



**BY THE RIVERS OF  
TERROR: A RESPONSE  
TO JAMES MACKAY**

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The day I decided to write this article I was sitting in a classroom for an Old Testament course. We had just begun a section on “difficult” psalms. In preparation for the class we had been asked to read James Mackay’s interpretation of Psalm 137. Mackay, a Sergeant in the Indiana National Guard, argued in his article that this psalm gave license to violence. As a pacifist, I disagreed with this interpretation. My disagreement, however, did not extend particularly far. New Zealand is a country very removed from events in the Middle East; our context is radically different to an American military context. My response to Mackay’s article, therefore, was one of distance and detachment.

To begin the class on Psalm 137 my lecturer played the 70’s classic, “Rivers of Babylon”<sup>1</sup>. Perhaps the irony of a song written about a psalm rejecting singing should have struck me more forcefully, but I had a different reaction. I struggled to sit still. My knowledge that this song had been used as a torture device at the Abu Ghraib prison camp in 2003 caused the music to play differently in my ears.<sup>2</sup>

I could not listen without being forcefully reminded of the images that had played on television when the scandal was first exposed. Photographs of naked men being dragged on leashes or arranged in pyramids, while American soldiers grinned and posed in the background, were vividly relived. As I listened again I wondered what it would have been like to hear to this music at ear-splitting levels, non-stop for days.<sup>3</sup> I sat down and I remembered Abu Ghraib. Suddenly I was not detached anymore. Suddenly I was disgusted. That the words of the Bible could be used to not only justify violence, but to physically inflict harm, disturbed me. I realised that violent attitudes require a response.

Unfortunately hermeneutics of violence seem to be on the rise. Xenophobia, abuse, and war-like attitudes have become increasingly commonplace in political discourse. The terrorist actions of a few extremist groups are being countered by

increasingly vengeful foreign policies.<sup>4</sup> Attitudes towards Muslim communities are becoming openly hostile, irrespective of different approaches to faith.<sup>5</sup> Within this climate the response of the church is of paramount importance. The pressing issue now is whether the Christian gospel provides yet another rhetoric for racial intolerance and conflict,<sup>6</sup> or whether within scripture there is a different voice, a quieter and more vulnerable voice, declaring a message quite apart from the fury and fire of violence.

### MACKAY’S READING OF PSALM 137

Mackay’s analysis, entitled: “The Violent Conclusion of Psalm 137 in Relation to 9/11,” was published in 2014 in the book *Global Perspectives on the Bible*. Mackay’s interpretation of Psalm 137 provides a good example of a hermeneutic that justifies violence. He argues that the psalm gives a clear precedent for engaging in conflict against those who inflict harm. The violence that Mackay promotes in his article is not vague, he uses Psalm 137 to justify taking revenge on Muslim extremists for their attack on America in September, 2001 (9/11). In his interpretation, Mackay compares the difficulties and suffering of “Zion” to the suffering of America in the wake of 9/11.<sup>7</sup> His conclusion, “with God’s help we can overcome the enemy”,<sup>8</sup> makes it clear that Mackay believes this psalm provides a justification tantamount to the moral endorsement of God for America’s war on terror.

### I REALISED THAT VIOLENT ATTITUDES REQUIRED A RESPONSE.

4 Patrick Healy and Helene Cooper, “Trump Wants War Declared on ISIS and ‘Extreme Vetting’ of Immigrants,” *The New York Times*, July 15, 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/16/us/politics/france-trump-war-declaration-isis.html>; Clark Mindock, “War with ISIS: United State And Russia Discuss Syria Military Pact To Fight Islamic State Group Together,” *International Business Times*, July 14, 2016, sec. National, <http://www.ibtimes.com/war-isis-united-states-russia-discuss-syria-military-pact-fight-islamic-state-group-2391499>; Christine Ockrent, “The Nice Attack Reminds Us That France Is at War,” *The Guardian*, July 16, 2016, sec. Opinion, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2016/jul/16/nice-attack-france-at-war>.

5 Julie Bourdon, “Attitudes towards Muslims in Europe,” *Mission Network News*, July 18, 2016, <https://www.mnnonline.org/news/attitudes-towards-muslims-europe/>.

