



SONGS IN A FOREIGN LAND: A POSTCOLONIAL READING OF PSALM 137 AND AGRARIAN CONFLICT IN THE TOBA BATAK HOMELAND

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Abstract

Psalm 137 preserves the collective trauma of the people of Judah in the aftermath of the Babylonian exile. This article analyses Psalm 137 through a postcolonial hermeneutical approach in order to disclose the dynamics of imperial hegemony, cultural resistance, and the preservation of communal identity under conditions of domination. Employing a qualitative library-based method, the study proposes that Babylon's demand that the Judean exiles sing the "songs of Zion" may be read not as a neutral request for entertainment, but as a practice of cultural domination that sought to appropriate and control the identity of the colonised community. Conversely, the refusal to sing, the vow to remember Jerusalem, and the lament articulated in the psalm are interpreted as forms of symbolic resistance against imperial power. The article then brings this reading into dialogue with documented struggles for customary land among the Toba Batak community in North Sumatra. Since this is a library-based study, the contextual discussion draws on scholarly literature, advocacy reports (e.g., AMAN, KSPPM), and documented legal cases rather than on ethnographic fieldwork. In this comparative light, the psalm illuminates analogous patterns in the defence of ancestral land, collective memory, and cultural identity amid contemporary forms of marginalisation. The article therefore argues that Psalm 137 is not merely a historical record of suffering, but a text of resistance that remains theologically and ethically relevant for communities confronting domination, dispossession, and injustice in the present.

Keywords: Psalm 137; postcolonial hermeneutics; Tano Batak (customary land); land dispossession; collective memory

INTRODUCTION

Psalm 137 is one of the most powerful laments in the Old Testament, for it records the traumatic experience of the people of Judah after the destruction of Jerusalem and the Babylonian exile in 586 BCE. The psalmist's question, "How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?" (Ps. 137:4), articulates not only religious grief, but also an acute crisis of identity

that emerges when a community loses its land, religious institutions, and political autonomy. The experience of exile may therefore be understood as forced migration that generated profound social, cultural, and theological dislocation (Ahn, 2011; Smith-Christopher, 2002). Psalm 137 consequently functions not as an individual lament alone, but as the collective memory of a

community struggling to preserve its identity under imperial domination.

Within the development of biblical studies, Psalm 137 has been read as a text that exposes the complex relationship among power, memory, and resistance. A number of studies indicate that Babylon's demand that the Judeans sing the "songs of Zion" cannot be understood as a simple request for entertainment; rather, it constitutes a form of symbolic domination that seeks to control the cultural identity of a colonised community (Hays, 2005; Joerstad, 2018). From a postcolonial perspective, this practice reflects cultural hegemony: the attempt of an empire to define, control, and represent conquered peoples according to its own interests (Gramsci, 1971; Said, 1978). By contrast, the refusal of the Judean community to sing discloses a form of symbolic resistance that preserves collective memory and communal dignity under colonial pressure. However, a significant tension remains unresolved in current scholarship. Interpreters have long struggled with the psalm's brutal conclusion (vv. 7–9), often framing it as an ethically problematic expression of vengeful rage, while others read it primarily as passive lament or theological resignation (Zenger, 1996; Allen, 1983). A postcolonial reading intervenes in this debate by reframing the "violence" of the text not as unmediated anger, but as the only available language of the powerless

against systemic imperial erasure. By doing so, it challenges the tendency in Psalms scholarship to psychologise the text without sufficiently accounting for the structural colonial dynamics that produced it. This unresolved tension—between ethical discomfort and the legitimacy of oppressed rage—provides the entry point for this study.

Although scholarship on Psalm 137 has produced an extensive body of research, many studies continue to focus primarily on historical questions, literary form, and the theology of exile (Allen, 1983; Goldingay, 2008; Gerstenberger, 2001). Postcolonial studies that specifically position the psalm as a text of resistance against cultural hegemony remain comparatively limited. Important contributions have been made by Berquist (2007), Joerstad (2018), and Ramantswana (2019), yet they have not developed a sufficiently sustained dialogue with the contexts of indigenous communities in Southeast Asia, particularly the Toba Batak homeland. More importantly, previous studies have not adequately explored how the psalm's theological language of land and memory can function as a critical resource for faith communities navigating the ethical demands of agrarian justice in postcolonial Indonesia.

The transition from the Judean exile to the contemporary struggles of the Toba Batak community is not based on a presumed historical or

sociological identity between the two contexts. Rather, this article employs a postcolonial comparative hermeneutics that operates through what might be termed structural analogy. The Babylonian empire and the modern Indonesian state-corporate complex (exemplified by PT Toba Pulp Lestari) are, of course, historically incommensurable. However, they share a common colonial logic: the severance of a community from its land in order to dismantle its collective identity and subordinate it to external hegemonic control. The analogy is thus drawn at the level of power relations, symbolic domination, and the function of memory as resistance, not at the level of historical equivalency. Acknowledging this methodological distinction is crucial, as it allows the biblical text to illuminate the contemporary struggle without reducing the specificities of Batak adat law, clan structures, or local political economies to mere replicas of ancient Near Eastern imperial practices.

