

# The Righteous is Blessed, the Wicked are Cursed: The Divine Retributive Justice of Psalm 1 in the Literary Forms of the Psalter

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## *Abstract*

Most Psalms scholars agree that Psalm 1 functions as the introduction to the whole book of Psalms. This study builds on this foundation and seeks to demonstrate how Psalm 1 truly functions as an introduction to the Psalter. To this end, the article shows how the different literary forms of the book of Psalms revolve around the central theme of divine retributive justice first introduced in Psalm 1. The different literary forms of psalms then are confessions and expansions of, appeals and responses to, entreaties and praises of the divine retributive justice of Psalm 1.

## I. Introduction

The important place of Psalm 1 in the Psalter has received a plethora of attention since Brevard Childs. In his *Introduction to Old Testament Scriptures*, Childs classifies Psalm 1 as a “Torah Psalm” and suggests that Psalm 1 has a new function as the introduction to the whole Psalter. He elaborates, “Psalm 1 has assumed a highly significant function as a preface to the psalms which are to be read, studied, and meditated upon.”<sup>1</sup> Since then, the proposed introductory place of Psalm 1 has received the support of many subsequent Psalms scholars. Gerard H. Wilson, James L. Mays, Patrick Miller, J. Clinton McCann Jr. and others have affirmed the important function of Psalm 1 as an introduction to the entire Psalter.

The introductory function of Psalm 1 hinges upon two basic arguments. The first argument is in the placement of Psalm 1 in the final canonical form of the Psalter. G. H. Wilson, in his NIV Application Commentary on the Psalms, maintains:

<sup>1</sup> Brevard Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1979), 513.

If you were to open a handwritten medieval manuscript of the Psalms at its beginning, chances are that you would discover this psalm—the first in the canonical collection—written in red ink and without any evidence of a number. That is because at an early date the psalm we now know as Psalm 1 was understood to be an introduction to the whole Psalter rather than just another psalm. It is likely that the final editors of the Psalter chose Psalm 1 as the gateway to the psalms because it encourages the readers/hearers to consider the songs that follow to have the effect of divine guidance or torah. This psalm also exhorts the readers both to read the psalms and to meditate deeply on the message God is communicating through them. It strongly affirms that how one responds to the revelation of God unleashed by reading the psalms determines one's ultimate destiny.<sup>2</sup>

The second line of reasoning is in the reference to the “torah of YHWH” in verse 2 of Psalm 1—“But his delight is in the law of the Lord and on his law he meditates day and night.” For Wilson and others, the “torah” in Psalm 1 refers to the whole Psalter instead of the Pentateuch.<sup>3</sup> According to McCann, Psalm 1 is an introduction because it alters the function of the whole Psalter as not anymore a product of Israel's cultic worship but as God's word or instruction to the faithful.<sup>4</sup>

While there is a growing consensus on the introductory function of Psalm 1, what is sad however is how scholars expressed their view with slight differences. McCann writes, “As an introduction to the Psalter, Psalm 1 announces that the torah of the Lord, God's instruction, applies to everything! It is an invitation to be open to God's instruction and to use the content of the rest of the Psalter as one source of God's instructions.”<sup>5</sup> Patrick Miller, however, emphasizes on how Psalm 1 speaks of the two different ways for piety. He maintains:

... to hear Psalm 1 as it is given to the community of faith, that is, an introduction to what follows in the rest of the Psalter, is to be pointed down a particular path, a way that will be elaborated and unfolded in the psalms that follow. . . . the placing of this psalm (Psalm 1) as the introduction to the Psalter serves to lift up the role of the whole collection of

<sup>2</sup> Gerald H. Wilson, *Psalms 1-72* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002), 92.

<sup>3</sup> Gerald H. Wilson, *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter* (SBLDS 76; Chico: Scholars, 1985); Basil De Pinto, “The Torah and the Psalms,” *JBL* 86 (1967): 154-74.

<sup>4</sup> J. Clinton McCann Jr., *A Theological Introduction to the Book of Psalms: The Psalms as Torah* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1993), 26.

