

Psalm 1
Choice Between Two Ways

The word *tôrâh* (translated “law,” v. 2) refers to the story of God’s actions to create a people and guide them into the future, as described in Genesis and the first chapters of Exodus. Likewise it refers to the obligations, precepts and guidelines that shape the people’s life, as in the rest of the first five books of the Bible, the Torah. These two dimensions, narration and obligation, or, in the Jewish tradition, *haggadah* and *halakah*, are complementary. The English word *law* suggests a restriction that limits freedom. But God’s *tôrâh* as described in Scripture occasions rejoicing (see Pss 19:8; 112:1; 119:92), so it is better understood as God’s will or design for the chosen people. *Tôrâh* is how God shapes the human soul, like a road map that guides and identifies landmarks toward a destination.

Psalm 1 must be interpreted as a psalm in its own right and in relation to the entire Psalter. As a preface to the Psalter it introduces themes which culminate in the praise at the end of Book Five. The *tôrâh* is the open door to praise through which one has access to interior rooms. Happy the wise person who meditates the *tôrâh* continually, enters through it to appreciate the riches of the Psalter and ends in praising God.

The Psalter opens with the word אֲשֶׁרֶ, ¹ “happy,” which has little to do with feeling and much to do with the lasting blessing held out to the person who pursues the good. Happiness results from a choice to participate in the divine life. This initial word begins with the first letter of

¹ The first word is fitting for its wordplay. The Semitic stem (šr) from which אֲשֶׁרֶ, “happy,” is derived yields a verb meaning “walk, advance” (cf. Isa 3:12; 9:15; Prov 4:14; 9:6; 23:19) and a noun denoting “footstep.” One who walks or stops along a path is “happy” (אֲשֶׁרֶ) if his or her “steps” (אֲשֻׁרָיִ) are not detained alongside those of the wicked (as in [Hebrew] Pss 17:5, 11; 37:31; 40:3; 44:19; 73:2; Prov 14:15; Job 23:11; 31:7).

the alphabet, *ʾaleph*. The last word in the psalm, “perish,” begins with the final letter, *tav*. Opening or closing oneself to God’s will (*tôrâh*) results in a choice between happiness and death. The contrast is sharpened by repeating *way* (v. 6; “path” in v. 1), and *righteous* and *wicked* (vv. 5-6). The repetition forms a chiasm:

- A “*the wicked will not stand*”
 B “*in the congregation of the righteous*”
 B’ “*the LORD watches over the way of the righteous*”
 A’ “*the way of the wicked will perish*”

The ruin of the wicked is on the periphery, and God’s custody of the righteous is central. “Wicked” and “righteous” are opposite forensic terms with no mitigating degrees. One is either “guilty” or “acquitted.” In the theology of Psalm 1 a person is either right with God or wrong.

Other repetitions form a thematic inclusion (vv. 1 and 6). The poet advises against following (literally, “walking in”) the advice of *the wicked* or standing in their *way* (NRSV, “take the path”), for “*the way of the wicked will perish*” (cf. Prov 4:18-19; 15:9). The “way” is a metaphor for human behavior (for example, Ps 25:8-9; Prov 1:15; 2:8-9). That person is fortunate who, like the righteous of Ps 26:4-5, does not share the ideas, projects, and behavior of the wicked. Rather, this one benefits from constant reflection on the guide for behavior, God’s *tôrâh*, received with affection and joy. The alternative route is introduced by “but” (Hebrew *kî*, v. 2 and *lôʾ-kên*, v. 4), which introduces an emphatic denial, “The wicked are not so.” In the end, the individual who shunned unwholesome company is included in community with the righteous, a “congregation,” standing in a court of law (v. 5). The final scene is in diametric contradiction to the opening. At first the good person was advised to avoid *the session, mōšab*, of scoffers. In the end the wicked have no place in *the righteous assembly, ʿedâh*. The scene has changed completely. Once it is too late, the accounts cannot be adjusted; the sentence is pronounced. The decent individual who keeps honest in an immoral society thrives according to the divinely ordained *tôrâh*. An intransitive verb, “will perish,” puts down “the way” of the wicked which leads to their ruin. In contrast, an active, transitive verb with God as the subject raises up the destiny of the good, “the LORD watches over the way of the righteous.” The asymmetrical composition of v. 6 is calculated for its effect. In the first hemistich “the LORD” (subject) prospers “the way” (complement). In the second hemistich “the way” (subject) of its own accord turns to nothing.

A	B	C
The LORD	watches over	the way of the righteous
C	. . .	
the way of the wicked	will perish.	

