

## Psalm 139

A Psalm of David, paired with the Torah reading Deuteronomy 26 on the First Fruit Offering.

**Psalm 139:1** - "O lord, you have searched me, and known me."

"searched" - *chaqar* - to search out thoroughly, explore. The word's primary reference is to searching the earth by boring or digging, as for water or metals.

God knows us better than we know ourselves, because we are blinded by self-deception.

- **Jeremiah 17:9** - "The heart is deceitful above all things, and desperately wicked: who can know it?"

- **Psalm 26:2** - "Test me, O LORD, and try me; examine my heart and mind."

- **Jeremiah 20:12** - "O LORD of Hosts, who examines the righteous, who sees the heart and mind, let me see Your vengeance upon them, for to You I have committed my cause."

- **Hebrews 4:12** - "For the word of God is quick, and powerful, and sharper than any twoedged sword, piercing even to the dividing asunder of soul and spirit, and of the joints and marrow, and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart."

**Psalm 139:2** - "Thou knowest my downsitting and mine uprising, thou understandest my thought afar off."

Targum: "my sitting down to study the law"

"uprising" - The Targum interprets this of rising up to go to war, as David did by the direction of the Lord.

More probably, it denotes the whole of daily life, as it does in **Deuteronomy 6:7** - "And thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shalt talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up."

NET - "even from far away you understand my motives."

"afar off" - *rachowq* - far off, or long ago, "of old" - God peers into our soul and heart and mind in this world from His vantage point in eternity.

God sees our thoughts, imaginations and devices as they are forming, taking their final shape and finally resulting in actions.

Genesis Rabbah 9:3

... 'And God saw everything that He had made'—R' Yochanan said: A king of flesh and blood who builds a palace, he looks upon the upper ones (i.e., stories) – one glance/ r'iyah, and upon the lower ones – one (separate) glance, but the Holy One looks upon the upper ones and upon the lower ones – one glance [altogether].

**Psalm 139:3** - "Thou compassest my path and my lying down, and art acquainted with all my ways."

"compassest" - *zarah* - scatter, winnow. In the same way the threshing process separates the grain from the chaff, beating it and then throwing it up so the chaff is blown away, so God sifts and separates what is of value, real and substantial from vanity and evil in our own lives.

- **Amos 9:9** - "For, lo, I will command, and I will sift the house of Israel among all nations, like as corn is sifted in a sieve, yet shall not the least grain fall upon the earth."

- **Isaiah 30:28** - "His breath is like a rushing torrent that rises to the neck. He comes to sift the nations in a sieve of destruction..."

- **Luke 22:31** - "Simon, Simon, Satan has asked to sift (winnow) each of you like wheat."

But the wicked continue as if their lives are unobserved or judged by God:

- **Psalm 10:13** - "Wherefore doth the wicked contemn God? he hath said in his heart, Thou wilt not require it."

"lying down" = *reba`* - from a root that can mean lying down for copulation

The rabbis took that as a hint. Looking again at the word for "compass/ winnow"- *zarah*, (see above) noted that the word is similar to "a gold crown (רָר)" and is from a root that means "to sneeze," or scatter droplets of mucus. Mucus could also indicate sperm to the rabbis. Therefore, this verse could be talking about David's conception:

Rashi - the droplet of [semen, transmitted in] sexual intercourse, from whose choicest part the fetus is formed.

As outlandish as this logic seems to us, the psalm does talk about the formation of the fetus (**verses 13-16**), and since David is a type of Messiah, this could be seen as describing Christ's miraculous conception. This mysterious "droplet of semen" that is also a "gold crown" then would be referring to the supernatural power of the Holy Spirit hovering over Mary that resulted in Christ's virgin birth.

- **Luke 1:35** - "The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the Most High will overshadow you; therefore the child to be born will be called holy – the Son of God."

See **Jeremiah 1:4-5** - "Then the word of the Lord came to me saying 'Before you were born I knew you; I ordained you a prophet to the nations.'"

