# Commentary on Psalm 1

## Introduction

The Psalter begins not with a prayer but with a portrait. Psalm 1 stands at the threshold as a kind of moral and spiritual map. Its opening word, *ashrei*—“happy,” “fortunate,” “on the good way”—is not an emotion so much as a verdict: here is what well-ordered life looks like. The psalm invites you to imagine a life that resists drift and cultivates depth, not by accident but through practice.

Two features orient us immediately. First, the poem is built on a dynamic of contrast—the righteous and the wicked—but that contrast is more than moral sorting. It is a study in stability versus weightlessness. The righteous becomes like a well-sited tree; the wicked, chaff; the former endures judgment, the latter cannot even stand. Second, this psalm is deliberately coupled with Psalm 2. Together they form a two-door vestibule to the Psalter: Psalm 1 exalts Torah—divine instruction; Psalm 2 exalts the Lord’s anointed and the sovereignty God asserts over the nations. Both end with *ashrei* (1:1; 2:12), enclosing the gateway with the same word of flourishing. Torah-shaped meditation (Psalm 1) and refuge in the king whom God installs (Psalm 2) are not rival claims but paired coordinates for reading the next 148 poems.

Psalm 1 is often described as “wisdom.” That is fair as long as we define our terms. Wisdom here does not mean aphorisms; it means an art of living under God’s instruction. The psalm’s artistry is concise. Hebrew poetry works by parallel lines (each line-pair is a “colon,” a linked unit), and by compact images that do the heavy lifting. Two structural devices frame Psalm 1: inclusio—the poem begins and ends with “way” (*derek*): the way you avoid (v. 1), the way God “knows” (v. 6); and merism—a totality expressed through poles, as in “day and night,” meaning “always” (v. 2).

The opening verse is all motion and sound: *lo halakh… lo amad… lo yashav*—“did not walk… did not stand… did not sit.” The triple *lo* (“not”) hammers out an anaphora (a repeated opener) that feels like a guardrail. The sequence is not mere stylistic variety. It traces increasing entanglement: from walking “in the counsel of the wicked,” to standing “in the path of sinners,” to sitting “in the seat (*moshav*) of scoffers.” *Moshav* can be a literal seat or a community—an “assembly” (BDB). The company you keep becomes the house you live in. The Greek translators (LXX, the ancient Greek Bible) render that final phrase, strikingly, as “the seat of pestilence” (καθέδρα λοιμῶν), turning scoffing into contagion. That is not a different Hebrew text so much as an interpretation: scorn spreads.

The hinge of the psalm comes quickly: *ki im*—“but rather” (v. 2). The person who lives well delights (*ḥefetz*) in the *torat YHWH*—the “instruction of the LORD”—and *yehgeh* in it “day and night.” *Yehgeh* is a wonderfully concrete verb (BDB: “murmur, utter, muse”). Lions *yehgeh* over prey (Isaiah 31:4). The righteous person voices Torah to himself. This is not silent reading but a kind of rehearsed speech. The Greek meletaō (“meditate/practice”) in the LXX confirms the sense of steady rehearsal. The phrase “day and night” is a merism: everything in between belongs to this practice. Joshua 1:8 uses the same language: “You shall *yehgeh* on this Torah day and night.” The psalm also plays with pronouns: “the Torah of the LORD” becomes “his Torah” (*torato*)—a move the rabbis hear as appropriation: labor in it until it becomes yours (Avodah Zarah 19a).

Then comes the image, as vivid as it is economical: “He shall be like a tree *shatul*—transplanted—by *palgei mayim*, channels of water” (v. 3). *Palgei* are not wild streams but divided runnels—irrigation channels (BDB). The image is cultivation, not chance. The tree gives fruit “in season” (*be’ito*)—no forced productivity—and its leaf “does not wither” (*lo yibbol*). The verb *nabel* (“wither”) is Isaiah’s word for the grass that dries and flowers that fall (Isaiah 40:7–8); in Ezekiel’s river-vision, the trees by the waters “do not wither” (Ezekiel 47:12). A close parallel to our psalm is Jeremiah 17:8, where the one who trusts in the LORD is “like a tree planted by water,” not anxious in drought. Psalm 1’s last line—“all that he does *yatsliah*”—has been misread as a pledge of unbroken luck. The verb means “to succeed” in the sense of reaching the right end. It is used of Joseph: “the LORD made all he did *yatsliah*” (Genesis 39:3). The point is alignment: when habit and instruction form a character, deeds tend to hit their mark.

