

## ***Faith on Trial: An Analysis of Psalm 139***

**L.C. Allen**

[p.5]

The Christian prizes the Psalter on at least two counts. He loves those psalms which he can read easily through New Testament spectacles, such as Psalms 22 and 110. Then he values another group for their evident spiritual timelessness. Examples are Psalm 23, a masterpiece of devotion expressed by an individual believer, and Psalm 73, a duel between faith and materialism which the modern Christian knows all too well. Into this latter category doubtless falls Psalm 139 too, for its fine picture of God as gloriously transcendent yet intimately near. But the reader must always endeavour to let Scripture speak for itself, on its own terms. Perhaps this is more difficult in the case of the Psalms than in any other part of the Old Testament. Since each psalm generally stands alone, it is easier to detach it from its cultural context. The task of the exegete is to glean a passage's basic meaning and setting; only when that task has been carefully discharged, may parallels and principles be deduced which are particularly relevant to the Christian. The Old Testament has suffered much in the past from being studied at two separate levels, by the academic who is in danger of ignoring the crucial fact that it belongs to the Christian canon of Scripture, and by the non-academic who rushes to 'Christianize' and rejects material which he cannot instantly reshape. This article is written from a dual conviction that the Church has received from her Lord the Psalms as sacred Scripture and that the Christian can come to appreciate them fully only if he learns to look at them over Israel's shoulder.

### **I. STRUCTURE**

Any fairly lengthy composition falls into a pattern of its own, as the writer develops his theme. This is true of both prose and poetry, but perhaps more obviously so in the case of poetry. There the light and shade of the literary scene often takes the form of strophes, clear poetic units which may be defined in terms of subject matter, tone, key terms and/or sounds.<sup>1</sup> It is essential to trace these groupings, not only in order to appreciate the artistry of the composition, but as a help towards and check upon exegesis, so that the full message may be communicated.

A glance through Psalm 139 reveals a division into at least two parts. An obvious break seems to occur between verses 18 and 19. The passionate outburst of verses 19-22 and the appeals using imperatives or virtual imperatives in verses 19-24 contrast strangely with the quieter tones and statements of the preceding material. In fact verses 19-22 strike a jarring note for the Christian; he readily sympathizes with the sentiment that if the psalm finished with verse 18 it would be one of the most beautiful poems in the Psalter.<sup>2</sup> An attempt has been made to detach verses 19-24: H. Schmidt considered that they were added later by the same psalmist.<sup>3</sup> But the beginning and end of the psalm are firmly bolted together by the device of inclusion,

---

<sup>1</sup> Cf. J. Muilenburg, *JBL* 88 (1969), p. 12: 'By a strophe we mean a series of bicola or tricola with a beginning and ending, possessing unity of thought and structure.'

<sup>2</sup> E. Reuss, cited by E. Würthwein, *VT* 7 (1957), p. 170.

<sup>3</sup> *Die Psalmen (Handbuch zum Alten Testament, 1934)*, p. 246.

i.e. coming round full circle to the starting point: 'search' and 'know' in verse 23 are verbal echoes of verse 1.<sup>4</sup> Nor has a suggestion to cut

[p.6]

out verses 19-22 as secondary found favour:<sup>5</sup> it smacks of cultural re-vamping. The psalm must be accepted as a whole, apparent warts and all.

Thus far then the piece falls into two unequal parts, on the evidence of tone, theme and verbal style. There some structural critics would stay.<sup>6</sup> J. Holman has gone on to bolster this literary division with a thorough analysis of verses 1-18.<sup>7</sup> He finds in it a parabola or a concentric structure. At the centre stands verse 10, and it is surrounded at equidistant points by mutually echoing material. The note of praise at verse 6 is matched in verse 14, both including the terms 'know' and 'wonderful'. 'Thoughts' in verse 2 is repeated in verse 17.<sup>8</sup> Holman traces a fascinating network, but two queries suggest themselves. First, is the content of verse 10 so important as such a crucial structural role would suggest?<sup>9</sup> Secondly, the hymnic asides of verses 6 and 14 seem to be further matched in verses 17f., which find no stylistic role in Holman's scheme.<sup>10</sup> But he has rendered a valuable service in demonstrating the close interlocking of verses 1-18 and also the role of verses 19ff. as a climax—both radical and integral—to the foregoing.

The most common way of subdividing the psalm is to find four strophes, verses 1-6, 7-12, 13-18, 19-24. It is easier to substantiate this structuring in some parts than in others. Verses 1-6 are bound together by the keyword 'know' with Yahweh as subject ('knowledge' in verse 6), which occurs no less than four times. Verse 6 forms a fitting devotional conclusion. Verse 7 provides a new opening with its rhetorical questions as a prelude to statements concerning God's omnipresence and the psalmist's inability to hide from Him. Presumably a third stanza begins at verse 13 with the new theme of God's creation of the poet, which is developed in subsequent verses. The conclusion of devotional praise in verses 17f. neatly matches the end of the first strophe, and its greater length marks the climax of three parallel strophes before a fourth, which like the fourth beast of Daniel 7 is 'different from all the rest'.

However, a difficulty arises in the presumed third strophe. Verse 14 like verses 6 and 17f. is a further ascription of praise to God. Holman's scheme made some allowance for this phenomenon, whereas the quadristrophic analysis outlined above glosses over it lamely. M. Mannati has attempted to resolve this anomaly. He observes that verses 15f. continue the

---

<sup>4</sup> J. Holman, *VT* 21 (1971), pp. 301, 308, refers also to 'way(s)' (vv. 3, 24), 'Yahweh' (vv. 1, 21) and 'rise up' (vv. 2, 21). J. Krašovec, *Biblische Zeitschrift* 18 (1974), p. 227, notes the semantically related terms in vv. 2, 23: 'discern my thought,' 'know my anxious thoughts'.

<sup>5</sup> M. Bittenwieser, *The Psalms Chronologically Treated* (1938), pp. 535f., claimed that these verses were originally part of Pss. 140f.

<sup>6</sup> Holman, *art. cit.*, p. 298, names Gunkel, Kraus and Mowinckel.

<sup>7</sup> The Structure of Psalm cxxxix,' *VT* 21 (1971), pp. 298-310.

<sup>8</sup> The Hebrew term is actually singular in v. 2. Holman detected other concentric parallels: 'there' in v. 10 echoes v. 8, while 'even' in v. 10 is echoed in v. 12; 'all' occurs in vv. 4 and 16; perhaps 'my rising up', v. 2, is matched by 'I awake', v. 18.

<sup>9</sup> Holman 'borrows' the parabolical structure from L. Alonso Schökel's analysis of Isaiah 14: 4-22: there, however, the suggested focal point, v. 14, does contain a thematic highlight of the piece.

<sup>10</sup> In fairness it should be stated that in v. 17 he removes the motif of direct praise of God by interpreting the Hebrew *rē'eykā* as 'friends' (instead of 'thoughts') with ancient versional support. The parallelism of vv. 2 and 17 is then achieved by means of homonyms.

theme of verse 13, while verse 14 breaks the chain of thought and, moreover, possesses no metrical rhythm and has the maladroit repetition of 'wonderful': therefore it is an intrusive prose comment on the context.<sup>11</sup> Then all the strophes have the same pattern, size and proportion a line or verse of introduction prefaces a central unit of three lines with strong unity of theme and form, which is in turn followed by two concluding verses which have a change in construction and a different theme (verses 1 + 2-4 + 5f.; 7 + 8-10 + 11f.; 13 + 15f. + 17f.; 19 + 20-22 + 23f.). Mannati's structure is extremely attractive (yet verse 20 seems closer to verse 19 than to verses 21f.), but his treatment of verse 14 cuts a knot which Holman was in part able to justify. Its rhythm is uncertain: perhaps the best metrical analysis is to regard it as 2+2+2 and then, as in RSV, JB and NEB, to take the final clause closely with verse 15a as a separate line of 3+3. The doubled 'wonderful' can be explained as emotional exuberance: the repeated 'all' in verses 3f. is analogous.<sup>12</sup> 'Works' in the sense of works of creation (cf. Ps. 104: 24) fits the overall theme well enough.

