The Theology International Conference
Re Imagining Theology, Religion, Culture, And Humanities for Public Life
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Faculty of Theology, Universitas Sanata Dharma Yogyakarta

Understanding the Curse Against Enemies in Psalm 137 Through Structural Analysis as a Psalm of Lament and its Insights on Interpreting Violence in the Bible

Bobby Steven Octavianus Timmerman

Faculty of Theology, Sanata Dharma University Yogyakarta
romobobmsf@gmail.com

Abstract

Psalm 137 is one of the most eyebrow raising parts of the Old Testament. Some Christians reject it as a prayer because of its horrible images of violence," O Daughter of Babylon, doomed to destruction, happy is he who repays you for what you have done to us - he who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks." (Ps 137:8-9).

The purpose of this article is to provide plausible interpretation of Psalm 137 which contain horrible images of violence against Israel's enemies. Using structural analysis and exegesis of Psalm 137 as an example of a psalm of lament of the oppressed, this study argues that the psalmist cries for retaliation according to the principle of talion, i.e., a concept of punishment whereby the prescribed penalty is identical with, or equivalent to, the offense.

This psalm is a protest against the brutality of great nations (in this case: Edom and Babylon) toward small nation (in this case: Israel). The psalmist does not ask for power to revenge the enemies by one's own initiative but leaves it to YHWH. The curse, uttered in the context of prayer, becomes a vehicle for catharsis. The curse in the psalms provides an acceptable expression of emotions in our prayer.

Keywords: *Psalms of lament, Violence in the Bible, Principle of talion, Structural analysis*

Introduction

Recitation of the psalms is a wellspring for spirituality. Over the centuries, Roman Catholic, Eastern Orthodox, and many other communities recite the psalms. As Gina-Hens-Piazza rightly notes, despite the richness it contributes to our spirituality, praying the psalms is not without risk. Many lines of these psalms, especially those lines with graphic images of violence distract our reflection.[1] There are some psalms with inflammatory language toward one's enemies: "O God, break the teeth in their mouths" (Ps 58: 8-10); "Slaughter them God…strike them down" (Ps 59:11); "May his children be orphans and his wife a widow" (Ps 109:6).

Psalm 137 is one of the most eyebrow raising pieces of scripture in the Bible. Some Christians reject it as a prayer because of its horrible images of violence: "O Daughter of Babylon, doomed to destruction, happy is he who repays you for what you have done to us - he who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks." (Ps 137:8-9).

The problem posed by text is obvious to anyone who reads it through the end. the plain sense of the last pair of verses is a proclamation of blessing upon the man who has killed his captor's children. This is one of those points at which skeptics somewhat reasonably accuse believers of worshipping a hateful, genocidal, and bloodthirsty god. Even C.S. Lewis, the great apologist, describes Psalm 137's concluding outburst as "devilish".[2]

[1] G. Hens-Piazza, "Learning to Curse," *Review for Religious* 53 (1994) 860.
[2] C.S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms* (London 1964) 20.

Method

Using structural analysis and exegesis of Psalm 137 as an example of a psalm of lament of the oppressed, this study argues that the psalmist cries for retaliation according to the principle of talion, i.e., a concept of punishment whereby the prescribed penalty is identical with, or equivalent to, the offense.

How should we interpret Psalm 137 properly? I think the best way to do it is by understanding it as a psalm of lamentation. Laments give force to a confidence that YHWH hears the cry of the oppressed. The psalmist cries for retaliation according to the principle of *talion*, i.e. a concept of punishment whereby the prescribed penalty is identical with, or equivalent to, the offense. Identical (or "true") *talions* are death for homicide ("Whosoever sheds man's blood, by man shall his blood be shed": Gen. 9:6), wounding for wounding ("an eye for an eye": Ex. 21:23–25; Lev. 24:19–20), and doing to the false witness "as he had purposed to do unto his fellow" (Deut. 19:19).[3] This psalm is a protest against the brutality of great nations (in this case: Edom and Babylon) toward small nation (in this case: Israel). The psalmist does not ask for power to revenge the enemies by one's own initiative but leaves it to YHWH.

