

STUDENT ESSAY



Psalm 139: The All-knowing and Ever-present God An Exegesis and Spiritual Reflection¹

Considered by many to be among the most exquisite poetry of the Psalter, Psalm 139 is also one of the most debated with respect to its form and setting. It is not neatly classified with any of the traditional psalm genres, although it contains elements found in psalms of praise, thanksgiving, lament, and wisdom. It is clearly, however, an individual, meditative prayer that makes use of the personal pronouns “I” and “you.”

With regard to its setting, some psalm scholars hold that Psalm 139 is the prayer of an innocent person who has been accused (perhaps of idolatry), and part of a sub-group of psalms referred to as “prayers of the accused” (Allen 324). In this context, the psalmist’s petition is that the Lord (Yhwh) examine his heart and find him innocent. Others propose that the psalm should be set in the liturgical context of a New Year festival where the voice of the psalmist is the

¹ Psalm 139 is reprinted at the end of this essay.

king, professing the praise of Yhwh and then promising to renounce all the enemies of the Lord (Kraus, *Psalms 60-150*, 512).²

What most commentators agree on is that the themes and language of this psalm are far more significant than its setting or genre to the reader who desires a closer relationship with God. The wisdom and poetry of this psalm distinguishes it from others in the Psalter. The following discussion aims to uncover the psalmist's understanding of what it means to be known and probed by the Lord. By careful examination of the psalm's structure and verses and by a concluding spiritual reflection, it is hoped that readers will develop a deeper appreciation for its poetry and meaning.

Exegesis

Exegesis of this psalm usually begins by dividing it into four sections. What is striking is the sharp break in tone between verses 18 and 19, apparently separating the psalm into two unequal parts: verses 1-18 and 19-24. Some commentators have interpreted this break as an indication that verses 19-24 did not originally belong with the first part of the psalm (Allen 320). However, the inclusion found at the beginning and end of the psalm: "Lord, you have probed me, you know me" (v. 1) and "Probe me, God, know my heart" (v. 23),³ indicate that both parts of the psalm make one unit. As James L. Mays puts it, "In spite of this stark transition between the parts, the psalm is a unit" (426). For purposes of this discussion, the psalm will be examined in its four sections as one unit.

The first section of the psalm declares that Yhwh is the all-knowing God (Kselman and Barré 550). Richard J. Clifford notes that the root of the Hebrew verb "to know" appears seven times in the psalm (279). The theme of knowledge is significant because it does not refer to ordinary, human knowledge. The kind of knowledge implied here, the divine knowing, is God's overwhelming, intimate knowledge of the psalmist. As J. Clinton McCann explains, "verses 1

² The heading or superscription of Psalm 139 reads: "For the leader/A psalm of David" (v. 1). "For the leader" is most likely a musical reference, since the psalms were sung and performed in liturgical ceremonies (Kraus, *Psalms 1-59*, 29-30). The second phrase, "A psalm of David," is not unique to this psalm, as seventy-three psalms in the Psalter refer to David in their headings. Whether this phrase indicates Davidic authorship or a sub-collection of psalms attributed to David as a composer of songs (1 Sam 16:17-18) and orchestrator of psalmic praise in the temple (1 Chr 16:7-43) is difficult to ascertain (Kraus, *Psalms 1-59*, 22-23; McCann 655-56; cf. Ps 72:20). What can be said is that from "ancient times it is part of David's story that he was a poet and a singer" (Kraus, *Psalms 1-59*, 23). The mention of David in the heading suggests that it bore great significance for the ancient community of worship.

³ All citations of Scripture in this essay are taken from the New American Bible unless otherwise indicated.

through 6 focus on God's knowledge of the psalmist's actions, thoughts, and words" (1235). It is God who knows when he sits and stands, journeys and rests. It is God who knows his thoughts and words before they are spoken.

A potential sense of ambiguity in the psalmist's prayer in this section has been noted. God's knowledge overwhelms him and, perhaps, frightens and even oppresses him: "Behind and before you encircle me/and rest your hand upon me" (v. 5). William P. Brown comments that the metaphor of God's hand takes on special significance as "God 'besieges' him from all sides, 'behind and before,' and lays down the hand from above. . . .Such rhetoric leads the reader to expect a cry of protest or despair" (209; cf. Job 13:21). Yet the psalmist does not lament or complain. In contrast to Brown, Hans-Joachim Kraus suggests that the psalmist "stands amazed under the mystery and wonder" of God's activity (*Psalms 60-150*, 514). And in his awareness of the closeness of God, the psalmist finds himself in a state of contemplation about God's infinite understanding and presence.