An attempt to do justice to verse 14, apart from Holman's has been made by R. Lapointe.<sup>13</sup> He suggests briefly in a footnote that the second strophe ends at

[p.7]

verse 14b ('...works'). Then the first three strophes all conclude in similar fashion. The suggestion is worth developing. At first sight this restructuring cuts across the thematic divisions cited earlier, but perhaps they were too sharply defined. Thematic overlap appears elsewhere in the psalm: the divine presence celebrated in verses 7ff. is heralded in verse 5, before the praise of verse 6 which brings the first strophe to an end. Likewise it is feasible that before the praising of verse 14, verse 13 introduces a theme which the next strophe is to develop. Moreover the initial 'For' of verse 13 suggests close structuring with the preceding.<sup>14</sup> Then the basic theme of God's knowledge of the psalmist comes to the fore at the beginning of the next stanza, which is verse 14c ('Thou knowest...', RSV).<sup>15</sup> The merit of this scheme is that like Holman's it regards as strategic the parallelism of verses 6 and 14 and the occurrence of 'wonderful' in both these verses. Repetition of words is frequently a key to structure. The relative size of the strophes is altered, with the second strophe as an eight-line unit, while the others have roughly six lines. This transfers the imbalance from the third to the second strophe, on the assumption of a four-strophe scheme and the retention of verse 14.

The length of the fourth sub-unit has in fact been queried. M. Dahood would make it begin at verse 17 on stylistic grounds: the Hebrew *w<sup>e</sup>lî*, literally 'and to me', at the start of verse 17 and *lî* at the end of verse 22 form a fine inclusion.<sup>16</sup> In support J. Krašovec has detected a train

---

<sup>11</sup> 'Psaume 139: 14-16,' *ZAW* 83 (1971), pp. 257-261. Similarly E. Würthwein, *art. cit.*, p. 179, note 1, deleted v. 14a and the first three words of v. 16 as glosses, noting that the other strophes consist of six lines, while the third has eight in the present Hebrew text.

<sup>12</sup> Heb. *kol, kullah*.

<sup>13</sup> *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 23 (1971), p. 401, note 40.

<sup>14</sup> Heb. *kî* could be asseverative 'indeed'. Holman, *BZ* 14 (1970), p. 64, and Kragovec, *art. cit.*, p. 225, have argued for a causative force.

<sup>15</sup> This reflects a frequently adopted repointing of the Hebrew consonantal text as *yāda'tā*. Divine omniscience is the leitmotif of the psalm.

<sup>16</sup> *Psalms III* (Anchor Bible, 1970), pp. 285, 296. He also regards vv. 1 and 23f. as a frame to the psalm, so that the first strophe consists of vv. 2-6 and the last of vv. 17-22 (*op. cit.*, p. 285). His structural view largely depends on his grammatical analysis of v. 1. He takes the first verb as a 'precativ perfect' and the second as a jussive, rendering as imperatives, 'examine me and know me'. Then v. 1 is nicely matched by v. 23. But the existence of a precativ perfect is still very much a matter of debate. Krašovec, *art. cit.*, p. 227, note 9, observes that

of thought linking verses 17 and 19ff.<sup>17</sup> In verse 17 the Hebrew *yāq'êrû*, taken by some, e.g. the RSV, as 'are valuable' and by others, e.g. JB and NEB, as 'are difficult (to understand)' is in fact a *double entendre*. Where the toleration of the wicked is concerned, God's thoughts transcend all the psalmist's expectations, and so are difficult to comprehend. But they are also precious, especially the truths of divine omniscience and omnipresence; the psalmist gladly takes God's side and views His enemies as his own. This exegesis appears unduly complicated, especially since verse 18 seems to interrupt the presumed development of thought. The repetition of *lî*, stressed by Dahood, is to be regarded as an example of minor stylistic bonding between strophes rather than as a pointer to formal structuring.

This review of suggested divisions of the psalm might lead the reader to conclude that structure, like beauty, lies in the eye of the beholder. Difference of view depends on the relative weight attached to stylistic and thematic features. Careful balancing of different factors is essential. Perhaps justice is best done to the evidence by taking Lapointe's suggestion seriously. The psalm comes to a vehement climax with verses 19-24.<sup>18</sup> Holman has correctly observed that a deep caesura lies between verses 18 and 19. The preceding material belongs closely together, bound by tone, theme and style, but may be subdivided into three parts, verses 1-6, 7-14b, 14c-18, each ending on a note of praise, with verses 17f. functioning besides as a conclusion to the whole passage.

## II. FORM

Form criticism has made a significant contribution to the understanding of the Old Testament, especially in the Psalms and prophetic literature. It is concerned with literary types or genres, and endeavours to study the overall type in the light of particular examples and *vice versa*. Basically Psalm 139 is the prayer of an individual, in the sense that it is addressed to God throughout.<sup>19</sup> But when one attempts to get beyond this simple observation there seems to be no obvious

[p.8]

category in which the psalm as a whole may be placed. At first glance it might be viewed as a hymn of praise or at least a meditation employing hymnic features.<sup>20</sup> It celebrates God's attributes, not in general terms but in relation to the psalmist. What then of the concluding verses? Psalm 104 could be compared, in which an individual addresses God in praise as the Creator whose mighty power and loving care are mirrored in the world around. That psalm concludes with an appeal that God would remove sinners as self-made flaws in His handiwork. The implication appears to be that then all remaining men would praise Him like

---

Dahood's proposal is inconsistent with the development of the psalm, which essentially begins in a narrative tone and ends with a passionate appeal.

<sup>17</sup> *Art. cit.*, p. 226.

<sup>18</sup> Holman, *VT* 21 (1971), p. 307, has finely analysed vv. 19-24 as consisting of two antithetically parallel sub-units (vv. 19f., 23f.) separated by a synonymously parallel pair of verses, vv. 21f.; he notes that each of the three parts employs a different divine term.

<sup>19</sup> It deviates from this form only in one place in the Massoretic Text, at v. 19, where 'men of blood' are addressed. It is probably that the reading underlying the Syriac and Targum is original, *yāsûrû* (for MT *sûrû*; so RSV, NEB). The direct address to God in v. 20 lends support.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. S. Mowinckel, *The Psalms in Israel's Worship* (E.T. 1962), vol. 1, p. 91. The hymnic features are listed by H. Gunkel, *Die Psalmen* (Handkommentar zum Alten Testament, 1926), p. 587, and summarised by J. M. Bullard, 'Psalm 139: Prayer in Stillness', *Society of Biblical Literature 1975 Seminar Papers*, vol. 1, pp. 141-150 (p. 145).

the psalmist, as He deserves. Is Psalm 139 of this type, with an amplified appeal? It hardly seems so, since the balance is altered by the length of the appeal. A study of the structure has shown that it can hardly be regarded as a theological footnote to the psalm. Rather, verses 19ff. function as a demarcated climax to which the foregoing material serves as a prelude.

Verses 19-24 read like an individual's complaint (or lament, as it is now less often called) in which a situation of personal distress is brought to God's attention in urgent prayer. The negative appeal of verse 19 echoes that which regularly occurs in the complaint (cf. Pss. 17: 13f.; 74: 22f.). Moreover the two-sided structure of verses 19-24 is reminiscent of the double wish or petition which can occur in both communal and individual complaints, urging God to punish persecutors or those exploiting the sufferer's distress and to vindicate and bless the sufferer (cf. Ps. 5: 10f. [Heb.11f.]).<sup>21</sup>

From a primary form-critical viewpoint the psalm appears to combine two genres. The particular combination is strikingly akin to that of Psalm 90.<sup>22</sup> That psalm is a communal complaint addressed to God. It delays its appeal until verses 13-17, and the earlier and larger part of the psalm serves as a basis for the concluding appeal. The earlier portion is dominated by the concept of God's eternity, which is applied by contrast to the people's plight. In the light of this parallel Psalm 139 can be regarded as essentially an individual complaint in a developed form. It is prefaced with a long passage praising attributes of God which the sufferer finds relevant to his situation.

Mowinckel defined Psalm 139 as an 'Unschuldklagepsalm', a complaint expressing innocence.<sup>23</sup> The literary type of protestations of innocence, where the psalmist strongly affirms his loyalty to God, has been identified elsewhere in the Psalter, notably in Psalms 5, 7, 17.<sup>24</sup> Mowinckel included Psalm 139 in cases of this type and explained the references to divine omniscience as a motif of innocence God knows that he has been faithful. The protestation of innocence, which normally occupies part of a psalm, is here developed to cover most of the poem, i.e. verses 1-18, in an extended treatment of omniscience.

Can one get behind this literary categorizing to an actual setting for the psalm? H. Schmidt in his monograph *Das Gebet der Angeklagten im Alten Testament* included Psalm 139 in a group of psalms which he called 'prayers of the accused'.<sup>25</sup> Schmidt envisaged a judicial trial in a religious setting. Evidence for such a trial he found in 1 Kings 8: 31f., in which Solomon prays for a divine verdict upon cases brought to the temple, Deut. 17: 8-13, where cases too difficult for local courts are to be heard at the central sanctuary, Exodus 22:8f. (Heb. 7f.), where certain cases are brought 'before God', and also Numbers 5: 11-31, which decrees a trial by ordeal for a woman suspected of adultery, including an oath administered by the priest. Schmidt included in this category quite a large number of psalms and

[p.9]

deduced technical procedures of this religious court from allusions in these psalms. It is generally felt that he exaggerated his total case and incorporated too many psalms. It is

---

<sup>21</sup> Cf. C. Westermann, *The Praise of God in the Psalms* (E.T. 1965), pp. 52, 64.

