Body Imagery in Psalm 139 and its Significance for a Biblical Anthropology[1]

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Vor dem Hintergrund der modernen Debatte um den Körper zwischen Fitness und Cyberspace mag ein Blick in das Alte Testament anachronistisch erscheinen. Anhand von Psalm 139 lässt sich jedoch zeigen, dass der Körper als psychosomatische Einheit aufgefasst wurde und keineswegs eine Dichotomie zwischen Denken und Fühlen bestand. Das in Psalm 139 und in weiteren biblischen Schriften zum Ausdruck kommende Körperkonzept ist grundlegend für eine Bestimmung der Menschen als soziale Wesen und vermag auch eine personale Gottesbeziehung zu integrieren. Es relativiert das dichotomische Menschenbild der christlichen Tradition und verhindert sowohl eine Abwertung als auch eine geistlose Fragmentierung des Körpers.

In the West the body is booming. It is brought into shape, tanned, adorned. It has to be beautiful, powerful, youthful – fit for fun. If it doesn't function properly, there are pills to help it along, or parts are replaced. In October 2000 the respected German weekly newspaper "Die Zeit" started a series of articles dealing with the human body. The first of these articles was called "The human body is a building site". Its author, Simon Golin, refers to a poll conducted by a well-known German opinion research institute, according to which a clear majority of respondents were in favour of routine procedures such as heart transplants and artificial insemination; 21 per cent would welcome the improvement of brain performance by implanting a microchip into the brain. No less than four percent would even consider having their own head put on a stranger's body.

In Western Europe there exists something of a post-modern cult about the body somewhere between the gym and cyberspace. In the same newspaper, Gabriele Klein, a sociologist, argues that a person cannot position himself or herself socially without a body, and she finds the increasing fear that the body may disappear as a result of digital communication totally unfounded. But she, too, calls for a "reformulation of the moral-ethical, political, aesthetic, medical-technological and social ground rules for determining what constitutes a human body".[2]

What then can Christian theology contribute to the scientific discourse about the body, and thus to an understanding of humankind? Considering the current discussions about the body it is worthwhile to turn to the Bible, especially since there exist broad generalizations of a

Christian subordination of the body – as for example Lisa Isherwood and Elizabeth Stuart show in their feminist Introduction to Body Theology.[3]

This paper aims at illustrating with the help of Psalm 139, what the implications of the discussion of the body are and what part it plays in the determination of what it is to be a human being. It consists of four parts. First of all, there is a brief look at some books or texts focusing on the topics of corporeality and the concept of humankind. Secondly, the paper deals with the structure of Psalm 139, followed by an interpretation taking into account the body metaphors, and finally their significance for a biblical view of humankind will be discussed.

Research theses on the biblical concept of humankind and body

As a collection of originally Hebrew and Greek writings the Bible provides a wealth of literary differing texts describing people in various situations and stages in their lives. In three textual areas of the Old Testament there are fundamental reflections on human existence: in the creation narratives in Genesis 1-3, which have become the main points of reference of all discussions about the human condition both in the Bible and in the Christian tradition; secondly in wisdom literature; and finally in many psalms, for instance Psalm 139, which focus on the relationship between the psalmist and God, or fellow human beings.

In its attempt to define what makes a person a human being, the Christian-dogmatic tradition has almost exclusively concentrated on the discussion of Genesis 1-3 which describes man and woman being created in the image of God, and in their sinfulness.[4] Many interpretations of this text associate the body with lust and sinfulness and it is often the female body that became a symbol of flesh and thus the invocation of evil.[5]

Old Testament exegesis, however, has taken note of the body–related concepts used in Gen 1. It is the starting point of the well-known study by Hans Walter Wolff on the "Anthropology of the Old Testament" which was first published in 1973 and is available today in its 6th, hardly changed, edition and in many translations.[6] As an "anthropological grammar"[7] Wolff introduces four Hebrew body-related expressions, and develops their multi-layered levels of meaning. They are נפֶשׁ "throat, neck, desire, soul, life, person", בשָׂר flesh, body, kinship, weakness", רוּח "wind, breath, vitality, spirit, disposition/character, willpower" and finally לבב or לב "heart, feeling, wish, reason, decision".[8] Wolff successfully disassociates these concepts from a long received, but restrictive translation as well as from modern associations. Wolff's Protestant perspective is of course apparent in the way he deals with "seeing and hearing" in § 9, which is entitled "The nature of man": although the

eyes are mentioned 868 times in the Old Testament, Wolff does not deal with them in detail. The ear, on the other hand, which is mentioned only 187 times, is stressed by Wolff and he writes: “Man cannot truly see himself in a mirror, but in the call which goes out to him, and in the promise, he receives”.[9] The theological position expressed here is clearly inspired by the so-called Dialectic Theology which came up in Germany in the 1920s. Its most important representative is Karl Barth. Throughout his book Wolff continuously emphasises, like Barth, God’s un-availability, his being completely different.[10]

