# Commentary on Psalm 1

## Introduction

Psalm 1 stands at the head of the Psalter not merely as a preface but as a threshold. It introduces the Psalms by presenting two ways—the way of the righteous and the way of the wicked—and by mapping those ways onto creation’s textures: a deeply rooted tree by channels of water, and chaff driven by wind. These images are not decorative. They embody the poem’s thesis that a life aligned with divine instruction participates in the grain of reality, while a life set against it tends toward insubstantiality and loss.

The opening line, ashrei ha’ish, “Happy the man,” signals wisdom instruction about human flourishing. The word ashrei (“happinesses,” a plural of intensity) occurs frequently in Scripture; here, the distinctive ashrei + ha’ish (“the man”) individualizes the programmatic exemplar. Notably, Psalm 2 ends with ashrei again—“Happy are all who take refuge in him” (2:12)—creating a frame around Psalms 1–2: personal character (Psalm 1) and public history (Psalm 2) are bound by the same promise of flourishing. The paired placement suggests editorial design, likely in a post-exilic setting when Torah devotion and hope for God’s kingship were interwoven. Yet Psalm 1’s claims are not confined to a particular moment. They are articulated through perennial metaphors of path, speech, water, wind, and tree.

Verse 1 offers a crisp triad of negatives: the exemplary person “has not walked in the counsel of the wicked, nor stood in the path of sinners, nor sat in the seat of scoffers.” The successive verbs—walk, stand, sit—trace a movement from casual exposure through settled identity. In Hebrew, these are perfect forms (lo’ halakh… lo’ ‘amad… lo’ yashav) used gnomicly: they characterize a life-pattern, not a one-off choice. The terms chart social locations as well as actions: counsel (decision-making), path (habitual practice), seat (belonging, a company). The LXX’s striking rendering of “seat of scoffers” as “seat of pestilence” (καθέδρα λοιμῶν) hears in lētsim (“scoffers”) the danger of social contagion: mockery spreads. The verse is also crafted for the ear—the threefold lo’ (“not”), and the paired prepositions u- (“and in/and at”) marking the second and third cola—so that negation sets a cadence.

The decisive hinge is the adversative ki ’im—“but rather”—in v. 2 (and again in v. 4). What defines the righteous is not finally avoidance but delight: “in the Torah of the LORD is his delight, and in his Torah he meditates day and night.” The verb ḥafetz denotes desire, not duty. The Qal of hagah, often rendered “meditates,” literally means to utter in a low voice—“mutter” or “murmur” (cf. Joshua 1:8; Isaiah 59:3). The psalm’s merism “day and night” (a figure naming two poles to evoke a totality) describes not a schedule but a saturation: Torah becomes the person’s audible world. The second colon subtly varies the phrasing from “the Torah of the LORD” to “his Torah,” a stylistic shift that likely continues to refer to God, while hinting at internalization: the divine word becomes “his.”

From this interior delight the poem moves to its most sustained image: “He shall be like a tree transplanted by channels of water” (v. 3). The participle shathul is precise; BDB glosses it “transplanted,” a term elsewhere used of vines or trees set in a chosen place (Jeremiah 17:8; Ezekiel 17:22–23; 19:10). The site is not random: palgei mayim are divided channels, irrigation runnels, rather than a single stream. This is cultivation as much as nature. The three blessings that follow—fruit “in its season,” unwithered leaves, comprehensive prosperity (yatsliach)—do not promise perpetual summer. “In its season” insists on rhythm, not frenzy; prosperity in biblical idiom often names fittingness and stability (cf. Genesis 39:3).

The contrast is abrupt: “Not so the wicked; but rather like chaff the wind drives away” (v. 4). The poem’s asymmetry is as important as its contrasts. Three lines for the tree collapse to half a line for chaff. This is not only a moral judgment; it is a poetics of substance and void. Chaff (motz) recurs elsewhere as an emblem of judgment or worthlessness (Psalm 35:5; Isaiah 17:13). Here, the “wind” (ruaḥ) is unnamed as divine, though elsewhere the “angel of the LORD” is explicit agent (Psalm 35:5). The economy is deliberate: what has no weight merits no elaboration.

Verse 5 turns image into outcome: “Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous.” The verb “stand” (qum) here carries legal force: to stand is to be established, to hold one’s ground (cf. Deuteronomy 19:15 “a matter shall stand”). “In the judgment” (ba-mishpat) may be read as an archetypal adjudication (traditional Jewish commentators often relate it to the day of death), but the second colon adds a social horizon: “the assembly of the righteous” (‘adat tsaddiqim) is a unique phrase in Scripture. ’Edah is a “called assembly,” not a casual crowd; Psalm 111:1 pairs “assembly” with “council” (sod), suggesting a purposeful gathered order. Psalm 1 envisages ultimate belonging as a communal good.