<sup>22</sup> Mowinckel, *op. cit.*, p. 24, and L. Sabourin, *The Psalms: Their Origin and Meaning* (1969), vol. 2, p. 294, have helpfully compared the two psalms.

<sup>23</sup> *Psalmstudien V* (1923), p. 91, note 1. Cf. *The Psalms in Israel's Worship*, p. 131.

<sup>24</sup> See Gunkel, *Einleitung in die Psalmen*, vol. 2 (1933), pp. 238f., 251. He compared Psalm 119: 101, 104, 128.

<sup>25</sup> Beiheft zur *ZAW* 49 (1928), p. 26, note 2.

noteworthy that where Psalm 139 is concerned he explained it otherwise in a subsequent commentary, detaching verses 19ff. from what precedes.<sup>26</sup> In more recent times Schmidt's forensic thesis has been revived in different forms by L. Delekat and W. Beyerlin. The former has reconstructed a complex procedure of an accused man seeking asylum at the temple, undergoing an ordeal and devoting the rest of his life to temple service.<sup>27</sup> He places Psalm 139 among psalms which have this setting and provides an analysis of it.<sup>28</sup> It is slightly less relevant to mention Beyerlin's work since he does not include Psalm 139 in his study, on the ground that it refers not to direct enemies of the psalmist but to those who are God's enemies and have become his own.<sup>29</sup> He conceives of a religious court which handled special cases, but in general he is much less speculative than Delekat; he attacks in particular his notion of asylum in the Psalms as a literalization of metaphor. The psalms in this category—Beyerlin claims eleven—are regarded as statements made by the accused at various stages of the court proceedings, such as at a preliminary investigation. He does not class compositions of this type as individual complaints, but posits a separate genre, the 'Bittgebet', prayer of petition.<sup>30</sup>

The most notable exposition of Schmidt's basic thesis with specific regard to Psalm 139 has been that of E. Würthwein,<sup>31</sup> whose conclusions the commentaries of Weiser, Kraus and Dahood have largely followed. The psalmist has been accused of idolatry.<sup>32</sup> He faces trial at a religious court and he indirectly calls upon Yahweh to attest his innocence, as he appeals to God's complete knowledge of him and his circumstances. Verses 1-18 are thus comparable to the self-cursing of Job 31. The praise of divine omniscience of his movements in verse 6, Würthwein compared to the motif of 'Gerichtsdoxologie', judicial doxology, in which God's judgment is praised as infallible.<sup>33</sup> In turn H.-J. Kraus has characterized verses 1-18 as containing elements of this category.<sup>34</sup>

Würthwein's conclusions have not gone unchallenged, perhaps especially because they have met with widespread appeal and endorsement. The issue of the cultic or non-cultic setting of

---

<sup>26</sup> *Op. cit.* (in note 3 to section i), pp. 244-246.

<sup>27</sup> *Asylie and Schutzorakel am Zionheiligtum. Eine Untersuchung zu den Privaten Feindpsalmen* (1967).

<sup>28</sup> *Op. cit.*, pp. 253-256.

<sup>29</sup> *Die Rettung der Bedrängten in den Feindpsalmen der Einzelnen auf institutionelle Zusammenhänge untersucht* (Forschungen zur Religion und Literatur des Alten und Neues Testaments 99, 1970), p. 11.

<sup>30</sup> *Op. cit.*, pp. 152-155. Earlier H. Birkeland, *Die Feinde des Individuums in der israelitischen Psalmenliteratur* (1933), pp. 109ff., distinguished a similar group of psalms, including Psalm 139, from the complaints as 'Schutzpsalmen', 'protective psalms', wherein the psalmist prays for Yahweh's protection against imminent, rather than actual, danger.

<sup>31</sup> 'Erwägungen zu Psalm cxxxix,' *VT* 7 (1957), pp. 165-182. Mention should be made of a quite different cultic setting given to the psalm by G. A. Danell, *Psalm 139* (1951), pp. 32f. He characterises it as the Israelite king's avowal to Yahweh after his enthronement, comparing 1 Kings 3: 5-15. J. H. Eaton, *Kingship and the Psalms* (1976), pp. 83f., suggests that it was composed for a king under attack from his enemies.

<sup>32</sup> Heb. 'ōṣēb in v. 24, rendered as an adjective 'wicked' in the RSV, has this meaning in Isaiah 48: 5, and the Targum so understood it here; cf. Deuteronomy 13: 12ff.; 17: 2ff. The Qumran manuscript 11QPS<sup>a</sup> appears to have understood the term as 'āṣēb, 'idol': it lacks a vowel letter, and would most probably have rendered the word in MT with a vowel letter, as 'wṣb (R. Tournay, *Revue biblique* 73, 1966, p. 261). Holman, *VT* 21 (1971), pp. 309f., has intriguingly gone further than Würthwein and specified the type of idolatry as sun worship (cf. Job 31: 26-28). Developing a suggestion of Danell, *op. cit.*, pp. 31f., he finds solar aspects ascribed to Yahweh in vv. 1-18 and the concept of the sun god as the god of justice underlying the appeal for justice in vv. 19ff. The psalmist dramatically attributes to Yahweh all the powers ascribed by others to the sun god, as an affirmation of his orthodoxy. At the other extreme Bullard, *art. cit.*, p. 147, while evidently viewing the setting of the psalm as a cultic trial, is reluctant to specify the charge.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. F. Horst, 'Die Doxologien im Amosbuch', *ZAW* 47 [= 6] (1929), pp. 45-54. He cited Joshua 7: 19; 1 Samuel 6: 5; Jeremiah 13: 15-17.

<sup>34</sup> *Psalmen* (Biblischer Kommentar Altes Testament, 1972), p. 918.

psalms is an old one; Würthwein himself dismissed as a superimposing of a Protestant ideal Gunkel's assessment of Psalm 139 as a non-cultic, private psalm.<sup>35</sup> In reprisal a number of attempts have been made to categorize this psalm as a product of the wisdom schools. Such categorizing is in fact a complementary way of describing genre. It is a different dimension from description in terms of complaint, innocence, thanksgiving and the like, and assumes that the wisdom teachers took over such forms from cultic usage and employed them as vehicles of their own distinctive way of thinking. O. Eissfeldt briefly defined the psalm as a wisdom poem, 'a devotional reflection on God's omniscience and omnipresence—perhaps occasioned by the suspicion raised against the worshipper that he has associated with the impious'.<sup>36</sup> G. von Rad viewed the psalm similarly. He included Psalm 139 in a group of 'Torah Psalms' which 'celebrate the revelation of Yahweh's will as the source of all knowledge and as an indispensable guide in life'.<sup>37</sup> J. L. Koole compared the themes and vocabulary of the psalm to wisdom material in the Book of Job concerning the world of nature.<sup>38</sup> He interpreted the psalm as a (non-cultic) defence of a wisdom teacher who as an exponent of international wisdom has fallen under suspicion of importing

[p.10]

foreign religion, idolatry (v. 24). The psalm presents Israel's natural science, and is the first evidence of a conflict between faith and science. H. Schüngel-Straumann has related the psalm even more closely to the Book of Job in a fascinating way.<sup>39</sup> Its setting is polemic within the wisdom schools, and the issue at stake is the right attitude to God. She lays weight upon verse 6 as an echo of Job 42: 2f., repeating its vocabulary of knowledge, ability and wonder. Using the form of an individual complaint, the psalmist describes God as essentially full of mystery. In verses 19-24 he is attacking those wisdom teachers who speak of God from a theoretical theological standpoint, as Job's companions did. They are in fact God's enemies (vv. 20f.) and teach what is alien to true faith and doctrine.

Psalm 139 then is caught up in a basic controversy which has long raged over the Psalter at large, the question of cultic or non-cultic situations. In this case it has resolved itself in recent times into a choice between a religious trial or a wisdom-oriented didactic (or polemic) poem. A fundamental problem is that forms are fully capable of straying from their original habitat and acquiring a new setting. To give a modern example of a particular composition, a hymn of worship, 'Amazing Grace' (primarily a religious poem?), can be converted into a secular pop song!<sup>40</sup> The thought is a discouraging one: it is one thing to identify form in the abstract and quite another to identify the setting of a given psalm. Nevertheless hypothesis is essential, provided that adequate controls are introduced. One must endeavour to reconstruct a reasonable background which will do justice to the contents of the psalm.