Although Wolff introduces a new perspective to biblical anthropology, he is not sensitive to gender issues. In his characterisation of human existence, he focuses on the male. Women are explicitly spoken of only under the topic of sexuality and human reproduction.[11] Speaking about the inner parts of the body, a mother’s womb is mentioned en passant whereas Wolff concentrates on all the words that are euphemistically applied to the male genitals.[12] Even if one does not blame Wolff for these gaps, as his work came out in 1973, I wonder why it is published until the present day without alteration or even a comment on this matter.

In their study of biblical body symbolism published in 1998, Silvia Schroer and Thomas Staubli, both Roman Catholic theologians living in Switzerland, try to integrate the concept of body into the world of the Old Testament and the Ancient Near East.[13] By specifically reverting to Latin American Liberation Theology and feminist perspectives, and against the traditionally body-subordinating interpretation, they attempt to develop a “biblical spirituality of the body”[14]. In contrast to Wolff’s “hearing” they emphasise the “seeing”. The book sets out the thesis that the Hebrew concept of humankind and the world is founded both on the language and literature, as well as the iconography of its time. Unlike Wolff they also quote New Testament texts and reject any systematisation, albeit at the expense of a summary of their results. Thus they draw a colourful picture of the human body and its gendered existence and they argue against its subordination and oppression.

In the same vein the already mentioned English scholars Lisa Isherwood and Elizabeth Stuart see the body from a feminist perspective.[15] Although their work does not focus on body parts or biblical texts they highly esteem the body language of the bible. Both authors aim at showing that the body is a positive symbol of Christian belief.

Thus, in Western scholarship it is mainly the feminist perspective that started a new discourse on the body. Some thoughts on Psalm 139 may contribute to that discourse. This prayer expresses an intimate relationship with God focusing on body parts and their function

and it shows that the two areas which are separated in the Protestant tradition, thinking and feeling, can be expressed synthetically and in a body-related language.

The structure of Psalm 139

Psalm 139 is considered one of the "theologically most interesting texts … of the Old Testament psalter"[16], and yet at the same time it is one of its most controversial prayers. The person praying comments on his or her relationship with God, who is described as all-knowing and all-embracing. The prayer turns from an absolute trust in God's closeness (verses 1-6) to thoughts of flight (verses 7-12) and remembrance of being created by God (verses 13-17) and it ends with a fearful plea, that God may test mind and heart throughout (verses 23-24).

On behalf of the psalm's genre, there have been suggestions reaching from hymn[17] to a song of an individual's trust in God[18], a wisdom psalm[19] or a lament by a defendant[20]. While some people see in it a subjective prayer, characterized by individual experience, others praise its general appeal to all, and its universality.

The speaker of the psalm deserves a short preliminary remark. At first sight it is not clear if the subject (the "I") of the psalm is a man or a woman. Since I would like to call into question the common linguistic inclusion of the female in masculine forms – even though they are meant to be inclusive – I shall refer to the male or female psalmist. I shall come back to the question of whether the gender can be decided upon at a later point.

As far as the structure of the psalm is concerned, two parts can be distinguished, namely verses 1-18 and verses 19-24.[21] The first part deals solely with the relationship between the one praying and YHWH. In the second part negative sensitivities and actions accumulate, whilst the body imagery almost completely fades. In verse 19 a wish is expressed towards YHWH for the first time and a third person, the sinner, is mentioned. Furthermore, this verse contains a massive desire for revenge.

There is an inclusion between verse 1b and verses 23-24, which is marked by the use of several key words: "you have searched me and known me" (verse 1b) and: "search me and know my heart" (verse 23a). If verse 23 is taken to be part of the psalm both formally and as regards content, the question arises as to whether verses 19-22 have been inserted later.[22] One aspect in favour of this assumption is the fact that verse 23 can be joined seamlessly to verse 18, as the awakening mentioned in this verse prepares a resumption of the dialogue with God in verse 23. An argument against this assumption arises from the difficulty of explaining why at the end the person praying asks to be tested, and why he himself is unsure

of the right way. A reason is provided by verses 19-22, as they show by their dramatic disassociation from the so-called sinners that the person praying considers him- or herself in a hostile situation, and in this situation he or she asks God for a decision. A glance at the communication structure shows that verses 19-22 also fit formally into the relationship between God and the person praying:

Regarding the direction of speech, three sections can be distinguished within verses 1-18, the first part of the psalm: verses 1-6 are dominated by an "I-You" relationship, in verses 7-12 the "I" prevails and in verses 13-18 the "You-I" structure is emphasised once more. Verses 19-20 set the You in relation to – neutrally speaking – outsiders. Verses 21-22 pick out the relation of this "I" with these people as a central theme. Finally, verses 23-24 return to the "You-I" relationship and thus to the starting point. This relationship structure is emphasised by the trenchant relationship of the body-related terms to the persons named by means of possessive suffixes or pronouns: *my* tongue, *your* hand, *your* countenance, *my* kidneys and so on.

