

I

INTRODUCTION

It will be generally known that the approach to the Psalms of the Old Testament has changed considerably during the first half of the twentieth century.¹ This change is especially obvious on the European continent.² The form-critical and religio-historical outlook, inaugurated by Hermann Gunkel and developed in a more simple and consistent manner by Mowinckel, is the scientific foundation of this new development. The Psalms now are regarded not only formally, but also materially, as part of the religious poetry of the Ancient Near East. The religio-historical interpretation of the Psalms as cultic poetry was deepened through the fertile ideas of Vilhelm Grönbech,³ and these have influenced Mowinckel as well as other scholars—especially Danish ones. Mowinckel's interpretation of the so-called "Ascension-Psalms" (primarily Psalms 47, 93 and 95–100) is an adaptation of Grönbech's ideas.

The Festival of Yahweh's Ascension to his Throne on New Year's Day, which Mowinckel finds reflected in these and related psalms, is described on the lines of a "ritual drama" with the re-creation of the world as its central theme.⁴ In the ritual drama of the New Year Festival at the time of the autumn equinox, Israel experienced a repetition of the events at the Creation of the world—God's fight against the powers of Chaos, the primeval ocean, Rahab, the Dragon and their attendant host of demons. This Divine fight ends in the defeat of the enemies of God and precedes the creation of the heavenly vault as the strong protection against the powers of Chaos, the "Sea" and the "Flood". The creation of the Heavens is God's decisive act of salvation and the proof of His power over all other gods. "All gods of the nations are mere idols, but the Eternal made the heavens".⁵ In the festival, this act of salvation was re-experienced by the people, through the religious act

of “remembrance”, *anamnesis*.⁶ “To remember” the saving facts of religion means to the Ancient World that these facts are tangibly experienced, that the members of the congregation, to use an expression from Kierkegaard, “become contemporary” with the fundamental act of salvation in the history of the world. The religious experience involved is best illustrated from the Roman Mass and the Lutheran interpretation of the Communion Service, as expressed in Grundtvig’s version of the Latin hymn on the “sweet remembrance” of Jesus, which has nearly become a part of the Danish Communion ritual. When Christ is properly remembered, He is actually present as a living reality. The Creation of the Heavens, the Divine fact of Salvation, is phenomenologically and typologically⁷ a parallel to the “*consummatum est*” of the New Testament. It is the Divine act through which the life of the people of God is assured.

This conviction is most impressively set forth in the sublime lines of the *Eighth Psalm*. The poet contemplates the Heavens as the bulwark created by the Lord against all his enemies. This work of Yahweh is greater than any other work of His, even greater than the First Man, who was created to be King of God’s World. But this contemplation of the works of God is expressly the re-experience of the Salvation, in its ritual re-iteration. It fills the souls of the worshippers with the assurance that “God’s in his Heaven—All’s right with the world”. The World stands again—firm over the threatening Flood. Chaos cannot hurt God’s people. This assurance is found not only in Psalm 8 and (for example) in Psalm 93, but also in Psalm 29 and in the great hymn which Luther “christened”—Psalm 46.

The Ascension-and-New-Year Festival of Israel, which emerges from the Old Testament hymns, was related to similar celebrations all over the Ancient Near East.⁸ Mowinckel in his *Psalmstudien II* certainly compared the Israelite festival and its Babylonian counterpart; but he did not, as is often said, take his starting point in Babylon. He started in Israel, as good method demands.⁹ Paul Volz had already trodden this path, but Mowinckel worked more consistently and, above all (thanks to Grönbech), he had a more lively understanding of

the religious experience found in the festival. Mowinckel's description was then enriched through the great finds of the Ras Shamra "mythological" tablets. Flemming Hvidberg's investigations¹⁰ of these texts have shown that the Divine Ascension Festival was found also in Canaan. We now perceive (as the British so-called "Myth and Ritual School"¹¹ has also maintained) that a "ritual pattern", in many variations, but with certain essential features, appears in various parts of the Ancient East and seems to be important for the understanding both of Old Testament ritual and ecclesiastical cult and dogma.

