GRIEF, MEMORY, AND HOPE: SIGNIFICANCE OF ANCESTRAL LAND IN PSALM 137 "BY THE RIVERS OF BABYLON" IN HEALING INTERGENERATIONAL MIGRATION TRAUMA[1]

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Abstract. Psalm 137 presents a paradigmatic expression of exile and lament, and the power of shared hope to return to the ancestral land. Memories trigger strong feelings and a firm resolve not to "forget" the ancestral home. This paper argues from a constructive perspective that in Psalm 137, the memory of ancestral land is not merely nostalgic or a source of grief, but it functions as a theological act that preserves communal identity and sustains hope for restoration and healing. Even today, we feel strongly about land, especially ancestral lands, because they are closely connected to our identity, cherished memories, grief, and hopes. Methodologically, we will employ historical-critical exegesis and theological reflection enriched by cultural memory theory. In treating Psalm 137, which David Stowe calls the "Memory-Project,"[2] most scholars have emphasized the side of trauma and vengeance; this study highlights a merger of positive theological and psychological approaches to trauma, grief, memory, and ancestral land as resources of hope and healing, especially for migrants who are mostly

1 GenAI Disclosure Statement: GenAI was not used in any way in the paper.

2 David Stowe, *Song of Exile: The Enduring Mystery of Psalm 137* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 114.

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affected by intergenerational trauma arising from migration circumstances.

Keywords: ancestral land, grief, memory, historical migration trauma, healing migrants

Socio-Historical Background of Psalm 137

Psalms are among the oldest extant poems in the world, ranking with any poetry in any culture, ancient or modern, from anywhere in the world.[3] Psalm 137 is said to have been written during the exile, by one of the exiles,[4] between the years 597 BCE and 538 BCE. Historically, it follows the 586 BCE defeat of Judah and destruction of Jerusalem by Nebuchadnezzar II.[5] The aftermath was the capture and siege of Jerusalem, which was the capital of Judah, and many Judeans (Jews), especially the elite, craftsmen, soldiers, priests, and others who were talented, were captured and deported to captivity in different Babylonian cities.[6]

Scholars suggest that this psalm was authored in exile because of the vivid expression of the experience, even though verses 1-3 use the past tense. In verse 8, the author depicts Babylon as yet untouched by the Persians, making the Psalm appropriately belong to the exilic period whose *terminus ad quem* is 538 BCE.[7] The exile is said to have lasted 7 decades, in

3 N. T. Wright, The Case of the Psalms: Why They are Essential (London: HarperCollins Publishers, 2013), 1.

4 William L. Holladay, *The Psalms through Three Thousand Years: Prayerbook of a Cloud of Witness* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 57.

5 Gosta Ahlstrom, *The History of Ancient Palestine* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 781.

6 Elias Bickermann, *The Jews in the Greek Age* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 133.

7 William R. Taylor, *The Song of an Exile* (137: 1-9), vol. 4, *The Interpreter's Bible: Psalms and Proverbs*, ed. George Arthur Buttrick (New York: Abingdon Press, Nashville, 1955), 704.

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connection with the land-related prophecy of Jeremiah 29:10, but there is no historical consensus.

The popular prophetic message of the time endured despite the silencing of prophets and the exiling of some as undesired inhabitants. Their message sank into the Jewish consciousness, and in their "racial memory," as Dimont calls it, a reason why their faith flourished even in the foreign land where they were an oppressed minority.[8] Though the continued existence of the holy city, according to Renckens, "kept the national feelings and national hopes alive,"[9] the exiles needed a place to belong, a land to call their own, beyond being united by their oral tradition of God's great act of deliverance.[10]

Scholars consider the Babylonian exile and the latter dispersions as progressive social and religious crises,[11] which completely affected the people's "mazeway," as Anthony Wallace calls it; their sense of meaning and order, and their mental representation of their world, themselves, their culture, and their society.[12]

As a minority community, the exiles became more unified because of the common situation and mechanisms of survival and resistance. The need to adapt to this new situation made the community acquire a completely new social structure

8 Max Dimont, *Jews, God and History* (New York: Signet Books, 1962), 64.

9 Henry Renckens SJ, *The Religion of Israel*, trans. N.B. Smith (New York: Sheed and Ward, 1966), 280.

10 William L. Holladay, *Long Ago God Spoke: How Christians May Hear the Old Testament Today* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 127.

11 Tero Alstola, "Judeans in Babylonia: A Study of Deportees in the Sixth and Fifth Centuries BCE" (PhD diss., Leiden University: 2017), 222, 224, 226-227.

12 Daniel L. Smith, *The Religion of the Landless: The Social Context of the Babylonian Exile* (Houston: Meyer Stone Books, 1989), 49, 50.

there in exile.[13] This solidarity created a separation from other Jews who did not endure the exile, hence forming a "community of crisis." The peak of this conflict is between the two groups.[14] Hans Kippenberg notes evidence of the development of 'classes' in the post-exilic period.[15] Those who returned, as Daniel Caroll elaborates, were not the same people, as they had seen the larger world and the great cities of its most powerful empire at the time and had lived among other cultures. Meanwhile, those who remained developed resentment and an opposition towards the returnees, as they did not want them to change the status quo of their lives. As such, their return did not automatically mean they were free people.[16]

Yet, amid survival, some Judean exiles intermarried with the conquerors, and some assimilated. In a way, they followed the advice of Jeremiah, who advised the exiles not to resist their new situation, but to settle productively and peacefully in Babylon (cf. Jer. 29:4-7). But this was controversial in many ways, as marriage also involved faith; hence, the concerns were religious, not political or cultural. Intermarrying compromised the demands of their Jewish faith.[17] There is also evidence of bilingualism among the exiles, especially in Aramaic, which was widely used alongside Hebrew among the subject peoples across the Assyrian and Babylonian empires.[18]

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13 Henry Renckens SJ, *The Religion of Israel*, 276.

14 Smith, *The Religion of the Landless*, 63, 64, 65.

15 John W. Rogerson, "Old Testament," in *The Oxford Handbook of Biblical Studies*, eds. John W. Rogerson and Judith M. Lieu (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 18.

16 M. Daniel Caroll R., *The Bible and Borders: Hearing God's Word on Immigration* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Brazos Press, 2020), 40-41.

17 M. Daniel Caroll R., *The Bible and Borders*, 41.

18 Holladay, *The Psalms through Three Thousand Years*, 56.

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In an attempt to look at history from a positive lens as well, historians consider the defeat of Judah in 586 BCE as an event that made it possible for Judah to germinate "a new phase" of Jewish life.[19] Renckens supports that the exile made a new pattern of life both necessary and permanent. He says, "Only a radical break with the old order could make the rise of the new Jewish world possible."[20]

Historical-Critical Exegesis of Psalm 137

Poetry is a human language that says more, and says it more intensely than does ordinary language. It enriches the understanding of human experience.[21] As psalms are important ancient Israelite poems, it is important that every psalm is read with its context in mind in order to grasp the historical, social, and political situations hidden between the terse lines of the Psalms, and to harmonize the richness in the contexts of words, commitments, moods, feelings, aspirations, actions, and messages being communicated.

