

Isagogical Notions on Psalm 139 – an Orthodox Perspective

Cătălin-Emanuel ȘTEFAN
„Babeș-Bolyai” University, Cluj-Napoca

Abstract: *Western theology often considers isagogy to be an end in itself. Though sometimes reticent, Orthodox discourse sees this science as a theological tool. To illustrate this reality, the article studies some isagogical elements specific to Psalm 139. The elements concerned are the psalm's author and its composition's historical context, which are closely related. Multiple author hypotheses are discussed, such as those of David, Zechariah, Adam, and Ezra. The possibility of an unknown author, singular or collective, is also discussed, a perspective specific to the Western approach. As for the context of the writing, the contexts of the characters above are analyzed, as well as the situation in which the psalm would belong to the exilic or post-exilic period. Responsibly practiced, isagogy enriches the understanding of the sacred text.*

Keywords: *Isagogy, Psalm 139, Author, Historical Context, Modern Criticism*

Preliminaries

If we were to give a more or less academic definition of the concept of isagogy, we would say that through this science we try to find out as much as we can about a given text. Thus, isagogy deals with several issues such as the author, the time and place of writing, authenticity, the evolution of the text, the literary genres present in the text, the purpose, etc.

Isagogy can be seen from several perspectives. Western scholarship often sees it as an end, so they attach so much importance to it. Over the past centuries, Western biblical scholars have usually put every element of the Bible through the filter of historical-critical analysis. Although there have been several tendencies over the years, as we shall see somewhat later, all these efforts have had in common the desire to find out the „true” nature of the sacred text. Although this constant rush has succeeded in providing a range of more or less relevant information, it has had several negative consequences, such as the desacralization of the biblical text. The Eastern part of Christianity had a different perspective on isagogy. Sometimes, it was either ignored altogether or treated very generically. These attitudes have been motivated mainly by the premise that such research has a limited and secondary purpose, i.e., the mere sounding out of information, which does little to help the true believer in the words of Scripture. Fortunately, for some time now, the Orthodox Church has understood that used with moderation and responsibility, the isagogical study of the biblical text does not overshadow its value but rather brings it into an even greater light. Moreover, even some of the essential patristic exegetes of the Bible had a similar perspective (i.e., Origen, John Chrysostom, or Jerome).

Subscribing to this view, we believe that investigating the framework behind a scriptural fragment can, on the one hand, give us a certain familiarity with the sacred text and, on the other hand, help us to understand better that the biblical text is not only relevant because of the divine dimension but also because of the human dimension that God Himself has assumed through inspiration. This can be seen in Scripture and its most minor subunits. To illustrate all this, we shall examine some isagogical aspects of Psalm 139, a biblical fragment with much to offer regarding its historical „background” and spiritual content. For practical reasons, we will limit our investigation to the psalm's author and the time of writing.

What does it mean to be an author?

For the modern reader, the relationship between the author and their work is as close as it gets. Every paper is permanently accompanied by the name of the person or collective that produced it, and those who publish appear in official lists alongside what they have written. Even a pseudonym does not conceal an identity but only gives a particular significance to the texts it accompanies. An anonymous creation seems unusual, perhaps even strange or untrustworthy. In the collective mind, the value of a text is not only in what it conveys but also in the „source” that provides it. For example, it is sometimes the case that a work is only considered „good” if it comes from a reputable person. Otherwise, it risks not being sufficiently credited. These issues make the status of „author” a matter of prestige and rigidity. This is why our reference to creations that belong to totally different times is sometimes forced or alien to the setting of the work. In what follows, we will look at several modern hypotheses, based on which we will try to highlight the difference between ancient and contemporary views of what it means to be an author¹.

The title is one element that can help determine the author of Psalm 139. We find four versions of the title. All mention King David, but each has a different nuance. The MT's title appears: „To the chief of the singers; a psalm of David.”² The Syriac version of the MT has one more mention than the Hebrew version: „To *David*, when a certain man named Shimei, the son of Gherah, cried out and reproached him for rebelling, saying: O thou bloody man.”³ Most of the LXX codices have a title similar to that in MT: „To the end; a psalm of David.”