If it is possible for cultic forms to be taken over by wisdom teachers, it is equally possible for wisdom motifs and terminology to be transferred to other settings. For example, the prophet

---

<sup>35</sup> Cf. K. Koch's similar general criticism of Gunkel in *The Growth of the Biblical Tradition* (E.T. 1969), p. 177.

<sup>36</sup> *The Old Testament: An Introduction* (E.T. 1966), p. 125.

<sup>37</sup> *Wisdom in Israel* (E.T. 1972), p. 48.

<sup>38</sup> 'Quelques remarques sur Psaume 139,' *Studia biblica et semitica Th. C. Vriezen dedicata* (1966), pp. 176-180.

<sup>39</sup> 'Zur Gattung und Theologie des 139. Psalms,' *BZ* 17 (1973), pp. 39-51.

<sup>40</sup> 'All texts and words transmitted in human groups are themselves alive in the sense that they are prone to migrate from one original setting into other settings and it may be difficult or impossible in each individual case to pinpoint the different stations of a given psalm' (E. Gerstenberger, 'Psalms', *Old Testament Form Criticism*, ed. J. H. Hayes, 1974, pp. 179-223 [p. 223]).

sometimes uses wisdom language to communicate his message (e.g. Isa. 28: 23-29). Accordingly one can conceive of wisdom elements in the Psalter as well as of pure wisdom psalms, and there is no necessity to see a clear-cut demarcation between wisdom and cult in such cases.<sup>41</sup> In fact J. K. Kuntz has argued that Psalm 139 'lacks sufficient stylistic and ideological peculiarities to warrant inclusion in the wisdom psalms category'. Wisdom terminology and themes are used to 'represent the psalmist's own observations about his experience with the deity'. 'Its strikingly personal utterances and sustained and personal address to the deity signal its ineptness as a wisdom psalm. Moreover, the sage was not the only individual in ancient Israel who was given to thinking about the omniscience and omnipresence of the deity.'<sup>42</sup> Thus real doubt has been cast on the theory that Psalm 139 is a wisdom composition pure and simple. It is therefore opportune to investigate afresh the main rival theory. Certainly the evidence of a religious court outside the Psalms is impressive, and one should not be surprised at finding psalms linked with this sacral institution in the Psalter.<sup>43</sup> Such an explanation deserves to be taken seriously and tested against the contents of this particular psalm.

### III. EXEGESIS

#### a. 'You know all about me' (vv. 1-6)

Verses 1-18 are the prelude to verses 19-24. Eventually the psalm is to come round full circle to its opening theme and take up the motif of God's searching and knowing. But closer study poses a riddle: what is the precise relationship of verses 1 and 23? If the psalmist has already undergone a judicial enquiry, on the

[p.11]

sacro-legal hypothesis,<sup>44</sup> he hardly awaits another. On any theory the quasirepetition is strange. The explanation that by the end he gladly accepts what earlier he had to endure<sup>45</sup> is only partially satisfying. Dahood's recourse to a 'precativ perfect' in verse 1 brings harmony but at the cost of an uncertain usage and a violation of the inner movement of the psalm.<sup>46</sup> Kraus turns the psalm on its head and envisages a post-trial scene: the psalmist praises God in thanksgiving and finally quotes in verses 19ff. his earlier complaint uttered before a verdict had been given in his favour.<sup>47</sup> So verse 23, in inverted commas, looks forward and verse 1 looks back to the same event, the judicial investigation of the charges of which he was accused.

The simplest and probably the best solution is to render the verbs of verse 1 as present, just as the perfect and imperfect consecutive Hebrew verbs in verses 2-5 always are. This

---

<sup>41</sup> Cf. R. E. Murphy, 'A Consideration of the Classification "Wisdom Psalms"', *Congress Volume Bonn 1962* (Supplements to VT, vol. 9, 1963), pp. 156-167, who argues on these lines and expressly excludes Psalm 139.

<sup>42</sup> 'The Canonical Psalms of Ancient Israel: Their Rhetorical, Thematic and Formal Dimensions,' *Rhetorical Criticism* (J. Mulenburg Festschrift, 1974), eds. J. J. Jackson and M. Kessler, pp. 186-222, esp. pp. 206-208.

<sup>43</sup> Cf. Gerstenberger's judicious acceptance of a religio-forensic setting in general (*art. cit.*, pp. 204f.).

<sup>44</sup> Cf. Beyerlin, *op. cit.*, p. 110. He assigns Psalms 5, 7, 11 and 17 to an early stage in the judicial proceedings, a preliminary investigation.

<sup>45</sup> 'At the beginning it was something he had to accept and could not deny. Now he is glad that it should be so' (G. S. Gunn, *God in the Psalms*, 1965, pp. 128f.).

<sup>46</sup> See note 16 to section i. Holman, *BZ* 14 (1970), p. 39, follows Dahood.

<sup>47</sup> A. A. Anderson, *The Book of Psalms* (New Century Bible, 1972), vol. 2, p. 904, follows Kraus.



interpretation is adopted by the Jerusalem Bible: 'you examine me and know me'.<sup>48</sup> Verse 1 refers to Yahweh's general insight into the psalmist's life. The theme is developed in detail in verses 2-4. In fact verses 1-4 form a subunit, commenced and crowned by the divine name and dominated by the keyword and motif of God's knowing. Yahweh knows him inside and out. The psalmist—his motivation, his circumstances—is an open book to Him. Why this stress on divine knowledge? An investigation of the Old Testament usage of the term 'know' and related vocabulary such as 'see', 'perceive' and 'test' (v. 23) with God as subject reveals that in most cases they refer to God's providential role as a judge—not necessarily in a formal sense but by way of metaphor—who punishes the guilty and acquits the innocent.<sup>49</sup> The range is remarkably wide: there are cynical questions claiming impunity, such as 'How does God know?' (Job 22: 13; Ps. 73: 11) or 'Who knows us?' (Isa. 29: 15); negative statements claiming impunity, such as 'Yahweh does not see; the God of Jacob does not notice' (Ps. 94: 7; cf. 10: 11; Job 22: 14; Ezek. 8: 12); confession of sin (Ps. 69: 5); appeals to God to establish one's innocence (Job 10: 7; 31: 6; Ps. 40: 9; Jer. 12: 3; cf. Josh. 22: 22); appeals for God to punish (1 Kings 8: 39; Jer. 18: 23); and statements of personal innocence or vindication or divine punishment (Job 11: 11; 23: 10; Pss. 44: 21; 138: 6; Isa. 66: 18). These examples concern the term 'know'; similar results apply to the words 'test (try)' and 'search'.

This consistent association of the terms used here sheds light upon the implicit aim of the psalmist. He is in some situation of persecution and attack, as both Job and Jeremiah were. The final strophe of the psalm serves to undergird this conclusion. In fact the psalm as a whole is remarkably akin—in expanded form—to Jeremiah's passionate appeal for vindication against his attackers: 'You know me, Yahweh; you see me and test my attitude towards you. Pull them out like sheep for the slaughter' (Jer. 12: 3; cf. 15: 15). Accordingly the psalmist is not engaged in some quiet reverie on a divine attribute, but pleading from the start for justice to be done. The appeal to divine knowledge does not indeed prove that a trial, religious or otherwise, is the setting of the psalm, but it is quite consistent with it. Certainly a polemical element is not merely evident at the conclusion of the piece but underlies it from the start.

A feature of this psalm is the resumption of motifs broached earlier. Thus verse 4 develops the theme of verse 2b, God's knowledge of the psalmist's thought processes. Similarly verse 5 introduces a motif which is duly to be developed at length in the second stanza, the presence of God. He is not only 'far off', the

[p.12]

transcendent God who observes all from heaven (v. 2; cf. Jer. 23: 23f.; Ps. 11: 4f.). He is also close by. There is ambiguity in the expressions used. The term for 'surround' means primarily 'confine' and is often used in a hostile sense 'besiege'; but it can be used of protection. Similarly God's hand (here literally palm) can refer to His loving care or to His punishment. Probably the text is to be pressed to neither extreme but is simply a neutral statement of Yahweh's absolute control of the psalmist's movements.<sup>50</sup> It is conceivable that he refers to his situation of trouble and traces it back to God as its instigator, but the context hardly favours this possibility. In verse 6 the psalmist moves away from description to record his

---

<sup>48</sup> Cf. F. Delitzsch, *Psalms* (E. T. 1871), pp. 342, 345, 'Thou searchest and knowest me'; likewise Bultmann, *op. cit.*, p. 534; Koole, *art. cit.*, p. 177.

<sup>49</sup> For the general religious phenomenon of divine omniscience and its moral function see R. Pettazoni, *The All-Knowing God* (E.T. 1956).

