Lament as Resistance and Rage: An Asian Woman Immigrant's Reading of Psalm 137 in the Light of Anti-Asian Hate Crimes of North America

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The Lament of Asian Immigrant Women in a Foreign Land

Since late 2019, coronavirus has spread worldwide. This virus has sparked tragic and painful losses in every corner of the world. These losses have occurred in a variety of fields including health, economics, politics, poverty, race, and mental problems. As a result, we have seen increasing pain, anger, and mutual distrust. Especially the rapid increase in hate crimes against Asians in North America is challenging how churches and societies respond to racial injustice.

On March 16, 2021, six Asian women were murdered by a white man, Robert Aaron Lon, in Atlanta, Georgia in the United States. Park Hyun Jung, one of the victims, was a woman who was a primary school teacher in Korea. She immigrated to the United States with her two sons.[1] Like most lives of first-generation women immigrants, day by day she would have had to fight an uneasy situation. At the same time, she had to stand as a strong supporter and a mother of her two sons. However, her life, dream, passion, and hope that deserved to be respected have been destroyed in her workplace by a hater. The media in the United States wanted to minimize her death by suggesting it was sex addiction, rather than focusing on it as a hate crime. They insulted her life, her family, and her death. The denial of this overt racial crime has sparked deep anger among Asians. Then rage emerged as an action— the Stop Asian Hate movement. This anger arose within the hearts of those who were defending the powerless of society, lamenting the victims, accusing some of social injustice, testifying to the pain arising from racism, and desperately hoping that there would be no more such suffering.

The crimes related to Asians and the reality of Asian Immigrants are not only matters of race but also the "matrix of domination characterized by intersecting oppressions" including race, class, gender, and colonial status.[2] This web of oppression makes Asian women in a white-dominant society exposed to situations to be dishonored, vulnerable, and humbled. The suffering has become identity-shaping for and a window onto Asian women's lives as Kwok Pui-lan argues that Asian Feminist theology is "a story of suffering."[3] Hate crimes against Asians during the pandemic are not new, but have made the suffering worse and stronger. In the sixteen largest cities of the United States, the hate crimes against Asians increased 164% in 2021 when comparing last year.[4] Anti-Asian hate crimes were reported for surging 717% in

[1] BBC News, "Atlanta Spa Shootings: Who Are the Victims?" March 22, 2021. https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-56446771

[2] Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 23.

[3] Pui-lan Kwok, "God Weeps with Our Pain," in *New Eyes For Reading: Biblical and Theological Reflection by Women from the Third World*, eds. John S. Pobee and Barbel von Wartenberg-Potter (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1986), 92.

[4] Josh Campbell, "Anti-Asian Hate Crimes Surged in Early 2021, Study Says," *CNN*, May 5, 2021. https://www.cnn.com/2021/05/05/us/anti-asian-hate-crimes-study/index.html

early 2021 in Vancouver, Canada.[5] It has verified that the dysfunctional social imagination of American society in relation to white supremacy is still in full bloom.[6]

Reading Ps 137 as a lament of resistance and rage from an Asian immigrant woman's perspective in the light of her struggle within an anti-Asian-hatred context may help to deal with how the dominant society fails to protect and respect the identity of various marginalized groups and how those marginalized groups can resist attempts to impose on them a forced identity.

Lament in Psalm 137 as Resistance and Rage

Psalm 137 is associated with the Israelite community's trauma of exile in Babylon. Even if the exact date or background cannot be discerned, it does reflect memories of exiled communities or gatherings on the banks of the Babylonian River, or of the trauma of expulsion.[7] In the Jewish and Christian communities, Psalm 137 has been interpreted in various ways, and Psalm 137 began to be read as a "revolutionary call for liberation and justice" in the twentieth century, in relation to the sorrowful story of African slavery. Similarly, an Asian woman immigrant reading Psalm 137 can consider it as a political song intended to motivate the oppressed against the oppressive forces, beyond an individual predicament faced by those who struggle.[8] This perspective makes more sense when combined with the features of lament.

