

REFORMED THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY: CHARLOTTE

THE UNIQUE PLACE OF PSALM 137 IN THE PSALTER AND ITS
ENDURING VALUE FOR BELIEVERS

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Introduction

Perhaps no words on nonviolence and forgiveness are more famous than those from the mouth of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount: ‘But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven. For he makes the sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust’ (Matthew 5:44-45). These are powerful words that have been a stronghold for Christians suffering persecution and even martyrdom. Even more powerful than the words, perhaps, is Jesus’s own example in passively receiving unjust treatment and even a shameful death on a cross, choosing to forgive rather than spite his enemies. This forbearance, forgiveness, and mercy are at the very heart of the gospel. What are Christians to do, therefore, when they find in Scripture passages that, far from forgiving their enemies, cry out for vengeance and wrath to be poured out on them? This is just what appears in several Psalms. Probably chief among these so-called ‘imprecatory’ Psalms is Psalm 137, with its chilling final verse: ‘Blessed shall he be who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rock!’ (Psalm 137:9). Of this verse, even the Bible-loving, whole-counsel-of-God preaching Spurgeon wrote, ‘The desire for righteous retribution is rather the spirit of the law than of the gospel.’¹ What *are* Christians to make of this verse, and this Psalm as a whole?

Thesis

It will be argued that Psalm 137 is in fact a Psalm which entrusts judgment to God and relinquishes vengeance; yet this Psalm holds a unique place amongst the imprecatory Psalms. Psalm 137 can be categorized as a prophecy-fulfillment imprecation. It is helpful to use the category of Meredith Kline of an ‘intrusive feature’ in God’s economy of redemption to

¹ Charles Spurgeon, *The Treasury of David: Volume Three* (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 2016), 229.

understand Psalm 137.² According to this principle, God's eschatological, final judgment is realized during the current era of common grace, at specific times and for specific purposes.³ It is for this intrusive judgment on Babylon, foretold in Isaiah 13:16, that the Psalmist prays. The unique judgment brought about upon Babylon, which Isaiah 13:16 prophesies, and the Psalmist of Psalm 137 prays for, is in the past and therefore not to be prayed for in reference to God's enemies today. It is rather to be broadened and seen as typological for God's general judgment coming on the wicked at the end of time. This thesis will be argued for by examining the text. Then, the passage will be examined in light of other biblical revelation, showing the cohesiveness of this Psalm with the rest of Scripture. Finally, the modern meaning of this Psalm in the worship of God's people will be explored.

Psalm 137

Psalm 137⁴ is properly understood as a community lament. The structure of this Psalm can be understood as a description of the suffering of exile (vv. 1-3), confession of allegiance to the LORD as God (vv. 4-6), and a prayer for judgment on adversaries (vv. 7-9).⁵ The Psalm opens with a setting, "By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion." This Psalm is therefore a post-exilic Psalm, and is likely looking back at exile after returning home.⁶ The Psalmist experienced the bitter exile and destruction of Jerusalem in 586-587 BC. There is a repetition of the word בַּיִת ("there") in verses one and three, and the word בְּמִצְבַּת ("in the midst") is used in verse two, all denoting the idea of both past time

² As will become clear, while Kline's idea will be borrowed, it will not be argued for in the same way that he argues for it. He seems to place all imprecatory Psalms into a unique, past stage of intrusiveness in redemptive history, which is different from what will be argued for here.

³ Meredith Kline, *God, Heaven, and Har Magedon* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock Publishers, 2006), 210.

⁴ The ESV translation of the Psalm will be used throughout. It is provided as an appendix.

⁵ The verse divisions came from Leslie C. Allen, *Psalms 101-150* (WBC Vol. 21, Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2002), 303. The actual headings though are original.

