

Psalm 137

A Blessing Upon Baby Killers?

By David Schell

Abstract: Psalm 137 is an easy proof-text for the atheist argument that the Bible is an archaic, violent book, and its God would be evil if God existed. I read the text closely, paying attention to key words and the history of interpretation, and asking how passages with this level of violence can be the word of God. I conclude that Psalm 137 is not more violent than modern songs, and is in scripture because God cares enough about the cries of the oppressed to allow them space even to wish retributive death upon the children of their enemies.

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Translation

By the rivers of Babylon¹
 There we sat, and
 [There] we wept
 When we remembered Zion

On the willows in the midst of her
 We hung up our lyres

Because
 there our guards asked us for words of song,
 And our oppressors, celebration:
 "Sing for us [a] song of Zion!"

How shall we sing the song of the Lord
 on foreign dirt?²

If I forget you, Jerusalem
 May my right hand forget [the lyre]³
 May my tongue catch⁴ in my mouth
 If I do not remember you,
 If I do not exalt Jerusalem
 above my greatest joy.

Remember LORD, against Edomites
 the day of Jerusalem
 who said, "Raze her!"
 "Raze her all the way to her foundation!"

Daughter Babylon, ground zero!⁵

¹ Hebrew "Babel."

² "Dirt" could be translated "ground" or "earth. I chose "dirt" because the Hebrew is not just suggesting "a foreign land," but that the soil itself is foreign, following Frank-Lotter Hossfeld and Erich Zenger, *Psalms 3: A Commentary on Psalms 101-150*, trans. Linda Maloney, ed. Klaus Baltzar, Hermeneia – A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible. Edited by Peter Machinist et. al. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, c2011.), 516.

³ "The lyre" is not in the Hebrew, but "forget my right hand" doesn't make any sense. The right hand is clearly doing the forgetting, but forgetting what? The context of hanging up lyres, requests for songs, and the pairing of hand and tongue make it easy to guess that "how to play the lyre" is what the right hand should forget if the Psalmist forgets Jerusalem.

⁴ The Hebrew is literally "May my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth," but this idiom does not translate nicely, and I have chosen to use an English idiom that captures the sense of being unable to speak.

⁵ The word I translate "ground zero" is passive participle of $\text{TT}\Psi$, "to destroy," with a prefixed "the." A literalistic translation would be "The destroyed one." No commentators I read had anything to say about this, save Dahood, whose comments were minor, vague, and which I hold in suspicion.

[God]⁶ bless the people who even things up⁷
And [treat you] the way you treated us:

[God] bless those who take your babies
and shatter them against the rock.

⁶ “God” is not mentioned in the Hebrew, but the Psalmist pronounces a blessing over the would-be Babylonian baby-shatterers. “Blessed be,” while accurate as a wooden translation, doesn’t quite convey that intensity to English-speakers. The word means simply “happy” (cf. its use in Pss 1 and 2).

⁷ “Shalam” implies a completeness. In this case, it seems to be used as “What goes around comes around, and I can’t wait until it comes around to you.”

Introduction

Psalm 137 is one of the most troubling passages in all of scripture. It is often used on anti-Christian websites as an easy proof-text for the argument that the Bible is an archaic book, filled with words of violence, and that the God depicted in scripture would be evil, if that God existed. Christians prefer to avoid it altogether. A pastor told me recently that she does not like that passage,⁸ and when it came up in the lectionary several years ago at a church I attended, the minister removed the final two verses. It is not an easy passage to wrestle with, but the rewards are well worth the effort.

Close Text Analysis

Psalm 137 uses impressively efficient language. In three Hebrew words, “עַל נְהַרֹתַי” על נְהַרֹתַי בְּבָבֶל,” “By the rivers of Babylon,” the psalmist invokes the whole history of Israel, punctuated by its bloody and heart-wrenching deportation to Babylon. The entire first verse sets the situation and emotional context: “There we sat down and yes, we wept, when we remembered Zion.” The last three words, “בְּזִכְרוֹנֵי אֶת-צִיּוֹן,” “in remembering Zion,” express instantly the cause of the distress. The verse forms a chiasm:

By the rivers of **Babylon**
 There we sat down
 Yes, we wept
 In remembering **Zion**

The sitting down and the weeping are bracketed by the two-fold reason: the location by the rivers of Babylon, and the memory of Zion. Few citizens of Babylon would weep when sitting down by the rivers of Babylon, and the memory of Zion did not make many other psalmists weep. It is the

⁸ Conversation with a pastor, Oct. 27, 2016. This conversation was confidential.

juxtaposition of the two – the location in Babylon combined with the memory of Zion, combined with the unspoken wish to not be there – that causes the heartbreak and the weeping.