6 Michelle Boorstein, “Why Donald Trump Is Tearing Evangelicals Apart,” *The Washington Post*, March 15, 2016, sec. Religion, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/acts-of-faith/wp/2016/03/15/evangelical-christians-are-enormously-divided-over-donald-trumps-runaway-candidacy/>.

7 James Mackay, “The Violent Conclusion of Psalm 137 in Relation to 9/11,” in *Global Perspectives on the Bible*, ed. Mark Ronance and Joseph Weaver (Boston: Pearson, 2014), 155.

8 Ibid.

1 Bony M, “By the Rivers of Babylon” *Nightflight to Venus*, 1978.

2 Erin Runions, “‘Rivers of Babylon’ and the Torture of Detainees in Abu Ghraib,” in *Global Perspectives on the Bible*, ed. Mark Ronance and Joseph Weaver (Boston: Pearson, 2014), 153–154.

3 Ibid.

The interpretation that the Bible justifies war is a well-recognised approach.<sup>9</sup> Mieke Bal, for instance, writes: “the Bible, of all books, is the most dangerous one, the one that has been endowed with the power to kill”.<sup>10</sup> However, considering the implications of this hermeneutic, which are quite literally life-and-death, it is important to analyse this approach carefully. Historically in politically turbulent contexts leaders have been all too apt in using whatever justification presents itself to endorse their actions. The Bible is no exception. But scripture is not a propaganda tool to be used whenever convenient, it is the word of God. Therefore, conclusions drawn from the Bible, particularly conclusions that seem politically driven, must be critiqued.

My discussion on violence will be grounded on an examination of Mackay’s interpretation. I will raise three key issues with his hermeneutic. The first is that assuming objectivity when reading is a flawed starting point. The second is that contemporary comparisons to Zion and Babylon are problematic. The third is that concluding that Psalm 137 provides an example to follow is unconvincing.

### ISSUE 1: SUBJECTIVITY IN OBJECTIVITY’S CLOTHING

Mackay’s reading of Psalm 137 assumes that the meaning of this text is straightforward. To assume that Biblical texts are uncomplicated is not an uncommon assumption, nor is it always a harmful one. Pope Gregory described the Bible as a river “that is smooth and deep, in which both a lamb may wade and an elephant swim”.<sup>11</sup> At times it is important to acknowledge the simplicity of Biblical texts. To the person who is anxious and weary the knowledge that Jesus invites all who are overly burdened into

9 A good example of this is the “Just War Theory”. For more information on this see Alexander Moseley, “Just War Theory,” *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, accessed July 20, 2016, <http://www.iep.utm.edu/justwar/>.

10 Mieke Bal, *On Story-Telling: Essays in Narratology*, ed. David Jobling, vol. 21, Word Biblical Commentary (Sonoma, CA: Polebridge, 1981), 14, quoted in Eric A. Seibert, *The Violence of Scripture: Overcoming the Old Testament’s Troubling Legacy* (Augsburg Fortress: Fortress Press, 2012), 45.

11 This is a translation of Pope Gregory by William Goode which is taken from the quote: “Quasi quidam quippe est fluvis, ut ita dixerim, planus et altus, in quo et agnus ambulet et elephas natet”. For the full text and translation please see: William Goode, *The Divine Rule of Faith and Practice; Or, A Defence of the Catholic Doctrine That Holy Scripture Has Been, since the Times of the Apostles, the Sole Divine Rule of Faith and Practice to the Church, against the Dangerous Errors of the Authors of the Tracts for the Times and the Romanists, in Which Also the Doctrines of the Apostolical Succession, the Eucharistic Sacrifice, Etc. Are Fully Discussed* (Philadelphia: Herman Hooker, 1842), 421.

rest with him is a simple and profound message (Matt 11:28). Likewise for the grief-stricken and the lonely, Jesus’ uncomplicated assurance of God’s comfort brings healing and life (Matt 5:1–11). There are times when wading gently through scripture is undoubtedly the best approach.

