

The following section contains some brief remarks on each verse of the Hebrew text of **Psalm 139** which demonstrates God's intimate familiarity or *knowing* our human constitution. Note that I emphasize various aspects of this "knowing" in italicized words:

Vs 1: You have *searched* me and *known* me: First comes the "searching" or chaqar followed by a "knowing" or yadah. Both words imply familiar acquaintance, actions accomplished in the past; yadah can apply to knowledge in the sexual sense.

Vs 2: You *know* when I sit down and when I rise up: Another instance of yahah but with reference to two human functions, "sitting" and "rising." Note that the reference pertains not so much to actions completed but to the act of sitting and rising (i.e., when they actually are happening).

-You *discern* my thoughts from afar: "Thought" derives from the verbal root rahah, "to feed, pasture." This is an apt name for thoughts because like an animal pasturing, they munch on whatever grabs our attention and move indiscriminately to another object.

Vs 3: You *search out* my path and my lying down: "To search out" or zarah suggests a winnowing where one separates, for example, wheat from chaff. This action has two objects, "path" and "lying down," the latter suggesting the reclining of an animal in a field.

-You are *acquainted* with all my ways": Such being "acquainted with" or sakan fundamentally means "to dwell." Thus God "dwells" or accompanies us in our ways or activity.

Vs 4: You *know* it altogether (i.e., "before a word is on my tongue"): Another instance of yahah for "knowing" on God's part prior to articulation of speech but not necessarily thought.

Vs 5: You *beset* me behind and before: Such "besetting" is a laying siege as to a town; God assaults us from two directions, behind and before (but not necessarily from the side).

-And *lay your hand* upon me: This "laying" of hands suggests the consequence of besieging, i.e., the actual capture of the psalmist by means of divine knowledge.

Vs 6: Such *knowledge* is too wonderful for me: The psalmist acquiesces to God's dahath or intimate knowledge which sums up God's besieging and laying on of his hand just mentioned.

Vs 7: where shall I go from your Spirit?: Here we have the first mention of God's Spirit or ruach which, like air (to which ruach also applies), is omnipresent. Hence, the psalmist comes to realize much like Jonah who fled from God that no movement can remove him from the divine presence.

-Where shall I flee from your presence? This is a rhetorical question which has now become irrelevant because the Spirit or Ruach has eliminated any need for movement; again like Jonah, the psalmist submits to God.

Vs 8: If I ascend to heaven you are there: Note another association of "heaven" with the "air" or ruach (Spirit). The psalmist seems to be pressing the issue, as it were; despite having been besieged, he undertakes a vertical movement or one into heaven where once again he discovers God's presence.

-If I make my bed in Sheol, you are there: Sheol represents death, the opposite pole of the just mentioned vertical movement into heaven. Even this depth as well as the height

of heaven the psalmist finds confining for God's knowledge.

Vs 10: Even there your hand *shall lead me*: Such awareness of God's "leading" sums up the psalmist's taking the "wings of the morning" and "dwelling in the uttermost parts of the sea" in vs 9.

-And *your right hand shall hold me*: This "holding" is a firm, steady grasp which keeps the psalmist on the "way everlasting" of vs 24 below despite his attempts, again like Jonah, to escape God.

Vs 12: Darkness is not dark for you: The divine knowledge recounted in this psalm transcends any form of darkness as we see in the following two additions to this verse: "night is bright as the day" and "darkness is as light with you."

Vs 13: You *formed* my inward parts: The Hebrew verb qanah suggests a forging with respect to metal and pertains to the psalmist's kilyah or more specifically, "kidneys," considered as the most sensitive or vital part of our human constitution. Contrast this delicate nature with the harsh notion of qanah or forging.

-You *knit* me together in my mother's womb: This notion of "weaving" or sakak has a humorous implication, that of God knitting the psalmist as one would a sweater or garment.

Vs 14: You *know* me right well: This literally reads, "You know me exceedingly" (me'od) or have perfect knowledge of me.