**Psalm 139:4** - "For there is not a word in my tongue, but, lo, O LORD, thou knowest it altogether."

Or "before a word is formed in my tongue"

- **Isaiah 65:24** - "And it shall come to pass, that before they call, I will answer; and while they are yet speaking, I will hear."

**Psalm 139:5** - "Thou hast beset me behind and before, and laid thine hand upon me."

"beset" = *tsûr* - to press upon, compress or bind together, to fashion

Some of the rabbis and the Septuagint saw this as God "forming" or fashioning David in the womb, as discussed below.

But the Targum interprets it "and stirred against me the stroke of thine hand," i.e. as chastisement.

The verse probably denotes how God compasses us, to uphold but also to restrain with His presence and providence. This is a transition from speaking of God's omniscience to His omnipresence.

### Creation of Adam

The rabbis have much commentary on **Psalm 139** as describing Adam's creation. They interpreted phrases in Genesis and Deuteronomy to imply that Adam was first created as a combined male and female, and gigantic, filling the whole world, but then they find in **Psalm 139:5** the description of God "hedging" Adam into a form much shorter - like we appear today.

Said R' Shmuel bar Nachmani: In the hour when the Holy One created the first human, He created [for] him a double-face/di-prosopon/ du-par'tsufin, and sawed him and made him backs, a back here and a back [t]here, as it is said, "Back/achor and before/qedem You formed me" [Ps 139:5].

R' Tanchuma in the name of R' Banayah and R' B'rakhyah in the name of R' Elazar said: In the time that the Holy One created Adam Harishon, [as] a golem He created him and he was set up from [one] end of the world and unto its [other] end – that's what is written: "Your eyes saw my golem" [Ps 139:16]. R' Yehoshua bar Nechemyah and R' Yehudah bar Simon in R' Elazar's name said: He created him filling the whole world. From where [do we know he extended] from the East to West? That it's said: "Back/achor (i.e., after, the place of sunset) and before/East/qedem You formed/enclosed me /tsartani" [Ps 139:5]. From where [that he went] from North to South? That it's said: "and

from the edge of the heavens and until the edge of the heavens" [Dt 4:32]. And from where [that he filled] even the world's hollow-space? That it's said: ". . . and You laid Your palm upon me" [Ps 139:5]

For R. Elazar said: "Adam was tall as to measure from the earth up to heaven, as it is said (Deut. 4, 32) Since the day that God created Adam (man) from one end, etc., after he had sinned, the Holy One, praised be He! laid His hand upon him, and made him shorter, as it is said (Ps. 139, 5) Behind and before hast Thou hedged me in, and Thou placest upon me Thy hand."

Could this also describe the pre-incarnate Christ being "hedged" into human form with the "emptying" described in **Philippians 2**?

**Psalm 139:6** - "Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high, I cannot attain unto it."

This is the expression of deep humility.

- **Psalm 131:1** - "LORD, my heart is not haughty, nor mine eyes lofty: neither do I exercise myself in great matters, or in things too high for me."

Pride says something different:

- **Isaiah 14:14** - "I will ascend above the heights of the clouds; I will be like the most High."

**Psalm 139:7** - "Whither shall I go from thy spirit? or whither shall I flee from thy presence?"

Not only is everything revealed to God, but He is also present everywhere.

- **John 4:24** - "God is a Spirit: and they that worship him must worship him in spirit and in truth."

- **Acts 17:24,28** - "God that made the world and all things therein, seeing that he is Lord of heaven and earth, dwelleth not in temples made with hands ...For in him we live, and move, and have our being; as certain also of your own poets have said, For we are also his offspring."

- **Ephesians 4:6** - "One God and Father of all, who is above all, and through all, and in you all."

- **Romans 11:36** - "For from Him and through Him and to Him are all things."

