# Commentary on Psalm 1

## Introduction

Two paths open the Psalter. One leads under shade—the cool, irrigated ground where a transplanted tree puts down roots. The other is a threshing floor, a swirled haze of husks that do not last. Psalm 1 is not merely first; it is a doorknob. It tells you how to enter the book and what to look for once inside.

The poem’s architecture is simple and exact. A three‑part refusal—“does not walk… does not stand… does not sit”—is followed by a single desire: “his delight is in the teaching (*torah*) of the LORD.” A sustained simile develops the consequence: a well-sited tree whose fruit comes “in its season.” Then the turn: “Not so the wicked,” who are like chaff in a sudden wind. The closing couplet sets the two ways side by side: the LORD “knows” the way of the righteous; the wicked way “perishes.”

Several literary devices deserve names, if only to help us see them. The psalm opens with an anaphora (repetition at the start of clauses): three *lo’ (“not”) clauses in a row. The final verse is antithetic parallelism—one line set against its opposite. The poem is framed by inclusio—“way” (*derek`) in verse 1 and again in verse 6—forming an envelope that keeps the reader’s attention on moral direction rather than private feelings. A “colon,” incidentally, is a single poetic line; Hebrew verse often comes in paired cola whose relationship creates the meaning.

The progression—walk, stand, sit—has the tidy inevitability of habit becoming character. Classical Jewish commentators noticed the deepening involvement (Rashi; Radak). Ibn Ezra suggests a different nuance: the “wicked” (*resha‘im*) are unstable, already unmoored, making the walker easy prey to counsel that is all drift and no root. The last group, *letzim*, are not merely naughty; in Proverbs they are unteachable mockers of instruction itself (BDB). The ancient Greek translation (the LXX) renders them as λοιμῶν—“pestilent fellows,” literally “plague‑people”—a revealing shift from mockery to contagion.

If the negative is crisp, the positive is expansive. The righteous do not merely avoid; they desire. The verb *ḥefetz* denotes pleasure and want, not duty. And the meditation verb *yehgeh* does not mean silent musing. It is a murmured recitation—a voiced study that moves from lips to memory, the same verb used in Joshua 1:8, where reciting Torah “day and night” is linked to success. “Day and night” is a merism (two extremes naming a whole), a Hebrew way of saying “constantly.”

Two editorial decisions seem intentional. First, Psalm 1 pairs naturally with Psalm 2; both poems end with the word “happy” (*ashrei* 1:1; 2:12), creating an entry arch to the Psalter that is at once personal and political: devotion to God’s teaching (Psalm 1) and trust in God’s reign over arrogant powers (Psalm 2). Second, Psalm 1’s language leans toward wisdom rather than cult. The temple is not the focus; Torah is. That suits the book’s later history, when study and prayer often had to replace rites. But the psalm does not date itself. Its theological center—the “two ways”—is classically Deuteronomic: “Follow the path… that you may thrive” (Deut 5:30); “I set before you life and death” (Deut 30:15–20). The Psalm’s metaphor of “way” (*derek*) and “walking” (*halakh*) is the Bible’s long habit of turning ethics into a path underfoot.

The tree is not merely blessed; it is cultivated. The participle *shatul* means “transplanted” (BDB), the gardener’s act of re‑siting a good sapling. Its placement is beside *palgei mayim*—divided watercourses. These are channels, irrigation rills, not a single stream. In a land of seasonal rain, the difference is everything. Jeremiah 17:8, likely echoing our psalm, speaks of a tree whose root reaches out to a stream and which does not fear heat. Ezekiel 19:10 pictures a vine planted “beside abundant waters.” The point is not prosperity gospel but rootedness: fruit in the proper time and leaves that don’t wither in stress. The final line—“whatever he does prospers”—troubles modern ears. But “prosper” (*yatsliaḥ*) here is closer to “comes to good effect” than “strikes it rich.” Its nearest scriptural cousin is again Joshua 1:8: success as the outworking of obedience, not as a guarantee against suffering. Read inside the Psalter, with its laments and exiles, the promise is backbone, not insulation.