In many parts of the Bible, lament is presented as a work of a community, but women are the center of the voice of lamentation (cf. Lam 1-2, Jer 9:17-20). In lament, women express feelings, speak sadness, testify to the terrible memories of death, challenge injustice-ignoring social complacency, and lead communities in the first steps of their journey towards healing and recovery. Ancient Greek lament was a means of social protest against the limitations imposed on women.[9] Greek laments serve to show how women lamented under patriarchy and in times of crisis.[10] In ancient societies and patriarchal societies, lament was one of the few forms of social critique available to women who were in a vulnerable position in male-dominated societies.[11] Thus, we can presume that at the place of lament along the rivers of Babylon, women's voices might have led to lamenting of the Israelite community as resistance and rage.

Psalm 137 is made up of three stanzas. The first stanza (vv. 1-4) with a first-person plural voice presents the voice of lamenting as an expression of suffering and resistance to injustice. Second, a strong commitment not to forget Jerusalem is expressed (vv. 5-6). The last stanza is an expression of anger and a curse against the injustice of enemies (vv. 7-9).

> [1] *By the rivers of Babylon—*
> *there we sat down and there we wept*
> *when we remembered Zion.*

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[5] Palash Ghosh, "Anti-Asian Hate Reports Surge In U.S.—But It May Be Far Worse In Canada," *Forbes*, May 7, 2021. https://www.forbes.com/sites/palashghosh/2021/05/07/anti-asian-hate-reports-surge-in-us-but-it-may-be-far-worse-in-canada/?sh=3f841a494f79

[6] Mark Charles and Soong-Chan Rah, *Unsettling Truth: The Ongoing, Dehumanizing Legacy of the Doctrine of Discovery* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2019), 100.

[7] Walter Brueggeman and William H. Berllinger, Jr, *Psalms: New Cambridge Bible Commentary* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 573.

[8] Hulisani Ramantswana, "Song(s) of Struggle: A Decolonial Reading of Psalm 137 in Light of South Africa's Struggle Songs," *Ole Testament Essays* 32, no. 2 (2019): 473.

[9] Michael Galchinsky, "Lament as Transitional Justice," *Human Rights Review* 15, no. 3 (2014): 261.

[10] Ruth Emily Rosenberg, "A Voice Like Thunder: Corsican Women's Lament as Cultural Work," *Current Musicology* 78, no. 3 (2004): 32.

[11] Ibid., 39.

2 On the willows there
we hung up our harps.
3 For there our captors
asked us for songs,
and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying,
"Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"
4 How could we sing the Lord's song
in a foreign land?

The opening phrase "by the rivers of Babylon" indicates that there were Israelite exiled communities at the aqueducts or canals at the Tigris and Euphrates River as Ezekiel says the exiles dwelled by the river Chebar, a tributary of the Euphrates (1:1-3; 3:15).[12] Interpreters have interpreted this phrase as having the purpose of purifying the community, prayer for personal purification, symbolic expression of the tears of exiles, or relaxation after a hard day.[13] It is also often mentioned in connection with the intense labor of maintaining irrigation canals.[14] Some scholars interpret exile with a meaning that focuses on living away from home in a foreign country where people live in miserable conditions.[15] John Ahn notes that the constant flow of the tears of the marginalized Israel communities in Babylon represents the hardships faced by loss of fame and identity, and he relates that to the cultural and linguistic barriers that today's many first-generation immigrants have to face.[16]

Similar to Psalm 137, we can see today the various and mixed forms of oppression that Asians experience in white dominant society are clearly present, and the recent Atlanta tragedy and hate crimes against Asians testify that Asian immigrants have not been fully accepted as equal members of society and instead are looked down upon. Lament expressed following the Asian hate crimes disclosed intersectional oppression and people who have a sense of resistance and rage against those crimes poured into the streets to protest them. From this point of view, the act of lamenting by the rivers of Babylon in Psalm 137 is not only an expression of sorrow but also a public act of resistance against silencing or denying oppression in public places.

