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## Reflections on Psalm 137

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## Reflections on Psalm 137

### Abstract

In lieu of an abstract, below is the essay's first paragraph.

"In the communal prayer life of the church - namely the liturgies of the Eucharist and the Divine Office, as well as the Book of Common Prayer to name a fewwe Christians tend to be selective in our focus on the Psalms. We do give at least a tacit recognition to the truth expressed about the Psalms from the saints who have preceded us: Athanasius called them "an epitome of the whole Scripture," a view echoed by Luther's insight that they are "a little bible and summary of the Old Testament;" Basil goes further and claims that the Psalms are "a compendium of all theology." But John Calvin comes closest to the way we should view them because he expresses a unity of theology and spirituality when he states that the Psalms provide "an anatomy of all the parts of the soul." It is interesting to note that, unlike many other books of scripture, the Psalms (with only a few exceptions) do not contain revelations or statements from God to us but rather express the community's prayers to God – the Psalms are our voice praying the prayers of praise, penitence, hope, lamentation, loss, faith, fear and rage."

## *Reflections on Psalm 137*

(This essay is excerpted from a book length manuscript currently entitled

*Be You Perfect*)

*Robert Brimlow, PhD*

In the communal prayer life of the church - namely the liturgies of the Eucharist and the Divine Office, as well as the Book of Common Prayer to name a few - we Christians tend to be selective in our focus on the Psalms. We do give at least a tacit recognition to the truth expressed about the Psalms from the saints who have preceded us: Athanasius called them “an epitome of the whole Scripture,” a view echoed by Luther’s insight that they are “a little bible and summary of the Old Testament;” Basil goes further and claims that the Psalms are “a compendium of all theology.” But John Calvin comes closest to the way we should view them because he expresses a unity of theology and spirituality when he states that the Psalms provide “an anatomy of all the parts of the soul.” It is interesting to note that, unlike many other books of scripture, the Psalms (with only a few exceptions) do not contain revelations or statements from God to us but rather express the community’s prayers to God – the Psalms are our voice praying the prayers of praise, penitence, hope, lamentation, loss, faith, fear and rage.

So if we grant that the Psalms are both significant theologically and important spiritually, and so much so that they hold a vital place in our liturgical practices, we need to address why we are so selective in our utilization of the Psalms and what we might be losing through that selectivity.

In general, we as a church have tended to focus on the “nice” psalms – the psalms of praise, faith and hope. Even when we use the psalms of fear, loss and

lamentation, we choose and redact those psalms which assert a strong belief in the saving power of God: that God will remember us and will come to our aid, at least eventually. But as far as I have been able to determine, we do not pray the “dark” psalms. For example, I have been unable to find a liturgical expression of Psalm 88 which is almost unremitting in its evocation and depiction of despair. It reads as an elaboration of the first two verses of Psalm 22 (“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me? Why are you so far from helping me from the words of my groaning?”) without the declaration of faith and confidence that follows. As Walter Brueggemann has written, “As children of the Enlightenment, we have censored and selected around the voice of darkness and disorientation, seeking to go from strength to strength, from victory to victory. But such a way not only ignores the Psalms; it is a lie in terms of our own experience.” (The Message of the Psalms, p. 11)

It is precisely the entirety of our experience – and by “our” I mean the experience of the whole community of believers – that is expressed by the Psalms and which is foundational to a life of faith. We therefore need to confront and understand the dark psalms in that nexus of theology and spirituality. My purpose in this paper is to examine one of the most disturbing of those psalms.

(In the way of further preface, I hope you will indulge my shift of voice from one that is clearly academic to that of personal experience. My interpretation of Calvin notwithstanding, we assume a clear distinction between theology and spirituality that renders attempts to write in their nexus rather daunting – and that doesn’t even consider that I am writing from a philosopher’s perspective as well.)

The idea about the selectivity and redaction involved in the liturgical use of the psalms first came to my attention sometime in the middle of the 1970's, and, oddly enough, initially I wasn't even aware that the expression I encountered was originally a psalm. Back in the 1970's, the Catholic Church was deep in the wave of liturgical reform introduced by Vatican II. I went to mass one Sunday and was surprised by the processional hymn because of the context in which I first heard it some time before:

By the rivers of Babylon  
Where we sat down,  
And there we wept  
As we remembered Zion.  
But the wicked carried us away  
Captivity  
Required from us a song.  
How can we sing King Alpha song  
In a strange land?  
Oh let the words of our mouth  
And the meditation of our heart  
Be acceptable in thy sight,  
Oh Fari.