⁶ Allan Harman, *Psalms, Volume 2: Psalms 73-150*, A Mentor Commentary (Great Britain: Christian Focus Publications, 2011), 953.

and distant location. The Psalmist is not presently in Babylon; the events described are in the past. But the Psalm was clearly written by someone who experienced the exile, as the first person plural is used throughout the Psalm to describe the past experience of exile.⁷ Therefore, this Psalm was likely written during the window of time between the return of the exiles after the decree of Cyrus in 538 BC, but before the rebuilding of the temple. It is therefore likely that the Psalm was composed in the late 6th C BC.⁸ It is likely that the Psalmist, returned from exile and living in Jerusalem, feels sorrow not just in hindsight, but also presently, as he looks at the lonely and still destroyed city that used to be so beautiful (Lamentations 1:1). Chief among his present sorrows would be the loss of the temple, something which must have felt exceedingly bitter. To be back in Jerusalem but without the temple would have evoked much sorrow and even despair for an Israelite in the 6th century.

Psalm 137:1-3

Although the Psalmist is presently in Jerusalem, the Psalm “takes place” as it were, back in Babylon in exile. The Psalmist enters back into the past experience of himself and his faithful Israelite brothers, in order to relive and process before God the pain, but also the faith, that they experienced in exile. He describes the past action of he and his Israelite companions in exile as sitting down and weeping (verse one). The Psalmist is communicating a feeling of utter defeat. The reason for this is given in verse three, “For there our captors required of us songs, and our tormentors mirth, saying, ‘Sing us one of the songs of Zion!’” It has been argued that what the Babylonians desired was entertainment.⁹ There is plausibility to this, since the captors of Israel

⁷ It must be granted, however, that it is not strictly necessary that the Psalmist himself was in Babylon in exile, as Allen posits (Allen, *Psalms 101-150*, 304). It is certainly conceivable that the Psalmist is voicing the feelings of those who were in exile, whom he identifies with as a fellow Israelite, even though he was not there himself. But it is unlikely that this is the case given the deep emotional language used. A straightforward reading of the text sees the Psalmist as having experienced the bitter exile himself.

⁸ Allen, *Psalms 101-150*, 304.

⁹ Mari Joerstad, “Sing Us the Songs of Zion: Land, Culture, and Resistance in Psalm 137, *12 Years a Slave*, and *Cedar Man*.” *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 40 (2018), 5.

desired נִנְנָשׁ (“joy, mirth”). But it is best to understand these petitions to sing a song of Zion not as a petition for entertainment, strictly speaking, but as a taunt.¹⁰ This taunt would have been in a similar vein to the taunts of Psalm 79:10 and Psalm 115:2, where the nations mock the Israelite worshipers of the LORD with, “Where is their God?” The Babylonians desire for mirth from the Israelites is not a sincere desire for a happy, entertaining song, but a cruel taunt meant to communicate that their happy songs about the LORD are false and meaningless. Their mighty God had failed them, they claim.

Psalm 137:4-6

The faithful Israelites (author of the Psalm included) refuse to give into the taunts of their enemies and sing. This was an act of faith, because the believing Israelites whose inner thoughts are voiced in Psalm 137 had internalized the real meaning of exile. Howard Osgood explains that, “Of the multitudes who were carried into captivity the majority changed their sky but not their mind. They had loved idolatry in the temple of Jerusalem, and they were at home and content and growing rich in Babylonia.”¹¹ But for a small number of Judahites taken to Babylon in exile, they received it as the severest of covenant disciplines. For them, exile meant the exchange of joyful songs for songs of mourning over their sins. “The desolation of Zion was the gaping, festering wound of the sin of Israel, the reproach of His recreant people. Till that wound was healed there could be no joy over Zion for those who knew God. Their captivity was the sign that ‘his anger was not turned away, but his hand was stretched out still.’”¹² In this way, the Psalmist and his faithful Israelite companions in exile receive exile with the same faith as the

¹⁰ Hans-Joachim Kraus, *Psalms 60-150*, translated by Hilton C. Oswald (CC, Minneapolis: Fortress, 1993), 503.

¹¹ Howard Osgood, “Dashing the Little Ones Against the Rock.” *Princeton Theological Review* 1.1 (1903), 30.

¹² Osgood, “Dashing the Little Ones Against the Rock,” 31-32.

prophet Micah who wrote, “I will bear the indignation of the LORD because I have sinned against him, until he pleads my cause and executes judgment for me” (Micah 7:9).