The lament by the rivers confronts oppression with mockery (v. 3). The songs of Zion were for the great festivals of Israel, and these songs were to proclaim that victory or to celebrate the security of Jerusalem.[17] Furthermore, Zion meant a safe place protected by God. Zion means the land where God pours out justice and righteousness (Isa 1:27; 33:5). In this sense, the demand to sing Zion's songs for the oppressors' entertainment deliberately insults God. It was an insult to Israel's way of life and to the very roots of, their beliefs and their collective existence. They responded to such an insult by hanging their harps on the willow trees as a sign of resistance (v. 2). Like the oppressors who insulted the mourners in Psalm 137, a man in New York recently assaulted a mother who participated in the protest with her young child.[18] Though the tears continued to flow through the streets of injustice, some Asians are

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[12] Young-jin Min, "The Ritual of Lament: Psalm 137," *Bible Studies* 7, no. 11 (2001): 3.
[13] John Ahn, "Psalm 137: Complex Communal Laments," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 127, no. 2 (2008): 278.
[14] Ibid.
[15] Bob Becking, "Does Exile Equal Suffering? A Fresh Look at Psalm 137," in *Exile and Suffering: A Selection of Papers Read at the 50th Anniversary Meeting of the Old Testament Society of South Africa* OTWSA/OTSSA Pretoria, August 2007, eds. Bob Becking and Dirk Human, OTS 50 (Leiden: Brill, 2009): 181.
[16] Ahn, "Psalm 137," 279.
[17] Allen P. Ross, *A Commentary on The Psalms* Vol. 3 (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2016), 789-90.
[18] NBC New York, "Two Asian Women Assaulted in One Day in NYC Amid Calls to End Hateful, Racist Attacks," March 22, 2021. https://www.nbcnewyork.com/news/local/assault-suspect-punches-woman-on-her-way-to-anti-asian-violence-protest-police/2956585/

still spat upon, beaten, and insulted in the streets. Many Asians in North America, especially women and elders, have had their very existence threatened and some have lost their lives. This parallel between the Asian community in North America and the Israel community in Babylon demonstrates that the values and cultures of both of these communities were despised and rejected by the oppressors, and the marginalized communities were forced to live under a matrix of oppression.

This experience of pain and ridicule leads the psalmist to articulate a strong commitment, one that, if broken, will bring down a curse on herself.

5 If I forget you, O Jerusalem,
let my right hand wither!
6 Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth,
if I do not remember you,
if I do not set Jerusalem
above my highest joy.

The verb *zakar* (remember) is repeated in verses 1, 6, and 7 to form connectivity in Psalm 137. The verb in the second stanza has a strong determination which is more than simply remembering the pain of Jerusalem's destruction. It is a pledge that if they forget the pain Israelites have experienced and let themselves become satisfied with the life and identity of an exotic land, they will curse themselves.[19] This struggle is neither romantic nor a 'forgive and forget' thing which bypasses or denies the oppression or suffering and jumps into hope quickly based on boundless optimism.[20] This determination is a will to identify the oppression clearly, name it, and be outraged against its injustice. It shows that lament in response to injustice will be continued because "without the practice of public lament, justice is blocked, paralyzed, and unable to begin."[21]

In the last stanza, the lament of the community explodes and is presented as a radical rage, including the language of curse and vengeance.

7 Remember, O Lord, against the Edomites
the day of Jerusalem's fall,
how they said, "Tear it down! Tear it down!
Down to its foundations!"
8 O daughter Babylon, you devastator!
Happy shall they be who pay you back
what you have done to us!
9 Happy shall they be who take your little ones
and dash them against the rock!

The curse and vengeance of the last stanza of Psalm 137 (vv. 7-9) might have remained as a challenge to interpreters and preachers or at least caused them some anxiety because Jesus mentions endless mercy and forgiveness for one's foes (Matt 5:38-42; Luke 6:29-30). The

[19] Anastasia Boniface-Malle, "Singing a Foreign Song at Home Analogy from Psalm 137," *Journal of Biblical Text Research* 24 (2009): 293.
[20] Fleming Rutledge, *The Crucifixion: Understanding the Death of Jesus Christ* (Grand Rapids, MI: William Eerdmans, 2015), 116, 123. Rutledge considers forgiveness too easy to say - even if it is because of the cross. She criticizes that many Christians believe that forgiveness is the essence of Christianity. See, Ibid., 142.
[21] Kathleen M. O'Connor, *Lamentations and the Tears of the World* (New York: Orbis Books, 2002), 128.

destructive last part of Psalm 137 can also provoke a strong negative reaction with a variety of complex interpretive issues: in particular, abuse of children. Indeed, although this issue expresses the poignant suffering of wars that had occurred in reality in the ancient Near East, it may be understood as metaphors in many parts of the Bible (cf. 2 Kgs 8:12; Isa 13:16; Hos 13:16; Nah 3:10). Even the ancient readers would not have understood this as a conqueror's right or as morally acceptable. Both the Jewish and Christian communities have struggled with these verses and have come up with a variety of ways to interpret them.[22] The phrase "your little ones" is not interpreted literally, or it is intended to place responsibility for the vengeance in God's hands rather than focusing on violence.[23] Some understood the violence against a baby as representing God's promise of compensation. From a pastoral or ethical point of view, this passage has sometimes been rejected.