As far as the verb forms used are concerned it is worth noting that verses 1-5 describe concluded, perfected actions using the perfect tense and narrative form from the point of view of the person speaking, whilst verses 7-12, with the exception of verse 11a, advise of imperfective actions which are not yet finished, and still going on.[23] This means that the person praying relates to statements which for her have become a reality when she speaks of YHWH's all-embracing knowledge in verses 1-5. In verses 7-12 on the other hand, she deliberates the current possibilities of her actions and their effects on her relationship with God.

The Body Imagery in Psalm 139

In verses 1-6 the person praying picks out as a central theme the fact that her whole life, every movement and every thought, is known and familiar to God.

1b O LORD, you have searched me and known me.
2 You have known when I sit down and when I rise up;
you have discerned my thoughts from far away.
3 You have searched out my path and my lying down,
and are acquainted with all my ways.
4 Even before a word is on my tongue (לשׁון)
O LORD, you did know it completely.
5 You have hemmed me in, behind and before,

and layed the palm of your hand (כף) upon me.

6 Such knowledge is too difficult for me;
it is too high that I cannot attain it.

The verbs used in these verses, ישׁב "to sit down" and קום "to get up" are reminiscent of Israel's creed in Deuteronomy 6:4: YHWH's commandments, the passage says, are to be talked about when sitting down and when getting up (6:7). The tongue (לשׁון) in verse 4 stands pars pro toto for the power of communication, speech and language, and thus has an eminently social function. The tongue expresses both life-promoting and life-hostile speech, and this antithesis is a central theme especially of the wisdom literature and the psalms; the wicked people, the godless and the so-called "strange woman" have "smooth" tongues, they talk flatteringly and falsely,[24] whilst the just and wise as well as Lady Wisdom are noted by their pure speech[25]. It is therefore one of the aims of wisdom teaching to recognise false speech by judging the deeds of the speakers.[26] Unlike human beings who can only measure the words of their fellow human beings by their actions, God, according to verse 4, knows a person's words before they are uttered.

Up to the present verses 1-5 have been interpreted in two opposite ways. Does the close relationship between the person praying and God express a feeling of security and divine protection? Or is it proof of a fundamental despair of God[27] which provokes thoughts of escape? Due to the parallel with Deuteronomy 6 and the use of the adjective "wonderful" in verse 6 the psalm is very often interpreted as a hymn celebrating God's closeness. However, the evaluation of a life which is completely open to God's scrutiny is negative from the point of view of the person praying: the verb צור "you hemmed me" used in verse 5 is normally only used for warlike encircling or: surrounding and besieging,[28] the "behind and before" makes it impossible for the psalmist to move in a horizontal direction, renders him incapable of going on, to go on his way, and to rest as he sees fit. The laying on of hands in this context is not a gesture conveying blessing, but prevents the psalmist's movement in a "vertical" direction: YHWH's hand rests heavily on him, even presses him down. Human as well as divine actions are concentrated in the hands. They can be creative and destructive, powerful and violent. In the Old Testament the hand is thus very often a symbol for power and its literally shattering effect is clearly emphasised in verse 5.

The connation of the adjective פליאה in verse 6, often translated as "wonderful", is also significant. The underlying verb which also occurs in verse 14 usually has the meaning "too difficult, not intelligible"[29] when used together with the preposition מן and a personal

pronoun, as in this case. Thus, read from verse 5, the first section of the psalm does not end in wonder but in despair.

7 Where can I go from your breath (רוח)?
Or where can I flee from your face (פנים)?
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 dawn
and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,
10 even there your hand (יד) shall lead me,
and your right hand (ימין) 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.

The terminology in verses 7-12 also fluctuates between the feeling of security and the fear of persecution: the introductory questions contain thoughts of flight, the person praying wants to "flee" (בחר, verse 7b) "from the face of God". Here the psalm formulates a paradox, as the countenance, the face turned towards the other person is really "the expression of making contact and establishing a relationship"[30], as the well-known priestly blessing shows: "May the Lord bless you and keep you; may the Lord make his face shine upon you and be gracious to you; may the Lord turn his face towards you and give you peace" (Numbers 6:24-26). In contrast, in situations where Israel's God averts or hides his face, his anger (Deuteronomy 31:17) or his enmity (Job 13:24) become evident. The fear of the face of God is based on the probably postexilic concept that whoever looks at the deity has to die (cf. e.g., Exodus 33:20-33).

