# Commentary on Psalm 1

## Introduction

Psalm 1 is not merely the first poem in the Psalter; it is a threshold. The editors placed it where they did to teach us how to walk through the rest of the book. Its six verses sketch a moral map—two paths diverging from the first step—and then trace those paths to their ends. The poem’s simplicity is part of its power: a handful of images and a few favored Hebrew words carve out a landscape of counsel, company, and consequence.

The opening word, *ashrei*—often rendered “happy,” “fortunate,” or “flourishing”—sets the tone. Unlike *barukh* (“blessed be...”), which is a benediction directed to or from God, *ashrei* functions as an exclamation about a person’s condition. The form is plural—“O the happinesses!”—a Hebrew way of speaking about a cluster of goods. That does not mean Psalm 1 celebrates self-made success. Across the Bible *ashrei* can mark the one who trusts or waits for God (Psalm 2:12; Isaiah 56:2). Here, too, “happiness” is tethered to a relation: the ongoing choice to keep company with God’s teaching.

Verse 1 builds the danger in three beats: “who did not walk... did not stand... did not sit.” This is anaphora—the deliberate repetition of a phrase at the start of successive clauses—and it works like footsteps refusing to turn down the wrong road. The nouns ascend as well: counsel (the realm of ideas), way (habitual conduct), seat (belonging). So do the companions: the wicked (*resha‘im*), the sinners (*ḥatta’im*), the scoffers (*letsim*). The line is shrewd about how we change: first we listen, then we loiter, finally we settle in.

The positive counterpoint in verse 2 pivots on pleasure, not bare duty: “But rather, in the teaching of the LORD (*torat YHWH*) is his delight (*ḥefetz*).” The verb “meditates,” *yehgeh*, is onomatopoetic: it can describe a lion’s low growl (Isaiah 31:4) or the murmuring of the heart (Proverbs 15:28). The psalmist imagines a person who mouths Scripture day and night—a merism, the pairing of opposites to suggest wholeness. The teaching is first named as God’s (“the LORD’s teaching”) and then, strikingly, “his teaching” (*be-torato*). Traditional readers already saw what the Hebrew hints: what begins as God’s word, received, becomes internalized, memorized, and woven into one’s speech. Torah moves from the page to the palate.

The most famous image follows: the righteous “is like a tree transplanted (*shatul*) by channels of water (*palgei mayim*).” Two technicalities matter. First, the tree is not wild; it is set by intention. The passive participle *shatul* points to a careful gardener. Divine agency stands behind the flourishing that human choice makes possible. Second, *palgei mayim* are “divisions” of water—irrigation channels or runnels, not a lone river. This is cultivation as much as providence. The tree yields “its fruit in its season,” an important proviso that keeps the “all that he does prospers” from collapsing into a promise of constant harvest. The metaphor echoes widely: Jeremiah 17:7–8 pictures a trustful person as a tree by water that “does not cease to bear fruit,” and Ezekiel 47:12 dreams of a grove with leaves that never wither. Psalm 1’s tree stands in that tradition of rooted vitality.

The wicked’s counter-image arrives curtly: “Not so the wicked! Rather, like chaff (*mots*) which the wind (*ruaḥ*) drives away.” Chaff is the husk and dust that flies off when grain is tossed in the air. The point is not that the wicked are fleeting, but that they lack weight—substance that could resist a real wind. The figure is a biblical commonplace for moral inconsequence (Psalm 35:5; Hosea 13:3; Isaiah 41:15–16). Intriguingly, the ancient Greek translation (the LXX) doubles the negation (“not so the wicked, not so”) and renders “seat of scoffers” in v. 1 as “chair of pestilence,” casting scorn as a contagion that spreads. Whatever the translator had before him, the effect underscores the poem’s social realism: company shapes character.

