
For the Chief Musician. A Psalm by David.

PSALM 139: 1 LORD, you have searched me, and you know me.

A fine account of the omniscience of God, Psa 139:1-6; of his omnipresence, Psa 139:7-12; of his power and providence Psa 139:13-16. The excellence of his purposes, Psa 139:17, Psa 139:18. His opposition to the wicked, Psa 139:19, Psa 139:20; with whom the godly can have no fellowship, Psa 139:21, Psa 139:22.

The title of this Psalm in the Hebrew is, To the chief Musician, or, To the Conqueror, A Psalm of David. The Versions in general follow the Hebrew. And yet, notwithstanding these testimonies, there appears internal evidence that the Psalm was not written by David, but during or after the time of the captivity, as there are several Chaldaisms in it. See Psa 139:2, Psa 139:3, Psa 139:7, Psa 139:9, Psa 139:19, Psa 139:20, collated with Dan 2:29, Dan 2:30; Dan 4:16; Dan 7:28; some of these shall be noticed in their proper places.

As to the author, he is unknown; for it does not appear to have been the work of David. The composition is worthy of him, but the language appears to be lower than his time.

Concerning the occasion, there are many conjectures which I need not repeat, because I believe them unfounded. It is most probable that it was written on no particular occasion, but is a moral lesson on the wisdom, presence, providence, and justice of God, without any reference to any circumstance in the life of David, or in the history of the Jews.

The Psalm is very sublime; the sentiments are grand, the style in general highly elevated, and the images various and impressive. The first part especially, that contains so fine a description of the wisdom and knowledge of God, is inimitable.

Bishop Horsley's account of this Psalm is as follows: - "In the first twelve verses of this Psalm the author celebrates God's perfect knowledge of man's thoughts and actions; and the reason of this wonderful knowledge, viz., that God is the Maker of man. Hence the psalmist proceeds, in the four following verses, Psa 139:13-16, to magnify God as ordaining and superintending the formation of his body in the womb. In the 17th and 18th (Psa 139:17, Psa 139:18) he acknowledges God's providential care of him in every moment of his life; and in the remainder of the Psalm implores God's aid against impious and cruel enemies, professing his own attachment to God's service, that is, to the true religion, and appealing to the Searcher of hearts himself for the truth of his professions."

The composition, for the purity and justness of religious sentiment, and for the force and beauty of the images, is certainly in the very first and best style. And yet the frequent Chaldaisms of the diction argue no very high antiquity.

Verse 1

O Lord, thou hast searched me - חקרתני chakartani; thou hast investigated me; thou hast thoroughly acquainted thyself with my whole soul and conduct.

PSALM 139: 2 You know my sitting down and my rising up. You perceive my thoughts from afar.

 Verse 2

My downsitting and mine uprising - Even these inconsiderable and casual things are under thy continual notice. I cannot so much as take a seat, or leave it, without being marked by thee.

Thou understandest my thought - לרעי lerei, "my cogitation." This word is Chaldee, see Dan 2:29, Dan 2:30.

Afar off - While the figment is forming that shall produce them.

PSALM 139: 3 You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways.

Verse 3

Thou compassest my path - זרית zeritha thou dost winnow, ventilate, or sift my path; and my lying down, רבי ribi, my lair, my bed.

And art acquainted - Thou treasurest up. This is the import of סך sachan. Thou hast the whole number of my ways, and the steps I took in them.

PSALM 139: 4 For there is not a word on my tongue, but, behold, LORD, you know it altogether.

Verse 4

There is not a word in my tongue - Although (כי ki) there be not a word in my tongue, behold O Jehovah, thou knowest the whole of it, that is, thou knowest all my words before they are uttered as thou knowest all my thoughts while as yet they are unformed.

PSALM 139: 5 You hem me in behind and before. You laid your hand on me.

Verse 5

Thou hast beset me behind and before - אחר וקדם צרתני achor vekodam tsartani, "The hereafter and the past, thou hast formed me." I think Bishop Horsley's emendation here is just, uniting the two verses together. "Behold thou, O Jehovah, knowest the whole, the hereafter and the past. Thou hast formed me, and laid thy hand upon me."

