APPENDIX VII

Psalm 13

(see pp. 298 ff.)

The following discussion concerns the three basic issues faced by critical scholarship in connection with Psalm 13:

(1) The historical (biographical) background of the psalm;
(2) The structure of the psalm;
(3) The change of mood in the psalm.

(1) The historical (biographical) background of the psalm

Modern scholars generally assume, on the basis of "Give light to my eyes, lest I sleep the death" (verse 4), that our psalmist was mortally ill. Thus, for example, Gunkel writes: "The poet was in a critical condition (verse 4). It is reasonable to assume that our psalm speaks of a lengthy illness, seriously threatening the life of the psalmist, as in the contiguous psalms". However, in his view: "[The psalmist's] main fear is that his hope and trust in God will be upset, and that his enemies will be exalted when his trust fails. His enemy is God's enemy. When the righteous falls, the enemy rejoices and the name of God is desecrated. However, even if we admit that this is the main source of his suffering, we should not deduce therefrom that the poet did not suffer actual physical pain. We must simply admit that spiritual pangs are bitterer in his view than the physical pangs of his sickness". Similar to this are the views of Weiser and Kraus.

Not only does Schmidt agree with this view, he even deduces from the prayer "give light to my eyes" the nature of the poet's sickness: "Can the speaker be anyone other than one who feels threatened by a serious eye disease? Day and night this fear of this sickness is not abated. A proof that it is not a spiritual illness but an actual physical eye disease that the psalmist suffers is his fear that as a result of his present suffering he is liable to die . . . However, more than he suffers from the illness, more than he is consumed by worry at the progress of his illness, he suffers when he thinks of the 'lest they say' of his enemies".

Mowinckel, on the other hand, believes that the enemies are the *po'ălē 'āwen*, "evildoers", that is, according to his interpretation, witches and magicians who cause sickness (*PsSt*, I, p. 123; *The Psalms in Israel's Worship* [transl. by D. R. ap-Thomas], II, Oxford 62, pp. 250-251; *The*

Old Testament and Modern Study, pp. 197ff. See the criticism of Gunkel, *Introduction*, pp. 202 ff.; Kaufmann, II/2, p. 699, note 80; A. F. Puukko, "Der Feind in den alttestamentlichen Psalmen", *OTS*, VIII (1950), pp. 47-65; Szörényi, *op. cit.* (p. 83, note 23), pp. 224-240; Keel *op. cit.* (p. 301, note 4), pp. 21ff.

According to Dahood, our psalmist laments as he stands on the threshold of death. Death is his enemy. Dahood also believes that our psalm contains references to the Canaanite myth according to which the chief enemy of Baal was the god of death; he therefore also takes the plural of "my foes" (verse 5) to be an instance of *pluralis majestatis*.

H. Birkeland rejects the conception that our psalm refers to sickness: "The psalm contains no mention or hint of sickness. As is well known, there are other moral dangers in the world besides illness. Gunkel limits himself to asserting that what the enemies are liable to say and their rejoicing at his downfall are important aspects of the writings of elegiac poets. But in our psalm in particular, it is as clear as the sun at midday that the enemy is considered as the cause of the psalmist's possible death. Had our psalm been the poem of an invalid, Mowinckel would have been justified in seeing the witch, the magician who caused the sickness, as the 'enemy'. But the assumption that our psalm refers to sickness, which Mowinckel receives from Gunkel, is not at all correct". And what is Birkeland's own view? "It seems that the psalm was written about the defeat of a military leader (a king), a defeat in a battle against an enemy of his nation" (*Die Feinde des Individuums in der israelitischen Psalmenliteratur*, Oslo 1933, p. 301).

Birkeland is right in his criticism of his predecessors: there is no hint of sickness in our psalm; hence all interpretations based on it have no validity. But is his own view valid? Neither is there, after all, any reference to a military leader or king, to war or defeat.

