

Responsorial Psalm 6th Sunday in Ordinary Time C Exegesis

Responsorial Psalm

[Ps 1:1-2, 3, 4 and 6](#)

(40:5a) **Blessed are they who hope in the Lord.**

Blessed the man who follows not
the counsel of the wicked,
nor walks in the way of sinners,
nor sits in the company of the insolent,
but delights in the law of the LORD
and meditates on his law day and night.

Blessed are they who hope in the Lord.

He is like a tree
planted near running water,
that yields its fruit in due season,
and whose leaves never fade.

Whatever he does, prospers.

Blessed are they who hope in the Lord.

Not so the wicked, not so;
they are like chaff which the wind drives away.
For the LORD watches over the way of the just,
but the way of the wicked vanishes.

Blessed are they who hope in the Lord.

Jerome Biblical Commentary

Ps 1. A post-exilic wisdom Ps, which has been prefixed to the collection as an introduction; in one of the variant readings to Acts 13:33, Ps 2 is called the first Ps. Structure: 1-3, the just man; 4-5, the godless; 6, the two ways. **1.** A congratulatory formula, "Happy..." is typical of the wisdom style; here, the characteristics of the just man are defined negatively: keeping away from bad companions.**2.** Positively, he is constantly and joyfully occupied with study and observance of the Torah, the expression of the divine will.**3.** Positively, his well-being can be compared to a fruitful tree (Jer 17:7-8; Ps 92:13-15), a common comparison in the ancient Orient (Amen-em-ope, *ANET* 422); the bracketed line in 3e is a gloss formed on the pattern of Jos 1:8.**4-5.** In sharp contrast are the wicked—"chaff," the lighter, useless, parts of wheat that are blown free as the wheat is sifted on a breezy mound. What "judgment" is meant? Either one at the end time, or more probably an effective judgment in this world (cf. E. Arbez, *CBQ* 7 [1945] 398-404). In this world, the judgment would be the exclusion of the sinner from

ANET J. B. Pritchard, ed., *Ancient Near Eastern Texts* (rev. ed.; Princeton, 1955)

CBQ Catholic Biblical Quarterly

the company and fate of the just. **6.** The biblical sense of "way" as manner of life is apparent (cf. F. Nötscher, *Gotteswege und Menschenwege in der Bibel und in Qumran* [Bonn, 1958]); the just will prosper whereas the wicked will be punished. One should avoid an excessively legalistic interpretation of Ps 1; the ideal held out is one of joyful loyalty and dedication.

Douay-Rheims followed by Haydock's Commentary

1 Blessed is the man who hath not walked in the counsel of the ungodly, nor stood in the way of sinners, nor sat in the chair of pestilence. 2 But his will is in the law of the Lord, and on his law he shall meditate day and night. 3 And he shall be like a tree which is planted near the running waters, which shall bring forth its fruit, in due season. And his leaf shall not fall off: and all whatsoever he shall do shall prosper. 4 Not so the wicked, not so: but like the dust, which the wind driveth from the face of the earth. 5 Therefore the wicked shall not rise again in judgment: nor sinners in the council of the just.

6 For the Lord knoweth the way of the just: and the way of the wicked shall perish.

The happiness of the just: and the evil state of the wicked.

Theodoret observes that this psalm has "no title in Hebrew;" and some have attributed it to Esdras, when he collected the psalms into one book. But the Compl. Septuagint reads, "A psalm of David;" "without a title among the Hebrews." The Fathers attribute it to David, and suppose that he speaks particularly of Joseph of Arimathea, or of Jesus Christ; though the Jews refer this high encomium to Josias. Jeremias (xvii. 7.) has imitated this psalm, which may be considered as a preface to all the rest, and an abridgment of the whole duty of man. (Calmet) --- **[Ver. 1.] Blessed.** Hebrew also, Manifold are (Haydock) "the blessings" (Pagnin) both for time (Haydock) and eternity. (Worthington) --- *Ungodly*, who mind no religion, or a false one. (Haydock) --- Hebrew, "inconstant." --- *Sinners*, who are still more obstinate. (Calmet) --- *Pestilence.* Hebrew, "scoffers," who are the most dangerous sort of people, boldly deriding all religion, and maintaining atheism. There is a beautiful gradation here observed, showing the fatal consequences of evil company. If the virtuous associate with one even of the least contagious, the infection presently catches him, and he is soon introduced among the more dissolute, where he stops with little remorse, till at last he even glories in his shame, and becomes a champion of impiety, 1 Corinthians xv. 33. (Haydock) --- These three sorts of wicked people may designate pagans, Jews, and heretics. (St. Clement [of Alexandria?], Strom. ii.; St. Jerome) (Calmet) --- He is on the road to heaven, who has not consented to evil suggestions, nor continued in sin, so as to die impenitent. (Worthington)