The contrast is abrupt, almost disdainful: “Not so the wicked—*lo ken*—but like chaff” (*mots*) the wind drives (*tiddfennu*) away (v. 4). The verb suggests force, not a gentle breeze (BDB: “drive asunder”). Chaff is the weightless husk left after threshing; it is a biblical trope for futility. Elsewhere enemies are wished to be “like chaff before the wind” (Psalm 35:5; cf. Psalm 83:14; Isaiah 41:2). Psalm 1 uses the image not as a curse but as an anthropology: a life without rooted practice has no ballast.

The tone turns judicial in v. 5: “Therefore (*al ken*) the wicked will not *yakumu* in the judgment.” *Yakumu* can mean “arise,” “stand,” or “endure.” The ambiguity is apt. Such people have nothing to stand on when weighed. The parallel clause—“nor sinners in the *adat tsadiqim*—assembly of the righteous”—reverses v. 1: the one who once sat (*yashav*) in the *moshav* of scoffers now cannot belong among the upright. The LXX, interestingly, has “nor sinners in the counsel (βουλή) of the righteous,” echoing v. 1’s “counsel of the wicked.” Whether “assembly” or “counsel,” the idea is the same: a life ordered by God’s instruction has a community; a life ordered by scorn ends alone.

The final line grounds the whole: “For the LORD *yada*—knows—the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish” (v. 6). *Yada* in Hebrew is not mere information. It is covenantal regard and sustaining attention: “You only have I *yada* of all the families of the earth,” says God (Amos 3:2); “I *yada* you in the wilderness” (Hosea 13:5). God “knowing” the righteous way means God attends to and preserves it. The wicked way, by contrast, collapses on its own: the verb is intransitive—“perishes.” Evil is not a rival substance to be crushed but a path without future.

If the Psalter is a long conversation between God and the human soul, Psalm 1 explains how to enter the conversation. It is not a prayer, yet it tells you how prayer will work: as the disciplined rehearsal of divine speech until it becomes “your Torah,” shaping perception, desire, and action. The rest of the Psalms will cry out, argue, and praise. Psalm 1 whispers at the door: begin with a practice that plants you by water.

Technical terms used:

- BDB: Brown–Driver–Briggs, a standard Hebrew lexicon that provides meanings and usage.

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

- Inclusio: a framing device where a word or theme appears at beginning and end.

- Merism: naming two extremes (e.g., “day and night”) to express totality.

- Colon: one unit (line) in a parallel pair of Hebrew poetry.

## 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* opens the Psalter with a wisdom beatitude: “Happy/fortunate is the person.” The line then advances by sound and step: *lo halakh… lo amad… lo yashav*—three “not”s (*lo*) followed by *walk/stand/sit*. The anaphora (repeating the same opener) and the repeated l-sounds create an audible guardrail; the verbs enact a staircase of entanglement. One begins “walking in the counsel of the wicked” (*resha’im*)—borrowing outlook. Then one “stands in the path of sinners” (*chatta’im*)—lingering where patterns form. Finally, one “sits in the seat (*moshav*) of scoffers” (*letsim*)—making a home among cynics.  
  
The nouns intensify the scene. *Resha’im* are the wicked in the active sense; *chatta’im* are those missing the mark, the habitual offenders. The climax is *letsim*, a term the book of Proverbs makes infamous: the *lets* is “proud and haughty” (Proverbs 21:24), resists reproof (9:7–8; 13:1), and “delights in scorning” (1:22). This is not a sharp-witted satirist; it is the person who has made contempt a vocation. *Moshav* can be a literal seat or an “assembly/dwelling-place” (BDB; cf. Psalm 107:32). The verse’s moral geography is architectural: advice becomes a street; a street becomes a neighborhood; the neighborhood becomes your address.  
  
The Greek translators render the last phrase, famously, as “the seat of pestilence” (καθέδρα λοιμῶν). No Hebrew manuscript reads “pestilence” here; the LXX likely reads the Hebrew metaphorically, converting scoffing into something infectious. The effect is to warn not only of moral decline but of social contagion. Either way, the artistry lies in showing corruption as drift: not a sudden crash but a slow settling-in.  
  
Note how “path/way” (*derek*) enters here; it will return in v. 6, creating an inclusio (a frame) that seals the psalm. The line’s terse parallelism uses the dynamics of “A is so, and what’s more, B”: walk—stand—sit moves from transient contact to settled identity. The best prophylactic, we will learn in v. 2, is a counter-practice that fills the mouth and the day.  
  