However, not all messages in the Bible are simple, and there are times for a more rigorous approach. The Bible is a mix of texts encompassing a vast swathe of genres, styles, contexts and time periods. As Goheen and Bartholomew point out, there is both an overarching message in the Biblical narrative and a multiplicity of approaches,<sup>12</sup> which is part of what makes scripture so engaging. Psalm 137 is a complicated text. Its poetic genre, its exilic connections and its political background are all features that should warn against reading the text too literally.

Unfortunately Mackay has not acknowledged this fact, assuming instead that the message of Psalm 137 is clear. Reading Hebrew poetry as if it were Hebrew torah,<sup>13</sup> Mackay argues for retribution.

So do we simply forgive the terrorists and forget

everything they did? Absolutely not. To do so would be irresponsible and not biblical, as we learn from Psalm 137. This is an enemy that is clearly against human rights and has declared war upon the United States, the rest of the world, and God. We must respond; we must retaliate in order to defend ourselves, our nation, and our way of life. This is precisely the sentiment that is voiced by the writer of Psalm 137.<sup>14</sup>

Mackay, either intentionally or unintentionally, ignores any possibility that considerations of genre or context make the meaning of Psalm 137 too complex to be ascertained at face value. He instead assumes that the meaning is obvious. Only through making this assumption does he conclude that Psalm 137 justifies violence.

Compounding upon his assumption, Mackay concludes that to forgive would be “not biblical”. This claim is an odd one given the sheer quantity of Bible verses advocating the opposite view,<sup>15</sup> however, that objection aside, what is important here is his use of the term “biblical”.

12 Craig G. Bartholomew and Michael W. Goheen, *The Drama of Scripture* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2004), 23.

13 “Torah” in Hebrew means “law”.

14 Mackay, “The Violent Conclusion of Psalm 137 in Relation to 9/11,” 155.

15 Mt 5:23–24, 6:14–15, 18:21–22; Mk 11:25; Lk 6:37, Lk 17:3–4; Jn 8:7; Rom 12:20; 1 Cor 13:4–6; 2 Cor 2:5–8; Eph 4:31–32; Col 3:13.

The Bible, as the “spirit-breathed” word of God, has long been acknowledged to possess a certain authority for confessional Christians (2 Tim 3:16). The level of authority that the Bible contains is hotly contested, depending on the perceived degree of divine influence on the writing, editing and compilation of scripture.<sup>16</sup> Regardless, its impact on western culture has been significant and as a result claims made in reference to the Bible still carry a certain social weight. Consequently, declaring a view “biblical” or “not biblical” holds power. From a Christian standpoint this power is intensified, particularly if the assertion expresses few reservations or doubts. To declare a view “biblical” assumes an ability to accurately and objectively discern the meaning of the “God-breathed” text; therefore, bestowing on the interpreter, and on their view, authority.

The problem with this claim is that reading is highly subjective. One of the most important benefits of post-modernity has been to draw attention to that subjectivity. Stanley Fish writes that it is impossible for any audience to “simply read” a text, as this implies “the possibility of pure (that is disinterested) perception”.<sup>17</sup> The implication of this insight is that readers of the Bible bring their own perspectives to the act of reading. These perspectives are not formed after reading, they inform the reading process.

...interpretive strategies are not put into execution after reading... they are the shape of reading, and because they are the shape of reading, they give texts their shape, making them rather than, as it is usually assumed, arising from them.<sup>18</sup>

As a result of post-modernity it has become absolutely necessary for scholars to approach the pursuit of knowledge carefully. While some philosophers, such as Derrida, have argued that almost any claim to objectivity is inherently flawed,<sup>19</sup> this does seem a rather extreme position. Sarah Coakley instead argues for “expanded objectivity”. This is where a paradoxical tension is maintained

between subjectivity and objectivity through the increase of a scholar’s “capacity to see”.<sup>20</sup> In other words human bias may be counteracted by a larger awareness of the diversity of experience.

But it is not only within post-modernity that we find this more cautious approach. There is a long Christian tradition that acknowledges human fallibility and bias, Paul for instance wrote that when it comes to knowledge, prophesy and reason “we see in a mirror dimly” (1 Cor 13:8–12). This perspective does not deny objective truth, as all truth belongs to God,<sup>21</sup> but recognises that our ability to comprehend it is imperfect. Sarah Coakley even argues that our ability to understand truth depends on God’s transformative power,<sup>22</sup> a sentiment that resonates well with the observations of Job, that “fear of the Lord – that is wisdom” (Job 29:28). Wisdom and truth depend on God, and human beings are “joyful beggars” in the process of discerning, fallible and prone to error, but delighting in the journey.