<sup>5</sup> McCann, *Psalms as Torah*, 40.

psalms a book of instruction for true piety and ethics and not just a book of liturgy for the worship for the community of faith.<sup>6</sup>

In order to support their proposals, scholars employ verbal similarities found between Psalm 1 and the rest of the Psalms. For example, Psalms 1, 19, and 119 are read together because of the verbal link “torah of YHWH.”<sup>7</sup>

It is noteworthy that Norman Whybray detracts from the above proposals. He finds it questionable to think that Psalm 1 functions as introduction because he thinks that “the notion that the Psalter should have an introduction or ‘preface’ at all is not based on anything in the text: it is derived, in modern discussion at least, from a prior conviction that the Psalter must have a logical, or at least comprehensible, ‘structure’.”<sup>8</sup> He is equally opposed to relating the “torah of YHWH” as the Psalter. Hence, he writes, “In sum, it must be concluded that Psalm 1 clearly refers to a written corpus which can be the subject of mediation, but that there is no evidence that this is the Psalter.”<sup>9</sup>

Whybray is indeed a valuable voice to be heard, but his critique that the Psalter’s logical or comprehensive structure and order is a modern conviction should be dismissed. It seems to me that Whybray is assuming the opposite presupposition, that is, an illogical and incomprehensible order of the book of Psalms. Thus, the question to be asked is: which of the two presuppositions is more plausible? I suggest that the presupposition of a logical order of the Psalter is grounded on how ancient Israel’s community viewed the Psalter with awe and reverence as their hymnbook, which is part of their cultic life characterized by order and regularity. If the truth be told, the notion of an illogical structure seems more modern than ancient. Also, there is a theological conviction that God who is the divine author is a God of order.

My only complaint regarding the above proposals is the method used to show the relationship between Psalm 1 and the rest of the Psalter. I recognize that identifying verbal similarities definitely possesses some merit, but I find the connections drawn between Psalm 1 and the rest of the Psalms based on verbal relationships as often arbitrary and weak. Furthermore, it must be admitted that such connections are hard-pressed to show how Psalm 1 functions as introduction. Thus, this

<sup>6</sup> Patrick D. Miller, *Interpreting the Psalms* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986), 85-6.

<sup>7</sup> McCann, *Psalms as Torah*, 25-32; James L. Mays, “The Place of the Torah-Psalms in the Psalter,” *JBL* 106 (1987): 3-12.

<sup>8</sup> Norman Whybray, *Reading the Psalms as a Book* (JSOTSup 222; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1996), 41.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

short essay seeks to propose a more robust connection between Psalm 1 and the rest of the Psalms by going beyond merely verbal relationships to a more thematic and conceptual study. I will show how the different literary classifications of psalms, which are often linked to Herman Gunkel,<sup>10</sup> revolve around the central principle of divine retributive justice first introduced in Psalm 1. Simply stated, I will argue that each of the different literary forms is one of the following within its own literary genre: expanding on, confessing, appealing to, responding to, entreating, and praising the divine retributive justice of Psalm 1.

Insofar as it is impossible to show how every psalm responds to Psalm 1, I will demonstrate my thesis using only one psalm to stand for each major psalm classification. The following psalms under discussion were chosen based on two considerations. First, the literary forms of the chosen psalms are representative of each major psalm classification. The literary forms of these psalms enjoy a major consensus among Psalms scholars. Hence, this study builds on the consensus of most Psalms scholars concerning the forms of these psalms in order to concentrate on how the representative psalm employs Psalm 1 rather than engaging in the issues of form criticism.<sup>11</sup> Second, the manageable length of each representative psalm is ideal for devoting more discussion on the relationship to Psalm 1 rather than detailed exegesis. Before we proceed, a careful study of Psalm 1 is called for.

## II. Psalm 1: Divine Retributive Justice

Psalm 1 is often classified as a wisdom psalm primarily because of its close association with wisdom literature and its didactic tone. The didactic tone is evident for it explains the two ways of life, typical of wisdom literature. It markedly distinguishes the righteous from the wicked according to their sources of guidance and values (vv. 1-2), the effects of their lifestyle (vv. 3-4), and their eventual destiny (vv. 5-6).<sup>12</sup>

The righteous is one who shuns evil by not following the advice of the wicked, taking the paths of the sinners and sitting at the seat of the scoffers. He is not only characterized by his disengagement, but also by his engagement. He engages himself into the torah of YHWH. His

<sup>10</sup> Hermann Gunkel, *The Psalms: A Form-Critical Introduction* (trans. T. M. Horner; Philadelphia: Fortress, 1967).

<sup>11</sup> Form Criticism of the Psalms is a complex study. See H. G. M. Williamson, "Reading the Lament Psalms Backwards," in *A God So Near: Essays in Old Testament Theology in Honor of Patrick D. Miller* (ed. B. Strawn and N. R. Bowen; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2003), 3-15.

