

**THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN
THE WISE AND THE FOOLISH IN PSALMS:
THEODICY, UNDERSTANDING PROVIDENCE,
AND RELIGIOUS RESPONSES**

HAYYIM ANGEL

*Happy is the man who has not followed the counsel of the wicked,
or taken the path of sinners,
or joined the company of the insolent;
rather, the teaching of the Lord is his delight,
and he studies that teaching day and night.
He is like a tree planted beside streams of water,
which yields its fruit in season,
whose foliage never fades,
and whatever it produces thrives.
Not so the wicked;
rather, they are like chaff that wind blows away.
Therefore the wicked will not survive judgment,
nor will sinners, in the assembly of the righteous.
For the Lord cherishes the way of the righteous,
but the way of the wicked is doomed (Ps. 1).*

Ultimately, one of the 150 psalms had to be chosen as the very first of the Book of Psalms. Nevertheless, it is interesting that the passage selected as Psalm 1 is not a prayer to God; it is wisdom from the psalmist to his readers.¹

Radak (on 1:1) maintains that the Book of Psalms begins with this proclamation of faith because of the centrality of the themes of reward-punishment and Divine providence: "In this psalm, David included the laws of man and

Hayyim Angel is Rabbi at Congregation Shearith Israel of New York City (the Spanish-Portuguese Synagogue, founded in 1654) and teaches Tanakh at Yeshiva University. He has published articles on Tanakh in journals such as Tradition, Or HaMizrah, and Jewish Bible Quarterly. Twenty of his biblical studies were collected in a book, Through an Opaque Lens. Another twenty studies were collected in a second book, Revealed Texts, Hidden Meanings.

what should happen to him in this world; that is, the reward for the righteous and punishment for the wicked. This psalm is very exalted, and therefore he began his book with it." Indeed, belief in providence and justice is critical for prayer in general.

Amos Hakham suggests another reason for the primary position of Psalm 1: It is an exhortation – those approaching God must be righteous.² Nahum Sarana adds that Psalm 1 stresses Torah study, treating it as an act of profound worship in addition to prayer.³ Thus, Psalm 1 makes for an excellent opening to the Book of Psalms. It creates the religious foundation upon which many of the Psalms are based.⁴

MANIFESTATIONS OF THIS EXPECTATION IN PSALMS

Many psalms are based on the assumption that the persecuted is righteous, and therefore worthy of salvation. To cite but two examples:

*He brought me out to freedom;
He rescued me because He was pleased with me.
The Lord rewarded me according to my merit;
He requited the cleanness of my hands;
for I have kept to the ways of the Lord,
and have not been guilty before my God;
for I am mindful of all His rules;
I have not disregarded His laws.
I have been blameless toward Him,
and have guarded myself against sinning;
and the Lord has requited me according to my merit,
the cleanness of my hands in His sight (18:20-25).*

*Preserve my life, for I am steadfast;
O You, my God,
deliver Your servant who trusts in You.*

*Have mercy on me, O LORD,
for I call to You all day long (86:2-3).*

Capturing the discomfort of several earlier commentators, Amos Hakham suggests that the psalmists are not bragging about their righteousness, as much as teaching that even a divinely chosen king is obligated to remain faithful to God.⁵ However, the psalmists are not boasting about themselves; they are praying or thanking God for His manifestation of justice in the world.

While many psalms appeal to God's attributes of justice, others describe the manifestation of God's providence to others. For example, Psalm 37 is concerned with people becoming demoralized by the success of the wicked and the suffering of the righteous: *Do not be vexed by evil men; do not be incensed by wrongdoers; for they soon wither like grass, like verdure fade away* (37:1-2). Psalm 37 essentially rotates on the same premise as Psalm 1, arguing that the wealth and success of the wicked is illusory. The tone of these two psalms is notably different, though. Psalm 1 is a confident proclamation of faith, whereas Psalm 37 expresses concern with what many people think and the need to defend the traditional belief system.

