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## PSALM 137: Israel's Remembrance of Zion in Exile

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**Abstract:** This article is an exegesis of Psalm 137 and a presentation of implications that can be made for the contemporary Ghanaian Christian. Through analysis of the text, it is revealed that the Psalm gives a picture of the emotional situation of the Israelites during the Babylonian exile. Within the Psalm, their sorrow is expressed, followed by a description of their affection for Jerusalem. Finally, the Psalm concludes with a prayer and curses against their enemies as well as a blessing for the one who will be used to repay Babylon as they (Israelites) were treated. The paper also points out that there are lessons that today's Ghanaian Christian can glean from the Psalm and its applications. The paper highlights that Christians must learn to practice their religion anywhere they find themselves. It also postulates that the psalm promotes Patriotism and the love of country for all as well as the attitude that the Christian should portray towards the anticipation of the New Jerusalem. Finally, the paper highlights the attitude of leaving one's enemies and vengeance in the hands of God.

**Keywords:** Psalm 137, Ghana, Christianity, Vengeance, Patriotism

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Psalm 137 is a psalm that is often used. Its opening phrase is often sung in today's world of Christian music.<sup>1</sup> This psalm gives a picture of a group of 'Zion Lovers' sitting by the rivers of Babylon and weeping, refusing to sing the Lord's song in a foreign land. They cursed their captors and prayed that the Lord repays them as they had served Israel. It is true that the lyrics of the psalms have stretched an influence that goes far beyond the confines of organized religion throughout the course of cultural history.<sup>2</sup>

While the period of composition of the Psalms is an issue in biblical scholarship, it is possible that several of the Psalms refer to the time of the Babylonian captivity. There may be disputes about many of the Psalms but, according to Kidner, Psalm 137 "needs no title to announce that its provenance was the Babylonian exile."<sup>3</sup> The captives' mournful sentiments of pensive melancholy and weary longing during its long and weary period of captivity constitute the burden of Psalm 137. Hence, it seems more correct to date it during the exile.<sup>4</sup> It is the only psalm that points with certainty to the period of the exile, though the others cannot be classified as wholly pre-exilic or wholly post-exilic.<sup>5</sup> Some suppose it to have been composed by Jeremiah, the prophet of tears, and sent to his countrymen in the land of their exile, in order to awaken fond memories of the past and sustain a lively hope for the future. It is full of heart-melting, tear-bringing pathos. The moaning of the captive, the wailing of the exile, and the sighing of the saints are heard in every line. Because of its tone and praise for the temple it is considered among the 'Zion hymns', namely the psalms that talk about Jerusalem.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The popular song "By the rivers of Babylon" is sung in many Christian churches and always welcomes thrills from the congregations. Alex Acheampong and the Young missionaries have also thrilled the world of Ghanaian Adventist music with the song "Babylon" which makes use of some of the lyrics in Psalm 137. Generally, the Hebrew psalms are universally admired not only because they are exquisitely beautiful, but also they are written in a strain of sensibility that touches every soul.

<sup>2</sup> Erhard S. Gerstenberger, "The Lyrical Literature," in Douglas A. Knight and Gene M. Tucker, eds. *The Hebrew Scriptures and its Modern Interpreters* (Philadelphia: Scholars, 1985.), 433.

<sup>3</sup> Derek Kidner, *Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries*, 14b, ed. D. J. Wiseman (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity, 1975), 459. See also Leopold S. J. Sabourin, *The Psalms* (New York: Society of St. Paul, 1974), 320, where Mowinckel is mentioned to have considered Psalm 137 to be "considerably later than the return."

<sup>4</sup> Sabourin, *The Psalms*, 24.

<sup>5</sup> Werner H. Schmidt, *Old Testament Introduction* (New York: The Crossroad, 1984), 303.

<sup>6</sup> Walter. Beyerlin, ed., *Near Eastern Religious Texts Relating to the Old Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1975), 43.