<sup>50</sup> Dahood, *op. cit.*, *ad loc.*

reaction to God's 'knowledge' and control as one of humble amazement and praise (cf. Ps. 118: 23). In a related fashion Isaiah called Yahweh 'wonderful in counsel' (Isa. 28: 29). The psalmist realises that he has entered into a realm of mystery. In this area of knowledge a great gulf lies between God and himself. His own sense of inadequacy and limitation induces him to express his reverence for divine omniscience.

**b. 'I cannot hide from you' (vv. 7-14b)**

God's closeness, broached in verse 5, is now developed. The rhetorical question of verse 7, expecting the answer 'nowhere', is amplified in verses 8-10 into a series of examples, of hypothetical locations above or beneath the earth and movement from the eastern end of the earth to the far west. What is the psalmist's implicit intent in these emphatic statements? If the motif of divine knowledge in the preceding verses was to be set against a background of appeal to God as Judge, an identical setting can be envisaged here. Man's accessibility to God is stressed in a divine threat of judgment at Jer. 23: 24: 'Can a man hide himself in secret places so that I cannot see him? ... Do I not fill heaven and earth?' The context is a condemnation of prophets who base their authority on subjective dreams (23: 23-32). God is great enough to see through their claims (vv. 23, 25). In a similar fashion the psalmist appears to be stating his awareness of his own availability to the divine Judge. He freely acknowledges that he cannot escape God: 'before him no creature is hidden' (Heb. 4: 13; cf. the parallelism of Heb. 4: 12 with Ps. 139: 2, 4). Verses 7ff. are in fact an imaginative amplification of God's knowing all his ways (v. 3) from a different theological perspective. The personal life of the psalmist is related spatially to the universalism of God. More commonly when the theme of God's judicial knowledge is treated, it is in terms of God's eyes surveying the world (cf. Ps. 11: 4f.; Jer. 16: 17), but Jeremiah 23: 24b, cited above, provides a parallel. The psalmist is fully aware that he can hide nothing from God—not even himself, wherever he sought to go. The implication is that he has not tried, nor would he, to 'hide deep from Yahweh' his 'counsel' (Isa. 29: 15), for it would be a waste of time and effort. 'There is nowhere one cannot be reached by God's judgment.'<sup>51</sup>

If Jeremiah 23: 24 is the key to the exegesis of this passage, the influential interpretation of E. Baumann must be deemed incorrect.<sup>52</sup> He postulated a turning point in the psalm at verse 13. In verses 1-12 the psalmist relates his former resentment at God's patronizing and intolerable control of his life; he tells how he contemplated fleeing Jonah-like from Him, but judged it impossible. It was only when he gained a new insight, into God's creative care, that he was converted to identify with God and His purposes. Structural analysis of the psalm does not

[p.13]

favour this interpretation: verses 1-18 are bound together as a unit. If the break came earlier, one would have expected some clear structural indication. It is preferable to attempt to view verses 1-18 as the progressive development of an overall theme from separate angles.

The psalmist never wanted to escape God: rather, 'escape would be impossible if he wished it'.<sup>53</sup> Amos 9: 2-4 treats the motif of human inescapability from God in a way similar to the

---

<sup>51</sup> K. -H. Bernhardt, 'Zur Gottesvorstellung von Psalm 139', *Kirche—Theologie—Frömmigkeit* (G. Holtz Festschrift, 1965), pp. 20-31 (p. 30). Bernhardt mainly discusses Yahweh's omnipresence here and elsewhere in the OT, especially as a judicial motif.

<sup>52</sup> 'Der 139. Psalm—ein Bekenntnis der Metanoia,' *Evangelische Theologie* 11 (1951), pp. 187-190. Cf. W. Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, vol. 1 (E.T. 1961), p. 491.

<sup>53</sup> A. F. Kirkpatrick, *The Book of Psalms* (1902), p. 787, echoed by Dahood, *ad loc.*

present passage, rhetorically instancing contrasted areas to build up an impression of total non-evasion of divine punishment for sin. But there one gets an impression of the 'Hound of heaven' pursuing fugitives from justice. Here there is a slightly different perspective: the psalmist, wherever he went, would find himself confronting a God who was already there. The psalmist can be at only one place in the world at any one time, but God is everywhere.<sup>54</sup> The accessibility of Sheol to God is a moot point in the Old Testament. It is often denied in order to stress that fellowship with God and enjoyment of His blessing is confined to this life (Ps. 88: 5 [Heb. 6]; Jon. 2: 4 [Heb. 5]). But it is included in the wider circle of divine sovereignty in both Amos 9: 2 and here: cf. Job 26: 6 'Sheol is naked before God'. The divine presence represents God's personal control (v. 10):<sup>55</sup> if verses 7ff. are an amplification of verse 3b, they are also of verse 5. God controls not only the psalmist but the whole world, so that nowhere in God's world could he evade Him.

At verse 11 there is a transition to a related theme. It is unlikely that 'darkness' stands for Sheol, despite Psalm 88: 12 (Heb. 13).<sup>56</sup> There seems to be no compelling contextual reason why verse 8b should be re-emphasised in such a way. Rather, the psalmist is developing another motif that belongs to the sphere of divine judgment, which finds expression also at Job 34: 22: 'There is no gloom or deep darkness where evildoers may hide themselves'. Holman has observed that after verse 9 in which the psalmist has envisaged himself following the movement of the sun till sunset, there comes the darkness of night in verse 11.<sup>57</sup> This insight is by no means an alternative exegetical explanation but reflects the artistic arrangement of motifs at the psalmist's disposal. A common variation of God's judicial knowing is His seeing (cf. Job 22: 13f.). The limitations of human sight are here denied: 'Yahweh sees not as man sees' (1 Sam. 16: 7). There is in fact an unexpressed link between this implicit reference to God's 'omni-vision' in verse 12 and the specific mention of the kidneys (KJV 'reins', RSV 'inward parts') in verse 13. It is to be found in Jeremiah 20: 12, an appeal to 'Yahweh of hosts, you who test the righteous, you who *see kidneys* and heart'. In passages which treat of divine judgment the kidneys frequently figure as the organ of man's conscience. More specifically they are mentioned in two psalms which have been assigned to the categories of psalms of innocence and psalms of the accused: 'you who test hearts and kidneys' (Ps. 7: 9 [Heb. 10]); 'test my kidneys and heart' (Ps. 26: 2). The sequence of thought is then as follows: God sees the psalmist at all times, even in the dark; He sees into the depths of his being, into his kidneys, probing his conscience—and that is no surprise, since God was responsible for their creation.

The thought passes from facet to facet of divine judgment. The motifs are selected not haphazardly but so as to yield a climactic progression: the psalmist has moved from a contemplation of the dimension of time and human activity in the first stanza to the dimension

---

<sup>54</sup> Krasovec, *art. cit.*, pp. 237, 244. W. I. Wolverton, 'The Psalmists' Belief in God's Presence', *Canadian Journal of Theology* 9 (1963), pp. 82-94, insists that there is no concept of divine universal immanence here, but, as in Psalm 23: 6, simply God's personal presence with the individual believer. His interpretation appears to be an over-reaction to any possibility of pantheism.

<sup>55</sup> In v. 7 'spirit' and 'presence', literally 'face', are identical with God Himself (Danell, *op. cit.*, p. 13). They are both extensions of God's personality, to use A. R. Johnson's definition in *The One and the Many in the Israelite Conception of God* (2 1961), p. 16. J. W. Rogerson, 'The Hebrew Conception of Corporate Personality: A Re-Examination', *JTS* 21 (1970), pp. 1-16 has seriously questioned the anthropological theory upon which Johnson's own use of the phrase is primarily based, but in this type of instance it remains a valuable insight.

<sup>56</sup> Danell, *op. cit.*, p. 16; Dahood, *ad loc.*; Holman, *BZ* 14 (1970), p. 60, all interpret in terms of Sheol.

<sup>57</sup> *VT* 21 (1971), p. 306.

of space and human situations, and finally on to man himself.<sup>58</sup> At this point the logical flow is interrupted. There has been

[p.14]

more than enough material for praise, and the psalmist again confesses himself overwhelmed with awesome wonder at the majestic conception of God that his words have suggested: the God who controls both the world and its individual microcosm, by right of creation.<sup>59</sup>

**c. 'You know me because you created me' (vv. 14c-18)**

He returns at the end of verse 14 to give expression to his underlying theme, God's complete knowledge of himself.<sup>60</sup> This is varied in parallelism by reference to non-hiding (cf. Ps. 69: 5 [Heb. 6]). The inability to hide from God has been treated from a spatial aspect in verses 9-12, and now it is applied to the individual's creation. The theme of verse 13 is picked up and amplified. It is yet another facet of the kaleidoscopic concept of the divine judicial scrutiny. It finds expression in Isaiah 29: 16: 'Shall the potter be regarded as the clay? ...' Isaiah 29: 15 itself has permutations which have already appeared in the psalm: hiding, darkness, God's seeing and knowing. In 29: 16 the statement 'He has no understanding' is a repudiation of divine insight and the addressees' liability to punishment (cf. Ps. 94: 7). The relationship between the pro-Egyptian politicians and Yahweh is that of clay pots to potter. He is their Maker. How ridiculous to suppose that He is unaware of their dark deeds and will not call them to account! The reasoning is repeated in Psalm 139: 15f. (cf. Ps. 33: 15) with reference to the psalmist himself. From conception onwards he has been the object of Yahweh's creative workmanship.<sup>61</sup> The specific reference to God's seeing in verse 16 is a reminder of the overall judicial theme.