<sup>12</sup> John Collins, "Psalm 1: Structure and Rhetoric," *Presbyterian* 31 (2005): 37-48.

murmuring of the torah of YHWH produces his righteous lifestyle. He is serious in living out the source of guidance to his life, which is the torah of YHWH. Proverbs 3:7 truly encapsulates the characteristics of a righteous person—the righteous one fears the Lord and shuns evil. Thus, the righteous one is blessed (אַשְׁרֵי). A person is pronounced as אַשְׁרֵי because his condition is desirable and praiseworthy perhaps because of his moral character and the blessings that come with it.<sup>13</sup> Contextually, the blessings bestowed to the righteous include fruitfulness, success, care, protection, vindication and most importantly, YHWH's knowledge of him. Simply put, the righteous will experience the presence of YHWH, which brings blessings, protection, and favor.

On the other hand, the wicked are the enemies of the righteous.<sup>14</sup> The wicked are described in plural form. They are the wicked (רְשָׁעִים), sinners (חַטָּאִים), and mockers (לְצַיִם). They are the kind of people the righteous does not associate with. It goes without saying that the torah of YHWH is far from the wicked; the same way the torah of YHWH is as close to the righteous. Consequently, the wicked are cursed. The cursed fate of the wicked is described to be like chaff blown away. They do not share in the divine blessings of the righteous. Most importantly, they will not stand in the day of YHWH's judgment. Hence, the wicked will perish.<sup>15</sup>

A careful look at Psalm 1 shows that the psalm is expressed in a third-person didactic form. It is form-critically suitable to function as an introduction to the Psalter. As an introduction, it presents a general worldview where there is the observable connection between human conduct and divine blessing or judgment. Psalm 1 presents a theological principle of YHWH's blessings on the righteous and YHWH's judgment

<sup>13</sup> Waldemar Janzen, "אַשְׁרֵי in the Old Testament," *HTR* 58 (1965): 215-226.

<sup>14</sup> Gerald T. Sheppard, "'Enemies' and the Politics of Prayer in the Book of Psalms," in *The Bible and the Politics of Exegesis: Essays in Honor of Norman K. Gottwald on His Sixty-Fifth Birthday* (ed. D. Jobling et al.; Cleveland: The Pilgrim Press, 1991), 61-82.

<sup>15</sup> Kraus suggests that one should first understand the "judgment" referred to here as a sacral-legal and cultic institution. He suggests, "The wicked do not have access to the act of sacral judgment, which is the presupposition for access to the sanctuary, and therefore also do not arrive at the congregation of the righteous, that is, the congregation that praises God in the holy place." However, he also recognizes that it also "transcends the empirical reality of the cultic-sacral and are made transparent entities that affect all of existence and point to the end-time." Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 1-59* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 21.

on the wicked. Thus, Psalm 1 explains the divine retributive justice formula: the righteous one is blessed while the wicked are cursed.

This divine retributive justice principle finds its parallel in Deuteronomy's curses and blessings. In Deuteronomy, the one who obeys the torah of YHWH is blessed, while the one who disobeys is cursed. This principle runs throughout, both explicitly and implicitly, the Deuteronomistic history and the prophetic literature. It is less important to inquire of the source and the traditional priority between the Deuteronomistic and Wisdom traditions.<sup>16</sup> What is foremost is how this divine retributive justice principle virtually covers most of the Hebrew Bible. Its presence in the Psalms will be demonstrated below.

### III. The Divine Retributive Justice of Psalm 1 in the Different Psalm Forms

#### *Royal Psalm:*

*Submission to the king by the righteous brings blessing, while antagonism to the king by the wicked brings about curses.*

Psalm 2 is rightly classified as a royal psalm. The psalm develops a chiasmic structure (A-B-A').

A Kings' conspiracy against YHWH's anointed king (vv. 1-3)

B Anointment of YHWH's anointed king (vv. 4-9)

A' Kings' submission to YHWH's anointed king (vv. 10-11)

The psalm starts off with a description of the conspiracy of kings and rulers against YHWH and his anointed one (מַלְכֵי אֲדָמָה). They are described as the antagonists in the psalm. Their antagonism and failure to pay obeisance to YHWH and his anointed are insults to YHWH. Accordingly, they will not go unpunished for YHWH will deal with them in wrath and judgment.

The antagonism of the wicked is exacerbated when YHWH anoints and blesses the chosen king. The king is not only anointed but also blessed to reign in Zion. The king's anointment gives him a special relationship with YHWH as son. Also, the anointed king is blessed to have authority over the whole earth (v. 8) and certain triumph over opposing nations and kings (v. 9).

<sup>16</sup> Moshe Weinfeld, *Deuteronomy and the Deuteronomistic School* (Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1992).