The Hebrew **נִלְחָנוּ**, “we hanged,” carries the generic sense of hanging something up, such as shields,⁹ but is used much more frequently to describe hanging as a form of execution.¹⁰ The psalmist clearly has both meanings in mind. This is poetry; instruments can be executed. The wording here may also be related to **קִלְבָּן**, a quiver for arrows, which shares the same first three consonants as **נִלְחָנוּ**, “we hanged,” which would also make sense as a pun because *kinnor*, the lyre, is related by physical shape to archery bows.

Verse three says the captors ask the captives for words of song, and the tormentors ask for mirth. This is reflected in the slavery system in the American south in which slaves could be forced to sing and dance to entertain their masters,¹¹ which is probably what is being described here. Jeremiah Wright explicitly called North American slave owners “Babylonians,”¹² and throughout his sermon “Faith in a Foreign Land,” Wright refers to the United States’ culture as “Babylonian.”¹³ Wright expresses concern about the trivializing of the story and culture of captive peoples,¹⁴ like the way Hebrew history would have been trivialized if the captives had sung the songs of Zion for Babylonian entertainment.

Demands to sing Psalms 121, 122, 124, and especially 125, which are about the Lord defending Zion, would be particularly cruel to exiles. The word “Zion” appears 42 times in the

⁹ Song of Songs 4:4, Ezekiel 15:3, 27:10-11.

¹⁰ Gn 40:19, 22, 41:13; Dt 21:22, Josh. 8:29, 10:26, 2 Sam 4:12, Est. 2:23, 5:14, 6:4, 7:9-10, etc.

¹¹ Aisha Harris, “Was There Really ‘Mandingo Fighting,’ Like in *Django Unchained*,” *Slate*, published December 24, 2012, accessed November 3, 2016, http://www.slate.com/blogs/browbeat/2012/12/24/djangounchained_mandingo_fighting_were_any_slaves_really_foiced_to_fight.html.

¹² Jeremiah Wright, “Faith in a Foreign Land,” *Cross Currents* 57, No. 2 (Summer 2007), p. 241.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 237-250.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 242-243.

book of Psalms, and nearly all those instances are celebrations of the beauty of Zion and the way God will protect it. Thus, the request for songs of Zion could also be perceived as a taunt: “Sing to us about how your God will protect you, and how beautiful your capital city is – that we burned down.” John Calvin construed the mocking thus: “Is your God dead, as if they had said, to whom your praises were formerly addressed? Or if he delights in your songs, why do you not sing them?”¹⁵

The psalmist has changed the language from “A song of Zion” to “A song of the Lord.”¹⁶ This makes sense: wherever Zion appears in the Psalms, the Lord is not far away. Indeed, Zion is titled “the city of our God.”¹⁷ The New International Commentary therefore observes that “any *song of Zion* was thus a song of YHWH.”¹⁸

The next two verses are a chiasm, and the last line of the chiasm is also the first line of a parallelism. The broadest piece of the chiasm is “If I forget you / If I do not remember.” “If I do not remember” is paralleled below with “If I do not exalt Jerusalem above my greatest joy.” Inside, “May my right hand forget / may my tongue catch in my mouth.” Where I have translated “catch,” the text literally says “cling to the roof of my mouth.” This idiom is uncommon in English and would be unhelpful; the sense is a hope that the tongue will be unable to perform – specifically, to sing the songs of Zion. “Catch” captures this sense better.

