# Commentary on Psalm 1

## Introduction

At the threshold of Israel’s prayer book, we do not find a prayer. Psalm 1 opens with a map. It sketches a world divided not by tribe or temperament but by two roads that run through every life. One road is paced by counsel, path, and seat; the other by delight, murmuring, and root. The poem is brief, the vision broad. Everything that follows in the Psalter—lament and doxology, desperation and praise—will be heard within the acoustics of this first psalm’s choice.

The opening word, *ashrei*—“happy,” “flourishing,” “fortunate”—is a fixed Hebrew idiom formed from a plural noun used as an exclamation. Classical Jewish readers (Radak among them) noticed the plurality: happiness is not a single spike of luck but an accumulation of goods. The person envisioned here—note the generic “the man” (*ha’ish*), a type rather than a name—begins by not doing three things. He does not walk in wicked counsel, does not stand in the path of sinners, does not sit in the seat of scoffers. The verbs form a staircase—movement, then stance, then settled belonging. Staircase parallelism (a poetic form where each step builds or intensifies the previous one) traces the moral drift from brief exposure to full residence.

Listen to the line: *…uv-derekh chata’im lo ‘amad u-v-moshav letsim lo yashav.* The recurring sibilants (sh, s) slow the cadence, and the repeated negatives (*lo … lo … lo*) create a protective fence of language. The last noun, *letzim* (scoffers), deserves special attention. In Proverbs, the *lets* is not the class clown but the person for whom correction is pointless (Prov 9:7–8; 15:12); mockery has hardened into a stance. Interesting, then, that the Greek translators (LXX) render “seat of scoffers” as “seat of pestilences” (ἐπὶ καθέδραν λοιμῶν), hearing moral derision as social contagion. The Hebrew text (the MT, or Masoretic Text) pictures a circle of insolence; the Greek hears a quarantine ward.

If verse 1 builds fences, verse 2 opens a garden gate. The adversative *ki im* is best rendered “rather.” “Rather, in the teaching of the LORD (*Torat YHWH*) is his *chefetz*—his deep desire—and in his teaching he *yehgeh* day and night.” Two features matter here. First, the phrase shifts from “the LORD’s teaching” to “his teaching.” Ancient Jewish readers heard a progression: at first Torah is God’s; through labor and love, it becomes “his”—internalized rather than owned. The effect is inversion rather than a full chiasm (a mirror structure), but the point is sharp: revelation does not stay external. Second, *yehgeh* is a verb with throat. Lions “growl” (*yehgeh*) over prey (Isa 31:4); mourning doves “moan” (*hegeh*) (Isa 38:14). Here, as in Joshua 1:8, it names the old discipline of audible study: low, persistent recitation that engages breath, ear, and memory. “Day and night” is a merism (a totality suggested by naming extremes); not “without rest” but “as the rhythm of life.”

The tree in verse 3 is not simply planted; it is *shatoul*—transplanted—by *palgei mayim*, channels of water. The noun *peleg* means a division or branch; *palgei mayim* are not wild rivers but directed runnels—irrigation. The righteous person is placed on purpose where water flows. This horticultural precision resonates with Jeremiah 17:8, which uses the same verb (*shatul*) and imagery to describe the one who trusts in YHWH, and with Ezekiel’s visions of choice plantings (Ezek 17:22–23; 19:10). The Psalmist’s tree yields fruit “in its season” and “its leaf does not wither”; the final line, “and in all he does he prospers,” expands the figure. The point is not nonstop fruiting but stability, reliability, an alignment with right seasons. Rootedness, not rush.

The contrast is surgical. “Not so the wicked,” says verse 4, and then: “rather, like chaff (*motz*) that the wind drives (*tidpennu*) away.” The Hebrew is as terse as winnowing: four words tell the whole fate. Farmers know this image: thresh and toss, and the chaff lifts, flutters, and is gone. The poet chooses *motz* (fine chaff) rather than *qash* (stubble), emphasizing lightness and waste. The verb is forceful: *tidpennu* (from *nadaph*) means “drive, push away.” Note the lack of a definite article on *ruach* (“wind”): any wind will do. Where the righteous tree sits over divided waters, the wicked are divided by the slightest air. Elsewhere, this imagery functions in prayer for judgment (Ps 35:5) or prophetic warning (Isa 17:13; Hos 13:3); here it is moral physics.