Verses 5–6 move from threshing floor to courtroom and then to God’s perspective. “Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment.” In biblical legal idiom, to “stand” is to have a case that holds up. Deuteronomy 19:15 speaks of a matter that “stands” (*yakum*) on the testimony of two witnesses; here the wicked “will not stand,” their case collapses. Nor will they enter “the assembly of the righteous.” The word for “assembly,” *‘edah*, is the Pentateuch’s term for the congregation of Israel; Psalm 1 repurposes it as the righteous community. The poem ends with an elegant asymmetry: “For the LORD knows (*yada‘*) the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked perishes.” In Hebrew, *yada‘* often means intimate recognition and care (Exodus 33:12; Amos 3:2; Nahum 1:7). God’s knowing is protective attention, not mere surveillance. Notice that it is the “way” of the wicked that expires, not a direct statement that God destroys them. The path they have chosen proves to be a cul-de-sac. That is moral physics, not mechanical retribution.

Two structural notes seal the frame. First, *derekh*—“way”—appears at the start (v. 1) and the end (v. 6), a classic inclusio: bracketing the poem with the same word to focus our reading. Second, Psalm 1 pairs naturally with Psalm 2 as a twin gate to the Psalter: both mention *ashrei* (Psalm 1:1; 2:12), and Psalm 2 shows the “other path” writ large—the nations plotting against God’s anointed—while ending with “Happy are all who take refuge in him.” The two together teach us to read the Psalms as a school in orientation, not a miscellany of religious moods. The laments and praises to come will be heard inside this moral geography: counsel and company shape character; delight reforms desire; fruit ripens in season; a way may look wide and yet go nowhere.

Technical terms used:

- Anaphora: repeating a word or phrase at the start of successive lines or clauses.

- Merism: naming two extremes (“day and night”) to suggest totality.

- Inclusio: framing a unit by repeating a key word or phrase at its start and end.

- Parallelism: Hebrew poetry’s basic technique of pairing lines so the second confirms, sharpens, or completes the first.

- LXX: the Septuagint, an ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible that sometimes preserves or creates interpretive nuances.

- BDB: Brown–Driver–Briggs, a standard Hebrew lexicon.

## Psalm 1

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| **1.** אַ֥שְֽׁרֵי־הָאִ֗ישׁ אֲשֶׁ֤ר ׀ לֹ֥א הָלַךְ֮ בַּעֲצַ֢ת רְשָׁ֫עִ֥ים וּבְדֶ֣רֶךְ חַ֭טָּאִים לֹ֥א עָמָ֑ד וּבְמוֹשַׁ֥ב לֵ֝צִ֗ים לֹ֣א יָשָֽׁב׃ | Happy is the man who has not followed the counsel of the wicked, or taken the path of sinners, or joined the company of the insolent; |
| **2.** כִּ֤י אִ֥ם־בְּתוֹרַ֥ת ה׳ חֶ֫פְצ֥וֹ וּֽבְתוֹרָת֥וֹ יֶהְגֶּ֗ה יוֹמָ֥ם וָלָֽיְלָה׃ | rather, the teaching of the LORD is his delight, and he studies that teaching day and night. |
| **3.** וְֽהָיָ֗ה כְּעֵץ֮ שָׁת֢וּל עַֽל־פַּלְגֵ֫י־מָ֥יִם אֲשֶׁ֤ר פִּרְי֨וֹ ׀ יִתֵּ֬ן בְּעִתּ֗וֹ וְעָלֵ֥הוּ לֹֽא־יִבּ֑וֹל וְכֹ֖ל אֲשֶׁר־יַעֲשֶׂ֣ה יַצְלִֽיחַ׃ | He is like a tree planted beside streams of water, which yields its fruit in season, whose foliage never fades, and whatever it produces thrives.-b |
| **4.** לֹא־כֵ֥ן הָרְשָׁעִ֑ים כִּ֥י אִם־כַּ֝מֹּ֗ץ אֲֽשֶׁר־תִּדְּפֶ֥נּוּ רֽוּחַ׃ | Not so the wicked; rather, they are like chaff that wind blows away. |
| **5.** עַל־כֵּ֤ן ׀ לֹא־יָקֻ֣מוּ רְ֭שָׁעִים בַּמִּשְׁפָּ֑ט וְ֝חַטָּאִ֗ים בַּעֲדַ֥ת צַדִּיקִֽים׃ | Therefore the wicked will not survive judgment, nor will sinners, in the assembly of the righteous. |
| **6.** כִּֽי־יוֹדֵ֣עַ ה׳ דֶּ֣רֶךְ צַדִּיקִ֑ים וְדֶ֖רֶךְ רְשָׁעִ֣ים תֹּאבֵֽד׃ {פ} | For the LORD cherishes the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked is doomed. |

