Psalm 1: Text, Translation, and Interpretation
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The Psalter is more than a collection of prayers and hymns appropriate for use in the Temple or on the way to the Temple. As Ps 1 demonstrates, it is designed to be a book of consolation for the one who seeks to be a righteous person against all odds. The Psalter comes across a collection designed for use by those with musical, instructional, and judicial responsibilities vis-à-vis both king and people. Levites seem therefore in mind, to judge from the superscriptions taken together with Deut 10:7-8; 17:18-19; 21:5; 26:11-12; 27:9-10, 31:9-13; 33:10; 1 Chr 6:16-24; and 2 Chr 17:7-9.

1 1 The blessings of the one who has not walked in advice of the wicked,
in the way of the errant has not stood,
in the seat of scoffers has not sat!

2 4 On the contrary, יהוה’s direction is his delight, and he repeats his direction day and night.

3 5 He shall be like a tree planted by channels of water
where he will yield his fruit in season,
his foliage will not fade, and all he does will thrive.

4 8 Not so the wicked. On the contrary, they are like chaff the wind drives away.

5 9 So it is that the wicked in judgment will not stand, the errant in the assembly of the righteous.

6 10 For יהוה takes note of the way of the righteous and the way of the wicked will perish.
The claims of this psalm are counterfactual. It is not the case that the wicked are like chaff the wind drives away. It is not the case that the righteous are verdant and fruitful trees, successful in everything they do. But it should be.

Ethical discourse speaks of truths as self-evident even if they are not. We say, for example, that all men are created equal, endowed by their Creator with certain inalienable rights: life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. In point of fact, people are created in unequal circumstances. Life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness, furthermore, are alienable rights. They can be taken away. They often are. But they shouldn’t be.

Truth greater than fact is inscribed in this psalm. The psalm only makes sense in the heat of conflict. Imagine its words on the lips of children on their way to the gas chambers. Then you will understand that they are fighting words.

Ps 1:1. O the blessings of דַּעַקְתֵּיָה the way a blessing or macarism begins in Hebrew. Ps 1 is an extended macarism. Blessings refer to more than concrete benefits that accrue or not accrue; it refers to the happiness of the one who enjoys particular benefits. The happiness of the one who has not gone the usual way but delights in another way is the subject of this Psalm. Pss 112 and 119 may also be understood as extended macarisms.

The unassailable happiness that attends the one who prefers God’s wisdom to that of the unscrupulous is contained in that one’s relationship with God. God notes the path she undertakes. The path of the unscrupulous, on the other hand, is deprived of God’s concern. It will peter out. It leads to the abyss.

Ps 1 is a recipe for unassailable happiness. It is a fitting introduction to the Psalms, because the Psalms are all about the movement from despair to hope, and the happiness this Psalm praises is of the kind that hopes in the face of unhopeful circumstances.

Walk in advice, truth etc. is an idiom that occurs with a certain frequency in ancient Hebrew, and Greek influenced by it. Someone may walk, metaphorically, in light or darkness (Isa 2:5; John 8:12; 1 John 2:11), in truth (1 Kgs 2:4; 3 John 1:4).

רשע wicked and צדיק righteous are adjectives that serve to designate classes of people. Moral categories are in view. The unprincipled, the unscrupulous, are termed רשעים. The principled and scrupulous are termed צדיקים. The terms reference a black-and-white distinction, like our forensic terms ‘guilty’ and ‘innocent.’ In some contexts, רשע and צדיק are best translated with precisely those terms. Will God destroy צדיק and ‘the innocent along with the guilty?’ (Gen 18:25). The wicked are those who violate the divinely established moral order, people whose actions are wanton and despicable. צדיקים are those who are innocent of such wrongdoing, faithful to God-given mores. A צדיק is more than a blameless person. A תם ישור or צדיק blameless and upright one when he protests his innocence (Job 29-31).

The translation equivalents wicked and righteous allow for concordant translation of a number of cognate terms, ‘wickedness,’ ‘the right,’ and ‘righteousness’ included. The terms apply equally well to God and men though in the final analysis, God alone is צדיק. However, wicked and righteous have “Bible” stamped all over them. Outside of religious discourse, righteous in particular is not a productive word. The contrast in the text is
between the wanton and the innocent; the devotees of evil, and the one intent on good; between those who engage in reprehensible acts, and the one who prefers the wisdom of God. The assembly of the righteous is a term for the community of the faithful, those who are pledged to the truth of God. One’s membership in the assembly of the righteous - a given, not a prize - entails (1) participation in worship; (2) the shaming of the wicked; and (3) the edification of the upright. All three responsibilities are exercised throughout the Psalms. Psalm 1 aims to edify the righteous, shame the wicked, and prepare those who would for the worship of praise.

