

CHAPTER 6

PSALM 137

6.1 Introduction

The final promising candidate for the study of imprecatory psalms is Psalm 137. Psalm 137 is one of the best known of the psalms that focus on the traumatic experience of exile in Babylon. The psalm reveals the sufferings and sentiments of the people who probably experienced at first hand the grievous days of the conquest and destruction of Jerusalem in 587 BC., and who shared the burden of the Babylonian captivity after their return to their homeland. At the sight of the ruined city and the temple, the psalmist vents out with passionate intensity his deep love for Zion as he recalls the distress of alienation from their sanctuary. Therefore, this psalm touches the raw nerve of Israel’s faith.

The poem commences with the melancholy recollection of the destruction of the temple and Jerusalem which caused the Israelite captives to mourn and stop playing their musical instruments. The Babylonian masters asked the captives to join them in the mockery of YHWH. The Israelite captives refused to participate in the mockery of YHWH and the psalmist pledges his complete devotion to Jerusalem and therefore, towards YHWH. Finally, the psalmist prays for the wrath of God to be unleashed against the enemies of Judah, the Edomites and Babylonians, who were responsible for the destruction of Jerusalem and their misery in Babylon.

This chapter is organized in the same way as the preceding chapters (2-5).

6.2 Text and Translation³¹

³²	A	עַל נְהָרוֹת בְּבֵל שָׁם יִשְׁבּוּ	1 ³³	a	By the rivers of Babylon- there we sat
		וְגַם־בָּכִינוּ בְּזָכְרֵנוּ אֶת־צִיּוֹן:		b	and also wept when we remembered Zion.

³¹ This is my own translation. All quotations from Psalm 137 in this study are taken from this translation unless stated otherwise.

³² This subdivision of Psalm 137 into **stanzas** (Roman numerals) and **strophes** (uppercase letters) is discussed in 6.4.

³³ When citing the Psalms and other scriptural passages, the numbering and versification of the BHS text is used throughout the present study rather than the numbering and versification of the LXX, Vulgate, or modern translations.

		על-עֲרָבִים בְּתוֹכָהּ תָּלִינוּ כְּנֹרֹתֵינוּ:	2	a	On the poplars within (it) we hung our lyres.
	B	כִּי שָׁם שְׁאַלּוּנוּ שׁוֹבֵינוּ דְּבַר־שִׁיר	3	a	For there our captors asked us for words of a song.
		וְתוֹלְלֵינוּ שְׂמָחָה		b	And our tormentors, mirth, [saying]
		שִׁירוּ לָנוּ מִשִּׁיר צִיּוֹן		c	“Sing us one of the songs of Zion.”
	C	אֵיךְ נִשִּׁיר אֶת־שִׁיר־יְהוָה עַל אֲדָמַת נָכָר:	4	a	How can we sing the song of YHWH on foreign soil?
II	D	אִם־אֶשְׁכַּחךְ יְרוּשָׁלַם	5	a	If I forget you, Jerusalem
		תִּשְׁכַּח יְמִינִי:		b	may my right hand forget [its skill].
		תִּדְבַק־לְשׁוֹנִי לְחַפִּי	6	a	May my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth-
		אִם־לֹא אֶזְכְּרֶיךָ		b	if I do not remember you,
		אִם־לֹא אֶעֱלֶה אֶת־יְרוּשָׁלַם עַל רֹאשׁ שְׂמֵחָתִי:		c	if I do not exalt Jerusalem above my chief joy.
III	E	זְכֹר יְהוָה לְבָנֵי אֲדוֹם אֵת יוֹם יְרוּשָׁלַם	7	a	Remember, YHWH, against the sons of Edom the day of Jerusalem.
		הָאֹמְרִים עָרוּ עָרוּ עַד הַיְסוּד בָּהֶם:		b	Who said “raze it, raze it to its foundation.”
	F	בַּת־בָּבֶל הַשְּׂדוּדָה	8	a	Daughter of Babylon, doomed to destruction.
		אֲשֶׁר־יִשְׁלַם־לְךָ אֶת־גְּמוּלְךָ שֶׁגָּמַלְתָּ לָּנוּ:		b	How blessed is the one who repays you with the recompense which you have repaid us.
		אֲשֶׁר־יִשְׂאֵחַז וְנִפֵּץ אֶת־עַלְלֵיךָ אֶל־הַסֶּלַע:	9	a	How blessed will be the one who seizes and shatters your infants against the rock.

6.3 Text Critical and Translation Notes

Verse 3b. ותולְלֵינוּ - “And our tormentors”

The translation of the noun תולְלֵינוּ is problematic. תולְלֵינוּ occurs only here in the Old Testament. Instead of the Masoretic Text תולְלֵינוּ the LXX and Syriac have the equivalent of וּמוֹלִיכֵינוּ (“those who carried away”), which is parallel with “those who made us prisoners” in 3a. The Targum of Psalms (*TgPss*) reads תולְלֵינוּ as “our despoilers” (Cook, 2001). Kissane (1954:286-287) suggests וְהִלְלוּם (“rejoicing”) (cf. Judg 9:27; Lev 19:24) instead of the Masoretic Text תולְלֵינוּ, which when combined with “words of song” forms the parallel clause to 3a. The noun תולְלֵינוּ forms a word-play with תָּלִינוּ (“we hung”) in verse 2 and this seems to support its consonantal integrity and would discourage the emendations reconstructed for the LXX, Syriac and Targum of Psalms, which may be guesses from the context. תולְלֵינוּ is possibly derived from ילל (“howl, lament”), which is generally associated with distress. Dahood (1970:270-271) links תולְלֵינוּ with the *po‘el* of הלל (“mock”) and views the initial ת of תולְלֵינוּ as a participial prefix by comparison with Psalm 139:21 and envisages elision of ה. Phelps (1997:281) argues that from the context of Psalm 137, the meaning of תולְלֵינוּ is “our tormentors” (3b) since the noun is parallel to שׁוֹבְיָנוּ (“our captors”) in verse 3a. The NASB, RSV, ESV, NAB, NRSV, JPS and NIV follow the same approach and translate תולְלֵינוּ as “our tormentors.” This translation follows Phelps’ approach and translates תולְלֵינוּ as “our tormentors.” From the context of verse 3, the noun תולְלֵינוּ has “to do with mistreatment and punishment of the captives” (see Kraus, 1989:501; VanGemeren, 1991:828).

Verse 5b. תִּשְׁכַּח יְמִינִי - “may my right hand forget [its skill]”

The LXX takes תִּשְׁכַּח as passive תִּכָּחַשׁ (“be forgotten”), so it translates תִּשְׁכַּח as ἐπιλησθείη (“be forgotten”). Kraus (1989:501), as well as the editors of BHK and BHS, argue that תִּשְׁכַּח is a scribal error and should be emended to תִּכָּחַשׁ or תִּכָּחַשׁ (“wither or grow lean”). This emendation תִּכָּחַשׁ brings about a pun or a word play on the parallel verb אֲשַׁכַּח (“I forget you”). Hamilton (1980f:923) argues that the verb שכח usually mean “to forget” but in few instances such as Psalm 137:5 the verb cannot mean “to forget” but “to wither”. The RSV, NJB and NJV follow this interpretation and translate תִּשְׁכַּח as “wither.” The KJV, NASB, NIV, ESV, JPS and NKJV stay with the Masoretic Text, “may my right hand forget.” This translation

follows the approach of the translations that stay with the Masoretic Text, “may my right hand forget” (תִּשְׁכַּח יְמִינִי).

However, the meaning of תִּשְׁכַּח יְמִינִי (“may my right hand forget”) (5b) is not entirely clear. The colon is without an object, so the phrase “its skill” has been inserted by some translations (e.g. NASB and NIV) as the object because it is implied though it is not in the Masoretic Text (Feuer, 1985:1623). Therefore, this translation inserts “its skill” as the object of the colon. A number of translations (e.g. ASV, ESV, NASB, NAB, NKJV and NLT) consulted in this study have followed this approach.

Verse 8a. הַשְּׂדוּדָה - “doomed to destruction.”

Instead of the passive reading in the Masoretic Text הַשְּׂדוּדָה (“you devastated one”), some ancient versions such as the Symmachus Greek version of the Old Testament, the Syriac and the Targum of Psalms have הַשְּׂדוּדָה “destroyer,” which is the active equivalent form of the verb שָׂדַד “to destroy.” HALOT, following the Syriac, gives a conjectural reading הַשְּׂדוּדָה (“taker of the spoils”) and the Targum of Psalms (*TgPss*) translates הַשְּׂדוּדָה as “the despoiler.” The active form attested by the Syriac and the Targum of Psalms (*TgPss*) is favoured by most scholars (e.g. Briggs & Briggs, 1907:486; Leupold, 1959:935-936; Weiser, 1962:794, 796; Dahood, 1970:273; Anderson, 1972b:900; Allen, 1983:235, 237; Kraus, 1989:500-501; Seybold, 1996:509; Eaton, 2003:454). Bratcher & Reyburn (1991:1117) argue that either sense is appropriate. Anderson (1972b:900) argues that the active form seems more appropriate. He says the “reading of [the] Masoretic text is less likely because, when Babylon fell to the Persians in 537 BC., the city was not even partly destroyed.” Prinsloo (1984:116, 132) rejects the textual amendment of הַשְּׂדוּדָה to הַשְּׂדוּדָה on the grounds of lack of external evidence and the hypothetical nature of the historical situation in which the psalm was thought to have originated. Few translations (e.g. RSV, NRSV, NAB and NEB) follow the approach of the Syriac and the Targum of Psalms. The majority of translations consulted in this study translate הַשְּׂדוּדָה in the passive voice: The TEV translates הַשְּׂדוּדָה as “you will be destroyed”; the KJV has “who art to be destroyed”; the NASB has “you devastated one”; the NIV and NJB have “doomed to destruction”; the ESV has “doomed to be destroyed”; the JPS has “that art to be destroyed”; the NKJV has “who are to be destroyed”; and the BBE has “whose fate is destruction.” This

translation follows the same approach. It views הַשְׁדּוּדָה as the *qal* passive participle form of the verb שָׁדַד “doomed to destruction.”

