

Psalm 137 and its Canonical Placement

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Introduction

Psalm 137 is one of the better known psalms for two reasons: first, vv. 1–4 have the dubious honour of ranking sixth in the list of million-selling singles in the UK, with Boney M's cover of *By the Rivers of Babylon* beating The Beatles' *She Loves You* by two places, and sitting only narrowly behind *You're the One that I Want* from the movie *Grease*. Second, and more significantly, the psalm's concern with loss, grief and anger mixes some of the most evocative and poignant imagery in Scripture with what has been described as the most offensive line in the Psalter: 'happy are those who repay you for what you have done to us – those who seize your infants and dash them against rocks' (137:8b–9).¹

Western Christians struggle to reconcile such a graphic and violent image of vengeance with the New Testament's commandment to love one's enemies. Where is the theological coherence between an apparently bloodthirsty desire for revenge and the teachings of Christ? How may a Christian appropriate such sentiments as Scripture? These are the concerns that tend to spring to mind upon a reading of this psalm, but there are further challenges to interpreting Psalm 137 beyond the fact that contemporary, Western Christian sensibilities struggle with imprecatory psalms. These challenges appear when we seek to explain the canonical placement of Psalm 137. How does a psalm that speaks so graphically of the Exile function in a literary context that in its final form dates to around the third or second century B.C.?

This essay will offer some suggestions that shed light on the canonical position of Psalm 137 and how it contributes to the theology of the Psalter. We will start with an overview of Psalm 137. An introduction to canon criticism of the Psalter will lead into a discussion of the function of Book V. The canonical placement of

¹ John Goldingay, *Psalms Volume 1: Psalms 1-41* (BCOTWP; Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 66-67.

Psalm 137 will then be considered on two levels: first in terms of its relationship to its immediate neighbours, and second in terms of its function within Book V and, by extension, the whole Psalter.

Overview of Psalm 137

The opening verses speak of the pain experienced in exile in Babylon, but the psalm was most likely composed back in Jerusalem. The repeated שָׁם (*šām*) “there” in vv. 1 and 3 suggest that the psalmist is removed from the rivers of Babylon and writes retrospectively, the series of perfect verbs confirming the locative and temporal distance from the Exile itself.² Thus the psalm is most likely dated to the period when Cyrus of Persia allowed the Jews to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the Temple (573–516 B.C.).

The references to harps and songs suggest that the collective “we” in vv. 1–4 refers to Temple musicians or Levitical singers. The deportation by the Babylonians focused on the upper echelons of Judahite society to which the Temple musicians and singers belonged. The psalm opens with expressions of the loss and shame experienced by those deportees who would have previously been responsible for leading the worship celebrations at Temple festivals. The psalmist himself may or may not have been a deportee himself. If he were, he would have returned to Jerusalem an elderly man, struggling to reconcile the present state of the Temple ruins with the vibrant worship festivals of his younger days. If he were a second-generation exile, then the emotion conveyed through the psalm demonstrates the extent to which the exilic experience was seared into the post-exilic inherited memory.

The psalm falls into three sections, although there is disagreement regarding the exact division of these. The relationship of v. 4 to what precedes and follows is problematic: does it answer the question of v. 3? Or does it introduce the pledge of commitment in vv. 5–6? Numerous English versions (e.g. NIV, NRSV, NASB, ESV, NKJV) divide the psalm after verse 3, but there is good reason to extend the first strophe to include verse 4.³ The geographical

² Occasionally, שָׁם functions as a locative adverb denoting near rather than distant events e.g. Psalm 48:6, 76:3. There is, of course, some fluidity in the way the perfect should be understood in Hebrew poetry, reflected by the NET Bible’s translation of all these perfects into English presents.

³ So Frank Lothar Hossfeld and Erich Zenger, *Psalms 3: A Commentary on Psalms 101–150* (Hermeneia; Minneapolis: Fortress, 2011), 513; Leslie C. Allen, *Psalms 101–150* (WBC; Waco: Word, 1983), 235, John Goldingay, *Psalms Volume 3: 90–150* (BCOTWP; Grand

markers “By the rivers of Babylon” and “on foreign soil” both use the preposition עַל (*‘al*) and form an *inclusio* around that part of the psalm characterized by nine instances of the first person plural suffix נוּ (-*nû*). The psalmist switches usage of the first person plural to the singular in vv. 5–6 (the second strophe), calling down curses upon himself should his commitment to Jerusalem ever waver. The final strophe shifts gear further into an impassioned plea for vengeance. The two sub-units 7a–b and 8–9 in this strophe are thematically connected through the imprecations against the parallel Sons of Edom (not reflected in many English translations) and Daughter (of) Babylon.

Strophe I

Clay tablets found at Nippur and Niru show an extensive system of irrigation canals in Babylon. Psalm 137 depicts the deportees beside these canals as they remember Zion, weeping over the loss of their home and the crisis of faith and identity. The juxtaposition of Babylon and Zion in the opening sentence is programmatic for the whole psalm; the psalm is predicated upon the polarities symbolized by these two cities. If יֹשְׁבְנוּ (*yāšabnû*, 137:1) is intended as “sit” then it is possible that the psalmist is describing a posture and location associated with mourning (see Neh 1:4 and Ezra 8:21). The verb may also be understood more broadly as “dwell” in which case these opening verses could refer to the general life situation of the deportees as they worked beside the canals, maintaining them or watering crops.⁴

Musical instruments are designed to be played; therefore the dismal image of harps hanging unused in the trees appears to complete the picture of abject mourning (137:2). However there is worse in store for the deportees. Not allowed to weep in peace, they are tormented by their captors mockingly demanding that they sing songs of Zion for their entertainment. The causal conjunction כִּי (*kî*) “for” indicates that this is the real reason for the silent harps. They are now much more than a physical testimony to the deportees’ pain and sorrow; rather they are symbols of protest against the

Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 604, pace Geoffrey W. Grogan, *Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2008), 215; Allan Harman, *Psalms* (Ferne, Scotland: Mentor, 1998), 427.

