

## Psalm 137: Exile - Not the Time for Singing the Lord's Song

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### ABSTRACT

*The experience of exile is not confined to the pages of the Bible dealing with the Babylonian exile. Exile is not only a geographical place, but it is a religious state of mind. Although the Jews were geographically displaced, their biggest experience of exile was their loss of the structured, reliable world which provided them with meaning. Exile is thus primarily not a geographical issue, but it is a social, moral, cultural, liturgical and spiritual issue; an understanding that one is in a hostile, alien situation. The purpose of this paper is to analyse Psalm 137 to ascertain what Israel's response was in a time of exile. How did they address the faith crisis of exile? How did they react to the loss of their world, their temple, their homeland, their security? Did they continue to worship in a strange land, and if so, how? A second purpose of the paper will then be to establish what the proper response of contemporary worshippers during times of exile should be.*

### A INTRODUCTION

The experience of exile is not confined to the pages of the Bible dealing with the Babylonian exile. Exile still happens in our midst. Masenya,<sup>1</sup> in a recent article, refers to herself as being “in exile at home, in the academy, and in the church.” Concerning African South African women’s experience in contemporary South African society, she writes that although they “form the majority of the South African population, their lived experiences seldom, if ever, form part of the subject matter of biblical studies in general and biblical hermeneutics in particular.”<sup>2</sup> This serves as an example of an experience of what Brueggemann<sup>3</sup> calls being an exile while living physically at home. Berlin<sup>4</sup> also maintains that exile is not only a geographical place, but it is a religious state of mind. Brueggemann<sup>5</sup> has proposed that exile is a metaphor for

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<sup>1</sup> Madipoane Masenya, “‘For better or for worse?’ – the (Christian) Bible and Africana women.” *OTE* 22/1 (2009):131

<sup>2</sup> Masenya, “‘For better or worse?’” 126.

<sup>3</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *Cadences of home: Preaching among Exiles*. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1997), 115.

<sup>4</sup> Adele Berlin, “Psalms and the literature of exile: Psalms 137, 44, 69 and 78.” Pages 65-86 in *The Book of Psalms: Composition and reception* (eds. Peter W. Flint and Patrick D. Miller, Leiden: Brill, 2005), 65.

<sup>5</sup> Brueggemann, *Cadences of home*, 1.

understanding the faith situation in the Church in the United States. He then continues to use exile as metaphor with “the experienced anxiety of ‘deported’ people.”<sup>6</sup> He argues that although the Jews were geographically displaced, their biggest experience of exile was their loss of the structured, reliable world which provided them with meaning. Exile is thus primarily not a geographical issue, but it is social, moral and cultural;<sup>7</sup> even liturgical and spiritual; an understanding that one is in a hostile, alien situation.<sup>8</sup> Brueggemann therefore proposes that this loss of a structured, consistent and dependable world where cherished symbols of meaning are ridiculed and rejected and where value systems are diminished is an important point of contact between the ancient texts and contemporary experience.<sup>9</sup> The loss of the reliable and known world results in many people living in a strange and unfamiliar situation that does not seem like home, but creates a deep sense of being in exile.

The purpose of this paper is to analyse Psalm 137 to ascertain what Israel’s response was in a time of exile. How did they address the faith crisis of exile? How did they react to the loss of their world, their temple, their homeland, their security? Did they continue to worship in a strange land, and if so, how? A second purpose of the paper will then be to establish what the proper response of contemporary worshippers during times of exile should be.

## **B STRUCTURE, GATTUNG, SITZ IM LEBEN, DATING**

### **1 Structure**

The psalm is structured as follows: Strophe 1 (vv. 1-4) contains the lament of the people, strophe 2 (vv. 5-6) can be described as self imprecation. The Song of Zion is turned upside-down, and instead of joy, the emphasis falls on grief and bitterness. Strophe 3 (vv. 7-9) is a curse, directed at the enemy, in the form of a petition addressed to God.<sup>10</sup>

### **2 Gattung**

Various possibilities have been offered regarding the *Gattung* of Psalm 137. Burden<sup>11</sup> argues that Zion is the main focus of the psalm and he designates it an unusual Song of Zion which also contains elements of lament and vengeance.

