

BEMBRY, J. – Yahweh's Coming of Age. Eisenbrauns, Winona Lake, 2011. (23,5 cm, VII, 163). ISBN 978-1-57506-172-6. \$39.50.

This book, which is an adaptation of a Harvard dissertation supervised by Jo Ann Hackett, offers an examination of the theme of old age in the Old Testament, especially of YHWH. Only in Daniel 7, where he is called the "Ancient of Days", YHWH is portrayed explicitly with old age imagery. The book of Daniel is commonly accepted as a late text (second century BCE). Bembry tries to make it plausible that it was a deliberate choice of the ancient authors in Israel's early traditions to depict YHWH as youthful and strong, much like the Canaanite god Baal, and not as old and possibly weak, like the Canaanite god El. In a later stage in the history of the Israelite/Jewish religion this possible negative association with old age was more or less replaced by the positive one with YHWH as a father. This left room for "recycling" the older Canaanite mythological elements and representing YHWH as an aged deity.

Bembry offers an interesting hypothesis, but it is hard to prove. There are many problems of interpretation and dating of the relevant texts. Also the relation between the texts cannot be solved convincingly. There is the danger of making the data fit into a framework which the ancient authors would probably not have recognized as their own view. The religious reality was probably much more complicated than this relatively simple line of development suggests. Nevertheless, this study offers a very interesting approach to the available data of the religion of ancient Israel and its surrounding cultures, especially Ugarit.

In part I of the book Bembry discusses more in general the ancient texts about old age. In the first chapter (pp. 5-60) he gives a survey of the relevant Biblical texts and a short history of their interpretation. Most attention is paid to the famous text about old age in Qoheleth 12:1-7 (pp. 46-55). With regard to the much discussed problem of interpreting these verses literally, figuratively, or as a combination of the two, he decides to read them "with an openness to both its metaphorical and its literal qualities" (p. 49). This can be regarded as typical of his approach of the texts. It is sound but not ground-breaking. In the evaluation of previous research in this field he dutifully criticizes the few publications on this field in the last decades. In his conclusions, however, he hardly adds new insights. The main line of the texts is that of respect for the elderly, with stories like those of Lot and Isaac as exception to the rule. Old age is described both as a time of trouble and loss, but also as a time "to pass on wisdom and dispense blessings" (p. 60).

It takes less space (in chapter 2, pp. 61-87) to discuss the Ugaritic evidence. As is noted by Bembry, this is of a different nature than the Biblical material, because most of it is related to the description of the gods, especially El. We have to assume that this reflects the views on old age in the human sphere. There can be no doubt about it that El was pictured as an old man, "the father of years" who is praised for his wisdom. Yet he is not always treated with respect, especially not by his daughter Anat. El is also described in the myth of Dawn and Dusk (KTU 1.23) as sexually active. Not everyone will agree with Bembry that in this text El "demonstrates the impotence so common to elderly men" (p. 71) and that the fact that in the end he is able to impregnate two women is some kind of miracle. The evidence from the legends of Danel and Kirta adds very little to the discussion. It is clear that references are made to old men, but we learn very little about the evaluation of the story teller of being old.

More interesting are the iconographic sources discussed by Bembry on pp. 78-86. Here he also uses material from other places of the ancient Levant to show that as a rule El was associated with a full-grown bull, and thus represented as an old, seated ruler, whereas Baal was associated with a bull-calf and thus depicted as a youthful warrior.

The conclusion, again, is not surprising: "The picture of old age at Ugarit is in many ways similar to that of the Hebrew Bible. Senescence has its good and bad sides" (p. 86).

In the third chapter (pp. 91-106) Bembry tries to answer the question why YHWH was not portrayed explicitly with old-age imagery (which in his opinion should be distinguished from attributing eternal life to YHWH) through most of Israel's history. According to Bembry the basic reason is the wish to avoid any association with weakness or with all too human like features. It would have been for the same reason that there are no references to YHWH siring offspring. This would also have been an important criterion in the choice of imagery that was related to or taken from the Canaanite representation of Baal and El. Many elements were taken over from El, but deliberately not his old age.

In the final chapter (pp. 107-150) Bembry explains how finally YHWH did "come of age", according to Daniel 7 describing a vision in which someone called "the Ancient of Days" represents the god of Israel. Here the speculations begin. Bembry assumes that new name for YHWH points to a new development in the way YHWH was pictured in the Jewish religion. This would have been based on the fact that "by the middle of the 2nd century B.C.E. Yahweh's fatherhood was well ensconced" (p. 149). The new name would have been taken from the reservoir of old Canaanite mythic material, which in one way or another had persisted through the ages to be recycled in a time when the association with idolatry was lost. The combination of the "Ancient of Days" with the "Son of Man" in Daniel 7 would remind of the Ugaritic myths in which the old god El transfers some of his power to the younger god Baal. Bembry could have a point in relating the picture of an aged god with the Ugaritic texts about El. There are other examples in this period of the acceptance of religious conceptions that in earlier days were prohibited, for instance concerning matters of life after death. The suggested very close link to the Ugaritic beliefs about El and Baal, however, is not very likely. The association of the "Son of Man" with Baal certainly goes too far. In general Bembry seems to be too positive about the possibility to relate the biblical to the Ugaritic material. When one looks at the available material in the history of the Levant in periods and places more closely related to ancient Israel one sees a so very complicated situation that one becomes reluctant to draw such direct lines. It is a pity that Bembry restricted his attention for this material to the iconographic evidence.

Nevertheless, the survey and discussion of the relevant material in the Bible and in the Ugaritic texts on the topic of (gods of) old age is very useful. The same holds true for the secondary literature. Bembry is much in discussion with John Collins, Frank Moore Cross and Mark Smith. It would have been interesting when he would have paid more attention to the work of Johannes de Moor. Bembry does mention his *The Rise of Yahwism* (although not the revised edition of 1997), but does not evaluate his ideas about the relation between YHWH and El (cf. the review of De Moor of Bembry's book in *RBL* 08/2012). The same can be said about the recent studies on YHWH and his Asherah.

Amsterdam, January 2012

Klaas Spronk