

Creation Theology in Psalm 139

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ABSTRACT

The first reference in the Bible to God's activities is "in the beginning, God created." This puts "Creator" at the top of the list of descriptions of who Yahweh is and what Yahweh does. This implies that Yahweh stands in relationship with the world, and not only with Israel. Israel was created to be his people as a result of him being the Creator of the world. He is therefore the God of all humanity and the ultimate source of creation. God's creative actions began "in the beginning," but it did not stop there. God's creative activities include originating, continuing and completing creation. There are an abundance of creation texts in the Old Testament. Genesis, Exodus, the legal texts of the Pentateuch, the prophets, wisdom texts and the psalms all contribute to the OT theology on creation. My purpose with this article is to analyse Psalm 139 to determine how this psalm articulates creation theology. Creation theology plays a decisive role in every aspect of the psalm. God's omniscience (vv. 1-6), his omnipresence (vv. 7-12), his creation of humankind (vv. 13-18) and the petition for vengeance and transformation (vv. 19-24) should be understood within the framework of creation theology.

A INTRODUCTION

The first reference in the Bible to God's activities is obviously found in Genesis 1:1 – "in the beginning, God created." This puts "Creator" at the top of the list of descriptions of who Yahweh is and what Yahweh does. Before anything else, Yahweh is Creator. This immediately places Yahweh in relationship with the world, and not only with Israel. He is Creator of Israel as people, because he is Creator of the world. He is the God of Israel because he is the Creator. He is the God of all humanity because he is the Creator. He is not a nationalistic god, limited to Israel only, but the God of all of creation.

When we speak of creation we immediately state that the Universe did not simply happen, but was created by God. He is the ultimate source of creation. The creative actions of God began "in the beginning," but it did not stop there. God's creative activities include not only the work of originating creation, but also continuing and completing creation.¹ God did not stop being Creator after he completed the work of Genesis 1-2. Fretheim² argues that crea-

¹ Cf. Terence E. Fretheim, *God and World in the Old Testament. A Relational Theology of Creation* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2005), 5-9 for a convincing discussion on this issue.

² Fretheim, *God and World*, 6.

tion in the Old Testament (hereafter OT) does not only refer to the origins of the physical world. God's creative activity is often associated with other orders of life – social, cultural and national. God is therefore not reduced to the role of manager of creation, but he has a continuing relationship with the world as Creator. God does not only care for creation, but he also brings into existence that which is genuinely and refreshingly new. Deutero-Isaiah's use of creation language for Yahweh's deeds of salvation can thus be understood as a demonstration of God's ongoing creative work (cf. Isa 41:20).³ Creation also refers to the divine eschatological action whereby God brings a new heaven and earth into being (Isa 65:17-25; Rev 21:1-5). God is now working towards that goal. This new creation is not a return to the original beginning but something genuinely new.⁴ Redemption is a key component of this new creation. Redemption thus stands in service of creation. God redeems people to be what they were created to be.⁵

Another important feature of the OT understanding of creation is that it has a fundamental relational character.⁶ As Fretheim⁷ puts it:

Israel's God is a relational God who has created a world in which interrelatedness is basic to the nature of reality; this God establishes relationships of varying sorts with all creatures, including a special relationship to the people of Israel.⁸

Creation texts abound in the OT. Genesis, Exodus, the legal texts of the Pentateuch, the prophets, wisdom texts and the psalms all contribute to the OT theology on creation.

In this article, I want to analyse Ps 139 to ascertain how the psalm verbalises creation theology. My aim is to show that creation theology influences every aspect of the psalm. Creation theology not only plays a decisive role in stanza 3, with its focus on the creation of humankind, but also in stanzas 1, 2 and 4.⁹

³ Fretheim, *God and World*, 8.

⁴ Fretheim, *God and World*, 9.

⁵ Fretheim, *God and World*, 125.

⁶ Fretheim, *God and World*, 13.

⁷ Fretheim, *God and World*, 16.

⁸ For a comprehensive discussion of the features of this definition, cf. Fretheim, *God and World*, 16-22.

⁹ Cf. the discussion on the structure of the psalm for this division of stanzas.

