

## Psalm 137: A Psalm of Imprecation

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### Abstract

*Psalm 137 is a very emotional and theologically important passage within the Psalter, providing insight into the tragic experiences of the Israelites during the Babylonian exile. This psalm vividly depicts themes of exile, mourning, and the need for justice, intertwining lamentation and imprecation within its poetic framework. The poem is structured in three stanzas, transitioning from feelings of sorrow (vv. 1-4) to a proclamation of loyalty to Zion (vv. 5-6), and concluding with curses directed at Edom and Babylon (vv. 7-9). The raw emotional intensity of this psalm confronts contemporary readers, particularly its severe imprecations, including the demand for divine punishment against Babylon. This article examines Psalm 137 within its historical and literary contexts, assessing its structure, themes, and theological ramifications. It underscores the psalmist's plea for justice in reaction to injustice, stressing that these imprecations are not personal vendettas but a supplication to God as the supreme adjudicator. The paper examines the conflict between Old Testament imprecatory prayers and New Testament doctrines of love and forgiveness, illustrating their coexistence within the overarching biblical narrative. The article finishes by examining the significance of Psalm 137 for current readers, providing insights into its implications for contemporary interpretations of justice, suffering, and divine reactions to malevolence. Psalm 137 ultimately stands as a perennial testament to the profundity of human feeling and faith amidst injustice.*

**Keywords:** Psalm 137, Babylonian exile, imprecatory psalms, divine justice, lamentation, Zion, affliction, biblical theology, New Testament reconciliation, oppression.

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## INTRODUCTION

God is consistently depicted in both the Old and New Testaments as a loving, forgiving, and gracious entity, exemplifying unwavering compassion and patience. In Exodus 34:6-7, God identifies Himself as “The Lord, the Lord, a God merciful and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in steadfast love and faithfulness” (NRSV), a characterization echoed in the Old Testament in verses such as Psalm 103:8 and Joel 2:13. These scriptures highlight God's loving-kindness (Hebrew: *chesed*), which signifies His steadfast covenant fidelity and compassionate care for His people (Smith, 2011, p. 148). Likewise, the New Testament corroborates the same divine traits, especially in 1 John 4:8, which states that “God is love.” This consistency emphasizes that the God of both Testaments is not a being of contradictory natures but rather the same immutable, loving God. Jesus' mission exemplifies this love via acts of mercy and forgiveness, as demonstrated in John 3:16, where God's love results in the provision of eternal life.

The consistency of God's character across both Testaments disproves any idea of duality, illustrating a cohesive biblical theology of divine compassion and mercy (Wright, 2018, p. 211). Consequently, whether conveyed by the prophets or via Christ, the Scriptures affirm a God whose nature is love, characterized by kindness, grace, patience, and fidelity.

Nevertheless, several biblical texts include passages that articulate a want for divine wrath to be unleashed upon adversaries, which may provide a challenge for some readers to reconcile with the predominant theme of divine love. Imprecatory psalms, such as Psalm 137:9, in which the psalmist desires the annihilation of Babylonian newborns, or Psalm 109:6-15, which invokes harsh curses upon an adversary, embody profound distress and a plea for divine retribution (Brueggemann & Bellinger, 2014, p. 141). Such texts frequently unsettle contemporary readers, who may view them as inconsistent with the portrayal of a kind and compassionate God. Nevertheless, these verses are more comprehensively interpreted within their historical and theological framework. They represent not endorsements of personal retribution but manifestations of deep anguish and a request for divine intervention in a realm of inequity (Day, 2002, p. 166). These appeals for divine retribution are founded on the conviction that God is the supreme arbiter who will enforce justice and redeem the downtrodden (Zenger, 1996, p. 83). When juxtaposed with passages highlighting God's love, such as John 3:16 or Romans 5:8, it becomes evident that these ostensibly severe verses mirror the profundity of human suffering and the yearning for justice, which is finally realized through God's redemptive love. Consequently, instead of presenting a contradiction, they highlight the intricacies of God's nature—simultaneously kind and just—and encourage readers to confront the truths of a flawed world (Waltke, 2007, p. 625).

