the study of alphabetic texts that record the local language, rather than of documents in Akkadian, Hurrian, or Hittite that use a syllabic script. Moreover, the accent rarely moves beyond issues of literature and religion, and so the equally fascinating debate on the history, society, or economy of the region is only sampled.

The stories Smith relates are hardly “Untold” (see his explanation on p. 6). Any major survey of Ugarit and its remains is bound to rehearse the relevance of its archives on Bible research. However, in focusing on the lives and personalities of the scholars (and their students) who explored the religious and literary facets of Ugarit, Smith achieves the admirable (and often neglected) task of thickening the contexts in which this research unfolded. Naturally (as he admits) Smith is better informed about the great ancestors who roamed North America, relying partly on their personal correspondence; but there are also generous pages on several research centers, including those in France (where the field was born), Israel (where its biblical component achieved early focus), as well as Germany and Spain (where it continues to acquire major research tools and outlets).

Smith follows his story through four chronological tableaux: through the Second World War; to 1970; until, and then after 1985. Under each, Smith considers more or less seriatim, the tools of the trade, the defining subjects of discussion, and the major research personalities of the period. He also offers reflections on one theme that he deems critical for the period. Smith selects diverse issues regarding Ugaritic and Hebrew religions to feature in each of the four chapters and so achieves a continuity that is missing elsewhere (see pp. 82–100; 197–200; 209–210). The focus is on monotheism—how to define it, when to locate its origins, where to situate its manifestation—as it happens, the subject of a book Smith has published about the same time as ours: *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism: Israel's Polytheistic Background and the Ugaritic Texts* (New York, 2001). Whatever the merits of the larger treatment, in these pages Smith is into calibrating polytheism, at one point finding in Israel a “far more reduced form

of polytheism” when compared to the pantheons in Ugarit (p. 36). That the breadth and multiplicity of pantheons are heavily affected by the wealth and cosmopolitanism of the city-state is not deemed an issue. Ugarit was the Hong Kong of its days, a port-city catering to a broad and pluralistic clientele. So if we wish to evaluate the density of polytheism in Judah it should be in comparison to the pantheons and theologies of relatively impoverished regions. There is also speculation about the god El and the repertoire of Ugaritic traditions about him that survived in biblical lore (pp. 197–200). Here again, I speculate that we are likely to recover as diverse mythological profiles of El as there are archives from diverse states, mainly because the authority if not also the kinship of individual deities likely depended on the number of prominent deities tended to and fed by a city’s temples. Finally, Smith tries to locate the origins of Israel’s monotheism (pp. 210–212) in the shifting sociology of allegiances within families due to major political realignments and the effect they had on lineage and patrimony. Since I am dubious about the distinction he draws regarding social units in Ugarit and Israel, I am not inspired by his pronouncements on the subject. When in the ancient Near East is the family not the main vehicle of social identity? Where can we not argue opposite positions on the basis of relatively scant data? How can one rely on a highly processed text such as the Hebrew Bible to find in it evidence of a “diminished lineage system”?

In fact, without denying the usefulness, even the charm, of the book under review, the overall impression I have of it is of a handy accumulation of note cards and bibliographies, but also of the triumph of footnotes over text, the former occasionally undistinguishable in contents from the latter. (Footnotes occupy half as many pages as text; but they use smaller font.) Not surprisingly, as the story moves away from the combats of the immortal forefathers (at first, the likes of Albright, Cassuto, Gaster, Ginsberg, Gordon, and Rosenthal; later, of Dahood, Goetze, Greenfield, Held, and Pope) footnotes begin to aggressively commandeer textual space under the label “Texts and Tools.” The writing betrays its notecard origins, with paragraphs rarely dovetailing into each other. Smith, in fact, has not been served well by his publisher: if editing strives for balancing material, clarifying phrasing, controlling hyperboles, pruning excesses, and developing transitions, there is hardly any evidence of its operation here.

Still, if you are willing to sacrifice literary quality (as I was), you will find in this work an almost complete bibliography on the subject of the book, some nifty quotes from letters (and emails), and useful pedigrees for scholars engaged in Ugaritics. The amount of material the book discusses is staggering, even when much of it is hardly developed. Smith is generally a reliable commentator on developments in the field, although *ex cathedra* pronouncements gradually replace judgment based on scholarly consensus or retrieved from archival research. Throughout, there is the free, perhaps

too generous, dispensing on scholars and their work such epithets as “great, accomplished, brilliant.” Consequently, the rare disparagements stand out sharply, as when Smith faults Cyrus Gordon and Michael Astour for lacking “the benefit of doctoral level training in classical literature” (p. 78) or when stating that Baruch Margalit, “though a graduate of Brandeis and a student of Cyrus Gordon [one course!], was an autodidact in Ugaritic” (p. 151). In fact, almost all of Smith’s heroes were autodidacts in Ugaritic, some lacking “doctoral level training” in many areas to which they contributed very nicely. Astour himself has published over forty learned studies that rely on Ugaritic material, but this is hardly noted.

As he should be, Smith is hopeful about the future of Ugaritic studies (pp. 212–213). He calls on “more complex models for cultural analysis for Ugarit and Israel” (p. 224) as an avenue for a more responsible application of comparative research. He cautions against excesses as illustrated by Mitchell Dahood’s approach (basically achieving harmony between Hebrew and Ugaritic through vocalic and semantic manipulations) and cites many of his critics. Truth to tell, that particular enterprise has largely exhausted itself and what we now read is largely repetitive, tentative, and tangential. Comparisons and contrasts that came readily to us (for example, Canaanites have myths and Hebrews have epics) have also largely outplayed their usefulness. Yet Ugarit is freeing itself from the grip of the biblesizers, not because (God forbid!) it no longer produces juicy texts, and not just because we are acquiring a more sophisticated notion of Ugarit and its culture, but because recent excavations in Syria have taken from Ugarit its privileged position as the stepmother of Israel. Archives from such sites as Ebla, Emar, Tuttul, and Ekalte are resurrected, providing testimony on remarkably diverse cultures even when proximate to each other. Over their long existence, these cultures metamorphosed often and significantly, as societies and as shaper of political and religious institutions. Although Ugarit remains unique in producing second-millennium alphabetic texts, the expansion of our knowledge about contemporaneous cultures in Syria has made it imprudent to chart the development of the Hebrew faith and character just from its texts, for we distort most violently when we compare most narrowly.

Misgivings notwithstanding, it is good to have Mark Smith’s book from which to chart the evolution of our insights into Ugarit and ancient Israel. There is an index of modern authors, but a nice bibliography would have eased the pain of ferreting it out from the footnotes.