

## The Psalmic Image of the Development of the Body in the Womb (Ps 139:13-16) – From Intuition to Knowledge

Stelian PAŞCA-TUŞA\* , Cătălin-Emanuel ȘTEFAN\*\*

**ABSTRACT.** The complexity of the human body has fascinated humanity since the beginning of time. Varied approaches to the human body can be observed in founding myths, visual arts, legends, writings, and religious celebrations. Historically, the body was not the central focus of ancient peoples but rather a recurring motif. In antiquity, the human body was not viewed as an isolated entity with parts to be studied in detail. Instead, it was seen as a whole that reflected the complexity of both the material and spiritual worlds. Therefore, the emphasis was on understanding the entirety of the body and its relation to other aspects of reality rather than dissecting its components. Nonetheless, some texts reveal insightful observations about the body, one of which is Psalm 139:13-16. Although this text features images characteristic of antiquity, it should not be regarded merely as a fragment of Eastern cultic literature; a higher level of knowledge inspires it. This study emphasizes how the psalmist captures the theological dimension of the body's development in the womb.

**Keywords:** body; Psalm 139; womb; embryo; God

### 1. Introduction

This psalmic fragment has been examined from an anthropological perspective, serving as one of the key texts underlying the scriptural conception of humanity. In our study, we will focus solely on the development of the human body, as emphasized in this psalm, to better understand the inspired character of this anthropological text. Other specialists have explored this direction as

---

\* Deacon, PhD, Professor at the Faculty of Orthodox Theology, Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania. E-mail: stelian.pasca@ubbcluj.ro.

\*\* PhD Student, Faculty of Orthodox Theology, Babeş-Bolyai University, Cluj-Napoca, Romania. E-mail: catalin.stefan@ubbcluj.ro.



well. Notably, biblical scholars like Michael D. Goulder<sup>1</sup> and Konrad Schaefer<sup>2</sup> draw attention to Hebrew anatomical terms and provide extensive descriptions from an anatomical perspective. Researcher Susanne Gillmayr-Bucher<sup>3</sup> has sought images of the human body in the Psalter; although she examines Psalm 139, her analysis is not explicitly focused on it. She explores the role of these images and their specific language but tends to treat the subject too generally. She has aimed to identify patterns in using these images, occasionally neglecting the particulars of each psalm. Another essential contributor to this theme is Leonard P. Maré<sup>4</sup>. His work closely resembles the previously mentioned biblical commentaries but uniquely concentrates on verses 13-18 to discuss anatomical imagery concerning creation. However, his focus is not on fully exploring these anatomical images' significance but establishing the context necessary for a complex anthropological understanding. Therefore, his study instrumentalizes the anatomical imagery without giving it standalone importance. Lodewyk Sutton's article<sup>5</sup> shares a similar approach; while it may appear to address a different theme within Psalm 139, it emphasizes creationist imagery in verses 13-16 and seeks to illustrate the connection between the psalmist's constitution and his cry to God, which he considers paradigmatic in the context of Holy Scripture. Although anatomical imagery is not the primary focus of his research, it provides valuable insights into how the psalmist relates to his own body. Lastly, Sutton published another study focusing on the human constitution as a unified whole, exploring the link between the human body and the rest of creation according to ancient conceptions.

It is important to note that the studies cited either analyze verses 13-16 of Psalm 139 from an anthropological standpoint, treat the anatomical dimension too generally, or focus on the connection between the body and the world. In this paper, we intend to focus exclusively on the anatomical elements within this psalmic fragment. Our goal is to understand the ancient author's perspective on the human body, particularly on its development in the womb. We also aim to highlight several insights of the psalmic author that he arrived at without access to contemporary medical research. We believe that examining these aspects can enhance our understanding of specific issues that, although significant, remain underexplored.

<sup>1</sup> Michael D. Goulder, *The Psalms of the Return (Book V, Psalms 107-150)*, Sheffield Academic Press, Sheffield, 1998, p. 241.

<sup>2</sup> Konrad Schaefer, *Psalms*, The Liturgical Press, Collegeville, 2001, p. 326.

<sup>3</sup> Susanne Gillmayr-Bucher, „Body Images in the Psalms”, *JSOT* 28, 3 (2004), pp. 301-326.

<sup>4</sup> Leonard P. Maré, „Creation Theology in Psalm 139”, *OTE* 23, 3 (2010), pp. 693-707.