By contrast, the wicked are “like chaff which the wind drives away.” The simile is terse and cruel. Chaff (*motz*) has two properties that matter in biblical usage: it is weightless and it is waste. The figurative database confirms the pattern: chaff, almost always, is the image of enemies in judgment (Ps 35:5; Isa 17:13). Here the agent is the *ruaḥ*, wind—or spirit. The ambiguity is theological: the same word names the breeze and the breath of God. Either way, nothing holds.

The legal turn in verse 5 sharpens the destinies. “Will not stand in the judgment” uses *qum* in its juridical sense: to stand means to have your case established. Deuteronomy 19:15: “a matter will stand [*yakum*—be established] on the testimony of two witnesses.” The wicked have no standing. Nor do sinners belong in “the assembly of the righteous” (*‘adat tsaddiqim*). The noun *‘edah* can mean Israel’s congregation; here it leans eschatological—fellowship under God’s verdict. The poets’ final verb chooses relationship over surveillance: “the LORD knows (*yada‘*) the way of the righteous.” In biblical idiom this knowing is intimate and covenantal: “I have known Abraham” (Gen 18:19); “You only have I known” (Amos 3:2). The opposite fate needs no actor. The wicked way “perishes.” Rot is what happens when something has no root in the real.

A word on reception. Rabbinic tradition loved the small hinge in verse 2: “the teaching of the LORD… and on his teaching.” “At first,” says Avodah Zarah 19a, “it is called God’s Torah; after one labors in it, it becomes his.” The Talmud even uses our verse in a wry legal debate (Kiddushin 32a) about whether a teacher can forgo honor: is Torah “his”? Elsewhere the rabbis hear in “its fruit in its season” a humane rhythm for scholars’ lives, down to domestic obligations (Ketubot 62b). One need not follow the halakhic byways to feel the larger point: Psalm 1 imagines devotion as something that becomes your voice, your mind, your rootedness—your way.

Definitions for reference:

- LXX: the Septuagint, the ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible.

- MT: the Masoretic Text, the standard medieval Hebrew text underlying most modern translations.

- BDB: Brown–Driver–Briggs Hebrew and English Lexicon, a standard reference for biblical Hebrew.

- Merism: a figure naming two extremes to imply the whole (“day and night”).

- Anaphora: repeating a word at the start of successive phrases.

- Inclusio: repeating a word/idea at beginning and end to frame a unit.

- Colon: a single poetic line within a pair or triplet.

## 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

“Happy the man who has not walked in the counsel of the wicked, nor stood in the path of sinners, nor sat in the seat of scoffers.”  
  
The opening word, *’ashrei*, is a plural of intensity: not a mood but a state of flourishing (Radak: “many good things”). The grammar builds a staircase. Each rung is a refusal: “has not walked… has not stood… has not sat.” The nouns track the verbs. *‘Atzat* (counsel) is advice you can still ignore; *derek* (path) is a chosen course; *moshav* (seat) is a place you settle and a platform of influence. In wisdom literature, these are not separate sins so much as a deepening posture. Ibn Ezra notes a complementary angle: the “wicked” are themselves unstable; the walker risks being drawn into their drift.  
  
The last group, *letzim*, is not a throwaway insult. In Proverbs the *lets* is a technical villain: the mocker who rejects instruction (Prov 1:22; 9:7–8; 15:12). The LXX renders “seat of scoffers” as “seat of pestilent [persons]” (ἐπὶ καθέδρα λοιμῶν), converting mockery into contagion. It is a translation by interpretation: moral derision spreads like disease.  
  
The line also works in the ear. The Hebrew recitation (see the phonetic line) hammers the triple *lo’* (*LŌ'* hā-*LAKH*… *LŌ'* *ʿāMĀDH*… *LŌ'* *yāSHĀV*). This is anaphora—repeating the same word at the start of successive phrases—and the stresses land where the ethic lives: on the refusal and the act. What we are told to admire in verse 1 is self‑governance: a capacity to say no to a setting that will shape you if you let it.  
  