The research gap, therefore, is not merely geographical or thematic; it is conceptual. While postcolonial readings of the Psalms have advanced our understanding of imperial dynamics, they have rarely been placed in sustained dialogue with land-based indigenous struggles in Southeast Asia. The present study addresses this gap by testing and refining postcolonial hermeneutics in a context where adat (customary law), corporate capital, and state

power intersect. What is gained by this dialogue is twofold: it provides a fresh interpretive lens for Psalm 137 that moves beyond ancient history, and it offers the Toba Batak struggle a theological-hermeneutical framework that validates lament as a legitimate political and ecclesial act.

The novelty of this article, therefore, does not depend solely on the contextual application to the Batak homeland. Rather, it offers three distinct conceptual contributions. First, it proposes a model of postcolonial biblical interpretation tailored to the Indonesian context, where the hermeneutical “Other” is not merely textual but constituted by living indigenous communities contesting corporate and state power. Second, it redefines lament not as a passive expression of grief but as a form of active theological resistance—a conceptual move that has significant implications for contextual theology in Indonesia. Third, it constructs a dialogical bridge between the biblical symbolism of “Zion” and the Batak concept of “Tano Batak” (customary land), arguing that both represent not just geographical spaces but archives of collective memory and identity that are crucial for survival under domination. By articulating these contributions, the article aims to move the conversation beyond contextual comparison toward a substantive rethinking of how Scripture speaks to land struggles in the Global South.

Against this background, the present article analyses Psalm 137 through the lens of postcolonial hermeneutics in order to uncover the mechanisms of Babylonian cultural hegemony, the strategies of resistance enacted by the Judean community, and the psalm's relevance for the struggles of indigenous communities in the Toba Batak homeland. The article argues that Psalm 137 is not merely a lament concerning the past, but a narrative of resistance that continues to address communities striving to defend their land, memory, and identity amid contemporary forms of coloniality and domination.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a qualitative library-based method to interpret Psalm 137 through a postcolonial hermeneutical approach, chosen for its capacity to critically read power relations, domination, and resistance (Sugirtharajah, 2002, 2011). The analysis is grounded in a close thematic reading of Psalm 137, primarily utilizing standard English translations (NRSV, NIV) and established commentaries (Allen, 1983; Goldingay, 2008; Gerstenberger, 2001), while the Hebrew text is consulted only for lexical clarification—thus the article offers a literary-theological reading rather than a text-critical contribution. To operationalize postcolonial hermeneutics, the reading is guided by five specific questions derived from Gramsci

(1971), Said (1978), and Spivak (2023): How does the text represent imperial mechanisms of control? Who controls the voice and identity of the colonized? How does empire appropriate cultural symbols? What strategies of resistance (refusal, memory, lament) are enacted? Moreover, how does the text function as a counter-discourse against hegemonic narratives? These questions provide a systematic interpretive grid for the exegetical analysis.

Subsequently, the postcolonial reading is brought into dialogue with documented Toba Batak land struggles, drawing exclusively on secondary sources: scholarly literature on adat law (Vergouwien, 2004), advocacy reports (AMAN, 2021; KSPPM, 2021), and legal case analyses (Sinurat, 2019; Hidayat, 2024; Manalu, 2025). This study is not an ethnographic fieldwork project but a hermeneutical exercise; the comparison thus operates through structural analogy in power relations rather than historical equivalence, allowing the biblical text and the contemporary context to illuminate each other while preserving their distinct histories. The interpretive analysis proceeds in three stages: (1) reassessing the structures of power embedded in the text, (2) rereading the text from the standpoint of the oppressed community, and (3) critiquing interpretive traditions that marginalize subaltern voices, ultimately enabling Psalm 137 to function as a critical theological

resource for analyzing colonial and postcolonial realities in contemporary Indonesia.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Babylon as Empire and the Destruction of Judah's Identity

Psalm 137 emerges from the historical experience of Judah's exile to Babylon following the destruction of Jerusalem in 586 BCE. This event cannot be understood merely as military defeat; it was an imperial strategy aimed at dismantling the collective identity of a conquered people. The Neo-Babylonian deportation policy, as documented in both biblical (2 Kings 24–25; Jeremiah 52) and extra-biblical sources (the Babylonian Chronicles), was not an ad hoc response to rebellion but a systematic administrative practice. The Babylonian empire, like its Assyrian predecessor, employed mass deportation to neutralize political resistance, exploit skilled labor, and sever conquered populations from their territorial and religious foundations (Oded, 1979; Vanderhooft, 2018). The destruction of the temple, the collapse of the city walls, and the deportation of Judah's royal family, priests, officials, and skilled workers formed part of a mechanism of power that sought to sever a community from the land, memory, and symbols that constituted its existence (Ahn, 2010; Smith-Christopher, 2002). From the perspective of postcolonial hermeneutics, these actions

demonstrate that empire does not merely control territory physically; it also seeks to regulate the symbolic space in which a people's identity is constructed and transmitted. Exile must therefore be understood as a colonial project directed at collective consciousness, not merely as the displacement of a population in the aftermath of war.

The strategy of deportation implemented by Babylon reveals how imperial power operated through the destruction of the social structures of the conquered society. By relocating the royal family, priests, officials, and skilled workers to the imperial centre, Babylon weakened Judah's capacity to preserve leadership, tradition, and social solidarity (Smith-Christopher, 2002). Within Gramsci's framework of hegemony, domination is exercised not only through military force but also through the formation of social conditions in which colonised groups lose the resources needed to reproduce their own identity (Gramsci, 1971). The destruction of Jerusalem was therefore an assault on the world of meaning that sustained Judah's life. The promised land, the temple, and the Davidic dynasty were not merely socio-political institutions; they were theological symbols that affirmed the distinctive relationship between YHWH and his people. When these three foundations collapsed, Judah faced a deep identity crisis and was compelled to ask anew what it meant to exist as the people of God.