PSALM 139: 6 This knowledge is beyond me. It's lofty. I can't attain it.

Verse 6

Such knowledge is too wonderful - I think, with Kennicott, that פלאיה דעת pelaiiah daath should be read פלאי הדעת peli haddaath, "This knowledge," ממני mimmenni, "is beyond or above me." This change is made by taking the ה he from the end of פלאיה pelaiiah, which is really no word, and joining it with דעת daath; which, by giving it an article, makes it demonstrative, הדעת haddaath, "This knowledge." This kind of knowledge, God's knowledge, that takes in all things, and their reasons, essences, tendencies, and issues, is far beyond me.

PSALM 139: 7 Where could I go from your Spirit? Or where could I flee from your presence?

Verse 7

Whither shall I go from thy Spirit? - Surely רוח ruach in this sense must be taken personally, it certainly cannot mean either breath or wind; to render it so would make the passage ridiculous.

From thy presence? מפניך mippanycha, "from thy faces." Why do we meet with this word so frequently in the plural number, when applied to God? And why have we his Spirit, and his appearances or faces, both here? A Trinitarian would at once say, "The plurality of persons in the Godhead is intended;" and who can prove that he is mistaken?

PSALM 139: 8 If I ascend up into heaven, you are there. If I make my bed in Sheol, behold, you are there!

Verse 8

If I ascend - Thou art in heaven, in thy glory; in hell, in thy vindictive justice; and in all parts of earth, water, space, place, or vacuity, by thy omnipresence. Wherever I am, there art thou; and where I cannot be, thou art there. Thou fillest the heavens and the earth.

PSALM 139: 9 If I take the wings of the dawn, and settle in the uttermost parts of the sea;

PSALM 139: 10 Even there your hand will lead me, and your right hand will hold me.

PSALM 139: 11 If I say, "Surely the darkness will overwhelm me; the light around me will be night";

Verse 11

Surely the darkness shall cover me - Should I suppose that this would serve to screen me, immediately this darkness is turned into light.

PSALM 139: 12 even the darkness doesn't hide from you, but the night shines as the day. The darkness is like light to you.

Verse 12

Yea, the darkness hideth not from thee - Darkness and light, ignorance and knowledge, are things that stand in relation to us; God sees equally in darkness as in light; and knows as perfectly, however man is enveloped in ignorance, as if all were intellectual brightness. What is to us hidden by darkness, or unknown through ignorance, is perfectly seen and known by God; because he is all sight, all hearing, all feeling, all soul, all spirit - all in All, and infinite in himself. He lends to every thing; receives nothing from any thing. Though his essence be unimpertible, yet his influence is diffusible through time and through eternity. Thus God makes himself known, seen, heard, felt; yet, in the infinity of his essence, neither angel, nor spirit, nor man can see him; nor can any creature comprehend him, or form any idea of the mode of his existence. And yet vain man would be wise, and ascertain his foreknowledge, eternal purposes, infinite decrees, with all operations of infinite love and infinite hatred, and their objects specifically and nominally, from all eternity, as if himself had possessed a being and powers co-extensive with the Deity! O ye wise fools! Jehovah, the fountain of eternal perfection and love, is as unlike your creeds as he is unlike yourselves, forgers of doctrines to prove that the source of infinite benevolence is a streamlet of capricious love to thousands, while he is an overflowing, eternal, and irresistible tide of hatred to millions of millions both of angels and men! The antiproof of such doctrines is this: he bears with such blasphemies, and does not consume their abettors. "But nobody holds these doctrines." Then I have written against nobody; and have only to add the prayer, May no such doctrines ever disgrace the page of history; or farther dishonor, as they have done, the annals of the Church!

PSALM 139: 13 For you formed my inmost being. You knit me together in my mother's womb.

Verse 13

Thou hast possessed my reins - As the Hebrews believed that the reins were the first part of the human fetus that is formed, it may here mean, thou hast laid the foundation of my being.

PSALM 139: 14 I will give thanks to you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Your works are wonderful. My soul knows that very well.

