ANY modern appraisal of the use of the Old Testament in Christian worship is almost certain to include some consideration of the imprecatory passages in the book of Psalms, which in the intensity of their feeling, and, at times, in the violence of their language, appear to offset the passionate longing which the Psalmists elsewhere express for the presence and favour of God. The imprecations of the Psalmists have sometimes been condemned with a ferocity and intolerance similar to those of which they are themselves accused, often, it may be supposed, without any awareness that the identity of the enemies and evildoers and the nature of their activity raise any problem whatsoever. But an attentive reading of even an English translation of the Psalter reveals that the interpretation of those passages which refer to enemies and evildoers is by no means straightforward; and even a nodding acquaintance with the history of exegesis emphasizes the fact.

The problem (if indeed it may be fairly regarded as a single problem) is one of peculiar complexity and has points of contact with a series of other questions in the Psalter and in the general study of Old Testament literature and religion. Any attempt to

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1 A lecture delivered in the John Rylands Library on Wednesday, the 12th of May 1965. Certain parts of this lecture are based on the Swedish text of lectures delivered by the author in the University of Uppsala on 22 April 1965, and in the University of Lund on 26 and 27 April 1965. The following abbreviations are used: A.N.V.A.O. = Avhandlinger utgitt av Det Norske Videnskaps-Akadem i Oslo ; B.Z.A.W. = Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft ; F.R.L.A.N.T. = Forschungen zur Religion und Literatur des Alten und Neuen Testaments ; H.K.A.T. = Göttinger Handkommentar zum Alten Testament ; N.T.T. = Norsk Teologisk Tidsskrift ; S.N.V.A.O. = Skrifter utgitt av Det Norske Videnskaps-Akadem i Oslo ; Z.A.W. = Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft.
solve it must take account of the application of form-critical methods to ancient Israelite psalmody, must attempt an assessment of opposing theories about social, political, and religious groupings at certain periods of Old Testament history, and must reckon with the psychological and religious presuppositions of ancient Israelite literature, the nature of ancient Israelite cult, and the complex interplay of external influences which were brought to bear upon ancient Israelite life. It is manifestly impossible within the space of one short lecture to investigate thoroughly, still more to solve definitively, so complex a problem. Nevertheless there may be some gain from an attempt to trace the main lines of scholarly debate, and to determine what is clear and what still remains uncertain, even if it is not always possible to arrive at definite conclusions.

The psalms which come into consideration fall into three main groups: psalms in which the speaking subject is expressly plural ("we"); psalms in which the speaking subject is singular ("I"); and psalms in which the "I" who speaks is explicitly or by inference the king. It is possible to maintain (as we shall have occasion to notice later) that this third group, in which the king speaks, forms an important link between the other two, since the king is at one and the same time an individual and the representative of the community. It can, at all events, be argued that the king's enemies are likely to be identical with the enemies of the nation, and accordingly that when either the king or the community (the "we" of the first group mentioned above) speaks of enemies, the probability is that the reference is to foreign enemies who threaten or attack the nation or hold it in subjection. It is in those psalms where a private individual speaks (if it be conceded that there are any such psalms) that theories of the identity of enemies and evildoers diverge bewilderingly.

Does an individual speak in those psalms where the pronoun "I" and the corresponding verbal forms are used? This question, and the varying ways in which it has been answered, are complicating factors in the consideration of our problem. Traditionally the "I" was taken to refer to David or some other historical individual who was held to be the author of any given
psalm. In a notable article published in 1888, Rudolf Smend argued that the “I” of the Psalms is the community. Nearly a quarter of a century later, Emil Balla contended that the “I” should be taken in a genuinely individual sense, except in those psalms where there are clear indications that the reference is collective, a view which, on the whole, was endorsed by Herrmann Gunkel and his disciples. Closely allied with the identification of the “I” is the problem of the meaning and reference of the Hebrew terms “’ānî” and “’ānāw”, which have been the subject of several important studies, and to which we must later return.

