

# PSALMS 1-44

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*A Theological Commentary for Preachers*

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# PSALM 1:1–6

## Psalm of Orientation

### *Delighting in the Word*

THE PSALTER IS A book of songs, but Psalm 1 is hardly a representative of that genre. Rather, as a psalm of orientation, it is “a poem commenting on how life works,” more in line with Wisdom literature (as for e.g., Prov 2:1–15, 20–22) and, in particular, functioning as a beatitude.<sup>1</sup> But, along with Psalm 2 that proclaims the reign of God and his Anointed, this first psalm sets the stage for the rest of the collection with its emphasis on the way of the righteous. Aquinas called it “as it were, the title of the entire work.”<sup>2</sup> And, Psalm 1, Jerome claimed, is “the main entrance to the mansion of the Psalter.”<sup>3</sup>

### **Psalms 1 and 2**

In Book 1 (Psalms 1–41) of the Psalter, there are only four psalms without superscriptions: Psalms 1 and 2, 10 (considered as continuing Psalm 9), and 33 (but it has τῷ Δαυιδ, *tō David*, “David’s,” in the LXX).<sup>4</sup> This suggests that Psalms 1 and 2 may well belong together, forming a joint introduction to the Psalms.<sup>5</sup> Links between the first two psalms include: “blessing” in 1:1a and 2:12d;<sup>6</sup> “sit” in 1:1d (and scoffing) and 2:4a (and laughing and mocking); *הִנֵּה*, *hgh*, in 1:2b (“meditate”) and 2:1b (“conspire”); “path” and the “perishing” with regard to it (1:1c,

1. Goldingay, *Psalms* 1:80.

2. Aquinas, *Exposition of the Psalms of David: Psalm 1*. Indeed, the first word of this psalm begins with א, *aleph*, the last begins with ת, *taw*—from “A to Z” so to speak. So “this psalm embraces all that a happy/blessed individual needs for living life according to the Lord’s precepts. An acrostic is suited to this emphasis on totality” (Petersen and Richards, *Interpreting Hebrew Poetry*, 94). Notably, in the in the Leningrad Codex, Psalm 1 is unnumbered.

3. *The Homilies of Saint Jerome*, Vol. 1, 3.

4. On superscriptions and my take on them, please see Introduction.

5. There are references in the Talmud that assert the union of the first two psalms. According to R. Yehuda: “‘Happy is the man’ [Ps 1:1a] and ‘Why are the nations in uproar’ [Ps 2:1a] constitute a single chapter” (*b. Ber.* 9b; also see 10a) (see <https://www.sefaria.org/Berakhot.9b.30>). Justin Martyr (*Apology* 1.40) quoted Psalms 1–2 without a break, and Tertullian cited Ps 2:7 as coming from the “first psalm” (*Against Marcion* 4.22 [ANF 3:384]), as also does Bezae Cantabrigiensis (D<sup>ea</sup>, a fifth-century NT codex) in Acts 13:33.

6. In fact, the final macarism of 2:12d does not seem particularly necessary to the conclusion of Psalm 2, but it creates an explicit link to 1:1.

## PSALM 1:1–6

6 and 2:12b); noun עֵץ, *ets*, “tree,” in 1:3a and adverb עַתָּה, *attah*, “now,” in 2:10a; “day” (יוֹמָם, *yomam*) in 1:2b and “today” (הַיּוֹם, *hayyom*) in 2:7c; “judgment” in 1:5a and “judges” in 2:10b; fate of the wicked/rebellious (1:4 and 2:5, 9, 12abc; and in both, this is portrayed by similes: 1:4b and 2:9b). Indeed, the righteous individual of Psalm 1 is a parallel to Yahweh’s Anointed in Psalm 2: the delight of the former in Yahweh’s “law” (1:2) is matched by the declaration of the latter of Yahweh’s “statute” (2:7a); the one is “transplanted by canals of water” (1:3b), and the other is “installed . . . upon Zion, My holy mountain” (2:6).<sup>7</sup> And likewise, the “wicked” and “sinners” and “scoffers” of Psalm 1 meet their kin in “nations” and “peoples” and “kings” and “rulers” of Psalm 2; the former are scattered like chaff blown in the wind (1:4b), and the latter are shattered like pots by one wielding a rod of iron (2:9). Fruitfulness, delight, and honor are for those who disassociate themselves from the wicked (Psalm 1), and also for those who associate themselves with Yahweh’s Anointed (Psalm 2).<sup>8</sup>