¹ Stelian Pașca-Tușa, „Prolegomene la psalmul proniciei dumnezeiești (Ps 90) – repere ermineutice pentru înțelegerea demersului isagogic,” in *Mitropolitul Andrei – păstorul blând al Transilvaniei euharistică. Studii în onoare*, vol. 2, ed. Claudiu-Ioan Grama, Cluj-Napoca: Renașterea, 2019, p. 415-416.

² *Septuaginta. Psalmii, Odele, Proverbele, Ecclesiastul, Cântarea cântărilor*, vol. 4/I, eds. Cristian Bădiliță et al., București / Iași, Polirom, 2006, p. 326.

³ John M. Neale, Richard Frederick Littledale, *A Commentary on the Psalms: From Primitive and Mediaeval Writers and from the Various Office-books and Hymns of the Roman, Mozarabic, Ambrosian, Gallican, Greek, Coptic, Armenian, and Syrian Rites*, vol. 4, London, Joseph Masters Publishers, 1874, p. 311.

Codex Alexandrinus has, in addition, an exciting mention compared to the rest of the LXX manuscripts: „To the end; a psalm of/to *David*. A Psalm of Zechariah in the Diaspora.”⁴

Note that the main versions of the text present King David as the psalm's author (except for Codex Alexandrinus, which seems to say that the author is the prophet Zechariah). Both the rabbis⁵ and the Church Fathers⁶ have interpreted this literally and unanimously considered it sufficient reason for the psalm to be attributed to him. For this reason, we can say that these categories of exegetes speak of David's direct authorship in Psalm 139. Their opinion seems to be attested by other books of Holy Scripture, not only the Psalms. The historical books, although they do not speak of the actual writing of Psalm 139, describe in great detail the musical and cultic manifestations of the king. Thus, David is said to have been a good harp player from an early age (1 Sam 16:16-23) and to have been called „the sweet singer of Israel” (cf. 2 Sam 23:1), there is mention of musical instruments made by him (1 Chr 23:5; 2 Chr 29:26-27), some compositions that he sang in the context of sad (2 Sam 1:17; 3:33) or happy (2 Sam 22:1) events, and even *the first psalm of praise* that he wrote (1 Chr 16:7). In addition, chapters 23-26 of the first book of Chronicles describe at length how David reorganized the public worship of Israel. It is noteworthy that in these reforms, the king left his mark even in the form or perhaps even the rehearsal of the songs, as is evident from the following mention: „All these sang under their father in the temple of the Lord with cymbals, psalteries and harps, at the services in the temple of the Lord, *according to the teaching of David*, or Asaph, Jeduthun and Heman” (1 Chr 25:6).

However, Jewish commentators emphasize a particular nuance of Davidic authorship. They consider that the term מְנַצֵּחַ (*m'natséakh* – overseer, conductor, or, as it appears in classical Romanian translations, „the greatest of singers”) found in the title, as well as some statements in the psalm, fits the first

⁴ *Septuaginta. Psalmii*, p. 326.

⁵ „The Midrash on Psalms”, in *Yale Judaica Series*, vol. 12, eds. Leon Nemoy et al, New Haven, Yale University Press, 1959, p. 342; Norman H. Strickman, ed, *Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra's commentary on Books 3-5 of Psalms: Chapters 73-150*, New York, Tuoro College Press, 2016, p. 502; Avrohom Chaim Feuer, *Tehillim Psalms / a new translation with a commentary anthologized from Talmudic, Midrashic and Rabbinic sources*, vol. 5, New York, Mesorah Publications, 1996, p. 1634; Stelian Pașca-Tușa, „Psalm 1 – An Isagogic, Exegetical and Theological Interpretation (Part I)”, in *Studia Universitatis Babeș-Bolyai – Theologia Orthodoxa*, 2014, no. 1, p. 9. Stelian Pașca-Tușa și Liviu Vidican-Manci, „The Godly Light in Psalms – Theological Perspectives”, *Teologia*, 2020, no. 2, p. 116-136.