In this threatening situation, the psalmist asks himself where he should go in order to be separated from YHWH's רוח. I am not translating the Hebrew term with the usual "spirit", because רוח has a much wider range of meaning. The onomatopoeic noun, in Hebrew usually used as a feminine word, originally signifies moved air, a breath, wind or storm, and in human beings, it stands for vitality. It has both a physical dimension – when he drinks, it returns to Samson who had nearly died of thirst (Judges 15:19) – as well as a psychological dimension which manifests itself as the will to live (Genesis 45:27).[31] In exilic texts[32] רוח

signifies what in Genesis 2:7 is called נשמה, the divine breath which gives life to humankind. Psalm 104:29-30, a creation hymn says: "When you, God, hide your face, they (those created) are terrified, when you take away their רוח,[33] they die and revert to dust. When you send out your spirit, they are created and you renew the face of the earth."[34]

The psalmist in Psalm 139, however, is, unlike the one in Psalm 104, far from praising God's dynamic power. Besieged and unable to move she dreams about getting to the utmost ends of the cosmos, in a vertical direction – heaven and Sheol, i.e., the underworld – as well as a horizontal direction – to the East with the rising sun and the West where, viewed from Palestine, the sea is located, and where the sun sets. But the psalmist already knows that God will be there, too. Thus she tells herself – verse 11 is a self-quotation – that it is better to fall into darkness – which in the Ancient Near East is a power of chaos – than into the hand of God. This falling down into, being seized, has to be interpreted as a threat; in Job 9:17 the same verb describes YHWH's attack with a tempest. Being held by God's right hand (verse 10b), i.e., the particularly strong one, points in the same direction. In contrast the verb נחה "to lead, to guide" in verse 10a has a more positive ring, as it is used for example for the guiding of Israel in the desert.

The ambivalence of feelings becomes completely clear in the final part of the section. On the one hand, not even the darkness can hide the psalmist from God. Thus, he cannot carry out his escape from God, which in view of his persecution fantasy is negative. Viewed in isolation however, the thought that the chaos power of darkness cannot spread before God and is bathed in bright light is a comforting one.

In the face of God's inescapable presence, the flight remains unrealised and from verse 13 onwards the psalmist forces herself to cast a further look back over her relationship with this God – a look back on her own coming into being in her mother's womb.

13 For it was you who formed my kidneys (כליות),
you knit me together in my mother's womb (בטן אמי).
14 I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.
Wonderful are your works; that I myself (נפש) know very well.
15 My bones (עצם) were not hidden from you,
when I was being made in secret,
intricately woven in the depths of the earth.
16 Your eyes beheld my unformed substance (גלם).
In your book were written all the days that were formed for me,

when none of them as yet existed.

17 How weighty to me are your thoughts, O God!
How vast is the sum of them!

By verse 13 at the latest we notice a change of mood: mentioning the kidneys of all organs – which to us today seems very strange and which is unique in the Old Testament – makes sense if we look at the relational function of this organ.[35] The kidneys, whose existence as a pair was familiar from the slaughter of animals, are the seat of affections (Psalm 73:21; Proverbs 23:16) and of conscience (Psalm 16:7; Jeremiah 12:2). This association is based on the experience that the area around the kidneys is particularly sensitive to heat and cold. As the creator of the kidneys, God is described in v. 13 metaphorically as the one who makes his people's affections and their ability to relate with one another possible. The idea often found in other prayers, namely that God tests hearts and kidneys (Psalm 26:2: Jeremiah 11:20: 20:11: Revelation 2:23) – most translations speak of "heart and mind", omitting the concrete organ – shows that the relationship between those praying and the deity is being comprehensively tested.

Psalm 139 combines the formation of a human body in the womb, which can be physically experienced, with the theological tradition of God's primeval creation known from Genesis 1-2. The divine creation of an individual here is defined metaphorically as weaving; the parallel metaphor of being woven in the depths of the earth (verse 15) contributes a variant of this idea that has a cosmological and even mythical background. The verbs "creating" and "weaving" also denote divine actions in the primeval creation of Lady Wisdom in Proverbs 8. The reference to the psalmist's bones (עצם) links the mythical concept with the individual's body.

According to verse 16 God has paid attention even to the un-formed something – the word used in this context, golem (גלם) is only used here, and in the later Hebrew of the Mischnah it describes the embryo. God's eyes look upon his creation – on the individual as well as on the world, and Genesis 1:31 concludes: "It was all very good." Just as God can dispel darkness according to verse 12, which means he has power over it, in the same way he decides on the length of human life and is thus Lord over time (verse 16). Acknowledging God's omnipotence over his or her own fate, the psalmist feels overwhelmed, as in verse 6, but this time the feeling is not despair, but amazement.