B STRUCTURE, GATTUNG, SITZ IM LEBEN, DATING**1 Structure**

Fokkelman¹⁰ proposes the following structure for the psalm: Stanza 1 (vv. 1-6) can be divided into two strophes: vv. 1-3 and 4-6. Stanza 2 (vv. 7-12) consists of three strophes: vv. 7-8, 9-10 and 11-12. Stanza 3 (vv. 13-18) also consists of three strophes: vv. 13-14, 15-16 and 17-18. Stanza 4 (vv. 19-22) can be divided into strophe 9 (vv. 19-20) and strophe 10 (vv. 21-22). Verses 23-24 (strophe 11) stand on their own as the last stanza of the psalm.¹¹

Terrien's¹² proposal for the structure of the psalm is similar to that of Fokkelman. He divides the psalm into four strophes, namely 1-6 (God's search and knowledge of me), 7-12 (where to flee from God's presence?), 13-18 (the marvellous creation of little me) and 19-24 (God's continuous search of me).

Gerstenberger¹³ puts forward a somewhat different structure. He divides the psalm in the following sections: 1a is the superscription, 1b-6 contains meditative prayer, 7-12 plaintive reflection, 13-16 is an acknowledgement of the Creator, 17-18 contains adoration, 19-20 imprecation, 21-22 is a dedication and a vow, while 23-24 is a petition.

The structure proposed by Fokkelman is probably correct except his suggestion that vv. 23 and 24 stand apart from the previous stanza. As I shall illustrate in my analysis of the psalm, the prayer in the last two verses link with the preceding prayer for vengeance and expression of hatred. My own proposal is the following:

Stanza 1: vv. 1-6 – God's omniscience

Stanza 2: vv. 7-12 – God's omnipresence

Stanza 3: vv. 13-18 – God's creation of humanity

Stanza 4: vv. 19-24 – petition for the destruction of the wicked and for personal transformation.

Fokkelman's strophe division is accepted as correct.

¹⁰ Jan P. Fokkelman, *85 Psalms and Job 4-14* (vol. 2 of *Major Poems of the Hebrew Bible*; Assen: Van Gorcum, 2000), 303-304.

¹¹ Cf. Richard J. Clifford, *Psalms 73-150* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2003), 280 for a slight variation on this proposed structure. Clifford maintains that vv. 23-24 form part of Stanza 4. However, due to a complete change in subject matter, it is obvious that vv. 23-24 stand on their own.

¹² Samuel Terrien, *The Psalms: Strophic Structure and Theological Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 874.

¹³ Erhard S. Gerstenberger, *Psalms, Part 2, and Lamentations* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 401-405.

2 Gattung

Diverse suggestions have been made to classify Ps 139: hymn, spiritual song, song of innocence, prayer, psalm of confidence, song of thanksgiving, individual complaint, theological meditation, royal psalm, and song of wisdom are but a few of the suggestions that have been offered by various scholars.¹⁴

Craven¹⁵ describes the psalm as a lament of the individual. However, except the prayer for the death of the evildoers, the psalm does not display the usual characteristics of a psalm of lament.¹⁶

Firth¹⁷ classifies the psalm as a prayer of the accused. However, for this view to be entirely persuasive, one would have expected a more explicit protestation of innocence, as is the case in Ps 7:3-5.¹⁸ I disagree with this standpoint because it understands vv. 19-24 to be the key to the interpretation of the psalm and then reads the psalm through the lens of these verses. My own reading of the psalm (as the analysis will show) suggests that the key to the psalm's interpretation is not found in the last six verses, but in the theological idea of Yahweh as Creator.

Elements of various types of psalms can be distinguished in the different subsections of the psalm. Complaint, thanksgiving, hymn and wisdom discourse are all present.¹⁹ Gerstenberger²⁰ argues that due to the unity of the psalm, the whole text should not be subjected to the rule of one form element only. The common denominator of the various form elements could guide us to the most likely *Gattung*. He asserts that the most prominent features of the different form elements are sapiential language and a meditative mood. Therefore he tentatively typifies the psalm as a Meditation.