Verse 7 introduces the second section by a rhetorical question, which is answered in verses 8-12: "Where can I hide from your spirit? / From your presence, where can I flee?" (v. 7). The psalmist is now the subject of the verbs, with the exception of verse 10, where the section breaks to acknowledge the guiding hand of God (Clifford 281). Whether the psalmist traverses the heavens or the depths of Sheol, flies with wings or goes beyond the sea, he is not hidden from God. God's reach and presence are inescapable. Even in Sheol, the depths of the earth, a place where "God has no business being," God is present (Brown 210). Leslie C. Allen agrees, for "while Sheol is not within Yhwh's sphere of blessing, it is within the sphere of divine sovereignty" (328-329). The benign nature of this sovereignty is acclaimed by the psalmist in verse 10: "Even there your hand will guide me / your right hand hold me fast."

In the final affirmation of this section the psalmist begins, "Surely darkness shall hide me" (v. 11). But God is everywhere, and even a "conjuring incantation that calls darkness to descend has no power, for darkness is light and night is like day for Yhwh" (Kraus, *Psalms 60-150*, 515). Light is always a sign of Yhwh's presence and wisdom, whereas darkness often signifies God's withdrawal (Jer 4:23). In this instance, the use of poetic license by the psalmist to proclaim darkness as God's light emphasizes God's overwhelming, pervasive presence.

The way St. Augustine interprets the concluding verses on darkness in this section adds to the discussion. Verse 12 is cited by St. Augustine as follows: "For darkness shall not be darkened by Thee / And night shall be lightened as the day" (638). The dark is darkened, according to St. Augustine, by those who commit sin and defend their sins to God. Those who confess their sins, even

though they are in the darkness, can “see” the night as something positive. The night may be likened to the guiding hand of the all-knowing and ever-present God, who makes it his personal concern to set us on the path of righteousness. For, “if we learn that it is by the desert of our sins that we suffer adversities, and our Father’s scourges are sweet to us . . . so shall we find the darkness of this night to be, as it were, the light of this night” (St. Augustine 638).

Whether or not St. Augustine’s interpretation is accepted as the literal meaning of the psalm (in distinction from a spiritual meaning), his reflection complements the themes discussed thus far. God knows, sees and is always present. For the psalmist and the reader, the implications of being so intimately known and pursued by God would suggest that God is aware of human sinfulness, and does what He can, with the guiding hand of verse 10, to lead the psalmist in the paths of righteousness.

The theme of the third section, verses 13-18, is Yhwh’s knowledge of the psalmist (Kselman and Barré 550). This section goes beyond the account of an all-knowing and ever-present God in the first two sections. For the psalmist, Yhwh is bound up in every aspect of creation, life and death. The verb “formed” in verse 13 is “used elsewhere of God’s gracious activity of constituting the whole people,” that is, the nation of Israel, one of God’s wonderful works (McCann 1236). This familiar usage of the verb brings special significance to its use here. The object of the verb “to form” in verse 13 is “my inmost being”: “You formed me in my inmost being,” or, literally, “you formed my kidneys” (v. 13). Although it may seem odd to single out the kidneys for God’s formative work, in Hebrew the kidneys “are the seat of the innermost feeling and stirrings of the human will” (Kraus, *Psalms 60-150*, 516). Beyond what God knows and probes in the previous sections, it is revealed in the third section that Yhwh has intimate knowledge of one’s innermost being, right down to the kidneys!

Furthermore, Yhwh is the Creator who “knits” life in the womb: “You knit me in my mother’s womb” (v. 13). As Brown states: “through a particularly vivid metaphor. . . God is weaver, an image that targets God’s (pro) creative activity” (211). The metaphor of God as weaver differs from the frequent biblical metaphor of God as potter (Gen 2:7). Knitting is a fine, detailed process, traditionally associated with women’s activity, and in this psalm the metaphor conveys that one can find God’s purposeful handiwork in the womb. McCann concurs with Brown as he argues that human life is not simply a matter of biology: “God is the one who has ‘intricately woven’ the psalmist together” (McCann 1236).