But, even if we disregard such complicating factors and ask simply how the enemies and evildoers are described in the text of the relevant psalms, we find on the one hand a confusing variety and on the other hand a conventional monotony. The enemies are described as the psalmist’s accusers, and as uttering falsehood, slander, and the like against him. E.g.,

O Yahweh, how numerous are my adversaries!
Many are rising up against me.
Many are saying of me,
‘There is no salvation for him in God’.3

And again,

For there is no truth in their mouth,
their inward part is destruction,
their throat is an open sepulchre;
they flatter with their tongue.4

They are also described as warriors or brigands:

Be gracious to me, O God, for men are trampling me down;
all the day long the foeman oppresses me.
My enemies trample upon me all the day long;
yea, many fight proudly against me.5

Sometimes the psalmist’s enemies are described as hunters who try to catch him:

Bring me forth out of the net which they have hidden for me.6

In other passages they are represented as wild animals who seek him as their prey:

3 Ps. iii. 1 f. (Heb. 2 f.). 4 Ps. v. 9 (Heb. 10).
5 Ps. lvi. 1 f. (Heb. 2 f.). 6 Ps. xxxi. 4a (Heb. 5a).
ENEMIES AND EVILDOERS IN PSALMS

Many bulls encompass me;
strong bulls of Bashan surround me.
They open their mouths wide against me,
like a ravening and roaring lion.  

This baffling variety in the description of the enemies and their activity is matched by a similar diversity in the accounts given of the worshipper and his sufferings. He is oppressed not only by the assaults of the enemies in their varied forms, but also by grievous illness, and even by death itself:

There is no soundness in my flesh,
because of Thine indignation;
neither is there any health in my bones,
because of my sin.  

My wounds stink and fester,
because of my folly.  

The breakers of death were about me;
the torrents of perdition assailed me;
the cords of Sheol encircled me;
the snares of death confronted me.  

(It is perhaps apposite to recall similar features in the Songs concerning the Suffering Servant of Yahweh, where sufferings are described in varying terms in one and the same poem, and where, too, both individual and collective interpretations have been advanced.) But though the descriptions of both the activities of the enemies and the sufferings of the worshipper vary greatly, one has only to read several of the relevant psalms to find the same terminology recurring with a frequency which justifies the expression “conventional monotony” used above.

Further, we may note that a number of different terms are used to describe the pious on the one hand and the enemies on the other; e.g., for the pious, “ḥāṣîd”, “ṣaddîk”, “‘ebyôn”, “dal”, “rāš”, “‘ānî”, “‘ānāw”, and for the enemies, “rəśā‘îm”, “ḥattâ‘îm”, “pō‘îlê ‘āwen”. Of the terms applied to the pious, “‘ānî” and “‘ānāw” in particular have been subjected to close investigation in order to establish the relationship between the pious and the evildoers and to define the character of both

1 Ps. xxii. 12 f. (Heb. 14 f.).  2 Ps. xxxviii. 3 (Heb. 4).
3 Ps. xxxviii. 5 (Heb. 6).
4 Ps. xviii. 4 f. (Heb 5 f.). The reading “breakers” (as in 2 Sam. xxii. 5) should probably be adopted in v. 4 (Heb 5) instead of “cords”.
The view of "'āni" and "'ānāw" which received its classical formulation in a famous study by Alfred Rahlfs ¹ is associated with the theory that the enemies were a group or party of godless Jews in the post-exilic period. According to this view, the "'nīyyīm", "'nāwīm", or "ḥāṣidīm" on the one hand and the "rēṣā'im" on the other were parties opposed to each other within the Jewish community at that time. Other considerations apart, it may be said that this particular theory, in the form in which it was commonly held, was bound up with the general tendency to date the majority of the Psalms in the post-exilic period, and even late in that period. It is well-known that scholarly opinion has in the main swung away from such late dating; and on chronological grounds alone it would be difficult to defend this interpretation of the pious and their enemies as opposing groups within Judaism during the later Old Testament period. But, apart from the question of dating, developments in other spheres of Psalm study have brought with them different hypotheses about the identity of the pious and the evildoers.

One of the great turning points in the modern study of the Psalter is associated with the name of Hermann Gunkel. But here, as in much else, Gunkel held what may be regarded as a mediating position. The scheme of literary classification of which he was the pioneer involves a distinction between psalms of the individual and psalms of the community. In those psalms which he labelled "laments of the individual" ("Klagelieder des Einzelnen") Gunkel maintained that the afflicted psalmist was the butt either of those who inferred that his sufferings were the divine punishment on him and therefore that he must have sinned grievously, or, in other psalms, of cynical enemies who denied the outworking of divine justice in human affairs and derided the psalmist who, in spite of his piety, had to endure suffering. The afflicted pious one was an individual, and not the personification of a group. The antithesis between the pious and the ungodly is not merely a reflection of post-exilic party strife, but points to a religious and social cleavage in Israel which existed already in pre-exilic times. Further, Gunkel did not