Peels's proposal is close to Gerstenberger's. He maintains that the text is so varied that it is very difficult to define one specific genre for the psalm. The poet meditates on God's omniscience and expresses his surrender and belong-

¹⁴ Cf. Eric Peels, "'I Hate Them with Perfect Hatred' (Psalm 139:21-22)," *TynBul* 59/1 (2008): 41.

¹⁵ Toni Craven, *The Book of Psalms* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 1992), 22.

¹⁶ Cf. Clifford, *Psalms*, 279 for criticism of this and other attempts to classify the psalm as one of the traditional psalm genres.

¹⁷ David G. Firth, *Surrendering Retribution in the Psalms. Responses to Violence in the Individual Complaints* (Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2005), 44; cf. also Robert B. Coote, "Psalm 139," in *The Bible and the Politics of Exegesis: Essays in Honor of Norman K. Gottwald on his Sixty-fifth Birthday* (eds. David Jobling, Peggy L Day & Gerald T Sheppard, Cleveland: Pilgrim, 1991), 35-38.

¹⁸ Cf. Robert Davidson, *The Vitality of Worship: A Commentary on the Book of Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998), 445.

¹⁹ Gerstenberger, *Psalms*, 405.

²⁰ Gerstenberger, *Psalms*, 405-406.

ing to God. The tone of the psalm is one of devotion and intimacy; it is not the scholarly product of dogmatics.²¹

I agree with Gerstenberger and Peels that the psalm should be understood as a meditation. In the context of the psalm the different theological motifs, namely God's omniscience, God's omnipresence, God's creation of humankind, the petition against enemies and for transformation indicate that this meditation occurs within the framework of a celebration of Yahweh as Creator.

3 Sitz im Leben

Gerstenberger²² maintains that the psalm is a personal prayer and meditation, but it could have been read in the common assembly by a wise person, a representative of some school or learned circle, followed by a communal response to the reading (possible vv. 17-18). Eaton's argument²³ that the speaker is a king, praying to God in the sanctuary for strength to confront his enemies, does not find support in the text. Nothing in the psalm is particularly royal. Peels²⁴ has argued convincingly against the notion of a cultic trial by ordeal as the Sitz im Leben for the psalm.

To my mind it is quite difficult to pinpoint the Sitz of the psalm. Gerstenberger's proposal is probably the best suggestion.

4 Dating

The psalm can probably be dated to the exilic or postexilic community in either Judah or the Diaspora.²⁵ Terrien²⁶ argues for a date during the last years of the kingdom of Judah, maintaining that the psalm reflects a situation of national agony. The evildoers are then identified as Babylonian tyrants, Judahite traitors, or Judahite patriots who opposed Jeremiah's preaching. Terrien's argument cannot be accepted. The text does not offer any support for his viewpoint. The enemies are unnamed and to identify them with a specific people is completely arbitrary.

²¹ Peels, "Perfect hatred," 42.

²² Gerstenberger, *Psalms*, 406.

²³ John Eaton, *The Psalms. A Historical and Spiritual Commentary with an Introduction and New Translation* (London: T&T Clark, 2003), 459.

²⁴ Peels, "Perfect hatred," 41-42.

²⁵ Gerstenberger, *Psalms*, 406.

²⁶ Terrien, *Psalms*, 880.

C ANALYSIS OF PSALM 139

1 Verses 1-6 – God’s omniscience

The psalm opens with the poet’s declaration that Yahweh knows him. He uses 6 verbs to describe this intimate knowledge that Yahweh has. Yahweh knows everything about him. His knowledge extends to the psalmist’s “sitting and rising” (v. 2), a merism that indicates all the poet’s movements from the instant he opens his eyes to the moment he goes to sleep at night. He is able to perceive the thoughts and intentions of the psalmist. רע (v. 2) refers to one’s thinking or intention “in the sense of my purpose or aims or striving or desires.”²⁷ Yahweh thus looks into the poet’s mind and can discern what he intends and desires to do. Even though Yahweh looks from afar (מרחוק), he perceives the most intimate details of the psalmist’s life and thoughts. Yahweh knows what the poet does, what he thinks and also everything he says (v. 4).

