

Psalm 139: A Study in Ambiguity

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ABSTRACT

The interpretation of Ps 139 remains a deeply contested matter. In particular, the psalm's genre and integrity continue to be debated, with the key issues related to the place of vv. 19-22. Do these verses constitute the key to interpretation, or are they a later interpolation? If they are an interpolation, can we trace the psalm's development back through the material in vv. 1-18 (possibly with some minor expansions), so that vv. 23-24 are seen as a unit displaced from the introduction? Conversely, if vv. 19-22 are original, how do we account for marked change of tone present so that instead of the seemingly bucolic reflections found in vv. 1-18 the text then shifts to an imprecation against the wicked? This paper proposes a unified reading of the psalm which uses ambiguity as a central technique for developing different experiences for those who pray this psalm within the subgroup of the prayers of the accused. It will be argued that ambiguity is an intentional compositional strategy within the psalm, with the effect of the ambiguity different for those who read the poem from the perspective of innocence as opposed to the experience of those who read from the perspective of guilt.

KEYWORDS: Psalm 139, ambiguity, Psalm 139:19-22; prayers of the accused; perspective of innocence; perspective of guilt.

A INTRODUCTION

The interpretation of Ps 139 remains a deeply contested matter.¹ In particular, the psalm's genre and integrity continue to be debated,² with the key issues

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¹ Erhard S. Gerstenberger, *Psalms, Part 2, and Lamentations* (FOTL 15; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2001), 405, observes that this is "one of the most intensely studied poems in the Psalter. The discussion about its genre classification has been going on for a long time with no end in sight."

² Helpfully summarised in Frank Lothar Hossfeld and Eric Zenger, *Psalms 3: A Commentary on Psalms 101-150* (Hermeneia; trans. Linda M. Maloney, Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2011), 537-538 and Allen P. Ross, *A Commentary on the Psalms: Volume 3 (Psalms 90-150)*, (KEL; Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic, 2016), 815-816. Curiously, Samuel Terrien, *The Psalms: Strophic Structure and Theological Commentary* (ECC; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2003), 816, is content to note that

related to the place of vv. 19-22. Do these verses constitute the key to interpretation, or are they a later interpolation? If they are an interpolation, can we trace the psalm's development back through the material in vv. 1-18 (possibly with some minor expansions), so that vv. 23-24 are seen as a unit displaced from the introduction? Conversely, if vv. 19-22 are original, how do we account for marked change of tone present so that instead of the seemingly bucolic reflections found in vv. 1-18 the text then shifts to an imprecation against the wicked? Although Harmon has proposed that this is because the psalm models a proper approach to prayer, with vv. 1-18 providing the "theology proper" against which honest prayer is to be offered in vv. 19-22,³ it seems reductionist to read the psalm only in terms of how it teaches believers to pray. This is not to deny that one of the functions of the collection of the book of Psalms is to provide a model of what it means to pray,⁴ but to focus on this element to the exclusion of other interpretative elements for any given psalm means not attending to the particular contribution that it makes. Rather, this paper will propose a unified reading of the psalm which uses ambiguity as a central technique for developing different experiences for those who pray this psalm within the subgroup of the prayers of the accused.

B GENRE

Focusing for the moment on the issue of genre (as it allows us to address the major issues of debate), there exists a basic division between those who see Ps 139 as a praise poem of some sort and those who treat it as a complaint. Gunkel, for example, classified it among the hymns of the individual, one which allowed a profound reflection on the nature of the relationship between God and the individual,⁵ albeit one which allowed for more to be said.⁶ Indeed, given the depth of its language, and expressly disagreeing with Mowinckel, Gunkel believed that its language of devotion, it "can surely only be conceived as the

the form and genre of the psalm is 'exceptional' but then adds nothing by way of explanation, though he later (p. 880) refers to it as a 'strange prayer of praise.'

³ Steven R. Harmon, "Theology Proper and the Proper Way to Pray: An Exposition of Psalm 139," *RevExp* 104 (2007): 779-784.

⁴ See Howard Neil Wallace, *Words to God, Word from God: The Psalms in the Prayer and Preaching of the Church* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005), 103-134, though Wallace's own treatment of the psalm (pages 180-186) is not dissimilar to Harmon.

⁵ Hermann Gunkel (completed by Joachim Begrich), *Introduction to Psalms: The Genres of the Religious Lyric of Israel* (trans. James D. Nogalski, Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1998), 46. Tying it to creation, Rolf A. Jacobson, "'The Faithfulness of the Lord Endures Forever': The Theological Witness of the Psalter," in *Soundings in the Theology of the Psalms: Perspectives and Methods in Contemporary Scholarship* (ed. Rolf A. Jacobson, Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2011), 111-138 (118) seems also to identify the psalm as hymnic.

⁶ Gunkel, *Introduction*, 40.

outpouring of an individual praying alone."⁷ Bellinger is less specific, considering it to be a "general hymn",⁸ though one which he believes may have been linked to the prayers of the accused.

