

**Zeitschrift:** Theologische Zeitschrift  
**Herausgeber:** Theologische Fakultät der Universität Basel  
**Band:** 26 (1970)  
**Heft:** 6

**Artikel:** I. Engnell's Contributions to Old Testament Scholarship  
**Autor:** Willis, John T.  
**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-878764>

### **Nutzungsbedingungen**

Die ETH-Bibliothek ist die Anbieterin der digitalisierten Zeitschriften. Sie besitzt keine Urheberrechte an den Zeitschriften und ist nicht verantwortlich für deren Inhalte. Die Rechte liegen in der Regel bei den Herausgebern beziehungsweise den externen Rechteinhabern. [Siehe Rechtliche Hinweise.](#)

### **Conditions d'utilisation**

L'ETH Library est le fournisseur des revues numérisées. Elle ne détient aucun droit d'auteur sur les revues et n'est pas responsable de leur contenu. En règle générale, les droits sont détenus par les éditeurs ou les détenteurs de droits externes. [Voir Informations légales.](#)

### **Terms of use**

The ETH Library is the provider of the digitised journals. It does not own any copyrights to the journals and is not responsible for their content. The rights usually lie with the publishers or the external rights holders. [See Legal notice.](#)

**Download PDF:** 08.02.2025

**ETH-Bibliothek Zürich, E-Periodica, <https://www.e-periodica.ch>**

## I. Engnell's Contributions to Old Testament Scholarship

Professor Ivan Engnell of Uppsala (1906–64) experienced a zestful intellectual career in his search for an understanding of Israel's history, an appreciation of Israel's location in her religious environment, and a method or approach which would explain the history and completion of her great literary product, the Old Testament. During this search, Engnell was constantly expanding or modifying or sharpening or even abandoning views which he had previously expressed. Thus, while his later writings often have affinities with his earlier works, the sentiments and emphases are not precisely the same. Engnell's own keen awareness of this intellectual development is reflected, among other things, in the request that his Swedish Introduction to the Old Testament<sup>1</sup> not be translated into other languages,<sup>2</sup> apparently because his position had taken on new dimensions since its publication. Engnell's magnum opus was a two volume Swedish Bible Encyclopedia, the second edition of which was published only a year before his death.<sup>3</sup> While this work contains articles written by several Scandinavian scholars, it includes a number of significant essays by Engnell himself, which reflect his most mature views, and give this impressive publication a strong ideological homogeneity. Recently, an English translation of thirteen of the most important of these essays, representative of Engnell's latest positions, has been published.<sup>4</sup> The purpose of this paper is

---

<sup>1</sup> I. Engnell, *Gamla Testamentet. En traditionshistorisk inledning*, 1 (1945).

<sup>2</sup> This statement is based on a letter received by the present writer from Prof. Helmer Ringgren of Uppsala in 1966.

<sup>3</sup> I. Engnell (ed.), *Svenskt Bibliskt Uppslagsverk*, 1–2 (2nd ed. 1963).

<sup>4</sup> I. Engnell, *A Rigid Scrutiny. Critical Essays on the Old Testament*. Translated and edited by John T. Willis with the Collaboration of Helmer Ringgren (1969).

to offer a compendium or aperçu of the major emphases reflected in these articles, and here and there to make critical evaluations and suggestions.

1.

Engnell calls his approach *traditio-historical*. For him, this is a very comprehensive and complex method involving many aspects and disciplines.

The first aspect is an *analysis* of the biblical literature, a process which consists of delineating (or determining the extent of) tradition works, collections, complexes and individual units. The purpose is to ascertain their original «Sitz im Leben» and function, and perhaps discover their earlier arrangement, which is sometimes different from the present order in the books of the Old Testament.<sup>5</sup> This aspect is strikingly similar to Lindblom's form-critical approach.<sup>6</sup> But unlike Lindblom, Engnell insists that such an analysis is only the beginning of a comprehensive treatment of the whole, if the critic wishes to deal fairly with the history of the traditions which have reached their final form in the Old Testament books. Engnell cautions against confining the criteria to be used in this analysis to the linguistic emphasis of literary historical criticism, or to the priority assigned to form and type by form criticism. He urges that along with these, careful attention must be given to content, including subject matter, leitmotifs, and the intention of the literary piece.