The Psalmist takes a vow of self-imprecation in order to communicate his ultimate allegiance to Jerusalem in verses 5-6. These verses have as their background the songs of Zion, such as Psalms 84 and 122.¹³ In these Psalms, allegiance to Jerusalem, the dwelling place of God on earth, is akin to allegiance to God. The Psalmist, “Longs, yes, faints for the courts of the LORD;” his strength is in God, and in his heart are the highways to Zion (Psalm 84:2, 5). It is important to note, then, that though these verses are negative in their articulation, taking the form of a self-imprecatory oath, they have their foundation faith in the promises of God to bring about restoration after exile.¹⁴ The Psalmist, by saying the words, “If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget its skill!” (Psalm 137:5), betrays the fact that Jerusalem is of value not merely in the past but also in the present and in some sense in the future as well. He therefore defies the enemies of God in exile by refusing to give into their taunts and admit that God has been defeated.

Moreover, the Psalmist would have been very familiar with the prayer of Solomon in 1 Kings 8:46-53. In this prayer, Solomon asks that, if exile is to happen in the future because of Israel’s sin, and they turn in humble repentance to him, that God would, “Hear in heaven your dwelling place their prayer and their plea, and maintain their cause and forgive your people who have sinned against you, and all their transgressions they have committed against you, and grant them compassion in the sight of those who carried them captive, that they may have compassion on them” (1 Kings 8:49-50). It is hard to overstate how important this prayer would have been to faithful Israelites in exile. Not only does it communicate that God is willing to forgive his people

¹³ Allen, *Psalms 101-150*, 308.

¹⁴ Osgood, “Dashing the Little Ones Against the Rock,” 32-33.

in exile, but it also implicitly prays for their restoration to Jerusalem after exile. This is clear in the prayer for “compassion” from their captors.

The Psalmist also displays faith because of the final verses of this Psalm, which indicate familiarity with and trust in the prophecies concerning the destruction of Babylon in Isaiah 13. If the Psalmist was familiar with such a passage, surely he would have been familiar with the rest of Isaiah and its prophecies concerning Judah’s restoration after exile through God’s use of Cyrus of Persia (Isaiah 45).¹⁵ It can be concluded, therefore, that the Psalmist and his companions, even while mourning in exile over their sin, were hoping in the promises of God to restore Jerusalem fully, including the temple, even while they themselves were in exile.

Psalm 137:7-9

The Psalmist turns from expressing his allegiance to Jerusalem, to calling upon God to judge the Edomites. Though this feels like an abrupt shift, upon further reflection the Psalmist’s thought pattern becomes plain. As he reflects upon the destruction of Jerusalem, and feels on the verge of despair (vv. 1-3), this feeling is met by deep faith in God’s promises to restore his most holy house, the temple (vv. 4-6). As he lingers on this thought of Jerusalem and its destruction, but also its promised restoration, his mind goes to those who responded in just the opposite way to Jerusalem’s destruction, and who laughed at God’s promises. As he has just vowed a vow of self-imprecation if Jerusalem (and the God who dwells there) are not his highest joy, he feels

¹⁵ This final point assumes that Isaiah is one document written in the eighth century by the prophet Isaiah. There are very good reasons to believe this to be the case. For an explanation of these reasons, see Schultz, Richard L. “Isaiah, Isaiahs, and Current Scholarship.” Pages 243-61 in *Do Historical Matters Matter to Faith? A Critical Appraisal of Modern and Postmodern Approaches to Scripture* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012); Schultz, Richard L. “How Many Isaiahs Were There and What Does It Matter?: Prophetic Inspiration in Recent Evangelical Scholarship.” Pages 150-70 in Vincent Bacote, Laura C. Miguélez, and Dennis L. Okholm, eds. *Evangelicals & Scripture: Tradition, Authority, and Hermeneutics* (Westmont, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2004); Oswalt, John N. “The Implications of an Evangelical View of Scripture for the Authorship of the Book of Isaiah,” in *Bind Up the Testimony: Explorations in the Genesis of the Book of Isaiah*, ed. Daniel I. Block and Richard L. Schultz (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2015); Gregory K. Beale, *The Erosion of Inerrancy in Evangelicalism: Responding to New Challenges to Biblical Authority* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2008).