In spite of Gunkel's importance for the history of interpretation, treating the psalm as a hymn faces significant challenges. This is because it is clear that vv. 1-18 largely describe the psalmist's previous experience of Yahweh. That is, these verses predominantly represent a narrative that reports what Yahweh has done. This is evident from the use of the *qatal* for קָרַר with which the psalm opens, with the subsequent verbs focused on what has previously happened. Within the first stanza (vv. 1-6)⁹ all the verbs are *qatal* except for וַתִּדַע (v. 1) and וַתִּשָּׂא (v. 5), both of which are a converted *yiqtol* that is closely tied to the preceding *qatal* and likewise refers to a previous event.¹⁰ Although this pattern is not followed in the second stanza (vv. 7-12), this is because it is largely focused on hypothetical events. The third stanza (vv. 13-18) is, like the first, also focused on narrating the past, even if it is a little more flexible in its verb forms. Reporting the past is more typical of the thanksgivings, a psalm genre which usually includes some report of Yahweh's previous action.¹¹ These elements have seen a number of recent scholars prefer to describe the psalm as a thanksgiving.¹²

⁷ Gunkel, *Introduction*, 40-41.

⁸ William H. Bellinger Jr., *Psalms: A Guide to Studying the Psalter* (2nd ed.; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2012), 91, cf. Walter Brueggemann and William H. Bellinger Jr., *Psalms* (NCBC; Cambridge: University Press, 2014), 582.

⁹ As with other matters, the structure of the psalm is much debated, and the commonly used four stanza structure (e.g. Gene Rice, "Psalm 139: A Diary of the Inward Odyssey," *JRT* 37 (1980): 63-67, or Andreas Wagner, "Permutatio Religionis – Ps. CXXXIX und der Wandel der Israelitischen Religion zur Bekenntnisreligion," *VT* 57 (2007): 91-113) is adopted here for convenience rather than out of conviction. It would, following David G. Firth, *Surrendering Retribution in the Psalms: Responses to Violence in the Individual Complaints* (PBM; Milton Keynes: Paternoster, 2005), 45-46, be better to treat the psalm as having two stanzas – the "doxological" (if so be it!) material of vv. 1-18 and the plea in vv. 19-24, thus representing two stanzas, each of which can be further divided into strophes as this properly acknowledges the caesura that exists after verse 18. But as this does not affect the argument here, and the fourfold structure is widely used, so this makes it easier to interact with other scholarly works. On the general complexity, see Jan Holman, "The Structure of Psalm CXXXIX," *VT* 21 (1971): 298-310.

¹⁰ Indeed, the presence of these converted verbs is a pointer to the fact that the *qatal* verbs are to be understood as narrating events from the past.

¹¹ Bellinger, *Psalms*, 80-82.

¹² So, Nancy deClaisse-Walford, Rolf A. Jacobson and Beth LaNeel Tanner, *The Book of Psalms* (NICOT; Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2014), 962.

But regarding the psalm as a thanksgiving is also problematic, not least because a characteristic of these psalms is that the report of the past points to a crisis of some sort which Yahweh has resolved, and no such crisis is reported here. That is, the past that is reported here does not point to a moment of crisis, but rather to acts which were characteristic of the psalmist's previous experience of Yahweh. Although narratives of the past are not particularly characteristic of them, this is not inconsistent with the psalms of trust.¹³ Reading the psalm within this genre may also draw on various elements from wisdom literature, particularly Job,¹⁴ since drawing on these traditions provides a mechanism for understanding why Yahweh is to be trusted. Of course, any one psalm may work to extend generic boundaries and in the process create a new genre, and one could simply gather the suggestions considered so far under the general heading of 'praise' and leave the discussion there on the basis that poets are not compelled to work with the categories scholars have noted, especially because these categories are descriptive of how poems might work, not necessarily prescriptive of what a poet needs to do.¹⁵

Yet even the more general classification of "praise" can also be understood as problematic, most obviously because it places considerable weight on vv. 1-18, but then struggles with vv. 19-24. Unsurprisingly, those who have regarded the psalm as a lament have placed more weight on the closing stanza, not least because it is not until these verses that we reach the actual point of appeal.¹⁶ Even so, the appeal proper is held back until vv. 23-24, where the verbs turn from narrative to imperative, asking Yahweh to act by searching out the psalmist, creating a link back to verse 1. A prayer which concludes by asking Yahweh to act suggests that it is spoken from within an unresolved crisis, and this is more typical of the complaint psalms.¹⁷ If the interpretative focus is placed upon the conclusion, then reading the psalm as a complaint, and specifically one which is tied to the prayers of the accused, makes more sense of the psalm.¹⁸ This approach has the incidental benefit of providing a reading which integrates vv. 19-22 within the poem. Although this model can be traced back to the work of H. H. Schmidt, credit should be given to Würthwein for demonstrating the

¹³ So, John Goldingay, *Psalms: Volume 3 (Psalms 90-150)* (BCOTW; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2008), 626.

¹⁴ See Helen Schüngel-Straumann, "Zur Gattung und Theologie des 139. Psalms," *BZ* 17 (1973): 39-51. She is careful to stress that the presence of didactic elements does not mean the poem needs to be removed from the cult.

¹⁵ Cf. James Hely Hutchinson, "The Psalms and Praise," in *Interpreting the Psalms: Issues and Approaches* (ed. Philip S. Johnston and David G. Firth; Leicester: Apollos, 2005), 85-100 (93-95).

¹⁶ Firth, *Surrendering Retribution*, 43-45.

¹⁷ Cf. Ernst Würthwein, "Erwägungen zu Psalm CXXXIX," *VT* 7 (1957): 171.