Definitions:  
- Anaphora: repeating a word/phrase at the start of successive lines.  
- LXX: Septuagint, the ancient Greek translation, often interpretive.  
- Inclusio: framing a unit by repeating a key term at start and end.

### Verse 2

The hinge *ki im* (“but rather”) shifts from negation to practice. The blessed person “delights” (*ḥefetz*) in the *torat YHWH*—“the instruction of the LORD”—and *yehgeh* in it “day and night.” Two details matter.  
  
First, the verb *yehgeh* does not denote silent, abstract thought. BDB glosses “murmur, utter, muse.” Lions *yehgeh* (Isaiah 31:4); the righteous mouth *yehgeh* wisdom (Psalm 37:30). Joshua 1:8 instructs the leader to *yehgeh* on Torah “day and night” so as to “do” all that is written. The LXX uses μελετᾶν, a verb that can mean “practice, rehearse.” In other words, the psalm describes voiced rehearsal—an embodied discipline of reciting and ruminating until the words stick.  
  
Second, the pronouns shift: from “the Torah of the LORD” (*torat YHWH*) to “his Torah” (*torato*). The tradition caught the significance: at first it is God’s Torah; after toil, it becomes “his” (Avodah Zarah 19a). The psalm has no patience for passive piety. Delight (*ḥefetz*) is appetite that generates habit; habit turns borrowed speech into owned speech.  
  
“Day and night” is a merism: a way of saying “always.” It does not require ceaseless reading so much as a steady rhythm that saturates the day. Psalm 119, a later meditation on Torah, will sing variations on this theme. Exodus 13:9 envisions “the Torah of the LORD in your mouth”—a striking convergence with our verse’s emphasis on voiced meditation.  
  
Definition:  
- Merism: naming extremes (day/night) to indicate totality.  
- BDB: standard Hebrew lexicon recording meanings and usage.

### Verse 3

Now the image: “He shall be like a tree *shatul* (transplanted/planted) by *palgei mayim* (channels/streams of water).” Both nouns are precise. *Shatul* (BDB) often marks deliberate setting in a chosen place (cf. Jeremiah 17:8; Psalm 92:13–14). *Palgei* are not a single river but divided runnels—the vocabulary of irrigation (BDB “divide/channel”). The righteous life is not a lucky accident beside a brook; it is cultivated nearness to a managed source.  
  
Three clauses unpack the image with the force of concrete poetry:  
- “That gives its fruit in its season” (*be’ito*). This resists fantasies of nonstop output. Ancient agricultural wisdom knew that off-season fruit is poor. A Torah-shaped person learns seasons—presence in crisis, rest without guilt, action when the time is ripe.  
- “Its leaf does not wither” (*lo yibbol*). The verb *nabel* (“wither, fade”) is Isaiah’s word for grass and flowers that fail (Isaiah 40:7–8). Ezekiel’s trees by the temple river do “not wither” (47:12). Our psalm locates similar durability not at Zion’s temple but by Torah’s channels—a portable river.  
- “All he does *yatsliah*.” The verb denotes success in the sense of achieving the proper end, not getting rich by default. It is the Joseph verb (Genesis 39:3): God makes his work succeed. The LXX’s κατευοδόω (“be prospered along the way”) nicely preserves the sense of a road that goes through.  
  
Parallels deepen the texture. Jeremiah 17:8 describes the person who trusts in the LORD as a tree that “does not fear when heat comes.” The cousin image in Psalm 36:9—“You give them drink from the river of your delights”—shifts the source to God’s generosity but keeps water as life. At the other end, Psalm 119:136 uses “streams of water” (*palgei mayim*) for tears—a hyperbolic flip of our verse’s refreshment: channels can irrigate or weep, depending on whether Torah is kept.  
  
Definition:  
- Inclusio: this verse sits between “way” (v. 1) and “way” (v. 6), the frame that defines where such a tree “walks.”

### Verse 4

“Not so the wicked—*lo ken*.” The poet withholds elaboration and offers only eleven Hebrew words. Where the righteous enjoy a layered image, the wicked are granted brevity—because there is less to say. They are “like chaff” (*mots*) that the wind (*ruach*) “drives” (*tiddfennu*) away. The verb (BDB: *nadaph*) is vigorous—drive, push, scatter—not a light, playful breeze. The point is not merely that evil is impermanent; it is insubstantial.  
  
