Jewish and Christian Reading of Psalm 1: An Anglican Perspective on a Shared Spiritual Threshold

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Psalm 1, the gateway to the Book of Psalms, stands as a spiritual threshold embraced by both Jews and Christians. In the Anglican tradition, its voice echoes as an invitation to meditation, discernment, spiritual growth, and the practice of dialogue.

Introduction: Psalm 1 as a Shared Spiritual Threshold

Psalm 1 occupies a unique place in both Jewish and Christian tradition, standing as a spiritual threshold for the entire Psalter. It contains neither explicit prayer, nor praise, nor lament. It does not directly mention the Temple, nor the history of Israel. But it traces two paths: that of the righteous, rooted in the Torah, and that of the wicked, destined for dispersion.

Ancient and contemporary exegetes discern in it not only the gateway to the book of Psalms, but also a summary of the entire dynamic of life according to God. This threshold dimension, this doorway, is fundamental for contemporary Jewish-Christian dialogue, particularly in the Montréal context of interreligious exchange.

Marking the threshold of the Psalter in both Jewish and Christian tradition, Psalm 1 is read as a programmatic introduction. It proposes a “clear dichotomy between the way of the righteous and that of the wicked,” while at the same time opening a renewed invitation to choose the way of wisdom and Torah (Teaching), in fidelity to God’s commandments. For the Anglican tradition, shaped by the English Reformation of the 16th century and a deep awareness of biblical sharing with Judaism, the voice of Psalm 1 resonates as a call to meditation, discernment, spiritual growth, and dialogue.

I propose a journey in six steps:

I. The historical context of the Reformation and the birth of the Anglican Psalter
II. The role of the Psalter and Psalm 1 in Anglican tradition
III. The use of Psalm 1 in the liturgical cycle and Anglican spirituality
IV. Jewish and Christian readings in dialogue
V. The metaphorical and spiritual approach to the Psalms in Anglican life
VI. A concluding reflection on Jewish-Christian dialogue

I. The English Reformation, the Book of Common Prayer, and the Integration of the English Psalter

To approach Psalm 1 from an Anglican perspective requires understanding the historical context that shaped Anglican liturgical and biblical tradition. The English Reformation, initiated in the 16th century under Henry VIII and amplified by Thomas Cranmer, marked the break with the monopoly of Latin liturgy and the advent of worship in the vernacular. For the first time, the English read the Bible in their own language and were united by a common prayer in English.

The publication of the *Book of Common Prayer* in 1549 was both a political and spiritual founding act.[1] It established a “uniformity of worship in English,” making God’s Word accessible to the greatest number, while affirming the authority of Scripture over Christian life.

The *Book of Common Prayer* integrated the entire Psalter into daily prayer, translated into English primarily in Miles Coverdale’s version. Unlike the King James Version (1611), Coverdale’s translation—derived from the *Great Bible* (1539), itself influenced by the Latin *Vulgate* and Luther’s German translations—became the poetic and devotional soul of Anglican prayer. Notably, it was not translated directly from Hebrew or Greek, but from Latin and German.

Coverdale’s Psalter, with its literary and rhythmic qualities, remained in use even after the *King James Version* was introduced: “It harmonizes so well with Cranmer’s majestic prose in the *Book of Common Prayer* that composers, from the 16th century to today, have continually set these Psalms to music,” enriching liturgical experience.

This choice was deliberate. It expressed continuity with shared biblical heritage and showed that the English Reformation did not aim to exclude the common biblical foundation with Judaism, but to revitalize it for Christian life.

II. Liturgical Use of the Psalter and Psalm 1 in Anglican Tradition

The integration of the Psalms into daily prayer is central to Anglicanism. From 1549 onward, the *Book of Common Prayer* prescribed the entire Psalter to be recited each month, through daily readings at Morning Prayer and Evening Prayer. This practice, inspired by medieval monastic usage, also continues Jewish precedent, where *Tehillim* structures personal and communal piety.

Psalm 1 opens the Psalter and is read on the first day of the month. It also appears in Sunday readings, aligned with the Revised Common Lectionary used by the Anglican Church of Canada, the Episcopal Church in the USA, and other denominations.

