

**From Collective Trauma to Collective Trust:  
A Korean American Reading of Psalm 60 during the Coronavirus Pandemic**

Hyun Ho Park  
Grace United Methodist Church, San Ramon, CA

**Collective Trauma from Recent History to the Current Tragedy**

*Protesters in the streets, rows of coffins, and wailing people*—these are a few of the vivid images I recall from a video I secretly watched when I was little, less than ten years old. It was a video of the May 18 Gwangju Democratization Movement of 1980, in which over 160 civilians were killed and more than 3,000 were wounded by the South Korean military in Gwangju, South Korea. I found the videotape hidden in my father's closet. It had no title. My scavenger hunt during his absence and my unauthorized viewing without his guidance left me in a state of wonder and surprise rather than the much-expected curiosity and excitement. It took years for me to understand why civilians had faced this military brutality, why the military regime at that time had hidden the incident from the broader public, and why my father had concealed this secretly recorded and circulated tape deep in his closet. It took me even more years to finally understand the depth of the collective trauma this horrendous incident had caused among many of his generation.<sup>1</sup>

Collective trauma persists beyond time, space, and even the lives of those who directly suffered from a tragic event in the past. "The tragedy is represented in the collective memory of the group," Gilad Hirschberger states; "it comprises not only a reproduction of the events, but also an ongoing reconstruction of the trauma in an attempt to make sense of it."<sup>2</sup> Although it took me years to understand the tragedy of my father's generation, I needed only weeks to grasp a tragedy of my generation, the sinking of the *Sewol* ferry. It happened on April 16, 2014, and resulted in 304 deaths, among them 250 students from Danwon High School on their way to Jeju Island for a field trip. I didn't have to go on a scavenger hunt this time because the tragedy was happening on TV right in front of my eyes. It was so mentally and emotionally devastating that I was at loss for many days and weeks. The South Korean government's inept on-site response to the incident and its opacity during the investigation process produced not only anxiety but also anger among many Koreans. The Korean economy fell into a slump for many weeks if not months. A year and a half later, I gave a presentation on the *Sewol* ferry incident to a group of Korean clergy families to recollect and (re)construct its meaning and saw many in the audience shedding tears. Watching the *Sewol* sinking, taking with it many young lives, is surely a collective experience, memory, and trauma.

Years have passed, and I am watching another tragedy unfolding in front of my very eyes. COVID-19, the novel coronavirus, has already taken more than 100,000 American lives and has put 40 million out of work. This virus will stay with us—not only out there or even in

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<sup>1</sup> For example, see Kyung Hyun Kim, "Post-Trauma and Historical Remembrance in Recent South Korean Cinema: Reading Park Kwang-su's 'A Single Spark' (1995) and Chang Sŏn-u's 'A Petal' (1996)," *Cinema Journal* 41, no. 4 (2002): 95–115, accessed April 29, 2020, [www.jstor.org/stable/1225790](http://www.jstor.org/stable/1225790).

<sup>2</sup> Gilad Hirschberger, "Collective Trauma and the Social Construction of Meaning," *Frontiers in Psychology* 9 (Aug. 10, 2018): 1441, doi:10.3389/fpsyg.2018.01441.

our own bodies but also in our memory. Let this sink in: The United States has had 100,000 deaths due to this virus in less than two months. This is more than the number of lives the United States lost in the Vietnam war over two decades. The United States seems defenseless in front of this invisible enemy. Many are in fear of contracting the virus or unwittingly spreading it. No matter where people are—whether dealing with the virus inside their own bodies, working in labs and hospitals, or out on the streets or inside shops and homes—this fierce battle for life is continuing and victory seems far away. The spike in confirmed cases of the coronavirus and of deaths in the United States is surely a challenge for Americans and our national pride as “a city on a hill” and “a beacon of hope” for the world. If this disease is not leaving an indelible scar in your psyche, it is doing so among the vulnerable, especially among minorities and people of lower socioeconomic status.<sup>3</sup> COVID-19 is leaving many people traumatized physically, socioeconomically, and psychologically.

### **Psalm 60 amid Utter Destruction**

Psalm 60, a lament psalm, reflects another trauma in history, not in South Korea or the United States but in Israel. In its superscription, the psalm seems to be describing David and Joab defeating the Edomites (e.g., 2 Samuel 8:11–14): “*when Joab on his return killed twelve thousand Edomites in the Valley of Salt.*”<sup>4</sup> Yet, what follows after says otherwise.