This is the background against which Psalm 137 opens: “By the rivers of Babylon—there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion” (v. 1). The Hebrew verb *yāšabnû* (we sat) is not merely descriptive of physical posture; it connotes dwelling, remaining, and the experience of being stuck in a place of displacement (Goldingay, 2008). The rivers of Babylon—the canals and irrigation systems that sustained the imperial capital—become a geographical marker of estrangement. The exiles inhabit a physically real space that nevertheless feels foreign to their identity. They live far from Jerusalem, separated from the temple, and subject to an empire that determines the direction of their lives. The act of “sitting and weeping” is not merely an emotional expression, but a testimony to the experience of being uprooted from the space that had given meaning to their existence. Lament arises from the rupture between the identity they possess and the reality they are forced to endure.

The poetic structure of verses 1–2 reveals an emotional movement that is crucial to the psalm’s argument. The opening scene establishes three elements: a location (the rivers of Babylon), a posture (sitting), and an action (weeping). The repetition of the preposition “there” (*šam*) in verse 1—“there we sat down and there we wept”—creates a sense of being trapped in a

place of sorrow. The hanging of harps upon the willows in verse 2 adds an image of silence: the instruments of worship are no longer played, but neither are they discarded. They are suspended, waiting, preserved in a state of suspended grief. This poetic detail suggests that the community’s identity is not lost; it is, rather, held in abeyance, awaiting a time when worship can be restored (Hays, 2005). The movement from weeping (v. 1) to hanging harps (v. 2) to the captors’ demand (v. 3) creates a rhetorical progression from private grief to public confrontation with empire. This structure reveals that the psalm is not a static lament but a carefully crafted narrative of resistance that moves from the interiority of grief to the external demand for submission.

The theological and political force of the psalm intensifies in the captors’ demand: “Sing us one of the songs of Zion!” (v. 3). The Hebrew verb *šir* (sing) appears in the imperative, reflecting the asymmetry of power between captor and captive. The demand is not a request but a command, issued by those who hold political and military power. The phrase “songs of Zion” refers to the liturgical repertoire associated with Jerusalem’s temple cult (Allen, 1983; Gerstenberger, 2001). These songs celebrated YHWH’s kingship, his choice of Zion as his dwelling place, and his covenant with David. To demand these songs in Babylon was therefore to demand that the exiles

perform their own humiliation—to transform their sacred symbols into entertainment for their oppressors. The psalmist’s response, “How could we sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land?” (v. 4), is not a rhetorical question of helplessness but a theological declaration. The word *’adama* (foreign land) is deliberately chosen to contrast with *’adama* (land) as the space of divine promise. The refusal to sing is therefore grounded in theological conviction: the songs of YHWH cannot be performed outside the land where YHWH has chosen to dwell, nor can they be performed for an audience that does not honour YHWH (Joerstad, 2018).

What is striking in Psalm 137 is that colonialism never entirely succeeds in erasing the collective memory of a conquered people. It is precisely in the midst of estrangement that the act of remembering emerges as a form of resistance. The word “remember” (*zakar*) in verse 1 does not designate a passive mental act, but an active practice of preserving identity amid the pressure of assimilation. In the Hebrew Bible, *zakar* is often associated with covenantal fidelity: to remember is to act, to represent, to make present what is absent (Brueggemann, 1995; Noth, 1966). The exiles do not merely recall Jerusalem; they hold it before them as a living reality against which their current condition is measured and found wanting.

Here, Pierre Nora’s (1989) concept of *lieux de mémoire* (sites of memory) becomes illuminating, but it requires careful adaptation. For Nora, a site of memory arises when real environments of memory (*milieux de mémoire*)—the living, unmediated transmission of tradition—are lost, and communities consciously create places where memory can be preserved. Jerusalem, for the exiles, functions precisely as such a site: the physical city is destroyed and inaccessible, yet it continues to exist as a mental and spiritual geography that structures the community’s identity. Memory becomes a substitute geography for a displaced people. In the absence of the temple, the exiles construct a temple of memory. In the absence of the land, they preserve a map of belonging in their songs and laments. This is why the oath in verses 5–6 is so significant: “If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither; let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth if I do not remember you.” The oath is not merely an expression of devotion; it is a ritual of self-cursing that binds the community to its memory of Jerusalem. To forget is to die; to remember is to live. The oath reveals that memory is not nostalgia but survival—a refusal to allow the empire to define the community’s identity. The right hand and the tongue, the instruments of music and speech, are to be sacrificed if memory fails. This hyperbole suggests that the community’s

identity is so intimately bound to Jerusalem that losing the memory of the city would mean losing the capacity to be the people of God.

Within a postcolonial framework, the practice of remembering in Psalm 137 may be understood as resistance to assimilation. Colonialism often seeks not only to control territory, but also to shape the consciousness of conquered peoples so that they accept a new identity defined by the ruling power. The memory of Jerusalem becomes a symbolic stronghold that prevents Judah from dissolving into Babylonian culture. The commitment to remember affirms that their status does not determine their identity as captives, but rather their covenantal relationship with God and their attachment to the promised land. Memory in Psalm 137 thus functions as a refusal of the colonial project that seeks to produce compliant and assimilated subjects (Spivak, 2023; Fanon, 1963). Jerusalem, though destroyed, remains the centre of their religious, political, and emotional orientation. The city continues to live through the memory of the exiles, and that living memory sustains hope for restoration and justice.

