

The anthropological function of the outcry “When God searches my heart” in Psalm 139:1 and 23 and its later use in Romans 8:27

Lodewyk Sutton

University of the Free State, Bloemfontein, South Africa
suttonl@ufs.ac.za

Abstract

Psalm 139 is viewed as a possible ritual or individual (though representing a group) meditative confession after some possible trial. This is said due to the “sapiential language and a reflective mood that are the most salient features of most elements” in the psalm, and also the psalm’s perspective of YHWH as creator (Gerstenberger, 2001:406; Maré, 2010:697). Within Psalm 139 and throughout its creation imagery, the psalm makes use of multiple imageries relating to the human body. According to Psalm 139:1 and 23, God is searching the inmost being (the heart) of the one praying the psalm. Many scholars use these verses of Psalms 139 as in intertextual text for Romans 8:27. In this article an anthropological comparison between Psalm 139:1 and 23 on “when God searches our hearts” and its later use in Romans 8:27 is made to determine the relevance of the function of the outcry “when God searches my heart” and its intertextual importance or relevance.

Key words

Psalm 139; Romans 8:27; heart; anthropology; intertextuality

1. Introduction

Psalm 139¹ is viewed as a possible ritual or individual (though representing a group) meditative confession after some possible trial. This is due to the “sapiential language and a reflective mood that are the most salient features of most elements” in the psalm, and also the psalm’s perspective

1 The research in this article is part of a larger research project on Psalm 139 with the title “Reading Psalm 139 as a literary unit: A bodily interpretation from the perspective of space.”

of YHWH as creator (Gerstenberger, 2001:406; Maré, 2010:697). Within Psalm 139 and throughout its creation imagery (Ps 139:13–15), the psalm makes use of multiple imageries (and also some anthropomorphisms) relating to the human body. According to Psalm 139:1 and 23, God is searching the inmost being of the one praying the psalm. The heart is part of the inner person. The anthropological perspective or function in the statement “when God is searching the heart” thus becomes an important issue. The heart could take on functions that concern the vegetative, emotional, noetic, and voluntative natures of humanity (Janowski, 2013:157–158). Many scholars use Psalm 139:1 and 23 as intertextual texts for Romans 8:27.² In this article a comparison of the anthropology behind the idea of Psalm 139:1 and 23 on “God searching our hearts” and its possible later use in Romans 8:27 is made in order to determine the relevance and function of the emotional outcry “when YHWH searches my heart,” by the one praying Psalm 139 and by Paul in the Letter to Romans. This is done firstly by determining the anthropological importance³ of the heart as part of the inmost being of a human; secondly,

2 See in this regard: Hendriksen (1980:277); Cranfield (1982:424); Murray (1984:312); Dunn (1988:479); Longenecker (2016:735ff).

3 When looking at what can be understood under Old Testament anthropology, Bernd Janowski (2003:1) starts with the question: “What is a man (human or person)?” Janowski (2003:1) argues that the human sciences have always asked the question as to who or what a person is; and that new images are created in accordance with specific needs in a specific time in answering this question. In the same way the question can be formulated in Biblical anthropology, where a specific viewpoint is followed, without being in direct conflict or losing contact with other sciences asking the same questions. What is intended when talking about the Old Testament person? His/her needs, his/her expectations, his/her passions? Is it at all possible to create an image of a person from the Old Testament (Janowski 2003:1)? The problem already arises when one looks at the term “man,” because it indicates the existence of certain fundamental anthropological certainties or invariables that have remained the same over time and space. In the same sense as images of nature and society, images of human beings are bound to historical change and development. An Old Testament anthropologist that takes this into account can then formulate his or her conclusions based on historical anthropology (Janowski 2003:2). Historical anthropology has its origins in Germany and looks at the principal ways in which humans are historical. It represents the true human in his or her manners, thoughts, emotions and sorrows in the centre of the analyses and raises the awareness of the historical and cultural reality and diversity of human life (Janowski, 2003:5). The object of historical anthropology, according to Janowski (2003:6), will be to look at the historical and cultural variables to establish the invariables of human behaviour: conduct, thoughts, emotions and sorrows. This differs from traditional philosophical anthropology and the question as to the nature and purpose of a person’s existence. At the end of an obligation to an abstract anthropological norm, the time has

by determining the cultural coded meanings when God is depicted as searching (testing and knowing) the heart; and thirdly by applying this information to the literary context of Psalm 139, so as to establish the function of the emotional outcry “when God searches my heart” for the one praying Psalm 139:1 and 23 and if the function is the same in its later use by Paul in Romans 8:27 (an intertextual comparison).⁴

2. The heart and its anthropological function

Wolff (1974:40–44) explains the heart⁵ that is understood as the synthetic way of thinking by using the narrative of Nabal’s death in 1 Samuel 25:37.

arrived for results from the human sciences and also from the historical-philosophical founded anthropological critic to come together for new paradigmatic questions. This is where the Old Testament sciences can contribute perspectives and results that can lead to change in present problems. Anthropological questions are therefore, according to Janowski (2003:6), a suitable starting point.