Claus Westermann suggests that Psalm 137 is not a psalm but a folksong, though he does not outline the reasons for his classification.<sup>7</sup> Hermann Gunkel puts this psalm among a number of psalms that cannot belong in any of his categories because they borrow elements from two or more types; these are referred to as “mixed psalms.”<sup>8</sup> However, in his treatment of the various psalms, Leopold S. J. Sabourin places Psalm 137 in the laments of the community.<sup>9</sup> A critical look at the psalm gives the reader an impression that it is a psalm of lament and more specifically, a community lament.<sup>10</sup> In Psalm 137 we realize that the downhearted captives cannot enjoy themselves (vv. 1- 2), they cannot humor their proud oppressors (vv. 3- 4), they cannot forget Jerusalem (vv. 5- 6), and they cannot forget Edom and Babylon (vv. 7-9). A critical look at the psalm reveals that it portrays the lamenters weeping and refusing to sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land. Also, they express their love for Jerusalem by vowing never to forget it. They end this psalm by praying against Edom and Babylon for being the cause of their present situation. From this observation, the entire psalm can be looked at in a structure of three parts:

1. The laments of Israel in Captivity (vv. 1-4)
2. Israel’s remembrance of Jerusalem (vv. 5, 6)
3. Israel’s prayer against Edom and Babylon (vv. 7-9)

The problem that this study seeks to address is the application of the Psalm in the context of the Ghanaian Christian. The psalm will be interpreted and then issues stemming from such interpretation will be discussed as they relate with the Ghanaian context. The interpretation of Psalm 137, which this study seeks to offer, will be done viewing it as a psalm of lament of the community taking into consideration its peculiar traits that are observed. Because of its nature, some aspects of its history, form, and literary structure will be considered in this interpretive work. These aspects are not conclusive in themselves but it is hoped that the psalm will be understood in terms of its meaning and use as well as what it implies for the contemporary Ghanaian Christian. This goal will be met by an interaction with the text and content of the psalm. This will be taken from its beginning to end so that the literary structure and form can stand out. The exposition will be organized into three sections, following the broad structure of the psalm given above. After these three sections a final section will discuss the implications for the Ghanaian context.

## 2. THE LAMENTS OF ISRAEL IN CAPTIVITY (VV. 1-4)

The psalm begins with a description of what the captives were doing. We are told where they were, their posture and their act as well as the motivation for it:

By the rivers of Babylon,

There we sat down, yea, we wept

When we remembered Zion (v. 1).<sup>11</sup>

This takes one back to the Babylonian captivity immediately. While captives, they sat by the rivers of Babylon and wept. The reason that they give for their weeping is “when we remembered Zion.” If by Babylon is meant the country, then the rivers of it are Chebar, Ulai, Tigris, Euphrates, and others. However, if it refers to the city itself, then only

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<sup>7</sup> Claus Westermann, *Praise and Lament in the Psalms* (Atlanta: John Knox, 1981), 256.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 8-9, 297.

<sup>10</sup> The very psalm in which the question is asked, “How can we sing?” is itself a song, one of the Lord’s songs, still. Nothing can be more sad, or more despondent than the sorrow that this psalm of lament of the people expresses. It speaks of weeping in the remembrance of Zion; it speaks of lyres hung upon the willows by exiles who have no heart to use them; and yet the very telling of these sorrows, of this incapacity for song, is a song still. We chant it in our churches today, hundreds and thousands of years after its composition, as one of the Church’s melodies, as one of the Lord’s songs. The very refusal to sing may be itself a song. “How shall we sing?” is itself a permanent hymn, an inspired song, for all churches.

<sup>11</sup> All Bible translations are taken from the NKJV.

Euphrates, which ran through it; and is expressed by 'rivers', because of the largeness of it, and because of the several canals cut out of it, for the service of the city. Babylon is said to dwell upon many waters, upon the banks of which the captive Jews were; either through choice, where they could be alone, and mourn their fate, indulge their sorrows, and escape their grief; or by the order of those who carried them captive, there to be employed, either in taking goods from ships that were unloaded there, or to repair and maintain the banks of the rivers, or to do some servile work or another. Here, they would sometimes "sit down" pensive, as mourners used to do, and lament their case. Also this phrase may express their residence here, and the continuance and length of their captivity, which was seventy years (Jer 29:10).

The book of Ezekiel proves to be a very good source of information concerning the state of the exiled Jews of Babylon because he was among the people of Judah who were taken into exile in Babylon in 598/597 BCE.<sup>12</sup> Ezekiel 1:3 and 3:15 indicate that the captives were settled at Tel-Aviv along the river Chebar.<sup>13</sup> Since in both Ezekiel and in Psalm 137 the picture drawn of the exiles gives us the situation of a deplorable state, we can conclude that the 'rivers' of Psalm 137 refers to river Chebar in Ezekiel.<sup>14</sup>

To the Hebrews, nothing could present a more striking contrast to their native country than the region into which they were transplanted. Unlike their national temple which was a small but highly finished and richly adorned fabric, standing in the midst of its courts, all that they saw was the colossal temple of the Chaldean Bel, rising from the plain. No wonder then that, the psalm is sung in pathetic words.