Vs 15: My frame *was not hidden* from you: The Hebrew for "frame," hetsem, more specifically means "bone" or "substance," referring to the psalmist's skeletal structure.

-When I was being *made in secret*: Such making alludes to the "knitting" of vs 13 above, referring to the secretness of the womb.

-*Intricately wrought* in the depths of the earth: Here the psalmist refers to the earth's depths, another locale for his being knit together.

Vs 16: You eyes *behold* my unformed substance: This "unformed substance" or golem means an embryo; a word from the same verbal root, gelom, means "wrapping" or "garment." Thus the unformed nature of the embryo consists in various "wrappings" which are overlaid to complete a fully formed person at birth.

-In your book every one of them *was written*: Reference to the "days that were formed for me" later in this verse.

Vs 17: How precious to me are your thoughts: Consider vs 2 above where we have the same word for "thought" but here it is applied to God.

Vs 18: If I would *count* them, they are more than the sand: That is, God's "thoughts" derived from rahah, "to pasture." Thus God's thoughts...his pasturings...are infinite in number.

-When I *awake* I am still with you: Implication is that the "pasturing" just mentioned continues when the psalmist is not conscious or at sleep. There is a play on the phrase, "still with you:" hody himak, which demonstrates the closeness of God.

Vs 23: *Search* me, O God, and *know* my heart: Two requests, one for searching and another for knowing (the heart). The former or chaqar is the same word used in vs 1 where the past tense is used; it is as though at the end of Psalm 139 the author wishes God to continue his searching into the future. The latter request is for knowing in the already

mentioned sense of *yadah*, only here it is more specific, the heart.

-*Try* me and *know* my thoughts: A refinement of the just mentioned twofold request with another mention of *yadah*. Note that the psalmist appeals for this knowing to be applied to his thoughts as well as his heart.

Vs 24: *See* if there be any hurtful way in me: Mention of a “way” or *derek* connotes a path on which one treads and can refer to the heart.

-*Lead* me in the way everlasting: Another mention of *derek*; first the psalmist wants God to see his “way” and then be guided along the correct one.

* * * *

Here is a list of references from the Psalter with reference to the word “*fear*,” an important concept in Old Testament spirituality. “Fear” associated with God can easily be misinterpreted, so a brief explanation of the verses below present a better understanding of this term’s significance. Unless noted otherwise, the Hebrew word for “fear” is *yar’e*:¹

2.11: Serve the Lord with *fear*, with trembling: Here “fear” is related to “trembling” in God’s service, the latter verb being derived from *gyl* whose root means “to move in a circle.”

5.7: I will worship towards you holy temple in the *fear* of you: Here “fear” has an object, towards-which. Note that the psalmist is worshiping outside the temple and directs his fear towards this sacred building.

9.20: Put them in *fear*, O Lord: Reference to “the nations” with a further request for them to “know that they are men.” Hence, fear is related to an awareness of mortality, especially with regard to those not belonging to Israel.

15.4: But who honors those who *fear* the Lord: This psalm contains a list of qualities belonging to those “who shall sojourn in your tent.” It is not explicit that such a righteous person fears God but “honors” those who do so.

19.9: The *fear* of the Lord is clean, enduring forever: Two qualities, “clean” (*tahar*, connoting splendor) and “enduring forever” (*homedeth lahd*, continuous endurance).

22.23: You who *fear* the Lord, praise him: A general exhortation to “fear,” whereas the second half of this verse exhorts the sons of Jacob and Israel to glorify and stand in awe of God.

22.25: My vows I will pay before those who *fear* him: It is not clear what these vows are but perhaps they are related to the offering of a sacrifice. Note that such vows are made not before God but before “those who fear him.” This implies the collective nature of Israel in relationship with God.

23.4: I *fear* no evil, for you are with me: This confidence is situated within the context of “the valley of the shadow of death.” Note the play on words: *‘yra* (“I fear”) and *rah* (“evil”).