A significant challenge inside Scripture is the existence of psalms that explicitly articulate prayers and desires for the annihilation of adversaries, commonly known as the imprecatory psalms. Texts like Psalm 137:9, which advocates for the annihilation of Babylonian children, and Psalm 109, which summons curses against an enemy, have unsettled readers for decades because of their vehement rhetoric and overt incitement to violence (Brueggemann & Bellinger, 2014, p. 141). Although challenging, these psalms are essential to the biblical canon and cannot be disregarded or eliminated, since they encapsulate profound human feelings of pain, indignation, and a yearning for divine justice (Day, 2002, p. 167). Although sometimes referred to as "imprecatory," it is noteworthy that the Scripture does not employ this term or explicitly classify these psalms as such (Waltke, 2007, p. 626). This label is an academic construct intended to characterize their content, however it does not undermine their theological importance. These psalms emphasize the psalmist's complete dependence on God for justice instead of seeking personal vengeance, and their inclusion in Scripture encourages readers to confront the intricacies of faith amid injustice and suffering (Zenger, 1996, p. 84). Their inclusion in the biblical canon illustrates the profundity and authenticity of human experience in relation to divine sovereignty.

Psalm 137 is a poignant text that encapsulates the deep sorrow, yearning, and rage of the poet in exile, illustrating the complete spectrum of human emotion

in response to loss and injustice. The psalm commences with a sorrowful recollection of Zion, as the exiles grieve by the rivers of Babylon for their homeland (Psalm 137:1-4). The profound affection for Zion, the nucleus of their spiritual and cultural identity, pervades the psalm, exemplifying the psalmist's steadfast commitment to God and His sacred city (Brueggemann & Bellinger, 2014, p. 141). This affection contrasts sharply with a profound animosity against their oppressors, articulated by curses directed at Babylon and Edom (Psalm 137:7-9). The psalmist's request for vengeance, notably the appalling yearning for Babylonian offspring to be shattered against the stones, underscores the profundity of their anguish and need for justice (Day, 2002, p. 168). This duality—the affection for Zion and animosity against adversaries—underscores the psalmist's complete humanity, as they grapple with reconciling their religion amidst the atrocities of exile and oppression (Zenger, 1996, p. 87). Instead of sterilizing human emotions, Psalm 137 engages readers in the authenticity of mourning, demonstrating that even intense rage and sorrow can be presented before God. Their inclusion in Scripture highlights the theological importance of sincere human expression and the conviction that God serves as the ultimate judge of justice (Waltke, 2007, p. 628).

This article examines the issue stemming from the vengeful petition in Psalm 137:8, a distressing passage linked to Israel's experience of exile. Psalm 137, as an imprecatory psalm, articulates a desire for the annihilation of others, so provoking substantial theological and ethical concerns. The research specifically examines whether the psalmist is seeking personal vengeance in this text and analyzes the theological ramifications of this request for the Bible in its entirety. This article aims to critically analyze the concerns presented by the petition for vengeance in Psalm 137:8. The study aims to enhance comprehension of the meaning and context of Psalm 137 through a thorough investigation of the text. The research seeks to evaluate the theological importance of the psalm and its role within the wider biblical narrative.

## **METHODOLOGY**

This research utilizes a biblical-theological analysis as its principal methodological technique. Biblical-theological analysis emphasizes the interpretation of Scripture within its canonical, historical, and theological settings to reveal its intended meaning and value. The investigation commences with a meticulous examination of hymn 137, focusing on its literary composition, historical context, and emotional resonance as a hymn of lamentation and imprecation. The historical and cultural background of Israel's captivity in Babylon is essential for comprehending the psalmist's emotions of sorrow and appeals for justice. The analysis positions Psalm 137 within the larger context of the biblical canon, examining its theological significance and its relationship with themes of divine justice, mercy, and covenant fidelity. This methodology analyzes the psalm's language and imagery to identify its theological content and its context within the Psalter. The study aims to provide a deeper view of the psalm's significance and its relevance to the Bible's overarching narrative by merging historical-critical and theological perspectives.

## RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Psalm 137 arises from the terrible experience of the Babylonian exile, a crucial episode in Israelite history that significantly influenced the theology and literature of the Hebrew Bible. This psalm conveys the grief, despondency, and yearning of the Israelites who were compelled to leave their homes after the Babylonian conquest of Judah. The psalmist's evocative depiction of lamenting by the rivers of Babylon and the unwillingness to sing Zion's praises in a strange land (Psalm 137:1-4) embodies the shared sorrow of an exiled and subjugated populace (Brueggemann & Bellinger, 2014, p. 143). The historical context is crucial for comprehending the psalm, as it expresses both a mourning for Jerusalem's destruction and a deep sense of dislocation and estrangement. This background delineates the psalmist's appeal for divine justice, providing insight into the profound emotional and theological challenges faced by the exiles (Smith, 2011, p. 211).

The Babylonian captivity constituted a time of profound anguish and metamorphosis for the Israelites. Following the conquest of Jerusalem in 587 BCE, numerous residents of Judah were exiled to Babylon, where they existed as slaves under foreign dominion. The exile signified both the forfeiture of political autonomy and the devastation of the temple, which was important to their religious identity and rituals (Wright, 2018, p. 223). This tragic tragedy undermined the Israelites' sense of covenantal security, resulting in a theological crisis as they confronted inquiries regarding God's presence and justice amid national devastation (Sweeney, 2005, p. 378). The exiles' sense of dislocation and indignity is poignantly illustrated in Psalm 137, especially in the conflict between their profound affection for Zion and their animosity towards their oppressors. The psalm articulates the shared sorrow and indignation of the Israelites, while also affirming their persistent desire for restoration (Zenger, 1996, p. 89).

The annihilation of Jerusalem in 587 BCE constituted not merely a military setback but also a profound spiritual catastrophe for the Israelites. The temple, serving as the primary site of worship and emblematic of God's presence among His followers, was destroyed, resulting in a significant sense of loss and estrangement from the divine (Clements, 1982, p. 54). This calamity inspired the theological contemplation evident in works like as Psalm 137, where the singer conveys both sorrow and a profound desire for retribution against the oppressors. The destruction of Jerusalem marked the perceived victory of Babylon's deities against Yahweh, exacerbating the Israelites' sorrow and their plea for divine retribution (Smith, 2011, p. 213). Furthermore, the mention of Edom in Psalm 137:7 underscores the animosity directed against neighboring nations that exploited Judah's demise, since the Edomites purportedly applauded Babylon's devastation of Jerusalem. This additional layer of treachery intensified the Israelites' perception of injustice and amplified their pleas for retaliation (Brueggemann & Bellinger, 2014, p. 144). Psalm 137 encapsulates the consequences of these events, merging deep sadness with a plea for divine justice, demonstrating how the agony of exile served as a spur for unrestrained professions of faith. Placing the psalm in the historical context of 587 BCE elucidates that its severe imprecations arise from the profound suffering and disorientation resulting from the devastation of their city and temple,

mirroring the intricacies of human emotion and the Israelites' steadfast hope for divine intervention and justice.

Psalm 137 is included in Book V of the Psalter (Psalms 107–150), which is marked by themes of restoration, praise, and the realization of God's promises. Although the overall tone of this section of the Psalter conveys hope and redemption, Psalm 137 is distinguished by its raw and profoundly emotional sorrow, encapsulating the anguish of the Babylonian captivity (Brueggemann & Bellinger, 2014, p. 141). Although most psalms in Book V extol God's fidelity in rescuing Israel, Psalm 137 is centered on the unaddressed sorrow and yearning of the exiles, rendering it a distinctive addition to the anthology. The positioning following Psalm 136, which narrates God's unwavering love and powerful deeds in Israel's past, accentuates the disparity between the exiles' current anguish and the anticipation of divine assistance (Zenger, 1996, p. 87). This contrast highlights the conflict between lamentation and praise that defines much of the Psalter.