The sound of that song brought me back a few years earlier, to a time when I used to hang out in the Jamaican section of Brooklyn. Back in the days before Eric Clapton covered Bob Marley's "I Shot the Sheriff," I liked to eat what to me were exotic foods like goat meat and I would listen to the music the Jamaican owners of the diner would play off of 45's from the Island. Now I can vaguely remember tapping my feet to Toots and the Maytals and all the Jamaicans laughing at the skinny white boy trying to dig "Pressure Drop" riddims and ska chunes.

I'm not sure what attracted me to Jamaican music back in 1970. It could have been the dreads, or maybe Marley's and Hibbert's accents, the rhythms, or even the

smell of ganja in the streets. It may have been the goat meat and cold bottles of Red Stripe on a summer day for all I know now. But whatever, most of the music has faded over the past forty years; all of it except “Rivers of Babylon.” It has stuck in my mind all this time. The Melodians’ voices sang it low and soft and it plays in my memory a bit scratchy now – much like my vision of the skinny white boy grooving across dirty linoleum. I loved that song even before I knew what it meant, even before I knew I couldn’t get it entirely.

What I did not realize then – and what I can only dimly grasp now – is how the song is a capturing of the African experience, a view of African life in the west through the lens of Israel. Never mind that “King Alpha” refers to the Emperor Haile Selassie and the curious theology of the Rastafarians. The song encapsulates what some theologians have urged us in the Christian community to do: rather than interpret Scripture and apply it to our lives here and now, we need to interpret the here and now and apply it to Scripture. The story of the Babylonian captivity of Israel, their longing for Jerusalem and their experience of being aliens in a strange land is also the story of the Church as well as the story of the African slave. We are slaves, subject to our master’s will, suffering separation and longing for the saving word to call us back home.

Of course, we don’t usually see it that way, we who have grown up in a nation with Christian roots and the power of self-government firmly in our own hands - especially as overt discrimination and Jim Crow laws fade into our collective memory. Yet even for us, the words of Psalm 137 resonate. As I discovered much later, “Rivers of Babylon” is based on the first four verses of that Psalm:

By the rivers of Babylon –  
There we sat down and there we wept  
When we remembered Zion.  
On the willows there  
We hung up our harps.  
For there our captors  
Asked us for songs,  
And our tormentors asked for mirth, saying,  
“Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”

How could we sing the Lord’s song  
In a foreign land?

Even if we have not experienced what it is to be slave and tormented by political powers, the psalmist’s voice does capture the sense of desolation and abandonment – of feeling a stranger even within our own skin – that I think many of us have felt at least on occasion. All the psalms speak to us, expressing our experience and giving voice to our prayers; it is why the psalms are so central to our liturgies and communal prayers. When all is unfamiliar and comfort is distant, and when the preacher speaks of joy in her sermon or homily, sometimes we do not even have a memory of what that joy felt like. Those are the times when we feel so distant from Jerusalem that it is as though we are abandoned on another planet, and consolation does not even seem possible.

But the psalmist seems to offer us encouragement in the next two verses:

If I forget you, O Jerusalem,  
Let my right hand wither!  
Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth,  
If I do not remember you,  
If I do not set Jerusalem  
Above my highest joy.

In the words of curses we exhort ourselves to cling to what is good, true and beautiful. If I forget you, let my right hand wither – if I forget you, let me accomplish nothing with my work and my strivings. If I fail to remember you, then take away my speech; let my thirst overpower me and let me be in the stillness of death. My own joy and happiness are nothing compared to the glory of God; indeed, my joy and happiness are only the glory of God and I must keep that foremost in my mind, heart and memory. The words of my mouth and the meditations of my heart are meaningless unless they are acceptable to you, my God and Savior.

This is the way the psalmist urges us to be when we are in the grips of captivity: we must above all maintain our faithfulness. What is striking about these initial verses of the psalm is not the call to faithfulness but rather what is absent: the psalmist does not express hope – neither the hope of return to Jerusalem, nor the hope that he and the people will be remembered by God. There is no hope for a time when all will be healed and we find ourselves to be found and brought home again. In the midst of our despair we must not forget that we are not forgotten, but that does not appear to be the message the psalmist is giving.

