

# THE PSALTER




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## CONSTITUTION OF THE TEXT

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### Canonicity and Traditional Importance

Placed at the beginning of the Writings (*K<sup>c</sup>tûbîm*) in the Hebrew Bible and in the Septuagint (cf. also Lk 24:44), but after Job in the Catholic Bible, the Psalter presents itself as a collection of poems. The essential aspects of the spirituality of the Israelite people can be found there.

The word “psalm”, which comes directly from the Greek, means a poem that is to be sung, usually with musical accompaniment (cf. Ps 137:2); a derivative of the word, *psaltêrion*, designates a musical instrument. In Hebrew, the name given to this collection, *T<sup>h</sup>illîm*, is semantically more restrictive. It means “praise”; however, the hymn genre only applies to 25 of the 150 psalms that make up the book.

In our day, the psalms are usually quoted according to the numbering in the Hebrew text. However, certain Churches keep the numbering of the old Greek and Latin versions, especially in the liturgy; in

general, for the psalms between Ps 9 and 147 the difference is one number.

The Septuagint adds a 151<sup>st</sup> psalm, of which the Hebrew equivalent was found in Qumran. It is an autobiographical poem in which David tells of his vocation not only as king but also as musician and writer of psalms. The ancient Syriac version even has 155 psalms, for two of which Qumran vouches. That is to say that until the dawn of the NT the collection remained open, at least in certain circles.

The NT cites the psalms more than one hundred times. Jesus himself sang and prayed them, in particular during the last supper (Mk 14:26 and parallels). Several times in the gospels he quotes a verse of a psalm word for word; in fact, he uses eleven different psalms. Still today, these texts form an essential component in the prayer of Jews and Christians of every denomination.

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## INTERPRETATION

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### Literary Genres

Especially since Gunkel, exegesis has given much attention to the form-critical classification of the psalms. It has become customary to distinguish more or less 14 literary genres: hymns, hymns to the LORD King, hymns to Zion, individual laments, psalms of individual trust, individual thanksgiving, collective laments, psalms of collective trust, collective thanksgiving, royal and/or messianic psalms, wisdom, historical, prophetic, cultic psalms (the last of these categories, for example, set forth the conditions for acceding to the sanctuary). As useful as it may be, such categorizing has its limits. For example, the use of “I” or “we” is not always decisive in concluding whether the psalm is that of an individual or of a collective; in the poems expressing trust, the one preceding and the one following the resolution of the

drama are put on the same footing; it is difficult to distinguish certain hymns from the historical psalms or the prayers of collective thanksgiving; the so-called royal psalms, which are at times supplications and at times thanksgiving for the king, hardly have a precise form-critical status; finally, from the strict point of view of literary genre, a good number of psalms are composites. That has inadvertently led many exegetes to see in them an amalgam of texts by various authors and of various dates, whereas the study of the composition’s structure would rather tend to confirm their original literary unity.

In short, without neglecting the valuable information gained from the form-critical approach, it would seem preferable to opt for a simpler presentation of the categories of psalms, relying more on the

psychological moods expressed and on the way the believing persons and communities might use them, including of course, the people of Israel. Thus we shall distinguish between the psalms of praise, the dramas of liberation, the teaching poems, and the festive songs for special occasions.

- *The psalms of praise* celebrate the Lord for what he is and for what he does in creation and in history (Ps 8; 29; 33; 47; 92-93; 96-100; 103-105; 111; 113; 117; 135-136; 145-150).
- *The dramas of liberation* are rooted in situations of political, social, moral, physical, psychological or simply existential destitution experienced either by an individual or a collectivity or even by a king in solidarity with his people (Ps 3-7; 9-14; 16-18; 20-23; 25-28; 30-32; 34-36; 38-44; 51; 53-64; 66; 68-71; 73-74; 76-77; 79-80; 83; 85-86; 88-90; 94; 102; 106-109; 115-116; 118-120; 123-126; 129-131; 137-144). Theoretically, the drama type consists of eight stages: lamentation, supplication, trust in

salvation, announcement of divine intervention, testifying to liberation, thanksgiving, unshakeable trust if the problems should ever recur, and testimony given in public. Certain poems are limited to one stage; others consist of several of them; two psalms even include up to seven (Ps 31 and 40).

- *The teaching psalms* are not addressed to God but to the collectivity. They aim at formation or reform. Of the following three aspects, one or other is predominant: historical (Ps 78; 114), cultic (15; 24) or moral (1; 19; 37; 49-50; 52; 75; 81-82; 91; 95; 112; 127). In the last case, the poem usually contains a prophetic interpellation or an oracle.
- *Other psalms finally underline and accompany special occasions of collective celebration.* Four sub-groups have been distinguished according to whether the psalm is dealing with civil feasts in honor of the king (Ps 2; 72; 101; 110; 132), wedding festivities (45; 128), pilgrimages (46; 48; 84; 87; 121-122; 133-134), or agricultural feasts (65; 67).

### The Book's overall Plan

Present-day commentaries are ever more sensitive to the canonical organization of the Psalter. Of course, its subdivision into five "books" based on very explicit references in the text (41:14; 72:18-20; 89:53; 106:48; 150:1-6), has always been noted:

1. Ps 1-41;
2. Ps 42-72;
3. Ps 73-89;
4. Ps 90-106;
5. Ps 107-150

Often, an analogy with the five books of the Torah was suggested, as if one were dealing here so to speak with a euchological expression of the Torah, which on the whole could be attributed to David in the same way as the Pentateuch's composition was attributed to Moses. Even if it is difficult to decode the internal logic of the organization of each of the five "books", a quite homogenous vocabulary and even a certain structural coherence can be observed in certain consecutive psalms.

