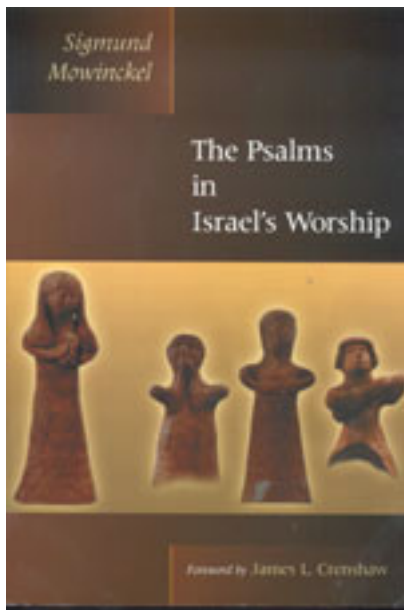


RBL 07/2005



**Mowinckel, Sigmund**

***The Psalms in Israel's Worship***

Translated by D. Ap-Thomas

The Biblical Resource Series

Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004. Pp. 605. Paper. \$40.00.  
ISBN 0802828167.

William P. Brown  
Columbia Theological Seminary  
Decatur, GA 30031

“We wish to become acquainted with psalms as they really were, namely as real prayers uttered by men [*sic*] of flesh and blood praying in actual situations at a definite period” (1:1). So opens Sigmund Mowinckel’s magisterial treatment, a tour de force that either presses the “historical” into Gunkel’s form-critical understanding of psalmic poetry or gingerly draws it out, depending on one’s perspective. In either case, the “historical” for Mowinckel (as well as for Gunkel) did not concern the psalmists’ own historical or personal contexts, their “flesh and blood.” The psalmists were by profession anonymous figures, hiding behind their evocative yet stereotypical poetry (2:136). Mowinckel’s focus, rather, was on the psalm’s *actual* usage in worship (whether intended or not), that is, the psalm’s “cultic situation” with its attendant “ideological and liturgical complexity” (1:106). It was his aim “to reconstruct the *precise cultic occasion* which has *produced* [the psalms]” (1:36, emphasis added), that is, to mine the sociological function of psalmic poetry (1:27).

Mowinckel’s monumental work was originally published in English in 1962 by Abingdon as a revision of his 1951 study, *Offersang og Sangoffer* (“Offering Song and Song Offering”), which itself was a summary of his earlier prolific work on the psalms, including his six-volume *Psalmestudier* (1921–24). Now a handy two-volumes-in-one

reprinting is available, complete with an informative foreword by James L. Crenshaw that provides a sweeping summary of psalms interpretation from the superscriptional evidence to the current diversity of approaches and includes a *very* selective annotated bibliography. (Nothing of Michael D. Goulder's work, for example, is represented.) In view of a growing interest in the performative aspects of the psalms, this reprint could not be better timed.

The opportunity to reread and savor this classic has its rich rewards. Critically reviewing such a classic work, however, is at best awkward in light of all that has been done in psalms research, ritual theory, and history of religions in recent years. Sufficient for this venue is to review the work with fresh eyes and, consequently, with renewed appreciation. In rereading it, I am amazed more now at the compelling force and comprehensive sweep of Mowinckel's engaging presentation. Rhetorically, the work soars. With masterful flair and substantive argumentation, Mowinckel successfully countered a prevailing prejudice of his day, one that deemed liturgical compositions to be of a "certain inferiority" (1:5, 12). Mowinckel exposed and effectively debunked the presumption that the performative and the experiential, the public and the personal, were incompatible.

To his credit, Mowinckel admits up front that his approach rests on brief references and allusions, supplemented by the Mishnah *and* the "imagination" of the interpreter (1:5). But as he pointedly notes, it is hard to imagine the Israelite worshiper fulfilling ritual obligations "alone in his closet, or in the fields" (1:8). Mowinckel's "imagination" carried him to the other extreme of social contexts in his insistence that the majority of the psalms *must* be read in "the midst of the Great Assembly" (1:8), as if cultic practice were exercised exclusively within this most centralized of sacred contexts. Such necessity was built into his limiting definition of cult: "the socially established and regulated holy acts and words in which the encounter and communion of the Deity with the congregation is established, developed, and brought to its ultimate goal" (1:15). More tersely, cult is "a relation in which a religion becomes a vitalizing function as a communion of God and congregation" (1:15); or the "visible and audible expression of the relation between the congregation and the deity" (1:16). In all three formulations, "congregation" makes an appearance. The simple act of prayer and invocation, consequently, is claimed to have originated outside the cult (1:22). For Mowinckel, thus, the cultic was preeminently public in its most expansive, national sense, and anything less was consigned, in effect, to the worshiper's "closet," including, in effect, all forms of familial and "popular" piety unrelated to the temple.