¹⁸ Cf. Claus Westermann, *The Living Psalms* (Edinburgh: T&T Clark, 1989), 267.

fruitfulness of this approach,¹⁹ since Schmid was not consistent in his approach to the psalm. The virtue of this approach is that it takes seriously the prayer itself in pointing to the psalm's genre, but in comparison with the other complaints it should be noted that the psalm does not specify a particular problem from which deliverance is sought.²⁰ A more general classification of "prayer" is thus conceivable, though as with the label "praise" it suffers from a lack of specificity – but perhaps this is something to celebrate since it is the mixture of praise and prayer which makes this psalm so interesting. But if it is a prayer, the request for the psalmist to be searched by Yahweh makes most sense within the framework of the prayers of the accused.²¹

C CONTEXT IN THE PSALTER AS A POINTER TO AMBIGUITY

Within the last book of David (Pss 138-145) it can reasonably be argued that this psalm prepares for Ps 140, the closing appeal guiding the one who prays onto the everlasting way of God's direction as they then encounter enemies from whom deliverance is needed.²² This element of reception may indicate that the compilers of the Psalter saw it as a bridging text, one which moved from the thanksgiving which dominates Ps 138²³ to the appeals for deliverance found in Ps 140. Particularly noteworthy in this respect is that Ps 140 is a prayer for protection from the wicked (Ps 140:5),²⁴ and a central element of their threat is malicious speech. If Ps 139 does arise from the prayers of the accused, if in a less specific manner than in other prayers in this group (e.g. Pss 7; 17),²⁵ then the plea with which it ends prepares for the more particular request for protection in

¹⁹ Würthwein, "Erwägungen." I am dependent on Leslie C. Allen, "Faith on Trial: An Analysis of Psalm 139," *VE* 10 (1977): 8-9, for the summary of Schmid at this point as I have not been able to access his books.

²⁰ Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 60-150: A Commentary* (CC; trans. Hilton C. Oswald; Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Fortress, 1989), 512, argues on the basis of the עָשָׂה mentioned in v. 19 that the poet is beset by enemies, but this is not actually claimed by the text.

²¹ John H. Eaton, *Kingship and the Psalms* (London: SCM Press, 1975), 83-84, identifies the psalmist as a king under attack. In this he is followed by Steven J. L. Croft, *The Identity of the Individual in the Psalms* (LHBOTS 44; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1987), 46, and Aran J. E. Persaud, *Praying the Language of Enmity in the Psalter: A Study of Psalms 110, 119, 129, 137, 139 and 149* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2016), 135-136. But since there is no clear evidence within the psalm that the enemies are national figures, this is not a persuasive reading of the psalm.

²² See Christoph Buysch, *Der letzte Davidpsalter: Interpretation, Komposition und Funktion der Psalmengruppe Ps 138-145* (SBB 63; Stuttgart: Katholisches Bibelwerk, 2009), 155.

²³ Buysch, *Der letzte Davidpsalter*, 24, argues that the elements of thanksgiving are not all present. However, the opening אֲתָנָח is still indicative of thanksgiving.

²⁴ As with Ps 139:19, עָשָׂה is used here.

²⁵ See Firth, *Surrendering Retribution*, 20-36.

the following psalm since anyone who was falsely accused could well see themselves as a victim of slander.

The placement of the psalm thus suggests that the compilers of the Psalter saw Ps 139 as a mixed form, but rather than this being a problem, it allowed for its creative deployment within the final Davidic collection. Although this is a helpful element within the psalm's reception, one which supports the conclusion that the psalm's form is mixed and yet ultimately focused on the vindication of the accused, it does not resolve the question of how the psalm's components relate to one another. After all, would anyone who prayed Ps 139 knowing that they were in fact guilty of some charge be comfortable in praying Ps 140, or indeed the other prayers which follow in Pss 141-143? The final shape of the Psalter seems, therefore, to assume that those who work through the final Davidic collection do so on the basis of innocence,²⁶ as someone vindicated by Yahweh's searching of them. But this is not the only possible experience, and Ps 139 needs to allow for both the innocent and the guilty to pray it.

If Ps 139 needs to allow for both the guilty and the innocent to use it as a prayer text, then this suggests that both the doxological material and the plea need to be equally appropriate for both. This means that there has to be an element of ambiguity that runs through the psalm as a whole. Some awareness of this possibility has been noted in recent scholarship, with both Goldingay²⁷ and Buysch²⁸ pointing to the fact that the presence of God which is stressed in vv. 1-18 would be positive for some, and negative for others. This is an important development in the psalm's interpretation, but it represents a reading of the psalm as a whole more than of its constituent parts. The goal of this paper is thus to take seriously the mixed form of the psalm as a key element within its rhetorical goals as a text complete within itself (a form which is affirmed by its canonical placement), and to explore the ways in which it functions as a prayer which is equally formative for both the innocent and the guilty, so that for the innocent it is indeed doxological affirmation whereas for the guilty it generates a growing level of threat. It is the careful deployment of ambiguity within the psalm, especially vv. 1-18, which enables this.

²⁶ Within the prayers of the accused (whether or not one judges there was a formal institution) the innocence affirmed is relative to a particular charge, not a general statement. See Gert Kwakkel, *'According to My Righteousness': Upright Behaviour as Grounds for Deliverance in Psalms 7, 17, 18, 26 and 44* (OTS 46; Leiden: Brill, 2002), 294-295.

²⁷ Goldingay, *Psalms* 3, 639-640.

²⁸ Buysch, *Der letzte Davidpsalter*, 76-77.