The omniscience of Yahweh is thus emphasised. The deities of the other nations were able to discern the thoughts of the human heart, but their divine knowledge was not as comprehensive as that attributed to Yahweh.²⁸ Yahweh’s all encompassing knowledge results from his being the Creator of the world, and of the poet. Yahweh is the transcendent Creator of everything, yet he is the one who intimately knows the psalmist. Divine distance and intimacy is thus held together in the psalm, and the psalmist is the object of knowledge that bridges the distance between Creator and creation. Yahweh’s transcendence and immanence is thus brought together.²⁹

The “I-Thou” exchange indicates unsurpassed intimacy.³⁰ Yahweh’s knowledge of the psalmist is not disembodied knowledge, but knowledge of presence, knowledge that happens in communion.³¹ The knowledge that God possesses about human beings, is born from relationship. This is emphasised through the occurrence of ידע in the first stanza. The verb occurs in verses 1, 2

²⁷ John Goldingay, *Psalms 90-150* (vol. 3 of *Psalms*; Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 630.

²⁸ John W. Hilber, “Psalms,” in *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary. Old Testament* (5 vols., ed. John H. Walton, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 433.

²⁹ William P. Brown, *Seeing the Psalms: A Theology of Metaphor* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 208.

³⁰ Terrien, *Psalms*, 875.

³¹ William P. Brown, “Psalm 139. The Pathos of Praise,” *Int* 50/3 (1996): 282; cf. also Steven R. Harmon, “Theology Proper and the Proper Way to Pray: An Exposition of Psalm 139,” *RevExp* 104/4 (2007): 780. Harmon points out that the classical attributes of God, namely omniscience, omnipresence and omnipotence occur in this psalm in the context of a close, intimate and personal relationship with humankind.

and 4 and indicates a knowledge born from relationship.³² The relational character of creation has been pointed out in the introduction. Yahweh's relational knowledge of the poet is thus the consequence of him being the Creator.

Brown³³ points out that the language of combat used in verse 5 underlines the completeness of Yahweh's knowledge of the psalmist. God even lays his hand upon the psalmist; he is besieged from all sides. This, however, does not elicit a response of protest at such harsh treatment, but a response of adoration. The hand metaphor is thus given a surprising twist. Instead of crushing, the hand of God discerns, sustains and vindicates. The language of combat is thus paradoxically used to describe divine beneficence.

In verse 6 the poet declares how incredibly wonderful and marvellous Yahweh's omniscience is to him. He is filled with wonder at the knowledge of who the Creator is.

2 Verses 7-12 – God's omnipresence

The second stanza focuses on Yahweh's omnipresence. The psalmist declares that he cannot go anywhere that God cannot find him. The deities of the ancient world were thought to be capable of extending their power to the inhabited world as well as the netherworld. Yet, each deity was limited by his or her specific sphere of authority.³⁴ As the Creator, Yahweh cannot be restricted and it is impossible to escape his presence. Goldingay³⁵ argues that the petitioner might have had a reason to flee God's presence. I disagree with Goldingay. It seems to me that the author is not attempting to flee the presence of God. He is thinking out loud: "What would happen if I should attempt to flee from God? Would it at all be possible?" Thus, the image of God's hand gripping the psalmist (v. 10), is not indicative of judgment, but it suggests guidance and support.³⁶

If the poet could flee up to the sky he might have escaped the attentions of other human beings, but not the presence of Yahweh. Going in the opposite direction, down into Sheol would also be unsuccessful. Yahweh is usually absent in Sheol, with rare exceptions (cf. Job 26:6; Prov 15:11; Amos 2:9).³⁷ Generally speaking, Yahweh leaves Sheol to its own devices. However, this

³² Cf. Willi Schotroff, "עָדָה yd° to perceive, know," *TLOT* 2: 508-521 (515). Schotroff provides a comprehensive overview of the possible meanings of עָדָה.

³³ Brown, *Seeing the Psalms*, 209.

³⁴ Hilber, *Psalms*, 433.

³⁵ Goldingay, *Psalms*, 631.

