

Psalm 139:16 and Predestination: Text Criticism and Interpretation

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Doesn't Psalm 139:16 tell us that God predetermines our lives long before we were born? Isn't this biblical proof for the omniscience of God concerning the future?

This is a far more complicated question than most people imagine. It is easy to read biblical passages through certain theological or doctrinal lenses and assume a meaning that fits that doctrine. However, a close examination of most of the biblical passages that we tend to use as proof texts for doctrines, or that seem so easily and definitely to teach certain things, will frequently reveal a much more complex picture. This particular passage is a good example, not just of problems with too easily applying a passage to a certain doctrine, but of some of the more complex issues of properly and accurately interpreting Scripture.

In this case, the problems are not even primarily of interpretation, but are mostly problems with the text itself, how the physically written words have been preserved and transmitted to us in ancient manuscripts. Biblical scholars call these kinds of problems **textual problems** and use an approach called **textual criticism** or **textual analysis** to try to understand and address such issues.

Psalm 139:16 Your eyes beheld my unformed substance. In your book were written all the days that were formed for me, when none of them as yet existed. –NRSV

גַּלְמִי רָאוּ עֵינֶיךָ וְעַל-סֵפֶרְךָ כָּל־יְמֵי יִצְרֹן יְיָ-לֹד אֶתְךָ בְּהֶם:

The Text

Before we can begin to talk about the meaning of this verse, we have to begin with the actual text itself to see if there are any problems with how the text has been preserved. We also need to examine the sense of the text in terms of word meanings and grammar.

In this case, there are several **textual problems** with the verse. Textual problems refer to difficulties with how the original language is physically written in a manuscript. Those problems usually result from various kinds of errors that occur because of human fallibility, the kind of material used in the writing, or because of the age of the manuscript and physical damage to the text.

Without getting too technical, there can be a range of textual problems in a verse, ranging from misspelling of words, reversing of letters, transposing of words or phrases, omission or repetition of letters or words, additions to the text either accidentally or intentionally, sloppy writing, substituting a similar sounding word, confusion of similar letters, use of

synonyms, etc. Most any mistake of writing that human beings can make is found in the biblical text.

We also must keep in mind that we do not have a "master text" of the Bible stored in a vault somewhere. What we have are hundreds, or for the New Testament thousands, of ancient handwritten manuscripts. These manuscripts do not all agree exactly in every detail, presenting us with thousands of major and minor differences in how the text reads. The original language texts that we use for translations today are confluations from all of those ancient texts, compiled by using various criteria of textual analysis to determine the best and most accurate reading (in a process called **Text Criticism**). That is usually an attempt to find the earliest form of the text before it was subjected to later copying that began to introduce some of the errors. The assumption here, allowing for the human factor in reproducing manuscripts by hand, is that later texts have a higher probability for human errors creeping into the text than do earlier ones.

However, textual scholars recognize that there are errors incorporated into the earliest manuscripts that we have. Unless we want to evoke a certain theology of the Bible that begins with a confessional assumption of infallibility for the "original" writers ("inerrant autographs"), we are faced with the likelihood that some errors of writing have always existed in the manuscripts. That means that even when all the manuscripts we have agree on a reading, there may still be problems with the text that have to be resolved in order for us who are so far removed from the text to understand it. And there remains the possibility that even with accurate renderings of the text, we still may not know the meaning of some words or some features of the language that would let us understand the text perfectly.

Note that in the Hebrew text of Psalm 139:16 given above, there are asterisks toward the end of the verse. Those indicate serious problems with the text, although there are others as well. Various ways of reconstructing or understanding the verse account for a variety of ways this verse is translated. We probably should take the comment of one scholar seriously when he says "V. 16b is of uncertain meaning." (Leslie Allen, *Psalms 101-150*, Word Biblical Commentary, p. 252).

A complete analysis of the text of this verse would require an understanding of Hebrew. But we can get some idea of the problems by a quick summary.