This requires an evaluation of Israelite religion in light of ancient Near Eastern religions. In his earlier works, Engnell tended to adopt the view of the English "myth-and-ritual" school, and to affirm that

---

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p. 4.

<sup>6</sup> J. Lindblom affirms: «Zu einem wissenschaftlich stichhaltigen Resultat kommen wir in der Prophetenforschung nicht, bevor wir damit ernst machen, die Prophetenbücher als Sammlungen von einzelnen Revelationen zu behandeln und jede Revelation für sich, zunächst ohne Seitenblicke auf die anderen, zu analysieren», *Micha literarisch untersucht* (1929), p. 141. Again he writes: «Die Prophetenbücher sind niemals schön zusammenhängende, wohl disponierte Bücher gewesen, sondern Sammlungen zerstreuter Revelationen, die nach sehr äußerlichen Gesichtspunkten miteinander verbunden worden sind», *ibid.*, p. 85, n. 1. He emphasizes the same point in *A Study on the Immanuel Section in Isaiah* (1958), pp. 27, 32, 42, and 54.

there was a common "pattern" of religion throughout the ancient Near East to which Israel largely conformed.<sup>7</sup> But this yields to a much greater emphasis on the manner in which Israel incorporated the religious ideas which she took over from her neighbors, and on matters which are uniquely Israelite, in his later works. He writes: "... it is necessary that we view the Old Testament realistically as a product of the ancient Near Eastern culture, of which Israel and its national literature, the Old Testament, are a part. But in doing this, ... we must not lose sight of the importance of determining peculiar Israelite characteristics."<sup>8</sup>

A second aspect of the traditio-historical method consists of ascertaining the *synthesis* of the biblical material. The scholar must try to determine the function of the tradition units and complexes in the position which they occupy in the final form of Old Testament books. As a matter of fact, for Engnell, the critic's primary task is to discover and explain the unity which was intended by those responsible for combining and arranging the originally disparate units. Sometimes, the contrast between the original *Sitz im Leben* of a tradition unit and its later or final *Sitz im Leben* in a tradition work or tradition complex aids the scholar in determining its present "democratized" or "disintegrated" function.<sup>9</sup> For example, Engnell argues that several "literary" pieces in the Old Testament which originally concerned the king (such as Royal Psalms) were later "reapplied" to persons other than the king, including priests, prophets, cultic officials, and individuals.<sup>10</sup> He also contends that traditions which were originally located in the cult, such as the Exodus

---

<sup>7</sup> See especially Engnell's dissertation, *Studies in Divine Kingship in the ancient Near East* (1943; 2nd ed. 1967). Among other things, on p. 2 he praises Hocart because "he has shown a fine insight into its [the sacral kingship's] structure and ideology, and in particular a keen eye for its ritual pattern, which he is the first to have actually reconstructed. We are... concerned with 'the ideal pattern', which... seems quite useful in tracing conceptions and ideas pertaining to the divine kingship; for, as far as I can ascertain, the texts confirm, as a matter of fact, to a great extent his reconstruction".

<sup>8</sup> *Scrutiny* (n. 4), pp. 3-4.

<sup>9</sup> By "democratization" and "disintegration", usually Engnell means that material which was originally applied to the king was later transferred to ordinary people: *Studies* (n. 7), p. 38, n. 3; *Scrutiny* (n. 4), p. 104, n. 67.