Regarding authorship, Psalm 137 is said to have been written by someone who sat by the rivers, wept, hung up his harp, and later recorded the memory.[22] Scholars attribute it to the prophet Jeremiah. The Septuagint adds, in some manuscripts, a superscription "Of David (by/for) Jeremiah." The link to Jeremiah is because he is traditionally considered the author of the Book of Lamentations. Several verses of Psalm 137 also share wording with Jeremiah 51, which foretells the destruction of the Edomites, "repaying" Babylon for her

19 Dimont, *Jews, God and History*, 60.

20 Renckens SJ, *The Religion of Israel*, 280.

21 Laurence Perrine, *Sound and Sense: An Introduction to Poetry*, 11th ed. (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth/Thomson, 2004), 7 – 8.

22 Stowe, *Song of Exile*, 13.

crimes, and "dashing" evildoers.[23] David is most likely not the author because he lived about four centuries before the exile.

While the genre of lament in Psalms is by far the most attested form of psalm in the Book of Psalms,[24] Psalm 137 is classified as an "individual communal lament"[25] as it is a prayer that stems from their collective suffering in exile, expressing the grief, humiliation, and longing shared by the whole community. The tone is personal, but the language is symbolically representative, suggesting it was intended for public recitation, likely in post-exilic worship.[26] As a poem, the phrase "Rivers of Babylon" emphasizes their displacement, while Zion or Jerusalem serves as a metonymy for their identity, homeland, covenant with God, and God's presence.

The first part, verses 1-4, is a sorrowful dirge or elegy, evoking a mood similar to mourning the dead, as it conveys the sorrowful memory of exile. Here, the poet "presents a retrospective look at the situation of Judean exiles during their sojourn in Babylon."[27] In the second part, verses 5-6, the oath of loyalty to Jerusalem expresses the poet's bitterness and self-imprecation. The third part, verses 7-9, contains an imprecatory *lex talionis* prayer for God to avenge the exiles' enemies.

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23 Adele Berlin, *Psalms 120-150*, vol. 5, *The JPS Bible Commentary*, ed. Benjamin Sommer (Melrose Park, PA: The Jewish Publication Society, 2023), 94.

24 Linda S. Schearing, "Psycho-theological Functions of Lament: Giving Voice to Anger and Grief," in *Theology in a Post-Traumatic Church*, Ed. John N. Sheveland, (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2023), 138, 139.

25 "Individual" because an individual voice speaks on behalf of the community and thus embodying collective grief in personal form. So "*individual communal*" is a hybrid form.

26 Walter Brueggemann, *Praying the Psalms: Engaging Scripture and the Life of the Spirit*, 2nd Edition, (Oregon: Cascade Books, 1984), 21.

27 Willem S. Prinsloo, "Psalm 137," in *Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible*, eds. James D.G. Dunn and John W. Rogerson (Michigan: Grand Rapids, 2003), 430.

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These 3 parts also form a three-movement structure that shifts sharply in tone, emotion, and focus, creating dramatic contrast. According to Brueggemann, the psalm moves from Grief >>> Resolve >>> Protest.[28] These dramatic contrasts, according to Meir Stenberg, help to sustain the theological tension.[29]

In the Psalms' prayer tradition, both lament and imprecation are crucial and valid theological speech forms;[30] hence their protest, which Sr. Marion Moeser calls: "The loud, religious 'Ouch!' 'Why?' 'Please!'"[31] - is a prayer. Lament psalms are important for life and faith and do not have to be lost, as Westermann says, because they end up in praise, which is full and unfettered.[32]

Ancestral Land in Israel's History and Theology

In different societies, ancestral land extends beyond physical territory, representing a deep and multifaceted connection to a people's identity, culture, and spiritual worldview. It is a shared inheritance across generations and plays a significant role in cultural survival. The capture of ancestral land, however small, has historically caused tragedies because of sentimental attachment rooted in the significance of such land to the people's existence, being, "past-present-future" history, and identity.

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28 Brueggemann, *Praying the Psalms*, 25, 42-43, 46.

29 Meir Sternberg, *The Poetics of Biblical Narrative: Ideological Literature and the Drama of Reading* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 20.

30 Brueggemann, *Praying the Psalms*, 9.

31 Schearing, "Psycho-theological Functions of Lament," 139.

32 Walter Brueggemann, "The Costly Loss of Lament," *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 36: (1986): 57-58.

A territory is important for the purpose of legitimizing a societal unit, which in this case is a nation.[33] William Holladay asks, "*Did the Israelites Need Land*?" as he considers it an assumption that the Israelites needed land. He observes that the promise of land to Israel is ancient and is embedded in the ancient narrative of the patriarchs, and their memory is that their ancestors were nomads, aliens moving from one pasture to another, depending on the tolerance of the local population.[34]

William Holladay traces these historical events of the Israelites and the land in Scripture. He begins with the promise of land to Abraham, the ancestor of the Israelites (Gen 12), the covenant binding on both the offspring and the land (Gen 17:5-7), the purchase of land (cave) to bury his wife Sarah (Gen 23:1-20), and the repetition of the similar promises later to Jacob (Gen 28:13-14).[35] Abraham and his descendants lived a nomadic life, even in the Promised Land; this is why they are often referred to as sojourners, especially in the book of Genesis. The only land Abraham is said to have owned is the Machpelah cave, which he bought for his wife's interment.[36]

For the Israelites, therefore, land is understood both theologically and morally,[37] and was not merely a property, but a sacramental reality and a tangible sign of their covenantal relationship with God. It was meant to be held in love, trust, and fidelity to the covenant. In the Old Testament, humans' love for God cannot be interpreted except in the context of fidelity to

33 Smith, *The Religion of the Landless*, 57.

34 Holladay, *Long Ago God Spoke*, 126.

35 Holladay, *Long Ago God Spoke*, 127.

36 M. Daniel Caroll R., *The Bible and Borders*, 19.

37 Ronald Hendel, *Remembering Abraham: Culture, Memory, and History in the Hebrew Bible* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 52-53.

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the covenant relationship and a commitment to the social and private dimensions of loyalty to the covenant.[38] Their identity as the chosen people was deeply rooted in the fulfilled promise of land given to Abraham in Gen. 12 and 15. As such, when they lost the land, numerous theological questions arose regarding their covenant with God. For example, "Has God revoked his covenant?" Though William Holladay says, "the dream of land is the dream of the underclass,"[39] it is different in this case, as land is more than the physicality of a place; it is a sign and bond of a relationship never meant to end.

The Rivers of Babylon

The land between the rivers Euphrates and Tigris was called Mesopotamia by the Greeks; *Mesos* is a Greek word for middle, and *Potamos* for river. Politically and culturally, the borders of this land have varied in history.[40] Attempts at expansion were made, and Romans and Parthians, Byzantines and Sassanians, Muslims and Magians, and later, in the 13th century, Mongols and Turks fought over it.[41] Mesopotamia is one of the most influential common sources of both Hebrew and Greek civilization, and it is an important historical land for the Hebrews, as important patriarchs, judges, and kings lived there.

Historically, it was traditional to worship near water sources,[42] (see also: Ezek. 3:15, Acts 16:13), as divine attributes were given to water, which was also considered infinitely

38 G. Ernest Wright, *The Old Testament and Theology*, 115.

39 Holladay, *Long Ago God Spoke*, 127.

40 Cyrus H. Gordon, "Mesopotamia," in *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible: K-Q*, ed. George Arthur Buttrick (New York: Abingdon Press Nashville, 1962), 359.

41 Paul Kriwaczek, *Babylon: Mesopotamia and the Birth of Civilization* (New York: Thomas Dunne Books/St. Martin's Press, 2005), 19.