⁴ Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms* 3, 515.

conquerors' demands for the subordination of the Judahites and their cult to pagans and their gods.

The anguish stirred by the memory of Jerusalem is exacerbated by the taunts of the captors and emphasised by syntagmatic and phonological parallelism of the poetry in v. 3. The stiches show a progression of thought that intensifies the demands of the Babylonians and the humiliation of the exiles. The Qal participle שׁוֹבְנֵינוּ (*šōbēnū*) "our captors" simply expresses the hierarchy created when one person holds others against their will. שׁוֹבְנֵינוּ (pronounced 'shovenu') though, gives way to תּוֹלְלֵינוּ, (pronounced 'tolalenu', note the assonance), a problematic *hapax legomenon* most likely meaning "tormentors" or "mockers", that fills out the way in which the captives were treated and heightens the portrayal of their misery.

This "parallelism of greater precision"⁵ is developed further in the series of demands imposed by the captors. The neutral term "song" is defined more specifically as שִׁמְחָה (*šimhā*), a word that normally means joy or joyfulness, but by extension can refer to a song of joy, or even a song of military victory.⁶ The prescribed content of the song is next defined as a song of Zion, the kind of song exemplified by Psalms 48, 76, and 87 and characterized by the exaltation of Zion as God's enduring city. The demand for such a song was a particularly cruel taunt, intended to humiliate via the bitter irony of a conqueror's songs on vanquished lips. The development of thought in the stiches of v. 3 can thus be expressed as:

Our captors asked us for a song; our mockers a joyous victory song,
"Sing for us about your impregnable city and your God who lived
there!"

(my paraphrase)

Verse 4 answers the demand imposed by the Babylonians. It most likely provides an explanation to the psalm's Jerusalem audience for the captives' resistance and has a modal sense "How *could* we sing Yahweh's song on foreign soil?"⁷ There is an interesting reversal of

⁵ David J.A. Clines, "The Parallelism of Greater Precision," in *Directions in Biblical Hebrew Poetry* (ed. Elaine R. Follis; JSOTSS 40; Sheffield: JSOT, 1987), 77-100.

⁶ Lenowitz Harris, "The Mock-Simha of Psalm 137," in *Directions in Biblical Hebrew Poetry* (ed. Elaine R. Follis; JSOTSS 40; Sheffield: JSOT, 1987), 149-160.

⁷ Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms 3*, 516.

the parallelism of precision from the previous verse: the psalmist broadens “Songs of Zion” to the more general designation “Yahweh’s song”. For the exiles, the Babylonians’ mockery exposed the theological crisis of the Exile. The ironic demand for a Song of Zion was the equivalent of a playground taunt that cuts deeply. “Our god’s bigger than yours, nah-nah-na-na-nah” was the effective cry, and it struck at the very heart of the Judahites’ self-understanding.

The presence of Yahweh in the Temple, and the presence of his chosen people in the land he had given to them, were central to the Judahites’ covenant identity. The removal of those covenant markers created an existential crisis additional to the trauma of having been conquered and exiled. Therefore it was not simply victory songs that could not be sung by this conquered people, it was *any* kind of God-song. No song that had previously been sung in Jerusalem, and more specifically in the Temple, to the praise of God whose presence dwelt therein, could be sung to entertain pagans whose gods now appeared more powerful than their own. The integrity of the Judahites could not be compromised by fusing their religious identity with that of foreigners.

Strophe 2

The theme of remembering from v. 1 is continued in the second strophe. Whereas the first strophe comprised a retrospective portrayal of exilic abandonment and desolation, the second strophe brings the psalmist’s experience into the present and expresses his current and future commitment to Jerusalem.

The double self-curse involving hand and tongue are suggestive of a musician invoking a punishment that will render him unable to play an instrument or sing. However, the hand and tongue may also be metonyms for action and speech more generally: if the psalmist fails to make Jerusalem the centre point of his affections then may he be struck dumb and paralysed. The self-curse thus extends beyond the psalmist’s likely profession to fundamental elements of life itself.⁸

Remembering is a major device used in this psalm to link past, present and future: the psalmist looks back to the past and expresses the sense of desolation and alienation felt in Babylon as the exiles

⁸ Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms* 3, 518. George Savran, “How Can We Sing the Song of the Lord? The Strategy of Lament in Psalm 137,” *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 112/1 (2000), 50.

remembered the glories of their former homeland; he invokes curses upon himself if he fails to remember his commitment to Jerusalem in the present time; yet he also looks forward to the future when God will remember the suffering of his people and fulfil his promises to them.

Strophe 3

The psalm now changes from remembering as an action performed by the psalmist and his community to remembering as an imperative directed at God. Although the involvement of the Edomites in the destruction of Jerusalem is not mentioned in the biblical historical narratives, Obadiah 10–14 confirms their presence and solidarity with the Babylonians. It is not clear who the addressees of the direct quote are. Are they the Edomites spurring one another on? Or are the Edomites urging on the Babylonian troops in their destruction of the city? Either way, the psalmist invokes the principle of *lex talionis*: the punishment meted upon the Edomites should match what they had done to Jerusalem. Since the Edomites called for the total destruction of Jerusalem, the psalmist likewise wishes the same upon them, although he leaves the agency of their punishment for God to determine.