Verses 5–6 move from field to court. “Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment.” The idiom “stand in judgment” uses a legal metaphor: to stand is to “hold up,” to have one’s case established (cf. Deut 19:15; Ps 130:3; Mal 3:2). They cannot. Nor will sinners belong in the “assembly of the righteous” (*‘adat tzaddiqim*). The noun *‘edah* is the term Priestly texts use for Israel’s gathered community. Psalm 1 reminds us that righteousness is not only personal virtue; it is social adhesive. Chaff does not build a congregation.

The psalm ends by returning to the language of road: “For YHWH *yodea*—knows—the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked *toved*—perishes.” In Hebrew, to “know” can mean more than to register facts; it often carries the sense of attentive recognition, covenantal regard (Exod 2:25; Ps 37:18). God’s knowing is a kind of keeping. Note the singular: “the way of the wicked”—not their ways—perishes. Many walkers, one roadway; the path itself proves terminal. This is an inclusio (a literary “envelope”): the poem that opened with “counsel/path/seat” closes with “way,” framing all with a single image.

Does the psalm describe the world as we find it? Not every righteous person is an orchard; not every cruel man blows away. But Psalm 1 does not pretend to close our eyes to the unevenness of life. It sets the terms, not the statistics. It gives us a rule, and the rest of the Psalter will give us the exceptions—complaints from drought years, songs from floodplains. At the door, we are told how to walk.

Notes on terms:

- MT: the standard Hebrew text (Masoretic Text) preserved by medieval Jewish scribes.

- LXX: the ancient Greek translation (Septuagint), often interpretive and sometimes preserving a different underlying Hebrew.

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

- Merism: a figure naming two extremes to suggest a whole (“day and night” = always).

- Inclusio: framing a unit with the same motif at beginning and end.

- Colon: a single poetic line; Hebrew poetry commonly sets one colon in parallel with another.

## 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 asher lo halakh… lo ‘amad… lo yashav*.” The psalm’s first breath draws three boundary lines. The triple negation (*lo … lo … lo*) makes a verbal fence; the verbs form a staircase: walking (*halakh*), standing (*‘amad*), sitting (*yashav*). This is “staircase parallelism,” a poetic intensification where each step increases involvement—from movement alongside bad counsel to fixed company among those who scoff. The sound-work matters: *uv-derekh chata’im lo ‘amad u-v-moshav letsim lo yashav* strings sibilants (sh, s) and liquids (l) into a slowing cadence that feels, in the ear, like the brakes going on.  
  
The three circles—*resha‘im* (wicked), *chata’im* (sinners), *letzim* (scoffers)—are not three species so much as three stations on a trajectory. In the wisdom tradition, the *lets* is a recognizably tragic figure: unteachable, allergic to reproof (Prov 9:7–8; 15:12). The verse’s order moves from thought-world to thoroughfare to fellowship: “counsel” (*‘etzah*), “path” (*derekh*), “seat” (*moshav*). The imagery is directional (cf. Deut 5:29–30; 8:6; the figurative database shows this path-metaphor is ubiquitous). By starting with what the righteous does not do, the poet follows a pattern found elsewhere in Psalms: “Turn from evil and do good” (Ps 34:15)—negation as preparation for positive desire.  
  
A notable textual wrinkle lies in the ancient Greek translation (LXX), which renders “seat of scoffers” as “chair of pestilences” (ἐπὶ καθέδραν λοιμῶν). The Hebrew MT’s *letzim* becomes Greek “pestilences,” shifting from moral derision to infectious harm. This is not a different Hebrew reading so much as an interpretive move: derision spreads; it sickens a community. For our psalm’s logic, the effect is similar: the final station is a settled, corrosive belonging.  
  
Traditional Jewish readers catch an ethical psychology here. Rashi calls the three negatives “a fence around a fence”—a set of guards before the heart is reached. Radak notes that *ashrei* is a plural form used as an exclamation (“How many felicities!”), suggesting that the happy life is cumulative. The line is precise without being pedantic: it does not catalogue sins; it describes drift. The poem will now pivot to desire.  
  
Definitions: Staircase parallelism is a form of parallelism in which the second and third cola build sequentially on the first, often repeating a keyword while intensifying the action.

### Verse 2

“*Ki im be-Torat YHWH chef’tso u-v-Torato yehgeh yomam va-laylah*.” The adversative *ki im* means “rather”: the righteous is not merely abstaining; he is aimed. The word *chefetz* (“delight,” “deep desire”) in BDB’s range covers “longing” and “precious thing.” The object is *Torat YHWH*, the LORD’s teaching—both instruction and story. The next clause inverts the phrasing: “and in his teaching (*Torato*) he *yehgeh* day and night.” Jewish tradition heard this inversion as a pedagogy of the heart: what begins as God’s becomes “his” through study. The effect is not ownership but internalization.  
  