³⁶ Brown, *Seeing the Psalms*, 210. In contrast to this viewpoint, Clifford, *Psalms*, 281 argues that the hand of God does not have a positive meaning here, because God is laying hold of the poet, who is attempting to flee from Yahweh, cf. also Terrien, *Psalms*, 876-877.

³⁷ Terrien, *Psalms*, 876.

does not imply that Sheol is beyond Yahweh's reach. Yahweh can have access to Sheol whenever he wishes.³⁸

The psalmist then imagines what would happen if he tries to escape Yahweh's presence somewhere on earth itself (vv. 9-10). The expression "wings of the dawn" (כַּנְפֵי־שָׁחַר) possibly refers to eastern horizon, while "the farthest sea" (אֲחֵרֵית יָם) refers to the western end of the Mediterranean, where the known world stopped.³⁹ Even darkness will not hide him from God (vv. 11-12). To be seized by darkness seems to be an extremely negative experience, but when one is trying to hide, darkness might be the best place to be. Yet, Yahweh can enter the realm of darkness, just as he can reach into Sheol, and it will be as light to him. To Yahweh, there is no difference between light and dark, and there will be no escape.

The psalmist employs creation language to explore God's omnipresence. By stringing together image after image from the created order, the poet emphasizes that God's presence cannot be escaped; there is no limit to his reach, because all of creation falls under God's dominion.⁴⁰

3 Verses 13-18 – Fearfully and wonderfully made ...⁴¹ God's creation of humanity

In the third stanza the psalm celebrates the mystery of human birth. The first two stanzas of the poem celebrated Yahweh as being omniscient and omnipresent. Stanza 3 emphasizes that Yahweh knows the poet and surrounds him with his presence, because he is the Creator. In ancient times it was believed that the deities played a role in pregnancy and birth. The precise nature of that role by the deities was unclear, but the people still tried to describe their activity.⁴² The psalmist is filled with wonder and awe regarding his origins. This appreciation and celebration of the self should not be understood as an exercise in navel-gazing, but as a celebration of the Creator, who encountered humanity with his creative love. The poet rediscovered the knowing presence of Yahweh through the wonder of his own creation.⁴³

³⁸ Goldingay, *Psalms*, 632.

³⁹ Davidson, *Vitality of Worship*, 447.

⁴⁰ Cf. Carol A. Miles, "Psalm 139," in *Psalms for Preaching and Worship. A Lectionary Commentary* (eds. Roger E. Van Harn & Brent A. Strawn. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 358.

⁴¹ Cf. John C. Collins, "Psalm 139:14. Fearfully and Wonderfully Made?" *Presb* 25/2 (1999): 115-120 for an alternative translation of this phrase, cf. also Thijs Booij, "Psalm CXXXIX. Text, Syntax, Meaning," *VT* 55/1 (2005): 6-7. Booij's article provides a comprehensive discussion of this and other textual matters.

⁴² James L. Crenshaw, *The Psalms. An Introduction* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 64-65; cf. also Hilber, *Psalms*, 434.

⁴³ Brown, "Psalm 139," 282.

Yahweh formed him in the womb of his mother (cf. Job 10:8-12; Jer 1:5). The reference in verse 15 to the depths of the earth is not a contradiction: the language of poetry must be understood symbolically. The view of mother earth was common in the ancient Near East as well as classical Greece.⁴⁴

The picture that emerges from the description of God's creative activity seems to be that of the growth of the foetus within the womb as the work of a "skilled divine embroider weaving in secret an intricate pattern or design, still to be unveiled."⁴⁵ It emphasises how individual this process is; every human being has been individually created by God. Human beings have been set apart, they are indeed distinctive creatures.⁴⁶ Therefore, Yahweh ought to be praised. The wonder and glory of God's creative deeds overwhelms the poet, and he cannot but break forth in praise.

We should keep in mind that the psalmist does not provide us here with a scientific explanation of the creation of humankind. He is writing poetry aimed at celebrating the theological reality of Yahweh as the Creator. He is certainly well aware of the role of sexual relations played in his creation, but he is celebrating Yahweh as the originator of his being born. The same is true of Gen 1 and 2. The Genesis text does not provide us with a scientific account of the creation of the cosmos, but with a theological description, celebrating Yahweh as the Creator.