Psalm 137 is categorized as an imprecatory psalm, with poems like Psalm 69 and Psalm 109, which articulate fervent appeals for divine retribution against adversaries. Psalm 137 is distinctive for its dramatic portrayal of exile and its explicit historical allusions to Babylon and Edom (Psalm 137:7-9). In contrast to earlier imprecatory psalms that typically generalize the identification of oppressors, Psalm 137 specifically identifies Babylon as the oppressor and Edom as a complicit foe, anchoring its imprecations in historical occurrences (Day, 2002, p. 170). Furthermore, the final lyrics, which demand vengeance against the children of Babylon, are some of the most startling imprecations in the Psalter, illustrating the psalmist's profound sorrow and perception of injustice (Waltke, 2007, p. 631).

The psalm's distinctive literary features encompass its emotional intensity and its unwillingness to reconcile the tension between mourning and hope. Unlike other psalms that go from lamentation to praise, Psalm 137 concludes with lingering anger and a curse, imparting the burden of the psalmist's trauma to the reader (Brueggemann, 2003, p. 65). This literary selection underscores the psalm's role as a visceral articulation of human suffering, firmly anchoring it in the experience of exile. Situated in the Psalter, Psalm 137 exemplifies profound human sorrow and a yearning for divine justice, contrasting with the more joyful and optimistic psalms in its literary environment.

Hebrew Text and Translation of Psalm 137

(Ps. 137 BHS)	(Ps. 137:1-9 NKJ)
<p><sup>1</sup> על נהרות בבל שם ישבנו גם־בכינו  בְּנַחֲרֵנו אֶת־צִיּוֹן: <sup>2</sup>על־עַרְבִים בְּתוֹכָהּ תָּלִינוּ  כְּנִרֹתֵינוּ:  <sup>3</sup> כִּי שָׁם שָׂאֲלוּנוּ שׁוֹבֵינוּ דְּבַר־יְשׁוּרִי  וְתוֹלְלֵינוּ שְׁמִחָה שִׁירוּ לָנוּ מִשִּׁיר צִיּוֹן:  <sup>4</sup> אֵיךְ נִשְׁרֵר אֶת־שִׁיר־יְהוָה עַל אֲדָמַת  נָכָר:</p>	<p>1 By the rivers of Babylon,  There we sat down, yea, we wept  When we remembered Zion.  2 We hung our harps Upon the  willows in the midst of it.  3 For there those who carried  us away captive asked of us a song,  And those who plundered us <i>requested</i>  mirth, <i>Saying</i>, "Sing us <i>one</i> of the  songs of Zion!"  4 How shall we sing the  LORD'S song In a foreign land?</p>

<p><sup>5</sup> אם־אֶשְׁכַּחְךָ יְרוּשָׁלַם תִּשְׁכַּח מִיָּמַי:  <sup>6</sup> תִּדְבַק־לְשׁוֹנִי לְחִכִּי אִם־לֹא אֶזְכְּרֶיךָ  אִם־לֹא אֶעֱלֶה אֶת־יְרוּשָׁלַם עַל רֹאשׁ שְׂמֹחַתִּי:</p>	<p><sup>5</sup> If I forget you, O Jerusalem,  Let my right hand forget <i>its skill!</i>  <sup>6</sup> If I do not remember you, Let  my tongue cling to the roof of my  mouth-- If I do not exalt Jerusalem  Above my chief joy.</p>
<p><sup>7</sup> זָכֹר יְהוָה לְבָנֵי אֲדוֹם אֵת יוֹם יְרוּשָׁלַם  הַקָּמְרִים עָרוּ עָרוּ עַד הַיְסוּד בָּהּ:  <sup>8</sup> בַּת־בְּבֶל הַשְׂדוּדָה אֲשֶׁר־יָשָׁב שָׁלֵם־לָךְ  אֶת־גְּמוּלָךְ שְׂגֻמְלָתָ לְבוֹ:  <sup>9</sup> אֲשֶׁר־יָשָׂא חֹזֶן אֶת־עַלְלֶיךָ אֶל־  הַפֶּלֶע:</p>	<p><sup>7</sup> Remember, O LORD, against  the sons of Edom The day of  Jerusalem, Who said, "Raze it, raze it,  To its very foundation!"  <sup>8</sup> O daughter of Babylon, who  are to be destroyed, Happy the one  who repays you as you have served us!  <sup>9</sup> Happy the one who takes and dashes Your  little ones against the rock!</p>

