

2016

Book Review: Poetic Heroes: Literary Commemorations of Warriors and Warrior Culture in the Early Biblical World

Brian R. Doak

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.georgefox.edu/ccs>

 Part of the [Christianity Commons](#)

SMITH, MARK S. *Poetic Heroes: Literary Commemorations of Warriors and Warrior Culture in the Early Biblical World*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014. xxiv+636 pp. \$55.00 (paper).

Mark Smith's *Poetic Heroes: Literary Commemorations of Warriors and Warrior Culture in the Early Biblical World* is a tour de force of philological commentary, comparative religion, and historical reconstruction that ultimately focuses its attention on the way warriors and their concerns appear in the Hebrew Bible. After an introduction posing the question of warrior poetry's broad cultural appeal (1–12), Smith devotes part I to “the literary commemoration of warriors and warrior culture” (15–47), in which he lays out a glossary of heroic terminology and literary practice in the Hebrew Bible, highlighting the problem of finding cultural reality within literary rep-

resentations. Part 2 (51–67) explores “three warrior pairs in Mesopotamia, Greece, and Israel” (i.e., Gilgamesh and Enkidu, Achilles and Patroklos, and David and Jonathan) and then “gender inversion in the poetry of heroic pairs” (68–95). Part 3 undertakes a detailed study of “human and divine warriors in the Ugaritic texts” (99–208), focusing on the Aqhat and Baal epics as well as the Rephaim texts, and part 4 arrives at “Israelite warrior poetry in the early Iron Age” (211–332), where the focus is on Judges 5 and 2 Sam. 1:19–27. The book is replete with maximal citation to the secondary literature, featuring nearly 250 pages of endnotes (333–576) as well as a detailed set of indexes.

So many of the book’s intriguing features deserve engagement, but space permits only a brief foray into a few topics. There is always at least an implicit question of what one is trying to accomplish in a search for origins or an earliest period, and certainly the attempt to excavate back into the heroic poetry of Israel’s premonarchic era is one such project. Granted, Smith does not use the loaded language of “origins” as such, but the stretch back into the “early biblical world” clearly invokes the idea of Israel’s origins from a history-of-religions perspective as well as the hotly debated linguistic problems of dating biblical Hebrew. Smith correctly points to the following dilemma with regard to any dating schemes for the corpus of the supposed early poetry, and indeed for the dating of any part of the Hebrew Bible, on the basis of language: “all arguments in any direction turn on arguments from silence. This very fact indicates that claims either way are inherently suspect and possible at the same time.” Because of this fact, Smith argues, “the approach taken by either side [in the linguistic dating debate over biblical Hebrew] in their broad outlines is not acceptable” (218). His solution is to interrogate the evidence on the basis of three criteria: (1) *dissimilarity*, that is, “language features attested early but not later” (which raises the question of how we know already which texts are the examples of the “early” and the “later”); (2) *replacement*, that is, do we see later terms replacing a “corresponding earlier term or feature” (again, prompting the question of how we know at the onset what is early and late); and (3) *culture*, that is, looking for features that “combine linguistic and cultural information” (from archaeology, comparative analysis, geography, and so on—potentially allowing escape from the problems of historical circularity based on language; 219).

Smith’s attempt to apply these criteria to analyze Judges 5 is, in my view, the highlight of the book. Through a deft handling of the term *pērāzôn* (“village militia”; Judg. 5:7, 11) Smith argues for an early date for the poem because the very notion of a “village militia” “best fits an Iron I context prior to the sorts of standing armies described for Israelite kings” (226). However, the phrase “described for” in this quoted section reveals a larger problem—who or what is it, exactly, that is doing this “describing”? The clear subject here would be the Bible itself. One may rightly wonder, then, how it is that Smith knows the descriptions of any part of the monarchy in the Bible or its standing armies represent a truly historical memory, on which further conclusions may be made. This is a subtle example of a type of problem that comes up at various points, but Smith attempts to get beyond it—with marked success—by comparison with the more securely dated Ugaritic poetry, archaeology and iconographic analysis, and the linguistic analysis of Hebrew.

Smith contends that the history of the development of Judges 5 into its current form reveals something like two poems in one: the second half of the poem, nearly devoid of references to Yahweh, is the older core, dating to the Iron I period (1200–1000 BCE), while the introduction, the first half, filled with references to Yahweh and Israel, is later, in the tenth century. Thus the primacy of Yahweh and Israel, not present in the earliest heroic tradition, comes to characterize the older material. On analogy with his other work in *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism* (Oxford: Oxford

The Journal of Religion

University Press, 2001), then, Smith sees his vision of the rise of Yahwism in Israel writ small in the old heroic poetry. Put another way, the older heroic poetry follows a pattern of religious development that Smith has already schematized in his previous body of work—just as Second Isaiah's soaring monotheism came to color or even overwrite Israel's polytheistic origins as revealed in other texts, so too the northern monarchy of the tenth- or ninth-century Israel (not Judah, notably) took up the older vision of tribal chieftains and fighting stars and transformed it into Yahweh poetry and Israel poetry (265).

All of the hallmarks of Mark Smith's previous work on the history of Israelite religion are on display in this book, in full force: masterful invocation of the Ugaritic corpus; detailed philology; and a meaningful hypothesis about the historical development of Israel's literature, deity, and national self-understanding. There is no other book on this topic that can be adequately compared to this one in terms of its scope and depth, and Smith is to be congratulated for providing a weighty contribution to the study of Israel's heroic past.

BRIAN DOAK, *George Fox University*.