Other scholars too believe that the enemy himself is the cause of the psalmist's suffering. Some among them also discover the identity of the enemy. From the previous generation, for example, Hitzig, Delitzsch, Kirkpatrick refer the psalm to Saul's persecution of David. Duhm thought of the political and sectarian opponents of the faithful during the Maccabean period. Puukko agrees with him (*op. cit.*). About such detective work C. Westermann remarks in a methodological note: "It is not possible to answer the question of who the enemy is by considering this

motif per se divorced from the rest of the psalm. Certainly we cannot solve this problem by choosing one of the many terms used to refer to the 'enemies' in the book of Psalms. These methods will not serve the purpose, as we must see everything that is said about the enemy in its context in the whole psalm. Before we consider the question 'who is the enemy', we must ask: what is the enemy accused of in the psalm? What does the psalmist argue against him? This question in turn will be answered only by considering it in relation to the rest of the lament" ("Struktur und Geschichte der Klage im Alten Testament", *ZAW*, LXVI [1954], p. 61 [= *Forschungen am Alten Testament*, München 1964, p. 285]).

This observation is certainly valid and highly important — as long as it implies that every lament must be considered per se. However, this is not what Westermann means; he prefers, as usual, to generalise referring to all the elegies, and he refers to the genre called "elegies" or "laments" (including those laments in which the enemy is not mentioned explicitly; see below in this note). Therefore the value of his conclusion is doubtful: "We cannot, from what is said about the enemies in the individual laments, draw any conclusions about the particular constellation in which two mutually hostile groups confront each other on questions of foreign affairs or internal policies or ideological warfare. But we can see what is said about the enemy as reflecting a situation of internal disintegration in the nation. It is clear to us that breaches and dissension have broken out. We do not know exactly what their nature is, only one thing is clear: the cause of every internal disintegration lies in the relation of this people to its God" (*ibid.* p. 66).

G. Widengren, comparing this psalm with the Akkadian psalms of lamentation, stresses that the same expressions can be used in different contexts and that stereotyped phrases do not by any means admit a single generalised explanation as to the identity of the enemy; one must rather examine each particular passage, using other criteria, to ascertain just what these stereotyped descriptions of the enemy refer to (*The Accadian and Hebrew Psalms of Lamentation as Religious Documents*, Uppsala 1936). Keel also dismisses the question of the enemy's identity as irrelevant and, in the light of psychological themes, regards the enemy as a projection of the suppliant himself. In his opinion the references to them in the Psalms can be divided into two groups according to their content:

those which express mere hostility (type: *'ōyēv*) and those which pass a moral judgment on the foes (type: *rāšā'*). In the earlier psalms the psalmist's opponents are simply described as enemies and their hostility is denounced, as in the present psalm (*ibid.*, esp. pp. 107-109, 129-131).

According to Kraus: "The enemy of the individual is a power (Macht) that separates him from his God, and his pronouncements are absolute. The enemy decrees: You are severed from God — your life, which approaches death, proves this!"

The absence of any concrete description of the sufferings of the elegiac psalmists (What is their sickness? Who is their enemy?) gave rise to the conception of the psalms generally accepted today as cultic forms used for cultic purposes (according to the originator of this conception, Gunkel, such a form is the *source*, even if not the *meaning*, of the psalm. (See his complaint about the lack of specificity of the psalms, above, p. 49). "Had the elegiac psalms been created in a sick bed," writes G. von Rad, "these psalms would certainly not have been so completely void of concrete details describing the individual condition in which the authors found themselves" ("'Gerechtigkeit' und 'Leben' in der Kultsprache der Psalmen", in: *Bertholet Festschrift*, Tübingen [1950], p. 428 [= *Gesammelte Studien zum Alten Testament*, München 1958, p. 236]).