⁶ Teodoret de Cir, *Tălcuire a celor o sută cincizeci de psalmi ai proorocului împărat David*, trans. PS. Iosif al Argeșului, Sfânta Mănăstire Sfinții Sfinții Arhangheli Petru Vodă, 2003, p. 423; Cuv. Eftimie Zigabenu, Sf. Nicodim Aghioritul, *Psaltirea în tălcurile Sfinților Părinți*, vol. II, trans. Ștefan Voronca, Galați, Egumenița, 2006, p. 729; Ioan Chirilă, ed., *Introducere în Veciul Testamentul*, București, Basilica, 2015, p. 437; Stelian Pașca-Tușa, „Psalm 1 – An Isagogic”, p. 8-9; Stelian Pașca-Tușa și Bogdan Șoptorean, „The Book of Psalms in the Ascetic Practices of the Philokalic Fathers”, in *Orthodox Theology in Dialogue*, 2023, no. 9, p. 105-119.

created man much better than David. Therefore, the rabbinic tradition holds that Adam conceived the psalm, and David created its lyrical form⁷. Thus, from the rabbinic perspective, Davidic authorship applies only to the form of Psalm 139, not to its content or originality.

Modern criticism takes a different view of the author of the psalm. Scholars of the last two centuries say that the psalm's title should not be interpreted literally⁸. From their perspective, the wording **לְדָוִד** (*le-David* – for David) in the title is an uncertain reference that can have several meanings. It is considered that the analyzed phrase does not present David as the one who composed the psalm but instead as the one to whom it is dedicated⁹. At the same time, it is not excluded that the mention of David in the title might suggest that David indirectly left some imprint on the tone or style of his writing or even that the psalm was inspired by the cultic repertoire of his time. However, modern scholars are keen to emphasize that the historical books that speak of David's religious reform (books of Samuel and Chronicles) are from the post-exilic period and, therefore, the above-mentioned „imprint” is, for them, uncertain¹⁰. We note that modern scholars opt for an *indirect authorship of David* on the psalm. They see its mention in the title „as a way in which the ancients linked the biblical writings to a suitable, well-known and inspired biblical personality, thus confirming the divine inspiration and authority of these writings.”¹¹

Other scholars have hypothesized that the mention of the king in the title is closely related to the general idea of the fifth book. They believe that the psalms that make up Book IV (Psalms 90-106) were written while the Jewish people were in Babylonian exile and that the psalms in Book V (107-150) were written after their return from exile. In the view of scholars, the authors of the Final Psalms used the image of King David to awaken hope in the hearts of the people recently freed from bondage that Israel would regain the glory it had enjoyed during his reign. Thus, the king's name symbolizes hope for national restoration rather than a testimony to his influence on the Psalms¹².

Whatever the relationship between David as a historical person and this psalm, it is a certainty for modern scholars that there is insufficient evidence to attribute authorship to him. They fix the writing of the psalm much later, by *an unknown individual author, male or female*¹³, or perhaps even by *a collective author*.

⁷ Avrohom Chaim Feuer, *Tebillim Psalms*, p. 1634.

⁸ Alexander F. Kirkpatrick, *The Book of Psalms*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1912, p. 786.

⁹ *Septuaginta, Psalmii*, p. 45.

¹⁰ Fred Skolnik, Michael Berenbaum, eds, *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, vol. 16, Farmington Hills, Macmillan Reference USA, 2007, p. 669.

¹¹ Adele Berlin, Marc Zvi Brettler, *The Jewish Study Bible*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2004, p. 1282.

¹² Nancy L. de Claissé-Walford, *Reading from the Beginning. The Shaping of the Hebrew Psalter*, Macon, Mercer University Press, 1997, p. 97.