<sup>5</sup> Lodewyk Sutton, „The anthropological function of the outcry 'When God searches my heart' in Psalm 139:1 and 23 and its later use in Romans 8:27”, *STJ* 4, 2 (2018), pp. 243-263.

To accomplish this, we will employ various research methods. First, we will familiarize ourselves with the internal structure of Psalm 139. As mentioned, our focus will be verses 13-16 rather than the entire psalm. To explore this sequence in-depth, it is essential to consider the psalm and the context in which this passage appears. Once we understand these aspects, we can delve deeper into the specific interest section.

While we will not conduct a detailed analysis of all four verses, we will concentrate on the anatomical elements present in them. This involves identifying the main biological concepts and examining the language used to express these ideas in the two sources of the psalm: the Masoretic Text and the Septuagint. We will also investigate how these concepts contribute to the primary imagery in this psalmic sequence. To gain a broad perspective on these anatomical images' role, depth, and significance, we will consult modern scholarship and the traditional interpretations of Jewish and Christian exegetes, specifically the rabbis and the Church Fathers. Given that Jewish exegesis has predominantly focused on the philological study of Scripture, we will frequently reference the analyses provided by Jewish interpreters.

Finally, after exploring these elements, we will attempt to outline how the author of Psalm 139, as a representative of a distant historical and cultural context, understood the formation of his own body.

The paper is organized into several sections. The first part discusses the general aspects of the chosen psalm and the specific section under consideration. The following section analyzes the anatomical content of verses 13, 15, and 16 and how it has been interpreted over time. In the final section, we will synthesize and systematize the information gathered to outline the key features of the anatomical perspective in Psalm 139.

## 2. The internal structure of the Psalm

Thematically, Psalm 139 is divided into two main parts: the first part is doxological, while the second is petitionary<sup>6</sup>. Verses 1-18 form a complex hymn of glory directed towards God, highlighting attributes such as omniscience, omnipresence, and omnipotence that evoke human awe. In contrast, verses 19-24 shift the focus from God to the psalmist's enemies and even include an imprecation against them.

---

<sup>6</sup> Walter Brueggemann and William H. Bellinger Jr., *Psalms*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2014, p. 581.

A detailed analysis reveals that the verses can be grouped into several structural units. Modern scholarship does not have a unified approach regarding grouping these verses, with scholars generally proposing between four and seven sections. Walter Brueggemann, William Bellinger Jr., Leslie C. Allen, and Michael Goulder are among those who divide Psalm 139 into five sections. They commonly segment the first part of the psalm into verses 1-6 and 7-12 while differing in their treatment of the latter half. Brueggemann and Bellinger Jr. break down sections 13-18, arguing that verses 17-18, which discuss “the friends of God,” should not be viewed solely as a conclusion for verses 13-16 but rather as a summation for the entire psalm<sup>7</sup>. Allen supports the division of verses 13-18 but segments the petitionary section (vs. 19-24) into two distinct ideas: the destruction of the wicked (vs. 19-22), which he considers unrelated to the primary themes of the psalm, and the psalmist’s request for God to examine and guide him (vs. 23-24)<sup>8</sup>. Goulder presents a similar segmentation<sup>9</sup>.

In the initial part of our study, we noted that some of the referenced articles focus specifically on verses 13-16, while others consider the broader sequence of 13-18. This variation is attributable to differing approaches to segmenting the psalm. The segmentation is not of ultimate importance; instead, it serves as a tool to facilitate our future analysis. Now that we have outlined the main sections of the psalm, we can proceed to a deeper examination of the chosen passage.

### 3. Intrauterine constitution of the body (v. 13)

This verse contains three essential elements: the verb “to weave,” the imagery of the kidneys, and the womb image. Contemporary scholarship primarily relies on the Masoretic Text, which underscores the significance of the idea that man is סְבִבָּה – “woven”<sup>10</sup>. Scholars from recent centuries contend that this term encapsulates the process of fetal development. They believe that the term chosen by the Septuagint translators (ἀντελάβου – “to support”) does not fully express the depth of the original text’s imagery. For these scholars, the verb “to weave” effectively conveys the harmonious integration of the various anatomical components, such as bones, muscles, veins, and others<sup>11</sup>.

<sup>7</sup> Walter Brueggemann and William H. Bellinger Jr., *Psalms*, p. 583.

<sup>8</sup> Leslie C. Allen, *Psalms 101-150* (WBC 21), Word Incorporated, Dallas, 2002, p. 582.