<sup>6</sup> Brueggemann, *Cadences of home*, 1.

<sup>7</sup> Brueggemann, *Cadences of home*, 2.

<sup>8</sup> Brueggemann, *Cadences of home*, 115.

<sup>9</sup> Brueggemann, *Cadences of home*, 2.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Jan P. Fokkelman, *Major poems of the Hebrew Bible Volume II: 85 Psalms and Job 4-14*. (Assen: Van Gorcum, 2000), 301-302 for a different proposal for the structure of the psalm.

<sup>11</sup> Jasper J. Burden, *Psalms 120-150*. (Kapaastad: NG Kerk-Uitgewers, 1991), 122.

It is true that Zion takes a prominent place in the psalm, yet the dominant mood of the Song is not gladness and joy but sorrow. The psalm itself claims that exile was not the appropriate occasion for singing a Song of Zion (v. 4) although their captors wanted them to do so (v. 3). It is therefore not really possible to typify the psalm as a Song of Zion.

Kellerman<sup>12</sup> argues for a *Mischgattung* with elements of a lament of the people, a prayer for vengeance and a song of Zion all present in the psalm. Prinsloo<sup>13</sup> (cf. also Steenkamp<sup>14</sup>) also proposes a *Mischgattung* for Psalm 137. Strophe 1 reveals the characteristics of a communal lament, while the second strophe displays the formal elements of a song of Zion: Zion / Jerusalem takes a central place, is addressed directly, and is praised. However, the content of this strophe does not reflect a song of Zion, as already stated above. Prinsloo<sup>15</sup> argues that the song of Zion is turned upside down and this strophe is therefore an individual lament with a strong element of self imprecation. The third strophe can be described as a curse text where the אֲשֶׁרִי formula is again turned upside down and used to convey a curse and not a blessing.

To my mind the psalm should be classified as a communal lament. The elements of lament, petition and vengeance all form an integral part of the structure of psalms of lament. The switch from first person plural to first person singular can be attributed to an individual expressing on behalf of the community the sentiments of all of the people concerning Jerusalem.

### 3 Sitz im Leben

The historical situation portrayed in the psalm is that of the Babylonian exile. Kraus<sup>16</sup> even maintains that this is the only psalm that can be dated beyond all doubt. Verse 8 implies that the Babylonian Empire still existed when the psalm was composed. The poet, however, looks back at the exile that has already happened. The psalmist probably experienced the exile when one takes into account the passion of his writing<sup>17</sup> (cf. also Fohrer).<sup>18</sup>

<sup>12</sup> Ulrich Kellerman, "Psalm 137." ZAW 90/1 (1978): 53.

<sup>13</sup> Willem S. Prinsloo, "Psalm 137: Ecclesia Pressa, Ecclesia Triumphans," in *Die lof van my God solank ek lewe* (Willem S. Prinsloo. Irene: Medpharm, 2000), 285-286.

<sup>14</sup> Yolande Steenkamp, "Violence and hatred in Psalm 137: The psalm in its ancient social context." *Verbum et Ecclesia* 25/1 (2004): 299-300.

<sup>15</sup> Prinsloo, "Psalm 137," 285.

<sup>16</sup> Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 60-150* (trans. Hilton C. Oswald. Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 1989), 501.

<sup>17</sup> Leslie C. Allen, *Psalm 101-150*. (Waco: Word, 1983), 239.

<sup>18</sup> Georg Fohrer, *Psalmen*. (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1993), 133.

The psalm not only relates the story of a specific period in Israel's history, but it was probably utilised in the cult as an observance of lament by the exiles.<sup>19</sup> Gerstenberger<sup>20</sup> suggests that the setting of the psalm may have been a worship service where it was used to articulate disgust and loathing against continued oppression and a yearning for transformation. In the later Jewish tradition the psalm was used on the ninth day of the month Ab to commemorate the destruction of Jerusalem<sup>21</sup> (cf. also Levine).<sup>22</sup> The psalm was also possibly used on one of the "Days of Lamentation" when prayers for the restoration of the people and the land were offered to God<sup>23</sup> (cf. Zech 7:1-5).