6.4 The Structure of Psalm 137

When looking at the structure of Psalm 137, one of the most striking features is the multiple occurrence of the first person plural as agent/subject in verses 1-4 (Prinsloo, 1984:116). In verses 5-6, there is a transition to the first person singular forms, then in verse 7a the subject changes to YHWH, who is addressed for the first time in the imperative זְכֹר יְהוָה (“Remember, YHWH...”). The reference to the Edomites introduces a new element to the content of the psalm (Prinsloo, 1984:117). In verses 8-9 Babylon is addressed, but an unknown agent is evoked (i.e. “the one who repays...”). Although the overt subject is this unknown agent, on a covert level YHWH is still the agent, since he is the one to whom the last petition was explicitly directed (7a) and he is probably regarded as the eventual avenger of evil.

Wendland (2004:319) and Des Camp (2006:3) observe that verses 1-4 focus on the past, verses 5-6 on the present and verses 7-9 on the future.

On the basis of alternation of agent/subject and time orientation, Psalm 137 may be subdivided into three stanzas: verses 1-4, 5-6, and 7-9. This three-fold subdivision of the psalm is held by the majority of scholars (e.g. Briggs & Briggs, 1907:484; Anderson, 1972b:896; Allen, 1983: 240; Prinsloo, 1984:117; VanGemeren, 1991:826; Mays, 1994:422; Motyer, 1994:577; McCann, 1996:1227; Bar-Efrat, 1997:3-11; Davidson, 1998:439-441; Gerstenberger, 2001:390; Eaton, 2003:454 and Maré, 2010:117).

The three stanzas of Psalm 137 may be sub-divided into the following strophes (Gerstenberger, 2001:390):

Stanza I (1-4): Setting & Complaint

Strophe A (1-2) Description of trouble

Strophe B (3) Taunt of enemies

Strophe C (4) Plaintive answer

Stanza II (5-6): Total Commitment & Devotion to Jerusalem

Strophe D (5-6) Total commitment & devotion to Jerusalem

Stanza III (7-8): Imprecations against Edom and Babylon

Strophe E (7) Implicit curse against Edom

Strophe F (8-9) Implicit curse against Babylon

The above structure of Psalm 137 is discussed in detail in the subsequent analysis.

6.5 Intra-textual Analysis of Psalm 137

6.5.1 Stanza I (verses 1-4): Setting & Complaint

Stanza I (verses 1-4) gives the setting of the Israelite captives and their distress. This stanza consists of three strophes: *A* (verses 1-2), *B* (verse 3) and *C* (verse 4). Strophe *A* (verses 1-2) describes the setting of the Israelite captives and their lament over the destruction of Zion. Strophe *B* (verse 3) focuses on how the Babylonian masters tried to force the Israelite captives to join them in mocking YHWH. Strophe *C* (verse 4) is the captives' answer to the Babylonian captors' request to mock YHWH.

6.5.1.1 Strophe A (verses 1-2)

Strophe *A* (verses 1-2) consists of a bicolon (verse 1) and a single colon (verse 2).

In the **bicolonic verse (verse 1)**, **1a** commences with **עַל נְהַרֹת בְּבֶל** ("by the rivers of Babylon") (1a) which gives the setting of the psalmist and his companions when they sat and wept (verse 1b). The Babylonians lived in the Mesopotamian region, between the two main rivers, namely the Tigris and the Euphrates. From the two rivers sprouted tributaries which were linked to irrigation canals. The phrase **עַל נְהַרֹת בְּבֶל** ("by the rivers of Babylon") alludes to the Tigris and Euphrates and also the irrigation canals in Babylon (see Anderson, 1972b:898; Bratcher & Reyburn, 1991:1113; VanGemeren, 1991:827). The adverb **שָׁם** ("there") refers back to the place where the psalmist and his companions sat and wept i.e. **עַל נְהַרֹת בְּבֶל** ("by the rivers of Babylon" or the irrigation canals of Babylon) (Ahn, 2008:276). Here the word **שָׁם** is used early in the sentence for emphasis (See: Brown *et al*, 1979:1027), but also to indicate a

distance location ("there", not "here"), which suggests a place now removed for the author. Probably the author of the psalm is back in Palestine.

The verb יִשְׁבְּנוּ ("we sat") describe the activity of the psalmist and his companions in Babylon.

1b begins with גַּם־בָּכִינוּ ("and also wept") which describes the activity of the subject, the psalmist and his companions in Babylon. The phrase גַּם־בָּכִינוּ is followed by בָּזְכַרְנוּ אֶת־צִיּוֹן ("when we remembered Zion") which gives the reason for the activity of the psalmist and his companions in verse 1. The noun צִיּוֹן ("Zion") probably refers to Jerusalem as the city of YHWH and to his dwelling, the temple (Stolz, 1997b:1072; Bratcher & Reyburn, 1991:1113). Although Zion may refer to the entire city of Jerusalem, according to Hartley (1980a:764), "Zion frequently occurs in poetic passages referring to the temple area where YHWH dwells." Zion was understood by Israel as the symbol of God's presence in their midst. Therefore, Israel believed that Zion would never fall and that they would experience, safety and security (Maré, 2010:120). The situation described in 1a is that the temple had indeed been destroyed and that Zion had become a mere memory.

1b can be subdivided into two cola or propositions. 1b as a whole describes an event simultaneous with 1a: while we sat, we also wept. The semantic relation is therefore simultaneity.

To sum up verse 1, the psalmist and his companions were in exile in Babylon – by the irrigation canals. They remembered the destruction of the temple and that sad memory caused them to mourn.

The **single colon (verse 2a)** further describes the setting and activity of the psalmist and his companions. **2a** commences with עַל־עֲרָבִים בְּתוֹכָהּ which gives the location. The noun עֲרָבָה may denote "poplar" (i.e. *populous Euphratica*) (Brown *et al*, 1979:788; Walker, 1997:479). The phrase עַל־עֲרָבִים בְּתוֹכָהּ ("on the poplars within") is followed by תָּלִינוּ ("we hung") which describes the activity of the psalmist and his companions in Babylon. The verb תָּלִינוּ is followed by כְּנֹרֹתֵינוּ which means "our lyres" (Brown *et al*, 1979:490). This verse implies that the psalmist and his companions may have been temple musicians who were carried into exile with their harps and repertoire of temple music (Mays, 1994:421). The lyre (or harp) was a musical instrument which had strings and a wooden frame, commonly associated with joy and gladness (see Oswalt, 1980e:447). The figure of hanging the lyre on the trees is metaphorical and means that the owners set aside their instruments and did not play them

again (Bratcher & Reyburn, 1991:1114). It also shows that the musicians had given up praise publicly (Goldingay, 2008:604).

To summarize verse 2, the psalmist and his fellow musicians set aside their instruments and did not play them again because of their sad memory of the destruction of Jerusalem. As far as coherence or semantic relations are concerned, verse 2 is a vivid and metaphorical restatement of verse 1. The poplars correspond to the rivers where they grew and the hanging up of the lyres corresponds to the passiveness (sit) and sadness of the psalmist and his companions. The psalmist and his fellow musicians are probably used synecdochically for the entire Judean exile community, who were deprived of the joyous YHWH worship in the temple.

There is also an extended parallelism with the pattern (a b c a' b') in verses 1-2.

a	By the rivers of Babylon (<i>setting</i>)
b	there we sat and also wept (<i>action</i>)
C	When we remembered Zion (<i>pivot /climax</i>)
a'	On the poplars within (<i>place</i>)
b'	we hung our lyres (<i>action</i>)

The purpose of the extended parallelism is to highlight or emphasize the point that the psalmist and his companions' memory of the destruction of the temple (or Zion) is the crescendo of verses 1-2. There is pivotal parallelism in verses 1-2 because the phrase *when we remembered Zion* is pivotal to the understanding of the psalmist and his companions' actions in verses 1 and 2. The musicians' memory of Zion affects their behaviour or actions; their sad memory makes them sit and mourn over the temple (verse 1) and to put away their instruments (verse 2).

To sum up Strophe A (verses 1-2), the psalmist, his fellow musicians and other Judeans were in exile in Babylon, besides the irrigation canals. There they recalled the destruction of the temple in Zion and they were deeply saddened and as a result they sat down and mourned. The joy of the presence of YHWH in the temple now existed only as a memory in their hearts because Zion was in ruins. They hung their musical instruments on the trees and they did not play them again. The tone of this strophe is passiveness and sadness.

6.5.1.2 Strophe B (verse 3)

Strophe B (verse 3) consists of a single tricolon.

In the **tricolonic verse (verse 3)**, **3a** begins with the conjunction כִּי (“for”) which may have an affirmative function (“for there...”) (Prinsloo, 1984:117), may be used merely as a particle of emphasis, but may also connect this verse to the preceding verses (1-2), giving more concrete reasons for their passiveness and mourning. The preposition כִּי is followed by the adverb שָׁם (“there”) which is a repetition of the word שָׁם in 1a, where the distant place where the psalmist and his companions sat and wept is identified as the נְהַרֹת בָּבֶל (“the rivers of Babylon”). This is followed by שְׁאַלֵנוּ (“they asked us”) which refers to the activity of the שׁוֹבֵינוּ (“our captors”), a *qal* participle which refers to the Babylonian captors. The psalmist and his companions were captives. The participle שׁוֹבֵינוּ is followed by דְּבַר־שִׁיר (“words of a song”) which shows that the Babylonian captors wanted to hear the words of a song and not just music. Therefore in 3a, the Babylonian masters asked the Israelite captives to sing songs for them.