deep indignation at those who treat God as their enemy and laugh at his promises. The Edomites exemplified this in the history of Old Testament Israel, especially during the destruction of Jerusalem. When the Babylonians were laying siege to Jerusalem and destroying the temple, the Edomites took a twisted delight in it and cheered them on, saying, “Lay it bare, lay it bare, down to its foundations!” (Psalm 137:7). The Psalmist, when he remembers this, prays, “זִכְר֣ הַזֹּה” (Psalm 137:7), which is the same phrase used to open Psalm 132.¹⁶ There it is a prayer for God to remember David’s obedience, but here it is a prayer for God to remember the Edomites disobedience.¹⁷ This is specifically a prayer for God to remember and act in judgment upon the Edomites. This idea is common in the Psalter, where God’s remembrance is specifically a reference to his faithfulness to act in judgment or reward in response to the deeds done, as in Psalm 10:14, “But you do see, for you note mischief and vexation, that you may take it into your hands.” The turn to imprecation, therefore, is not a vindictive turn, but an explicit denunciation of any retaliatory response—the Psalmist entrusts judgment to God. It is apparent once again that the Psalmist is trusting God in the midst of his sorrow.

The Psalmist then rests his faith in the promises of God to bring judgment not just upon Edom, but also Babylon. He says, “O daughter of Babylon, doomed to be destroyed” (Psalm 137:8). Describing a city as a “daughter” is common in the Old Testament (cf. Psalm 45:12; Isaiah 1:8), and is simply a way of personifying a place, making clear that it is not a locale that will be punished, but the people within it.¹⁸ The Psalmist then concludes by stating, “Blessed shall he be who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rock!” (Psalm 137:9). This final verse, though shocking in its imagery, also shows forth faith on the Psalmist’s part, as he

¹⁶ Allen, *Psalm 101-150*, 308.

¹⁷ Note that the prophetic book of Obadiah, among other places in the Old Testament, takes up the topic of Edom’s coming judgment, and assures God’s people that it is sure to come.

¹⁸ Harman, *Psalm 2: Psalms 73-150*, 956.

trusts God's promises to do this very thing to Babylon, as promised in Isaiah 13:16, "Their infants will be dashed in pieces before their eyes; their houses will be plundered and their wives ravished." The Babylonians did this to Israel, far exceeding what God appointed them to do in bringing his people to exile, and their deeds shall return upon their own heads.¹⁹ Once again, the Psalmist is not vindictive, but trusting God to carry out this divine judgment. The total destruction of Babylon as a covenant curse is indicated, but the literal destruction of infants on rocks is not the meaning of the words. Osgood comments, "No intelligent dweller in Babylonia, heathen or servant of Jehovah, could fail to understand the metaphor of Babylon's being hurled from her exaltation in pride and power, for the literal interpretation is ridiculous, no cliffs or rocks or mountains being anywhere near."²⁰ The precise nature of the imprecation in these final verses, though, is what will now be examined more closely.

The Analogy of Scripture

In order to understand the nature of the imprecation in Psalm 137:7-9, this passage must be compared and contrasted with other passages of Scripture. First, it is important to look at this Psalm in light of other passages in the Psalter. The idea of divine judgment coming upon God's enemies is a consistent theme in the Psalter. It is the contention of the present work that the Psalms are never vindictive or spiteful, and they always entrust judgment to God, but in order to properly defend this, distinctions must be made between the various types of imprecatory Psalms. There are at least three different types of imprecatory Psalms, which will be examined in order to better understand Psalm 137.

Other Imprecatory Psalms

¹⁹ Allen, *Psalms 101-150*, 309.

²⁰ Osgood, "Dashing the Little Ones Against the Rock," 35.