¹³ Konrad Schaefer, *Psalms*, Collegeville, The Liturgical Press, 2001, p. 326.

Because the psalm is linguistically, intellectually, and theologically sophisticated, Erhard S. Gerstenberger believes that the author could not have been an ordinary person but a learned man¹⁴. Scholars generally say that the author lived in the exilic or post-exilic period,¹⁵ and see the addition to the title in the Codex Alexandrinus (*A Psalm of Zechariah in the Diaspora*) as a testimony to this fact, even if they do not identify the psalm's author with the prophet Zechariah¹⁶.

Michael D. Goulder's view is also enjoyable. He believes that the author of the psalm is a Jewish leader trying to impose an essential reform amid the people¹⁷. The psalm seems to show that his reforms are opposed by „sinners”, „bloodshed men” who, in opposing the psalmist's reforms, are opposing God¹⁸. M. Goulder proposes the identification of the psalmist with Ezra¹⁹, who led the second wave of Jews returning from Babylon to Judea. We will analyze M. Goulder's argument at length later.

The challenges of establishing a historical context for the emergence

At the isagogical level, the notion of the author does not stand on its own but goes hand in hand with that of historical context. Every author, whatever his or her identity, lived and wrote at a particular moment in history. Through its opportunities, challenges, and specificities, this period has left its mark on the author's condition and the work he or she has produced. Therefore, research into the authorship could be truncated if the historical context behind the text in question is not addressed.

Western research has often started from the premise that the Psalms cannot be dated individually²⁰. However, since the nineteenth century, literature has attempted to assign a temporal writing segment to each psalm, sometimes even to distinct verses. In the case of this psalm, dating could be done according to title, position in the Psalter, language, and content.

Those who consider the information provided by the title of Psalm 139 place its writing during the reign of King David. Modern archaeological research

¹⁴ Erhard S. Gerstenberger, *Psalms*, vol. 2, Grand Rapids, William. B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2001, p. 406.

¹⁵ W. Brueggemann and W. H. Bellinger Jr, *Psalms*, New York, Cambridge University Press, 2014, p. 582.

¹⁶ Alexander Kirkpatrick, *The Book of Psalms*, p. 786.

¹⁷ Michael Goulder, *The Psalms of the Return (Book V, Psalms 107-150)*, Sheffield, Sheffield Academic Press, 1998, p. 241.

¹⁸ Michael Goulder, *The Psalms of the Return*, p. 246.

¹⁹ Michael Goulder, *The Psalms of the Return*, p. 247.

²⁰ Geoffrey Wigoder, *Enciclopedia Iudaismului*, trans. R. Lupan and G. Weiner, Bucharest, Hasefer, 2006, p. 540.

says that he reigned between 1010-970 BC²¹. The psalm must also have been written towards the end of the 11th century or early 10th century BC. This view of when the psalm was written is specific to rabbinic and patristic traditions.

The addition in the Syriac version of the title (*when a certain man named Shimei, the son of Gherab, cried out and rebuked him for rebelling, saying: O thou bloody man*) might help date the psalm. Although this mention occurs only in the Syriac text (and is thus a singular case), it is not foreign to how the psalms are written. In the MT, the titles of the thirteen Psalms refer to such details from the life of David²². In the LXX, the titles of five more psalms are added, making a total of eighteen titles giving details of a supposed time when David composed that song. Examples are Psalm 3 („when he fled from the presence of his son Absalom”²³), Psalm 33 („when he changed his countenance before Ahimelech, and was let go and departed,”²⁴), Psalm 50 („when Nathan the prophet came to him to rebuke him for the time when he had gone into Bathsheba, the wife of Uriah”²⁵), etc. Our addendum refers to the episode described in 2 Sam 16:5-8: „And when King David came to Bahurim, there went out from there *a man of the family of the house of Saul, Shimei the son of Gerab. And he cursed, throwing stones at David and all David's servants; all the people and fighting men were on the king's right hand and his left. 'Go away, go away, you murderer and lawless one', said Shimei, cursing the king. The Lord has turned upon you all the blood of the house of Saul, in whose place you have made yourself king, and the Lord has given the kingdom into the hand of your son Absalom; and behold, you are in trouble because you are a bloodbatb*”. The quoted passage describes an incident when David left Jerusalem with his men, not to meet his son Absalom. According to the second book of Kings, the conflict with Absalom and the encounter with Shimei occurred towards the end of David's reign. Therefore, considering the Syriac version of the title, we could feel the psalm to have been written more precisely in the *first half of the tenth century BC*. However, we have no guarantee as to the veracity of the information given by this variant of the title; therefore, if one accepts the direct Davidic authorship, then the idea remains that the psalm was written during his reign, without being able to say whether at the beginning or the end of it.

