

## **Singing a Foreign Song at Home: Analogy from Psalm 137**

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### **1. Introduction**

Conventional settings make people at ease even with situations that often contradict realities in which people find themselves. Conventionality can be imposed by culture or by religious values that are instilled through the teachings and practices of religious orientation. Religion is fundamentally pertinent in this discussion especially with reference to Africa. Africans are inherently religious. John Pobee delineates the elements of African culture, experience, and history that make African ness. “First, *homo Africanus homo religiosus radicaliter* and, thus, had a religious and spiritual epistemology and ontology.<sup>1)</sup> In other words, although those religious values may contradict the cultural norms of a given particular people, it is astounding to see that often religious norms supersede cultural norms, at least from the external perspective. Albeit, deep inside (at least from the Africa point of view) Christians continue to carry their cultural values and practice them surreptitiously. In fact culture and religion didn’t have a clear demarcation in the African world view. However with the coming of Christianity, Africans were told to separate the two, which in practice was not viable. Hence, whenever the two aspects clash in practice, Christians are labeled as “syncretistic.”

This religiosity from the “surface” cannot be blamed totally on African Christianity. Rather, those who brought the Gospel in many parts of the continent did not regard African religion and culture as important aspects in evangelization. In fact African culture was considered barbaric and a hindrance to Christianity. Anyone who chose to espouse Christianity was expected to

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1) John S. Pobee, “Bible Study in Africa: A Passover of Language”, *Semeia* 73: (1996), 166.

abandon African culture and practices. Failure to discard those inherent values was seen as a sign of unbelief. Furthermore, because Christianity came with what was termed as “modernization,” it was believed that anyone who embraced Christianity cannot continue to live in the so called “uncivilized” way. Christianity and modernity were not clearly separated. To put it in plain language, Christianity embodied Western culture and values which were regarded as essential parts of Christianity.

The lack of clear extrication between Christianity and Western values brought disconnection or what this writer calls in this paper as “displacement or spiritual exile.” In other words, African Christians are often “exiled” while living in their own land. Spiritual exile can be equally deadly as the physical one. In fact, from the world view of an African, which is inherently the same as that of the OT, one cannot separate spiritual from the physical. The Jewish exiles were not harassed physically, but the spiritual torment excruciated them. They were away from the land of Promise (which was God’s gift), they had no kingship (Yahweh’s representative on earth), and they had no Temple (worship was never complete without sacrifices). The lack of these three cultic institutions became a cause for lament. In a way, Israel suffered more spiritual torture than physical suffering in exile. That is why when Babylonians asked them to sing one of the Songs of Zion, they were angry for such abhorrent mockery. Instead, they reversed their request by singing a lament song, which evidently didn’t require a use of harp. They had to hang their harps on the willows, sending a clear signal to the Babylonians that they “just have had it!” Jewish exiles didn’t get their swords to fight their scorners, nor did they resort to resentful quietism. Instead, they expressed their anger in a peaceful protest in two ways: they sang a lament and imprecatory song and by abandoning instruments used in praise of Yahweh and Zion, the holy city. They did not keep them inside their houses; rather they hang them in the willows for all to see that Jewish exiles will not sing the happy songs in exile. It was a non-violent rebellion.

### **1.1. African Christianity and Spiritual Exile**

When an African is dismantled from being an African and a Christian, then that person is not free because he/she lacks internal coherence and unity. That

implies cultural and religious enslavement. In other words, it is a spiritual dislocation where a person cannot sing an appropriate song for the given situation. Africans who have come to such realization would ask the same question as the Psalmist in Psalm 137, but rather succinctly, “how can one sing the Lord’s song at home?” Is this “home” (Christian church) a place where one feels he/she belongs? Often our churches are foreign to the people and continue to be so as long as Christian faith does not embody what is inherently African.

## **1.2. How can we sing the Lord’s Song At Home? Paradox in African Christianity**

In order to appropriately respond to this question, we need to look at various aspects in the African Christianity. Firstly, Christianity as has been mentioned above came to Africa already pre-packaged. Africans were not expected to dismantle that package to choose what fits them. It was also expected that one package would fit all. Secondly, Christianity came to Africa together with or in some parts, side by side with colonialism. Christianity and the Bible were intended “to free Africans” from physical and spiritual enslavement. On the surface, however, the Bible and Christian religion were used to justify western superiority; that is, dominance over economic and political spheres, as well culture and religion. Africans were enslaved from all angles. Thirdly, even when Africans assumed theological training, they continued and still continue carrying the same “mantle.” Theological books are mostly written by western scholars thus producing leaders and educators who not only impersonate their masters but became people who continue to embody and enhance western world view, however misrepresented or distorted that perspective might be.

Since our first encounter with the West over 300 years ago, our own identity has been a subject of suspicion, and all that formed the fabric of our existence became subject of questioning and attack. Actually even those good practices that could resonate with the Christian faith were counted or classified as paganism and barbaric!<sup>2)</sup> The former Senegalese president and founder of the Negritude, Leopold Sedar Senghor, once wrote that the successful project of our ‘secret enemy’ is making the African doubt even her own self.

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2) See, S. A, Thorpe, *African Traditional Religion: An Introduction* (1991), 2.

Colonialism and its attendant elements such as slavery, forced paid or underpaid labour on colonial farms, racial subjugation, and the brainwashing education through religion and formal education has made Africans change the focus of reference.

Since the colonial project became very successful it made Africans cast away every element of their culture and decided to live on borrowed culture. For example, for Africans to honour their dead was considered as sinful and amounted to excommunication! The Western Christianity made Africans believe that they did not have God; they only had deities and worshiped idols. Africans were convinced to believe that the Western culture is part of the Gospel which is universal and meant for the salvation of all humanity.