<sup>9</sup> Michael D. Goulder, *The Psalms of the Return*, pp. 242-246.

<sup>10</sup> *New American Standard Bible*, The Lockman Foundation, La Habra, 2020, p. 659.

<sup>11</sup> Michael D. Goulder, *The Psalms of the Return*, p. 245; Konrad Schaefer, *Psalms*, p. 328.

We must also consider the implications of the two biological details in the verse: the kidneys and the womb<sup>12</sup>. These anatomical elements symbolize immediate physical realities and the psalmist's deeper contemplations. Scholarly interpretations vary widely and often reflect subjective viewpoints. Gillmayr-Bucher emphasizes the wonder the psalmist experiences when observing his composition, advocating for a literary understanding of both elements<sup>13</sup>.

In Jewish thought, these organs are viewed from two perspectives. Firstly, the most common interpretation views the kidneys in a literal manner, but with nuances. Rabbis argue that the psalm does not refer to the organs themselves but rather symbolizes the internal components of humanity – those aspects that remain hidden or in the dark<sup>14</sup>. Since the ancients could not see internal organs while a person was alive, these organs were shrouded in mystery. The second perspective offers a figurative understanding of these organs, attributing different meanings to them. Jewish exegesis also emphasizes that the womb serves as a setting for a mysterious process – the development of the fetus<sup>15</sup>. Rabbis view a person's intrauterine growth as a collaborative act between God and human physiological processes, a notion that is mirrored in patristic exegesis as well<sup>16</sup>.

#### 4. The pre-embryonic stage when “matter” or “bones” are formed (v. 15)

Verse 14 does not present any anatomical depiction, serving instead as a doxology that responds to what has been articulated in the previous verse. Thus, it is irrelevant to our study, leading us to the next verse. Here, we encounter several anatomical elements, although they differ across the basic textual versions. Despite variations between the Masoretic Text and the Septuagint, this does not impede our research, as both provide profound anatomical perspectives, as will be discussed shortly.

Goulder argues that the four verses under review (vs. 13-16) build on the preceding one (v. 12). He argues that this verse illustrates the emergence and development of humanity in two stages, presented in reverse chronological

<sup>12</sup> Konrad Schaefer, *Psalms*, p. 327.

<sup>13</sup> Susanne Gillmayr-Bucher, „Body Images in the Psalms”, p. 317.

<sup>14</sup> Avrohom Chaim Feuer, Nosson Scherman and Meir Zlotowitz, *Tehillim (Psalms) – a new translation with a commentary anthologized from Talmudic, Midrashic and Rabbinic sources*, vol. 5, Mesorah Publications Ltd., Brooklyn, 1996, p. 1639.

<sup>15</sup> Norman H. Strickman (ed.), *Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra's commentary on Books 3-5 of Psalms: Chapters 73-150*, Tuoro College Press, New York, 2016, p. 500.

<sup>16</sup> Cuv. Eftimie Zigabenul and Sf. Nicodim Aghioritul, *Psaltirea în tâlcuirile Sfinților Părinți*, vol. II, trans. Ștefan Voronca, Egumenița, Galați, 2006, p. 738.

order<sup>17</sup>. Verses 13 and 14 describe the intrauterine formation of a person, while verses 15 and 16 recount the formation that occurs before this in the “lowest parts of the earth.” Thus, we can identify an embryonic stage in which a recognizable human develops, alongside a pre-embryonic stage where “matter” or “bones” are formed, likely corresponding to the initial creation of humankind. Goulder underscores that it is significant that the psalm addresses these matters, suggesting that verse 15 indicates a dual origin for humans in the Jewish perspective: one stemming from the union of flesh and the other from dust<sup>18</sup>.

In contrast to previous vers, the differences between the Masoretic Text and the Septuagint, in this instance, are more pronounced. Although the vocabulary of the two versions is relatively similar, their meanings diverge slightly. For the rabbis, the term *רָגְצָה* – “nature”<sup>19</sup> holds a different significance than what Greco-Roman culture assigns to it. Rather than signifying the ontological essence of an individual<sup>20</sup>, rabbis interpret it as referring to a distinct inner reality. In Targumic thought<sup>21</sup>, this term denotes “the latent power that nature has placed in human beings”<sup>22</sup>. Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra does not explicitly define this “power” but notes its latent nature, suggesting it is something an individual is born with, becoming apparent later in life. He connects it to the images of the facial hair of a teenager or the capacity of speech in a newborn child<sup>23</sup>. Modern Jewish commentators have further defined this power, viewing it as a range of energies and inherent talents while also considering a more literal interpretation where the same term may also refer to the “skeleton”<sup>24</sup>.

