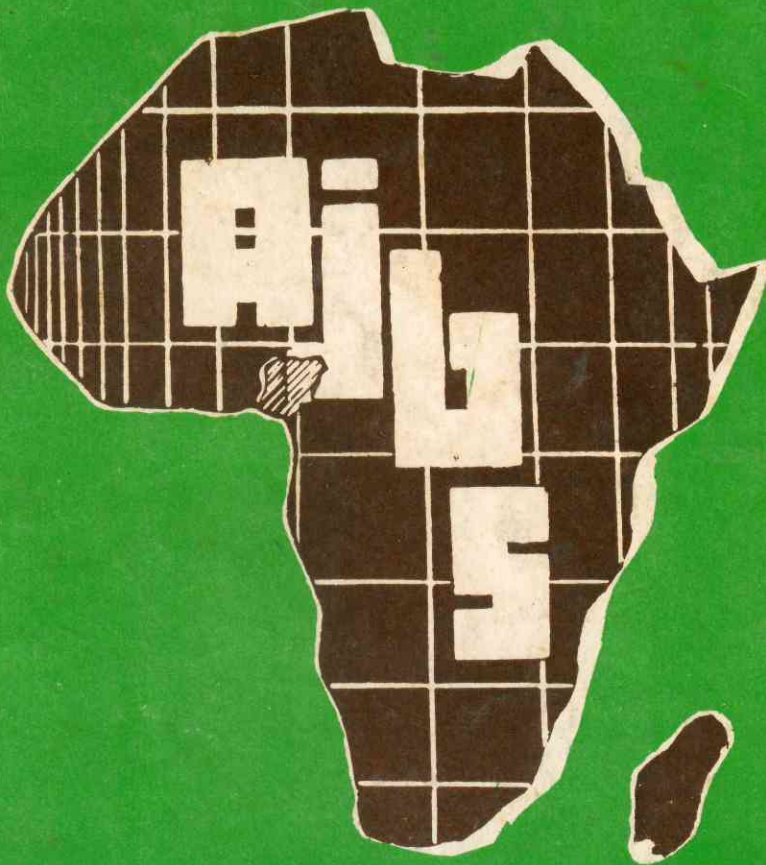


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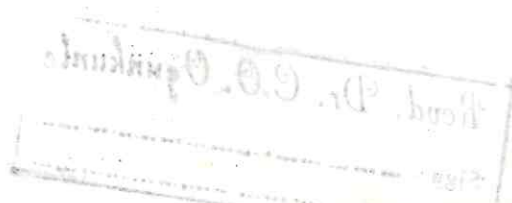
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Ven. Dr. J.O. Akao
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NOTES ON CONTRIBUTORS

- (1) Professor Ukachukwu Chris Manus is a Professor of New Testament at Obafemi Awolowo University, Ile-Ife, Nigeria.
- (2) Dr. M.E. Adeyemi is lecturer in Religious Studies at the Federal College of Education Okene, Nigeria.
- (3) Revd. Fr. Dr. J. Mamman is Lecturer/Chaplain at Ahmadu Bello University Zaria, Nigeria.
- (4) Revd. Dr. C.O. Ogunkunle is a Lecturer of Old Testament at the Department of Religions University of Ilorin, Nigeria

SUFFERING OF THE ISRAELITES IN CAPTIVITY: A RE-READING OF PSALM 137 IN THE NIGERIAN CONTEXT¹

by

Rev. Dr. C. O. Ogunkunle

A. Introduction

The art of re-reading the Bible in the Nigerian context is an exciting and stimulating exercise. The main task, especially for Nigerian Biblical Scholars is the effective bridging of the gap between the time the Bible was written for first recipients on the one hand; and its current readers and interpreters on the other hand. In other words, for a proper understanding of the Bible, it is mandatory to know both 'what the text meant then' and 'what it means now'. Surely it is dangerous to faith to lean on one end of the continuum at the expense of the other in the bid to interpret the text. It has been rightly said that:

Reading the Bible with an eye only to its meaning for us can lead to a great deal of nonsense as well as to every imaginable kind of error-because it lacks controls ... on the other hand, nothing can be so dry and lifeless for the church as making biblical study purely an academic exercise in historical investigation.²

The passage for our consideration is Psalm 137, which is one of the imprecatory Psalms in the Psalter.³ Therefore, the goal of this

paper is to examine psalm 137 historically and exegetically in order to understand its use in the Nigerian context. As one of the imprecatory Psalms in the Psalter, a brief survey of various views on imprecation will be highlighted so as to have a better understanding and appreciation of the Psalm.