Virtus est vitium fugere, et sapientia prima. (Horace i. ep. 1.)

--- The suggestion, delight, and consent to sin, are here rejected, as well as every offence against God, ourselves, or our neighbours. (Hopper.)

Ver. 2. Will. He is wholly occupied and delighted in keeping God's commandments. (Worthington) --- This distinguishes the saint from him who only refrains from sin through fear. (Calmet) --- *Qui timet invitus observat.* (St. Ambrose) --- Yet even servile fear is of some service, as it restrains exterior conduct, and may, in time, give place to filial reverence. (Haydock) --- *Meditate,* and put in practice. (Menochius) --- *Night.* The Jews studied the books of the law so earnestly from their childhood, that they could recite them as easily as they could tell their own names; (Josephus, contra Apion 2.; Deuteronomy vi. 6.) and is it not a shame that many Christians should be so negligent, that they have never so much as read the gospels! (Calmet) though they be eager enough after idle books. The sacred writings are the records of our inheritance. They shew us our true destination, and deserve to be most seriously considered from the beginning to the end. (Haydock)

Ver. 3. Tree. Probably the palm-tree, the emblem of a long life, Job xxviii. 18. The tree of life is watered by the river of living waters, proceeding from the throne of God, who is the source of all grace, Apocalypse xxii. 1., Luke xxi. 33., and John iv. 14. (Calmet) --- Those who make good use of favours received, are continually supplied with fresh graces. (Worthington) --- *And.* In the office-book a new verse begins here, though not in Hebrew, which the Vulgate follows. They were not marked by the sacred penman. --- *Prosper,* and be rewarded hereafter, though the just man even among the Jews might be here afflicted. Prosperity was only promised to the *nation*, as long as it continued faithful. Individuals were in the same condition as Christians. They were to trust in the promises of futurity, though some have very erroneously asserted, that there is no mention of eternal felicity in thee holy canticles; (Berthier) Ferrand says, hardly in the Old Testament. (Calmet) --- All this verse might perhaps be better understood of the tree. "And its leaf....and whatever it shall produce," *faciet (fructum).* (Haydock) --- Some trees are always covered with leaves, like the palm-tree, &c. (Menochius)

Ver. 4. Not so. Hebrew, "but are like the chaff which the wind driveth away." (Haydock) -- They are inconstant (St. Jerome) in the good resolutions which they sometimes form. (Haydock) (Job xxi. 18.) --- The good corn remains, but they are tossed about by every wind, and their memory perishes with all their children and effects. (Calmet) --- They yield to the slightest temptation. (Worthington)

Ver. 5. Again. So as to gain their cause, (Amama) or to make opposition; as the Hebrew *yakumu*, "stand up," with defiance, intimates. (Haydock) --- They are already judged, (John iii. 18.) and can make no defence; they being separated from the just, like goats, Kimchi (though he is defended by Amama. Haydock) and some other Jews, falsely assert that the souls of the wicked will be annihilated, and that only the just Israelites will rise again. (Buxtorf, Syn. 1.) --- But this is very different from the belief of the ancient Jews, who clearly assert the truth respecting future rewards and punishments, 2 Machabees vii. 9, 14, 23, and 36., and Wisdom v. 1., or Josephus, or 4 Machabees x.) See Job, &c. --- The Fathers have adduced many such proofs from the other parts of