The chaff comparison is widely used for those God defeats. Psalm 35:5: “Let them be like chaff before the wind, with the angel of the LORD driving them.” Psalm 83:14: “Make them like thistledown, like stubble before the wind.” Isaiah 41:2 pictures hostile kings scattered like chaff. In those contexts, the image functions as a wish for enemies. Here it functions as diagnosis: a life detached from divine instruction is already weightless. The metaphor’s frequency clusters in judgment scenes; Psalm 1 relocates the judgment to character itself.  
  
There may be a hint of double meaning in *ruach*, “wind/spirit.” While the line does not explicitly name God as agent, biblical poetry often lets divine breath do the work of winnowing. Either way, the contrast with v. 3 is pointed: where the tree has roots and a managed source, chaff has no root and is at the mercy of whatever gust happens along.  
  
Definition:  
- Simile: an explicit comparison (“like chaff”) that transfers qualities (lightness, worthlessness) from one domain to another.

### Verse 5

“Therefore” (*al ken*) draws a consequence: “the wicked will not *yakumu* in the judgment, nor sinners in the *adat tsadiqim*—the assembly of the righteous.” *Yakumu* has the range “arise/stand/endure.” The forensic setting is clear (*ba-mishpat*): when the time comes for weighing, the wicked lack standing—literally. The ambiguity fits the poem’s scope. This can be read as a present moral reality (hollow lives cannot endure scrutiny) and as eschatological (at God’s decisive judgment, they will not stand).  
  
The second colon answers v. 1 in reverse. Once you “sat” (*yashav*) in the *moshav* of scoffers; now you cannot stand among the assembly of the righteous. The poem’s internal logic moves from location to community to destiny. The noun *edah* (BDB) often denotes a purposeful congregation with covenant overtones (e.g., “the congregation of Israel”). The LXX reads “counsel (βουλή) of the righteous,” echoing v. 1’s “counsel of the wicked.” That echo makes the symmetry even tighter: you began by borrowing advice from the wrong circle; you end excluded from the counsel of the right one.  
  
Traditional Jewish readers split the timing. Radak hears “day of judgment” as the day of death; others hear a broader eschatological horizon. The psalm sustains the tension. It is less interested in timelines than in trajectories. A way of life that cultivates substance can endure testing; a way that cultivates scorn cannot.  
  
Definitions:  
- Forensic/judicial setting: the language of standing in court, examination, verdict.  
- LXX nuance: “counsel” for “assembly” spotlights the communal mind one belongs to.

### Verse 6

Everything rests on the theology of this final couplet: “For the LORD *yada*—knows—the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.” In biblical Hebrew, *yada* is not bare cognition. It names chosen regard and sustaining attention: “You only have I *yada* of all the families of the earth” (Amos 3:2); “I *yada* you in the wilderness” (Hosea 13:5). Here the object is a “way” (*derek*), not simply a person—a patterned life God takes note of and preserves.  
  
The second colon is the poem’s most theologically subtle line. No agent is named for the wicked; the verb is intransitive: “the way… perishes” (*to’ved*). Evil is not a solid counter-thing that God must smash. It is a path that resolves into nothing, the moral equivalent of chaff. The antithetic parallelism—knowing/preserving versus perishing—sharpens the choice without melodrama. The inclusio closes: *derek* (“way”) appeared in v. 1, where the blessed refused “the path of sinners”; it returns here to underline that Psalm 1 is about roads and where they lead.  
  
Canonically, the verse also bridges to Psalm 2, where the “way” of mutinous nations is also doomed, while those who “take refuge” are called *ashrei* (2:12). Together they sketch two maps: Microscopic (a person’s habits) and macroscopic (a world’s politics) governed by one logic—divine regard sustains; deracinated revolt ends in wind.  
  
Definitions:  
- Antithetic parallelism: a line-pair where the second contrasts the first, sharpening meaning.  
- Inclusio: the return of “way” at the end, echoing the beginning.  
  
In sum: Psalm 1 does not promise the untroubled life; it offers a rooted one. Its counsel is concrete—fill your mouth and your hours with the voiced rehearsal of a text until it becomes your own. Plant yourself by channels. In time, the leaves hold, and the fruit comes when it should.

## 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**: 26

**Traditional Commentaries Reviewed**: 26 (Ibn Ezra (3); Malbim (4); Meiri (4); Metzudat David (4); Radak (4); Rashi (4); Torah Temimah (3))

**Concordance Entries Reviewed**: 57

**Figurative Language Instances Reviewed**: 151

**Master Editor Prompt Size**: 122,831 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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