### AUTHENTICITY, DATE AND ADDRESSEES

Psalms 1 and 2, which an ancient tradition considered to be one single psalm (cf. *\*interpr*), structure the psalter as a whole. The first text gives an existential or wisdom frame, while the second envisages the history of salvation in a messianic perspective. At the beginning and at the end of the five books of Psalms, some authors point to texts that express one or other of these perspectives. Thus it is possible to distinguish a "covenant frame" that is shown at the beginning of Book I (Ps 2), the end of Book II (Ps 72), the end of Book III (Ps 89), and the first conclusion of Book V (Ps 144). This structure seems to be doubled by a "wisdom frame" (beginning of Book I: Ps 1;

beginning of Book III: Ps 73; beginning of Book IV: Ps 90; beginning of Book V: Ps 107; first conclusion of Book V: Ps 145).

116 psalms are preceded by one or several words that serve as a heading. For example, 73 of them (in the Greek version 82) are attributed explicitly to David, which is even the case for the entire second "book" (Ps 72:20). These probably late additions seek to give precisions – which in truth are of varying reliability – as to the milieu in which the text originated or the circumstance that occasioned its writing, or also as regards its belonging to a collection or its standard liturgical use, etc. Let us just recall the series

of 15 “Songs of Ascent” (Ps 120-134), which apparently were used for the pilgrimages to the Holy City.

Exegetes who practice the historico-critical method have tried to date each of the psalms. In the majority of cases, this is a waste of time because of the unreliability of the *incipit* (cf. the preceding), the brevity of the poems, their diverse origins and their content that is often not characterized and thus adaptable to various situations. That is why a good

number of exegetes, though they do not ignore the historical dimension that in many ways is indispensable, prefer rather a canonical and even synchronic approach, which tends to consider the Psalter in its final state. As is true for the Bible as a whole, it is appropriate to become accustomed to considering the Psalter as a collective heritage both as regards its origin and as to its use. It served and still serves as an essential book to a believing and praying people.

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#### PRESENTATION OF THE PERICOPE

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The first Psalm is a teaching poem and serves as an introduction to the whole psalter.

An ancient tradition believes that Pss 1 and 2 were one single psalm (cf. Acts 13:33 Western Text; Justin, 1 *Apol.* 1,40; and in Judaism *b. Ber.* 9b). In that case,

“O happiness” (1:1; 2:12) would form an inclusion that links them closely together. The whole would then form a picture with two wings, made up of a first more existential or sapiential part and a second part that looks at the history of salvation.

## Psalm 1

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### SUGGESTIONS FOR READING

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**Ps 1-2 Significance** The diptych formed by Ps 1 and Ps 2 *\*intr* has a messianic significance that Christians have not failed to emphasize. The “anointed one” in Ps 2 is the man-tree of Ps 1, and in the image of wood *\*voc3* are concentrated the rich symbols of the tree, the tree of life and the tree of the cross *\*chr3*.

**Ps 1 Structure** Verses 1-4 form a diptych based on the antithesis of the righteous and the wicked; they are coupled with one another in a comparison with plants: the perspective is moral and relevant to the present day. Verses 5-6 continue the antithesis, but with an eschatological perspective. The first word of the poem begins with *aleph*, the first letter of the alphabet, and the last one begins with the last letter, *taw*. In this case, the process can confirm the role of Ps 1 as a synthesis of the whole psalter, as can the passage from *a* to *z*, which is to say, from the today with its moral choice to the tomorrow of eschatology.

### TEXT

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#### ≈ Text ≈

**1a O happiness of the man** Th.: “perfect the youngest who...”

**1c on the seat** Tg. Ps.: in the assembly” as in v. 5b.

#### ≈ Vocabulary ≈

**1a Happiness** A noun that is always in the plural in Hebrew when introducing a macarism (*ašré*) *\*gen*. The meaning is not static but dynamic, since the verbal root has the meaning “to walk straight” towards a goal. S and Tg. Ps. translated the term as *twbwhy*, “happiness” (in the plural). G, V and almost all modern translations opt for the adjective “happy”, which is placed at the beginning of the phrase = “happy (blessed)” in the NT (Mt 5:2ff.). Hence the common word ‘beatitude’.

**1b to sit at the sitting** The verb sometimes has a negative sense, cf. Ps 17:12; Gen 37:25, “and they sat down to eat bread” (after throwing Joseph into a cistern).

**1b arrogant** The word refers to the semantic field of senseless and extreme presumption. The usual translation as ‘scoffers’ or ‘mockers’ renders the weakened sense of the word in post-biblical Hebrew. In the Bible, on the contrary, *lēç* is often translated into G as *kakos* (‘wicked’: Prov 9:7,8; 14:6), *loimos* (‘grievous’ ‘pernicious’: Prov 19:25; 21:24; 22:10; 24:9) or *akolastos* (‘licentious’: Prov 20:1; 21:11). In the Hebrew text, it appears as a parallelism to *rš’* (‘godless’: Prov 9:7), *zdw*n (‘insolence’: Prov 21:24) or *ywlt* (‘madness’: Prov 24:9) and is in opposition to terms that characterize wisdom (*hkm*, *nbwn*). The term *lçwn*, which comes from the same semantic group, offers comparable equivalents.