Scripture, which they had read with as much attention as modern critics. (Calmet) --- *Council*, (Menochius) or rather "counsel," as the same word, *Greek: Boule*, is used by the Septuagint as [in] ver. 1., (Calmet) though the Hebrew *hadath*, here be different, and mean a *council*, or assembly. (Menochius) --- Septuagint and Vulgate may be understood in the same sense. (Haydock) --- Sinners shall be destitute of all hope at the resurrection, and shall be driven from the society of the blessed. (Worthington) --- They will not even be able to complain, since they had been so often admonished of their impending fate, (Berthier) and would not judge themselves in time. (St. Augustine; 1 Corinthians xi., and Acts xxiv. 15.) Protestants, "They shall not stand," &c. (Haydock)

Ver. 6. *Knoweth*, with approbation. There is only one road which leads to heaven: but these men, having sown in the flesh, must *reap corruption*, Galatians vi. 8. (Berthier) --- God will reward or punish (Worthington) all according to their deserts. (Haydock) --- To some he will thunder out, *I never knew you*; while others shall hear, *Come*, &c., Matthew xxv. 34., &c. (Calmet) --- In this world, things seem to be in a sort of confusion, as the wicked prosper. But, at the hour of death, each will receive a final retribution. Temporal advantages have been dealt out to the wicked for the small and transitory acts of virtue, the afflictions of this world have served to purify the elect from venial faults. (Haydock)

Word Biblical Commentary Volume 19 (non-Catholic)

Translation

- ¹ *Blessed the man who has not walked by the counsel^a of the wicked,
and has not stood in the way^b of the sinful,*

a 1.a. **עצת**, "counsel," in S, is transposed with **דרך** "way" in v 1c; though such a change might be viewed as an improvement in the sequence of thought, it is unnecessary. The word **עצד** can mean either "counsel" or "council"; Dahood translates "council" in this context (*Psalms 1*, 1–2). A similar alternative is the translation "fellowship" (of wicked men), on the basis of the use of the term in the Qumran literature, as proposed by Bergmeier, *ZAW* 79 (1967) 229–32. Both alternatives are possible, though it is a question of judgment rather than semantics and depends upon the translation of the rest of v 1; see notes b* and c* below

b 1.b. **דרך** "way." Dahood (*Psalms 1*, 2) translates **דרך** by "assembly," basing his translation upon a supposed usage of the cognate term in the Ugaritic texts. The word is used again (in v 6, twice) and thus is critical to the meaning of the psalm as a whole. According to, Dahood, the Ugaritic word *drkt*, which means "dominion, power," and hence "throne" (see Aistleitner, *WUS* #792), undergoes a semantic shift from "dominion" to the place where dominion is exercised, namely the "assembly." But

and has not sat in the gathering^c of scoffers.^d

² But in the Lord's Torah is his delight
and in his Torah will he muse^a by day and night.

³ So shall he be like a tree,
transplanted by running waters,^a
which shall yield its fruit in its season,

the argument is weak. Within Ugaritic, there is precisely such a semantic shift, but it is from "dominion" to "throne" (namely, the seat of dominion). The use of the term in Ugaritic may designate the dominion of the deities; Anat, for example, is called b lt.drkt, "mistress of dominion" (RS 24.252.7). No doubt the Ugaritic nuance of drkt ("dominion, power") does occur in the OT in the Hebrew usage of the root **דָּרַךְ** (see Judg 5:21 and P. C. Craigie, *JBL* 88 [1969] 257). In the present context, however, the argument for the meaning "assembly," insofar as it is based on Ugaritic, is without firm foundation. "Throne" would be a possible translation, though it would not fit the poetic context well. Furthermore, the contrasting of two ways (1:6) is a common theme in both biblical literature (Deut 30:19; Jer 21:8; Prov 1:1–7; Matt 7:13–14) and in Near Eastern texts: e.g. in Gilgamesh X.vi (*ANET*, 93) and the "Hymn to Aten" (*ANET*, 371). In summary, it is better to retain the translation "way" for Heb. **דָּרַךְ**, both here and in v 6.

c 1.c. "Gathering" (**מוֹשֵׁב**) or "seat"; on the meaning of the term, see Rinaldi in *BeO* 17 (1075) 120.

