

Psalm 139

John the Baptist
Evening Prayer Wednesday Week 4

This is one of the most beautiful of the psalms. The psalmist is confident that God knows him intimately and therefore knows that the psalmist opposes those who oppose God's will. We might compare the following:

Let my verdict come from you, for you can see that I am upright.
Scrutinize my heart; probe it by night; test me by fire; you will find no wickedness in me.
There is no error in what I have said..

– Psalm 17:2-3

Pass your judgment on me, YHWH, for I have lived an honest life, trusting in YHWH without wavering. Test me, YHWH, put me to the proof; probe my feelings and my heart.

– Psalm 26:1-2

Our author seems to be drawing on Near Eastern poetic images which see the sun-god ['Utu', Shamash] as a god of justice scrutinising all mankind with impartiality (see verses 5,8,9 and 12). However the psalmist's accent is on God's transcendence. Echoes of the central theme are found in Job 5:8-9; 23:8-10,17; 26:6,10,14. Also in Sirach 16:17; 17:15,19,23 and Wisdom 1:7,10.

O the depth of the riches and wisdom and knowledge of God! How unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!

– Romans 11:33

The Spirit searches everything, even the depths of God.

– 1Corinthians 2:10

God is light and in him there is no darkness at all.

– 1John 1:5

I am the one who searches minds and hearts, and I will give to each of you as your works deserve.

– Revelation 2:23

The title reads: 'To the leader. Of David. A Psalm*.'

¹YHWH*, you search me and you know me.

²You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from afar.

³You search out my journeying and my resting, and are acquainted with all my ways.

The 'You' in verse 2 is emphatic, as is 'you' in verses 8 and 13. The idea of God's searching is picked up again towards the end of the psalm (verse 23). Compare the following:

I know your rising up and your sitting down,
your going out and coming in.

– Isaiah 37:28

The Lord the Almighty searches out the abyss and the human heart; he understands their innermost secrets. For the Most High knows all that may be known; he sees from of old the things that are to come. He discloses what has been and what is to be, and he reveals the traces of hidden things. No thought escapes him and nothing is hidden from him.

– Sirach 42:18-20

Augustine thinks of God's hand laid on Moses:

While my glory passes by I will put you in a cleft of the rock, and I will cover you with my hand until I have passed by; then I will take away my hand, and you shall see my back; but my face shall not be seen.

– Exodus 33:22-23

The first man did not know wisdom fully; nor will the last one fathom her.

– Sirach 24:28

The angel of YHWH said to Manoah, 'Why do you ask my name? It is too wonderful.'

– Judges 13:18

Though they dig into Sheol, from there shall my hand take them; though they climb up to heaven, from there I will bring them down. Though they hide themselves on the top of Carmel, from there I will search out and take them; and though they hide from my sight at the bottom of the sea, there I will command the sea-serpent, and it shall bite them.

– Amos 9:2-3

'Am I a God near by, says YHWH, and not a God far off? Who can hide in secret places so that I cannot see them?' says YHWH. 'Do I not fill heaven and earth?' says YHWH.

– Jeremiah 23:23-24

If I look for Sheol as my house, if I spread my couch in darkness.

– Job 17:13

The eyes of the Lord are ten thousand times brighter than the sun; they look upon every aspect of human behaviour and see into hidden corners.

– Sirach 23:19

His eyes are upon the ways of mortal human beings, and he sees all their steps. There is no gloom or deep darkness where evildoers may hide themselves.

– Job 34:21-22

⁴Even before a word is on my tongue, YHWH, you know it completely.

⁵You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me.

⁶Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it.

⁷Where can I go from your spirit? Where can I flee from your presence?

⁸If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.

⁹If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,

¹⁰even there your left hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast.

¹¹If I say, 'Surely the darkness will cover me, and the light around me become night,'

¹²even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you.

God knows us intimately

¹³For it was you who formed my inward parts, you knit me together in my mother's womb.

¹⁴I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; you know me very well!

¹⁵My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth.

¹⁶Your eyes beheld me as a foetus.

In your book were written all the days that were prepared for me, before any of them existed.

'Mother's womb' in verse 13 may include a reference to the 'womb' of 'mother earth'.

The dead do not live; shades do not rise – because you have punished and destroyed them, and wiped out all memory of them. But you have increased the nation, YHWH, you have increased the nation; you are glorified; you have enlarged all the borders of the land. YHWH, in distress they sought you, they poured out a prayer when your chastening was on them. Like a woman with child, who writhes and cries out in her pangs when she is near her time, so were we because of you, YHWH; we were with child, we writhed, but we gave birth only to wind. We have won no victories on earth, and no one is born to inhabit the world. Your dead shall live, their corpses shall rise. O dwellers in the dust, awake and sing for joy! For your dew is a radiant dew, and the earth will give birth to those long dead.

– Isaiah 26:14-19

I do not know how you came into being in my womb. It was not I who gave you life and breath; nor I who set in order the elements within each of you.

– The mother to her seven sons in 2Maccabees 7:22

Did you not pour me out like milk and curdle me like cheese? You clothed me with skin and flesh, and knit me together with bones and sinews.

– Job 10:10-11

In the womb of a mother I was moulded into flesh, within the period of ten months, compacted with blood, from the seed of a man and the pleasure of marriage.

– Wisdom 7:1-2

The Old Testament speaks of a register of what we have done; but nowhere else of a book in which our destiny is written beforehand.

You have kept count of my wanderings;
you have stored my tears in your goatskin.

– Psalm 56:8

The court sat in judgment, and the books were opened.

– Daniel 7:10

Who can search out his mighty deeds ... When human beings have finished they are just beginning, and when they stop they are still perplexed.

– Sirach 18:4,7

Let the final word be: ‘he is the all!’

– Sirach 43:27

Can you find out the deep things of God? Can you find out the limit of the Almighty? It is higher than heaven – what can you do? Deeper than Sheol – what can you know? Its measure is longer than the earth, and broader than the sea. If he passes through, and imprisons, and assembles for judgment, who can hinder him?

– Job 11:7-10

I do not sit with the worthless, nor do I consort with hypocrites; I hate the company of evildoers, and will not sit with the wicked. ... Do not sweep me away with sinners, nor my life with the bloodthirsty, those in whose left hand are evil devices, and whose right hand is full of bribes.

– Psalm 26:4-5,9-10

To ‘hate’ is not to love. It is to make a choice to oppose.

Verse 23 echoes verses 1-2.

¹⁷How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God! How vast is the sum of them!

¹⁸I try to count them – they are more than the sand; I come to the end – I am still with you.

¹⁹O that you would kill the wicked, O God, and that the bloodthirsty would depart from me –

²⁰those who speak of you maliciously, and rise up against you for evil!

²¹Do I not hate those who hate you, YHWH? And do I not loathe those who rise up against you?

²²I hate them with perfect hatred; I count them my enemies.

²³Search me, O God, and know my heart*; test me and know my thoughts.

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