In this connection, the figure of the *divine* or *sacral king* has attracted special interest. Swedish scholars, as earlier the Danish Johs. Pedersen, have emphatically stressed the position of the king in the cult as the vicegerent of the god, as "son of the god", who fights the god's fight in the ritual drama of the creation festival. Like Ba'al, he suffers death and is raised from the underworld, and so secures salvation for the people which he embodies. In Canaan, the Death and Resurrection of the god are integral elements of the cultic drama. These ideas were accepted by Israel only in a severely modified form. The "dying god", as Johs. Pedersen, Hvidberg and Engnell unanimously assert, was incompatible with Israel's idea of God. Yahweh was eminently the "Living God", "the God of Life", the God "who does not die", as the original text of Habakkuk 1: 12 runs according to rabbinical tradition. But this conviction did not prevent certain features from the ritual combat between God and the powers of Chaos, as we see it in poetical allusions in Job, the Prophets, above all in Deutero-Isaiah, from entering the world of Israelite thought.

The myth of the fight of the gods was, however, fundamentally reinterpreted in Israel. Above all, it was "historified" and, in the Passover ritual, turned into a myth of God's fight against the "nations". The Chaos, Rahab and Tiamat were identified with Egypt and Pharaoh, and the legend of the Exodus was embellished by features drawn from the Creation epic.¹² This has been especially emphasized by Johs. Pedersen. Features from these mythical complexes are present in great numbers in the Psalms, especially in those we call the "Royal Psalms". These "Royal Psalms" are now generally treated, not as

political and historical documents, but as cultic ritual poems. Even when elements from the mythical combat are found in poems which are perhaps better understood politically and historically, they are, nevertheless, to be recognized as survivals from the earlier "pattern". Political enemies and the military defeats of the king are described and painted in colours taken from the divine ritual combat. The political enemies are identified with the powers of Chaos; the powers of Chaos are actualized in political enemies.

There are psalms other than those which are expressly labelled "Royal Psalms" because they mention the king, the Anointed of the Lord, etc., which belong to this material. In agreement with an idea which is common among historians of religion, recent scholars (especially in Sweden) have emphasized that the Psalms in general, in Israel as among other peoples, originally belonged to a royal ritual. Later, it is said, they were "democratized", that is, the rituals were made accessible to the general public, the "commoners". In Israel, this is especially the case with the poems which have as their subject the innocent suffering of the servant of God (Psalms 22, 69, etc.). It is clear that the problem of the "enemies" in the Psalms must be re-studied in the light of this new approach. In many cases, we shall probably have to conclude that the "enemies" in the Psalms (even in those where the king is not explicitly mentioned) are primarily the powers of Chaos, the primeval enemies of men and God, who are conquered by the sacral king. In some psalms, however, they have been actualized in the concrete enemies of the nation or of the single individual, whether they be demons, or men who have made a covenant with them, "sorcerers", or whatever else combats the plans of the saving God of the Creation Story.

Of course, we must never forget the strong influence on all such foreign ideas which was exercised by the Israelite conception of the "jealous God" of Moses. This is especially obvious in the sphere of Creation-ideology. What people meant, when they heard the words of Psalm 95: 5, it is not easy to say. The "Sea" to most of them would recall the evil power of *tehôm*, the Flood, and similar malignant primeval monsters. When it is said that God "made" it, an idea quite

different from that given by the ancient myths may have been conveyed. It seems that the "Sea" has been "depotentialized" through the Israelite belief that God has all powers in His hands. He "made" even the Chaos. Or did men distinguish, in a case like this, between the primeval monstrous "Sea" and the sea of the ordered universe after the third day of Creation? The parallelism of 95: 5 seems to favour this interpretation. But, at all events, the psalm is tending towards a comprehensive monism, with Yahweh as the sole agent in Creation and with all the powers subordinated to Him. This, however, does not exclude the significance of the "parallels" drawn from the other spheres of the Ancient Near East. Although they are reinterpreted when taken up into the Israelite cultural structure, it is of importance to know whence Israel got the material by means of which its culture was built up.