Strikingly, Psalm 37 appeals to personal observation to verify its thesis: *I have been young and am now old, but I have never seen a righteous man abandoned, or his children seeking bread* (37:25). Could it be that the psalmist never saw the righteous suffer? Many commentators cannot accept this statement at face value. Ibn Ezra, Radak, and Meiri modify the verse by maintaining that the righteous are never totally abandoned. These commentators are forced to argue for some poetic flexibility as they attempt to bridge the literal reading of the verse and actual human experience.

Similarly, some commentators struggle with some of the sweeping formulations in Psalm 107:

Some lived in deepest darkness, bound in cruel irons, because they defied the word of God, spurned the counsel of the Most High. He humbled their hearts through suffering; they stumbled with no one to help (107:10-12). *There were fools who suffered for their sinful way, and for their iniquities. All food was loathsome to them; they reached the gates of death* (107:17-18).

According to the literal reading of these verses, all prison terms and illnesses are attributed to sinful behavior. Rashi and Ibn Ezra therefore explain that anyone who is ill is called a fool (v. 17), since by definition he or she

must have sinned. However, Ibn Ezra (on 107:11, 42) modifies this principle with regard to prison sentences: most people who are in prison must have sinned, but it is possible that some have not and are being punished unjustly.

On 107:17, Radak explains the verse differently: "Had they been wise, they would think: Why has God sent this illness upon us? . . . But fools are insensitive to this matter, and do not repent until their illness becomes very great." According to Radak, the difference between wise people and fools is not that wise people never get ill whereas fools do. Rather, wise people who get ill utilize their illness as a religious opportunity for introspection and repentance, whereas fools do not. Thus, Radak frames the contrast between the wise and fools primarily as one of religious response, not as a guarantee of a higher quality of life for the righteous.

Perhaps the most unusual response to the suffering of the righteous is found in Psalm 94: *Happy is the man whom You discipline, O Lord, the man You instruct in Your teaching* (94:12). Rather than calling upon his audience to wait patiently for ultimate justice, or insisting that the righteous never suffer, this psalmist views suffering as a sign of Divine favor.⁶

Moreover, the psalmist in 94 is unique in his rebuke of those who do not fully trust in God's supervision and fairness: *Take heed, you most brutish people; fools, when will you get wisdom? Shall He who implants the ear not hear, He who forms the eye not see? Shall He who disciplines nations not punish, He who instructs men in knowledge?* (94:8-10). In contrast, other psalmists do not fault those praying and questioning God's justice; they simply attempt to answer their doubts.

To summarize the main approaches to conflicts with the beliefs set out in Psalm 1 and the commentators' responses:

1. There are no conflicts, and wise people can perceive justice all the time (37:25, 107:11).
2. In the end, all will be righted, so be patient (Psalm 1, 37). Psalm 37 explains this principle to a doubting audience; Psalm 94 rebukes those who doubt God's justice.
3. The principles of justice always work, and therefore one may pray to God to apply them, or thank God after they are applied (18:20-25; 86:2-3).
4. Suffering may be a sign of God's love, rather than punishment (94:12).

And two modifications of the commentators:

5. The principles of justice apply most of the time (Ibn Ezra, Radak, Meiri on 37:25; Ibn Ezra on 107:11).

6. The wise use their suffering as a religious opportunity to reach out to God and to introspect, whereas fools abandon faith (Radak on 107:11).

THE CONCERNS OF PSALMISTS

Although the principles underlying Psalm 1 are affirmed by many of the psalmists, some are confronted with spiritual struggle. For example, Psalm 39 opens with a raging internal battle, as the psalmist attempts to restrain himself. Ultimately, though, he is unsuccessful, and does complain about his suffering:

I resolved I would watch my step lest I offend by my speech; I would keep my mouth muzzled while the wicked man was in my presence. I was dumb, silent; I was very still while my pain was intense. My mind was in a rage, my thoughts were all aflame; I spoke out (39:2-4).

Amos Hakham explains that although the psalmist starts by trying to control himself, he eventually speaks out and does not conclude with any theological resolution. However, he remains steadfastly devoted to God through his suffering, praying that He eliminate his torments.⁷

Perhaps the most remarkable prayer in this regard is Psalm 73, which presents a theological struggle of the psalmist himself:

*As for me, my feet had almost strayed,
my steps were nearly led off course,
for I envied the wanton;
I saw the wicked at ease
It was for nothing that I kept my heart pure
and washed my hands in innocence,
seeing that I have been constantly afflicted,
that each morning brings new punishments.
Had I decided to say these things,
I should have been false to the circle of Your disciples.
So I applied myself to understand this,
but it seemed a hopeless task
till I entered God's sanctuary*

and reflected on their fate (73:2-17).