The imagery of “way” and “walking” is biblical idiom for moral life. Deuteronomy is full of it: “Follow only the path… that you may thrive” (Deut 5:30), and negatively, “turn away from the path” as a metaphor for idolatry (11:28). Our psalm’s last line will circle back to *derek* (way), creating an inclusio—a frame that keeps us thinking in terms of paths.  
  
Finally, “happy” is not the same as “untroubled.” The Psalter will spend far more ink on trouble than on ease. Psalm 1 sets not the weather but the direction: what you attend to, what you refuse, where you plant your life.  
  
Technical notes:  
- Anaphora: repetition of *lo’* (“not”) creates rhythmic emphasis.  
- Inclusio: *derek* appears in vv. 1 and 6, bracketing the poem.  
- LXX: λοιμῶν (“pestilent [ones]”) for *letzim* marks mockery as socially infectious.  
  
References: Deut 5:30; 11:28; Prov 1:22; 9:7–8; 15:12.  
  
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### Verse 2

“But rather, in the teaching of the LORD is his delight, and on his teaching he murmurs day and night.”  
  
The adversative *ki ’im* (“but rather”) turns the thought from avoidance to appetite. The core claim is about desire: *ḥefetz* denotes pleasure and longing, not mere compliance. The object is *torat YHWH*—the LORD’s instruction. “Torah” here is not a statute book only; it is the teaching that shapes a life.  
  
The verse’s second half delights in a grammatical pivot: “and on his teaching he meditates (*yehgeh*).” The rabbis noticed and coined a maxim: “At first it is God’s Torah; after one has labored in it, it becomes his” (Avodah Zarah 19a). The Talmud even drew halakhic implications from this possessive (Kiddushin 32a): if Torah can be called “his,” does a teacher’s honor yield? You need not enter that debate to grasp the literary point. The pronoun signals internalization. What was external becomes native speech.  
  
The verb *yehgeh* is onomatopoetic in the lexicon: a low murmur, the voiced recitation of someone committing words to memory (BDB; cf. Josh 1:8). Biblical meditation is vocal. The phrase “day and night” is a merism, a Hebrew way to say “always.” Connected texts confirm the pattern: God guides Israel “day and night” in the wilderness (Exod 13:21), and Joshua is told to recite Torah “day and night” in order to act faithfully (Josh 1:8). Psalm 1 borrows that cadence to describe a civilian, not a general. The democratization is striking: devotion once associated with leaders and priests becomes a lay vocation.  
  
“Delight” carries its own corrective. Malbim insists that the good is done because it is good, not as a calculated bid for reward. The psalm’s promise of flourishing will arrive in the following verse; the desire comes first. Love of instruction precedes any outcome.  
  
Technical notes:  
- Merism: “day and night” = all the time.  
- *yehgeh*: murmured recitation, not silent musing (cf. Isa 31:4; Josh 1:8).  
- Reception: “God’s Torah” → “his Torah” in rabbinic interpretation (Avodah Zarah 19a; Kiddushin 32a).  
  
References: Exod 13:21; Josh 1:8.  
  
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### Verse 3

“He shall be like a tree transplanted by channels of water, that yields its fruit in its season; its leaf does not wither; and whatever he does prospers.”  
  
Every word of the simile is chosen. *Shatul* is not wild growth; it is a transplant (BDB), the gardener’s act of deliberate placement. The site is *al‑palgei mayim*—beside divided watercourses. These are irrigation channels (note the plural), not a single stream that might run dry. In the Levant, irrigation is security.  
  
The figurative pattern is widespread. Jeremiah 17:8 likely echoes our psalm: the blessed one is “like a tree planted by water,” not fearing heat, its leaves ever green. Ezekiel 19:10 speaks of a vine planted by abundant waters. In the figurative database, “tree by water” consistently signals stability and sustained vitality in arid conditions. Our psalm adds three effects, a small staircase of blessing: fruit comes “in its season” (timely productivity); the leaf does not wither (ongoing vitality under stress); “whatever he does prospers” (general efficacy).  
  