The Songs of Zion as Instruments of Babylonian Cultural Hegemony

The movement from the lament of the exiles by the rivers of Babylon (vv. 1–2) to the encounter with their captors (v. 3) reveals that Psalm 137 is not only a text of sorrow, but also

a text that records colonial relations of power. The captors demand that Judah sing the “songs of Zion” must be understood as more than a request for entertainment. The text itself provides limited information about the captors’ intentions; it simply reports the demand: “For there our captors asked us for songs, and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying, “Sing us one of the songs of Zion!” (v. 3). The interpretation that this demand constitutes cultural domination is not explicitly stated in the text but emerges when the request is read against the background of imperial power asymmetry and the liturgical significance of Zion songs. The author must therefore distinguish between what the text explicitly reports and what the postcolonial interpretive framework proposes.

To grasp why singing these songs in Babylon would be theologically unbearable, one must understand what the “songs of Zion” meant within Israel’s liturgical imagination. In the Psalter, the songs of Zion (e.g., Psalms 46, 48, 76, 84, 87, 122) are not merely hymns about a city; they are theological affirmations of YHWH’s presence, protection, and kingship. Zion is the place where YHWH dwells (Ps. 132:13–14), the mountain of his sanctuary (Ps. 48:1–2), and the site of his enthronement as king over the nations (Ps. 99:1–2). The songs celebrate YHWH’s choice of Jerusalem as the centre of his rule, the guarantee of divine protection

against enemies, and the locus of pilgrimage and worship for the covenant community (Allen, 1983; Goldingay, 2008). To sing these songs was to perform one's identity as a people chosen by YHWH, dwelling in the land he had given, and worshipping him at the place he had hallowed. The songs were therefore inseparable from the land, the temple, and the covenant—the very elements that the Babylonian conquest had destroyed. Singing them in Babylon would mean performing a theology of divine presence and protection in a land where YHWH's presence was not manifest and where his protection had been catastrophically withdrawn. This theological dissonance is what the psalmist expresses in the question: "How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?" (v. 4). The question is not merely emotional; it is theological.

Within Israel's liturgical context, the songs of Zion were not ordinary songs of amusement. They were expressions of faith intimately bound to Jerusalem as the centre of divine presence and as the identity marker of the covenant people (Allen, 1983; Goldingay, 2008). When these songs are demanded in the land of exile, however, their meaning is detached from their original context. Sacred symbols are reduced to cultural commodities available for consumption by those in power. It is precisely here that colonial violence operates symbolically. The coloniser need not

destroy culture directly; it is sufficient to alter the function of that culture so that it loses its critical power and its original identity. In this sense, Babylon's request constitutes a colonisation of meaning: an attempt to control the ways in which a community understands and expresses its own identity.

This reading is consistent with Edward Said's (1978) critique of the relationship between knowledge and power: empire sustains its domination by defining and representing colonised peoples according to imperial interests. In Psalm 137, the Judeans are not granted the space to define themselves; they are positioned instead as objects of exotic spectacle. Songs that once mediated encounter with God are forced to become instruments of entertainment for the captors. What is at stake, therefore, is not music alone, but the authority to determine the meaning of culture. The coloniser attempts to seize interpretive control over symbols that had long served as the foundation of Judah's identity. However, this theoretical insight must be held in dialogue with the psalm's own narrative: the psalm does not explicitly accuse the captors of such intent; it presents the demand and the exiles' refusal. The postcolonial reading proposes a framework for understanding the political and symbolic weight of that exchange.

The request also reveals what Homi Bhabha (1994) describes as the ambivalence of colonial power: empire often displays an attraction to the culture of colonised peoples, but such attraction is never egalitarian. The culture of the colonised is valued only insofar as it can be enjoyed, controlled, and used to strengthen the dominant position of the coloniser. Babylon appears to admire the songs of Zion, yet it shows no interest in the suffering that gives rise to those songs. It desires aesthetics without history, music without trauma, and culture without the demand for justice. This ambivalence explains how a colonising power can consume the cultural products of a people while continuing to preserve oppressive structures against that same people. Again, this is an interpretive inference drawn from the colonial dynamics visible in the text, not a claim that the text itself states. The text's silence on the captors' motivation invites, but does not compel, this reading.

The question in verse 4, "How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?", must consequently be read as an act of cultural resistance. The Hebrew phrase *'al admat nekar* (upon foreign soil) contrasts implicitly with the *'adamah* (the land) of promise. This lexical choice grounds the refusal in the theology of land: the songs of YHWH belong to the land where YHWH dwells and to the covenant community that dwells in

that land. To sing them outside that land, for an audience that does not acknowledge YHWH, would be to participate in a symbolic system that normalises exile and oppression. The question is not merely an expression of sorrow, but a refusal of the empire's attempt to redefine the community's identity. The people of Judah refuse to transform sacred song into entertainment for their captors. They refuse to participate in a symbolic system that would normalise exile and oppression. Within a postcolonial framework, silence and the refusal to sing become forms of resistance no less significant than speech itself. The silence of the exiles becomes a political voice that rejects the legitimacy of Babylonian power.