Result and Discussion

Psalm 137 is composed in three strophes:

1. *Complaint* (vv. 1-4) which can be divided into three sections: a) Sorrows and resistance of the psalmist (vv. 1-2), b) Ridicule by the tormentors (v. 2), c) Reflection of the deportees (v. 4).
2. *Emphatic Adherence to Jerusalem* which can be divided into two sections: a) First oath: no longer being able to act (v. 5) and b) Second oath: no longer being able to speak (v. 6).
3. *Imprecations against Edom and Babylon* which can be divided into two sections: a) Implicit curse against Edom (v. 7) and b) Implicit curse against Babylon (vv. 8-9).

The analysis of Psalm 137 can be summarized in the following structural plan dealing with the psalmist's look into the past (captivity, vv. 1-4), his present

[3] http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/talion, accessed March 20, 2023.

circumstances (vv. 5-6), and his future concern, i.e. curses against the enemies (vv. 7-9).

Complaint

1-2 Sorrows and resistance of the psalmist

3 Ridicule by the tormentors

4 Reflection of the deportees

Emphatic Adherence to Jerusalem

5 First oath: no longer being able to act!

6 Second oath: no longer being able to speak!

Imprecations against Edom and Babylon

7 Implicit curse against Edom

8-9 Implicit curse against Babylon

1. Form

Ps 137 defies straightforward classification in form-critical terms. Schmidt (242) regarded it as unique. Gunkel (580) commented that it begins as if it were a communal lament, continues like a hymn, and ends as a curse. Dahood (269) characterized it as a lament. There is favorable evidence for this label: besides the description of woe in vv. 1–3, which refers both to the sufferers and to their foes, vv. 5–6 can be understood as an implicit confession of trust, while v. 7 is a petition for punishment. These are elements of the lament (cf. Westermann, Praise, 52–64; for "remember," in v 7, cf. Schottroff, 'Gedenken,' 35). Moreover, the demand of v 3 is related to the mocking questions of laments (Pss 79:10; 115:2; Kraus [1989] 503). So G. S. Ogden (*JSOT* 24 [1982] 89–90) simply labeled it a lament, consisting of a description of crisis (vv 1–3), a confession of trust (vv 4–6), and a petition (vv 7–9).[4]

To sum up, this present psalm has elements of communal lament. However, we have to take account of the elements and vestiges of complaint that the text presents, and those that it lacks. The invocation and initial plea are missing. Instead

[4] L.C. Allen, *Vol. 21: Word Biblical Commentary:* Psalms 101-150 (Revised) (Dallas 2002) 302.

of affirmations of confidence we have a vow of allegiance in vv. 5-6. Instead of a proper petition we get two imprecations against two different national groups (vv. 7-9).[5]

2. Exposition

2.1. First Section (vv. 1-4): Complaint

[1] By the rivers of Babylon there we sat down, we wept when we remembered Zion.

[2] On willows in its midst we hung our harps.

[3] For there our captors asked us the words of a song, and our tormentors, mirth, saying: 'Sing us one of the songs of Zion!'

[4] How shall we sing the song of the Lord in a foreign land?

The first section (vv. 1-4) depicts a realistic topography of the exilic situation, coupled with a refusal to cooperate with a Babylonian demand to sing a song of Zion. This topographical scene is remembered by three phrases beginning with the preposition *ʿal* (on, at): "on Babylon's canal"; "on willows at its midst"; and "on foreign land".