Africans did not take time to investigate the validity of their ‘truthful claims,’ they believed that westerners were the messengers of the ‘word’ and Africans were the recipients. People who use water from the river, they normally filter that water before they use it for drinking. If you so happen to drink without filtering, you might end up drinking the filthy stuff together with water, which could in turn lead to disease. Most of African Christians did not filter what was brought to them. They took both religion and the foreign culture. The failure of sorting out created a “vacuum” among those who confess the Christian faith. In other words, they find themselves in between the two worlds where they do not fit in either world. As a result, Africans are now living on borrowed religions and are actually ready to fight bloody wars against their own religions [Christianity and ATR] which they do not know much about and don’t believe in them entirely. To put in Kwame Bediako’s words, such practice can become burdensome. He says: “Christianity in Africa continues to carry a burden, a veritable incubus, which it has to come to terms with and, if possible, seek to overcome and lay to a rest.”<sup>3)</sup> In fact Bediako goes extra miles by saying that “Christianity can never become an adequate frame of reference for the full expression of African ideals of life because of its history in Africa.”<sup>4)</sup>

This and others are signs of an African who lives in ambivalence. This conflict of ideas and values create uncertainty and problems also in the interpretation of the Bible. Of particular concern in this paper is the place of

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3) Kwame Bediako, *Christianity in Africa: Renewal of non-Western Religion* (1995), 4.

4) Bediako, 5.

Lament language/texts in African Christianity.

## 2. African Christianity and Lament

The missionary era was the time when lamenting was considered to be an embarrassment and a failure in the Western culture. This negative connotation of lamenting in the Western culture (which was looked upon as superior and “Christian”) intensified the rejection of African tradition of lament. The missionary analysis of the lament over death in the Northwestern Tanzania describes lament as fear, hopelessness and horror over the enemy of life. Otto Hagena narrates his observation of lamentations over the dead among the Haya of Tanzania as follows:

In the middle of the night I woke up, frightened upon my bed. Long lamenting sounds tear the silence, gets down in order to rise anew. And again, the same sound, the same voice, crying out of the darkness of the night ... Why all these days, yes, week-long lamentations, whereby the main lamentors sometimes carry on until their voices are gone? ... But anybody who has observed such lamenting more often from nearby knows: the basic tone for that is fear and the horror of the enemy of life with the creature.<sup>5)</sup>

In the view of missionaries, such apparent desperation and hopelessness was brought about by the fact that people did not know the Lord of life. For them, the remedy is when the people see the light of Christ.

The negative attitude towards lamenting in the Western culture influenced African negativity towards their own lament heritage.

“The missionaries told the Africans what they needed to be saved from, but when Africans needed power to deal with the spiritual realm that was real to them, the missionary was baffled. The ancestors were to be

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5) Hagena, Otto, *Schatten des Todes-Light of Leben. Bethel bei Bielefeld:verlangschandlung der Anstalt* (Bethel, 1949, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed) 3. (Wilhelm Richerbacher, Trans., Lecturer at Makumira Univeristy College, February 1998. Otto Hagena was a Bethel missionary in the Northwestern part of Tanzania in Buhaya/Kigarama between 1929-1939.

ignored; infant mortality and premature deaths were purely medical matters. Failure of rains and harvest were acts of God. Childlessness had nothing to do with witchcraft, nor was there any spiritual aspect to any other physical disorder or infirmity.”<sup>6)</sup>

The Western culture claimed on what can be known and proved rationally; problems were to be dealt with scientifically. It claimed to possess superior knowledge that could solve problems for Africans. By the time Christianity was brought to Africa, the missionary world view had somehow detached distinctively from the worldview of the Bible. The Western worldview as critiqued by African scholars had by then become quasi-scientific. Abogunrin points out, “Consequently, although the missionaries still talked about God, heaven, angels, Satan, Holy Spirit and evil forces, they were no more than cultural clutches that lacked the existential dynamism they once had before and during the medieval period.”<sup>7)</sup>

## 2.1. Religion, Language and Experience and the Bible Interpretation

Since it is not possible to mention all areas, in this paper we will concentrate on the area of prayer in the context of various sufferings in Africa. The question to be asked here is: how does religion, language and experience relate or should relate? Do African Christianity and worship life take into account African experiences of sufferings, especially in the era of HIV/AIDS, wars, poverty and many other underlining forms of sufferings? What form/s must or do our prayers take in such situations? What language can we use in a particular experience? How do we relate words and experience?

Psalm 137 is a clear demonstration where religion, language and experience are blended together to express denial over spiritual dominance. Like other lament psalms, Psalm 137 is an honest prayer or a proper response to particular experience. Exile was a form of colonialism where the oppressor claimed both political and spiritual dominance. Nevertheless, for the psalmists in exile,

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6) Mercy Amba Oduyoye, *Hearing and Knowing: Theological Reflections on Christianity in Africa* (1986), 41.

7) S. O. Abogunrin, “Biblical Research in Africa: The Task Ahead”, *African Journal of Biblical Studies* 86 Vol 1 (1986), 14.

spiritual domination was not viable. At least, from the perspective of Psalm 137, defiance to spiritual mockery and dominance became a way forward. Compliance to the demand of singing the Songs of Zion would signify “forgetting Zion” that is, forgetting the events that befell Judah and Jerusalem in the day of captivity. Compliance would mean accommodating colonial supremacy even in the matters of the heart.

In our exploration for suitable Scriptures for special audiences/selection especially with relation to suffering and poverty, it is prerequisite that we utilize the Psalms of lament as prayers befitting such experiences. However, we cannot simply pick any Psalm of lament and use it in difficult situation; we must first understand that even Psalms of lament vary and they all need special attention in interpretation.

### **3. About Psalm 137: Challenges to Interpretation<sup>8)</sup>**

*“How can we sing the Lord’s Song in a foreign land?”* (Psalm 137:4).

In exile, Israel was faced by many challenges concerning their faith and worship. In the absence of the Temple, much of their formal worship patterns had to be revisited! There was more emphasis on Torah or Word of God. However, in Psalm 137, we hear that when their captors demanded them to sing “One of the Songs of Zion” Israel refused. Instead, they put their harps on the willows, and cried! Lament was their new song in their new situation!

Psalm 137 was an attempt by exile to save their nation and dignity by the means of song. The interpretation and appropriation of this Psalm has challenged many for centuries. First because of its lament nature: its language has formidable implications especially within the Christian tradition. Lament was/is seen as a sign of unbelief! Like other imprecatory Psalms, this Psalm bears curses that are unpalatable to Christians. Another component for its difficulty in interpretation is the twisting of genre conventions in the Psalm as well as its horrific conclusion of infanticide.

#### **3.1. How can a Christian sing this Song? Quest for Methodology**

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8) “See, Supplementary Volume 24, 316-317 for the Translation notes of the text of psa 137:1-9.

