

Psalm 1: Following the Poet's Intention.

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Surprisingly, Psalm 2 was the first psalm until Psalm 1 was added to the collection of psalms. Psalm 1 is likely the last of the psalms written. Psalm 1 is in need of introduction and it makes sense to follow Briggs¹ or a similar line of thought. Psalm 1 may have been written during peace time between the exiles of Israel and Judea. Or it could have been written earlier in response to the messages of the prophets.

The New Testament Pharisees were very strict when it came to observing the Old Testament law because they believed the nation was conquered and exiled in the Old Testament because of their unfaithfulness to God. The Psalmist seems to think along the same lines as the New Testament Pharisees. He loves the law, delights in it and places a very high priority on meditating in it.

The impressive poetry of Psalm 1 is illuminated by knowledge of Hebrew poetry and careful attention as one goes through the lines. Parallel lines are foundational to Hebrew Poetry. There are different kinds of parallel lines with fancy names that do not matter nearly as much as what the parallel lines are doing for the poem. That is what one needs to look for when reading Hebrew poetry. One should assume that each line and its interaction with the other lines as well as the specific words chosen by the poet is intended to play a role in the poem and we as readers must seek to understand the intention of the poet and what they are doing in the poem.

The first phrase, "How blessed is the man" is a half line written as an interjection² that wells up out of his heart and flows over his lips in praise of God. How blessed! The blessed, is in a good place or position. He is happy and content.

The psalmist continues by negatively describing the blessed with a triplet of lines. The Blessed "is not..." The person that does not do the things the wicked does is the one who is blessed. The wicked are evildoers and the blessed do not think the way they do.

Walking in their counsel is thinking like evildoers. There is some debate among scholars whether it is to walk in the "counsel" or "council" of the wicked. The Hebrew word can carry either meaning. One finds a minority of translations and commentators support council. If council is accepted, it places the wicked in a group whereas counsel indicates they are like minded with the wicked and points to the very core of their condition.

It is counsel that fits the parallelism of Hebrew poetry in the next line whereas council does not. This walking in the counsel of the wicked means to be under the influence of the guilty. It is not the beginning of influence or the slipping into wickedness, but rather it is the condition of being under the influence of the wicked already. They already think the way the wicked think.

Although many people understand the second and third lines of this triplet as indication of sinking deeper into sin, we will see that is not the case here. The second line simply reiterates line one. This is a classic example of "Synonymous Parallelism" which simply presses the thought into one's mind a second time. One could go a step further and say it is, "Static Synonymous Parallelism." Explained in a moment with the next line which is a "Dynamic Synonymous Parallelism."

¹ Briggs, C. A., & Briggs, E. G. (1906–1907). A critical and exegetical commentary on the book of Psalms (pp. 3–4). New York: C. Scribner's Sons.

² Barnes, A. (1870–1872). Notes on the Old Testament: Psalms (Vol. 1, p. 2). London: Blackie & Son.

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The path is simply where one walks and wicked and sinners are synonyms. Standing in the path of sinners, indicates continual participation in the sinners' journey of guilt. They are comfortable in the company of fellow sinners who are burdened with guilt. This person travels the same road of life, the same way of life as the sinners.

Now sinner is not a word used all that often today as it is as likeable as the word hypocrite, so it is worthwhile to discuss what is meant by "sinner" in the Bible. The Hebrew word for sinner (סֹנֵא) has a wide range of meaning. It is often used of those who are to receive the wrath of God. It is sometimes used of a person who might be teachable and converted to serving God. It is also used to describe the person whose heart is set against God.

But sinner is not a label to be used with disgust since they are not always without hope of repentance. Let it be a term that ignites compassion for those in need of God. Perhaps they are teachable and one day willing to turn to God. But the comfort that sinners find in the company of other sinners seems to them as a friend, though it brings destruction in the end. This present comfort lessens their desire to change. The thought of repentance is seldom considered by a sinner, though possible. **The sinner resist hearing of God and correcting his ways and salvation is far from him.** Matthew 11:15 (nasb)

The next parallel line moves from the general terms of the previous two to the specific term of scoffers.³ This heightens the tension. No longer is it the vague terms wicked and sinner but we are now told it is precisely the "scoffer" we are talking about. It is the slight change from the first parallel line that make it "dynamic." The second line had no movement and that is what made it "static." Both lines are still "Synonymous Parallelisms"

Twice Proverbs uses scoffer with the word "naïve"⁴. Scoffers are very vocal, thinking they know more than they do. They often resort to ridicule of those who oppose them to sound knowledgeable despite their inexperience and lack of knowledge. (see Proverbs 9:7) The Scoffer hears only his own rhetoric and does not listen to others. They heap ridicule on others. To sit down in the seat of scoffers means to take one's place with them. This means is to exclude themselves from the sphere of righteousness and indicates an enduring ungodly disposition.⁵ They agree with and support the scoffers' position against God.⁶

The first three and a half lines (verse 1) of the psalm has described the blessed in the negative by describing what they avoid in their discretion of the company they keep. Verse 2 turns a to a positive description of what he chooses. The actions of the blessed are contrasted with those of the wicked.