## Verse-by-Verse Commentary

### Verse 1

“*Ashrei ha’ish*” is an exclamation—“O the happinesses of the man”—that points not to a passing mood but to a condition grounded in orientation. The verse unfolds with anaphora: three times *lo’* (“not”) leads off the phrase, like a metronome of refusal: “he did not walk... did not stand... did not sit.” The sequence maps a descent from flirtation to fellowship to full belonging. The nouns intensify the same way: “counsel” (ideas overheard), “way” (habits adopted), “seat” (membership assumed). The social taxonomy—*resha‘im* (wicked), *ḥatta’im* (sinners), *letsim* (scoffers)—moves from those who distort justice, through those who practice wrongdoing, to those who deride the very categories of right and wrong. BDB glosses *lets* as one “incapable of discipline or rebuke”—the endgame of cynicism.  
  
Two sound-level cues deserve notice. First, the triple *lo’* gives the line its spine and creates a cadence you can feel in the mouth. Second, the clustering of sibilants (*š*, *s*) in “*ba‘atsat resha‘im... uvmoshav letsim*” hisses with the air of whispered counsel—an instance of Hebrew poetry’s love of sound echoing sense.  
  
The Greek (LXX) renders “seat of scoffers” as “chair of pestilence,” imagining scorn as a kind of moral contagion. Even if that choice stems from a different Hebrew Vorlage or a translator’s interpretation, it is a sharp insight into the verse’s social realism. “Seat” (*moshav*) can mean not only a literal chair but a sitting company, an assembly (cf. Psalm 107:32). The danger is not mere proximity; it is absorption into a community of mockery.  
  
The structure of the whole psalm is already implied. Verses 1–2 place negativity and positivity in proper order—first “turn from evil,” then “do good” (cf. Psalm 34:15). The emphasis falls not on an ascetic “no” but on the “yes” that fills the cleared space.  
  
Terms:  
- Anaphora: repetition at line openings for emphasis and rhythm.  
- LXX: the Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, often interpretive.

### Verse 2

The hinge phrase *ki im* (“but rather”) reverses direction from negation to desire: *ḥefetz* is delight, not duty. The object is *torat YHWH*, “the LORD’s teaching,” an expansive word that includes instruction, story, commandment, and counsel. The second colon’s shift to “his teaching” (*be-torato*) is not presumptuous appropriation but a description of internalization: what is learned becomes the learner’s speech and thought. Traditional Jewish readers captured the movement: first “God’s Torah,” then “his Torah.”  
  
The verb *yehgeh* (“meditates”) is wonderfully concrete. Elsewhere it describes a lion’s low growl over its prey (Isaiah 31:4), the heart’s murmuring wisdom (Proverbs 15:28), or a prophet’s brooding (Psalm 63:7). Meditation here is vocal, embodied: whispering and reciting, committing to memory. The time frame—“day and night”—is a merism, a compact way to say “continually.” Joshua 1:8 makes the same pairing and, tellingly, links it to *yatsliaḥ* (“prosper”), the very verb that closes Psalm 1:3. The intertext suggests a script: speech shapes thought, thought shapes path, path shapes outcome.  
  
The psalm resists two easy distortions. First, this is not scholasticism. Delight, not mere diligence, is the motive. The word *ḥefetz* in BDB includes “good pleasure,” hinting that human desire itself can be trained to love what God teaches. Second, the “day and night” devotion is comprehensive but humane. It is the kind of permeation Deuteronomy imagines when it says to recite these words “when you sit in your house and when you walk on the road, when you lie down and when you rise” (Deut 11:19): life woven with teaching, not a life shrunk to a study carrel.  
  