Modern criticism assigns a different date to Psalm 139. Although there is more than one opinion, scholars over the last two centuries assign a much later date for writing the psalm. In the 19th century, the idea was popularized that the Psalms were a creation of the Maccabean period. This would indirectly suggest that Psalm 139 was also written in the 2nd century BC. This view is based on the

²¹ David M. Carr, Colleen M. Conway, *An Introduction to the Bible: Sacred Texts and Imperial Contexts*, Hoboken, Wiley-Blackwell Publishers, p. 58.

²² Vladimir Prelipcean et al., *Studiul Vechiului Testamentului pentru Facultățile de Teologie*, Cluj-Napoca, Renașterea, 2003, p. 290.

²³ *Septuaginta. Psalmii*, p. 45.

²⁴ *Septuaginta. Psalmii*, p. 111.

²⁵ *Septuaginta. Psalmii*, p. 148.

idea that it was only in that period that the Israelites were genuinely monotheistic²⁶.

Twentieth-century scholars have wholly rethought the dating of the Psalms. They abandoned the premise of so-called late Jewish monotheism and turned their attention to a more detailed study of the content and language of the Psalms. Their research has revealed that the Masoretic version of the Psalms does not exhibit a purely Jewish language, with many Aramaic words and expressions²⁷. At the same time, their language has evolved more than other holy writings, which could indicate that they were written later. In addition, significant similarities have also been found between the book of Psalms and other Old Testament books. Considering these similarities and the possibility of the late writing of the Psalms, it has been concluded that the other holy books influenced the composition of the Psalms. Therefore, in addition to other methods, some twentieth-century scholars have proposed dating the Psalms according to the books with which they bear similarities.

Pierre E. Bonnard has noted the influence of the book of the Prophet Jeremiah on thirty-three psalms (including our psalm), both in terms of their language and their „spirituality”. In the case of Psalm 139, Frank Lothar Hossfeld and Erich Zenger found four significant similarities. The text of Jer 1:5 („Before I conceived you in the womb I knew you”) and verse 16 of the psalm („Your eyes have known my uncirculated ones”) offer the same picture of divine omniscience and divine foreknowledge, the two passages differing only in that the former gives the perspective of the Creator and the latter the perspective of creation. The text of Jer 17:10 („I, the Lord, pierce the heart and try the reins”) has its counterpart in the sapiential language of the psalm. Man's need for God to do him justice in the face of his enemies is rendered in almost the same way both in Jer 12:3 („You know me, O Lord, you see me and search me, and whether my heart is with you”) and in verse 23 of our psalm („Search me, O Lord, and know my heart”). The antithesis between man's wrong paths and the right path that God Himself shows him is present in Jer 6:16 („Stop from your ways! Look and inquire into the ways of the ancients, the good way, and walk in it”). Jer 18:14 („he has stumbled in his ways, and forsaken the old paths, and walked in the paths of old, and the paths of the ungodly”), is also found in the last two verses of the Psalm („try me and know my paths, and see that the way of wickedness is in me, and direct me in the way everlasting”)²⁸. In addition to all this, Michael D.

