


Memories of Zion in Exile: A contextual reading of the Ironical 'Bitter Beatitudes' of Psalm 137



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While one's memory might not always be flawless, possibly because of forgetfulness, memory loss, or selective recall, there are certain memories that demand to be remembered. These memories can flow through people's lives like rivers. Psalm 137 depicts a compelling backdrop and scenario that closely mirrors the actual experiences of individuals and their recollections. This Psalm is regarded as the most direct and poignant recollection of the Babylonian exile in the entire Psalter. Although some may find the desires expressed in the Psalm troubling and unsuitable for New Testament believers, it aligns with Israel's theological and liturgical response to undeserved or unavoidable suffering. It serves as an entreaty to Yahweh (YHWH), the ultimate source of strength amid powerlessness and hope amid hopelessness. Consequently, Psalm 137 represents a substantial theological statement with contemporary relevance. This article draws a parallel between the emotional anguish experienced by the psalmist, stemming from their unfavourable socioeconomic circumstances, and the similarly oppressive socioeconomic, and psychological conditions faced by many in contemporary times.

Intradisciplinary and/or interdisciplinary implications: This article employs the principle of contemporaneity while engaging with the biblical, literary, and exegetical scope of Psalm 137 to establish a theological rationale and contextual adaptation for this retaliatory Psalm attributed to David. The theological assertion is that in a society marked by violence and abuse, where there exists a sinister conspiracy of brutality, invoking YHWH's intervention by breaking the silence indeed has the potential to effect change. This theological datum makes Psalms 137 resonates in the memory of many today.

Keywords: Psalm 137; memory; retributive Psalm; theological and liturgical; contextual realities; unmerited suffering.

Introduction

Memory plays a significant role in understanding human cognition, spirituality, and the human experience through shaping of human behaviour, learning, and identity. Defined and described at different levels Duling (2011) observes that:

Memory is usually related to images and places ... Memory of events and persons is selective ... Memory does not recall the real past, but only constructions of it; it 'distorts' the past in its need to show that an 'event' has a significance beyond the event itself. Memory constructs the past for the present, especially in relation to one's social group. The social group neither totally dispenses with, nor altogether determines, individual memory – 'it is individuals as group members who remember' ... although it does limit its range of options. Social groups identify themselves and are identified by, their 'collective memories'. Different groups may have different or even competing, versions of the same persons or events (which amounts to memory 'contestation'). The past tends to be 'constructed' as a narrative with a beginning, middle and a *satisfactory* ending. (p. 1)

In the biblical context, memory is linked to faith, covenant, and communal identity. Memory offers valuable insights into the human experience and the importance of remembering and learning from the past. The close connection of memory with tradition is reflected in Kirk's (2010) remark:

Like memory, tradition is refracted through the contemporary social realities of the communities in which it is enacted, such that it comes in important respects to reflect, even to signify those realities. (p. 62)

While there exist both individual and collective memory (cf. Fentress & Wickham 1992:vii–viii; Hutton 1993:73–89; Kinny 1999:426; Olick 2006:6–8), Cattel and Climo (2002:22) hold that, 'Individual and collective memory come together in the stories of individual lives. The process of constructing a life story is heavily mediated by social construction'. One's memory might not always be flawless, possibly because of forgetfulness, memory loss, or selective recall, but there are certain memories

Note: Special Collection: African Hermeneutics.

that demand to be remembered. These memories can flow through people's lives like rivers. Psalm 137 depicts a compelling backdrop and scenario that closely mirrors the actual experiences of individuals and their recollections.