To acknowledge human fallibility is not the mere recognition of personal sinfulness, but also a deep understanding of the inability of human beings

to fully comprehend God and truth. “...As the heavens are higher than the earth, so my ways are higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts” (Isa 55:9). The practical consequence of these insights, from both post-modern philosophers and from Christian tradition, is that before interpreting scripture it is important to recognize the impact of subjective experience.

Mackay’s reading of Psalm 137 does not sufficiently acknowledge his own contextual biases. He assumes that the meaning of the psalm is obvious and, moreover, assumes that his reading is objective. He concludes that Psalm 137 validates violence, but he does so without acknowledging the potential impact of his military background on the text. Unfortunately these assumptions and oversights render his interpretation deeply flawed, and his claims to discerning the biblical message of Psalm 137, unconvincing.

**MACKAY’S READING OF PSALM  
137 DOES NOT SUFFICIENTLY  
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CONTEXTUAL BIASES.**

<sup>16</sup> Millard J. Erickson and Arnold Hustad, *Introducing Christian Doctrine*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2001), 55–59; Daniel L. Migliore, *Faith Seeking Understanding: An Introduction to Christian Theology*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: W. B. Eerdmans, 2004), 50–51.

<sup>17</sup> Stanley Fish, “Interpreting the Variorum,” in *Literature in the Modern World: Critical Essays and Documents*, ed. Dennis Walder (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 63.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Ref. Jacques Derrida, *Limited Inc* (Evanston Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1972).

<sup>20</sup> Sarah Coakley, *God, Sexuality and the Self: An Essay on the Trinity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 19–29.

<sup>21</sup> Martin Sutherland, “Seeking Wisdom: Towards a Christian View of Scholarship,” *Stimulus* 19, no. 2 (July 2012): 12.

<sup>22</sup> Coakley, *God, Sexuality and the Self: An Essay on the Trinity*, 19–29.

## ISSUE 2: CONTEMPORARY COMPARISONS AND POLITICAL PROPAGANDA

Because Mackay has not acknowledged his biases, I will now illustrate one major way in which his political and military context seems to have affected his reading. In a war situation it is of utmost importance for the individuals fighting to be motivated to kill. Moreover, it is important for public opinion to approve that killing. The most common tactic in achieving both of these ends is to “demonise” the enemy, to create a mentality of “us” and “them”, “good” and “evil”.

The synthesis of demonic essentialist identity and intimate, invisible proximity is a familiar trope in the history of constructed enemies during times of war, where previously innocuous differences are overlaid with new deadly significance, often linked back to ancient rivalries.<sup>23</sup>

From a military perspective, vilifying the “enemy” is a necessary part to fighting a war. It ensures both the motivation needed for soldiers to fight and public endorsement.

In Psalm 137 there is an “ancient” enemy – the enemy is Babylon. There is also a victim, Zion. For a people group who perceive themselves as victims of injustice it is understandable why resonance may be found in this psalm. The misery as a result of oppression is poignant in Psalm 137, a sentiment that victims may relate to and consequently draw comfort from. John Goldingay makes the point that hanging up the harps was a public way of declaring, “that one has given up on praise”.<sup>24</sup> Leslie Allen goes further, suggesting that it symbolically signifies an end to traditional fellowship and festivals.<sup>25</sup> In some situations, it may be helpful for victimised communities to relate to Psalm 137, as it gives voice to suffering in a real and honest way.

However, when taken to the extreme, comparing the situation of Zion to contemporary victims is problematic. This is assuredly the case when making a comparison to America and 9/11. Firstly, there are differences in circumstances. One of these differences is that Psalm 137 is likely to have been

written during the exilic or post-exilic period.<sup>26</sup> The sorrow expressed is in relation to Israel’s exile. In contrast, America’s suffering is not due to exile. The level of death and destruction has been horrific, and perhaps the American “way of life” has been threatened,<sup>27</sup> however this is not to the extent of forced migration or slavery.