Stood in the way is a metaphor for sticking to a particular pattern of behavior. In ancient times, one sat in a seat (cathedra, as in ex cathedra) to judge or teach. Scoffers: those who laugh at the moral order attributed to God, convinced that he does not enforce it. They mock those who conform themselves to it.

Ps 1:2. Delight, with an emotional overtone, not merely preference or preoccupation. Delight echoes blessings at the head of the composition. Repeat: repeat out loud; specifically, portions thereof.

Direction or instruction is a better translation of תּוֹרָה than law. After all, torah in the Bible is the term used for a mother’s instruction of her child (Prov 1:8). To be sure, law with reference to God’s instruction has the advantage of equivalence with Greek nomos in the sense of a body of norms, used of Yahweh’s law / the law of Moses in the Old Greek Pentateuch and thereafter. NJPSV and Alter have teaching in Ps 1:2. NJPSV has instruction in Josh 1:8. Buber-Rosenzweig translate torah with “Weisung” = direction.

The advice of the wicked is contrasted with direction or counsel whose source is God. The counsel of יהוה is in textualized form. Compare Deut 17:18-19:

It shall be, when he sits on the throne of his kingdom, that he shall write himself a copy of this corpus of direction in a book under the supervision of the levitic priests. He shall have it with him, and he shall read aloud from it all the days of his life.

Josh 1:8:

Let not depart this book of direction from your mouth, but repeat it day and night, so that you will take care to act according to all that is written in it, for thus you will make your way thrive and thus you will succeed.

a “The entire body of direction Moses my servant made compulsory for you” (1:7)
Isa 59:21:

On my part, this is my covenant with you, said יהוה,
My spirit that is on you
and my words that I put in your mouth
will not depart from your mouth,
from the mouth of your offspring,
or from the mouth of your offspring’s offspring,
said יהוה,
now or ever.

Some interpreters think Ps 1:2 refers to “heart-recitation” = meditation rather than “mouth-recitation” = out-loud repetition, but Josh 1:8 and Isa 59:21 “from your mouth,” and Deut 17:18-19 in which קרא means to “read aloud,” suggest otherwise. There are no grounds for holding that the verb הגה references murmured speech. A lion’s roar reverberates (הגה) over its prey (Isa 31:4); the mournful cry of a people reverberates (הגה) like the song of doves (Isa 59:11); the mouth of a principled person reverberates (הנה) with wisdom, and his tongue speaks (דבר) justice (Ps 37:30). In all these cases, the verb הנה references reiterative sound without regard to volume.

יהוה’s direction, like that of a mother (Prov 1:8), is full of warning. On a par with the two passages quoted, it is natural to think of the תורה direction of יהוה as that found in Deuteronomy, which one generation was to impress on the next, המצות the body of injunctions to be repeated home away and away, “when lying down” and “when getting up” (Deut 6:7) – day and night in Ps 1:2.

However, given Ps 1’s placement at the head of the Psalter, it is also natural to think of the Psalter as the instruction of יהוה in which one is to delight, a fit object of memorization and recitation, morning, noon, and night.

Parallelisms establish equivalences. The strictest equivalences are not necessarily contiguous. Thus ביעת רשעים in advice of the wicked finds its closest echo in the relatively non-contiguous יהוה בתורת יהוה in the direction of יהוה. The expected oppositional counterpart of רשעים wicked, צדיקים righteous, does not appear until the end of the composition, in vv 5-6. In v 6 רשעים is repeated, forming an inclusio.

After an onset construction whose constituents occur in canonical order of verb + argument, the repeated fronting of the argument of the verb in the unit’s successive constituent clauses – a ב-introduced prepositional phrase in every case, with or without one or more preposed syntactic operators – draws attention to it. The fronting in v 1 prepares the way for and allows the fundamental contrast of the unit, signaled by אם כי, to be more sharply drawn.

הלך עמד ישב is a semantic sequence that builds to a crescendo of increasing compromise with the advice and behavior of the unprincipled. The crescendo sets the
stage for the reversal introduced by רשעים, on the other hand, is not a crescendo. The first two items are on a par. They are synonyms. The first is the standard oppositional counterpart to צדיקים, the second no less general of a term, but not used in a trope with ליצים. צדיקים is an example of parallelism of specification. A thematically affine passage, Ps 26:4-5, takes the opposite tack, in which מidders ומרעים and רשעים are an example of parallelism of generalization relative to the preceding מ кудים:

I have not sat with scoundrels,
I will not go in with dissemblers.
I hate the company of evil men,
with the wicked I will not sit.