Psalm 137 falls within the realm of poetry that endeavours to encapsulate the emotions of a singular moment – specifically, an endeavour to capture the moment of degradation and hopelessness that followed Judah's devastation and exile at the hands of the Babylonians. Within this Psalm, one can witness the portrayal of an individual grappling with the weight of excruciating emotional torment and trauma, while another aspect of it rejoices in the advantages arising from such inhumane actions. Consequently, the Psalm may be regarded as a contemplation of YHWH's justice concerning his retribution and theodicy (Kselman 1989:838). While the Psalm primarily focusses on the emotional and spiritual distress of the exiles, it indirectly touches upon unfavourable socioeconomic circumstances, which can be compared to similar conditions faced by marginalised and oppressed communities in contemporary times. This article is thus an attempt to reread the contents and experience of the psalmist in Psalm 137 in the light of its literary, contextual, and theological trinity for contemporary appropriation. The explorative reading proceeds, firstly by stating the Psalm's literary setting (in terms of its form, structure, and composition); secondly continues with an understanding of Psalm's imprecatory dimension; thirdly, it seeks to unveil its theological appropriateness in the Hebrew Bible and/or Old Testament canon; and fourthly, it articulates its contextual appropriation for many who are crying for relief from the clutches of their captors.

Literary setting of Psalm 137

Psalm 137 is a part of the larger collection of Psalms in the Psalter.¹ As a heartfelt community lament, Psalm 137 is apparently inserted after the Songs of Ascents (Ps 120–134),² among two outstanding communal hymns (Ps 135–137) that are lacking superscriptions compared to surrounding Psalms (DeClaissé-Walford 2019:670). Its function in the narrative story of Book V (Ps 107–150)³ is interpreted differently. In view of the fact, Psalms 135–137 are seen to have likely formed a kind of appendix to the Songs of Ascents (DeClaissé-Walford 2019)

[...] Scholars have aptly argued that Ps 137 can be interpreted as a concluding word to the Songs of Ascents using, ... the power of memory to keep hopes for Zion alive. (p. 674)

1. The name 'Psalter' has its origins in the Greek word 'Salterion', which initially meant 'stringed instrument' but later evolved to signify a 'collection of songs'. It was utilised in the Codex Alexandrinus as the title for the Book of Psalms. In the Masoretic Text, the traditional Hebrew Old Testament text established by Hebrew scholars in the 8th and 9th centuries AD, the entire book is referred to as 'Tehillim', meaning 'hymns' (Anderson 1983:23). While the term 'Psalm' pertains to individual poems within the book, in this article, 'Psalter' and 'Psalms' will be used interchangeably as appropriate.

2. According to deClaissé-Walford (2019:673), 'While the Songs of Ascents depict the Psalm singers either on their way to (Ps 120 and 121) or physically present in Jerusalem (Ps 122–134), Psalms 137 is set "by the rivers of Babylon" (v. 1)'.¹

3. DeClaissé-Walford (2019:672) notes that, 'The centrepiece of Book V is a collection of Psalms used at various festal celebrations in the life of Israel – celebrations best undertaken in Jerusalem, the centre of religious and political life in pre-exilic Israel'.

This Psalm is a poignant expression of sorrow, a heartfelt lament that resonates deeply with the emotions of the exiled Israelites. The art of lamentation in the context of prayer is a refined and poetic form of expression that held a significant place in Israelite tradition. While similar petitions can be found in various parts of the Old Testament, the majority of them are elegantly captured within the Psalms as laments. This approach is remarkably bold, as it boldly calls upon YHWH to address their needs, essentially expecting and, in some cases, demanding a decisive response from the divine to alleviate or overcome their hardships. The underlying assumption for these forceful, legitimate prayers and/or petitions is that Israel has the right, and that YHWH has a legitimate obligation to answer the prayer because His people who are bound to Him in a covenant of mutual fidelity and commitment are offering it (Brueggemann 2002:118). This stylised form of prayer is often in the voice of an individual speaker who prays, as a member of the community but who, at the same time, speaks from an intimate, functional, and personal relationship with YHWH (cf. Ps 17:1–5). In another form, the prayer may be offered by the voice of the community when the whole community is caught up in a public crisis, such as war or drought (cf. Ps 94:1–8).

In Psalm 137, the psalmist's words convey the deep emotional impact of exile on the community. According to Kafang (2002:25), each Psalm was created within a specific 'life setting' or 'cultural context'. This context could encompass various aspects such as social, political, geographical, or provincial factors. When examining the essential elements that contributed to the inception of the Psalter and guided its unique evolution, Terrien (1952:19–32) analysed the prevailing themes, including deliverance, warfare, the divine presence in religious rituals, expressions of gratitude for bountiful harvests, reflections on sacred history, and intimate communion with the divine. The following sections analyse Psalm's 137 form, structure, setting and composition along with certain lexical and syntactical elements.