The idea of sitting down probably refers to those assembled for worship or those who happened to come together on some special occasion or perhaps a poetic representation of the general condition of the Hebrew captives, as sitting and meditating on the desolations of their native land. Among the poets, sitting on the ground is a mark of misery or captivity.<sup>15</sup> The fact that they wept could mean that as they sat there, they meditated and actually wept. Their emotions overpowered them, and they poured forth tears. The reason for this serious weeping was attributed to thoughts of their native land, its former glory, the wrongs done to it, the desolations there, the temple in ruins, and their devastated homes. They also wept when they thought of the happy days which they had spent there, and when they contrasted them with their present condition.

The second verse refers to the hanging up of their musical instruments<sup>16</sup> "upon the willows in the midst of it." These were musical instruments, used in the temple service by the Levites, who seem to be the persons speaking here. It seems that they took care of them, and preserved them from the plunder of the enemy. They also carried them with them to Babylon, in hope of returning with them to use them as before, or to solace themselves and others in captivity, though now they had no heart to make use of them. Their sorrow was so great that they hung their lyres upon the willows as useless things. The instruments were once used to accompany the songs of praise and the service of God in the temple. Now, the instruments with which they had sought to beguile their weary hours and to console their sad spirits in their captivity seem to be useless.<sup>17</sup>

The word rendered "willows" (*arabîm*), used only in the plural, denotes the willow or osier, so called from its white, silvery leaves. It is probable that the weeping willow—the willow with long pendulous branches—is here referred to.

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<sup>12</sup> Benjamin Abotchie Ntreh, *A Concise History of Ancient Israel and Judah* (Cape Coast, Ghana: Marcel Hughes, 2006), 98-99.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 99.

<sup>14</sup> Though many scholars conclude that the exiled Israelites were camped by River Chebar, as stated in Ezekiel 1:3, it is important to note that other captives were by River Ulai as alluded to in Daniel 8:2. See Matthew Henry, "Psalm CXXXVII" in *Matthew Henry's Commentary*, (Electronic Edition)

<sup>15</sup> This impression is gleaned from the melancholic way in which the Poet(s) described the situation.

<sup>16</sup> Though many versions such as the New King James Version, American Standard Version, New Living Translation, etc translate *kinnor* as "harp", it is better translated as "lyre." (Brown Francis, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*. Walton Street, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1906, 490.)

<sup>17</sup> They are seen as useless because they singers "hanged them upon the willows". If they were useful to them, they would not have hanged them.

It has been objected to the statement here that the willow is not now found in the neighborhood of ancient Babylon, but that the palm is the only tree which grows there<sup>18</sup>. All that the psalm, however, would necessarily demand in a fair interpretation would be that there should have been even a single clump of these trees planted there, under which a little band of exiles may have seated themselves when they gave utterance to the plaintive language of this psalm.

“In the midst of it” refers to the midst of Babylon since that was the immediate plausible antecedent. One may argue that this refers to the midst of the waters but this does not seem possible. They could not sing, such was their grief, though they had their lyres with them. Therefore they hung them up on the branches of the trees around them. It could also mean, poetically, that they were as dumb as if they had hung up their lyres there.

They also added that in the midst of their weeping they were interrupted:

For there those who carried us away captive asked of us a song,

And those who plundered us *requested* mirth,

*Saying, ‘Sing us one of the songs of Zion!’ (v. 3)*

There seems to be a piece of parallelism here where the Psalmist describes the Babylonians as those who carried them away captives as well as those who plundered them. These people are here, after causing pain in the hearts of the people of Israel, requesting a song and mirth. The Chaldeans or Babylonians who plundered them of their substance, and reduced their city and temple to heaps of rubbish insisted not only on having the words of a song repeated to them, but that they should be set to some tune and sung in a manner expressing mirth. The “songs of Zion” that were requested referred to songs which used to be sung in Zion in the temple, called the songs of the temple (Amos 8:3). They made this demand either out of curiosity, that they might know something of the temple songs and music they had heard of; or rather as jeering at and insulting the poor Jews in their miserable circumstances. They seem to be saying: ‘Now sing your songs if you can’.