3b is syndetically linked to 3a by the conjunction וְ. 3b commences with תּוֹלְלֵינוּ (“our tormentors”) which is synonymous in meaning with שׁוֹבֵינוּ (“our captors”) in 3a. Both שׁוֹבֵינוּ and תּוֹלְלֵינוּ are *hapax legomena* (Ahn, 2008:280). The noun תּוֹלְלֵינוּ (“our tormentors”) refers to the Babylonian masters who were in charge of the Israelite captives. The noun תּוֹלְלֵינוּ is followed by צִיּוֹן שְׂמֵחָה (“mirth”) which may describe the gleeful manner in which the tormentors said שִׁירוּ לָנוּ מִשִּׁיר (“sing us one of the songs of Zion”) or it may be better understood as object, with the verb of 3a (שְׁאַלֵנוּ) implied: And our tormentors [asked from us] mirth. Then 3a and 3b are parallel: Our captors (parallel to “tormentors”) asked from us a song (parallel to “mirth/gladness”). Then 3c states the direct words which function as another parallel to both 3a and 3b).

3c gives the exact words the tormentors said שִׁירוּ לָנוּ מִשִּׁיר צִיּוֹן (“sing us one of the songs of Zion”). The Babylonian masters tried to make the Israelite captives sing one of the sacred songs used in worship in the temple. The captors’ request was a mockery or scorn to Israel’s worship at the temple. A song of Zion would be a song celebrating the majesty and protection of YHWH over his people (see Pss 46; 48; 76; 84; 87 and 122). The captives understood such a song as a song “of YHWH” (4a). How could the Israelite captives sing songs of Zion proclaiming the victories and deliverances of YHWH while they were in exile? Therefore the captors’ request to sing a song of YHWH was an insult to the faith of the Israelites. In effect, the Babylonians were trying to force the exiles to join them in the mockery of YHWH. The

temple symbolised the presence of YHWH. The Babylonians had destroyed the city of Zion, together with the temple. When they made their request, by implication the captors were asking the Israelite captives the mocking question “where is your God?” (cf. Pss 42:3, 10; 79:10; 115:2) (Anderson, 1972b:898; Kraus, 1989:503; VanGemeren, 1991:827; Mays 1994:422; McCann, 1996:1227). They wanted to convince the Israelite captives that YHWH (their God) had forgotten and abandoned them. They also implied that YHWH was weak, powerless and could not deliver his people in their time of trouble (Vos, 2005:267; Steenkamp, 2004:304). This was an indirect attack of the character of YHWH. The captors were not only mocking Israel, but their God. As Anderson (1972b:898) rightly puts it, the captors’ request was “tinged with sarcasm: ‘sing about the indestructible Jerusalem and its so-called almighty God’.” The motivation for the captor’s request was not a request for information and less to glorify God, but to make a caricature of him and his people. Their request is aggravated by the injunction that the Israelites should display joy/mirth (שִׂמְחָה) by singing.

As far as coherence or semantic relations are concerned in verse 3, there is a synonymous parallelism, BASE-RESTATEMENT, which follows a climatic pattern: (a) **words of a song** (b) **mirth** (the type of song), (c) a song **of Zion**. The song is further specified in 4a as a song **of YHWH**.

To summarize Strophe *B* (verse 3), the Babylonian masters asked the Israelite captives to sing the sacred songs used to worship YHWH in the temple. Their request was a mockery to Israel’s worship at the temple, which was also an indirect attack on the character of YHWH, because the songs of Zion celebrated the majesty and protection of YHWH over his people.

6.5.1.3 Strophe C (verse 4)

Strophe *C* (verse 4) consists of a single colon (verse 4). This **single colon (verse 4)** is the Israelite captives’ answer to the Babylonian masters in the form of a rhetorical question. **4a** begins with an interrogative particle אֵיךְ (“how?”) which is indicative of a rhetorical question to which the answer “no” is expected. This interrogative particle אֵיךְ is frequently found in laments (Prinsloo, 1984:117). In this context the rhetorical question marks strong indignation. The implication of the interrogative is: “No, it is impossible for us to sing one of the songs of Zion to you in this situation!”. The interrogative particle אֵיךְ is followed by נִשְׁרִי (we sing). The subject of נִשְׁרִי is the psalmist and his companions. The verb נִשְׁרִי is followed by אֶת־שִׁיר־יְהוָה (“song of

YHWH”) which shows that the song was probably a psalm-like song such as Psalms 24; 46; 48; 84; 87 and 122 (Seybold, 1996:510). The phrase שִׁיר־יְהוָה (“song of YHWH”) in 4a is synonymous to שִׁיר צִיּוֹן (“song of Zion”) in 3c (Anderson, 1972b:898; Prinsloo, 1984:125). The phrase אֲדָמָת נֹכַר (“a foreign soil”) implies that they were in Babylon, “a pagan land” away from their sacred city (made sacred by the temple, YHWH’s earthly dwelling), which is why the Israelites could not sing one of their sacred songs (Bratcher & Reyburn, 1991:1115). The captives’ words in verse 4 create the mood of desperate and seemingly hopeless lament and thus set up verses 5-6 as a song of Zion which expresses confidence and hope for Israel (VanGemeren, 1991:827).

To recap Strophe C (verse 4), the Israelite captives refused to participate in the mockery of YHWH. Singing a song of Zion in a foreign land would be an insult to YHWH. It was impossible for the Israelite captives to sing a song intended to praise YHWH for the amusement of their masters.

6.5.2 Stanza II (verses 5-6): Total Commitment & Devotion to Jerusalem

In Stanza II (verses 5-6), the psalmist expresses his deep commitment and devotion to Jerusalem and therefore, towards YHWH. This stanza consists of a single strophe: *D* (verses 5-6).

6.5.2.1 Strophe D (verses 5-6)

Strophe *D* (verses 5-6) consists of a bicolon (verse 5) and a tricolon (verse 6).

In the **bicolonic verse (verse 5)**, **5a** commences with the conditional clause אִם־אֶשְׁכַּחְךָ (“if I forget you”). The conditional clause consists of the adverb אִם (“if”) which is attached to אֶשְׁכַּחְךָ (“I forget you”). The psalmist is included in אֶשְׁכַּחְךָ as the subject of the verb. The object of אֶשְׁכַּחְךָ is Jerusalem (יְרוּשָׁלַם).

5b is syndetically linked to 5a. 5b begins with תִּשְׁכַּח (“may it forget”) which functions like a jussive and refers to the psalmist’s right hand (in the feminine). The noun יְמִינִי (“my right hand”) functions as the subject of the colon. It refers to the psalmist’s right hand. The verb has no object. What will the psalmist’s right hand forget? The NJB understands it as the functions of the hand (“may my right hand wither”). If the present suppliant (in the singular) is not a musician,

this interpretation is the safest. Other translations refer to the "skill" of the hand (NKJV, NASB, ESV). The latter interpretation implies that the suppliant says that he will "never be able to play the harp again" (TEV).

The verb שכח ("forget") is repeated in both 5a and 5b. The purpose of the repetition is to emphasize the causal relation between the psalmist hypothetically forgetting Jerusalem and his right hand hypothetically losing its skill.

As far as coherence or semantic relations are concerned, there is causal correlation, REASON-RESULT in 5ab – more specifically CONDITION-OUTCOME. 5b is the result or outcome or consequence of what would or should happen to the psalmist (*apodosis*) when he forgets Jerusalem (*protasis*). 5a is thus a conditional clause. If the *protasis* expresses what would happen, it is a real or hypothetical result, to be translated: "then will my right hand forget." If the *protasis* expresses what should happen, it is a desired result, as in the translation: "May my right hand forget." If the psalmist forgets Jerusalem then his right hand would forget its skill of playing the harp.

It is striking that the subject in verse 4 switches to the singular and with that the notional time switches from past to present. An individual recalls what happened "there" (שם) in Babylon and now states the principle why the captives gave such a strong refusal to their captors (verse 4). This is perhaps given by the individual in a worship setting.

The **tricollic verse (verse 6)** contains two negative conditional clauses: 6b and 6c, following the main clause (6a) which expresses the result or outcome of the double condition. It indicates the consequence of what would or should happen to the psalmist (*apodosis*) should he not remember (6a) or exalt (6b) Jerusalem (*protasis*).

6a begins with תִּדְבֵק ("may it cling") which has a jussive function and refers to the psalmist's tongue. The phrase לְחִבֵּי ("roof of my mouth") is an idiom for speechlessness or dumbness (see Martens, 1980b:301; Brown *et al*, 1979:335).

6b is syndetically linked to 6a. 6b expresses an impossible condition (*protasis*) which would have made the psalmist's tongue cling on the roof of his mouth. 6b commences with the adverb אם ("if") which is attached to לֹא אֶזְכְּרֶיךָ ("I do not remember you"). The psalmist is the subject of לֹא אֶזְכְּרֶיךָ. Jerusalem is the object. An impossible condition is expressed here. It is impossible for the pious to forget Jerusalem and fail to exalt her.

6c consists of the second negative conditional clause: יִירוּשָׁלַם עַל רֹאשׁ שְׂמֵחָתִי אִם-לֹא אֶעֱלֶה אֶת ("If I do not exalt Jerusalem above my chief joy"). The *apodosis* of both 6b &

c is 6a. 6c begins with the adverb אִם (“if”) which is attached to אֶל־לֹא אֶעֱלֶה (“if I do not exalt”). The psalmist is the subject of לֹא אֶעֱלֶה. The phrase יְרוּשָׁלַם עַל רֹאשׁ שְׂמֹחָתִי is the object of לֹא אֶעֱלֶה.