#### 4 Dating

Taking the discussion of the *Sitz* of the psalm into consideration, the psalm should be dated shortly after the return from exile. The perspective of the poet on what happened speaks of someone who most probably was an eyewitness to the pain and suffering that the people of God experienced during the exile. After their return from Babylon, confronted with the sight of Jerusalem and specifically the temple still in ruins, they give voice to the full intensity of their emotions of vengeance and bitterness.

#### C ANALYSIS OF PSALM 137

The first strophe of the psalm transports the reader to the exile in Babylon. The situation there is described graphically. The exiles sit and cry at the rivers of Babylon. The rivers of Babylon probably refer to the Tigris and Euphrates, their tributaries, and a network of irrigation canals.<sup>24</sup> Their memories of Zion fill them with sorrow and longing. The exiles' remembrance of Zion is "not just an accidental remembering but a deliberate focusing of attention and thought, a focused mindfulness on the part of a community gathered for recollection."<sup>25</sup> Zion has been destroyed, everything they relied on and trusted in have disintegrated around them.

<sup>19</sup> Kraus, *Psalms 60-150*, 502.

<sup>20</sup> Erhard S. Gerstenberger, *Psalms, Part 2, and Lamentations*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2001), 395.

<sup>21</sup> Kellerman, "Psalm 137", 54.

<sup>22</sup> Herbert J. Levine, *Sing unto God a new song*. (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995), 185.

<sup>23</sup> Arnold A. Anderson, *The Book of Psalms Vol 2, Psalms 73-150*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1981), 897.

<sup>24</sup> Geoffrey W. Grogan, *Psalms*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 215.

<sup>25</sup> John Goldingay, *Psalms Volume 3: Psalms 90-150*. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2008), 603.

Zion, as the dwelling place of God (cf. Ps 76:3; Is 8:18), was understood by Israel as the symbol of God's presence in their midst. Therefore they believed that Zion would never fall and they would always experience prosperity, safety and security. Even if other nations should attack them, they would prevail and Yahweh would repel all attacks against them (cf. Pss 46:5, 48:3-8). The prophets especially gave this tradition an important place within Israel's theology as a symbol of the safety and security to be found in Yahweh.

Thus, Zion was a symbol of refuge and protection, and also a source of joy. However, in Psalm 137 Zion no longer represent refuge and safety, or joy and gladness. Zion has become a source of sorrow. The people remember Zion, not with gladness, but with sadness. Because Zion took such a central position in Israel's theology, the fall of Jerusalem and their consequent separation from Zion, was an extremely traumatic experience for them. Remembering Zion created grief and a deep inner longing, because the joy of the presence of Yahweh in the temple and their meeting with him there now existed only as a memory in their hearts. Zion was destroyed. The security offered by Zion has been shattered. The Zion tradition is turned upside down, thus bringing the experience of bitterness and sorrow so much more into focus.

Judah hung their lyres in the trees; they could not sing songs of joy (vv. 2-4). Lyres are usually connected with praise (cf. Pss 92:4, 98:5, 108:3, 147:7, 149:3, 150:3) and thus their lyres which hung from the willows signified publicly that they have given up praise.<sup>26</sup> These are all expressions of the intense sorrow and mourning that the people experienced due to exile. In verse 1 their sorrow is connected with their remembrance of Zion. Jerusalem had been invaded, the temple was destroyed, and the people have been taken into exile to a foreign country, away from Zion, their source of peace and safety. Here in exile they cannot but weep when they remember this horrible experience. However, their sadness is not devoid of hope, but it is a sorrow that results in a mighty protest and prayers of vengeance where Yahweh is implored to take action on behalf of his people and bring an end to their sorrow and justice to their cause.

Their sorrow is heightened when their captors mockingly tormented them in the midst of their experience of anguish and suffering by demanding them to sing a song of Zion, a song of joy. This motif belongs to the area of mocking questions asked by enemies: Where is their God now? Why did He not save them? (cf. Pss 79:10; 115:2).<sup>27</sup> They were not only mocking Israel, but Israel's God. The motivation for this request was not to glorify Yahweh, but to make a caricature of Him and his people. The captors wanted to convince the Jews that their God had forgotten them and abandoned them; but also that their

<sup>26</sup> Goldingay, *Psalms Volume 3*, 604.

