

THE PSALMS THEN AND NOW:  
“RECEPTION HISTORY” AS A WAY OF SEEING AND HEARING THE PSALMS<sup>1</sup>

The Bedell Lecture Series, for which this paper was originally written, is to allow the members of the National Bible Society of Ireland to engage with different ways of reading the Bible through the mediation of a biblical specialist. My own interest is in reception history, a fairly recent newcomer to biblical studies, so it is appropriate that I demonstrate its vitality and relevance: I shall do this by focusing on one book, namely the Psalter, and within this book, one text, Psalm 137.

There are at least three interrelated ways in which the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible can be read, although these are by no means mutually exclusive. The most obvious is a *spiritual engagement* with the biblical texts, which sees the Bible as an aid to prayer and growth in faith: this might be alone, perhaps with some reading aid, or with others, in bible study groups. A second approach is to read the Bible as ancient history—perhaps motivated by travel, the media, or more obviously academic interests—and this might be called a *historical engagement* with the Bible. Its primary interest is in the background to these often opaque texts—their date, their origin, their ancient Near Eastern counterparts, and their possible purpose in an early life-setting. The third approach is about reading the Bible as literature: this is more about an aesthetic sensitivity to the poetry and storytelling which comprises so much of the Old Testament, but could also be linguistic, comparing the texts in their Hebrew, Greek, Aramaic, Syriac or Latin versions; it could also include a contemporary dialogue with the text, using modern techniques of reading. Obviously it is possible to read the Bible using more than one of these approaches.

Two further ways in which we can “receive” the Bible are through art and music, and each of these complements the three approaches noted above. So rather than giving a theoretical lecture on what reception history is, and how it arose as an academic

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<sup>1</sup> I am most grateful to Professor Gunnlaugur Jónsson of Reykjavík University, Iceland, for allowing me reproduce some parts of a paper I wrote in his *Festschrift*: ‘Seeing and Hearing Psalm 137’ was published in *Mótun Menningar/Shaping Culture. Afmoelisrit/Festschrift Gunnlaugur Jónsson*, ed. K. Eyjar (Reykjavík, Hid Íslenska Bókmenntafélag, 2012), 91-107.

discipline, I intend to illustrate what reception history does, given its interest not only in the text *per se*, but also in its resonance beyond words. The best way of “doing” reception history is to engage with just one text, and to see how it has been read, visualized and heard in many different ways by Jews and Christians alike. Using reception history is a bit like using a kaleidoscope: as it throws different light on these ancient texts, a myriad of new patterns begins to emerge.

Before we turn to a particular psalm, it is important to recognize that the psalms were both “seen” and “heard” from the very beginning. The words would often have been accompanied by ritual and drama, so there would have been much to see, externally, and in addition the rich metaphorical language of the Hebrew poetry would have been an inspiration for the inner sight and imagination. Similarly the words would often have been sung to musical accompaniment, so in addition to the natural rhythm and repetition of the poetry, there would have been much to hear, as well. This provides us with a trajectory for seeing and hearing the psalms through the centuries. We can now see the psalms through many different artistic forms—through an illuminated manuscript, or stained glass, or an etching on wood, or paint on canvas, or in mosaics and tapestries. And we can now hear an interpretation of the music of the psalm through a variety of media—whether they be Gregorian plainsong, Latin motets, metrical psalms in the vernacular, librettos in opera scores, and popular music—reggae, hip-hop, and country and western. This is what it means, in part, to “do” reception history: to read the text, and to add to one’s understanding of it the various ways in which Jews and Christians through the ages have sought to “see” and “hear” it.

Psalm 137 is a most appropriate choice because the *text* of the psalm appeals to both the eye and the ear. Reception history is not doing its work if it does not begin with the *text*: the actual words are important, whether in Hebrew or in translated form. Reception history, as the title of this paper suggests, is about the psalms “then” as well as “now”.

So let us look briefly at the actual text of Psalm 137.