As far as coherence or semantic relations are concerned, there is a synonymous parallelism, BASE-AMPLIFICATION in 5a, 6b and 6c. 6c is synonymous with 5a and 6b. 6c further expands in detail what it means to forget Jerusalem in 5a and 6b (Prinsloo, 1984:117).

As far as coherence or semantic relations are concerned, there is also a synonymous parallelism, BASE-RESTATEMENT in verses 5b and 6a. In both cola, the psalmist calls a curse on himself, by asking God to paralyse him so that he would not be able to play his instrument or sing if he should forget Jerusalem (see Bratcher & Reyburn, 1991:1116). The psalmist’s curse on himself also expresses an impossible condition: he deems it impossible that he should forget Jerusalem and fail to exalt her.

There is also a synonymous parallelism, BASE-RESTATEMENT in 5a, 6b and 6c. 5a, 6b and 6c also displays a climactic (“staircase”) pattern. Forgetting Jerusalem in 5a and 6b is the same as not making Jerusalem the source of one’s joy and happiness in 6c.

There is an extended parallelism with a chiasmic pattern (a b b’ a’) in verses 5-6 (see Prinsloo, 1984:117; VanGemeren, 1991:828; McCann, 1996:1227). There are two conditional clauses (5a, 6b) of which, the two elements of protasis (if...) and apodosis (then...) occur in reverse order (5b, 6a):

a	If I forget you, Jerusalem (<i>protasis/condition</i>)
b	may my right hand forget its skill (<i>apodosis/result/curse</i>)
b'	may my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth (<i>apodosis/result/curse</i>)
a' (1)	If I do not remember you (<i>protasis/condition</i>)
	(2) I do not exalt Jerusalem above my chief joy

The purpose of the extended parallelism is to highlight or emphasize the psalmist’s self-imprecation and faithfulness towards Jerusalem. If he forgets Jerusalem (which is disloyalty to YHWH), he will be calling a curse on himself – he will lose the skill of playing musical instruments with his right hand and the ability to sing songs of Zion with his mouth. This implies

that remembering Zion or Jerusalem (or making Jerusalem the source of one's greatest happiness) leads to a renewed devotion to the Lord (see VanGemeren, 1991:828).

Verses 5-6 show that love for Zion is not separate from love for God. For the exiled community of Israelites, love for God and Jerusalem was intertwined because of the temple. Loyalty to YHWH lay in remembering rather than in forgetting Jerusalem. The godly Israelites who were in exile could not forget Jerusalem and everything it stood for: the covenant, the temple, the presence and the kingship of YHWH, atonement, forgiveness and reconciliation. The pious Israelite community vowed never to forget God's promises and to persevere and wait for YHWH's redemption (VanGemeren, 1991:828).

In a nutshell, the psalmist in Strophe *D* (verse 5-6) refuses to sing as instructed by his captors because it would be a mockery of YHWH. However, it is impossible for the psalmist to forget Jerusalem because it is his greatest joy (see Vos, 2005:268). He therefore pledges complete loyalty and devotion towards Jerusalem and therefore, towards YHWH. The psalmist shows his passionate love for Jerusalem, the central place of worship. His devotion takes the form of a solemn vow invoking upon himself the penalty of total or partial paralysis: Should he forget where his loyalty lies, namely Jerusalem, he would lose control of the most important organs of a musician – his hands and tongue (see Seybold, 1996:510) – so that he would never be able to play his musical instrument or sing again. The psalmist also deems it impossible that he would forget Jerusalem and fail to exalt her. The psalmist's loyalty to Jerusalem is a measure of his loyalty to YHWH, since the city symbolizes the divine presence.

6.5.3 Stanza III (verses 7-9): Imprecations against Edom and Babylon

Stanza III (verses 7-9) is a series of imprecations on the nations that were hostile to Israel. Stanza III consists of two strophes: *E* (verse 7) and *F* (verses 8-9). Strophe *E* (verse 7) is an imprecation against the nation of Edom. Strophe *F* (verses 8-9) is an imprecation against the nation of Babylon.

6.5.3.1 Strophe E (verse 7)

Strophe *E* (verse 7) consists of a single bicolon. In the **bicolonic verse (verse 7)**, **7a** commences with the imperative זָכֹר (“remember”). For the first time in this psalm YHWH is addressed – the command is directed toward YHWH (the second word) as a vocative. The

appellative is followed by **לְבָנֵי אֶדוֹם** (“against sons of Edom”) which refers to the descendants of Esau, the brother of Jacob (cf. Gen 36:1), and thus blood brothers of the Israelites. The phrase **יְרוּשָׁלַם יוֹם** grammatically is the object of YHWH's remembering. The phrase **יְרוּשָׁלַם יוֹם** (“day of Jerusalem”) (cf. Jer 32:28) indicates the destruction and laying waste of Jerusalem (Van der Ploeg, 1974:427; Prinsloo, 1984:509). Since the Edomites were hostile towards the Israelites during this event, the phrase **יְרוּשָׁלַם יוֹם** not only serves as object of the verb, but also to identify the setting of the Edomites' mischief. During the destruction of Jerusalem, the nation of Edom, Israel's brother nation, threaded behind the Babylonians like hyenas following a lion (Vos, 2005:269). Jerusalem had already been destroyed by Babylon and yet, the Edomites continued with the destruction and they plundered the city (see Obadiah 10-14; Ezek 25:12-14; 35:5-6) (Anderson, 1972b:900; Kraus, 1989:503; Van der Ploeg, 1974:426-427; Seybold, 1996:510-511; Harman, 1998:428). They also killed the fugitives. Even after the exile, the Edomites were the greatest enemy of Judah (Prinsloo, 1984:128). Albertz (2003:28) also observes that, in 1 Esdras 4:36-46, the Edomites are singled out and blamed for the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple. YHWH is now asked to remember the destruction of Jerusalem to the detriment of the Edomites. This means he should call them to account for their hand in Jerusalem's fall.

7b gives the very words the Edomites uttered against Israel on the day she was captured by Babylon. 7b is syndetically linked to 7a by the participle **הַאֲמָרִים** (“who said”) which functions as a relative clause and refers back to **בְּנֵי אֶדוֹם** (“sons of Edom”) in 7a. This is followed by the words uttered by Edomites: **עֲרוּ עָרוֹ עַד הִיסוֹד בָּהּ** (“raze it, raze it to its very foundation”). The imperative **עֲרוּ** (“raze it”) is repeated twice for emphasis (Anderson, 1972b:900) and directed towards the Babylonians. The double imperative **עֲרוּ עָרוּ** stresses the Edomites' thirst for vengeance (Anderson, 1972b:900). The phrase **עַד הִיסוֹד בָּהּ** (“to its very foundation”) denotes the level of destruction that the Babylonians were to execute on Jerusalem. The preposition **בָּהּ** refers to the city of Jerusalem. There seems to be a play on words in verse 7b, as Dahood (1970:273) suggests (see Isa 47:2-3; Ezek 16:37; Lam 1:8). Jerusalem is depicted as a woman despoiled of her clothing; the repeated command **עֲרוּ** shares the feminine suffix **בָּהּ**. If Jerusalem is depicted as woman, then the command in 7b would read “strip her to her buttocks” (Dahood, 1970:273). Although **יְסוֹד** literally refers to the foundations of a building, such a metaphorical sense is quite possible. Dahood (1970:273) translates the verse as “strip her, strip her, to her foundation.” The meaning of the **עָרוּ** in the *Piel* is to expose, uncover, reveal (see

Holladay, 1988:282). Some translations follow Dahood's approach, for example the NJV translates 7b as "Strip her, strip her, to her very foundations"; the BBE has "Let it be uncovered, uncovered even to its base."

In short, YHWH in Strophe *E* (verse 7) is exhorted to think of the evil deeds committed against him by the Edomites, who conspired with the heathens (daughter of Babylon) against their brothers, the Israelites. The Edomites helped and encouraged the Babylonians in capturing and destroying Jerusalem in 587 BC. Therefore, the psalmist makes a petition to YHWH to punish the Edomites for their hostility towards Israel.

6.5.3.2 Strophe F (verses 8-9)

Strophe *F* (verse 8-9) consists of a bicolon (verse 8) and a single colon (verse 9).

In the **bicolonic verse (verse 8)**, **8a** commences with בַּת־בָּבֶל ("daughter of Babylon") which functions as vocative. The expression בַּת־בָּבֶל is a poetic name for Babylon and its people; a personification of Babylon (Martens, 1980a:115). The mention of Babylon here in 8a (Stanza III) and in 1a (Stanza I) forms an inclusion (*inclusio*). In verse 1, Babylon is portrayed as a conqueror, but in 8a the destruction of Babylon is envisaged. The inclusion has a double function: In poetic terms it rounds off the psalm (Vos, 2005:266); rhetorically it emphasizes a reversal of roles. The ruthless conqueror, Babylon, who destroyed many nations, such as Judah, will now be destroyed (Prinsloo, 1984:128). This is expressed by the participle passive ("doomed to destruction"). Prinsloo (1984:128) argues that the choice of this verbal form (הַשְׂרִיָּה) emphasizes the inevitability of the fate of Babylon. The passive participle הַשְׂרִיָּה is possibly an indirect reference to YHWH's activities because Babylon has destroyed Jerusalem, the centre of the YHWH cult. Therefore, YHWH's honour would only be upheld if Babylon was destroyed (Prinsloo, 1984:128; Mays, 1994:423). The nation of Babylon fell to the Persians in 539 BC.