42 Roland de Vaux, *Ancient Israel: Its Life and Institutions*, Tr. John McHugh, (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1961), 277-278.

mutable and a medium of supernatural agency.[43] Thus, for the Israelites, sitting "by the rivers" of Babylon meant gathering to pray, mourn, and reminisce about the homeland, and it reminded them of the practice of worshipping near water sources. With the pain and distress of exile, the rivers became sites of lamentation and memory.

The Exile's Social, Political, and Religious Experiences

Socially, the exile significantly and irreparably fractured a well-bonded society; families and hierarchies were torn down.[44] The exiles were deported over 500 miles away to Babylon, with the trauma of leaving their beloved city destroyed, its people scattered, the kingship in the line of David ended, and, above all, the temple, which is Yahweh's throne, destroyed.[45] They were also traumatized by the memory of the prophecy of Ezekiel (Ez. 10:1-22, 11:22-25).

Prior to the exile, Hebrew flourished as a literary and spoken language.[46] But after the exile, the script was changed from the alphabetic script that the Israelites shared with the Phoenicians, Ammonites, Moabites, and Edomites to the square script still used for Modern Hebrew.[47] The exile made

43 Marti, Nissinen, "Sacred Springs and Liminal Rivers: Water and Prophecy in the Ancient Eastern Mediterranean," in *Thinking of Water in the Early Second Period*, vol. 461, *Beihefte zur Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*, eds. Ehud Ben Zvi and Christoph Levin (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014), 29.

44 Barry J. Beitzel, *Biblica: The Bible Atlas* (Sydney: Global Book Publishing, 2007), 216.

45 Holladay, *The Psalms through Three Thousand Years*, 54.

46 John Elwolde, *Language and Translation of the Old Testament* (Oxford: Oxford University Press), 136.

47 Wilfred G. Lambert, "Ancient Near Eastern Studies: Mesopotamia," in *The Oxford Handbook of Biblical Studies*, eds. John W. Rogerson and Judith M. Lieu (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 76, 136.

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Judah economically non-viable.[48] Those who were skilled and made Jerusalem productive and flourishing were taken away. (2 Kings 24:14).

Religiously, the exile strengthened a monotheistic faith, and it was an important *prefiguration* of the Church.[49] This new challenge compelled them to reinterpret their faith in the pagan Babylonian Empire, without their Land and Temple.

Music, Liturgy, Memory in Exile Communities

In history, the Kingdom of Judah was known for its music. Music was important for liturgical, royal, and prophetic activities. From David's time, musicians participated in the liturgy and festivals. They sang psalms and accompanied the rituals with harps, lyres, cymbals, and trumpets (cf. 1 Chr. 15:16-24, 25:1-7). As the psalms testify to a long, rich, and ancient tradition of sung prayers, N. T. Wright calls the Psalms "the Church's original hymnbook."[50] They form the musical corpus of the Israelites, which retells their history as God's people.

Music was considered an instrument of covenantal memory, a sacred vocation, and a vehicle for the presence of the Divine; when the priests and musicians sang in unison, the glory of the Lord filled the temple (cf. 1 Chr. 25:7, 2 Chr. 5:12-14). The Levites were trained as temple musicians, as the temple was an important center for the manifestation of these resounding rhythms of faith. Music was closely connected with God's revelation through the prophets, as when "the hand of the Lord came upon Elisha, while the musicians played" (2 Kings 3:15).

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48 John Rogerson, "Israel to the end of the Persian Period: History, Social, Political, and Economic Background," in *The Oxford Handbook of Biblical Studies*, eds. John W. Rogerson and Judith M. Lieu (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 281.

49 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 710.

50 Wright, *The Case of the Psalms*, 3.

It is important to note that music was already being used for therapeutic purposes to bring spiritual relief, such as when David played the lyre to calm King Saul's tormented spirit (cf. 1 Sam. 16:14-23). Musical instruments were also used by the prophetic circles for ecstatic prophecy, which often involves trance-like ecstasy and emotional excitement (cf. 1 Sam. 10:2, 2 Kgs. 3:15, Is. 5:1). The timeline here is from the 11th to 10th century BCE, and music had already assumed liturgical, royal, and prophetic functions.

In exile, 6th Century BCE, music was not mere entertainment, but an instrument for preserving the faith. Songs carried theological truths and the faith of the Jews, like portable sanctuaries helping them to reinterpret their faith and worship without the temple, altar, or choir.

In theorizing about "memory," Paul Ricoeur explains that the Greek philosophers made a distinction between "*mneme*," "an unexpected unbidden popping into minds of a concrete memory," and "*anamnesis,*" the intentional recall by which the mind carries out an active search for something in the past. *Mneme* was understood as an affection, a *pathos*; while *anamnesis* was a disciplined activity of the mind.[51]

A later French philosopher, Henri Bergson, conceptualized two kinds of memory in his book *Matter and Memory*: pointed recollection (*souvenir*) and habit (*habitude*). Both forms are operating in Psalm 137. The opening verses, with the mourning scene by the river, present memory as souvenir, or *mneme*, with its pathos of longing and loss. The second section presents an inward turn and suggests an *anamnesis*, an act of intentional recall and of disciplined effort.[52] Thus, this re-living and

51 Paul Ricoeur, *Memory, History, Forgetting*, trans. Kathleen Blamey and David Pellauer (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2004), 14-30.

52 Stowe, *Song of Exile*, 110.

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remembering resonates with the Church's understanding of *anamnesis*[53] in the liturgy, where we remember the salvific events and make them present.

Verse 2 of Psalm 137 describes harps hung upon the poplars, signifying silenced liturgy. Refusal to sing for their captors in verses 3-4 can also be interpreted as an act of covenant fidelity with God, as well as a resistance, non-violent resistance. It was a means of cultural survival, an act of worship, and a refusal of profanation. The insistence "How could we sing the song of the Lord in a foreign land?" (Verse 4) becomes a theological question about authentic worship in displacement and amidst oppression, as music carried memories of lost worship. The destruction of the temple ceased the continuous song of the Lord accompanied by harps, lyres, and cymbals. In the context of Verse 5, the hand that once plucked the harp now pledges loyalty to memory itself.[54] It was a grave mockery asking them to sing sacred songs to amuse pagan oppressors. Thus, the

53 This Greek word, as explained in The New Dictionary of Sacramental Worship, "is practically untranslatable in English," while "'memorial,' 'commemoration,' 'remembrance,' all suggest a recollection of the past, anamnesis means making present an object or person from the past." Some theologians have used the word "reactualization" to express what anamnesis entails. Cf. Frank C. Senn, "*Anamnesis*," in *The New Dictionary of Sacramental Worship*, ed. Peter E. Fink, SJ (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1990), 45.

54 Cf. Konrad Schaefer, OSB, "Psalms," in The Jerome Biblical Commentary for the 21st Century, 3rd edition, eds. John J. Collins, Gina Hens-Piazza, Barbara Reid, OP and Donald Senior, CP (New York: T&T Clark, 2022), 707; Furthermore, "the hand would no longer be able to play the harp and the tongue no longer be able to sing the Songs of Zion. The memory is more precious than body or life. The psalm's stunning intention is that, in spite of the fact that the temple has been left in ruins and Jerusalem destroyed, the victorious captors will not control the memory and imagination of this community of exiles. Memory is a powerful weapon and can be sustained over the long haul and fuel resilience." – Walter Brueggemann and William Bellinger, *Psalms: New Cambridge Bible Commentary* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 574.

silence of Psalm 137 is not the absence of faith, but the protest of faith.