- <sup>1</sup> By the rivers of Babylon –  
     there we sat down and there we wept  
     when we remembered Zion.
- <sup>2</sup> On the willows there  
     we hung up our harps.
- <sup>3</sup> For there our captors asked us for songs,  
     and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying,  
     "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"
- <sup>4</sup> How could we sing the LORD's song  
     in a foreign land?
- <sup>5</sup> If I forget you, O Jerusalem,  
     let my right hand wither!
- <sup>6</sup> Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth,  
     if I do not remember you,  
     if I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy.
- <sup>7</sup> Remember, O LORD, against the Edomites  
     the day of Jerusalem's fall,  
     how they said, "Tear it down! Tear it down!  
     Down to its foundations!"
- <sup>8</sup> O daughter Babylon, you devastator!  
     Happy shall they be who pay you back what you have done to us!
- <sup>9</sup> Happy shall they be who take your little ones  
     and dash them against the rock!<sup>2</sup>

It is clear that it is a unity of three parts, so we have to deal with all of it, not only the bits we might like. Verses 1-4 are dominated by first person common plural forms—“we sat down” (*yāšabnû*), “we wept” (*bākînû*), “we remembered” (*bězokrēnû*), “we hung up” (*tālînu*), “our lyres” (*kinnorotênû*), “Our captors” (*šôbênû*) and “our plunderers” (*tôlālênû*) taunted us: “sing to us!” (*šîrû lānû*). The plea (verse 4) is “how shall we sing?” (*’ék nāšîr*). So what do we *see* here? We view groups of exiles grieving, with their lyres silent, in memory of Zion; we observe their mourning rites interrupted by the derisive mockery of their Babylonian captors, wanting to be entertained by one of the joyful songs of Zion—songs which, in a foreign land, were impossible to sing, making the exiles’ degradation even more humiliating. What do we *hear* here? Well, in the Hebrew, we hear those ‘nû’ endings, creating phonetically a mourning sound common to lament forms, occurring some nine times in the first three verses.

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<sup>2</sup> Taken from the NRSV.

Verses 5-6 form the second part of the psalm and here the first person singular is prominent: this is a self-imprecation addressed not to God but to the city of Jerusalem, vowing utter loyalty and devotion: “if *I* forget you (*’im-’eškāhēk*) let *my* right hand wither (literally, forget [*tiškaḥ yēmîni*])<sup>3</sup>; “if *I* do not remember you (*’im-lō’ ’ezkērekî*) ... let *my* tongue (*lěḥkkî*) cleave to the roof of *my* mouth (*lěšōnî*)... if *I* do not set (*’im-lo’ ’a’āleh*) Jerusalem above *my* highest joy (*’al ro’š śimḥātî*)”. What do we *see* here? Here we view just one individual—possibly a Levitical singer, for whom the singing of Zion hymns would have been a special responsibility—vowing never to take for granted the privilege of singing and worshipping in Jerusalem. It is unclear as to whether he is still in Babylon, or he is now living back in Yehud, where once again songs of Zion could be sung, but when the memory of captivity was still bitterly intense. Much depends on how we interpret the word “there” (*šām*) in verses 1 and 3.<sup>4</sup> And what do we now *hear*? No longer is the timbre weeping and mockery, but a muted self-imprecation: in Hebrew, just as *nû’* endings dominated the first verses, the *’î* rhymes dominate here, evoking bitter nostalgia.

Verses 7-9 make up the third part of the psalm and again the verbal forms are different, mainly using second and third person masculine plural forms. The taunts of the Edomites are recalled: “Tear it down!”<sup>5</sup> echoes the taunts of the Babylonian captors in verse three (“Sing us one of the songs of Zion!”). So what do we *see*? Here the imagery is notably more violent—a city being stripped completely naked, a people utterly destroyed, a future generation massacred as an act of retribution. And what do we *hear*? We hear only curses—two which are received and two which are given—and these are insistent

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<sup>3</sup> Noting the pun on the verb  $\sqrt{skh}$  which can mean ‘forget’ or ‘whither’: here it is used differently in each phrase.

<sup>4</sup> *šām* can denote present experience as well: see, for example, Pss 48:6 and 76:3.

<sup>5</sup> The verb *’ārû* (“Tear it down!”) uses the Piel imperative for extra force; here, with the context of the female city, Zion, the implication is of sexual devastation and rape.

and even crude in their vindictiveness, contrasting with the evocation of grief in the first part and of reflective nostalgia in the second.

Actually, all three sections—the first focussed on “we”, the second on “I”, the third on “they”, contain elements of taunt or curse. The taunts of the Babylonians in the first part correspond with the taunts of the Edomites in the third part; and the self curse in the second part anticipates the curse on Babylon in the third. Babel, “city of confusion” actually frames the entire psalm. Each part of the psalm depends on the other: this is the song of partisans fighting for freedom and justice.