Verse 14

I am fearfully and wonderfully made - The texture of the human body is the most complicated and curious that can be conceived. It is, indeed, wonderfully made; and it is withal so exquisitely nice and delicate, that the slightest accident may impair or destroy in a moment some of those parts essentially necessary to the continuance of life; therefore, we are fearfully made. And God has done so to show us our frailty, that we should walk with death, keeping life in view; and feel the necessity of depending on the all-wise and continual superintending care and providence of God.

PSALM 139: 15 My frame wasn't hidden from you, when I was made in secret, woven together in the depths of the earth.

 Verse 15

My substance was not hid from thee - עֲצָמִי atsmi, my bones or skeleton.

Curiously wrought - רֻקְמָתִי rukkanti, embroidered, made of needlework. These two words, says Bishop Horsley, describe the two principal parts of which the human body is composed; the bony skeleton, the foundation of the whole; and the external covering of muscular flesh, tendons, veins, arteries, nerves, and skin; a curious web of fibres. On this passage Bishop Lowth has some excellent observations: "In that most perfect hymn, where the immensity of the omnipresent Deity, and the admirable wisdom of the Divine Artificer in framing the human body, are celebrated, the poet uses a remarkable metaphor, drawn from the nicest tapestry work: -

When I was formed in secret;

When I was wrought, as with a needle, in the lowest parts of the earth. "He who remarks this, (but the man who consults Versions only will hardly remark it), and at the same time reflects upon the wonderful composition of the human body, the various implication of veins, arteries, fibres, membranes, and the 'inexplicable texture' of the whole frame; will immediately understand the beauty and elegance of this most apt translation. But he will not attain the whole force and dignity, unless he also considers that the most artful embroidery with the needle was dedicated by the Hebrews to the service of the sanctuary; and that the proper and singular use of their work was, by the immediate prescript of the Divine law, applied in a certain part of the high priest's dress, and in the curtains of the tabernacle, Exo 28:39; Exo 26:36; Exo 27:16; and compare Eze 16:10; Eze 13:18. So that the psalmist may well be supposed to have compared the wisdom of the Divine Artificer particularly with that specimen of human art, whose dignity was through religion the highest, and whose elegance (Exo 35:30-35) was so exquisite, that the sacred writer seems to attribute it to a Divine inspiration."

In the lowest parts of the earth - The womb of the mother, thus expressed by way of delicacy.

PSALM 139: 16 Your eyes saw my body. In your book they were all written, the days that were ordained for me, when as yet there were none of them.

Verse 16

Thine eyes did see my substance - גִּלְמִי golmi, my embryo state - my yet indistinct mass, when all was wrapped up together, before it was gradually unfolded into the lineaments of man. "Some think," says Dr. Dodd, "that the allusion to embroidery is still carried on. As the embroiderer has still his work, pattern, or carton, before him, to which he always recurs; so, by a method as exact, reverse all my members in continuance fashioned, i.e., from the rude embryo or mass they daily received some degree of figuration; as from the rude skeins of variously coloured silk or worsted, under the artificer's hands, there at length arises an unexpected beauty, and an accurate harmony of colours and proportions."

And in thy book all my members were written - "All those members lay open before God's eyes; they were discerned by him as clearly as if the plan of them had been drawn in a book, even to the least figuration of the body of the child in the womb."

PSALM 139: 17 How precious to me are your thoughts, God! How vast is their sum!

Verse 17

How precious also are thy thoughts - רעיך reeycha, thy cogitations; a Chaldaism, as before.

How great is the sum of them! - מה עצמו ראשיהם mah atsemu rasheyhem; How strongly rational are the heads or principal subjects of them! But the word may apply to the bones, עצמות atsamoth, the structure and uses of which are most curious and important.

PSALM 139: 18 If I would count them, they are more in number than the sand. When I wake up, I am still with you.

Verse 18

If I should count them - I should be glad to enumerate so many interesting particulars: but they are beyond calculation.

When I awake - Thou art my Governor and Protector night and day.

I am still with thee - All my steps in life are ordered by thee: I cannot go out of thy presence; I am ever under the influence of thy Spirit.

