

Smith, Morton, (ed) by Shaye J D Cohen, — Studies in the Cult of Yahweh, I: Historical Method, Ancient Israel, Ancient Judaism

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Reviewer: Prof P M Venter

The editor of this book is a former student of Morton Smith. Cohen collected twenty essays from Smith's work, published between 1952 and 1983, and arranged them according to three topics. The first essay deals with *historical method*, the following six with *ancient Israel* and the last thirteen with *ancient Judaism*.

In this collection the reader gets a bird's eye view of the research and the methods Smith used when he studied the different aspects of ancient Israel and ancient Judaism. When reading the essays one gets the impression of thorough and comprehensive research. Smith was not satisfied with general statements. He found it unacceptable to investigate history from documents which are not contemporaneous with the events. His approach to history was comprehensive, studying events within the framework of the society at large and in terms of all its role players. According to Smith the historian's task is *to calculate the most probable explanation of the preserved evidence* (p.7). For Smith that evidence primarily came from written texts and sometimes from archaeological investigation. Smith proved himself to be a master of reading and analyzing ancient texts. Although socio-scientific methodology was not as developed as today, the tendency in Smith's work was towards the social context of history and the role community structures played in events.

Smith saw *ancient Israel* as an integral part of the ancient Near East. According to him Israel shared a common theology with all of its neighbours, but had its own culture, brought about by the uniqueness of its topography. Smith warned against the fundamentalistic trend in research of what he called *pseudorthodoxy* (p 39), which is inclined to isolate Israel from its neighbours. In Smith's view the Israelites invaded the land during the iron age, bringing typical Mediterranean culture with them. In the pseudepigraphy of Israel he found common ground with the Greco-Roman literary tradition. Smith came to the conclusion that the technique of attaching and inserting material found in pseudepigraphical material, was a continuation of a trend already present in the forming of the Pentateuch. In Isaiah 40-55 he found material borrowed from the Persians during the 6th century BCE mainly for the apologetic needs of the Yahwist community in the Diaspora and for purposes of devotional rhetoric within the Israelite tradition. Even in Israel's law codes from the 8th through 6th century BCE, the social and economic situation prevalent in the eastern Mediterranean is reflected.

When investigating the history of *ancient Judaism*, Smith tried to understand all events within the context of different social groups interacting at a specific place and a specific time. His ability to *demolish received truths* (as stated on the dust jacket) is shown in his ability to invert questions and search for answers from an alternative perspective. In discussing the works of Jervell, Goodenough, and Moore he often criticized their simplistic use of the ancient material, differing from them in its interpretation. The scenario of ancient Judaism which he reconstructed was one of different groups having different, even clashing viewpoints on matters, for example the image of God, and the messianic figures. The Dead Sea groups consisted, according to his view, of conflicting groups, mirroring the differences between the groups from which they developed. Like ancient Israel, ancient Judaism existed within the context of the Mediterranean world, as illustrated in Smith's essays on the wine god and the concept of

helios in ancient Palestine. In the final two essays, on the terms *Jews/Gentiles* and the Maccabees as priests, Smith's capability to work both comprehensively and critically is illustrated quite well. He analyzed these terms in terms of the political history of Palestine, the forming and dissolving of groups in it, and the ever-changing scenario of the community. These essays reveal him to be an expert on the works of Josephus.

This book is highly recommended for Old Testament scholars and those interested in the history of ancient Israel, and especially for those studying Judaism between the 3rd century BC and the 1st century CE. Although the material dates from research a decade or four ago, it is still relevant and complementary to socio-historical investigation. Especially the section on ancient Judaism is of importance for the contemporary study of the Dead Sea Scrolls.