But this conclusion, deduced from the vagueness of the psalms, does not at all necessarily follow from the given premise. It is of the intrinsic nature of great lyric poetry — and herein lies its very greatness — that the incidental, the personal, the individual, the biographical is transformed into a general human symbol (compare the words of Staiger, above, p. 50). The poem can be a complete sublimation of physical suffering, and a mortally sick poet — if he is truly worthy of this high title — can compose, on the basis of his individual sickness, a poem about human suffering without any concrete details. Compare, for example, these remarks of Delitzsch on Psalm 22: "David descends with his laments to the depths of a suffering much deeper than his personal suffering. With his hope he ascends to the heavens, beyond the hope of recompense for his own sufferings". Why, therefore, should we not assume that our psalm too is true lyric poetry, not a liturgical formula, and that this is why it does not contain realistic details of a concrete situation? After all, even according to Gunkel, most of the psalms, including ours, are not liturgical formulae but expressions of individual thought. Thus he admits that the

indefiniteness of the psalm does not prove that it is purely formulaic.

Gunkel, however, offers another argument: the psalms are not personal expressions of the emotions of their authors. David, after all, in his lament (II Samuel 2) mentions Saul and Jonathan by name. Why do we not find the name of any of the psalmist's contemporaries in any of the psalms? (*Introduction*, p. 11). This line of argument is followed also by Nic. H. Ridderbos. He holds that "the absence of precise details in the Psalms, especially when viewed against the background of other OT poems, which do indeed contain plenty of factual details — can . . . be explained only by the assumption that the psalmists kept to a particular style; they worked in fixed conventional forms and repeatedly made use of traditional phraseology. This suggests that the psalms did not come into existence through some man's expressing his feelings as his heart prompted him. There were certain guilds of minstrels who obliged the poet to conform to fixed traditional genres. The psalmists belonged to these guilds or else were influenced by their verses" ("Psalmen und Kult", in: Neumann [ed.], *Zur neueren Psalmenforschung* [cited above, p. 313, note 23], p. 267). Yet the assertion about the vagueness of the psalms does not prove any of the conclusions which have been drawn from it. What the Talmudic Sages said with reference to the prophecies that have been preserved in the Bible (*T. B. Megillah* 14a) is surely valid with reference to the psalms. The absence of psalms with concrete biographical details from our Psalter is to be explained on the basis of the fact that such poems were purposely excluded from the collections from which our book of Psalms was composed precisely because of their personal aspects.

With reference to our question of our psalmist's main source of suffering, we should like to make the following methodological remark: the interest of modern scholars in the cause of the psalmist's despair is not the same as ours. We undertake the inquiry in order to clarify the mood of the author as expressed in the language of the psalm: we do not ask what was the poet's condition, not even his true feeling, but only what is the feeling expressed in the poem: our goal is to understand the poem. Not so the modern commentators. Their interest stems from a historical purpose, that of discovering details either about the biography of the poet or about the history of his period. We ask: what is the nature of the sorrow expressed in the psalm? They ask: what was the nature of the sorrow in his

life that led him to write the poem? Schmidt's commentary, referred to above (see also p. 294, note 4), can serve as a classic example of this biographical approach; he is not content with establishing the fact that our psalmist was sick, but is also interested in determining the type of sickness. This approach is characteristic of positivism in Biblical scholarship even in our days but, as has here been repeatedly demonstrated, it is based on false premises: the function of the interpreter is not to infer from the poem details about the life of its creator (see e.g. above, pp. 49-50). This is the function of the biographer.

However, even as biographers, the scholars we have cited are inadequate. For, since the interpretation they offer is incorrect, their historical-biographical conclusions are unfounded. Therefore, even were our expressed goal to read the psalms not as poetry, as an end in itself, but as a source of historical-biographical information, the views of the scholars cited would not be acceptable. Form-critics too have done their part to perpetuate this approach. For example, Gunkel finds support in form criticism for his diagnosis if the psalmist's illness in Psalm 13 (see above).

Above all, one must bear in mind what has already been said about the interpretation of poetry which concerns itself not with the poem but with the poet's biography. Even assuming that the psalm contains indications that the psalmist was ill when he wrote it, even if we had details of his illness, it would still be impossible to conclude with certainty that he really was ill (see pp. 51-52).