The phrase “lowest of the earth” is interpreted by modern Jewish exegetes, including some medieval ones like Rashi, in a figurative manner. The rabbis suggest that this expression serves as a metaphor for the womb, where the embryo develops. They argue that the psalmist metaphorically references his intrauterine growth<sup>25</sup>. The comparison is deliberate, as the womb nourishes and supports the child in the same way that the earth facilitates the germination and growth of a seed<sup>26</sup>. According to these exegetes, the psalmist presents profound

<sup>17</sup> Michael D. Goulder, *The Psalms of the Return*, p. 245.

<sup>18</sup> Michael D. Goulder, *The Psalms of the Return*, p. 245; Leonard P. Maré, „Creation Theology in Psalm 139”, p. 700.

<sup>19</sup> *New American Standard Bible*, p. 659.

<sup>20</sup> Dumitru Stăniloae, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă*, vol. 1, Institutul Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, Bucharest, 2010, p. 371.

<sup>21</sup> Chair Avrohom Feuer, Nosson Scherman and Meir Zlotowitz, *Tehillim (Psalms)*, p. 1640.

<sup>22</sup> Norman H. Strickman, *Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra's commentary*, p. 502.

<sup>23</sup> Norman H. Strickman, *Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra's commentary*, p. 502.

<sup>24</sup> Chair Avrohom Feuer, Nosson Scherman and Meir Zlotowitz, *Tehillim (Psalms)*, 1640.

<sup>25</sup> Norman H. Strickman, *Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra's commentary*, p. 502.

<sup>26</sup> Chair Avrohom Feuer, Nosson Scherman and Meir Zlotowitz, *Tehillim (Psalms)*, p. 1640.

insights that align closely with modern medical understanding of human development.

Some Church Fathers, such as St. Athanasius the Great<sup>27</sup> and St. Isidore of Pelusium<sup>28</sup>, offer an intriguing perspective on these elements. They connect verse 15 back to Adam and Eve, interpreting the “bone” as referring to the woman and the “nature” as referring to the man. In this interpretation, the psalmist states that his “bone” was made secretly, reminiscent of how the woman was formed. Furthermore, these Church Fathers believe that the preceding verses discuss the creation of man in general, with verse 15 elaborating on how the first family came into existence: Eve was created “in secret” from a rib, while Adam was formed “in the lowest parts of the earth.”

## 5. God's penetrating vision and the unfinished stage of embryo formation

The concluding verse of this section also contains anatomical language. As Goulder observes, verses 13-14 pertain to the embryonic stage, while verses 15-16 reference an earlier developmental phase<sup>29</sup>. While this symmetry is apparent, it is not perfect; verses 15 and 16 are more closely related than their counterparts. Scholars from recent centuries argue that the ideas presented in verses 15-16 are so complex that they cannot be fully expressed in a single verse. These verses introduce significant concepts like “my bones,” the notion of creation “in secret,” “nature,” and “the lowest of the earth”.

In this context, the Masoretic Text differs noticeably from its Greek translation. The concept of begetting is rich within Jewish thought. Rabbis commenting on this verse emphasize that the term refers to the earliest moments of human existence. The original term בָּנָה does not focus on time but carries a more personal connotation. In modern terms, it could be translated as “embryo”, though it denotes an amorphous mass<sup>30</sup>. With this understanding, contemporary rabbis highlight the depth of the term, suggesting that from a particular perspective, the human embryo can be likened to a piece of wood waiting to be carved or clay to be shaped. Although neither the embryo nor the materials mentioned have a definite form yet, they already possess the properties of their eventual form<sup>31</sup>. Thus, the

---

<sup>27</sup> Sf. Atanasie cel Mare, *Tâlcuire la psalmi*, trans. Parascheva Enache, Doxologia, Iassy, 2021, p. 408.

<sup>28</sup> Cuv. Eftimie Zigabenul and Sf. Nicodim Aghioritul, *Psaltirea în tâlcuirele Sfintilor Părinți*, p. 738.

<sup>29</sup> Michael D. Goulder, *The Psalms of the Return*, p. 245.