Whereas 137:7 constitutes a plea to God against the Edomites, 137:8a expresses the utmost confidence that Babylon will receive its just desserts. The city is doomed to destruction. Babylon is addressed in identical terms (“Daughter Babylon”) in several prophetic texts (Is 47:1; Jer 50:42; 51:33) that speak of the downfall of the city which is a metonym for the Babylonian empire as whole. This form of address thus evokes these prophecies and the audience is thereby reminded that the psalmist’s confidence is based upon God’s prior promises and he may have complete assurance that God will fulfil them. The beatitude of 137:8b explicitly states the principle of *lex talionis* and establishes the expectation that whatever follows in 137:9 is, therefore, an illustration of what the Babylonians did to the Judahites. Once again, the agent of the enemy’s destruction is left unnamed. However, the linking of this beatitude with the prior plea to God in v. 8 makes it clear to the reader that it is God who is ultimately responsible for justice.

The shocking language of 137:9 has its roots in Ancient Near Eastern war practices and a number of OT texts refer to similar acts of violence (2 Kings 8:12; Hos 10:14; 13:16; Nah 3:10). The killing of children points to the removal of the enemy’s means of

continuation as a nation. In this respect, the psalm fills out with graphic detail the prophecies that had already been spoken of Babylon's destruction. As a representative of the powerless, the psalmist cries out to God, not only seeking recompense for the atrocities experienced by his people, but also handing over responsibility for that recompense to God as the only source of legitimate justice.⁹

Having examined the psalm itself, we may now move on to considering its position within the Psalter. We will start with an introduction to the application of canon criticism to the Book of Psalms.

Canon Criticism of the Psalms

For many years the Psalter was regarded as the Hymnbook of Second Temple Judaism, a 'Liquorice Allsorts' collection of songs and prayers for Israel's cult, with a purely cult-functional purpose. However, Brevard Childs' development of the canon-critical method demonstrated the value of working within the interpretative structure that Scripture received from those who formed and used it in its final state.¹⁰ When Child's doctoral student, Gerald Wilson, applied this newly developed method to the Psalter, he made some astonishing discoveries about the way in which the final form of the book affects its interpretation.

Wilson examined forty-two Sumerian third millennium BC stereotyped hymns dedicated to temples, arranged according to apparent political and geographical motivations, and a Catalogue of Hymn Incipits comprising twenty-two cuneiform tablets cataloguing numerous hymns by their opening lines. Wilson persuasively argued a precedent from such hymn collections and catalogues for similar editorial activity in the Psalter that infuses the book with theological reflection and didactic purpose.¹¹

Prior to the Exile, Israel had been a nation whose identity was bound up with her king and cult. When she could no longer look to the monarchy or Temple for leadership and identity, she turned to

⁹ For a detailed discussion of the imprecatory psalms see Erich Zenger, *A God of Vengeance? Understanding the Psalms of Divine Wrath* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1996) or John L. Day, *Crying Out for Justice: What the Psalms Teach Us about Mercy and Vengeance in an Age of Terrorism* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2005).

¹⁰ Brevard S. Childs, *Introduction to the Old Testament as Scripture* (London: SCM, 1979), 73.

¹¹ Gerald H. Wilson, *The Editing of the Hebrew Psalter* (SBL Dissertation Series 76; Chico: Scholars Press, 1985).

adherence to the Torah (e.g. Neh 10:29). Torah-obedience, therefore, became the ‘hermeneutical underpinning’ for the post-exilic community.¹² Torah should not be restricted to the Mosaic law, however, but more widely defined as ‘instruction’. Consequently, the exhortation of Psalm 1:2 to read what follows as Torah, divine instruction, provides the hermeneutical lens through which to read the Psalter and indicates how Israel’s songs and prayers to God became words to the wise from God. As James Sanders notes, “In crisis situations, only the old, tried and true has any real authority”¹³, and so it appears that the nation’s sacred songs, already authoritative for worship, were loosened from their cultic context and subordinated to a new theological function, namely to provide a meaningful rationale for the post-exilic community in their quest for survival as the people of God.¹⁴

Thus Wilson pioneered an interpretation of the Psalter as a literary and canonical whole with a coherent message and structure. In the thirty years since the publication of Wilson’s ground-breaking work, many have sought to define the content and shape of that coherent message and structure, albeit with differing results.¹⁵ Jerome Creach sees a concern for the destiny of the righteous as the unifying factor, whereas James Mays suggests that the world and humanity be understood in terms of the reign of God.¹⁶ Wilson preferred a development in thought from the failure of the Davidic kingship to the celebration of Yahweh’s kingship. All of these elements are present in the Psalter and the challenge remains to identify a structure and message that gives adequate recognition to the nuances at play in the book. The overview that follows is based on Wilson’s work, with additional input from more recent scholarship.

¹² Nancy deClaisse-Walford, *Reading From the Beginning: The Shaping of the Hebrew Psalter* (Macon, GA: Mercer University Press, 1997), 78.

¹³ James A. Sanders, *From Sacred Story to Sacred Text* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1987), 21.

¹⁴ Childs, *Introduction*, 514-5; deClaisse-Walford, *Reading*, 120.

¹⁵ It is important to note that acceptance of editorial shaping to the Psalter with hermeneutical significance is not universal. Notable deniers include John Goldingay and Craig Broyles. Broyles argues that the psalms’ original function was to help God’s people in their worship, and removing them from this encounter denies the purpose for which they originally came to be (Craig C. Broyles, *Psalms* (NIBC; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1999), 8). Likewise, Goldingay asserts that “[i]nstead of looking for a structure in the Psalter, a more fruitful way of seeking a grasp on the Psalms as a whole is the more traditional approach of seeking to understand the types of psalms that recur, categorizing them into various ways of speaking to God and being addressed by God (Goldingay, *Psalms* 1, 37).