The unity of the whole is further illustrated by the word “remember” ( $\sqrt{zkr}$ ) which is found in all three parts: the remembering of Zion (*bězokrēnû 'et-šiyyôn*) in verse 1; the remembering of Jerusalem (*'im-lō' 'ezkěrekî*) in verse 6; and the plea to God to remember (*zěkōr Yhwh*) in verse 7. As Erich Zenger said of this psalm, it reflects on profound human helplessness, a unified whole, whereby, stage by stage, everything is ultimately handed over to the justice of God.<sup>6</sup>

So this is the way in which we might both “see” and “hear” the text of the psalm in its earliest exilic or Second Temple setting. The next stage is to try to see and hear the interpretations of Psalm 137 in later Jewish and Christian tradition: it is at this stage we begin to see the very different ways in which Jews and Christians, in art and in music, “saw” and “heard” this psalm.

The main emphasis in *Jewish exegesis* has been to take the *complete psalm* as an entire poetic drama—a kind of “meta-narrative” whereby the whole community, past and

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<sup>6</sup> See Erich Zenger, *Ein Gott der Rache? Feindpsalmen verstehen* (Biblische Bücher, 1; Freiburg: Herder, 1994), 47-50. Trans. L.M. Malancy, *A God of Vengeance: Understanding the Psalms of Divine Wrath*, (Louisville: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996).

present, might focus their faith and identity on Jerusalem.<sup>7</sup> This emphasis is found at the very earliest stage of writing, in the exile of the sixth century BCE; during the Greek occupation in the second century BCE; after the fall of the Second Temple in 70 CE; living with Gentile persecution in the sixth century CE; during the crusades and the medieval controversies; during persecution by the “Roman” church; during attempts at integration; after the Holocaust; and after the formation of the State of Israel. We shall see shortly how this is communicated in artistic and musical representations as well as writing.<sup>8</sup>

By contrast, the main focus in *Christian exegesis* has less an interest in any “meta-narrative” but rather in single verses, or even single phrases in selected verses, with the intention of finding a spiritual and Christ-centred interpretation. This is found in the early Church Fathers; it is expressed by Augustine, after the sack of Rome in 410 CE; by Luther, and during the Reformation; by those under threat of exile from England; during the American Revolution; in the twentieth century, in poverty and oppression; during the Great Depression; in the 1990s, and in the twenty-first century, the psalm lives on.

So Jews have used Psalm 137 to refer to a corporate and temporal reality focussed, literally, on Jerusalem; and Christians mainly use this psalm to refer to a more individualized and eternal reality, where “Jerusalem” is seen as a heavenly city and a symbol of a pilgrim faith based upon Jesus Christ.<sup>9</sup> In each tradition this psalm is seen and heard in quite different artistic and musical ways

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<sup>7</sup> See for example Adele Berlin, “Psalms and the Literature of the Exile: Psalms 137, 44, 69, and 78”, *The Book of Psalms. Composition and Reception*, eds. P.W. Flint and P.D. Miller (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 66-85.

<sup>8</sup> Abraham Cohen observes: “...if we think of him [the psalmist] as an exile recently back from Babylon, viewing with horror the havoc wrought in the city he dearly loved (Kimchi), ...Refugees from Europe, when they returned and saw how their native cities had been turned into masses of rubble by the Germans, surely shared this mood”: see *The Psalms. Hebrew Text and English Translation, with an Introduction and Commentary* (London and New York: Soncino Press, 1985), 447. See also Avrohom Chaim Feuer (tr. and ed.), *Tehillim* (Artscroll Tanach Series Volume Two; New York: Mesorah, 1985), 1610-24.

<sup>9</sup> This is clearly evident in the readings of the church fathers, both in the Greek East and the Latin West, and writers of the Middle Ages and early Reformation comment on this psalm in a similar way: Origen, Jerome, Augustine, Cassiodorus, Aquinas and Luther are all typical examples: see Susan Gillingham, “The Reception of Psalm 137 in Jewish and Christian Tradition”, *Jewish and Christian Approaches to the*

Let us take, first, a Christian illumination of this psalm. One most pertinent example dates from as early as the ninth century; it is from the Utrecht Psalter, once held at the Benedictine monastery of Hautvillers, and using artists from the school at Rheims. The imagery for Psalm 137 is particularly complex: the artists have selected six verses (1, 2, 3, 6, 7 and 8) and have presented these in a continuous artistic sequence.<sup>10</sup>