<sup>30</sup> Konrad Schaefer, *Psalms*, p. 328.

<sup>31</sup> Chair Avrohom Feuer, Nosson Scherman and Meir Zlotowitz, *Tehillim (Psalms)*, p. 1640.

term used in verse 16 is complex and profound, underscored by the fact that it is used only once in the entirety of Holy Scripture (making it a hapax legomenon)<sup>32</sup>.

Some medieval Jews also spoke about several aspects in Psalm 139, particularly in the verse 16, that led them to think of Adam. Thus Rabbi Meir proposes an interesting interpretation of the phrase “Your eyes saw me in the womb (when I was unborn).” He connects the notion of indefiniteness to the tradition that God gathered dust from the earth's four corners to create the first man. He asserts that the Lord would have known Adam even while gathering the scattered dust for his creation. Rabbi Meir emphasizes a literal interpretation of the phrase, suggesting it reflects the most undefined stage of human existence – when man was merely dust and not just any dust, but widely scattered. This interpretation highlights the complexity and marvel of God's action in creating the first man since it is harder to envision a “final product” when the “base matter” is dispersed than when it is more unified, as in the case of the embryo<sup>33</sup>.

The Church Fathers also pay special attention to the term “unformed”. For instance, St. John Chrysostom interprets it to mean that God has known humanity since its formation in the womb or that the Lord is aware of human deeds from the outset: “Your eyes have seen my unformed substance”<sup>34</sup>.

## 6. Knowing the mystery of the making of man through divine revelation

To understand the role of anatomical imagery in this selected section, we will briefly examine the entire doxological part of the psalm (vs. 1-8). In this segment, the author reflects on his relationship with God. He begins his meditation by considering divine omniscience, which he describes in verses 1-6. Next, he discusses another aspect of his relationship with the sacred: God's omnipresence, elaborated on in verses 7-12. The third important aspect focuses on the psalmist himself. In this section, the author contemplates his internal composition and how it was formed. He references kidneys, the womb (verse 13), bones, and the nature (or, more specifically, the embryo from which he developed) (v. 15). The doxological part of Psalm 139 concludes by addressing the psalmist's relationship with God as manifested through his connections with other people, as seen in verses 17-18.

Although each strophe has its theme, the psalm is interconnected by a “red thread” that links them. The doxological section revolves around a single theme expressed in various nuances. The psalmist explores four elements

<sup>32</sup> *Septuaginta. Psalmii, Odele, Proverbele, Eclesiastul, Cântarea cântărilor*, vol. 4/I, eds. Cristian Bădiliță et al., Polirom, Bucharest/Iassy, 2006, p. 328.

<sup>33</sup> Chair Avrohom Feuer, Nossen Scherman and Meir Zlotowitz, *Tehillim (Psalms)*, pp. 1640-1641.

<sup>34</sup> Sf. Ioan Gură de Aur, *Omilia la Psalme*, trans. Laura Enache, Doxologia, Iassy, 2011, pp. 633-634.

crucial for his relationship with God: divine omniscience, divine omnipresence, human's own person, and the other people. These elements reveal a progressive understanding of reality<sup>35</sup>.

At first, the believer realizes that the Lord sees and knows him, but this knowledge is somewhat external (as God observes actions, the "way," etc.). As he draws closer to the divinity, he understands that the Lord sees everything and is in the midst of it all. This expanded perspective shifts from viewing God as distant to experiencing Him as closely intertwined with life<sup>36</sup>. Then, man gains an even deeper understanding: God knows everything and is everywhere and has ensured that man possesses a harmonious composition, having cared for him from the beginning. This revelation elevates their relationship to its peak. Man naturally feels a deep connection to the Lord upon realizing that God has worked within him, not just in the external world<sup>37</sup>. As he acknowledges that he is "such a marvelous creature" (v. 14), the thought arises that perhaps others share this exact wondrous nature. Consequently, even as his relationship with God becomes profoundly intimate, he feels compelled to broaden that relationship to include others.

Given all this, we recognize that our specific section (vs. 13-16) holds a privileged position within the psalm. The psalmist's relationship with God evolves throughout the text. Initially, he has a more distant connection, knowing only some aspects of God (vs. 1-6). He feels closer as he realizes that the Lord first approached him (vs. 7-12). Finally, his relationship with God reaches an extreme level of intimacy, revealing that God is not only near but also intimately knowledgeable about his inner self as the one who has made him. At this point, their relationship achieves its highest degree of closeness. The psalm follows an intriguing logic: it starts with general acquaintance, progresses to the notion of presence, and culminates in intimacy, considered the ultimate goal. Consequently, specialists regard verses 13-16 as the "crowning" moment of what precedes them<sup>38</sup>.