Hope and the Persistence of Identity

In Psalm 137, hope and identity are strongly rooted in collective memory.[55] For exiles, remembering Zion keeps alive the belief that God's presence and promises will endure, and therefore that they must endure.[56] Their deep longing is not mere nostalgia, but confidence that they are God's people (*identity*) and that God will restore them and all they have lost (*hope*).[57] According to John Locke, memory constitutes our "sense of self;" that is, the self is "essentially coterminous" with its memories.[58]

God reaffirmed His covenant promise to Israel through Moses before the Exodus was complete, "I will take you as my people, and I will be your God" (Ex. 6:7), "...how I bore you on eagle's wings" (Ex. 19:4-6), "I will walk among you, and I will be your God, and you shall be my people" (Lev. 26:12), "For you are a people holy to the Lord your God" (Deut. 7:6, 14:2, 26:18-19). "It has pleased the Lord to make you a people for himself" (1 Sam. 12:22, see also 2 Sam 7:23-24).

Through the prophets, the tone of these loving assurances is even more intimate: "... O Israel, do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine" (Is. 43:1), I chose you and did not cast you off" (Is. 41:8-9). This covenantal assurance informed their hope as they held Jerusalem in memory

55 David Stowe clarifies that people can share memories, but they share them as individuals whose memory-lives are irreducibly private. Cf. Stowe, *Song of Exile*, 110.

56 Stowe, *Song of Exile*, 39.

57 Prinsloo, "Psalm 137," 430.

58 Stowe, *Song of Exile*, 110. Cf. John Locke, *An Essay on Human Understanding*, Bk. 2, Chp. 27, no. 9.

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also helped to preserve them from disintegrating and slowly assimilating into Babylonian culture. Their cry to God for justice manifests their faith even more strongly. However, for them, "justice should be done in the visible and the historical world of here and now."[59]

For the exiles, "remembering Jerusalem" is crucial in preserving their deep, historical relationship with God. Because their remembering is collective, and in light of Jan Assmann's theory of cultural memory, we see that this ongoing act of remembering shapes their past into a shared narrative that supports identity, continuity, and meaning. In this process, all the trauma, loss, and rupture can be reinterpreted into a story that explains their "who we are" as well as their "why we endured."[60]

Grief and Longing

In Psalm 137, grief is not self-indulgent despair, but it shapes their disposition of worship, even amid pain and lamentation. Lament is a valid and acceptable form of prayer; just as Jesus lamented to the Father, "My God, My God, why have you forsaken me" (Mk. 15:34). God always shows solidarity in human pain.

Writing about the expression of feelings in Psalms, including grief, Wahl elaborated that: "Psalms have a compelling grip on us. We find expressed in them feelings of joy and grief, of fear and anger, with which we seem to identify; we seem to find in them a reflection of our own aspirations and complaints, our own gratitude and shame."[61] They make the believing commu-

59 Thomas Peter Wahl, *The Lord's Son in a Foreign Land: The Psalms as Prayer* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1998), 187.

60 Jan Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Early Civilization* (Cambridge University Press, 2021), 37-39.

61 Wahl, *The Lord's Son in a Foreign Land*, 1.

nity aware of the full range of human experience and dispose them to prayer by reflecting actual contexts.[62] The Church teaches that: "The Psalms bring to the fore the grandeur of God's actions in creation and history, as well as the depth of human feelings in the face of these actions. They celebrate the Lord who created the universe and governs history, and they express human joy and sorrow, hope and anguish, gratitude and supplication."[63]

Caroll describes Psalm 137 as: "A veritable roller-coaster of emotions about their being so far from everything that had given meaning and order to their lives."[64]The exiles suffered grief and deep pain for different reasons related to their exile experience. They lost their homeland and the place of their king, which was an important sign of the Davidic dynasty and hope for glory,[65] and they were hurt by the destruction of their Temple. There were deaths along the way, and thousands lost their loved ones, as scholars say between forty and fifty thousand Judaeans went into exile.[66] Important relationships were permanently halted; they lost freedom and autonomy, and their community and its structures perished. Many suffered traumas from alienation, violence, and destruction as well. The loss or alienation from Divine Presence caused them *theological grief* as well, as they experienced spiritual emptiness and interpreted their suffering as abandonment by God.

Living a life of uncertainty and in-betweenness, as they were neither at home nor fully integrated in Babylon, was also

62 Dragoslava Santrac, "Praying the Psalms: How Biblical Prayers can Enrich our Personal and Liturgical Prayer Lives," *Theologica* 33/2 (2018): 262.

63 *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, no. 2588.

64 M. Daniel Caroll R., *The Bible and Borders*, 34.

65 M. Daniel Caroll R., *The Bible and Borders*, 34.

66 Henry Renckens SJ, *The Religion of Israel*, 278.

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a cause and context of grieving. In its entirety, the exiles' grief was rooted in their loss of the indispensably fond social and religious collective memory, which also constitutes their identity as God's chosen people.

Grief over Ancestral Land

For ancient Israelites, ancestral land embodied both the theological promises and their cultural belonging. It was the material and spatial expression of their divine election as chosen people as well as their response in obedience. Their dwelling in the land and the fulfillment of their hopes, as Wittenberg elaborates, were contingent on their relations to both the land and God.[67]

The loss created a crisis of theological identity among the exiles. Losing their land was like losing the visible sign of divine promise. Yet that memory became the seed of hope. Their experience is deeper than mere homesickness; it is grief.

Land is sacred, and its holiness has been communicated throughout history. Land was never distanced from the human person. Prophet Ezekiel said "*eretz*" meaning: land, country, earth can sin by being unfaithful (c.f. Ez. 14:13), can as well be made desolate and waste (c.f. Ez. 6:14, 12:19-20), can be taken away (Ez. 7:21-22, 33:24-26), but can also be restored to bear fruits (c.f. Ez. 11:17, 28:25-26, 36:8-10, 24-28, 33-35).

So, why would they grieve over land? The exile experience was a death, a death of an important embodiment of the people's history and identity. Being removed from their land separated families and disrupted cherished social ties. The

67 Gunther Wittenberg, *The Vision of Land in Jeremiah, in The Earth Story in the Psalms and the Prophets*, (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2001), 129-130.

posture of sitting on the ground in Psalm 137:1 is culturally understood as that of mourners in the ancient East.[68]

We can also think of the graves of their ancestors, who, like seeds, are planted in their ancestral land. Francesca Stavrakopoulou expounds the functions of the dead in biblical times' contexts. She says a grave is a medium of social, cultural, and ideological meaning communicated both among the living and between the living and the dead. The burial place not only expresses, but also represents, or materializes, ideology; it is ideology.[69] She says: "For the living, a grave serves not merely to hold the remains of the deceased, and not only to memorialize the existence of an individual; ... a grave is also a socially structured space."[70]

Ultimately, the most tangible sign of the close bond between the nachalah (i.e., inheritance) and the family was the family tomb, which linked the present generation with the ancestors.[71] The grief of the loss of loved ones becomes the binding force for the family.

Ancestors are materially present in the ancestral land.[72] Being forced out of this important land, however small it is, becomes a source of unimaginable pain and grief as if for a new bereavement; the memories cause weeping: "... we sat and wept, remembering Zion..." (Psalm 137:1).