The first type of imprecatory Psalm can be categorized as general imprecations. In these Psalms, such as Psalms 9, 10, 37, 73, 79, and 94,²¹ the Psalmist brings his frustration over the evil activity of the wicked before the Lord. There is oftentimes coupled with this frustration over their evil activity a frustration over their prosperity (e.g. Psalm 37:7; 73:4ff). In these Psalms, the Psalmist trusts God to bring forth judgment, sometimes in this life (e.g. Psalm 9:5-6), but more often in the next life, at the final day. These Psalms seldom contain prayers for God to bring forth judgment on the wicked in the present, but simply trust the Lord that the wicked's day of judgment is coming. The righteous likewise can rejoice that they will be spared this fate because of God's mercy. When they do contain prayers (e.g. Psalm 79:12), they are praying back to God the promises he's made to judge the unrepentant. This is exemplified especially clearly in Psalm 37:8-11: "Refrain from anger, and forsake wrath! Fret not yourself; it tends only to evil. For the evildoers shall be cut off, but those who wait for the Lord shall inherit the land. In just a little while, the wicked will be no more; though you look carefully at his place, he will not be there. But the meek shall inherit the land and delight themselves in abundant peace." The characteristic of these Psalms is that they are general reflections on the wicked as an entire subset of humanity, rather than reflections on individual people who are seeking to harm the Psalmist. These Psalms are often easier to stomach for Christians today because they sound a great deal like the New Testament, which promises a final day of judgment just like the Old Testament. The lack of vindictiveness is evident in these Psalms precisely because they simply pray God's promises of judgment back to him.

The second type of imprecatory Psalm can be categorized as immediate imprecations. These Psalms, such as Psalms 55, 69, 83, and 109, are the typical Psalms people think of when they think of the imprecatory Psalms. These Psalms are in response to immediate situations in

²¹ The Psalms given for each category are not meant to be exhaustive lists, only representative examples.

the lives of individual people. They are prayers for God to judge specific people. Psalm 55 is an example of this type of Psalm. David prays, “For it is not an enemy who taunts me–then I could bear it; it is not an adversary who deals insolently with me–then I could hide from him. But it is you, a man, my equal, my companion, my familiar friend. We used to take sweet counsel together; within God’s house we walked in the throng. Let death steal over them; let them go down to Sheol alive; for evil is in their dwelling place and in their heart” (Psalm 55:13-15). This category of Psalm, which contains several infamous ones such as Psalm 69 and 109, are especially difficult for Christians to make sense of.

These Psalms always have in the background the ultimate hope that God, in bringing judgment upon the wicked, would use the judgment to lead them to repentance and saving faith. This is shown forth clearly in Psalm 83:16, an imprecatory Psalm that ends, “Let them (the nations) be put to shame and dismayed forever; let them perish in disgrace, that they may know that you alone, whose name is the LORD, are the Most High over all the earth.” James E. Adams says of this verse, “*Why* are we taught to pray for God’s judgment on the enemy? *So that they will be converted!* Nothing could be clearer from this prayer.”²² Additionally, these prayers are birthed from real, painful, dangerous situations in which the Psalmist is desperate for God’s help. John Frame explains, “Sometimes we are persuaded that someone is guilty of a great injustice that we are not able to deal with in our own strength. As in biblical imprecations, the believer is to share this concern with God. In doing so, he must share God’s evaluation of injustice, that ‘because of these things the wrath of God comes upon the sons of disobedience’ (Eph. 5:6). And so he calls for divine vengeance to be exercised—not by himself, but by God.”²³ Frame gives as a historical example the story of Idi Amin in Uganda, who went around killing Christians out of

²² James E. Adams, *War Psalms of the Prince of Peace: Lessons from the Imprecatory Psalms* Second Edition (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 1991), 65.

²³ John M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2008), 340-341.

personal hatred for Christians. He explains that Christians prayed for God's vengeance to fall upon him. He explains that this prayer is right because, while Christians should always desire another's conversion, "Prayer is often immediate, and rightly so." Moreover, if Amin was converted, "Such a conversion would have brought vengeance against this man, a vengeance visited by God's grace upon Christ in his atoning sacrifice."²⁴ The immediacy of these Psalms, in that they are prayed in light of real, dangerous, imminent danger, coupled with the ultimate desire for conversion, go a long way in enabling these Psalms to make sense to Christians and even be incorporated into Christians' own prayers.