#### ≈ Literary Devices ≈

**1-4/5f. Antithesis of numbers: singular and plural.** As regards moral choices, verses 1-4 consider the righteous person individually and the wicked collectively. Thus the believer is seen as someone who resists, who goes against the stream. With a view to the after-life, verse 6 considers the two groups collectively.

**1.5 at the sitting... did not sit.../ will not rise up... in the assembly** *Inclusion by means of an antithetical chiasm* which underlines the outcome of ‘the way of the righteous’ vis-à-vis that of the wicked: because the righteous did not sit at the sitting of the arrogant, he will be able to appear at the final assembly;

### M/S/V

<sup>1</sup> O happiness of the man who did not walk  
according to the counsel of the wicked,  
<sup>S</sup> who did not walk on the way of the wicked,  
who did not stop on the way of the sinners  
<sup>S</sup> in the thinking  
and did not sit at the sitting of the arrogant.  
<sup>V</sup> mockers.

conversely, the wicked who stopped and sat will not rise up at the judgment.

**1.5.6 wicked... sinners / wicked... sinners / wicked inclusive parallelism**, the first two terms that describe the godless are first repeated in the same order at the end of the text (v. 5), before the stronger word (*ršā’im*) is used to conclude the psalm (v. 6).

**1.6 happiness of the man... wicked... way / way of the righteous... way of the wicked... will be lost thematic inclusion** in the whole psalm, which makes a strong contrast between the happiness of the righteous that is underlined at the beginning of the psalm and the ruin of the godless at the end.

**1 O happiness of the man who alliteration** with aleph: *ašré hā’iš ašer*.

**1 who did not walk... did not stop... did not sit ternary parallelism**, the three segments begin with “who did not walk... did not stop... did not sit”, thus insisting on abstention from all contact with the godless. The three verbs mark a crescendo in the denial of intimacy with the wicked *\*chr1*.

**1 wicked... sinners... arrogant a depreciative decrescendo**, which underlines the futility of the sitting of the godless who limit themselves to scoffing, in contrast to the permanence and the fruit of the tree planted near watercourses (v. 3).

**1b at the sitting... sit etymological image.**

#### ≈ Literary Genres ≈

**1 macarism** “O happiness of...” *\*voc1a*, a typical term in wisdom literature.

### CONTEXT

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#### ≈ Ancient Texts ≈

**1.6 way of the wicked / way of the righteous** In Egypt, the expression ‘path of life’ (*mṯn n’nh*) goes back at least to the pharaoh Amenophis IV-Akhenaton: the right path in practical existence is linked to learning and ensures a happy life. A series of texts illustrate this theme.

“The beginning of the teaching of life,

The testimony for prosperity,

All precepts for intercourse with elders,

The rules for courtiers...

In order to direct him to the ways of life,

To make him prosper on earth”

(The *Instruction of Amen-Em-Opet*, in James E. Pritchard [ed.], *Ancient Near Eastern Texts Relating to the Old Testament* [2<sup>nd</sup> ed.

## G/V

<sup>1</sup> Blessed [is] the man who did not walk  
according to the counsel of the godless,  
who did not stop on the way of the sinners  
    <sup>v</sup> *the path*  
and did not sit on the seat of the pestilential.  
    <sup>v</sup> *and on the seat of pestilence.*

corrected and enlarged; Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1955] 421.)

In the Petosiris inscriptions (around 300 BCE, cf. G. Lefebvre, *Le tombeau de Pétosiris*, Cairo, 1924), the path of life ensures happiness and prosperity in this world.

Inscription 62, I ff.:

“I shall guide you to the way of life,  
the good way of him who obeys the god [that is Thot],  
happy he whose heart leads to it.

He whose heart is firm on the way of the god,  
his existence on the earth is strengthened.

He who has the fear of the god in his soul,  
his bliss is great on the earth.”

Inscriptions 116, 1.2. and ff. by Sishou, father of Petosiris:

“You who are alive on the earth, and those who are to be born, who will come to this mountain, who will see this tomb and will pass by it, come, I shall guide you to the path of life: you will navigate with a favorable wind, without accident, and you will reach the harbor of the city of the generations [that is the necropolis] without having felt afflictions. (...)”

Cf. also inscription 127, 1.2 and ff. by Zedthotefankh, grandfather of Petosiris.

To the extent to which the Nile is Egypt’s main route, ‘path’ and ‘water’ are here seen as identical.

The theme of the two paths often appears in Greco-Latin literature.

- It is to be found first of all with Parmenides (quoted by Proclus, *In Tim.* I, 345, 18), where it is applied to the knowledge of being and of truth:

“Come, I shall show you – remember well the words  
That I am going to speak – which are thus the only  
Conceivable ways offered to the search.

The first, namely that it is and that it cannot  
Not be, is the way of persuasion,

A way worthy of trust that follows truth;

The second, namely that it is not and that it is

Moreover necessary that non-being exist,

I assure you, that is an uncertain

And even unexplorable track; for non-being

(The one that leads to nothing) abides unknowable

And remains inexpressible.”

- Applied to ethical choices, the theme can be found again in Xenophon (*Mem.* II, 1,21). Cicero, inspired by the latter (*Off.* I, 118), recounts the following story:

¶ 1-3 Jer 21:7-8; Ps 40:5

Whoever leans on God is like a green tree

“When Hercules reached the age of puberty – a time given by nature in order to choose the path of life that each person will take – he withdrew into solitude and (...) there he deliberated a lot and for a long time with himself in order to know which of the two paths that he could see, that of Pleasure and that of Virtue, was more worth taking. (...) Imbued with the precepts of our parents, we are most of the time led to follow their customs and their way of living. Others are led by the judgment of the crowd, and what seems to be the most beautiful to the greatest number is what they desire above all else. Some however, either because of a certain good fortune or because of a happy nature, independently of their family upbringing, have followed the straight path in life.”