¹⁶ Jerome F.D. Creach, *The Destiny of the Righteous in the Psalms* (St Louis, Missouri: Chalice, 2008); James L. Mays, *The Lord Reigns: a Theological Handbook to the Psalms* (Westminster: John Knox Press, 1994).

Wilson's evidence for intentional editorial activity includes explicit indicators such as psalm superscriptions and the postscript at Ps 72:20, tacit indicators such as the grouping of psalms with doxologies, the grouping of the Hallelujah psalms and the placing of certain psalms at the 'seams' of the five-book divisions. The absence of psalm superscriptions is also significant. For example, the position of Psalms 1 and 2 as untitled psalms at the head of a section dominated by psalms with author designations and superscriptions suggests that they are to be viewed separately from the other psalms. The identification of wisdom psalms at key points led Wilson to postulate a wisdom-orientation to the Psalter with Psalms 1 and 145 forming a wisdom framework around a book of divine instruction.¹⁷

Within that wisdom framework, Wilson noted that Books I to III of the Psalter appear to trace the development and ultimate failure of the Davidic covenant. By the end of Book III Psalm 89 remembers the Davidic covenant in dim and distant terms (89:19–20; 49), and despite God's promise to extend that covenant to future generations (89:4, 29, 36), the covenant is viewed as failed (89:44). The powerful description of the failure of that covenant in 89:38–44 sets the scene for Books IV and V to offer a new perspective and theological resolution, namely a return to the Mosaic covenant and a focus on the kingship of God. Now that the Davidic covenant is gone, a reliance on God alone is Israel's mandate.¹⁸ Book IV in particular celebrates the kingship of God with the cluster of יהוה מלך ('Yahweh reigns') psalms (93, 96, 97, 99), and the Psalter concludes with a resounding expression of praise (Psalms 146–150).

¹⁷ Book I contains a cluster of Davidic wisdom psalms (Psalms 32, 34 and 37) and although not normally considered wisdom, Psalm 41 closes Book I with the בֵּרֵךְ "blessed" formula used in Psalm 1. Wisdom psalms cluster again in Book V (Psalms 112, 127, 128, 133), along with the wisdom-influenced Psalm 111 and the great Torah Psalm 119. Along the way, Psalm 49 appears in Book II; Psalm 62 also bears wisdom influences. The sapiential vocabulary of Psalm 73 justifies its position in opening Book IV, whilst wisdom influences also appear in Psalms 78, 92 and 94. Interestingly, in post-exilic Israel, Torah piety and wisdom became so closely linked that by the early second-century BC, wisdom and Torah had become indistinguishable; in fact, Ben Sira links Wisdom, who proceeds from mouth of God with the written Torah (Sir 24:3, 23). See Anthony R. Ceresko, "The Sage in the Psalms," in *The Sage in Israel and the Ancient Near East* (eds. John Gammie and Leo G. Perdue; Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 1990), 217-230.

¹⁸ Gerald H. Wilson, "Shaping the Psalter: A Consideration of Editorial Linkage in the Book of Psalms," in *The Shape and Shaping of the Psalter* (ed. J. Clinton McCann Jr.; JSOTSS 159; Sheffield: JSOT, 1993), 75.

Wilson's overall approach has garnered much support with subsequent scholarship refining and amplifying his work. For example, J. Clinton McCann Jr. notes that the answer to the problem posed by the Exile is not restricted to Books IV and V, but is anticipated earlier in the Psalter. Psalms in Book III alternate between expressions of lament and hope whereby God is either celebrated as universal judge or his deeds on behalf of Israel despite her past faithlessness are recounted.¹⁹ Thus trust in the Davidic covenant, the traditional basis for hope, is rejected in Book III, but hope itself is not entirely abandoned.

Other scholars have sought to reconcile the enduring presence of royal psalms within a corpus that places so much emphasis upon the failure of Davidic kingship.²⁰

Biblical evidence outside the Psalter demonstrates that expectations did continue for the future restoration of David's line (Zech 12:7–9) and Psalm 2's lack of superscription, plus the thematic and linguistic links between Psalms 1 and 2, suggest a dual introduction to the whole Psalter including a messianic orientation. If then, at the time of the Psalter's final redaction, the royal psalms were understood along eschatological and messianic lines, then right from Psalm 2, the Psalter addresses the question of the continuing validity of the divine promises with the expectation that Yahweh's kingship will eventually result in the fulfilment of those promises.²¹ This helps explain the puzzling number of Davidic psalms in Books IV and V. Perhaps these point to the modelling of David as the ideal person who trusts in God, but they may equally point to a strongly messianic theology.

¹⁹ J. Clinton McCann Jr. "Books I-III and the Editorial Purpose of the Psalter," in *The Shape and Shaping of the Psalter* (ed. J. Clinton McCann Jr.; JSOTSS 159; Sheffield: JSOT, 1993), 93-107.

²⁰ In his early work, Wilson noted that the strategic placing of royal psalms (especially Psalms 2 and 144) gives the Psalter not only a wisdom frame but also a royal-covenantal focus. However, he postulated that the former takes precedence due to the primary positioning of wisdom Psalms 1 and 145, and the wisdom shaping of covenantal Psalms 2 and 144 (which form an inclusio around the covenantal framework). In later discussion, Wilson allowed for a greater messianic thrust to the Psalter although he maintained it was still to be understood within the wider framework of the kingship of God, the role of the 'anointed servant' being to usher in God's reign. (Gerald H. Wilson, *Psalms Volume 1* (NIV Application Commentary; Grand Rapids: Zondervan 2002), 711).