Despite the interpretive difficulties, expressions of desperate anger as the culmination of lament in Psalm 137 can be an expression of deep pain and a strong desire for an end to oppressive injustice. When we remember the Exodus story which tries to neutralize the Hebrews by killing their children (Exod 1:16-17), the expression of killing children in Psalm 137 may be regarded as a longing for neutralizing unrighteous oppression in the future of society.

Also, the radical imagination can unveil violence and terror. As Erich Zenger says, it becomes "the necessary barb acting against the temptation to minimize or ignore repressive and destructive violence."[24] When considering the relationship between Native Americans and North American settlers, the great commandment (Matt 28:18-20) to baptize all nations may have caused far more violence and damage than the violent texts in Psalm 137.[25] The violence in the Bible, including Psalm 137, should not be justified. However, such texts cannot be avoided or ignored unconditionally. Interpreters need to remember that texts of violence have the power to illuminate hidden violence and to force us to face uncomfortable truth. Interpreters also need to recognize that justice is at the heart of God's existence and ministry, and that God allows people to lament and complain to God when they experience injustice.[26]

Lament for Singing the Song of Zion

Psalm 137 recalls the destruction of Jerusalem and, at the same time, evokes a sense of resistance to the suffering and oppression caused by the empire. It can be extended today to combat the intersectional oppression of race, gender, colonial status, and classism. This psalm accuses the dominant cultures of committing oppression with their actions and strategies. It may work as a warning to people who become numb to the suffering from injustice that they observe.[27] Faith never favors "pious silence," and the Bible makes these direct, aggressive, and persistent demands because the lamenters believe that God is coming at the request of those voices.[28]

Since lament as non-violent resistance may help to carry out corporate responsibility on social justice without blaming a certain group or forming a dichotomy between victims and

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[22] Mari Joerstad, "Sing Us the Songs of Zion: Land, Culture, and Resistance in Psalm 137, 12 Years a Slave, and Cedar Man," *Horizons in Biblical Theology* 40 (2018): 3-4.
[23] James H. Waltner, *Psalms* (Scottdale, PA: Herald, 2006), 655.
[24] Erich Zenger, *A God of Vengeance? Understanding the Psalms of Divine Wrath* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox, 1996), 75.
[25] Joerstad, "Sing Us the Songs of Zion," 13.
[26] Chris Marshall, *Little Book of Biblical Justice: A Fresh Approach to The Bible's Teachings on Justice* (Intercourse, PA: Good Books, 2005), 22-23.
[27] Zenger, *A God of Vengeance?* 74.
[28] Walter Brueggemann, *The Threat of Life: Sermons on Pain, Power, and Weakness* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1996), 101.

victimizers, it may form a dialogue that understands and respects the wounds of both sides of a conflict. Thus, interpreters do not turn from or bypass the pain, resistance, and anger in Psalm 137 too quickly, using words to turn it into hope. To take a step toward a just society, it is necessary to provide a space for the suffering of the oppressed to be sufficiently heard, to accuse injustice, and to express rage, acknowledging that hope comes slowly. Lament can be not only a longing for justice but also a practice of justice that requires God's redemptive action: "to be outraged and to take an action on behalf of the voiceless and oppressed is to do the work of God."[29]

The song of Zion can never be sung without consciousness of conflict and rage from injustice in the land of oppression. Hope is hidden because Psalm 137 ends with fierce anger. If they lacked hope, nonetheless, they would not be angry, would not move, resist, or lament. The community of tears projects a belief in freedom and ultimate justice through Psalm 137. God's justice is on the move because "God is overcoming evil, delivering the oppressed, raising the poor from the dust, vindicating the voiceless victims who have had no one to defend them."[30]

"Blessed are those who mourn," for they will sing a song of Zion (Matt 5:4).

[29] Rutledge, *The Crucifixion,* 143.
[30] Ibid., 328.