

Psalms: Liturgical Approaches to the Psalms (Cultus / Ritual)

Author: Dr. Bruce Waltke | Session 19

Sponsored by Biblicalelearning.org by Ted Hildebrandt

Keywords

Cultus, Ritual, Liturgical Approach, Sigmund Mowinckel, Hermann Gunkel, Enthronement Psalms, Chaoskampf, Fall Festival, Temple, Psalm 93

Abstract

In Lecture 19, Dr. Bruce Waltke examines the liturgical approach to the Psalms, also known as the cultic or ritual approach, which focuses on the external, congregational expressions of Israel's worship. He surveys key academic theories, comparing Sigmund Mowinckel's proposal of an annual enthronement festival influenced by ancient Near Eastern chaoskampf myths with Hermann Gunkel's form-critical perspective and Ernst Weiser's covenant-renewal view. Waltke offers a balanced critique, acknowledging the illumination provided by Near Eastern mythic imagery (such as in Psalm 93) while defending the biblical narrative and the historical primacy of Davidic authorship and private prayer origin. Finally, he outlines the symbolic, typical, sacramental, and propaganda functions of the temple liturgy, using Psalm 73 to demonstrate how congregational worship in the sanctuary resolves personal spiritual crisis.

Outline

I. Introduction and Course Context

A. Review of Previous Hermeneutical Approaches

1. Hermeneutical Foundation: Spiritual approach, sympathy with human author, scientific study of text
2. Historical and Royal Approach: Davidic authorship and royal hymnbook framework
3. Literary Form Categories: Poetry over against narrative/prose
4. Form Criticism (Gattungen): Hymns of praise, grateful praise, laments, and songs of trust

B. Transition to Lecture 17/19: The Liturgical Approach (Sitz im Leben / Page 256 of Notes)

II. Defining the "Cultus" and Liturgical Approach

A. Terminology Clarification

1. Popular English usage vs. Academic definition
2. Cultus as external, concrete expression of religion and structured experience

B. Major Scholarly Definitions

1. Sigmund Mowinckel: Socially regulated holy acts and words establishing divine-human communion
2. Ernst Eichrodt: External religious actions performed by appointed exponents in set forms
3. Kurt Goldhammer: Patterned, symbolic, meaningful activity connecting worshipers

C. Characteristics of Liturgical Worship

1. Material/Concrete vs. Purely inward or spiritual feelings
2. Regulated/Set forms vs. Spontaneity (Old Testament strict structure vs. New Testament flexibility)
3. Congregational worship vs. Individual isolation
4. Covenantal requirements for approaching God (Confession of sin, Psalm 1 law-keeper)

III. Historical-Critical Perspectives on the Cultus

A. Hermann Gunkel's Form-Critical View

1. Rejection of superscripts/titles as trivia and unhistorical
2. Adoption of Wellhausen's evolutionary hypothesis (Post-exilic dating)
3. View of Psalter as democratized private prayers from the synagogue imitating pre-exilic cultic forms

B. Sigmund Mowinckel's Cultic Reconstruction

1. Temple setting and the pre-exilic Autumn/Fall Festival
2. Annual Enthronement Festival of Yahweh (Translating Adonai Malach as "Yahweh has become King")
3. Influence of Ancient Near Eastern Myths (Babylonian Akitu festival for Marduk; Ugaritic Baal vs. Mot/Yam Chaaskampf)
4. Sacramental function of cultic reenactment and creative effective word

C. Other Academic Views (e.g., Artur Weiser's Sinai Covenant Renewal Festival)

IV. Evaluation and Critique of the Cultic/Enthronement Hypothesis

A. Positive Contributions and Insights

1. Historical prominence of the Fall Festival (Sukkot/New Year/Day of Atonement) during the Monarchy (1 Kings 8)
2. Grammatical viability of Adonai Malach ("Yahweh reigns" / "Yahweh has become King")
3. Illumination of mythic/cosmic imagery for divine creation and victory over chaos (Exegesis of Psalm 93)

B. Negative Critiques and Methodological Flaws

1. Reliance on pagan ANE myths rather than Mosaic revelation
2. Lack of scriptural warrant for an annual enthronement ritual

3. Unrestrained, hypothetical reconstructions rejected by Gunkel and modern scholars
4. Primacy of Davidic authorship and private prayers moving into public temple use

V. Functions of the Cultus and Temple Liturgy

A. Four Main Functions

1. Symbolic: Concrete representation of spiritual realities (Ark, Mercy Seat, Cherubim)
2. Typical: Prefiguring greater spiritual realities and Christ
3. Sacramental: Experiencing divine presence through covenantal means
4. Artistic Propaganda: Truthfully proclaiming and advocating divine reality

B. Case Study: Resolution of Spiritual Crisis in Psalm 73

1. The Crisis: Envy of the prosperous wicked vs. Suffering of the righteous
2. The Turning Point: Entering the sanctuary of God (Psalm 73:17)
3. The Resolution: Realization of final destinies, eternal presence, and God as ultimate portion