- 4 For the purpose of this article the following presuppositions are made: Firstly, in Ps 139:1 the Hebrew word לבב (heart) is not explicitly used as it is in v 23. The concept of the one searching the inmost being of a human is the same and therefore relevant here. Secondly, although God is traditionally understood as the one searching the hearts in Rom 8:27, a strong argument could be made that the one doing the searching is the Holy Spirit and that what he knows is a Spirit-focused mind-set (Berding, 2013:96). Kenneth Berding (2013:94–108), in his article “Who searches hearts and what does he know in Rom 8:27”, presents eight considerations why the traditional understanding, that it is God who searches the hearts and what the Spirit knows, should be challenged. For the purpose of this article the traditional view that it is God who searches the heart is followed, as it does not change the outcome of this study; even in the New Testament interpretation regarding who is doing the searching, whether it is God the Father or the Holy Spirit, the one doing the searching is still God. Thirdly, the argument for the traditional understanding of Rom 8:27 includes connections to Hebrew Bible passages that focus on the theme that God examines and knows people’s hearts, such as 1 Sam 16:7; 1 Kgs 8:39; 1 Chron 28:9; 29:17; Ps 17:3; 26:2; 44:21; 139:1, 2, 23; Prov 15:11 and Jer 17:10. The connection between Ps 139:1 and 23 and Rom 8:27 is due to a similarity in the theme and not to it being a literal quotation. This can be observed due to the fact that the LXX Greek and New Testament Greek do not correspond, for example δοκιμάζω in Ps 139:1, 23 and ἐραυνάω in Rom 8:27. For the purpose of this article the comparison is made because of the similarity in the theme and not necessarily due to a direct quotation. Also the connection is made due to its citation in the list in the margin by Nestle-Aland’s *Novum Testamentum Graece* (2001:789).
- 5 The following words in Hebrew are used for heart, לב and לבב. Holladay (1988:171–172) translates לב and לבב as heart and chest (the physical organ), but also as heart that is the seat of vitality, inner self or seat of feelings and impulses, and the mind and mood in totality. Further explanations and translations of לב and לבב include: mind, character, disposition, inclination, loyalty, concern, intention, purpose, mind, attention, consideration, understanding and conscience. Jastrow (1950:687) also translates לב and לבב as heart.

Nadal's heart stops beating, but only ten days later does he die when YHWH smites him. The heart is viewed as the central organ that makes the limbs move. It is not about the beating heart but rather the internal parts of the body. The anatomy of the heart and the space where the heart is situated in the body are considered in the Old Testament (Hos 13:8; 2 Sam 18:14; 2 Kgs 9:24; Jer 4:19). It was primarily in sickness that Israel learned to recognise the heart as the central and crucially vital organ (cf. also Ps 37:15; Isa 1:5; 57:15). The heart is always recognised as being an inaccessible, hidden organ inside the body. The essential activities of the human heart in the Old Testament according to Wolff (1974:44–55) are of the mental and spiritual kind: these activities are thinking, wishing (to wish for something), reasoning and decision-making (in terms of the will and when judgments need to be made).

Idioms that are used in connection with the heart are:

“heart can be hardened” (total inability to think and/or feel, to judge and evaluate, to remember and know what to do, to learn and relate to others – Ex 4:21; 7:3, 13, 14, 22; 8:15, 19, 32; 9:7, 12, 34, 35; 10:1, 20, 27; 11:10; 14:4, 8; Deut 2:30; 15:7; 2 Chron 36:13; Mk 3:5; 10:5; Mt 19:8; Rom 2:5; 9:18); “the hard heart” (not fearing the YHWH which results in ignorance about God – Prov 28:14; Isa 63:17; Eph 4:18); “heart of stone, as hard as the lower millstone” (non-functioning heart – Job 41:24); “circumcised heart” (the need to have the heart function as it should and to work in the way God intended. The circumcised heart becomes a new working heart – Deut 10:16; Jer 9:26; Ezek 36:26; Rom 2:29; Acts 7:51; see Lev 26:41; Deut 30:6 [heart that works probably loves God]); “fat heart” (also a dysfunctional heart – Isa 6:10; 32:3; 43:8; Mt 13:15); “double heart” (is a deceitful and lying heart – Ps 12:2); “singleness of heart” (is a pure heart – Eph 6:5; Col3:22; see in contexts of lying and deceit, Ps 24:4; Prov 22:11; Matt 5:8; 1 Tim 1:5; 2 Tim 2:22); “whole heart” or “all one's heart” (same as a pure heart, required in dedication to God – Deut 6:5; Mark 12:30; Matt 22:37; Luke 10:27). The heart receives its input from the eyes (Pilch and Malina, 2000:68–72).