¹The verbal root for the word “to see” is *ra’ah* whose various forms often sound similar to those of *yar’e*. References are according to the **Revised Standard Edition**.

25.12: Who is the man that *fears* the Lord: Such “fear” is followed by the assurance that “God will instruct him in the way that he should choose” which is reminiscent of Proverbs’ exhortation to acquire fear and wisdom (cf. Prov 9.10). Note the play on words: *yere*’ (fear) and *yorenu* (instruct).

25.14: The friendship of the Lord is for those who *fear* him: Such “friendship” or *sod* derives from a verbal root implying familiar conversation; it also means a couch.

27.1: The Lord is my light and my salvation; whom shall I *fear*: Note that the verbal root for “salvation” is *yashah* from which derives the name Jesus. I.e., “The Lord is my light and my *Jesus*.”

27.3: Though a host encamp against me, my heart shall not *fear*: Lack of fear is situated here in the “heart” although other aspects of the psalmist’s constitution may show alarm.

31.19: How great is the goodness which you have laid up for those who *fear* you: “Laid up” connotes hiddenness or concealment, chiefly from the eyes of observers.

33.8: Let all the earth *fear* the Lord: Both animate and inanimate beings are required to fear God. The second part of this verse reads, “let all the inhabitants of the world stand in awe of him.” Here “to stand in awe” comes from the verbal root *gor* whose central meaning implies a turning aside (i.e., from a person one fears). Hence, we may say that those “standing in awe” of God are sojourners as recounted in Heb 11.13: “having acknowledged that they were strangers and exiles on the earth.”

33.18: Behold, the eye of the Lord is on those who *fear* him: Here the vision of God is the source of fear. Note that “eye” and “well” come from the same verbal root, *hayn*. Such a divine eye is therefore a well of eternal life.

34.4: I sought the Lord and answered me, and delivered me from all my *fears*: The act of “seeking” implies a treading as from the verbal root, *darash*, and hence frequenting a given place. Once this frequenting has taken place, the Lord answers the psalmist and then rescues him.

34.7: An angel of the Lord encamps around those who *fear* him: This type of angel or messenger acts like a city wall around those who fear God. Compare this surrounding with the angels’ appearance at the birth of Christ, “And the glory of the Lord shone around them [shepherds], and they were filled with *fear*” (Lk 2.9) after which an angel appeared to the shepherds.

34.9: For those who *fear* him have no want: This is preceded in the same verse by “O *fear* the Lord, you his saints.” Such fear implies complete fulfillment in that it casts out any need.

34.11: Listen to me, I will teach you the *fear* of the Lord: This verse is reminiscent of Prov 1.7 & 2.9, “The fear of the Lord is the beginning of knowledge.” Although the beginning is spoken of and associated with fear, there is no mention of the completion of knowledge and wisdom and with what quality they end.

36.1: There is no *fear* of God before his eyes: Such absence of fear pertains to the wicked of vs 1. I.e., to have such fear, one’s eyes must be opened to see.

40.3: Many will see and *fear*: Note the play on words between “see” and “fear,” *yir’u* and *yiya’u*.

46.2: We will not *fear* though the earth should change: Implied is something like an earthquake when “the mountains shake in the heart of the sea.” To counter this changing, vs 5 says “God is in the midst of her, she shall not be moved,” that is, Jerusalem where presumably the psalmist is located.

49.5: Why should I *fear* in times of trouble: Again, a play on the words “fear” and “trouble,” ‘yra’ and rah.

52.6: The righteous shall see and *fear* and shall laugh: Three verbs: see, fear, laugh. Another play on the words “see” and “fear,” yir’u and yiyr’u.

55.5: *Fear* and trembling come upon me: Here we have a fear opposite to that pertaining to God, the psalmist’s enemies.

55.19: Because they keep no law and do not *fear* God: Fear is associated here with not keeping the law, but the Hebrew reads, “do not change.” Thus those who “do not change” or forsake their evil ways lack divine fear.