The focus on Babylon as the place to which they were deported is sharpened both by the double "there" (vv. 1b and 3a) and by the phrase "at its (Babylon's) midst" (v. 2a). The result is a powerful contrast with "Zion", the counter pole to Babylon. It is precisely in Babylon that the deportees remember Zion and do so in pain and sorrow, as v.1b says ("we wept").[6]

The connection between water and lamentation is by no means self-evident. Suggestions range from an associative linkage between water and tears, to a hypothetical cultic rite of cleansing.[7]

If it is a group of temple musicians who are presenting the scene described in vv. 1-4, those who before their deportation had sung the hymns of Zion at the great Temple festivals in Jerusalem and been responsible for the official theology of Zion, their distress is especially touching. According to their belief, Yahweh resided on Zion not only as the God who protected Jerusalem but also as the powerful warrior

[5] E.S. Gertensberger, *Psalms Part II and Lamentation* (Grand Rapids, Mich. 2001) 204.
[6] Hossfeld - Zenger, *A Commentary on Psalms 101-150*, 514-515.
[7] G. Savran, "How Can We Sing a Song of The Lord: The Strategy of Lament in Psalm 137" *ZAW* 112 (2000), 44.

against whom the enemy armies must destroy. The hymns of Zion, Psalms 46-48, celebrated the unconquerability of Zion, as demonstrated in the attack by Sennacherib in the year 701 B.C. Zion had become the center of Israel's collective identity, and these "Zion musicians" themselves took their identity from the liturgy of Zion.[8]

(vv. 1-2): Sorrows and resistance of the psalmist

In vv. 1-2, the author allows the singers ("we") to tell their story and share their feelings. "By the rivers of Babylon" deftly shows how far from arid Palestine the people are. Their distance from Zion and its worship brings tears, as in Ps 42:3 (My tears have been my food day and night, while people say to me continually, "Where is your God?").[9]

(v. 3): Ridicule by the tormentors

Looking back on their situation, now they are at the center of the power that had destroyed Zion. They lament not the external conditions of their life but their internal distress, which was only sharpened by the ridicule of their tormentors. The demand for song in v. 3 introduces the element of mockery common to the lament tradition (for example Ps 44:14-15; 79:4; 80:7).

Hossfeld and Zenger explain that the Babylonian overseers' challenge in v. 3: "Sing for us one of the songs of Zion!" is a threefold provocation:

(1) In the middle of Babylon, the center of power that had destroyed Zion, they are asked to sing about the greatness of Zion and its election by Yahweh as the place of his presence in the world.

(2) They are to do this to entertain their Babylonians overseers. If we read the quotation merged in v. 3 in the context of v. 2, the provocation is still sharper. The musicians addressed have symbolized their violently caused "alienation" from Jerusalem Temple liturgy by hanging their Temple instruments on the willows at the center of Babylon, either as a sign of their sorrow, which permitted no festal music of the lyre, or as a protest against their deportations.[10] or as a demonstration of the contradictory nature of their situation.

[8] Hossfeld - Zenger, *A Commentary on Psalms 101-150*, 514.
[9] R.J. Clifford, *Psalms 73-150* (Nashville, 2003) 273.
[10] The deportation was directed primarily against the administrative and cultural upper class of Jerusalem, especially the Temple as power center; the Temple singers were part of this group.

(3) Although they themselves are full of sorrow, their tormentors command them to show bliss and jubilation. That the Jerusalem Temple musicians in particular have to resist this unreasonable and degrading demand is explained twice. First, v. 3b, with the demand that they should give a performance of festal joy with their songs, formulates a contradiction to their basic option, as characterized in v. 1b: their remembrance of Zion in Babylon, in view that the Babylonians have done to Zion, can only be "weeping", i.e. sorrow and lament. They can and will not forget and "cover up" the sufferings of Zion by allowing themselves to be persuaded to make "festival music".[11]

R. J Clifford emphasizes how great their sorrow was by the following words:
"To be away from Zion is suffering enough, but their captors insult them, asking them for the songs of Zion. Such songs (e.g., Pss 46, 48, 76, 84, 122) told the splendor of the city: how the Lord defeated enemy kings there, made it a center of fertility, and installed the Davidic king in its midst. Such claims are too painful to speak of now, especially for those who would only laugh at them."[12]

(v. 4): Reflection of the deportees

From a literary point of view, we could understand v. 4 as a quotation of the direct answer given by the deportees to their tormentors. Then the translations would have to be: "How can/shall we sing YHWH's song in a foreign land?"

