

## Psalm 139: A Hymn and Lament to the Omniscient and Omnipresent God

Psalm 139 is one of the clearest and boldest Biblical texts addressing the omniscience and omnipresence of God with implications to God's sovereignty and our prayer. W. A. Shelton calls it "one of the grandest psalms in the entire collection, if not, indeed the best of them all," and says of it, "Its tone is high, and its conception of the personal and highly spiritual nature of God rises to glorious heights...It is the O.T.'s highest conception of the relationship of God to the individual soul."<sup>1</sup> Every aspect of life is known by and controlled by God from David's procreation to any attempt to escape Him, so David affirms his hatred of God's enemies and calls upon God to prove his loyalty. As with most psalms the development is rather generic, encouraging anyone who finds herself in a similar situation to David to pray and own this psalm as her own as well. It is so wonderful to pray our theology and to see its deep personal implications with God so deeply involved in our lives.

The psalm begins and ends with an enclusio that echos with a repetition of the same words (vv. 1-3, 23-24). These repeated verbs are search (*ḥāqar*), know (*yādaʿ*), way (*derek*), and purposes or anxious thoughts (*rēaʿ* in vv. 2 and 17, and synonym *śarʿappāy* in v. 23). At the start of the psalm this divine knowledge

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<sup>1</sup> W. A. Shelton, "Psalms LXXIII-CL," in *The Abingdon Bible Commentary*, ed. F. C. Eiselen, E. Lewis, and D. G. Downey (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1929), p. 595.

becomes the basis of God's control but by the end of the psalm these sentiments become reassuring requests in prayer.

In verses 1-6 David expresses that God knows all about him. In synonymous parallelism God searches me (*hāqartani*) with words used elsewhere of spying out the land, prospecting and legal investigation (Deut. 13:15; Judg. 18:2; Job 28:3). The Lord's knowledge of David is as though He has completed an thorough investigation of His servant. Using the figure of merism of opposites for sitting and rising, and travelling and resting, God is acclaimed to know all about David (vv. 2-3). The discernment of the Lord is communicated through the verb of winnow (*zērītā*). This winnowing or sifting of David's thoughts and intents is either from afar as a spatial metaphor or from before as in prescience "long ago."<sup>2</sup> Either way we take that metaphor, David clearly states that God knows it all (thoughts, intents, acts, and character) before David would speak (v. 4) so God is not limited to an open future but penetrates to know the future in advance. The process of the Lord's knowledge is painstakingly sifting, which results in the Lord's being intimately acquainted with all my ways. David further emphasizes the comprehensiveness of God's knowledge through the phrase "all my ways" which is a common metaphor for a person's actions, undertakings and moral behavior.

This form of knowledge is overpowering and involves control for David's life (vv. 5-6).<sup>3</sup> With this knowledge the Lord has surrounded (*sartani*) David, as evident in its root which is elsewhere used of besieging a city (e.g. 2 Chron. 20:1). This control of God's knowledge is further developed as "You put Your hand on me," which as a phrase is only elsewhere in the Biblical text in Job 9:33 where it refers to Job's desire for someone to exercise authority over both himself and God so that he would gain an impartial hearing. So both metaphors express in synonymous parallelism that God's knowledge controls him. David reflects that

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<sup>2</sup> B.D.B., s.v. *rahoq* 2.b., p. 935 and compare Isa. 22:11

such knowledge is overpowering in its control, beyond his abilities (*pil<sup>3</sup>iyyāh...mimmen<sup>1</sup>*), rather than merely incomprehensible.<sup>4</sup> With the issue being that of control, David admits that he cannot prevail against it (*lō' ūkal lāh*) and it is insuperable (*niśg<sup>6</sup>bāh*) as with impregnable walls of a fortress. With God being all knowing and controlling, there is no escape from this omnipresent God.

In verses 7-12 David develops that God is present everywhere so that he cannot hide from God. In synonymous parallelism David announces his theme of hiding from God's presence or face. This theme is developed over the next three verses to indicate that there is no place to escape. Using merism, David considers God as present in heaven where the throne room of God is normally thought to occupy, but also even in the opposite deep pit of the land of the dead where God is not normally thought to be, God is there as well. Likewise to travel from East to West as fast as the dawn travels will still not let David escape from God. As with God's penetrating sheol the place of the dead, so the depth of the sea is associated in Hebrew thought forms with chaos, which are normally seen as beyond God's presence, but even there God is present and controlling. God's control is evident in "Even there thy hand will guide me and Thy right hand will lay hold of me" (v. 10). Whether David contemplates the darkened environment of sheol or the chaotic environment of the depth of the sea or the oppression of evil in this life, he considers that light is as darkness and darkness is a heavy weight crushing him. Even this darkness would not prove too dark for the Lord, Who penetrates it and sees through the darkness as if there is no barrier or fog at all.

The Lord knows everything about David and controls him with this knowledge. David cannot escape God's controlling Knowledge even in the chaos

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<sup>3</sup> The openness commitment to libertarian free will and the denial of prescience is grounded in a commitment to reject the kind of control that God's knowledge of the future brings, however an openness God does not fit this Biblical text with its divine controlling knowledge..

<sup>4</sup> B.D.B., s.v. *pālā* p. 810 and compare Jer. 32:17; and Gen. 18:14, while reading *kethib* as in Judges 13:18.

and depth of suffering in this life, because David can conjecture no place of escape in which God would not also be as well. However, God exercises even greater control than this in His creating and planning of David's whole life. This is evident by verse 13 beginning with the conjunction *ki*, which should best be taken in a causal way. That is, because David has been created and had his life planned by God, David is even more under God's control from which he cannot escape.