Why does the poet understand the creation of humanity to be so wonderful? In Genesis humankind is said to be created in the image of God. What does this mean? Goldingay⁴⁷ argues that the immediate context does not provide the answer to this question, and that one must look beyond the passage to understand what it means. He maintains that to be created in God's image and according to his likeness suggest something concrete and visible. He therefore asserts that God's image lies in humankind's bodily nature, and not the inner nature. The OT often refers to God as having eyes, a nose, a face, a mouth, hands, even a womb. Goldingay does not think that these references should be dismissed as anthropomorphisms. The prohibition of making images of God is therefore not based on the fact that God is Spirit, but on the insufficiency to embody God's fully personal nature.

⁴⁴ Terrien, *Psalms*, 877, cf. also Goldingay, *Psalms*, 634-635.

⁴⁵ Davidson, *Vitality of worship*, 448.

⁴⁶ Goldingay, *Psalms*, 634.

⁴⁷ John Goldingay, *Israel's Gospel* (vol. 1 of *Old Testament Theology*; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 2003), 102-103.

In contrast to Goldingay, Walton⁴⁸ points out that in the ancient Near East physical likeness was not the main issue in an image, “but a more abstract, idealized representation of identity relating to the office / role and the value connected to the image.” Thus humans as the image of God embody his qualities and do his work. Humans are symbols of God’s presence and act on his behalf as his representatives. In an earlier work Walton⁴⁹ wrote that צַלֵּם refers to a representative in physical form, and not a representation of physical appearance. He defines image then as “a physical manifestation of divine (or royal) essence that bears the function of that which it represents.” The image bearer thus has the capability to mirror the characteristics of the one represented and act on his behalf. It is therefore a mandate of power and responsibility; not tyrannical power, but the creative use of power; power as God exercises it.⁵⁰ Fretheim⁵¹ also argues that this mandate of power should be understood not in terms of domination or violence, but in terms of creative word and deed. God gives his creative power and the ability to exercise that power to humanity and invites them to participate in that power.

In his discussion on the meaning of this phrase Waltke⁵² states that צַלֵּם (“image”) occurs seventeen times in the OT. In Genesis it is used four times in the phrase “image of God.” צַלֵּם, with two possible exceptions where it refers figuratively to a transitory image (Pss 39:6; 73:20), always refers to a physical image or having a formed body. However, this does not mean that God has a corporeal form. The word implies that humans are theomorphic, having the form of God, but because God is spirit and not flesh and blood, to be made in God’s image entails that humans represent God faithfully and adequately in their total beings. The distance and difference between God and humanity is underlined through the addition of “according to his likeness.” Likeness (דְּמוּת) defines and limits the meaning of צַלֵּם, emphasising the idea that image is no more than a faithful and adequate representation of God. If one compares the attributes of God with human characteristics this becomes clear. God is omniscient, omnipotent, omnipresent, heavenly, eternal, and Spirit. Humans are not. Yet humans are fearfully and wonderfully made, created to be faithful and adequate representations of God, able to live in relationship with him. Furthermore, in the biblical world “god’s image” possesses the life of god. This means

⁴⁸ John H. Walton, “Genesis,” *Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary. Old Testament* (5 vols.; ed. John H. Walton, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2009), 20-21.

⁴⁹ John H. Walton, *Genesis* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2001), 130-131.

⁵⁰ Walter Brueggemann, *Genesis* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1982), 32; cf. also Victor P. Hamilton, *The Book of Genesis Chapters 1-17*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990), 137-138.

⁵¹ Fretheim, *God and World*, 49.

⁵² Bruce K. Waltke, *An Old Testament Theology: An Exegetical, Canonical and Thematic Approach* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007), 215-219.

that the life of Yahweh indwells his image. “Image” also confers the functional notion of duty and authority. However, in contrast to the ancient Near Eastern literature where only kings were thought to be created in the image of god, Gen 1 grants this status of the image of God to all of humanity.