8b commences with אֲשֶׁרִי שִׁישַׁלְמֶךָ ("how blessed is the one who repays you") which expresses a *lex talionis* – which demands a fate for Babylon similar to the fate they had imposed upon Judah (cf. Lev 24:19-20) (Van der Ploeg, 1974:428; Bratcher & Reyburn, 1991:1117; VanGemeren, 1991:829; Wendland, 2004:326). 8b begins with the so-called אֲשֶׁרִי formula, a congratulatory exclamation (see Bratcher & Reyburn, 1991:16), often used as a positive beatitude (verses 8b, 9a; cf. Pss 1:1; 119:1-2; 128:1-2) (Gerstenberger, 2001:393).

אֲשֶׁרִי (“how blessed”) is directed to שִׁישְׁלֶם־לָךְ (“the one who repays you”). The prepositional object לָךְ refers to בַּת־בָּבֶל (“daughter of Babylon”).

The phrase שִׁישְׁלֶם־לָנוּ is the second object of יִשְׁלֶם indicating with which or to what measure the Babylonians should be repaid. The psalmist asks for justice, repayment, tit-for-tat. In verse 8b, the verb גָּמַל means recompense, repay, require in a bad sense (Brown *et al* (1979:168). In this context, the verb גָּמַל shows that Babylon should be repaid the evil that she did to Israel (see Carpenter, 1997a:873). Maybe the Babylonians did just what verse 9 expresses. Verse 8b shows that Babylon should be treated in a similar way she treated Judah.

To recap verse 8, the psalmist prays for the destruction of Babylon. He wants Babylon to experience the same treatment that they gave Judah (“retribution principle”). A blessing lies on anyone who is used in bringing down Babylon.

As far as coherence or semantic relations are concerned, there is alliteration between verse 8b: יִשְׁלֶם־לָךְ (“who repays you”) and verse 7a: יְרוּשָׁלַם (“Jerusalem”).

The last **colon (verse 9)** is syndetically linked to the preceding verse because of the emphatic repetition of אֲשֶׁרִי (“how blessed”) (verse 8b, 9a) (Vos, 2005:266), which is now directed to שִׁיאֲחֹז וְנַפֵּץ אֶת־עַלְלֶיךָ אֶל־הַסֵּלַע (“the one who seizes and shatters your infants against the rock”). The noun עַלְלֶיךָ (“your infants”) refers to the infants of Babylon (בַּת־בָּבֶל). The vivid description of shattering infants against rocks is perhaps hyperbolic and may be taken figuratively because rocks were scarce in Babylon (Anderson, 1972b:900; Vos, 2005:270). The argument that rocks were scarce in Babylon is not very convincing because the city was built from rocks. A victor could dash an infant against any stone of the buildings. The expression of dashing infants on rocks should be understood as “a reference to the cruelty of ancient warfare generally” (Kraus, 1989:504). It was common for victorious armies to kill children – especially the male children – of their conquered enemies (cf. 2 Kgs 8:12; Isa 13:16; Hos 13:16; Amos 1:3, 13; Nah 3:10) (see Mays, 1994:423; Vos, 2005:270; Bratcher & Reyburn 1991:1117). Verse 9 should be interpreted in light of this ancient Near Eastern context and mentality (Keel, 1997:9; Van Dyk, 2003:96). The Babylonians were also well-known for their cruelties (see Ogden, 1982:89-97). Probably they actually killed off at least some of the children of Jerusalem. In verse 9, the psalmist thus prays that YHWH would bring on Babylon the atrocities they themselves had committed in Judah and elsewhere (*lex talionis*) (Anderson, 1972b:900; Strawn, 2009:349-350). In this way she would taste the bitterness of such utter defeat, helplessness and

defencelessness that they would not be able to defend even their infants. Like in verse 8b, a blessing lies on anyone who destroys Babylon.

There is also an extended parallelism with a chiasmic pattern (a b c b' a') in verses 8-9.

a	Daughter of Babylon, doomed to destruction (<i>Generic imprecation</i>)
b	How blessed is the one who repays you (<i>beatitude on Babylon's destroyer</i>)
c	the recompense with which you have repaid us (<i>reason for destruction</i>)
b'	How blessed will be the one who seizes and shatters (<i>beatitude on Babylon's destroyer</i>)
a'	your infants against the rock (<i>Example of imprecation</i>)

The purpose of the extended parallelism is to highlight or emphasize the point that Babylon's atrocity against Judah is the very reason for her fall or destruction. Babylon destroyed Jerusalem, the centre of the YHWH cult, therefore YHWH's honour will only be upheld if Babylon is also destroyed (see Prinsloo, 1984:128-129; Mays, 1994:423; Wendland, 2004:326). This explains the blessing given to the destroyer of Babylon. The destroyer of Babylon is blessed because he is YHWH's instrument of retribution. Who this destroyer would be, is not mentioned. The singular is used. The king of a conquering nation is usually mentioned instead of the nation (plural), as in Isaiah, where Cyrus is indicated as the saviour of God's people (Isa 44:28; 45:1-25). There are a number of instances in Scripture where nations are depicted as YHWH's instruments of destruction (e.g. In Isa 7:20, Assyria is depicted as a razor hired by YHWH. In Isa 8:7, Assyria is depicted as the mighty floodwaters of the river that YHWH will bring against the nations. In Isa 10:5, Assyria is referred to as "the rod of YHWH's anger" – YHWH will use Assyria as his instrument of wrath against godless nations).

As far as coherence or semantic relations are concerned in verses 8-9, 8a is a generic imprecation, 8b states the retribution principle and 9 illustrates or gives a specific example of imprecation.

In summary, the psalmist in Strophe *F* (verse 8-9) prays for divine retribution (*lex talionis*) on Babylon, the total destruction of Babylon as a nation, because of her ruthless atrocities against Judah. Babylon destroyed Jerusalem, the centre of the YHWH cult. YHWH's honour will

only be restored if Babylon is destroyed. Therefore, Babylon's destroyer will be blessed because he will be the instrument of divine retribution. The conquest will be on a national scale. Although the destruction of infants is used as an example, the reference is to a national calamity and not to vengeance of individuals against individuals.

6.5.4 Summary of intra-textual analysis

Psalm 137 begins with a portrayal of the psalmist and his companions, probably fellow musicians, when they were in exile in Babylon, beside the irrigation canals (verse 1a). They recall the destruction of the temple in Zion and their deep sadness as they sat down and mourned (verse 1b). The joy of the presence of YHWH in the temple now existed only as a memory in their hearts because Zion was in ruins. They hung their musical instruments on the trees and they ceased to play them (verse 2a). The Babylonian masters asked the Israelite captives to sing the sacred songs used to worship God in the temple (verse 3a). Their request is a mockery to Israel's worship at the temple, an indirect attack on the character of YHWH, because the songs of Zion celebrated the majesty and protection of YHWH over his people. In response to the captors' request, the Israelite captives refused to participate in the mockery of YHWH (verse 4). Singing a song of Zion would be an insult to YHWH. It was impossible for the Israelite captives to sing a song intended to praise YHWH for the amusement of their masters.

However, for the psalmist it is impossible to forget Jerusalem because that is his greatest joy. He therefore pledges complete loyalty and devotion towards Jerusalem and therefore, towards YHWH (verse 5). The psalmist shows his passionate love for Jerusalem, the central place of worship. The psalmist deems it impossible, unheard of or unthinkable that he would forget Jerusalem and not exalt her. His devotion takes the form of a solemn vow invoking upon himself the penalty of total or partial paralysis, in which he would lose control of the most important organs of a musician – his hands and tongue – so that he would never be able to play his musical instrument or sing again, should he forget where his loyalty lies, namely Jerusalem (verse 6).

The psalmist makes a petition to YHWH to punish the Edomites for their hostility towards Israel (verse 7). He concludes by praying for divine retribution (*lex talionis*) on Babylon, the total destruction of Babylon as a nation, because of her ruthless atrocities against Judah (verses 8-

9). Babylon destroyed Jerusalem, the centre of the YHWH cult. YHWH's honour will only be restored if Babylon is destroyed. An inversion of roles is envisaged in the petition. In verse 1, Babylon is portrayed as a conqueror and in verse 8a, Babylon is destroyed. Babylon's destroyer will be blessed because he will be the instrument of divine retribution (verse 8b, 9a).

6.6 Literary Genre, Historical and Life Setting of Psalm 137

6.6.1 The Literary Genre of Psalm 137

There has been considerable disagreement amongst scholars with regards to the genre (or *Gattung*) of Psalm 137. Anderson (1972b:896) and Schmidt (1934:242) point out that the psalm does not fit in any of the usual categories. With regards to the genre of the psalm, various suggestions have been given by scholars and exegetes:

- Gunkel (1968:265) assigns the psalm to the category "Imprecatory Psalms" on the basis of its content.
- Like Gunkel, Mowinckel (1962b:51-52) also classifies Psalm 137 as an imprecatory psalm.
- Schmidt (1934:242) calls Psalm 137 a "ballad"; an epic poem recounting an event from the nation's history.
- Mays (1994:421) classifies Psalm 137 as a song about Zion and not one of the "songs of Zion" because the songs of Zion are hymns full of joy and confidence. The "songs of Zion" portray Jerusalem as majestic and invincible (cf. Ps 46 and 48).
- Kraus (1989:501) contends that Psalm 137 is a communal lament.
- Allen (1983:241) sees Psalm 137 as a modified version of a song of Zion.
- Burden (1991:122) argues that the main focus of Psalm 137 is Zion and he views the psalm as an unusual song of Zion which also contains elements of lament and vengeance.
- Kellermann (1978:53) argues that Psalm 137 has a combination of genres (*Mischgattung*): lament (verses 1-4), a song of Zion (verses 5-6) and a curse (verses 7-9).
- Like Kellerman, Prinsloo (2000:285-286) also proposes a *Mischgattung* for Psalm 137. Stanza I (verses 1-4) reveals the characteristics of communal lament, while verses 5-6 display the formal elements of a song of Zion: Zion/Jerusalem takes a central place and is praised. However, the content of verses 5-6 do not reflect a song of Zion. He argues that the song of Zion is turned upside down and Stanza II (verses 5-6) is therefore an individual

lament with a strong element of self imprecation. According to Prinsloo (2000:285), Stanza III (verses 7-9) is a curse text where the blessing formula (אֲשֶׁר־י) is again turned upside down and used to convey a curse rather than a blessing.