**Psalm 139:8** - "If I ascend up into heaven, thou art there: if I make my bed in hell, behold, thou art there."

David is saying this, but only Christ can *truly* say this, since He is the only one who has both ascended to heaven and descended to this world, to the grave and to the underworld.

This points to **Deuteronomy 30:11-14**:

"For this commandment which I command thee this day, it is not hidden from thee, neither is it far off. It is not in heaven, that thou shouldest say, Who shall go up for us to heaven, and bring it unto us, that we may hear it, and do it? Neither is it beyond the sea, that thou shouldest say, Who shall go over the sea for us, and bring it unto us, that we may hear it, and do it? But the word is very nigh unto thee, in thy mouth, and in thy heart, that thou mayest do it."

...and Paul's quote from it in **Romans 10:4-8**:

"For Christ is the end of the law for righteousness to every one that believeth. For Moses describeth the righteousness which is of the law, That the man which doeth those things shall live by them. But the righteousness which is of faith speaketh on this wise, Say not in thine heart, Who shall ascend into heaven? (that is, to bring Christ down from above:) Or, Who shall descend into the deep? (that is, to bring up Christ again from the dead.) But what saith it? The word is nigh thee, even in thy mouth, and in thy heart: that is, the word of faith, which we preach;"

The Torah had descended to Israel on Mt. Sinai. It pointed to Jesus, who has descended from heaven to earth (**John 3:13**), was crucified, and descended even further into "the belly of the earth" (**Matthew 12:40**) and even to hell (*sheol*). He also ascended in resurrection, and in His ascension to Heaven again (**John 13:3**).

Elsewhere, Paul quotes **Psalm 68** in a similar way:

- **Ephesians 4:9-10** - "Now this expression, "He ascended," what does it mean except that He also had descended into the lower parts of the earth? He who descended is Himself also He who ascended far above all the heavens, so that He might fill all things."

The word is "in their mouth" in that God's word reaches our innermost being (**Luke 24:32**), and governs our every action (See **Luke 6:45**).

It's impossible for us to go up to heaven or descend into the depths on our own. Jesus has been there and brought what was needful for salvation directly to us.

**Psalm 139:9-10** - "If I take the wings of the morning, and dwell in the uttermost parts of the sea, Even there shall thy hand lead me, and thy right hand shall hold me."

The rays of the rising sun were considered as wings, swiftly carrying the morning light from east to west.

- **Malachi 4:2** - "The Sun of Righteousness shall arise With healing in His wings..."

"The uttermost parts of the sea" - these were the extremities of distance, from the rising sun in the east to the westernmost part of the Mediterranean sea in the west. IT could also be interpreted as the depths of the sea, like in the experience of Jonah.

- **Romans 8:38-39** - "For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

It is recorded in the Midrash Tanchuma, Bereshit 9:8 that when people gathered to attack Cain in his wanderings he cried out, reciting **Psalm 139:7-10** for protection.

**Psalm 139:11-12** - "If I say, Surely the darkness shall cover me; even the night shall be light about me. Yea, the darkness hideth not from thee; but the night shineth as the day: the darkness and the light are both alike to thee."

"cover" = *shûwph* - cover, break, bruise, overwhelm (an unusual word, used only three times)

Interestingly, also used here:

- **Genesis 3:15** - "And I will put enmity between thee and the woman, and between thy seed and her seed; it shall bruise (*shûwph*) thy head, and thou shalt bruise (*shûwph*) his heel."

Even hiding in a cave where no natural light can penetrate, where I am overwhelmed with thick darkness as if in the plague of darkness in Egypt, You still see all as if it were daylight.

i.e. darkness cannot hide me, because You see clearly whether it is dark night or bright sunshine.

This can be seen in a positive way for believers - Even when we are suddenly enveloped in grief or suffering or depression in which the darkness seems impenetrable, and our separation from God seems hopeless, He sees us through the darkness as if it were light.