In grappling with the interpretation of this Psalm and other hard texts in the OT, several methodologies have been employed: 1) Omit or discard discomfort phrase/verse and retain niceties. 2) Read difficult verses metaphorically; this will include verses 8 and 9 in Psalm 137. While poetry is open to metaphorical interpretation, it is tantamount to also see literal aspects in the Psalms of Lament and particularly in this psalm. It is often tempting to go the easy way by omitting or interpreting metaphorically. Incidentally, the harsh judgment of Babylon has also found its way in the NT in Revelation 18:1ff. Of course again here, we are also tempted to read symbolically since the book of Revelation as a whole is full of symbols.

In order to understand Psalm 137 we need to employ exegesis which makes use of the scientific methods and approaches, but methods which allow a better grasp of the meaning of texts in their linguistic, literary, socio-cultural, religious and historical contexts. In other words, interpretation of biblical texts often calls for eclectic approach. In order to interpret these psalms, we must be aware of our point of entry in a way that we bring out the living voices out of these Psalms of Lament. Psalms of Lament are not simply living documents that can be twisted to befit the interpreter or the reader. They are living voices, voices of real people who lived in real political and social situations that adversely affected them.

Eclecticism involves ones' ability to be self conscious on political and historical situations where both the reader and interpreter are located. Analyzing the text alone using linguistic features is not sufficient. With particular reference to this text, a post colonial reading of the Bible is also essential. This is a reading that takes context into account.

Post-colonialism is an interpretive reading that originates from the worldview of indigenous people who were formally colonized by imperial power. It is a way for local people to use their own traditions to shape their modern world views: how they understand the Bible and religion, how they set up governments. Post-colonials read the Bible through a "contextual theology," meaning their current context provides a matrix of interpretation. Though post-colonial reader is aware of the fact that the Bible is a historical text, however, the interest focuses on what that text says given the colonial history of that particular context. This intended meaning is influenced by the past (history), religion and culture.



In summary, such interpretation must take into account the following aspects:

- Interpretation as self-involvement:
  - ▶ Connectedness and association with the text.
  - ▶ Interpreter as objectively informed (interact and dialogue with the text) and subjectively involved (taking life issues seriously)
  - ▶ Interpreter and reader become part of hermeneutical process
  - ▶ Awareness of cultural aspects-symbols and signs
- Interpretation as self-Awareness
  - ▶ Understanding of salvation story
  - ▶ Understanding of ones' story: Space and Time
  - ▶ Imaginative use of older materials to address the new situation
  - ▶ Flexibility and openness to tradition

Although we have spelt out the methodology in question, with respect to Psalm 137, we shall mostly utilize some of the linguistic and literary aspects in reading this psalm using the post-colonial awareness in the back of our minds.

## **4. Interpretation of Psalm 137: Cognitive Compression**

### **4.1. Use of Metonym “Zion”: Emotions as Culturally and Socially Defined**

Meaning is so fundamental to language in that it must be a central focus to language and its features as we interpret biblical texts. When interpreting biblical texts, we need to pay careful attention to linguistic structures/features. We need to determine how such structures/features function in expressing meanings. The mappings between meaning and form are a key subject of linguistic study. Linguistic forms, in this view, are closely linked to the semantic structures they are designed to express.

However, of more importance in cognitive linguistics is the fact syntactical, morphological and phonological representation is basically conceptual. With regard to Psalm 137, the application of metonymic cues aim at determining how sentiments of anger and joy are conceptualized, expressed and realized.

Linguistic emotions and sentiments find their meaning in cultural and social constructions. Scholars of cognitive linguistics argue that sentiments are not simply feelings based on physiology but rather, sentiments are governed by dimensions of cognition.<sup>9)</sup> Effective reading and application of the text do not end up with analysis of language structures and linguistic features for two reasons: 1) language is not only a close system of signs that refer only to other signs (structuralism); meaning is dependent on larger context (situation and discourse); 2) Meaning is not reducible to one dimension, that is, simplified to pellets. Human language as means of communication is multi-dimensional, complex and contains nuances that must be discerned using complex and open methodologies. Apart from working with linguistic features, the reader must be aware of social and cultural constructions surrounding the text. Context is central to this hermeneutics and working with context involves first and far most the process of self-realization and self-affirmation. This in other words, is what I would like to call conscious reading by use of cognitive linguistics as well as pay close attention to the text as we have it. These include use of figures such as metonym, as well as other aspects of cognitive linguistics such as time and space and they way this Psalm twist genre and theological conventions.

With respect to Psalm 137, we shall concentrate on the use of metonyms and other literary features that will facilitate appropriate interpretation. Metonymy is the *modus operandi* where a word or an expression that symbolizes an entity comes to be used of an entity closely associated with, within a given domain. The construal of a metonym is commonly based on physical or indexical association.

Metonyms are pointers to understanding the thought pattern in this lament Psalm. The psalmist refers to Zion in verses 1 and 3. This is a cognitive compression where Zion actually refers not just to the mountain where the Temple stood but to Jerusalem as a whole. Zion stands for Jerusalem of the past where the Temple stood. In this thought pattern, the glories of the past Temple which used to stand on mount Zion are implied, where sacrifices and worship were performed in honour to Yahweh and where songs of praise were sung to

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9) See for example, Z. Kövecses, *Metaphors of Anger, Pride, and Love: A Lexical Approach to the Structure of Concepts* (Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1986); Also Z. Kövecses, *Emotion Concepts* (New York: Springer, 1990).

Yahweh and to the glories of His Holy City.<sup>10</sup> It also refers to Jerusalem that was destroyed: Jerusalem the city, and the Temple that were razed to the ground by the Babylonians in 587 B.C.E and again in 582 B.C.E. This memory brings sadness to the exiles who sat by the streams of Babylon. But this is also a New Jerusalem that is anticipated, Jerusalem of the future where the psalmist looks forward to its highest glory. Prophet Jeremiah had told them not to delude themselves in the Temple while continuing in idolatry (Jeremiah chapter 7; 26). The presence of the Temple will not guarantee their protection from Yahweh because Yahweh will destroy the Temple of Jerusalem as he did in Shiloh! In this psalm, the psalmist does not abide with such conformity. The psalmist has a role in reshaping the future of Jerusalem by vowing to remember!