D THE NATURE OF AMBIGUITY

Although ambiguity is now a frequently observed element in biblical texts, an understanding of the concept is not always provided.²⁹ A failure to define ambiguity does not result in ambiguity becoming an ambiguous concept, merely a vague one. "Vagueness" can be understood as a point in a text which does not provide sufficient clarity for interpretation.³⁰ This might be because of something ambiguous in the text which was not recognised in the process of composition (including redaction), and so may simply represent a failure to explain key concepts. That is, vagueness occurs when language is insufficiently defined, and this has no rhetorical significance. But, following William Empson, we may define ambiguity as "any verbal nuance, however slight, which gives room for alternative reactions to the same piece of language."³¹ Ambiguity is language use which creates space for different responses to it,³² and the creation of this is thus rhetorically significant. Empson's famous typology of ambiguity allows for seven types of ambiguity, but if we regard ambiguity as that which is rhetorically significant for a text, then his fifth and seventh types (in which an author only realises the possibility of the ambiguity part way through the composition or where there is an actual contradiction) need to be regarded as vagueness rather than ambiguity.³³ A further problem with these two types is that they require critics to determine the thought process of the authors, something that is surely impossible. However, Empson's other five categories are all potentially useful as they point to the different ways in which ambiguity can be deployed, provided we recognise that the evidence for ambiguity being rhetorically significant is built up by noting a range of evidence that suggests this. For example, there might be points where a text returns to the ambiguity, has multiple occurrences of it, or where the meaning can only be discerned because of the ambiguity.

Drawing on Empson's model, and seeing it as descriptive of modes of ambiguity rather than prescriptive of what might occur in a particular text, we can reasonably suggest that three of his remaining types occur in Ps 139:

²⁹ For example, Nissim Amzallag and Shamir Yona, "The Significance of the Rhetorical Ambiguity in Isaiah 54:16," *OTE* 31 (2018): 323-338 take ambiguity as a key concept for their paper, but do not offer a definition of it.

³⁰ This can also be distinguished from the ambivalence proposed by Walter Harrelson, "On God's Knowledge of the Self – Psalm 139," *CurTM* 2 (1975): 261-265.

³¹ William Empson, *Seven Types of Ambiguity* (3rd ed.; Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1960), 1.

³² In speech-act terms, this represents the distinction between illocution and perlocution.

³³ See David G. Firth, "Ambiguity," in *Words and the Word: Explorations in Biblical Interpretation and Literary Theory* (ed. David G. Firth and Jamie A. Grant, Nottingham: Apollos, 2008), 151-186 (158-159).

1. Details effective in multiple ways. This is perhaps the most commonly understood model of ambiguity where a text leaves open multiple senses for a word or sentence, as for example in Song of Songs 2:12 where *הַזְמִיר* needs to mean both 'pruning' and 'singing.'
2. Simultaneous use of unconnected meanings. This is a rarer form of ambiguity than the first and needs to be differentiated from it in that in the first type some resolution is provided, even if that is only temporary (especially in *Janus* parallelism), whereas in this mode no resolution is provided.
3. Alternative meanings combine to clarify author's intention.³⁴ In this model, it is the means by which the different elements are ultimately merged that is crucial.³⁵

These elements can be explored through important verbal nuances within the psalm. This will involve a close reading of certain elements, because although the ambiguity of certain elements within the psalm, notably the nearness of Yahweh as either a positive or negative experience has been noted previously,³⁶ the mechanism by which this has been developed and the modes of ambiguity used have not (as far as I am aware) been examined.³⁷ However, as will be argued, because this psalm is structured to create a different experience for the innocent and the guilty, the text itself does not close off the particular modes of ambiguity that are experienced. Rather, different readers who pray this psalm are led to develop its themes differently depending on whether their starting assumption is one of innocence or guilt.

E EXAMPLES OF VERBAL AMBIGUITY IN PSALM 139

Although there are elements in the psalm's title which are potentially ambiguous (though for modern readers "vague" might be a more appropriate term), we will concentrate for the balance of the paper on key terms which operate with the modes of ambiguity noted above. For reasons of space, only a few key examples will be examined, but they should be sufficient to demonstrate the central point.

³⁴ Although Empson speaks of the "author's intention" it is better to speak of evidence within the text that points to intended ambiguity. His remaining types, multiple possibilities with a single resolution and apparent contradictions may also be present within the Psalm, but they do not appear to be rhetorically significant.

³⁵ See Firth, "Ambiguity," 159-169, for more on how these modes are used in the Bible.

³⁶ E.g. Artur Weiser, *The Psalms: A Commentary* (OTL; London: SCM Press, 1962), 803; Goldingay, *Psalms 3*, 639-640.

³⁷ Yair Mazor, "When Aesthetics is Harnessed to Psychological Characterization: 'Ars Poetica' in Psalm 139," *ZAW* 109 (1997): 260-271 has done preliminary work in this area, but his focus is on the psychology of the poet, which thus closes off the ambiguity for the reader.

Many nouns and adjectives within the psalm are potentially ambiguous, but in order further to limit the focus of this investigation, only key verbs are examined. It will be noted in each case that, when read from the perspective of the prayers of the accused, the guilt or innocence of the one who prays this psalm leads to a different sense being given to these verbs.

1 The Verb **הָקַר**

The verb with which the psalm opens after the vocative, **הָקַרְתִּי**, is a good example of ambiguity. The issue here revolves around whether Yahweh's having searched out the psalmist is viewed positively or negatively, and the evidence here shows that this is left unresolved within the text. Given the widely recognised associations between this psalm and the book of Job, it is not surprising to note that it provides some of the key evidence for this. As **הָקַר** here is in *qal*, we shall only consider other occurrences of this stem for comparative purposes.