The poet of Psalm 139 is filled with awe at the knowledge of God’s creative work. Humankind is indeed the apex of God’s creation, the only creatures to have been created in God’s image. Indeed, humankind has been made just a little lower than God, exclaimed the poet of Ps 8:53 The psalmist was quite correct. He knew nothing about genes and chromosomes, or molecular biology. Modern science however, has proved the psalmist to be correct. The newborn infant once was a fertilised egg a millionth of the size of a pinhead, but already containing “information” equivalent to a thousand books. The chromosomes already included the directions for a brain. This brain would contain uncountable nerve cells; a frequent estimate puts it at hundred billion. These nerve cells are interconnected with synapses, which are numbered by scientists as more than the physical particles in the known universe.⁵⁴ Humans are indeed “fearfully and wonderfully made.”

4 Verses 19-24 – Petition for the destruction of the wicked and for personal transformation

After the celebration of Yahweh’s omnipotence and omnipresence and the beautiful description of humanity’s creation in verses 1-18, verses 19-22 come as a major shock to the system. No wonder that Christian devotion uses the former in isolation from the latter.⁵⁵ This is to a large extent not surprising, since many Christian believers regard the use of lament as falling outside the parameters of Christian belief and practice.⁵⁶ The truth though is that no serious student of the biblical text can ignore the frequent occurrences of lament throughout the Bible, mostly in the OT, but also in the NT.⁵⁷ The question though remains: how does this petition for the destruction of the enemies and the subsequent expression of hatred fit in with the rest of the psalm that focuses on the celebration of Yahweh as Creator?

⁵³ Cf. Leonard P. Maré, “Psalm 8. God’s glory and humanity’s reflected glory,” *OTE* 19/3 (2006): 933-935.

⁵⁴ Roger L. Shinn, “Fearfully and Wonderfully Made,” *Living pulpit* 15/2 (2006): 8-9.

⁵⁵ Goldingay, *Psalms*, 639.

⁵⁶ Cf. Scott A. Ellington, *Risking Truth. Reshaping the World through Prayers of Lament* (Eugene: Pickwick, 2008). Ellington provides a comprehensive and thorough treatment of the subject; cf. also Leonard P. Maré, “A Pentecostal Perspective on the Use of Psalms of Lament in Worship,” *VE* 29/1 (2008): 91-109.

⁵⁷ Ellington, *Risking Truth*, 163-182.

To my mind, the cursing of the enemies in the psalm does not fall outside Yahweh's position as Creator. As Creator he does not stand aloof from his creation and therefore He can be called upon to intervene. As Creator, Yahweh has a responsibility to get involved when injustice rules the day. Non-intervention would indicate a powerless or disinterested or non-functioning god. Yahweh, however is continually present and active in his creation and in the lives of his creatures, therefore the psalmist can cry out to him for vengeance.

In addition to this Fretheim⁵⁸ has argued that a strong link exists between creation theology and law. God has not only given direct laws to Israel on how they should live, but God has also built a basic moral sense into the structures of the created order. Natural law can discern what is right and just from observations of the world and how it works best completely apart from one's relationship with Yahweh. This common natural law results in humans being held accountable for violating generally acknowledged boundaries, separate from any knowledge they might have concerning what is clearly given by Yahweh. This understanding is present in pre-Sinai narratives (cf. Gen 20:9; 26:5; 34:7; Exod 18:13-27). The biblical authors "appeal to self-evident standards of morality, a shared perception of what is right, a basic sense for the created order of things."⁵⁹ This natural law was understood to be the result of God the Creator at work among various nations.

For example, Fretheim⁶⁰ argues that the oracles against the nations in Amos 1:3-2:3 can be interpreted in view of the above. Amos denounces several of Israel's neighbours for the atrocities they committed, in effect arguing that they should have known better because of their common humanity and moral sensitivities. The assumption is that Amos recognised that God the Creator had been working in their cultures over the centuries to generate customs and laws that would be in the best interest of all communities and to which these nations were held accountable, even if they did not know the origin of these expectations and laws.