- Silius Italicus (*Punica* 15,10) finally applied this story to Scipio.

## RECEPTION

## ≈ Biblical Inter-Textuality ≈

As the first text in the “Writings” (*Ketouvim*), Ps 1 is directly connected with the two other traditional parts of the Hebrew Bible: the *Torah* (cf. v. 2, reference to the *torah* of the Lord and the theme of the tree of life in Gen 2:9) and the “Prophets” (*Nevi'im*: beginning of this section, cf. the relationship of Ps 1:1-3 with Josh 1:7-8; and the end of the *Prophets*, cf. the relationship of Ps 1:2 with Mal 3:22-23 and of Ps 1:5 with Mal 3:13-24).

**1a Happiness** Macarisms *\*gen1* are a frequent form in the OT (37 times) and the NT (40 times). In Ps (25 times), what is found more frequently than “O happiness of the man (*'iš*)” (twice) are synonyms: “O happiness of the courageous person (*geber*)” (3 times) or “of the human being (*'ādām*)” (4 times), and at the collective level, “O happiness of the people” (4 times). So which deeds, values or attitudes get the human person “walking” towards happiness *\*voc1a*? Ps gives the answer: for the collectivity, to acclaim God and to live the covenant with God; for the individual, to meditate and to observe the *Torah* *\*voc2*, to take refuge in God, to trust God, to fear God, to be part of God’s household in the Temple, to receive God’s help, strength, forgiveness, to think of the poor, to have a family and prosperity, and even to ask God for the enemy’s punishment. Ps 119, which in every verse celebrates God’s Word, commandments, laws, etc., begins with the words, “Happy the ones whose way is faultless, who walk in the Teaching of the Lord.” Knowledge of God coincides with the observance of the commandments.

**1.6 path of the wicked / path of the righteous** In the OT, the theme of the two paths appears first of all without any reference to

retribution in the world to come (Hos 14:10; Sir 21:9-10; Prov 10:29). However, in the Book of Proverbs the association between the 'path of the righteous' and 'life' does appear (Prov 4:10-19; 12:28; 15:24). Ps 138:24 (G) also mentions the 'eternal path'. More clearly eschatological, the theme of the two paths with different outcomes (Mt 7:13-14; Lk 13:24) underlines in the NT a contrast: on the one hand, the apparent ease of the spacious way chosen by many and which leads to perdition, and on the other hand, the initial difficulty of the narrow way found by a small number and which leads to eternal life.

≈ **Jewish and Oriental Peritestamental Literature** ≈

**1 to walk, to stop, to sit** For Ibn Ezra, these verbs indicate a progression towards evil. Rashi understands them in the opposite way as causality: to sit down, then to get up, and finally to walk (the median verb can be understood as "to stop" or "to get up").

≈ **Christian Tradition** ≈

**1-6** BASIL *Hom. Ps.* compares this *prooimion* to the Psalter with the foundation of a building, the hull of a ship, the heart of an animal. According to CASSIODORUS, *Exp. Ps.*, if the poem does not have a

title, it is because it is itself the heading for the other psalms and because nothing must be "placed at the head of our Lord and Savior" (there is an almost identical text in BEDE, *Ps. Exeg.*; cf. also PS-HAYMON OF AUXERRE, *Comm. Ps.*).

**If. happiness** GREGORY OF NYSSA, based on 1 Tim 6:15-16, sees God as the one and only happy One and thus defines human happiness as resemblance to the divine beatitude (*Ps. Inscr.*). More commonly, the Fathers identified the perfect human person with Jesus as Lord (AUGUSTINE, *Enarrat. Ps.*, who also establishes a relationship with Ps 40:8: "At the beginning of the book [that is to say, in Ps 1], it is written of me"; JEROME, *Tract. Ps.*), Savior or Spouse of the Church (ORIGEN, *Sel. Ps.*, EUSEBIUS, *Comm. Ps.*, THEODORET OF CYRRHUS *Interpr. Ps.*, CASSIODORUS *Exp. Ps.*), the first-born of every creature (HILARY, *Tract. Ps.*), the new Adam (BEDE *Ps. Exeg.*) who did not walk according to the plan of the goddess, who is identified with Adam and/or the tempting devil (ARNOBIUS, *Comm. Ps.*). Cf. also THOMAS AQUINAS, *In Ps.* But since "the whole Christ is head and body, [the psalm] speaks of Christ and of his body the Church" in a marital perspective (PS-ALBERT, *Comm. Ps.*). In a more anthropological and moral sense, CALVIN, *Comm. Ps.*, defined happiness

as the result of a good conscience. For BELLARMINE, it consists in true righteousness, friendship with God (*Ps. Explan.* 9).

**1 counsel... way... seat**

= *sin in thought, in deed and through teaching* (JEROME, *Tract. Ps.*)

= *sin in thought, in deed and out of habit* (AMBROSE, *Enarrat. Ps.*, where he defines sin not only in relation to the commandments of the Decalogue, but even along the lines of evangelical radicality, which invites a person to total dispossession; *item*: BASIL *Hom. Ps.*).

= *sin in thought, in deed and by bringing others to do what is evil* (THOMAS *In Ps.*).

= *sin by turning away from God, by delighting in sin, and by no longer being able to return to God unless one is freed by Christ* (AUGUSTINE *Enarrat. Ps.*).