The verb can be used in a general sense of 'seek', as for example in Prov 23:30, where it refers to those who have sought mixed wine. Although such seeking there is clearly presented as folly, this emerges from the larger context and is not inherent in the verb. A similarly neutral sense may be present in Job 32:11 where Elihu outlines his reasons for waiting on the side-lines while Job's other comforters spoke first. Elihu is clearly critical of their failure to find sufficient wisdom, but again this is established by context, not the word itself. The implication here is that their search was substantial, even if unsuccessful. The substantial nature of the searches associated with this verb may be brought out more clearly by noting its use in Job 28:3 where it is used to describe the complexities of mining and the challenges of finding ore. This sense of a detailed search is also present in Job 28:27 where it is applied to God's ability to search out the location of wisdom that is beyond human ability to discover. Although the larger narrative structure of the book will show that Eliphaz is mistaken, his claim in Job 5:27 would also suggest that he at least believed that his search for truth had been a thorough one. Such thoroughness is also suggested in the verb's association with spy the narrative in Jdg 18:2 where a detailed exploration is clearly intended.

Although these uses of the verb can be defined as either positive or neutral, it is also possible to use the verb in a more negative way, so that the searching to which it refers is aimed at demonstrating a flaw of some sort. In Job 29:16, Job claims that he had "searched out" (in the sense of examined) the case of the stranger, in essence assuring himself of the legitimacy of their claim.³⁸ It is not necessary that Job found a fault with these people, merely that he had searched them thoroughly to ensure this was not the case. The threat posed by

³⁸ On this interpretation, cf. Tremper Longman III, *Job* (BCOTWP; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2012), 336-340.

God conducting such a thorough search emerges in Job's rejection of his comforters in Job 13:9. Here, even though the comforters clearly claim to be in the right, Job points out that God's thoroughness in searching them out will reveal faults they had not previously recognised. Similarly, Jer 17:10 has Yahweh declaring that he searches the heart in order to recompense all for their ways. Searching the heart must involve a thorough search since this specifically covers thoughts, but these otherwise hidden things will be exposed, leading to judgment for sin. The associations with Job and Jeremiah come to the fore within the Psalm when the verb *חָקַר* is used to introduce the appeal to God in v. 23, with the request being that God search out the heart, just as Jer 17:10 had indicated.

Is this searching positive or negative? The only other incidence of the verb in the Psalter (Ps 44:22) makes clear that God's searching will discover any worship of other gods. Those who have been loyal to Yahweh, or who can at least claim that they are innocent of a particular charge, may see this verb's report of Yahweh's previous activity and the request with which the appeal begins as positive – that Yahweh would recompense such loyalty. But those who are guilty would not have any such certainty. The reality of Yahweh's previous searching, combined with the appeal for further searching, can only be seen as threatening, as Yahweh demonstrates the flaws in the one who prays.³⁹ In the initial statement, one could argue that the ambiguity is the first type in that both senses are kept open for one who reads the psalm. This is, to some extent, still true by the time we reach the final appeal, but by this point anyone accused can only read this appeal in one way – either as something negative (if guilty) or as something positive (if innocent). The text itself leaves both options open, but a reader (rather than the author as Empson posits it) is forced to read this in only one way, thus clarifying the reader's experience even if the text itself remains open. If Yahweh has searched and known, then asking God to search and know (and in particular to know the heart) is not an appeal that will always be experienced in the same way.

2 The Verb *זָרָה*

In v. 3, the psalmist says *אֶחְקֶי וְרַבְעֵי וְרִיתָ*. The assertion that Yahweh is well aware of the path of the psalmist is, of course, a common trope within the Psalter (e.g. Pss 16:11; 142:4). But the verb *זָרָה* is much less common, especially in *pi'el* (as here). Again, there are multiple ways in which this verb might be understood, and indeed even the more common tradition of translating it here as "search out" (ESV) or "compasseth" (KJV) may be taken in multiple ways. Although BDB

³⁹ E. J. Young, "The Background of Psalm 139," *BETS* 8 (1965): 101-110 (110) sees this searching as a source of delight for the psalmist, but this does not allow for the range of senses here. Th. Booij, "Psalm CXXXIX: Text, Syntax, Meaning," *VT* 55 (2005): 1-19 (2) also denies that this may be understood negatively, but presupposes the meaning of later elements within the psalm.

only recognises one root here, it is wise to follow DCH and recognise two roots, with the common interpretation treating it as זרה II. Nevertheless, this immediately raises the question of which root is the correct one to employ since the different options are not grammatically marked, and without wider disambiguation, readers may not know how to distinguish between homonyms.

If we understand the usage here to derive from זרה I, then the options are all associated in some way with scattering. This scattering can be experienced both positively and negatively. Negatively, the verb is used in *qal* to refer to things being scattered and hence being made useless. The clearest example of this occurs in Exod 32:20 where Moses is said to have taken the powdered remains of the golden calf and scattered them across the waters which he then made the Israelites drink. Although not expressly a statement of divine judgment, the *pi'el* occurs in Ps 44:12,⁴⁰ which refers to Yahweh's actions with Israel where he has scattered them among the nations. In that the psalm is essentially an extended complaint against Yahweh because of his failure to continue acting for Israel as he had previously, this is clearly understood negatively.⁴¹ That is, this scattering is undesirable, and would be whether or not it is an expression of divine judgment. However, the *pi'el* specifically refers to divine judgement in 1 Kgs 14:15, where Israel's scattering is because their idolatry has provoked Yahweh's anger, and this sense is picked up in Ps 106:27 which reports such a scattering.