B. Historical Context

The Babylonian captivity came upon the people of Judah as the judgment of God on their various sins: they failed to listen to God and his prophets; they refused to turn from their evil ways and practices, they followed the gods of their fathers, they were lawless, etc. (Jeremiah 25:1-11; Habakkuk 1:2-11).

Psalm 137 is one of the exilic Psalter. The Psalm deals with the response of the Israelites to their persecution, oppression and suffering while in captivity in Babylon. The Psalm contains the bitter experience of the exiles and it has helped us to understand the situation and condition of the Israelites during their seventy years of captivity. It has been said of Psalm, 137 that:

It reveals the suffering and sentiments of people who perhaps experienced at first hand the grievous days of the conquest and destruction of Jerusalem in the year 578 BC, who shared the burden of the Babylonian captivity and after their return to their homeland now, at the sight of the city still lying in ruins, give vent with passionate intensity to the feelings lying dormant in their hearts.⁴

Psalm 137 occupies a unique place in the Psalter, especially as it is both historical in nature and imprecatory in content. The Psalm is historical in the sense that it bridges the gap between the captivity and the return of the exiles. J. Vernon McGee, while speaking of the historicity of the Psalm says:

The Books of Kings and Chronicles lead us to the Babylonian captivity and destruction of Jerusalem while Ezra, Nehemiah

and Esther pick up the story after the seventy-year captivity is over and the people are back in their land.⁵

Thus, Psalm 137 is one of the few documents that throw light on the history of the Israelites during their years of captivity.⁶

Also, Psalm 137 is imprecatory as it contains imprecation on self, the Edomites and Babylonians. In fact, several Christians and Biblical Scholars have reacted differently to the Psalm because of its imprecation. Firstly, dispensationalists and the Roman Catholics reject the Psalm on the ground that it expressed feelings that are contrary to what they think it ought to say. Therefore, they believe that the Psalm does not belong to the Bible. A.F. Kirkpatrick is a strong dispensationalist whose approach to the scripture is to draw a sharp distinction between the Old and New Testaments. He argues that:

Imprecatory Psalms must be viewed as belonging to the dispensation of the Old Testament; they must be estimated from the standpoint of the law, which was based upon the rule of retaliation, and not of the Gospel, which is animated by the principle of love; they belong to the spirit of Elijah, not of Christ, they use the language of the age which was taught to love its neighbours and hate its enemies.

The Roman Catholics, on the basis of moral and religious ethics, removed part or the whole of some of the imprecatory Psalms from their daily reading as seen in the Liturgy of the Hours. For example, Psalm 137:8-9 is omitted from the Liturgy of the Hours.⁸

Secondly, the conservative scholars are naïve about the imprecatory Psalms in the sense that they believe the whole Bible yet they are ignorant about the imprecatory Psalms.⁹ Peter C. Craigie, while discussing the theological perspectives of the book of Psalms, points out that there are theological problems in reading the Psalter and in making it relevant and meaningful. He refers to the imprecatory Psalms as "problematic passages; so-called individual laments" where the sentiments of the Psalmists seem to be harsh, unloving, vindictive,

and hard to relate to the gospel and to Jesus' injunction that we should love even our enemies.¹⁰

Finally, there are some scholars who have a good perspective on imprecatory Psalms. Perhaps the Chief advocate for the use of imprecatory Psalms in the last century is Albert Barnes who argues that "what we consider as wrong, harsh and vindictive should be understood in the spirit of the age in which the Bible was composed."¹¹ He argues further that "imprecatory Psalms are a mere record of what actually occurred in the mind of the Psalmist and are preserved for us as an illustration of human nature when partially sanctified."¹²

H. C. Leupold warns scholars against making sharp pronouncements against the writers of imprecatory passages, especially as the New Testament writers make similar imprecations as found in Acts 8:20; 23:2; II Timothy 4:14, etc. He contends that David, to whom many of the imprecatory Psalms are attributed showed an exemplary spirit of tolerance and forgiveness, especially towards Saul.¹³ Speaking on Psalm 137:7-9, he says:

*Strictly speaking, these are not curses, except indirectly. In the one instance God is called on to remember the wickedness that was done, in the other a benediction is pronounced upon him who requires the evildoer.*¹⁴