The first word in the verse in Hebrew (the object of the sentence) is what is called a *hapax legomenon* ("said once"), meaning that this word only occurs here in the Hebrew Bible. That is a clue that this is going to be a difficult verse to translate, because most often we simply do not know the precise meaning of such words. Since they are used only once, we have little way to establish the meaning of the word beyond later tradition or comparisons of the word to material outside the Bible. In Aramaic, a similar word means "an unfinished vessel," and in later Talmudic Hebrew the word is used to mean "embryo." If we take this form of the word as correctly written, then it most likely means something like "unformed substance," which is how the NRSV translates the word

However, since this is a word that we have elsewhere only in much later Talmudic Hebrew, some scholars have suggested that the word here in Psalm 139 is defectively written. The most common suggestion is that this is a case of the transposition of two letters. Vowels are not part of the original text in Hebrew (added by the Massoretic scribes from oral tradition around AD 500). Since most Hebrew words are composed of only two or three base consonants, this would present a far more serious problem in Hebrew than it would be in most modern languages.

Original reading	Suggested correction
גלמי	גמלי
"my embryo"	"my deeds"

The suggested correction assumes a transposition of the final two letters of the word (the last letter is a pronominal suffix, "my"). If this is a correct assumption, the corrected Hebrew would read "my deeds" or "my works." This is understood to be a poetic balance in the verse to "days." This reading is supported by a Syriac version (translation) that obviously understood the Hebrew in this way.

The second problem in the text is the one indicated by the asterisks. The Massoretic text of this verse, which tried to preserve the written tradition as accurately as possible even to preserving errors and nonsensical phrases, has an added word following the phrase "days were formed." It can be either the negative "no" or an incorrectly spelled "to him." As written, it would either read, "days were not formed," if we take the negative with the first verb, or "not one" if we take it with the following noun. The problem with the second option is that in Hebrew it is normally verbs that are negated, not nouns. The problem with the first option is that it leaves no clear meaning for the sentence.

Even the Massoretic scribes knew that this was probably incorrect, so they added a marginal correction (called a *qere*, "read") that the word should be correctly spelled to read "to him." In Hebrew, the word "no" and the single word "to him" have almost identical sounds, *lo*. This corrected reading actually appears in some manuscripts and in the Qumran scrolls. The text would then read "days were formed for him."

However, since this still does not make good sense in the verse, most modern translators correct the text even further, and read "to me." This is an attempt to give the sentence some meaning while still trying to stick as closely as possible to the preserved text, while at the same time acknowledging that the preserved text makes little sense. This gives us the modern translation that is widely accepted: "days formed for me." It should be noted that this reading is neither the original Hebrew text nor the scribal correction, but a conclusion based on the syntax of the verse and an educated guess as to the meaning of the text.

Massoretic Text	Qere Correction	Modern emendation
לא	לו	לי
"not"	"to him"	"to me"

There are also some scholars who have suggested reading *both* the original negative "no" or "not" *and* the marginal correction "to me." This is reflected in the NRSV translation that uses the negative with "one": "... all the days that were formed **for me**, when **none** [not one] of them..."

This simply illustrates that there are serious textual problems in this verse. The verse has no clear meaning as it stands in Hebrew, and can only be made meaningful by assuming certain errors in the text and trying to reconstruct a possible reading.

Syntax

Besides these textual problems, there are also problems in understanding the relationships of words in the verse and their meaning. While the syntax of the first phrase is straightforward (even though we are unsure of the meaning of the first word), the second phrase is not so clear. The words are: "in your book are written all of them." The problem here is that there is no immediate antecedent of the plural pronoun "them."

If we read the suggested correction of the first word, "my deeds," then there is no problem since this provides an antecedent. However, if we stay with the original text, the only other possibility is "days" later in the sentence. It is unusual to have a pronoun refer to something that has not yet been mentioned in a sentence, but it is possible. This would mean that the final phrase is an expansion of the second: "all of them were written, [that is] the days [which were] were formed" However, this is very awkward Hebrew syntax and would be a very odd and complicated way to make a relative clause.