We would expect that this psalm, like many of the psalms, would speak to us of consolation and better days and reminds us that we are God's people, even when we are captive, disoriented and alienated. Yet Psalm 137 is unlike the other psalms and does not convey that message even though it would seem to be required. The psalmist goes on:

Remember, O Lord, against the Edomites  
The day of Jerusalem's fall,  
how they said, "Tear it down! Tear it down!  
Down to its foundations!"  
O daughter Babylon, you devastator!  
Happy shall they be who pay you back  
What you have done to us!  
Happy shall they be who take your little ones  
And dash them against the rock!

There is more than lamentation and grief in these verses. Here the slave plies other recent memories into the fabric of the prayer: he weaves together the memory of his capture and subjugation together with the memory of the fall of Jerusalem. If Jerusalem is truly set above his highest joy – above wife, children and even the self – then the fall of Jerusalem is beyond the psalmist's deepest grief. It is worse than his death or the death of his children; and he has prayed that the memory of Jerusalem and all it is and represents will stay fresh in his mind and heart. There is no possibility of a joyful song in captivity, but not only because he is a slave and feels no joy but because Jerusalem is destroyed except in his prayers and his soul's eyes. There is no possibility of a joyful song to entertain his tormentors, offering them a bit of diversion so they can relish their victory the more. There is no possibility of a joyful song while he is in their land, while he has been separated from his home, while he is alienated from all that makes him what he is.

We do need to bear in mind, though, that this psalm itself is a song and it is being sung by the alien in a strange land. It is a song of protest and sorrow and grief; a song of loss and wandering, of homelessness and subjugation. It is not that the psalmist can not sing at all; it is just that his song is not a song of old Zion but of the new Zion

held in chains. The songs of joy have become a song of grief beyond tears and words. And also a song beyond hope. The songs of joy have become a song of impotence and helplessness, of being tossed on the winds at the whims of new masters.

And more. Beyond the grief and loss and helplessness there is an anger that goes beyond anger, transforming itself into a hatred that is so extreme that it is embarrassing for us to read it – and shameful for us to chant it in our liturgies. The psalmist cries to the Lord for a revenge so frightful and disgusting that it should make us fearful.

In the face of the new masters who subjugate and alienate the people of God and make them slaves in order to work and entertain like vaudeville comedians, the real Master is called upon. This affront to Your people and to Your holy place is an affront to You and must be redressed. The world is out of kilter and needs to be set aright and rebalanced with justice. This daughter Babylon has no idea of the gravity of the sin she has committed; and, indeed, there is no greater sin than an assault upon you, O God. As they have destroyed Jerusalem, so they must be destroyed. Their destruction must be complete: an annihilation, a reduction to nothingness so that no one remains to hold dear the memory of Babylon. Only if all memory of Babylon disappears can this sin disappear. The grief we feel should be visited on this daughter Babylon, and she must see her children held by the ankles and smashed on the rocks. She must see and understand before her own death that all memory and traces of her existence will be lost and that no one will be left to sing of Babylon. There will be nothing left. This comes close to redressing the crime against God and his people.

One of the outcomes of this view – and as all prayers have, this prayer has a view – is that neither person nor nation has what we, in our contemporary age with our modern politics, would call a right to life or right to living in itself. Rather, this view holds that all life is contingent, provisional. A person or a nation may live as long as that life is continually earned through memory and faithfulness to God and his word. In addition, life may be forfeited through sin. Sin is death. And in this psalm, the most serious of sins – the sin against God himself – means not only death but complete worthlessness and erasure from all memory. This is the most horrible of punishments: the irredeemable punishment which entails the slaughter of the next generation who, by their kinship alone, bears the sin of all the people of Babylon.

Clearly there is operating in this psalm a notion of guilt (and therefore of innocence) that we may well find alien. We recoil at the idea that children should be killed at all let alone killed with a brutality reminiscent of Nazi atrocities against Jewish babies. Not only that, but we also likewise reject the idea that adults should be killed if they are innocent, or even if they are guilty but do not offer resistance. The guilty adult who does not resist, who is neither armed nor poses an imminent or immediate danger, is not one who deserves extra-judicial killing in our day and age. Yet these considerations do not occur to the psalmist because he has a different understanding of social and religious relationships. What he focuses upon are his own pain, grief and degradation as well as that of his compatriots and that of his God. And, significantly, that pain, grief and degradation is identical for all three. There is no distinction in this instance among the crime committed against the individual, the crime committed against the community and the crime committed against God himself. The unity obtaining among the three is

complete and its expression should surprise us and make us pause. The sin against one is the sin against the others, and avenging the crime against one is its expiation as well as revenge and expiation for the others. Avenging the crime against the psalmist avenges Israel and avenges God as well. While we might not resonate with the cry for vengeance and all that entails, this notion of an ontological unity among God, people and the individual is one that is important and may well provide a way to more fully understand and appreciate our own relations with God and each other. { note: this topic will be explored more fully in the book from which this essay is excerpted. }