<sup>27</sup> Kraus, *Psalms 60-150*, 503.

God was a weak and powerless God who could not deliver them in their time of trouble. By demanding a song of Zion they wanted to force the exiles to join in this mockery of Yahweh<sup>28</sup> (cf. also Steenkamp).<sup>29</sup>

Songs of Zion (cf. Pss 46, 48, 76, 84, 122), however, were not appropriate during the experience of exile. Therefore the exiles refused to sing songs of joy in the midst of their captivity. Exile, a time of grief and mourning, a time of pain and anguish, was not the time for singing songs of Zion, songs of gladness and joy. Israel thus continued to worship during exile, but their worship was not expressed through songs of joy. Weiser<sup>30</sup> is therefore correct when he writes: “Not every place and hour, not every inward frame of mind and not every human environment, is suitable for sounding forth God’s praise.” Brueggemann<sup>31</sup> expresses a similar viewpoint when he writes that songs of Zion are pornographic when they are sung amongst those who do not believe in Zion. The captives could not do anything else but to verbalise their experience of sorrow, their experience of exile.

It is highly ironic that the captors ask “joy” from their prisoners by demanding a song of Zion because joy and gladness are missing in the psalm. Jerusalem is destroyed; thus there can be no joy. The experience of exile made joyful singing impossible. Their separation from Zion filled them with misery and not happiness. The circumstances were not proper for singing the song of the Lord. During exile joyful songs are not appropriate; exile is the time for lament. Indeed, Zenger<sup>32</sup> maintains that what was appropriate in their circumstances, was doubt about God. Yet they clung to God and his promises, for whom else could they turn to?

In the second strophe the poet’s loyalty to Jerusalem is highlighted. The poet does not claim that Yahweh could be worshipped only in Jerusalem. The exiles were well aware that Yahweh was not confined to Jerusalem in any physical sense; the Psalms do often declare that Yahweh is Lord over the entire world. The purpose is rather to indicate that while singing joyful songs of Zion is not possible in exile, there may be another aspect of worship: verbalising one’s pain and sorrow before God in the form of lament. The negative situation, in which the exiles found themselves, does not mean the end of

<sup>28</sup> Cas J. A. Vos, *Theopoetry of the Psalms*. (Pretoria: Protea, 2005), 267.

<sup>29</sup> Steenkamp, “Psalm 137”, 304.

<sup>30</sup> Artur Weiser, *The Psalms*, tr by H Hartwell. (London: SCM, 1962), 795.

<sup>31</sup> Walter Brueggemann, *The message of the Psalms: A Theological commentary*. (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1984), 75.

<sup>32</sup> Erich Zenger, *A God of vengeance? Understanding the Psalms of divine wrath* (trans. Linda M. Maloney, Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 48.

worship, but an emphasis of a different aspect of worship. “The voice of faith ‘there’ was the voice of prayer with tears.”<sup>33</sup>

Yet Jerusalem remains the object of the poet’s highest joy (v. 6). Although exile is not the time for singing the Lord’s song, not the time for joy, gladness, rejoicing, the (destroyed) Jerusalem still is the source for elation.

In verses 5-6 the theme of self imprecation is on the table (cf. Job 31:16-22; Ps 7:5-6). The poet would rather be lame and dumb than to forget Jerusalem. If his right hand became lame<sup>34</sup> and if his tongue got stuck to the roof of his mouth, he would not have been able to make music or to sing to glorify God. This is indeed the greatest curse that any musician ever could utter.<sup>35</sup> Then he would not have been able to take his rightful place in the cultic assembly.<sup>36</sup> To forget Jerusalem would have been the same as to forget God, because God’s power was revealed in Jerusalem’s fate, in her fall and in her rebuilding for which the psalmist longs.<sup>37</sup>

The third strophe calls attention to the lament of the people, focusing on a cry for retribution and vengeance against the enemy. Here we find the proper response for worshippers during times of exile: the verbalising of one’s pain, sorrow, even feelings of vengeance. Exile is not the time for singing joyful songs; it is the time to lament. In this strophe the poet prays for judgment from God to fall upon the enemies of Judah. They who were responsible for the destruction of the temple and the capture of God’s people are the object of his prayer for retribution and vengeance.