The psalmist cries out in wonder and praise in verse 14 as he recognizes the intimacy of God’s creative activity: “I praise you, so wonderfully you made me!” In verse 15a the psalmist reiterates that nothing is hidden from Yhwh, not

even his “bones.” This statement is complemented by the next poetic line, in which the psalmist speaks of being fashioned “in the depths of the earth” (v. 15b). McCann points out that the depths of the earth may be a metaphor for the womb but that the verse may also reflect a motif common to Ancient Near Eastern cosmologies in which humans originated from below the earth. If so, the psalmist asserts that “God is ultimately in control of even this process” (McCann 1236).

The importance of what is secret but not hidden from God is explored further by St. Augustine. He writes in response to verse 14: “Thou has made within a bone for me in secret, yet is it not hidden from Thee” (638). What is made in secret for St. Augustine is an inward strength, which is evoked by the word “bones.” Strength is put there by Yhwh so that we will not be broken in trials, tribulations and adversity. And because, according to St. Augustine, all are fashioned in the depths of the earth, this inner strength is necessary in order to follow the paths of righteousness. “For what great matter is it, if an Angel be brave?” (639). God then has not only given the psalmist his shape, form and life. God has given him the will and strength to sustain himself against sin and the wicked.

In verse 16 one might assume the psalmist is laying the groundwork for a doctrine of determinism or predestination: “Your eyes foresaw my actions; / in your book all are written down; / my days were shaped, before one came to be” (v. 16). Kraus asserts, however, that “This is not a matter of a theoretically speculative doctrine of predestination” (*Psalms 60-150*, 517). He warns against taking these lines out of their context and using them to dispute the gift of human free will. Kraus’s answer to such a claim is what he refers to as a “doxology of judgment” (517). Put simply, the intimate knowledge and omnipresence of Yhwh point to his place in creation as judge. He is in a position to know completely the psalmist’s intentions and actions, and the psalmist, in turn, submits to “the world judge and Creator from whom nothing is hidden” (517).

The psalmist brings the third section to a conclusion in verses 17-18, as, in Allen’s words, “His little mind is baffled by confrontation with the comprehensive, infinite mind of God” (330). The psalmist marvels at the works of creation and their number: “Were I to count, they would outnumber the sands; / to finish, I would need eternity” (v. 18). The reference to sand in the first half of the verse implies that God’s works of creation are too numerous to count. The second half of verse 18 is translated variously. The New Revised Standard Version (NRSV) reads “I am still with you.” It is important to consider how this phrase fits into the psalm thus far. Simply, if the psalmist had any feelings of ambiguity about the presence of God before (vv. 1-6), they have been fully

replaced by feelings of wonder and submission. Everything the psalmist is, is bound up in God.

This tribute to God's creative work in the third section gives the psalmist dignity and purpose (like that acclaimed for all human beings in Psalm 8:5). The fourth section, verses 19-24, brings the psalm to completion. The psalmist must join in the divine work. In these final verses, "the psalmist disassociates himself from the wicked" (Kselman and Barré 550). In doing so, he invites God's probing of his own heart and way of life (vv. 23-24), as he "lays himself. . . open to God's examination" (McCann 1237).

In verses 19-22 the psalm "abruptly calls for the death of the wicked and avows hatred in return for those who hate God" (Mays 428). These verses have often been considered inexplicably different in content from the rest of the psalm. Furthermore, "liturgical use of the psalm has often omitted these verses, apparently because of their direct request for revenge" (McCann 1237). In these verses the psalmist expresses his wish that God destroy the "wicked" and remove the "bloodthirsty." He also swears loyalty to God by hating those who hate and oppose God: "With fierce hatred I hate them, / enemies I count as my own" (v. 22). The loathing and hatred of sin is not here, as in many psalms, a reaction to the threat of danger. Clifford suggests, rather, that after "contemplating the majesty and the delicacy of creation, the psalmist realizes there is only one thing marring it—sin" (283). Sin is what disfigures creation. The psalmist is now aware that he must distance himself from the wicked and avoid sinful ways. This is his purpose: to walk in the ways of the righteous.

Verses 23-24 reveal what has been implied in the previous verses, but delayed until now. As Mays states, "the first real petition comes at the very end, in verses 23-24," and "it gives theological balance to the whole" (429). The psalmist *invites* Yhwh's knowing, probing, and guidance: "See if my way is crooked, / then lead me in the ancient paths" (v. 24) or, as in the NRSV, "lead me in the way everlasting." The way everlasting is "the existence that is not shaken or brought to an end as the way of the wicked will be" (Mays 429). The way of the righteous is to be known, to be probed, to be examined and to be set right, now and forever.