In his treatise, *A Grief Observed*, which is based on his personal experience of bereavement, C. S. Lewis sees grief as "a

68 Taylor, *The Song of an Exile* (137: 1-9), 705.

69 Francesca Stavrakopoulou, *Land of Our Fathers: The Roles of Ancestor Veneration in Biblical Land Claims* (London: T&T Clark International, 2010), 1, 3.

70 Stavrakopoulou, *Land of Our Fathers*, 1.

71 Wittenberg, *The Vision of Land in Jeremiah*, 133.

72 Stavrakopoulou, *Land of Our Fathers*, 4.

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sudden jab of red-hot memory" which makes the whole act of living different. It is like a long valley, a winding valley where any bend may reveal a totally new landscape. In his view, grief is personal, non-transferable, and comes with an unavoidable bodily experience, as the body feels like "an empty house." It feels like fear, restlessness, loneliness, laziness, fluttering in the stomach; like darkness, especially "young grief," suspense, and waiting, which give life a permanently provisional feeling. Grief covers the griever's eyes with tears, making it difficult to see anything properly. The memories turn the griever into a whimpering child, unable to settle down and feeling it is not worth starting anything, what he calls "empty successiveness."

We can relate to this feeling in Psalm 137:4: "How can we sing ..." Looking back at the memories is appalling, and a steady look at them is unbearable, even though they are real, genuine, and wholly involuntary. The griever thinks more about the deceased than oneself. These memories, as C.S. Lewis expounds, can choke prayer and hope.[73]

The grief of the exiles is not separable from their ancestral land because the land (earth) was related to them as kin, and as a partner and co-creator rather than as property, commodity, or possession.[74] They considered themselves "planted" in the land and deeply felt they belonged to and with it.[75] Today, the traditional understanding of the land as "given," and as "kin," is being re-incorporated in the six core ecojustice principles,

73 Clive Staples Lewis, *A Grief Observed* (London: Harper Collins: 1996), 3-4, 11-12, 16-18, 22, 28, 30, 33, 45, 60.

74 The Earth Bible Team, "The Earth Story in the Psalms and the Prophets," in *The Earth Story in the Psalms and Prophets*, ed. Norman C. Habel (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2001), 28.

75 Wittenberg, *The Vision of Land in Jeremiah*, 130.

which re-establish the dignified place of Mother Earth in relation to the human person.[76]

Hope and Land

Among the exiles, hope is deeply connected to their experience and memory of ancestral land, as differentiated from "foreign land." We see this in v. 4. Their land matters because it contains a historical continuity of their life, faith, God's promises, culture, and history. This is why they can find neither joy nor excitement in singing in a land with no deep roots in their faith history.

Hope is manifested as loyalty, faithful waiting, and testimony of resilience. The exiles resist the temptation to fall away to foreign cults or assimilate because those are not built on the promise and faith given to their fathers, and they have seen and testified to God's work in their history and collective memory. Refusal to conform is a loud proclamation of hope.

Theologically, the memory of Zion, the covenant, the Temple, the liturgy, and songs become anchors of identity and hope when visible signs are lost. Memory is a crucial vehicle of restoration. Believing that "a testimony can freeze a moment in time," Stowe says, the opening lines of Psalm 137 are a testimony, and they have frozen this scene now for some two-and-a-half millennia. Recording a memory through testimony, he opines, transforms it into a rough material of history.[77]

Exiles Today: Grief, Memory and Hope among Migrants

Migration sits at the centre of human life. We consider migration not as an event, but as a spectrum of migratory

76 Norman C. Habel, "Guiding Ecojustice Principles," *Spiritan Horizons*, Vol. 11, Issue 11 (Fall 2016): 92-109.

77 Stowe, *Song of Exile*, 4.

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experiences.[78] Phenomena associated with trauma are consistent across cultures. But lived experiences of traumatic events are personal and are influenced by personal perspectives.[79] Among migrants and forcibly displaced persons traumatic grief coexists with anxiety, depression, and Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), conditions which impede normal functioning.[80]

Intergenerational vs. Historical Trauma

Inter-generational traumas are multiplex traumas rooted in historical traumatic events, which encompass all areas of human life, psychological, social, cultural and spiritual. They can trace back to original traumatic events as far back as centuries.[81] The patterns of historical trauma behind the intergenerational traumas can stretch as far back as 10 generations and are linked with large-scale social injustices such as slavery, colonialism, forced displacement, genocide, and loss of land and language.[82]

A historical trauma is always linked to specific historical injustices that affect the cultural memory and identity of the

78 M. Daniel Caroll R., *The Bible and Borders*, 1-2, 45.

79 Renee Bradford Garcia and Elizabeth Pomeray, *Trauma and Grief Assessment and Intervention, Building on Strength* (New York: Routledge, 2022), 29.

80 Garcia and Pomeray, *Trauma and Grief Assessment and Intervention*, 119.

81 Luis Urrieta, "Indigenous Reflections on Identity, Trauma, and Healing: Navigating Belonging and Power," *Genealogy* 3(2) (2019): 1, https://doi.org/10.3390/genealogy3020026.

82 Laurence J. Kirmayer, Joseph P. Gone, and Joshua Moses "Rethinking Historical Trauma," *Transcultural Psychiatry* 51(3) (2014): 299-319.

group.[83] It is a cumulative emotional and psychological wounding that occurs to a group of people and is passed down across generations. Persons and communities are often affected even if they did not experience the actual traumatic event directly. Trauma is passed down together with the different coping mechanisms developed to survive the traumatic events.[84] When this trauma is passed down across generations, in families and cultural groups of those affected, it continues to influence their behaviours, emotional patterns, beliefs, parenting styles, and coping mechanisms. In this continuum it is considered inherited and intergenerational trauma.[85]

Migration Trauma *Vis-à-vis* Ancestral Land

While migrants[86] and destinations change, the reasons for migration and its reality has not completely evolved as migrants face situations similar to those faced by migrants centuries ago. In most cases, migration is a survival response to intergenerational traumas, which oftentimes are linked to land. Alongside migration, these traumas have become what

83 Sandy Woo-Cater, "Unearthing Historical Trauma to Advance Health Equity for Survivors of Human Trafficking," *HCA Healthcare Journal of Medicine* 3, no. 3 (June 28, 2022): 197–202, https://doi.org/10.36518/2689-0216.1432

84 Garcia and Pomeray, *Trauma and Grief Assessment and Intervention*, 30.

85 Psychotraumatology, "Intergenerational (Transgenerational) Trauma," *IP Trauma*, last updated July 3, 2025, https://iptrauma.org/docs/trauma/intergenerational-transgenerational-trauma/

86 "Migrants" in this paper is a term inclusive of all forms thereof: Immigrants, asylum seekers, exiles, deportees, internally displaced persons (IDPs), and refugees.

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Vivien Elton refers to as "Signatures of our time"[87] and have massively written their affliction in human history.

Land is formative of the identity, personal recognition, which is at the heart of our human condition, memory, ancestry, continuity, as well as spiritual belonging. It is the most fought for reality, because its dispossession is a threat, which in the process triggers emotional wounds, then violence, helplessness, grief and ultimately migration.

Thus, migration is primarily a traumatic event because of the loss of one's motherland.[88] It gives a new definition to life and to the traditional sense of physically belonging to a place and a community, as one hardly denounces the ancestral land, however long the alienation lasts, and however bitter the separation experience was. There is always a continuing feeling of connectedness to ancestral land.

