



Translation, Interpretation and Exposition of Psalms 1-2

Often misunderstood simply as two psalms that happen to begin the Book of Psalms, Psalms 1 and 2 are in fact *The Introduction to the Book*. Psalm 1 indicates that the book is to be meditated upon as “Torah,” for the purpose of being rooted in righteousness. Psalm 2 indicates that the book is at the same time about God’s anointed Son, the King of the Jews, who, despite appearances, determines the fate of the nations!

“Psalms 1-2 combine to form an Introductory Poem about choosing the right lifestyle and the right Lord. The right lifestyle consists of walking in the path of righteousness by adhering to God’s teachings; the right Lord consists of taking refuge in God and His Messiah.”

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THE TEXT OF HOLY SCRIPTURE

Psalm 1: Contrasting Lifestyles

Part 1: The Wise Teacher’s Beatitude

¹Blessed (is) the man who walks not in the counsel of the wicked,
Nor in the path of sinners stands,
nor in the seat of scoffers^a sits;^b

²But only in the teaching^c of Yahweh (is) his delight,
and in His teaching he murmurs^d day and night.
The simile^e

³He will be as a tree transplanted beside water channels,^f
It will yield its fruit in season,
Its leaf will never wither.

The outcome

Whatever he does will prosper!^g

Part 2: The wicked and their fate

⁴Not so the wicked.
But only as chaff which the wind blows.^h

⁵Therefore the wicked will not rise up in the judgement,ⁱ
Nor sinners in the assembly of the righteous.

Summary

⁶Indeed, ’tis Yahweh who knows^j the way of the righteous,
But the way of the wicked will perish.^k

Psalm 2: Contrasting Lords

Part 1: Earth’s Rulers Rebel

¹Why do the nations rage,
the peoples murmur in vain?

²Earthly kings take their stand,
Princes intrigue together
against Yahweh,
and His messiah, [saying:]

³*“Let us break their yoke-cords,
Let us cast their ropes from us.”*

Part 2: God as King in heaven

⁴The Enthroned One in heaven laughs,
The Lord mocks them.
⁵Then He speaks to them in his anger,
In His wrath he alarms them [saying:]
⁶*"I Myself have installed My king
upon Zion, My holy mountain."*

Part 3: "David" as King on Zion

⁷Let me [the king] tell of the decree^m of Yahweh.
He said to me:
*"You are my son,
I this day begetⁿ thee.
⁸Ask it of me,^o
and I will make the nations^p your inheritance,
Your estate, earth's limits.
⁹You can smash them with an iron bar,
break them like a potter's vessel."*

Part 4: Earth's Rulers Are Warned

¹⁰Now,^q O kings, be prudent,
Take heed, O rulers of the earth.
¹¹Serve *Yahweh* in awe,
Delight in trembling,
¹²Kiss The Son,^r
Lest he grow angry so that you perish on the way,
For his anger can be kindled quickly.

Happy (are) all who take refuge in Him!^s

^a Jacobson (59 fn 5) notes that the word "scoffers" overlays "the noun's basic sense of 'babblers' with an additional sense of menace," adding "perhaps the identity of the scoffer should be understood in connection with the enemies in the psalms, who so often threaten the psalmists with their words (cf. Ps. 12:4)."

^b "In two ways the opening verse . . . elegantly sets up a 'one against the masses' image. On the one hand, as is often the case in the Old Testament's wisdom literature, the *one* is set up against three—*wicked*, *sinner*s, and *scoffers*. And, on the other hand, this already unmatched equation is then multiplied because each of those three is not a single person but a group. The effect is to deepen the contrast between the way of the righteous and the way of the wicked: not only are the two ways distinguished by *who* travels down them but by *how many* travel down" (Jacobson, 60, emphasis mine). Note also the progression from mere walking to sitting.

^c The word is "torah" which means teaching, but which is also the term for the Pentateuch, aka the Five Books of Moses, aka The Torah. (The other two parts of the Hebrew 'Old Testament' are The Prophets, starting with Joshua, and The Writings, starting with the Psalms.) Interestingly the first chapter of The Prophets and the Psalms contains an admonition to meditate on the Torah (Josh 1:7-8; Ps 1:2). In so doing each is a canon-conscious referent that implies the second and third parts of the Hebrew Bible/Old Testament are in continuity with the

teachings of the first part, The Torah, which is the most revered part of the Hebrew Bible within Jewry.

^d This is the same word as that referring to the musing/murmuring of the nations in Psalm 2:1.

^e “One of the most striking similes in the Psalter The image is well suited for the life characterized by study of torah.” (Jacobsen, 61-62.)

^f The word “channel” (*péleg*) denotes irrigation channels, made to ensure a constant supply of water.

^g To continue the simile, “It [the tree] will bear fruit [even multiply?].”

^h Note how little attention is given to the state of the wicked. As Alter has observed, the wicked is not afforded the dignity of being assigned so much as a verb.

ⁱ The verse refers possibly to the wicked/sinners having no place among the respectable (such as those who make court rulings—see Deut 25:1 for “in the judgment” having legal connotations). It could possibly refer to judgment at the end of life.

^j The righteous are described with reference to having a relationship with God, whereas the wicked are described with reference merely to their fate: death. (See further the next footnote.)

^k Because the way of the righteous is the object of the verb in the first clause and the way of the wicked is the subject of the verb in the second, the implication is “that it is far better to give up spurious claims to subjective autonomy and become the object of the Lord’s care. This is the true path to happiness and life.” (Jacobson, 63.)

^l “[T]he entire rebellion of the nations is depicted as *nothing but* speech. They do not raise sword or weapon against God, but rather only their voices” (Jacobson, 68.)

^m The word “decree” is best understood as a legal term that referred to the certificate of legitimation that the king received at his enthronement, which identified him as the legitimate ruler.

ⁿ As Craigie notes, “‘I have begotten you’ is metaphorical language; it means more than simply adoption, which has legal overtones, and implies that a ‘new birth’ of a divine nature took place during the coronation.” (Cited in Jacobson, 69.)

^o Such asking is *apropos* in light of the newly declared father-son relationship.

^p Here God’s promise reverts to the nations that rebel against God and His Messiah. It reflects the fact that, as Jacobson notes, “a part of God’s response to the rebellion of earthly powers is to install the Davidic monarch on Zion.” (69.)

^q As is the case here, the word translated “now” often appears at a critical juncture in the psalm. Here the psalm’s argument “hinges” (Jacobson) by returning to the rebellious earthly rulers, warning them in effect to be silent. Jacobson (70): “[T]he poem closes by warning the *kings of earth* not to utter vain words of rebellion against the universal king of heaven and God’s chosen king on Zion. Instead, those kings are adjured to employ their mouths appropriately in an act of silent submission” (i.e., kissing the feet of God’s son [or the ground before him]). Compare the Black Obelisk of the Assyrian King Shalmaneser III on which king Jehu is depicted as kissing the ground in front of Shalmaneser.)

^r I have translated literally, yet the meaning of the verse is disputed, not the least because it accepts that an Aramaic word for “son” (*bar* instead of Hebrew *ben*) is here employed. I find little difficulty with this if only because the words are addressed to foreign kings.

^s Though not specified, it is the feet of the Davidic king that the rulers are urged to kiss, as an act of humility and submission. The line “Happy are those who take refuge in Him” seems quite intentionally to form an inclusion [book-end] with Ps. 1:1, signalling the two psalms make up a two-part introduction to the Psalter.