Another difference is that America and the Zion of Psalm 137 are not comparable in terms of power. Zion may have been a proud, independent people group, but while in exile they were also powerless.

Psalm 137 is not the song of people who have the power to effect a violent change in their situation of suffering, nor is it the battle cry of terrorists. Instead, it is an attempt to cling to one’s identity even when everything is against it.<sup>28</sup>

Goldingay also notes here that when Israel was asked for “songs” and “mirth” by their enemy, this

gave the captors “something to scorn” and the captives “something to lament”.<sup>29</sup>

Contrast this to America, a global superpower, with huge international influence both culturally

and politically. For these reasons alone Mackay’s comparison of America with Zion is inappropriate.

However, relating America to Zion is problematic for other reasons. Zion was more than a physical location or people group, it was also a symbol. The symbolic “Zion” represented “holiness” (Isa. 64:10) and “God’s dwelling place” (Ps. 132:14). In other words, Zion was God’s chosen people. Consequently, a too eager comparison of America with Zion is unsuitable. America is not the exclusive place where God dwells, nor is it more holy than other nations. In other words, despite Mackay’s confidence that with “God’s help we can overcome” America is not God’s chosen people. In fact, from Paul’s perspective God’s people, at least in a representative sense, are the Church (2 Cor 5:20).

Moreover, comparing Zion to America implies that the enemies of America are equivalent to the enemies of Zion. This ties well to my point that in war it is important to have an enemy. Zion’s enemy, in this case, was Babylon. Like Zion, Babylon also has allegorical connotations. While being a physical

<sup>26</sup> As shown by verse 4.

<sup>27</sup> Mackay, “The Violent Conclusion of Psalm 137 in Relation to 9/11,” 155.

<sup>28</sup> Eric Zenger, *A God of Vengeance? Understanding the Psalms of Divine Wrath*, trans. Linda M. Maloney (Louisville: John Knox Press, 1996), 48.

<sup>29</sup> Goldingay, *Psalms 90–150*, 604.

<sup>23</sup> Danielle Celermajer, “If Islam Is Our Other, Who Are ‘We’?,” *Australian Journal of Social Issues (Australian Council of Social Service)* 42, no. 1 (Autumn 2007): 104.

<sup>24</sup> John Goldingay, *Psalms 90–150* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Academic, 2008), 604.

<sup>25</sup> Leslie C. Allen, *Psalms 101–150*. (Waco, Texas: Word Books, 1983), 241.

oppressor of the Israelites, Babylon is also used in scripture to symbolise evil (Rev 14:8). Thus, by comparing America to Zion, America's enemy – Iraq, becomes symbolically evil.

At this point it would be nice to be able to assume that Mackay was unaware of these implications. That by comparing America to Zion, Mackay inadvertently linked Iraq to Babylon. However, this is not the case. Mackay makes it clear that he is aware of the connections he is making when he states that Babylon is “modern-day Iraq”.<sup>30</sup> A subtle statement, but a powerful one. Indeed, it is possible to envision this little observation as a slogan for a military advertisement. By a simple comparison Mackay effectively dehumanises America's enemy, thereby giving a soldiers a reason to fight, and therein reducing the Bible to a political tool.

Interestingly, but not surprisingly, the comparison of Iraq to Babylon has connections to the horror of Abu Ghraib. As Erin Runions points out:

At the very least, the decision to play “Rivers of Babylon” at Abu Ghraib indicates that an allegorical-mythical

figure of Babylon was grafted onto Iraq in some way... In this case, Babylon seems to stand in for Iraq, since Iraq is where ancient Babylon was actually located, while ancient Israel becomes the United States.<sup>31</sup>

It is impossible to know for certain whether the jailers of Abu Ghraib considered their prisoners to be modern-day representatives of Babylon, but it is telling that according to a prisoner's testimony, one of the first charges brought against him was that he was “anti-Zionist”.<sup>32</sup>

### ISSUE 3: EXEMPLARY VIOLENCE

Having now established that the meaning of Psalm 137 is clear and that Iraq is the enemy, Mackay finishes his argument by concluding that the appropriate “biblical” response is violence. In coming to this conclusion Mackay presents Psalm 137 as an example of how to behave.