Following TERTULLIAN, *Marc.* 4,8, several Fathers saw in Joseph of Arimathea the type of the righteous person described here in the negative. THEODORET OF CYRRHUS, *Interpr. Ps.*, specifies the inclusive meaning of the word “man”, which “also includes women”.

**1c to sit in the seat** In general, this is seen as an allusion to the chair of the scribes and the Pharisees (ATHANASIUS, *Exp. Ps.*; HILARY *Tract. Ps.*; AMBROSE *Enarrat. Ps.*; CASSIODORUS *Exp. Ps.*).

According to ORIGEN, *Sel. Ps.*, the verse can apply to three situations: not benefiting from the truth by surrendering to vain thoughts, not living according to the true teaching, considering false dogmas to be true. Ps-ALBERT, *Comm. Ps.*: spreading the poison of bad teaching through word or example; the “seat” has four feet: malice, contempt for God, absence of shame, shrewdness in propagating evil. For CALVIN, *Comm. Ps.*: a metaphor calling to mind the hardening that is brought about through the habit of a life in sin.

**1c<sup>L</sup> mockers** RUPERT OF DEUTZ, *Oper. Sp. Sancti* 2,10-11, develops the theme of the crucified righteous One who is overwhelmed by mockery.

≈ Theology ≈

**1 Moral Theology: Social Relations** It is not so much a matter of cutting oneself off from compromising human contact and of turning in on oneself, as some religious movements encourage one to do, but rather of absolutely refusing to make a pact with evil. Did Jesus not sit down more than once in the company of sinners, even in opposition to what was customary?

## TEXT

## ≈ Text ≈

- 3a like a tree** *Tg. Ps.* adds “living” (or “of life”).  
**3b which gives its fruit** *Tg. Ps.*: “whose fruit ripens”.  
**3d all that he does succeeds** *Tg. Ps.* amplifies “and every flowering that blossoms produces seeds and succeeds”.

## ≈ Vocabulary ≈

- 2a.4b<sup>M</sup> on the contrary** literally “for if”: a conjunctive phrase expressing strong opposition.  
**3<sup>G</sup> tree** Its first meaning: “wood” (the ‘material of the tree’). The same term, which is available but infrequent when a tree is meant in Greek, can be found in particular in Gen 2:9 and Rev 22:2 (*xulon tês zôês*, “tree of life”), Gen 40:19 (*kremasei se epi xulou*, “he will hang you up on a tree”). These examples make it possible to weave inter-textual relations that associate the tree of life with the tree of the cross. *\*chr3a*  
**3<sup>M</sup> its foliage** Literally: “its shoots”.

## ≈ Grammar ≈

- 3<sup>M,G</sup> verbs** Both translations use the future, somewhat anticipating the eschatological perspective that in M and G belongs to v. 6.

## ≈ Literary Devices ≈

- 2 day and night** *Hyperbole* For “day and night” *\*cul2*.  
**3f. Antithetical comparisons** A combination of a double metaphor using the image of plants as an image of success and of failure: on the one hand, the green tree that is deeply rooted and well nourished, able to produce and to reproduce, an image of what is alive; on the other, the straw that has turned yellow, that is without roots or sap or a future, an image of death.

## ≈ Literary Genres ≈

- 3-4 māšāl** *\*dev3f*.

## CONTEXT

## ≈ Ancient Cultures ≈

**2b murmurs** The translations (G, V, S) reduce the verb’s action to an interior process (for G a silent one) of “meditation”. That is the objective aimed at, even in M, but there not without going through a strategy of exterior piety. For in ancient Israel, people had the custom of pronouncing biblical texts *sotto voce*, which supported reflection and prayer (cf. 1 Sam 1:12f.). This concrete means of implementation at certain times during the day as well as the night (Deut 6:7 “you will speak with these words”) included the body in the contemplative activity in such a way as to maintain a meditative attitude that continued “day and night” (the same hyperbole in Josh 1:8), including during sleep *\*dev2 \*chr2*, and it fostered stable moral behavior. The Jews and many Christians have kept this practice, even when they recollect themselves in private. In addition, G and V substitute the pleasure of the murmured instruction with the choice of the will that comes from meditating the law.

## ≈ Ancient Texts ≈

**3 Antithetical Comparisons** Already in Egypt, the ancient *Instruction of Amen-Em-Opet* (6,1-12) compared the wise person and his contrary to two trees, one growing in a garden and bearing fruit, the other growing in dry land and serving as fuel.

- 2** On the contrary, in the Teaching  
<sup>S</sup> *the law* of the LORD [is] his desire  
 he murmurs his Teaching day and night.  
<sup>S</sup> *he meditates his Law*
- 3** He is like a tree planted near watercourses,  
 which gives its fruit in its time,  
 and its foliage does not wither  
<sup>S</sup> *does not fall*  
 and all that he does succeeds.

## RECEPTION

## ≈ Comparison of Translations ≈

**2<sup>M</sup> Teaching** <sup>G</sup> **law** The Hebrew noun *tôrah* signifies above all the Pentateuch. It comes from *yrh*, to teach. The meaning “law”, which was retained by G, V, S and most translations, thus reduces the meaning (Isa 2:3). The sacred nature of the work attributed to Moses explains why we use a capital [Torah]. Oddly, *Tg.Ps.* translates its first occurrence in 2a as *nimôs’*, which is related to the Greek *nomos*, law, and the second occurrence in 2b with a derivative of *rh* (= *yrh*); S repeats *nomûsô*.

