

## Portrayal of Divine Omnipresence in Psalm 139

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**ABSTRACT:** This article highlights how King David encounters God, who transcends all space and time limitations and is greater than any part of His creation, while at the same time being fully present in David's individual context. Based on Psalm 139, this article shows how David is overwhelmed by God's perfections, and how, being conscious of the manifestation of the presence of God, he ends up in praise and prayer. The article will conclude with three hermeneutical keys through which an individual can approach the reality of God, whose perfection transcends human intellectual capacity.

**KEYWORDS:** omnipresence, divine perfection, hermeneutics, restored humanity, spiritual life

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### 1. Introduction

The title of this article refers to the term “portrayal,” a word related to the depiction of a concept that, in truth, may never be exhaustively captured. The word *portrayal* typically denotes a representation of something in art or literature, inevitably evoking the idea of an image—a picture, painting, sketch, or some other form of visual illustration—whether of a person, object, or even an abstract idea. To claim that one can produce a complete and comprehensive portrayal of the concept of Divine Omnipresence appears unrealistic and, perhaps, even futile. Although the Bible states that humans are created in His image—a claim that has raised a whole plethora of interpretations (Măcelaru, 2021, pp. 596–608)—it clearly makes no attempt to affirm that humans can share in the divine perfections. Yet, in Psalm 139, King David manages to offer a deeply moving description of the attributes of the infinite God as perceived through the lens of human limitation. Though far from being a perfect or exhaustive depiction, and without any pretense of expressing all that can be said about God, Psalm 139 nevertheless reveals a profound awareness of God's Omnipresence and other divine perfections. As Geoffrey W. Grogan observes, “God's primary disclosure in the OT is found in the Pentateuch. Here we learn of his creatorship, his judgement, his gift of covenant relationship. His redemptive acts, his exacting standards, his patience, and so on. Deuteronomy 1–11, in particular, brings many of these themes together and from chapter 4, almost a full summary of the Old Testament

doctrine of God may be obtained" (Grogan, 2008, p. 304). He continues his argument by indicating that the Psalms serve as a response to God's revelation, expressed through prayer and praise. David's encounter with God in Psalm 139, therefore, goes beyond a mere doctrinal disclosure and becomes a profoundly personal experience, one that overwhelms him and defies easy articulation (Măcelaru, 2018, pp. 27–34; Măcelaru, 2016, pp. 97–105).

In this article, I use the term "perfection" instead of "attribute", drawing on the interpretation which suggests that "the term perfections (...) works better than attributes because perfections specifies that the characteristics of God are each perfect and inherently characterize the God who is perfect. The term attributes do not inherently specify perfect characteristics and might hint that these originate in someone's concept of God rather than in God himself" (MacArthur & Mayhue, 2017, p. 161). When constructing a theological argument about an infinite God defined by perfection—perfect in all that He is—it becomes inevitable to ask how the human mind can begin to comprehend such a divine reality. This leads to the central theological reflection that undergirds this article: To what extent can a limited human being understand and construct a theological portrayal of so complex a concept as the omnipresence of God?

The structure of this article follows a threefold path: the first part presents a theological exploration of the concept of divine omnipresence; the second part analyzes how this concept is portrayed within the specific context of Psalm 139; and the third and final part proposes three hermeneutical keys aimed at helping us respond to the central theological question outlined above.

## **2. A Brief Theological Approach to Omnipresence as a Perfection of God**

The starting point of the present analysis of the concept of omnipresence is the premise that the person of God and His perfections can never be fully comprehended by the limited capacity of the human mind and knowledge (Măcelaru, 2019, pp. 171–181). As one theologian puts it, "It is not only true that we can never fully understand God; it is also true that we can never fully understand any single thing about God. (...) Thus, we may know something about God's love, power, wisdom, and so forth. But we can never know his love completely and exhaustively. We can never know his power exhaustively. We can never know his wisdom exhaustively, and so forth" (Grudem, 2004, p. 154). To this, I would add: we can never know His presence exhaustively. We cannot experience the fullness of His presence in its total manifestation, for in our frail, physical bodies we would not be able to endure it. Yet, the limitations of our understanding, faith, and perception do not imply that God is any less present. Rather, it is a matter of God choosing to reveal Himself to us in a measured and gracious way, according to what we are able to receive.

As human beings, we live within the specific limitations of space and time. Consequently, it becomes difficult for us to comprehend how God—who transcends both time and space—can simultaneously manifest His presence in our immediate, personal environment. On this matter, G.W. Grogan insightfully stated: “God is perfectly present with himself, transcending all limitation of space, and yet present with every point of space with all that he is. Transcendence means that God is greater than and independent of the creation. Immensity refers to the fact that God transcends and fills all space. And omnipresence indicates that God is present with every point of space in his entire being” (Grogan, 2008, p. 173; Rotaru, 2015, pp. 34-44).