Tense-switching is a feature of vv 1-3. The qatal of 1:1 encode a past tense relative to the non-past tense markup in the embedded clauses of 1:2 - a nominal clause followed by a yiqtol clause with a temporal argument והolics ליגי. The temporal argument encodes aspect (durativity).

What blessings accrue to the one who has not done x, y, and z in the past! - the qatal והוכים כל עמיד yetיב mark the fact. In the present (without excluding the past), הוראה יהוה is the subject’s delight. The nominal clause is open to this understanding, and serves to encode it in context. Now and in the future, the subject will repeat out loud passages from the corpus of direction in which he delights. A yiqtol marks this.

All the referenced actions and attitudes in vv 1-3 are continuous in nature. All are viewed in their wholeness. Apart from והולים ליגי, any supposed contrast in aspect would not fit the semantics of the case. Qatal והッシ in lieu of the nominal חפצו was conceivable. In that case tense-switching would not have occurred. If yiqtol served to encode imperfectivity, as aspect-prominent analyses of classical Hebrew suggests, one might have expected a string of yiqtols in vv 1-3. In point of fact, a yiqtol tends to be found in an אשרי construction after an imperative. In that case, yiqtol encodes a future tense relative to the reference point (now) implied by the imperative. Ps 34:9:

Taste and see that יהוה is good!
The blessings of the man who takes refuge in him!

Tense-switching – not aspect-switching – is no less obvious in Ps 137:8-9. Tense-switching in parallelism is a form of merismus. In the past as in the non-past, particular acts or attitudes characterize a particular subject (e.g. Ps 26:4-5 quoted above; Pr 3:13).

Ps 1:3. He will be like a tree planted by channels of water where he will yield his fruit in season; whose foliage will not fade, and all he does will thrive. Cf. Ps 92:13-14. He is spoken of, not she, per the usual in ancient literature, and in modern literature until recently. The use of the third masculine pronoun foregrounds but does not limit the application of the psalm to those of masculine gender. The tree and the individual who is
faithful to יהוה merge in the course of the simile. My translation seeks to bring that out.

In a parallel passage, Jer 17:7-8, the tenor-vehicle distinction is likewise blurred.

Blessed is the man
who will trust in יהוה,
whose source of trust will be יהוה!

He shall be like a tree transplanted by water,
by a stream he shall send forth his roots.
He shall not notice when heat comes,
his foliage shall be verdant.
In a year of stress he shall not pine,
and he shall not be deterred from producing fruit.

Ps 1:4. Not so the wicked. On the contrary, they are like chaff that the wind drives away. The fates of the wanton and the innocent are intertwined. The wicked are so called because they prey on the innocent. There is no way that the innocent can stand (persist) unless the malevolent are driven away from their feasting on them. For a prayer to the same effect and with identical imagery, see Ps 35:4-5.

In Job 21:17-18, Job asks how often the wicked receive their just reward. He implies that he thinks, “not often enough.” Job desires that they receive it, because as long as they do not, the innocent are at their mercy. The imagery is similar to that of Ps 1:

Ps 1:5. The wicked in judgment will not stand. The reference is to the judgment phase of a trial. במשפט in the judgment = in judicial proceedings is a securely attested idiom:

In judgment is not a reference to judgment in the sense of the wind driving away the wicked in whatever circumstance, but to the determination of judgment in judicial proceedings. The thought of the psalm transits from the general in v 4 to the particular in
v 5. In the context of law grounded in sought communion with the Guarantor of law, the promise is that God will ensure that those committed to breaking the law do not prevail in judgment. Such individuals are to be cut off from the number or assembly of the faithful.

The non-success of the wicked in judicial proceedings and their excommunication from polite society are necessary if the prey of the wicked are to be protected.

In a legal system worth its salt, commitment to justice involves ensuring that (1) the wicked do not prevail in the very place the innocent seek redress, a court of law; and (2) predators are segregated from actual and potential victims. Law and order that is devoid of such practical consequences is not law and order at all.

According to Psalm 1, יהוה stands behind commitment to justice in the above sense. יהוה actively pursues it in ways that befit deity, in collaboration with, not in lieu of, human engagement to the same end.

When God’s proactive commitment to justice is not shared by a society, the future of that society is put at risk. According to the teaching of the prophets, intervention on the historical plane will follow. The situation will be forced through a cataclysm of the kind that zeroes out the known world, and ushers in a new one. Zeph 3:11b-12:

For then I will rid from your midst your proudly arrogant.
You shall no longer be high and mighty on my holy mountain.
I will leave a remnant in your midst, a poor and humble people, who will take refuge in יהוה’s name.