God gives the righteous substance and durability. The wicked vanish. Success of the good depends on God; failure is a consequence of the wicked condition and behavior. God is occupied with the destiny of the person who occupies him or herself with “the law of the LORD.” Along with other meanings, the verb, “perish,” has the physical sense of going astray or getting lost—perdition, in its literal sense. A synonym of *Sheol*, the residence of the dead, is Abaddon (Ps 88:11; Job 26:6; 28:22; Prov 15:11), a cognate of *ʾbd*. Some translators understand *tōʾābēd*, “will perish,” as a present tense with a moral connotation (NEB, RNAB). Others understand it to refer to the future judgment (NRSV, JB), in which case it might be eschatological. The prospect of judgment is alluded to in the chaff image. This and the overarching structure evokes the liturgy of blessing and curse (see Joshua 24; Deut 27:11–28:68). Judgment separates and purges the worshiping community of ungodly elements. Given this connection, the wicked are idolaters, and their influence attempts to lead the faithful from God’s way. Psalm 1 is a meditation on the final destiny of the wicked and God’s accompaniment of the good. Anyone whose life is rootless and meaningless because he or she is godless will have no defense when arraigned in judgment. A reciprocal contrast is made between the other two parties; God will defend the lover of the law. Another contrast: the wicked scoffers, *seated* (v. 1), will not be able to “stand in the judgment . . . in the congregation of the righteous” (v. 5). This psalm shares the contrast with the wisdom school.

The symmetrical structure is formed by the opposite ways of the righteous and the wicked.

- (positive) “Happy are those who do not” (plus three negations, v. 1)
“but [rather] their delight is . . .” (v. 2)
the tree image of the good person (v. 3a)
the result: “they prosper” (v. 3b)
- (negative) “The wicked are not so”; a negation of what preceded
(v. 4a)
“but [rather],” followed by the chaff image (v. 4b)
the result: the recompense of the wicked (v. 5)
- (summary) the principle upon which the teaching is based (v. 6)

The Hebrew juxtaposes the righteous individual and the wicked class. The wicked are not a plurality, but rather a consolidated party; the word *‘eṣāh*, “advice,” reduces their counsel to a slogan (v. 1). This is also clear from *môšab* (NRSV, “seat”), “session” or “assembly,” (cf. Ezek 28:2; Ps 107:32). In contrast, the term *tôrâh* is less formal, more attractive and relational. Clearly it includes the sacred writings, but it is more. It is the fine tuning to the divine will, and it is a source of pleasure, an object of desire. It is not imposed from without but inspired by the inclinations of the heart, which are free and loving. The logic of the text is “[h]appy is the person who . . .” maintains integrity and performs actions which conform to the meditation of the heart, “. . . like a tree planted by streams of water.” On the other hand, the wicked are dismissed as a group.

The good person is described in relation to what he or she likes (v. 2). The Hebrew reads, “In the *tôrâh* of the LORD is his or her delight”; that is, God’s law is a personal preference. An individual is formed by what one loves and reflects on continually. What delights us invades us. The verb *hgh*, translated “meditate,” has a physical and auditory connotation, to mutter, to whisper with one’s lips. This verb is applied to a young lion “growling” over its prey (Isa 31:4), the dove’s “moaning” (Isa 38:14), and as a synonym of “speak” (Pss 37:30; 71:24) or “remember and muse on” (Ps 143:5). “They meditate” can mean “they mumble [to themselves] in a low tone.” The aim of this practice is clear from Josh 1:8, “you shall meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to act in accordance with all that is written in it.” The poet describes a person who continually (“day and night”) relishes the law, feeds on and is nourished by it.

This person is compared to a tree planted beside running streams, which sinks its roots in the dampened earth, continually buds forth and produces seasonal fruits. After sketching the qualities of the good, the psalmist expands the material advantage that redounds on the individual who minds all that he or she does. The concise Hebrew formulation may also be translated, “God prospers all that he or she does” (v. 3b). The referent (NRSV), “In all that *they* do, *they* prosper,” is ambiguous, as in Hebrew. Grammatically the poet speaks about a tree but is interested in the good person, who is resilient, stable, and fruitful because he or she is deeply rooted in the spiritual and ethical soil of the *tôrâh*. Imagery points inwards and outwards. A person is inwardly devoted to the law, “well-rooted” (the Hebrew verb *štl* is used, instead of *ntʿ*, “plant”) in the soil, stretching out roots for moisture. Outwardly such a person is fruit-bearing like a tree. The author mentions the tree’s fruit before its leaves. In the stark and arid landscape of Palestine we would expect the greenery to catch the attention.