This psalmist portrays himself as one who almost lost his faith as a result of his witnessing the success of the wicked and enduring his own suffering.⁸ Not until he entered God's sanctuary were his theological difficulties resolved (v. 17).⁹ He proceeds with the same response as in Psalms 1, 37, and others: the wicked ultimately will meet their sudden doom (vv. 18-20).

Unlike those psalms that use patience as a resolution, however, Psalm 73 continues: *My mind was stripped of its reason, my feelings were numbed. I was a dolt, without knowledge; I was brutish toward You* (vv. 21-22). Though he had reached a response in verses 17-20, the psalmist breaks chronological boundaries with this flashback, indicating an ongoing religious struggle. It also is noteworthy that this conclusion was not obvious to this psalmist as it is to those of Psalms 1 and 37. He needed to enter God's sanctuary after reaching a state of near-despair from his introspection.

The conclusion of Psalm 73 suggests a different contrast between the wise and foolish:

*Yet I was always with You,
 You held my right hand;
 You guided me by Your counsel
 and led me toward honor.
 Whom else have I in heaven?
 And having You, I want no one on earth.
 My body and mind fail;
 but God is the stay of my mind, my portion forever.
 Those who keep far from You perish;
 You annihilate all who are untrue to You
 As for me, nearness to God is good;
 I have made the Lord God my refuge,
 that I may recount all Your works* (vv. 23-28).

The psalmist concludes that he is close to God (v. 23), whereas the wicked are far away from Him (v. 27). The success of the wicked may be short-lived, but that is not the main resolution of Psalm 73. Instead, the psalmist ultimately uses his suffering and theological torment as an opportunity to draw closer to God.¹⁰

Rather than viewing this psalm as exceptional, one midrash contends that Psalm 73 contains the true essence of the Book of Psalms: "*I was a dolt, without knowledge, and so forth (73:22): This should have been the beginning of the Book, but there is no chronological order in the Torah*" (*Eccles. Rabbah* 1:12). Instead of the confident declaration of faith in Psalm 1, the sages of this midrash appear to have considered the struggle of Psalm 73 central to the religious nature of Psalms. The response of the wise contrasts with that of the fool, even if both might live the same successful – or tormented – lifestyles. However, the wise do not necessarily perceive justice any more than fools do.¹¹

This tension between the potential primacy of Psalm 1 or Psalm 73 is captured poignantly by Radak's comments on Psalm 92:

*How great are Your works, O Lord,
how very subtle Your designs!
A brutish man cannot know,
a fool cannot understand this:
though the wicked sprout like grass
though all evildoers blossom,
it is only that they may be destroyed forever.
But You are exalted, O Lord, for all time (92:6-9).*

Typically, these verses are understood as contrasting the wise and fools. Wise people have patience, confident that the success of the wicked is illusory. In contrast, fools do not understand this truth (Rashi, Amos Hakham). Radak, however, struggles with the flow of these verses and their underlying theology:

Subtle Your designs: the reasons for difficult matters in this world were not revealed to the wise . . . *A brutish man*: this verse may be connected to [the verse] above or [the verse] below. If above, then its interpretation is thus. . . . Every man is a fool (*ish – ba'ar lo yeda*), who cannot know this, that is, to understand Your designs. If below, it will be explained thus: *A brutish man cannot know – though the wicked sprout like grass*, that is, why they succeed in this world. However, the wise understand that *they may be destroyed forever . . .* . . . One also may interpret the verse even relating to what is below, yet its meaning is the same as the first interpretation:

Every man is a fool and does not understand the success of the wicked in this world nor the suffering of the righteous in this world; for even though he said that *they may be destroyed forever* . . . there remain difficult questions on this matter. Our Sages (*Berakhot 7a*) have said that even Moses our Teacher did not understand (Radak on 92:6-9).