By bringing the picture of Zion/Jerusalem, the Psalmist mentally participates in broader historical, political social/religious circumstances of God of the psalmist who allowed such catastrophe to happen his own people. However, Yahweh is mentioned only once directly in the whole Psalm (v. 7), but through references to Zion/Jerusalem, God is implied throughout.

In summary, the metonym of Zion permits us to see by association events that happened in different times and space. The request of the enemy is, “sing to us one of the Songs of Zion (v. 4).” Paradoxically the Jews wonder, “How can we sing Yahweh’s songs?” So the songs of Zion demanded by their tormentors are in fact the songs in the honour of the God of Israel! The broader picture is envisaged here by association. It is within this broader picture that we see the psalmist’s participation in changing the destiny of his/her people: 1) Sitting and Weeping, 2) denial to abide with colonial wish, 3) By remembering Zion/Jerusalem. This actively participation is expressed in the language of pain, grief, and subversive denial on one side and on the other side by a vow to remain loyal to God and to the City of Jerusalem.

#### **4.2. Metonym Representing Physiological Aspects**

Looking into the immediate context of these phrases, we can infer that the

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10) Such Psalms would include songs that celebrate the power of Yahweh as in Ps 46, 48, 76 (also praises Jerusalem as a place where God reigns, the Enthronement Psalms like 47, 93, 95, 97, 99 among others.

psalmist is using these metonyms of compressing “right hand and “tongue” to refer to inability to sing. The psalmist makes a promise: “If I forget you O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither/fail to play harp” and “let my tongue stick to the roof of my mouth” if I forget about the past and present Jerusalem, if I forget about God Yahweh. However from psychoanalytic point of view, the reference could mean more of bodily inability to function, to cease to have power, referring to paralysis or a modern term stroke.

The psalmist in fact makes a vow not to sing at all those happy songs in the moment of despair and gloom. Then to make the point clearer and to make a vow concrete, he wishes a curse upon himself/herself if he/she were to abide with the demand of their captors. So that the withering of the right hand could mean total disability, that is losing power to perform all functions. The right hand in the Hebrew thought pattern refers to power.

As for the tongue sticking to the roof pallet, the psalmist wishes that he/she loses ability not just to sing but the inability to communicate, hence to become useless. Therefore the “right hand” and “tongue” represents the whole body. As such, it refers to the whole person. Again the broader picture is in view here

In the Hebrew world view, emotions and sentiments are conceptualized through metaphors and metonyms. The psalmist is not simply using indexical language (metonyms) to express physiological conditions; rather through such language to be able to express sentiments/emotions that were culturally and religiously given a space. Pain is given language of expression and form.<sup>11)</sup> Since pain was given language, form and a place in the cultic life of Israel, we therefore encounter all kinds of human emotions as recorded in the Psalms of Lament: bitterness, crying, lament, happiness, and singing satirically and contrastively intertwined. Psalms represents every human emotion.

Martin Luther has this to say:

Where does one find words of joy than in the Psalms of Praise and Thanksgiving? There you will look into the hearts of all saints, as into fair and pleasant gardens, yes, as into heaven itself... On the other hand, where do you find deeper, more sorrowful, more pitiful words of sadness than in the Psalms of lamentation. There again, you look into the hearts of

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11) See Brueggemann, “Formfulness of Grief”, 263.

all saints, as into death, yes, as into hell itself. How dark and gloomy it is there, with all kinds of troubled fore-bearings about the wrath of God. So, too, they speak of fear and hope, they use such words that no painter could so depict for the fear or hope, and no cicaro or other orator so portray them. And they speak these words of God and with God, and this, I repeat, is the best thing of all. This gives the words double earnestness and life...Hence it is that the Psalter is the book of all saints and everyone, in whatever situation he may be, finds in that situation psalms and words that fit his case that suit him as if they were put there just for his sake, so that he could not put it better himself, or find or wish for anything better.<sup>12)</sup>

We encounter in these Psalms how anger and human sentiments are conceptualized, analyzed and expressed in a way that is unique to that particular culture. Emotions are culturally and socially defined and organized sentiments as well as socially and culturally construed. In the ancient Hebrew, pain and anger are shaped by the liturgical shape; it is also within the worship setting that pain is given language. This truth is more discernible in thanksgiving Psalms such as Psalms 18, 30, 116, 138. In these psalms, the psalmists narrate how they have been saved by God from some calamity. As a result, they bring their prayers and thanksgiving offering in the Temple. In 1 Sam 1:9ff, we read that Hannah wept bitterly in the Temple until the Priest Eli mistook her for a crazy drunken woman! The Bible gives testimony to multitude of women and men whose lives, needs, and experiences were shaped by these complaint prayers. The community in which they lived gave them space and language to express their deepest longings in the form of a lament. Moreover, these women and men found their life experiences as reflected in these Psalms of Lament.

#### **4.3. Other Literary Features used in Conjunction with Metonym of Zion**

The psalmist drives the point home by using other literary features. To have power over situation is to see the impossibility of further humiliation! The

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12) Martin Luther, *Luther Works, Vol 35, Word and Sacrament 1* (1960), 255-256.

psalmist expands this impossibility by making a vow by use of conditional clauses containing both protasis (if) and apodosis. Both  $\text{אִם}$  in verse 5b and  $\text{אִם־לֹא}$  (used twice in verse 6) refer to real conditions. Also both clauses are used in the context of oath making. When one vows not to do something then the clause used is  $\text{אִם}$  and when one vows to do something the clause used is  $\text{אִם־לֹא}$ . Therefore psalmist laments, “*If I forget you, let my right hand forget...*” would that mean that the psalmist vows to always remember Jerusalem. “If I do not remember you... let my tongue stick to the roof of my mouth... would mean that the psalmist vows to remember Jerusalem always. The point made is the same: even “over there” in the strange land, the psalmist will “live in Jerusalem.” The psalmist makes this vow of allegiance to Yahweh and dissident denial by use both stylistic and linguistic features.

