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Yahweh Mālak Psalms

A group of Psalms is characterized by the common use of the single phrase: yahweh mālak, “Yahweh is king” or “Yahweh reigns”.

Hermann Gunkel described them as “Psalms of Yahweh’s Enthronement”. He first listed the three Psalms which begin with this cry: 93, 97, and 99. To these he added 47 and 96: 10ff. because the cry occurs later in each of them (although Ps. 47: 9 is slightly different: mālak ’elōhīm). Finally he added Psalm 98 because verse 6 picks up a parallel theme to the ones mentioned in the previous Psalms¹.

Sigmund Mowinckel devoted one full volume of his *Psalmenstudien* to the enthronement Psalms and to the festival which inspired them². He expanded the number of Psalms under consideration. Beginning with a first group including Psalms 47, 93, 95, 96, 97, 98, 99, and 100, he added a second group, Psalms 8, 15, 24, 29, 33, 46, 48, 50, 66a, 75, 76, 81, 82, 84, 87, 114, 118, 132, 149, Ex. 15, 1–18 (which Gunkel had also listed as a parallel to these Psalms). He also draws on a third group which included Psalms 65, 67, 85, and the Psalms of ascent 120–134.

Hans Joachim Kraus has returned to the narrower grouping used by Gunkel and argues for Gunkel’s interpretation of the Psalms against Mowinckel’s³. Klaus Westermann supports Kraus in his choice of Psalms as well as in his basic interpretation⁴.

A general treatment of these Psalms would have to take up the basic questions concerning the “Sitz im Leben” which are answered so differently by the scholars cited above. The purpose of this study is much more limited. It asks simply which Psalms should be *grouped together* and which subgroupings should be made in classifying them. An attempt is made to let the Psalms speak for themselves without imposing any particular setting, date or classification upon them.

1.

The first step in this study takes the core group of the Yahweh Mālak Psalms which have been universally recognized as fitting

¹ H. Gunkel, *Einleitung in die Psalmen* (1933), p. 94f.; *Ausgewählte Psalmen* (4th ed. 1917), p. 134f.

² S. Mowinckel, *Psalmenstudien*, 2. *Das Thronbesteigungsfest Jahwäs und der Ursprung der Eschatologie* (1922), pp. 3–6; compare also *The Psalms in Israel’s Worship*, 1 (1962), pp. 106ff.

³ H. J. Kraus, *Die Königsherrschaft Gottes im Alten Testament* (1951), p. 123f.

⁴ K. Westermann, *Das Loben Gottes in den Psalmen* (1953), p. 106f.

together, i.e. 47, 93, 96, 96, 97, and 99 (all of which include the decisive phrase *yahweh mālak*, “Yahweh reigns”, in Psalm 47 in modified form) and analyses the *motifs* which dominate the inner structure of the Psalms and the vocabulary of these motifs.

(1) The most obvious characteristic of these Psalms is *Jahweh’s act* by which he expresses his reign or kingship. This is proclaimed in the first verse of Psalms 93, 97, 99. In Psalm 47 the phrase (modified) occurs in verse 9 and in Psalm 96 in verse 10. Psalm 47 is the only one which refers to “an ascent” (verse 6), and it is the only one that refers directly to his “sitting upon a throne” (verse 9). Two of the Psalms (93 and 96) follow this cry with the statement *’aph-tikkōn tēbēl* “Yea, the world is established”, while Psalm 99 uses the same verb with “righteous acts” as an object. Verbs of making (*’āšā*) as well as words of judging (*shāphat*, *dīn*) occur in 96, 97, and 99.

Among attributes of Yahweh which appear rather commonly are (*nōrā’*) “to be feared”, Psalms 47, 96, 99, (*gādōl*) “is great”, Psalms 96 and 99, and (*rōm* or *na’alā*) “is exalted”, Psalms 47, 93, 97, and 99. Other characteristic attributes include (*’ōz*) “strength” in Psalms 93, 96 and 99, (*nākōn kis’akā*) “your throne is established” in Psalms 93 and 97, with other references to righteousness, justice and the like.

The next question is: Who or what did Yahweh act upon in demonstrating his rule? Psalms 47, 96, 97 have (*kol hā’āreṣ*) “all the earth”. (*Hā’ammīm*) “peoples” are the objects of his action in 47, 96 and 98. Psalms 93, 96 and 97 list (*tēbēl*) “the world” as the object of his reign, while Psalm 97 (parallel to Psalm 95) speaks of his reign in regard to (*kol ’elōhīm*) “all the gods” as the subjects of his reign.

(2) Next come questions of *worship*. Those assembled for worship of Yahweh as king include (*kol hā’ammīm*) “all the peoples”, Psalms 47, 96, 97 and 99, (*kol hā’āreṣ*) “all the earth” Psalms 96, 97, (*haššāmayim*) “the heavens” Psalms 96 and 97, and even (*kol ’elōhīm*) “all gods” in Psalm 97. Additional references point to Israel under varying names. Psalm 93 is a pure hymn addressed only to Yahweh, giving no hint of the worship situation or those who are assembled.