As one can see from the above, in the Old Testament, the two Hebrew words for the heart are almost exclusively associated with the human being. In these cases, the heart according to Janowski (2013:157) takes on “functions

that concern the vegetative, the emotional, the noetic, and voluntative nature of humanity.”⁶

The vegetative function concerns having a living heart, thus implying the physical nature of a person’s heart. This includes everything that supports or nourishes (Jdgs 19:5, 8, 21–22; Ps 104:14) the heart. That which provides or presents the heart with energy is also included and is expressed in different vegetative images of the heart (1 Sam 28:5; Ps 22:14, 15; 38:10, 11; 39:3, 4; 61:2, 3; 102:4, 5; Jer 4:19). These vegetative expressions or processes also resemble the emotional function (Janowski, 2013:157). The emotional function of the heart is alluded to when the heart is viewed as the seat of all human emotions (Ps 13:2, 3; 25:17; 34:18, 19; 69:20, 21 109:16, 22; Isa 15:5; 65:14; Jer 48:36; Lam 1:20; 2:18). The noetic function of the heart refers to the intellectual ability that is associated with the head or the brain. In the Old Testament, the heart is associated with thinking. Therefore, the Old Testament person thinks, remembers, comprehends, recognises and concentrates with the heart. The voluntative function is associated with will and planning (Janowski, 2013:157–158).

3. The cultural coded meanings of the notion of God searching (testing and knowing) the heart

Brueggemann (1997:202–203) proposes that Israel’s testimony concerning YHWH is a two-sided testimony:

“On the one hand, YHWH tests Israel (Deut 8:2, 16; Ex 15:25; 16:4) in order to find out if Israel is serious in its loyalty to YHWH. Thus the sojourn experience is a trial in a judicial sense, in order to measure Israel’s allegiance to YHWH. Not that the entire motif of testing belies any claim of YHWH’s omniscience. YHWH must test

6 Malina (Pilch and Malina, 2000:68–72) explains the function of the heart in social contexts according to the human activity zone – the eyes-heart; the zone of emotion-fused thought. In the Old Testament the heart becomes the organ that expresses human thought. How a person thinks is expressed in the words: “saying in their heart” (Gen 24:45; Deut 7:17; 8:17; 9:4; 18:21; 29:19; Ps 10:13; 14:1; 53:1; Isa 47:8; 49:21; Jer 13:22; Obad 1:3; Mk 2:8; Lk 5:22; Rom 10:6; Rev 18:7); “thoughts of the heart” (Gen 6:5; Deut 15:9). To remember something is uttered in the words: “laying it to one’s heart” or “laying it up in one’s heart” (Ex 7:23; Deut 4:39; 11:18; 32:46; 1 Kgs 8:47; 2 Chron 6:37; Job 22:22; Ps 119:11; Isa 47:7; 57:1; Jer 12:11; Mal 2:2); “keeping it in one’s heart” (Prov 4:21; Luke 2:19, 51).

to find out what YHWH does not yet know. Therefore, in something of a derivative usage, psalms of trust often petition YHWH to lead the one praying in a way of fidelity and well-being (Ps 5:8; 27:11; 31:3; 61:2; 139:23–24; 143:10). The petitioner states his innocence with verbs of testing: ‘Prove me, O Lord, and try me; Test my heart and mind’ (Ps 26:2).”

Waltke (2007:264) also subscribes to the interpretation that the testing refers to YHWH who authenticates His relationship between Himself and his followers. A second meaning of the searching and the testing that flows logically from this first understanding according to Waltke (2007:264) is also that the testing indicates that God knows everything and that God knows a person’s thoughts, motives and actions and therefore one can be certain that His judgments will be just.

In accordance with this interpretation, Keel (1978:184) understands searching and testing the heart as an Old Testament concept, as seen in the images of fire and water where the fire and water are the most important means of cultic purification (Num 31:23; cf. Ps 26:6). Here too the “testing” is viewed not simply as a process of assessment but also as one of refinement. Because the word of God has been refined, it is free of all dross, utterly pure (Ps 12:6) and desirable (Ps 119:140) (Keel, 1978:184).

4. The literary context of Psalm 139 and the function of the emotional outcry “when God searches my heart”

Psalm 139 is part of the fifth Davidic collection, Psalms 138–145 (due to their Davidic superscription), which is part of Book V in the Book of Psalms, namely Psalms 107–150. According to Tucker (2014a:124–125), Psalm 138 is a response to the crisis that is being articulated in Psalm 137, and the rest of the Davidic Psalter (Ps 139–145) depicts the psalmist in a situation of significant need. In this situation, Psalm 139 “bemoans the threat of the wicked” and “seeks deliverance from the wicked.” It is important to take note that Psalm 139 forms part of a process of restoration in a historical period after the exile (Hossfeld and Zenger, 2011:6; cf. Tucker, 2014b:188).