- Gerstenberger (2001:394) views the denomination of Psalm 137 as communal complaint. The lament is haphazard with regards to the elements which make up laments. The standard forms of a lament seem to have been modified in Psalm 137. In Psalm 137, the invocation and initial plea are missing. According to Gerstenberger (2001:394), the psalm does not have an adequate introduction to make it useful in complaint liturgies and the complaint itself is formulated in a strange narrative style (verses 1-4). Instead of a vow of confidence or a vow to give thanks, Psalm 137 has a vow of allegiance (verses 5-6). Instead of a proper petition, Psalm 137 has imprecations against two different nations: Edom and Babylon. The imprecatory element is part of the complaint ritual.
- Anderson (1972b:897) sees Psalm 137 as “a Communal Lament culminating in an imprecation upon the enemies.” He argues that the psalm is a communal lament because of the opening verses. In verse 1, the author describes how he and his fellow exiles remembered Jerusalem; how he is ready to be cursed if he forgets and does not remember Jerusalem (verse 5-6); therefore, God must remember “the day of Jerusalem” (verse 7) against the foes: Edom and Babylon (verses 7-9) (Anderson, 1972b:897).
- Maré (2010:118) also argues that Psalm 137 should be classified as a communal lament because elements of lament, petition and vengeance all form an integral part of the structure of psalms of lament. He attributes the switch from first person plural to first person singular to an individual expressing on behalf of the community the sentiments of all the people concerning Jerusalem.

In light of the above views, and the structure and content of Psalm 137, it is probably best to concur with Anderson (1972b:896-897), Kraus (1989:501), Gerstenberger (2001:394) and Maré (2010:118) who argue that Psalm 137 is a Communal Lament or Complaint culminating in an imprecation on Israel’s enemies. Psalm 137 may be seen as a communal lament because of the following reasons:

- Firstly, as Anderson (1972b:897) observes, the lament genre is determined by the opening verses of the Psalm. In Stanza I (verses 1-4), there is a multiple occurrence of the first person plural forms and in Stanza II (verses 5-6), there is a switch to the first person singular forms. This may be a literary device if the Psalm is a communal lament, where the

singular is used collectively or representatively. The psalmist, in Stanza II (verses 5-6), speaks on behalf of the exiled community in Babylon.

- Secondly, as VanGemeren (1991:826) and Gerstenberger (2001:394) observe, imprecation or cursing is a common feature of Psalm 137. The psalmist prays for God's punishment or judgment on the nations that mistreated Judah and were responsible for their misery.
- Thirdly, the general literary structure of Psalm 137 (complaint: verses 1-4; vow: verses 5-6 and imprecations: verses 7-9) and the content are similar to that of lament, even though the invocation and initial plea are missing. The psalm also has "a vow of allegiance (verses 5-6) instead of a vow of confidence or a vow to give thanks (Gerstenberger, 2001:394).
- Fourthly, the theme of being zealous for YHWH and his worship (at the temple), which is seen in one of the laments, Psalm 69 (see verses 9-10), is also seen in Psalm 137 (verses 1-6).

6.6.2 The Date and Historical Setting of Psalm 137

Kraus (1989:501) contends that Psalm 137 is the only psalm that can be dated with certainty. He believes that the Babylonian Empire was still in existence when the psalm was written, because in the psalm Babylon is doomed to destruction (verse 8). The date should therefore be set as before 538 BC. (Kraus, 1989:501). Assigning a date to the psalm has not been an easy task for scholars and exegetes (see Vos, 2005:272). One unquestionable fact of Psalm 137 is that the subject matter is the Babylonian exile.

In order to understand the arguments on the date of the psalm, a brief overview of the historical situation is necessary. In 597 BC., the Southern Kingdom of Judah fell to Nebuchadnezzar during the reign of King Jehoiachim. The temple treasures were taken and the cream of the population was exiled to Babylon. Ten years later, ending the vassal-reign of King Zedekiah, and after an eighteen-month siege, Jerusalem was taken (587 BC.). The walls of Jerusalem were broken down, the last of the temple treasures were taken and large parts of the city and the temple were destroyed. A large number of Judeans were exiled. But forty-eight years later, in 539 BC., the Babylonians were defeated by the Persians under Cyrus. During this time, the city of Babylon was not destroyed. The destruction of Babylon took place much later in 300 BC. When the Persians defeated the Babylonians, their leader Cyrus allowed the exiles to return to their homelands in 538 BC. The temple was rebuilt and consecrated in 515 BC. and

the rebuilding of the city walls took place during the time of Nehemiah (ca 445 BC.) (Vos, 2005:272-273).

As Vos (2005:273) and Prinsloo (1984:121-123) observe, the dating of Psalm 137 has not been easy, and a number of suggestions have been made. The psalm could have:

- Originated between 597 and 587 BC., that is in Babylon between the first deportation and the final destruction of Jerusalem and exile.
- Been written during the exile following 587 BC. This implies that the psalm was written by one of the exiles before his return in 538 BC.
- Been written by someone who was neither in Babylon nor Jerusalem. The psalmist could have been someone from the Diaspora, which began in 561 BC., when the exiled Jews had freedom of movement and began to migrate to other countries.
- Been composed shortly after the exiles returned (538 BC.), but before the temple was completed in 515 BC.
- Originated after the completion of the temple, but before the rebuilding of the city walls, that is between 515 BC. and 445 BC.
- Originated after the destruction of Babylon in about 300 BC. This date of origin is based on the passive participle הַשְׁדִּירָהּ ("you devastated one") in verse 8a, which implies that Babylon was already destroyed when the psalm was written.

From the content of Psalm 137, the author seems to have been in exile after the fall of Jerusalem in 587 BC. and may have been one of the temple musicians taken to Babylon as an entertainer. It was a common practice for the conquering nations to take musicians from the conquered nations for their entertainment. For example, Sennacherib in his account of the siege of Jerusalem states that Hezekiah sent to him "male and female musicians" as part of his tribute (Wiseman, 1958:67). Most likely the psalmist and his companions shared a similar fate (Oppenheim, 1958: 205). The psalm seems to have been written by its author when he/she was no longer in exile, in Babylon, as indicated by the complete actions in verses 1-3 (Ogden, 1982:89) and the repeated use of "there" (שָׁם) in verses 1b and 3a. The adverb שָׁם shows that the land is distant and strange – not the place where the author finds himself at the time of writing (Delitzsch, 1980c:335; Anderson, 1972b:897; Allen, 1983:239; Kraus, 1989:501-502; Vos, 2005:273). This implies that the psalm was written after the exile. The fact that Jerusalem is addressed directly in verses 5-6 points to the possibility that the psalmist could have been in

Jerusalem when he wrote the psalm. Therefore the psalm could have originated in the early years of the return of the Jews from exile (Maré, 2010:119; Wendland, 2004:322), probably between 537 BC. and 515 BC. During this period, the city of Jerusalem and the temple were in ruins (see Anderson, 1972b:897; Davidson, 1998:439) and the memories of the Babylonian exile were still very fresh in the minds and hearts of the Jews (McCann, 1996:1227). The psalmist's experience in Babylon and the devastating after-effects of the exile could have inspired him/her to compose the psalm. Probably the psalm was written by a member of the Levitical guilds, which were responsible for music and singing in the temple (see 2 Chron 25:1-8; Ezra 2:40-42) (McCann, 1996:1227). The psalm tells us that YHWH would cause Babylon to fall (verse 8), and during this time, the Babylonians had fallen into the hands of the Persians. Psalm 137 was an encouragement and comfort to God's despondent people, since their city of Jerusalem and the temple were in ruins. YHWH was going to help them to rise again as a nation.

6.6.3 Cultic Setting of Psalm 137

With regards to the cultic setting of Psalm 137, Anderson (1972b:897) believes that the psalm may have been intended for one of the Days of Lamentation (cf. Zech 7:1-5), where prayers were offered for the full restoration of Jerusalem and its people. The Jews had been "the object of cursing among the nations" (Zech 8:13), but the psalmist pleads with God to reverse the situation.

Kraus (1989:502) argues that most likely Psalm 137 was issued from an observance of the lamentation by the exiles. The exiled community of Jews could have gathered together at the streams of the canals to reminisce about the destruction of Jerusalem. Kraus (1989:502) suggests that exiles could have gathered at specific places such as in the houses of the elders or at the canals: (1) to lament over the ruined sanctuary in Jerusalem and to pray for a change of fortunes; (2) to search the Scriptures for proclamations about future events. It can also be deduced from 1 Kings 8:46ff. that the praying assembly at such occasions assumed the "direction of prayer" facing toward Jerusalem.