The deportees' rejection to perform the festal songs of Zion, accompanied by the harp orchestra for the Babylonians is ultimately, for them, about YHWH's divinity. YHWH's songs, played for the entertainment of those who do not worship YHWH, would be a mockery of YHWH.

"Songs of Zion" may refer to happy melodies in honor of Jerusalem (Pss 76; 84; 87). To sing such songs in a "foreign land" would be a profanation, for this land was considered unclean (cf. Amos 7:17; Hos 9:3).[13] In other words, the songs of Zion cannot be sung out of context. Songs of worship must be presented to the living God, not to pagan princes. At the heart of this, lies an important theological point: songs of praise must be presented to the One worthy of praise. Otherwise, they are perverted by their very presentation.

[11] Hossfeld - Zenger, *A Commentary on Psalms 101-150*, 515.
[12] Clifford, *Psalms 73-150*, 273.
[13] C. Stuhlmuller, *Psalm II*: 73-150 (Delaware 1983) 189.

Hossfeld and Zenger conclude that a song dedicated to YHWH, sung by the conquered and deported temple musicians for the entertainment of the adherents of Marduk, in the midst of Babylon, was simply impossible, especially if the deportees wanted to hold fast to their faith in YHWH.[14]

2.2. Second Section (vv. 5-6): Adherence to Jerusalem

5 If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right-hand forget!
6 Let my tongue cleave to my palate, if I do not remember you, if I do not set Jerusalem above my chief joy.

The second section takes as its theme remembering as an action that creates identity. This section is shaped by composing two conditional clauses.

v. 5 First oath: no longer being able to act.

"If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right-hand forget!"

v. 6 Second oath: no longer being able to speak.

"Let my tongue cleave to my palate, if I do not remember you,
if I do not set Jerusalem above my chief joy."

Verse 5ab and 6 ab are chiastically structured: v. 5a and v 6b formulate, with the contrasting verbs "forget" "not remember", the conditions of oath against the self and serve as a frame around the consequences formulated in v. 5b and v. 6a.
The next clause, v. 6cd, takes up the conditional clause formulation and intensifies its content. The commemorative adherence to Jerusalem is for the "I" an act of the highest "joy".
While in the first section, in rejection of the joy demanded from outside, the appropriate way of remembering Zion is lament, now in the second section it is the freely willed "joy" that comes from within.

This thematic links between vv. 1-4 and vv. 5-6 also speak against the hypothesis that the two sections were originally created as independent "songs" or are fragments from different songs.[15]

[14] Hossfeld - Zenger, *A Commentary on Psalms 101-150*, 516.

[15] Hossfeld - Zenger, *A Commentary on Psalms 101-150*, 516.

G. Savran rightly notes that “right hand” and “tongue” may serve as metonymy for all human action and speech. Both may signify a more limited reference to the stop of playing music and singing in the first part of the psalm.[16]

To sum up, vv. 5-6 mean that forgetting Jerusalem is like not being able to act (hand, v. 5) and not being able to speak (v. 6). For a musician, these would be a terrible curse, like the 90% death of one’s body.

2.3. Third Section (vv. 7-9): Punishments desired

7 Remember, O Lord, for the sons of Edom, the day of Jerusalem, those saying, 'Raze, raze to its foundation!'

8 O Daughter of Babylon, doomed to destruction, happy shall he be who repays you for what you have done to us,

9 he who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks!

v. 7 Implicit curse against Edom

The third section (vv. 7-9) changes the direction of the discourse and the speaker’s attitude. He begins in v. 7a with the imperative “remember!” addressed in the vocative to YHWH.

While the theme of the two preceding sections was remembering on the part of the deportees or those returned from exile, the focus now is on YHWH’s remembering Jerusalem.

YHWH is supposed to remember the Edomites, and what they cried out “(on) the day of Jerusalem”, that is, on the evil day when Jerusalem was destroyed.[17]

Although here in v.7 the addressees of the Edomites challenge are not named, the quotations placed on the lips of the Edomites in v. 7b corresponds to the quotation of the Babylonian tormentors in v. 3b.

