Hjelde, Sigurd

Sigmund Mowinckel und seine Zeit: Leben und Werk eines norwegischen Alttestamentlers

Forschungen zum Alten Testament 50


Mark E. Biddle
Baptist Theological Seminary at Richmond
Richmond, Virginia

This intellectual biography of a giant in the field of Old Testament studies offers a combination biography and history of the discipline of Old Testament studies, addressing elements of the history of the Norwegian Church and of Norwegian higher education, particularly with regard to Mowinckel’s position in the tension between church and academy, between conservative and liberal theology, and between theology and religious studies (2–3). Hjelde divides his task into two major sections. Six biographical chapters (107 pages) outline the periods in Mowinckel’s life. Eight thematic chapters (210 pages) then examine Mowinckel’s relationship to the church and Christianity, his work as a teacher, three focal features of his Old Testament scholarship, and his work as a Bible translator and as a preacher. The disproportionality between the two major sections of the work reflects both the nature of the sources (for the biographical section, Hjelde relied largely on Mowinckel’s personal papers, including correspondence with his family and his teachers S. Michelet and H. Gunkel; for the thematic section, of course, Mowinckel’s publications and scholarly reaction to them) and the intention of the work, which is to offer an account of Mowinckel’s thought in historical context.

Hjelde describes the oldest son of a highly regarded Norwegian gentleman pastor and amateur orientalist who grew up in a southern regional center (Beiarn, population 1,700)
and went away at age fourteen to school in Bergen (population 72,000), where he first demonstrated an affinity for academics (finishing with seven firsts and five seconds), although an affinity for mischief may have prevented him from attaining the same reputation for citizenship with some of his teachers. Mowinckel studied theology at Kristiania in a university context in which the liberal-academic versus conservative-confessional dichotomy had ripened to the point that conservatives had found it necessary to establish a competing “Church Theology Faculty.” According to his own testimony, Mowinckel chose theology because of a “theoretical” interest in religion as a historical and social datum, not in response to a sense of pastoral calling. His scholarly promise became evident with the publication, soon after completing his initial studies, of two articles on the prophetic phenomenon in the *Norsk Theologisk Tidsskrift* (1909, 1910) in which he distinguished between seers as ecstatics, *nebi‘im* as enthusiasts, and the classical prophets (specifically Amos, Hosea, Micah, Zephaniah, and Jeremiah) as a new phenomenon.

After an interim spent at home with his parents and then teaching religion, Norwegian, and history at the gymnasium in Egersund, where he demonstrated a talent for teaching, Mowinckel journeyed to Germany to study Assyriology with Peter Jensen at Marburg (1911). He soon found that he had little regard for Jensen’s pan-Babylonianism, although he considered him an outstanding teacher of languages. More to the point, Mowinckel found cuneiform tedious and came to the awareness that he was not meant to be a philologist. Taken together, he concluded that (at least for him) Assyriology was not quite so key for Old Testament studies as he had once thought. His focus on the Old Testament became sharper, a focus that brought him to Giessen in the summer term of 1912 to hear Herman Gunkel, whom he considered simply brilliant. Before departing Germany a short year later and after a few false starts, Mowinckel had decided upon Ezra-Nehemiah as the subject for a doctoral dissertation and had begun serious work. Letters, especially to his younger brother, reveal that while his studies were progressing nicely, Mowinckel’s personal life was dominated by financial worries, concerns about future job prospects, and difficulties with the German language, German weather, homesickness, German food, German culture, and Germans.

Mowinckel’s progress toward the doctorate was impeded by tuberculosis and a period in the sanitarium. Even this obstacle, however, offered opportunities. In the sanitarium, Mowinckel met his future wife, understandably found himself confronting existential questions that resulted in a significant deepening and redefinition of his personal faith, and, the rigors of convalescence notwithstanding, found time to write the influential *Zur*

1. In a letter to Michelet, Mowinckel commented, “Ich spreche leider sehr viel besser [sic] Deutsch mit mir selbst als mit den Deutschen” (60).
Komposition des Buches Jeremias. Regarding his faith experience, he would later comment that he had come to understand that conversion is coming to God, not to a theology, and that Christ is other than any explanation of him. This sanitarium experience also prompted Mowinckel to remediate the course in practical theology he had previously skipped. Incidentally, his assessment of that course of study anticipates contemporary doubts that any course of training in practical theology can fully prepare future pastors for what they will confront in practice (76). Upon recovery from tuberculosis, Mowinckel submitted his Ezra-Nehemiah study in February/March 1916. In it, Mowinckel argued that Nehemiah’s memoir can best be compared to Mesopotamian royal inscriptions (Assyriology!) and offered a historical reconstruction of the Jewish community during the Persian period.