The sense of this word could admittedly add to the strength of Dahood's argument (note b), in that it would provide synonymous parallelism for the first three lines as follows: "council//assembly//gathering (session)." Nevertheless, the more conventional rendering shows a progression within the parallelism. Just as the verbs demonstrate a kind of progression (or regression): "walked//stood//sat," so too do the nouns: "counsel//way//gathering."

d 1.d. The verb **לִיץ** has the basic sense "to talk loosely," and the noun **לִיץ** has the sense "babbler"; but the context here suggests the nuance "scoffers." cf. H. N. Richardson, "Some Notes on **לִיץ** and Its Derivatives." *VT* 5 (1055) 163–79.

a 2.a. The root **הִגִּד**, which may be onomatopoeic, implies more than just "meditating"; some kind of utterance is indicated, such as "murmuring" or "whispering."

a 3.a. "Running waters"; viz. "irrigation channels," fed with a constant supply of water.

and its foliage shall not wither.

So, in all that he shall do, he shall prosper.^b

⁴ *Not so the wicked!*

But they are like the chaff that wind tosses.^a

⁵ *Therefore, the wicked shall not rise up in judgment,^a*

nor sinners in an assembly of the righteous.

⁶ *For the Lord protects^a the way of the righteous,*

but the way of the wicked shall perish.

Notes

1.a. עצה, “counsel,” in S, is transposed with דרך “way” in v 1c; though such a change might be viewed as an improvement in the sequence of thought, it is unnecessary. The word עצה can mean either “counsel” or “council”; Dahood translates “council” in this context (*Psalms I*, 1–2). A similar alternative is the translation “fellowship” (of wicked men), on the basis of the use of the term in the Qumran literature, as proposed by Bergmeier, *ZAW* 79 (1967) 229–32. Both alternatives are possible, though it is a question of judgment rather than semantics and depends upon the translation of the rest of v 1; see notes b* and c* below

1.b. דרך “way.” Dahood (*Psalms I*, 2) translates דרך by “assembly,” basing his translation upon a supposed usage of the cognate term in the Ugaritic texts. The word is used again (in v 6, twice) and thus is critical to the meaning of the psalm as a whole.

b 3.b. The syntax is ambivalent, and the line could refer to the *tree*. But the line is best taken as referring to the righteous man and as concluding the first section (vv 1–3); it is thus unnecessary to delete the line as a gloss (as suggested in *BHS*).

a 4.a. G adds (“... from the face of the earth”). The words may have been added simply for stylistic reasons, to avoid the abruptness of MT, which is nevertheless the best text.

a 6.a. “Protects”: the normal sense of the verb ידע is “to know”; on the sense “protect, guard,” see Dahood, *Psalms I*, 5.

S Syriac

ZAW Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft

According to, Dahood, the Ugaritic word *drkt*, which means “dominion, power,” and hence “throne” (see Aistleitner, *WUS* #792), undergoes a semantic shift from “dominion” to the place where dominion is exercised, namely the “assembly.” But the argument is weak. Within Ugaritic, there is precisely such a semantic shift, but it is from “dominion” to “throne” (namely, the seat of dominion). The use of the term in Ugaritic may designate the dominion of the deities; Anat, for example, is called *b lt.drkt*, “mistress of dominion” (*RS* 24.252.7). No doubt the Ugaritic nuance of *drkt* (“dominion, power”) does occur in the OT in the Hebrew usage of the root דרך (see Judg 5:21 and P. C. Craigie, *JBL* 88 [1969] 257). In the present context, however, the argument for the meaning “assembly,” insofar as it is based on Ugaritic, is without firm foundation. “Throne” would be a possible translation, though it would not fit the poetic context well. Furthermore, the contrasting of two ways (1:6) is a common theme in both biblical literature (Deut 30:19; Jer 21:8; Prov 1:1–7; Matt 7:13–14) and in Near Eastern texts: e.g. in Gilgamesh X.vi (*ANET*, 93) and the “Hymn to Aten” (*ANET*, 371). In summary, it is better to retain the translation “way” for Heb. דרך, both here and in v 6.

1.c. “Gathering” (מושב) or “seat”; on the meaning of the term, see Rinaldi in *BeO* 17 (1075) 120. The sense of this word could admittedly add to the strength of Dahood’s argument (note b), in that it would provide synonymous parallelism for the first three lines as follows: “council//assembly//gathering (session).” Nevertheless, the more conventional rendering shows a progression within the parallelism. Just as the verbs demonstrate a kind of progression (or regression): “walked//stood//sat,” so too do the nouns: “counsel//way//gathering.”