The final line (v. 6) explains the asymmetry of destinies by asymmetry of grammar. “For the LORD knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked perishes.” To “know” (yada‘) in biblical idiom is active recognition and care (Exodus 33:17; Genesis 18:19), not mere cognition. The second colon withholds an agent: the way of the wicked perishes (toved). Evil, the psalm suggests, is self-eroding. The LXX makes explicit what the Hebrew leaves implicit, translating, “the way of the ungodly shall be destroyed,” supplying an agentive force. Both readings are theologically coherent: divine knowledge keeps and sustains; wickedness dissipates under the pressure of reality—and God is reality’s guarantor.

Two further observations ground the psalm’s voice. First, its diction is spare and concrete. Abstract claims are carried by images whose workings we know from the world: counsel, path, seat; channels, fruit, leaves; wind and chaff. Second, it is carefully placed. With Psalm 2 it forms an editorial diptych: Psalm 1 opens with ashrei; Psalm 2 closes with ashrei; both concern “way” (derekh) and “meditation” (hagah; cf. Psalm 2:1). Together they set before the reader a life of Torah-shaped desire and a world subject to God’s rule. The choice that Psalm 1 presents is moral, social, and finally theological: to live with reality’s grain—under instruction that becomes delight—or to scatter with the wind.

## Psalm 1

**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 threefold negation (lo’ … lo’ … lo’) and the graded verbs (walk–stand–sit) map moral drift with social precision. The Hebrew uses perfect forms—lo’ halakh … lo’ ‘amad … lo’ yashav—which in this gnomic context characterize settled habit. The movement is from exposure to entrenchment: “counsel” (‘etsah) is the sphere of deliberation; “path” (derek) of patterned conduct; “seat” (moshav) of settled belonging. BDB notes moshav as “seat, assembly, dwelling-place,” and our verse uses the assembly sense: those who “sit” constitute a company.

The three groups—resha‘im (wicked), ḥatta’im (sinners), letsim (scoffers)—are not synonyms. BDB’s entry on letsim stresses the arrogant unteachability of the mocker (Proverbs 9:7–8; 14:6). The taxonomy is social: advice-givers who lack moral ballast; actors who habituate wrongdoing; a coterie whose defining posture is derision. The LXX’s surprising καθέδρα λοιμῶν (“seat of pestilences”) hears in scoffing a contagion—mockery that infects.

The diction is also crafted for the ear. The initial ashrei ha’ish sets a firm stress pattern; the series u-vederekh … u’vmoshav (“and in the path … and in the seat”) organizes the second and third cola, while the repeated lo’ nails each clause. The triad echoes Israel’s idiom of walking in divine ways (Deuteronomy 8:6; 10:12): metaphorically, “walk” signifies conduct, “way/path” a moral trajectory. That idiom’s positive form throws this verse’s negatives into relief.

Traditional commentators already heard escalation here: Ibn Ezra notes that standing is more settled than walking, sitting more settled than standing. The moral psychology is acute: one begins by heeding dubious advice, then “lingers” where such counsel has sway, finally “takes a seat” and becomes part of the company. The verse thus places happiness not in a private mood but in wise social alignment.

Figurative parallels and usage pattern: “Walk in God’s ways” is a common metaphor for ethical life (Deuteronomy 8:6; 10:12; 19:9). Its ubiquity underlines that movement imagery in v. 1 is programmatic: one either “walks” God’s way or the counsel/path/seat of another moral order. Psalm 1 repurposes this familiar idiom to map the stages by which we are socialized into a community’s loves.

### Verse 2

“But rather—his delight is in the Torah of the LORD, and in his Torah he mutters day and night.”

The adversative ki ’im is a hinge in Hebrew rhetoric: “not this … but rather that.” The verse moves from avoidance to appetite. Ḥefetz (“delight, desire”) names inward attraction; this is motivation, not mere compliance. The second colon shifts from “the Torah of the LORD” to “his Torah.” The pronominal suffix most naturally still refers to God (a stylistic variation to avoid repetition), yet its placement after “his delight” suggests internalization: the divine instruction becomes the person’s own.