Now that we have examined the overall logic of the doxological part, we will take a closer look at its central focus, specifically verses 13-16. This group of verses has its internal logic. Two of the four verses are primarily descriptive (vs. 13 and 15), while the others are mainly meditative (vs. 14 and 16). Each meditative verse reflects a natural reaction in the psalmist's soul after realizing the implications of the preceding verse. This section reverses the description of

---

<sup>35</sup> Lodewyk Sutton, „The anthropological function”, p. 561.

<sup>36</sup> Michael D. Goulder, *The Psalms of the Return*, p. 245.

<sup>37</sup> Lodewyk Sutton, „Darkness as an Anthropological Space: Perspectives Induced by Psalms 88 and 139 on the Themes of Death, Life and the Presence of YHWH”, *OTE* 32, 2 (2019), p. 565.

<sup>38</sup> Dumitru Stăniloae, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă*, p. 371.

the human body's development stages. It accounts for four elements: the kidneys (v. 13), the skeleton, the embryo (v. 15), and finally, God's thoughts recorded in His book (v. 16).

The text begins with the kidneys because, in Jewish thought, they and other internal organs are crucial in developing the human body. These vital organs are given special significance. The psalm then mentions the skeleton. In ancient understanding, the skeleton was viewed as more structural than physiological; it was believed to form before the other organs and was considered less important.

Next, the text refers to the “embryo”<sup>39</sup>, indicating a stage when the skeleton had not yet formed. At this point, humans were thought to be amorphous masses but contained the characteristics of their future bodies. However, the psalm does not stop there. The final stage mentioned is when a person is not an embryo but a thought in God's mind. Before creation, the reasons for a person's makeup already existed in His “book.”

The four stages presented in the psalm provide a beautiful chronological perspective. In the first stage, the Lord establishes a new person's features. Then, God translates His thoughts about the person into a physical form, creating the embryo. Though from a material standpoint, the body may appear undeveloped, ontologically, it contains all the elements that confer personhood, as it is endowed with the image of God and incorporates divine traits that will guide its development<sup>40</sup>.

The Church's understanding is clear: When God chooses to create a new human being, He does not see them in stages. Instead, He has the perfect image in mind from the very beginning<sup>41</sup>. Thus, in the divine plan, the embryo is viewed not as a mere amorphous mass but as the manifestation of the perfect image of humanity in the material realm, albeit in an unfinished form<sup>42</sup>. The third stage refers to when the body begins to develop. In Jewish thought, development starts with the appearance of the skeleton, which provides form to the body. Once the skeleton is formed, the person God intended begins to take shape. The final stage described in the psalm is when the body reaches perfection. At this point, the body has its outward appearance (determined by the skeleton) but still requires internal perfection by forming organs vital for biological life. These organs, represented by the kidneys, are fragile yet crucial, which is why they are mentioned last. Although this perspective has some shortcomings from a biological standpoint, its overall message is profound. It discusses the gradual

<sup>39</sup> *Septuaginta. Psalmii...*, p. 328.

<sup>40</sup> Konrad Schaefer, *Psalms*, p. 328.

<sup>41</sup> Dumitru Stăniloae, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă*, p. 372.

<sup>42</sup> Lodewyk Sutton, „Darkness as an Anthropological Space”, p. 565.

formation of a human being in the womb, reflecting reality, the unity in the emergence of a person, and the divine orchestration of this process.

Now that we understand this, we might wonder why the psalm presents the four elements in reverse order. The answer lies in the psalmist's reflection on his existence, starting from what he is most familiar with – the perfect state of his body – and working backward to the moment when the Lord decided how to create him. Thus, the psalm creates a deep introspection based on personal experience<sup>43</sup>.

## Conclusions

Sequences 13-16, through their language and imagery, create a distinctive picture of how the ancients understood the development of the human body in the womb. Modern research has uncovered several textual nuances that confirm the psalmist possessed deep insights despite lacking medical knowledge. Following the Tradition of the Church, we believe these insights are not mere human speculation but stem from the psalmist's interaction with the grace of the Holy Spirit.