1.d. The verb ליץ has the basic sense “to talk loosely,” and the noun יץ has the sense “babbler”; but the context here suggests the nuance “scoffers.” cf. H. N. Richardson, “Some Notes on ליץ and Its Derivatives.” *VT* 5 (1055) 163–79.

WUS J. Aistleitner, *Wörterbuch der ugaritischen Sprache*

RS Ras Shamra

OT Old Testament

JBL Journal of Biblical Literature

ANET J. B. Pritchard (ed.), *Ancient Near Eastern Texts* (3rd ed. with supplement. Princeton: Princeton UP, rev. 1969)

Heb. Hebrew

BeO *Bibbia e oriente*

cf. *confer*, compare

VT *Vetus Testamentum*

2.a. The root *hgh*, which may be onomatopoeic, implies more than just “meditating”; some kind of utterance is indicated, such as “murmuring” or “whispering.”

3.a. “Running waters”; viz. “irrigation channels,” fed with a constant supply of water.

3.b. The syntax is ambivalent, and the line could refer to the *tree*. But the line is best taken as referring to the righteous man and as concluding the first section (vv 1–3); it is thus unnecessary to delete the line as a gloss (as suggested in *BHS*).

4.a. G adds *π προσώπου τ ς γ ς* (“... from the face of the earth”). The words may have been added simply for stylistic reasons, to avoid the abruptness of MT, which is nevertheless the best text.

5.a. “In judgment” implies the *place* of judgment (cf. Deut 25:1); i.e. the wicked will have no place, or no respect, in the courts of law, where justice and righteousness are the *modus operandi*. Such a meaning is strongly implied by the second line of the synonymous parallelism (v 5b). If this interpretation is correct, then there is not any eschatological implication of a final judgment here.

6.a. “Protects”: the normal sense of the verb *יָדַע* is “to know”; on the sense “protect, guard,” see Dahood, *Psalms I*, 5.

Form/Structure/Setting

Psalm 1, by virtue of its language and content, must be classified with the *wisdom psalms* (cf. Pss 32, 34, and 49 in this volume). Its terminology and teaching reflect the thought of the Wisdom Literature in general and the Book of Proverbs in particular (cf. Prov 2:12–15, 20–22). The psalm was probably not composed in the first instance for use in formal worship; rather, it must be viewed as a literary and poetic composition, expressing with remarkable clarity the polarity of persons and their destinies.

There are certain basic problems pertaining to the analysis of the psalm in terms of poetry, particularly with respect to meter. While the analysis of meter is always difficult in the study of Hebrew poetry (see the critical remarks in the Introduction), there is even less regularity than usual in Ps 1. The interpretation of most scholars has proceeded on the basis of a provisional metrical analysis (e.g. Gunkel, *Die Psalmen*, 1–4), but it has been claimed by Bullough that the psalm is not metrical at all, but is “plain rhythmic

BHS *Biblia hebraica stuttgartensia*, ed. K. Elliger and W. Rudolph (Stuttgart: Deutsche Bibelstiftung, 1977)

G Greek translation: as published in *Septuaginta*, LXX ed. A. Rahlfs, 1935. In Daniel, G includes both OG and Th, as published in J. Ziegler’s ed., 1954.

MT The Masoretic Text [of the Old Testament] (as published in BHS)

prose" (*VT* 17 [1967] 42–49). For a critical analysis of the problem of meter, see O. Loretz, *UF* 3 (1971) 101–3. The translation above has not included a metrical notation (as is done for other psalms in this commentary). Bullough is probably correct in his view that the psalm is not metrical in the normal sense; the only approximate indicator of balance is the division of lines, which are very uneven in length. But although there is not a normal metrical structure to Ps 1, it is still dearly and distinctively *poetry*. Parallelism is used in vv 1, 2, 3c–d, 5, and 6. And the psalm as a whole is a finely crafted piece of poetic literature, as various recent studies have shown. Merendino has shown that the psalm is a work of art (*Kunstwerk*), and Lack's structural analysis has shown the dosely knit structure of the whole—the text is a "tissue of interdependencies" (*Bib* 57 [1976] 167).

