

Psalm 139

You Know Me

Psalm 139 is the most personal expression in Scripture of the Old Testament's radical monotheism. It is a doctrinal classic because it portrays human existence in all its dimensions in terms of God's knowledge, presence, and power. It reflects an understanding of the human as enclosed in divine reality. ✎ The psalm is even more a devotional classic, because used as prayer it bestows and nurtures an awareness of the LORD as the total environment of life. ✎ It teaches and confesses in the fullest way that "my times are in your hand" ✎ (31:15).

1. The psalm is composed of two unequal parts. There is a sharp break in tone, content, and function between verses 18 and 19. The function of verses 1–18 is praise; the purpose of this longer part is indicated by the specific declaration, "I praise you" (v. 14a), by the characterization of the LORD's ways and works as "wonderful" (vv. 16, 14) and in general as unlimited. Three sections tell how the psalmist's existence is totally comprehended by God. The LORD knows whatever the psalmist thinks and does (vv. 1–6); the LORD is present to him wherever he is (vv. 7–12); the LORD was even present to him when he began to be ✎ (vv. 13–16). Verses 17–18 round out part one with a wondering summation and awed declaration; no inventory of life can outrun the truth that at its end "I am still with you" ✎ . The function of the second part, verses 19–24, is prayer that concerns the wicked in the world (vv. 19–22) and the possibility of wrong in the self (vv. 23–24). The two parts are held together by an inclusion formed by the repetition of the opening declaration, "LORD, you have searched me and known me," as a petition, "Search me, God, and know my heart" (vv. 2, 23) ✎ . In spite of this stark transition between the parts, the psalm is a unit.

2. The principal clue for the interpretation of **Psalm 139** is given in the relationship of its opening declaration and concluding prayer. What the psalm confesses to be the case at the beginning is sought in an appeal at the end. The initial address and concluding request form a parenthesis around the whole psalm to indicate that the whole is a continuous unfolding of their one theme and concern. The prayer does not wander away from its beginning subject only to return to it at the end. The psalm is speech addressed

to the God who searches and knows the human being. ❖

The inclusion within which the whole is set establishes two things about the psalm. First, the concern of the psalm is the relationship between the psalmist and God ❖. The opening sentence speaks of the self as the object of God's action, and so does the rest. From the opening vocative to the final word, the prayer confesses an existence described in terms of the activity of God ❖. It portrays the self in the light of the work of God and God's work and person as the ❖ context of the self. Even where others finally enter the picture being drawn (vv. 19–22), they are introduced into the prayer only as a way of speaking of the psalmist's relation to God. Of course it could be said that the concern of all psalms is the relation between God and those who use them as praise and prayer. But here that relation is the single unrelieved concern. It is explored and unfolded with an intensity and development that transcends any of the others.

Second, the psalm concentrates on one dimension of God's relation to human beings. "You know me"—that is the theme of the whole all the way to the plea, "Know me so that you can lead me." ❖ The verb and its synonyms recur in verses 2–4 to fix the theme. "Know," together with "search" and "test," belongs to the vocabulary used to describe the LORD's activity as a divine judge who discerns and assesses the human heart ❖ (e.g., 11:4–7; Jer. 9:7; 17:10; Job 7:17–18; 13:9). Reference to this divine activity has a variety of functions in prayer in the Old Testament: as a motive for God's intervention in prayers for help (Ps. 69:19; Jer. 11:20; 15:15; 18:23) and as a statement about the self in confessions of innocence (Pss. 17:3; 26:2; 44:21; Jer. 12:3) and sin (Ps. 69:5; Exod. 32:22) and trust (Ps. 142:4). No one of these functions seems an adequate account of what is happening in Psalm 139. The prayer of the second part certainly is related to the praise of the first part. The petition and accompanying declarations of identification with God in verses 19–22 seem calculated to put as much distance as possible between the psalmist and the wicked; the declarations depend on the confession of God's total knowledge of the psalmist's existence. The whole has the cadence of a faith that trusts itself to a being known by the LORD that includes discernment of the self, presence to the self, and creation of the self ❖. The psalm is a spiritual achievement that transcends the limits and functions of the usual types.

3. The three sections of the psalm's first part are a literary fabric woven of first and second personal pronouns. Virtually every line's syntax contains a "you" or "your" and

an “I” or “me” or “my.” God is thou to the psalmist’s I. The psalmist speaks about self by speaking to God and speaks about God by speaking as a self. God and self are inextricably the subject of the psalm’s language. What is said about God is not abstract, conceptual, about God in and of himself. It is not neutral ontological language about the being of God as ultimate reality. It is relational, deals with thou and I, God in relation to psalmist. *What* he does, *where* he goes, *that* he is are all comprehended by the knowledge, presence, and power of God . God is not a passive sphere of existence “in which he lives and moves and has his being” (Paul’s mistake at Athens), but knower, presence, actor—a personal vis-à-vis to every dimension of the psalmist’s existence as person. Omniscience, omnipresence, and omnipotence are often used as expository language for the three sections of part one. But it must be done with care lest this conceptualization becomes a knowing about God without a being known, accompanied, created, and sustained by God. Devotion and confession must not be reduced to metaphysics.