Firstly, he prays for revenge against the Edomites. The Edomites were the descendants of Esau, the brother of Jacob (cf. Gen 36:1), and thus blood brothers to the Jews. They acted treacherously against Israel when, on the day of Jerusalem’s invasion and ruin, they took sides with the enemy and rejoiced over the destruction of the city (cf. Is 34:1-17; Jer 49:7-22; Ezek 25:12-14, 35:1-15; Obad: 1-21). They even captured some of the Judahites when they tried to flee the scene of destruction in Jerusalem. Edomites were employed by Nebuchadnezzar as mercenaries who encouraged the complete destruction of Israel’s holy place (cf. Ezek 25:12-14). Even when the exiles returned, Edom remained one of Judah’s greatest enemies. This animosity continued till the Roman era with the rise of Antipater, who was an Idumean (an Edomite) and

<sup>33</sup> James L. Mays, *Psalms*. (Louisville: John Knox, 1994), 422.

<sup>34</sup> Cf. Prinsloo, “Psalm 137”, 282 for this reading

<sup>35</sup> Goldingay, *Psalms Volume 3*, 607.

<sup>36</sup> Kees Waaijman, *Psalmen vanuit die Ballingschap*. (Kampen: Kok, 1986), 174.

<sup>37</sup> Weiser, *Psalms*, 796.

the father of Herod the Great<sup>38</sup> (cf. also Vos).<sup>39</sup> Yahweh must remember these deceitful deeds of the Edomites and destroy them.

The day of Jerusalem in verse 7 refers to the day when Jerusalem was punished for her sins against Yahweh. It probably refers to the *יְהוָה יוֹם*, the day when Yahweh intervenes to judge humankind for their sins (cf. Is 2:12-17, 13:6, 9; Joel 1:15, 2:1-17; Amos 5:18-20, Zeph 1:2-18, 2:2-3, Mal 4:1). Israel (and Judah) initially thought that the *יְהוָה יוֹם* was going to be a day of blessing for them and punishment for the enemies. However, prophets like Amos and Zephaniah turned this idea on its head by indicating that the *יְהוָה יוֹם* will firstly be a day of judgment against God's own people.

The *יְהוָה יוֹם* is thus a prophetic theme that refers to God's judgment against his people, but also against the other nations. In Psalm 137 it specifically refers to Judah. This is the day on which the anger of Yahweh was unleashed against Judah, when they were judged by the holy God. This was the day on which God's people were torn away from their land and their temple, the day on which everything they believed in fell into ruins around them. It is the day that had catastrophe written all over it, the horrific day when God executed judgment.

Verses 8-9 are the climax of this prayer for vengeance. The emphasis falls on Babylon as the main culprit. In verse 1 Babylon was portrayed as the conqueror, here in verse 8 Babylon is *הַשָּׂרִיָּדָה*. This prayer for retribution calls to mind Isaiah 13:15-16, which is an oracle directed against Babylon.

The prayer for vengeance against the Babylonians is probably one of the most horrifying prayers in the Bible. Not only does the poet pray for retribution against Babylon and that the heads of their children must be dashed against the rocks, but he calls the one who performs this hideous deed, "happy." Here the psalmist uses an expression of blessing (the *אֲשֶׁרִי* formula) as curse against the enemy. It is no wonder that Gerstenberger<sup>40</sup> maintains that this wish for the annihilation of children is "a deplorable example of deep-rooted ethnic hatred." But is Gerstenberger correct with this statement? Is it really ethnic hatred that is portrayed here? Zenger<sup>41</sup> argues that it should rather be read as "an attempt, in the face of the most profound humiliation and helplessness, to suppress the primitive human lust for violence in one's own heart, by surrendering *everything* to God." The psalm is not a song of people who have the power to effect a violent change in their situation of suffering, nor is it the battle cry of

<sup>38</sup> Samuel Terrien, *The Psalms: Strophic structure and Theological commentary*. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 867.

<sup>39</sup> Vos, *The poetry*, 269.

<sup>40</sup> Gerstenberger, *Psalms*, 393.