The final category of imprecatory Psalm brings the focus back onto Psalm 137. The foregoing analysis of imprecatory Psalms is important in understanding the unique place of Psalm 137 amongst the imprecatory Psalms. It can be categorized as a prophecy-fulfillment imprecation.²⁵ Perhaps the most challenging part of Psalm 137 for Christians is its vivid detail, praying for infants to be dashed against the rock (Psalm 137:9). Light is shed on this when it is understood that this Psalm is properly understood as what Meredith Kline calls an "intrusive feature" in God's sovereign work in history. This Psalm is specifically a prayer for God to fulfill the promises he made in an earlier part of Scripture—Isaiah 13—to judge Babylon in specific ways, bringing back on them the wickedness they committed against the Israelites. Kline explains, "That ethic of imprecation and execration, of dispossession and obliteration, was introduced in the history of Israel's conquest of Canaan as a prototypical anticipation of the final judgment. It was there an exceptional, intrusive feature within the broader, underlying common grace order."²⁶ To be sure, the previous category of imprecatory Psalms (immediate imprecatory Psalms) could also be considered intrusive, in that the person is praying for something unique

²⁴ Frame, *The Doctrine of the Christian Life*, 341.

²⁵ It is possible that Psalm 83 also has elements of prophecy-fulfillment imprecation.

²⁶ Kline, *God, Heaven, and Har Magedon*, 210.

and unusual to happen—for God to bring his future judgment into the present. But Psalm 137 is unique in praying for God's judgment to fall on a nation, and praying for it in such vivid detail. This can help Christians in understanding that the Psalmist in Psalm 137 is entrusting judgment to God just as much in verse 9 (where he blesses those who carry out God's previously foretold judgment) as he is in verse 7, where he prays, "Remember, O LORD, against the Edomites."

This fact is brought out in greater detail in the New Testament.

New Testament Development

The New Testament develops the prayers of the imprecatory Psalms in significant ways. Most notably, the authors of the New Testament quote the imprecatory Psalms as being fulfilled in the life of Christ. Of utmost significance for the present study is that nowhere in the New Testament are the imprecatory Psalms seen as something to sub-Christian. Rather, they are seen as expressions of God's righteous judgment on his enemies. For instance, Peter quotes two of the most severe imprecatory Psalms, Psalm 69 and 109, as being fulfilled in the judgment that came upon Judas. He says concerning Judas's death after betraying Jesus, "For it is written in the Book of Psalms, 'May his camp become desolate, and let there be no one to dwell in it'; and 'Let another take his office'" (Acts 1:20). Adams writes, "The close interweaving of the New Testament with these most difficult psalms stresses their value for our churches today."²⁷

Psalm 137 in particular is developed in important ways in the New Testament. To begin with, the judgment of Babylon becomes a significant theme in the book of Revelation (Revelation 18), as the judgments spoken of in Isaiah 13 and Psalm 137 are broadened to apply to the judgment of the whole unbelieving world with its impenitent wickedness. There is also a significant use of Psalm 137 in Luke 19:44. There, Jesus laments over Jerusalem in their unwillingness to accept him as their Messiah. He then foretells the coming destruction of

²⁷ Adams, *War Psalms of the Prince of Peace*, 14.

Jerusalem as a result of their sin. As a part of this judgment, he says of Jerusalem that their enemies would come and, “Tear you down to the ground, you and your children within you” (Luke 19:44). The Greek word for “tear you down to the ground” is ἐδαφίζω, and it appears only here in the New Testament. It is precisely the same word used by the Psalmist in the LXX translation of Psalm 137:9.²⁸ Jesus says that the Jews and their children within them will be dashed to the ground. He is therefore alluding to this Psalm and saying that, just as God’s retributive justice fell upon the Babylonians for their sin, in much the same way it will fall upon the Jews in their coming destruction, which happened in 70 AD. This communicates that Christ clearly does not see Psalm 137, including its most intense verse, as contrary to his message, but rather as true and Spirit-inspired expressions of God’s judgment on the wicked. Moreover, he enables the reader of the Psalm to rightly understand the use of the word “blessed” (בָּרוּךְ) in Psalm 137:9. Osgood writes, “Does any intelligent reader interpret literally these sayings by the Saviour and of the Saviour? Is he to take men and dash them in pieces with a rod of iron and find delight in that work? Are not His words expressive of the terrible results of men’s own sin, precisely as Jeremiah’s breaking the earthen jar before men was a visible type of the ruin sin would bring?”²⁹ In other words, those who dash the little ones against the rock are “blessed” in the sense of carrying out God’s work alongside him, just as Revelation 19:14 and Luke 22:30 indicate believers will do. The word does not indicate a vindictive delight in the destruction of the ungodly, for God himself takes no delight in the death of the wicked (Ezekiel 33:11). These words of Ezekiel are a caution against any who would take the imprecatory Psalms, or any passage of Scripture, as warrant for delighting in the judgment of the ungodly. Just as Jesus wept

²⁸ Osgood, “Dashing the Little Ones Against the Rock,” 33.