### Translation

- 1:1 Blessing [upon] the person  
who has not walked by the advice of the wicked,  
or in the path of sinners stood,  
nor in the seat of scoffers sat.
- 1:2 But, instead, in the law of Yahweh [is] his delight,  
and in His law he meditates day and night.
- 1:3 And he is like a tree  
transplanted by canals of water,  
which its fruit—it yields in its season,  
and its foliage—it does not wither;  
and [in] all he does, he succeeds.
- 1:4 Not so the wicked;  
instead, [they are] like chaff which is blown away [by] wind.
- 1:5 Therefore the wicked will not rise up in the judgment,  
nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous.
- 1:6 For Yahweh knows the path of the righteous,  
but the path of the wicked perishes.

7. If the channels of water are an allusion to the temple (Ezek 47:12), and if the “transplantation” is into the house of Yahweh (Ps 92:13), then the referents of 1:3 and 2:6 may be even more similar.

8. Botha, “Ideological Interface,” 202.

## Structure

The psalm appears to be carefully structured:<sup>9</sup>

### The Blessing of the Righteous (1:1–3)

*Introduction* (1:1a; “blessing”)

**A** Description of the righteous (1:1b–2): 3 negations (לֹא, *lo’*; “path”)

**B** Agricultural simile with אֲשֶׁר ... כְּעֵץ (*k’ets ... ’asher*), 1:3abcd)

**C** Summary: righteous (1:3e)

### The Bane of the Wicked (1:4–6)

**C’** Summary: wicked (1:4a)

**B’** Agricultural simile with אֲשֶׁר כַּמּוֹץ (*kamotz ’asher*, 1:4b)

**A’** Description of the wicked (1:5): 1 negation (לֹא); “path” (×2)

*Conclusion* (1:6; “perishes”)

## Theological Focus

The fertile stasis of the righteous—constant, affective intercourse with divine revelation, the outcome of which is fruitfulness—results in the blessing of divine care of their ways; but the futile kinesis of the wicked, the outcome of which is fruitlessness, results in divine judgment, the destruction of their ways.

## Commentary

### The Blessing of the Righteous (1:1–3)

There clearly is a “profound awareness of a deep ideological divide between two groups of people in society”—righteous vs. wicked.<sup>10</sup> The wicked have all kinds of schemes, stances, seats, and scoffing (1:1); the righteous are characterized by one delight—the constant meditation upon the *Torah* of Yahweh. The two are incompatible and cannot mingle, as 1:1 and 1:5 detail. Alter notes that,

in a manner rather uncharacteristic of biblical poetic style, the psalmist takes pains to place explicit indicators of logical transition . . . [כִּי אִם, *ki ’im*, “instead” (1:2); לֹא־כֵן, *lo’-ken*, “not so” (1:4a); אִם כִּי אִם, *ki ’im* (1:4b); and עַל־כֵּן, *’al-ken*, “therefore” (1:5)]. Reality is thus made to yield an exact moral calculus: there are things the just man will not do; indeed, there is something antithetical he does instead; the

9. Modified from Petersen and Richards, *Interpreting Hebrew Poetry*, 96.

10. Botha, “Ideological Interface,” 192. The “righteous” one is not to be mistaken for one who is sinless; in the Psalms it indicates guiltlessness and innocence in the generality of one’s life, describing one who is loyal to Yahweh, an integral member of the community of God. The first word of the Psalm is “blessing,” and the last, “perishes” (as was noted, they respectively begin with the first and last letters of the alphabet: אֲשֶׁר־י, *’ashre*, and תִּשְׁבֵּר, *to’ved*). The contrast is further heightened by “instead” in 1:2a, 4b.

