

Psalm 139. Search me, Lord

Context

Psalm 139 is one of the best-known and beloved psalms in the collection. It is often read as a calm reflection on God's omniscience, omnipresence and omnipotence and how these awesome divine qualities elicit wonder and comfort from the composer. Such a reading simplifies the psalm and ignores the final stanza (vv. 19–24), which is an intense statement of hatred towards the psalmist's dangerous enemies and includes an appeal to God to realize that the psalmist is innocent. Moreover, the first three stanzas (vv. 1–6, 7–12, 13–18) themselves express ambivalence about God's pervasive knowledge, presence and power. In the light of its final stanza, the psalm is best considered a lament.

For the title, see the [Introduction](#).

Comment

139:1–6. *You hem me in*

At the end of the psalm, the composer wants God to search him and find him devoid of any offensive way (vv. 23–24). He begins, though, with a positive statement that God has indeed *searched* him and knows him. Indeed, he knows that there is nothing that he does or thinks that is beyond God's purview. He describes God's comprehensive and omniscient knowledge with a series of merisms (pairs of opposites that denote everything in between). God knows his every action, from his sitting to his standing up, from his *going out* (action) to his *lying down* (resting). He knows everything (*all my ways*) about him. He even knows what the psalmist is going to say before he utters the statement (v. 4).


The psalmist clearly understands that God knows him completely and thoroughly. The question remains as to whether God's knowledge is comforting or upsetting to him. Is it good or bad that God *hems* him *in* completely (using another merism [*before and behind*])? The verb (*šûr*) is often used of a siege (1 Sam. 23:8; 2 Sam. 20:15). Someone who is hemmed in is confined and enclosed, so the statement could be taken negatively. Of course, it could also be read in a very positive light. Although the verb is not used in Job 1:10, the Accuser tells God that the only reason why Job maintains his relationship with

him is because God places ‘a hedge around him and his household and everything he has’. In other words, God protects Job from trouble and showers him with material blessings. The same ambiguity surrounds the second colon of verse 5 (*you lay your hand upon me*). Again, is this a good thing or a bad thing? Is the hand on him to guide or to punish (see [Ps. 38:2b](#); Broyles 1999: 485). Is the psalmist’s awareness of God’s extensive knowledge of him *too wonderful* or marvellous for him (one meaning of *pele*), or too difficult and overwhelming for him (another meaning)?

139:7–12. Where can I go?

The rhetorical questions that open the second stanza support a negative reading of the psalmist’s tone in the first stanza. They imply that there is nowhere he can escape God’s presence. He cannot get away. The psalmist’s attitude is reminiscent of that of Jonah who wanted to get away from God, but could not because God is present everywhere, including the raging sea. If the first stanza emphasized the omniscience of God, the second illustrates his omnipresence, once again using merisms. God is in the *heavens* as well as in the *depths* (and everywhere in between). God is in the east (*the wings of the dawn*,²⁸ where the sun rises) and in the west (*the far side of the sea*, referring to the Mediterranean) and everywhere in between. Read in isolation, verse 10 seems very positive. God *guides* and protects (*your right hand will hold me fast*) the psalmist, but the context may lend a negative connotation. That is, he may be complaining about divine coercion. After all, verses 11–12 express his desire to hide from God, as well as his awareness that it is impossible to do so because God can make *the night shine like the day*.

139:13–18. You know me

Although the psalmist may be ambivalent about the extent of God’s knowledge and the scope of his presence, he certainly has no doubts that God is and has been with him from the very beginning and that he knows him thoroughly. After all, it was God who created him. God did not simply create humanity and then withdraw, as though natural processes alone accounted for the birth of future generations. No, God is intimately involved in the birth of all his human creatures . And the result is amazing, as the

²⁸ Hilber (2009: 434) points out that ‘this metaphor may share in the ancient Near Eastern imagery of a winged solar disk’.

psalmist considers that he is *fearfully and wonderfully made*. God's knowledge of the psalmist even extends to the time before he was conceived (*your eyes saw my unformed body*). He not only knows the psalmist's distant past, but also his future, a statement about God's foreknowledge. Knowing the vastness of God's thoughts (vv. 17–18, where they *outnumber the grains of sand*) overwhelms the psalmist.

139:19–24. Vindicate me

In a rather surprising turn (at least to the modern reader), the psalmist now vents his hatred and anger towards the wicked, who are bloodthirsty and therefore dangerous. They must present a specific threat to the psalmist, since they seem to provoke his stress and worry (v. 23). He calls on God not only to kill the wicked, but also to search him to proclaim his innocence and then presumably to remove the danger from his life. While the first part of the psalm may express ambivalence about being in God's presence, knowledge and power, the conclusion expresses a 'reasoned surrender to God's pursuit' (Broyles 1999: 487). The psalmist concludes with a request that God lead him in the way everlasting. The 'way' is a frequent metaphor for life in wisdom literature, which speaks of two ways, here in contrast to the wicked way that leads to death.

Meaning

The psalmist was anxious about wicked people who threatened his life. He understood that God knew him thoroughly and intimately. He knew that God was present with him wherever he went and that God was all powerful, although initially he expressed ambivalence about the fact that God hemmed him in and he could not get away. At the end of the psalm, he surrenders to God and puts his hope in him 🗨️.

Like the psalmist, Paul knew that the Christian life was difficult and that the Christian faced many threats. In response, Paul reminds his readers:

If God is for us, who can be against us? He who did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for us all—how will he not also, along with him, graciously give us all things? Who will bring any charge against those whom God has chosen? It is God who justifies. Who then is the one who condemns? No one. Christ Jesus who died—more than that, who was raised to life—is at the right hand of God and is also interceding for us. Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall trouble or hardship or persecution or famine or nakedness or danger or sword? As it is written:

‘For your sake we face death all day long;
we are considered as sheep to be slaughtered.’

No, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him who loved us. For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

(Rom. 8:31–39)