The psalm's ending is two-fold. First, there is a summons to the kings and rulers of the earth to end their antagonism and resign themselves to YHWH and his anointed one, lest YHWH punishes in wrath those who do not submit to him (vv. 10-11). Second, there is a declaration of the blessings in taking refuge in the anointed king (v. 12).

Psalm 2 is often thought to be connected to Psalm 1 based on the **יְשׁוּעָה** formula at the end of Psalm 2—"Blessed are all who take refuge in him"—which forms a closing *inclusio* to Psalm 1. McCann, seeing the connection between Psalm 1 and 2, writes, "While Psalm 1 informs the reader that the whole collection is to be approached and appropriated as instruction, Psalm 2 introduces the essential content of that instruction—the Lord reigns! Nothing about God, the world, humanity or the life of faith will be properly learned and understood apart from this basic affirmation."<sup>17</sup> While the theme of the reign of the Lord is undoubtedly present in this psalm, it seems to me however that McCann presses too hard to bring the YHWH Malak psalms into Psalm 2. I suggest Psalm 2 builds on the divine retributive principle of Psalm 1. It appends a royal ideology to the divine retributive justice principle. This is evident in how the kings and rulers of the nations in Psalm 2 should be understood as the wicked in Psalm 1. The word **רָשָׁע** in Psalm 1 is used to describe the righteous meditation of YHWH's torah, but the same lexeme is used in Psalm 2 to describe the nations' conspiracy against YHWH. The wicked are not only those who are sinners and scoffers and who are far from the torah of YHWH, but also those who conspire against YHWH and his anointed king. As in Psalm 1, the wicked rulers and judges are subject to YHWH's wrathful judgment, while those who submit themselves to YHWH are blessed for they can take refuge in him in the midst of political conspiracy and social chaos.

Royal psalms like Psalm 2 declare that YHWH blesses those who submit to his kingship and his anointed one. He brings curses to those who stand in opposition against him. Blessings and curses come not only on the basis of one's response to torah but also to one's response to the kingship of YHWH and his anointed one.

***Psalm of Confidence:***

*Despite the contrary situation, the righteous adamantly confesses  
his confidence in divine retributive justice.*

Psalm 11 is a psalm of confidence. It powerfully begins with an emphatic confession by the psalmist of his confidence in YHWH—"In the Lord I take refuge." The psalm describes the psalmist's response to the

<sup>17</sup> McCann, *Psalms as Torah*, 41.

words of his wicked enemies. Verses 1b–3 contain the enemies' words of derision. In these verses, the wicked enemy threatens the life of the psalmist with the warrior's bow and arrow. They insinuate the helplessness of the psalmist. Hence, the psalmist is mockingly advised to flee and save his life from the pursuing enemy. Here, the wicked enemy shakes the foundations of the psalmist's faith. The enemy mocks the righteous psalmist of what he can do when YHWH's moral order is unseen.<sup>18</sup> Kraus maintains, "When all the law and order is overturned and chaos in the form of raw violence breaks out—what can the righteous do then?"<sup>19</sup>

Despite the enemies' taunting and threats, what is remarkable in this psalm is the psalmist's theological assertions about YHWH. He declares that YHWH is a righteous judge. YHWH tests and examines all of humankind (v. 4). He confidently expresses that on the day of judgment, YHWH will judge accordingly. The wicked will be dealt with curses of dreadful punishment in snares, fire, brimstones, and scorching wind (vv. 5-6) while the righteous will be blessed to see the face of YHWH (v. 7).<sup>20</sup>

Psalm 11 is connected with Psalm 1 in a confessional way. The psalmist's confession of his trust in divine retributive justice despite his conflicting situation is unmistakable. This is seen in how the moral order that is challenged is YHWH's retributive justice, which we have seen in Psalm 1. The advice of the wicked in Psalm 1 is seen in the way the wicked enemy of the psalmist in Psalm 11 advises the psalmist to flee to the mountain like a bird. This metaphoric advice should be interpreted to be in contrast to taking refuge in YHWH. Thus, the wicked enemy in Psalm 11 schemes to make the psalmist question the validity of the retributive justice principle of Psalm 1. The enemy implies that the upright in heart does not escape the bow and arrow of the foe. The enemy mocks the psalmist in believing that YHWH knows the way of the righteous. The confidence of the psalmist is found in that the final fate of the wicked described in Psalm 11 is summarized in Psalm 1 as destruction, while the righteous is blessed to be in YHWH's presence. Thus, while Psalm 1 provides the divine retributive tradition in didactic tone, the psalmist in Psalm 11 expresses his trust and hope in the divine retributive justice tradition of Psalm 1 even when his situation or the counsel of the people around him says otherwise.