fate of the wicked is the contrary of the fate often just; and there is a consequential generalizing summary . . . [1:6] to be drawn from what has been asserted.<sup>11</sup>

There appears to be a progression in the walking, standing, and sitting that is characteristic of the wicked and those who choose their ways:<sup>12</sup> “Listening to people formulating plans is one thing. Acting on them is another. Spending one’s life in the company of such schemers is to walk into a marsh from which one is unlikely to emerge.”<sup>13</sup> So there is clearly work involved in the gaining of divine blessing by the righteous: “Their happy estate is not something given automatically by God, but is a direct result of their activity.”<sup>14</sup> They are to “not . . . walk,” “[not] stand,” and “[not] sit” with the wicked, but they are to “delight” and “meditate” in Yahweh’s *Torah*.<sup>15</sup> In light of the negations of 1:1, the “law of Yahweh” (1:2) is, in contrast, to be reckoned as the righteous person’s “advice” to walk by, “path” to stand on, and “seat” to be established upon. This is an invitation to the joy of divine revelation for communion with the *Torah*-giver and for the conduct of one’s life as a *Torah*-lover.

Broadly, תּוֹרָה, *torah*, indicates “instruction” or “teaching”; “specifically, it is the instruction which God gives to mankind as a guide for life. Thus it may include that which is technically law, but it also includes other more general parts of God’s revelation,” whether narrative (the Pentateuch), poetry (Prov 3:1; 7:2; 28:4, 7, 9), or prophecy (Isa 1:10; Dan 9:10).<sup>16</sup> Therein is guidance for life from the Creator of life, without which guidance the life of mankind is futile; but with it—by its delight to the devout and in their meditation of it, as Ps 1:3 affirms—life is fertile.

The verb הִגֵּד, *hgh*, “meditate” (1:2b) is also found in Josh 1:8, also in connection to the *Torah*. Indeed, the similarities are significant: both texts have “meditate day and night”; both have “law” and “success” (Ps 1:2–3). The linkage of the verb “meditate” with “mouth” in Josh 1:8 of course suggests reading, but it might include “recitation from memory or of rehearsing the traditional narratives [35:28; 37:30; 71:24]. Meditation might also signify the ‘audible murmuring’ of one whose thoughts are occupied in deep reflection upon God’s words and deeds [143:5].”<sup>17</sup> הִגֵּד is also associated with singing: 71:23–24; and 77:12 with 77:6; the associated noun הִגְיָוִן, *higgayon* (9:16; 92:3; untranslated), apparently a musical direction, may also link it with song. In any case, an intensive and continuous interaction with divine revelation—the outcome of a positive affect towards it—is the mark of the righteous person.

11. Alter, *Art of Biblical Poetry*, 144.

12. The “advice of the wicked” (1:1b) is their scheming, and “the path of sinners” (1:1c) their arrant lifestyle; “the seat of scoffers” (1:1d) is likely their derisive disposal of all matters theological.

13. Goldingay, *Psalms*, 1:83.

14. Craigie, *Psalms 1–50*, 60. On the distinction between good fortune and blessing, Goldingay (*Psalms*, 3:511) notes that “‘good fortune’ describes a state or an experience and does not comment on the agency that brings it about, while ‘bless’ refers to the personal action that generates that state or experience.”

15. Seow observes that אָשַׁר recalls אָשַׁר, *’ashar*, “to proceed/walk” (as in Prov 9:15); in fact, “walking” and “being blessed” are closely associated, not only in Ps 1:1 (negatively), but also in Pss 89:15; 119:1; 128:1 (“Exquisitely Poetic Introduction,” 279n28).

16. Craigie, *Psalms 1–50*, 60. *Torah* is used in all these references. Janzen (“Psalm 1,” 120) perspicaciously notes: “In ‘Ikeā’ terms, *tôrāh* offers ‘directions for assembling and enjoying a life.’” Indeed, I would argue that every pericope of Scripture, in both the Old and New Testaments, provides such a guide to life in its various aspects and parts, that facilitates the person of God becoming complete, inhabiting the ideal world of God, with God (i.e., becoming Christlike). Thereby, every pericope becomes a portion of the *Torah* in this broad sense.