The structure of the psalm may be set forth as follows: (1) the solid foundation of the righteous (1:1–3); (2) the impermanence of the wicked (1:4–5); (3) a contrast of the righteous and the wicked (1:6). Within this overall structure the poet has made careful use of chiasmus in the first two sections:

vv 1–2	A
v 3	B
v 4	B'
v 5	A'

On this chiasmic structure, see further N. H. Ridderbos, *Die Psalmen*, 120 and R. L. Alden, *JETS* 17 (1974) 11–28. The inner chiasmus between the first two parts of the psalm is then united in the contrast of the antithetical parallelism in v 6, which also has an internal chiasmic structure.

Psalm 1, as a didactic poem, does not in the first instance have a cultic or social setting; its primary setting is literary, for it forms an introduction to the Psalter as a whole and has been placed in its present position by the editor or compiler of the Psalter for that purpose. But although the psalm is a distinct and independent literary composition, there is some evidence, in both the early Jewish and Christian traditions, to suggest that it was joined to Ps 2, and the two psalms together were considered to be the first psalm of the Psalter. In the Jewish tradition, Rabbi Johanan is credited with the following words in the Babylonian Talmud: "Every chapter that was particularly dear to David he commenced with 'Happy' and terminated with 'Happy.' He began with 'Happy,' as it is written, '*Happy is the man,*' and he terminated with 'Happy,' as it is written, '*Happy are all they that take refuge in him.*'" (*Ber.* 9b). The reference here to the first verse of Ps 1

UF UF Ugaritische Forschungen

Bib Biblica

JETS Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society

Ber. Berakot

and the last verse of Ps 2 indicates that the two psalms together were considered to be a literary unit.

The evidence from the early Christian tradition is found in Acts 13:33. The writer, Luke, gives a quotation from Ps 2:7, but introduces it as coming from the first psalm; the corrections, both in the early Greek text and in modern English versions, to read “the second psalm,” are appropriate given the change in the conventional system of numbering the Psalms. Nevertheless, the oldest Greek text of Acts provides evidence for the early Christian view that the first two psalms were considered to be a single unit. If the two psalms were first joined in the Psalter (despite being independent compositions prior to their incorporation in the Book of Psalms), it may be that they were intended to provide a double perspective in introduction; Ps 1 provides an introduction from the perspective of wisdom, whereas Ps 2 provides a prophetic approach to the book. It has also been suggested that the two psalms were joined together to form a coronation liturgy, perhaps for one of the last kings of Judah; the king, at his coronation, pledged himself to fulfill the Deuteronomic law of kings (W. H. Brownlee, *Bib* 52 [1971] 321–36).

Comment

The solid foundation of the righteous (1:1–3). The righteous are introduced as the “blessed” or “happy” (see further H. Cazelles, *TDOT* I, 445–48). Their happy estate is not something given automatically by God, but is a direct result of their activity. A person can be happy, from a negative perspective, by avoiding the advice, the life style and the assembly of wicked persons (v 1). The three parallel lines of v 1 are poetically synonymous and thus all describe in slightly different ways the evil company which should be avoided by the righteous. Though the three lines, taken together, provide a full picture of what is to be avoided, it would be stretching the text beyond its natural meaning to see in these lines three distinct phases in the deterioration of a person’s conduct and character (see further G. W. Anderson, *VT* 24 [1974] 231–33). The righteous person avoids all the dimensions of the way of the wicked; therein lies the source of blessedness or happiness.

But a person who is to be happy must also engage in a positive task, which is identified in v 2 as being related to the Torah. Although the term *Torah* can be used of the law, or of the Pentateuch, or even (at a later date) of the whole OT, its significance here is the most fundamental one. Basically, the word *Torah* means “instruction”; specifically, it is the instruction which God gives to mankind as a guide for life. Thus it may include that which is technically law, but it also includes other more general parts of God’s revelation. The Torah is to be a source of “delight” (see further the *Explanation*, below), a delight which is discovered by means of constant meditation on its meaning.

TDOT Theological Handwörterbuch zum Alten Testament, ed. E. Jenni and C. Westermann or G. Botterweck and H. Ringgren (eds.), *Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1974.)