Perhaps this argument can be applied to our text. The poet prays that God should slay the wicked. The parallelism between the verse halves identifies the wicked as "men of blood," in other words murderers who take the lives of the innocent. Verse 20 further identifies these evildoers as people who speak treacherously against God. In view of the discussion above, the petition of the psalmist can be understood to be a plea that Yahweh should fulfil his responsibility as Creator and punish those who have transgressed the natural laws that he established. It must be noted that the offence of the wicked is directed against God, not the poet. He is therefore not praying for personal

⁵⁸ Fretheim, *God and world*, 140-144.

⁵⁹ Fretheim, *God and world*, 141.

⁶⁰ Fretheim, *God and world*, 142.

vengeance against his enemies, but for vengeance against the enemies of God, those who have transgressed the moral order of God's creation.

The most offensive part of this section is without a doubt the expression of hatred towards his enemies in verses 21-22. Nowhere else do we find hatred against enemies expressed so frankly and unequivocally.⁶¹ The theological dilemma that this poses results from comparisons with other parts of the Bible that stresses neighbourly love, forgiveness and reconciliation.

This cry for vengeance and expression of hatred seem shocking, but the poet identifies himself so fully with Yahweh and what matters to Yahweh that he wishes to express that he has nothing to do with sinners and their lifestyle. He completely and utterly rejects the wicked and indicates that he is loyal to Yahweh. Yahweh created him, knows him, is always present with him; he belongs to Yahweh; therefore he will stay true to Yahweh.⁶² Peels⁶³ aptly calls the imprecation of verses 19-20 and the expression of hatred in verses 21-22 "a confession in the negative mode."

This identification with Yahweh against God's enemies brings the psalmist to the place where he wants God to scrutinise him to see whether there is any wicked way in his life (vv. 23-24). He wants God to transform him; he neither wants to follow the way of the wicked nor lives a life that leads away from God. He places himself in the hands of God, knowing that he himself is imperfect and therefore he desires to consign himself to the probing light of God's presence.

D SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Psalm 139 celebrates Yahweh as the Creator. Yahweh is portrayed in the biblical text first and foremost as the Creator of the universe. Yahweh's creative activities began "in the beginning," but did not stop there. God's creative deeds include originating, continuing and completing creation.

Creation theology plays a major role in every aspect of the psalm. In the context of the psalm the different theological motifs, namely God's omniscience, God's omnipresence, God's creation of humankind, the petition against enemies and for transformation indicate that the psalm should be understood as a meditation that transpires within the framework of a celebration of Yahweh as Creator.

Yahweh is omniscient, because he is the Creator. He knows the poet intimately in every facet of his being. This intimate knowledge results from a

⁶¹ Peels, "Perfect hatred," 35-36.

⁶² Peels, "Perfect hatred," 43-44 points out that a similar complex of thoughts is found in Ps 26; cf. also Pss 7 & 17; Jer 12:3.

⁶³ Peels, "Perfect hatred," 45.

close relationship that exists between the poet and God. Yahweh is omnipresent, because he is the Creator. The psalmist utilises creation language to consider God's omnipresence. By stringing together image after image from the created order, the poet underlines that God's presence cannot be escaped; there is no limit to his reach, because all of creation falls under God's dominion.

The psalm continues with a joyful celebration of the beauty and wonder of humanity's creation. The psalmist appreciates the greatness of Yahweh in creating human beings. Yahweh formed him as a skilful artist, establishing humans as the apex of creation, the only beings made in God's image.

Finally, we have seen that even the petition for vengeance and the subsequent expression of hatred do not fall outside the parameters of Yahweh's position as Creator. As Creator, Yahweh has a responsibility to intervene when injustice seems to prevail. As Creator, Yahweh has set a basic moral sense into the structures of the created order. Natural law can discern what is right and just from observations of the world. Therefore humans can be held accountable for violating generally acknowledged boundaries. The petition of the psalmist is thus a plea that Yahweh should fulfil his responsibility as Creator and should punish those who have transgressed the natural laws that he established. The psalmist identifies himself with Yahweh against God's enemies; therefore he prays that God should examine him to see whether there is any wicked way in him. He wants God to transform him; he doesn't want to follow the way of the wicked; he places himself in the hands of God, delivering himself to the penetrating light of God's presence.

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