¹ A. Rahlfs, "יְרוּם und יְהֵד in den Psalmen, I. Göttingen, 1892."
ENEMIES AND EVILDOERS IN PSALMS

enter into the area of cultic interpretation which has become familiar in more recent times. For the most part he regarded the extant psalms as non-cultic religious poems, composed according to the structure and idiom of genuinely cultic texts of an earlier age. For our present discussion it is of interest to note that in his view the military terminology which is sometimes applied to the activities of the enemies and the ungodly goes back ultimately to the royal psalms.¹

It was with the publication of Sigmund Mowinckel’s monumental *Psalmenstudien* that there was added to Gunkel’s literary classification a thoroughgoing cultic interpretation of the Psalms; and, in particular, it was in the first volume of that famous series that a new departure was made in the understanding of enemies and evildoers. To that we return in a moment. Meanwhile we may note in the theory of Hans Schmidt ² an important link with Gunkel’s view. For Schmidt held that in those psalms where references occur to the Psalmist’s illness, the enemies who confront him infer from his affliction that he must have committed some serious misdeed, and in this sense are described as false accusers. Schmidt also contended that in those individual laments where the Psalmist protests his innocence, he would be required to undergo some form of cultic process to determine whether or not he was guilty of the crimes alleged against him. Thus Schmidt’s view represents one form of that cultic approach to problems of Psalm interpretation which was to dominate so much of the scholarly writing on this and similar problems in subsequent decades. It may be admitted that Schmidt’s theory provides a possible solution of some of the relevant psalms; but it cannot in itself account for every aspect of the problem with which we are concerned.

Mowinckel’s theory, subsequently in part discarded by its author, was presented in the first of his *Psalmenstudien*.³ His

¹ On the laments of the individual see H. Gunkel and J. Begrich, *Einleitung in die Psalmen* (H.K.A.T., Göttingen, 1933).
main contentions were that in the expression "pōʾālē ʾāwen", commonly rendered "evildoers" or "workers of iniquity", the word "ʾāwen" indicates supernatural or magical power, that the "pōʾālē ʾāwen" were sorcerers who by their potent spells brought about the afflictions of the pious sufferers, and that the psalms in question were used to ward off or counteract the evil effects of the black arts practised by the "pōʾālē ʾāwen". This theory involved the rejection of the older view that the enemies were a party of ungodly renegades within the post-exilic Jewish community. Like Gunkel's view, it involved an individual interpretation of the psalms in question; but it went beyond Gunkel's view in ascribing to these psalms a thoroughgoing cultic character. Moreover, it was an essential (and much disputed) feature of Mowinckel's hypothesis that the activities of the "pōʾālē ʾāwen" were the cause of the illnesses of the pious sufferers.

Criticism was directed against Mowinckel's theory from various quarters and on various grounds. Professor Artur Hjelt, writing in the *Buhl Festskrift*, subjected some of the relevant psalms to a brief exegetical examination and reached the conclusion that Mowinckel had not made out his case. Hjelt's main contentions were two: first, that in the psalms in question there is no adequate ground for supposing that the psalmists regarded the enemies as the *cause* of their illness; and second, that terms which Mowinckel had regarded as referring to magical practices need not, or do not normally and naturally, carry such a sense. In this country, Professor G. R. Driver questioned the cogency of Mowinckel's use of Babylonian parallels. On the other hand, Professor Alfred Guillaume gave strong general support to the interpretation of these psalms in terms of magical practice, while rejecting Mowinckel's explanation of the term "ʾāwen". It may,

1 A. Hjelt, "Sjukdomslidandet och fienderna i psalerna. (Ett bidrag till bedömande av S. Mowinckels teori)", *Studier tilegnede Professor, Dr Phil. & Theol. Frants Buhl i anledning af hans 75 aars fødelsedag den 6 september 1925 af fagfaeller og elever*, redigeret af Johannes Jacobsen (Copenhagen, 1925), pp. 64-74.


indeed, be questioned whether this word must, or should, be understood in the sense for which Mowinckel argued. It is also a difficulty for Mowinckel’s view, as Hjelt and others have pointed out, that although the Psalmists are afflicted by the malice, slanders, and threats of their enemies, they do not ascribe their illnesses to their enemies’ activities, but to the divine displeasure and their own sinfulness. Nevertheless, it is entirely in keeping with Old Testament thought to ascribe to the spoken word creative and destructive power. Such a conception, however, need not imply any reference to sorcerers. A dying patriarch or a prophet could exercise a similar power by the words which he uttered.¹ It should, therefore, be obvious that the evil words of the enemies were not regarded as empty words, whatever we may think about the identity of the enemies and evildoers.