The wonder at the act of creation leads to thanksgiving in verse 14. In this verse, which is central to the psalm, the psalmist considers her birth as a special act of devotion by God, and

assures him: “My I well knows it.” This unusual translation is based on a body-related term which has an immense history of interpretation. The Hebrew term נפשׁ is usually translated as “soul”; it occurs more than 754 times[36] and thus has a much wider range of meaning than the English word. The three uses of the verb נפשׁ nif. “to breathe freely, to breathe a sigh of relief”[37] point to the basic meaning of the noun being “breath”, which can be found only rarely.[38] Genesis 2:7 describes humankind as a נפשׁ חיה, a living creature once God has breathed the breath of life into it. Close in meaning to “breath” is “throat, pharynx”[39] and in this rendering נפשׁ stands for desire and longing, associating feelings with physical sensations: either she thirsts for God’s loving care and help as in some psalms[40] or she longs for the beloved as in the Song of Songs[41].

However, נפשׁ is not a part of the body, but rather stands for the individual as a whole, both in its neediness and in its being alive. In both cases נפשׁ is moving, is dynamically directed towards something. נפשׁ is synonymous with “life” in situations where the salvation or preservation, threat or destruction of an individual *person* is at stake. [42] In almost a hundred places נפשׁ can even be translated as a pronoun, and this is also the case in Psalm 139:14: “my נפשׁ knows” is synonymous with an emphatic “I myself know”. In the face of God’s pressing presence, the psalmist remembers that he is somebody’s creation. And as a נפשׁ who is gifted with speech he can praise God for this.

The development towards an understanding of the soul as distinct from the body, as the seat of life – an idea which we today are familiar with – is based on the Greek expression ψυχή (psyche).[43] The basic meaning of the onomatopoeic word ψυχή in Ancient Greek writings – in Homer and the tragedians – is analogous with “breath”, and ψυχή as seat and bearer of the (individual) life, of physical sensations and of will.[44] In classical Greek philosophy, however, not least of all under the influence of Plato, ψυχή is reduced to denoting the core of a being, the immortal soul, uninfluenced by the perishing of the body, one’s thinking, wanting and feeling.[45] This dualistic understanding – imparted through a long discussion about human’s being created in the image of God, and its sinfulness – has shaped our perception of the soul, not least due to the fact that certain passages of the New Testament, which was written in that very Greek language, allow themselves to be interpreted that way. But, as we see from the psalm, in Hebrew thought, soul and body could not be separated and evaluated dualistically.

Although the second part of the psalm, verses 19-24, does not show/use any body imagery, I will try to interpret its main thoughts and discuss its function.

18 If I count them [e.g., the thoughts of God], they are more than the sand,
I awoke, and I am still with You.
19 O that you would kill the wicked, O God,
and you, the bloodthirsty depart from me!
20 Those who speak of you maliciously,
and lift themselves up against you for evil!
21 Do I not hate those who hate you, O LORD?
And do I not loathe those who rise up against you?
22 I hated them with perfect hatred; I counted them my enemies.
23 Search me, O God, and know my heart (לב),
test me and know my thoughts.
24 See if there is any wicked way in me,
and lead me in the way everlasting.

Although verse 18b gives a textual signal of a new beginning through its talk of awakening, there is an abrupt change of mood from the recent comforting proximity of God to the desire that God might kill the wicked; it almost seems as if the psalmist, on waking up, had become aware of her own situation, i.e., her persecution by other people. The persecution by God, which is hinted at in verses 1-6, now becomes real in the shape of a true persecution by human beings and at the same time shows an individual who cannot be imagined outside her social relationships. The psalmist speaks of her enemies and the demand to the "men of violence" (blood people), to keep away from her, has to be seen in the light of her considering her life threatened. "Bloodthirsty" are those people who will stop at nothing, not even at murder in order to gain an advantage. (Psalms 26:9; 55:24; 29:10).
The psalmist exonerates himself with the help of the idea that one's own adversaries are also God's enemies and thus are to be hated. This is a traditional argument frequently used in the laments and with it the psalmist exonerates himself and his desire for revenge. But this desire for revenge is formulated as an unreal supposition and its main intention is for the psalmist *not* to take revenge himself, but rather to beseech God to be the judge. Interestingly God's judgement is not asked for on the wicked, but on the psalmist herself – as if in a kind of sudden self-reflection: did not a moment ago the psalmist describe God as her persecutor, his enemy? Was it all just a nightmare? The request for God to examine her heart (לב) in verse 23 again points to the core of the psalmist. The לב, nowadays the place of conscience