James E. Adams has done a simple but thorough work on imprecatory Psalms. He argues that the Psalms are not just word of men but God's revelation of Himself and His attributes. Hence the Psalms must be accepted as God's divine word rather than raising questions and objections on them.¹⁵ He argues further that imprecatory Psalms are not meant for personal use and we need to understand how the Psalmists, Jesus Christ, and the Apostles understood and used them.¹⁶

In the light of the various understanding of the imprecatory Psalms as highlighted above, I would like to submit that Christians and Biblical scholars should have a positive attitude towards

imprecatory Psalms and prayers. It should be noted that great men of God used these Psalms in the Old Testament. Also, God in his infinite wisdom led those who canonized the scriptures to include imprecatory Psalms in the scriptures. The Bible says in II Timothy 3:16-17:

*"All scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof for correction, and training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work."*¹⁷

Indeed, imprecatory Psalms must be seen as fully inspired like any other portion of the Bible. Therefore, the nine verses of Psalm 137 should be left intact without omitting any part of it. It has been rightly noted on Psalms 137 that:

*"The elimination of verses 8-9 would not only destroy the literary structure of the Psalm, but would deprive it of an essential key to a correct and theologically acceptable understanding of its perspective on violence."*¹⁸

Psalm 137 should be dated in the early years of the return of the exiles, perhaps between 537-515 BC. It was during this period that much of the city including the temple was in ruin.¹⁹

The fact that the author of the Psalm was no longer in Babylon at the time of writing is implied in verses 1-3 where he was mainly reporting what happened in Babylon.

C. Exegetical Context

The prophetic utterances of the seventh century prophets, especially Jeremiah and Habakkuk on the nation of Judah in general and the city of Jerusalem in particular were fulfilled as the Babylonians destroyed the city and took several people captive into their land (Jeremiah 25:8-11). God allowed them to suffer for their sin in the hands of the Babylonians, their oppressors. The gloomy picture of

their plight by the rivers of Babylon is portrayed in verses 1-3 of the Psalm. The people were involved in hard Labour on farmlands as seen in verse 2. They were tired and helpless to the extent that they could neither sing nor use their harps.

Psalm 137 has three stanzas namely, verses 1-3 which deal with the historical condition of the exiles; verses 4-6 which is the response of the exiles to the request of their oppressors; and verses 7-9 which deal with the imprecation against the Edomites and Babylonians.

One key word in Psalm 137, which occurs in each of the three stanzas of the Psalms is *Zakar* which means to remember, call to mind past experiences or things formerly known in such a way that the present feeling, action or thought is affected.²⁰ In verse 1, the Psalmist remembered Zion; in verse 6, the Psalmist pronounced a self-imprecation if he fails to remember Jerusalem; and in verse 7, the Psalmist asked the LORD to remember the evil of the Edomites. It has been rightly noted that:

"The central concept of remembering links verses 5-6, where the Lord is called upon to remember Jerusalem's fall (v.7). The importance of memory is pervasive, literarily and conceptually. In Psalm 137, remembering means faithfulness to God's place to God's on-going purposes. Remembering Jerusalem is an act of resistance in a foreign land (v.4). God's people could not sing but they could remember. Indeed, they had to remember".²¹

The Israelites in Psalm 137 remembered Zion and Jerusalem and several things were brought to their memory such as the temple, its services, the godly men that dwelt there, the mighty deliverances that God had wrought, the dynasty of David that had its seat there, and the holy city as the object of sacred pilgrimages during high festivals.²² Their remembrance of these various things about Zion and Jerusalem led to their emotional depression, similar to that of Nehemiah when he learnt of the condition of Jerusalem (Nehemiah1:4). Unfortunately, the oppressors compounded their

problem by asking them to sing one of the songs of Zion for them. The verb, *zakar* appears in several other Psalms in the Psalter, especially the historical Psalms: 22:27; 25:7; 42:4,6; 74:2,18,22; 77:5,11; 78:35,39; 79:8; 83:4; 88:5; 89:47,50; 98:3; 103:14,18; 105:5,42; 106:4,7,45; 109:14,16; 119:49,55; 132:1; 163:23; 143:5.

Psalm 137:4 is a transition between verses 1-3 and 5-6. In other words, while the verse concludes the preceding section it also presents the reaction of the Israelites to the request of their oppressors. It is obvious that the suffering of the exiles re-awakened their commitment to the LORD. Hence, they made it known that the song of the LORD should be sung only in the Temple during sacrifices (II Chronicles 29:27) and not in a foreign land. The loyalty of the exiles to Zion and Jerusalem at the time of their suffering is chiastically expressed in the self-imprecation in verses 5-6:

- a If I forget you O Jerusalem²³
- b May my right hand forget her skill
- b May my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth
- a¹ If I do not remember you
- a² If I do not exalt Jerusalem above my chief joy.