At first it seems like Psalm 137 does advocate violence, “happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock” (Ps. 137:9).

<sup>30</sup> Mackay, “The Violent Conclusion of Psalm 137 in Relation to 9/11,” 155.

<sup>31</sup> Runions, “‘Rivers of Babylon’ and the Torture of Detainees in Abu Ghraib,” 153–154.

<sup>32</sup> Global Research, “Torture at Abu Ghraib: The Full Sworn Testimony of Ali Shalal,” *Global Research: Centre for Research on Globalization*, February 19, 2007, <http://www.globalresearch.ca/torture-at-abu-ghraib-the-full-sworn-testimony-of-ali-shalal/4865>.

This graphic and controversial passage is one that scholars have naturally wrestled with. Eric Zenger for example, deals with its notoriety by suggesting that writing a psalm is a faithful act; by expressing anger Israel is giving everything to God.

...it is an attempt, in the face of the most profound humiliation and helplessness, to suppress the primitive human lust for violence in one's heart, by surrendering *everything* to God – a God whose word of judgement is presumed to be so universally just that even those who pray the psalm submit themselves to it.<sup>33</sup>

Another interesting interpretation made by Othmar Keel is that the phrase is symbolic, that it “signif[ies] a reality far larger than [its] concrete meaning...”<sup>34</sup> Keel argues that, due to the Middle Eastern tendency of describing an abstract desire in concrete terms,<sup>35</sup> it is better to understand this phrase as “Happy is he who puts an end to your self-renewing domination!”<sup>36</sup>

However these interpretations are not entirely convincing. Firstly, this phrase is not merely angry, as Zenger contends,

it is anger translated into a desire for violence. Moreover, unlike many psalms, Israel is not asking God to act, she is essentially blessing whoever will deliver violence (Ps. 137:9). Secondly, Keel's assertion that the phrase is symbolic, does not fully account for its horror. The conclusion of Psalm 137 paints a brutal image, making the phrase abstract seems a convenient way to create distance from that cruelty.

Rather than attempt to dismiss or explain away “the uncharity of the [psalmist] poets”,<sup>37</sup> I will assume that the end of Psalm 137 is in fact a bitter desire for vengeance. However, rather than concluding that this vengeance is an example to follow, I will argue the reverse.

The first reason why the violence of Psalm 137 should not be used to justify violence generally is because of its highly contextual nature. Psalm 137 is not an abstract psalm, it was clearly written in response to the Babylonian exile. The anger shown

<sup>33</sup> Zenger, *A God of Vengeance? Understanding the Psalms of Divine Wrath*, 48.

<sup>34</sup> Othmar Keel, *The Symbolism of the Biblical World: Ancient Near Eastern Iconography and the Book of Psalms* (Warsaw: Eisenbrauns, 1997), 9., quoted in Goldingay, *Psalms 90–150*, 610.

<sup>35</sup> Goldingay, *Psalms 90–150*, 610.

<sup>36</sup> Keel, *The Symbolism of the Biblical World: Ancient Near Eastern Iconography and the Book of Psalms*, 9., quoted in Goldingay, *Psalms 90–150*, 610.

<sup>37</sup> C. S. Lewis, *Reflections of the Psalms* (London: Fontana Books, 1958), 27.

in this psalm is not from a position of distance, it is deeply imbedded in grief. In Psalm 137's context there is a concrete enemy, Babylon, who has taken Israel captive. The contextual nature of Psalm 137 warns against an easy application to another context, particularly if there are significant differences between the two.

Bearing the contextual nature of Psalm 137 in mind, it makes sense that the response of the psalmist is likewise contextual. The psalmist desires a specific response to a specific situation. This contrasts with other psalms of a more transcendent nature. In Psalm 139 for instance the psalmist declares his hatred of wicked people (11–22), and then in the same breath he asks for God to test him (23–24). The psalmist's desire in this case seems to stem from a genuine desire to do what is right and to become more pleasing to God. The extraordinariness of this motivation is that his earnestness makes even the psalmist vulnerable before the justice of God. His desire for holiness exceeds his context, showing that his love of what is objectively right transcends his subjective experience. Thus, his love of justice overrides his love of vengeance.