Gerstenberger (2001:395) says that the setting of Psalm 137, "may have been a more elaborate worship service, in which it was intoned to express revulsion against continuing

oppression and desire for change.” The spirit of Psalm 137 is communitarian, melancholic and emotional. The setting may have been of a congregation of people under pressure from majority groups (captors, taunters) and in trying to fight back, the congregation remembers the oppression and despair of the exilic period and use it either as a memory of misery or symbolically in place of their own suffering. Since the Jews had special worship services to commemorate the fall of Jerusalem (cf. Zech 7:3-6; Lamentations), the psalm could have been attributed to this event.

As observed in the previous section (6.6.2), Psalm 137 could have provided comfort and encouragement for the post-exilic Jews who were rebuilding the temple and walls of Jerusalem. The psalm assuages the shock and disillusionment caused by the exile (Vos, 2005:274). Probably the purpose of the psalm is to make the burden of the exile more tolerable and to encourage the post-exilic community to move on with their lives and put their hope in YHWH. Therefore, most probably, the psalm could have been used at the festival of lamentation over the destruction of Jerusalem (cf. Zech 7:1-5; 8:19), where prayers were offered to YHWH for the full restoration of Jerusalem and its people (see Anderson, 1972b:897; Allen, 1983:239; Davidson, 1998:439; Eaton, 2003:454; Vos, 2005:274-275).

6.7 Canonical Context of Psalm 137

Psalm 137 belongs to the fifth book of Psalms (107-150). Book 5 (Psalms 107-150) is the last and longest of the five books of the Psalter. Book 5 (Psalms 107-150) may be subdivided into the following divisions (Wilcock, 2001b:145, 168-169, 219-220, 246, 274):

- Psalms 107-110: A further Exodus Psalm (Ps 107) and the third Davidic collection (Ps 108-110)
- Psalms 111-119: Three acrostics (Pss 111, 112, 119) and the first Hallel (or the “Passover or Egyptian Hallel”) (Pss 113-118)
- Psalms 120-134: The Songs of Ascents
- Psalms 135-145: The second Exodus collection (Pss 135-137) and the fourth Davidic collection (Pss 138-145)
- Psalms 146-150: The final Hallel

From the above subdivisions of Book 5 (107-150), it is clear that Psalm 137 belongs to the fourth subdivision (Psalms 135-145). In the fourth subdivision, Psalm 137 belongs to the subgroup referred to as “the second Exodus collection” – Psalms 135-137 (Wilcock, 2001b:246). Psalms 135-137 are positioned between the “Songs of Ascents” (Psalms 120-134) and David’s final collection (Psalms 138-145). Scholars ask why Psalms 135-137 are grouped together and canonically positioned between the “Songs of Ascents” and David’s final collection. Wilcock (2001b:246) argues that in some ways these psalms (135-137) look back to the Songs of Ascents; thus Psalm 135 begins and ends like Psalm 134 and may be an expansion of it. He also points out that one of the Jewish traditions actually joined Psalms 134 and 135 together and if “Hallelujah” was meant as a coupling between psalms in the Egyptian Hallel, this may be the case also with Psalm 134 and 135. It is obvious that Psalm 136 has a close relationship with Psalm 135; this probably explains why the term “Great Hallel” is sometimes applied to Psalms 120-136 (e.g. VanGemeren, 1991:713). Therefore, it is reasonable to regard Psalms 135-137 as a supplement or appendix to the Songs of Ascents (McCann, 1996:664; Wilcock, 2001b:246).

As Wendland (2004:325) observes some of the preceding psalms in the Zion salvation corpus seem to point forward to Psalm 137:

- **Psalm 126:** In this psalm, YHWH brought back the captives of Zion (verse 1) and as a result their tongues were filled with songs of gladness (verse 2, cf. Ps 137:3, 6).
- **Psalm 129:** In this psalm, YHWH is petitioned to punish “all who hate Zion” in the same way as they ferociously terrorized God’s people (verses 1-4).
- **Psalm 132:** This psalm speaks well of Zion as the “dwelling place” of YHWH and his anointed king, as epitomized in the promised Messiah (verses 11-18); the “gladness” of God’s saints (verse 16) will contrast with the “shame” of all their enemies (verse 18).

The three psalms (Pss 126, 129 & 132) exhort Israelites to remember (or not to forget) Zion. That is why some commentators (e.g. McCann, 1996:664; Wilcock, 2001b:246; Allen, 1983:239) view Psalms 135, 136 and 137 as a supplement or appendix to the “song of ascents corpus” which variously highlight the total loyalty-to-YHWH theme which is prominent in Psalms 120-134. In Psalm 137, the psalmist is zealous for YHWH. The psalmist’s love for Jerusalem or Zion is not separate from love for God. The imprecations in verses 7-9 are not motivated by personal revenge but zeal/love for YHWH. YHWH’s honour is at stake here and will be restored if Babylon is destroyed because Babylon had destroyed Jerusalem.

McCann (1996:664) would also argue that Psalms 135-137 function as the prelude to David's last collection (Psalms 138-145). The first and last psalms of this collection return to the theme of God's loving-kindness in Books IV-V (see Pss 138:2, 8; 145:8; see also Pss 89; 90; 106; 107; 118). David's final collection (Psalms 138-145) mainly consists of laments, and culminates in Psalm 144, which is a royal lament.

Structurally, Psalms 105-119 are parallel to Psalms 135-149. The earlier sequence begins with Psalms 105-107, which reviews the exodus from Egypt and return from Babylon. The latter sequence which begins with Psalms 135-137 also reviews the exodus from Egypt and return from Babylon. In each sequence (Pss 105-107; 135-137), a group of Davidic psalms follows (Pss 108-110; 138-145), then a set of Hallel psalms, and the Hallel psalms lead up to Psalm 119 in the one case and Psalm 149 in the other (Wilcock, 2001b:246).

Psalm 137 shares common words and themes with Psalms 135-136.

Common vocabulary shared by Psalms 135 and 136

כִּי־טוֹב	for he is good	135:3	136:1
אֶרֶץ	earth	135:6, 7	136:6
נִכָּה	to smite	135:10	136:10, 17
מִצְרַיִם	Egypt/Egyptians	135:8, 9	136:10
בְּכוֹר	firstborn	135:8	136:10
זָכַר	to remember	135:13	136:23
יְהוָה	YHWH	135:1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 13, 14, 19, 20, 21	136:1
פַּרְעֹה	Pharaoh	135:9	136:15
וַהֲרַג מְלָכִים	and slew kings	135:10	136:18
לְסִיחֹן מֶלֶךְ הָאֱמֹרִי	Sihon, king of the Amorites	135:11	136:19
וּלְעֹג מֶלֶךְ בַּשָּׁן	and Og, king of Bashan	135:11	136:20
וַיִּתֵּן אֶרֶץ נַחֲלָה	and he gave land as an inheritance	135:12	136:21

נַחֲלָה לְיִשְׂרָאֵל עַמּוֹ [עַבְדָּו]	a heritage to Israel his people/ servant	135:12	136:22
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Thematically, both Psalm 135 and 136 focus on YHWH's great acts of redemption in the past. The deliverance of Israel from slavery is of particular importance in both psalms (135:8-12 // 136:10-22). The theme of Israel's deliverance from hostile nations is seen in both psalms (135:10-11 // 136:18-20). The theme of God's work in and sovereignty over his creation is seen in both psalms (135:6-7 // 136:14-9). The theme that God gave land to Israel as an inheritance is seen in both psalms (135:12 // 136:21-22).

Common vocabulary shared by Psalms 137, 135 and 136

יהוה	YHWH	137:4, 7	135:1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 13, 14, 19, 20, 21; 136:1
צִיּוֹן	Zion	137:1, 3	135:21
יְרוּשָׁלַם	Jerusalem	137:5, 7	135:21
זָכַר	to remember	137:1, 6	135:13

Thematically, Psalm 135:1-3 calls those who minister at the sanctuary (i.e. the priests and Levites) to praise YHWH, to sing praises to him because of his goodness. In Psalm 137:3-4, the Babylonian captors ask the Israelite captives, the temple musicians, who ministered at the sanctuary, to sing the songs of Zion or YHWH (i.e. songs that praised God for his majesty and protection over his people) used in worship in the temple. The request of the Babylonian masters is a mockery to YHWH and the faith of the captives, because Babylon had destroyed the city of Zion and the temple. In Psalm 135, God's people are exhorted to sing songs of praise because of YHWH's goodness, whereas in Psalm 137, the temple musicians are asked to sing songs of YHWH not because of YHWH's goodness but as a mockery of YHWH. The psalmist prays severe imprecations against Babylon not because he had a personal vendetta against the Babylonians but because of Babylon's atrocities against Judah when they destroyed Jerusalem and the temple and their mockery of YHWH and the faith of the Judeans in captivity.

Psalms 135 and 136 mention specific ways in which God's goodness has been demonstrated in the history of Israel (135:4-11; 136:10-24). He is sovereign and he is the creator of the whole universe; he does as he pleases in his universe and he controls all the forces of nature (135:6-7; 136:4-9). He redeemed Israel from Egypt through his miraculous power (135:8; 136:10-16). He gave victory to Israel over their enemies, the Canaanites (135:10-11; 136:17-20). The theme of YHWH's sovereignty in the universe is also seen in the events that transpire in Psalm 137. God's sovereignty is also seen in history, since he does what he pleases. Israel's exile in Babylon was part of God's plan, but unfortunately the Babylonian captors did not see it that way - they saw the exile of the Jewish people as YHWH's failure to protect his people against them, hence in their view, YHWH was powerless. The basis of the imprecations in verses 8-9 is YHWH's sovereignty and not the psalmist's individual hatred or the people of Judah's hatred toward Babylon. As a sovereign God, YHWH was able to punish Edom for their hostility against Judah, and Babylon for their atrocities against Judah and for destroying the temple in 587 BC. As sovereign Lord, YHWH is able to bless the destroyer of Babylon (Psalm 137:8b; 9a) which shows that he is in control of history.