## ≈ Biblical Inter-Textuality ≈

**2a desire** Delighting in the divine Teaching is part of the ideal and thus of the apprenticeship of every pious Israelite (Ps 112:1; 119:16, 24,35,47,70,77,92,143,174).  
**3b fruit** In making a moral and spiritual anthropological transposition, the NT uses the relationship between cause and effect to speak of the good or bad tree and the good or bad fruit (Mt 3:10; 7:19; 12:33; Lk 3:9; 6:43-44). But the relationship can be turned around: “From the fruit of righteousness grows a tree of life.” (Prov 11:30) Of course the tree brings forth the fruit, but it is equally true that the tree springs forth from the seed and thus from the fruit.  
**3f. tree... straw** Jer 17:6 opposes instead the shrub in the desert to the green tree.

## ≈ Jewish and Oriental Peritestamental Literature ≈

**2 teaching (Tôrâh) of the Lord... his teaching (Tôrâh)** Rashi: the Tôrâh received from the Lord has become his own Tôrâh, which he ruminates (observes and passes on).  
**3 tree** Here the *Tg.Ps.* annotates the term *‘ç* (“tree”): “he is like the tree of life”. The image of the trees living near watercourses, without any antithetical match, is well developed in Qumran (IQH 8,5-8). And the analogy between the perfect tree and the Word of God is in the Qur’an (14,24-25).  
**3 foliage** Rashi: the smallest leaf is useful; similarly, the least of the wise person’s words.

## ≈ Christian Tradition ≈

**2 murmurs** ORIGEN, *Sel. Ps.*, based on 1Thess 5:17, recommends meditating on the Law while eating and drinking and even sleeping; he also suggests a figurative interpretation of “day and night”: an image of trial and tranquillity respectively. According to the more realistic AMBROSE, the instruction does not imply “so much

2 On the contrary, in the law of the LORD [is] his will  
and on his law he will meditate day and night.

3 He will be like the tree planted near springs of water,  
*v* that was planted beside the watercourses,  
that will give its fruit in its time, whose foliage will not dry up,  
and everything he does will succeed.

¶2 Josh 1:8 Ps 119:148

Meditation on the Torah day and night

¶3 Ps 92:13-16; Gen 2-3; Prov 3:18; 11:30; Rev 2:7; 22:2,14,19; Mt 7:17-19; 12:33; Lk 3:9; 6:43

Tree, symbol of wisdom or of good moral behavior

Ezek 47:1-12; Rev 22:1-2

Tree on the bank of the waters

the constant intention to read the Law as the taste for observing it". He exhorts people to "drink" both Testaments; the First diminishes thirst, the New one quenches it completely (*Enarrat. Ps.*). For EUSEBIUS, *Comm. Ps.*, "law" can be understood at three levels: natural law, the law of Moses, and the Gospel. For ATHANASIUS, *Exp. Ps.*, "angelic law". HILARY, *Tract. Ps.* as well as JEROME, *Comm. Ps.* and *Tract. Ps.*, make clear that one must not only read Scripture but put it into practice. AUGUSTINE, *Enarrat. Ps.*, makes a very Pauline distinction: "It is one thing to be in the Law and another to be under the Law. The person who is in the Law acts according to the Law; the one who is under the Law is led by the Law. Thus the one is free, the other a slave." BEDE, *Ps. Exeg.*, repeats, barely annotating.

**3a tree... watercourses** According to several Fathers, a reference to Prov 3:18.

= *tree of life*, symbol of wisdom. JEROME, *Comm. Ps.* and AMBROSE, *Enarrat. Ps.*, refer to the tree of life in Gen 2-3. And JEROME, *Tract. Ps.*, to the fruit-bearing trees in Ezek 47.

= *image of the cross* JUSTIN (*1 Apol.* 1,40-42 and *Dial.* 86; cf. TERTULLIAN, *Adv. Jud.* 13,11; CASSIODORUS, *Exp. Ps.*).

= *Christ himself* (JEROME, *Tract. Ps.*), as the Spouse (GREGORY OF NYSSA, *Hom. Cant.* 5), the new Man (RUPERT, *Oper. Sp. Sancti* 1,18 et 20), the Word (BEDE, *Ps. Exeg.*), near the rivers = the divine Scriptures (HIPPLYTUS, *Comm. Dan.* 1,17; EUSEBIUS, *Comm. Ps.*; ATHANASIUS, *Exp. Ps.*; PS-ALBERT, *Comm. Ps.*). AUGUSTINE, *Enarrat. Ps.*, reads "in its time" as a reference to the resurrection, the ascension and the gift of the Spirit; this theme is taken up again by BEDE, *Ps. Exeg.* and PS-HAYMON OF AUXERRE, *Comm. Ps.*

= *the baptized person*. Very early, the ecclesiological and sacramental perspectives were grafted on to this old Christological reading, with the water calling to mind baptism (*Barn.* 11,1-11; CYPRIAN, *Epist.* 73,10; HILARY, *Tract. Ps.*; GREGORY OF NYSSA, *In bapt. Christi*).

**3b fruit... foliage** AMBROSE, *Enarrat. Ps.*, connects the fruit to the mystical realities (faith, knowledge of the mysteries), and the foliage, which protects the fruit against the sun or the cold, to the moral virtues. PS-ALBERT, *Comm. Ps.*, distinguishes three kinds of fruit, which are associated with three kinds of plants: scholarship that is free of error (grape), sweet consolation (fig), sweetening and healing (olive). BELLARMINE rather holds on to the trees that do not lose their foliage: pine, palm, olive tree (*Ps. Explan.* 10).