The subject, from the Psa 139:14 to the Psa 139:16 inclusive, might have been much more particularly illustrated, but we are taught, by the peculiar delicacy of expression in the Sacred Writings, to avoid, as in this case, the entering too minutely into anatomical details. I would, however, make an additional observation on the subject in the Psa 139:15 and Psa 139:16. I have already remarked the elegant allusion to embroidery, in the word רקמתִי rukkamti, in the astonishing texture of the human body; all of which is said to be done in secret, בסתר bassether, in the secret place, viz., the womb of the mother, which, in the conclusion of the verse, is by a delicate choice of expression termed the lower parts of the earth.

The embryo state, גלם golem, has a more forcible meaning than our word substance amounts to. גלם galam signifies to roll or wrap up together; and expresses the state of the fetus before the constituent members were developed. The best system of modern philosophy allows that to semine masculino all the members of the future animal are contained; and that these become slowly developed or unfolded, in the case of fowls, by incubation; and in the case of the more perfect animals, by gestation in the maternal matrix. It is no wonder that, in considering these, the psalmist should cry out, How precious, or extraordinary, are thy thoughts! how great is the sum-heads or outlines, of them! The particulars are, indeed, beyond comprehension; even the heads - the general contents, of thy works; while I endeavor to form any tolerable notion of them, prevail over me - they confound my understanding, and are vastly too multitudinous for my comprehension.

PSALM 139: 19 If only you, God, would kill the wicked. Get away from me, you bloodthirsty men!

Verse 19

Surely thou wilt slay the wicked - The remaining part of this Psalm has no visible connection with the preceding. I rather think it a fragment, or a part of some other Psalm.

Ye bloody men - אנשי דמים anshey damim, men of blood, men guilty of death.

PSALM 139: 20 For they speak against you wickedly. Your enemies take your name in vain.

Verse 20

Thine enemies take thy name in vain - Bishop Horsley translates the whole verse thus: - "They have deserted me who are disobedient to thee; "They who are sworn to a rash purpose - thy refractory adversaries."

The original is obscure: but I cannot see these things in it. Some translate the Hebrew thus: "Those who oppose thee iniquitously seize unjustly upon thy cities;" and so almost all the Versions. The words, thus translated, may apply to Sanballat, Tobiah, and the other enemies of the returned Jews, who endeavored to drive them from the land, that they might possess the cities of Judea.

PSALM 139: 21 LORD, don't I hate those who hate you? Am I not grieved with those who rise up against you?

Verse 21

Do not I hate them - I hold their conduct in abomination.

PSALM 139: 22 I hate them with perfect hatred. They have become my enemies.

Verse 22

With perfect hatred - Their conduct, their motives, their opposition to thee, their perfidy and idolatrous purposes, I perfectly abhor. With them I have neither part, interest, nor affection.

PSALM 139: 23 Search me, God, and know my heart. Try me, and know my thoughts.

Verse 23

Search me, O God - Investigate my conduct, examine my heart, put me to the test, and entwine my thoughts.

PSALM 139: 24 See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the everlasting way.

Verse 24

If there be any wicked way - **עצב דרך** *derech otseb*: a way of idolatry or of error. Any thing false in religious principle; any thing contrary to piety to thyself, and love and benevolence to man. And he needed to offer such prayer as this, while filled with indignation against the ways of the workers of iniquities; for he who hates, utterly hates, the practices of any man, is not far from hating the man himself. It is very difficult "To hate the sin with all the heart,

And yet the sinner love."

Lead me in the way everlasting - **בדרך עולם** *bederech olam*, in the old way - the way in which our fathers walked, who worshipped thee, the infinitely pure Spirit, in spirit and in truth. Lead me, guide me, as thou didst them. We have **ארח עולם** *orach olam*, the old path, Job 22:15. "The two words **דרך** *derech* and **ארח** *orach*, differ," says Bishop Horsley, "in their figurative senses: *derech* is the right way, in which a man ought to go; *orach* is the way, right or wrong, in which a man actually goes by habit." The way that is right in a man's own eyes is seldom the way to God.