²¹ Harry P. Nasuti, *Defining the Sacred Songs: Genre, Tradition and the Post-critical Interpretation of the Psalms* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 1999), 203; David C. Mitchell, *The Message of the Psalter: an Eschatological Programme in the Book of Psalms* (JSOT Supplement Series 252; Sheffield: JSOT Press, 1997), 255.

Thus the Psalter is far more than a rough collection of songs for various circumstances, grouped by type or superscript. The songs drive a narrative that is intended to inform and transform, and the narrative charts a trajectory from lament to praise. Individual psalms play their part in the overarching narrative through various linking devices: they might be connected by the absence or presence of superscripts; lexical similarities between preceding or subsequent psalms might emphasise a particular theme; or psalms of a similar form *Gattung* might flavour a certain book or book section. For example, the predominance of lament psalms in Book I sets the tone of grief and despair experienced by the exiles, whilst the ‘Yahweh reigns’ Psalms in Book IV inspire confidence and hope through the sovereignty of God.

Within the five divisions of the Psalter, Book V presents the most challenges for the reader wanting to discern the theological focus of its editors. Book IV presents the kingship of God as the only enduring hope for Israel and there is a sustained, thematic unity to the book. It concludes with the possibility that within the divine kingship is provision for a future Davidic hope, so long as Yahweh’s sovereignty is upheld.²² Book V, however, as Wilson notes, is more diverse, with few roadsigns and landmarks.²³ There are several obvious groupings of psalms identified by superscripts (the Songs of Ascents Psalms 120–134, and two Davidic groups, Psalms 108–110 and 138–145), plus the concluding grouping of Hallelujah Psalms (146–150). Psalms 113–118 form an additional grouping known as the Passover Hallel. The challenge is to identify a theological structure to the book that also takes account of the psalms in Book V that fall outside these groupings, especially the two ‘awkwardly placed’ psalms, 119 and 137.

Book V

In essence, Book V acts as a response to the kingship of God as set out in Book IV.²⁴ The call to thanksgiving for the enduring love of the Lord in Psalm 107:1 is programmatic for the rest of Book V.

²² See Lindsay Wilson, “On Psalms 103–106 as a Closure to Book IV of the Psalter,” in *The Composition of the Book of Psalms* (ed. Erich Zenger; Leuven: Uitgeverij, 2010), 755–766 for a discussion of how Psalms 103–106, in closing Book IV, leave open the possibility of a future Davidic hope.

²³ Wilson, “Shaping the Psalter,” 79.

²⁴ I am indebted to Erich Zenger, “The Composition and Theology of the Fifth Book of Psalms, Psalms 107–145,” *JSOT* 80 (1998), 77–102 and Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms 3* for their insights into the overall structure of Book V.

Lexical and thematic similarities plus the wisdom orientation of their respective conclusions indicate that Psalms 107 and 145 form an *inclusio* around the content of Book V, with Psalms 146–150 serving as a final doxology, an extended crescendo of praise.

The three Davidic psalms (108–110) take up the theme of Books I–IV. Psalm 108:6–11 contrasts the promises of God with the present reality of foreign domination. Psalm 109 furthers the cry of distress and plea for deliverance. Psalm 110 answers those cries with the promise of judgement over the nations and a renewed messianic role for the king. It is striking that already in these early psalms of Book V we see echoes not only of the dominant themes of Books I–IV, but also of Psalms 1 and 2. The wisdom theme of Psalm 1 is taken up in Psalm 108, and the messianic theme of Psalm 2 in Psalm 110.

Psalms 111 and 112 reiterate the wisdom theme introduced in 107:43. Psalm 111 is particularly interesting at this point in the Psalter. It calls to remembrance God's works in the past (111:6) and praises them as faithful and just, done in faithfulness and uprightness (111:7–9). In the light of Book IV, this psalm emphasises the confidence and hope that remain for those who put their trust in the sovereignty of God. However, when viewed in the light of all that has been set forth so far in the Psalter, the psalm takes on a cautionary aspect. It is hard to imagine that a post-exilic audience could appropriate 111:7–9 without remembering the events of the Exile. For a people living with the aftermath of the Exile, this psalm would surely cause them to ponder the covenant disobedience that led to the loss of their land. From this perspective, the call to fear the Lord and follow his precepts (111:10) is more than an exhortation towards a godly life such as we might find in the Book of Proverbs. It implicitly carries with it a reminder of the corporate consequences of failing to live such a life.

Psalms 113–118 form a unit known as the Passover Hallel. This unit celebrates the sovereignty of God over all the nations and the place of God's people among them. It recalls the first Exodus (hence the name 'Passover Hallel') in Psalm 114. The rescue and resettlement of the poor and needy (113:7–9) is celebrated from the perspective of the individual in Psalms 116 and 118 and corresponds to the rescue of God's people from Babylon, the second Exodus.

Psalm 118 ends with a reference to cult participation in the Jerusalem Temple. The next major grouping of Psalms is the so-called Pilgrim Psalter, Psalms 120–134. These psalms, with the

superscription ‘Song of Ascents’, chart the search for a place of security away from hostilities (Psalms 120–121) that culminates in the celebration of life on Mount Zion (Psalm 133) in the house of the Lord (Psalm 134). Given the Zion theology of this psalm grouping, Psalm 119 appears to interrupt the flow of thought from the end of Psalm 118 to the Songs of Ascents. However, Psalm 118 presents God’s rescue of the needy as gates through which the righteous may enter (118:19–20). In this respect, Psalm 119, that extols the Torah as the source of wisdom and instruction for a godly life, functions as a commentary on the Torah-adherent life as characteristic of both the righteous who have been rescued and the life to which they have been rescued. In addition to looking back to Psalm 118, it also anticipates Psalms 120–134 in terms of living out the Torah in preparation for pilgrimage to Jerusalem.

