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Mark Smith, God in Translation: Deities in Cross-Cultural Discourse in the Biblical World

Alan Lenzi

University of the Pacific, alenzi@pacific.edu

God in Translation: Deities in Cross-Cultural Discourse in the Biblical World. By Mark S. Smith. Grand Rapids, Mich.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2010. Pp. xxvi + 382. $18 (paper).

This volume, which first appeared in 2008 as volume 57 of the Forschungen zum Alten Testament series (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck), is fundamentally a response to ideas presented by Jan Assmann in *Moses the Egyptian: The Memory of Egypt in Western Monotheism* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1997) and *The Price of Monotheism* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 2010 [original German, 2003]).

Smith's goals in this book are threefold: first, to elaborate upon Jan Assmann's treatment of translatability of divinity in the ancient Near Eastern and Greco-Roman worlds; second, to challenge and overturn Assmann's idea that the biblical tradition completely lacks any notion of translatability of divinity (Assmann's "Mosiac Distinction")—a lynch pin, according to Smith, in Assmann's theory that Mosaic monotheism, in contrast to polytheism, is inherently intolerant and prone to violence; and third, to enrich our understanding of ancient authors' notions of deity as presented in the Hebrew Bible and other ancient Near Eastern texts. Smith's study casts a wide net both chronologically and geographically, and his research runs deep, as the copious footnotes attest. The brief summary offered here cannot do justice to the cornucopia of evidence he has arrayed. Taken as a whole, Smith has persuasively debunked Assmann's claim about the absence of translatability in the Bible itself. Whether that success overturns Assmann's claims about the relationship between biblically based monotheism and violence, however, is another matter.

Drawing on a solid theoretical base, Smith understands translatability of deity as taking two forms: horizontal translatability, which is "the recognition of others' divinity across (and even despite) cultural [and geographic] boundaries" (p. 96); and vertical translatability, which is the "translation of divinity through time within a particular culture" (p. 81). Biblical authors utilized horizontal translatability in texts from the early monarchy. Starting in Neo-Assyrian times and extending on into the Common Era, however, the biblical authors turned more and more to vertical translatability; that is, they drew on and developed earlier concepts of the biblical deity due to the pressure of changing imperial contexts that threatened Israelite, Jewish, and eventually Christian religious identities.

Smith begins his study in the Late Bronze Age by elaborating on Assmann's recognition that translatability in this era was founded on the westward expansion of the Mesopotamian scribal curriculum and the political context of the great imperial powers. A survey of political treaties and the El Amarna diplomatic correspondence bears witness to the impact of the political *ecumene* (a term borrowed from Assmann) on the translation of deities. As Smith writes, "[t]he larger political setting of this sort of ecumenism is a function of empire, both in their relations with one another and in their relations with their vassals (and vice-versa)." (p. 80). Smith finds that translatability involved both the inter-cultural

identification of specific gods as well as kinds of categories of gods, including rank, function, geography, and gender. Moreover, the practice of translatability could include the use of another culture's god-talk (specific terms and idioms) to describe one's own gods and the recognition of cooperation between one's own gods and those of another land. According to Smith, expressions of translatability in this era were rooted in a familial metaphor: the various political actors imagined themselves to be from the same family, sharing resources and a sense of identity. Smith finds that translatability only occasionally influenced literature (e.g., myths), ritual, and prayer. Thus, for example, one finds a myth transmitted in Hittite that has (mis)appropriated a Canaanite deity's name and epithet.

In chapter two Smith counters Assmann's claim that the Hebrew Bible is monolithically against translatability by examining biblical texts that date back to monarchic times and attest translatability. After a brief discussion of Num. 23:7–10 and Yahweh's identification with Canaanite El, Smith's discussion ranges through Gen. 31:43–53, Judg. 3:20, Judg. 7:12–15, Judg. 11:24, 1 Kings 20, 2 Kings 1:6, and 2 Kings 3:27. Smith reads each of these texts as a reflection of "a monarchic period worldview that sees the various chief gods of the nations . . . on par with one another" (p. 119), a conclusion he supports with several other texts (e.g., 1 Kings 18) that appear to assume the idea of translatability of gods even as the texts polemicize against it. Smith's conclusion in this chapter is similar to what he found in chapter one, but the material in the Bible operates at a regional level due to the fact that the early monarchies in the Bible arose in the general absence of Egyptian or Mesopotamian imperial involvement in the Levant.

In chapter three Smith investigates Ps. 82, Deut. 32:8–9, and Deut. 6:4 as important examples of the biblical rejection of translatability. The remainder of the chapter seeks to understand this shift within the context of the religious and political dynamics in Mesopotamia and their impact on the Levant during the eighth to sixth centuries. The Judean/Israelite rejection of translatability in late monarchic and exilic times was a form of religio-political resistance against successive imperial incursions into the Levant. As Assyrian and Babylonian political power surged, there was a tendency toward inner-cultural "summodeism," Smith's term for "the notion of one deity as the sum and summit of the reality of other deities" within polytheistic Mesopotamia (p. 169). In contrast, as Israelite and Judean political power diminished, translatability was rejected and exclusive monotheism grew increasingly prominent. In the final pages of the chapter Smith offers an interesting comparison of the different responses to empire as manifested in local traditions from Ugarit during the Late Bronze Age and Israel during the Iron Age.