The third phrase of the verse presents almost unsolvable problems, largely because of the textual issues, but also because there is no clear grammatical structure. The words are (using the proposed correction for the text): "days were formed for me [not] one of them." Any translation that makes this read smoothly is making an educated guess as to the meaning. That is necessary in translations since there has to be something to read there. But we need to be honest in acknowledging that the last part of the verse is nearly nonsensical in Hebrew.

Context

Since the verse is so problematic to translate, perhaps the immediate context can give us some clue to the meaning. Most psalms tend to be essentially unified in theme, so an

examination of the preceding verses in the psalm ought to provide a framework in which to place this verse.

- 1 O LORD, you have searched me and known me.
- 2 You know when I sit down and when I rise up; you discern my thoughts from far away.
- 3 You search out my path and my lying down, and are acquainted with all my ways.
- 4 Even before a word is on my tongue, O LORD, you know it completely.
- 5 You hem me in, behind and before, and lay your hand upon me.
- 6 Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it.
- 7 Where can I go from your spirit? Or where can I flee from your presence?
- 8 If I ascend to heaven, you are there; if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.
- 9 If I take the wings of the morning and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,
- 10 even there your hand shall lead me, and your right hand shall hold me fast.
- 11 If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me, and the light around me become night,"
- 12 even the darkness is not dark to you; the night is as bright as the day, for darkness is as light to you.
- 13 For it was you who formed my inward parts; you knit me together in my mother's womb.
- 14 I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made. Wonderful are your works; that I know very well.
- 15 My frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret, intricately woven in the depths of the earth.

After some stereotypical elements of praise and cursing of enemies in verses 17-22, the psalm concludes with this prayer:

- 23 Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts.
- 24 See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.

Without trying to exegete the entire psalm, even a cursory reading identifies this psalm as a confession of openness before God. The theme of the psalm is established by both the opening confession ("you have searched me and known me") and by the concluding prayer ("search me...know...see...lead"). The basic thrust of the psalm is that God knows all about the psalmist, even before he was born, so it will do no good to try to hide "any wicked way" from God. There is even the poetic imagery of God carefully crafting him in the womb, with the implication that if God made him then God would know everything there is to know about him. With that confession that God knows all about

him, the psalmist places himself in submission to God, and uses that confession as the basis of the prayer for God's guidance in the "way" of life.

It is in this context that the ambiguity of verse 16 must be seen. If we read "unformed substance," the first part of the verse repeats the thought of the preceding verse: "my frame was not hidden from you, when I was being made in secret." This is a declaration that God knows about the psalmist even what he does not know about himself. If we read "my deeds," verse 16 expands the thought of verse 15 to include later action in life. But the point remains the same in context: God knows all about the psalmist; he can hide nothing from God.

That all suggests that however the last part of verse 16 is to be read, it is not about predestination nor is it about God knowing the future. Both of those ideas would be to violate the thrust of the rest of the Psalm. Here, the psalmist can lay himself open before God and pray for God's guidance in his life, not because God knows what will happen or because God has predetermined what will happen, but because God knows the psalmist better than he knows himself.

The psalm is not about omniscience, in the classic meaning of that term. Neither is it about predestination, although if read uncritically this verse would be one of the strongest predestination passages in Scripture. Nor is it really about omnipresence in the absolute and universal sense in which that idea is used. Those are all abstracted intellectual and ontological concepts. This psalm is intensely personal about God's presence in the life of an individual in the specific reality of life, a person who is willing to confess that presence as a basis for prayer and trust in God. As one biblical scholar noted: "Not omnipresence but constant exposure to divine scrutiny (Heb 4:13), not so much omnipresence as confrontation with an unseen Person at every turn..." (Allen, p. 262).

So, this psalm *is* about the knowledge of God, what he knows about us as individuals. But it is a far leap to abstract this intensely personal psalm, or a single corrupted verse in it, into grandiose statements about the attributes of God. And, as we have seen, if the text is carefully examined it will not support that anyway.