Form and structure

Psalm 137 stands out as a vivid and direct recollection of the Babylonian exile within the entire Psalter. While it's often referred to as the quintessential 'Psalm of violence' (Zenger 1996:46), it resists easy categorisation in form-critical terms (cf. Anderson 1972:896). According to scholarly analyses, it initiates with a tone akin to a communal complaint (cf. Kraus 1989:504), and then evolves into something resembling a hymn – song of Zion (cf. Allen 1983:241; Burden 1991:122; Mays 1994:421), ultimately concluding as a fervent curse (cf. Mowinckel 1962:51–52). It can be primarily identified as a communal lament, a classification supported by several compelling indicators. Beyond the depiction of sorrow in verses 1–3, which pertains both to the afflicted and their oppressors, verses 5–6 can be interpreted as an implied expression of trust, while verse 7 constitutes a plea for retribution. These elements collectively contribute to its lament-like character (Gerstenberger 2001:394; Gunkel 1998:580; Maré 2010:118; cf. Westermann 1981:52–64).

As a lyrical or poetic composition, categorised as a communal lament, Psalm 137 has a distinct structure that majority of scholars have divided into a three-fold subdivision, with specific time orientation and alternation of different subject and/or agent (Wendland 2004:319; cf. Allen 1983:240; Anderson 1972:896; Bar-efrat 1997:3–11; Davidson 1998:439–441; Eaton 2003:454; Gerstenberger 2001:390; Mays 1994:422; McCann 1996:1227; Motyer 1994:577).

The Psalm begins with the exiles sitting by the rivers of Babylon, weeping as they remember Zion (Jerusalem). They hang their harps on the poplar trees and when taunted by their enemy captors, they refuse to sing songs of joy in a foreign land. The act of hanging the lyre on the trees serves as a metaphor, symbolising that the owners had chosen to set aside their instruments, never to play them again. This symbolic gesture also signifies that the musicians had ceased to publicly offer praise through their music. It is likely that the psalmist and his fellow musicians represent the entire Judean exile community in a synecdochic manner. This community, as a whole, experienced a loss of the joyful worship of YHWH in the temple during their exile (Simango 2018:222; cf. Goldingay 2008:604). Table 1 outlines these structural divisions.

At the middle of the Psalm, the psalmist expresses the depth of their commitment and devotion to Jerusalem, their sorrow and captivity, emphasising that their right hand has lost its skill (Table 2), likely referring to their inability to play musical instruments or create music in their current state.

In this closing section, the psalmist expresses a passionate desire for vengeance against the Edomites (verse 7) and Babylonians who had oppressed them. They invoke a curse upon those who had taken them captive and destroyed Jerusalem (Table 3).

Setting and composition

Psalm 137 is composed in the first person, with the psalmist speaking on behalf of the exiled Israelites. It combines deep

TABLE 1: Setting of the complaint (verses 1–4).

Masoretic text	New international version
על נהרות בבל שם ישבנו גם-כבינו בוקרנו את-ציון:	¹ By the rivers of Babylon, There we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion.
על-עֲרָבִים בתוכה תלינו כנרותינו:	² There on the poplars we hung our harps,
כי שם שאלונו שובינו דברי-שיר ותולדנו שמחה שירו לנו משיר ציון:	³ for there our captors asked us for songs, our tormentors demanded songs of joy; they said, 'Sing us one of the songs of Zion!'
איך נשיר את-שיר-יהוה על אדמת נָכַר:	⁴ How shall we sing the LORD'S song in a strange land?

TABLE 2: Expression of commitment and devotion to Jerusalem (verses 5–6).