One of the most thoroughgoing attacks levelled against Mowinckel’s hypothesis was contained in a substantial doctoral thesis by the Dutch scholar N. H. Ridderbos,² who argued, as others had done, that the activities of the enemies are nowhere in the relevant psalms explicitly said to be the cause of the illness of the pious, that Mowinckel’s appeal to Assyrian and Babylonian parallels was not cogent, and that his interpretation of certain terms in a magical sense was forced. But, as Mowinckel himself observed,³ both Ridderbos’s assault and also some subsequent criticisms of *Psalmenstudien I* came a little post festum. Mowinckel had already been led to modify his standpoint as a result of the researches of his own disciple, Harris Birkeland. Birkeland published three important contributions to this area of Psalm study: ¹stdin und ¹dínw in den Psalmen (1933)⁴; *Die Feinde des Individuums in der israelitischen Psalmenliteratur* (1933); and *The Evildoers in the Book of Psalms* (1955),⁵ of which a shortened version was published in Swedish.⁶ When *Die Feinde des Individuums* was submitted as a doctoral thesis at Oslo, Mowinckel,

¹ Gen. xxvii; Num. xxii-xxiv; Jer. i. 9 f.
acting as first opponent appointed by the Faculty, conceded the cogency of some of Birkeland's contentions.¹

What, then, was Birkeland's general position? For him the pious or godly ones are Israel as the covenant people. For him the enemies, even in the individual laments, are national enemies, i.e., foreign nations who threaten, attack, or exercise dominion over Israel. For him all, or practically all, individual psalms are royal psalms: it was against the king, as representative of the people, that the enemies directed their attacks, military attacks, but also dangerous and potent words, accusations by which the king, and therefore the people, could be weakened, destructive words and malicious schemes by which they exploited the king's illness, seeking to enfeeble the body politic.

Birkeland's argument proceeds from a consideration of indubitably national psalms in the "we" form (xliv; lx; lxxix; lxxx; lxxxiii; cxxiv; cxxv) to another group differing from them only formally, viz., royal psalms in which the first person singular pronoun is used, where national afflictions are described, and where the enemies are the enemies of the "I". In some of these psalms (xviii; xx; xxi; lxxxix; cxliv) there are undoubted references to foreign enemies. The vocabulary used to describe the enemies and their activities is similar to that used in the "we" psalms ("iš ḫāmās", "ben ūawlāh", "'innāh"). Further, the king's need and danger are described as a sojourn in Sheol, from which Yahweh draws him up. In yet a third group (xxviii; lxii; lxxiii; 1 Sam. ii. 1-10) Birkeland finds royal psalms which use the singular pronoun "I", and which resemble the style and content of those laments of the individual which Gunkel regarded as the prayers of the pious poor. The psalms in this third group, so Birkeland claims, also describe the enemies in the same terms as the national laments. He concludes that the enemies are foreign, and that the affliction is war; and he claims by these observations to have built a bridge between the national and the individual laments. Carrying his metaphor further, one might add that the indubitably royal psalms are the keystone of the bridge.

¹S. Mowinckel, "Fiendene i de individuelle klagesalmer", N.T.T., 4 Rekke, 5 Bind (35 Årgang) (Oslo, 1934), pp. 1-39.
We must revert later to some of the features of Birkeland's theory. Meanwhile it is perhaps in place to quote Mowinckel's illuminating comment, that whereas Gunkel and Mowinckel began their investigation from psalms which they held to be indubitably psalms of sickness, and proceeded to eliminate those which might otherwise be held to have a national or collective reference, Birkeland began from the other end, from what he regarded as indubitably national features, and proceeded to eliminate supposed references to sickness and to private enemies.¹