This final point, regarding omnipresence, is particularly significant in helping us understand that God’s presence is an objective reality in every place and at every moment. Such a perspective challenges believers to cultivate a deeper longing for the experiential reality of the divine presence in their daily lives. The continuous presence of God within one’s reality creates the foundation for the manifestation of all His other perfections. God is present everywhere with all that He is. Therefore, He is not partially present in one place and partially in another; His whole being is fully present at every point in space. This reality, combined with His omnipotence, distinguishes the biblical God from all other so-called gods or conceptions of the divine. As Bray pointed out, “The only point in saying that God is everywhere lies in implying that he can act anywhere, and not just within particular limits. This was a problem with the pagan gods of antiquity, and it is common in polytheistic systems whose gods are usually limited in space, in function, or in both” (Bray, 1993, p. 86).

In this regard, Robert L. Reymond has issued two important cautions when interpreting the concept of omnipresence. First, he emphasizes the need to clearly distinguish the Christian understanding of omnipresence from pantheism. This requires affirming that God should not be identified with the universe itself, nor reduced to an impersonal force manifested throughout creation. God remains essentially distinct from the universe and from the world He has made. Second, Reymond points to biblical expressions such as God “ascending,” “descending,” “coming,” or “going,” and clarifies that these do not imply that God literally moves from one location to another. Instead, they employ metaphorical language to describe special manifestations or interventions of God at particular moments or places (Reymond, 1998, p. 169). We might rightly say that in some contexts God’s presence is experienced as more intense, more personal, or even more severe in its judgment. However, regardless of the degree of intensity or intimacy with which God’s presence is revealed at a specific time or place, the foundational truth remains: He is there.

Emil Brunner reinforces this point by arguing that the feeling of being close to or distant from God is primarily a human reality, not a divine fluctuation. As he explains, “[This experience] is primarily dependent on man, not on God. Sin,

apostasy from God, is distance from God, for which man, not God, must bear the responsibility, even though God, moved thereto by the sin of man, withdraws Himself, from him, by ‘hiding His face,’ in that He sets His wrath between Himself and man” (Brunner, 1949, p. 260). Thus, any sense of divine absence is not due to a lack of God’s presence, but rather to the human condition of sin, which disrupts the awareness and enjoyment of that presence.

Karl Barth observes that far too often, God is misunderstood and reduced to something entirely different from who He truly is. He is frequently conceived as a vague, substance-less, kindness-less, and above all, boring concept of “transcendence”: a detached greatness that has no specific will, performs no concrete actions, utters no clear message, and exercises no real authority (Barth, 2008, p. 45). Such a perception of God is fundamentally flawed. The notion of a neutral, impersonal, and monotonous transcendence with no defined will or involvement is not what the Bible teaches. In contrast, Barth emphasizes that the God revealed in Holy Scripture is not only transcendent over humanity and the world, but also their Lord. He is faithful, personal, and intentionally engaged with His creation. As Barth explains, “What is revealed before us is His specific way of caring, acting and speaking to the created world with the intention of affirming, protecting, and restoring His right over creation and thereby the natural condition of creation and its honor” (Barth, 2008, p. 46). God is not distant or passive; He is actively involved in the world, and His transcendence is never detached from His immanence. Because God is omnipresent—fully present in every part of the universe—He can act instantly and effectively anywhere. His omnipresence, therefore, is inseparably linked to His lordship, expressed through His sovereign control and authoritative engagement with creation.

### **3. The Portrayal of Divine Omnipresence in Psalm 139**

Psalm 139, written by King David, is widely regarded as “the peak of the Psalter, the maturest individual faith in the Old Testament, and the clearest anticipation of the New. All the marks of intimate friendship—detailed knowledge, reading of minds, a hand on the shoulder to encourage or check—are here ascribed to God” (Elwell, 1989, p. 396). The psalm opens with the profound affirmation: “O Lord, you have searched me and known me” (NRSV v. 1), expressing David’s deep awareness of being fully known and seen by God, whose presence encompasses not only the present moment but the entirety of his existence—from the moment of conception in his mother’s womb.