What emerges from this analysis is that music in Psalm 137 is not merely an aesthetic element, but an arena of ideological struggle between empire and a colonised community. The songs of Zion become a symbol of contested meaning—between domination and resistance, assimilation and memory, colonial power and identity preserved against erasure. However, the primary evidence for this reading remains the psalm's own narrative movement: the captors "demand, the exiles" question, and the oath of remembrance. The theoretical framework of cultural hegemony illuminates these textual dynamics, but it does not replace them. Psalm 137 remains the primary object of analysis; theory serves to make

visible the power relations that the text registers but does not explicitly theorise.

This distinction between textual evidence and theoretical inference is methodologically crucial. The article does not claim that the Babylonian captors consciously intended cultural appropriation in the modern postcolonial sense. Rather, it argues that the structural dynamics of imperial power—the asymmetry between captor and captive, the demand to perform one's identity for the entertainment of the powerful, and the refusal to participate in such performance—are intelligible through postcolonial categories. This reading is proposed as a plausible interpretive framework, not as a definitive reconstruction of ancient intentions. By maintaining this distinction, the article allows the biblical text to speak on its own terms while showing how postcolonial theory can illuminate dimensions of the text that might otherwise remain invisible.

Lament as the Language of Resistance of the Oppressed

Psalm 137 demonstrates that lament is an act of resistance born from the experience of oppression. In a postcolonial reading, lament functions as a space through which groups deprived of political, economic, and military power can nevertheless preserve their agency through language. When Judah lost its land, temple, and political

sovereignty as a result of Babylonian expansion, it no longer possessed formal instruments for pursuing justice. However, the community still retained memory, narrative, and voice. Psalm 137 can therefore be read as a counter-discourse to the imperial narrative that seeks to define the identity of conquered peoples. Lament becomes a medium for rejecting the normalisation of conquest and for preserving the collective awareness that their condition is not natural, but the result of structural violence enacted by empire (Brueggemann, 1995; Sugirtharajah, 2002).

However, lament in the biblical tradition is not only resistance; it is also prayer, complaint, testimony, protest, memory, accusation, and hope. The Hebrew Psalter contains over sixty psalms of lament. Within them, lament operates as a theological structure that moves from suffering to petition, from complaint to trust, and from accusation to hope (Brueggemann, 1995; Gerstenberger, 2001). To reduce lament exclusively to political resistance would be to impoverish its theological depth. In Psalm 137, lament is simultaneously a cry to God about unbearable circumstances, a testimony to the community's suffering, a protest against injustice, an accusation against the oppressor, and a hope that God will act to restore what has been lost. These dimensions are not mutually exclusive; they co-exist within the same text. The psalmist's question, "How could we sing the

Lord's song in a foreign land?" (v. 4), is at once a theological question about the possibility of worship in exile, a political refusal of cultural assimilation, and a prayerful complaint directed toward God about the circumstances that have brought them to this place.

In this context, the rhetorical question in Psalm 137:4 constitutes a powerful act of cultural resistance. The question is not merely an expression of emotional incapacity to sing, but a refusal of Babylon's attempt to control the meaning and function of Judean culture. The request to sing the "songs of Zion" was, in effect, an effort to transform the sacred symbols of a conquered people into entertainment for the coloniser. By refusing to sing, the exiles refuse to allow their culture to be reduced to a commodity consumable by dominant power. This refusal shows that the cultural sphere can become an arena of resistance as significant as the political or military sphere (Ramantswana, 2019; Joerstad, 2018).

The resistance enacted by the exiles does not stop at the refusal of the coloniser's demand. The middle section of the psalm shows that resistance is also enacted through the practice of remembering. The oath not to forget Jerusalem in verses 5–6 reveals that memory functions as an instrument of identity formation. In colonial situations, one of the central aims of empire is to generate historical amnesia, so that conquered

groups lose their connection to their cultural and historical roots. The act of remembering is therefore a political act. The psalmist even declares a willingness to lose the ability to play music and to speak if he should forget Jerusalem. This declaration indicates that identity is more important than comfort under the rule of the coloniser. Memory consequently functions not only as recollection of the past, but also as a strategy for preserving communal continuity and hope for a different future (Nora, 1989; Smith-Christopher, 2002).

From a postcolonial perspective, the practice of remembering in Psalm 137 may be understood as resistance to assimilation. Colonialism often seeks not only to control territory, but also to shape the consciousness of conquered peoples so that they accept a new identity defined by the ruling power. Within this framework, the memory of Jerusalem becomes a symbolic stronghold that prevents Judah from dissolving into Babylonian culture. The commitment to remember affirms that their status does not determine their identity as captives, but rather their covenantal relationship with God and their attachment to the promised land. Memory in Psalm 137 thus functions as a refusal of the colonial project that seeks to produce compliant and assimilated subjects.

The dimension of resistance reaches its most difficult point in verses 7–9, which contain prayers for

judgement against Edom and Babylon. This section has often raised ethical problems in the study of the Psalms because it employs severe images of violence: “Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock!” (v. 9). A postcolonial reading cannot simply dismiss or explain away these verses; it must engage them with ethical seriousness. The psalm emerges from the experience of a victimised community that has suffered catastrophic loss—the destruction of Jerusalem, the desecration of the temple, the murder of children, and the experience of exile. Verses 7–9 must therefore be read as the expression of trauma and a demand for justice, not as a legitimisation of violence. The Judean community has no army with which to retaliate, no court through which to try the perpetrators, and no political power by which to demand its rights. In such circumstances, the only available space is the space of prayer. The language of judgement in Psalm 137 represents the act of entrusting the demand for justice to God when all human mechanisms have been seized by empire (Zenger, 1996).