The attitude in worship is very clearly defined as one of subjec-

tion and praise indicated through the repeated use of synonyms of this idea.

(3) The next step was to list the *words* which appeared most *characteristic* of the motifs of these Psalms. Other Psalms with clusters of these same motifs might be presumed to belong to the same category. The characteristics were listed as follows:

- A. The characteristic and unique expectation of these Psalms that all the earth, all peoples, or the nations should be present.
- B. References to other gods.
- C. The signs of exaltation and kingship.
- D. The words showing characteristic acts of Yahweh, including creating, making, establishing, sitting, doing wonders, judging, doing righteous acts, and saving.
- E. All the words which indicated the attitude of praise before this heavenly king.

A tentative classification of Psalms according to this very rough lexicographical survey gave the following results:

All five categories	–	89, 96, 97.
Four	– A B D E	9, 86.
	A C D E	– 18, 22, 44, 47, 57, 59, 67, 98, 99, 108, 149.
	B C D E	– 29, 95.
Three	– A D E	– 2, 33, 65, 72, 100, 102, 105.
	A C D	– 10, 24.
	A C E	– 48, 66.
	B D E	– 135, 138, 148.
	C D E	– 50, 68, 74, 145, 146.
	A B D	– 82, 58.
Two	– including C	–
	D C	– 11, 93, 103
	C E	– 5, 84.
	A C	– 46.

Even though rough and mechanical, this classification should warn that the Psalms of Yahweh's kingship form a group far more complex than has often been assumed. On the one hand, the Psalms beginning with a typical cry "yahweh mālak" are not as homogeneous as one might expect. On the other hand, a number of Psalms display, at least in some sections, characteristics very close to one or another group of these Psalms.

2.

The investigation now turns to a more careful and accurate *classification* of the Psalms just listed.

(I) Even the original group of Psalms demonstrate a fundamental difference in the way Yahweh's rule is conceived. Psalms 93, 96, and 97 understand this rule to center God's mighty acts of *creation*. They go on to emphasize the theme "greater than the gods". (II) A second group on the other hand emphasizes acts of Yahweh on behalf of *Israel* which include judgment and victory over the nations. These very readily join the themes of Zion and Davidic kingship and include Psalms 47 and 99. – Around these groups others may be gathered which display particular constellations of motifs common to one or the other group. However, among them are a very few with distinctive ideas concerning the reign of God unlike either of these categories. (III) Psalms 10 and 11 emphasize a picture of God as *judge*, particularly upholding the rights of the fatherless and the widow, etc. To them should perhaps be added Psalm 9:8–13 and Psalm 82 as well as Psalm 33:13ff. (IV) Still a fourth classification is represented only by Psalm 50. It celebrates God as king in *covenant* judgment over Israel in which heaven and earth are called as witnesses. It brings a number of prophetic passages to mind, but appears to stand alone in the Psalms.

And now let us look more closely at the distinctive characteristics and groupings of these groups.

Group I. The core of the first group is composed of the three Psalms which have all five elements listed in the classifications above: 96, 97:1–7; 89:6–15. Psalms 96 and 97 contain the distinctive cry "yahweh mālak", while all three contain the attributive "Yahweh is great and to be feared above all gods". 96 and 89 stress that the earth is established and shall not be moved, while all three call upon the heavens to be glad and rejoice. All three Psalms stress the attributes of righteousness and truth, although only Psalm 96 specifically speaks of his "coming to judge the earth". These Psalms refer to the reign of Yahweh in terms of his mighty acts in *nature* and stress the theme of his being "greater than the gods".

Several other Psalms stress a similar theme and should be classi-

fied along with these three as belonging to group one. They are Psalms 93, 24:1-2, 7-9, 29:1-10, 48:1-12, 95:1-5 and 148:1-13. Some other Psalm portions reflect the same themes in much less vivid colours. They appear to be late echoes or simply derived themes from the basic classification. These include Psalms 33:2-12, 46:1-12, 74:12-17, 86:8-10, 103:19-22, 135:5-7, 145:3-13, 146:6-7

Throughout these Psalms, Yahweh is celebrated as king because he is responsible for nature's order. Nature testifies to his power, faithfulness and righteousness. All expressions of nature belong to him. He made, established and judged them. He reveals his rule in nature as "judgments" and in so doing proves himself superior to divine as well as natural powers.

Key words for this classification include the words "established" and "for ever" as related to this order of nature. Yahweh is praised because of his strength and glory. He is "great" and "to be feared", "far superior to all gods".

This reign is observed by Israel as well as the nations. The nations tremble and fear, and even rejoice before him. Israel rejoices that this same Yahweh is her covenant God. All present are called to see, believe and worship Yahweh, the king.

Three elements in the rule of God are reflected in these Psalms. The rule of Yahweh over the heavens and the earth is characterized by might, righteousness and justice. He is faithful and true in all of his acts.