Masoretic text	New international version
אם-אֶשְׁכַּחְךָ ירושלים תשכח ימיני:	⁵ If I forget you, O Jerusalem, may my right hand forget <i>its skill</i> .
תדבק לשוני לחכי אם-לא אזכרכי אם-לא אצלה על ראש שמקתי:	⁶ May my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth if I do not remember you, if I do not consider Jerusalem my highest joy.

sorrow and longing with anger and a desire for retribution against their captors. The composition is distinguished by its profound emotional intensity and vivid imagery, serving to effectively convey the profound pain and yearning of the Israelites for their homeland. According to DeClaissé-Walford, Jacobson and Tanner (2014:946), 'Psalm 137 has the distinction of having one of the most beloved opening lines and the most horrifying closing line of any Psalm'. Keil and Delitzsch (1988) attempt to illustrate the portrayal of vivid imagery and how the emotional intensity in the opening verses of the Psalm when they said:

The bank of a river is a favorite place of sojourn of those whom deep grief drives forth from the bustle of men into solitude. The boundary line of the river gives to solitude a safe back; the monotonous splashing of the waves keeps up the dull, melancholy alternation of thoughts and feelings and cool water exercises a soothing influence on the consuming fever within the heart. (p. 800)

Although this beautiful Psalm lacks an official title or direct indication of the circumstances in which it was composed, there is little doubt about its historical context (cf. Kraus1989:501). The absence of the author's name adds to the mystery, making it impossible to identify them now. Nonetheless, it becomes evident that this Psalm was penned by one of the Babylonian exiles, an individual who had personally endured and empathised with the sufferings of their fellow exiles. This author also retained a vivid recollection of the injustices inflicted upon Jerusalem during its besiegement and ultimate destruction by its adversaries. The writer's identity was deeply rooted in their Jewish heritage, a true 'Hebrew of the Hebrews', who, in this concise Psalm, encapsulated and conveyed the essence of Hebrew sentiment, patriotism, and devotion (cf. Allen 1983:239; Anderson 1972:897; Davidson 1998:439; Delitzsch 1980:335; McCann 1996:1227).

The mention of Babylon within the Psalm serves as a poignant reflection of the historical context in which it was most likely composed – during the Babylonian exile of the Israelites, an event that unfolded in the 6th century BCE when Jerusalem and the Temple fell to the Babylonian forces, marking a pivotal and sorrowful period in Israelite history (cf. Belcher 2006:78; Kraus1989:501; Stern 2007:33). Clearly, this lament is a communal expression, originating from the time of the Babylonian exile. It was a period marked by the preceding horrors of ancient siege warfare. The fall of Jerusalem, orchestrated by the ruthless Babylonians and incited by the treacherous Edomites, as described in Obadiah 10–16, was

TABLE 3: Lamentation and invocation of curses against Edom and Babylon (verses 7–9).

Masoretic text	New international version
זכר יהוה לבני יום ורושלים אדום האמריים פרו פרו עד היסוד בָּה:	⁷ Remember, O LORD, the children of Edom in the day of Jerusalem; who said, 'Raise it, raise it, even to the foundation thereof.'
בתי-בבל השודדה אשרי שישלם-לך את-גמולך שגמלת לנו:	⁸ O Daughter of Babylon, doomed to destruction, happy is he who repays you for what you have done to us--
אשרי שיאטו ונפצו את-עלליך אלה-הסלע:	⁹ he who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks.

undeniably a profound national tragedy. It resulted in the near-complete destruction and deportation of the community of faith. Furthermore, within the city's fall, the pillars of that faith were obliterated. These included the Davidic monarchy, the sacred city of Jerusalem, and the temple of YHWH. All of these foundational elements that had defined Israel's identity as a nation and as the people of God were either razed to the ground or forcibly displaced.