However, this is not the end of the ethical question. The imprecatory prayer of verse 9 poses a profound theological problem: does the desire for vengeance on enemies” children reproduce the very logic of violence that the empire enacted against Judah? This question has troubled interpreters for centuries. A

responsible reading must hold together two realities. First, the psalm’s language of violence is the language of a traumatised people who have no other recourse. To condemn this language as simply unethical is to ignore the structural violence that produced it. Second, the text does not enact violence; it prays for it. The psalmist does not take up arms; he appeals to God as the judge of history. The violence is entrusted to divine justice, not human retaliation. This distinction—between praying for divine judgement and enacting human violence—is crucial. The psalm does not legitimise the community’s own violence; it cries out for God to act when human justice is unavailable (Zenger, 1996; Brueggemann, 1995).

However, the danger of reproducing violence remains real. The desire for vengeance, even when expressed in prayer, can easily become internalised and later enacted. The history of biblical interpretation shows that imprecatory psalms have been used to justify violence against enemies, including anti-Semitic violence, crusades, and colonial conquest. This interpretive danger must be acknowledged. A postcolonial reading must therefore approach verses 7–9 with what might be called a “hermeneutics of caution.” It reads these verses as testimony to suffering and as a plea for divine justice, but it also reads them in the full awareness that the language of vengeance is dangerous and must not be disconnected from

the ethical demands of neighbour love and forgiveness. The theological task is not to erase the anger of the victims, but to ensure that their anger is held in tension with the God who is both judge and redeemer, both just and merciful.

Within Frantz Fanon's (1963) framework, the anger of the oppressed cannot be understood as merely irrational emotion. Anger arises when human dignity is systematically violated by colonial power. Fanon argues that colonial violence produces a profound psychological dislocation in the colonised, and that the expression of rage—even violent rage—is a necessary moment in the process of decolonisation because it constitutes a refusal of the coloniser's dehumanisation. However, Fanon also warns that this rage, if not directed toward liberation, can become self-destructive or turn into new forms of oppression. In applying Fanon to Psalm 137, one must be precise: the psalm's imprecatory prayer is not a call to arms but a cry for divine intervention. It expresses the rage of the colonised, but it directs that rage toward God as the ultimate arbiter of justice, not toward human action. This is both a strength and a limitation. It is a strength because it prevents the community from taking vengeance into its own hands. It is a limitation because it leaves the victims dependent on divine action that may not come in their lifetime. The lament of Psalm 137 thus embodies the tension

between the demand for immediate justice and the patience required by faith.

Similarly, Gayatri Spivak's (2023) question—"Can the subaltern speak?"—finds a profound resonance here, but it requires careful application. Spivak's argument is not simply that oppressed groups are silenced, but that the structures of representation (including academic discourse) often speak for them in ways that reproduce their subordination. The subaltern, for Spivak, is not a romanticised figure of resistance; rather, subalternity is a position from which speech is structurally impossible within dominant discursive frameworks. In the case of Psalm 137, the Judean exiles are subalterns in the sense that they lack political voice within the Babylonian imperial system. However, the psalm itself is evidence that they can speak—not within the imperial discourse, but within their own theological tradition. The lament becomes a form of counter-speech that operates outside the dominant framework. Spivak's caution, however, warns that the act of reading Psalm 137 through postcolonial theory risks speaking for the subaltern rather than allowing the text to speak. A responsible reading must therefore listen to the psalm's own voice—its grief, its anger, its hope—without reducing it to an illustration of theory. The psalm speaks; the task is to hear it in its full complexity.

The voice of the oppressed can never be fully silenced. Politically, Judah had no platform from which to express its aspirations under Babylonian domination. However, through this psalm, its voice remains present and endures beyond the limits of history. Psalm 137 becomes an archive of suffering as well as an archive of resistance. It prevents the experience of victims from disappearing from collective memory and ensures that the imperial narrative does not become the only narrative transmitted to future generations. Lament is therefore the language of resistance by which oppressed communities preserve identity, sustain memory, articulate moral anger, and demand justice in situations of powerlessness. The strength of this psalm lies in its capacity to transform suffering into testimony and memory into resistance. However, its strength is also a warning: the desire for vengeance must be held in tension with the hope for a justice that does not merely reverse but transcends the logic of violence. Psalm 137 remains relevant for marginalised communities today because it shows that remembering and lamenting are initial acts in rejecting domination and pursuing the restoration of human dignity—but they are not the final acts. The psalm's open-endedness—it ends with the prayer for divine action, not with the community's triumph—leaves space for a hope that is still awaiting

fulfilment (Ramantswana, 2019; Sugirtharajah, 2011; Segovia, 2000).