What does this tongue-catching and hand-forgetting mean? Hossfeld and Zenger (rightly) dismiss several suggestions about what it means, ranging from the idea that to sing the songs of Jerusalem in Babylon would be to forget Jerusalem, or capitulation to the Babylonians, or (most

¹⁵ John Calvin, “Psalm 137.” *John Calvin Commentary*, Christian Classics Ethereal Library, Accessed October 12, 2016, http://www.ccel.org/study/Psalms_137?version=nrsv&tab=commentary&commentary=comm1.

¹⁶ Nancy Declaisse-Walford, “Psalm 137,” in *The Book of Psalms*, The New International Commentary on the Old Testament, Edited by Robert Hubbard, Jr. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2014), p. 955

¹⁷ Ps. 48:1-2, NRSV.

¹⁸ Declaisse-Walford, Jacobson, and Tanner, 955.

absurdly) that this line was a rebuttal of returned exiles criticized for failing to sing the songs in exile.¹⁹ Hossfeld and Zenger's explanation is hardly more likely. They believe the question, "How can we sing the Lord's song on foreign ground?" paired with the next verse, is talking about a "Principle of Life:"²⁰ If the exiles forget Jerusalem, not only should they not be able to sing, but they should not be able to do anything at all. "...not remembering and forgetting are like not being able to act (hand, v. 5) and not being able to speak (tongue, v. 6)."²¹

Such theories serve only to obfuscate the transparent. The question, "How can we sing the Lord's song on foreign dirt" is not about capitulation, or forgetting Jerusalem, or a rebuttal of criticism, or a principle of life that if they forget Jerusalem, they "would be better off dead."²² Have these commentators any empathy? "How can we sing" is the cry of broken hearts. Ask the broken-hearted to sing you a song, Hossfeld, and demand happy tunes from the miserable, Zenger. Endure a heart-wrenching collapsed relationship, then sing the song that wove its way into your heart because you knew it was about your now-estranged beloved. Sing it when they arrive with a new lover! "How can we sing the Lord's song?" One could more easily dunk the moon in the ocean. This is poetry, the language of the heart.

Given the context of requests for songs and the parallelism between "May my right hand forget" and "May my tongue stick in my mouth," it makes sense that what the right hand is forgetting is how to play the lyre, the instrument mentioned in verse 2 (following the NLT and GOD'S WORD translations). Most other translations vaguely say "forget her skill." The Jubilee Bible's translators say "May my right hand be forgotten." Another common translation is

¹⁹ Frank-Lothar Hossfeld and Erich Zenger, *Psalms 3: A Commentary on Psalms 101-150*, trans. Linda Maloney, ed. Klaus Baltzar, *Hermeneia – A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible*, ed. Peter Machinist et al. (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 2011), 518.

²⁰ *Ibid.*

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² *Ibid.*

“crippled” (NET Bible). The NRSV translation takes the NET’s assumptions to their full conclusion with “May my right hand wither.” “Wither” is particularly absurd because even if this verb has anything to do with the Ugaritic word for “wither” (as Dahood suggests),²³ because for the hand itself to be forgotten or crippled would call for an entirely different verb tense than Qal Imperfect, and for a direct object marker before “hand.” In Hebrew, the pattern is generally Setting > Verb > Subject > Object, and though this is poetry, there is no excuse for translating it as though the hand is being acted upon – being forgotten or withered, rather than forgetting. As Tuell notes, “It is “not unusual in the Psalms for verbs to lack explicit objects: e.g., Ps 139:1 ‘Yhwh, you have searched me and you know...’”²⁴ The hand is doing the forgetting, and skill upon the lyre is clearly what the hand should forget. It is not inserting too much opinion to make clear what the right hand is forgetting, and translators should do so at least in a footnote to make clear in English what should be clear to any reader of the original text.

While there is a clear division between verses 6 and 7, there is also a clear transition from a hope to remember Jerusalem and an imprecation that God would remember the day of Jerusalem against the sons of Edom: the word “remember.”