Spiritual Reflection

When I was a teenager, I attended a charismatic Christian service with friends from high school. I did not consider myself religious at the time, but I attended the service because it was what my friends were doing and I went along. I was not all that inspired by what I saw and heard, and I thought to myself that certainly I believed in God but that maybe I was not the type of

person who would live a life devoted to prayer and worship. After eighteen years in ministry and a graduate degree in theology, I guess the joke is on me.

In all seriousness, Psalm 139 is what happened to me. Maybe I was intimidated, overwhelmed or afraid. But I could not run from, or fight, what God had known to be my purpose. I had always felt that my decisions were my own, but what I realized I needed more than free will was that my thoughts and actions begin with God.

The wisdom of this psalm is a profound understanding of a deeply personal God who is radically involved in every aspect of creation and life. What it offers to a community or an individual is a kind of freedom that begins with contemplation of God. As a community, we need ritual, for it helps us remember and celebrate. We need guiding rules, for they help us remain faithful and steadfast when we are tired and distressed. We also need, however, to consider that being religious or faithful begins with the type of contemplation the psalmist expresses in Psalm 139.

As the psalm suggests, relationship with God begins with questions of who God is and what God does. Furthermore, what is God to me and how does that affect how I relate to the rest of the world? The themes of knowledge and presence are not merely divine characteristics attributed to a supreme being. This is the importance of metaphor in this psalm. The metaphor of the guiding hand (v. 10), which has carefully woven each individual person's being (v. 13), is not just about why God is God. It is what defines our relationship with God. God has a personal interest in me (in all of us) and an interest in seeing my purpose realized. I am the handiwork of God, carefully created by the one who sees and records my days and sustains me in my trials.

Why would we not invite God to examine our hearts? God knows our purpose better than we do. He has not set us up to fail, and he does not look forward to judgment and punishment. He sees with infinite knowledge, and because he knows all, he can direct us away from what is wrong. And God is not unmoved by our love of virtue and righteousness. He celebrates with us when we embrace the "way everlasting": "But now we must celebrate and rejoice, because your brother was dead and has come to life again; he was lost and has been found" (Luke 15:32).

In conclusion, my study of Psalm 139 has opened up for me some of the most beautiful poetry found in the Psalter. I truly believe this psalm sets itself apart from other psalms and offers something uniquely instructive. Admittedly, this could be said of every psalm. But I hope I have been able in this discussion to help the reader to recognize the deep expression of who God is and what God does that makes this psalm so beautiful. A closer reading of Psalm 139 can draw us all into that sense of awe and purpose that comes from contemplation of God.

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PSALM 139

The All-knowing and Ever-present God

1 For the leader. A psalm of David.

I

Lord, you have probed me, you know me:

2 you know when I sit and stand;

you understand my thoughts from afar.

3 My travels and my rest you mark;

with all my ways you are familiar.

4 Even before a word is on my tongue,

Lord, you know it all.

5 Behind and before you encircle me

and rest your hand upon me.

6 Such knowledge is beyond me,

far too lofty for me to reach.

II

7 Where can I hide from your spirit?

From your presence, where can I flee?

8 If I ascend to the heavens, you are there;

if I lie down in Sheol, you are there too.

9 If I fly with the wings of dawn

and alight beyond the sea,

10 Even there your hand will guide me,

your right hand hold me fast.

11 If I say, "Surely darkness shall hide me,

and night shall be my light"

12 Darkness is not dark for you,

and night shines as the day.

Darkness and light are but one.

III

13 You formed my inmost being;

you knit me in my mother's womb.

14 I praise you, so wonderfully you made me;
wonderful are your works!
My very self you knew;

15 my bones were not hidden from you,
When I was being made in secret,
fashioned as in the depths of the earth.

16 Your eyes foresaw my actions;
in your book all are written down;
my days were shaped, before one came to be.

IV

17 How precious to me are your designs, O God;
how vast the sum of them!

18 Were I to count, they would outnumber the sands;
to finish, I would need eternity.

19 If only you would destroy the wicked, O God,
and the bloodthirsty would depart from me!

20 Deceitfully they invoke your name;
your foes swear faithless oaths.

21 Do I not hate, Lord, those who hate you?
Those who rise against you, do I not loathe?

22 With fierce hatred I hate them,
enemies I count as my own.

V

23 Probe me, God, know my heart;
try me, know my concerns.

24 See if my way is crooked,
then lead me in the ancient paths.

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