The verb hagah has a concrete sense: to utter, murmur, growl (BDB); of a lion over prey (Isaiah 31:4), or the tongue “muttering” wickedness (Isaiah 59:3). In Joshua 1:8, Israel is told to hagah the Torah “day and night,” the very collocation we find here. The psalm imagines Torah as spoken into the body: study is voiced, not merely thought. The merism “day and night” expresses totality; it is less about clock time than saturation. The line thus describes a consciousness acoustically shaped by divine words.

Sound and structure sustain the effect. The parallel “in the Torah of the LORD … and in his Torah” is a small instance of “A is so, and what’s more, B”: the second colon repeats a key term and adds the how (by murmuring continually). The logic is compact: delight issues in practice; practice deepens delight.

Parallels and pattern: Hagah in the sense of meditative utterance appears in key instruction passages (Joshua 1:8), and in psalms it can shade into devising/imagining (Psalm 2:1—“why do nations hagah a vain thing?”). Psalm 1 redeems the verb for piety: human interior speech becomes the place where divine speech takes root.

### Verse 3

“He is like a tree transplanted beside channels of water, which yields its fruit in its season, and its leaf does not wither; and in all that he does he prospers.”

The simile is extended and precise. Shathul, “transplanted,” differs from the more common nata‘ (“planted”): it implies deliberate placement. The site is cultivated: palgei mayim are divided channels, irrigation runnels (cf. Psalm 36:9, “the stream of your delights”; Psalm 119:136, “streams of water” for tears). Jeremiah 17:8 uses the same arboreal figure for the one who trusts in the LORD: leaf evergreen, no fear of drought. Psalm 1’s version emphasizes location (by channels) and timing (“its fruit in its season”).

Each element is significant. “Fruit in its season” rejects forced productivity; the metaphor blesses rhythm. “Its leaf does not wither” uses navel (“to droop, fade”). BDB notes yibbol occurs five times, often for vegetation withering (e.g., Isaiah 28:1; Ezekiel 47:12). Here sustained moisture prevents that natural decline. The final claim—“all that he does he prospers”—uses the Hifil yatsliach, a verb used of Joseph’s success (Genesis 39:3). Prosperity here is alignment with what is fitting and stable, not mere accumulation.

The image works by transfer: the channels correspond to Torah; transplanting to a decisive re-siting of one’s life; fruitfulness to the social and moral yield of wisdom. Rashi’s comment that “even the leaves are useful” has a keen ethical edge: in the righteous, even casual speech can edify.

Parallels and pattern: Tree-by-water imagery is relatively rare and pointed. Jeremiah 17:8 is the closest parallel; together they define a biblical topos of sustained vitality through plantedness near a life-source. Streams in Psalm 36:9 and 119:136 extend the figure: God as the source of delights; tears as “streams.” Psalm 1’s distinctive contribution is the verb shathul—cultivated placement—and the triad of results (seasonal fruit, evergreen leaf, comprehensive success).

Textual note: The LXX’s διέξοδοι ὑδάτων (“channels/outlets of water”) neatly matches palgei. Its interpretation confirms the sense of irrigation rather than random watercourse.

### Verse 4

“Not so the wicked; but rather like chaff that the wind drives away.”

The abrupt lō’ khen (“not so”) before a compressed simile enacts the difference it asserts: substance merits elaboration; what is light and residual receives half a line. The second ki ’im (“but rather”), balancing the ki ’im of v. 2, turns the hinge toward negation: where delight led to rootedness, the wicked are at the mercy of motion.

Motz, “chaff,” is the fine casing separated from grain in winnowing. The verb tiddĕfennu (“drives it”) in the intensive stem underscores force. Chaff imagery consistently marks judgment and insubstantiality: “Let them be like chaff before the wind” (Psalm 35:5); “like chaff of the threshing floors chased by the wind” (Isaiah 17:13); “make them like thistledown, like stubble before the wind” (Psalm 83:14). The pattern’s typical contexts are prayer against enemies and prophetic judgment scenes; Psalm 1 adapts the figure not as imprecation but as anthropology: a life misaligned with instruction lacks weight.

The agent here is “wind” (ruaḥ), unnamed as divine. Elsewhere the “angel of the LORD” is the driver (Psalm 35:5). The psalm’s restraint is intentional: wickedness need not be dramatically punished; it dissipates under ordinary pressures. The poetics reinforce the point: a single, airy simile replaces the rooted, irrigated tree’s elaboration.

LXX nuance: “οὐχ οὕτως οἱ ἀσεβεῖς … ἀλλ’ ὡς ὁ χνοῦς ὃν ἐκρίπτει ἄνεμος” (chaff thrown by wind) matches the MT’s force, preserving the impersonal agent. The translator sees no need to supply God as the immediate actor; the created order suffices to undo what is weightless.