(2) The structure of the psalm:

According to Westermann (*The Praise of God in the Psalms*, pp. 68-69), the structure of Psalm 13 is as follows:

Address (Turning to God) Introductory cry for help		LORD	verse 2a
Lament	Foes	How long shall my enemy be exalted over me?	verse 3b
	I	How long must I bear pain?	verse 3a
	Thou	Wilt Thou forget me for ever?	verse 2a
Confession of trust		But I have trusted in Thy steadfast love	verse 6a
Petition	Hear!	Consider and answer me	verse 4a
	Save!	Lighten my eyes	verse 4b
	Punish!		
Motifs		Lest my enemy say	verse 5
Double wish		(4-5?)	
Vow praise		I will sing to the LORD	verse 6a
(Declarative) Praise of God		Because he has dealt bountifully with me	verse 6b

A comparison of this suggestion by Westermann with our analysis of the structure (see above, p. 302f.) will reveal significant differences. The reason for these differences is the same as that indicated with reference to the structure of Psalm 74 (pp. 283 ff.). A look at the order of the verses in the structure proposed by Westermann (we have added the verse numbers) will demonstrate again that Westermann did not take the text and the order of its verses seriously.

According to Westermann, the structure of our psalm also shows the same interaction that is present — in his view — in all the laments in the Bible: "The lamenter, God, and others, i.e. a group of persons among or against whom the lamenter depicts himself in his lament. We are thus concerned not merely with utterance of an individual reacting to a state of distress but with an occurrence which necessarily involves *three* parties. . . . The elegist is never a solitary, isolated individual: he is always a member of a collective whole" ("Struktur und Geschichte" [cited above, p. 437], p. 48).

Our basic objection to this thesis is the methodological argument already adduced more than once against Westermann's views: they are schematic. Another argument, also already mentioned (above, p. 283) is that Westermann bases the structure of the lament-psalms not on the psalms as we have them, but on non-existent, imaginary creations.

As for the thesis itself: the criteria determined by Westermann for identifying the "lament of the individual" are not peculiar to the genre they are supposed to identify. "I", "You", "he" or "they" — the poet, God, others — serve as the basis in psalms of praise. They are also found in prophecies: the oppressor, the oppressed, God (or the prophet as His messenger). Is not this the natrual structure of all human religious thought — I, the universe, God? Does not the very structure of language imply this in the three persons of the verb? If this is the case in all human speech, how can it be a criterion for determining the genre of lament?

Finally, let us return to the question we raised when discussing Westermann's view on the structure of Psalm 74 (above,pp. 283ff.): how does it help us to understand our psalm? In Westermann's survey of psalm-research since Gunkel, he writes: "This whole tendency to explain as many as possible or even all of the Psalms either by the 'ideology' of a specific (and only just discovered) festival, by a cultic scheme, or by connecting a basic myth with a specific ritual . . . , seems to me, in spite of all the effort that has been expended on it in the last thirty years, to have produced meager results for the understanding of the individual Psalms" (*The Praise of God*, p. 21). This judgment of Westermann on the rebellious disciples of Gunkel is equally true of Westermann's own research. How do his remarks about elegies or laments help towards an understanding of Psalm 13?

(3) The change of mood in the psalm

The change of mood from one extreme to the other found in our psalm is explained in different ways by Biblical scholars. We mentioned above (p. 313, note 23) that Schmidt tends to attribute this phenomenon to the editing of the psalm, in which, he says, two different independent poems were combined into one.

If we recognize the ascent from despair to confidence as a psychological law of true prayer and read the psalms without preconceptions, we shall find this law confirmed in quite a number of psalms,