It is important to note here that the Hebrew word used for their request (*she’elunu*) does not express the idea of compulsion or force. While the root word literally means to “ask”, it has been used variously as to beg, inquire, desire, request, question, borrow, consult, pray, or seek<sup>19</sup>. Perhaps the idea is that they did not merely ask music, but they wished to hear the words—the songs themselves—in which they were accustomed to praise God. This may have been a taunt, and the request may have been in derision; or it may have been a serious request, and with no desire to reproach them, or to add to their sorrows. Since, we are not to impute bad motives to others where there is no evidence that there are any, and where the supposition of good motives will answer just as well, it is important to mention that perhaps the request was not meant to compound the situation of the Israelite captives. Rather, the expression here may have been a kind and natural wish to hear the songs of these foreigners—songs of which they might have heard much by report; perhaps songs which they had overheard them singing when they were in a less desponding state of mind, and when they sought to comfort themselves by these ancient national melodies.

This request was from “those who plundered us.” The word used means a tormentor. Its proper rendition will be one who extorts lamentation from others, or who causes them to howl. The general idea is that the request of mirth and happiness was coming from those under whom they were then suffering or those who had caused these trials to come upon them. They felt tormented by the requests of their captors to sing the songs of Zion.<sup>20</sup>

Their reaction to this request is a question which is rhetoric in nature. This is seen in v. 4: “How shall we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?” This question tells us that the only reason assigned for not complying with the request for one of the songs of Zion was that they could not “sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land.” The term “foreign land” could be explained, as Benjamin Abotchie Ntrel puts it, as “a land of abominable deeds.”<sup>21</sup> Thus, we are led to infer that

<sup>18</sup> E-Sword 2005, *Psalm 137* (retrieved October 20, 2010).

<sup>19</sup> Brown Francis, S. R. Driver, and Charles A. Briggs, *A Hebrew and English Lexicon of the Old Testament*. (Walton Street, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1906.), 982. See also Strong’s Concordance, number 7592.

<sup>20</sup> Ntrel, *A Concise History*, 98-99

<sup>21</sup> Ntrel, *A Concise History*, 98-99

there was no bad motive—no disposition to taunt and ridicule—in the request that was made. However, this does not rule out the fact that they felt tormented by the request.

### 3. ISRAEL'S REMEMBRANCE OF JERUSALEM (VV. 5, 6)

The next part of the psalm seems to be telling how dear Jerusalem is to the lamenter. Though the entire psalm begins as a communal lament, the plural pronoun, "we" changes from this point to the singular, "I." This makes it sound like the lament of an individual:

If I forget you, O Jerusalem,

Let my right hand forget *its skill!*

If I do not remember you,

Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth—

If I do not exalt Jerusalem

Above my chief joy (vv. 5-6)

The meaning here is that to sing in such circumstances would seem to imply that they have forgotten Jerusalem. That is, they will appear to be unmindful of its sorrows, and care not that it was desolate. The captives wept when they remembered Zion and here they cannot forget Jerusalem. The remembrance of its calamities pressed hard upon them, and they could not do anything which would seem to imply that they had become unmindful of the sufferings that had come upon their nation. One will not make merry during a calamity of such magnitude. These captives seem to be saying that it would be bad on their side if they should make merry while their temple lies in ruins, their city desolate, and their people captives in a foreign land.

The lamenter vows that if he forgets Jerusalem, may his "right hand forget *its skill.*" Although "*its skill*" is not in the original, the statement seems to refer to his skill in music, particularly in playing on the musical instrument. The psalmist seems to be saying, "Should I so far forget Jerusalem as to strike the lyre to one of the songs of Zion in a foreign land, let my right hand forget any of its works; let it be disabled from working at all; or let it be dry and withered." The Revised Standard Version translates the sentence as "let my right hand wither!" The sense could also be that: "Let everything that is as dear as my right hand be taken from me." John Kitto, in *The Pictorial Bible*, says that there is a striking and appropriate point in this, which has been overlooked. The truth is that it is customary for people in the East to swear by their professions, so one who has no profession—who is poor and destitute, and has nothing of recognized value in the world—swears by his right hand, which is his sole stake in society.<sup>22</sup>