#### 4.4. Cognitive Compression of Space/Location

There are complex mental spaces with reference to time and space in Psalm 137. Reference to “Babylon” is made by the use of *inclusio* in the first and last strophes respectively (vv. 1-3; 8-9). Far from home and the Temple, the psalmist is grieved by bitter memories of what happened to Zion. Interestingly, in verse 1 when reference is made to location, “Babylon” the psalmist seems to see this space (where he is presently sitting and weeping) as something remote. Through the use of two spatial particles  $\text{עַל}$  (used twice in verse 1 and 2), and another element of space  $\text{שָׁם}$  in verse 3, the psalmist sees Babylon as a place far and distant, “over there!” Even the response to this strange request in the beginning of second strophe verse 4, seems to refer to Babylon as  $\text{עַל}$  “there, the land of calamity/foreignness ( $\text{אֶרֶץ־נִבָּה}$ ).” However, when reference is made to Jerusalem, the infinitive construct is used with time prefix ( $\text{בְּ}$ ) as in  $\text{אֶת־צִיּוֹן בְּזָכְרֵנָּה}$ . The literal meaning is: “In our remembering...the Zion (Zion is the object of remembering). With regard to space, there is a mental dislocation. Physically, the psalmist is in the land of calamity and mentally “in” Jerusalem. As if the spatial markers are not sufficient to drive the point home, the psalmist uses another repetition strategy. Zion/Jerusalem is repeatedly referred (interchangeably) to in verses 1, 3, 5, and 6. This art of repetition is significant in the Hebrew poetry; it points to where emphasis is, here it is on the spatial

location of Jerusalem, the Temple and all that they entail. But the events suggest different reality, exiles are “over there” on the banks of the Babylonian rivers.

This displacement creates a conflict and explains the reason for lament in the first strophe (vv. 1-3) and bitter imprecations or curses upon himself in the second strophe (vv. 4-6), and plea for proportional retribution in the last strophe (vv. 8-9). The Psalmist wants to live in the past; albeit, the present forms the reality which he/she rejects and vows to reject by using emotive words like **יְמִינֵי תְשֻׁבָה**. The use of **תְשֻׁבָה** (Arabic *ksh* evokes emotions among the exiles who sat by the banks of Tigris and Euphrates rivers and their tributaries. In Arabic it means “lame/cripple.” It is this conflict of mental placement that constitutes the lament for psalmist, vow on the part of the psalmist, and imprecations against the oppressors. This pattern unites pain and ferocity, melancholic tenderness and passion, intense love for Zion and liturgical imprecations against enemies.

#### 4.5. Cognitive Compression of Time

Another feature of mental involvement in Psalm 137 and in most Psalms of lament is with regard to time aspect. A thorough and careful look at the psalm indicates the wholistic and broader time reference: past, present and future. The immediate and distance past (vv. 1-4, 7) becomes the basis for understanding the present. “Remembrance” (and its contrast “forget”) is central to this time element. Recollection of past events gives meaning to the present situation of misery and sadness and a reason for bitter retribution and future hope in verses 5-7 and 8-9. The memories of the past (v. 1) arouse a specific action of negative response, yet appropriate response from the exiles, “they hung their musical instruments on the trees!” The past defines the present action; in this case denial to participate in happy songs in the physical land of Babylon. The past also frames the future anticipation: calling God to “remember” or to “act (v. 7).” Correspondingly, the psalmists see their role in the shaping of that future: through vow of allegiance and imprecatory liturgy. The psalmist/s will sing a different song, a lament! Retributive justice will be part of the lament and part of the reshaping of the psalmist/s future.

#### 4.6. Psalm 137 and the Broader Lament Genre in the OT

Psalm 137 is considered as one of the Lament Psalms in the Psalter. Lament genre is pervasive in the OT. They constitute more than one third of the OT literature.<sup>13)</sup> Psalms of lament in the Psalter (and in Lamentations) constitute only a portion of the laments contained in the OT. The Old Testament shows from the very beginning the elements of lament as in Gen 25:22; 27:46; Judges 15:18; and 21:2. Prophetic books contain both national and individual laments (e.g., the laments of the nation in Jeremiah 14-15; Isa 63-64; and the laments of individual in Jer 11-2. The lament is important structural element in the prophetic literature such as Jeremiah and Trito-Isaiah, where we find both individual and national laments (see Jer 11; 12 and Jer 14-15 and Isa 63-64).

Though Psalms 137 can be categorized as a national lament<sup>14)</sup>, it also shared other features with the imprecatory Psalms such as Pss 69, and 109. This category is the most difficult literature to be interpreted and to be appropriated by Christians. As such, they do not entirely find their way into the lectionaries and usual readings in many churches.

#### 4.7. Twisting of Literary Conventions in Psalm 137

Scholars are of the opinion that there is a movement from Lament to praise in the Psalms of lament. Taking Psalm 13 as a model of lament, they identify the following pattern: 1) a complaint to God, 2) prayer for help, and 3) an expression of confidence. However, this is questionable since some Psalms do not portray such movement. Psalm 88 for example does not end up with praise or even promise to praise. It is the most somber Psalms of the OT. The royal lament of Psalm 89 ends with an expression of grief and not confidence. We read in verses 49-51.<sup>15)</sup>

*“Lord, where is your unfailing love?  
You promised it to David with a faithful pledge;*

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13) See William Holladay, *The Psalms Through Three Thousand Years: Prayerbook of a Cloud of Witnesses* (1993), 293.

14) The most discernible Psalms of communal lament among others include Pss 12, 44, 58, 60, 74, 79 and 80.

15) Verse 52 is not part of this Psalm, it is the doxology added to end book III of the Psalter. Each book of the Psalter ends with doxology.



*Remember/consider Lord how your servants are disgraced,  
I carry in my heart the insults of so many people  
Your enemies have mocked me, O lord  
They mock the one you anointed as king” (NLT).*

Psalm 137 also does not end with praise, but on curses or at least, asking for blessing upon that one who repays the psalmist’s enemies. In the conventional OT understanding, *macarism* (Greek for life of blessedness/happiness) is a life that is enjoyed by one who is righteous, the one who has a close relationship with Yahweh. Contrastively, *macarism* is invoked here upon the one who repays Edom and upon the one who shall destroy Babylon and her future descendants. The psalmist, who in this case is the oppressed (hence “righteous”), invokes curses upon himself/herself; curses that were normally meant for the enemies. As it is evidently seen, the psalmist is not only twisting genre/literary conventions but challenging theological understanding as well. Like Job (or the character in the book of Job), the psalmist demonstrate theological defiance, by questioning what was normative at the time!