Psalms 135 and 136 state that YHWH gave land to his people as an inheritance (135:12; 136:21-22 cf. Deut 4:21, 38; 12:9), whereas there is a contrast in Psalm 137. The Israelites are not in the land that God gave them as an inheritance but are in exile in Babylon. The exiled community of Israelites experienced a deep sense of loss and grief when they remembered the temple and Zion (see McCann, 1996:1227).

The theme that God vindicates and shows compassion on his people in Psalm 135:14 is also seen in Psalm 137. In Psalm 137:7, the psalmist makes a petition to YHWH to punish the Edomites for their hostility towards Israel ("retribution principle"). Therefore, YHWH is called upon to vindicate his people by punishing the Edomites because they had conspired with the Babylonians when they captured and destroyed Jerusalem in 587 BC. In Psalm 137:8-9, the psalmist prays for the destruction of Babylon. He wants Babylon to experience the same treatment that they gave Israel ("retribution principle"). Therefore, the basis for imprecations in verses 8-9 is divine retribution (*lex talionis*) and not the psalmist's or the captives' hatred toward the Babylonians.

The theme of "remembering" is also common in Psalms 135, 136 and 137. In Psalm 135, YHWH's name is everlasting and is brought to remembrance (זכר) by all generations (135:13).

Psalm 137 is a fulfilment of Psalm 135:13. In Psalm 137, the Israelite captives remembered (זכר) the destruction of the temple (i.e. the temple symbolised God's presence) and their sad memory caused them to mourn (137:1). The psalmist invokes a curse on himself: if he does not remember (זכר) Jerusalem (which also amounts to not remembering YHWH), he should lose his ability to sing songs of Zion with his mouth (137:6). In Psalm 136, YHWH's remembering of Israel is related to deliverance. YHWH remembers Israel and rescues her from her adversaries (136:22-23). In Psalm 137, we have the opposite; YHWH's remembering of Edom is associated with punishment or judgment. YHWH is also called to "remember" (זכר) the hostility of the Edomites when the nation of Judah fell to the Babylonians. Therefore, the psalmist makes a petition to YHWH to punish the Edomites for their hostility towards Israel.

Therefore, Psalms 135-137 have philological and thematic links. The two main themes in Psalms 135-137 are YHWH's sovereignty and complete loyalty to YHWH (which is also a prominent theme in Psalms 120-134). **YHWH's sovereignty:** God is sovereign; he is the creator of the universe. He controls the forces of nature and the tortuous course of history, even though it may not appear so. Psalms 135-137 may be seen as an appendix to the "Songs of Ascents" (Pss 120-134) because the opening psalms (Pss 120-134) portray the threats and difficulties of various kinds that could have been encountered by the post-exilic community as they travelled from Babylon to Zion. Psalms 135-137 may have provided comfort and support to the post-exilic community as they meditated on these psalms and learnt that God is sovereign; he controls the course of history. He was with them in exile, in Babylon. God's presence and protection was going to be with them during their journey back to Jerusalem (cf. Ps 121). As a result, the pilgrims could anchor their trust in YHWH because of his sovereignty over the course of history. Psalms 135-137 may also be seen as a prelude to Psalms 138-144 because these psalms (Pss 138-144) focus on God's sovereignty and faithfulness. Since the main theme of Psalms 135-137 is God's sovereignty, Psalms 135-137 function as an introduction to Psalms 138-144 because these psalms (Pss 138-144) explain in detail the theme of YHWH's sovereignty. For example, Psalm 139 teaches that YHWH has the ability to see everything within the human heart. The theme of YHWH's sovereignty, love and faithfulness is also highlighted in Psalms 138 and 140-144 when he rescues the psalmist from his distress. Therefore, in Psalm 137, the psalmist appeals to YHWH (the one who controls history) to provide his divine justice by punishing Edom and Babylon for their atrocities against Judah.

Complete loyalty to YHWH: In Psalm 137, the psalmist has complete loyalty and devotion towards YHWH. The psalmist's love for Jerusalem and Zion is not separate from the love for God. The psalmist's devotion to YHWH is seen when he deems it impossible, unheard of, or unthinkable that he would forget Jerusalem. His devotion takes the form of a solemn vow invoking upon himself the penalty of total or partial paralysis, in which case he would lose control of the most important organs of a musician – his hands and tongue.

Psalm 137 may have provided comfort and encouragement for the post-exilic Jews who were rebuilding the temple and walls of Jerusalem. The psalm may have encouraged them to continue in their complete loyalty to YHWH, move on with their lives and put their hope and trust in YHWH. Psalm 137 encourages the listeners/readers to acknowledge the sovereignty of YHWH in history. Therefore, the reader/listener should trust in the Lord because he is sovereign and in control of everything. The acknowledgement of the sovereignty of YHWH gives hope for the present, and comforts and encourages the followers of YHWH to persevere in their faith no matter how difficult their present circumstances may be.

6.8 Imprecatory Implications in Psalm 137

Most psalms in the Scriptures are cherished by Christians except for Psalm 137. The closing verses of Psalm 137 are often seen as “unimaginable cruelty” (Broyles, 1999:479). Therefore, in Christian songs and worship services the last verses of Psalm 137 are normally omitted (McCann, 1996:1228). What are the imprecatory implications and message of Psalm 137?

While many Christians view verses 7-9 as “unimaginable cruelty,” the historical setting of Psalm 137 (see section 6.6.2) is the Babylonian exile and the psalm should be understood in light of its historical context. It is important to understand what was at stake for the exiled people of Judah. Deportation by the Babylonians was cruel: Judah lost not only their homeland but also the temple, where their God had revealed himself; their king, through whom YHWH exercised his rule; and the land, which YHWH had given to them as an inheritance (see Pss 135:12; 136:21-22; cf. Deut 4:21, 38; 12:9). Therefore, the very existence of the people of Judah and their faith in YHWH were jeopardised (Broyles, 1999:479).

The expression of dashing infants on rocks (verse 9) has been misunderstood as the psalmist's thirst for revenge or cruelty but this is not the case. In ancient warfare it was common for victorious armies to kill the children of their conquered enemies (see 2 Kgs 8:12; Isa 13:16; Hos 13:16; Amos 1:3, 13; Nah 3:10). The expression of dashing infants on rocks implies proportionate divine retribution for the terrible wrong that the Babylonians had done and for which they should be punished. It is possible that the Babylonians had dashed the infants of the Judeans on the rocks so they are to experience the same treatment they gave the people of Judah.

The imprecations in the closing verses of Psalm 137 are not motivated by a spirit of personal revenge or inconceivable cruelty on the part of the psalmist, but rather by divine retribution. The Edomites and Babylonians are to be punished because of the way they mistreated Judah. YHWH is called upon to vindicate his people by punishing the Edomites for their conspiracy with the Babylonians when they captured and destroyed Jerusalem in 587 BC. The Babylonians were well known for their cruelties and in this manner they had captured Judah and destroyed the temple and the city of Jerusalem. Therefore, the psalmist prays to YHWH so that he would bring on the Babylonians the atrocities they had committed in Judah (*lex talionis*), so that in like manner they would experience utter defeat, helplessness and defencelessness.

The Babylonians are also to be destroyed (verses 8-9) because they had destroyed Jerusalem, the centre of the YHWH cult. YHWH's honour will only be restored if Babylon is destroyed. Hence, a blessing is pronounced on Babylon's destroyer because he will be an instrument of divine judgment.

As seen from the canonical context, the psalmist probably prays severe imprecations against Babylon not only because of their (past) atrocities against Judah when Jerusalem fell, but also because their (present) mockery of YHWH and the faith of the Judeans in captivity (verse 3).

There is also an inversion of roles in Psalm 137: In verse 1 - Babylon is portrayed as a conqueror; in verse 8a - Babylon is destroyed. Babylon's destroyer will be blessed because he will be an instrument of divine retribution (verse 8b, 9a). The focus of the psalm is not so much on imprecation but on YHWH's sovereignty. The canonical context of Psalm 137 also confirms

this as the main theme. YHWH as the Sovereign Lord who controls history is able to destroy Babylon, a powerful nation that had conquered many nations.

As already observed (see section 6.6.1), there is a multiple occurrence of the first person plural forms in verses 1-4 and in verses 5-6, there is a switch to the first person singular forms. This may be a literary device if the psalm is a communal lament, where the singular is used collectively or representatively. Therefore the psalmist in verses 5-6 expresses on behalf of the community the sentiments of all the people concerning Jerusalem. The psalmist identifies with his forefathers or with the Judeans who were in Babylon. So when the psalmist prays imprecations on Edom and Babylon he is not vengeful in act or spirit but he makes a prayer on behalf of God's people. He prays for divine vengeance. He submits his prayer to God and he leaves vengeance to God. It is YHWH who is to punish Edom and Babylon rather than the psalmist.

The message of Psalm 137 to the followers of YHWH is that when the present world system or unbelievers may pressurize them to mock God and ultimately abandon their faith, they should continue to honour YHWH and persevere in trusting him. Even though it may seem that they live in exile far removed from God, literally or figuratively (Vos, 2005:275), in those situations, the followers of YHWH should refuse to participate with the ungodly in the mockery of God. Instead they should stand firm in their faith and remain loyal and devoted to YHWH. No matter how difficult the present circumstances may be, YHWH's followers can trust YHWH because he is sovereign and in control of the course of history (see Vos 2005:275) and ultimately he will vindicate his honour and the faith of his people. Thus, the sovereignty of God over everything gives hope and comfort to the followers of YHWH who may leave vengeance to God while persevering in their faith.