There is one more aspect of the psalm that we need to address, and it has little to do with the theology of it or the philosophical implications of ontic unity. Instead, this aspect focuses more on the psychology of the psalm. It is interesting to note that the psalmist is not the avenger or the destroyer of Babylon. The psalmist certainly does not see himself capable at the moment of being the instrument of expiation, but he also does not imagine that he will be granted the power to avenge in the immediate future by the intercession of God's will and power. I don't know why this is so. It doesn't seem likely that the psalmist is surrendering and giving himself over, nor is he resigned to the thought that God will not save him, but perhaps I conclude this only because of the way many other psalms address suffering and God – and perhaps, at a minimum we ought to read any psalm in the context of all the psalms. In other psalms the salvific power of God is praised – for example, Psalm 107: 6: “Then they cried to the Lord in their trouble, and he delivered them from their distress.” Or in Psalm 146: 7 – 9:

The Lord sets the prisoners free;  
The Lord opens the eyes of the blind.

The Lord lifts up those who are bowed down;  
The Lord loves the righteous.  
The Lord watches over the strangers;  
He upholds the orphan and the widow,  
But the way of the wicked he brings to ruin.

In Psalm 107 the psalmist reminds himself and the community of God's faithfulness in the past; how God displayed his mercy and wielded his power on behalf of his people. In Psalm 146 the psalmist speaks in the present tense – how even amid the suffering the hand of God works to lift up, heal, watch and uphold his faithful people, and simultaneously brings to ruin the evil doers who harm and abuse his people.

In yet other psalms the power of God is not felt as being operative. Yet the psalmist calls on God for relief. For example, Psalm 44: 23 – 26 reads:

Rouse yourself! Why do you sleep,  
O Lord?  
Awake, do not cast us off forever!  
Why do you hide your face?  
Why do you forget our affliction and oppression?  
For we sink down to the dust;  
Our bodies cling to the ground.  
Rise up, come to our help.  
Redeem us for the sake of your steadfast love.

And in Psalm 7: 6 – 8, much the same thing is reiterated in very similar language:

Rise up, O Lord, in your anger;  
Lift yourself up against the fury of my enemies;  
Awake, O my God; you have appointed a judgement.  
Let the assembly of the peoples be

Gathered around you,  
And over it take your seat on high.  
The Lord judges the peoples....

In these psalms the psalmists feel abandoned. They are frightened and suffering and feel as if God is sleeping: for God must be sleeping and therefore unaware of the unjust pain his people are enduring. The psalmists are shouting to wake God up, as if to say, “Don’t you see what’s happening down here, right now to your people? Let’s get on it and send some relief.” These psalmists speak from a position of great faith in the fidelity of God; they have no doubt that God will respond to their prayers. In addition, they also display a great familiarity with God, a familiarity we might well describe as a friendship, for who else but a friend would feel confident enough to wake someone from her slumber and demand her help be forthcoming? The psalmists here display both a faith in and friendship with God that is noteworthy in their absence in Psalm 137.

In Psalm 137 the psalmist has a curious position. As I remarked above, he does not see himself as the avenger; nor does he see himself as being saved by God’s intercession at present or even at some future time. In fact, Psalm 137 isn’t even addressed to God; God is spoken to only at verse 7 and there he is asked to remember the joyous treachery of the Edomites, not his people in captivity. This is a psalm of helpless resignation. It is true and we must remind ourselves that it is rare to see in any of the psalms that the psalmists speak of their own power. The points most of the psalms make are rather those of praise and reliance upon the promise and power of God. Even so, it is not unprecedented for the psalmist to speak of his own power used in service to God, for

his understanding is that his own power is only a derivative one from God alone. Thus,  
in Psalm 18: 31 – 34, 37 – 40:

For who is God except the Lord?  
And who is a rock besides our God? –  
The God who girded me with strength,  
And made my way safe.  
He made my feet like the feet of a deer,  
And set me secure on the heights.  
He trains my hands for war,  
So that my arms can bend a bow of bronze....