<sup>10</sup> *Scrutiny* (n. 4), pp. 84-85, 121, 150, 225, 235, 238, 250, 275.

from Egypt and the Passover, have been transformed into historical texts in the present form in which they appear in the Old Testament.<sup>11</sup>

Engnell's insistence that one must look for a synthesis, i.e., the unity and coherence in the final form of Old Testament books and complexes, is partly a reaction to literary-historical and form-critical scholars who found unity and purpose only in their "original sources" and "reconstructed types". But it also grows out of his appreciation for ancient ways of arranging material and linking together units and collections, which seem to be illogical to "the modern Western mind". However, it is not true that Engnell was so pre-occupied with demonstrating coherence in the final form of a book that the virtually neglected attempts to discover earlier stages, and when possible even the original stage, of a tradition unit. Analysis is a genuine facet of his method, not just something he mentions in passing.

## 2.

We may illustrate this by examining briefly his treatment of (a) the Book of *Psalms* and (b) the Books of *Samuel*.

(a) Engnell sees a purposeful arrangement in the present Book of *Psalms*. Each of the five "books" in the Psalter ends with a doxology: 41:14; 72:18-19; 89:53; 106:48; and 150:6, or perhaps the entire 150th Psalm. Laments are predominant at the beginning of the Psalter, and hymns at the end. The principles according to which the prophetic literature is arranged, including the alternating pattern and the technique of association, also occur throughout the Book of *Psalms*.<sup>12</sup> Even though some of the individual psalms originated in cultic situations at different sanctuaries in the land of Canaan, in time they were taken over by the cult in the Jerusalem temple, where they were censored, revised, and combined with psalms that originated there. In this way they gained a respectable standing and were soon "canonized" through their repeated use by cult personnel and worshippers who participated in this cult.<sup>13</sup> Duplicates in the Psalter, such as Pss. 14 and 53, 40:14-18 and 108, do not necessarily point to earlier collections, but may indicate that such material was

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 193-94, 205-06.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 70-71.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 72, 73.

drawn from a large body of cultic-literary material which had been used in more than one connection.<sup>14</sup>

But Engnell also insists on the importance of probing behind the present form of the Psalter in order to determine the earlier or even original "Sitz im Leben" and function of individual psalms or psalm collections. In fact, his understanding of Old Testament religion is based on the hypothesis that "originally the psalm material had its center altogether in the royal cult and in the peculiar rôle of the sacral king in this cult".<sup>15</sup> Thus, Engnell is quite concerned to re-examine long accepted criteria used by literary historical critics to date psalms in the post-Exilic and even Maccabean periods.

It had been argued that the "universalism" in the Psalms represents a stage beyond the "nationalism" of the pre-Exilic period, and thus "universalistic" psalms must be post-Exilic. But Engnell contends that there is no such thing as genuine universalism in the Psalms or the Prophets. Rather, Israel's king, as Yahweh's anointed, claims to possess world dominion, which is a natural expression of the type of Yahwistic exclusivism promulgated in the royal-sacral Jerusalem cult, in which other nations enter into the picture of the coming "kingdom of peace" only as those vanquished by Israel.<sup>16</sup> – Literary historical critics concluded that the great prophets initiated many religious concepts which appear in the psalms, and therefore the psalms must be dated after the prophets, so in the post-Exilic period. But Engnell argues that the reverse is true. The prophets presuppose the type of cultic piety found in the Psalms. This is to be expected because the prophets played a prominent role in the official cult, especially by mediating and proclaiming the oracle. Thus the Psalms are for the most part pre-Exilic.<sup>17</sup> – Literary historical scholars argued that anti-cultic psalms such as 40, 50, 51 and 69, are based on anti-cultic statements of the prophets, and thus are late. But Engnell denies that there are statements in the prophets or the psalms which are against *right* cult. To be sure, they oppose foreign cults, the North Israelite cult, and a cult made vain because the

---

<sup>14</sup> Ibid., p. 71. Cf. H. Ringgren, *Oral and Written Transmission in the Old Testament*: Stud. Theol. 3 (1950), pp. 34–59.