In addition to contemporary research, we have highlighted how two traditional categories of exegetes – the rabbis and the Church Fathers – have also identified textual features that enhance our understanding of human development. Jewish interpreters, examining the Masoretic Text, emphasize elements such as man's "kidneys" (which include both the organs and the desires that arise from them), the period spent in the womb (v. 13), the bones, and the concept of "nature" (which refers to the embryo, the earliest stage of human development, v. 15). The Church Fathers, viewing the text through the lens of the Septuagint, place less emphasis on anatomical terminology. Instead, they focus on the gradual emergence of humanity, interpreting verses 13-14 as a depiction of humanity's overall development, while verse 15 details the unique way each of the two original parents was brought to life. Though the Patristic interpretation leans more toward an anthropological rather than a biological understanding, it does contain elements that support our perspective.

In addition to analyzing the language, this paper also explores how the imagery presented by the psalm contributes to a broader understanding of human development. The structure of the stanzas reveals a gradual approach of humanity to God, mediated by four main elements: His omniscience, omnipotence, the individual, and others. As demonstrated, the closer one is to God, the deeper one's understanding of one's nature becomes. Therefore, verses 13-16 hold a

---

<sup>43</sup> Dumitru Stăniloae, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă*, p. 372.

special significance within the psalm. We have found that these verses comprise two descriptive lines (vv. 13 and 15) and two reflective ones (vv. 14 and 16). The descriptive verses trace a reverse path of human evolution as the psalmist reflects on his body from the stage of perfection back to its most rudimentary form, the embryo. This study shows that the psalmist's discourse reveals remarkable insights about his composition even without precise medical knowledge. Hence, it is evident that a lack of medical knowledge did not preclude a profound understanding of reality articulated in relatively simple language for ancient people.

## REFERENCES

Allen, Leslie C., *Psalms 101-150* (WBC 21), Word Incorporated, Dallas, 2002.

Brueggemann, Walter and Bellinger Jr, William H., *Psalms*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2014.

Cuv. Eftimie Zigabenul and Sf. Nicodim Aghioritul, *Psaltirea în tâlcuirele Sfinților Părinți*. vol. II, translated by Ștefan Voronca, Egumenița, Galați, 2006.

Feuer, Chair Avrohom; Scherman, Nosson and Zlotowitz, Meir, *Tehilim. (Psalms) – a new translation with a commentary antropologized from Talmudic, Midrashic and Rabbinic sources*, vol. 5, Mesorah Publications Ltd., Brooklyn, 1996.

Gillmayr-Bucher, Susanne, „Body Images in the Psalms”, *JSOT* 28,3 (2004), pp. 301–326.

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

Maré, Leonard P., „Creation Theology in Psalm 139”, *OTE* 23, 3 (2010), pp. 693-707.

*New American Standard Bible*, The Lockman Foundation, La Habra, 2020.

Schaefer, Konrad, *Psalms*, The Liturgical Press, Collegeville, 2001.

*Septuaginta. Psalmii, Odele, Proverbele, Eclesiastul, Cântarea cântărilor*, vol. 4/I, edited by Bădiliță, Cristian; Băltăceanu, Francisca; Broșteanu, Monica and Florescu, Ioan-Florin, Polirom, Bucharest/ Iassy, 2006.

Sf. Atanasie cel Mare, *Tâlcuire la psalmi*, translated by Parascheva Enache, Doxologia, Iassy, 2021.

Sf. Ioan Gură de Aur, *Omilia la Psalme*, translated by Laura Enache, Doxologia, Iassy, 2011.

Stăniloae, Dumitru, *Teologia Dogmatică Ortodoxă*, vol. 1, Institutul Biblic și de Misiune al Bisericii Ortodoxe Române, Bucharest, 2010.

Strickman, Norman H. (ed.), *Rabbi Abraham Ibn Ezra's commentary on Books 3-5 of Psalms: Chapters 73-150*, Tuoro College Press, New York, 2016.

Sutton, Lodewyk, „The anthropological function of the outcry 'When God searches my heart' in Psalm 139:1 and 23 and its later use in Romans 8:27”, *STJ* 4, 2 (2018), pp. 243-263.

Sutton, Lodewyk, „Darkness as an Anthropological Space: Perspectives Induced by Psalms 88 and 139 on the Themes of Death, Life and the Presence of YHWH”, *OTE* 32, 2 (2019), pp. 556-577.