Psalm 137, in its original Hebrew form, conveys the profound emotional intensity and spiritual significance of the psalmist's mourning during the Babylonian exile. The Hebrew text utilizes vivid and evocative language, with significant terms like na'harot Bavel ("the rivers of Babylon") and Zion functioning as metaphorical indicators of sorrow and yearning (Waltke, 2007, p. 629). A contemporary English translation articulates these ideas well, emphasizing the psalmist's determination not to sing the Lord's song in a strange land (Psalm 137:1-4) and the culminating imprecations in the concluding verses (Psalm 137:7-9). The contrast between the lyrical beauty of the initial stanzas and the severe imprecatory language of the ending verses underscores the psalm's emotional and theological depth (Brueggemann & Bellinger, 2014, p. 145). Analyzing the Hebrew text alongside contemporary translations facilitates a comprehensive comprehension of its literary artistry, theological motifs, and cultural milieu.

Psalm 137 is structured into three separate stanzas, each fulfilling a specific role in expressing the psalmist's feelings and theological contemplation. The initial stanza (vv. 1-4) establishes the setting by poignantly depicting the exiles' sorrow beside the rivers of Babylon. This line articulates the grievance, conveying the anguish of dislocation and the inability to sing the Lord's song in an alien territory. The expression "we hung up our lyres" (Psalm 137:2) signifies the cessation of gladness and worship, highlighting the profundity of their grief (Zenger, 1996, p. 90). The second stanza (vv. 5-6) shifts to a proclamation of loyalty to Jerusalem, whereby the singer vows to prioritize Zion above all, even at the expense of personal anguish. This poem illustrates the covenantal affection for the sacred city, depicting Zion as the manifestation of God's presence and the core of Israelite identity (Smith, 2011, p. 214).

The third and final stanza (vv. 7-9) transitions to curses directed at Edom and Babylon, articulating the psalmist's distress through a request for divine retribution. Edom is denounced for its involvement in the devastation of Jerusalem, whilst Babylon, the principal aggressor, is subjected to severe curses, culminating in the appalling desire for the brutal annihilation of its offspring (Psalm 137:8-9). This stanza conveys the psalmist's need for retributive justice, highlighting the profound emotional wounds inflicted by exile (Day, 2002, p. 171). The transition from lamentation to devotion and ultimately to imprecation illustrates the psalm's

complex structure, encapsulating the complete spectrum of human emotions elicited by suffering and displacement. The analysis of this structure elucidates the psalm's theological meaning, illustrating how the experience of exile influenced Israel's comprehension of justice, worship, and the aspiration for restoration.

Psalm 137 poignantly illustrates the themes of exile and lamentation, offering an emotional and theological perspective on the Israelites' deep sense of loss and estrangement from Zion. The initial verses (Psalm 137:1-4) convey the sorrow of the exiles as they repose by the rivers of Babylon, mourning the devastation of their homeland and their relocation to an alien territory. The refusal to sing the Lord's song in a foreign setting signifies profound sorrow and the apparent incongruity of worshiping God while distanced from the temple in Zion, which represented God's presence among people (Brueggemann & Bellinger, 2014, p. 142). This emotional response signifies both individual suffering and communal grief, as Zion was integral to their cultural and spiritual identity. The psalm serves as a poignant testament to the human experience of mourning, enabling the exiles to articulate their sadness while reaffirming their allegiance to Jerusalem as the spiritual core of their faith (Zenger, 1996, p. 91). Psalm 137 emphasizes the concept of exile, highlighting the theological and emotional challenges of sustaining hope and faith amid significant dislocation and loss.