The “rivers of Babylon” (as in verse 1) flow in a harsh line right across the bottom of the image, symbolising the chaotic forces of nature.<sup>11</sup> Verse 2 is represented in the right hand bottom corner, where a group of Babylonians demand a “Song of Zion”. Verse 3 is represented in the middle of the bottom of the image, where a company of desolate Jews sits on the banks of the river, with their lyres hanging on the trees. In the top left corner, moving down through the middle of the illustration to the bottom left, is a particularly Christian illustration of verses 6a and 6b. We see a small group of people looking up to heaven, from which emerges the hand of God which is held up and blesses another group of people in front of what seems to be a tabernacle representing the Temple of Jerusalem. On a hill next to the tabernacle is a figure with a rayed nimbus, who, as elsewhere in the Utrecht Psalter, represents Jesus Christ. Next to him are three disciples; they and he are pointing to his lips. In the context of the psalm this probably refers to the prophecies of Christ concerning the destruction of Jerusalem, for example in Matt 23:27; Lk 13:34, 21:20-24 and Jn 2:19-22. Here is a particularly Christian reading of the psalm: just as Edom and Babylon fell and so vindicated the Jews, the sack of Jerusalem by Rome in 70 CE gave Christians an increasing sense of triumph. Verses 7-8 are depicted in the rest of the illustration: here we see Edom and Babylon being besieged and destroyed—i.e. a prophecy now fulfilled—but in the context of the earlier

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*Psalms: Conflict and Convergence*, ed. Susan Gillingham (Proceedings of the Oxford Conference on Jewish and Christian Approaches to the Psalms; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 64-82.

<sup>10</sup>The Psalter is kept at the University of Utrecht Library, MS 32; for Psalm 137, see fol. 77r. The Utrecht website is <http://psalter.library.uu.nl>. For Psalm 137 see: <http://psalter.library.uu.nl/page?p=160&res=1&x=0&y=0>

<sup>11</sup> In the commentary tradition of the early fathers such as Jerome and Augustine the “waters of Babylon” represent “waters of confusion”, or everything which is alien to God, capable of drowning the soul. It may well be that this is intended here.

illustrations this is an omen, therefore, of the fate to come to Jerusalem itself. Hence, interwoven in the fabric of the illustration, is a message which speaks not so much of the suffering of the Jewish community as a faith focussed on the person of Christ who, after the final destruction of Jerusalem its Temple, embodies a new faith and hope which is not so much material and temporal as spiritual and eternal.<sup>12</sup>

A contrasting image, a Jewish one, dates from some four centuries later. This is the Parma Psalter, an equally lavish manuscript, produced under Jewish patronage in Italy. Its date is about 1280 and it marks an act of defiance during a prolonged period of intense persecution following the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215, when Jewish books were burnt and Jews were forced to convert to the Christian faith. Psalm 137 with its “meta-narrative” about exile in a strange land, is thus a most poignant psalm.<sup>13</sup>

The illustration follows the Hebrew word *‘al* (“upon”, or “by”) and precedes the word *nahārôt* (“rivers”). Instead of the multitude of illustrations in the Utrecht Psalter, here the entire Jewish story of exile is summarized in just the two figures, each lying beside the water, one apparently wiping tears from his face, the other beating his breast.<sup>14</sup> To the right, placed upon the letter Zayin, hang two lyres. The illustration and psalm are surrounded by the commentary of Abraham ibn Ezra which offers further insights into

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<sup>12</sup> The Utrecht Psalter influenced several other illuminated Psalters, including, in England, the Harley and Eadwine Psalters which were first preserved in the Augustinian monastery in Christ Church Canterbury. Whereas the illustrations in the Utrecht Psalter are in dark brown ink, those in the twelfth century Eadwine Psalter are vividly coloured. This is now held by Trinity College (MSR.17.1) and kept at the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge: it has two Latin versions, a Latin commentary, an Old English version and Anglo-Norman translation. Its illustrations echo those of the Utrecht Psalter. See [http://www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk/functions/imagewindowzoomify.php?/gallery/CambridgeIlluminations/images/zoomify/Trinity\\_R\\_17\\_1\\_fol.234v](http://www.fitzmuseum.cam.ac.uk/functions/imagewindowzoomify.php?/gallery/CambridgeIlluminations/images/zoomify/Trinity_R_17_1_fol.234v).

<sup>13</sup> Psalm 137 is held at the Palatina Library; Ms Parma 1870 (*Cod. De Rossi* 510), fol 198A. A facsimile of this image can be seen at [www.facsimile-editions.com](http://www.facsimile-editions.com).