For migrants, there is always a land-related trauma that memory and narrative will still own and carry forward as is. Until the hoped-for restoration or return is attained, the narrative and the trauma it carries remain, and even when the trauma heals, the history remains. When such trauma remains untreated, those experiences can lead to chronic psychological illnesses such as depression, anxiety, or PTSD.[89] The *strange* land that receives migrants also has a healing effect on them,

87 Vivien Elton, Marianne Leuzinger-Bohleber, Gertraud Schlesinger-Kipp and Vivien B. Pender, "Editorial Introduction – Trauma, Flight, and Migration: A Signature of Our Time," in *Trauma, Flight and Migration: Psychoanalytic Perspectives*, eds. Vivien Elton, Marianne Leuzinger-Bohleber, Gertraud Schlesinger-Kipp, and Vivien B. Pender (London: Routledge, 2023), 1.

88 Elton, Leuzinger-Bohleber, Schlesinger-Kipp and Pender, "Trauma, Flight, and Migration: A Signature of Our Time," 2.

89 Elton, Leuzinger-Bohleber, Schlesinger-Kipp and Pender, "Trauma, Flight, and Migration," 2.

as it provides an opportunity to revise their personal history and to repair damage.[90]

Scriptural Contexts of Migration: Holy Family and Apostles

Joseph, Mary, and the child Jesus experienced a stressful migration journey as well, fleeing a gruesome ruler, Herod (Matt. 2:13-15). What was the threat? The threat was that Jesus was the newborn King. It is about Land again, as kingship is rooted in and is expressed jurisdictionally in terms of Land. Herod is ready to commit any form of injustice, even to kill innocent children, just to remain a ruler of the Land and protect his illegitimate kingship, as he was not of the Davidic line, but was imposed by the foreign Roman government. We can imagine how much fear and sadness the family of Jesus felt while fleeing their ancestral land, and how much discomfort they suffered as they were not rich enough to travel on foot with a donkey for some days. At that time, there was a problem of robbers on the ways, and it was also a challenge to get food, water, and a safe place to rest at night along the way.

The same was with the different journeys of St Paul and other apostles in the early church who faced the difficulties of migration as well. St Paul walked long journeys on foot, hungry in harsh weather, and sometimes lacked shelter (2 Cor. 11:26). He experienced rejection, suspicion, and persecution, and was arrested and tortured (Acts 14:19, 16:23-24, 2 Cor. 11:24-25). He was also shipwrecked on his way to Rome (Acts 27:41-44). But also, he experienced hospitality from strangers and local believers (Acts 16:14-15). Daniel Caroll proposes a sense of

90 Elizabeth Haworth, "Forced to Flee: The Experience of Peruvian Women in Times of Political Violence," in *Trauma, Flight and Migration: Psychoanalytic Perspectives*, Eds. Vivien Elton, et al. (London: Routledge, 2023), 63.

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realism in which suspicion and rejection towards immigrants does not come as a surprise, as in host cultures, there will always be those who are compassionate and also those who are cruel.[91]

While Apostles generally depended on the generosity of good people (Lk. 8:1-3), we see in their resoluteness that they were deeply convinced by their experience, memory and purpose. Their faith and memory of Jesus motivated them to remain determined, just as the Judeans in the Psalm 137, not to forget their *Yerushalayim* – Jerusalem – "Foundation of Peace"[92] - the Lord Jesus, the source of their joy.

Hospitality Crises

The migration crises of our time manifest the failure of hospitality. Harsh and traumatizing realities of migration today include indefinite and unexpected separation from family and homeland, insecurity along the journeys, home-sickness, inclement weather, injustices, language barrier, public distrust in receiving countries, and restrictive and hostile deterrent policies.

Migrants also suffer disappointments, grief over their dead, empathy for the most helpless among them, and pain over unquantifiable losses. They encounter unsympathetic people and even officers, similar to the ruthless captors and tormentors in Psalm 137:3, merciless robbers "who strip strangers naked, beat them leaving them half dead" (c.f. Lk. 10:30). Migrants are hurt by rejection and being despised, public humiliation and being considered as without dignity, being called names. Cases of migrants who have been abused,

91 M. Daniel Caroll R., *The Bible and Borders*, 45.

92 George Arthur Buttrick, ed., *The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible: An Illustrated Encyclopedia*, 4 vols. (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962–1965), s.v. "Jerusalem.", 843-844.

tortured, deceived, and exploited for profit, and even denied their right to life, are on the rise. These migrants are traumatized and are in need of healing.

Journeys of many migrants, of all races and histories, hang by a thin thread between life and death. But migration is a reality that involves our lives and our practices. Elizabeth Haworth sees migration as a metaphor for something much more general: the unsettledness, otherness, and precarity that are part of the human experience.[93] Migrants are tormented by memories of their love for home and kin, and their rootedness in culture, religion, and ancestral land. No one loves to be away from home for no reason. Migrants and displaced persons long to return home if the conditions that made them leave are remedied. They wish their lands are healed from wars, disasters, persecutions, etc. No one loves to sit by the river in foreign lands and weep, remembering home while enduring oppression, as in Psalm 137. Sparse across the globe, migrants are today's grieving Judeans, as their experience is similar.

Working on Healing

1. Healing Memories of Ancestral Land

Psalm 137 is helpful in processing migration trauma and healing the deep wounds of migrants primarily because it can vocalize their pain. Linda Schearing highlights that vocalizing the pain allows one to process the trauma and start healing.[94]

Theologian Dorothee Solle and Psychiatrist Judith Hermann laid out three stages of moving from suffering to healing. The first is characterized by "the experiences of muteness and isolation." One feels the need to establish safety. In the second stage one "becomes capable of speaking of the pain with a

93 Haworth, "Forced to Flee," 63.

94 Schearing, *Psycho-theological Functions of Lament*, 140.

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mix of emotion and rationality," and capable of lament, with change becoming possible through reconstruction of a trauma story. In this stage one is able to speak of the previously unspeakable agony. In the third stage, "the person attains the rational language and solidarity with others," resulting from being heard and reconnects with life going forward.[95]

In Psalm 137 we can situate the writer in the second stage with nuances of progressing to the third stage, especially by the inclusion of the communal plural forms. To heal memories of ancestral land, guided by Psalm 137, it is crucial to begin with an honest acknowledgement of pain; a lament/mourning that is inclusive of memories of actual experiences and feelings. Mourning "is a sign of a psychic maturation and a process which accompanies the healing of trauma."[96]

Among other things, migrants need to process the grief of loss of home, culturally meaningful systems, and the loss of the feeling of life and safety within one's home setting/culture.[97] This should be allowed to organically happen at both individual and group levels, because without help, mourning migrants can end up mourning forever.[98] Shared mourning also helps to strengthen the cohesiveness and reflective capacities of the healing group.[99]

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95 Schearing, *Psycho-theological Functions of Lament*, 141.

96 Mariia Lenherr, "Collective Trauma and Mystic Dreams in Zabuzhko's "'The Museum of Abandoned Secrets,'" *Genealogy* 3 (1) (2019): 8.

97 Elton, Leuzinger-Bohleber, Schlesinger-Kipp and Pender, "Trauma, Flight, and Migration," 5.

98 Vamik D. Volkan, "Mourning, Large-Group Identity, and the Refugee Experience," in *An Uncertain Safety: Integrative Health Care for the 21st Century Refugees*, eds. Thomas Wenzel and Boris Drozdek (Cham, Switzerland: Springer, 2019), 23-35.