His rule is first witnessed over creation and nature. This rule was established in the past and continues into the present. Because of it the future is secure. This rule was established against opposition and is continued despite threats. As a result the stability and permanency of nature's order is guaranteed by Yahweh's continued rule and power.

The second element speaks of his rule over the heavens and the gods. Here the emphasis is upon a present rule. Yahweh reigns alone. His rule is absolute, and he allows no competition from any other power. Therefore, the future causes no threat to those who believe in him and who worship him.

The third element proclaims his rule over the earth, for all the earth belongs to him. The time is again rooted in the present but looks to the future. The mood is one of trembling joy at his present

rule and hope for his righteous judgment in the future. He comes now to judge the earth. He is exercising his reign over the nations and Israel. All this occurs in Zion. This last feature relates to themes in the following categories.

Group II. A second group includes three of the original Psalms. They include all of the elements mentioned in the basic classification of Psalms except that referring to "other gods". These are Psalms 47, 98, and 99. They all celebrate Yahweh's reign over all the earth and all peoples, but there is a very decisive difference from the Psalms of the first group. Those acts by which Yahweh has established and proclaimed his rule center in *Israel's* history of salvation rather than in creation and nature. Psalm 47 declares, "He subdued peoples under us, he chose our inheritance for us." Psalm 98 proclaims, "He remembered his covenant love and faithfulness to Israel. All the earth has seen it." Psalm 99 sings that "He established justice in Jacob" and goes on to speak about his relation to Moses, Aaron and Samuel. There is, therefore, in them a decided shift of interest. To the Psalms already mentioned should be added Psalm 22:28–32 and Psalm 46. Psalm 44:1–9 reflects the same theme but seems to be a late, exilic use of the ancient themes.

The worship setting for this group assumes a gathering of peoples, princes and rulers from all the earth. God is shown to be king by virtue of his having established justice in Israel and of having acted faithfully to his promises to her. This group presents a second phase of the celebration of Yahweh's universal rule. It, like group one, looks forward to his imminent coming to judge the earth.

Group III. A small third group of Psalms pictures Yahweh as enthroned for *judgment*. As the righteous judge he represents justice to the widow and the orphan and to all oppressed. This theme is then used to call on Yahweh to correct injustice and to establish righteous judgment in the land. The theme may be seen in Psalm 9:8–13, Psalm 10:16, 11:3–7, Psalm 33 (where the element of wisdom is particularly strong), and in Psalm 82 where Yahweh acts as judge over the gods but particularly in respect to the establishment of judgment for individuals in the world. None of these Psalms is so closely related to cultic themes as those in groups one and two.

Group IV. Psalm 50 represents a completely different category. It presents a *covenant* lawsuit in which the heavens and the earth are called as witnesses to Yahweh's judgment of his people. Israel is then indicted for breach of covenant. Parallels may be found in Deut. 32:1 ff., Is. 1:2–3, Mic. 6:1–8, Jer. 2:4–13. In this Psalm creation has no significance except that the world belongs to God. There is no reference of any kind to the nations. Apparently the Psalmist stands *in the midst of the judgment* which was anticipated in types one and two.

3.

All these Psalms concern the royal rule of Yahweh. Yet, in a strict sense, only the first two categories should properly be called “yahweh mālak” Psalms. The third category derives its ideas and vocabulary from them. The fourth category is a related, but different, “Gattung”. A *summary* of these results may now be compared with those of Gunkel and Mowinckel.

First, these results confirm Gunkel's grouping of six Psalms plus Exodus 15, as indeed did Mowinckel's work, with the refinement that they should be broken down into two groups:

Gunkel	Mowinckel	Group I	Group II
47	47		47
93	93	93	
96	96	96	
97	97	97	
98	98		98
99	99		99
(Ex. 15)	(Ex. 15)		(Ex. 15)

The second result has been to confirm Mowinckel's expansion of the “Gattung” with six additional Psalms which belong in group I:

Mowinckel	Group I
95	95
24	24
29	29
33	33 ¹
46	46 ¹
48	48

The third result suggests that Mowinckel is wrong in listing 31 additional Psalms. Two of them (Psalms 50 and 82) have been shown to belong to groups III and IV which are, strictly speaking, not “yahweh mālak” Psalms. The other 29 Psalms simply have not fulfilled the lexicographical requirements of this test.

This research, however, suggests that two other Psalms should be added in each group while a list of six later derived Psalms which were developed from group one should also be added.

Mowinckel's additional
list

(not confirmed)		Group I	Group II
8	81	89: 5–14	22
15	82	148	44: 1–12
50	84		
65	85	74 ¹	
66a	87	86 ¹	
67	118	103 ¹	
75	120–134	135 ¹	
76	149	145 ¹	
		146 ¹	

The time is ripe for a restudy of the implications of these Psalms for worship and theology in the Old Testament.

John D. W. Watts, Rüschlikon/Zürich

¹ Marks Psalms which are judged to be late imitations or adaptations of the “Gattung”.