Hjelde quickly surveys Mowinckel’s mature years. At thirty-two, he married Karoline (Caro) Simonsen, a Methodist, with whom he had two daughters. Through her influence, he had a second formative religious encounter with the Oxford Movement. Soon he became a leader in and unofficial spokesman for the Movement. He became more active in the church, finally seeking ordination as a fifty-five-year-old. He continued to teach, write, and preach until near the very end of his life.

While cursory in many respects, Hjelde’s portrayal of Mowinckel’s biography succeeds in exposing the key themes that governed his subject’s intellectual and scholarly life. These themes resurface in the core of this examination of Mowinckel’s life and work, the section that examines, of course, Mowinckel’s Old Testament scholarship. Three chapters examine Mowinckel’s work on the Psalter, consonant with his lifelong concern with worship (the cult) as the center of religion, his engagement with the so-called Uppsala school in a controversy over the utility of source criticism and the significance of sacral kingship as a category for interpreting Israel’s messianic hopes, where his interest in God’s action and purposes in history appears, and his attention to the prophetic literature, where Mowinckel’s relationship to the church and Christianity found scholarly expression in his understanding of the relationship between theology and religious studies.

Mowinckel saw his approach to the Psalms as an extension of Gunkel’s form-critical insights. Since the *Sitz im Leben* of the Psalter was the cult, if one can reconstruct the specific liturgical context of individual psalms, one has found the key to interpretation. In six *Psalmenstudien* (1921–24), Mowinckel attempted to execute this research program. The first argued that the enemies in the psalms of individual lament were “spellcasters.” In the second, and probably best-known, study, Mowinckel rejected the historical (psalms as references to some historical king of Judah/Israel) and eschatological (as references to the coming Messiah) approaches to the so-called enthronement psalms in favor of a
“cultic” interpretation of these psalms as the texts for the ritual, with a Babylonian counterpart, celebrating YHWH’s kingship on New Year’s Day. The less influential studies three through six argued that cultic prophecy had a fixed place in Israel’s cult, dealt with a number of technical terms, argued that blessing and cursing were regular components of worship, and located the psalmists in the circles surrounding the temple, respectively. Years later (1951), Mowinckel’s *The Psalms in Israel’s Worship* reflected largely the same views, although Mowinckel had modified his identification of the enemy, acknowledged the “eschatological” aspects of the enthronement psalms, and become willing to entertain a partial “rehabilitation” of the collective interpretation of the first-person singular pronoun in the Psalter.

Many familiar with Mowinckel but unable to read Scandinavian languages, in which much of the debate was conducted, may associate Mowinckel’s concentration on the cult with the myth-and-ritual approach of the Uppsala school and its insistence on the centrality, in not exclusivity, of oral tradition. In fact, Mowinckel remained convinced of the usefulness of literary criticism throughout his career, publishing source-critical studies of Canticles, Job, Isaiah, the Decalogue, and the Pentateuch. While he respected the importance of oral traditions, he warned against excess and one-sidedness and was interested in developing precision regarding the identification of oral tradition and in defining the limits of the method. Sacral kingship and the Jewish messianic hope figured prominently in the debate. As defined by S. H. Hooker, sacral kingship essentially hinged on the identification of god and king. Mowinckel objected against treating all gods in all religions according to a single model, against a definition of a “high god” so broad as to be meaningless, and, specifically, against this identification of the high god and king. As related to the Israelite Messiah concept, in particular, the Uppsala school’s effort to understand the Suffering Servant in relation to the Babylonian New Year’s festival or to treat the Servant as a Tammuz figure mistakenly restricted the biblical Messiah to an eschatological figure, in Mowinckel’s view. In contrast, he was careful in his 1951 publication (*He That Cometh*) to distinguish the Son of Man, Messiah, and Suffering Servant figures in terms of tradition history. While Messiah is a future-oriented political term, it is devoid of eschatology. Only the frustration of Israel’s hopes for political restoration gave birth over time to eschatology proper.