Contextually, Mowinckel articulated a judicious middle position between Gunkel and his followers, on the one hand, and Engnell and the "cult-patternists" or the myth and ritual

school, on the other. But by building on Gunkel's work, Mowinckel turned his teacher's developmental approach on its head: the Norwegian saw cultic formulation as the culmination, not the beginning (and vanishing) point, of the psalm's evolution in biblical Israel. (For Gunkel, the majority of psalms were "spiritualized" imitations of old, now lost, cultic poetry [1:29].) In addition, Mowinckel was not convinced that the older instances of psalmic poetry were characteristically more pure. "Mixed, less pure types" (or better undifferentiated types), rather, indicated greater antiquity, and differentiation was the mark of later development (1:89, 96–97; 2:157).

Mowinckel's cult-functional approach was informed, if not inspired, by the anthropological work of his day, particularly that of V. Grønbech and A. van Gennepe. From them Mowinckel came to discern the dramatic, emotive dimensions of ancient ritual—what I would call the *pathos* of the cult—and in so doing was able to put the personal dimension of religious practice back into public liturgy. It is in the cult, moreover, that Mowinckel considered salvation and creation, redemption and blessing, to be inseparably bound: the "fact of salvation" actualized in the cult enables the renewal of a "worn out" world (1:18).

In addition to his clarion call for a cult-centered hermeneutic, Mowinckel is most well known for his nearly singular concentration on the autumnal New Year's festival, the Israelite cousin of the Babylonian festival. This central festival served as the occasion not just for the enthronement psalms, whose festal shout Mowinckel interpreted in a uniquely dramatic way, but for much of the Psalter. As is well known, criticisms that emerged were varied, including alternative proposals of rival festivals made by Artur Weiser and Hans Joachim Kraus (covenant renewal and Zion festivals, respectively). But Mowinckel's theory has (so far) stood the test of time, while alternative reconstructions, with their equally grand claims, have proved less convincing. (For a thorough review, see J. J. M. Roberts, "Mowinckel's Enthronement Festival: A Review," in *The Book of Psalms: Composition and Reception* [ed. Peter W. Flint and Patrick D. Miller; VTSup 99; Leiden: Brill, 2005], 97–115). Far from inventing something out of thin air, Mowinckel lodged this reconstructed enthronement festival, the festival of YHWH's epiphany, within the well-attested Feast of Tabernacles. And it is safe to say that no study has yet made a convincing argument that the enthronement psalms were essentially postexilic products of the eschatological imagination influenced by Isa 40–66, as Gunkel had claimed. For Mowinckel, the psalms lived and breathed most fully under the monarchy (1:35).

Regarding Mowinckel's translation of *YHWH mlk/mlk YHWH*, studies of linguistic evidence remain inconclusive. But regardless, Mowinckel's *explanation* of the festal proclamation remains sufficiently nuanced: the formula in no way implies that YHWH's

rule is *not* eternal, much less that Israel's God must be counted among the dying and rising deities of the ancient Near East (1:137). Rather, the enthronement festival reenacted a defining experience of YHWH's rule *for the present* (1:110). The work of liturgy is more than the exercise of the worshiper's imagination; objective reality is itself shaped in the liturgical act (1:111). According to Mowinckel, "in the cult the fact of salvation is re-experienced as a new and actual reality" (1:115). Or more succinctly: "Yahweh is *ever anew* witnessed as 'coming' " (ibid., emphasis added).

On one level, Mowinckel treated the psalms as puzzle pieces that when fitted together reveal the rich choreography of movement and sound (and one could add sight) of First Temple worship. Psalm 24, for example, refers to ritualized activity outside the temple's outer gate during a royal procession, while Ps 118 points to events before and after entrance through the inner gate (1:180). Other reconstructions, however, rest on slimmer evidence, such as Pss 46 and 48 presupposing a "ritual sham fight" (1:246)