As C. S. Lewis so clearly indicates, desire for justice is connected (1) to a deep awareness of wrong in the world; and (2) to knowledge that God is just.<sup>38</sup> Not only this, but a desire for justice places the responsibility of vengeance in God's hands.<sup>39</sup> Conversely, violence does not look to God to decide what is right. Violence takes justice into human hands and demands action, either through the slaughter of children, or through the total destruction of "terrorists".<sup>40</sup> Despite the many cases where the Bible declares that vengeance belongs to God, Psalm 137 demands its own understanding of what is just. In doing this, the psalmist is appropriating a "God-like" role, and as a result, is a better example of what not to do. If wanting to avoid a similar kind of idolatry, readers should be cautious in adopting the attitude found Psalm 137.

A love of justice is the second reason why the violence of Psalm 137 should not be used to inform contemporary situations. As previously stated, justice looks to God, and in the process it places the responsibility of justice in his hands.

38 Ibid., 15–21.

39 Ibid.

40 Mackay, "The Violent Conclusion of Psalm 137 in Relation to 9/11," 135.

We need not be surprised if the Psalms, and the Prophets are full of the longing for judgement, and regard the announcement that "judgement" is coming as good news. Hundreds and thousands of people who have been stripped of all they possess and who have the right entirely on their side will at last be heard... The Divine Judge is the defender, the rescuer.<sup>41</sup>

The cry of the psalmist for justice echoes the ongoing cry of all creation for things to be made right. It is not limited to a specific enemy or human understanding of evil. Instead justice requires a complete redemption of everything that has been broken, a bringing of shalom back into every part of the world. Justice may sometimes apply to specific situations, but only when placed in God's hands. Because justice breaks through the limitations of human understanding it is in its very nature transcendent, making it far more applicable to contemporary contexts.

Violence, on the other hand, cannot escape its context. Not only does it require a specific enemy, it also engages in a specific action from a human understanding of justice. Whether this action means paying back the Babylonians or going to a war on terror,<sup>42</sup> acts of violence are intimately connected to a context of outrage and grief. In its very nature violence is not transcendent and, therefore, it cannot inform contemporary situations.

Finally, and most importantly, the violence of Psalm 137 should not inform contemporary situations because of Christ. In Jesus' ministry there are not only several situations where Christ shows an extreme aversion to violence,<sup>43</sup> he also has violence done to him on the cross. Jesus suffered violence, and in so doing he not only identified with the injustice felt by Israel at the hands of Babylon, but also the injustice of 9/11. Jesus' suffering does not detract from the misery felt by both Israel and America, rather it shows a God prepared to walk with us in that suffering. Moreover, when he suffered that violence instead of taking matters into his own hands, he looked to the Father, begging for his attackers to be forgiven (Lk. 23:32–34). In his final moments Jesus focused on justice, on making things right for all people, rather than on violence.

41 Lewis, *Reflections of the Psalms*, 17.

42 Mackay, "The Violent Conclusion of Psalm 137 in Relation to 9/11," 155.

43 Ref. Matt 5:11, 5:21–22, 5:38–46; Mk. 7:21–23, 11:25; Lk 6:27–28; Jn. 8:7, 14:21–27, 16:33.

**JUSTICE REQUIRES A COMPLETE  
REDEMPTION OF EVERYTHING THAT  
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OF THE WORLD.**

Christians are called to emulate Christ and thus, should not attempt to justify violence through Psalm 137. This is because ultimately, interpreting the text in this way goes against the example of Christ.

## **CONCLUSION**

In response to James Mackay I have argued that his interpretation has three major issues. The first is his assumption of objectivity. The second is his comparison of America and Iraq to Zion and Babylon respectively. The third is his conclusion that Psalm 137 is an example of how to respond to Iraq. I cannot claim that I argued from a position entirely separate from subjective experience, as I was deeply impacted by the horror of Abu Ghraib. However, it is my hope that despite this, challenging Mackay's use of the Bible for violent and political ends was justified. It is my firm belief that the Christian gospel challenges hermeneutics of violence, and that within an increasingly antagonistic global context the role of the church is to voice that challenge. This means that, instead of aligning ourselves with nations thundering for vengeance, we stand alongside a God whispering for peace.

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