Psalms of confidence like Psalm 11 demonstrate not a hollow confession of confidence. The confidence in the divine retributive justice

<sup>18</sup> Wilson, *Psalms 1-72*, 248.

<sup>19</sup> Kraus, *Psalms 1-59*, 202.

<sup>20</sup> The image described here suggests the reference to eschatological judgment and vindication.

of Psalm 1 is often eschatological and forward-looking. There is a confidence that if retributive justice is not found today, then it shall be in the future.

**Lament Psalm:**

*The righteous psalmist laments over his miserable situation  
and asks YHWH to bless him and curse the wicked.*

Psalm 13 is a rather short psalm. It is a lament psalm introduced at the beginning by a series of four strong plaintive questions (הַיָּסוּרִים, “how long?”). The questions reflect the psalmist’s preoccupation with his own issues in life. The four plaintive questions are laments, which may be classified accordingly: problem of YHWH’s absence or separation from YHWH (v. 1); emotional problem (v. 2), problem of death (v. 3), and problem with enemies (vv. 2b, 4).<sup>21</sup> Wilson is correct to say that “the questions at issue here are not simple requests for knowledge but express deep human misgivings about the character and activity of God and their effect on human life. This kind of questioning—flung in the face of God, as it were—is a product of and a response to the experience of the hiddenness of God, who refuses to appear and act as humans expect and desire.”<sup>22</sup>

The psalmist’s multifaceted yet intricately related dilemma resulted in the multifaceted plea to YHWH. First, he poured out his heart towards YHWH with a series of laments (vv. 1-2). Second, he petitioned YHWH to save his life from potential death, lest the enemies triumph over him (vv. 3-4). Third, he rejoices and confesses his trust in YHWH’s unfailing love (vv. 5-6).<sup>23</sup> The cause for the emphatic four “how long” questions is perhaps due to the imminent death of the psalmist—“Give light to my eyes, or I will see sleep the sleep of death.” Thus, he pleads for YHWH to respond to him before he dies. The tone of urgency is unmistakable.

The relationship of a lament psalm like Psalm 13 to Psalm 1 is found in the function of Psalm 1 as the basis of the psalmist’s complaint. It may be said that the psalmist knows the tradition of Psalm 1. There is a tacit indication that the psalmist feels that the misery he experiences is unwarranted. Misery should not dawn upon the righteous. Moreover, the misery is deemed too long, such that he complains about YHWH’s apparent delay or neglect. He longs for YHWH’s favor, care, and protection to be evident. This expectation and desire are grounded on

<sup>21</sup> The enemy might want to mock him or make accusations of guilt against the psalmist.

<sup>22</sup> Wilson, *Psalms 1-72*, 278.

<sup>23</sup> The celebrative tone here need not result from an answered request, but from an expression of faith and assurance.

the tradition set in Psalm 1. The psalmist here struggles concerning the retributive principle set in Psalm 1, which appears to be irrelevant in his current dilemma.

In lament psalms like Psalm 13, the righteous psalmist grieves before YHWH for he is disturbed to see the discrepancy between the divine retributive justice in Psalm 1 and his personal experience. He laments over how the righteous is suffering and the wicked is triumphing over him. The psalmist pleads YHWH to bring about blessing on him who is righteous and corresponding curses to the wicked enemies.

***Psalm of Innocence:***

*The righteous psalmist asserts his righteousness  
meriting YHWH's blessings instead of curses.*

Psalm 26 is often classified as a psalm of innocence. It depicts a court scene where the psalmist pleads “not guilty.” The psalmist’s list of reasons for vindication is enclosed by verses 1–2 and verses 11–12 of the psalmist’s imperatival request for vindication (vindicate me, prove me, try me, test my heart and mind, redeem me, be gracious to me).

The bulk of the psalm is focused on how the psalmist argues for his blamelessness and righteousness. Verses 3–10 form the basis of his plea of innocence. Wilson suggests, “This psalm is a prayer for redemption founded on an extended protestation of personal innocence, which the psalmist invites the penetrating gaze of divine scrutiny to confirm and honor.”<sup>24</sup>

The psalmist uses two ways to express his innocence and integrity. First, he tells us of his blameless actions. He is the one who lives a blameless life and constantly trusts in YHWH rather than in others or himself (v. 1b). He is careful to walk in the love and truth of YHWH (v. 3). He loves to go to the temple of the Lord to give thanks and tell of God’s wondrous deeds (vv. 6-8). Second, the psalmist distances himself from the wicked and evildoers. He claims that he does not engage in any deception and hypocrisy (vv. 4-5).