Just as the king would learn to live a life of humility and righteousness through constant reflection on the meaning of Torah (Deut 17:18–20), so too could all mankind. And an understanding of Torah contributed to long life, peace and prosperity (Prov 3:1–2), for in its words God has set down the nature of a life which would reach the true fulfillment for which it was created.

The happy estate of the righteous is illuminated in v 3 by the simile of the tree. A tree may flourish or fade, depending upon its location and access to water. A tree transplanted from some dry spot (e.g. a wadi, where the water runs only sporadically in the rainy season) to a location beside an irrigation channel, where water never ceases to flow, would inevitably flourish. It would become a green and fruitful tree. The simile not only illustrates colorfully the prosperity of the righteous, but also make a theological point. The state of blessedness or happiness is not a *reward*; rather, it is the result of a particular type of life. Just as a tree with a constant water supply *naturally* flourishes, so too the person who avoids evil and delights in Torah *naturally* prospers, for such a person is living within the guidelines set down by the Creator. Thus the prosperity of the righteous reflects the wisdom of a life lived according to the plan of the Giver of all life.

The wicked (1:4–5). “Not so the wicked” (v 4); that is, they shall not prosper as the righteous (v 3). The life of the wicked is summarized succinctly in the brief simile of v 4b. They are like chaff. The language reflects the practice of winnowing grain at harvest time. The grain would be tossed into the air with a pitchfork at the village threshing floor; the wind would separate the light chaff and husks and blow them away, while the more substantial grain fell back to the floor. Chaff is something light and useless, part of the crop, but a part to be disposed of by the farmer. The wicked are thus depicted in the simile as lightweights, persons without real substance or worth.

The “lightness” of the wicked is then elaborated in v 5. The two lines of v 5, in synonymous parallelism, reflect essentially the same thought, namely that the wicked hold no weight or influence in the important areas of human society. Where the righteous meet for the pursuit of justice and government, the wicked have no place and are not recognized. They live for themselves and cannot participate in the affairs of those who live for others and for righteousness.

The contrast (1:6). And so, in the last resort, human beings are of two kinds. They may be righteous; if so, God protects their way. But they may be wicked, and for the wicked, the final destiny is doom. The doom of the wicked, as it is expressed in this psalm, is not primarily a punishment, any more than the happiness of the righteous is a reward. Each is presented as the natural outcome of a way of life which has been chosen.

Explanation

“The fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom” (Prov 1:7); these words are often taken to be an expression of the fundamental principle of the Wisdom Literature, of which this psalm is a part. Psalm 1 elaborates upon this principle with respect to human

behavior. The righteous person is the one whose “fear” (or reverence) of God affects his daily living; he avoids evil and learns how to live from God’s Torah, and therein lies his wisdom. The wisdom, as expressed in this psalm, is essentially related to the present life; the psalm does not clearly evince any doctrine of future life (as proposed, for example, by Dahood in *Psalms I*, 3–5). The anticipated prosperity is in the present life, just as the failure of the wicked is to be a present reality.

The contrast between the two ways (1:6) is illuminated further in the words of Jesus in the “Sermon on the Mount” (Matt 7:13–14). Jesus speaks of two gates, a broad gate giving entrance to the “way that leads to destruction” and a narrow gate giving entrance to “the way that leads to life.” (Alternatively, the text could be interpreted to mean that there are two ways, one leading to a broad gate, the other leading to a narrow gate). The principles of Jesus’ teaching are essentially those of the psalm, yet there is an eschatological element in the words of Jesus (see also Luke 13:24), for the kingdom of God, represented by the way of life associated with the narrow gate, has both a present and a future dimension of reality.

There is a further aspect of this psalm which is relevant to its application. In the last resort, the principal wisdom of the psalm can be reduced to v 2; the prosperity and happiness of the righteous depends upon their finding “delight” in the Lord’s Torah. But how is such delight to be found? In practical terms, it is achieved by constant meditation upon the Torah (v 2b), which is God’s *instruction*. As instruction, it contains guidance from the Creator as to the meaning of creation. Life is lived in futility if its fundamental purpose is never discovered. It is the meaning of human existence which is enshrined in the Torah, and it is the discovery of that meaning which flows from meditation upon Torah.