Expression of indignation

Siege warfare in the ancient Near East was undeniably cruel, with one of the most brutal and unfortunately common practices of conquerors being the heart-wrenching act of dashing infants against rocks amid the fury and devastation of war (cf. 2 Ki 8:12; 1 Sm 15:16). This barbaric slaughter of the most defenceless non-combatants was a strategy aimed at achieving total annihilation, effectively waging war on the next generation (Allen 1983:237). While this practice was not unusual, it never failed to elicit shock and horror (2 Ki 8:2). Thus, the Psalm in question reaches an emotional climax as it addresses this gruesome reality. The Scriptures also employ this horrific imagery in judgement oracles against various entities, including Israel (Hs 13:15; Hs 14:1), Jerusalem (Lk 19:44), and Assyria (Nah 3:10). Strikingly, Babylon itself is promised a similar fate (Is 13:16).

Indeed, Psalm 137:9 employs two verbs, *רָצַח* [to grasp or seize] and *רָצַח* [to smash or dash to pieces], in a conjunctive manner to convey a profound meaning. The use of the *pi'el* form for *רָצַח* [dash to pieces] serves to intensify the action described in the *qal* form. This intensification paints a vivid picture of fragmentation and destruction. It is not merely that the infants are smashed, but that this violent act results in the scattering and shattering of baby fragments. Within the context of the text, both the actions of seizing and smashing are portrayed as essential for the realisation of genuine happiness or blessing, as underscored by the term *אֲשֶׁר־יָרַח*. This implies that the psalmist views this severe retribution as a path towards establishing a sense of justice and vindication, where those responsible for heinous deeds confront a comparable destiny. The use of these verbs and their intensified form in the *pi'el* underscores the depth of emotion and desire for retribution expressed in the verse.

While the exact age range the expression *עֲלֵלִים* [infants] refers to in Psalm 137:9 isn't explicitly defined in the text, the context and a parallel verse in Lamentations 4:4 provide some clues. In Lamentations 4:4, the phrase *עוֹלָלִים שֶׁאֵלֵינוּ יִקְרָא*, which translates to 'little children beg for bread', strongly implies that these children are of an age where they can speak and likely comprehend the direness of their situation. This would imply that in Psalm 137:9, when the psalmist speaks of 'grasping them and smashing them again and again against a rock', it would require significant effort and extreme callousness, as these children are not infants but old enough to comprehend the horrors being inflicted upon them and even old enough to plead for mercy. This interpretation

aligns with the Psalm's portrayal of a deeply distressing and horrifying scenario, underscoring the intense emotions and sense of injustice conveyed by the psalmist (Keil & Delitzsch 1988:800).

Such matters should be met with a degree of sombre rejoicing. In fact, rejoicing is commanded in anticipation of Babylon's future devastation in accordance with the principle of *lex talionis* (cf. Jer 51:48). Commenting on the implications of the imprecations in the closing verses of the Psalm, Simango (2018) remarks:

The Babylonians were well known for their cruelties and in this manner, they had captured Judah and destroyed the temple and the city of Jerusalem. Therefore, the psalmist prays to YHWH so that he would bring on the Babylonians the atrocities they had committed in Judah (*lex talionis*) so that in like manner they would experience utter defeat, helplessness and defenselessness. (p. 238)

Thus, the psalmist appeals to YHWH as the ultimate Judge to administer justice according to His own decree. In doing so, the psalmist excludes personal revenge, desiring no more than the satisfaction of divine justice, which YHWH will ultimately bestow upon those who persist in their sinful ways.

Theological Datum of Psalm 137

Theology is often defined as the thoughtful articulation of biblical revelation within specific historical contexts, enabling the transmission of the Christian faith to future generations (Finlayson 1969:7). According to Clements (2001:36), 'theology is only truly theology when it engages with the concerns of contemporary life'. As Christian theology is an ongoing, dynamic endeavour, it cannot be definitively encapsulated in a single formulation. Instead, each generation of Christians, within their respective cultural contexts, must earnestly engage with the theological task, adapting and responding to the evolving challenges and questions of their time (Ramm 1961:15).