The intimacy of God's knowledge is reinforced by the mention of God's 'book' in which the psalmist's actions throughout his life 'are written'.<sup>62</sup> There are forensic overtones here: cf. Daniel 7: 10 'The court sat, and the books were opened' (cf. Mal. 3: 16 and also Ps. 56: 8 [Heb. 9]). The exhortation of *Pirqe Aboth* ii. 1 is worth citing as a parallel: 'Know what is above you: a seeing eye and a hearing ear and all your deeds written in a book'. The final part of verse 16 rises to a climax. Not only did God see him in his hidden embryonic state. Not only are his temporal actions all recorded in heaven. God also from the beginning had mapped out his life. As the psalmist comes to the end of the statement of his awareness of God's complete and utter knowledge of himself he gives this extreme illustration. From one perspective his life is but the outworking of a divine destiny.<sup>63</sup>

---

<sup>58</sup> Schüngel-Straumann, *art. cit.*, p. 48.

<sup>59</sup> Accordingly 'works' in v. 14 is exceedingly apt at this point.

<sup>60</sup> See note 15 to section i.

<sup>61</sup> Verse 15b is in the context a metaphorical reference to his formation in the womb: cf. JB 'in the limbo of the womb' and Delitzsch, *ad loc.*: 'The earth was the mother's womb of Adam, and the mother's womb out of which the child of Adam comes forth is the earth out of which it is taken.' There may be an allusion to the widespread ancient myth of man sprouting from the earth (cf. Gen. 1: 24; 2: 7 and perhaps Job 1: 21). Cf. H. W. Wolff, *Anthropology of the Old Testament* (E.T. 1974), pp. 96f.; Eichrodt, *Theology of the Old Testament*, vol. 2 (E.T. 1967), p. 141. For metaphorical use of mythological motifs in the Old Testament cf. Isaiah 51: 9f.

<sup>62</sup> It is here taken as exegetically significant that the Hebrew verb for writing is in the imperfect state. It has the sense of a continuous present, while the following verb is perfect and past.

<sup>63</sup> The context of the whole psalm indicates that 'the fact of divine predestination does not in any sense do violence to human responsibility' (E. J. Young, *Psalm 139: A Study in the Omniscience of God*, 1965, p. 83). For determinism here and elsewhere in the Old Testament see G. von Rad, *Wisdom in Israel* (E.T. 1972), pp. 263, 282; cf. Eichrodt, *op. cit.*, pp. 175, 177; and D. J. Clines, 'Predestination in the Old Testament' in *Grace Unlimited*, ed. C. H. Pinnock (1975), pp. 110-126. One of Clines' concluding propositions is that 'the Old

In verses 17f. the psalmist draws the strophe and the whole of the psalm thus far to an end with a final outburst of praise. Again he confesses himself overwhelmed. If his own 'thoughts' are an open book to God (v. 2), God's on the other hand are inscrutable and incomprehensible: they are 'difficult' to grasp.<sup>64</sup> God's intense concern for him<sup>65</sup> and the outworking of God's mind and will in his individual life fill him with a sense of the divine mystery.<sup>66</sup> His little mind is baffled by confrontation with the comprehensive, infinite mind of God.

Thus far the psalm has been dominated by the expression of an 'I-Thou' relationship with God. Holman has noted the contrast between the representations of God and man, especially in verses 1-12.<sup>67</sup> On the one hand there is the multiplicity of the psalmist's activities and the agitation of various human possibilities; on the other is the majestic superiority of God's knowledge, expressed in sober, calm tones, comprehending everything by the mere fact of his presence. Clearly

[p.15]

the psalm does not simply present dogmatic theology,<sup>68</sup> but it does bear some relation to a formal theology. At first sight the material is an individual application of aspects of God's revelation of Himself to Israel. But the reality is more complex than this. It has been shown that step by step the psalmist is echoing a variety of motifs all associated with the overall theme of God as the Judge who knows men's hearts and calls them to account. Viewed atomistically, there is little new in the psalm: the poet appears to take up existing motifs which already clustered around the basic concept of the judgment of God and which had already utilised a number of other theological ideas to this single end. Such novelty as there is in the psalm lies in their skilfully being amassed together in continuous array, in a veritable bombardment. The idea of judgment is a metaphorical one, together with the related notions of accountability and punishment. At the least the implicit reference to them throughout suggests a situation of attack and accusation. The psalmist seems to be attempting to clear his name and to establish his integrity, in the vein of St. Peter: 'Lord, you know everything; you

---

Testament knows nothing of a divine predestination that predetermines in advance the particular acts of an individual'. One wishes that he could have included the Psalter, in particular Psalm 139: 16, in his survey. Some scholars, such as A. Weiser, *The Psalms* (E.T. 1962), *ad loc.*, interpret 'days' in terms of predetermined length of life. There are a number of difficulties in the text of v. 16. It would be possible to take *yšrw* as an imperfect form synonymously parallel to *yikkātēbū* 'are written', deriving it from a root *šwr* 'delineate, fashion', used in Exodus 32: 4 with *beret* 'engraving tool' (cf. B. S. Childs, *Exodus*, 1974, pp. 556, 565). In Ezekiel 43: 11 the derived noun evidently means 'outline, sketch'. In post-biblical Hebrew the verb in the piel means 'draw, paint, embroider'; cf. Syriac *šūrta* 'writing, text'. Then the verb would be pointed *yūšārū* (hophal or passive qal) or *yūšārū* (niph'al). The final part of the verse would then read 'my days are inscribed—and not merely one of them', the last phrase reinforcing 'all' earlier, emphasising that his whole life is recorded.

<sup>64</sup> Hebrew *yāqāru* can theoretically mean either 'are precious' (RSV) or 'are difficult' (JB, NEB). The latter rendering is demanded by the parallel vv. 6, 14: *pl' min* in v. 6 (cf. *pl'* in v. 14) includes the meaning 'be too difficult for'.

<sup>65</sup> The emphatic *li* at the beginning of v. 17 seems to mean 'where I am concerned'. For the understanding of *li...rē'eykā* as 'your thoughts directed towards me' cf. Psalm 40: 6 (EVV 5) *maḥšebōteykā 'elēnū*; 40: 18 (EVV 17) and 41: 8 (EVV 7) *ḥšb lē* 'devise for'; Hosea 7: 15 *ḥiššēb 'el*.

<sup>66</sup> Cf. von Rad, *op. cit.*, pp. 107-109.

<sup>67</sup> VT 21 (1971), p. 301.

<sup>68</sup> Cf. Gunkel's famous description: 'nicht abstrakt-philosophisch, sondern konkreterreligiös' (*Die Psalmen*, p. 587).

know that I love you' (John 21: 17). The categorization of verses 1-18 as a developed protestation of innocence is clearly correct.

It is feasible to suppose that in the setting of the psalm the judgment is more than metaphorical:<sup>69</sup> the psalmist faces a religious court and is attending the preliminary hearing. The last line of verse 18 may support the forensic claims for the psalm made by Würthwein and others. Does the awaking refer to the morning trial after the preliminary investigation of the night before?<sup>70</sup> If so, the psalmist is summing up his confession of God's insight into his life and inescapable presence. As he faces the moment of truth, the actual trial, he admits himself fully aware of the seriousness of the situation. He cannot fob God off then or at any other time. The all-knowing God will be there, scrutinising and searching.<sup>71</sup>

The ascriptions of praise in verses 6, 14, 17f. do indeed appear to be examples of 'Gerichtsdoxologie', which also appears in another Psalm evidently emanating from the sacral court, Psalm 7: 9b-11 (Heb. 10b-12).<sup>72</sup> The claim of innocence, elsewhere in such psalms made by means of self-cursing (Ps. 7: 3-5 [Heb. 4-6]) or in a plain disclaimer (Pss. 17: 3-5; 26: 4f.) is in verses 1-18 expressed in a more oblique fashion.