Contextualising the Struggle over Land Dispossession in the Batak Homeland

Psalm 137 finds strong resonance in the experience of Toba Batak indigenous communities that, for more than a century, have confronted various forms of domination over their living space. If the Babylonian exile separated Judah from its land, sacred city, and identity-forming symbols, the experience of Toba Batak communities discloses a similar pattern through the dispossession of customary land (*tanah ulayat*), the marginalisation of *adat* law, and the subordination of local knowledge by state and corporate systems of power. In both contexts, land functions not merely as an economic space, but as the foundation of collective identity that connects a community to history, culture, ancestors, and religious meaning (Vergouwen, 2004; Smith-Christopher, 2002). However, the comparison must be handled with caution. Judah's exile involved forced deportation from homeland to imperial territory—a physical removal from the land itself. By contrast, Toba Batak land conflict involves indigenous communities remaining in or near their ancestral lands while facing legal, corporate, and state-backed dispossession. These are different structures of suffering. The analogy is therefore drawn at the level of structural power

relations—the severance of community from land, the erasure of collective memory, and the subordination of local knowledge—not at the level of historical equivalence. This distinction is crucial to avoid historical carelessness and to honour the specificity of each context.

Since the colonial period, Toba Batak communities have confronted fundamental changes in the governance of land. Customary systems of land control, which are grounded in clan structures (*marga*) and communal rights (*hak ulayat*), came under pressure when the Dutch colonial government introduced the concept of state ownership through the *domein verklaring* in the *Agrarische Wet* of 1870. This policy proceeded from the assumption that land not formally evidenced by administrative documentation could be claimed as state land. Such a perspective fundamentally contradicted Batak customary law, which understands land as communal property inherited across generations and legitimated through collective history rather than administrative certification. From a postcolonial perspective, this policy represents a form of epistemological domination because it disregards the validity of local systems of knowledge and replaces them with colonial legal categories deemed more legitimate and rational (Said, 1978; Sugirtharajah, 2002). Although the Basic Agrarian Law (UUPA) of 1960 formally abolished the *domein*

verklaring, the colonial logic of state control over land persisted through subsequent forestry and investment laws that prioritised corporate concessions over customary rights.

The continuity of colonial logic can still be observed in contemporary agrarian conflicts. One of the most prominent cases is the prolonged conflict between Toba Batak indigenous communities and PT Toba Pulp Lestari (TPL), a pulp and paper company with a concession area of 167,912 hectares spread around the Lake Toba area. The conflict involves at least 23 indigenous communities across five districts surrounding Lake Toba. The most well-documented case is the Pandumaan-Sipituhuta community in Pollung District, Humbang Hasundutan Regency, North Sumatra. The conflict began in 2009 when PT TPL began logging incense trees (*kemenyan*) in the customary forest of Pandumaan-Sipituhuta, which the community had managed for generations. The company's concession area overlapped with the customary forest claimed by the indigenous community. The community resisted, leading to violence, intimidation, and the arrest of several community leaders. In 2016, President Joko Widodo, through the Ministry of Environment and Forestry, designated 5,172 hectares of Pandumaan-Sipituhuta customary land as customary forest, removing it from TPL's concession. In early 2019, the regional government officially recognised this

land as customary forest belonging to the Pandumaan-Sipituhuta customary law community. However, the recognition was only partial: of the 5,172 hectares proposed, only 2,393.83 hectares were actually recognised. Moreover, even the Presidential Decree on Customary Forests, handed directly by President Joko Widodo in February 2022 to six indigenous communities (including Pandumaan-Sipituhuta), has not been fully honoured by TPL. As Hengky Manalu of AMAN Tano Batak stated, “The Presidential Decree on Customary Forests is not recognised by TPL. Part of the land still cannot be taken back by the indigenous community.”

Other communities have experienced similar struggles. The Ompu Umbak Siallagan community in Dolok Parmonangan Village, Simalungun Regency, has inhabited the area since the 1700s, with its current members representing the eleventh generation. In 1983, the government granted a concession to PT TPL (then named PT Inti Indorayon Utama) over 184,486 hectares of industrial forest, including 500 of the 815 hectares of the Ompu Umbak Siallagan community’s territory. The community never gave its consent to the company’s entry. In April 2024, Sorbatua Siallagan, the 66-year-old leader of the Ompu Umbak Siallagan community and an eleventh-generation descendant of King Ompu Umbak Siallagan, was sentenced to two years in prison and fined Rp 1

billion on charges of vandalism and land occupation on land he claims belongs to his ancestors. AMAN Tano Batak has characterised this as “criminalisation” of indigenous land defenders. The Supreme Court later acquitted Sorbatua, but the experience only deepened his resolve. Similar cases of criminalisation have been documented in Sihaporas Village, Simalungun Regency, where in September 2025, a clash between indigenous communities and TPL security personnel resulted in 33 community members being injured (15 men and 18 women), with damage to houses, huts, motorcycles, and vehicles. AMAN Tano Batak reports that conflicts between indigenous communities and TPL have occurred at least seven times.

The social impact of these agrarian conflicts displays similarities with the collective trauma reflected in Psalm 137. The loss of access to customary land affects not only economic welfare but also generates uncertainty of identity and a crisis of cultural continuity. For Toba Batak communities, *tanah ulayat* (customary land) is not merely a productive asset; it is a communal-spiritual space, with ownership based on patrilineal descent through customary symbols such as the *Hariara* tree. The land is intimately bound to the clan structure (*marga*), the village (*huta*), and the ancestral lineage (*tarombo*) that constitutes the community’s identity.