and seat of the soul, was in the Old Testament considered the seat of understanding and reason: according to Deuteronomy 29:3 for example, one has a heart in order to understand. Solomon asks God for a *listening* heart (1 Kings 3:9) so as to be able to distinguish between good and bad, and he is rewarded with knowledge and immense wisdom (1 Kings 4:9-14). At the same time the heart is the place of human intentions; it contains secrets (Psalm 44:22) and affections; it can be sad (1 Samuel 1:8) or glad (Proverbs 17:22). God's examination of the psalmist's heart has already been mentioned in connection with the kidneys and thus there remains a final observation on Psalm 139: At the beginning, the prayer mentions the tongue, at the end it mentions the heart. In parallel statements heart and tongue correspond, because the tongue carries thoughts and intentions outside (Psalm 37:30f.), a concept which runs through to the New Testament (Acts 2:26; James 1:26; cf. Mark 7:15ff.) The examination of the psalmist's heart which he asks for in verse 23 thus leads to an understanding of the things the tongue wants to say and in this regard verse 23 turns out to correspond to the beginning of the prayer in terms of content.

Body Imagery and Anthropology

In the year 2001 AD, organs are transplanted and discussions take place as regards the extent to which the body is a social and above all a construct of the media and whether it is not altogether superfluous for post-modern communication.

The difference between our current views and those of an individual from the 4th or 3rd century BC is considerable. Without wanting to directly compare those two concepts of humankind, it has become clear that the question about the person per se, about his or her identity is a modern – and today by no means uncontroversial – question.

The impression that the psalmist presents himself more as a conglomeration of body parts than as a whole is partly due to the lack of Hebrew terms for "person", "subject" or "body". Best of all, the expression נפשׁ, as used in Psalm 139, can be a comprehensive term for the whole human being. Despite the strong individualism of this psalm the speaker is not a self in the modern sense, even if the expression "I myself know" at first glance creates a sense of reflexivity.[46] Furthermore, this impression of being faced with a conglomerate is a result of our method of thinking which is analysing and deals with parts of the body in a logical way. The Hebrew text, however, shows that the parts of the body have to be understood as a psychosomatic unit: the individual expressions are not to be differentiated analytically, but to be summarized in the sense of a complex entity with different aspects. The body imagery of the psalm depicts a concept of humankind which perceives the whole person in its

thinking, feeling and acting. This emphasises that human life is corporeal and requires this corporeality to be a life which can relate to others.

Through its communication structure Ps 139 expresses the close relationship between the psalmist and God and this is emphasised by its body-related language. The body imagery stresses the fact that the psalmist is a creature, i.e., created by somebody else and in this respect the prayer is related to many other psalms. The emphasis on the individual, on the other hand, is un-typical since the majority of Old Testament texts stresses the social integration of the individual. However, physicality, being a created body, is a prerequisite for social relationships even in Old Testament thinking[47] and in a biblical context the relationship with God is part of this.

The fact that Ps 139 does not reveal the gender of the praying subject despite its body imagery may be confusing for readers of the 21st century. Whilst we today at once associate maleness and femaleness with the body and judge the body by the way it looks, the imagery of our psalm expresses a human experience which transcends all gender.

Therefore, as far as the significance of the body imagery in Ps 139 in relation to a biblical anthropology is concerned, three points should be made:

1. The body imagery of the Old Testament and its prerequisite, namely to understand the body as a psychosomatic unit, can help to qualify the sometimes dualistic concept of humankind in the Christian tradition. It can thus counteract a devaluation and disdain of the body on the one hand, and its spiritless fragmentation on the other hand.

2. Psalm 139 shows that it is not just the body as such that matters, but that relationships are described with the help of physical phenomena. On the one hand, a person is determined by his or her situation in place and time. On the other hand, one's bodily existence is defined by a person's relationship with God and with fellow human beings. In the relationship with God, one's physical, sensible and sensitive side cannot be excluded, for how else can we praise God but with a body and reference to our affections? I am saying this self-critically as the representative of a Protestant attitude which, due to its stress on listening to God and the intellectual debate about God, is in danger of neglecting essential dimensions of human existence.

3. Finally, body imagery can be an intermediary with regard to the concept of God. In the psalm, God is presented – with the help of physical aspects – as a living force, and at the same time as an acting personality, and the dynamism in this concept of God cannot be overestimated. By stressing God's omnipresence, Psalm 139 also shows that speaking of God in anthropomorphous terms has its limits.