### Verse 5

“Therefore the wicked shall not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous.”

‘Al-ken (“therefore”) draws a line from image to verdict. “Stand” (qum) is a legal idiom: to stand is to be established, to hold one’s position when adjudicated (cf. Deuteronomy 19:15, “a matter shall stand,” alluding to evidentiary sufficiency; Malachi 3:2, “who can stand when he appears?”). The indefinite “in the judgment” (ba-mishpat) may refer to God’s recurring acts of righting or to the climactic evaluation at death (Radak reads “day of death”).

The second colon is social: “the assembly of the righteous” (‘adat tsaddiqim) is unique, though “assembly” and “council” language elsewhere marks the purposeful gathering of the upright (Psalm 111:1, “in the council of the upright, and in the congregation”). ’Edah denotes a convened body, not a crowd; it implies shared commitments and oversight. Psalm 1’s righteous belong to a community; the wicked cannot join it.

The verse is chiastic with v. 1: there the righteous avoid counsel/path/seat; here the wicked fail in judgment and are excluded from the righteous’ assembly. The poem’s structure thus ties social location to ultimate belonging. Notably, the grammar parallels “wicked” with “sinners,” maintaining the two-term taxonomy of v. 1 rather than repeating “scoffers.” The mocker’s endpoint is already implied by his chosen seat.

LXX again clarifies the legal resonance: “διὰ τοῦτο οὐκ ἀναστήσονται ἀσεβεῖς ἐν κρίσει, οὐδὲ ἁμαρτωλοὶ ἐν βουλῇ δικαίων.” The choice of βουλή (“council, deliberative body”) for ‘edah emphasizes the orderly and deliberative quality of the righteous gathering, answering to “counsel” (‘etsah) in v. 1 with an antithetical counsel.

### Verse 6

“For the LORD knows the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked perishes.”

The psalm ends not with reward language but with ontology. To “know” (yada‘) in biblical usage often denotes personal recognition and covenantal regard: “I have known you by name” (Exodus 33:17); “I have known him [Abraham], that he may instruct his children” (Genesis 18:19). Here the LORD’s “knowing” the righteous way implies attention that keeps it in being. The parallel “the way of the wicked perishes” (toved) names a process of dissolution; Deuteronomy 8:19–20 uses ’avad for covenantal self-destruction.

The grammatical asymmetry matters. The first colon has a named subject and active verb; the second withholds the agent. Evil unravels by its own logic. This is not naïveté about history; it is a statement about the long moral arc. The LXX, more explicit, reads: “ὅτι γινώσκει κύριος ὁδὸν δικαίων, καὶ ὁδὸς ἀσεβῶν ἀπολεῖται”—“the way of the ungodly shall be destroyed”—supplying an agent where the Hebrew only implies one. Both lines agree on the outcome; they differ on how directly the poet wants to name God’s role in bringing it about.

The verse also bookends the psalm’s controlling metaphor of “way” (derek). In Hebrew thought, a “way” is at once character and trajectory. Psalm 1 has spoken of counsel, path, seat, assembly; it closes by naming what is behind or beneath them: a way that God knows and a way that is self-defeating. The choice is not merely moral preference; it is a choice between being known—held—in reality, and frittering into chaff.

Parallels and pattern: The idiom “the LORD knows” used of persons or ways indicates special regard (Exodus 33:17; Psalm 144:3). The verb ’avad for paths or peoples perishing is a common covenantal warning (Deuteronomy 8:19–20). Psalm 1’s distinctive twist is to oppose “knowing” not with “hating” or “judging,” but with “perishing,” thereby making divine knowledge the positive correlate of endurance.

In sum, Psalm 1’s artistry lies in how it lets a few concrete images carry a theology. The threefold no leads into a single, decisive yes; murmured Torah becomes plantedness; chaff names the logic of a life without weight. Set as the Psalter’s threshold—and framed with Psalm 2 by ashrei—it teaches that blessedness is neither luck nor stoicism but an apprenticeship: a voiced, communal, time-saturating attachment to the word that makes worlds and keeps ways.

## 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: 24

Traditional Commentaries Reviewed: 29 (Ibn Ezra (5); Malbim (4); Meiri (5); Metzudat David (5); Radak (5); Rashi (5))

Concordance Entries Reviewed: 15

Figurative Language Instances Reviewed: 236

Master Editor Prompt Size: 120,232 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