It is either implied that the Edomites urged each other to raze Jerusalem to the ground or the context of vv. 7-9 may suggest that the Babylonians are the addressees and were urged by the Edomites to “expose” the city, that is, all its building and especially its walls, down to the ground.

The Edomites were particularly active in the destruction of Jerusalem (Amos 1:11; Joel 4:19; Obad 10ff). They are threatened with the divine vengeance (Jer 49:7ff; Ezek 25:12ff; Is

[16] Savran, “*How Can We Sing A Song of The Lord*”, 50.
[17] cf. “day of Midian” Is 9:3; “day of Jezreel” Hos 2:2.

34, 63:1ff). As the kindred of Israel, they were still more odious to them than the Babylonians were, and possibly for this reason are here mentioned before the Babylonians.[18]

The verb used here are Piel, was deliberately chosen to evoke a double wordplay. On the one hand, there is an aural allusion to the first element of the name *Jeru-shalayim*. It is true that we do not know what meaning people associated with the name Jerusalem at the time when our psalm was created. But it seems certain that the assonance of *ʿārū-yerū* could not have been missed. On the other hand, Psalm 122 shows that people also associated the name Jerusalem with the noun *ʿîr*, "city", and made plays on it (as for example, in Ps 122:3). The imperative *ʿārū*, "expose" and the intensification combined with it, "down to the ground of her," accordingly emphasizes that Jerusalem is to be destroyed in its "essence". It is possible that the aspect of degradation is also to be heard when Jerusalem is thought of as being personified as a "woman" or as "daughter of Sion," who is to be publicly "exposed" and "disgraced."[19]

According to the Anchor Bible, the direct speech attributed to the Edomites in verse seven, "Raze it, raze it, even to the foundations thereof" is more properly translated as "Strip her, strip her." The Hebrew *ʿārū*, repeated twice, shares a feminine suffix. It can be translated, "make nakedness seen," used in contexts of metaphorical nakedness, such as in a euphemism for sexual intercourse, for example. In addition, the Hebrew word for "foundations" has a secondary meaning of buttocks.

In short, the Hebrew connotations of Psalm 137 suggest that Jerusalem under conquest is a woman being despoiled of her clothing, even subjected to sexual humiliation. This is consistent with a number of biblical texts pertaining to the plight of Judah. Gendered and sometimes explicitly sexualized language abounds in Jeremiah, Lamentations, and Ezekiel, all books that recount the causes and conditions of conquest and exile.[20]

vv. 8-9 Implicit curse against Babylon

Verses 8-9 are addressed to "daughter Babylon". "Daughter of Babylon" is, analogous to "daughter of Zion", the theological-political designation of the capital city of the Babylonian empire, which is responsible for the destruction and rape of "daughter Zion".

If we follow the MT in v. 8a, the participle *šodûdah,* given as an attribute to "you, daughter Babylon" and best translated as gerund, "the one condemned to devastation" or "who

[18] J.F. McCurdy, *A Commentary on the Holy Scriptures: Psalms* (Bellingham, Wa. 2008) 360.
[19] Hossfeld - Zenger, *A Commentary on Psalms 101-150*, 518.
[20] Stowe, *Song of Exile*, 176.

must/shall be devastated", or else future "who will be devastated," signals that the devastation called down on Jerusalem by the Edomites ought now to be reversed -according to the legal principle of *talion*- onto Babylon itself.[21]

The concept of *talion* is explicitly and even doubly formulated in the first of the two beatitudes that are directly addressed to daughter Babylon: on the one hand, by the repetition of the root *gml* "deed" (v. 8b) or "action" (v. 8c), and, on the other hand, by the verb *slm* Piel (v. 8b), known to be a technical term for the idea of retaliation. At the same time, we have here another wordplay on the name of Jerusalem. In contrast to the common association that explains Jerusalem as a city of peace and wellbeing (*šālôm*), here the perspective "city of retaliation" is evoked, inasmuch as the injustice exercised against her by her destroyers must be repaid.