God intimately created and determined David's life (vv. 13-16). God created (*qānîta*) David's inward parts. Actually, the word for inward parts refers to kidneys but in Hebrew thought this word describes the highly sensitive organ of self-thought. The less visible is being emphasized with the inner parts of David being created within his mother's womb.<sup>5</sup> The womb environment is compared to sheol as being hidden from view, except from God Who can see clearly into this secret place. In such an intimate secret place God sees our embryonic nature, our bones and our inner parts; so as a craftsman God is perfectly equipped to form us. God is personally involved as a craftsman weaving (*t<sup>e</sup>sukkēnî*) in meticulous fashion the tapestry that is David. The verb skillfully wrought (*ruqqamî* in v. 15c) is parallel to this weaving idea.<sup>6</sup> H. W. Wolff concludes that "everything that grew in his mother's womb is the work of the great weaver (*skk*); skin and muscles are seen as the fabric."<sup>7</sup>

Beyond the intimate sight of David in the time of his being created, God compared it with a previous written plan for all the days of his life. There are several other references to a book of God in the Old Testament and in ancient Near Eastern literature akin to a tablet of destiny.<sup>8</sup> This figure refers to

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<sup>5</sup> The fact that David's mother's womb is involved, and other texts present the origination of David's life in the sex act (Ps. 51:5) shows some measure of human cooperation along with the divine creation process.

<sup>6</sup> For similar meaning compare its use in Job 10:11

<sup>7</sup> H. W. Wolff, *Anthropology of the Old Testament*, p. 96.

<sup>8</sup> For O. T. references compare these examples: Isa. 4:3; Ezek. 2:9-10; Dan. 12:1. For ancient Near Eastern examples and discussion, see H. Ringgren, *Religions of the Ancient Near East*, trans. J. Sturdy (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1973), pp. 108-9.

foreordination of his whole life before he had even begun to live any of it. The future is not open if God knows it so intimately that he has planned it and then created David to fit within these complete plans of David's days. There is some possible ambiguity in the antecedent of the pronouns (*kullām*) "all of them" and (*bāhem*) "among them." If the pronouns refer to the embryo then David is affirming that the Lord blueprinted or foreordained the development of his embryo in the womb with a full plan for David's life. If the pronoun is to be understood proleptically to refer to "days" then David is affirming the foreordination of the days of his life, that is, either how long he would live (cf. Job 14:5) or by metonymy what would happen during the course of his life (cf. Jer. 1:5). Either way, the future is not open, for God has planned at least a few things concerning David but it may include everything. Thus, the reason David can affirm that the Lord knows his every thought, word, and deed is that He knows them beforehand (vv. 1-4, 16). The reason that he cannot escape from the knowledge and consequent control of God is that the Lord has formed his life and foreordained the course of his life. Likewise, the reason that David responds with such awe about the Lord's thought and purposes (vv. 17-18) is that it proves how precious and constant are the Lord's thoughts about him.

It is God's thoughts and purposes concerning David that are by the huge volume and intimacy amazing to David, so he expresses his awe to the Lord (vv. 17-18). When he awakes, probably from meditation<sup>9</sup> God is still intimately with David in presence and in knowledge. This anecdotal awareness of God's sovereignty, omnipresence, omniscience, and imminence raises the issue as to how David will respond. David's response is that of loyalty to God in prayer in light of these divine attributes

David exhibits his loyalty by opposing God's enemies and submitting to a divine search that will lead to everlasting life. The petitionary response first

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<sup>9</sup> While there are other views about awakening in resurrection or from sleep induced from counting all these divine thoughts, I think awakening from contemplation fits best, e.g. M. Buttenweiser, *The Psalms*, pp. 537-40 and compare Jer. 31:26.

negatively asks God to slay the wicked, especially those who surround David in his dark times (vv. 19-22). Such a petition ushers into a warning for these murderous men to depart from David's context. David explains his rationale for this petition on the basis that these violent lawbreakers are ultimately against God as His enemies and that part of David's loyalty is to hate those who hate God. David's animosity towards God's enemies is seen in the backdrop of a kind of holy war that stays loyal to God's cause even if it should cost opposing the lawbreakers. From the response of repudiating the enemies of God, David now turns to a positive petition for God to undertake a search of David's motive and ways for the outcome of everlasting life (vv. 23-24). This positive petition ends the enclausio with which the psalm began and thus completes the exploration of God's omniscience by asking God to turn His exhaustive knowledge back on David as a tool for God to rehabilitate David in God's ways. David's anxious thoughts refer back to the thoughts and motive that God already knows (vv. 2, 23). The trying of David's anxious thoughts is as in testing and purifying metals, is an expression on David's part to not have any lack of complete loyalty to God. An example, which David petitions to be rooted out of his life is any association with the way of pain, perhaps toward others or a way that might bring pain back upon David as a divine discipline. In contrast David wishes to be led by God into the everlasting way or the longstanding way of blessing.<sup>10</sup>

In summary, having repudiated the enemies of God (vv. 19-22), David asks God, Who knows him thoroughly (vv. 1-4) because He created him (vv. 13-16), and from Whose knowledge there is no escape (vv. 7-12), to examine his motives and thoughts to keep him from deviating from the ancient path of favor and blessing (v. 23-24).

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<sup>10</sup> The concept of everlasting is often seen as the age-old path (e.g. Jer. 6:16; 18:15). At this point it would tend to contribute to the psalm as communicating the proven age-old way of blessing. At this point in the stages of progressive revelation it is better not to see this as a reference to the fuller N.T. concept of everlasting life, which in the N.T. will include resurrection from the grave.