A more neutral sense is more difficult to find with this verb because there is no instance where what is scattered has any control over the process. However, there are more positive associations when the verb is associated with winnowing, as in Ruth 3:2 and Isa 30:24. The process of winnowing refers to the means by which that which is positive and desirable (i.e. the grain) is separated from the chaff. The literal sense is referred to in Ruth 3:2, whilst the reference in Isa 30:24 takes this further to indicate that the grain which had been winnowed was particularly desirable. Both of these references employ *qal*, but this sense seems to underlie the use of the *pi'el* in Prov 15:7 in which the lips of the wise (contrasted with the heart of fools) disperse knowledge. This dispersal presumes that this is knowledge worth having, and so may be taken as a metaphor that draws on the sense of winnowing noted in Isa 30:24. Among those who read this as an occurrence of זרה I,⁴² this is the dominant line of interpretation.

⁴⁰ The comparative rareness of the verbs here suggests that there may be a link with Ps 44 more generally.

⁴¹ On this form and Ps 44's place within it, see Craig C. Broyles, *The Conflict of Faith and Experience: A Form-Critical and Theological Study* (JSOTSup 52; Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1987), 139-144.

⁴² E.g. Terrien, *Psalms*, 2:871.

However, there is an emerging view which prefers to interpret the verb here as an instance זרה II, seeing it as a denominative from זָרַח, "span."⁴³ This is plausible, though it suffers from the fact that the only possible parallels within the Old Testament, Prov 20:8, 26, can also be understood as examples of זרה I. That is, these verses can be interpreted as describing the king winnowing the wicked or more specifically of his assessing them if we understand them as examples of זרה II.

In the end, it may not matter which root we adopt for our interpretation here as there is a degree of correlation between them, though זרה II is more explicit in suggesting the element of assessment. But that assessment, especially if winnowing is still held to lie in the background, can be experienced positively or negatively, depending on whether the poet is understood as grain or chaff. Winnowing was an important task within an agrarian society because of the importance of having sufficient grain and being able to use it. But what was winnowed had no control over what happened to it, and the process would prove either that the material was the desired grain (and perhaps even the better grain) or that it was chaff. Especially because of the closeness of this verb to הִקָּר in verse 1, and its ambiguity for the one who prayed, it is not unreasonable to think that the same ambiguity is carried over here. The innocent who prayed this psalm could see themselves as equivalent to grain, so that the assessment or winnowing would lead to a positive outcome. But the guilty could see this assessment as showing that they were, in effect, chaff, and so stood under God's judgment. As with הִקָּר, the various forms of ambiguity Empson proposes are left open by the text, with the one who prays determining the more likely sense for them on the basis of the validity of the charge against them.

3 The Verb צור

The verb צָרַחְנִי in v. 5 can also be interpreted positively and negatively. Generally, its occurrence here is taken as צור II, "confine, besiege." BDB also offers צור III, "shew hostility, treat as a foe," something that could be taken as an extension of the more negative end of צור II, though as we shall see it requires a change of idiom. צור IV, "fashion, delineate" is also noted, but the context would exclude this possibility.⁴⁴ The root's ambiguity here has been noted for some time. Weiser observes that it offers a perception that is "at first not so much cheering as depressing."⁴⁵ By contrast, Vesco claims "mais le verbe *šrr* ou *šwr* n'a pas ici un sens d'hostilité."⁴⁶ In part, this difference in interpretation could be

⁴³ E.g. Goldingay, *Psalms* 3, 629.

⁴⁴ צור I occurs only in nominal forms, and so needs not be considered. In DCH, BDB's צור II, III and IV are treated as צור I, II and III, but the divisions between them are the same. DCH also notes that this root is a byform of צָרַח.

⁴⁵ Artur Weiser, *Psalms*, 803.

⁴⁶ Jean-Luc Vesco, *Le Psautier de David: Traduit et Commenté* (Cerf: Paris, 2006), II: 1296.

because of their decision about other aspects of the psalm, but the difference in their views shows how scholarly readings of this verb differ quite sharply from one another.

The cause for this difference is to be traced to the various ways in which this verb can be used, so that again it can be understood positively and negatively. An example of the positive use of the verb can be seen in Deut 14:25 where it refers to the money that Israelites are to "bind" in their hand, thus securing it so that they can purchase whatever they might wish when they reach the central sanctuary. In this case, the verb has a protective element, a means of ensuring that nothing untoward happens to the money before the worshipper reaches the sanctuary. A similar sense is probably to be found in 2 Kgs 5:23 where Naaman tied up two talents of silver in bags, thus ensuring that the money could be transferred securely by Gehazi. The binding here is again protective.⁴⁷ The verb also occurs in Song of Songs 8:9 where it is part of the way in which the woman's family plans to protect her, again understanding this as a positive action.⁴⁸ Reading the verb this way would support Vesco's approach, seeing Yahweh's binding up of the poet as protective. That this is both behind and before means that the psalmist is protected from enemies in all directions. Read this way, the presence of Yahweh's hand in the second half of the verse would be interpreted positively, as a symbol of divine protection from adversity.