²⁶ „Critical scholarship in the 19th century generally regarded the Psalms as the product of the Maccabean-Hasmonean era. This view was grounded in the conviction of the late development of pure monotheism in Israel with its concomitant that the Psalms postdated the prophets.” Fred Skolnik, *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, vol. 16, p. 667.

²⁷ Alexander Kirkpatrick, *The Book of Psalms*, p. 786.

²⁸ Frank Lothar Hossfeld, Erich Zenger, *Psalms*, vol. 3, trans. Linda M. Maloney, Minneapolis, Fortress Press, 2011, p. 545-546.

Goulder notes another essential similarity with the book of Jeremiah. God's statement in Jer 23:23-24 („But I am God only from near, says the Lord, and I am not God from afar? Can a man hide in a secret place where I cannot see him? Do I not fill heaven and earth, says the Lord?”) has its counterpart in the Psalmist's statement in verses 7-8 („Where shall I flee from your Spirit and your face? If I ascend into heaven, You are there. If I descend into hell, You are before me”)²⁹. Suppose all these textual similarities are considered to be influences of Jeremiah's writing. In that case, one can also conclude that the „sinners” spoken of in verses 19-22 are not the enemies of the Psalmist but rather the Babylonians and Jews who opposed the words of the prophet in question. Taking all these details into account, some scholars have hypothesized that Psalm 139 was composed either *during the lifetime of the prophet Jeremiah*³⁰ (650-570 BC³¹) or *immediately afterward*³².

At the same time, many more or less significant similarities with the book of Job have also been found in our psalm. The imagery in verse 5 of Psalm 139 (which would read „You have fenced me in”³³ and „You have laid Your hand upon me”) seems to echo that of Job 19:8 („He has stopped up my way so that I shall not pass over”) and Job 9:33 („There is no third between us who lays his hand upon us both”). The reason for the „marvelous things” and the awe they cause the beholder appears in Job 42:3 and verses 14 of our Psalm. The image of creation in verses 13-16 is similar to that of Job 10:9 („Remember that you have made me from the earth and that you will turn me to dust”). The idea that man's days are well known and numbered from Job 14:5 („For his days are measured, and you know the number of his months”) also appears in verse 16 of our psalm („day by day they will be fulfilled, and not one of them will be unwritten”).³⁴ Both the psalmist in verse 19 („O that thou wouldst slay sinners, O God!”) and Job in chapter 24 („Why are the times of recompense hidden from the Almighty, and those who do not know him have not seen his days of judgment?”) are puzzled by the leniency God shows toward the wicked. In addition to these familiar images, the similarity between the two scriptures is also found in the vocabulary. The term אֱלֹהֵיָהּ (Elóah – God) appears frequently in the Book of Job, but only four times in the Book of Psalms, and one of these is in verse 19. Likewise, the Hebrew form of קָטַל (qatal – to kill) occurs only four times in the Old Testament: twice in the Book of Job (13:15 and 24:14), in Psalm 139:19 and Hag 1:9. In the

²⁹ Michael Goulder, *The Psalms of the Return*, p. 243.

³⁰ Samuel Terrien, *The Psalms: Strophic structure and Theological commentary*, Grand Rapids, William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2003, p. 880-881

³¹ Ioan Chirilă, *Introducere în Vechiul Testament*, p. 555.

³² Leopold Sabourin, *The Psalms: Their Origin and Meaning*, Eugene, Wipf & Stock Publishers, 1974, p. 21.

³³ Artur Weiser, *The Psalms*, trans. Herbert Harwell, Philadelphia, The Westminster Press, 1962, p. 799-800.