Terms:  
- Merism: naming two extremes (“day and night”) to convey totality.

### Verse 3

“Like a tree *shatul*—transplanted—by *palgei mayim*, channels of water.” The passive participle matters. This is cultivated stability, not a lucky sapling that happened to sprout by a river. The gardener’s agency (divine care) stands behind the righteous person’s flourishing. *Palgei* (from *peleg*, “division”) suggests irrigation runnels, multiple streams. This is not a precarious dependence on a single source; it’s reliable supply, a designed ecology.  
  
The imagery is rich and storied. Jeremiah 17:7–8 explicitly reuses the motif: those who trust in the LORD are “like a tree planted by water... it does not cease to bear fruit.” Ezekiel 47:12 envisions a grove whose leaves never wither, drawing life from the temple river. Psalm 1 sits in that same mental orchard. Yet it adds a wise constraint: “who yields its fruit in its season.” The promise recognizes the rhythms of growth. *Yatsliaḥ* (“prospers/succeeds”) thus cannot mean perpetual harvest; it means aptness, the right thing at the right time. The leaves that “do not wither” (*lo yibbol*) recall Isaiah 40:7–8’s contrast between fading grass and God’s durable word; here, durability flows from proximity to that word.  
  
The verse’s poise lies in the balance of agency. Human choice is real (delight, meditation), but the life-giving current is not self-generated. The transplanted tree and the dug channels embody what Deuteronomy promises to those who walk in God’s way (Deut 5:30; 8:6): a life aligned with a given order that nourishes.  
  
Comparative notes:  
- The noun-and-verb pairing repeats (*piryō yitten be’ittō*—“its fruit it gives in its season”), a compact Hebrew way to underscore regularity.  
- The final sweep, “and in all that he does he prospers,” must be read in the light of “in its season.” Psalm 37 and Psalm 73 will test this claim against the refractory facts of life; Psalm 1 gives the thesis against which experience wrestles.

### Verse 4

The Hebrew begins with a jolt: *lo khen ha-resha‘im*—“Not so the wicked!” The Greek version doubles it: “Not so the wicked, not so,” a hammering denial. After the luxuriant depiction of the tree, the line is almost curt: “Rather, like chaff that the wind drives away.” *Mots* (chaff) is an agricultural commonplace, the dry husk that separates from the kernel when grain is tossed in the air. BDB glosses *nadaph* (“drive away”) as the verb for forceful scattering; the form here underscores the violence of the gust. The wind (*ruaḥ*) is not merely meteorological; in Hebrew the word can mean wind, breath, or spirit. The psalm does not allegorize, but the double meaning lingers: the same breath that nourishes the tree exposes the chaff’s weightlessness.  
  
The chaff comparison is a stock figure for worthless power. Psalm 35:5 prays, “Let them be like chaff before the wind,” and Hosea 13:3 piles up ephemera: “like morning fog... like chaff swirling from the threshing floor.” Isaiah 41:15–16 imagines Zion threshing mountains, reducing enemies to chaff driven by the wind. Psalm 1’s use is in line with this pattern, but its rhetoric is distinctive. It devotes its descriptive energy to the righteous. The dismissal of the wicked is brisk, almost offhand. The imbalance is the point: one life is heavy and rooted, the other light and scatterable.  
  
The LXX’s earlier choice to translate “seat of scoffers” as “chair of pestilence” (v. 1) pays off here: what spreads like disease is as resistless as dust before a gale. Moral life, the psalm implies, is not neutral ground; forces—social, spiritual—press upon a person. The question is what you have made yourself—grain or chaff—in the face of a real wind.

### Verse 5

“Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous.” The logical *al ken* (“therefore”) ties the image to its consequence. The verb *yakumu* (“stand”) is legal shorthand. Deuteronomy 19:15 uses the same root to say a matter “will stand” (*yakum davar*) on the testimony of two or three witnesses; a single witness “will not stand” (*lo yakum*). Psalm 1 inverts the idiom: persons, not cases, fail to stand. When weighed, they don’t hold up.  
  