<sup>14</sup> *Midrash Tehillim* 137:1 and *Pesiqta Rabbati* 135a state that the reference to the weeping by (*‘al*) the waters is on account of (*‘al*) the people being compelled to drink from the river Euphrates whose waters then poisoned them. So this image (informed by Jewish exegesis just as the Utrecht Psalter had been informed by Christian exegesis) may also offer another reason for depicting grief at the waters of Babylon.

the narrative impact of this psalm and its testimony to the people's suffering throughout their history.

Equally important are examples of the ways in which Christians and Jews have "heard" Psalm 137 through the medium of music: both examples are taken from the period of the English Reformation. Important Christian examples are the responses to this psalm by William Byrd and Philippe de Monte. The context is again one of persecution. By the sixteenth century, when both Catholics and Protestants all over the Continent also began to experience threats of exile and material and spiritual deprivation under different monarchs, Psalm 137 was used, typically through selecting particular verses, as a means of hope—not in Jerusalem as such, but in God's ever-present help through Jesus Christ. "Quomodo cantabimus" by William Byrd (1584) is a motet, based upon verses 5-6 of the psalm, and was a response to a composition by his Catholic friend, Philippe de Monte, with whom he had worked in the court of Mary Tudor from 1554-55.

De Monte's "Super flumina Babylonis" was a motet on the first four verses and was a covert gesture of support for the Catholic-inclined Byrd, who was now composing in the Protestant court of Queen Elizabeth I. De Monte's composition, with the words "How shall we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?" and the references to being coerced into singing a "song of Zion" were most appropriate in Byrd's situation. So Byrd responded with his own composition of the next verses of the psalm which echoed that of de Monte's motet: it is also sung in eight parts and was also incorporated an inverted three-part canon. Byrd emphasised the importance of memory: his verses from the psalm focussed on "I will remember" and "Remember O Lord".<sup>15</sup>

These adaptations of Psalm 137 create an interesting contrast with a Jewish composition, some fifty years later, this time from Mantua in Italy, where Salomone

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<sup>15</sup> See Roger Bray, "William Byrd's English Psalms", *Psalms in the Modern World*, eds. L.P. Austern, K.B. McBride and D.L. Orvis, (Burlington VT and Farnham Surrey: Ashgate, 2011), 61-75. For a performance of de Monte's and Byrd's motets, sung by the Sixteen and conducted by Harry Christophers, see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IQlqALeJadc> (de Monte) and <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZxXYJchrly0> (Byrd).

Rossi was court musician. Using to his advantage the renaissance spirit of greater tolerance to Jewish culture, Rossi started to compose and publish Hebrew music for secular performances, based upon music from the ghetto.<sup>16</sup> By 1633 a collection of thirty-three psalms had appeared: these were polyphonic melismatic chants, with elaborations where the voices in the psalm suggested it, and were as much influenced by Monteverdi and the plainchant tradition in the church of Mantua as by the ghetto. The chorus is unaccompanied, full of dissonant chords and mournful tensions, sung by low and heavy voices: not only did this accord with the ban on music in the synagogues but it also alluded to the hanging up of the harps on the trees. The music evokes each stage of the people's suffering which is expressed in the psalm: it starts with a chromatic progression around the Hebrew word "wept", and continues into a flowing passage in unison for the Hebrew word "river". The reference to the hanging up of harps is achieved first by lowering the key by a semitone, with an unexpected F sharp in the soprano part at the end of the phrase. Rossi continued the (Jewish) emphasis on the complete psalm as a poetic drama, from their first exile in Babylon, their sufferings in the land under Seleucid rule, the Fall of their Temple to the Romans in the first century of the Christian Era, the ensuing Jewish Diaspora, and now the people's continual suffering all over Europe. So the Edomites' taunting towards the end of the psalm ("Tear it down! Tear it down!") repeatedly uses harsh, grinding chords.<sup>17</sup>

More contemporary musical arrangements of this psalm have used the words in a very different way. One example is the Rastafarians, which is more akin to the Jewish "narrative" account of the psalm than the Christian focus on specific verses. Here "Babylon" becomes the people of the west who sold the people of African ancestry into slavery in the Americas, and the "exiles" become the persecuted black Jamaican masses. What is striking is the way the genre of the psalm is completely reversed: what was a complex Hebrew lament is now a protest song, not full of self-pity, but defiantly "chanting down", in reggae rhythms, "Babylon's" might: the actual process of singing

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<sup>16</sup> This was in part because, since the destruction of the Second Temple, any musical accompaniment to the psalms in synagogue worship was forbidden. Rossi initially set the psalms to music as if for a secular performance, taking popular tunes from the ghetto.