In chapter four Smith draws on Dominic Boyer's work on censors in the former East Germany in order to understand the scribal changes introduced during the transmission of Deut. 32:8–9 and Gen. 14:22, both of which mention Yahweh and El Elyon together. Smith looks at the text critical data for both passages to discover how different scribes used vertical translatability to protect a monotheistic understanding of Yahweh against the perceived threat of polytheism. Moreover, scribes constructed an etiology of idolatry: so-called gods other than Yahweh in the Bible were interpreted as mere idols (see pp. 148–49, 175–80, and 215–16). As Smith writes, "The new foundational story of other gods as 'new gods,' generated in part by the identification of Yahweh and El Elyon, helped to issue in a new monotheistic picture for Israel that would serve as the norm for all time. Thus divine description of the past is divine prescription for the present and future" (p. 215). In a very interesting final section of the chapter Smith uses Boyer's work as a conceptual lens to plumb the social and intellectual contributions of the ancient biblical censors.

Building on Assmann's work, chapters five and six look at translatability in the Greco-Roman context. Smith surveys the translatability of divinity generally in a wide variety of non-Jewish texts in chapter five and the translatability of Yahweh (Iao) in non-Jewish sources, especially magical ones, at the start of chapter six. Smith holds that the interchange of religious officials, the scale and purpose of libraries, and the mobility of common people throughout the eastern Mediterranean in this era were unprecedented, which in turn transformed ideas about translatability of deity. Translatability was no longer an elite undertaking for some political purpose with little (if any) impact on religious experience, as in the Late Bronze Age. Rather, translatability "follows in the wake of empire's effects and the prestige of its literary and philosophical discourse" (p. 326) and becomes "conceptually constitutive" (p. 268) to Greco-Roman religious experience. Against this backdrop Smith raises the issue of local resistance to translatability. The negative Jewish reaction to Antiochus IV Epiphanes' cultic innovation

in the Jerusalem temple as described in 1 and 2 Maccabees and Daniel is Smith's parade example. Despite a proliferation of angels and demons in Jewish apocalyptic and mystical literature and a few attempts at translatability among diaspora Jews (Smith treats possible examples in the Letter of Aristeas, Aristobulus, and the LXX), the Jewish community by and large was resolutely monotheistic and resistant to horizontal translatability.

Smith also looks at some New Testament texts in chapter six to gain insight into translatability of the Gospel in early Christianity. In both Acts (chapters 14, 17, 19) and the Pauline epistles, Smith recognizes that Christians used vertical translatability to understand the transformation of the biblical god in light of Jesus Christ. In Acts, however, Paul also attempts to translate the Christian god into terms his audience would understand (horizontal translatability), though without success. In contrast to Acts, the "Pauline" epistles (1 Cor. 8, 10, Gal. 4, Col. 1–2, and Eph. 2–3 are treated) reject horizontal translatability: "the Christian vision of good and positive divinity [was] ultimately untranslatable to the categories of the larger Greco-Roman world" (p. 320).

In an epilogue Smith assesses the value of Assmann's work and draws out the implications of contemporary scholars' and theologians' work on divine translatability in their political contexts.

Smith offers a sophisticated and useful model for studying ancient notions of deity cross-culturally, effectively expanding upon and refining Assmann's earlier work. He also convincingly demonstrates the centrality of empire in understanding translatability of deity, whether within the political discourse of the Late Bronze Age or the broader cultural and philosophical discourse that followed on expansive imperialism in Greco-Roman times. Smith's historically nuanced treatment successfully enriches our historical understanding of ancient Near Eastern concepts of deity, including that of the biblical authors. He clearly establishes that the biblical authors did, at least early on, practice horizontal translatability, contrary to Assmann's claims.

It is unclear to me, however, that this historicist approach completely vitiates Assmann's ideas about the "Mosaic distinction" more generally. Smith complains that Assmann's treatment of translatability lacks historical detail because Assmann utilizes a "cultural memory" approach. But Smith himself has demonstrated that by and large the biblical scribes transmitting the text were unhappy with vestiges of non-monotheism in the text and attempted to camouflage it. In light of this, Assmann's cultural memory methodology seems rather appropriate for understanding how various post-biblical religious communities appropriated and utilized the predominant view of monotheism in the Bible for their own purposes. For, as Smith shows, exclusivist forms of monotheism, forged in resistance to great empires, became the predominant concept of deity among both early Jews and Christians; and this kind of monotheism would be wielded by Christians (and eventually Muslims) for their own imperial aspirations just a couple of centuries after the New Testament (for which see the excellent work of Garth Fowden, *Empire to Commonwealth: The Consequences of Monotheism in Late Antiquity* [Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994]). Even Smith admits early on in the book, "if Assmann's 'Mosaic distinction' is to be maintained, it would be during the late biblical and post-biblical reception of the Bible" (p. 10). One wonders therefore if Smith's historicist reading is ultimately talking past Assmann.

Still, Smith has offered a very important book for all those interested in understanding the intersection of politics, concepts of deity, and cultural identity in the ancient "biblical" world. It is highly recommended.

ALAN LENZI
UNIVERSITY OF THE PACIFIC