An overview of the historical-critical interpretation of Psalm 139 indicates that the psalm is traditionally interpreted by scholars in terms of the themes of the omnipresence, omniscience, and omnificence of God. The

result of this interpretation is that verses 19–24 seem to present a different trend of thought, thus giving rise to debate on the unity of this psalm.⁷ In recent years scholars such as Zenger (1996:31),⁸ Goulder (1998:240–241), Allen (2002:327) and Maré (2010:693–707) have approached this psalm (and its structure) from a perspective other than that of omniscience, omnipresence and the omnificence, and lately some scholars such as Baker and Nicholson (1973), Williams (1989), Gerstenberger (2001:401–408), Clifford (2003), Terrien (2003:871–881), Coetzee (2003; 2005) and Hossfeld (Hossfeld and Zenger, 2011:534–547) have started to take notice of the anthropological language that can be found in Psalm 139. Coetzee (2005: 521–530) uses a bodily interpretation of the womb in Psalm 139 to illustrate Israel’s embodied patriarchal theology of containment. Hossfeld⁹ (Hossfeld and Zenger, 2011:540) interprets the psalm from the perspective of a petitioner and the petitioner’s relationship with God. In his examination of this psalm, he stresses the significance of the “inner human” (soul, heart and kidneys), and the text as an anthropological key for understanding the existence of the human being before birth imagery is considered.

For the most part, the literary genre and *Sitz im Leben* of Psalm 139 can be viewed as uncertain (Terrien, 2003:875). The psalm can be interpreted as a personal hymn that praises the creator YHWH, a legal plea in the temple vigil, a plea of an individual unjustly accused of a crime who in the end appeals to God for vindication as the judge of all creation¹⁰, a plea

7 Cf. in this regard: Weiser (1962:799–807); Dahood (1970:283–299); Blaiklock (1977:129131); Kidner (1979:463–468); Anderson (1981:904–913); Kraus (1993:509–519); Wilcock (2001:258–261); Harmon (2007:777–786); and Harman (2011:961–966).

8 Zenger (1996:31) makes a strong argument for the unity of this psalm by arguing that the psalm is a prayer of an individual, with “a positively prophetic passion.” This individual wrestles with God in this psalm, due to the suffering this person experienced because of God, who has taken possession of him or her and also from who he or she cannot escape. This is explained in interpreting the psalm from an indicative negative and an imperative positive connotation.

9 Frank-Lothar Hossfeld did the commentary of Ps 139 in this commentary (Hossfeld and Zenger, 2011:534547).

10 Critique against this argument is that there is no specific accusation or declaration of innocence, although v. 24 may allude to an accusation of idolatry or pain (Peels, 2008:41).

for deliverance to God against enemies¹¹, and a rebel who flees from the close attention of YHWH (after the Babylonian exile) (cf. Rice, 1984:30; Brown, 1996:281; Brueggemann and Bellinger, 2015:581–582). It has also been interpreted as a spiritual song, a song of innocence, a prayer, a psalm of confidence, a song of thanksgiving, an individual complaint, a theological meditation and a royal psalm (cf. Peels, 2008:40–43, Maré, 2010:696).¹² Young (1965:110) explains it as a special self-revelation by God of his omnipresence to the psalmist. Gerstenberger (2001:405–406), Peels (2008:42) and Maré (2010:697) are of the opinion that, due to a large number of interpretations, one should rather understand each of the possibilities in terms of the context of a poet who meditates on human destiny before YHWH, making the psalm a meditative confession (cf. Terrien, 2003:879). As mentioned at the beginning of the article, this is due to the “sapiential language and a reflective mood that are the most salient features of most elements” (Gerstenberger, 2001:406; cf. Kraus, 1993:511–513). Maré (2010:697) comes to this conclusion because of his interpretation of the psalm from the perspective of YHWH as creator. This choice of describing the genre and *Sitz im Leben* for Psalm 139 as ritual or individual (representing a group, although the communal “we” is missing from the text) meditative confession after some sort of trial period (juridical process; torment by enemies; or a post-exilic experience, after the return from the Babylonian exile) is followed for this article.

Similar to Psalms 40:1, 68:1 and 109:1, the superscription of Psalm 139:1 also inserts a musical element by adding “David.” The second part of verse 1 starts with the repeating theme of YHWH that examines and knows the one praying the psalm. Hossfeld (Hossfeld and Zenger, 2011:540) attributes this theme to wisdom when he makes the comparison between older psalms (Ps 5:6; 7:10; 11:4–5; 17:3; 26:2) as part of a wisdom articulation about

11 Critique against this argument is that there is no clear life-threatening situation or a prayer for deliverance from any sort of personal distress. The enemies mentioned are also not the psalmist’s enemies but YHWH’s enemies (Peels, 2008:42).