**Psalm 139:13** - "For thou hast possessed my reins: thou hast covered me in my mother's womb."

"possessed" = *qanah* - possess, acquire, buy or sometimes to found, create or redeem

Targum: "thou hast founded me in my mother's womb"

"reins" = *kilyah* - kidneys, which to Jews was the seat of emotions and affections. The inward parts of our soul or being.

"covered" = *cakak* - a different word from **verse 11** - to cover, protect, hedge about, shut up, weave together. Used to describe weaving together the branches of a booth, as at Tabernacles.

The word is used of the wings of the cherubim covering the mercy seat (**Exodus 37:9**) of the ark of the covenant covered by the veil (**Exodus 40:3**) and of God covering us with his feathers and wings (**Psalm 91:4**).

The Septuagint uses *skene* (tent) to translate the Hebrew *sukkah* or booth, in the description of the feast of Tabernacles in **Leviticus 23:42**. Paul uses the same Greek word to refer to our human body:

- **2 Corinthians 5:4** - "For we that are in this tabernacle (*skenei*) do groan, being burdened: not for that we would be unclothed, but clothed upon, that mortality might be swallowed up of life."

Here, David is saying God wove together a covering for him, a "booth" consisting of his flesh and bones, in the womb.

- **Ecclesiastes 11:5** - "As thou knowest not what is the way of the spirit, nor how the bones do grow in the womb of her that is with child: even so thou knowest not the works of God who maketh all."

- **Job 10:11** - "Thou hast clothed me with skin and flesh, and hast fenced me with bones and sinews."

**Psalm 139:14** - "I will praise you; for I am fearfully and wonderfully made: marvelous are your works; and that my soul knows right well."

The rabbis, again, thought this referred to the creation of Adam. But spiritually this is the miraculous conception and birth of Christ, the second Adam - the Stone cut out of the mountain without hands, the tabernacle which God pitched and not man... whose name is justly called Wonderful, **Isaiah 9:6**. \_ *Gill's Exposition*

And compare what John says about those who believe:

- **John 1:13** - "Which were born, not of blood, nor of the will of the flesh, nor of the will of man, but of God."

**Psalm 139:15** - "My substance was not hid from you, when I was made in secret, and curiously wrought in the lowest parts of the earth."

"substance" = *otsem* - strength, body, bones or skeleton

Rashi - "the lowest parts of the earth": In the lowest compartment in my mother's womb.

i.e. in a place as remote to our understanding as the lowest parts of the earth, the underworld.

But also see **Genesis 3:19** - "'Dust thou art, and unto dust shalt thou return'"

The earth was the mother's womb of Adam, created from dust, and the mother's womb out of which every child of Adam comes forth is the "earthen vessel" of its mother, out of which it is taken.

The same phrase "the lowest parts of the earth" is used of Christ's descent into this world, into the womb of the virgin, where his human nature was curiously wrought by the finger of the blessed Spirit, **Ephesians 4:9**. - *Gill's Exposition*

"curiously wrought" - i.e. fashioned with skill and care. Used of the ephod, the priest's girdle (**Exodus 28:8**). The word, which means literally "woven or embroidered with threads of different colors," is applied by a natural metaphor to the complex and intricate formation of the body, which arises, by degrees, to perfection, like a tapestry under the hand of the artist.

**Psalm 139:16** - "Your eyes did see my substance, yet being imperfect; and in your book all my members were written, which in continuance were fashioned, when as yet there was none of them."

"your eyes did see" - **2 Chronicles 16:9** - "For the eyes of the Lord run to and fro throughout the whole earth, to shew himself strong in the behalf of them whose heart is perfect toward him." (See also **Zechariah 4:10**)

"my substance, yet being imperfect" = *golem* - something wrapped or rolled together, an unformed mass, an embryo or fetus, before it has unfurled into what it is to be.

Rashi - From the time that You created the world, Your eyes saw all the forms of the coming generations. My splendor and the pattern of my form, before I was born and before I came into the world, Your eyes saw. All man's deeds and the end of the days are revealed before You as if they were already formed, although not one of them was in existence, and not one was yet in the world. These are the wonders of God's works and the way of His might, that future events are revealed to Him before they come.