The book of Psalms has held immense significance for countless Jewish and Christian believers across various languages and nations for millennia. It has been a source of inspiration, expressing their hopes, fears, and renewing their faith in YHWH. The spiritual insight and religious heritage of a small group of ancient Israelites have left a profound and enduring impact on humanity. The Psalms encompass the theology of ancient Israel and convey the entire spectrum of human experiences and emotions – anger, despair, vindictiveness, grief, faith, praise, and questioning. These verses resonate with countless lives, offering a genuine and faithful reflection of humanity (cf. Craige 1983:45; McEachern 1981:9; Perowne 1976:40; Wood 1984:3). Its position in the Hebrew canon however, presents a perplexing picture in the various areas of text tradition (Kraus 1993:12). Within the Psalms, Israel's theological and liturgical response to undeserved or inescapable suffering finds expression in prayers of lament, sadness, complaints about unjust suffering, and protest against

righteous indignation. These lamentations, protests, and petitions represent Israel's primary faith strategy for bringing suffering into YHWH's sphere of concern (Brueggemann 2002:118, 147).

The psalmists, when faced with enemies threatening their reputations and lives, refrained from taking matters into their own hands. Instead, they turned to YHWH as the righteous judge and vindicator. Their cries were essentially the 'passionate pleas of the powerless for justice' (Zenger 1996:47). In the face of injustice that could not be addressed humanly, YHWH's chastened people had no alternative but to turn to Him. They appealed to the divine judge for justice, according to His own decree, rather than seeking private revenge. They entrusted the demands of justice to the rightful jurisdiction of YHWH (McCann 2001:121). Vindication and deliverance often required the downfall of their enemies, leading the psalmists to call upon YHWH's vengeance against their tormentors. The specific judgements they invoked upon the wicked, although at times seemingly harsh and vindictive, actually demonstrated the psalmist's strong commitment to justice and their concern for YHWH's character. They raised their cry for vengeance to YHWH – a cry that would ultimately transform into public praise when divine deliverance was realised (Zuck 1991:280).

The abrupt and shocking outcry in Psalm 137:7–9 can be understood as a passionate plea from the powerless, demanding justice (Zenger 1996:47). Zenger (1996) writes that:

Psalm 137 is 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 – a God whose word of judgment is presumed to be so universally just that even those who pray the [P]salm submit themselves to it. (p. 48)

Amid the horrifying brutality of such circumstances, where the temptation to 'forget' (cf. Ps 137:5) or forsake one's faith in exchange for personal safety and comfort looms large, Psalm 137 serves as a poignant appeal to YHWH. It underscores YHWH as the ultimate wellspring of strength in the face of powerlessness and a beacon of hope in the darkest moments of despair. In these verses, the psalmist implores YHWH for a just retribution against the treacherous Edomites and the merciless Babylonians, seeking their utter destruction through the violent annihilation of their infants. However, this raises the question of whether such an appeal aligns with YHWH's command that children should not be punished for the sins of their fathers (Dt 24:16). In response, Deuteronomy 24:16 pertains to judicial sentences carried out by humans, while YHWH retains the authority to visit the iniquities of fathers upon their children (Ex 34:7), as evidenced by His command to annihilate the entire Canaanite population upon Israel's entry into the land. The cry for punishment in Psalm 137 is a plea for justice commensurate with the gravity of the crimes committed. The one who would execute this justice is referred to as אֱשֶׁרָא (blessed, verses 8–9), as through

them, justice would be served, YHWH's honour upheld, and a portion of the world's injustices rectified.

Contextual relevance of Psalm 137

Psalm 137 is a biblical text that reflects the lamentation and anguish of the Israelites during their Babylonian exile. It is a poignant reflection on the unfavourable socioeconomic circumstances and psychological distress faced by the Israelites at that time. While it primarily focusses on the emotional and spiritual distress of the exiles, it indirectly touches upon unfavourable socioeconomic circumstances, which can be compared to similar conditions faced by marginalised and oppressed communities in contemporary times. The words of Psalm 137 do not prescribe the actions of a devout individual. Rather, they serve as a historical lens, allowing readers to revisit the bitterness endured by their forebears in the face of defeat, destruction, humiliation, exile, and enslavement at the hands of their conquerors. Through these words, readers are prompted to empathise with their experiences.