The second aspect stands as a parallel repetition of the first aspect. Here, the psalmist says that if he does not remember Jerusalem, then may his tongue cling to the roof of his mouth. "Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth" serves here as a double-duty modifier because it modifies both "if I do not remember you" which precedes it and "if I do not extol Jerusalem above my chief joy" which immediately follows it. He seems to be saying here that "let me have no use of my tongue; let me be dumb and speechless, and never sing a song or speak a word more, should I be so forgetful of the deplorable state of Jerusalem as to sing songs at such a season, and in an enemy's country." The "chief joy" referred to here seems to refer to the singing of the Lord's song and the playing of the lyre. The psalmist ends this part of the lament by saying that he will prefer to forfeit his chief joy than to forget Jerusalem.

### 4. ISRAEL'S PRAYER AGAINST EDOM AND BABYLON (VV. 7-9)

The Final section of the Psalm (vv. 7-9) begins by addressing the Lord (Yahweh) and asking for vengeance on behalf of Jerusalem. Verse 7 reads,

Remember, O LORD, against the sons of Edom

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<sup>22</sup> Cited in E-Sword 2005, *Psalm 137* (retrieved October 20, 2010).

The day of Jerusalem,  
Who said, 'Raze it, raze it,  
To its very foundation!'

The Lord is being asked to remember the day of Jerusalem. This day of Jerusalem is not known until it is linked with the "sons of Edom." The reference is to the day that Jerusalem was destroyed. The main point in Jerusalem that the Lord is being asked to remember is "against the sons of Edom." This gives us the explanation that "the day of Jerusalem" most appropriately refers to the day of its destruction. Sabourin says that the Edomites were "allied with the Babylonians to bring about the 'day of Jerusalem' (v. 7), the catastrophe of 587-6."<sup>23</sup> This assertion identifies the day of Jerusalem to be the day of destruction. It is also evidenced from the fact that the initial verbs "to remember" and "forget" were used in line with the destruction of the city. Moreover, the Lord is being asked to remember the sons of Edom "who said 'raze it, raze it, to its very foundation!'" The implication is that the "day of Jerusalem" is the day the sons of Edom said, "Raze it, raze it, to its very foundation!" The Psalmist therefore cursed the Edomites because they "seemed to have given moral support to the Babylonians when the destruction of Jerusalem was taking place."<sup>24</sup>

The Edomites can be traced to Esau, the brother of Jacob. In essence, they are the brothers of the Israelites. It looks like the old grudge between their fathers—birthright and blessing—is still in their hearts. Because of this, they rejoiced at the ruin of Israel and helped forward their affliction, and were assistants to the Babylonians in the plunder and destruction. The Psalm paints the picture of Edomites standing aside and instigating the Babylonians to completely raze Jerusalem. The verb used for "raze" (*aru*) means to "make naked" or "lay bare." The addition of "to the foundation" expresses the idea of completely pulling down its walls and laying them level with the ground. They were so spiteful and malicious that they wanted Babylon to root up the very foundation of the walls of Jerusalem, and let nothing be left or seen but the bare naked ground.

Verses 8 and 9 address Babylon. These verses constitute the 'imprecatory' portion of Psalm 137. Imprecatory psalms are the psalms which seem to cry for vengeance, and to manifest a revengeful and unforgiving spirit.

The two verses read,  
O daughter of Babylon, who are to be destroyed,  
Happy the one who repays you as you have served us!  
Happy the one who takes and dashes  
Your little ones against the rock!

Babylon is addressed as the people "who are to be destroyed." The Psalmist is sure of this destruction that will come upon Babylon. He continues to describe the one who will repay Babylon as they have served Israel as "happy." Since this follows immediately after the prayer for the Lord to remember against Edom, this pronouncement here also tells the Babylonians that the God of Israel will destroy them and that he will also bless anyone who treats Babylon with the kind of brutality that Israel suffered in their hands. The idea is that the one who shall repay Babylon for their treatment of Israel is blessed.

It is observed that at this point of the psalm the pronoun returns to the plural, "us." One cannot explain why there was a shift in the part of the psalm where the lamenter was remembering Jerusalem. In any case what is important is that the lamenters portray as blessed the person who will repay Babylon on the basis of what they had done to Israel. This part of the psalm seems to portray that he will be esteemed a fortunate man who is made the instrument of inflicting punishment on a city so guilty and so cruel. He will acquire fame and honor by doing it; his name will be made known abroad and perpetuated among people. This could explain why Cyrus, who conquered Babylon, is called the anointed one by Isaiah (Isa 45:1). In order to emphasize Yahweh's choice of Cyrus, Isaiah reports that Cyrus was directly

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<sup>23</sup> Sabourin, *The Psalms*, 319.