<sup>15</sup> *Scrutiny* (n. 4), p. 104.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., pp. 108–09. Cf. recently H. M. Orlinsky, *Studies on the Second Part of the Book of Isaiah*: Vet. Test. Suppl. 14 (1967), pp. 97–117.

<sup>17</sup> *Scrutiny* (n. 4), pp. 107–08, 138–142, 158–59.

lives of the worshippers were evil. But their demand for "righteousness" involves not only ethics, but also a cosmic dimension and cultic responsibilities. "The prophets do not demand righteousness *instead of* the cult, but righteousness *and* cult, right cult, to the right god and at the right place, that is, Jerusalem".<sup>18</sup> – The Wellhausenian school, presupposing an enhancement of religious comprehension in Israel by means of a natural evolutionistic process, maintained that the individualism found in many psalms reflects an advancement beyond the earlier pre-Exilic collectivism. But Engnell asserts that individualism and collectivism were correlates in ancient Near Eastern societies, including Israel. By means of his role in the cult, the king represents his people, thus virtually obliterating any alleged sharp distinction between individual and collective. The typical alteration between "I" and "we" in psalm literature lends support to this view.<sup>19</sup> – Finally, literary historical critics argued that for the most part the "enemies" in the Psalms were personal opponents of the psalmists, reflecting the antagonism which existed between the Hasidim and the Sadducees. Engnell insists that the enemies are figurative representatives of "evil" against which the "godly" must constantly strive, and that the struggle assumed in many psalms is a recurring ritual sham battle belonging to the New Year Festival, in which the king-Messiah was victorious over all Israel's enemies through Yahweh's intervention.<sup>20</sup>

b) Although the books of *Samuel* represent a different kind of literature from that which appears in the Psalter, Engnell's approach is basically the same. In contrast to literary critics who divide the books of Samuel into two or more earlier sources, he is concerned to show a synthesis in these books as a whole, which are part of the D work extending from Deuteronomy through II Kings, to be dated in the post-Exilic period. Accordingly, he argues that the Deuteronomic circle has combined a series of narrative cycles concerning leading figures in the early phases of the Israelite monarchy: Eli and Samuel

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 138. Cf. pp. 112–14.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 114–15; *Studies* (n. 7), pp. 35, 62, 66–67. Cf. also H. Gunkel, *The Close of Micah. A Prophetic Liturgy: What Remains of the Old Testament and Other Essays* (1928), pp. 115–49; M. Noth, *God, King, People in the Old Testament*, translated by Alice F. Carse: *The Bultmann School of Biblical Interpretation New Directions?* (1965), pp. 20–48.

<sup>20</sup> *Scrutiny* (n. 4), *op. cit.*, pp. 115–20.

in I Sam. 1–7; Samuel and Saul in I Sam. 8–15, Saul and David in I Sam. 16–31 and David king over Judah in II Sam. 1–4 and over all Israel in II Sam. 5–24. This circle sets forth the traditions handed down to it in light of its own ideology, the main elements of which are a pro-Jerusalemite and pro-priestly emphasis, a pragmatic view of history, and a negative attitude toward the monarchy growing out of the conviction that it is fundamentally anti-theocratic. In a few cases, the D group inserts its own original material, consisting largely of speeches which stress morality or survey Israel's history. But Engnell also probes behind this final redaction in an attempt to discover earlier stages in the history of the traditions involved, and in some cases the original *Sitz im Leben*. He speaks of a pre-Deuteronomic phase dating from the last years of Solomon or shortly after his death. He affirms that I Sam. 1:1–4:1a originated at Shiloh, and that the lament over Saul and Jonathan in II Sam. 1:17–27 is probably from David himself.<sup>21</sup>