12 Wagner (2007:91) interprets Ps 139 as “an abjuration form for an individual believer. We find three sections (Ps 139:1–6; 7–12; 13–18) declaring the qualities of YHWH, whereas in the last part (vv. 19–24) the praying person separates himself from those inimical to YHWH (vv. 21–22). The implication is that YHWH is the only and true God who demands abjuration from non-believers and true confession.” This is according to Wagner (2007:91), theology that is typical of a post-exilic generation.

God who examines and knows the innermost being of humans, which is the truth of a person's thoughts, feelings and will.¹³ The verb יָדַע plays an important part in the psalm, as the root of this verb covers a whole range of meanings, from simple recognition to an intimate sexual relationship. This is to know someone inside and out, every detail of that person (deClaissé-Walford *et al*, 2014:964). Where scholars differ on this knowledge of God about the psalmist, is whether this thought is comforting to the psalmist (cf. deClaissé-Walford *et al*, 2014:964) or a cause of anxiety and discomfort (cf. Hossfeld and Zenger, 2011:540).

Verses 2–3 continue by referring to God's knowledge about the psalmist when the fundamental actions of the person "shifting from external to internal attitudes and behaviour" are indicated in four parallel structured clauses (Hossfeld and Zenger, 2011:540). The external actions are described in two spatial merisms. The first merism describes actions of immobility: sitting and lying down. The second, contrasting to the first, is a merism of movement: standing and walking (cf. Deut 6:7//11:10; Ps 1:1; 127:2). The internal attitudes are described in the intentions (or will, v.2) of the psalmist and the moral way (or behaviour, v.3) in which he tried to live. The actions describing YHWH's examination are those from afar: knowing (יָדַע); discerning (בִּיַן); measuring (זָרַה); and dealing carefully (סָכַן) (Hossfeld and Zenger, 2011:540).

The notion of YHWH's presence is strengthened in verse 4. Again the theme of knowledge is evident when the petitioner's thoughts cannot even be formulated in terms of words, as YHWH already knows what he thinks and is about to say. The "word on the tongue" only appears elsewhere in 2 Samuel 23:2, when it is connected to David's last words. The thought according to Goldingay (2008:630) is that there is an invisible presence around the psalmist, in front of him and at the back of him, that has access to everything he does, thinks or says, even before he does it. Verse 5 describes this as if it is something that binds the psalmist, protecting him or restricting him. Hossfeld (Hossfeld and Zenger, 2011:540) explains that in verse 5, on a horizontal level, YHWH has hemmed in the psalmist, in

13 Cf. Wisdom literature such as Job 13:9 and Jer 12:3 and 17:10.

front and from behind; and also from a vertical point of view, YHWH has placed his hand on top of the psalmist.

According to Booij (2005:3), דעת in verse 6 is assumed by many scholars to refer to YHWH's knowledge of the one praying. Booij argues that the preceding verse is the key to understanding the context for דעת and that it is not about YHWH's knowledge but about the nearness or the amazement of the petitioner that this knowledge of God is too much for him to understand. He explains this in terms of יכל, which is assumed to mean "be able to reach" or "understand." Booij argues that יכל with the non-infinitive (pronominal suffix) לֹא־ means "prevail against, overcome" (cf. Gen 32:26; Num 8:30; Judg 16:5). It would make little sense for the speaker to say that he is "no match" for YHWH's knowledge. דעת must mean understanding in verse 6 (cf. Job 34:35). According to Booij (2005:3) what "the speaker intends to say is that it is too much for him to understand God's being so near and knowing him so well; it is too difficult for him, unreachably 'high', beyond his power." Hossfeld (Hossfeld and Zenger, 2011:540) develops this interpretation by adding that the petitioner in verse 6 is "irritated because that knowledge is puzzling and hard to bear." He makes this conclusion based on verse 5 and also on parallel formulations such as those in Psalm 101:5, Job 31:23 and 42:2–3. It is for this reason that he identifies verses 1–6 with the heading "Exposed to YHWH's knowledge" and not, as many scholars do, with "YHWH's omniscience."

Verses 7–12 describe the omnipresence of God, according to many scholars as indicated above. Bailey (1984:25) describes Psalm 139 in this context as a psalm that indicates the presence of God. According to Bailey, the psalmist experienced the immediate presence of God, and it must have thrilled the psalmist to know that God was with him in his pilgrimage through evil forces.¹⁴ This interpretation seems unlikely when one considers that the psalmist is fleeing from God's presence in verses 7–12. It is rather a case of overwhelming anxiety as Rice (1981:64) describes it:

God's knowledge, moreover, is not casual or indifferent. It is searching, penetrating, disturbing. It lays bare the innermost core of his being. To the evident surprise of the Psalmist, God is not only

14 Cf. Rehwaldt (1956:778–780), who has the same argument.

near; he is uncomfortably near. God is before him and behind him; he feels surrounded as if by a besieging army; he feels the constraint of God's hand upon him. Such a God is disturbing, disquieting, unsettling. He threatens our self-sufficiency. He does not confirm us as we are. He upsets the compromises we have made with ourselves and the world. Like most of us, the Psalmist yearned to know God. Obviously, he had not expected such a God as this. One may discern in the shadow of his surprise that the God he yearned to know was a projection of his own wishes and values, the champion of his cause. The encounter with the One who is truly divine is too much for the Psalmist. It requires a revolution in his life he feels he cannot make.