#### **4.8. Theological Aspects in Psalm 137**

##### **Remembrance**

The Prophet Jeremiah was the key prophet in prophesizing the fall of Judah and Jerusalem, a prophecy that brought him much sorrow and grief. In one of the messages he assured Judeans that exile was real, and so they have to be mentally prepared even to stay in that land and to seek its prosperity. He says in chapter 29: 4-7

*“The Lord Almighty, the God of Israel, sends this message to all the captives he has exiled to Babylon from Jerusalem: <sup>5</sup> “Build homes, and plan to stay. Plant gardens, and eat the food you produce. <sup>6</sup> Marry, and have children. Then find spouses for them, and have many grandchildren. Multiply! Do not dwindle away! <sup>7</sup> And work for the peace and prosperity of Babylon. Pray to the Lord for that city where you are held captive, for if Babylon has peace, so will you.”*

Although exiles were aware of this, in their mental faculty and given the covenant history of their relationship with Yahweh, they resisted such surrender through remembrance. Since Psalm 137 speaks frequently of “remembering” it is crucial to have a swift look at this aspect in the OT.

## 5. Remembering as Both a Divine and Human Prerogatives

### 5.1. Remembering as God’s Attribute: Creator/Liberator God

The story of salvation starts by God remembering the oppression of his people. This is especially true of Priestly documents such as the Exodus narrative. In Exo 2:24 and 6:5 the writer demonstrates that the deliverance started with God *remembering* the people oppressed by the Egyptians. The writer puts this in the mouths of both the narrator and God, “And God heard their groaning, and God *remembered* the Covenant with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob” (2:24). When God commissioned Moses to undertake the task of bringing out the people from Egypt, God declared, “*Moreover I have heard the groaning of the people of Israel whom the Egyptians hold in bondage and I have **remembered** my covenant*” (6:5). In these and other passages of the OT, remembering is made within the covenant oath. This is very significant, since God who makes the oath is faithful and true to that which is being promised from one generation to another.

After the golden calf incident in the wilderness God punished the Israelites but Moses intervened on their behalf pleading that God might *remember* the covenant made to their ancestors and spare the people. As a result, God changed the plan of destruction (Exo 32:13, 14). The same motif is seen in the Ark story where God makes a promise not to destroy again the earth by flood, “I will *remember* my covenant which is between me and you and every living creature of all flesh ··· (Gen 9:10). In these and other passages of the OT, remembering is made within the covenant oath.<sup>16)</sup>

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16) See also Exodus 2:24; 6:5; Deut 15:15; Lev 26:42; Pss 106:45 among many others.

## 5.2. Remembering as Constructive Engagement of Yahweh

In Exodus 3:7-8 the J Writer also implies that God remembered Israel in their oppression in Egypt. Here, “remembering” does not mean God just “kept in mind” the children of Israel, but that God’s remembering resulted into action of deliverance, actions of intervention, and the action of giving Israel a new life and new hope through the gift of land. The Creator God is the one who remembered and saved Israel from slavery in Egypt. One should not misinterpret this assertion as meaning that God forgets at times and then remembers again like a human being. The assertion explicates the fact that Israel’s history of salvation and their testimony to the saving deeds show that Yahweh who is the Creator and liberator of Israel is also the initiator of the covenant and promises. This testimony does not confine Yahweh to Israel as a nation alone; rather, it extends Yahweh’s deeds to the world as the initiator and controller of events. Thus, Walter Brueggemann makes this assertion, “Israel’s characteristic grammar in speaking of Yahweh, governed by active verbs, regularly insisted that Yahweh is a major player in Israel’s life and in the life of the world. Yahweh’s characteristic presentation in Israel’s rhetoric is that Yahweh acts powerfully, decisively, and transformatively.”<sup>17)</sup>

God becomes a major participant in that history where both the oppressed and the oppressor will eventually affirm the Lordship of Yahweh; through the historical events, they will know who controls history (cf. Exo 7:5; 9:16, 35). When both Israel and Egypt remember what Yahweh had done in history, they would know what kind of God Yahweh is to them and what Yahweh is to the whole world.

## 5.3. Remembering as Time Dimensional: Past, Present and the Future Tied Together

God’s remembering acts were time dimensional and transcended the past, present and the future. God, who transcends time, remembered the promises of the past; God saw their present affliction/condition and engaged in the activity to give them hope and a future.

We might as well go back to Exodus 3:7-8 where God’s acts of deliverance

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17) Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy*, (1997) 137.

started with God remembering them. It does not mean God had forgotten them, but that God was up to something on behalf of the oppressed Israel. Again, God's remembering acts were time dimensional and transcended the past, present and the future. God remembered the promises of the past; God saw their present affliction/condition in Egypt. If we bracket out the question of chronological placement and the historicity of the OT literature, we find out that the attribute that "God remembers" comes early in Israel's testimony. In fact, it begins the important section of Israel's core testimony, "Yahweh saved/delivered and brought them out of Egypt. The remembering of God precedes the deliverance and the bringing of the Israelites out of Egypt. This is to say that God's remembering is an integral part of the salvation history. It is in the act of remembering that God showed willingness to reconstruct and re-orient Israel's lives. God's declaration, "*I have seen the affliction of my people who are in Egypt, and have heard their cry because of their taskmasters; I know their sufferings.*" These decisive words precede God's final intention, "*and I have come down to deliver them from the power of the Egyptians and to bring them up out of that land to a good and broad land...*" (Exo 3:7-8). In other words, borrowing Brueggemann's 'phraseology<sup>18)</sup>' the lament/complaint from suffering shows the life of disorientation and God's intervention in such situation and a granting of life contrary to that is a new orientation. Consequently, when God remembers the people it implies that God is reconstructing the history/life of that people. When God enters into peoples' lives, the lives of the people will never remain the same; lives are change, transformed or in other words, reconstructed.

#### **5.4. Remembrance as Response to God's Gracious Deeds**

In both the narrative and liturgical/poetic literature of the OT, Israel is shown to be obliged to respond to God's gracious deeds. One of the ways was to remember. This does not simply mean to retain some information, recollect or keep in mind what was said and/or done. Remembrance means reliving God's gracious deeds especially in the context of the worship life. As recipients of divine promises, the children of Israel were to respond to God's gifts of grace.