<sup>17</sup> For a performance of this psalm, see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0XcjQLW1a98>.

becomes the agent of social change. Even the dreadful “jihad” in verse 9, against Babylonian domination, becomes the revolutionary call for liberation and justice. The song is for “King Alpha”—Haile Selassie—and the chorus after verse 2 makes it a freedom song quite unlike any other.

*By the rivers of Babylon,  
Where we sat down,  
There we wept  
When we remembered Zion.*

*'Cause, the wicked carried us away in captivity,  
Required from us a song,  
How can we sing King Alpha's song  
Inner (in a) strange land?*

There are several musical versions of this adaptation of Psalm 137. It was popularized by the Melodians in 1969, and by Boney Em and Bob Marley in 1975. The Jewish protest singer Matisyahu, combining Jewish faith with reggae, rock and hip-hop, produced a version called “Jerusalem” in 2006. And Sinéad O’Connor sang a more quiet and plaintive version on her album “Theology” in 2007.<sup>18</sup>

There is an equally wide range of illustrations of “seeing” Psalm 137 in twentieth century art. Usually just one verse is used to evoke a picture of material loss and degradation. One stark example is by Arthur Wragg: this was completed during the Great Depression in the 1930s. It is a raw and powerful black and white image of two tenement block windows, the top one with a withered plant on the sill and a birdcage with one or two birds inside. The bottom window, being closest, allows us to see through the curtains into a blackened room. In a second birdcage we can see the white upright silhouette of just one bird: it is hard to know whether, being caged, it is unable to sing, or whether it is

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<sup>18</sup> For a performance of the version by the Melodians, see [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o-5E6\\_qtXAw](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=o-5E6_qtXAw); by Boney Em, see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XO1-skXZEvs>; by Matisyahu, see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hirqJx6pth8>; and by Sinéad O’Connor, see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=abUxePtua1M>

attempting some choked warbling. The overall impression seems to be silence. The caption under it is taken from verse 4.



“How shall we sing the Lord’s song in a strange land?”<sup>19</sup>

Another image is by an Oxford artist, Roger Wagner. One of his first drawings of Psalm 137 depicts the Jericho bank of the Oxford-Birmingham canal, where some ironworks had hidden a number of striking copper beeches in a garden plot called St Sepulchre’s Cemetery. The subtitle is simply “By the Waters of Babel”, and its bleak brown brushstrokes evoke the whole tenor of the psalm—the threatening power of confusion, the sense of desolation, the canal in flood, and the inability to respond to beauty even when it takes root in the most unlikely places.

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<sup>19</sup> Taken from Arthur Wragg, *The Psalms in Modern Life* (London: Selwyn and Blount Ltd, 1933). No page numbers.



The Waters of Babel (1988).<sup>20</sup>

A third illustration is by Michael Jessing, a Northumbrian artist. This has no title. Jessing has used this psalm to remind him of his experience of living in New York City as a child, when he felt detached from nature and his spiritual self. The Babylonian figures represent statues set up before the city; the river here is the Hudson; however, the harp is a symbol not so much of despair, but of hope—the hope of playing again (and of painting again): so amidst the sense of desolation in this case we also perceive dreams and a different future<sup>21</sup>.

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<sup>20</sup> This image is reproduced with permission of the artist. It is found in Chris Miller, *Forms of Transcendence. The Art of Roger Wagner* (Carlisle: Piquant Editions Ltd, 2009), 8-9. In Roger Wagner, *In a Strange Land* (Oxford: Besalel Press, 1988), Psalm 137 is used again to depict the once deserted docklands of Canary Wharf. Empty cranes, piers, wharves, ladders and warehouses criss-cross our view; the colours here are blue, black and beige and the impact is again a sense of utter barrenness and bleakness.

<sup>21</sup> This description is taken from an e-mail correspondence in June 2010. Michael Jessing is a Northumberland painter who specializes in works on the psalms.