### ≈ Liturgy ≈

**Ps 1 in the Roman Lectionary** The liturgy develops the moral interpretation of the psalm in order to illustrate:

- *the two ways*: Friday of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Week of Advent, following Isa 48:17ff. ("the path on which you walk"); Thursday after Ash Wednesday, following Deut 30:15-20 (the two ways); Thursday of the 7<sup>th</sup> Week in Ordinary Time I, following Sir 5:1-8 ("Do not trust in your riches, do not delay in returning to the Lord"); Monday of the 30<sup>th</sup> Week in Ordinary Time II, following Eph 4:32-5:8 (darkness, light).
- *the two kinds of human being*: Thursday of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Week of Lent and the 6<sup>th</sup> Sunday in Ordinary Time – C, following Jer 17:5-8,10 ("cursed the man... like a thistle in the desert / blessed the man ... like a tree near the water).
- *the fruitfulness of holiness*: Common of Men and Women Saints; Thursday of the 29<sup>th</sup> Week in Ordinary Time I, following Rom 6:19-23 ("you bear fruit for holiness"); Wednesday of the 28<sup>th</sup> Week in Ordinary Time II, following Gal 5:18-25 (fruit of the flesh, fruit of the Spirit).
- *the reward promised to the righteous*: Thursday of the 27<sup>th</sup> Week in Ordinary Time I, following Mal 3:13-20a ("those who fear THE LORD"); Monday of the 33<sup>rd</sup> Week in Ordinary Time II, following Rev 1:1-5a; 2:1-5a ("I will give the victorious one to eat of the tree of life").

### ≈ Theology ≈

**3 fruit in its time** *Spiritual Theology: Fruitfulness* Following the Fathers, many a reader will spontaneously make a connection with the tree of life in Gen 2:9; 3:3 \**chr3a*. Even if it is difficult to attribute this allusion to the psalmist himself, it is not impossible that it surfaced in *Tg. Ps. \*tex3a*. In any case, "in its time" places the deepening of the Word of God within the dynamism of God's free gift. Adam and Eve sinned by trying to take for themselves the fruit (eternal life, total knowledge) by their own initiative and immediately, instead of waiting for God to give it to them at the time he wanted and totally freely. Similarly, the long process of assimilating the Word "day and night" \**cul2b* underlines God's action over time rather than in the immediate. Meditating on the Word brings the human person into a situation of ever greater availability for receiving God's gift.

## TEXT

## ≈ Text ≈

**4b straw that the wind takes away** *Tg. Ps.* “the storm”. G has *chnous*, which in theory can mean dust as well as straw, but the addition *apo prosôpou tês gês* orients the translation towards the first meaning (cf. V).

**5a they will not rise up... at the judgment** *Tg. Ps.* adds several words: “they will not be judged innocent, they will not rise up, the wicked, on the day of the great judgment”.

**5b assembly** G and V read *ba'āçat* instead of *ba'ādat*, repeating the same term as in v. 1a (cf. *boulè, consilium*), but with the meaning of “council”, rather than “counsel”.

**6a the LORD knows the way** *Tg. Ps.* reverses the subject and the object: “it opened itself before the LORD, the way of the righteous” \**gra6a*.

**6b the path of the wicked** *Tg. Ps.* has “paths” in the plural but the verb in the singular. V does not repeat “path” (*via*) the second time but uses a synonym (*iter*) so as to vary expressions.

## ≈ Grammar ≈

**5<sup>M</sup> at the judgment... in the assembly of the righteous** The preposition *b* can indicate the place (“in”) or the means (“by”) of the act conveyed by the verb. Both meanings seem possible here: the wicked will not rise up because of / in the midst of the assembly of the righteous since they were not found to be righteous by / at the time of judgment.

**6a for he knows** lit.: “for he is knowing”. Almost all translators, both old and modern, understand the actor-subject of the verb in the participle to be the LORD, with the exception of *Tg. Ps.* \**tex6a*.

## ≈ Literary Devices ≈

**5f. wicked... righteous... righteous... wicked** *Chiasm*.

## RECEPTION

## ≈ Comparison of Translations ≈

**5<sup>M</sup>G will rise up** Here, the Hebrew term *yāqūmū* keeps all the force of the original image: the physical movement of the one who rises up suggesting an eschatological movement. The context (v. 4: the image of the straw carried away by the wind, connoting death; v. 5: judgment, assembly of the righteous; v. 6: the way of the righteous of which THE LORD knows the outcome) points towards what is over and beyond: to rise up after death. The wicked will not rise up, either as a consequence of judgment or because they are not known in the assembly of the righteous. The verb *yāqūm* first called to mind an earthly eschatology (cf. Deut 25:6, where “the first-born to whom the (Levirate’s) wife will give birth will make the name of his

**4** It is not the same [for] the wicked.  
On the contrary, [they are] like the straw  
that the wind takes away.

**5** That is why the wicked will not rise up,  
at the judgment, the sinners,  
in the assembly of the righteous.

**6** For the LORD knows the way of the righteous;  
<sup>S</sup> *he, the LORD,*  
but the way of the wicked will be lost.

deceased brother rise up – *yāqūm*”) before referring to an absolute eschatology. The meaning will pass into the Greek *anistamai*. In Mt 12:41 (“the people of Niniveh will rise up (after death) – *anastēsontai*”), the verb *anistamai* has a double meaning: “to rise up” and “to rise up in order to accuse” (“on the day of judgment”: the same theme can be found in Wis 3:7-8, in 1 En 27,3, as well as in Qumran: 4Q418, fr. 69, v.7). M, G and V thus all use a verb (*yāqūm, anistamai, resurgere*) that in certain books of the OT commonly recalls either resuscitation (the simple return of the deceased to life on earth, cf. Isa 26:14,19) or the final resurrection (cf. Dan 12:2 for the Greek). This second meaning also applies to the NT.