The psalmist confesses that he is never *free* of God in his total existence , but the relation is described in such a way that neither is a prisoner of or mere function of the other. The psalmist is free for and to God . God is the limit of his existence, yet he is himself a real person to God—accountable, confronted, known. God is free for and to the psalmist. The motions of God’s relation to the psalmist transcend the psalmist’s understanding. What he knows, he knows he does not know. His knowing is an unknowing; its achievement is wonder, and its only certainty is “I am with you” (vv. 18, 6, 14). The prayer in the second part of the psalm must not be forgotten; in the prayer, the psalmist appeals to God’s freedom for decision and confesses his own accountability. There is some risk in using only verses 1–18. The psalm as a whole is not a text for any kind of divine determinism and resists any theology that compromises the freedom of God or the responsibility of the human being.

4. The second part of the psalm (vv. 19–24) has always posed the sharpest problems for interpreters. After eighteen verses of profound reflection on God as the ground of existence, the psalm abruptly calls for the death of the wicked and avows hatred in return for those who hate God! The vehement sentiments in verses 19–22 seem so inconsistent that some have suggested that they are a crude addition, and so unacceptable to religious sensibility that they are customarily omitted in liturgical and theological use. But in the thought world of the psalms, this section is not incoherent at all, no

more, for instance, than the wish for the elimination of the wicked at the end of [Psalm 104](#) or the references to the enemies in the midst of [Psalm 23](#)'s calm expression of trust. In the worldview of the psalms, the wicked and their dangerous threats to those who base life on God are an important part of the reality in the midst of which faith must live. To speak of them in speaking of one's relation to God was completely consistent, especially where the relation was to God in his judging discernment of one's life.

It is probably a mistake to take verse [19](#) as a real petition directed against some particular identifiable threat. The style of the wish is, rather, to be read as a form of the description of the self in relationship to God, and so in continuity with the rest of the psalm. The language used to describe the wicked is composed of terms and characterizations that are common in the psalms for those who threaten the righteous and their relation to God. The psalm makes no petition for help; the wicked do not seem a personal threat to the psalmist's life. They are described rather as the enemies of God. That is their danger! They are part of the society in which the psalmist lives who by their moral and religious conduct oppose and ignore God. To be willfully an enemy of God is unthinkable to the psalmist, but there the wicked are, the embodiment of another way than the fear of the LORD, conditioning and endangering the whole society by their character. So the psalmist at the conclusion of speaking to God about his relationship to God puts himself at all possible distance from them. Verses [19–22](#) are a rhetorical identification of self with God in the matter of the wicked. The topic of the wicked offers yet one more way in which the psalmist describes his life as an existence that is completely within the sphere of God's knowledge, work, and ways.

5. The first real petition comes at the very end, in verses [23–24](#). It is only two poetic lines long, but it gives theological balance to the whole as the counterpart of all the rest. The petition asks God to do now and in the future what God has done in the past, to examine and test the psalmist's heart and thoughts to uncover any way that troubles his relation to God so that God may lead him in another way, 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. The psalmist wants God to be his judge so that God may be his shepherd. Such is his experience of God and confidence in God that he does not fear a judgment that leads to punishment but prays for a searching and testing that lead to pastoral care . This final prayer is reason to recognize that the foregoing confession contains no

murmur of self-righteousness. It does not protest innocence or admit guilt. It is, rather, the voice of a person who has come to know the judge and the shepherd so much as one that he can wish nought else than to be known by God.

6. How did the psalmist come to the understanding of the self expressed in the prayer? The composer of [Psalm 8](#) looked to God the creator and found one answer to the question, “What are human beings, that you are mindful of them?” The composer of this psalm seems to have meditated on the vision of the LORD as the righteous judge who knows, searches, and tests the hearts of human beings. The psalm is composed of the implications of that vision for the existence of the psalmist, voiced as praise and prayer. The vision of God to whom every aspect of one’s life from conception is present can be terrifying (e.g., Job). The psalm shows that the vision inspires wisdom and trust for those who want nothing else than to be led in the way everlasting. The apostle Paul once said of himself, “Now I know only in part; then I will fully know even as I have been fully known.” Perhaps this psalm is a knowing only in part, but it is a knowing that knows already that it is fully known by God. It is a prayer that will lead all who make it their own into that knowing.