The Psalmist believes that the things of God are to have priority in his memory and in his enjoyment. If it is otherwise, then he enters into a curse, which involves the loss of his faculty. It should be said that the Psalmist's self-cursing is not a mere figure of speech, but it underlines his determined devotion to all that Jerusalem represents.²⁴

Psalm 137:7a is a call upon the LORD to remember all the disasters and judgements which He had against Edom. The Edomites were Israel's ancestral brothers from Esau, a relationship which Israel had been careful to observe (Deuteronomy 2:1-8). But then, their relationship grew sour and bitter. At the time of Jehoshaphat, the Edomites joined the Ammonites and Moabites to raid Judah (1 Chronicles 20:1). The Edomites once prayed that the Israelites be destroyed and remembered no more (Psalm 83:4-8). In this particular

Psalm, the Edomites were happy at the destruction of Jerusalem. It is important to note the use of 'aru, the piel imperative plural form of arah which means be naked or bare: The word 'arah is used in Psalms 37:34 and 141:8 to mean to pour out, to empty, to leave destitute'. The word is used in Psalm 137 by the Edomites for the tearing down of the wall of Jerusalem to its foundation cf. Habakkuk 3:13. The word expresses the bitterness, which existed between the Israelites and Edomites. Its repetition twice indicates an absolute and total destruction and it is for emphasis.²⁵ The various sins of the Edomites against the Israelites are listed in Obadiah 10-14. In fact, there are several prophecies of judgement against Edom in Isaiah 43:5-6; Jeremiah 49:7-22; Ezekiel 25:12-14; Amos 1:11-12; Obadiah, etc. Thus, in the light of various sins which the Edomites had committed, the Psalmist called on God to judge them accordingly.

The Psalmist also asked God to remember his judgement against Babylon (cf. Isaiah 13:1-22; 47:1-5; Jeremiah 50:1; 51:64). Incidentally, Isaiah 13:16 looks like a summary of Psalm 137:8-9. Therefore, the Psalmist's plea for the total destruction of the Babylonians who had regarded themselves as the powerful ones is not a new concept. It is a development of the prophetic utterance of Isaiah against Babylon. It has been noted that the daughter of Babylon who is doomed to destruction represents all that is hostile to God (Jeremiah 51:56; Revelation 18:2).²⁶

The imprecation in Psalm 137 should be understood in the light of the Psalmist's deep love and devotion for the city of Jerusalem. The fact that he said "remember" is an indication that he was helpless and he committed the whole matter into the hands of God in prayer. The Psalm is an indication of total surrendering of the whole matter to God. It has been rightly noted that:

Psalm 137 is not the song of people who have the power to effect a violent change in their situation of suffering, nor is it the battle cry of a terrorist. Instead, it is an attempt to cling to

one's historical identity even when everything is against it. Still more, it is an attempt, in the face of the most profound humiliation and helplessness, to suppress the primitive human lust for violence in one's own heart by surrendering everything to God.²⁷

The Psalmist was aware of the principle that vengeance belongs to the LORD and He will repay each person accordingly, cf. Deuteronomy 32:35; Jeremiah 11:20; Romans 12:19; Hebrews 10:30. Also, he was aware that imprecation was given to re-echo and re-affirm the message of judgements on the evil people mentioned in the law and the prophet. Therefore, every Christian and Biblical scholar must have a positive attitude towards the punishment pronounced on the evil ones in the imprecatory Psalms.

The concept of dashing the little ones against the rock in Psalm 137:9 is not so much of hatred but a common expression of warfare in the Old Testament (II Kings 8:12; Isaiah 13:16; Hosea 10:14; 11:16; Nahum 3:10). All that the Psalmist has done in verse 9 is to apply the legal principle of eye for eye, and tooth for tooth (Exodus 21:24). He prayed that the ruthless conqueror might himself taste the bitterness of defeat and helplessness. Incidentally, the Lord Jesus Christ deliberately used the Psalm 137:9 while lamenting over the city of Jerusalem in Luke 19:44.²⁸

D. Psalm 137 In The Nigerian Context

As a result of the presence of evil in the world in general and in Nigeria in particular, man is confronted daily by various problems which consequently have physical and psychological effects on him and his relation to others around him. Man's various fears include fear of uncertainty, fear of not being able to take care of oneself or family, fear of losing one's job or fear of unemployment, fear of evil and wicked people, fear of losing one's position and dignity in the society, fear of sickness, fear of death, etc.²⁹ It is obvious that the