Birkeland had put the royal psalms, with their obvious or presumed references to the king's afflictions and the king's enemies, at the centre of his canvas. The enemies were foreigners; the afflictions were national afflictions such as war, and (in some instances) the illness of the king. Another Scandinavian scholar, the late Professor Ivan Engnell, also put the king at the centre, and related the whole to the ritual of the New Year festival, the enemies and evildoers being hostile demonic powers, together with whom hostile foreign powers may sometimes be reckoned.² Since Engnell's view was advanced in a somewhat programmatic fashion, without detailed exegetical support, I refrain from detailed comment, restricting myself in the present context to a quotation of the judgement of Professor Helmer Ringgren, Engnell's successor in the Chair of Old Testament exegesis at Uppsala: "We need only admit the possibility of such an interpretation. What is important for our study is the fact that the opposition between the righteous and their enemies—whether they are called 'the wicked' or something else—is lifted up to a higher mythological or metaphysical level and related to the opposition between cosmos and chaos, or life and death, which, according to Pedersen, is so typical of the ancient Israelitic view of life".³

It is not in my judgement necessary or desirable to profess one's allegiance to any one of the hypotheses which I have briefly and all too inadequately surveyed. There is, in all

¹ See the sympathetic but searching analysis in the opening pages of the article referred to in n. (1, p. 26, above).
² Svenskt Bibliskt Uppslagsverk (Stockholm, 1963), ii. cols. 651-5.
probability, no single solution which satisfactorily accounts for all the factors in the problem. We may, indeed, properly ask whether there is one and only one problem. To assume that there is, is perhaps to misunderstand the nature of the Psalter and its varied riches. The Psalter is the Old Testament’s most characteristic and most comprehensive book. It does not belong to any one period in the history of Israel, for there are psalms which are post-exilic as well as many which are pre-exilic. Many are fragments of the liturgies used in the ancient kingdom of Judah; but it is evident that some have come down to us from the northern kingdom and represent to us, however fragmentarily, its cultic usage. Further, there can be little doubt that some, perhaps many, psalms have been altered and adapted in successive ages; and in such psalms it may well be a doubtful procedure to assume that there is one and only one consistent meaning in the text. ¹

Accordingly, in considering the problem or complex of problems relating to the enemies in the Psalter, it is safe to assume that there is no single key which will unlock all doors.² We have already noted the conventional monotony in recurrent descriptions of the enemies. It may fairly be argued that this characteristic is appropriate to the liturgical character of the psalms. In general, the prayers which they contain were not intended for use on one and only one occasion, but were used on many different occasions, which were of the same general character, but which did not precisely correspond to each other in every particular. The conventional monotony of the language allows for a wide range of national and individual experience. It therefore seems realistic to admit some measure of flexibility in interpretation.

Birkeland’s able and illuminating discussions of the subject suffer from such a lack of flexibility; and at more than one point he overstates his case. His contention that in principle there is no distinction between individual psalms on the one hand and collective or national psalms on the other (since the king or other

representative of the community is the embodiment of its life and the target of the enemies’ malice) seems to amount to a denial of the existence of genuinely individual psalms of lamentation,¹ a position which is in itself improbable and which is particularly difficult to apply to the entire range of psalms which purport to describe illness.² His view that the enemies are always national enemies is also forced. Why should it be insisted that “an impious nation” ("goy lô ḥāsîd") in Ps. xliii. 1 must refer to a foreign power,³ when “sinful nation” ("goy hōtē") in Isa. i. 4 unquestionably refers to Judah? Birkeland’s attempts to show that references to Israel as “wicked”, or to a division between the righteous and the wicked in Israel, occur in the Psalter only exceptionally, under the influence of prophetic teaching (as in Ps. lxxxi. 11 (Heb. 12)), or as instances of late Wisdom thought (as in Ps. i), or in descriptions of collaborators with alien enemies (as on Birkeland’s interpretation of Ps. ci), are additional examples of his tendency to overstate a line of argument which has contributed much to our understanding of the psalms under consideration.⁴

We must, then, allow for a wide range of interpretation, taking in the assaults of national enemies, the bane of illness in national leader or private individual, the potent word of slander or derision, and a variety of cultic acts and situations. The scope of this lecture does not permit of further detailed examination of this theme, to which I hope to return in another context. But wide as the range of interpretation may be, and varied as are the descriptions which the Psalmists give of affliction and conflict, there is nevertheless an underlying unity which is fitly expressed in Professor Ringgren’s words about “the opposition between cosmos and chaos, or life and death”.⁵

¹ See especially The Evildoers in the Book of Psalms, p. 46.
² Cf. Mowinckel’s discussion in The Psalms in Israel’s Worship, ii. 1 ff.
³ The Evildoers in the Book of Psalms, p. 12.
⁵ See above, p. 27.