Verses 8 and 9 are the both the most troubling and the most interesting grammatically. It starts, בַּת־בָּבֶל, the meaning of which is disagreed upon in the literature. “Bat” (“Daughter”) and “Babel” are connected by maqqef, which often suggests a construct chain (e.g., “Daughter of Babylon”), but can also simply suggest a connection between the words. The authors of the New International Commentary accept the former position without explanation.²⁵ Hossfeld and

²³ Mitchell Dahood, *Psalms III: 101-150*, Vol. 17A, The Anchor Bible, ed. William Albright and David Freedman (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1970, 271).

²⁴ Steven Tuell, notes on author’s translation of Psalm 137, Oct. 22, 2016.

²⁵ Declaisse-Walford, p. 956.

Zenger accept “Daughter Babylon” with little explanation.²⁶ The treatment of “Daughter Babylon” as a feminine personification of the city, rather than “Daughter *of* Babylon,” makes more sense, however. (Who would the daughter *of* Babylon be?) The treatment of cities themselves as feminine is common, appearing even in this passage. Jerusalem is referred to with a feminine verb even in the previous verse. “Daughter Babylon” is the preferred translation.

Immediately after “Daughter Babylon” comes the word I have translated “ground zero.” The underlying word, הַשְׁדָּוָה, means something like “the destroyed.” Many translations take הַשְׁדָּוָה to mean something along the lines of “one who is going to be destroyed,”²⁷ but the CEB, RSV, NRSV, and a few others translate it “destroyer.” This would make sense, and I would translate it “savage,” if only the participle was *active*. A passive participle of “destroy” does not treat Daughter Babylon as giver of destruction, but as the recipient. It is *possible* that the psalmist is referring to Daughter Babylon as a recipient of the benefits of the destruction of Jerusalem, but this stretches the imagination beyond what is reasonable. More likely, as Hossfeld and Zenger suggest, the psalmist has imagined the legal principle of “an eye for an eye” executed on Babylon, as demonstrated in the next few lines celebrating those who even the score and treat Babylon “the way you treated us.”²⁸ Similarly, an injured party escaping from a fight today might shout, “You’re dead!” to the offender, in present tense, suggesting that vengeance is so certain it has practically already happened. This seems likely to be what the psalmist is expressing here. Following that line of thinking, the shattering of children against rocks blessed in verse 9 is not a wish for violence excessive beyond all reason and imagination, but an evening-up of the score, an eye for an eye, a shattered baby for a shattered baby. This verse

²⁶ Hossfeld and Zenger, 520.

²⁷ NIV, NLT, ESV, NASB, KJV, HCSB, NET, etc.

²⁸ Hossfeld and Zenger, 519.

implies that the Babylonians had shattered Hebrew children against rocks, and “turnabout is fair play.”

The presence of the words “Blessed” and “Shalam” in the imprecation are interesting. It is not too far-fetched to imagine the exiles singing these lines in the presence of captors who only knew rudimentary Hebrew. In this case, “the destroyed one” would make even more sense as a reasonable translation of הַשְׂדֵדִים because captors who knew only rudimentary Hebrew would hear it as an affirmation of their status as destroyers. Pretending to sing songs about the destroyer status of Babylon while in reality singing about its destruction may have served as an act of resistance, though this should not be taken as an argument to that effect.

Excerpts from the History of Interpretation

This scripture has been interpreted metaphorically, both by Origen and Augustine. Origen interprets the babies to be dashed against the rock as “those troublesome sinful thoughts which arise in the soul.”²⁹ For him, the rocks are “the firm and solid strength of reason and truth.” Without even noting he is doing so, or suggesting there was ever a question about how to interpret this psalm, Augustine interprets the entire psalm metaphorically. He assumes Jerusalem to be the heavenly city, and Babylon to be the world. He interprets lyres as “God’s Scriptures, God’s commands, God’s promises, meditation on the life to come.”³⁰ He calls the requests for songs being “tempted by the delights of earthly things,” and the captors are (naturally) “the devil

²⁹ Origen, *Origen Against Celsus*, Ante-Nicene Fathers, Vol. 4, Christian Classics Ethereal Library, Accessed November 4, 2016. <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/anf04.vi.ix.vii.xxii.html>