56.4: Whose word I praise, in God I trust without a *fear*: This is preceded by vs 3, “When I am afraid, I put my trust in you.” Such trust is bound up with praising God’s devar or “word” which we may take as *the* Word, Jesus Christ.

56.11: In God I trust without *fear*. What can man do to me: Note the contrast between “man” (‘adam) in this verse and “flesh” (basar) of vs 4.

60.4: You have set up a banner for those who *fear* you: Note the association of “banner” (nes) with nus, “to *flee* from the bow.”

61.5: Give me the heritage of those who fear your name: “Heritage” and “name” are the associated; the latter being the object of fear.

64.4: Shooting at him suddenly and without *fear*: Three plays on words, “shooting” (lyroth), “shooting” (yoruu; another instance not in the English) and “fear” (yiyr’au).

64.9: Then all men will *fear*: Such fear results after God has shot arrows at the wicked, vs 7. It is also at the source of a story to be handed down to future generations, that is, “they will tell what God has wrought.”

66.16: Come and hear, all you who *fear* God: First there is a bidding followed by a hearing with reference to people who fear God. Again, the notion of telling a story of God’s deeds.

67.7: Let all the ends of the earth *fear* him: The four cardinal points of the earth and by implication the four elements of earth, air, fire and water.

76.8: The earth *feared* and was still: Stillness results from fear, that is, as belonging to the earth. It results from God uttering judgment from heaven which precedes this part of vs 8.

76.11: Bring gifts to him who is to be *feared*: Allusion to a sacrificial offering which is preceded by making vows to God and which has a close association with fear.

85.9: His salvation is at hand for those who *fear* him: Again, an allusion to the person of Jesus as salvation, yishu. The verbal root for “at hand” is qerev, more precisely, “the interior” or “midst” of a thing, not necessarily an exterior type of closeness.

86.11: Unite my heart to *fear* your name: The verb ‘ached for “unite,” in the sense of making one focus of attention by all our faculties. We get a glimpse of this unity in Gen 1.3: “and there was *one* day” or better, “day one,” which has a greater sense of consolidating

disparate elements.

89.7: A God *feared* in the council of the holy ones: Such “holy ones” are not clearly defined; a council by its very definition is a consultative body, but God needs no consultation. However, we may take this council as his angels whose function is to act as mediators for the accomplishment of God’s will.

90.11: Who considers...your wrath according to the *fear* of you: The Hebrew refines this by “strength (hoz) of your fear.”

91.5: You will not *fear* the terror of the night: “Terror” has the connotation of trembling (pachad).; it also suggests being cautious.

96.4: He is to be *feared* above all gods: Such gods most likely refer to the pagan nations in which Israel found herself. This verse implies the same sense of Ps 89.7, “council of holy ones,” but the members of this council are allied with God and are not his enemies as with the “gods.”

102.15: The nations will *fear* the name of the Lord: Such fear implies recognition of Israel’s God as opposed to the plurality of gods.

103.11: So great is his steadfast love toward those who *fear* him: This “steadfastness” or *gavar* of divine love suggests a warlike stance, one that is militant in its application.

103.13: As a father has compassion on his sons, so the Lord pities those who *fear* him: The verb for “compassion” here, *rachem*, is more properly a feminine trait, so it is interesting to situate it within a paternal context. *Rachem* is akin to *rachaph* of Gen 1.1: “the Spirit of God was moving over (*rachaph*) the face of the waters,” that is, giving birth to creation.

103.17: Everlasting to everlasting upon those who *fear* him: An embellished way of praising God’s love or *chesed*, the classical Hebrew word for divine love towards his children.

111.5: He provides food for those who *fear* him: This refers to material food and is suggestive of the Israelites in the desert after leaving Egypt. *Tereph* for “food” has a somewhat violent overtone; it implies something pulled or torn into pieces as prey.