### 3.

These brief observations concerning Engnell's approach to the book of Psalms and the books of Samuel indicate that he is indeed concerned to find a *coherence* in the Old Testament material in its present form, reflecting certain ideological biases. But they also show that he feels that the scholar must delve behind the final form to ascertain earlier (and when possible, original) stages in the growth of the tradition. Here, we may point out that while the "final form" of a book or complex sets forth the views of the circle responsible for its production, the traditional material which this circle inherited must have had a great influence in shaping its ideology, particularly if its members had a strong conservative respect for the material, as Engnell insists. Therefore, it is often impossible to clearly distinguish between the theology of the sacred tradition and the theology of its custodians. In other words, the distinctive ideologies of various traditionist circles may not be as easy to determine as Engnell sometimes concludes.

Engnell lays great stress on the importance of *oral transmission*

<sup>21</sup> Engnell, *Samuelsböckerna: Svenskt Bibliskt Uppslagsverk* (n. 3), 2, cols. 867–71. Cf. the similar approach of R. A. Carlson, *David, the chosen King* (1964).



in the preservation of Old Testament material. It is true that certain types of "literature" were written down very early or even from the very first. These include royal records, legal transactions, law codes, and sacral texts such as the psalms. In such cases, the principles of the literary critical method can be applied, as one aspect of the more comprehensive traditio-historical approach. But by and large, both small units and entire tradition works were transmitted orally in final fixed form in various traditionist circles long before they were written down. And in actual use and application, even materials which were originally written were committed to memory and transmitted orally, in a manner similar to that which is represented in the later Mishnah and Talmud. If this had not been the case, the language of the Old Testament would be widely divergent instead of strikingly uniform. When the critic is once convinced that Israelite literature is essentially sacral in character and functioned primarily in the cult, he is driven to the conclusion that it was preserved orally. And this consideration is the main reason to believe that the oral tradition was preserved fundamentally intact, and is authentic and reliable. After all, the traditionist circles believed that they were custodians of sacred traditions, and had a rigid conservative attitude toward these traditions which they were responsible for preserving in their respective cultic communities.<sup>22</sup> But if the oral tradition was fixed essentially in the form in which it was later written, one cannot help but wonder why it would be impertinent to apply the methods of literary historical source analysis to it.<sup>23</sup>

Theology and ideology form a vital part of Engnell's traditio-historical approach. Each of the *circles* responsible for the tradition works which compose the Old Testament represents a certain *theological position*. In one sense, then, we may speak of several religions in the Old Testament.

Methodologically, Engnell categorically rejects the view of an evolution of religious ideas from a lower to a higher plane. The alleged development from polytheism to monotheism, or ritual to ethics, or collectivism to individualism, or doom to hope, are all figments of the modern imagination.<sup>24</sup> Nevertheless, Israelite religion does have

<sup>22</sup> Scrutiny (n. 4), pp. 5-9, 72-74.

<sup>23</sup> So similarly C. R. North in his appreciation of Engnell in the second edition of *Studies* (n. 7), p. XX.

<sup>24</sup> Scrutiny (n. 4), pp. 14-16, 32-33, 95, 126-28, 157-58, 172, 175, 176.