Targum: "in the book of thy memory all my days are written, in the day the world was created, from the beginning that all creatures were created"

A better translation: "Thine eyes beheld my embryo, and in thy book were written all the days, the days which were being formed, when as yet there were none of them, and not one of them is lacking."

But an alternative interpretation has, "one of them (a particular day) was separated out

of them." This is the Sabbath, according to some rabbis; Yom Kippur according to others.

**Psalm 139:17** - "How precious also are thy thoughts unto me, O God! how great is the sum of them!"

i.e. God's plans and counsels on my behalf - first concerning my conception, and all my days until now and into the future - they can't be counted!

Compare **Psalm 40:5** - "Many, O LORD my God, are thy wonderful works which thou hast done, and thy thoughts which are to us-ward: they cannot be reckoned up in order unto thee: if I would declare and speak of them, they are more than can be numbered."

- **Jeremiah 29:11** - "For I know the thoughts that I think toward you, saith the LORD, thoughts of peace, and not of evil, to give you an expected end." (or, an end to be hoped for).

Targum: "to me how precious they that love thee, the righteous, O God!"

God's plans and thoughts for David and thus for the Messiah are meant here. If we are in Christ, then we participate in this hoped for victory of the Kingdom.

**Psalm 139:18** - "If I should count them, they are more in number than the sand: when I awake, I am still with thee."

The Targum: "I awake in the world to come, and I am still with Thee"

**Psalm 139:19-20** - "Surely thou wilt slay the wicked, O God: depart from me therefore, ye bloody men. For they speak against thee wickedly, and thine enemies take thy name in vain."

Better "O that thou would slay the wicked one." Like Job, he is perplexed that evil exists and opposes God. How can this omniscient God tolerate the existence of wicked men, who blaspheme and hate Him?

With the wicked the Psalmist will have no fellowship. But he doesn't speculate about the problem of theodicy, as we might. Instead, he turns his zeal against the evil he sees, and concludes with a prayer that God will purify his own heart, and lead him in the right way.

Indeed, God will "slay the wicked with the breath of His lips" (**Isaiah 11:4**). And antichrist and his followers will be destroyed in the Lake of Fire

**Psalm 139:21-22** - "Do not I hate them, O LORD, that hate thee? and am not I grieved with those that rise up against thee? I hate them with perfect hatred: I count them my enemies."

This response comes from his intense love and loyalty - a love of God for which he would expose himself to danger to revenge the evil.

"perfect" = *taklîyth* - complete, and carried to the end - a hatred not adulterated or mixed with personal vendetta or anything other than a love of God and opposition to sin. Of course, this judgment must first start in the house of God (**1 Peter 4:17**), and within our own hearts.

The psalm begins by acknowledging that God has searched his heart, and ends with a renewed call for God to search further:

**Psalm 139:23** - "Search me, O God, and know my heart: try me, and know my thoughts:"

"search" = *chaqar* - thoroughly examine, investigate with the idea of digging into the ground

**Psalm 139:24** - "And see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting."

"the way everlasting" = *derek olam* - the path to or of eternity

Jesus is the Way:

- **John 14:6** - "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me."

Jesus comments on this idea of perfect hatred:

- **Luke 14:26** - "If any man come to me, and hate not his father, and mother, and wife, and children, and brethren, and sisters, yea, and his own life also, he cannot be my disciple."

He is expanding on the Torah's prohibition of idolatry:

- **Deuteronomy 13:6-11** - "If thy brother, the son of thy mother, or thy son, or thy daughter, or the wife of thy bosom, or thy friend, which is as thine own soul, entice thee secretly, saying, Let us go and serve other gods, which thou hast not known, thou, nor thy fathers ... thou shalt stone him with stones, that he die..."

Perfect hatred and perfect love have the same objective - to let nothing separate us from Him.