*Ba-mishpat* (“in the judgment”) can point to a general judicial scene or to the decisive scrutiny that, in biblical thinking, accompanies death (Radak glosses “the day of judgment” as “the day of death”). The second half-shift is from courtroom to community: *ba‘adat tsaddiqim*, “in the assembly of the righteous.” *‘Edah* is the Pentateuch’s term for the congregation of Israel; here it names the righteous as a body with real boundaries. The syntax is elliptical: the verb “will not stand” governs both halves, so the meaning of the second clause is “nor will sinners [stand] in the assembly of the righteous.” The exclusion is not tribalism; it is the social side of the poem’s moral logic. Company mattered in verse 1; it matters at the end.  
  
This verse also answers a practical question latent in the poem: is the judgment entirely future? The legal idiom allows both an ultimate reading (final evaluation before God) and a present-tense social reading (no standing, no voice, no place in the community’s decision-making). Ancient assemblies recognized standing as a concrete category; Psalm 1 borrows that realism.

### Verse 6

“For the LORD knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked perishes.” The closing couplet provides the theological ground for the whole poem. The verb *yada‘* (“knows”) in biblical usage regularly carries the sense of intimate recognition, attention, and care (Exodus 33:12; Amos 3:2; Nahum 1:7). God “knows” their way in the sense that it lies before him and is held by him. The object is not the person but the path—*derekh*—which is just what the poem has been tracing since the first verse.  
  
The parallel line is deliberately asymmetrical. We do not read “the LORD knows the way of the wicked to destroy it.” Instead, “the way of the wicked perishes” (*to‘ved*, from *’abad*, “to be lost, ruined, to vanish”). In other words, the path itself proves evanescent; it does not lead anywhere solid. This is not clever wordplay; it is moral ontology. Some ways participate in what endures, and so they endure. Other ways are a self-cancelling project. The ancient proverb-like idiom of “two ways,” familiar from Deuteronomy (11:28; 30:15) and Proverbs (e.g., 4:19), is here rendered as horticulture and law, wind and standing.  
  
Two framing devices now snap into focus. First, inclusio: the poem begins with *derekh* (“in the way of sinners he did not stand”) and ends with *derekh*. The envelope tells us that paths and their ends are the theme. Second, Psalm 2—its twin—answers Psalm 1’s personal map with a political version: nations plotting, God enthroned, a royal son; it ends where Psalm 1 begins, with *ashrei*. Together the two poems make a thesis: happiness is not luck; it is the durable good of alignment with a reality God knows and upholds. The Psalms will now sing the range of emotional weather that passes over such a life. But the landscape has been drawn.   
  
Comparative notes:  
- The choice to say “the way perishes” (not “the wicked perish”) keeps the focus on pattern, not just persons.  
- The verbs quietly shift across the psalm: choices are cast as already made, images are painted in the present, consequences move into the future. It is the timeline of character.  
  
Terms:  
- Inclusio: bracketing a unit with a repeated word or phrase (here, *derekh*).  
- *Yada‘*: know as intimate, protective regard, not mere cognition.

## Methodological & Bibliographical Summary

### Research & Data Inputs

**Psalm Verses Analyzed**: 6

**LXX (Septuagint) Texts Reviewed**: 6

**Phonetic Transcriptions Generated**: 6

**Ugaritic Parallels Reviewed**: 0

**Lexicon Entries (BDB/Klein) Reviewed**: 29

**Traditional Commentaries Reviewed**: 23 (Ibn Ezra (3); Malbim (4); Meiri (4); Metzudat David (4); Radak (4); Rashi (4))

**Concordance Entries Reviewed**: 50

**Figurative Language Instances Reviewed**: 383

**Master Editor Prompt Size**: 156,106 characters

### Models Used

**Structural Analysis (Macro)**: claude-sonnet-4-20250514

**Verse Discovery (Micro)**: claude-sonnet-4-20250514

**Commentary Synthesis**: claude-sonnet-4-20250514

**Editorial Review**: gpt-5

### Date Produced

October 20, 2025