A theological anthropology, no matter if it argues from an exegetical, historical, systematic or practical viewpoint, cannot disregard the relationship between God and humankind. It has – and I say this especially from my European background – to keep open the thesis in its academic discourse that the autonomy of the individual is not the only possible destiny of humankind.

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[1] The following article was conceived as a public lecture at Humboldt-University Berlin (October 2000). The shortened English version was delivered at the School of Theology, Pietermaritzburg, South Africa (August, 2001). Many thanks to Imelda Weingart for the translation and helpful comments and to the respondents at Pietermaritzburg who spoke about their South-African experience of bodies and body language. My work on body imagery was inspired by meetings of the Hedwig-Jahnow-Forschungsprojekt, Marburg, a group of feminist scholars of the Old Testament, whom I would like to thank for thought-provoking discussions.

[2] Die Zeit, 26.10.2000, 41.

[3] L. Isherwood / E. Stuart, Introducing Body Theology, Introductions in Feminist Theology 2, Sheffield 1998.

[4] See, for example, W. Pannenberg, Die Bestimmung des Menschen. Menschsein, Erwählung und Geschichte, Göttingen 1978.

[5] The history of an androcentric and women-hostile interpretation of Gen 1-3 is pointed out by H. Schüngel-Straumann, Die Frau am Anfang. Eva und die Folgen, LIT-Verlag Münster, 2. Aufl. 1997, esp. 7-59. The connection of the female body and sin in the Western visual tradition of art is commented by Wioleta Polinska, Dangerous Bodies. Women's Nakedness and Theology, Journal of Feminist Studies in Religion 16 (2000), 45-62.

[6] H.W. Wolff, Anthropologie des Alten Testaments, Gütersloh (1973), [6]1994; English translation: Anthropology of the Old Testament, London 1974.

[7] Wolff, Anthropologie, 19.

[8] Cf. W.H. Schmidt, Anthropologische Begriff im Alten Testament. Anmerkungen zum hebräischen Denken, Evangelische Theologie 24 (1964), 374-388. In his foreword, Wolff explicitly refers to Schmidt's course.

[9] Wolff, Anthropologie (note 6), 119.

[10] When Wolff evaluates the difference between the sexes and sexuality from a theological point of view, he even quotes Karl Barth, e.g., Anthropologie, 254f: In the story of Amnon's rape of Tamar Wolff sees a lack of full partnership and love and he cites Barth's dictum "coitus without coexistence is a demonical matter." (Barth, Kirchliche Dogmatik III /4, 148) – in my eyes a very strange and misleading comment on that particular story.

[11] Cf. Wolff, Anthropologie (note 6), §19, 243-258.

[12] Cf. Wolff, Anthropologie, 102-103, 107-109.

[13] Silvia Schroer / Thomas Staubli, Die Körpersymbolik der Bibel, Darmstadt 1998; English translation by Linda M. Maloney, Body Symbolism in the Bible, Collegeville, MN 2001.