17. Martin, “Delighting in the Torah,” 722. The verb הִגֵּד is used in all these references, too.

While there is no doubt that this involves obedience to God’s word, the emphasis here is upon the affections of the righteous: *הִפִּיךְ*, *hpts*, “delight,” 1:2a, can refer to romantic attraction (Gen 34:19; also see Pss 5:4; 16:3; 37:23; etc., where it refers to divine pleasure). “Delight” in the divine word is also found in 40:8; 112:1. If the focus here in 1:2 were on *Torah* as commandment to be obeyed, that could have been more precisely stated in a parallelism with another commandment-related word, as in 78:10 (“covenant”); 89:31 (“judgments”); or 105:45 (“statutes”). But the psalmist employs *הִנְהִיךְ* in both lines of the parallelism (1:2a and 1:2b). Indeed, though the term is found thirty-six times in the Psalter, only here is it found in parallel to itself. All that to say, “to delight in the Torah is an affective inclination, a passionate disposition. To delight in the Torah is to rejoice in it, to love it, to long for it, to desire it more than gold, and to enjoy it more than honey. . . . The emphasis of Ps 1 is not upon deeds but delight, not on duty but desire, not on obedience but on affections that are rightly oriented towards God.”<sup>18</sup> A right attitude to the word of God is being inculcated here.

Such a one who is entranced in every way by God’s word “is like a tree transplanted [*שָׁתַל*, *shtl*] by canals of water” (1:3a), ostensibly by God himself (the verb is passive), and perhaps into the very “house of Yahweh” and into “the courts of our God” (92:13; the same verb *שָׁתַל* occurs there, as well as the simile of trees that bear fruit: 92:12–14). That is to say, the righteous one, who “day and night” dwells on the divine word, dwells in the very presence of deity.

The agricultural simile proceeds to describe the fertility of the righteous person, the tree, culminating in “fruit” that “it yields in its season” (1:3c)—doing what the tree was grown for, producing what the tree was supposed to. So much so, “the state of blessedness or happiness is not a *reward*; rather it is the result of a particular type of life. Just as a tree with a constant water supply *naturally* flourishes, so too the person who avoids evil and delights in Torah *naturally* prospers, for such a person is living within the guidelines set down by the Creator. Thus the prosperity of the righteous reflects the wisdom of a life lived according to the plan of the Giver of all life.”<sup>19</sup>

### The Bane of the Wicked (1:3–6)

Interestingly enough, reading the three verbs applied to the wicked ones—walking, standing, and sitting (1:1)—we spy the nefarious person as being constantly on the move, active, lively, dynamic. On the other hand, the righteous one does not even get a verb in 1:2a. Then in 1:2b, with “meditate,” this person is pictured as being relatively static, compared to the perpetually perambulating profane persons who are engaged in activities that are futile. Subsequently, in 1:3b, the verb “transplant” is employed, a participle that denotes the very opposite of active movement: this “tree” is docked and moored and anchored to a water supply. And thereby, the righteous becomes fruitful, non-withering, and successful (1:3cde)—fertile!—for this is the activity that matters: delight in Yahweh’s law, meditating upon Yahweh’s instruction for life (and consequently following it, of course). This is the life-trajectory of the righteous, one that extends into the future on a “path” that does not perish, for Yahweh intimately “knows” their

18. Martin, “Delighting in the Torah,” 716 (and see 714).

19. Craigie, *Psalms 1–50*, 61 (emphases original). Though, as was noted earlier, there are responsibilities to be undertaken (1:1–2), fruit is a “natural” consequence of those activities.

way (1:6a).<sup>20</sup> That makes sense: if they know *him* (through their constant intercourse with his revelation), he knows *them* and their ways, too.