I pursued my enemies and overtook them;  
And did not turn back until they were consumed.  
I struck them down so that they were not  
Able to rise  
They fell under my feet.  
For you girded me with strength for the battle;  
You made my assailants sink under me.  
You made my enemies turn their backs to me  
And those who hated me I destroyed.

And in Psalm 101, the psalmist sings “of loyalty and of justice” and “will  
study the way that is blameless” (v. 1 and 2). As part of walking the way of the loyal and  
just servant of God, the psalmist makes a series of promises to God in verses 3 - 5 and 8:

I hate the work of those who fall away:  
It shall not cling to me.  
Perverseness of heart shall be far from me;  
I will know nothing of evil.  
One who secretly slanders a neighbor  
I will destroy.  
A haughty look and an arrogant heart  
I will not tolerate....

Morning by morning I will destroy

All the wicked in the land,  
Cutting off all evil doers  
From the city of the Lord.

In these two psalms we are presented with a picture of the psalmists as instruments of God's faithfulness and justice. The psalmists are empowered by God to do God's will, which is to bring and maintain justice in the land of Israel. The enemies of the psalmist in Psalm 18 are the enemies of God; those whom the psalmist would destroy in Psalm 101 are those who sin – whose iniquities damage God's people and are an affront to God himself. The power of these psalmists is derivative: they are God's hand made manifest in redressing the balance and in driving sin and crime from God's people, eliminating the evil doers from the earth. God trained the psalmist for war and guided his war making with the strength needed to wage the battle against evil. God guaranteed the victory by making the enemies turn their backs and be slaughtered as the cowards they inherently are. The victory of the psalmist is God's victory; the psalmist acts not for himself but for the One from whom all power, grace and love flow.

So it seems a bit strange that the psalmist of 137 does not even consider himself as the destroying hand of God. He is resigned to his life of slavery and to the mockery and laughter of his captors as they demand that he sing and dance. He does not ask for deliverance from his enemies, even as he remains faithful to the memory of Jerusalem. Nor does he shout out to God in order to wake him up from his slumber and come for the salvation of his people. The psalmist of 137 is curiously supine and despairing of his own fate. What he does – the extent and import of his prayer – is only curse and plead for revenge at the hand of anyone bloodthirsty enough to crush Babylon.

I understand that call for revenge. There are some losses that are so great that we may feel that there is no relief but only that blood calls for blood, and that for the sake of justice, not comfort. There is no comfort to be had; some losses can not be regained, but still they must be paid for. While I understand the cry for revenge, I do not quite understand the psalmist.

If I had suffered the loss and degradation he suffered, if I experienced the shame, pain and grief that he experienced, I too would want revenge but I would most of all want the revenge to be at my own hands. I would pray for the ability and grace to be God's instrument of justice. But the psalmist does not do this. He doesn't ask for God's strength and training for war nor does he ask God to deliver his enemies to him. He does not ask God to awaken, nor does he ask God to remember his people or his own faithfulness to Israel. He only asks God to remember the Edomites. He asks for nothing else, not even agreement; the psalm doesn't even call for a response. The psalmist finishes with curses. Instead of asking to be the instrument of God's justice, he blesses the hands of others who will dash the babies against the rocks.

The psalmist is not the destroyer; he is the observer. In his mind's eye he can see the scene of revenge – the destruction of Babylon and the death of children juxtaposed with his memory of the destruction of Jerusalem. But this destruction does not come from his hands or the hands of God, but rather the hands of others. He is detached, an audience. He sits in a position of judgment and cold approval of the violence, much as the Edomites were audience to Jerusalem's destruction, much as the Babylonians wish to be audience to the songs of Zion.

Perhaps my failure to understand the psalmist lies in my experience.

While I have felt alienated, disoriented and wronged to the extent that hatred rose within me, never have I felt the degree of dislocation and impotence the psalmist feels or that perhaps all slaves feel. Sometimes when I could secure revenge for wrongs done to me, I would. Sometimes, when I recalled the commandment to forgive, even though I could avenge the wrong, I did not. And for those times when I did not have the power to avenge the wrong and lacked the steadfastness to forgive, I would pray that God deal with it. In short, I have always felt some recourse to power, but not the psalmist. His hatred and impotency is so extreme that what he expresses is the height of power – to be able to will and watch one's will become actualized without lifting a finger oneself. Stated in that way, that notion of power is one with which I am familiar.