<sup>1</sup> *O God, you have rejected us, broken our defenses;*

*you have been angry; now restore us!*

<sup>2</sup> *You have caused the land to quake; you have torn it open;*

*repair the cracks in it, for it is tottering.*

<sup>3</sup> *You have made your people suffer hard things;*

*you have given us wine to drink that made us reel.*

The psalmist is astounded by this defeat, which he thinks God caused against God’s own people. God has rejected them and broken their defenses because God has been angry at them (v. 1). Not only the land but also their own bodies are shaking due to the hard things that they have witnessed and experienced (vv. 2–3). While its content, a devastating defeat by the Edomites, is clear (vv. 9–12), its context is not clear. Scholars are divided over where to locate this psalm in history: in the time of David or Kings Joram, Jehoiakim, or Zedekiah or even in the postexilic period.<sup>5</sup> The failed attempt to subdue the Edomites and reclaim Judahite supremacy over Edom during Jehoram’s reign (850–843 B.C.E.; see 2 Kings 8:20–21; 1 Kings 22:47) or Edom’s cooperation with the Babylonians during the siege and fall of Jerusalem (587/586 B.C.E.; see Psalm 137:7; Obadiah 8–15) are also possible backdrops for the given text. Wherever one stands

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<sup>3</sup> For example, see Azeemah Kola, “How Collective Is the Trauma of COVID-19? The Pandemic Is Traumatic for All, but the Burden of Suffering May Be Unequal,” *Psychology Today* (April 14, 2020), <https://www.psychologytoday.com/us/blog/hyphenated/202004/how-collective-is-the-trauma-covid-19>.

<sup>4</sup> The superscript reads, “To the leader: according to the Lily of the Covenant. A Miktam of David; for instruction; when he struggled with Aram-naharaim and with Aram-zobah, and when Joab on his return killed twelve thousand Edomites in the Valley of Salt” (NRSV). All quotations of Psalm 60 in this article are from the NRSV.

<sup>5</sup> Frank-Lothar Hossfeld, Erich Zenger, Linda M. Maloney, and Klaus Baltzer, *Psalms 2: A Commentary on Psalms 51–100*, Hermeneia (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress, 2005), 95–96.

in this debate, however, the text's existential context is straightforward. The psalmist, as a spokesperson for his nation, feels abandoned and defeated.

Yet, the initial lament soon turns to petition.

<sup>4</sup> *You have set up a banner for those who fear you,  
to rally to it out of bowshot. Selah*

<sup>5</sup> *Give victory with your right hand, and answer us,  
so that those whom you love may be rescued.*

This supplication of the abandoned is not just a complaint; it is an expression of trust between God and God's people. The people came out to the battlefield against their enemy because God summoned them (v. 4). They gathered around the banner not out of panic but out of fear of God (v. 4) because they knew that they were God's beloved and that God would deliver them (v. 5).<sup>6</sup> This deep trust is also present in the initial address: "Now, restore us!" (v. 1). In other words, Psalm 60 is an innocent community's plea for God's intervention and salvation.<sup>7</sup>

This subtle and, at the same time, sudden change from the collective trauma of defeat (vv. 1–3) to collective trust (vv. 4–5) invokes the much-needed voice and presence of God.

<sup>6</sup> *God has promised in his sanctuary:  
"With exultation I will divide up Shechem,  
and portion out the Vale of Succoth.*

<sup>7</sup> *Gilead is mine, and Manasseh is mine;  
Ephraim is my helmet;  
Judah is my scepter.*

<sup>8</sup> *Moab is my washbasin;  
on Edom I hurl my shoe;  
over Philistia I shout in triumph.*

<sup>9</sup> *Who will bring me to the fortified city?  
Who will lead me to Edom?*<sup>8</sup>

The dramatic change in pronouns from "you" and "us" to "I," "my," "mine," and "me" brings God's promise closer to the hearts of those who seek God.<sup>9</sup> The names of the regions in verses 6–9 mark the portions and/or boundaries of the promised land which was divided and distributed to the Israelites in Joshua 13–22.<sup>10</sup> Just as Joshua encouraged them to renew their covenant in Shechem (v. 6), those who suffer defeat and despair need to remind themselves of

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<sup>6</sup> Similarly, Psalm 34:7 states, "The angel of the Lord encamps around those who fear him, and delivers them."

<sup>7</sup> Denise Dombkowski Hopkins, *Psalms, Books 2–3*, Wisdom Commentary Series 21 (Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press, 2016), 135.

<sup>8</sup> Psalm 60:5–12 is almost identical with Psalm 108:6–13. Hopkins notes, "Oracles were reused in different situations because they contain patterned, stereotypical speech." Hopkins, *Psalms, Books 2–3*, 135.

<sup>9</sup> Hopkins, *Psalms, Books 2–3*, 135.

<sup>10</sup> Hopkins, *Psalms, Books 2–3*, 135. For Succoth, see Genesis 33:17; Joshua 13:27–28; Judges 8:4–5.