That last clause is easily misread. *Yatsliaḥ* means “come to good effect,” not “hit every market high.” Its paired text, Joshua 1:8, is helpful: the promise of “success” comes not as a hedge against adversity but as the reliable outcome of aligning action with instruction. Within the Psalter, packed with complaint, “prosper” cannot mean immunity from loss. It means rootedness that bears in season, and endurance that does not go brittle.  
  
Traditional commentary noticed a human extension of the tree: even the “leaf” is good for something (Rashi), a way of saying that the righteous person’s speech and minor acts are of use. The Meiri extends the image to teaching: fruit “in season” is the ability to nourish others once one has first been rooted oneself—a humane rhythm that the rabbis elaborated, even in their scheduling of scholars’ domestic obligations (Ketubot 62b).  
  
Technical notes:  
- *shatul*: “transplanted,” implying deliberate placement.  
- *palgei mayim*: “channels” or “rivulets”—secured irrigation.  
- Figurative parallels: Jer 17:8; Ezek 19:10; cf. Deut 32:2 for nourishing water imagery.  
- Canonical echo: “prosper/succeed” (*yatsliaḥ*) links to Josh 1:8.  
  
References: Jer 17:8; Ezek 19:10; Josh 1:8; Ketubot 62b (via Torah Temimah).  
  
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### Verse 4

“Not so the wicked! Rather, they are like chaff which the wind drives away.”  
  
The reversal is abrupt. The Hebrew *lo’‑khen*—“not so!”—is a full stop. Rhetorically, the psalm’s asymmetry does the work: three verses to the righteous; four quick words to the wicked, who are immediately shifted into a simile and blown offstage.  
  
Chaff (*motz*) is more than refuse; it is the lightest possible thing on a threshing floor. In biblical usage it marks worthlessness and instability and is often yoked to scenes of judgment. The figurative database shows the pattern: “Let them be like chaff before the wind” (Ps 35:5); the nations are “like chaff on the hills before the wind” (Isa 17:13). Our verse keeps the same grammar of weight and motion.  
  
Agency is compressed into a single verb: *tidd’fennu* (Hiphil—causative—of *dāphāh*), “drives him away,” suggesting not a gentle wafting but a forcible expulsion. The agent is the *ruaḥ*: wind—or spirit. Hebrew leaves the constructive ambiguity in place. Sometimes the wind is simply wind; sometimes it is the breath of God (Exod 15:8). Either way, what lacks weight does not remain.  
  
Ibn Ezra draws a tight contrast: the righteous are like grain that stands; the wicked are like the fine waste at winnowing. Radak notes chaff’s petty nuisance—dust that stings the eyes—and its lack of use. The psalm’s sound matches its economy; where the tree grew in layered clauses, the chaff is one short line: named, gusted, gone.  
  
Technical notes:  
- Figurative parallels: Ps 35:5; Isa 17:13.  
- *ruaḥ*: wind/spirit—deliberate ambiguity.  
- Hiphil *tidd’fennu*: causative “drive away,” intensifying the image.  
  
References: Ps 35:5; Isa 17:13; Exod 15:8.  
  
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### Verse 5

“Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous.”  
  
The “therefore” ties verse 5 to the image of chaff. What cannot remain on the threshing floor cannot stand in court. The verb *qum* (“stand”) here carries a legal sense: to “stand” is to have one’s case established, to be validated. Deuteronomy uses the idiom: “A matter shall stand [*yakum*] by the testimony of two or three witnesses” (Deut 19:15). The wicked cannot “stand” in that sense; they lack legal standing before divine scrutiny.  
  
“Judgment” (*mishpat*) here reads as “the judgment,” a definite proceeding rather than a vague principle. Classical Jewish readers debated its timing—at death? the end of days?—but the point is functional: the wicked cannot maintain their cause when weighed.  
  
