

NEAR-PARANOIA KEY TO DECIPHERING PSALM 139

Ever have the feeling you were being watched or followed? That no matter how you shifted or fainted, your thoughts had been tapped? Before you get paranoid, consider that a certain ancient psalmist was bugged by the same psychosis.

The evidence is in the Hebrew scriptures at Psalm 139. Not only was the poet under the gun of some human attackers, he was convinced the Lord God himself had him under his thumb.

The clue to the psalmist's near-paranoia is in the closing stanza (verses 19-22). "God, I wish you would kill the criminals," he complains. "Then those bloodthirsty scoundrels will leave me alone. They're plotting against you, too. I hate them, hate them, hate them!"

How do you account for a tantrum like that? Imagine someone who has been indicted for a serious offense. Perhaps not a Class X felony, but definitely something more serious than littering downtown Jerusalem.

His unnamed accusers have pressed their charges through the courts.

In desperation the defendant stands in the temple precincts to protest his innocence. He argues ingeniously. He invites God himself to examine his life and decide whether he has strayed from the orthodox road. That appeal to the grandstand opens and closes his psalm.

In between are three stanzas which insist that there's no escaping God's omniscience, his omnipresence, or his omnipotence. (That's fancy theological jargon for saying that God knows everything, is present everywhere, and is powerful enough to do anything he wants.)

So in the first stanza (verses 1-6) the poet allows that the Lord knows his plans. "You know when I take a nap and when I get up," he admits. "You're familiar with my daily itinerary. You know what I'm going to say before I can get a word off my tongue."

Consequently the psalmist is convinced there is no getting away. "I could climb the heavens, sleep in hell, fly to the Orient, or sail to the west," he notes in the second stanza (verses

7-12), "but you would still grab me. You have eyes like a cat and can spy on me at night." In other words, God is everywhere.

And he can do anything. "In fact," says our man in stanza 3 (verses 13-18), "You're the one who made me. When I was an unborn embryo, you produced my organs and bones, and knit them together in such an intricate pattern."

When all is said and done, the author of Psalm 139 has built quite a case. He has admitted that God knows him inside and out.

Then he invites the Lord to explore his secret thoughts. In that way he hopes to prove his innocence against the charges his opponents have leveled against him.

Whether it worked or not we don't know. Although the fact that this particular poem was included in the official collection suggests that the psalmist must have received a favorable hearing.

Most notable is the way the author develops his theme. In less skilled hands God's knowledge, presence and power could have been pictured in cosmic terms:

"He knows everything that's going on in the world; he's all over the face of the globe and in outer space, too; he can change the course of history by manipulating the weather." That sort of thing.

Fortunately the author of Psalm 139 didn't bite off more than he could chew. Instead of exploiting the Lord's presumed universal clout, he zeroed in on a more personal scope:

"The Lord knows what I'm up to; I can't get away from him; my birth was his production." That, and no more.

Whether or not you buy into those religious sentiments, you have to admit it's a clever argument. It taps into a common feeling, the suspicion that you're being watched.

But instead of degenerating into paranoia, it gets turned into a super-orthodox confession of faith and profession of innocence. And that makes for an intriguing poem.

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