#### **d. 'Vindicate me against my false accusers' (vv. 19-24)**

The protestation of innocence is also expressed more directly, in the appeal of verses 19-22. At first sight the references to the wicked and God's enemies are quite general, but verse 19b—as well as the overall vehemence of the passage—indicates that these are his own enemies who confront him with their accusations. It is helpful to compare the outright appeal for protection against personal enemies in Psalm 59: If. (Heb. 2f.). For the sophisticated form of the appeal in this case, Psalm 83: 2 (Heb. 3) is comparable, where Israel's political enemies are described theologically as God's enemies. Certainly, if verses 1-18 are the psalmist's defence against attack, it is reasonable to assume that verses 19ff. specify his attackers. Wrong lies on their side, pleads the psalmist. If death is his sentence, they would be his murderers. Their rebellion against God<sup>73</sup> is in part at least their presumption in bringing before the court a wrongful accusation.

In verses 21f. it is noticeable that the psalmist now pushes himself to the fore. Throughout the earlier part of the psalm God has been very much the central figure.

[p.16]

The psalmist has stepped to the front of the stage, as it were, only in the doxologies and even there his secondary role is obvious. In these two verses he vigorously takes a similar lead in a strident affirmation of the responsible stand he has taken as Yahweh's ally in the cause of

---

<sup>69</sup> Koole's contention in favour of a non-cultic origin for the psalm that divine justice is never mentioned in the psalm (*art. cit.*, p. 178) completely overlooks the tenor of its motifs

<sup>70</sup> On the procedure cf. Beyerlin, *op. cit.*, pp. 144-146. Cf. Psalm 17: 15; Zephaniah 3: 5.

<sup>71</sup> The text is often revocalised as *h<sup>a</sup>qisšōtī* 'if I came to the end' (cf. RSV margin). But although it suits the previous verb 'count', it hardly fits the overall thought of innumerableness. The traditional Christian interpretation in terms of resurrection (so the Targum and Symmachus), revived by Dahood; *ad loc.*, is theologically anachronistic in the primary setting of the Psalms.

<sup>72</sup> Cf. Beyerlin, *op. cit.*, pp. 145, 153; Kraus, *Psalmen*, *ad loc.*

<sup>73</sup> MT *yom<sup>e</sup>rūkā* is evidently intended as a defective writing of *yō<sup>m</sup>rūkā* ('speak against you', with an awkward direct object), which some mss. and editions read. But it is generally repointed *yamrūkā*, 'defy you', following the evidence of Quinta, a Greek translation used by Origen.

moral truth. He now brings fully into the open his personal involvement with the wicked, which lay beneath the surface apart from verse 19b. The pair of verses are a typical claim of innocence: the verb 'hate' in Hebrew is a technical term for abjuration. Gunkel happily referred to Psalm 119: 113 for the corollary and gist of such statements: 'I hate double-minded men, but I love your law'. A near-parallel in a sacro-forensic psalm occurs at Psalm 26: 5: 'I hate the company of evildoers'. Here the asseveration is tactical as well as moral. His false accusers have alienated themselves from God, and the psalmist implicitly both encourages and defends himself with the assertion that he stands not only before God as Judge but with Him as his moral champion, who will vindicate his integrity. Then just as Psalm 26: 2 follows an overt appeal for such vindication (cf. Ps. 7: 8 [Heb. 9]) with a free surrender to the divine scrutiny at the investigatory hearing—'Test me, Yahweh, and examine me; try my kidneys and heart'—so here in similar vein the psalmist welcomes with a clear conscience the priestly examination in God's name.

Verse 24a appears to allude to the charge. There are two homonymous Hebrew nouns with the same form, 'ōṣēb. One means 'idolatry'<sup>74</sup> and the other 'pain'.<sup>75</sup> In this psalm in which the speaker defends himself against attack it is reasonable to assume that the term here used refers to the issue of accusation or complaint. It is not at all obvious how 'pain' satisfies such a requirement. Does the phrase refer to 'a hurtful way'<sup>76</sup> and, if so, is it a way that brings pain to others or one that leads to the pain of punishment?<sup>77</sup> On the other hand 'idolatry' yields an unambiguous ground for complaint. It is probable then that a charge of idolatry, doubtless frequently merited in Israel's syncretistic culture, is here repudiated. On the contrary, the psalmist in closing places his hand in God's (cf. v. 10) in a shuddering plea to be protected from such religious innovations as the 'new gods' of Deuteronomy 32: 17 and to be kept in the traditional 'ancient paths' (Jer. 6: 16; cf. 18: 15) of a pure faith in Yahweh.<sup>78</sup>

#### IV. EXPOSITION

Specific exegesis centred in the thinking and practice of an alien culture can appear to rob the Old Testament of its Christian applicability. It is certainly easier, for example, to pray the prayer of verse 24 according to the traditional Christian rendering of the RSV, 'See if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting'. But the character of verses 1-18 as a self-defence, the strong likelihood of a charge of idolatry in verse 24 and the possibility of a forensic reference in verse 18 together point the exegete to a setting of a religious court, and translation should reflect these and other cultural features of the psalm. Similarly exposition must follow the furrow of exegesis, if it is to claim scriptural authority with any honesty.

The psalm is not one which the Christian can re-use in this setting, unlike many an Israelite presumably. Apart from its institutional particularity, the earlier part of the final stanza is

---

<sup>74</sup> Isaiah 48: 5; a common emendation in Hosea 10: 6. For the Jewish tradition of understanding it in this sense, represented at Qumran and by the Targum see note 32 to section ii.

<sup>75</sup> Of travail 1 Chronicles 4: 9; of the exile Isaiah 14: 3.

<sup>76</sup> Brown, Driver and Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament* (1906), p. 780.

<sup>77</sup> Delitzsch, *ad loc.*; Weiser, *ad loc.* L. Koehler, *Lexicon in Veteris Testamenti Libros* (1958), *ad loc.*, emends the text to 'oqēb' 'insidiousness' on the basis of Jerome's *doli*; cf. F. Buhl's proposal 'og<sup>e</sup>bâ' in *Biblia Hebraica*, ed. R. Kittel (s 1937), *ad loc.* But it is more likely that Jerome's rendering, the Septuagint's 'lawlessness' and the Syriac 'lying' all reflect the difficulty of attempting to relate the term meaningfully to 'ōṣēb 'pain'.

<sup>78</sup> Cf. the Targum's interpretation: 'the way of upright men of old.'

blatantly offensive to the Christian's higher ideals.<sup>79</sup> Verse 19a can hardly be echoed by those whose Lord has taught them a respect for life and the way of forgiveness. (Would that such ideals were as rigorously self-

[p.17]

applied as to the psalmist!) But beneath the emotional language of the last stanza<sup>80</sup> there does lie a sober, objective conviction that Yahweh is a moral God who administers judgment. Baumann has correctly observed that the psalmist desires not so much the destruction of persons as of their pernicious influence.<sup>81</sup>

Above all there is a key factor which is all too often forgotten in the hasty condemnation of such psalms. The Israelite knew little of the intellectual reassurance of an occasion of judgment beyond this life (cf. 1 Cor. 4: 5). He hoped for a settling of moral scores before death (cf. Job 34: 23-30). Nor is this outlook completely alien to the New Testament, as the incident of Ananias and Sapphira reveals (Acts 5: 1ff.; cf. 1 Cor. 11: 30-32). As in the case of the psalmist, the possibility that the divine thunderbolt might claim another victim (Acts 5: 11) certainly constituted a radical call to moral decisiveness. Israel's religious courts, and also the secular courts established to wield God's justice in a theocracy, were set up for the specific purpose of punishing offences, capital and otherwise, with divine authority. So the psalmist's words are in harmony with the total religious ethos of Israel, and his passion merely garnishes an objective plea. This does not make him a whit more 'Christian', but it does invest him with a certain validity. Also it leads one to question whether it is right to bring Old Testament believers to trial, as it were, before a New Testament court set up according to principles of a different religious (though theologically similar) ethos. 'Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? ... Whatever does not proceed from faith is sin' (Rom. 14: 4, 23). Nevertheless, although and in fact because, the Old Testament is part of the Christian scriptures, it is obviously necessary to distinguish pre-Christian elements, which means to distinguish theology from more relative factors.