God's ownership over not only the land itself but also the people living there. Now, God refuses to remain in the past, is willing to join the struggle in the present moment, and therefore asks: "Who will bring me to the fortified city? Who will lead me to Edom?" (v. 9).<sup>11</sup>

### **From Collective Trauma to Collective Trust**

South Korea has become a leading country in the battle against the coronavirus pandemic. The nation mitigated its early outbreak, which exploded in the city of Daegu, and is now in the phase of stabilization. The number of daily new confirmed cases, which peaked at 1,062 on March 1, 2020, has been under 50 since April 5. The country even held a parliamentary election on April 15 with a 66.2% turnout of voters. This is in stark contrast to what is happening in the United States. The two countries began to have cases on the same date, on January 20. Yet, on April 28 the United States had 21,358 new confirmed cases, whereas South Korea had only 9 cases. South Korea had a total of 246 deaths on that day, but the United States had 61,342 deaths on the same day. Think about this. The U.S. population is six times that of South Korea's, yet it had 2,373 times as many new confirmed cases as South Korea on April 28. South Korea's success in suppressing the spread of the virus is backed up by "robust testing, very vigorous tracing, and quick treatment of the patients."<sup>12</sup> This early action to identify those with the virus, isolate the cases, and ensure their treatment are the keys to protecting the lives and livelihood of its people.

South Korea's success was possibly due to its failure to save lives during the sinking of the *Sewol* ferry in 2014 and in the early stages of the MERS outbreak in 2015. In an interview with *FRANCE 24*, Kyung-Wha Kang, South Korea's foreign minister, said:

We have acted quickly and preemptively. That is not just our philosophy but a reflection of our recent experience. You may know that in 2014 we had a terrible ferry boat accident where we lost 304 lives in the midst of very inept response by the government at that time. That has been a collective trauma to all Korean people and in 2015 the following year we had MERS outbreak that lasted about 3 months, didn't impact that many people, but was very highly fatal. I think, the government's reaction was very intransparent and dismissive and so heavily criticized. It came around, responded, and contained. So, this government was very determined to be prepared when disaster strikes . . . to act quickly and preemptively . . . and being uncompromisingly transparent and open in the process.<sup>13</sup>

In other words, it was the collective trauma resulting from the *Sewol* ferry accident that compelled the current Korean government to respond to the current pandemic not only quickly and preemptively but also with transparency and openness. The MERS outbreak the year after the sinking of the ferry paved the way to expedite the legislative process in case of a deadly

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<sup>11</sup> On Edom being Judah's archenemy, for example, see Dominic S. Irudayaraj, *Violence, Otherness and Identity in Isaiah 63:1–6*, Library of Hebrew Bible/Old Testament Studies 633 (London: Bloomsbury T&T Clark, 2017), 68–69.

<sup>12</sup> "'Fast and Pre-Emptive,' South Korea Earns Plaudits for Covid-19 Response," *FRANCE 24 English*, April 13, 2020, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=\\_mTN4Pv5F6M](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_mTN4Pv5F6M).

<sup>13</sup> "'Fast and Pre-Emptive.'"

disease in the future.<sup>14</sup> To resist and respond to this new virus, South Korea is using a mobile app for contact tracing, which does have security and privacy issues. Yet, most Koreans are sharing their information with the government because they believe that their government is willing to help them. This collective trust between the government and the people is the backbone of South Korea's success in its battle against COVID-19. South Korea is a politically divided country, like every other country. Not everyone supports the current government. Yet, its people know this is a critical moment and that they need to cooperate with each other in this fight.<sup>15</sup>

### **At the Crossroad**

Psalm 60 ends with words of both doubt and assurance:

<sup>10</sup> *Have you not rejected us, O God?*

*You do not go out, O God, with our armies.*

<sup>11</sup> *O grant us help against the foe,  
for human help is worthless.*

<sup>12</sup> *With God we shall do valiantly;  
it is he who will tread down our foes.*

Even after remembering God's promise (vv. 6–9), different responses emerge in this psalm. To God, who asked, "*Who will lead me to Edom?*" for battle, the psalmist still expresses a feeling of rejection and frustration (v. 10). The one who is doing the rejecting here, though he says it is God, is the psalmist himself. Yet, at this crossroad, he does not choose to remain where he is and play the blame game. Rather, he turns his trauma into trust and cries to God for help one more time because he knows that with God's help "we"—his nation—can fight against and defeat their foe (v. 12). In other words, the psalmist is encouraging his country to restore their trust in God and thus in one another, who put the same trust in their God.

We too, my fellow Americans, are at a crossroad. The deadly coronavirus has claimed many lives so far. The victory seems far away. Many have suffered and died. After 9/11, the United States is experiencing another collective trauma that will remain in the hearts and memory of its people. At this crossroad, we are called upon to choose whether we will remain defeated or will recover our faith in God and one another. Psalm 60 teaches that only when we turn our collective trauma to collective trust can we overcome this pandemic, and then "we shall overcome someday."

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<sup>14</sup> See, for example, Kyu-Myoung Lee and Kyujin Jung, "Factors Influencing the Response to Infectious Diseases: Focusing on the Case of SARS and MERS in South Korea," *International Journal of Environmental Research and Public Health* 16, no. 8 (Apr 22, 2019): 1432, doi:10.3390/ijerph16081432.

<sup>15</sup> The sweeping victory of the ruling party in the recent parliamentary election—180 out of 300 seats—demonstrated that the majority of South Koreans acknowledge and support their current government, particularly its efforts in the fight against COVID-19.