A much more negative sense is proposed by Ross, who translates the verb "besiege," and interpreting the verse as suggesting that the psalmist feels trapped by the level of divine presence.⁴⁹ Although this line of interpretation is not impossible, and the verb (understood as צור II) most commonly means "to hem in, to besiege," there is a significant problem with reading it as "besiege" which is seldom addressed. The key point to note here is that when the verb has this sense it occurs in the form על + צור (sometimes אל).⁵⁰ That is, the verb always includes the element of "enclosing," but "besiege" as a particular and therefore negative sense requires the addition of a preposition, with the meaning "besiege" provided by the whole expression, not the verb alone. The absence of a preposition here might be taken as indicating that Vesco is correct in denying any sense of hostility at this point.

However, the absence of the preposition does not mean that a negative interpretation is impossible, merely that it does not emerge from צור II. This is because, as a homonym, צור III is identical in form with צור II, and has the sense

⁴⁷ Ezek 5:3 could also be interpreted along these lines, though the sense there is perhaps more neutral.

⁴⁸ See Richard S. Hess, *Song of Songs* (BCOTWP; Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2005), 243-244.

⁴⁹ Ross, *Psalms* 3, 821. Cf. Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms* 3, 540, who see this as "the opposite of liberation."

⁵⁰ E.g. 2 Sam 11:1, 1 Kgs 15:27.

“show hostility to.” Although less common than צור II, it always denotes hostility, and this does not depend on the presence of a preposition. For example, in Ex 23:22 Yahweh declares וְצָרְתִּי אֶת־צָרְרֶיךָ. The parallel here clearly indicates that Yahweh will treat Israel’s enemies as his own, pointing to the idea of acting with hostility. This usage is also clear in Dtn 2:9, 19, since in both cases it means something like “to attack,” a sense that is also present in Mordecai’s decree in Esther 8:11 where the participle clearly refers to those who were to attack the Jews. Even though ancient readers did not divide roots in the same way as modern lexicographers, there is no reason why they would necessarily choose צור II rather than צור III as providing the primary sense here. Taken as צור III, we would translate “behind and before you attack me,” and this sense can then be carried forward into the second half of the verse since placing Yahweh’s palm on the poet can then be understood as a further specification of the means of assault.

The details here can thus be effective in multiple ways.⁵¹ Someone praying this psalm from a perspective of innocence could take the verb as צור II, thus pointing to Yahweh as the one who provides security, something exemplified in the presence of his hand. By contrast, the guilty can read the verb as צור III, seeing Yahweh as an enemy who attacks, the hand then being something that expresses the divine assault. But because the effect of the ambiguity varies for the reader, the text’s ambiguity represents an example of Empson’s second type since even though readers might close off the meaning of the text, the text itself leaves multiple possibilities open.

4 The Verb יקר

This rare verb occurs in the exclamation in v. 17, וְלִי מִה־יְקָרוֹ רֵעִידָ אֵל. In this case, there is also a closely related adjective, יקר, that is relevant, though in the first instance we shall consider only the verb. Once again, we will see that this verb can be understood in different ways – in this case, either as something being valued because it is worth having (perhaps because it is rare) or something which is costly, and which therefore involves losing something else to possess. Both of these options are again embedded in the text, so that the reader must choose which is most appropriate.

As most commonly glossed in English, the verb has the sense of “precious” or “valuable.” The idea of someone or something being valued can be seen in 1 Sam 18:30, where David’s name is said to be valued because of his great success against the Philistines. In this case, the point is that David was more successful than any of Saul’s other commanders, meaning that he was more respected than the others. He would clearly be valued by a population which

⁵¹ This differs from Leslie C. Allen, *Psalms 101-150* (WBC 21; 2nd ed.; Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2002), 328, who recognises the ambiguity, but suggests that the sense of the verb should not be pressed in either direction.

often faced the threat of raids from other peoples. Similarly, in 1 Sam 26:21, Saul affirms that David has considered his life precious in not killing him when the opportunity presented itself. Reading the psalm along these lines, we would render this line "How precious are your thoughts / intentions to me, O God."⁵² That is, the psalmist could think of God's thoughts as something positive, and thus to be valued.

But the verb can also have a more neutral sense, where the value of one thing is set against another, or more simply that to value something is to appraise it. This sense of something being appraised is evident in Zech 11:13, where the verb is used to describe the amount by which the shepherd within this sign-act is valued.⁵³ Whether or not the language there is to be taken as sarcastic lies beyond our purposes, because it is sufficient to note that here the verb refers only to the process of valuation, of assessing something's worth. Such a sense is plausible here, especially within a larger context of the following verse which reflects on the possibility of counting sand – something that is clearly impossible. A neutral sense may also be seen in Isa 43:4, where Yahweh indicates that he considers Israel as precious, but this is immediately set against the cost involved in Israel's redemption. In this case, Israel is both precious and costly.

This leads to a third possibility, where the verb is understood as "costly" and hence referring to the difficulty consideration of Yahweh's thoughts poses for the psalmist. This sense is clearly evident in Ps 49:9, which declares וְיִקָּר פְּדִיּוֹן נַפְשָׁם וְחֹדֶל לְעוֹלָם.⁵⁴ The ransom of one's life is here said to be costly, and nothing can be provided that would suffice. Clearly, in this case, there is a sense in which one's life is something that is valuable,⁵⁵ but the key contrast here is with a ransom that would keep one's life from Sheol. The problem recognised here is that the cost here is more than a human can afford, even for the wealthy. Hence, when something such as one's life is considered in terms of a possible exchange, the cost is too high, and it is the costliness of it which is the point of emphasis. This sense may also be present in the cognate adjective יָקָר. As with the verb, it can point to that which is valued because of its scarcity (e.g. 1 Sam 3:1), but within the Psalter it can point to that which is costly. In Ps 36:8, the adjective

⁵² In that the noun עַרְבָּ here is also ambiguous (and understood differently already in OG), our concern at this point is only with the verb, but the ambiguity here is more complex than this, and the sense of "thoughts / intentions" also needs exploration. However, for the purposes of this paper it suffices to leave open these options.

