

Dr. Bruce Waltke, Psalms, Liturgical Approach, Cultus/Ritual, Session 19, 6-min. Video Overview

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Welcome to The Explainer. We're diving into a really cool academic theory today, one that totally flips how you might think about the biblical psalms. What if they weren't quiet poems, but more like dramatic scripts for a huge public show? Let's just jump right in with this line from Psalm 93.

It's intense, right? I mean, you can practically hear those pounding waves. But here's the thing. What if it's more than just pretty powerful words? What if something else is happening here? And yeah, that is the central mystery we're looking at.

There's this theory; it's called the liturgical approach. And it basically says we're missing the whole picture, the original context. It argues these psalms weren't just for quiet reading.

No, they were part of these big live community worship events. So that verse, it wasn't just read; it was lived; it was experienced. Okay, so to really dig into this mystery, we need the right tool for the job.

And in the world of biblical scholarship, that tool is a concept called cultus. Now, I know what you're thinking. That word cult, it sounds a little alarming in English, right? But as Dr. Bruce Waltke points out, that's not at all what scholars mean.

Cultus is really just a technical term. It just means the established rituals, the public performance of faith. You know, think about a big formal church service, or even something like a graduation ceremony, or hey, even the rituals at a huge sporting event.

It's the how of public worship, the stuff you do together. The scholar Sigmund Moenkel, and you're going to want to remember that name. He's a huge player in this whole story.

He defined it as all the shared words and actions that connect a community to God. So it's not just about what you believe in your heart. It's about worship that's done together out loud as a whole community.

So where did this idea even come from? Well, it didn't just pop up out of thin air. It actually came out of this really intense debate between two, well, you could call them scholarly detectives. It was a teacher and his student, and they were both trying to figure out the original setting of the Psalms.

Okay, so in one corner, you've got the heavyweight scholar Hermann Gunkel. His take was that the Psalms were written pretty late, probably by private individuals for the synagogue, and they were basically just riffing on older temple styles. But then his own student, Sigmund Moenkel, takes a look at the exact same evidence and comes up with something completely different, a totally radical conclusion.

Mowinckel's big idea was this. A lot of these Psalms weren't just used in the temple. No, they were the actual script for a gigantic annual festival, a festival where the people of Israel would put on this huge dramatic performance, reenacting God becoming king over all of creation.

Now, where did he get this idea? Well, he looked around at the neighboring cultures, like the Babylonians. They had this yearly festival where they'd act out their God Marduk's big victory over chaos, all to make sure the new year would be orderly and prosperous. Mowinckel basically said, hey, what if Israel did something similar? He imagined this massive dramatic performance and the climax, the whole crowd shouting in unison that God has become king, like it was happening right then and there.

All right, let's bring it all back. How does this pretty controversial theory help us crack the case of our original mystery, Psalm 93? You remember this verse, right? The seas have lifted up their voice. Well, if you look at it through the lens of Mowinckel's big festival idea, it's not just poetic imagery anymore, not by a long shot.

It suddenly becomes a key scene in this huge cosmic drama. We're talking actors, a plot, and really high stakes. And this is where the theory really shines.

Those pounding waves, they aren't just water. They're the bad guy, the enemy, chaos itself. And God, he's not just some abstract idea.

He's the hero, the victorious warrior. And his majesty is the trophy he won from that epic battle. And the big finish? His temple is established, standing firm as the center of this brand-new ordered world.

All of a sudden, this poem has a plot, a hero, and a villain. It's a whole story. So, what's the takeaway here? What's the final verdict on all this? Well, to be honest, Mowinckel's big theory about this one single massive festival is mostly seen as too speculative by scholars today.

There's just not enough hard proof. But, and this is a big but, its impact was absolutely revolutionary. It completely changed the game for how we read the Psalms.

Yeah, the biggest problem for critics is simple. There's no direct evidence for this specific festival in the Bible itself. They argue that, okay, the parallels to other cultures are interesting, for sure.

But it seems like Mowinckel basically stitched together an entire national event from just little fragments and clues, kind of forcing an outside idea onto Israel's worship. In fact, his old teacher, Gunkel, famously called the whole thing pure imagination. Ouch.

But honestly, the real legacy here isn't about whether Mowinckel got every single detail right. It's about the fundamental question his work makes us ask. It forces a huge shift in our focus, away from a quiet, private reading, to a loud, public, powerful, shared experience.

It makes us see these texts, not just as words on a page, but as the main event of a living, breathing performance. And that's really the lasting power of this whole approach. It challenges us to hear a Psalm, not as a silent poem, but as the roar of a crowd.

It transforms these ancient words from static text on a page into living, breathing artifacts of a community's faith. And really, it all just starts by asking one simple but powerful question. What was the original setting?