Thus, Radak is unsure if 92:7 should be translated as "*A brutish man cannot know*" – whereas the wise man does know; or whether "man is a brute and cannot know," that is, no man – not even Moses our Teacher – can fathom the success of the wicked. This interpretive ambiguity resembles the tension between Psalm 1 and Psalm 73 as theoretical competitors for the primary position in the Book of Psalms. Specifically, when reading verses that appear to contrast the knowledge of the fools with that of the wise, Radak suggests that all people are fools when it comes to understanding God's ways.

CONCLUSION

There are two poles depicted within the Book of Psalms. Sometimes the wise person clearly understands God's ways whereas the fool does not. At other times, nobody – not even the psalmist – understands. Sometimes, it is assumed that the righteous person necessarily will live a happier life than the wicked, at least in the long run; at other times, nobody can perceive this justice.

Yet, there consistently remain two differences between the wise and the fool in Psalms. One is how they respond to conflicts between religious principle and perceived reality. Because of unfairness in this world, the wicked abandon God: *The benighted man thinks, 'God does not care'* (14:1). In contrast, the righteous develop their relationship with God, sometimes by remaining steadfast in their belief that everything must ultimately be fair, and sometimes by protesting or pleading. Whatever their response, they create a dynamic connection to God. *Yet I was always with You* (73:23), proclaims the troubled psalmist. The second is that the wise continually move back to the beliefs set out in Psalm 1, whereas fools despair of God's ultimate justice.

Psalms offer various ways of approaching God in all situations, good and bad. These matters, of course, reach far beyond the simple meaning of verses

in the Book of Psalms – they shape the very nature of prayer and religious experience.

NOTES

1. There are a few other psalms addressed to other people, rather than to God. See, for example, Psalms 4, 37, 49, 62.
2. A. Hakham, *Da'at Mikra: Psalms* Vol. 1 (Hebrew), (Jerusalem: Mossad HaRav Kook, 1979) pp. 5-6.
3. N. Sarna, *On the Book of Psalms: Exploring the Prayers of Ancient Israel* (New York: Schocken Books, 1993) pp. 26-29.
4. It is worth noting that the aforementioned commentators offer their explanations based on the current canonical form of the Psalms. However, the Talmud (*Berakhot* 9b-10a) suggests that Psalms 1-2 were initially combined. Notwithstanding, the Book of Psalms' introduction with its opening verses still may be interpreted along the lines of Radak, Hakham, and Sarna.
5. Hakham, Vol. 1, pp. 85-87, 95-96.
6. Cf. Deuteronomy 8:5: *Bear in mind that the Lord your God disciplines you just as a man disciplines his son.* Eliphaz appeals to this argument as well: *See how happy is the man whom God reproves; Do not reject the discipline of the Almighty* (Job 5:17). Cf. *Berakhot* 5b, which maintains that it is a daily occurrence that some people suffer without sin.
7. Hakham, p. 227.
8. A. Hakham, *Da'at Mikra: Psalms* Vol. 2, p. 10, suggests that the psalmist may be speaking autobiographically, but it also is possible that he is speaking as a sage describing the experience of many.
9. A. Hakham, Vol. 2, p.6, interprets this verse to mean that by coming to the Temple precincts, the psalmist met with sages and prophets, who taught him the proper response.
10. See further discussion of this psalm and its theological implications in J.C. McCann, Jr., "Psalm 73: A Microcosm of Old Testament Theology," in *The Listening Heart: Essays in Wisdom and the Psalms in honor of Roland E. Murphy*, O. Carm., K.G. Hoglund et al. (eds.) (Sheffield: *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament*, 1987) pp. 247-257.
11. It might also be significant that Psalm 73 begins the third collection of Psalms, and thus the second half of Psalms. If so, the very structure of the Book may waver between the confidence of Psalm 1, which begins the first half; and the uncertainty of Psalm 73, which begins the second half. Cf. W. Brueggemann & P.D. Miller, "Psalm 73 as a Canonical Marker," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 72 (1996) pp. 45-56. It must be stressed, however, that it is impossible to ascertain the underlying purposes of the current canonical arrangement of the Psalms, and therefore this suggestion belongs to the realm of intriguing speculation.