³⁰ St. Augustine, “Psalm CXXXVII,” *St. Augustine: Exposition on the Book of Psalms*. Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers, Series 1, Volume 8, *Christian Classics Ethereal Library*, Accessed November 4, 2016, <https://www.ccel.org/ccel/schaff/npnf108.ii.CXXXVII.html>

and his angels.”³¹ Augustine considers “the sons of Edom” to be the “the carnal,”³² who are naturally enemies of “Jerusalem.” When he arrives at the babies of Babylon being shattered, he does not even flinch. He starts by explaining how Babylon has done evil to Christians in teaching them Babylon’s ways, listing off a litany of sins. He says it is only right that Babylon be repaid. “What are the little ones of Babylon?” he asks. “Evil desires at their birth. For there are, who have to fight with inveterate lusts. When lust is born, before evil habit giveth it strength against thee, when lust is little, by no means let it gain the strength of evil habit; when it is little, dash it.”³³ And what, to Augustine, is the rock against which evil-desire-babies of Babylon are to be dashed? Christ, of course!

Over a millennium later, with historical hindsight, John Calvin took the story a bit more literally.³⁴ He contextualizes the psalm for his time, considering himself and the other reformers to be like the exiles amid oppression from the corrupt church, having no land of their own. He says, “in remembrance of our outcast state we should sigh and groan for the promised deliverance.”³⁵ While Calvin does not interpret the situation precisely metaphorically as Augustine does, he cannot help but draw connections. He agreed with the interpretation that Babylon was doomed to be destroyed, not the destroyer. He says the psalmist predicted the coming judgment of Babylon “by the eye of faith.”³⁶ Regarding the baby-bashing, Calvin does not flinch either – but goes in an entirely different direction than Augustine.

It may seem to savor of cruelty, that he should wish the tender and innocent infants to be dashed and mangled upon the stones, but he does not speak under the impulse of personal feeling, and only employs words which God had himself authorized, so that this is but the

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Calvin.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Ibid.

declaration of a just judgment, as when our Lord says, “With what measure ye mete, it shall be measured to you again.” (Matthew 7:2.)³⁷

Calvin’s defense is that the baby-bashing only *seems* cruel. His justification is essentially, “Turnabout is fair play, because God said so.” Many modern Christians, myself included, would not be comfortable with Calvin’s justification.

How is Psalm 137 Scripture?

Christian singer/songwriter Rich Mullins called Psalm 137 “one of the most confusing psalms in the Bible,”³⁸ and joked that it should not be read at a pro-life rally. Psalm 137 is particularly confusing under the view that every imperative in scripture is a command for all people for all time. However, it is also confusing in light of II Timothy 3:16, which says “All scripture is inspired by God and is useful for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness” (NRSV), and the theological perspectives around scripture that arose from centering II Timothy 3:16, particularly during the Protestant Reformation. It is even confusing in the broader Christian tradition that sees scripture as the word of God: In what way can the imprecations against Babylonians and blessings on those who kill their children be understood as the word of God? How can it be said to be inspired by God? In what ways is it useful for teaching, reproof, correction, or training in righteousness?

The problem is simpler if one accepts the perspective that God shows partiality between the righteous and unrighteous or elect and un-elect (see Romans 9:11-18). It is simpler still if one commonsensically views the blessing on Babylonian-baby-bashers as a time-bound imperative,

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Rich Mullins, “Rich Mullins Concert Part #5,” [filmed July 19, 1997]. YouTube video, 9:28. Posted March 24, 2007; accessed October 12, 2016; <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vQnFU5JvuWY>.

something intended for this one time and place. The simplest interpretation of all is to read this imprecation as a wish of the people of God that God does not endorse – but if this is the case, the earlier problem returns: How can Christians say this psalm, verses 8 and 9 in particular, is the word of God, useful for teaching, reproof, correction, and instruction in righteousness?

To engage with Psalm 137 properly, it is important to understand the context, not merely on an academic level, but on a human level. The first temptation readers must confront is a sense of superiority: “Those ancient Hebrews were so violent; we today would never wish death on the children of our enemies!” The temptation is strong, but it can be avoided if readers attempt empathy.