Psalm 26 uses Psalm 1 as the basis for the assertion of innocence. This is seen in the close linguistic connection between Psalm 26 and Psalm 1. The function of Psalm 26:4-5 is to distance the righteous psalmist from the wicked with the terminologies לֹא יֵשֵׁב, חַטָּא, and רָשָׁע that remind one of Psalm 1. Psalm 26:9-11 alludes to the idea of Psalm 1—“therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous.” The psalmist of Psalm 26 pleads for YHWH to spare him from sharing the destiny of sinners, bloodthirsty

<sup>24</sup> Wilson, *Psalms 1-72*, 470.

men, and the wicked. Bellinger writes, “The speaker does not want to be counted among the wicked, the guilty, but among the innocent—and thus wishes to be included in the congregation of the faithful in the sanctuary (v. 8) rather than in the congregation of the wicked (v. 9).”<sup>25</sup> The psalmist in Psalm 26 uses the criteria set in Psalm 1 concerning the righteous life and applies the description to himself in his personal plea for vindication.

Psalms of innocence like Psalm 26 use the description of the blessed person in Psalm 1 as a standard to assert his innocence and righteousness. Thus, the psalmist claims that he deserves YHWH’s blessings and vindication, and not curses.

### ***Penitential Psalm:***

*The righteous psalmist repents for his transgression  
so that YHWH may bless and not curse him.*

Psalm 25 is an acrostic psalm. It is appropriately classified as a penitential psalm. If the chiasmic structure alluded to by Craigie in his commentary is taken into consideration, then right at the center of the chiasm is verse 11 where the psalmist asks the Lord to forgive his sin.<sup>26</sup>

The psalmist starts and ends the psalm confessing his trust in the Lord (vv. 1-2a, vv. 20-21). The confession of trust is followed by the psalmist’s heartfelt petitions before YHWH to deliver him from afflictions and shame, brought on by both himself (v. 7, “remember not the sins of my youth and my rebellious ways”) and his enemies (v. 19, “Consider how many are my foes, and with what violent hatred they hate me”). In verses 8–10 and verses 12–14, the psalmist speaks about YHWH’s instructive nature as a teacher. YHWH teaches his people the way of the righteous and the blessings that come with obedience. At the center of the chiasmic structure is the psalmist’s prayer for forgiveness of sin in verse 11—“For the sake of your name, O Lord, forgive my iniquity, though it is great.” Wilson states, “At the central point of the psalm (25:11), he confesses ‘great’ iniquity and seeks forgiveness from God. Rather than simple ‘forgetfulness’, he is asking God not to allow these confessed sins to stand in the way of divine deliverance.”<sup>27</sup>

Psalm 25 is thematically and linguistically connected to Psalm 1 by the word  $\text{רָצוֹן}$ . The word occurs five times in the psalm (vv. 4, 5, 8, 9, 12). While Psalm 1 didactically explains that the righteous does not walk in the way of the sinners and that YHWH knows the way of the righteous,

<sup>25</sup> William Bellinger, *Psalms: Reading and Studying the Book of Praises* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1990), 457.

<sup>26</sup> Peter Craigie, *Psalms 1-50* (WBC 19; Waco: Word Books, 1983), 218.

<sup>27</sup> Wilson, *Psalms 1-72*, 463.

here in Psalm 25, the psalmist in a context of prayer knows that he has drifted away from the way of the torah of YHWH; thus he pleads YHWH to forgive him and redirect his way. He recognizes that only when his sins are forgiven will blessings come about. Only when he walks in the way of the righteous will he spend his days in prosperity and his descendants inherit the land (v. 13). Only then will anguish, affliction and shame be taken away from him.<sup>28</sup> The image of YHWH as a teacher of the right way or path echoes the importance of meditating on the torah of YHWH in Psalm 1.

Penitential psalms like Psalm 25 is a repentant response to the retributive justice yardstick set in Psalm 1. It is mindful of Psalm 1 where YHWH's judgment and curse come upon those who have strayed away from YHWH's way. Thus, penitential psalms are efforts to avoid YHWH's wrath and curse before it is too late.