[14] Körpersymbolik, 24.
[15] L. Isherwood / E. Stuart, Body Theology (note 3). Cf. also L. Isherwood (ed.), The Good News of the Body. Sexual Theology and Feminism, Sheffield 2000.
[16] S. Wagner, Zur Theologie des Psalms CXXXIX, Vetus Testamentum Supplementum 29 (1977), 357.
[17] H. Gunkel, Die Psalmen, Handkommentar zum Alten Testament, Göttingen [5]1968, 587; H.-P. Müller, Die Gattung des 139. Psalms, Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft, Supplement 1, Wiesbaden 1969, 345-355, esp. 354.
[18] G. von Rad, Weisheit in Israel, Neukirchen [2]1981, 71; English translation by James D. Martin, Wisdom in Israel, London 1972.
[19] J.L. Koole, Quelques remarques sur Psaume 139, Studia Biblica et Semitica Theodoro Christiano Vriezen, Wageningen 1966), 179. H. Schüngel-Straumann, Zur Gattung und Theologie des 139. Psalms, Biblische Zeitschrift 17 (1973), 39-51, calls psalm 139 an "instruction about prayer" (42).
[20] E. Würthwein, Erwägungen zu Psalm 139, in: ders., Wort und Existenz. Studien zum Alten Testament (1970), pp. 179-196; K. Seybold, Die Psalmen. Handbuch zum Alten Testament I/15, Tübingen 1996, 515.
[21] For a detailed discussion see also J. Holman, The structure of Psalm CXXXIX, Vetus Testamentum 21 (1971), 298-310; J. Krašovec, Die polare Ausdrucksweise im Psalm 139, Biblische Zeitschrift 18 (1974), 225-228.
[22] This conclusion also attempts to eradicate the negative sentiment of revenge from the prayer, a common Christian usage of psalms. Cf. E. Zenger, Ein Gott der Rache? Feindpsalmen verstehen, Freiburg 1994. He argues against such eliminations from a theological point of view.
[23] W. Gross, Von YHWH belagert. Zu Ps 139,1-12, in: E. Paul / A. Stock (eds.), Glauben ermöglichen. Festschrift für G. Stachel, Mainz 1987, 149-153.
[24] Proverbs 1:10-19; 4:14-19 (the wicked), 2:16; 5:3; 6:24; 7:21 (the strange woman).
[25] Proverbs 8:6-9 (Lady Wisdom), 31:6 (the worthy woman), 10:20; 12:18 (the wise).
[26] Proverbs 1:22-26; 18:20-21 and the mentioning of לשׁון in the call not to misuse God's name Exodus 20:7; Deuteronomy 5:11.
[27] E. Zenger, Ich will die Morgenröte wecken, Psalmenauslegung 2, Freiburg / Basel / Wien 1991, 245, speaks of "Gottesvergiftung" ("God-poisoning") quoting the title of a book by the German psychoanalyst Tilman Moser. Cf. Also Groß, Von YHWH belagert, 152 (note 23), 152.
[28] 1 Samuel 23:8; 2 Kings 16:5, 21:4, 9.
[29] Job 42:3; Deuteronomy 17:8, with negation Deuteronomy 30:11; and Proverbs 30:18; Psalm 131:1; Jeremiah 32:17, 27.
[30] Schroer / Staubli, Körpersymbolik, 95 (note 13).
[31] If a psychic aspect comes to the foreground, then רוח can cover a whole range of human feelings starting from deep emotions to the decline of the will to live. Cf. the biblical texts mentioned in: THAT II, 738. There are connotations overlapping with the Hebrew term לב that describes an internal aspect whereas רוח denotes a move from outside or inside. The meaning of רוח and לב as center of the will is only attested in Ezekiel and there as a new linguistic usage (cf. THAT II, [3]1984, 51).
[32] On this differentiation in time cf. R. Albertz / C. Westermann, Art. רוח, THAT II, [3]1984, 736.
[33] So MT, supported by the Septuagint and Vulgate; the Qumran-manuscripts read "your רוח".
[34]Analogous is Job 34,14-15: If he (e.g., God) should take back his spirit (רוח) to himself, and gather to himself his breath (נשׁמה), all flesh (בשׂר) would perish together, and all mortals return to dust.
[35] J. Kegler, Beobachtungen zur Körpererfahrung in der hebräischen Bibel, in: F. Crüsemann / C. Hardmeier / R. Kessler (eds.), Was ist der Mensch ...? Beiträge zur Anthropologie des Alten Testaments, Festschrift für H. W. Wolff zum 80. Geburtstag, München 1992, 28-41, esp. 34-37. He points out the psychosomatic aspects of this organ for human relationships.
[36] Cf. the distribution in the Old Testament in: C. Westermann, Art. נפשׁ, THAT II, [3]1984, 71-96, esp. 72.
[37] Cf. 2 Samuel 16:14; Exodus 23:12; 31:17.
[38] E.g. in the description of the Leviathan in Job 41:13.
[39] Cf. Numbers 21:5; 1 Samuel 2:33; Isaiah 5:14; 29:8; 58:11; Jeremiah 4:10; Habakkuk 2:4; Proverbs 3:22; 6:30; Psalm 69:2.
[40] Cf. Psalm 42:2.3; 63:2; 119:20, 81; 143:6 and Psalm 84:3; 107:9.

[41] Cf. Song of Solomon 1:7; 3:1-4, and Genesis 34:3; 44:30; Deuteronomy 13:7; 1 Samuel 18:1, 3; 20:17; Jeremiah 12:7.

[42] Cf. 1 Samuel 19:11; 2 Samuel 19:6; Jeremiah 20:13; Psalm 22:21; 33:19; 56:14; 86:13; 89:49; 116:8; 120:2; more passages in: Westermann, THAT II, [3]1984, 85-88.

[43] The Septuagint translates the Hebrew term in 680 of 754 places with ψυχη.

[44] More details in: N.P. Bratsiotis נפשׁ–ψυχη: Ein Beitrag zur Erforschung der Sprache und der Theologie der Septuaginta, Vetus Testamentum Supplementum XV (1966), 58-89; Cf. A. Dihle, Art. ψυχη A, THWNT IX, 1973, 605-607.

[45] For a further differentiation of ψυχή in Plato's philosophy cf. ThWNT IX, 1973, 608-609.

[46] R.A. di Vito, Old Testament Anthropology and the Construction of Personal Identity, Catholic Biblical Quarterly 61 (1999), 217-238, esp. 226-228.

[47] Here I agree with Gabriele Klein whom I quoted at the beginning.