Many readers in the United States will have difficulty identifying with the feeling of being dragged off to a foreign land and having their children dashed against rocks, but the tragedy of September 11, 2001 provides an opportunity for US readers to begin to “get into the heads” of the survivors. Most US citizens who are old enough to remember September 11, 2001 remembers where they were when they found out about the attacks. Initially, there was a spike in religious attendance, but it declined within two years.³⁹ This reaction of increased religiosity was accompanied by a desire for revenge, to have those responsible for this violence pay a similar price. The United States went to war in Afghanistan less than a month later. The following May, U.S. country music recording artist Toby Keith released a song he wrote, titled “Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue.” While the language is not identical with that of Psalm 137, the emotional content is recognizably similar:

Justice will be served,
And the battle will rage
This big dog will fight
When you rattle his cage

³⁹ Gallup, “Sept 11 Effects, Though Largely Faded, Persist,” *Gallup*, September 9, 2003, accessed October 21, 2016, <http://www.gallup.com/poll/9208/sept-effects-though-largely-faded-persist.aspx>.

And you'll be sorry that you messed with
 The U.S. of A.
 `Cause we'll put a boot in your ass
 It's the American way

Hey Uncle Sam put your name
 At the top of his list
 And the Statue of Liberty
 Started shakin' her fist
 And the eagle will fly
 And it's gonna be hell
 When you hear Mother Freedom
 Start ringin' her bell
 And it feels like the whole wide world is raining down on you
 Brought to you Courtesy of the Red White and Blue.⁴⁰

While few (if any) serious theologians would claim that these lines from Toby Keith's obscenity-laced song of anger are inspired by God, they belong in this paper because they offer U.S. readers a modern emotional entry point into the world of Psalm 137. Both Keith and the psalmist feel justifiable anger against a group that has caused national harm. Both imprecations are founded on a sense of justice. The psalmist's invective against Daughter Babylon is not an randomly-selected wish for violence; rather, the author wishes to have the scales leveled out and the world brought into balance. The word *shalam* means "to be complete;" the psalmist is literally wishing that someone will "get even" with Daughter Babylon.

The psalmist wishes for the death of the infants of his or her enemies, but modern readers do not hold any moral high ground over them. Lest a reader unfamiliar with American country music dispute the significance of "Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue" in American popular life, the song peaked at #1 on the Billboard Country Music Top 25 chart, and stayed on that chart

⁴⁰ Toby Keith, "Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue (The Angry American)," (music video), posted June 16, 2009, accessed October 12, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ruNrdmjcNTc>.

for twenty weeks.⁴¹ It was certified platinum by the RIAA in 2012.⁴² The U.S. government does not intentionally kill children specifically, but drone strikes are responsible for the deaths of a number of children. US president Donald Trump said “you have to take out their families,”⁴³ referring to the families of enemies of the United States. “Their families” presumably includes children. It is therefore reasonable to dispense, once and for all, with the notion that the human desire for vengeance today is less than that represented in this psalm, or that Psalm 137 represents a savage impulse that humanity has since overcome. I initially submitted this paper the day after my country elected Donald Trump to be our President, punctuating that statement with a resounding “bang.”

But for a text to be understood as “inspired by God,” it is not sufficient for it to not reflect attitudes significantly worse than popular modern-day attitudes. To recognize our place at or below the level of this text of terror does not elevate a text of terror to the status of “Word of God.” There must be more.

At this point, we must examine a significant difference between Toby Keith and the author of Psalm 137: **Power**. When Toby Keith wrote “Courtesy,” his country had been attacked. Unlike ancient Israel, Toby Keith’s country survived the attack. When it was over, “We lit up [their] world like the fourth of July.”⁴⁴ Toby Keith sang a song of celebration about past action that had already been done and was now being done, but the psalmist’s imprecation in verses 7-8 was a blessing upon someone else, when they do it. Therefore, to arrive at a more accurate vantage point on Psalm 137 in modern life, American readers would need to locate themselves

⁴¹ billboard, “Toby Keith – Chart History,” *billboard*, accessed October 21, 2016, <http://www.billboard.com/artist/430048/Toby%20Keith/chart?page=1&f=357>.