Finally, Hjelde depicts Mowinckel before 1930 as a typical liberal intellectual who emphasized Christian freedom, being instead of doing, and antilegealism. He criticized descendents of the previous century’s Awakening for abandoning efforts at reform from within the church and for establishing parachurch institutions instead. He advocated toleration of divorce and remarriage, considered the religious impulse a fundamental psychological drive, and viewed religion as part of culture that develops along with its host. For Mowinckel, the ideal “supreme” religion is, therefore, a historical rarity,
observable notably in Jesus, Paul, and Luther. Then Mowinckel encountered the Oxford Movement, which taught him the importance of the confession of sin and of surrender to God’s will. Rather than revise his theology, however, he shifted attention to the problem of scripture. How can one develop a historical concept of scripture in which both the human and the divine can find full expression? Over the course of his career, Mowinckel offered several responses to this question. A 1922 article in Norwegian described the Old Testament as the revelation of God but, simultaneously, as a human book, amenable to historical, literary, and comparative methods of study. It reveals God in a progressive manner essentially identical with the history of Israelite religion. By 1937, he would emphasize, in terms reminiscent of Barth and the Oxford Movement, that the word of God is always specific and current, calling individuals and communities to decision and action. The task for biblical theologians is to overcome the temporal and cultural distance in order to hear the call of God’s word. This effort was particularly in evidence in Mowinckel’s more popular treatments of the prophets in the 1930s and 1940s, where he argued that the problem of the times was a lack of purpose. His activity as a preacher conformed in every respect to the pattern established in his popular publications and personal devotion. (Hjelde helpfully includes three examples of Mowinckel’s preaching from various periods in his life.) Mowinckel came to recognize, on the one hand, that liberal theology tended to understand Christianity more as a worldview than as the power of God to re-create individuals and the world. The strong ethical content of Awakening Christianity, on the other, easily became “universal humanism rather than a revolutionary force” (135). Ultimately, after his encounter with the Oxford Movement, Mowinckel identified theologically with K. Barth—although in Mowinckel’s view Barth’s Christianity was still a matter of the head rather than the heart.

Readers will also find a number of lesser details reported in Hjelde’s study of interest. Mowinckel declined offers to replace B. Duhm at Basel and G. Hölscher at Marburg in order to fulfill his obligation to Kristiania—where early in his career a position was created specifically for him. It is puzzling, therefore, that, despite his devotion to his university, the university granted only one doctorate in Old Testament during his tenure. Mowinckel’s interest in literature led him to become involved in the controversy concerning Norwegian language reforms (1907, 1917, 1938), especially with regard to Bible translation. Most surprising, and understandably disappointing for Mowinckel himself, are the insights offered here on Mowinckel’s relationship with his teacher, H. Gunkel. Gunkel rejected Mowinckel’s article on “Hypostasis” for *Religion in Geschichte und Gegenwart* without explanation or even notification. To the publisher, Gunkel complained that it was too long and off the mark. In his 1926 commentary on the Psalms, Gunkel criticized Mowinckel’s *Psalmenstudien*, objecting that many psalm texts point to *Sitze im Leben* beyond the cult and that no text requires that the enemy be understood as
Mowinckel suggested. Although Mowinckel regarded himself as Gunkel’s loyal student, the master seemed only to regard his student’s work as a disappointment.

Hjelde has done the world of Old Testament scholarship a major service, especially since many of the materials reflected in this study are available only in Norwegian. His analysis is balanced and thorough. A very helpful bibliography includes Mowinckel’s more popular publications alongside his more prominent scholarship. A few well-chosen photographs supplement the book. If the study has a weakness, it may be that the somewhat artificial organization of the book makes it more difficult than necessary, in some cases, to see the relationship between occurrences in Mowinckel’s personal life and developments on his scholarship. Given the challenges facing the author of such an intellectual biography, however, one can readily imagine that any other arrangement would have given rise to its own difficulties.