<sup>41</sup> Zenger, *A God of vengeance?*, 48.



terrorists (cf. also Vos<sup>42</sup> who argues that the focus is not blind nationalism or personal revenge, but Yahweh's honour). The psalm should rather be read as the outcry of the powerless, of those who are in exile, to Yahweh to execute his righteous judgment.

The killing of children was often part of military tactics which had the total destruction of a people in mind (cf. 2 Kgs 8:12; Is 13:16; Hos 10:14, 14:1; Nah 3:10). Children are of course any nation's future, and therefore the killing of children will ensure the complete annihilation of the enemy. It should therefore be understood against the background of the Ancient Near East. However, it remains an appalling and gruesome prayer that gives offence.<sup>43</sup>

The psalmist prays for God's judgment against the enemies. Thus faith in God's power is here under discussion. The poet wants to underline that the last word will not be spoken by the enemies, but it will be spoken by God. Yahweh cannot and should not allow that his majesty and glory be affected by the mocking and blasphemy of the enemies.<sup>44</sup> This passionate verbalising of pain and anger and vengeance is a cry that the history books should be rewritten and balanced.

This prayer for vengeance also speaks of the hope and trust that the people placed in Yahweh that he would not allow injustice to remain unpunished. The cry for vengeance should thus be understood as a cry for justice.<sup>45</sup> Those who captured the people of God should know that the God of the captured would not remain angry with them indefinitely. They must know that the God of Israel is the only true and living God who will not allow the aggressors to get away with it. This violent prayer thus affirms the integrity of Yahweh, which might otherwise have seemed in doubt.<sup>46</sup>

## **D THE CHRISTIAN CHURCH AND PSALM 137**

What should Christians do with this bloodthirsty psalm? Does it have any value for the Christian church today? I think that Psalm 137 has a very important role within the life of the Church today. "Even the anger of the refugee or the exile

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<sup>42</sup> Vos, *Theopoetry*, 270.

<sup>43</sup> For an overview of the interpretation possibilities of Psalm 137:9, cf. Siegfried Risse, " 'Wohl dem, der deine kleine Kinder packt und sie am Felsen zerschmettert': Zur Auslegungsgeschichte von Ps 137:9." *Biblical Interpretation*, 14/4 (2006): 364-384.

<sup>44</sup> Weiser, *Psalms*, 796.

<sup>45</sup> Brent A. Strawn, "Psalm 137," in *Psalms for preaching and worship: A lectionary commentary* (eds. Roger E. van Harn and Brent A. Strawn. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2009), 348.

<sup>46</sup> Grogan, *Psalms*, 257.

can become an act of prayerful worship,” argues Pleins.<sup>47</sup> In times of exile the singing of the Lord’s song is not an option, in times of exile believers can and should voice their emotions and feelings of hurt, anger, vengeance and retribution.

A violent text such as Psalm 137 should be understood within its own context and be interpreted against the customs and social institutions of its own time.<sup>48</sup> The psalmist surely used images and metaphors regarding warfare familiar to his own time. The poet therefore prays that the principle of *lex taliones* should be applied.<sup>49</sup> Babylon must be paid back for what it had done to the people of God. The question however, remains: how should Christians living today understand and use this psalm? The principle of *lex taliones* is seemingly rejected by Jesus in Mathew 5:38-42. Can this psalm therefore be part of Christian worship? Can Christians pray this prayer?

The answer to this cannot be separated from the fact that the psalmist did not take matters into his own hands.<sup>50</sup> He did not dash the heads of the babies against the rocks; he did not take retribution on the enemies. This psalm is a prayer, a desire that he expresses to God to see to it that justice should prevail. It is a liberating act of bold faith where the psalmist commits his emotions of vengeance and hate into the hands of God. God is implored to take action on behalf of his people, because he has acted thus before. He had been the author of their salvation on numerous occasions throughout their violent history.<sup>51</sup>

Judah did not have the physical means to take vengeance on Babylon. The only weapon they had was their words, words addressed to Yahweh, whereby they verbalised their experiences of powerlessness and humiliation, their feelings of anger and retribution. Levine<sup>52</sup> rightly calls it the “verbal counterpart to the all-too-real bloodshed in the streets of Jerusalem at the time of the destruction.” This rhetoric of violence is uttered by people who do not have the means or ability to take vengeance into their own hands; therefore they commit it into the hands of Yahweh, to whom vengeance belongs (cf. Ps 94:1; Is 63:4; Rom 12:19; Heb 10:30). Judah’s weapons consisted of words

<sup>47</sup> J. David Pleins, *The Psalms: Songs of tragedy, hope and justice* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 1993), 41.