Nigerian Christians recognize their helplessness in the face of these various problems that are confronting them. Therefore, they approach God, the Supreme Being who has power and authority over the created world. It is with this background that the Nigerian Christians and church leaders read the Psalms and then give much emphasis to their practical use and application. In fact, some church leaders give specific prescriptions on how to use each of the Psalms – at specific times, in a particular posture, and with specific names of God, which are believed to have been revealed to them.³⁰

It is appropriate at this juncture to examine how three of such church leaders read and used Psalm 137. First on the list is J.O. Ositelu, the founder and first primate of the Church of the Lord (Aladura) Worldwide. He argues that Psalm 137 is meant to change an unpleasant situation. He says:

If you are unloved and hated, read this Psalm always with the Holy Name JEHOVAH and you will be loved in return.³¹

Another church leader who has given various prescriptions for the use of the Psalm is J.A. Bolarinwa, the former registrar of Ibadan Anglican Diocese. He believes that psalm 137 was written during the Babylonian captivity and for the use of the Psalm he prescribes that:

When one becomes an object of malice, hatred, derision and animosity one should read this Psalm with the general prayer frequently and the heavenly father will reverse the order and make one an object of love and admiration.³²

The general prayer that goes with the reading of Psalm 137 is:

El-Yah, Agla, Adonai, Jod, He, Foh, He, God of Abraham, God of Isaac, and God of Jacob, God of Shedrach, Meshach and Abednego, God the Father, God the son and God the Holy Ghost. Amen.³³

The third and final church leader to consider is prophet Isaac Olayinka Olanrewaju, a Pastor in the Christ Apostolic Church. He believes that Psalm 137 is meant for special deliverance from slanderer and wicked enemy. He says that those who have such problem should use the Psalm to pray to God who in His mercy will send deliverance.³⁴

E. Conclusion

There are four pertinent points to make in concluding this paper:

1. The task of bridging the gap between 'what the text meant then' and 'what it means now' has not been a difficult one in this paper because the Israelite and Nigerian cultures are somehow similar hence, their understanding of issues is virtually the same. The Israelites saw the Edomites and Babylonians as wicked enemies who were all out to destroy them while many Nigerian Christians are confronted with various evils that have negative physical and psychological effects on them.
2. The experience of the exiles in terms of suffering re-awakened their faith in God and sense of commitment to Him as noted in their deep love and devotion for the city of Jerusalem and for all it meant to them in the Psalm. Prior to the exile, they were lawless people who forsook God. So also, the various problems that are confronting Nigerian Christians have compelled them to seek God anew as shown in large attendance at prayer meetings and other religious programmes.
3. The Nigerian Christians and church leaders place much emphasis on the practical use of Psalms in the Psalter. In other words, unlike the Western Biblical scholars who place so much emphasis on the historical background and exegetical issues in each of the Psalms, the Nigerian Christians and church leaders are keenly interested in the practical use and application of the Psalms to their various situations.

4. While I do not frown totally at the use of imprecation as found in Psalm 137, I suggest that the Nigerian Christians, church leaders and biblical scholars should be careful at the abusive use of the Psalms. Imprecatory Psalms should not be hastily used as expression of anger, hatred and bitterness against human beings whenever there is a little misunderstanding.

Endnotes

1. This article is a revised edition of the paper presented at the 12th Annual Conference of the Nigerian Association for Biblical Studies (NABIS), which was held at Immanuel College of Theology, Ibadan, between 5th-8th July, 1999. The theme of the conference was "Reading the Bible in Nigerian Perspective".
2. Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All its Worth: A Guide to Understanding the Bible*. Forward by F.F. Bruce (London: Scripture Union, 1982), p. 13.
3. For detailed work on Imprecatory Psalms, see C.O. Ogunkunle, *Imprecatory Psalms: Their Forms and Uses in Ancient Israel and Some Selected Churches in Nigeria*. A thesis in the Department of Religious Studies, submitted to the Faculty of Arts in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, University of Ibadan, Ibadan, Nigeria. January 2000.
4. Arthur Weiser, *The Psalms: A Commentary*, OTL Translated by Herbert Hartwell (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1962), p. 794.
5. J. Vernon McGee, *Through the Bible*, 5 Volumes (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Inc., 1981); 2:865.
6. Some other Psalms that have exilic experience of the Israelites are Psalms 44, 74, 79, 89, 102, etc. See Peter R. Ackroyd, *Exile and Restoration*, OTL (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1968), p. 225.
7. A. F. Kirkpatrick, *The Book of Psalms* (Cambridge: University Press, 1951), p. lxxxix.
8. James P. Mahoney (ed.) *The Liturgy of the Hours According to the Roman Rite, Iv, Ordinary Time, Weeks 18-34* (New York: Catholic Book Publishing Co., 1975), pp. 1145-6.
9. McGee, *Through the Bible*, 2:868.
10. Peter C. Craigie, *Psalms 1-50*, WBC (Waco Texas: Word Books Publishers 1983), p. 41.