On a deeper and more significant level, Mowinckel recovered the corporate background of many psalms, if not the entire Psalter. More often than not, the "I" of the psalms was no private, isolated individual. Such stress on "corporate personality" (1:38) prompted Mowinckel to address the royal psalms first before treating the more generically based categories of psalmic poetry, beginning with the "hymn of praise." His thoroughgoing cult-corporate perspective led him to view the righteous and the wicked in the psalms as exclusively national entities, as Israel and "the heathen' oppressors" (1:208), rather than as possible markers of internal conflict. Mowinckel's insistence on this point, in retrospect at least, seems reactionary to the socioeconomic view espoused by others in his day, including Gunkel (1:30; 2:86). Only the psalms of illness, Mowinckel conceded, indicate a more individualized context. Here Mowinckel's imagination reveals an uncharacteristic reticence: "in many cases it is impossible to say anything certain about [the rhetoric of suffering in the psalms]" (2:18). Nevertheless, Mowinckel insisted that the line between a psalm of illness and a royal lament is "very vague" (2:16). Despite the slippery slope, one point emerges that remains indisputable, namely, the thoroughly "general wording" that characterizes the rhetoric of distress in the psalms. Recognizing this point opens the way toward discerning greater literary coherence in, for example, Ps 51 with its concluding two verses (2:17).

Particularly suggestive for this reader is Mowinckel's valiant foray into the murky world of authorship and composition, whereby Mowinckel shifted the focus from the world of the author to that of the community. Consistent with his focus, the superscription *ledavid* denotes royal function rather than single authorship. But it is toward the end of his treatment that Mowinckel probed quite profoundly the relationship between the psalmist and the (intended) speaker. His discussion cautions all interpreters of Psalms to be more

careful when relating the “psalmist” to the voice profiled in any given psalm (2:133–36). The speaking “I” is not the psalmist, for the psalm, as liturgy, is presented “on behalf of somebody else” (2:135). Though counted among the professional temple singers, the psalmist remains anonymous (like any good editor today!). The point of contact between psalmist and speaker is the psalmist’s poetic imagination at work on behalf of the worshiper. It was the power of poetic imagination that led Mowinckel to claim that the psalmist/author of Ps 137 was actually *not* among the exiles (2:130). Whereas a more contemporary focus would wonder how hegemonic the connection was between the psalmist and the worshiper, Mowinckel’s point is that the connection was established first and foremost by an act of empathic imagination, a fact that any liturgist and hymn writer today, in addition to an erudite Norwegian biblical scholar, can appreciate. Of course, *where* this poetic act of empathy leads in shaping the worshiper and the worshipping community remains an open question.

Finally, as every psalm interpreter has her favorites, it is worth noting what Mowinckel left outside his canon. For Mowinckel, “many” of the psalms were the product of “artistic hack-work,” and some minus the “artistic” (2:132). Although he does not identify them, Ps 119 is evidently among them (2:158). More broadly, Mowinckel’s discussion of the “learned psalmography” that composed the “didactic and problem psalms” (labels that are preferable, in my opinion, over the “wisdom psalms”) is laid out with calculated ambivalence. Noncultic in origin, the products of late psalm-writing represent a “disintegration of the [psalmic] style” (2:111). Severed from its cultic moorings, the didactic psalm is a blatant “*contradictio in adjecto*” (2:139). The *real* psalmist, by contrast, “hides wholly behind the worshipper and enters completely into him and his situation” (2:140). In other words, the didactic psalmist exercises too heavy a hand, while the cultic psalmist is innocent of inculcation! Intending to rescue the cultic from scholarly disparagement, Mowinckel swung the pendulum too far the other way in his estimation (or lack thereof) of the “didactic psalms.” Worship, whether modern or ancient, is not without its didactic aspects. Here Mowinckel missed an important step in consolidating further the bewildering variety of psalms in the Psalter. Nevertheless, it is to Mowinckel’s credit that he pays these late psalmographers some due: the “learned,” while leaving their own stamp on the Psalter with their “inferior” and “arid” didactic psalms (2:158), were also the “guardians of the spiritual and literary traditions of the Temple” (2:114), making possible the collections that constituted the Psalter. Still, as he was quick to point out, it was liturgy, more by accident than by intent, that eventually trumped the editors’ didactic aims (2:206) once all the psalms were appropriated in synagogue worship. Yet, ironically enough, Mowinckel concludes the discussion (in chapter 22, before his discussion of technical terms and his “additional notes”) with his sole reference to the worshipful use of psalms outside the temple, namely, the Hallel sung

during Passover in the home, an example of the “private (!) use of psalm singing” (2:206).

Much has advanced in Psalms research the last six decades that has both stretched and questioned many of Mowinckel’s points, as well as simply moved in different directions, particularly with the current emphasis on the Psalter’s final shape. But this *magnum opus* remains at least an essential companion, if not a guide, for those interested in the vital world of ancient Israel’s cultic use of psalms. A successor as rich and comprehensive as his remains far off on the horizon.