The exegesis has brought to light another feature that the modern Christian may find distasteful, the motif of innocence, which appears to spring from a proud and pretentious spirit. In this respect part of the fault at least may lie on the side of the adherent of a form of the Protestant faith which misinterprets the doctrine of total depravity. The psalmist is entering a plea of 'not guilty' to a particular charge, and it is in this relative light that his protestations, implicit and explicit, are to be understood.<sup>82</sup> St. Paul and many another Christian in his train have known the heartbreak of false accusation or of being misunderstood and wrongly blamed. In a polemical context Paul, like the psalmist, took refuge in the positive theme of God's fair judgment and protested his integrity as it were on divine oath: 'We preach not to please men but to please God who tests our hearts' (1 Thess. 2: 4; cf. 2 Cor. 11: 11; Gal. 1: 20). If God is for us, he virtually claims, who can be against us? This opening of the conscience towards God brings with it a humbling such as the psalmist himself expressed in his prayer. It also prompts to praise, and this too Paul discovered when under attack: 'The God and Father of the Lord Jesus, he who is blessed for ever, knows that I do not

---

<sup>79</sup> W. S. McCullough in the expository section of *The Interpreter's Bible*, vol. iv (1955), p. 717, significantly ignores vv. 19-22 completely.

<sup>80</sup> Yet Krasovec, *art. cit.*, pp. 245f., has rightly warned against underestimating the passionate tone that underlies vv. 1-18.

<sup>81</sup> *Art. cit.*, p. 190.

<sup>82</sup> On this issue see C. S. Lewis, 'Judgement in the Psalms', ch. 3 of *Reflections on the Psalms* (1958).



lie' (2 Cor. 11: 31). Both Paul and the psalmist were driven to an adoring avowal of how much God meant to them.

The very charge of idolatry is by no means irrelevant to the modern Christian, in a metaphorical sense. He may be seduced into new forms of the old faith, which in fact deny its substance. The injunction of 1 John 5: 21 'keep yourselves from idols' re-applies the theme of the psalm on these very lines, in the context of the whole letter and especially its stress on 'that which was from the beginning'. And there are cultural pressures which in their demands are quasi-religious, and these

[p.18]

are to be found not only in the area of totalitarian politics. Harvey Cox has applied the Yahwistic veto upon idolatry to the need to relativise all human values and their representations—anything that is fashioned by man himself.<sup>83</sup> He defines idolatry in terms borrowed from Gabriel Vahanian as 'the manifold, constant proclivity to elevate the finite to the level of the infinite, to give the transitory the status of permanent, and to attribute to man qualities that will deceive him into denying his finitude'. Idols are 'the symbols and values of a tribe, a clan, a nation projected into the heavens and given the status of divine beings'. Relativism 'is the necessary and logical consequence of faith in the Creator'.

The preacher will be tempted, and the writer pleads guilty to succumbing, to cull from the psalm a sermon on the natural attributes of God, His omniscience, omnipresence and omnipotence, and perhaps also His moral righteousness. A number of commentaries do encourage him so to do by using such terms as headings. Only the second of these is directly treated in Psalm 139. Every scrap of theology in the psalm is applied theology: it is the meaning of God for the individual believer in a particular situation of pressure. It is a God-consciousness not neatly intellectualised but let loose in his life in a frighteningly pragmatic way. Not even theology is an area in which the psalmist attempts to hide himself from God. Not omniscience, but constant exposure to a divine scrutiny (cf. Heb. 4: 13), not so much omnipresence as confrontation with an unseen Person at every turn, not omnipotence but divine control of an individual's life—these are the heart-searching themes of the psalmist. Above all there is a sense of the existential reality of God: the divine 'Thou' is as significantly real as the human 'I'. The Christian who professes faith in an 'Immanuel'—God with us—may discover that his faith means something more, but certainly it should not mean less.

The final petition provides a stress that the individual believer should feel the need of the ongoing guidance of his God in order to keep in the path of true faith. This is already implicit in the psalm's combination of statement and petition. As Weiser deduced in the case of a passage from a similar psalm, Psalm 139 by means of its two parts 'exhibits that peculiar intertwining of the assurance of faith and of the simultaneous striving for that assurance which ... is the mark of any faith which is truly alive'.<sup>84</sup>

## V. TRANSLATION

Yahweh, you search me and know me.

---

<sup>83</sup> *The Secular City* (1965), pp. 32-35. Cf. the provocatively entitled *Science is a Sacred Cow* by A. Standen (1952).

<sup>84</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 138.

You know when I sit down and get up.  
You sense my thinking from far away.  
You analyse when I travel and when I rest.  
In fact you are familiar with all my behaviour.  
For example, before a word has even reached my tongue,  
you know all about it, Yahweh.  
You surround me back and front.  
You put your hand on me.  
Such knowledge is wonderful and beyond me,  
it is so transcendent I cannot grasp it.

[p.19]

Where could I go to avoid your spirit?  
Where could I get away from your presence?  
If I went up to heaven, you would be there.  
If I lay down in Sheol, there you would be.  
I might fly on the wings of the dawn<sup>85</sup>  
and go and live at the furthest part of the sea.  
Your hand would be even there to guide me,  
your right hand would take hold of me.  
Or I might ask the darkness to cover me,<sup>86</sup>  
the light around me to turn into night.  
Even darkness is not too dark for you,  
night is as light as the day,  
light and dark are just the same.<sup>87</sup>  
The reason why is that you created<sup>88</sup> my conscience yourself,  
you put me together in my mother's womb.  
I praise you because you are awesomely wonderful,<sup>89</sup>  
the things you have made are so wonderful.

You know my being through and through.  
My bone structure was not concealed from you  
when I was being made in secret,  
made in all my intricacy<sup>90</sup> deep down in the earth.  
Your eyes saw my embryo.  
In your book they are all written down—  
my<sup>91</sup> days that were planned  
before any of them occurred.

---

<sup>85</sup> The Septuagint and Syriac took as *kēnāpay*, i.e. 'lift up my wings to the dawn (= the east)'. This reading is superficially attractive in that it provides two parallel areas as in the previous verse, but probably the contrast is expressed more subtly in this case, by stylistic variation. For the poetic 'wings of the dawn' cf. Malachi 4: 2 (Heb. 3: 20).

<sup>86</sup> Some such meaning for the verb is obviously required, but how it may be achieved is a moot point. Symmachus and Jerome so rendered, perhaps reading *yēšūkkēni*, as is often suggested, from *škk* as a byform of *skk*, in place of MT *yešūpēni*. On the other hand, G. R. Driver, *JTS* 30 (1929), pp. 375-377, suggested a root *šwp* meaning 'sweep close over', appealing to an Arabic cognate.

<sup>87</sup> The last line is frequently rejected as a gloss. Holman, *BZ* 14 (1970), pp. 62-64, gives a thorough presentation of the case for and against, and finally accepts its authenticity.

<sup>88</sup> See Anderson, *ad loc.*

<sup>89</sup> MT 'I am awesomely wonderful' ('...wonderfully made' in KJV, RV is a rather forced paraphrase). Most of the ancient versions appear to have regarded the consonantal text as second singular, 'you are...' (cf. 11QPS<sup>a</sup> *nwr*' *'th* 'you are awesome' for *nōrā'ōl*). Both are possible, but MT is less likely (cf. v. 6).

<sup>90</sup> Lit. 'made of different colours'.

<sup>91</sup> The force of the pronominal suffix is carried over from the preceding noun (Dahood, *ad loc.*).

How difficult I find your thoughts of me,  
O God! How vast they are in all their totality!  
If I tried to count them, they are more than grains of sand.  
When I awake, I shall be with you still.

I wish you would kill the wicked, God,  
and that murderous men would leave me alone,  
men who wickedly rebel against you,  
who wrongly rise<sup>92</sup> as your foes.<sup>93</sup>  
Do I not hate those who hate you, Yahweh?  
Don't I loathe those who attack you?  
I do hate them, hate them utterly.  
I regard them as my enemies.  
Search me, God, and know my mind,  
test me and know how anxious I am.  
See if I have been behaving as an idolator.  
Guide me along the age-old path of faith.

---

© 1977 *London School of Theology* (<http://www.lst.ac.uk/>). Reproduced by permission.

Prepared for the Web in July 2007 by Robert I. Bradshaw.

<http://www.biblicalstudies.org.uk/>

---

---

<sup>92</sup> MT *nāśu'* is either an orthographical variant or a scribal slip for *nāś<sup>e</sup>'û* (cf. Jer. 10: 5 and 11QPs<sup>a</sup> *nś'w*) with the ellipse of the natural object.

<sup>93</sup> MT *'āreykā*, 'your cities (?)', is a textual crux. Perhaps it is best taken as an Aramaism 'your enemies' (Aquila, Symmachus, Jerome, Targum, KJV, RV); there are a number of Aramaisms in the psalm. Yet it does not read very smoothly. The conjectural proposal *'āleykā*, followed by many (RSV 'against thee'), is a feasible suggestion. The common emendation *ś<sup>e</sup>mekā*, 'your name', favoured by D. W. Thomas, *The Text of the Revised Psalter* (1963), p. 53, 'liegt graphisch zu weit ab' (Gunkel), despite its attractive reference to Exodus 20: 7.