This deeply rooted, well watered, leafy tree with abundant fruit is compared to useless straw which the wind blows away after the grain has been sifted (cf. Pss 35:5; 92:12-14; Jer 17:7-8). Chaff portrays the lack of substance and the swift passing of the wicked. In the Hebrew Bible “chaff” is always used as a symbol of inconsistency and impermanence. A life lived apart from God is as empty, sterile, and worthless as chaff. Winnowing is repeatedly employed as a simile for God’s judgment (Hos 13:3; Zeph 2:2; Isa 29:5; Matt 3:12). It was familiar to the poet’s contemporaries who saw the grain threshed and winnowed every harvest. This simile describes both the people and their destiny, like chaff as long as they persist in wickedness. The economy of words matches the transitory image, in contrast to the elaborate portrayal of the ideal person like a tree.

The poet proposes as a constant practice the meditation on the *tôrâh*, by which a person shapes his or her conduct and from which flows everything else in life. The poet ably concentrates the integral life that comes from meditation on the law into a plant image; the scenery is remarkable. A tree—not a volunteer—is planted by a creek which guarantees irrigation, foliage, and fruit in season. The person who absorbs the *tôrâh* produces fruit. The beauty of the tree comes from within. The antithesis, chaff, is curtly dismissed. Two comparisons result, a tree with chaff and the stream with the breeze. A gust of wind blows away the insubstantial; the steady flow of the stream nourishes the tree.

The psalmist concludes with the total failure of the wicked—forensic (“will not stand in the judgment”), religious (exclusion from “the congregation of the righteous”), life and practice (“the way of the wicked will perish”). The reason for the beatific end of the righteous is a reciprocal relationship, God “watches over” (*ydc*, literally “knows”) the faithful, those who nourish themselves on the *tôrâh*. They are blessed because God protects their path. The poet invites the person who opens the Psalter to choose the blessed end and the means to attain it.

For the final verdict the poet employs the symbol of a path, which God traces and the good walk responsibly or, on the contrary, which the wicked design for themselves and which leads to perdition (cf. this theme in Psalms 37 and 73). God is absent from the life and destiny of the wicked, aptly formulated “the way of the wicked will perish.” The contrast is evident. The wise person who lives by the *tôrâh* is successful, while the one who flouts it is a failure. However, the poem cannot be reduced to a simplistic equation. The psalmist contrasts two attitudes. Those who depend on God and seek the divine will by studying the *tôrâh* enjoy a relationship with God; they strive constantly and listen intently for God’s word day and night. They are blessed by a sense of

the meaning of life. In contrast are those who scorn the devout life and aim to live off their own resources. They are like chaff separated and burned after the threshing; their existence lacks substance.

The Psalter begins with a beatitude, typical of the wisdom style (see Pss 112:1; 119:1), promising happiness to the person devoted to God. The characteristics of such a person are described negatively as the avoidance of bad companions. The psalmist outlines progressive levels of collusion with the wicked. The first and least offensive is walking (NRSV "follow") according to "the advice of the wicked," then standing in (NRSV, "take") "the path that sinners tread," which means conforming to their example. The most corrosive evil would be to "sit" in the scoffers' assembly² and participate in their mockery. The wicked scoff at the trust of the good person, who is constantly, joyfully occupied with the study and observance of the *tôrâh* (v. 2). Psalm 1 is not a prayer in a usual sense. The poet neither praises nor complains to God, nor laments or rejoices in his or her situation. The major theme is the adhesion to God's *tôrâh* in a person's life, and its importance for the attainment of happiness. Beatitude is derived from the personal commitment to a course traced by God's *tôrâh*.

Psalm 2

Happy Those Who Submit to God's Rule

Psalm 2 reenacts a coronation ceremony which possibly took place during an annual feast. It celebrates a king enthroned by God's grace. In the conception of the author and the Jewish and Christian communities who adopted this poem for their liturgy, the Davidic dynasty is the fulfillment of the divine promise and the focus of God's covenant with the chosen people. The structure of the poem follows the ceremonial ritual. The poet dramatizes the nations' rebellion against God's "anointed" (*mēšîaḥ*, vv. 1-3). In antiquity a change of throne signaled the flare for revolutionary activity. God is seated (*yôšēb*), enthroned over all in the heavens. The focus shifts to God's transcendent grandeur, and the king's installation in the temple, the "holy hill" of Zion (vv. 4-6). God's "decree," the protocol which endows the king with authority, is proclaimed. He is adopted as God's son, "begotten" on the day of anointing and elevated to universal dominion, which implies quelling dissident factions (vv. 7-9). The king issues the ultimatum that insur-

²"Session," *môšab*, implies a formal assembly (Ps 107:32; 1 Kgs 10:5; Ezek 28:2).