

Remembering Jonathan Z. Smith: Some Personal Reflections

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I want to thank Russel McCutcheon, Brad Stoddard, and all the others responsible for putting together this panel focused on remembering our teacher and colleague Jonathan Z. Smith. I am honored to be a part of it and want to express my personal sympathies to Elaine Smith, Jonathan's wife, and his daughter Siobhan Smith, who are with us this morning, just three days shy of what would have been his 80th birthday (November 21, 1938 – December 30, 2017).

Today I want to relate a few personal memories of Mr. Smith, as we students always called him, as well as an account of how he has so profoundly shaped or, as I will explain, “impressed” my scholarship.

In the neglected book Qohelet, which many know by the awkward name Ecclesiastes (not to be confused with Ecclesiasticus)—appellations that deserve etymological and historical exposition for another occasion—we encounter a two word admonition in Hebrew: *uzkór et-bor'ékah* (זכר את־בראיך): “Remember your creators...” Mr. Smith might well have pointed out that the verb *zakar*, quite literally “to press, or thrust,” was the noun for “male” in Hebrew (lit. “the thrusting one), in contrast to the word “female,” that is quite literally “a hole or cavity” (Genesis 1:27). Accordingly, to remember is quite literally based on “impression,” or formation, as opposed to recollection in the Platonic sense. Further, the form “creators” (Qal masc plural participle in the Masoretic text), *Creatorum tuorum* in the Vulgate, but “corrected” to the

singular κτίσαντος in the LXX, only occurs in the plural here in the entire Hebrew Bible. This, of course, led to all sorts of theological machinations about an allusion to the Trinity in 18th and 19th-century commentaries (Matthew Henry, Adam Clarke, Albert Barnes, et al.). In context, the admonition is to a youth who is to look back upon those who contributed one's formation, whether parents, teachers, or mentors, before the incompetence of older age takes its toll. I hope to do that today, and thus fulfill this ancient prescription of the Jewish Scriptures.

I had never heard of Jonathan Z. Smith, when I arrived at the University of Chicago in October 1972 to begin working on my Ph.D. in New Testament and Early Christianity in the Humanities Division. I had come to study with the late Robert M. Grant (History of Christianity) and Norman Perrin (New Testament). Grant urged me to sign up for Smith's course in "Hellenistic Religions" the Fall quarter, which I did. I still have the mimeographed handouts from that class; usually a primary text, often done by Smith himself for the class meeting, with extensive bibliographical notes. One of the beginning texts we covered was the 3rd millennium BCE Sumerian "Ode to the Pickax":

The hoe (*al*) makes everything prosper, the hoe makes everything flourish. The hoe (*al*) is good barley, the hoe (*al*) is a hunting net (*one ms. has instead: an overseer*). The hoe (*al*) is brick moulds, the hoe (*al*) has made people exist (*jal*). It is the hoe (*al*) that is the strength of young manhood. The hoe (*al*) and the basket are the tools for building cities. It builds (*aldue*) the right kind of house, it cultivates (*aljaja*) the right kind of fields. It is you, hoe, that extend (*dajal*) the good agricultural land! The hoe (*al*) subdues for its owner (*lugal*) any agricultural lands that have been recalcitrant (*bal*) against their owner (*lugal*), any agricultural lands that have not submitted to their owner (*lugal*). It chops the heads off the vile

esparto grasses, yanks them out at their roots, and tears at their stalks. The hoe (*al*) also subdues (*aljaja*) the *hirin* weeds. The hoe (*al*), the implement whose destiny was fixed by father Enlil -- the renowned hoe (*al*)!

I remember as Smith began to work through that text, line-by-line, I found myself wondering, what could any of this possibly have to do with Hellenistic Religions much less my interest in the history of early Christianity. I was soon to find out. It took a semester, but I gradually began to realize that Smith was slowly taking us through texts that illustrated the profound differences in the shifts in cosmology from the ancient Near East to the new world of Hellenism. Little could I understand at the time that various forms of ancient Judaism and early Christianity were fully integrated into this "brave new world" of Hellenistic dualism.

Over the course of that quarter I was exposed to a host of names and texts of which I had never heard, even though I arrived at the University of Chicago with what I thought was a solid M.A. from Pepperdine University in Biblical studies—with my Hebrew, Greek, Latin, French, and German in good shape. The names flew by me: Reitzenstein, Priezendanz, Widgren, Wendland, Prümm, Bieler, Festugière, Nilsson, Nock, Goodenough, Colpe, “Poimandes,” “The Mithras Liturgy,” “The Golden Ass,” “The Prayer of Joseph”—some of which I recognized, most of which I had never heard, and none of which I had read. But more important than assembling a bibliographic reading list to prepare for exams, I slowly began to realize that Smith was up to something far different. This is the Jonathan Z. Smith that famously said he could teach an entire Humanities introduction course from the latest issue of *Time* magazine or the Yellow Pages of any local phonebook.