Psalms 135 and 136 are two historical psalms of praise and thanksgiving celebrating God’s acts of redemption in the first Exodus and the instalment of the Israelites in the land. They are linked to the Pilgrim Psalter by the lexical and thematic connections between Psalms 134 and 135. The Pilgrim Psalter concludes with the exhortation to the servants of the Lord to sing his praise in the sanctuary; Psalms 135 and 136 thus stand as expressions of that praise to be offered in the house of the Lord. Although the psalms’ historical retrospectives are limited to Israel’s entry into the land, Psalm 135 concludes with a reference to the Lord as the one who dwells in Jerusalem, reinforcing the link with the Pilgrim Psalter. As songs that offer from within Zion praise to God who dwells in Zion, these are representative of the kind of ‘God-song’ that the exiles of Psalm 137 so vehemently refused to sing on foreign soil.

Before we are in a position to consider the placement of Psalm 137, we must first examine the final grouping of psalms in the Psalter before the Hallelujah Psalms 146–150, the Davidic Psalms 138–145. Psalms 138 and 145 form an *inclusio* around this group of psalms. They focus on praising the name of God because of his greatness and glory. Within these brackets, Psalm 139 is a profession of trust that leads into a series of psalms (140–144) of lament and supplication. Given the overall trajectory from lament to praise in the Psalter it is perhaps surprising that a group of psalms so focused on suffering and distress should be placed so close to the end of the Psalter with its grand finale of praise. However, even after the return of the exiles to the land, the Jewish people still lived with the effects of conquest. They were still subject to foreign powers; first the Persians, then the Greeks. The second exodus had not provided

everything that the returnees and their descendants had expected. Life was still harsh and uncertain. They were a people living with deferred hope who were effectively experiencing the unending consequences of the Exile. In this respect, the Psalter addresses 'real life' experience. Rather than presenting an escapist ideal, it testifies to the fact that God is to be praised in the midst of suffering and distress. A further significance to the positioning of this final group of lament psalms will be considered below in the discussion regarding the canonical placement of Psalm 137.

Prominent in this final group of lament psalms is the wisdom perspective of cause and effect, especially in regard to the wicked. The psalmist prays that they will reap the consequences of their own behaviour (140:9) and fall into their own nets (141:10). But not only do these psalms express a desire for the self-destruction of the wicked, they pray too for God's judgement and punishment to fall upon their enemies for what they have done (140:10–12; 143:12). There is a corresponding emphasis on the preservation of the righteous and protection from both wickedness and the wicked (140:1–2, 4–5; 141:3–4, 8–9; 142:6).

So the question we now need to ask is 'Why has Psalm 137 been placed between the historical psalms of praise and thanksgiving (Psalms 135 and 136) and the final Davidic grouping?' In terms of continuity of thought, Psalm 138 would seem to follow naturally from the historical psalms pairing and the Pilgrim Psalter; it expresses praise to God's name in continuity with Psalms 135 and 136, and its reference to bowing down towards the Temple links back to the Songs of Ascents in the Pilgrim Psalter. Just as Psalm 119 appeared at first glance to be an intrusive interpolation between the Passover Hallel and the Pilgrim Psalter, so Psalm 137 seems to interrupt the flow of thought in the latter part of Book V. If the final redactors had been constrained by a fixed historical precedent for keeping Psalm 137 next to its preceding and succeeding psalms, then this would possibly explain its position, but evidence from the Dead Sea Scrolls suggests otherwise.

When the Qumran manuscripts are compared with the Masoretic arrangement of the psalms, there is marked similarity in order between the psalms in Books I–III. However, there are far more instances of variation in order in Books IV and V. This suggests that the order of psalms in Books I–III was fixed much earlier than that of Books IV and V. Likewise, the presence of Psalms 121–132 in order in the Qumran Psalms Scroll 11QPs^a suggests that a fixed

grouping of most of the Pilgrim Psalter existed as a prior arrangement for the final editors of the Masoretic Psalter to draw on, one which was also used in the arrangement represented by the Qumran library. Psalm 137 is attested in the same scroll, where it is preceded by Psalm 139 and followed by Psalm 138. This suggests that there was a common tradition linking Psalms 137 and 138, but nothing more. Indeed, except for Psalms 121–132, the only similarities between the Masoretic and Qumran arrangements of Book V comprise pairings rather than groups, thus suggesting that there was a certain looseness surrounding the ordering of psalms in this book and that the final redactors of the Masoretic Psalter had editorial licence to arrange the psalms to suit their own theological agenda. There is no accidental placement of the ‘awkward’ psalms, 119 and 137; rather they play a decisive role in the theology of Book V.