I don't know what to make of this psalm or how we should understand it within our faith community. Even though my interpretation of its message differs in starkness from Brueggemann's (who sees considerably more hope in 137 than I think the text supports), I am cognizant of his warning that it is not up to us to "justify" such a prayer in Scripture (p. 76), though I must point out that there was some controversy within the early church about whether Psalm 137 should be included within the canon at all. Even so, Brueggemann does offer (p. 74 – 77) a way to understand the message of the psalm that I think is correct though I modify some parts of it.

While we are called to forgiveness, we need to think through what that forgiveness entails. As I implied above, when I am in a position of power, my forgiving my enemies may well take on a flavor of magnanimity: by overcoming my hatred and desire for revenge, forgiving my enemy becomes a way of exalting myself. Even

handing the matter over to God so that he “can deal with it” places me in the position of superiority such that even God serves my needs, much like a celestial valet.

So perhaps this psalm calls us to examine the nature of forgiveness by displaying a state in which the power of the victim plays no role and where there is no possibility of personal exaltation or even latent feelings of superiority. In those instances not only forgiveness but also faith may be inaccessible unless we first confront the full extent of the ugliness and the entire effect of our hatred. If Calvin is correct in his assertion that the Psalms provide us with a full anatomy of the soul, then this psalm is describing an aspect of ourselves that begs for examination. Even as I am repulsed by the display of utter hatred in the psalmist, so much more am I repulsed and frightened by the thought that this hatred may well exist within me and manifest itself in ways of which I am unaware.

What makes forgiveness even under ordinary conditions difficult is that it undermines our pride. When we have been wronged it is natural for us to feel that we deserve to be avenged: not only does justice demand that the world be set aright and rebalanced, but that demand is predicated on the notion that the victim of the wrong has a status which has been denigrated by the wrong. Forgiveness forgoes the vengeance and it seems to imply that it was permissible for the victim to be wronged. That in turn seems to imply that the victim’s status is so subordinate, low or negligible that redressing the balance of justice is unnecessary and may be ignored. It appears that the easiest way for us to deal with this apparent complicity in the denigration and denial of a worthy self that forgiveness entails is by positing and adopting a superior status. This enables us to forgive the offense to self by maintaining that the “real” self is able to assert itself from a

higher, transcending position and therefore grant forgiveness from this station without being in any way complicit in the offense. Forgiveness under this condition is a virtuous exercise which ennobles the forgiver.

In Psalm 137 there is no nobility at all, nor is there a romantic view of the self or community. There is no tolerance for the offender nor any accommodation for the humanity of the oppressor. The psalm is uncompromising in its vision and expression. In so being, it poses questions for us: Are there some offenses that we can not forgive or ought not forgive? Does the call to remain constant in our faith require that there are times that forgiveness be overridden? Is forgiveness from power genuine, or is the only authentic forgiveness one that comes from impotence, or from the recognition of our own hatred? Does forgiveness often provide us with an easy way of accommodating evil and enable us to avoid confrontation both with the evil doer and with those aspects of ourselves we would rather not admit exist? And is that kind of forgiveness inauthentic?

I can not provide answers to those questions as yet, and what I will propose in subsequent chapters may perhaps be better understood as a beginning or a preparation to answers to these questions. Yet I do have some confidence in asserting that this is a subversive psalm. It is certainly subversive in a way that is similar to the gospel's way by attacking the dominant social structure and order, but it does so idiosyncratically through its expression of impotent hate – a hatred the extremely oppressed have for their callous oppressors. But on another level it also subverts our cherished notions of “innocent victims” by explicitly displaying the ramifications of that hatred. It subverts our basic notions of ourselves by introducing us to a dark aspect of

our souls we would rather deny. It calls into question our contemporary notions of tolerance and humanism.

Precisely because it is difficult to understand how Psalm 137 fits within our faith and is consistent with the revelations, messages and expressions we receive from the other psalms, the rest of Scripture, theology and spirituality that it pushes us towards a deeper understanding of our relation to each other, those outside our communities and God. What we lose by ignoring or redacting this psalm is this challenge to reconsider ourselves and what we are called to be in a different light.