111.10: The *fear* of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom: A reference to Prov 9.10 already mentioned. Note the contrast between “beginning” here (*re’shyth*) with that of Proverbs, *techilath*. The latter’s verbal root, *chalal*, means “to lay open.” Thus the Proverbs verse speaks of a “laying-open” of wisdom, whereas the Psalm verse speaks of fear in the generative sense of enjoying primacy.

112.1: Blessed is the man who *fears* the Lord: As with Ps 1.1, there is a play on words, ‘*ashry-’ysh*, “happy the man.” The concept of happiness as denoted by the root ‘*ashar* suggests small, excited steps which rhymes with “man;” it is also a relative pronoun which conveys the idea of something in transition.

115.11: You who *fear* the Lord, trust in the Lord: The reason for such trust is that this verse continues by stating God’s role as help and shield.

115.13: He will bless those who *fear* the Lord: Two extremes of humanity are set forth, “small” and “great.” Presumably those in the middle are included.

118.4: Who *fear* the Lord say, “His steadfast love endures forever”: Another reference to *chesed*, divine mercy. It seems only those who fear God can proclaim *chesed*’s

endurance.

118.6: With the Lord on my side I do not *fear*: The psalmist then adds, “what can man do to me?” Here fear relates to the psalmist’s enemies. Note that “with the Lord on my side” reads in Hebrew, “the Lord to me,” direction towards-which on his part.

119.38: Confirm your promise, which is for those who *fear* you: “Promise” reads *haqem*, whose verbal root suggests a rising as well as abiding.

119.63: I am a companion of all who *fear* you: He also associates himself with “those who keep your precepts,” so “fear” and “keeping precepts” are one and the same.

119.74: Those who *fear* you shall see me and rejoice: Another play on the words “fear” (*yere’yka*) and “see” (*yir’uny*). The reason why people should observe the psalmist is because he has “hoped in your word.”

119.79: Let those who *fear* you turn to me: People who fear God are asked to regard the psalmist in order “to know your testimonies.” Note the play on words, “know” (*yodheu*) and “testimonies” (*hedotheyka*).

119.120: My flesh trembles for *fear* of you: Here the word for “fear” is *pachad*. This verse continues with “I am afraid of your judgments” with *yare’thy* for “fear.”

128.1: Blessed is every one who *fears* the Lord: Another instance of ‘ashry for “blessed” as in Ps 112.1 which alluded to Ps 1.1: “Blessed is the man who walks in the Law of the Lord.”

128.4: Thus shall the man be blessed who *fears* the Lord: The word for “man” here is *gaver* which denotes strength.

130.4: Forgiveness with you, that you may be *feared*: Here the purpose of forgiveness is to produce fear; it accompanies God (“with”).

135.20: You who *fear* the Lord, bless the Lord: A similar verse to Ps 128.4.

145.19: He fulfills the desire of all who *fear* him: The content of such “desire” is not explicit. This verse continues with, “he also hears their cry and saves them;” another instance where the verbal root for “save” is equated with the name Jesus.

147.11: The Lord takes pleasure in those who *fear* him: God also takes pleasure “in those who hope in his steadfast love” mentioned later in this verse. “Taking pleasure” or *ratsah* implies associating with the object of one’s delight.

* * * *

The last few liturgical weeks prior to *Asb Wednesday* have a certain “worn-out” quality. That is to say, during this period one can sense that the liturgical year seems to lack direction or goal. For instance, the readings continue without a unified theme, the last such instance having been during the Christmas season. The Church therefore requires renewal or a getting back to its divine source much like the onset of spring. If such an opportunity for rebirth were lacking, the year would tend to slowly but surely dissolve in a more or less meaningless cycle. Contrast this rebirth with the actual beginning of the liturgical cycle, Advent, where the last few Sundays prior to it stress the second coming of Jesus Christ. This proclamation seamlessly passes over to that belonging to his first coming for which the Advent cycle is a preparation.

* * * *