“By the waters of Babylon we sat down and wept”.<sup>22</sup>

Psalm 137 in Jewish artistic interpretation uses the whole psalm to narrate, visually, the story of the suffering of the whole people. This is the case with Marc Chagall’s depiction of Psalm 137, found on the north side of the Chagall State Hall of the Knesset. It is the only reference to a psalm in this place, and under the mosaic are the first and fifth verses: “By the waters of Babylon, we sit down and weep.... If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand wither...”.<sup>23</sup> Set amidst four vibrant wall tapestries with the themes of diaspora and return, and complemented by the more mellow floor mosaics which

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<sup>22</sup> ©Michael Jessing ([www.m-jessing.supanet.com](http://www.m-jessing.supanet.com))

<sup>23</sup> For the context of this image, see [http://www.knesset.gov.il/birthday/eng/KnessetBuilding2\\_eng.htm](http://www.knesset.gov.il/birthday/eng/KnessetBuilding2_eng.htm) Chagall was intrigued by the psalms: his early etchings for Vollard’s Illustrated Bible (1930-1956) included several depictions of David, Saul, Absalom and Beersheba, taken from psalm titles; his *Dessins pour la Bible* (1958-59) included two black and white images of Psalm 1; a stained glass window at All Saints Church, Tudeley (1967) is of Psalm 8; the windows of St. Stephan Church, Mainz (1978) have allusions to Psalm 119; he produced thirty-two etchings of selected psalms for his *Psaumes de David* (1979 onwards); and he completed the stained glass window of Psalm 150 in Chichester Cathedral (1978) in his ninetieth year. See Aaron Rosen, “True Lights: Seeing the Psalms through Chagall’s Church Windows”, *Jewish and Christian Approaches to the Psalms: Conflict and Convergence*, ed. Susan Gillingham (Proceedings of the Oxford Conference on Jewish and Christian Approaches to the Psalms; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 105-118.

represent the love of Jewish tradition past and present, this is a vast wall mosaic, six metres high and five and a half metres wide, depicting through the evocation of Psalm 137 the suffering of the Jews, both past and present.

Although its setting is prayers at the Western Wall, with the Old City and Tower of David in the background, this was completed in 1966 when Jerusalem was still under Jordanian control. But the mosaic also speaks of hope for the Jewish people: “By the waters of Babylon we sit down and weep...”<sup>24</sup> In the centre of the muted blues and greens a lighted Menorah hangs in space, a modern symbol of the harps which once hung unused on the trees, but here the gold flames evoke light and hope. Above the golden light is an angel with a Shofar, calling the people below to return to Zion: this echoes the tradition about the angels who curse Edom and Babylon on behalf of Israel in the *Targum* and *Midrash Tehillim*.<sup>25</sup> There are further hints of some Messianic hope in the star of David, set in the heavens to bring the people home (see Num 24:13-17). There is certainly an anticipation of celebration in this image, depicting not only physical pain but also hope in the restoration of justice.<sup>26</sup>

I end with two very recent musical interpretations of Psalm 137. The first reads the psalm neither as a symbol of hope, nor as a form of protest, nor as an act of defiance, but as a poignant but cathartic lament concerned with the sufferings of the Jewish people. This is by the composer Robert Saxton, who used Psalm 137 in the first of his eight-scene

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<sup>24</sup> The image can be seen in Jacob Baal-Teshuva, *Marc Chagall 1887-1985* (Cologne: Taschen, 1998), 240 (English version).

<sup>25</sup> This is a good example of the way artistic images create a dialogue with tradition. In *Targum* the curses in verse 7 and 8-9 are by ‘Michael prince of Jerusalem’ (*amr myk’l rbh dyrwšlm ydkr*) and ‘Gabriel prince of Zion’ (*amr gbry’l rbh dšywn*): its purpose is to raise this cry of vengeance to a supernatural level rather than seeing it as a basic human curse on the enemy. See David Stec, *The Targum of Psalms* (The Aramaic Bible, 16; Collegeville, MI: Liturgical Press, 2005), 231 and Moshe Bernstein, “Translation Technique in the Targum to Psalms. Two Test Cases: Psalms 2 and 137”, *SBL Seminar Papers 1994*, ed. E.H. Lovering (Atlanta, GA: Scholars Press, 1994), 326-45 (338-43).

<sup>26</sup> A year later the Israelis did in fact return to the Wailing Wall and the Shofar did sound out in Jerusalem. I am indebted to private correspondence with Ziva Amishai-Maisels for some of these reflections. See especially Ziva Amishai-Maisels, *Tapestries and Mosaics of Marc Chagall at the Knesset* (New York: Tudor Publishing Company, 1973), 113-126.

