WHO ARE THE BAD GUYS IN THE PSALMS?

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In another context, I have sought to identify elements of the anthropology of the Psalter. Drawing on such Psalms as 8, 62, and 51, I dealt with the human creature as sinner, but beyond that generally ignored all the words about evil-doers and the wicked, who come in many forms and often in the Psalter. That, however, leaves a conspicuous hole in the effort to look at how the human creature acts and lives as we see it in the Psalms. So I am going to take another shot at the question, specifically with regard to what I am calling colloquially “the bad guys.”

Along with others I have argued that Ps 1, often memorized and treasured for its substance, has a special place as an introduction both to the first book of the Psalter (Pss 3–41) as well as to the Psalter as a whole. As it introduces all that is to follow, it does so by setting out two ways that one may go in the human journey and what their outcomes are. One is the way of the righteous and the other the way of the wicked. In the process, the reader of the Psalter is introduced here at the beginning to the bad guys. And as one reads through the Psalter, one finds them present again and again and, not surprisingly, with a variety of designations. Some of the labels are quite broad and general, for example, “doers of evil” (PageSize); “oppressors” (PageSize); “transgressors” (PageSize); “evildoers” (PageSize); “men of blood” (PageSize). Others are more specific, e.g., “speakers of lies” (PageSize); “men of blood and deceit” (PageSize); and other references to false witnesses and liars (PageSize). And, of course, the bad guys are often simply identified

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1 For over thirty years, Hugh Williamson has been a dear friend and greatly respected and trusted colleague. From the time we first came to know each other in the Old Testament seminar in Cambridge, it was clear that here was one of the sharpest and most thoughtful of contemporary interpreters of Scripture. That awareness has only grown through the years. When it is joined with Hugh’s many modes of hospitality, one can only be grateful for an opportunity such as this both to pay tribute and to say thank you.

as enemies of the one who is praying (איבים; 3:8; 5:9; 6:11; 7:7; etc.) or "my pursuers" (רדפים; Ps 7:2).

I. The Wicked

The most common term for the bad guys in Ps 1 occurs in the first line of the Psalter and then appears three more times in this brief Psalm: "(the) wicked" (רשעים). The category “wicked” is then paralleled by the term “sinners” (חטאים) both in the first verse and a second time in v. 5. In the first verse, however, there is a third group, the לצים, translated variously as “the scornful,” the insolent,” “scoffers,” and the like. While these three groups by no means exhaust the various designations of bad guys in the Psalms, as I have indicated above, the important function of Ps 1 as an introduction to the Psalter suggests that a closer look at the three groups may help us understand more about those who are the opposite of or opposed to the righteous, the God-fearers, those who trust in the Lord and so live and act.

As far as I can tell, רשעים, “the wicked” are not only the primary category of bad guys in Ps 1 but also the most frequent designation in the Psalter as a whole. There are over eighty references to רשעים in the Psalms. As in Ps 1, the wicked are frequently in parallel with or set over against "the righteous" (צדיק; Ps 7:10 [Eng. 9]; 11:5; 34:22 [Eng. 21]; 37:28–29, 39–40; 58:4–12 [Eng. 3–11]; 68:3–4; 75:11[Eng. 10]; 97:10–12; 112:5, 10). While they are often referred to without further elaboration, in a number of psalms their behavior is spelled out in some detail. In Ps 50 with its recital of several violations of the commandments, the general category into which such people fall is “the wicked”:

16But to the wicked God says:
“What right have you to recite my statutes,
or take my covenant on your lips?
17For you hate discipline,
and you cast my words behind you.
18You make friends with a thief when you see one,
and you keep company with adulterers.
19You give your mouth free rein for evil,
and your tongue frames deceit.
20You sit and speak against your kin;
you slander your own mother’s child."