³⁴ Michael Goulder, *The Psalms of the Return*, p. 243-5.

other writings of the Holy Scriptures, in particular the book of the prophet Daniel, only the Aramaic form occurs. Given all this, Alexander F. Kirkpatrick considers that the appearance of our psalm must be linked to the appearance of the Book of Job but does not propose a date³⁵. Some suggest the 7th century as the time of the writing of this book. Following the logic proposed by A. Kirkpatrick, one might think that Psalm 139 was also written in the same period³⁶. However, most scholars instead opt for the last quarter of the 6th century BC³⁷, hence the psalm was composed after 525 BC. This also seems to be attested by adding the psalm title in the Codex Alexandrinus („A Psalm of Zechariah in the Diaspora”). The prophet Zechariah lived in the second half of the sixth century and was active from 520 BC³⁸, coinciding with the proposed dating of the Book of Job and, thus, of our psalm. However, the dating of the psalm, according to Zechariah's life, is an exercise of imagination rather than a scientific method since it does not start from substantial premises.

Michael D. Goulder's view of the author may also be significant. He believes that the psalm portrays an agitated political atmosphere similar to that described in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. M. Goulder identifies arguments for this supposition in the LXX and the other versions, even if there are textual differences between them. Thus, he says that the psalmist seems to be a Jewish leader attempting to bring about reform among the people, but his endeavours meet opposition from a corrupt society. The term רשע (translated as *sinner*) in verse 19 is generally thought to render a plural form, but M. Goulder understands it in the singular. He, therefore, speaks of a principal person who opposes the reforms, regarded as a „sinner” who is surrounded by an entourage of armed men, referred to by the psalmist as „the men of bloodshed” (v. 19). They all claim to worship the true God. Still, in reality, they „blaspheme his name” and are therefore considered God's „enemies” (v. 20). As the psalmist wants to purify society, they all become his enemies, whom he cannot but hate with „hatred of the perfect hatred” (vv. 21-22) because in opposing his reforms, they also oppose God's will. M. Goulder draws a parallel between this situation described in the psalm and the return of the first Jews from Babylonian bondage. If we consider that the reforming leader could be Ezra, then the primary opponent could be the high priest Jehohanan or another descendant (cf. Neh 12:10-11) of the high priest Joshua, son of Jehozadak (Zech 6:11). He was both priest and leader of the remaining Jewish community in Judea. His authority was due to the Persians and the fact that he came from a very important priestly family. He had armed men

³⁵Alexander Kirkpatrick, *The Book of Psalms*, p. 786.

³⁶Mitchell S. J. Dahood, *Psalms*, in *The Anchor Yale Bible* 17A, New York, Doubleday Publishers, 1970, p. 285.

³⁷Fred Skolnik, Michael Berenbaum, eds, *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, vol. 11, Farmington Hills, Macmillan Reference USA, 2007, p. 351.

³⁸Ioan Chirilă, *Introducere în Vechiul Testament*, p. 698.

around him, who appeared to be „men of bloodshed”. The high priest and his men still kept the faith of Israel but had adopted practices that were not in keeping with their faith, such as marrying foreign women. Ezra wants to eliminate these foreign practices and restore the purity of the Law among the people. Because the high priest does not recognize the true Law, he is considered the „sinner” who blasphemes God and blasphemes his name. Therefore, he is considered not only the enemy of the Lord but also of Ezra³⁹. In addition to all these details, M. Goulder notices another textual peculiarity that seems to support his idea. He refers to the unvocalized term עריריך present in verse 20. This has been interpreted differently by those who have translated or further transmitted the contents of the psalm. Most versions of the text (the Ancient Greek translations of Aquila and Symmachus, the Latin translation of Jerome, and the Targums) ascribe to the term the meaning of „Thine enemies”. The exact meaning is found in 1Sam 28:16, Sir 37:5 and Sir 47:7. However, in the LXX, the term has been translated by the phrase „Your cities” (*τας πολεις σου*)⁴⁰. Thus, according to this version, verse 20 would read: „For thou shalt say in thought, They will take away thy cities to destruction”⁴¹. Sometimes in Holy Scripture, Jerusalem is symbolized by the people of Israel, as in Isa 1:21 („How has the faithful and righteous *city* become like a wicked one?”). Because Psalm 139 speaks in the LXX of *cities* and not of a city, M. Goulder believes that at the time of its writing, Jerusalem was still partially rebuilt, and its population was living in smaller settlements, as at the time of Ezra's arrival in Judea. In this vein, the phrase „they shall take away your cities to destruction” reinforces the hypothesis that the „sinners” of verse 19 (i.e., the high priest and his men) not only distort Israel's faith and oppose Ezra's reforms but also attempt to impose their foreign practices on the cities they rule. It is also significant that M. Goulder believes that the rendering of the conflict between Ezra and the local leaders begins in Psalm 139 and stretches through Psalm 145⁴². If M. Goulder's hypothesis is accurate, we can believe that the psalm was written in the post-exilic period, after Ezra arrived in Judea, i.e., from 457 BC⁴³.