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18) Brueggemann views serene life as "orientation", troubled/suffering life as 'disorientation', and a shift to new life after suffering as "new orientation."

God the initiator and doer expect a response. Israel responded to God by celebrating the divine acts through the worship life especially during their three great annual festivals.

In celebrating the events, the whole life of the person is involved in reliving the message. Key to the remembering and celebrating the message is the participation of the community. Liturgy and worship are never done on individual basis; it is a communal (community) event and thus requires community involvement. Also central to worship is the fact that liturgy and narrative are always integrated. Remembering in a narrative form is a testimony of the marvelous things that God has done. Israel narrates from one generation to another the story of God's undeserved mercy to them. In this way, all generations are made to participate in that story. In other words, every generation is made to share the experiences of deliverance and the gift of the land. That is to say, remembering is not simply mental recollection of the past events, done to past generation and finding its implications for the present. Remembering means reliving past experiences as present experiences and reality; this implies ultimately connecting the past, present and the future. This is also seen in the poetic parts of the OT (e.g. Psalms 77, 78, etc.). Through worship life, Israel celebrates God's wonders in bringing about impossibilities on behalf of the oppressed, and to reverse the expected order of things/systems in the society (the mighty/oppressors are brought down and the oppressed/lowly are lifted up).

### **5.5. Lament Within the Broader Theological Framework**

Old Testament lament is structured by the larger theological concepts and contexts of both the narrative and poetic material. One significant theological motif that is recurrent in the Psalter and that finds larger biblical expression is the understanding of humankind. The Lament genre like other parts of the Old Testament, understands humanity's transitoriness and failure. The significance of lament is rooted in the fact that the **human being of whom the OT speaks is finite**. A human being is not idealized or spiritualized. Already in the first chapters of the Hebrew Bible human limitations are portrayed as part of the existence as in Genesis 1-11. Suffering is therefore, understood within this

theological truth. The Psalms of Lament and the Psalms of Creation and hope (8; 139; 90) express this truth, at the same time, affirm the divine exchangeability. And just as it is a part of human nature that a human being can pour out his/her heart in lamentation, so it is a part of divine nature that God is concerned about this cry of distress.

Another theological concept that frames the lament of the nation as well as that of an individual is the concept of **oppression and suffering of God's people**. It is in the suffering of Israel that God's involvement and participation in national life was perceived more clearly than in any other event. The language of the suffering and cry of the oppressed in Exodus and in other historical traditions of Israel (wilderness and exile) give voice to the present plight of the nation. There is a striking similarity between the distressful cry of the oppressed in those traditions and the cries of the nation and individuals in the Psalms of Lament. The theological significance of the national lament lies in its immediate relationship to the activity of God as saviour. Salvation is experienced as a hearing of the call of distress (see Psalms 44, 74, 77, 79). Complaints are appeal to God to be compassionate to those who suffer. All the multifarious forms of human affliction, oppression, anxiety, pain, and peril are given voice in those traditions. The cries of affliction are directed to God of the covenant, who is addressed as the only court that can alter their plight. The individual and community in the Psalms of Lament operate within this broader theological framework. It is within this framework that the Psalms of Lament find more elaborate and fixed structure than the earlier forms of laments.

### **5.6. Lament and Suffering**

The structure indicates what is essential to a psalm of lament, cries of help directed to God for an answer. Even the transitions within the Psalms serve this purpose. The theological significance of the laments of Israel lies first of all in the fact that it gives voice to suffering. The lament is the language of suffering; in it suffering is given the dignity of language: It will not stay silent! The function of the lament is to lay out one's own inner suffering before the one who alleviates suffering, heals wounds and dries tears. Human suffering, no matter what it is, is not something which only affects the sufferer alone and that which

one must overcome alone; suffering is something to be brought to God. The true function of the lament is supplication; it is means by which suffering comes before the one who can take it away.

### **5.7. Lament is about justice: That is a song of life**

As we have seen, Psalm 137 ends with a wish: Infanticide! This as we have said earlier, is one of the areas which, makes the interpretation of this psalm difficult. But it all sums up in the questions of suffering and social justice, and in this case, retributive justice.

For Pleins, issues of suffering and social justice are the main agenda of the Psalms, and these issues can be brought forward whatever entry or methodological approach one uses. He comments:

We can immerse ourselves at the beginnings of the tradition to wrestle with the sociopolitical context and questions of the text. We can locate ourselves at another stage of the tradition and meditate on these texts as documents imparting spiritual instruction. Or we can place ourselves in yet another stage of tradition to be moved by the psalms to sing songs of tragedy and trust, lament and praise. However, no matter what our port of entry, the issues of suffering, social justice and worship continually confront us in our engagement of the texts. These questions are critical to our continued appropriation of the psalms as living documents in church and synagogue today.<sup>19)</sup>

Of course this approach has already placed the issues of social justice and suffering at the center. In other words, Pleins looks at these psalms using an eye of a liberation theologian, and in these psalms he intends to find the ways these psalms grapple with the contemporary issues of oppression and liberation.<sup>20)</sup>

Justice in the OT is more of a religious concept than just a system of impartial decision as in the Western law. Justice includes first and far most protecting, restoring, helping righteousness, which helps those who have had their right taken from them in communal relationship to regain it."<sup>21)</sup> Justice and

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19) David Pleins, *Songs of Tragedy, Hope and Justice* (1993), 4.

20) Pleins, 5.

righteousness were often taken together. Therefore, justice was the core of Israel's relationship with the covenant God. In this case justice finds clarity and clear meaning when viewed together with and in the light of its covenantal relationship. Lament is, therefore, both a political and religious cry for justice. Lament addresses God and community to hear hurt and pain: e.g. Bob Marley addressed the issues of injustice and oppression through songs of liberation, even rephrasing Psalms 137.