Edom and Babylon, ancient embodiments of the Antichrist, provide historical parallels. There may be, and indeed have been, times in modern-day context of lived realities when believers must unite with their predecessors and appeal for the cessation of a contemporary manifestation of the Antichrist, articulating their grievances in a manner befitting the offense. In Psalm 137, the ancestors, depicted as powerless, had no recourse but to curse their triumphant oppressors. This irony underscores humanity's inclination to turn against itself. In an often hostile environment, the weak and disadvantaged frequently bear the brunt of mistreatment by the wealthy, powerful, and politically privileged. As one engages with the verses of Psalm 137, aptly termed 'Bitter Beatitudes', one strives to connect with those who have experienced displacement and forced migration because of conflicts, ethnic tensions, and economic hardships, leading to internal displacement or seeking refuge in other countries, or who may experience a sense of detachment from their cultural roots and traditional ways of life, which can lead to feelings of loss and alienation.

Today, there are many in different socioeconomic and political contexts, sitting beside the flowing rivers of exploitation, corruption, and violence, who are confronted by the ever-increasing levels of senseless and horrific oppression. They grieve over the loss of their children, their homes, and the destitution of their loved ones. As they reflect on the offensive and destructive actions of their leaders, their hearts are ignited with righteous indignation. These leaders have, regrettably, fallen short of fulfilling their rightful responsibilities to the highest standards. They weep and wail over the degradation and violation of human dignity, the neglect of societal peace, security, and cohesion, the deplorable state of their infrastructure, and the impoverished state of healthcare and education, are among other issues, weighing heavily on their minds.

The emotional distress experienced by the Israelites, as reflected in Psalm 137, can resonate with the psychological challenges faced by many today. The stress of living in adverse conditions, the trauma of conflict and displacement, and the uncertainty of the future can lead to mental health issues. The central theme of Psalm 137 is the longing of the Israelites to return to their homeland. This longing for a better life and a sense of belonging is a sentiment shared by many who hope for improved socioeconomic conditions, peace, and stability in their country. This theme can resonate with contemporary readers who may have experienced displacement, migration, or separation from their place of origin, emphasising the importance of one's roots and connection to their cultural and spiritual heritage.

Psalm 137 expresses anger and a desire for retribution against their captors. While these sentiments may be challenging for contemporary readers, they can serve as a reminder of the complex emotions that arise in situations of injustice and oppression. It prompts reflection on the ethical and moral responses to such feelings. Despite their suffering, the Psalm also conveys a sense of spiritual resilience and faith. The Israelites did not forget their God even in exile, and this can inspire contemporary readers to maintain their faith and hope in challenging circumstances. The Psalm ends with a plea for peace and the wellbeing of Jerusalem, which can serve as a universal message for contemporary readers, reminding them of the importance of working towards peace and prosperity for their communities and the world.

Conclusion

The Psalms, in line with the ancient Near Eastern ideal of a just ruler, depict YHWH as the preserver of order and justice in the world. They show Him as the defender of the rights of the vulnerable and oppressed. This portrayal, although conflicting with the harsh realities of a world inhabited by wicked individuals and plagued by unjust rulers, aligns with YHWH's commitment to justice. It reflects His fair decrees and actions, especially as experienced and revealed to His covenant people. The choice to maintain an active stance within the covenant, through expressions of complaint and protest, reveals Israel's unwavering determination to secure its future solely through this relationship, and not from any other source. Thus, the present need to reengage issues of complaint, lament, and voice is parallel to Israel's exile when Israel was driven from certified Presence to saddened and demanding exile (Brueggemann 2001:41).

This biblical, theological, and contextual exploration, akin to that of ancient Israel, is not undertaken in isolation but is firmly rooted in its context. It's impossible to detach it from a setting where multiple parties play diverse roles. The key lies in determining how to responsibly and actively engage in this defining relationship in specific circumstances. While the historical and cultural contexts of Psalm 137 and contemporary contexts are distinct, the themes of displacement, suffering,

and the resilience of the human spirit are universal. The Psalm serves as a reminder that people throughout history have faced adversity and have sought solace and strength in their faith and cultural heritage, which can offer insights and inspiration for those facing similar challenges today.

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