Other scholars speak of the fact that it is more likely that the Psalms have a very ancient substrate and that the present form was composed at any time during the Second Temple period⁴⁴, mainly between the 6th and 3rd centuries BC. This applies to section V of the Book of Psalms and, thus, implicitly to our psalm.

³⁹ „The high priest was a wicked man, like the Wicked Priest in the Qumran documents, because he did not observe the true Law. He uttered God's name for his own purposes, and seduced God's towns into vanity. He is thus God's enemy, and so will be Ezra's”. Michael Goulder, *The Psalms of the Return*, p. 247.

⁴⁰ Michael Goulder, *The Psalms of the Return*, p. 241.

⁴¹ *Septuaginta. Psalmii*, p. 328-9.

⁴² Michael Goulder, *The Psalms of the Return*, p. 247.

⁴³ Ioan Chirilă, *Introducere în Vechiul Testament*, p. 366.

⁴⁴ Fred Skolnik, *Encyclopaedia Judaica*, vol. 16, p. 668.

It must also be said that, in general, specialists are reluctant to date the Psalm.⁴⁵ Those who do, however, prefer to give a time frame rather than an exact moment, which would be the *exilic or post-exilic period*⁴⁶.

Conclusions

Studying the two isagogical elements, namely the author and the historical context of its appearance, we see that Psalm 139 is much more complex than it might seem at first sight. Beyond the information such an analysis provides, the isagogical approach can give even greater familiarity with the sacred text.

As for the author, it has been attributed to several biblical personalities throughout the ages, such as David (the most widespread opinion due to his mention in the title), Adam (some rabbis), Zechariah (some Church Fathers, due to his mention in the Codex Alexandrinus) or Ezra (Michael D. Goulder's opinion). Modern scholars, however, think that there is not enough evidence to attribute the psalm to a specific personality, and they are content to speak of a learned, perhaps even a collective, author.

Attempts to date Psalm 139 are often closely related to the author's perspective. If direct Davidic authorship is accepted, we may conclude that this song appeared around 1000 BC. Suppose one agrees with the authorship of some exilic or post-exilic personality (such as Zechariah or Ezra). In that case, we may believe the psalm was written between the 6th-5th centuries BC. The many similarities between our psalm and the books of Job and Jeremiah, generally dated around the same period, may be taken as arguments for this view. Some modern scholars point to the fact that the Psalms present a much more sophisticated language than other books and, therefore, consider them to belong to the post-exilic period in general.

Knowing all this, it is necessary to emphasize that for Orthodox theology, the research of this historical information is not an end but only a tool for a better understanding the text in question and its connection with the rest of Scripture. The isagogical approach, practiced with responsibility to our faith, following the example of great patristic exegetes, can lend credibility and faithfulness to Orthodox theological discourse. In studying Psalm 139, we have tried to show that a text already rich in theological and spiritual content can be even more valuable if we know some of the issues behind it.

⁴⁵ Arthur Weiser, *The Psalms*, p. 802; Alexander Kirkpatrick, *The Book of Psalms*, p. 786.

⁴⁶ Leopold Sabourin, *The Psalm*, p. 24; Erhard Gerstenberger, *Psalms*, p. 406; W. Brueggemann, W. H. Bellinger Jr., *Psalms*, p. 582; Geoffrey Wigoder, *Enciclopedia Iudaismului*, p. 541.