In contrast, we again see the wicked in perpetual motion in 1:4, but this time suffering a punitive outcome: they are unstable, scattered, and susceptible to the caprices of the wind—chaff, worthless husks, merely the feckless and sterile object of another agent that blows them away!<sup>21</sup> “The wicked are in constant motion, restless, without direction, carried hither and thither by forces over which they exert no control.”<sup>22</sup> They are unable to rise (1:5a),<sup>23</sup> and finally they perish (1:6b). In other words, “the poem is shown to run into a dead end for the wicked: walking, standing, and sitting on and along the road of the wicked spell deceleration, a coming to a standstill . . . and eventually destruction.”<sup>24</sup> What an irony—the “evocation of impotent kinesis over against fruitful stasis.”<sup>25</sup>

The destruction apparently happens via a divine judgment (1:5) in which the wicked are unable to “rise up” or stand successfully, unlike the righteous who come out of that divine assize to join a triumphant assembly. Notably, at the end, there is no mention of how, or at whose hands, the wicked perish.<sup>26</sup>

Like chaff it is insubstantial waste and goes with the wind. While there are many biblical hints of God’s judgment upon those who go such a way, in this psalm one senses that it is almost in the nature of things that the wicked way goes under. . . . This psalm suggests to us—and bids us open our eyes to look for the evidence—that in a more proximate sense wickedness often does itself in and leads to its own destruction in a world that is shaped and governed by God’s moral order.<sup>27</sup>

That, too, holds up to scrutiny, for the contrasting picture asserts equivalently that the seemingly natural outcome of deep interaction with God’s word is fruitfulness (1:2–3; see above), just as the rejection thereof attains its own seemingly natural end—perdition (1:4–5, 6b). And now, for the first time in this Psalm (and in the Psalter), in 1:6a Yahweh appears as subject of a verb. God “knows,” intimately, the “path” of the righteous: he is personally involved with them. But as for the wicked, he simply lets those reprobates go their own way, on their own “path”—and they “perish”! Thus we see further contrasts: the “advice of the wicked” (בְּעֵצָה, *ba’atsat rsha’im*; 1:1) vs. the “assembly of the righteous” (בְּעֵדוּת צְדִיקִים, *ba’adat tsaddiqim*; 1:5); as well as the “path of sinners” that began the psalm (1:1c) and the “path of the righteous” and the “path of the wicked” that conclude it (1:6).

20. God’s “knowing,” from יָדַע, *yd’*, is an intimate acquaintance, not a distant perception.

21. “The wicked themselves are not even accorded the dignity of being a proper grammatical subject of an active verb: windblown like chaff, whatever way they go on is trackless, directionless, doomed” (Alter, *Art of Biblical Poetry*, 146). Notice the phonological contrast between the agricultural similes: כָּמֹדֵי, “like a tree” (1:3a) vs. כְּפֹיֵי, “like chaff” (1:4b).

22. Alter, *Art of Biblical Poetry*, 145 (see 144–45).

23. I.e., they have no place, no respect, and no standing, before the divine Judge.

24. Botha, “Ideological Interface,” 194.

25. Alter, *Art of Biblical Poetry*, 146.

26. For unbelievers, this destruction is eschatological, but in the Psalms and much of OT literature, with their primary focus on the here-and-now, the perishing of the wicked might be more the antithesis of the success of the righteous in this life (1:3e), the counterposed general failure of the wicked person’s schemes, stances, seats, and scoffing.

27. Miller, “Beginning of the Psalter,” 85.

## Sermon Map

### I. Futility

Wicked in constant kinesis (1:1b-d)

Scheming, sinning, scoffing (1:1b-d)

Outcome: judgment and perishing of ways (1:5a, 6b)

Move-to-relevance: How we may be like the wicked

### II. Fertility

Righteous in relative stasis (1:2-3)

Interaction with God's word and fruit-bearing (1:2-3)

Outcome: judgment and divine care of ways (1:5b, 6a)

Move-to-relevance: Why we are not like the righteous

### III. *Be Blessed in Righteousness!*

Specifics on a deeper interaction with divine revelation