wherever we find such a radical transition from bitter despair at the beginning to triumphant confident rejoicing at the close (3:8; 6:9-10; 20:7; 26:12; 28:6-8; 31:20-23; 57:7, etc. — See Gunkel, *Introduction*, pp. 243-247). If, on the other hand, we persist in reading the psalms on the assumption that they were originally composed as a part of the cult, we shall tend to explain the change of mood as merely mechanical. J. W. Wevers writes of the psalmist's transition from despair to hope in and through prayer: "Such a psychological phenomenon is certainly not impossible; it, however, applies only to private prayer. The prayers with which we are concerned are mainly cultic, at least their origins are such. Accordingly a phenomenon so widespread as this one must find its explanation in the primitive cult" ("A Study in the Form Criticism of Individual Complaint Psalms", *VT*, VI [1956], p. 81). This remark is characteristic of the approach generally adopted in Biblical scholarship. Instead of proceeding from the investigation of the text to the theoretical conclusion concerning the nature of the psalm and its place in the religious life, scholars begin by asserting that our psalm *cannot* be a "private prayer". If, on subsequent examination, stylistic qualities, structure and content indicate a soul petitioning its God, scholars feel obliged to seek ways of explaining away such phenomena in order to confirm the preconception which is contradicted by the text.

A number of scholars accept F. Küchler's explanation that, in this type of psalm, the verse expressing the worshipper's certainty that his prayer has been answered was preceded by a priestly oracle revealing to the petitioner that his request has been accepted (See Gunkel, *Introduction*, pp. 132-133, 177-178, 243-256 [but see below]; J. Begrich, "Das priesterliche Heilsorakel", *ZAW*, LII [1934], pp. 81-92 [= *Gesammelte Studien zum Alten Testament*, München 1964, pp. 217-231]). Wevers disagrees with this view, arguing that no hint and certainly no actual example of such an oracle is to be found in the psalm. He claims: "The solution may possibly be found through an investigation of the invocation and its use of the divine name". He asserts that the tetragrammaton appears in invocations 274 times in the book of Psalms, of which 110 times are in individual laments. This name was thought to have a magical power, therefore its very use assisted the petitioner (*art. cit.*, p. 82). Gunkel, who generally accepts Küchler's explanation, expresses reservations. He writes: "We must admit that the suppliant's certainty that this prayer has

been accepted is not explained by the oracle. There are many laments which do not admit of such interpretation; there are the laments which have no connection with the cult. How can the confident, joyous conclusion of such psalms be explained? It would seem that this is none other than the influence of an ancient stylistic form which such psalms retain". Indeed, this ancient form, Gunkel admits, would not have been retained for generations and would not have exerted the influence it did were it not that the ascent to full trust is one of the essential traits of every true prayer (*Introduction*, p. 247). Similarly, Ridderbos explains the sudden change of mood in many psalms (*Die Psalmen*, p. 71). According to Weiser, "the remarkable fact that the great majority of the laments do not refer to. . . . an oracle refutes Gunkel's postulate that in these cases, too, we are presented with a stylistic form, cast into rigid mould, which at an earlier stage presupposes such an oracle" (*The Psalms*, pp. 79-80). In accordance with his view of the cult in Israel and the place of the psalms in the cult, he writes on verse 5 of our psalm: the worshipper's "assurance that his prayer has been answered is vouched for by his encounter with God present in the cult". Kraus, reasoning from the content of verse 6, maintains that "we can assume that God has intervened to save the psalmist, who utters praises in the holy place for the salvation and life he has received". Szörényi writes of this phenomenon in psalms: "The change of mood, the feeling of certainty that the prayer has been heard and answered, can be explained mainly by the unshakeable faith of the Israelites and their firm hope in Y', but also, to some degree, by the assumption — which must be considered separately in each case — that at the end of each individual lament a hymn of thanksgiving was added either through the influence of the liturgy or by the original author's intention or even by the arbitrary act of a later author, or perhaps compiler" (*op. cit.* [p. 83, note 23], pp. 303-304).

Instead of reacting to the views which run counter to ours and to those of the above-mentioned scholars (p. 313, note 23), which is the only view based on the actual text of the psalms (i.e. of those exhibiting this phenomenon), let us cite the opinion of Ch. F. Barth: "It equally unsatisfactory to explain this fact either by saying that separate psalms of lament and praise have been 'conflated' or by postulating a special 'intermediate' category. Strictly speaking, all psalms of individual lamentation contain expressions of trust and of certainty that they will be heard" (*Introduction to the Psalms* (transl. by R. A. Wilson], Oxford 1966, p. 17).