The curses in Psalm 137:7-9 are frequently regarded as concerning, although they should be interpreted within the context of the psalmist's reaction to oppression and injustice. The appeals for divine punishment against Edom and Babylon are not manifestations of personal vengeance but instead signify a profound religious concern for justice. The psalmist invokes God to intervene against their adversaries, appealing to divine justice as the final solution for the pain inflicted by these oppressors (Day, 2002, p. 171). The severity of these curses, especially the request for the annihilation of Babylonian offspring (Psalm 137:9), reflects the atrocities endured by the Israelites during the Babylonian conquest and exile. These passages, albeit emotionally intense, convey the conviction that vengeance is God's prerogative and that He is the sole arbiter of human conduct (Waltke, 2007, p. 632). The imprecations enable the psalmist to navigate grief and fury while delegating ultimate justice to God, providing a theological framework for comprehending suffering and divine sovereignty.

Imprecatory psalms, exemplified as Psalm 137, pose significant theological inquiries regarding the essence of divine justice. The psalmist's appeals for retribution are not only expressions of rage but a deep desire for divine intervention to reestablish justice in a society tainted by oppression. The psalmist's appeal for revenge signifies a conviction in God as the supreme adjudicator of justice, advocating for the marginalized (Brueggemann, 2003, p. 67). These prayers embody the theological belief that God's justice is not capricious but grounded in His covenantal fidelity and dedication to righteousness (Wright, 2018, p. 224). Comprehending these psalms within their historical and literary settings enables readers to recognize how they establish a framework for addressing pain and injustice, asserting that divine justice, if occasionally postponed, would finally triumph. Imprecatory psalms, consequently, express the conflict between human suffering and belief in God's just nature.

A theological tension emerges when juxtaposing the imprecations of the Old Testament, exemplified by Psalm 137, with the New Testament's focus on love, forgiveness, and non-retaliation. Jesus' teachings, especially in the Sermon on the Mount, instruct followers to "love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you" (Matthew 5:44, NRSV), which appears to conflict with the appeals for revenge found in the Psalms. Nevertheless, these viewpoints can coexist when comprehended within their distinct theological frameworks. The imprecations in the Old Testament illustrate the psalmist's appeal for divine justice amidst injustice, highlighting dependence on God's intervention rather than individual retribution (Day, 2002, p. 172). The New Testament emphasizes compassion and forgiveness, grounded in divine justice, encouraging believers to manifest God's redemptive intentions in the world (Wright, 2018, p. 226). Collectively, these viewpoints emphasize the complex dimension of God's character, in which justice and mercy coexist harmoniously. They also encourage readers to grapple with the intricacies of human feeling, heavenly authority, and the transformational potential of forgiveness.

## CONCLUSION

Psalm 137 is a significant and emotionally intense text among imprecatory psalms, providing a distinct perspective on the circumstances of the exiled Israelites and their theological considerations of justice and divine punishment. This psalm, arising from the anguish of the Babylonian captivity, encapsulates themes of sorrow, devotion, and the quest for justice. The psalmist articulates profound human feelings of sadness and fury, framed by a deep covenantal faith, via three distinct stanzas: mourning (vv. 1-4), love to Zion (vv. 5-6), and imprecations against Babylon and Edom (vv. 7-9). Located in the Psalter, Psalm 137 enhances the complexity of biblical literature by juxtaposing the psalmist's yearning for justice with their steadfast faith in God's sovereign action. Their presence among the imprecatory psalms underscores the theological and literary function of these works in expressing the lamentations of the downtrodden and emphasizing God's final role as judge.

Comprehending Psalm 137 provides significant insights for contemporary readers confronting issues of justice, suffering, and the human reaction to malevolence. The psalm's unrefined emotions highlight that the Bible confronts the realities of human suffering, permitting the articulation of grief, indignation, and a desire for justice in God's presence. This psalm confronts naive views of divine justice by illustrating the conflict between human aspirations for revenge and God's supreme authority. It emphasizes the significance of delegating justice to God instead than pursuing personal retribution, a motif seen in both Old and New Testament doctrines. Moreover, Psalm 137 prompts contemplation on how faith communities may address injustice and suffering while being true to God's attributes of justice and mercy. Modern readers are prompted to confront the complexity of divine justice and to reconcile biblical teachings on love with the pursuit of justice in a fractured society by engaging with the historical and theological themes of Psalm 137.

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