Ps 1:6. For יהוה takes note of the way of the righteous, and the way of the wicked will perish. The conceptualization of the moral imperative as a choice between two “ways” is a prominent trope of ethical instruction. Prov 4:14-15.18-19:

The path of the wicked do not take, do not set foot in the way of evil men.
Let it go, do not traverse it, veer away from it, pass it by. . . .

The path of the righteous is like the light of dawn, ever lighter until the break of day.
The way of the wicked is like murk, they do not know what trips them up.a

a Lit., what they trip on.

The horns of conflict a passage like this take for granted sound trite unless they are filled with specific content found elsewhere in ethical instruction of the same milieu. The combat a צדיק engages in is laid out in Job 29:12.15-17. Job remembers his past, before
he lost his estate, his children, and his health. In so doing, he describes himself as a blameless and upright one:

I would rescue the poor man who cried out,
the orphan, the one with no one to help him. . . .
I became eyes to the blind,
feet to the lame.
I was a father to the needy,
the dispute I was unfamiliar with, I would investigate.
I broke the jaws of the wrongdoer,
I would wrest prey from his teeth.

It is the path of the righteous in this sense that is, or should be, like the light of dawn,
ever lighter till the break of day (Prov 4:18; compare Prov 10:28). Ps 112, which covers much the same ground as Ps 1, understands the identity of the righteous in the same way, and in conjunction with Ps 111, models it directly on the identity of יהוה. Whoever is not thus engaged has no right to call herself a צדיק. The promise of Ps 1, the vision of a tree planted by channels of water, whose foliage never fades, is not hers to claim.

People like to think of themselves as followers of a more excellent way compared to that laid out in the ethics God gave to Israel of old.

That would be the case if people followed the blueprint of the Sermon on the Mount or that of the rabbis evoked in Pirkei Avot, blueprints that embrace all of the above, and up the ante still.

Few follow either way, or consider them models. In place of a way of life that is an expression of a proactive commitment to justice and that involves table-fellowship with the poor and hands-on advocacy on their behalf, one person at a time, most prefer a "virtual" form of ethics which consists of adjusting one's thought life to whatever is considered politically correct in one's milieu. This provides ideological cover for a concomitant, single-minded pursuit of personal peace and prosperity.

In Ps 92:3-9, the pushmi-pullyu quality of the destiny of the wicked is highlighted:

For you have made me glad, יהוה,
by your accomplishment,
I put to melody the work of your hands.
How great, O יהוה, are your works,
very deep are your designs.
Only a brute cannot know,
only a fool cannot grasp the following:
when the wicked shot up like wheat,
and the run of evildoers blossomed,
their being smashed for all time was the purpose,
with you above all, forever יהוה!
This emphasis is extraneous in Ps 1, but not incompatible with it.

Psalm 1 is characterized by a dense web of semantic, syntactic, morphological, and sonic parallelisms. Here is a partial color-coded inventory:

אַשְׁרֵי is a sound unit whose thrice repeated sounds (א, š, ר, ē) are tantamount to a musical flourish at the beginning of a symphony. The harmonic sound unit is at one and the same time a syntactic unit that introduces the entire composition. It is “the odd man out” in that it does not stand in parallelism with subsequent text units. As such it stands out, as does יומִם וּלְלָיָל at subunit end.

Rhymes are more pervasive in ancient Hebrew poetry than often noted, but the location of rhymed elements is not fixed. For example, ולא הלך לא עמד לא ישב constitute a sound rhyme – not to mention a syntactic and morphological rhyme – in reinforcement of the semantic rhyme. But the rhyme occurs once in the middle of a line and twice at the end of lines.

Another rhyme: רשעים חטאים לッツ in that series interlocks with יהוה which is carried forward by יהגה. The probable pronunciation of the Tetragrammaton, ending in ey, must be recalled.

Lexical chains stand out if one looks out for them.

1 אָשֶׁר  - macarisms in the Pss: 1:1; 2:12; 32:1.2; 33:12; 34:9; 40:5; 41:2; 65:5; 84:5.6.13; 89:16; 94:12; 106:3; 112:1; 119:1.2; 127:5; 128:1; 137:8.9; 144:15.15; 146:5; in Prov: 3:13; 8:32.34; 14:21; 16:20; 20:7; 28:14; 29:18. Compare also: Job 5:17; Isa 30:18; etc.