I begin to read Smith intensely that year. He had never published a book, but many of the articles that appear in his 1978 *Map is Not Territory* (Brill, 1978) were available. Over the next

couple of years several of us who began to gravitate toward Smith's courses and his ideas, collected these articles together, including: "The Garments of Shame" (*HR* 1966), "The Prayer of Joseph" (Brill, 1968), "Earth and Gods" (*HR* 1969), "Birth Upside Down or Right Side Up?" (*HR* 1970), "The Influence of Symbols on Social Change: A Place on Which to Stand" (*Worship* 1970), "*Adde Parvum Parvo magnus Acervus Erit*" (*HR* 1971), "I am a Parrot (Red)" (*HR* 1972), "The Wobbling Pivot" (*JR* 1972), "When the Bough Breaks" (*HR* 1973). In those days photocopying (called "Xeroxing") was beginning to catch on—mostly in the business world, but in a more limited way in universities. One of our group just happened to work for a company that allowed him unlimited personal photocopies done after hours so long as he supplied the paper and ink cartridges. We came up with the idea of putting together a kind of J. Z. Smith "Festschrift," bringing together all of Smith's articles into a nicely bound volume with a short introduction we composed, inspired by his 1974 William Benton Professorship lecture at Chicago "Map is Not Territory,"—which we found utterly ground-breaking.

I will never forget the day a few of us took a copy to Smith's office in the Humanities building, and unceremoniously presented it to him. He was completely surprised, taken aback, but pleased, by the gesture, remarking that he did not realize he had written that much!

I ended up taking half a dozen more courses from Smith as I continued my coursework with Grant, Perrin, McGinn, Ahlstrom, Eliade, Colpe, and several others. My interest in early Christianity continued, but in a way that had been fundamentally transformed by my in-depth exposure to Smith's lectures and published articles.

By 1975 I begin to think about asking Smith if he would agree to direct my dissertation. I planned to deal with Paul's first-person account of his "ascent to Paradise" in 2 Corinthians 12:1-10, and thus the broader phenomenon of "heavenly ascent" in the ancient Mediterranean world.

So far as I knew he had only had one other Ph.D. student dealing with early Christianity. I was later to learn that Smith wrote an entire Ph.D. dissertation on the Gospel of John at Yale, influenced by E. R. Goodenough, but it was stolen out of the back of his parked car and never recovered. In those days we sometimes had only a single typed copy of our work, as working with carbon paper was so tedious. Rather than reproduce it from handwritten notes and drafts, he changed his entire topic and ended up writing on Fraser's *Golden Bough*, as we all know.

Smith agreed to work with me. I was as terrified as I was thrilled. As fate would have it, all of my handwritten notes and research were stolen in 1977 at the Hyde Park post office while I was waiting in line—not for their value but for the Samsonite briefcase I carried them around in and the hope it would contain money or something of market value.

I almost gave up at that point, but Smith related to me the story of his stolen dissertation and encouraged me to go on. Over the next two years, we spent hours going through the chapter drafts of my dissertation one by one--he with his English Ovals and me rolling Drum tobacco. I would send him a draft, he would mark it up with his characteristic blue ink, and we would then go through section by section. I have saved all those drafts with the hundreds of markings and they are of incalculable value to me. He was the same way in returning course papers. His marginal notes were always insightful, both correcting and pointing one to other possible ideas and sources.

These dissertation meetings were cordial, but I can't say they were pleasant. There is nothing I have ever experienced that can compare to a one-on-one with Jonathan Z. Smith going through one's written work! I would go away from those meetings inspired to give things a better try, but with my head spinning with new ideas and insights. Smith was kind but demanding. At the same time, he was incredibly encouraging. He connected me with Morton Smith, Jacob

Neusner, Alan Segal, and other scholars, who assisted in dealing with Jewish mystical and rabbinic texts. He let me know that he thought what I was doing with Paul had never been done before—and was of immense value. I will always remember the day he approved the final draft—and shortly after that wrote a recommendation letter in my behalf for a position at University of Notre Dame--which I got.

Based on all I had learned from Jonathan Z. Smith, my challenge was to present Paul in light of our understanding of Hellenistic Religions. There were five fundamental insights Smith summarizes in his masterful article on "Hellenistic Religion" in the *Encyclopedia Britannica* that were foremost in my thinking. I sought to incorporate these into my treatment of Paul in a way that only Jonathan Z. Smith could guide me through. Here is a summary of those principles using his words:

1. The study of Hellenistic religions is a study of the dynamics of religious persistence and change in this vast and culturally varied area. Almost every religion in this period occurred in both its homeland and in diasporic centers—the foreign cities in which its adherents lived as minority groups.
2. Rather than a god who dwelt in his temple, the diasporic traditions evolved complicated techniques for achieving visions, epiphanies (manifestations of a god), or heavenly journeys to a transcendent god. This led to a change from concern for a religion of national prosperity to one for individual salvation, from focus on a particular ethnic group to concern for every human. The prophet or savior replaced the priest and king as the chief religious figure.
3. The history of Hellenistic religions is rarely the history of genuinely new religions. Rather it is best understood as the study of archaic Mediterranean religions in their

Hellenistic phase within both their native and diasporic settings. It is usually by concentrating on the diaspora that the Hellenistic character of a cult has been described.