<sup>24</sup> Ntneh, *A Concise History*, 99.

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addressed by Yahweh (vv. 1-7). It is probable that Cyrus “gained this recognition from the biblical writers because his action and favour that he showed toward the Jews was unsurpassed.”<sup>25</sup>

Apart from the mention of total destruction “to its very foundation” of Jerusalem as we see in v. 7, we are not given examples of what Babylon has done to Israel. This information seems to be what the poet supplies in the last verse of the psalm. Here the lamenter pronounces happy the man who will take the little ones of Babylon and dash them against the rock. The lamenter seems to be promoting genocide here as a result of the pain in his heart. Since the preceding lines are about repaying Babylon what they had done to Israel, this part which seems to be a logical continuation supplies the fact that the people of Babylon dashed their (Israel’s) little ones against the rock.

In regard to this passage, we are not necessarily supposing that the author of the psalm only approved of this action, or desired it, or prayed for it. It seems that he looked forward to the fulfillment of a prediction. With this kind of hope, he saw that a just and terrible judgment would certainly come upon Babylon and he expressed that in the common language of the times, and states the manner in which it would occur. In addition, he described the feelings - the satisfaction - of those who would execute the divine purpose in the overthrow of Babylon. Also, he referred to the esteem in which the conqueror would be held by people, and the glory of the achievement as giving him fame among people.

It must be admitted that the feelings of the author of the psalm appear to accord that he considers it proper that the city should be destroyed, and that he regards its overthrow as a righteous judgment, and as a thing to be desired. It is true that he might approve of such an overthrow, and see it to be right - he might describe the feelings of those by whom it would be done, their joy, their exultation, and even their barbarity, without himself approving of their barbarity, or sympathizing with their feelings, or partaking of their spirit. However, it still cannot in fairness be denied that these are more of imprecation than forgiveness, and are apparently prompted more by the spirit of revenge than by a desire of just punishment.

## **5. IMPLICATIONS FOR THE GHANAIAN CONTEXT**

Psalm 137 is a poem that has great significance for any group of people. This is so because it is a communal Psalm. This means that the Ghanaian Christian community can identify itself with the Psalm. This does not mean that Ghanaian Christians are in Exile. There are a number of lessons that can be gleaned from the interpretation of the Psalm.

First of all, the Ghanaian Christian will have to ask questions regarding the idea that the “songs of Zion” cannot be sang in a foreign land. Are there places where the Ghanaian Christian cannot practice his/her religion? Is this permissible? Is the God of the Christian tied to one main geographical location? If this is not so, then the Ghanaian Christian will glean a very important lesson from the Psalm that, The Lord’s song can be sang even in a foreign land. No matter what circumstance they find themselves in, they have to practice their religion. The practice of religion could even serve as a means of evangelizing to others. It is revealed in the study that the request was not necessarily meant to taunt the Israelites. Rather, it was possible that they requested for the “songs of Zion” out of genuine interest. If this was the case, then a refusal to sing was not the best decision. Christians should learn that religion can be practiced anywhere. Hence they can sing the Lord’s song even in a foreign land.

The lesson of patriotism cannot be left out in this discussion. The Israelite captives exhibited a true patriotic spirit in Babylon. They still remembered their homeland despite their plight. Apart from the fact that the memory of Jerusalem brings pain, the poet is not ready to forget his homeland. It is observed that the poem is primarily about the endearment toward Jerusalem. Ghanaians can learn that their homeland is very important and a place to be desired above any other place. Contrariwise, most Ghanaians prefer to travel out of the country; some struggling to get citizenship in other Western countries, and losing their Ghanaian identity. People join long queues to attend interviews for visa to other countries. Some even forge documents to get the chance to visit the West. Some stay beyond the time period stipulated on their permit and visa. This is, perhaps, because they value those countries above their own land.

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 100.

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The lesson that Ghanaians can learn from Psalm 137 is that of a desire to be in our homeland and a deep fondness for the nation. This will help reduce the problem of migration and brain-drain that has been an age-long problem.