As Mersi Silalahi, an indigenous woman from Sihaporas, stated: “Forest and custom (*adat*) are everything to me. Our lives are guaranteed, but if that is destroyed, the order of life becomes chaotic.” The loss of customary land is therefore an identity-dislocating event that disrupts the community’s relationship with ancestors, collective history, and the social structures that sustain its life. Under these conditions, indigenous communities experience something analogous to Judah in exile: they inhabit a legal and political space that no longer recognises their historical relationship with land inherited from their ancestors. The result is a form of estrangement that is not merely material, but existential.

Nevertheless, just as Psalm 137 shows that oppression does not necessarily produce resignation, the experience of Toba Batak indigenous communities also reveals multiple forms of resistance. One of the most significant forms is the preservation of collective memory through genealogies (*tarombo*), customary rituals, and communal historical narratives. The *tarombo* is not merely a record of ancestry; it is a living memory that legitimates the community’s relationship to its customary territory. Each *marga* (clan) traces its lineage to a founding ancestor, and this genealogical memory serves as the basis for claims to specific *tanah ulayat*. The practice of remembering

through *tarombo* is comparable to the psalmist’s oath not to forget Jerusalem (Ps. 137:5–6). Memory becomes a means of preserving identity while resisting the assimilative processes that erase the histories of marginalised communities (Nora, 1989; Spivak, 2023).

Lament also plays an important role in this context. Testimonies of indigenous communities concerning the loss of forests, water sources, agricultural land, and living space cannot be understood merely as social complaints. In light of Psalm 137, lament is the language that enables marginalised groups to articulate experiences of injustice that are denied space within dominant discourse. The documentation of indigenous experiences by organisations such as AMAN Tano Batak and KSPPM functions as a collective archive that resists the erasure of historical memory. The preservation of customary forests, the defence of ancestral graves, and the refusal to accept corporate encroachment are all forms of resistance that echo the psalmist’s refusal to sing the songs of Zion in a foreign land. As Nelson Simanjuntak, Chair of the Pundurham Simanjuntak Indigenous Community in Natumingka Village, Toba Regency, stated: “After the revocation of TPL’s permit, we took the initiative to reorganise part of our customary territory. We are trying to get the

state to recognise the land that has been seized.”

From a theological perspective, this reading shows that the issue of land cannot be reduced to an economic matter. In the biblical tradition, land is an integral part of the covenantal relationship between God and God’s people. Land is not merely an object of ownership, but a space of life within which justice, sustainability, and communion become possible. The dispossession of land that results in the marginalisation of local communities may therefore be understood as a theological issue because it concerns the honouring of human dignity and the continuity of God’s creation (Brueggemann, 1995; Smith-Christopher, 2002). For Toba Batak communities, the land is not only a physical territory but also a sacred space where ancestors are buried, where *adat* is practised, and where communal identity is sustained. The destruction of this space is therefore a violation of the community’s relationship with God, ancestors, and creation.

In light of Psalm 137, the church in the Toba Batak homeland is called to develop a theology attentive to the experience of communities that have lost, or are threatened with losing, their living space. Fidelity to the tradition of faith is not expressed only through liturgical practice, but also through solidarity with justice, the protection of human dignity, and respect for the rights of indigenous communities.

The involvement of churches and church leaders in the movement demanding the closure of TPL suggests that the church is beginning to recognise its responsibility in this struggle. Just as Judah was called to remember Jerusalem in the midst of exile, the church is called not to forget the struggles of communities whose identity and living space are threatened by various forms of contemporary domination. Psalm 137 therefore speaks not only of the ancient Babylonian exile, but also offers a theological framework for interpreting the struggles of indigenous communities that seek to preserve their identity, memory, and dignity amid the pressures of modern structures of power.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study has shown that Psalm 137, read through postcolonial hermeneutics, emerges as a text of resistance born from the traumatic experience of Judah under Babylonian domination. The close reading reveals several strategies of resistance: the refusal of cultural objectification (rejecting Babylon’s demand to sing the “songs of Zion”), the preservation of collective memory (the oath not to forget Jerusalem), and lament as the language of the oppressed. Methodologically, the study has refined postcolonial hermeneutics by applying a “structural analogy” approach that illuminates both the

ancient text and the contemporary context without collapsing their historical distinctiveness. In the Toba Batak homeland, this reading resonates with documented struggles of communities such as Pandumaan-Sipituhuta, Ompu Umbak Siallagan, Sihaporas, and Natumingka, who face dispossession of customary land (*tanah ulayat*), criminalisation, and identity dislocation produced by historical colonialism and modern corporate expansion (PT Toba Pulp Lestari). Just as Jerusalem became the symbol of identity preserved by Judah in exile, customary land for Toba Batak communities is an existential space inseparable from memory, *adat*, *tarombo*, and communal continuity.

It is important to acknowledge the limitations of this study. As a library-based research project without fieldwork or interviews, it cannot claim to have fully represented the lived experience of Batak communities, and its claims are interpretive proposals requiring further testing through field-based research. Future research should include ethnographic studies documenting the voices and theological reflections of indigenous communities themselves, as well as participatory action research exploring the church's role in land rights advocacy. The article challenges the church in the Toba Batak homeland to develop solidarity with marginalised groups, to recognise lament as a legitimate source of theological reflection, and

to embody a faith inseparable from the defence of human dignity, social justice, and living space. Psalm 137 thus speaks not only of ancient exile but offers a theological framework for interpreting contemporary struggles to preserve identity, memory, and dignity amid modern structures of power. This testimony transforms suffering into resistance and calls communities of faith to enact justice in solidarity with the oppressed.

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