The Canonical Placement of Psalm 137

a) Psalm 137 and its Immediate Neighbours

Psalm 137 is positioned immediately after two historical psalms that remember and celebrate Yahweh’s covenant gift of the land to the nation. The theme of remembering in Psalms 135 and 136 is thus continued with the repeated use of “remember” in Psalm 137. But the placement of this psalm immediately after Psalms 135 and 136 causes the remembering in Psalm 137 to serve two different purposes. On the one hand, it situates the psalmist’s plea to God to remember the suffering of his people and restore them in the context of God’s prior redemptive acts. But on the other, it provides a stark reminder to the Jews of the consequences of the failure of the Davidic covenant. In calling upon God to remember when the Edomites stormed Jerusalem and meted out justice, the psalmist is implicitly calling to mind that same time when God withdrew his assistance and forgot his people. The theological crisis brought about by the Exile was centred on the loss of those elements that confirmed Israel’s chosen nationhood: the people’s presence in God’s land and God’s presence in the Temple. The positioning of Psalm 137 therefore emphasises the reversal of those very signs of covenant nationhood that were celebrated in the two previous psalms.²⁵

²⁵ Allen, *Psalms 101-150*, 241.

Erich Zenger denies Psalm 137 the Deuteronomistic theology of judgement that interpreted the Exile as ‘just punishment’ for the nation, and he is correct in so far as the psalm is interpreted in isolation.²⁶ However, the canonical position of the psalm functions in part as a commentary on its interpretation and insists that the nation must take responsibility for the experience of Exile. The prophetic perspective that Babylon will be judged for its treatment of God’s people (Jer 51:20–26) is certainly present in the final strophe, but this element does not negate the Deuteronomistic perspective that is created by reading the psalm in light of Books I–III and Psalms 135–136.

Psalms 135 and 136 also represent ‘God-songs’ that celebrate the presence of God who dwells in Zion. Psalm 137 laments the fact that the exiles could not sing any type of God-song on foreign soil, not least a Song of Zion. When we consider the form of Psalm 137, it appears that this psalm is actually a modified Song of Zion. Since the advent of form criticism, scholars have struggled to assign Psalm 137 to a particular *Gattung* (form). Leslie Allen notes that it “defies straightforward classification in form-critical terms” and Claus Westermann even denies its identification as a true psalm, preferring to describe it nebulously as “something rather like a folk song.”²⁷ Whilst it is unhelpful to attempt to stuff a psalm too tightly into a form-critical strait-jacket (after all, the psalmists themselves were unaware of form-critical classifications), the conformity or otherwise of a psalm to a particular *Gattung* facilitates both a deeper understanding of the psalm and an appreciation for its individuality. In this case, the comparison of Psalm 137 with psalms that are classified as Songs of Zion yields fruitful results.

There are elements within Psalm 137 that correspond with ‘genuine’ Songs of Zion in the Psalter. Direct address of Zion is one such feature (e.g. 87:3; 122:2, 6–9). The beatitude formula “Blessed/happy is the one who” is another (84:4–5). But this is no standard Song of Zion. The usual celebration of the city’s impregnability (e.g. 46:4–7; 48:8; 87:5) is replaced with a reference to its destruction and the perfect verb forms that would usually rehearse the victory of God over Israel’s enemies (e.g. 48:4–6; 76:3–9) are now employed to narrate the pain of loss and despair (137:1–

²⁶ Hossfeld and Zenger, *Psalms* 3, 520.

²⁷ Allen, *Psalms 101–150*, 237; Claus Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981), 256.

3).²⁸ The beatitude formula is no longer applied to those who praise God in his city, but to those who avenge the perpetrators of its destruction. These reversals combine pathos with irony; they emphasise the depth of loss experienced by the exiles but they also cause the psalm to function as a song that manages to mock the very people who set out to taunt them. This Song of Zion cannot offer the usual praise thanksgiving for victory and security, but the imprecations of vv. 7–9 turn the impotence of the exiles in vv. 1–3 into an ironic cry against their tormentors. They asked the exiles for a Song of Zion; the psalmist has responded by composing such a song, but has embedded within it a call for the mockers' downfall.²⁹

Thus the reader of the Psalter is confronted by two themes through the placing of Psalm 137 immediately after Psalms 135 and 136. First, the reader is forced to recall the devastation caused by the failure of the Davidic covenant. Second, modifications to the usual Song of Zion present the expectation that God will act decisively to bring about vengeance for his people. This is set in the wider context of God's previous redemptive acts that were remembered in Psalms 135 and 136 and provide hope and confidence that God's long-term promises will prevail. The reader does not have to wait long for confirmation that God is faithful to his promises. The praises and thanksgiving of Psalm 138 constitute a God-song to be sung back on home ground. As such, it is a counterpart to Psalm 137, and the celebration of God's kingship that extends over all the earth (138:4–5) emphasises that the impassioned plea at the end of Psalm 137 was not ill-founded.

b) The Function of Psalm 137 within Book V

There are close links between Psalm 137 and the psalms immediately around it. But when we consider the grand overarching narrative of the Psalter, a position so close to the end of Book V seems an unlikely place to situate a song whose historical context would make it a better fit in the earlier sections of the Psalter lamenting the failure of the Davidic covenant. Why should it be necessary to emphasise the consequences of the Exile at this point in the Psalter?

A possible answer is to be found in the historical context of the final redaction of the Psalter. By this time, the Jewish people had lived

²⁸ Allen, *Psalms 101–150*, 238.

²⁹ Savran, "How Can We Sing," 58; Lenowitz, "The Mock-Simha," 157.

with the effects of conquest for many generations. However, their troubles were not limited to the fact that they were still subject to foreign rule. Further tensions arose because of the differing extents to which Jews embraced Hellenism, particularly during the Seleucid period. Conflict was now not only between Jew and Gentile, but between Jew and fellow-Jew. The laments within the Davidic grouping, Psalms 138–145, may very well be intended to speak into this historical context and in this case Psalm 137 would serve an important pivotal role between these psalms and the prior focus on Zion theology in the Pilgrim Psalter.³⁰

The final grouping of laments, Psalms 140–144, presents the individual as a victim of evil and evildoers, but Psalm 139 additionally suggests that perhaps the psalmist is tempted to join in with their wickedness. He decries those who hate God and declares his own hatred for them (139:21–22), but at the same time articulates doubts about his own integrity (139:23–24). The presence of these doubts is confirmed by references to protection from the temptations of evil (141:3–4) and a plea for direction in the right way (143:8).