The second beatitude (v. 9) must be also understood as a wish for the retaliation of the concept of *talion*. The following points of view must be taken into account if we are to achieve an appropriate understanding of the disturbing image in v. 9:

(1) The killing of children was frequently an element in the depiction of a military judgement sent by God, either for Israel of for foreign peoples. These military images were inspired by the brutal practices in war (unfortunately still common in our day), whose excess of violence were evident particularly in the cases of the murder of helpless children, pregnant women, and old people (cf., for example, Deut 32:25; 2 Kgs 8:12; Isa 13:15-18; Jer 51:20-23; Hos 14:1; Nah 3:10).

(2) Psalm 137:9 probably chooses the element of "children" out of this "picture of violence" for two reasons: on the one hand, this element corresponds to the address "daughter Babylon" in the sense that she is the "mother" of these children (v. 9: "your children"); on the other hand, this evokes the royal house in Babylon, whose continuation is to be thwarted through the death of the children of "daughter Babylon." That the aim of making "daughter Babylon" childless is to put an end to its "royal rule" is a central perspective also of the Babylon poem" in Isa 47:1-15 (cf. especially 47:1,8-9).

(3) Verse 8 explicitly emphasizes that the sentence must correspond to the principle of *talion*; this is confirmed in its content by Lam 2:19. Likewise, the contextual incorporation of the "daughter Babylon poem" in Isaiah 47 within the composition of Deutero-Isaiah emphasizes the antithesis between "daughter Babylon" and "daughter Zion". The contrast between "Zion" and Babylon" also shapes the sequence of Isaiah 12-14.

[21] Hossfeld - Zenger, *A Commentary on Psalms 101-150*, 518.

(4) The proclamations of the judgement and destruction of Babylon in Jeremiah 50-51 (especially 51:6, 20-26, 49-50, 55-56) must also be adduced in an interpretation of vv. 7-9. Psalm 127:8-9 has the thematic words: "daughter Babylon"; "devastate"; "repay" and "destroy" in common with this perspective. It is probable that Ps 137:8-9 was inspired by Jeremiah 50-51.

(5) Whether v. 9b, with "rock", also alludes to Edom (cf. Jer 49:16; Obad 3) or to *Sela* (=rock) as an Edomite city (cf 2 Kgs 14:7) is difficult to determine. Overall, we must say that the image of violence in v. 9 has, on the one hand, a broad background in the history of ideas; it is above all a politically laden image with which the psalm protests against the viciousness brutality of the great empires of the time toward their small neighbors. On the other hand, the virulent violence of such images, especially in their appeal to the emotions, is very problematic in today's perspective, especially when they are given additional religious overtones.[22]

(6) The Edomites and the Babylonians were accounted then enemies of the Lord and not just of Israel, for they had destroyed the Lord's city and temple in Jerusalem.[23]

Did infanticide take place in ancient militaristic contexts? There can be little doubt that infanticide took place in ancient militaristic contexts. Cities were assailed and babies were murdered. The prophet Nahum, for example, recounts the capture of Thebes in Egypt by the Assyrians.

"Yet [Thebes] was carried away, she went into captivity; her little ones were dashed in pieces at the head of every street; for her honored men lots were cast, and all her great men were bound in chains" (Nah 3:10).

We might well presume that Israel suffered in this way on at least one occasion. In 2 Kgs 8:12 the future king of Aram, Hazael, asks why Elisha is weeping. The prophet answers, because I know the evil that you will do to the people of Israel; you will set on fire their fortresses, you will slay their young men with the sword, dash in pieces their little ones, and rip up their women with child.

According to the Scriptures that our psalmist doubtless loved, however, his people, the Israelites who had also previously killed infants in battle. In the book of Deuteronomy, Moses reminds his audience of their earlier destruction of the kingdom of Heshbon: And the LORD our God gave [Sihon, King of Heshbon] over to us; and we defeated him and his sons and all

[22] Hossfeld - Zenger, *A Commentary on Psalms 101-150*, 519.
[23] C.S. Rodd, "Psalms" in *The Oxford Bible Commentary* (eds. J. Barton – J. Muddiman) (New York 2001) 402.

his people. And we captured all his cities at that time and utterly destroyed every city, men, women, and children; we left none remaining (2:33-34; cf. also the fate of Bashan in 3:3-4,6).