99 Lenherr, "Collective Trauma and Mystic Dreams," 22.

The pain of losing ancestral land (and home), which feels similar to losing identity, should be named in detail without minimizing it. To enable the "naming" of the pain, safe spaces for storytelling and history narration are important; spaces similar to the rivers of Babylon where one can sit and weep, and open up expressing their loss, anger, longing and grief (c.f. Ps. 137:1); A space where one can "remember" their ancestral land and whatever it is that one left behind, be it religious or political persecution, poverty, etc., as this is important knowledge in processing the trauma. This naming has to be mention specific names of the land, explore events of dispossession and displacement, and vent out the emotional impact both on persons and the group. Narrating grief breaks the cycle of silence which often deepens the reach of intergenerational trauma/wounds caused by unspoken land loss.

Than a mere property, ancestral land has to be appreciated as an important unsubstitutable reality which gives meaning and dignity to people's history, spirituality, ancestry and ancestors, and identity and a sense of belonging. Experts establish that a sense of stable belonging and of historical continuity is a basic psychological need.[100] Ecopsychologists emphasize that place attachment (association with land) is a crucial aspect of self-identity,[101] and of our "peoplehood."[102] Thus, healing requires restoring the bond between people and their ancestral land, until the land (even in the perceived sense) becomes

100 Monica McGoldrick, Joe Giordano and Nydia Garcia-Preto, "Overview: Ethnicity and Family Therapy," in *Ethnicity and Family Therapy*, 3rd Edition, eds. Monica McGoldrick, Joe Giordano and Nydia Garcia-Preto (New York: The Guilford Press, 2005), 1.

101 Gilberto Marzano, "Place Attachment and Place Identity: Their Contribution to Place Branding," *Culture and Creativity in Urban Development*, *Scholarly Papers* (2015): 42-47.

102 McGoldrick, Giordano, Garcia-Preto, "Overview: Ethnicity and Family Therapy," 1.

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a therapeutic and life-giving space. The theological meaning of land is also important, especially considering the ancestral land as God given (Gen. 12:7), as a covenant (Gen. 17:8), a blessing (Deut. 8:7-10), and home of the ancestors (Gen. 28:13).

Ecopsychologists stress also on the need to reconnect to the collective identity by engaging those cultural symbols linked to the lost, captured, or abused ancestral land even amidst displacement. Songs, rituals, languages, oral history and other cultural symbols are important for stabilizing in people the wavering sense of identity amidst pains of estrangement. As Psalm 137 is a collective lament, these rituals, gatherings, festivals, and intergenerational dialogue slowly reify a positive gaze towards belonging and reduce the pain and trauma of history. Saying with a firm conviction like the Psalmist "If I forget you ..." (cf. Ps. 137:5-6) needs a lot of affirmation hinged on the rediscovered and re-imagined collective identity.

Lawrence Kirmayer highlights that in healing intergenerational remembrances of indigenous identity and trauma, it is important to dive deeper into the personal, family, and community memory.[103] However, he cautions that to bring the historical and intergenerational land trauma to the surface is a delicate double-edged sword because often the violence experienced can hardly be made sense of in simplistic ways, and when simplified, can be used to invoke "homogenizing tropes of a collectivized indigenous victimization and powerlessness."[104]

2. Healing the Migrant

When a home is lost, all the organizing and containing functions break wide open, and there is a disintegration that,

103 In some contexts in decolonizing memory he explains it as "ethnic" memory.

104 Kirmayer, Gone and Moses, "Rethinking Historical Trauma, Adversity and Resilience in Indigenous Communities," 305.

according to Papadopoulos, occurs at three levels: individual–personal, familiar–marital, and socio-economic/cultural-political.[105] For families, especially those raising children, migration is disruptive and it introduces an entirely new reality; an extra integration stage in their cycle. In effect, traumatic family experiences/memories of migration, alongside their trail of emotions which are not just resolved immediately,[106] become an irremovable part of their heritage.[107]

These dynamics in the process of migration make migrants vulnerable due to the resulting feeling of powerlessness and the inability to control or manage their situation. In those circumstances their natural protection against overwhelming stimulus is destroyed by the sudden, unforeseeable and extreme experiences which, aside from trauma and grief, cause mortal danger and fear of death.[108]

Grief, loss, and powerlessness are for most migrants the major experience of their lives. Grief is an expected reaction to any significant loss.[109] As observed by Hannah Arendt, migrants suffer a double loss: first, the loss of self and secondly, of

105 Renos Papadopoulos, "Refugees, Home and Trauma," in *Therapeutic Care for Refugees: No Place like Home*, ed. Renos Papadopoulos (London: Routledge, 2002), 12.

106 Lenherr, "Collective Trauma and Mystic Dreams," 16.

107 McGoldrick, Giordano, Garcia-Preto, "Overview: Ethnicity and Family Therapy," 13.

108 Marianne Leuzinger-Bohleber, Gertraud Schlesinger-Kipp and Nora Hettich, "What has clinical psychoanalysis to offer to traumatised refugees? Some Experiences during the so-called "Refugee Crisis" in Hesse (Germany)," in *Trauma, Flight and Migration: Psychoanalytic Perspectives*, eds. Vivien Elton, Marianne Leuzinger-Bohleber, Gertraud Schlesinger-Kipp, and Vivien B. Pender (London: Routledge, 2023), 33.

109 Garcia and Pomeray, *Trauma and Grief Assessment and Intervention*, 25, 36.

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belonging in the common world.[110] Therefore to work towards their healing, it is important to explore deeply the reality of their grief and loss in two dynamics: first, the "foreignness" which we can look at as "loss of self," and secondly, the internalized and culturally protected sense of borders, which we can look at as "loss of sense of belonging to the common world."

The reality of rational "borders" (internalized ideological borders) is not an isolated or modern phenomenon. It has been there, and it is being passed down to generations. Fabio Castriota emphasizes particularly understanding "borders" as psychic, relational and cultural.[111] Hamilton highlights that borders, as ideological constructs, are sensitive as they are capable of triggering political movements or the migrant populations to decide to isolate themselves, even contrary to their own rationally considered self-interest."[112] This is because they feel out of their "familiar protective bubble," using words of Raphael-Leff.

As such, most migrants, according to Raphael-Leff experience a triple trauma: First, *displacement* and loss of forbearers (traditions, material possessions, ancestral graves, primal voices). Secondly, *transition*, suffering a disequilibrium of impermanence risks, and possible loss of family members in the crossing; and thirdly, *arrival*, with new demands of

110 Joan Raphael-Leff, "Perinatal Migration: Lived Experience and Integration Transmission," in *Trauma, Flight and Migration: Psychoanalytic Perspectives*, eds. Vivien Elton, Marianne Leuzinger-Bohleber, Gertraud Schlesinger-Kipp, and Vivien B. Pender (London: Routledge, 2023), 74.

111 Fabio Castriota, "Psychoanalysis and the Drama of Refugees in Italy," in *Trauma, Flight and Migration: Psychoanalytic Perspectives*, eds. Vivien Elton, Marianne Leuzinger-Bohleber, Gertraud Schlesinger-Kipp, and Vivien B. Pender (London: Routledge, 2023), 113.