²⁹ Osgood, “Dashing the Little Ones Against the Rock,” 34.

over Jerusalem instead of rejoicing, Christians likewise must glorify God for his justice, even while weeping at the thought of people experiencing his retribution.³⁰

Modern Application

This Psalm has enduring meaning for God's people today under three categories: eschatological, immediate, and Christological. These will be explained briefly in closing. Psalm 137 has eschatological value for God's people, as this Psalm, more than perhaps any other, shows forth the faith of the Psalmist in trusting God to bring about judgment he promised in the past. The Psalmist, in the face of great evil from the Edomites and Babylonians, trusts God's promises of intrusive, end-time judgment being brought into the common grace era. The Psalmist looks back on Isaiah 13:16 and entrusts judgment to God. The Psalmist therefore sets a model for God's people to entrust judgment of God's enemies to God, according to the promises of eschatological judgment he has made in Scripture. Psalm 137 is especially applicable because the judgment of Babylon, which is the focus of this Psalm, becomes a metaphor for the judgment of all God's enemies in the new heavens and new earth. The difference is that this promised judgment of God's enemies today will not be intrusive—as it was for the Psalmist—but it is nonetheless real and coming. There is a rest that God's people are encouraged to receive from Psalm 137, as they feel the weight of the world's taunts (Psalm 137:3, 7), and even experience persecution (Psalm 137:9), to trust that God will indeed show himself forth as the God of vengeance (Psalm 94:1). The Psalmist of Psalm 137 trusts this (Psalm 137:7-9). Christians today are to see God's past action in fulfilling his promises to judge Babylon, and take courage that he

³⁰ Much caution is needed in navigating this. James E. Adams in *War Psalms of the Prince of Peace* quotes Richard L. Dabney approvingly, who argues that, while pleasure in retribution is forbidden, “Inasmuch as it is righteously inflicted by God, it must be right in him, and must therefore be, when in his hand, a proper subject of satisfaction to the godly” (Adams, *War Psalms of the Prince of Peace*, 51). This is not a correct implication. Glorifying God for his attributes of justice and strength is not the same thing as taking satisfaction in his wrath. Moreover, how satisfaction practically differs from pleasure is unclear. Both are forbidden in Scripture, as coming from vindictiveness and a lack of compassion, rather than a heart of love and purity.

will do the same today. Promises to this effect are found in places like 2 Thessalonians 1:6-8, “God considers it just to repay with affliction those who afflict you, and to grant relief to you who are afflicted as well as to us, when the Lord Jesus is revealed from heaven with his mighty angels in flaming fire, inflicting vengeance on those who do not know God and on those who do not obey the gospel of our Lord Jesus.” Christians do not pray, however, for this eschatological, end-time judgment to become intrusive (as it was for the Psalmist of Psalm 137). To pray for God to take the little ones of modern day enemies and dash them against the rock would be to improperly appropriate a prophecy of Scripture, which has already been fulfilled. But there are other prophecies of coming judgment which Christians should take courage from nonetheless, and it is to these that Psalm 137 points.

There are circumstances, however, where prayers for intrusive judgment are appropriate and God-honoring, and these can be categorized as circumstances of immediacy.³¹ This circumstance is reflected in Psalm 137, as the Psalmist feels the weight of the evil of God’s enemies. But whereas the Psalmist rests faith on a promise of divine judgment coming in history, which modern Christians do not have, there are other Psalms which reflect prayers of this kind (e.g. Psalm 55, 69, 109), which Christians can appropriate for their own circumstances. Several cautions are necessary, however. To begin with, these prayers of imprecation are never to be prayed against personal enemies. These are prayers for the enemies of God. These two categories seldom overlap, and when they do, it is abundantly clear. This is a situation like Idi Amin, referenced earlier. But when we are not in those situations, we pray these Psalms, with Christ, against the enemies of God and the gospel around the world. These are appropriate prayers to pray for those who are persecuting Christians in other lands, which has the effect of producing