The killing of infants is also said to have taken place directly as the result of the judgements of Israel's deity. Samaria's destruction by the Assyrians was explained by Hosea thus: Samaria shall bear her guilt, because she has rebelled against her God; they shall fall by the sword, their little ones shall be dashed in pieces, and their pregnant women ripped open (13:16).

Clearly the author of Psalm 137 was an inheritor of this militaristic tradition. As Clines points out, the rhetoric of warfare is apparent throughout the Psalms. The psalmists are variously presented as warriors (Clines notes the following psalms as examples: 2, 3, 18, 20, 21, 44, 45, 58, 60, 72, 89, 110, 144, 149). Their deity takes on some of the characteristics of a violent "arch-killer" (possessing sword [7.13], shield [35.2], bow [7:13], arrows [e.g. 7:14; 18:15], and spears [35:3]). [24] Enemies are castigated and victories/vengeance sought. For the pacifist, the psalms can certainly be very hard reading![25]

Conclusion

The first two parts of Psalm 137 are marked by a positively excessive love for Zion and the God of Zion on the part of the one praying. Even if everything seems to speak against YHWH's holding fast to Zion, the psalm itself hold fast to it- and in vv. 7-9 implores YHWH not to disappoint that love for Zion.

The violent images in v. 9, on the other hand, reflect the gruesome reality of terror regimes from antiquity to today and, on the other hand, express longing for an end to these practices of such terror regimes-through divine violence, of course. That is, indeed, very problematic for our sensibilities today, because destructive violence, even if it comes from God, is to be rejected. However, we should point out that Psalm 137 cries for retaliation according to the principles of *talion*, and to that extent for the restoration of the distorted order of justice. The psalm is shaped neither by feelings of hatred nor by the irrationality of revenge; it is a protest against the brutality of great powers toward small nations. It is a psalm from the lips of the victims of history, and not the triumph song of victors.

[24] D.J. Clines,"The Book of Psalms, Where Men Are Men: On the Gender of Hebrew Piety"; www.shef.ac.uk/uni/academic/A-C/biblst/ DJACcurrres/GenderPiety.html accessed June 3, 2017.
[25] W.J. Lyons, *"A Man of Honour, A Man of Strength, A Man of Will?* A Canonical Approach to Psalm 137", *Didaskalia* 16 (2005) 59-60.

The psalm does not ask for power to carry our punishment against the enemies by one's own initiative but leaves it to God. To that extent, the psalm is an implicit rejection of violence that places everything in God's hand-doubt about God's power as well as hope in his saving omnipotence. Whoever accepts that view and understands vv. 7-9 as a poetic metaphor can pray and sing Psalm 137 even today, when we are aware of the problematic nature of images of violence-especially if vv. 1-4 are understood as a *memoria passionis*, as is the case of Judaism even now. There Psalm 137 is recited on the sixth weekdays as part of table prayer (on the Sabbath Psalm 126, which celebrates the restoration of Zion).[26]

According to J.G. Vos, the imprecatory psalms such as psalm 137 must be regarded as free from suspicion of immorality because God is both sovereign and righteous. He possesses the right to punish the wicked. The destruction of the wicked which is prayed for in Psalm 137 is not an unjust destruction. This psalm does not seek the unjust destruction of the life of man. On the contrary, this present psalms is in essence an appeal to the justice of God and a prayer for that justice to execute sentence upon the wicked.[27]

David Stowe wrote a personal reflection on Psalm 137 which may help us to understand it better. He learned about an episode that occurred in Poland in 1941 in an article by Dutch scholar Athalya Brenner, who draws an explicit comparison to the violent finale of Psalm 137.