In verses 7–12 the petitioner is describing all the realms of creation where the psalmist tries to hide from the presence of YHWH but fails to do so. In verses 13–18 the petitioner evaluates his own creation by YHWH. The imagery used to describe his creation is that of a body that is created in totality from the innermost being to the outward being of a person, therefore the imagery of the kidneys. According to Hossfeld (Hossfeld and Zenger, 2011:541), the creator is weaving “as the weaver effects an artistic texture with the shuttle (cf. Job 10:11; Prov 8:23).” As with Psalm 22:10 and Jeremiah 1:5, this psalm implies the existence of the total being already in the womb of the mother (cf. Banks, 2012:15–16). In verse 6 the knowledge of YHWH annoyed the petitioner to the point that he is depicted as fleeing in the following verses. In verse 14 thanks is given to YHWH as the creation of the petitioner is now part of the works of YHWH: works that are mostly understood as the actions and works of YHWH in history in previous psalms (cf. Ps 45:5; 65:6; 106:22). Now the action is focused on the created being.

The previous verses were concerned with God's knowledge about human beings and their creation process (spatial context). The imagery in verse 16 continues with God's knowledge about human beings but now focuses on their beginning in time. The imagery that is used is that of the embryo (Hossfeld and Zenger, 2011:542). According to Hossfeld (Hossfeld and Zenger, 2011:542), verses 17–18 are a statement by the petitioner in which he/she summarises how amazed and astonished he/she is about God. This is achieved by the rhetorical “how” question that is accompanied by a vocative. The thoughts and purposes of God are praised (cf. v. 14;

also Ps 36:8; 40:6; 104:24 – evaluation of God’s love). Verse 18 continues with imagery of abundance, with the comparison to the grains of sand that is a popular image in the Old Testament (cf. Gen 22:17; 28:14; 32:13). The “I awake” of the second part of verse 18 is problematic in terms of interpretation. Hossfeld (Hossfeld and Zenger, 2011:543) attempts to explain the problem by saying that it may be alluding to the awakening “of memory of the divine searching and the motif of the petitioner’s being tested by God at the psalm’s beginning. It is then an experience of God through the petitioner’s knowledge, which perceives God’s presence.” The verse ends with a reference to the knowledge of being in community with God – “I am still with you” (v. 18). It is this community with God that becomes the link to the next verses when this fragile community (cf. Ps 3 and 17 in reference to this fragile relationship) is put in danger because of enemies, and even more so if the petitioner does not follow the right way but follows the enemies’ cause (Hossfeld and Zenger, 2011:543).

This idea forms the link to verses 19–24¹⁵ when this fragile community is placed in danger because of the presence of enemies and more so if the petitioner does not follow the right path (Torah) but follows the cause or path of the enemies. According to Hossfeld (Hossfeld and Zenger, 2011:543), in verse 19 the petitioner then draws certain consequences from his/her purpose to stand in community with YHWH, and to protect it. The first action is a prayer to YHWH for intervention. This intervention refers

15 Vv. 19–24 are traditionally the section that causes the most problems for finding unity in Ps 139. It is therefore not strange that there are multiple interpretations for these verses. The theme of YHWH’s justice and order as the broader background in the book of Psalms and the Old Testament to understand vv. 19–21 is also stated by Brueggemann and Bellinger (2015:584) when they say that: “The psalm articulates a kind of tension in that the speaker knows a lot, but the central confession of the text is that YHWH knows the speaker completely. The poem confesses a lot about YHWH and about the enemies, and the speaker stands confidently before YHWH as creator and judge of all the earth.” Another key factor is that of the “hatred”. Eric Peels (2008:38) argues that hatred is not understood correctly by most scholars who interpret it as a negative sentimental emotion. Rather he explains that it should be understood in a broader sense as “neglect, rejection or personal preference to a nasty aversion and animosity”. According to Ballhorn (2004:270), Ps 139 stands out from the remaining Psalms of the group (Ps 140–144) with their confrontational terminology in terms of the poor. Nevertheless there is a moment of coherence. The main reason for the insertion into the last Davidic compilation lies in the final part (vv. 19–24) because therein, according to Ballhorn (2004:270), the situation of the hostility of the one praying is addressed anew.

to the destruction of the newly introduced enemies in the psalm that stand against the petitioner and YHWH (cf. Job 13:15; 24:14; Jer 12:1–3), and who threaten this fragile community between YHWH and the petitioner. No description is presented in verse 19 as to why the enemies and YHWH are in conflict, but they are called “men of blood”, thus implying that they are people with blood on their hands, perpetrators of violence or murder (cf. Ps 5:7; 26:9; 55:24; 59:3) (Hossfeld and Zenger, 2011:544).