⁵³ OG here represents a different text, but with Mark J. Boda, *The Book of Zechariah* (NICOT; Grand Rapids; MI: Eerdmans, 2016), 669, MT is retained.

⁵⁴ MT here is difficult, and the possibility that the verse is a gloss cannot be excluded, but this does not affect the meaning of the verb. For a tentative defence of MT, see Janet Smith, *Dust or Dew: Immortality in the Ancient Near East and in Psalm 49* (Cambridge: Clarke, 2011), 119-120.

⁵⁵ Something evident from the presence of the cognate noun יָקָר in vv. 13 and 21.

refers to Yahweh's יָקָר, here indicating that it is precious for his people. But by contrast, in spite of the long tradition in English versions of rendering it "precious", in Ps 116:15 it is more likely that the adjective has the sense of "costly", so that here it should be understood as pointing to the cost Yahweh experiences in the death of his saints. Within a psalm that has celebrated Yahweh's ability to provide life (e.g. v. 8) this represents a far more coherent interpretation.⁵⁶ Although it is generally wiser to focus on the possible senses of a verb from its own occurrences, the evidence from cognate forms cannot be discounted, especially when they show a similar semantic range. These examples all demonstrate the possibility that the verb here is potentially ambiguous.⁵⁷

Once more, the sense given to this verb is played out in the subsequent lines, leading to different interpretations. A positive sense of יָקָר, the most common tradition in English, takes delight in the preciousness of God's thoughts, even though vv. 17b-18a point to the fact that God's thoughts are ultimately beyond the ability of the psalmist to comprehend fully. This would mean that Yahweh's continued presence with the psalmist (v. 18b) is a comforting idea. But if we translated v. 17a as "how costly are your thoughts to me, O God", then in this case the experience of them for the psalmist is much less comforting. God's thoughts are beyond the psalmist's reckoning anyway, but the need to wrestle with them creates uncertainty because the benefit to the cost is not forthcoming if those thoughts or purposes cannot finally be comprehended. Yahweh's presence could then be troubling – after all, if in spite of the cost involved in seeking to understand them, they cannot finally be understood, then it is not clear that Yahweh's presence would necessarily be understood positively.

This element in turn may also impact on the one who utters this psalm as a prayer of innocence. Someone praying from the perspective of innocence could take the verb positively, and thus consider the fact that Yahweh's thoughts (which know the petitioner thoroughly) as something to be treasured. The innocent can accept that Yahweh will know vastly more than them, but in the case of a particular accusation the fact that Yahweh knows so much more may be thought of as an encouragement in that Yahweh's purposes will also be greater than those of the poet. But someone praying from the perspective of guilt may

⁵⁶ So Tremper Longman III, *Psalms* (TOTC; Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2014), 397.

⁵⁷ Another possibility can be seen in the presence of the cognate Aramaic verb in Dan 2:11, which has the sense of "hard, difficult." As noted in BDB, this led to the equivalent sense often being applied to the translation of this verse in the 19th CE, a sense still defended by Kraus, *Psalms 60-150*, 510-511. Although it is possible to see how these senses are related and thus at least a potential meaning here, there is no clear instance of the verb (or the adjective or noun) having this sense in Hebrew, and it is therefore excluded from the discussion here.

take the verb in its negative sense – Yahweh knows considerably more and the attempt to understand Yahweh is costly to the one who prays, not only because of their guilt (which may well predispose a certain interpretation), but also because the attempt to understand Yahweh is costly. Once again, the text leaves open the possibilities, with the reader required to resolve the options depending on their own posture before Yahweh.

F CONCLUSION

A short study cannot address all the problems posed by Ps 139. However, the evidence considered is sufficient to suggest that ambiguity is an intentional compositional strategy within the psalm, with the effect of the ambiguity different for those who read the poem from the perspective of innocence as opposed to the experience of those who read from the perspective of guilt. The verbs examined within the psalm all conform to Empson's definition of ambiguity, with each capable of being read differently. Empson's model, which is still useful as a means of classifying the main types of ambiguity, is limited by the fact that it presumes that the resolution of the ambiguity lies with the author of a text. Our study does vindicate this to some extent, since it demonstrates that the ambiguity in the psalm is part of a clear compositional strategy. At the level of composition, the first two types noted above are in evidence – that is, at various points the poet has left open multiple senses, while at other points there is a simultaneous use of unconnected meanings. But, crucially, these elements are not resolved within the psalm. Rather, the whole poem might be thought of as representing the third class noted above, where the goal is that the reader combines the various elements to determine a sense which is most relevant for them. Especially if the background of the prayers of the accused is relevant, this points to great rhetorical skill since it means that the petitioner who prays this psalm is led to recognise the most appropriate verdict for them precisely because they are the one who must combine the various elements. The "open ended and evocative language"⁵⁸ of the psalm is thus crucial, not only for its exegesis but also for its reception and continued significance.

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⁵⁸ William P. Brown, "Psalm 139: The Pathos of Praise," *Int* 50 (1996): 280-284 (281).

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