a history of its own. The first stage consisted of a pre-Israelite desert religion, which was tribal in character and centered in the worship of a great sky god or high god called 'El or 'El-Shadday. The second stage rests on Moses's personal encounter with this 'El of the fathers, who is the giver of fertility and the ethical god who judges men on the basis of ethical behavior. Prior to Moses, this god had been somewhat remote from men, a "deus otiosus", a "resting", inactive god. But Moses "activated" him, under the name Yahweh (Ex. 3:6), bound him to an amphictyony, and formed a well-organized cult. The third stage grows out of the confrontation between this Mosaic religion and the religion that existed in Canaan when Israel settled there. Yahweh was transformed into a national deity, in the process of which he took on the characteristics of the Canaanite high god 'El 'Elyôn, because both of these deities were phenomenologically of the same type and forms of the great west Semitic high god. The most significant aspect of this syncretism is that Israel adopted the concept of sacral kingship from the Canaanite religion with all the functions and ideas which this embraced. The king became the focal point around which the Israelite cult revolved. He embodies within himself the whole people. His most important role is that which he discharges in the Annual Festival. Negatively, as the "servant of the Lord", he engages in a "cultic sham battle" against the powers of evil, the powers of chaos, and vicariously "suffers", "dies", and descends into Sheol (descensus) to expiate the sins of the whole people. Positively, as "savior" and "messiah", he rises from the dead (ascensus), victoriously routs all Israel's enemies, is enthroned, enters into a sacral marriage (hieros gamos), and "fixes the destiny" of Israel's future, i.e., "creates" fruitfulness for the time to come. The final stage of this development is an expansion of this historical royal messianism, resulting particularly from the work of the prophets. It stresses more and more the futuristic eschatological aspect of messianism which was inherent from the first. Frequently, there is no way to determine whether a text is "cultic" or "eschatological", because past, present, and future exist simultaneously in the Old Testament concept of sacral kingship and messianism. In view of this brief summary of Engnell's appraisal of Israelite theology, it is not surprising that he insists that "messianism" is the *Leitmotiv* which holds Old Testament religion together.<sup>25</sup>

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 36–42, 157–62, 182, 215–36.

In conclusion, something needs to be said about *terminology* which is in current use in “form-critical” and “traditio-historical” treatments of Old Testament material. Gunkel called his approach “form-critical”. He understood this to include not only a determination of the extent of a pericope, a categorization of the various oral and written types, and an ascertaining of the “Sitz im Leben” of these types, but also a reconstruction of the history of a pericope from its origin to its final form in a book or complex. For example, he outlined four stages through which prophetic materials generally passed: very brief ancient oracles (“Worte” or “Wortzusammenstellungen”), brief prophetic oracles in metric form (“Sprüche”), longer oracles approximately a chapter in length (Reden), and whole books (“Bücher”).<sup>26</sup> This has led such scholars as Hahn, Eissfeldt and Koch to insist that traditio-historical criticism (“Überlieferungsgeschichte”) is one aspect of form-criticism (“Formgeschichte”).<sup>27</sup> On the other hand, Engnell and Kraus consider form-criticism to be one facet of the traditio-historical method.<sup>28</sup> But perhaps the name of the method is not as vital as its ability to deal adequately and comprehensively with the variety of material which the Old Testament affords. It may be that the form-critical and traditio-historical approaches are, merely intellectual “Siamese twins”, differing sometimes only from scholar to scholar, and sometimes only in emphasis.

At the same time, we must distinguish between two courses which may be pursued in attempting to trace the history of a tradition. One is the task of discovering the stages through which a pericope passed from its original form to its final position in an Old Testament book. The other consists of reconstructing the history of a cultic tradition (such as the Exodus tradition, Conquest tradition, Davidic tradition, and the like) from its origin through its various applications and usages in Israelite life.

*John T. Willis, Nashville, Tennessee*

---

<sup>26</sup> H. Gunkel, *Die Propheten als Schriftsteller und Dichter: Die Schriften des Alten Testaments*, 2 (1915), pp. XLII–XLIII.

<sup>27</sup> O. Eissfeldt, *Zur Überlieferungsgeschichte der Prophetenbücher des Alten Testaments: Theol. Lit.zt.* 73 (1948), 529–534, col. 531; H. F. Hahn, *The Old Testament in Modern Research* (1954), pp. 153–56; K. Koch, *Was ist Formgeschichte?* (1964), p. 45.

<sup>28</sup> H.-J. Kraus, *Zur Geschichte des Überlieferungsbegriffs in der alttestamentlichen Wissenschaft. Ev. Theol.* 16 (1956), 371–87, pp. 380–81.