That summer, in the Polish town of Jedwabne, the entire Jewish population— sixteen hundred men, women, and children— was rounded up, taunted, beaten, and incinerated in a barn. By neighbors with whom they had coexisted for generations. The atrocity was described four years later in a deposition taken from a Pole who witnessed the slaughter.

David Stowe asks," How was it possible for neighbor to commit such atrocities against neighbor?" The Polish Catholics who committed the massacre felt victimized themselves; they had been invaded first by Soviet Communists, then again within a few months by German Nazis. But that hardly begins to explain the savagery committed by the townspeople of Jedwabne, which they undertook willingly, apparently with little or no coercion from the Nazis. Brenner is well aware of the potential of language like the final lines of Psalm 137 to incite physical violence, but points out: "There is a great difference between expressing a sentiment and 'dashing the infants'- as, in a reversal of roles, the Poles were happy to turn verbal threats and plans into action and dash the Jewish children into the fire."[28]

[26] Hossfeld - Zenger, *A Commentary on Psalms 101-150*, 522-523.
[27] J.G. Vos, "The Ethical Problem of the Imprecatory Psalms", *Westminster Theological Journal* 04:2 (1942) 136.
[28] A. Brenner, "'On the Rivers of Babylon' (Psalm 137), or Between Victim and Perpetrator," *Sanctified Aggression*: Legacies of Biblical and Post Biblical Vocabularies of Violence, (eds. J. Bekkenkamp and Y. Sherwood) (London 2003), 76– 91.

Rather than recoiling from the unseemly spirit of violent retribution against innocents, she reasons that it is better to think such actions than to carry them out. To release such emotions through language can be therapeutic and possibly reduce the likelihood of actually committing physical violence. Ellen Davis writes. "Sunday lectionaries omit psalms like this altogether, or they include them in highly expurgated form. But by clapping our hand over the psalmists' mouth in that way, we lose something the Bible intends us to have. By refusing to listen to that anger and even take it on our lips, we lose an opportunity to bring our anger into the context of our relationship with God."[29]

G. Hens-Piazza argues that the curse, uttered in the context of prayer, becomes a vehicle for catharsis. Recitations of these curses acknowledge the desperate emotions Israel felt before its captor in exile, before the army that slaughtered its children, or before the hegemonic rulers who confiscated the land of its peasants. In the same way, reciting these curses against a foe allows us to express the objectionable but nevertheless real emotions we harbor toward those who harm our children, toward those who commit violence in our city.

G. Hens-Piazza continues to say that cursing is our initial response when we experience the pervasiveness of evil and our helplessness in front of it. By cursing our enemies, we give voice to our own capacity to hate. To censor these expressions of anger and hatred in prayer risk bypassing an important step on the way to conversion, that is, the ability and honesty to detect sinfulness in ourselves. The curse in the psalms provides an acceptable expression of these emotions as we move toward this change of heart in our prayer.[30]

Perhaps reflecting the ascendance of therapeutic models in the work of the church, theologians advocate owning up to emotions of violent rage rather than rejecting them as unworthy. At any given moment, the world witnesses myriads of crimes against individuals and communities that can and probably should trigger nearly murderous rage. In the face of intolerable injustice, it's better to acknowledge and articulate rather than repress that rage, but then -and this is the key theological move- submit that anger to God rather than act on it. In other words, the faithful believer leaves it to God to punish iniquity in His own way, at His own time. As Babylon was in fact punished -brought down by Yahweh- about fifty years after it destroyed the Jerusalem Temple.[31]

Thus, Christians can use Psalm 137 and other imprecatory psalms in the worship of God as long as these imprecatory psalms are understood properly as expressions of lament of

[29] E.F. Davis, *Getting Involved with God: Rediscovering the Old Testament* (Cambridge, Mass. 2001), 24.
[30] G. Hens-Piazza, "Learning to Curse", 862-863.
[31] Stowe, *Song of Exile*, 132.

the oppressed. As we have discussed before, in this present psalm, the psalmist pours out his anger, frustrations, and spite ultimately to achieve submission to God's will. Since evil contrasts in every way with God's plan, the psalmist prays for divine retribution.