Verse 19 becomes a petition to be separated from the evil enemies that are described further in verse 20 as those who speak of God with evil intent, and those who have cast down YHWH’s cities. The casting down of cities could be brought into comparison with the destruction of the Babylonian exile (cf. Ps 107:4, 36; 120–137); this may be seen as the reason why the enemies want to shame YHWH by speaking maliciously and trying to portray YHWH as powerless. Therefore, there is a destructive relationship between YHWH and the enemies. To keep this fragile community between YHWH and the petitioner intact, it is of the utmost importance not to be associated with the enemies. Therefore, verse 21 expresses this separation between the enemies and the petitioner by means of a rhetorical question that describes how the petitioner “loathes” the enemies (cf. Ps 95:10; 119:158). Verse 22 confirms the break with the enemies and emphasises that they are the enemies of the petitioner (cf. Neh 3:21; Job 11:7; 26:10; 28:3).

The last two verses (vv. 23–24) recall the first six verses that refer to experiencing the searching and testing. This is done in verses 23–24 by six petitions that describe the main concern of the petitioner not to go astray of the path or way of YHWH. The heart is used as a metaphor to describe verse 23, that YHWH must search the innermost being of the petitioner. There are two criteria that are used to achieve this task. The first is the “way of the idol,” that is a “proclamation of judgment on those who serve images and worship that is worthless” (Hossfeld and Zenger, 2011:545). Idol worship (עֲצָבָה) is not permitted (cf. Ps 97:7; 106:36, 38; 115:4; 135:15). The second is the “everlasting way” or the “enduring way” that is the moral path of Israel’s laws, probably referring to the Torah. It must be the right path to follow, the path of guidance (and righteousness – cf. Ps 1; 5:9; 27:11; Jer 6:16; 18:15) (Hossfeld and Zenger, 2011:545).

According to Keel (1978:184), the function of being tested is different in Psalm 139 because the one praying the psalm is not asking to be tested as if to be purified. Rather the petitioner asks of YHWH “to search him out (hqr) and – as a result of this process – to come to know him (v. 23; cf. v. 1).”¹⁶ The purpose for the one praying is a future hope where YHWH, knowing the innermost being of the person, will declare the petitioner’s innocence and “will lead him into a bright future (vv. 23–24).”

Knierim (1995:307) makes the point in reference to Psalm 139:23–24 that:

In this kind of self-awareness, about the difference of YHWH’s spirit and the spirit of the one praying the Psalm, because of their knowledge about God. They confess their sin and pray for guidance, for a clean heart and mind, for wisdom, for revelation and for God’s spirit. They are waiting and hoping for God. It is an awareness that YHWH proves, searches and tests their minds and hearts.

According to Janowski (2013:11), these texts show that:

The inner-most human being the heart and other organs such as the liver, kidneys and flesh are complementary aspects of a psychosomatic unity. Thus the essence of human beings manifests itself in their actions; what a human being is, expresses itself in what that human does. Human emotions are therefore an expression of the internal world of the soul, but also the medium through which human beings communicate with the world outside.

When one reads in Psalm 139:1 about the testing or the searching of the heart, the innermost being of a person, and the further description in

16 Keel (1978:184–185) makes an important observation when he states that: “Ideas of haruspicy may underlie this statement (and perhaps also Ps 7:9b). “Haruspicy was highly developed in Babylon as early as the eighteenth century B.C.” The discoveries of an inscribed model liver in Temple II (208) at Hazor and of another, uninscribed exemplar in Stratum VII at Megiddo demonstrate that haruspicy was known in Palestine no later than the fifteenth century B.C. (cf. also Ezek 21:21). The liver was regarded as the seat of feeling; therefore it was considered to be an appropriate mirror of future conditions. Furthermore, the livers of sacrificial lambs exhibited such diversity in structure that a multitude of opportunities for divination arose. The liver was believed to be a microcosm of the entire body. Indeed the whole environment was embodied in and assigned to portions of the liver. Not only was every possible part of the body included (‘finger,’ ‘mouth,’ ‘genitals’); so were remoter entities, such as ‘road,’ ‘station,’ ‘palace,’ and ‘throne.’” (Keel 1978:184–185).

verses 23–24 in the context of the everlasting way, the enduring way, the moral path of Israel’s laws and the Torah, then the text could constitute a new anthropological concept for Israel as described by Janowski (2013:159) when he reads Jeremiah 31:31–34 where YHWH will inscribe his Torah on the hearts of the covenant people. Janowski (2013:159) states:

As the place of emotion, recognition, and desire, Israel’s heart will henceforth be occupied by the Torah, so that the person living under the new covenant cannot do else but live according to one’s own good, that is according to the Torah. We can then summarise that the expression לב / לֵב, “heart” functions as a designation for all layers of the human person: the vegetative, the emotional, the noetic, and the volutative layer. The word captures the multiple layers of the biblical structure of the human person like no other anthropological term.