³¹ This is contrary, it seems, from the argument of Kline. Kline seems to see all imprecatory Psalms as intrusive, and therefore out of bounds for Christian prayer. I am arguing that the only Psalms to fit into that category are those which reflect prayers for God to fulfill intrusive judgments that have already been promised.

compassion and love for persecuted brothers and sisters in Christ worldwide. But these prayers, as argued earlier, are always to be prayed with the understanding (which ought to be prayed explicitly, also), that the best circumstance is one in which conversion occurs, and God's judgment is poured out on Christ at Calvary, not on his enemy. This is summarized very well in the Westminster Shorter Catechism, question and answer 102. It asks, "What do we pray for in the second petition (of the Lord's Prayer)?" The answer is, "In the second petition, which is, *Thy kingdom come*, we pray, that Satan's kingdom may be destroyed; and that the kingdom of grace may be advanced, ourselves and others brought into it, and kept in it; and that the kingdom of glory may be hastened."³² This answer brings together several important threads. It is ultimately the destruction of Satan that is prayed for, and it is also the conversion of others that undergirds these prayers. Moreover, the advance of Christ's kingdom is the ultimate aim of all prayers of imprecation, which leads to the final category.

All prayers of imprecation, including Psalm 137, have great Christological value for God's people. The Lord Jesus in his lament over Jerusalem in Luke 19:44 alludes to Psalm 137, showing God's people that all people who are opposed to Christ will suffer the fate of the Babylonians and the Jews in Jerusalem in 70 AD. The coming of Christ makes this Psalm distinctly Christological in that he alludes to the Psalm to describe the fate of the Jews, who will suffer this fate specifically because "you did not know the time of your visitation" (Luke 19:44). Being a friend of God or an enemy of God is dependent on one's response to Christ, who has visited and redeemed God's people. As Adams says, "Unless you become part of the kingdom of Christ, you will be among those destroyed in Christ's final victory."³³ The imprecatory Psalms are also Christological in that it is only in Christ that God's people can truly forgive and

³² "The Shorter Catechism," *The Westminster Confession of Faith*, 3rd ed (Lawrenceville, GA: Committee for Christian Education and Publications, 1990), Q&A 102.

³³ Adams, *War Psalms of the Prince of Peace*, 130.

relinquish vengeance. The Psalmist is assured that God will hear him and bring forth vengeance, so he is free to forgive. He prays, “Remember, O LORD” (Psalm 139:7), and pronounces a blessing on those who bring forth God’s judgment. In Christ, there is assurance that all sin will be dealt with. Whether on the cross or in hell, every single sin will be paid in full.

Conclusion

Psalm 137 is not a vindictive Psalm, but rather entrusts the judgment of God’s enemies (Edom and Babylon) to God himself, and rests by faith in the promises of judgment spoken in Isaiah 13:16. Moreover, this Psalm is unique in the Psalter in being especially representative of an intrusive feature in God’s economy of redemption. There is great enduring value for God’s people in reading, praying, and preaching this Psalm. The effect it ought to have is trust in God’s promises, just as the Psalmist displays in Psalm 137, as well as a heart of gratitude. The judgment deserved by believers has been placed upon Christ, and there is no longer any condemnation for them (Romans 8:1).

Appendix: Psalm 137 (ESV)

137 By the waters of Babylon,

there we sat down and wept,

when we remembered Zion.

2 On the willows there

we hung up our lyres.

3 For there our captors

required of us songs,

and our tormentors, mirth, saying,

“Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”

4 How shall we sing the LORD’S song

in a foreign land?

5 If I forget you, O Jerusalem,

let my right hand forget its skill!

6 Let my tongue stick to the roof of my mouth,

if I do not remember you,

if I do not set Jerusalem

above my highest joy!

7 Remember, O Lord, against the Edomites

the day of Jerusalem,

how they said, “Lay it bare, lay it bare,

down to its foundations!”

8 O daughter of Babylon, doomed to be destroyed,

blessed shall he be who repays you

with what you have done to us!

9 Blessed shall he be who takes your little ones

and dashes them against the rock!

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