## ≈ Biblical Inter-Textuality ≈

**4 straw** There is a classic comparison between the godless and the weightless chaff that is carried away by the wind (Job 21:18; Ps 18:43; 35:5; 83:14; Wis 5:14; Isa 17:13; 29:5; 40:23-24; Jer 13:24; Dan 2:35; Hos 13:3) or burnt in the fire (Isa 47:14; Nah 1:10; Mal 3:19; Mt 3:12; Lk 3:17; 1Cor 3:12).

**5 assembly of the righteous** Contrary to Ps 111:1, which speaks of the present-day liturgical assembly (G *sunagogē*), *ēdā* seems here to have an eschatological meaning. As regards the “righteous”, Heb 12:23 uses the term *ekklēsia*, the Church that is in the world to come.

## ≈ Jewish and Oriental Peritestamental Literature ≈

**6 way... way** The image with the double juridical and eschatological perspective (the two spirits) is developed in a whole paragraph in 1QS (3,13-4,26). Cf. also Qur’an 1,1.6-7. A major theme in Qumran, like that of the two spirits. Rashi explains v. 5 by means

- 4 It is not the same [for] the godless, not the same.  
On the contrary, [they are] like the dust  
that the wind carries [away] from the face of  
the earth.
- 5 That is why the godless will not rise up  
at the judgment,  
nor the sinners in the council of the righteous.
- 6 For the LORD knows the way of the righteous;  
but the way of the godless will be lost.

¶4 Job 21:18; Ps 35:5

**The wicked are like straw in the wind**

Jer 17:5-6

**Whoever leans only on what is  
human is like a dry thistle**

¶5 Wis 5:1; Lk 21:36

**The righteous rising up at the judgment**

¶6 Deut 30:15-19; Prov 4:18-19;

Jer 21:8; Mt 7:13-14

**The two paths: life or death**

Ps 112:10

**The desire of the godless comes to nothing**

of v. 6: “The Lord knows the path of the righteous and that person is before him in order to be known forever. On the other hand, the path of the godless, which is detestable in his eyes, leads far from his presence. That is why there will be no rising up (lit. put back on one’s feet: *hqm̄t rgl*) for the godless on the day of judgment nor any [possibility] for the sinners to be inscribed in the congregation of the righteous.”

≈ **Christian Tradition** ≈

**4 straw... wind** Wind = symbol of condemnation by God (ATHANASIUS, *Exp. Ps.*). Rather than “straw”, the Latins and Greeks hold on to the sense of “dust”. JEROME, *Tract. Ps.*, interprets the lot of the godless in terms of wandering: “His dust is not even of the earth... He has nothing solid. Everything he has, he has for punishment... He never remains in the same place.” THOMAS, *In Ps.*, makes the antithesis explicit: he places the object to which it is compared (the tree is rooted, compact, humid, and the dust is divided, dry, arid) in relation with the object that is compared (the righteous are rooted in the divine, the spiritual goods, gathered together through charity, irrigated by graces, and the wicked are divided, supported by external and superficial goods and thus deprived of the water of grace).

**5 judgment** According to EUSEBIUS, *Comm. Ps.* and CYRIL OF ALEXANDRIA, *Explan. Ps.*, David, the presumed author of the psalm, is the first to have spoken of a resurrection for everyone, the righteous and the godless, but for the latter in view of punishment. AMBROSE, *Enarrat. Ps.*, based on Scripture (Dan 12:2-3; Jn 5:28-29; 1 Cor 15:51): “Even if the sinners do not rise in the assembly of the righteous, they nevertheless will rise for judgment.” AUGUSTINE,

*Enarrat. Ps.*, makes clear: “not to judge but to be judged”. THOMAS *In Ps.*, relying on V, makes a double attempt to explain in what sense the godless “will not rise” \**tex5a* without however contradicting 2 Cor 5:10: “The good will be reunited in eternal life, to which the wicked will not be admitted”; these latter “will not rise because of their own judgment..., they will not rise from sin.”

**6 knows**

= *to experience* (biblical sense): the Lord knows the good, not the evil (EUSEBIUS, *Comm. Ps.*)

= *to honor* (ATHANASIUS, *Exp. Ps.*)

= *to love* (PETER LOMBARD, *Comm. Ps.*)

= *to recognize* (THOMAS, *In Ps.*). Already AUGUSTINE, *Enarrat. Ps.*, made the connection with Mt 7:23, and AMBROSE, *Enarrat. Ps.*, with Lk 13:27, where Jesus says to those who do not observe the will of the Father: “I never knew you.”

**6 way... way** The theme of the two ways can be found in *Did* 1-6 and *Barn* 18-20.

**6b will be lost** JEROME, *Tract. Ps.*: “It does not say that the godless will perish but that the path of the godless will perish. That is to say: godlessness will perish, but not the godless.”

≈ **Theology** ≈

**5-6 Dogmatic Theology: Judgment** Here, the psalmist is putting forward the resurrection of the righteous. Based on Dan 12:2-3; Wis 4:20, and on the whole of NT eschatology, Christian theology teaches that all human beings will survive biological death, and that one of two destinies is possible: “eternal life” and “eternal fire” (e.g. Mt 25:31-46).