112 Mark Hamilton, *Jesus King of Strangers: What the Bible Really Says about Immigration* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing, 2019), 8.

acclimatisation and acculturation.[113] In one word, for each trauma dynamic we can relate the undefined displacement with "grief," transition with "memory," and arrival with "hope," the core themes of this paper.

A foreigner, a sojourner, has been referred to in different ways, even as far back as the biblical times. In the Old Testament, terms like *Nokri/ben-nekar* and *zar* are used to refer to someone who is not an Israelite. There are times when "foreignness" is presented in positive or neutral manner (Ex. 22:21, Lev. 19:33-34, Deut. 10:18-19, Is. 56:6-7, Zech. 8:22-23), but also times when it is presented negatively, as bad and threatening (Deut. 7:1-4, 1 Kgs 11:1-8, Ezra 9-10, Neh. 13).

In relation to loss and mourning, Haworth sees the migratory process as going through several phases. First is intense sorrow for what is lost, fear of the unknown, and deep experience of loneliness and helplessness. Second is the manic stage, where the migrant minimizes the significance of the change in his/her life and overvalues everything new, disdaining the past and the lost. Third is the experience of nostalgia and the sorrow for the resurfacing lost world. Finally is the recovery of the pleasure of thinking and desiring to make plans for the future in which the past is regarded as such, and not as a "lost paradise" where one constantly longs to return.[114]

For Ilany Kogan, the conversation and process of healing has to permeate these five traumatizing realities that migrants experience. First, the separation and loss and the disruption that occurs with it. Second, the experience of loneliness and the feeling of not belonging to anyone. Third, the threat of identity. Fourth, the regression or infantilization which occurs as a consequence of migration. Fifth, the deferred

113 Raphael-Leff, "Perinatal Migration," 73, 77.

114 Haworth, "Forced to Flee," 62.

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mourning because of migration.[115] Healing these will help prevent "re-traumatization" which is more complex. We can notice these experiences in Psalm 137.

Mourning, which Mariia Lenherr sees as a sign of psychic maturation and an important process in trauma integration,[116] is considered "simple mourning" when it occurs under favourable conditions, "complicated mourning" when there are serious difficulties in working through the migratory grief and "extreme mourning" when the grief cannot be resolved. This is adapted from the Freudian theory of loss.[117] But trauma healing can always be pursued, however slow the process.

One of those ways is the use of symbolic actions to process the trauma, even when complex and multi-layered. In Psalm 137, the "hanging up" of the harps on the poplars in verse 2 can be understood as a symbolic action, a sign of giving up and leaving to God their grief, as it comes after they had "sat" and "wept." Symbolic actions enable the mind/psyche to externalize the grief and remake the lost meaning.

Aside from externalizing the grief, experts also recommend practices like "externalizing of conversations,"[118] an approach developed in the 1980s by Michael White, which employs practices of objectification of the problem against cultural practices of objectifying people. Stories of loss are

115 Vivien Elton, et al., eds. *Trauma, Flight and Migration: Psychoanalytic Perspectives*, 6.

116 Mariia Lenherr, "Collective Trauma and Mystic Dreams," 22.

117 Anna L. Christopoulos, Chrysi Giannoulaki and Nicholas Tzavaras, Mourning and Issues of Identity in the Treatment of Refugees in Lesvos," in *Trauma, Flight and Migration: Psychoanalytic Perspectives*, eds. Vivien Elton, Marianne Leuzinger-Bohleber, Gertraud Schlesinger-Kipp, and Vivien B. Pender (London: Routledge, 2023), 121.

118 Michael White, *Maps of Narrative Practice* (New York: W.W Norton and Company, 2007) 9, 26.

reconstructed in empowering ways, and somatic experiencing helps release stored bodily tensions from displacement trauma. Externalization is important because it separates the problem from the person and, therefore, enables more space for genuine engagement with the problem.

White points out that, when people are not tied to restricting "truths" about their identity and negative "certainties" about their lives, new options for taking action to address the predicaments of their lives become available, and they are able to assume responsibility.[119] This affects the story that is told, as future generations inherit falsehood and have no way of fact-checking due to the corruption of history. This creates false history, and therefore false memory. However, it is crucial to humbly cherish the truth value of the historical narratives. Being victims, many people bend the truth to fit their desired narrative, especially to waive guilt and to appeal to elevated public sympathy.

Exploring healing of intergenerational trauma in indigenous contexts, Urrieta recommends healing by decolonizing identity and trauma with a method he calls: "I/We belonging and healing." He recommends reconstructing a relationality that decentralizes the self, especially as the western worldview puts the "self" at the centre and the "other" as marginal.[120] Psalm 137 has this, by the remembering through a plural form: *We* sat and wept, *We* remembered, and *We* hung up our harps.

It is crucial to highlight that trauma continues to be transmitted if it is not faced. Next-generation survivors are left to psychically metabolize inherited trauma, and since human violation is perpetuated, many from this new generation will

119 White, *Maps of Narrative Practice*, 26.

120 Luis Urrieta, "Indigenous Reflections on Identity, Trauma, and Healing," 11.

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face their own repression and suffering. This pattern has been observed from migrant generations closest to genocide, war, exile and racialized violence globally.[121]

Equally, migration trauma is also emotional, behavioural, and a physical/bodily experience. Those who have survived traumatic events often experience profound and lasting changes in their physiological arousal, emotion, cognition, and memory.[122] Sverne Varvin elaborates that generally traumatized persons struggle with mental and bodily pains, which are difficult to understand and difficult to put into words. The pains may be expressed as dissociated states of mind, bodily pains and other somatic experiences and dysfunctions, overwhelming thoughts and feelings, behavioral tendencies and relational styles, ways of living, etc.[123]

As such, healing from migration trauma is a progressive process that only yields results in the context of safe and reliable relationships based on compassion, respect, holistic care, and non-judgmental acceptance, without stigma. While the process of healing from trauma provides fertile ground for personal growth, development, and enhancement of individual strengths, and fosters a profound appreciation for life, [124] it

121 Debra Gill, "Suffering from elsewhere: Trauma and its Transmission," in *Trauma, Flight and Migration: Psychoanalytic Perspectives*, eds. Vivien Elton, Marianne Leuzinger-Bohleber, Gertraud Schlesinger-Kipp, and Vivien B. Pender (London: Routledge, 2023), 101.

122 Garcia and Pomeray, *Trauma and Grief Assessment and Intervention*, 30.

123 Sverre Varvin, "Long-Term Psychoanalytic Treatments with Traumatised Refugees," in *Trauma, Flight and Migration: Psychoanalytic Perspectives*, eds. Vivien Elton, Marianne Leuzinger-Bohleber, Gertraud Schlesinger-Kipp, and Vivien B. Pender (London: Routledge, 2023),152.

124 Garcia and Pomeray, *Trauma and Grief Assessment and Intervention*, 35.

is important to heal the environment because the sense of loss is often socially constructed.

Conclusion

This paper has attempted to highlight the importance of ancestral land as portrayed in both the historical circumstances behind Psalm 137 and the contextual scriptural message towards healing intergenerational trauma alongside grief, loss, and alienation suffered by migrants. The exegesis and interdisciplinary exploration have helped build a strong foundation for a deeper appreciation of ancestral land in people's lives, especially by giving meaning to people's identity, spirituality, and sense of belonging. Psalm 137 is therefore an important and functional resource of hope, especially among migrants, as it gives a historical but practical context for theologizing and ultimately healing.