Psalm 137: Memory and Poetry

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The Psalms are of course poems written out of deep and often passionate faith. What I am proposing is that the poetic medium made it possible to articulate the emotional freight, the moral consequences, the altered perception of the world that flowed from this monotheistic belief, in compact verbal structures that could in some instances seem simplicity itself.¹

This paper will explore Psalm 137 from the perspective of that now familiar quote from Robert Alter. We find our text imbedded in the fifth book of the biblical Psalter. The voices of the psalm and its focus on Jerusalem are reminiscent of the Psalms of Ascents (Psalms 120-134). Psalms 135 and 136 continue themes from the concluding psalm of that collection and so it has been suggested “that Psalms 135-137 form a sort of appendix to the Songs of Ascents.”² All three psalms are untitled. Those who attend to the shape and shaping of the Psalter see Books IV and V as somehow related to the experience of exile and that perspective is certainly front and center in Psalm 137, which mourns the loss of the land as a heritage (Psalms 135:12; 136:21-22). Indeed, our text leads to a collection of

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Davidic psalms (Psalms 138-145) that is dominated by lament (Psalms 139-144) before the conclusion of the Psalter moves to full-throated praise. Psalm 138 also includes themes from Psalm 137: the temple (verse 2), singing of the ways of the Lord (verse 5), and trouble with enemies (verse 7). At the same time, the intensity of the expression of loss in Psalm 137 glaringly sets it apart from the surrounding psalms. I am currently writing a Psalms commentary and find that, in addition to form-critical insights, the place of a psalm in the Psalter provides interpretive clues, but so does its poetic medium. These two mesh well in the case of Psalm 137.

The analysis of Hebrew poetry has a long history with attention to parallelism, meter, and other poetic devices. There is not a lot of what has usually been labeled ‘parallelism’ in this psalm. Traditional treatments attempt to scan the meter of the psalm according to accented units in the poetic line. Some more recent interpreters have attempted to count syllables as a way of analyzing the poetic line. Freedman’s study of Psalm 137 typifies this approach, and Renfro even wants to count consonants.

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