Verse 2 is comprised of two parallel lines. They are "Synthetic Parallel" lines because they do not reiterate each other (Synonymous Parallelism) nor are they opposites (Antithetical Parallelism). These two lines have a logical relationship of cause and effect. The cause is his delight in the law of the Lord

³ Bratcher, R. G., & Reyrburn, W. D. (1991). A translator's handbook on the book of Psalms (p. 17). New York: United Bible Societies.

⁴ Proverbs 19:25; 21:11

⁵ Görg, M. (1990). סֹנֵא. G. J. Botterweck & H. Ringgren (Eds.), D. E. Green (Trans.), Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament (Revised Edition, Vol. 6, p. 426). Grand Rapids, MI; Cambridge, U.K.: William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.

⁶ Ibid.

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and the effect is his meditation day and night. The law of the lord is his source of contentment. It is his delight. Such a delight in fact, that day and night he meditates in the law.

What is it to meditate? The Hebrew word here means to read or recite in an undertone. The blessed is immersed in the law so deeply that he is mouthing the words as he recalls the law. As he does so, he applies a sound that is barely audible and perhaps the words are not even intelligible to anyone else, but it puts his focus on God and His law. This is the meditation of the blessed. (See: Jos 1:8).

Verse 3 compares the blessed to a tree (trans)planted near an irrigation ditch. Irrigation ditch does not sound as lovely as stream but maybe acequia or lateral will do. The ample water supply is the cause of the tree's contentment. The next two parallel lines give us the effects of this tree's happy state. It produces fruit when it should. The second of these two parallel lines intensifies the first with, not even do its leaves show the first sign of thirst. (dynamic). Lines 2 and 3 have a synthetic relationship to line 1.

These two lines have developed the idea of the tree planted by the water but seems to do nothing for the comparison of the man to the tree. The fourth line does not interact directly with the previous two parallel lines and could have been placed after line 1 without the verse appearing to be broken. Yet the two parallel lines develop the happy condition of the tree to help us better appreciate that of the blessed.

The final line of verse 3 is also synthetically parallel to the first line of the verse but has little relationship to lines 2 and 3. Again, it is the effect of the cause in the first line of the verse. It refers to the contentment of the blessed now instead of that of the tree he is compared to. The blessed succeeds in whatever he does. The majority of Bible translations uses the word "prosper" and a few uses the word "succeed".⁷

In verse four the psalmist presents us with a comparison of the wicked introduced by, "The wicked are not so." This seems to be another half line, giving reason to pause before continuing. The wicked are not like the blessed who are content. The wicked are compared to chaff driven away by the wind. This is chaff that is already winnowed and sits a pile outside. The pile is sitting there in the evening before a strong wind rises up. In the morning the chaff pile is gone with only a footprint left on the ground among the stubble to remind a person where the pile was and to bring to mind how temporary chaff is. The pile of chaff simply could not stand in the face of the wind. Perhaps it takes several strong winds, but the point of the psalmist is the dramatic shrinking of the chaff pile causes it to disappear with the wind.

The single line comparison of the wicked to chaff serves as the cause statement and is followed by two synonymous parallel lines that provides the effect. The synonymous general terms of wicked and sinners from verse 1 are brought back to mind. The first line of verse five tells us the wicked will fail to stand in the face of the judgment, just like the chaff pile in the wind. To stand in the judgment is to be acquitted. Not standing means they will be condemned.

The third line of this triplet intensifies the second line dramatically. Being condemned is an event, it is only the verdict. But not being in the assembly of the righteous is a lasting existence, it is the sentencing. It is separation from God and all his people forever.

⁷ I feel prosper has more financial overtones and therefore prefer succeeds which has more support in the lexicons for the hif'il form as is used here. The qal form of צלח can carry the meaning of prosper.

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It is in verse 6 that we see the masterful hand of the poet at work as the two lines are loaded with poetic features. The parallel lines of verse 6 also have the cause and effect interplay we have already seen in much of the psalm. The lines are opposites. (antithetical Parallelism.) Line 1 is for the righteous and line 2 is for the wicked. There is still more in verse 6 to notice. Line 1 gives only a cause for the righteous while line two gives only an effect for the wicked. We expect a cause and effect for each the righteous and the wicked. We want four lines instead of just the two. What one thinks is a summary of the entire psalm, which it is in a way, is more of a fill-in-the-blank exam.

The meaning of verse 6:

God approves of the way of the, righteous and they survive.

God disapproves of the way of the, wicked and they will perish.

Alternate candidates for survive:

(are preserved - opposite of perish; or maybe opposite of lost - are cared for, are kept, are shepherded)

Perish can mean "will become lost"⁸

Perhaps a read would unpack these two lines this way:

For the LORD knows the way of the righteous,
And the blessed man is preserved.

For the Lord despises the way of the wicked,
And the way of the wicked will perish.

This is what it is like to examine the poet's intention as they fashion the poem together. It is certainly more work. But it increases one's understanding of the passage as well appreciation for the well-crafted poetry of the Bible. The key is to ask why the poet did what they did. What does that line do? Or why is that word with these other words. Learning more about Hebrew poetry will expand the rewards of studying the poetic passages of scripture which is about one-third of the Bible.

⁸ (HALOT qal-1)