James L. Mays observes that “the principal clue for the interpretation of Psalm 139 is given in the relationship between its opening declaration and concluding prayer. What the psalm confesses to be true at the beginning is sought again through appeal at the end” (Mays, 1994, p. 426). At the outset, David affirms God’s omnipresence and omniscience, and he quickly

acknowledges his own limitations before such divine perfections, declaring: "Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is so high that I cannot attain it" (NRSV v. 6). This recognition leads him into prayer, seeking divine guidance to live in accordance with God's will. The psalm's opening statement and concluding plea thus serve as a literary and theological inclusio, framing the entire composition as a unified meditation on the presence and knowledge of God. As Mays (1994, p. 426) explains, "The initial address and concluding request form a parenthesis around the whole psalm to indicate that the whole is a continuous unfolding of their one theme and concern."

Commenting on this psalm, Rudolf Kittel describes it as "half hymn, half didactic reflection on one of the most serious theological problems: that of the complete divine control over space and time" (cf. Kraus, 1993, p. 511). As noted in the introduction to this article, the Psalms not only contain doctrinal elements but also transcend them. Grogan observes: "The doctrine of God in the Psalms is found in the epithets and adjectival phrases used of him, but pre-eminently in his great named and titles. Psalms that emphasize the attributes of God, never do so in a cold and detached manner, but always by way of praising response by the people to all that he is" (Grogan, 2008, p. 304). Psalm 139 is among the finest examples of this dynamic.

John M. Frame highlights verses 7-10 of Psalm 139 as an explicit biblical teaching on the doctrine of omnipresence, illustrating with poetic power that there is no place where one can flee from God's presence, not in heaven, not in the depths, not at the ends of the sea:

David is not saying that God just happens to be wherever David chooses to go. Rather, David understands that the very nature of God as Lord makes him inescapable. The One who made and controls heaven and earth is necessarily present everywhere in the world he has made (Frame, 2013, p. 387).

David realizes that there is no place where he can escape from the presence of God. Whether in heaven or even in Sheol, at the farthest limits of the sea, or in the deepest darkness, God is present, fully capable of turning darkness into light. As one commentator notes, "God's profound knowledge implies His omnipresence, not viewed abstractly but in terms of constant personal encounter. This too can be either a threat or a comfort. God is not only in the heavens, but also in Sheol, the place of the dead – an unusual thought for the Old Testament" (Grogan, 2008, p. 216).

David's affirmation that God is present even in Sheol reveals the depth of his trust in God. The Almighty—his personal Lord—has the power to meet him anywhere, even in the most desperate and dark situations, and to rescue him from them. David's awareness of God's intimate involvement in his life is rooted in the conviction that God takes a personal interest in him. This is why Craig C. Broyles states, "Psalm 139 is perhaps the most intimate of psalms. It displays a striking awareness of God's interest in individuals" (Broyles, 1999,

p. 483). Returning to the earlier discussion in this article regarding the distinction between pantheism and biblical monotheism, we can say that Psalm 139 clearly affirms that the God whom David knows and praises is the one true God, the Creator of the universe, who is distinct from His creation. His omnipresence does not imply identity with the world but reveals His lordship over it and His gracious presence within it. Mays observes:

Psalm 139 is the most personal expression in Scripture of the Old Testament's radical monotheism. It is a doctrinal classic because it portrays human existence in all its dimensions in terms of God's knowledge, presence, and power. It reflects an understanding of the human as enclosed in divine reality (Mays, 1994, p. 425).

This manifestation of God's perfections is both beneficial and overwhelming for David. It inspires trust, yet it also places upon him the responsibility to live and act in a manner worthy of God's presence. As one commentator notes, "The poet has a strong sense of God's presence and, it is implied, his life has been lived in the light of this consciousness" (Allen, 1983, p. 648). There is no greater Lord, and there is no place where David can escape from His presence. God is present everywhere, at every moment in time and space, with the fullness of His being. Grogan states: "Verse 12 is a most apt expression of full monotheism: God sees all as light because He has total knowledge" (Grogan, 2008, p. 216). For David, therefore, living in the light of God's presence and knowledge also involves a deep exposure of the inner self. Nothing can remain hidden before such a God, and this awareness compels David to conclude his psalm with a heartfelt prayer of surrender and self-examination. He lays bare his thoughts before God, recognizing that only God can truly evaluate the condition of the human heart: "Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my thoughts. See if there is any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting." (NRSV Psalm 139:23-24). In this closing plea, David entrusts himself entirely to God's omniscient gaze, seeking not only revelation but also transformation, confident that the God who knows him completely also leads him faithfully on the path of life.

#### **4. Three Hermeneutical Keys for Approaching the Concept of Divine Omnipresence**

In this final section of the article, I will propose three hermeneutical keys that can help us, as human beings, to better approach, experience, and portray the concept of divine omnipresence (cf. Măcelaru, 2016, pp. 67–77; Măcelaru, 2011, pp. 107–124). These keys can also be understood as three essential attitudes we must adopt, or lenses we must wear, in order to engage theologically with such a complex and transcendent concept.