The key verb *yehgeh* requires a small excursion into biblical sound. It can mean to moan (Isa 38:14), to growl (Isa 31:4), to muse (Ps 63:7). It is used in Joshua 1:8 for the same practice: recitation “day and night.” In other words, ancient study was voiced; the Psalmist’s righteous person is not silently perusing a page but murmuring. The merism “day and night” names a totality. It does not mandate nonstop reading; it signals orientation.  
  
The psalm’s literary art serves this theology. The movement from “Torah of YHWH” to “his Torah” is a controlled inversion (not a full chiasm), binding revelation to habit. Phonetically, *be-Torat YHWH … u-v-Torato yehgeh* binds God’s name (*YHWH*) and “his Torah” (*Torato*) in a pleasing echo that points to their union in practice. In the economy of the poem, verse 2 is the hinge: it answers the three negatives with a single positive desire.  
  
Parallels: Psalm 63:7 (“I remember you on my bed; I *ehgeh* of you in the night watches”) shows *hgh* used for meditative, often audible recollection; Psalm 77:13 similarly. By citing these, the verse participates in a broader biblical repertoire of embodied contemplation.  
  
Definitions: Merism names a totality by citing its extremes (“day and night”).

### Verse 3

“*Ve-hayah ke‘ets shatoul ‘al-palgei mayim…*.” The righteous is “like a tree”—a simile, explicit in Hebrew with *ke-* (“like”). But the diction is exact: the tree is not simply planted; it is *shatoul*, “transplanted” (BDB; cf. Jer 17:8; Ezek 17:22–23; 19:10; Ps 92:14). Transplanting implies intention: someone chose the spot. The location is *‘al-palgei mayim*, “beside channels of water.” The noun *peleg* means a division; these are irrigation cuts rather than a single river. The righteous is not lucky to be near a stream; he is placed where provision runs. The figurative language database confirms this water imagery elsewhere marks divine abundance: “river whose streams gladden God’s city” (Ps 46:5); “the stream of your delights” (Ps 36:9).  
  
The description proceeds in three phrases: fruit “in its time” (*be‘itto*), unfading leaf (*lo yibbol*), and comprehensive thriving (*ve-khol asher ya‘aseh yatzliach*). Each carries weight. “In its time” rebukes a culture of constant harvest; the righteous life is seasonal and reliable, not frenetic. “Leaf does not wither” answers the climate of drought. The final line steps beyond botany: the metaphor expands to the whole of life. The verb *yatzliach* (“prosper”) is the ordinary biblical verb of success (e.g., Gen 39:3), and in wisdom tradition it signals alignment with God’s order, not mere material gain.  
  
Two small textual notes sharpen the reading. First, the linkage to Jeremiah 17:8 is not accidental. Jeremiah uses the same verb (*shatul*) and similar wording to portray the one who trusts in YHWH: “He shall be like a tree transplanted by the water… and in a year of drought he is not anxious.” The Psalmist is not naïve about weather. Second, classical Jewish interpreters press the imagery to its edges. Rashi famously remarks that even the “leaf” of the scholar—his casual conversation—yields instruction; the point is not pedantic but poetic: perennial vitality.  
  
The music of the line is calm: long vowels in *shatoul* and *palgei* and the gentle cadence of *be‘itto … lo yibbol* mimic steadiness. The imagery, while ancient near Eastern in its fondness for cosmic trees, is democratized here: not a king but anyone rooted by Torah can have this life.  
  
Definitions: Simile is an explicit comparison (“like/as”); metaphor is implicit (“A is B”).

### Verse 4

“*Lo khen haresha‘im ki im ka-motz asher tidpennu ruach*.” After three lines of luxuriant growth, the poem gives the wicked four words. The abrupt *lo khen* (“not so”) cuts the scene. The wicked are “like chaff” (*motz*)—the lightest husk separated at threshing, more insubstantial than *qash* (stubble). The verb *tidpennu* (from *nadaph*, “drive away”) is vigorous; the wind does not merely lift; it “drives.” And the *ruach* (“wind,” “spirit”) lacks a definite article: any breeze suffices. The brevity is itself an argument: evil is not worth a paragraph.  
  