5. The intertextual importance or relevance of Psalm 139:1 and 23 on “when God searches our hearts” for Romans 8:27

Romans 8:27 is part of the passage Romans 8:18–30, where Paul focuses on the consequences and importance of a life that is lived and orientated towards Jesus Christ and “experientially” in the Holy Spirit. The thematic structure of the passage can be summarised according to Longenecker (2016:717), firstly as Romans 18–21, which places the focus on the current suffering and future glory of the Christians, in parallel with the current frustration and “future freedom of the creation.” The theme in the second unit, Romans 8:22–25, is the hope given by God to those who believe in Christ and who also have the “first fruits of the Spirit” and the hope that has been provided to creation. The theme of the third part, Romans 8:26–27, is the help and intercession provided by the Spirit in the prayers of Christians. The theme of the fourth part, Romans 8:28–30, is the assurance provided by Jesus Christ to those who believe, love and are called for His purpose that God “works all things together for good.”

In Romans 8:27 Paul describes how the Holy Spirit helps Christians to know what they must pray for. The second function of the Spirit in this text is the intercession on behalf of those praying before God. This intercession is possible because God knows the mind of the Spirit. The interceding that

takes place by the Spirit is in accordance with the will of God. The result of this is that the prayers translated by the Spirit do not lose anything of their content, from the “praying words of the Christians to the groans of the Spirit or from the Spirit’s groans before God to God’s gracious response to the Spirit’s prayers on behalf of a Christian” Longenecker (2016:734–735). It is due to this interaction that the searching of the heart plays such an important part.

According to Udo Schnelle (1996:102–104),¹⁷ Paul’s references to the heart, the innermost being, are found in different contexts in his Letter to the Romans. The heart can be unwise and darkened (Rom. 1:21; 2:5), and it can be the source of lusts (Rom 1:24; 2:5). The heart also knows the will of God (Rom. 2:15). For Paul “human beings stand in a new, salvation-bringing dependency relationship: they serve God and thus righteousness. There is a circumcision of the heart that is accomplished in the Spirit and not in the letter (Rom. 2:29).” Furthermore, Paul sees the heart as the place where the love of God is poured into the hearts of humans by the Holy Spirit (Rom 5:5). When one is baptised, it leads to obedience from the heart (Rom 6:17). When it comes to the subject of the “one that searches our hearts”, what Paul has in mind is described by Schnelle (1996:102–104) as follows:

God tests and probes the heart (Rom 8:27; 1 Thess 2:4) and makes the leanings of the heart apparent (2 Cor 4:5). The heart is the seat of feelings and emotions, the place of anguish (2 Cor 2:4), of love (2 Cor 7:3), of openness (2 Cor 6:11), and of sincere desire (Rom 9:2; 10:1).

Schnelle’s description describes especially the noetic function of the heart in the emotions experienced. This description relates to that of Dunn (1988:493) when he describes this function of the heart when it is being searched (in Rom 8:27) as:

The assurance Paul feels able to give is that God, who looks beyond outward appearance and mere words, recognises full well what the inarticulate groans signify – namely, that basic orientation to and dependence on God which still looks to God even when it has nothing to say. He knows what is the mind-set of the Spirit.

17 For a complete overview of Paul’s understanding of the heart, cf. the work of Udo Schnelle (1996:102–104).

The intercession of the Spirit becomes a comfort for Paul. The searching of the heart takes on a pastoral role and function. That searching is experienced positively, as a form of comfort in contrast to the initial experience of the one praying Psalm 139, who experienced distress and anxiety. While fragility was experienced in Psalm 139, stability or strength is experienced in Romans 8:27–28.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, within Psalm 139 the theme of “the one that searches the heart” highlights the vegetative, emotional, noetic, and voluntative functions of the heart. Verse 1 is an emotional outcry by the psalmist of one who feels that this encounter with the One who is truly divine is too much and that it requires a revolution in his life he feels he cannot make. It is almost suffocating; even at the end of the psalm, in verse 23, the community between the one praying and YHWH is fragile and easily threatened by enemies, hence the request to search the heart so as to keep him on the right path (the Torah) instead of the path of the enemies. The experience and emotion of the one praying the Psalm are thus mainly negative; even at the end of the psalm.

In Romans 8:27 the vegetative, emotional, noetic, and voluntative functions of the heart are retained, but in the light of the emotional outcry within the groanings that are found in Romans 8:18–30, the outcry becomes that of comfort rather than distress as it is for the one praying Psalm 139:1 and 24. As Dunn (1988:479) describes it “Paul assumes an openness and honesty before God expressed in this fumbling and confusion which has not tried to cloak or conceal itself either in strict silence or in idle words, but has confessed its dependence on God in this humbling wordless groaning.”

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