<sup>48</sup> Peet Van Dyk, “Violence and the Old Testament,” *OTE* 16/1 (2003): 96.

<sup>49</sup> Strawn, “Psalm 137,” 349-350 offers an interesting argument concerning *lex taliones* when he writes that the practice was humanitarian in nature, ensuring that punishment was limited and kept from excess.

<sup>50</sup> Van Dyk, “Violence”, 96, rightly argues that violent texts in the Old Testament cannot be used to justify violent acts or wars.

<sup>51</sup> Grogan, *Psalms*, 257.

<sup>52</sup> Levine, *Sing unto God*, 185.

addressed to Yahweh, and not deeds. Strawn<sup>53</sup> is therefore quite correct when he writes that the psalm should be read as a prayer “where the cry of rage is lifted, not in an angry fist against a human enemy, but in prayer to the God who claims sole proprietary rights to vengeance and payback.”

Contemporary Christian worship often provides the illusion that believers should not experience or confess anything negative. It is especially the proponents of the so-called “prosperity theology” who take this viewpoint and who believe that if one follows their rules of faith (usually there are seven or ten steps to happiness and prosperity!), one should never experience hardship. This is simply a lie. Contemporary Christians do experience times of exile. Christians can learn from Psalm 137 that times of exile are not times for singing the Lord’s song, but for lamenting to God, pouring out one’s heart before God, verbalising all one’s emotions of anguish and anger and hate and vengeance.

It is important that ... we remember ... that the present arrangements are not right, not acceptable, and not finally to be accepted. Psalm 137 draws its power and authority out of another vision, marked by homecoming, which seems remote, but is not for one instant in doubt. There will be a homecoming to peace, justice, and freedom. This psalm is the ongoing practice of that hope against enormous odds.<sup>54</sup>

## **E SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS**

The psalm describes a time when all hope seemed to be gone, a time of tremendous upheaval and disconsolation, a time when almost everything seems discouraging, meaningless and futile. It is a time where God seems far away, a time when the deafening silence of his voice thunders in one’s ears.

I have argued that exile is not only a geographical issue, but that it is a metaphor for contemporary experience. Great injustices take place in every corner of the world, and people still live through feelings of rage and vengeance. Abuse in various forms, infidelity, war, humanitarian crises, sickness, mistreatment of ethnic minorities, political upheaval, economic crises and the horror of violent crime are all expressions of exile in today’s world.

What should exiles do? Is exile the time for singing the Lord’s song? Psalm 137 has shown that Israel did not sing the songs of joy during exile; it would not have been appropriate. Israel addressed the faith crisis of exile by lamenting to Yahweh. They reacted to the loss of their world, their temple, their homeland, their security by crying out to Yahweh for justice. They continued to worship in a strange land; not through singing songs of Zion, songs of joy, but by expressing the deepest emotions of their innermost beings.

<sup>53</sup> Strawn, “Psalm 137,” 351.

<sup>54</sup> Brueggemann, *Message of the Psalms*, 75.

Exiles should therefore grieve for their loss and express all their negative emotions and feelings about the world that was and that has forever changed. The rage uttered to God; the bloodthirsty cry for vengeance is an expression of the powerless trying to cope with the new reality of exile. Exiles need to verbalise their loss and bewilderment and pain and sorrow and indignation. The appropriate response in times of exile is not to sing the Lord's Song, not to sing songs of joy and gladness, but exile requires abrasive speech addressed to God. Psalm 137 is one such text that exiles can utilise.

Psalm 137 also claims that expressing one's anger and misery implies that one does not remain in a perpetual state of despair, because expressing anguish and hatred, and crying for vengeance, indicate the hope that God will not allow exile to continue indefinitely, and thus it is indeed the place of new beginnings.

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