In addition, the remembrance of Jerusalem and the endearment of the Poet toward Jerusalem are overwhelming. Today's Christian has a form of "Jerusalem"<sup>26</sup> in view. The fact that the Israelite captives vowed never to forget Jerusalem implies that the Ghanaian Christian should also keep his/her Jerusalem in view at all times. No matter what circumstances one is found in, the hope of inheriting a "Jerusalem". Once this hope is kept alive, Christians will live a life that will go a long way to check their behavior. The love for Jerusalem was the motivating factor for the behavior of the Israelites in captivity. In the same vein, heavenly-minded believers will be greatly influenced in thought, behavior, likes, and dislikes.

Finally, the imprecatory nature of the last section of the Psalm poses lot of questions for the Ghanaian Christian. The biblical injunction to love the enemy seems to be violated here. Is the Christian supposed to offer the kind of prayer offered in this last section of the Psalm? Should the Christian love those who love him and hate those who hate him? Should prayers be offered against people who put the individual in a terrible situation? From the Psalms alone, there would be nothing wrong with this kind of attitude toward the enemy. However, the command of Jesus will imply that the action of the Israelite captives was wrong and should be avoided by today's Christian community.

The thoughtful Ghanaian Christian struggles between praying the Psalm and loving the enemy and refraining from praying against those who hurt him/her. Should they pray against them? Or should they pray for them? The imprecations in this prayer are quite strong and this makes the dilemma bigger. But the lesson that this psalms reveals is the fact that vengeance is for God. In Ghana, there is a common phrase that Christians who are hurt say to the ones who hurt them: *me gyae ma Nyame* (literally, "I leave it to God"). By this phrase, all that the person is saying is that thought hurt, he/she will not take vengeance, but will leave everything to God. Perhaps this is the attitude affirmed by the Psalm. So that the Christian should leave such hurts to God and allow God to take vengeance.

This seems to be the injunction that is provided in Romans 12:19:

"Beloved, do not avenge yourselves, but rather give place to wrath; for it is written, "Vengeance is Mine, I will repay," says the Lord."

Since the verb used in Psalm 137:7 (*zakar*, to remember) implies remembrance for punishment or joyful reward, then the Psalmist seems to be placing vengeance in the hands of God. Hence, this imprecatory prayer can be considered as a call to Yahweh to "remember" and take revenge in the form of punishment against the oppressor. Hence, the attitude that Christians may need is the attitude of allowing God to take revenge. It is like saying *me gyae ma Nyame* ("I leave it to God").

## 6. CONCLUSION

Psalm 137 is indeed one that gives a clear picture of the emotional situation that the Israelites found themselves in during the Babylonian exile. They were so distressed about the situation that they could not sing the Lord's song. All that they could do was to sit by the rivers of Babylon and weep upon remembering Zion. They saw their situation and geographical location as a foreign land and so they could not sing. In their sorrow, they hanged up their lyres upon the willows in the midst of Babylon. The psalm describes an expression of their sorrow and melancholy. After that the psalm goes on to describe their affection for Jerusalem which is used in the psalm as being synonymous with Zion. In this psalm, the captives saw the singing of the Lord's song as forgetting Jerusalem. This they vowed never to do. The psalm ends with a prayer against "enemy" nations who are identified as the cause of the current condition of Israel. This final part of the psalm was a prayer and curse against Edom and Babylon as well as a blessing for the one who will be used to repay Babylon as they have treated Israel. Throughout the psalm we see the remembrance of Zion in exile. In all these, one can glean lessons for the contemporary Ghanaian Christian.

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<sup>26</sup> Christians always refer to the Heavenly Kingdom as the "New Jerusalem". This idea is gotten from the use of the term in Revelation 21.

The lessons that today's Ghanaian Christian can glean from the Psalm and its applications are many. This paper highlights some of them. First of all, we can see that Christians must learn to practice their religion anywhere they find themselves. Also, the psalm promotes Patriotism and the love of country in all Ghanaians. The Ghanaian Christian should be proud of his origins and stay connected instead of rushing to spend life in another country. The application of the Psalm also revealed the attitude that the Christian should portray towards the anticipation of the New Jerusalem. Finally, the paper highlights the attitude of vengeance that the Psalm reveals. It is observed that the Christian should leave vengeance to God. It was pointed out that most Ghanaians have the tendency to always leave their enemies in the hands of God.

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