### ***Imprecatory Psalm:***

*The righteous pleads YHWH to bring curses  
on the wicked and blessings on himself.*

Psalm 58 in general is often classified as a lament psalm. However, careful scrutiny will show that it is best classified as an imprecatory psalm (or prophetic judgment speech according to Tate). It is less an inward look at his own misery, but more of "a vehement denunciation of the corruption of leaders and judges and an equally vehement call for their judgment."<sup>29</sup>

The psalm may be divided into four main parts, namely, the apparent unfair judgment of the pagan gods (vv. 1-2),<sup>30</sup> description of the wicked (vv. 3-5), imprecations against the wicked (vv. 6-9) and finally, affirmation of YHWH's retributive justice, in which the righteous will be rewarded.

The first two and last two verses of the psalm (vv. 1-2 and vv. 10-11) enclose verses 3-9. Verses 1-2 speak of the pagan ruling gods who are engaged in violence instead of exercising justice. They do not make fair judgments between the wicked and the righteous psalmist. This is in stark contrast to YHWH who brings about just judgment in verses 10-11. Verses 3-5 use the metaphor of a serpent to describe the wicked. Reminiscent of the serpent of Genesis 1, they speak lies. Also, they are

<sup>28</sup> Wilson also sees the centrality of the "way" or "ways of YHWH" in the psalm. He writes, "Finding the way of YHWH means experiencing deliverance, prosperity, and divine grace."

<sup>29</sup> Marvin Tate, *Psalms 51-100* (WBC 20; Dallas: Word Books, 1990), 84.

<sup>30</sup> Limburg reads this as earthly human leaders, Wilson as powerful individuals, and Kraus as demonic authorities.

invincible for “they cannot be charmed. No one has power over them, no one can repel them.”<sup>31</sup> Following a description of the wicked is the psalmist imprecations against them. The righteous psalmist knows that he is unable to overcome the wicked, he therefore asks for YHWH’s intervention. He wishes that YHWH breaks the lion-like teeth of the wicked enemy. Verses 7–9 describe an image of the wicked’s “total disappearance and being blown away” like water and snail.<sup>32</sup>

The relationship between Psalm 1 and Psalm 58 is evident in how the psalmist of Psalm 58 bases his imprecations against the enemies on Psalm 1. First, the wicked leaders and judges are described to be involved in injustice and devising evil schemes like the wicked of Psalm 1. These lords or judges are deceptive and violent. Second, the psalmist wishes for the misfortune of the wicked leaders and judges. The imprecation focuses on the vanishing of these enemies reminiscent of the chaff-metaphor used in Psalm 1 to describe the fate of the wicked. Third, the idea that YHWH is the judge and he judges righteously is also reminiscent of Psalm 1:5-6. The righteous will be avenged and rewarded with blessings and the wicked punished.

Thus, at the heart of imprecatory psalms like Psalm 58 is the desire to see the worldview of divine retributive justice directed and applied also to the wicked. The psalmist pleads for YHWH to reverse the fates of the righteous and wicked. The psalmist asks YHWH to bring about destruction and curses to the wicked. Imprecatory psalms apply the retributive justice principle not just to self but also to the wicked.

### *Thanksgiving Psalm:*

*The righteous praises YHWH because the righteous one is indeed blessed and the wicked cursed.*

Psalm 107 is a well-structured psalm. It is a thanksgiving psalm that describes at least four representative afflictions wherein YHWH’s *hesed* is manifested. YHWH answers prayers! The four proverbial afflictions and the gathering of the people from all corners of the world depict not only the return of the exile, but also the universal community of YHWH.<sup>33</sup> What is noteworthy is that each affliction is structured with at least three parts, mostly in the form of a formulaic refrain,<sup>34</sup> namely, (1)

<sup>31</sup> Kraus, *Psalms 1-59*, 536.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 248.

<sup>34</sup> Gerstenberger suggests that the refrain reflects the liturgical background of the psalm. See Erhard Gerstenberger, *Psalms, Part 2 and Lamentations* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001).

prayer, (2) YHWH's response and deliverance, and (3) giving thanks for YHWH's loving-kindness.

The four life afflictions may be briefly labeled as wanderers in the desert (vv. 4-9), prisoners in prison (vv. 10-16),<sup>35</sup> sick people (vv. 17-22), and sailors on the sea (vv. 23-32). The description of affliction is at once followed by a formulaic refrain of the community's clamor—"Then they cried out to YHWH in their distress" (in vv. 6, 13, 19, 28). The formulaic style and brevity of the community's outcry or prayer might be intended to function as a foil for a lengthy account of YHWH's works of deliverance. Immediately following the formulaic cry of the community, the psalm explains that YHWH has responded to the community's cry for help with the repeated refrain "from their distress he delivered them" (v. 6), "from their distress he saved them" (vv. 13, 19), and "from their distress he brought them out" (v. 28). The formulaic refrain is followed by an extended description of the particularities of YHWH's deliverance corresponding to the predicament and prayer. Salvation from life affliction necessitates another appropriate refrain—"Let them give thanks to the Lord for his steadfast love and his wonderful works to mankind" (vv. 8, 15, 21, 31). This is a call to praise YHWH for his wonderful works towards mankind (not just the returning exile). The refrain is augmented by varying yet specific reasons for praising YHWH. The reasons correspond with the description of YHWH's response and rescue.