Thus, each Anglican faithful would meditate on Psalm 1 at least twelve times a year, shaping interiorization of its dynamic: the choice between two ways, meditation day and night, rootedness in divine teaching.

John Wesley affirmed: “There is no liturgy anywhere that breathes so much scriptural piety and rational devotion as the Common Prayer of the Church of England.”

Pastorally, regular meditation on Psalm 1 becomes a matrix for education in wisdom, rootedness in Scripture, and openness to the universal prayer of the Church, in continuity with Jewish tradition.

III. Psalm 1 in the Liturgical Cycle and Anglican Spirituality

1. Monthly cycle and daily offices

Psalm 1 inaugurates the *Book of Common Prayer* Psalter on the first day of the month, at Morning and Evening Prayer. It is never separated from a dynamic of *ruminatio*, continuous meditation: “Blessed is the man that hath not walked… But his delight is in the law of the Lord; and in his law will he exercise himself day and night.”

2. Structure of Morning and Evening Prayer

The offices are ordered around Scripture reading, confession, proclamation of grace, recitation of Psalms and canticles, followed by intercessions. Psalm 1, at the head of the Psalter, frames the

day under the sign of meditating on God's Law.

The practice of reciting or singing the Psalms shapes the spiritual experience. The communal singing of the Psalms draws us closer to Jesus, who promised, "Where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am among them." This liturgical framework, inherited from both Judaism and early Christianity, illuminates the Jewish-Christian dialogue on the centrality of the Psalter, and of Psalm 1 in particular.

3. Pastoral example

N.T. Wright emphasizes: "The Psalms are the skeleton not only of the Old Testament but also of the New. Jesus clearly knew them intimately." Psalm 1 thus opens a Christ-centered and communal reading of prayer. In baptisms, confirmations, or funerals, Psalm 1 may be chosen to mark blessing, fidelity, and the invitation to follow the way of the righteous.

The prayer of Psalm 1, internalized month by month and at every stage of church life, shapes believers who are rooted in the listening of the Word and open to dialogue with other traditions.

IV. Jewish and Christian Approaches to Psalm 1: Convergence and Differences

1. The Christian Reading: a Christological and Eschatological Emphasis

On the Christian side, according to its introduction in *La Sainte Bible selon la Vulgate* translated by J.-B. Glaire, Psalm 1 is read as encapsulating the whole moral teaching of the Psalter – "a compendium of the entire doctrine of the Psalter and an abridgement of all its moral teaching" – but also as a prefiguration of Christ, "the Just One par excellence."

It opens the way to a typological reading, in which the righteous person becomes a figure of Christ, and the meditation on the Law foreshadows the fullness of Revelation in Jesus.

The Fathers of the Church (Ambrose, Augustine, Hilary of Poitiers) emphasize how Psalm 1 already announces the great theme of the two ways, and how the meditation on the Law leads, in Christian faith, to the contemplation of the incarnate Word, who fulfills the Law and gives it its fullest meaning. For most Christian interpretations, this psalm functions as a kind of "spiritual program" and an invitation to follow Christ-the-Way, Christ-the-Word, the root of the new Law.

In Anglican practice, the emphasis on the interiorization of the Word, the integration of meditation with prayer and action, and the dynamic of spiritual growth and fruitfulness are interwoven with these two major dynamics – moral and Christological.

2. Convergence and Difference between Jewish and Christian Readings

In their use of the Psalter and in their readings of Psalm 1, Jewish and Anglican Christian traditions share several points in common:

- The central place of the Psalter as a book of prayer and meditation, both personal and communal.
- The call to wisdom, fidelity, and sustained meditation on the Word/Law of God.
- The dynamic of the two paths, which runs through both Jewish and Christian spirituality as a structuring axis.
- The liturgical and rhythmic grounding of Psalm 1 in the daily life of the faithful.

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There is, however, a fundamental difference. The Jewish tradition reads Psalm 1 within its sapiential and prophetic context, in connection with King David, the people of Israel, and their history, emphasizing fidelity to the Torah as a path of life and blessing.

The Christian tradition – and even more so the Anglican tradition – often rereads Psalm 1 in the light of Christ, re-situating the meditation on the Law within the dynamic of faith in Jesus, the incarnate Word and the fullness of the Law.

