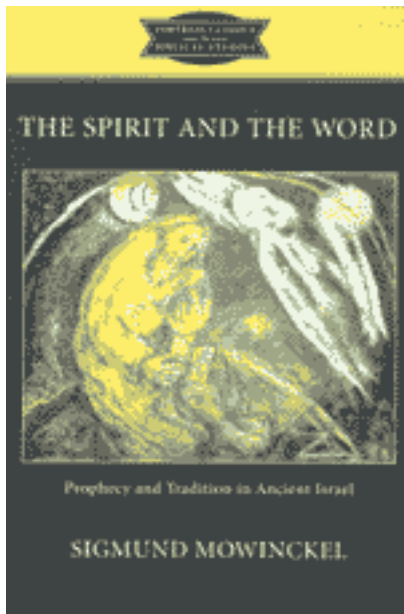


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Mowinckel, Sigmund
Edited by K. C. Hanson

The Spirit and the Word: Prophecy and Tradition in Ancient Israel

Fortress Classics in Biblical Studies

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The work of Sigmund Mowinckel (1884–1965) has stimulated and enriched biblical scholarship since the 1930s, with his last publication (*Religion and Cult*) appearing in English translation in 1981. Now Fortress Press has republished Mowinckel's difficult-to-find *Prophecy and Tradition: The Prophetic Books in Light of the Study of the Growth and History of Tradition* (Oslo, 1946). This book, long out of print, plus two additional essays, "The 'Spirit' and the 'Word' in the Pre-exilic Reforming Prophets" (*JBL* 53 [1934]: 199–227) and chapter 11 from Mowinckel's *Psalmestudien*, vol. 3 (Oslo, 1922), have been combined by editor K. C. Hanson into a new volume entitled *The Spirit and the Word: Prophecy and Tradition in Ancient Israel*. Dr. Hanson provides a helpful editor's forward that situates Mowinckel in the currents of European biblical scholarship. He expands the author's original notes with concise references to newer literature and also provides the book with bibliographies not only of Mowinckel's publications in English but also of assessments of his work, including select bibliographies on tradition history and prophecy. The reader will greatly appreciate that Dr. Hanson has improved the difficult, at times turgid, prose of Mowinckel's original English.

This new publication contains three parts: 1: The Relationship of Methods (chs. 1–2); 2: Tradition History and the Study of the Prophets (chs. 3–9); 3: The Prophetic Experience

(chs. 10–11). The discussion of methods in part 1 lays out in detail Mowinckel’s case for the importance of oral tradition and its relationship to written tradition in the Old Testament. The author defines the method he liked to call the “traditio-historical approach” (for him this meant both form-criticism and tradition history), demonstrates how “the traditio-historical approach to investigate the Old Testament has long been fruitful,” and presents what he thinks are its specific tasks.

Following Gunkel and Gressmann, Mowinckel recognizes the limits of source criticism, with its focus on the Old Testament as literature, and wants to “move beyond the schematization of literary [source] criticism to new problems and further results” (6). Mowinckel also understands himself to build on the works of other Scandinavian scholars who argued for the importance of oral tradition (e.g., Nyberg and Birkeland), but he distances himself from Engnell’s view that literary criticism is bankrupt and inadequate. For Mowinckel, traditio- and literary criticism answered mostly different questions but can and must be used together. Biblical scholars are, of course, familiar enough with textbook descriptions of how interpretive methods developed in the twentieth century, but it is surely worth the effort, and stimulating as well, to revisit the way Mowinckel, very much in the “school” of Gunkel and Gressmann, presents the case for studying oral forms and traditions as a path to the dynamic meaning of Scripture.

In Part 2 Mowinckel demonstrates how the traditio-historical method applies to the prophetic material. Like Gunkel, he begins by identifying the individual units or sayings within complexes of traditions and then moves on to the question of how the units have been arranged in the tradition, defending Gunkel and Gressmann against the charge that their analyses never reach a synthesis of the whole. Mowinckel himself is greatly interested in the dynamic growth of the tradition and the meaning of patterns and arrangements that emerge. Far from imposing a preexisting scheme on the material, he claims that arrangements of prophetic sayings into meaningful patterns is easily recognizable.

A key example is the well-known sequence of prophecies of disaster followed by promises of salvation. Since Mowinckel’s time, much has been written on the redactional arrangements of prophetic sayings, both confirming and extending his insights. Current interest on the final, written form of a prophetic book (for example, the work of the Society of Biblical Literature Seminar on the “Formation of the Book of Isaiah”) may be traced to some of the issues Mowinckel and others grappled with more than a half-century ago. But current readers will spot, here and there, elements in his method that no longer seem relevant or persuasive. For example, to use “human psychology” as a basis for recognizing a redactional scheme will likely persuade very few. He writes, “It is the principle inherent in the matter and in human psychology itself, namely, that the

prophecies of disaster and the threats come first, followed by the promises” (45; e.g., the tradition complexes in Isa 1:2–31; 6:1–9:6; Mic 1–5; 6–7). But Mowinckel clearly went beyond Gunkel and the early form critics when he claimed that the disaster-salvation pattern in prophetic complexes shaped by traditions was influenced by cultic-mythic views of reality, although he attributed, finally, more weight to the “actual history and spiritual situation” of the prophetic disciples than to any ritual pattern.

In reading Mowinckel today, when the context and climate of studying the prophets has largely moved beyond the issues of tradition-historical analysis, one might be tempted to think that Mowinckel’s interests are now “old hat.” But in this reviewer’s judgment, such a view would be a mistake. Students of Old Testament prophecy in the twenty-first century are greatly aided, even if their current preoccupation is with the final or canonical form of the text, in knowing the history of tradition and transmission of original prophetic sayings. Ignorance of the process of formation cannot really help us understand the written text before us.

The two essays in Part 3 take up matters that extend beyond the tradition-historical method. In the *JBL* essay (1934), Mowinckel concludes that the “reforming prophets” founded their legitimacy not upon a conception of Yahweh’s *ruah* but upon a rational, knowable, moral content of Yahweh’s will for justice. The book’s final chapter, drawn from the author’s *Psalmstudien*, exhibits Mowinckel’s particular understanding of prophetic elements in the Psalter and such matters as the relationship between prophet and cult. The chapter is still thought-provoking, although in many instances dated, but it still remains the starting point for students of cultic liturgies and prophetic oracles in the Psalms.

This small volume takes its place in a fine, new series, Fortress Press Classics in Biblical Studies. Like the others (Schweitzer, Gunkel, Jeremias, Perrin, Zimmerli [forthcoming]), this affordable and most useful volume is a must on the shelf of the seminarian, pastor, and biblical scholar.