The first key is the acknowledgment of our human insufficiency or limitation. We can only experience God's presence in a limited way, never comprehensively. As Wayne Grudem explains:

In order to know any single thing about God exhaustively, we would need to know it as He Himself knows it. That is, we would have to know it in its relationship to everything else about God and in its relationship to everything else about creation throughout eternity! (Grudem, 2004, p. 154).

The desire to live in the reality of God's presence is legitimate—we hunger for it with our souls. Yet, as David exclaims, "Such knowledge is too wonderful for me; it is high, I cannot attain it" (NRSV Psalm 139:6). This same attitude of awe and humility should characterize our own approach. We acknowledge that we can never fully comprehend God's omnipresence, and that our knowledge will always be partial and dependent on divine grace.

The second key is revelation. Our understanding and portrayal of divine omnipresence is possible only to the extent that God chooses to reveal it. As Emil Brunner rightly affirms:

We perceive that even that apparently neutral idea of Omnipresence – namely, the exalted position of God above space – is not the starting point but the end, in so far as the right understanding of the exaltation of God above spatial distance can only be fully understood from the standpoint of the God who makes His Presence known to us in this revelation of Himself (Brunner, 1949, p. 261).

God's omnipresence is an objective reality, but our experiential awareness of it depends on God's self-disclosure. Unless God reveals Himself, we cannot fully benefit from His presence. Recognizing this, we are invited to pray and desire this revelation, as David does in the concluding verses of Psalm 139. Revelation is not something we control. It is a gift to be received through communion with God.

The third key is faith. We can only interpret, experience, and live in the presence of God when our theological reflections are grounded in faith. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer puts it:

The basis of all theology is the fact of faith. Only in the act of faith as a direct act is God recognized as the reality, which is beyond and outside of our thinking, of our whole existence. Theology, then, is the attempt to set forth what is already possessed in the act of faith (Bonhoeffer, 2013, p. 137).

David's theological reflection in Psalm 139 begins with bold statements of faith. He knows that God sees him, understands his thoughts, and is present in every corner of the universe. These are faith-filled declarations, not empirically verifiable claims. David cannot scientifically prove his affirmations – but he lives according to them, modeling a theology that flows from trust in God's revealed truth.

Together, limitation, revelation, and faith form a triad of hermeneutical keys that enable us to approach the mystery of divine omnipresence with

reverence, attentiveness, and confidence. They remind us that theology is not merely an intellectual pursuit (Rotaru, 2023, pp. 62-79), but a relational engagement with the living God who is present—even now—with all that He is.

## 5. Conclusion

This article presents a theological exploration of how King David portrays the divine in Psalm 139. His poetic and prayerful reflection stands as one of the most profound and intimate portrayals of divine omnipresence found in the entirety of Scripture. David's words reveal a deeply personal engagement with a transcendent God—one who is both infinite and near, sovereign and intimately involved in every detail of human existence.

The central theological question guiding this study has been: To what extent can a limited human being experience and construct a theological portrayal of the omnipresence of God? In seeking to answer this question, I examined the narrative structure and theological content of Psalm 139, alongside the insights of several key theologians who have reflected on the nature of God's presence and the human capacity to grasp it.

The conclusion reached is that a human being can offer a theological portrayal of Divine Omnipresence only in a limited way, never exhaustively. Any such portrayal is necessarily partial, mediated by human language, shaped by human experience, and dependent upon God's self-revelation. Yet, this limitation does not render the theological effort meaningless. On the contrary, it becomes an act of faith, an acknowledgment of our insufficiency, paired with a humble openness to the revelation God graciously provides.

In response to this insight, I proposed three hermeneutical keys that should guide any theological attempt to engage with such a vast and holy mystery: insufficiency—an honest recognition of our cognitive and spiritual limits in comprehending the fullness of God's being; revelation—an openness to the fact that knowledge of God's presence is a gift, not a human achievement; and faith—a posture of trust that allows us to speak meaningfully about God, even without exhaustive understanding. These keys are not methodological steps to "solve" the mystery of omnipresence, but rather attitudes of the heart and mind that enable a reverent, faithful, and theologically responsible engagement with it.

Ultimately, Psalm 139 does not offer a systematic doctrine, but a lived theology—a testimony of one who is known, searched, and held by the God who is everywhere present. It invites believers not merely to analyze God's omnipresence, but to enter into it, to be shaped by it, and to respond with wonder, obedience, and praise. In this way, David's portrayal continues to guide us in our own attempts to speak of—and live within—the mystery of the God who is always present, always knowing, and always near.



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