This image is common. “Let them be like chaff before the wind” (Ps 35:5); “the nations rage … like chaff before the wind” (Isa 17:13); “they shall be like morning clouds, like chaff” (Hos 13:3). The pattern is consistent: chaff marks fragility and disposability, especially under divine judgment. Psalm 1’s distinctive use is to frame this as a moral physics lesson, not a courtroom sentence: what lacks root cannot last.   
  
The LXX chooses χνοῦς (“fine dust”) for *motz*, intensifying the sense of pulverized worthlessness. That translation, like the MT’s *motz*, is agricultural: when the winnowing fork is raised, there is a natural separation of grain and chaff. Ibn Ezra makes that point explicitly: the righteous are like grain, the wicked like straw. The verse’s grammar mirrors the act: a clipped sentence, a driven cadence.

### Verse 5

“*‘Al-ken lo yaqumu resha‘im ba-mishpat ve-chata’im ba‘adat tzaddiqim*.” “Therefore” connects field and court. “Will not stand in the judgment” uses a legal idiom: to “stand” (*qum*) in judgment is to hold up under scrutiny, to have one’s case established (cf. Deut 19:15, where a “matter stands” on two witnesses; Ps 130:3, “If you kept iniquities, who could stand?”; Mal 3:2). The wicked cannot. Nor will “sinners” belong in the *‘edah* (“assembly”) of the righteous. Here the psalm turns from individuals to a community. In Priestly texts, *‘edah* is Israel gathered by appointment (e.g., Exod 12:3; Num 16). Psalm 1’s claim is quiet and profound: righteousness coheres; it builds an *‘edah*. Wickedness disperses (v. 4), and so it cannot constitute a stable congregation.  
  
Ibn Ezra hears “they will not stand” as “they will not endure”—a fair gloss of the idiom and consistent with the poem’s emphasis on durability. Malbim draws a helpful distinction: even where a sinner might make a case “before himself” (appealing to human frailty), he cannot stand in the congregation measured by the lives of those who mastered their desires. That is not moral one‑upmanship; it is an observation about the weight of example.  
  
The LXX’s rendering is again instructive: “therefore the ungodly will not rise in judgment, nor sinners in the council of the righteous” (ἐν βουλῇ δικαίων). “Council” (βουλή) emphasizes deliberation; the MT’s “assembly” underscores belonging. The direction is the same: those without weight cannot weigh in. The verse’s parallelism is antithetic and synthetic: it both contrasts (wicked vs. righteous) and builds (individual standing → communal membership).  
  
Definitions: Antithetic parallelism sets one line against another; synthetic parallelism builds the thought forward.

### Verse 6

“*Ki yodea‘ YHWH derekh tzaddiqim ve-derekh resha‘im toved*.” The poem closes with an inclusio: it began with movement on a path; it ends with the fate of roads. “YHWH *yodea* the way of the righteous.” In Hebrew, *yada‘* (to know) often connotes attentive regard, covenantal recognition (Exod 2:25; Amos 3:2; Ps 37:18). To say God “knows” the righteous path is to say it is under divine attention and care. The second colon is strikingly different: the wicked path “perishes” (*toved*). There is no explicit divine subject; no bolt from the blue. The way collapses under its own design.  
  
Two grammatical observations sharpen the point. First, *derekh resha‘im* is singular: many walkers, one road. Vice is often varied; its outcome is unoriginal. Second, the assonance of *yodea‘* (long “o,” broad vowels) gives weight to the first clause; the clipped *toved* ends with a hard stop—sound mirroring sense. The LXX echoes this antithesis: “the Lord knows the way of the righteous, and the way of the ungodly will perish” (ὁδὸς ἀσεβῶν ἀπολεῖται).  
  
The verse answers the question of v. 5: What becomes of the “assembly of the righteous”? It is known, and so sustained. The “assembly” is not only a present social fact but a path God regards. Conversely, the “way of the wicked” does not simply lack blessing; it is doomed by design. Psalm 1 is not selling optimism; it is stating an ontology: in a world ordered by God, rootedness lasts and chaff does not.  
  
Parallels: Psalm 37:18 uses the same verb for divine knowing: “YHWH knows the days of the blameless.” There too, knowing implies keeping.  
  
Definitions: Inclusio is a framing device (here, the “way” at beginning and end). The MT (Masoretic Text) is our standard Hebrew; the LXX (Septuagint) is an ancient Greek translation that often interprets as it translates.

## 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**: 18

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

**Concordance Entries Reviewed**: 18

**Figurative Language Instances Reviewed**: 278

**Master Editor Prompt Size**: 115,518 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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