4. The archaic religions of the Mediterranean world were primarily religions of etiquette.

At the center of these religions were complex systems governing the interrelationships between gods and humans, individuals and the state, and living people and their ancestors. The entire cosmos was conceived as a vast network of relationships, each component of which, whether divine or human, must know its place and fulfill its appointed role.

5. The old religions of conformity and place no longer spoke to this new religious situation and its questions. Rather than the archaic structures of celebration and conformity to place, the new religious mood spoke of escape and liberation from place and of salvation from an evil, imprisoned world. The characteristic religion of the Hellenistic period was dualistic. People sought to escape from the despotism of this world and its rulers (exemplified by the seven planetary spheres) and to ascend to another world of freedom.

Toward the end of the 1970s, as most of us were finishing up our Ph.D. degrees, we began regular after-hours informal gatherings with Smith in Hyde Park, either at his house or one of ours. We would put drinks out on the table and discuss a given paper or topic. This practice continued years after we graduated, into the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s, after AAR annual meetings for dinner, as well as special gatherings at UC Davis for several years. We sometimes jokingly referred to ourselves as “The Chicago Seven.” In 2007 we published a set of papers from one of these conferences in a special issue of *History of Religions* Vol. 47, No. 2/3 (November 2007/February 2008), dedicated to Smith.

I will close with two personal anecdotes and a quotation. In 1995 Eugene Gallagher and I published the book *Why Waco: Cults and the Battle for Religious Freedom in America* (University of California Press, 1995). We dedicated the book to Jonathan Z. Smith, noting his work on Jonestown that had so influenced us. As we all know, Jonathan detested using the telephone and never used email. We all knew never to try calling him, although over the years we would sometimes call Elaine to work out this or that dinner arrangement. Sometime after Jonathan received the book, he *called* me on my home phone and left a message thanking me: "Jim, I got the book and read it. Thanks a hell of a lot for the dedication. You and Gene have done a great service with this book. I am proud of you both."

Then in 2009, as chair of the Department of Religious Studies at UNC Charlotte, I invited the Smiths to Charlotte, for a lovely spring visit. We had invited Jonathan to give the 25th Anniversary Loy H. Witherspoon lecture--our oldest and most distinguished lecture series at the university. That lecture, "Things Said/Things Done: The Relations of Myth and Ritual," was published by our department and is now online.¹ The lecture hall filled to capacity with university and community folk. That afternoon Jonathan had held a special open seminar with our undergraduate and graduate students, so many of whom had read his works in the course of their studies. Jonathan showed such devotion to the students, giving them extended time as he leaned on his magnificent cane and demonstrated his classic form of gesturing and facial expressions. Smith had a way of pulling students in and letting them know they were full participants in the sacred space of academic discourse.

¹ <https://goldmine.uncc.edu/islandora/object/uncc%3A597#page/1/mode/1up> (accessed June 7, 2019)

Lori Woodall and I, with Jorunn Jacobsen Buckley who joined us on the visit, were able to spend a couple of days of personal time with Jonathan and Elaine. This included several lingering meals and a visit to our UNC Charlotte Botanical Gardens, which Jonathan so immensely enjoyed. After a long lunch I read to him from my latest publication, a collection of poetry by James Whitehead titled *The Panther*, and presented him with a signed copy. He wrote to me two days after his return to Chicago—one of his beautiful handwritten letters in blue ink on notebook paper: "I have spent some time reading and rereading the Panther poems. They are quite wonderful (especially orally), and this resolved quickly my taxonomic question as to whether to shelve them on the 3rd floor with Christian apocrypha or on the second floor with modern and contemporary poetry in clear favor of the latter. I'm grateful for the gift."

Finally, I will close with a quotation from Plato that several of us exchanged upon hearing of Smith's death. It is so quintessentially, "Smith," I can't imagine anything better:

"Well, Socrates, do you wish to leave any directions with us about your children or anything else—anything we can do to serve you?"

"What I always say, Crito," he replied, "nothing new. If you take care of yourselves you will serve me and mine and yourselves, whatever you do, even if you make no promises now... "We will certainly try hard to do as you say," he replied. "But how shall we bury you?" "However you please," he replied, "if you can catch me and I do not get away from you." And he laughed gently...

Such was the end, Echebrates, of our friend, who was, as we may say, of all those of his time whom we have known, the best and wisest and most righteous man.