11. Albert Barnes, *Notes on the Old Testament: Psalms in Three Volumes Vol.1* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1950), p. xxix.
12. *Ibid*; p. xxxvii. For a summary of his six points, see Ogunkunle, "Imprecatory Psalms ..." pp. 47-50.
13. H.C. Leupold, *Exposition of Psalms* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1969), pp. 18-20.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 935.
15. James E. Adams, *War Psalms of the Prince of Peace: Lesson from the Imprecatory Psalms* (Phillipsburg, New Jersey: Presbyterian and Reformed Co, 1991), pp. 12-5.
16. See Ogunkunle, "Imprecatory Psalms ..." – pp. 291-2.
18. Erich Zenger, *A God of Vengeance? Understanding the Psalms of Divine Wrath* (Louisville, Kentucky: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), p. 48.
19. See, A.A. Anderson, *The Book of Psalms, Volume II, Psalms 73-150* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publ. Co., 1972), p. 897.
20. See, F. Brown; S.R. Driver & C.A. Briggs, *The New Brown-Driver-Briggs-Gesenius Hebrew and English Lexicon with an Appendix containing the Biblical Aramaic ...body*, Massachusetts: Hendrikson Publishers (1979), p. 269.
21. J. Clinton McCann, *A Theological Introduction to the Book of Psalm: The Psalms as Torah* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1993), pp. 118-9. Interestingly, it has been observed that remembrance, which is at the heart of Psalm 137, is also at the heart of the Christian faith. In instituting the sacrament of the Lord's Supper, Jesus said, 'Do this in remembrance of me' (Luke 22:19) cf. *Ibid.* p. 121.
22. Leupold, *Exposition of Psalms*, p. 934.
23. Jerusalem was an ancient city of the Southern Canaan, capital of the Davidic dynasty and religious center of Judaism. The word occurs about 669 times in the Old Testament. David brought the Ark of the Covenant to Jerusalem (II Samuel 6:17) and he made Zion, which is

located there, the throne of God's presence (Psalm 132:13). The fact that the city was very significant for the exiles is seen in its repetition thrice in verses 5, 6 and 7 of the Psalm. For detailed study of Jerusalem, see J. Barton Payne, "Jerusalem" in *Theological Wordbook of the Old Testament*. Two volumes edited by Lard R. Harris et. al. (Chicago: Moody Press, 1980), 1:405-6. For similar chiasmic expression of Psalm 137:5-6, see McCann, *A Theological Introduction to the Book of Psalms*, p. 118.

24. Anderson, *The Book of Psalms*, p. 899.
25. Brown, Driver, Briggs, *The New Brown Driver-Briggs-Gesenius, Hebrew and English Lexicon*, p. 738.
26. Adams, *War Psalms of the Prince of Peace*, p. 110.
27. Zenger, *A God of Vengeance? Understanding the Psalms of Divine Wrath*, p. 48.
28. See, Walter C. Kaiser, *Hard Sayings of the Old Testament*. (London: Hodder & Soughton, 1991), pp. 173-4.
29. Ogunkunle, "Imprecatory Psalms ..", p. 208.
30. *Ibid*, pp. 302-3.
31. E.O.A. Adejobi and J.O. Ositelu, *The Book of the Power of Prayer and the Secret of Meditation with God with the Uses of Psalms*. Foreword by G.O.S. Ositelu (Ogere, Sagamu: Publication Department of the Church of the Lord (Aladura) Worldwide, n.d., p. 34.
32. J.A. Bolarinwa, *Potency and Efficacy of Psalms* (Ibadan: Oluseyi Press, n.d.), p. 71.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 18.
34. Isaac Olayinka Olarewaju, *The Efficacious Power of Psalms in Daily Devotion* (Suleja: Awosanmi Press, 1998), p. 28.

Rev. Dr. C.O. Ogunkunle

Sign

Date