The challenge of Jewish–Christian dialogue, then, is that of recognizing the "interpretive difference." As understood in interreligious dialogue, this difference becomes not an obstacle but a space of fruitfulness and mutual enrichment, as Claude Geffré affirms in *De Babel à la Pentecôte*: "The comparative method thus makes it possible to share the other's perspective on one's own universe of beliefs without thereby renouncing one's own capacity for discernment and judgment."

V. Metaphorical Reading of Psalm 1 and Anglican Spirituality

1. The Tree Planted by the Waters: an Anglican Image of Growth

The most striking passage of Psalm 1 – "He shall be like a tree planted by streams of water, that brings forth its fruit in due season; its leaf shall not wither; and whatever he does shall prosper" – has inspired Anglican spiritual theology since the Reformation.

For Thomas Cranmer, the strength of the Psalter lies in its ability to offer vivid images of fidelity, spiritual vitality, and growth in God: "Meditation on the law –'day and night' –shapes the believer like 'a tree planted by the rivers of water.'" This image is not merely a moral illustration; it conveys the deep conviction that, for Anglicanism, the Christian faith is a path of maturation, perseverance in grace, and fruitfulness in both spiritual and communal life.

As John Stott, the renowned evangelical Anglican pastor, emphasizes, "the image of the tree planted by the waters expresses inner strength, stability amid trials, and the capacity to bear fruit in every season. It invites a life continually nourished by the source of the Word and of prayer."

From a pastoral perspective, this metaphor has been employed in many ways: preparation for confirmation, accompaniment of those going through times of vulnerability, meditations for prayer groups, and sermons during periods of social uncertainty. Thus, within the Anglican Communion, ecological commitment – such as that expressed in the recent Communion Forest initiative – is also grounded in this image of the tree, a symbol of divine fruitfulness and of the Christian vocation to growth and to the care of creation.

2. Other Metaphorical Images: Refuge, Shepherd, Path

The Anglican Psalter, heir to the Coverdale tradition, abounds in metaphorical images: God as shepherd in Psalm 23, as refuge in the psalms of supplication (Psalm 46 and 91), and as a path to be followed (Psalms 19 and 119). Anglican spirituality readily draws on these metaphors to portray the spiritual life as pilgrimage, the search for refuge, growth, and openness to grace.

For example, the Morning Prayer regularly invokes and actualizes the image of the Rock or the Refuge; celebrations of Confirmation or ordinations make use of the imagery of the flock, the path, or pilgrimage (see Psalm 119:5, "Your word is a lamp to my feet and a light to my path").

3. The Pastoral and Educational Approach

While repeatedly meditating on Psalm 1, the Anglican tradition also gives priority to spiritual

accompaniment. Pastoral sermons, lay formation literature, and prayer groups are built upon this dynamic: *to meditate on the Word day and night is to consent to being shaped like a tree, to bear fruit for the community, and to withstand the drought of trials through the irrigation of grace*.

Conclusion: Psalm 1 in Jewish-Christian Dialogue

Psalm 1, as the threshold of the Psalter, remains a doorway for dialogue. It offers a shared spiritual reference, fostering encounter across differences. As says the text of the Canadian Jewish-Catholic Dialogue The Psalms: A Doorway to Jewish-Catholic Dialogue: "We may interpret the words differently, but we use the Psalms in the same way: to give voice to our experiences in prayer and ritual, personally and communally."

For Anglican theology, Psalm 1 summarizes biblical wisdom – choosing life, meditating on the Word, growing like a tree, being blessed in fidelity – while inviting dialogical hospitality. Mutual listening, recognition of interpretive difference, and shared spiritual experience make dialogue fruitful, as Claude Geffré further emphasizes: "Moreover, the dialogical dimension calls the theologian, in his or her works, to remain open while affirming a clear position… This at the same time enables the creation of a space of shared positions."

In a fragmented world, common meditation on Psalm 1 engages us to live together in joy, growth, fidelity, and the search for happiness rooted in God. Psalm 1 is not the end, but the beginning of a shared journey, rich in meaning, memory, and hope.

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[1] See the Indicative Bibliogrphy at the end.

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