These psalms express the kind of dilemma faced by pious Jews during the Hellenistic period. Torn between their desire to follow the Torah and the attractions of Hellenism, they would surely experience self-doubt as they turned their back on fellow-Jews who embraced Hellenism. All the descriptions of the enemies and opponents then in the final Davidic grouping are characteristics that could be applied by a Jew to his fellow Jew denouncing his neighbour's Hellenism as apostasy. These characteristics extend beyond the lament psalms themselves across the whole final Davidic grouping, thereby adding thematic cohesion to the final redaction. For example, Psalm 138 refers to the proud (138:6); the wicked of Psalm 139 speak against God with malicious intent (139:20), they hate him and rise up against him (139:21); the poison of vipers is on their lips in Psalm 140 (140:3) and they seek to persecute the faithful psalmist (140:4–5; 141:9). But Psalm 145 is clear that in contrast to those who call on him in truth, the wicked will be destroyed (145:20).

³⁰ Harm van Grol, "David and his Chasidim: Place and Function of Psalms 138–145," in *The Composition of the Book of Psalms* (ed. Erich Zenger; Leuven: Uitgeverij, 2010), 332–335; "The Snares Laid for Faithful Lips: Hellenistic Apostasy in Psalm 141," in *The Composition of the Book of Psalms* (ed. Erich Zenger; Leuven: Uitgeverij, 2010), 711–722.

Harm van Grol suggests that the final redactor used Psalm 137 to transition into this final Davidic grouping since the issue of the conflict between ‘the own and the foreign’ characteristic of the tension between pious and Hellenist Jew is also the key issue in Psalm 137.³¹ His argument is persuasive but incomplete. The psalm’s refusal to fuse Judahite identity with that of foreigners does anticipate the historical context of the final redactors of the Psalter, but it also provides a retrospective on a previous fusion of Judahite identity with that of foreigners: the idolatry and spiritual adultery committed by both Israel and Judah that led to the downfall of the two kingdoms. When, through the canonical placement of the psalm, readers are forced to recall the removal of the signs of covenant nationhood and the reasons for their removal, Psalm 137 takes on a cautionary purpose. It is not accidentally or awkwardly placed. Rather, it takes up the caution implicit in Psalm 111 and forces readers to confront the mistakes of previous generations and consider whether their current behaviour is directing them down the same path. The impassioned cries for deliverance from the wicked in the final group of laments suggest that the final redactors of the Psalter saw the influences of Hellenism as equally dangerous to national identity as the earlier instances of covenant disobedience.

The great Torah Psalm 119 exhorts the wise to a Torah-adherent life and anticipates Psalms 120–134 in terms of living out the Torah in preparation for pilgrimage to Jerusalem. But the reader of the Psalter must be mindful of the lessons of history. Psalm 137 brings those lessons to the fore and reminds the reader of the consequences of the failure to live a Torah-oriented life. In this respect, Psalm 137 functions as a reminder of the destiny of the wicked, both explicitly in terms of the Edomites and Babylonians and, more importantly, implicitly in terms of the Judahites who disobeyed the covenant. This latter reminder serves as warning to those who approach the Psalter as Psalm 1 exhorted: delight in the law of the Lord and meditate on it day and night; put it into practice, because this is what happens if you do not. The final grouping of lament psalms brings a sense of urgency to the penultimate section of the Psalter. The implicit caution of Psalm 137 must be heeded. The enemies must be silenced, the righteous must be protected from both wickedness and those who perpetrate it, and the integrity of Judaism must be maintained.

³¹ van Grol, “David and his Chasidim,” 332.

Conclusion

The Psalter in its final form is concerned with an exhortation to the wise to read the collection of psalms as Torah. Its wisdom frame is complemented by a messianic thrust that looks forward to the reign of God's anointed one under his divine sovereign rule. Wisdom literature in general is concerned with ethical behaviour that coheres with the orderly arrangement of creation. However, the wisdom thrust to the Psalter is concerned with following Torah, that great body of divine instruction that contains, but is not limited to, the Mosaic law. This causes the ethics of wisdom literature such as are found in Proverbs to fuse with the demands of justice and righteousness (covenant obedience) as presented in the prophets. Although the Psalter does not present an explicit and developed Deuteronomistic theology of judgement, the shadow of the Exile hangs over the whole book.

Psalm 137 in isolation addresses the issue of God's justice for his people who have suffered terribly. In its literary context, however, the psalm reminds the reader that the divine justice that will bring recompense for the victims is the very same justice that demanded their punishment in the first instance. That very same justice could prevail again if Torah-disobedience is rife within the Jewish community and thus the psalm stands as a warning. It appears that the final redactors of the Psalter saw increasing Hellenism as one such threat to the integrity of the Jewish faith and sought to counter this by producing a book of divine instruction to teach the godly. The presence of a group of lament psalms before the final crescendo of praise in Psalms 146–50, and the canonical position of Psalm 137 support the reading of the Psalter as a book of instruction, encouragement and warning. It seems that the Psalter seeks to preserve the struggling post-exilic Jewish communities from Hellenistic apostasy, the penultimate psalm grouping (Psalms 138–145) concluding with the wisdom adage: "the Lord watches over all who love him, but all the wicked he will destroy." The kingship of God will prevail over both the wise and the wicked (let the reader understand).