Following the four scenarios is an interspersing of YHWH's judgment against the wicked and blessing to the righteous who are described as hungry and needy.

Verses 33–34: Curses upon the wicked

Verses 45–38: Blessings upon the hungry

Verses 39–40: Curses upon the oppressive princes

Verses 41–42: Blessings upon the needy

In verses 33–34, a disastrous description is made of the wicked when the rivers turn into desert, spring into thirsty ground, and fruitful land into salty waste. In verses 35–38, YHWH provides water to the hungry and blesses them with fruitful produce. In verses 39–40, YHWH

<sup>35</sup> Cohen suggests that "darkness" in Ps 107:10-16 refers to dwelling in darkness as a period of punishment. Chaim Cohen, "The Meaning of צל־מוֹתָ 'Darkness': A Study in Philological Method," in *Texts, Temples, and Traditions: A Tribute to Menahem Haran* (ed. M. Fox et al.; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1996), 287-309.

brings contempt and curse upon the princes who dealt oppressively with the poor and hungry. Finally in verses 41–42, YHWH saves the needy from distress. What is noteworthy here is the concept of reversal. YHWH reverses the fate of the wicked from blessings to curses and that of the righteous from curses to blessings.

The relationship between Psalm 107 and Psalm 1 is found in how the psalmist attributes YHWH's deliverance of the people who cried out to him and the reversal of the fates of the righteous and wicked as products of YHWH's *תִּסְדֵּךְ*. YHWH's *תִּסְדֵּךְ* is YHWH's retributive justice. Thus, YHWH's retributive justice is worthy to be praised. YHWH is to be praised for he does not only speak about retributive justice, but he also brings it about. The righteous is blessed and the wicked are cursed with judgment. Thanksgiving psalms like Psalm 107 praise the worldview of Psalm 1. The trustworthiness of the divine retributive justice principle set in Psalm 1 is affirmed and praised.

#### IV. Conclusion

Psalm 1 helps in reading the entire book of Psalms. I have demonstrated how the theme of Psalm 1, namely the divine retributive justice principle, truly introduces the book of Psalms. Mindful that reductionism is a taboo in biblical scholarship, it cannot be nonetheless denied that the argument of how one single theme is developed in the book demonstrates the thematic unity of the Psalms. While there is thematic unity, thematic diversity is also created in the different psalm types. The different psalm forms develop the nuances and complexities of the divine retributive justice theme within their own forms. In sum, the different literary forms of the book of Psalms revolve around the central theme of divine retributive justice introduced in Psalm 1. The different literary forms in the Psalms are then expansions of, confessions of, appeals to, responses to, entreaties of, and praises of the divine retributive justice set forth in Psalm 1.

Furthermore, many Psalms scholars have proposed the theology or theologies of the book of Psalms. Some scholars emphasize a one overarching theology of the Psalter. A few examples are kingship (Eaton),<sup>36</sup> wisdom and kingship of YHWH (Wilson), torah of YHWH (McCann), and Israel's worship (Mowinckel).<sup>37</sup> Others, however, have explored the question with a matrix of theologies.<sup>38</sup> For example, William Bellinger

<sup>36</sup> John H. Eaton, *Kingship and the Psalms* (Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1986).

<sup>37</sup> Sigmund Mowinckel, *The Psalms in Israel's Worship* (trans. D. R. Ap-Thomas; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2004).

<sup>38</sup> Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Theology of the Psalms* (trans. K. Crim; Minneapolis: Fortress, 1986).

lists three major theologies in the Psalms, namely covenant theology, creation theology and prophetic theology.<sup>39</sup> This essay humbly suggests that divine retributive justice is worthy of consideration as an overarching theme of the book of Psalms.

<sup>39</sup> William H. Bellinger Jr., "Portraits of Faith: The Scope of Theology in the Psalms" in *An Introduction to Wisdom Literature and the Psalms: Festschrift Marvin E. Tate* (ed. H. W. Ballard Jr. and W. D. Tucher Jr.; Macon: Mercer University Press, 2000), 111-28.