The second clause shifts from tribunal to fellowship: *ba‘adat tsaddiqim*, “in the assembly of the righteous.” The noun *‘edah* is familiar in Priestly texts for Israel’s congregation; in the Psalter it can mark the worshiping community (Ps 111:1) or the society of the faithful. Here the contrast is pointed. The righteous have a congregation; the wicked are solitary in their collapse. Malbim nuances the two classes: “wicked” as those hardened in malice; “sinners” as those overtaken by appetite. Even the latter, he argues, might find excuses when judged alone, but they cannot stand when measured against a company who overcame the same desires.  
  
The syntactic asymmetry across verses 5–6 is instructive. God is named as knowing the righteous way; no agent is named for the wicked’s end. Some collapses are self‑inflicted. A way without root falls of its own scant weight.  
  
Technical notes:  
- Legal idiom: *qum* (“stand”) = have standing/validity (Deut 19:15).  
- *‘edah*: assembly/congregation, here the fellowship of the vindicated.  
- Atmosphere: forensic (court) to communal (assembly).  
  
References: Deut 19:15; Ps 111:1.  
  
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### Verse 6

“For the LORD knows the way of the righteous; but the way of the wicked shall perish.”  
  
The conclusion is all economy. *Yada‘* (“knows”) in biblical idiom means more than awareness; it is covenantal regard and ongoing care. “I have known Abraham” (Gen 18:19) signals choice and charge; “You only have I known” (Amos 3:2) marks exclusive relationship. Applied to “the way,” the verb suggests more than God’s knowledge of persons. God attends to paths. A life ordered toward God is held in God’s regard.  
  
The second colon is deliberately impersonal. No subject acts upon the wicked way. It “perishes” (*tō’ved*) of itself. The psalm thus avoids a cartoon of retribution. It suggests something more sober: a path severed from reality is entropic. It unwinds.  
  
Two framing moves repay notice. First, “way” (*derek*) appears in verse 1 (“path of sinners”) and here, creating an inclusio that keeps the poem’s horizon practical. Psalm 1 is not about feelings in the abstract but about a manner of life. Second, Psalm 1’s final cadence prepares the reader for Psalm 2’s clash of powers: the local choice of a way under God (Psalm 1) opens into the global contest of ways (Psalm 2). Both end with *’ashrei*, “happy”—personal flourishing and political refuge braided into one entrance arch.  
  
The theology is bracing in its simplicity. Righteousness requires maintenance—cultivation, irrigation, attention—and the psalm names God as the one who sees and sustains that way. Wickedness requires no actor to destroy it. It burns itself out. That is less dramatic than thunderbolts, and perhaps more frightening.  
  
Technical notes:  
- *yada‘*: covenantal “know” = attend, care for, commit (Gen 18:19; Amos 3:2).  
- Inclusio: *derek* in vv. 1 and 6 frames the poem.  
- Asymmetry of agency: active divine care vs. impersonal perishing.  
  
References: Gen 18:19; Amos 3:2.  
  
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Definitions of key terms (for quick reference):  
- Merism: naming two extremes to imply the whole (“day and night” = all the time).  
- Anaphora: repeating a word at the start of successive phrases for emphasis.  
- Inclusio: framing a unit by repeating a word/idea at beginning and end.  
- Colon: a single line of poetry within a parallel pair.  
- Hiphil: a Hebrew verb pattern often indicating causation (e.g., “cause to drive away”).  
- LXX: the ancient Greek translation of the Hebrew Bible, useful for early interpretation.  
- BDB: Brown–Driver–Briggs, a standard Hebrew lexicon.

## 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**: 23

**Traditional Commentaries Reviewed**: 39 (Ibn Ezra (5); Malbim (5); Meiri (6); Metzudat David (6); Radak (6); Rashi (6); Torah Temimah (5))

**Concordance Entries Reviewed**: 31

**Figurative Language Instances Reviewed**: 380

**Master Editor Prompt Size**: 150,441 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

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