opera, “The Wandering Jew”, composed for BBC Radio 4 in 2010.<sup>27</sup> The psalm is sung in Scene 1 by the chorus of Nazi death camp inmates whilst the “wandering Jew” stands by, impotent to save them. It is the first music we hear: until then the only voice has been that of the “narrator”, the wandering Jew. The mixed chorus sings in low and sonorous tones, first in unison, then breaking into discord. A guard interrupts their singing, and two prisoners are removed, evoking the third verse of the psalm. The prisoners however resume the first verse of the psalm, which progresses into more general words of lament, ending with Ps 31:5: “into thy hands I commend my spirit”. These haunting mourning sounds, descending in cadences in fifths from B flat down to the key of E minor, are againheard in Scene 7, the penultimate scene, now sung by a “ghost chorus”, when the wandering Jew again encounters Jesus and both bear witness to their peoples’ pain. This time we hear only the music, not the words of psalm; the setting is now the Feast of Tabernacles, and psalms more appropriate to a more hopeful theme are intoned instead. Thus the psalm—or at least the music which reminds us of the psalm—acts as both an expression of the people’s pain and, in part, as a resolution to it.

The second example, also completed in 2010, is called “Super Flumina”; it is a composition by Howard Goodall. His is a most unusual musical adaptation of the psalm. The chorus (“Enchanted Voices”) most unusually, is all female: the quartet provides a “string soundscape”.<sup>28</sup> So instead of the more typical and often heavy male lament, the psalm starts with an exquisitely pure and haunting solo soprano voice; immediately we sense a grief which is intensely personal. The strings—which we hear, *sotto voce*, immediately—remind us, paradoxically, of the harps and songs which were once denied, but they are now the means of expressing the memory of the pain and loss. The soprano voice sings a high F sharp, then G sharp, then drops back to the low A – just a semitone

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<sup>27</sup> The recording is NMC D170. For Saxton’s discussion of the performance, see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ifoWIqnt11E>. The recording (‘The Wandering Jew’, by BBC Symphony Orchestra and BBC Singers with R. Williams [baritone]) is on NMC Recordings Ltd, 2011 NMC D 170. It can be previewed on <http://itunes.apple.com/us/album/robert-saxton-the-wandering/id441406269>.

<sup>28</sup> ‘Super flumina’ is from *Pelican in the Wilderness Classical FM Records CFMD13* (solo: Grace Davidson). It can be previewed on <http://itunes.apple.com/gb/album/pelican-in-wilderness-songs/id369907442>

less than the octave – emulating again and again the rise and fall of the distress.

Gradually other female voices accompany the memory of the lament as well: “As for our harps, as for our harps, we hanged them up...”. The wistfulness (in singing what once could not be sung) continues to the end of the psalm, with its fading harmonies: “How shall we sing?... How shall we sing?” Goodall explains what motivated him to produce this psalm, tracing this back to his days as a chorister at New College, Oxford:

“...dark evenings, the low glow of desk lamps, slow, measured muted phrases... our psalm-singing was precise, calm and emotionally contained... and yet the words of the psalms had such extreme emotions in them, of loss, suffering, anger, delight or ecstasy. So returning to them as a mature composer I wanted to unlock their intensity... ..*Super Flumina* spoke to me directly, since it is a sorrow expressed through its impact on the songs of the dispossessed. ... Another boyhood impression I had of the psalms was their maleness, partly because of the kind of choir I sang them with, and partly because King David’s musicians always read, in my boy-centric world, as men. But my singers were to be women: so I suppose instinctively I ‘heard’ this psalm as the mourning of the enslaved women. Perhaps this gave my setting its particular, tender sadness?”<sup>29</sup>

This interpretation echoes and complements the paradoxical elements of singing what could not be sung which we heard in Byrd’s Latin motet on this psalm.

And so the more recent artistic and musical representations of Psalm 137 reveal its potential to speak not only to communities of faith but also to secular culture. Starting with the text itself and moving on through Jewish and Christian reception history, it should be clear that “reception history” offers an important bridge not only between what is seen and what is heard, and between the past and the present, but also between the sacred and the secular. It should also be clear that the essence of reception history is to start with the text, and to assess later interpretations in the light of the text itself. In this way reception history appeals to all three approaches which I outlined at the beginning of this lecture: the spiritual, historical, and literary ways of reading Scripture are all part this ongoing process. So to receive the *whole psalm*, including those difficult verses at the

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<sup>29</sup> This is taken from e-mail correspondence with Howard Goodall in December 2011.

end, is vital: this is a psalm which demands that justice be done, and that (rather like the complaints in the book of Job) the God of justice will indeed respond to our prayers, inadequate as they may be. To “see” and “hear” Psalm 137 must begin with its ancient Jewish setting; but its reception offers a variety which the earliest psalmists could not possibly have imagined.

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