### **5.8. Language and Experience**

Psalms of Lament are songs of defiance/resistance over suffering and/or death: The main part of lament/complaint reveals this reality. The Psalms of lament exhibit a sense of a real power of spoken word from a human point of view. The power to concretize, give force, meaning and effectiveness to what would otherwise remain nebulous realities of life and inner longings. Psalms give possibilities and prowessness for us to search our own hearts that might have been deaf to realities of life. They challenge and extricate our euphemistic speech, reorienting our words to concur with those realities. Our Christian faith has created euphoria, a sense of wellbeing that, on one hand, narrows and deflects our understanding of life as straight, one-sided dimensional adventure. But on the other hand, it has made Christians to “experience” permanent spiritual numbness to pain and suffering that people face from day to day. Christian faith by its teachings has made the harsh realities temporal, deluding its believers to masochism, in hope of that otherworldly and permanent life. Christians are left to live in quasi de facto circumstances. As a result, faith and worship becomes less authentic and lethargic. This brings us back to the fundamental question: “How can we sing the Lord's Song at Home?”

## **6. Conclusion**

Historical Critical Approach as approach to interpretation of Scriptures claims almost total objectivity. This methodology of course has been very insightful in

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21) Interpreter's Bible Dictionary, R-Z, pg. 81.



unveiling the meaning of texts; notwithstanding with a lot criticisms lately. However, it is my assertion that total objectivity in the reading of biblical texts is unattainable. As interpreters, human agenda seems to be part of our hermeneutical processes, whether consciously or unconsciously. Since context is fundamental in understanding the message, deliberate subjectivity is often required in the reconstruction of the biblical message in order to address our contemporary issues concretely. As interpreters, we have to be aware of our port of entry which includes first and far most, one's context. An interpreter who is aware of context is able to reconstruct the meaning of biblical texts effectively. We can only understand our context in relation to the larger context including the biblical context! We can only reconstruct our own history when our own experiences dialogue with that of the biblical text. We can see our reality and who we are in the light of the biblical message. We can wrestle with our history in the light of the history of God's relationship with his people.

Biblical texts express this history of relationship in both prose and poetic language. Therefore, the process of interpretation must include analysis of how language communicates that reality. Language in the Bible is shaped by cultural and social contexts and is informed by the wider traditions of Israel's relationship with Yahweh. In Psalm 137, we have seen that the experience of suffering is expressed in the poetic language of lament. Even within this broader genre, the psalmist was at liberty to use metonym of compression as the appropriate device to express totality of space and time as well as totality of suffering and plea for justice.

Imprecatory Psalms invoke curses as a language of power in the seemingly defeated person/s. The Psalmists turn their attention to God, who was believed to be the source of power and blessing. It is Yahweh who can avenge the enemies. In Psalm 137, the psalmist invokes curses upon himself/herself for failure to seek the happiness of Zion/Jerusalem. Curses function here not only as an oath to allegiance but as performative speech which decisively intends to shape and re-orient the way things should be.

Christians cannot sing in "captivity" the Lord's song. We must realize that each situation calls for appropriate song. As Christians we can sing the Lord's Song when we allow both individual and communal suffering to be expressed as we do for thanksgiving mood. We need to see the following biblical truths in

expressing pain: 1) pain expressed in language of lament is directed to God. God is a safe place where one feels secure to honestly communicate the inner longings of the heart. Lament and petitions function structurally and theologically as a device to make the community and the protagonists in the psalms to bring out life extremities to God as Brueggemann remarks:

Israel characteristically met the hurtful dimensions of existence head-on, of course viewing them as faith crises, times of wondering about God and his fidelity, but also a faith opportunities, times to articulate again their expectations and assumptions, times to reformulate their position vis-à-vis the world of hurt and the God of faithfulness.<sup>22)</sup>

The language of lament in the OT was shaped by the religious traditions of Israel. It was in worship that pain was given space and language. That is why we find that lament and the language of lament very pervasive in the Bible. Both individual and communal lament was shaped by these rich traditions of Israel. It was also the language used by our Lord Jesus Christ in times of sad and despondency circumstances. The cry for help is the core of OT theology. In Exodus 3:7-9, we are told that God came down because of human pain and suffering.

We can sing the Lord's song when we allow the psalmists experiences to shape and inform our own experiences and give language to express our own experience. We can be comfortable with the language of lament through effective interpretation as well as appropriation of these texts in our worship and devotional life as a whole.

<Keywords>

Lament, Suffering, Prayer, Postcolonial Hermeneutics, Metonyms.

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22) Brueggemann, "From Hurt to Joy, From Death to Life", 3.

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<Abstract>

## 집에서 낯선 노래를 부르며: 시편 137편으로부터의 유비

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유배지에서 주님을 향해 부르는 노래가 아무 의미가 없음을 한탄하는 시편 137편으로부터, 필자는 자신의 아프리카 상황으로부터 다음과 같은 질문을 던진다: 우리가 어떻게 집에서 주의 노래를 부를 수 있을까? 탄식을 장려하지 않는 기독교인들 사이에서, 특별히 교회가 죽음과 불균형에 휩싸여 있는 시기에, 아프리카인들은 어떻게 주의 노래를 부를 수 있을까? 이에 필자는 아프리카나 다른 곳 어디에서든 탄식의 영성을 회복시킬 것을 제안하고 있다. 이 논문은 아프리카의 고통과 빈곤의 상황에 처해있는 특별한 청중을 위해 쓰여 졌다.

시편 137편은 다른 구약의 탄식시와 마찬가지로 번역은 물론 해석하기 어려운 본문 중 하나이다. 시의 저주 섞인 언어들이나 저주들은 구약의 어려운 탄식 용어들과 더불어 많은 문제점들을 더해주고 있다. 시편 137편은 양식과 문학적 관례들을 깨트리는 요소들과, 압축적인 환유어들, 그리고 탄식시란 양식 자체를 도전하는 특별한 패턴들을 포함하고 있다. 그러나 시를 세밀하게 읽고 해석해보면 그 시기 “시온의 노래”를 마음대로 부를 수 없었던 사람들이 자신들을 위한 나름의 언어를 이 시속에 표현하고 있음이 드러난다. 이 시를 현대의 특정한 청중에 적용해보려는 한 시도로, 필자는 이 시를 통해 탄식시란 양식이 아프리카의 고통과 빈곤의 상황에 처한 특별한 청중을 위해 “번역”을 위한 기도와 평화적 항거로 이해되고, 사용되고, 활용될 필요가 있음을 보여주고자 한다. 시편 137편은 다른 많은 탄식시들과 마찬가지로 정적주의(quietism) 신학이나 자기 경건에 빠지려는 경향에 도전하고 있다.