⁴² RIAA, “Gold & Platinum,” *RIAA*, accessed October 21, 2016, http://www.riaa.com/gold-platinum/?tab_active=default-award&ar=Toby+Keith&ti=Courtesy#search_section.

⁴³ Tom LoBianco, “Donald Trump on terrorists: ‘Take out their families,’” *CNN politics*, updated December 3, 2015, accessed October 21, 2016, <http://www.cnn.com/2015/12/02/politics/donald-trump-terrorists-families/>.

⁴⁴ Keith.

not merely among people who feel that they have been attacked and want vengeance, but among people who are powerless to get it.

The Black community in the United States is a prominent example of a people who feel attacked and unable to get their desired vengeance. The ancestors of Black Americans were Africans, exiles hauled off to a foreign land and made slaves, much like the Hebrews. When Jeremiah Wright preached on Psalm 137, he linked the two exiled peoples: the story of the Hebrews is the story of African Americans.⁴⁵ After a number of publicized and unpunished police shootings or killings of Black people, often men, often unarmed, and including unarmed children like Tamir Rice, a group of protestors with the Black Lives Matter group in 2015 at the Minnesota State Fair was recorded chanting, “Pigs in a blanket, fry ‘em like bacon.”⁴⁶ They were referring to police officers as “pigs” in a commonly-used derogatory term.

Considering this understanding of the social context surrounding the psalm, the context of being oppressed and knowing that people like you, including children, have been delivered to violent deaths, Psalm 137 suddenly looks very different. Modern readers are immediately confronted with the fact that the shouts of rage in Minnesota are much more metaphorical and vague in intent than the cries of rage in Psalm 137.

This angry language demanding what certainly seems like violent retribution did not come from a place of power like “Courtesy” did, but from a position of disempowerment. It is the cry of those who feel the weight of oppression and violence but are powerless to engage in retribution. Awareness of this inability to retaliate shared by Black Americans and ancient Hebrews is crucial in the proper understanding of this text. To put it explicitly, American

⁴⁵ Wright.

⁴⁶ CBS Interacts, “‘Pigs in a blanket’ chant at Minnesota fair riles police,” *CBS News*, published August 31, 2015, accessed October 21, 2016, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/pigs-in-a-blanket-chant-at-minnesota-fair-riles-police/>.

Christians need to understand that the United States is Babylon. The massive military budget of the United States and the persistent fears of white Americans that their guns will be taken away demonstrates our national tendency toward violence. It would be all too easy for lovers of violence in the United States to leap from this cry of the exiled and powerless for justice, directly to the assumption that their violent imaginations were inspired by God. This temptation must be resisted. This psalm is for the powerless, so let the citizens of Babylon pray to God for forgiveness and mercy.

What have we learned in discovering Psalm 137 in the canon? We have learned there is space in sacred scripture for angry, visceral cries for justice, even if those cries are not polite and do not have kind wishes for those who engaged in violence. It must be believed that God cares enough about the oppressed to allow them space, even in sacred scripture, to say how they truly feel. Was the wish of the psalmist fulfilled? It does not matter. Central to the examination of this psalm is the importance of recognizing that God created a space for an oppressed people to wish death upon the children of their enemies, and that future generations, for thousands of years, preserved those horrible words in sacred scripture, announcing for all the world that the words of the oppressed matter, and that God is listening and thinks they are important.

Jesus says to “love your enemies.”⁴⁷ Paul says, “Let love be genuine.”⁴⁸ Can love be genuine if the person claiming to love their enemies has not dealt with the strong emotions they carry against those enemies? Peter Rollins thinks it cannot. He argues that allowing space for people to express anger allows them to work through their negative emotions. He suggests that the practice of imprecatory prayer should perhaps be restored so Christians can deal with their negative emotions in supportive community, through angry words wishing for violence rather

⁴⁷ Mt. 5:44

⁴⁸ Rm. 12:9

than through violent actions.⁴⁹ Oh, that we would curse our enemies with our words instead of our weapons.

⁴⁹ Peter Rollins, "Becoming Human" (MP3 podcast), recorded November 11, 2012, Accessed October 12, 2016, <http://peterrollins.net/becoming-human/>

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