Psalm 135:
Hymn to Yahweh

Structure

	MT	NRSV
I. Summons to praise	1-3	1-3
II. Hymnic chant I	4	4
III. Hymnic chant II	5	5
IV. Praise of Yahweh	6-12	6-12
V. Prayer chant	13	13
VI. Hymnic chant III	14	14
VII. Polemics against other gods	15-18	15-18
VIII. Summons to praise	19-21	19-21

A SUPERSCRIPTION is missing (cf. Psalms 1–2; 71; 93–97; etc.). The song is composed of hymnic elements (vv. 1-14, 19-21) and a polemical passage (vv. 15-18) also found in 115:4-8 (hymnic vv. 19-21 have their counterpart in 115:9-11 as well). Correspondences with Psalm 134 occur in vv. 1-2, 19-20; with 135:17-22 in vv. 10-11. Affinities to other Hebrew writings abound (Allen, 224: "heterogeneity" of the text; Crüsemann, *Studien,* 127-29, overstresses, however, the basic difference between "imperative" and "participle" hymns; see listing at "Introduction to Cultic Poetry").

The SUMMONS TO PRAISE (vv. 1-3) with the imperative of *hll,* Piel, "acclaim, eulogize," is a common hymnic overture in the ultimate sections of the Psalter. In the final collection of psalms this imperative plural *hallĕlû,* "praise," occurs but once (22:24 [RSV 23]) before 104:35; and this particular psalm being introduced by the imperative singular of *brk,* "bless" (104:1), the *hll* summons in the plural may well belong to Psalm 105, as LXX has it. Anyway, Psalms 104–106 in the MT tradition show traces of *hll* framing, while Psalm 107 opens with the imperative plural of *ydh,* Hiphil, "give thanks." (Some exegetes want to make this a generic difference.) Thereafter clusters of songs increasingly use the *hll* type of opening: Psalms 111–117; 118 apparently joins the group with a *ydh* imperative plural (thus Psalms 113–118 are known to have been used in the synagogue as the "great Hallel" collection, particularly in the Passover liturgies; cf. Matt 26:30; → Psalm 113), Psalms 146–150, the so-called final Hallel, with Psalms 148 and 150 practically consisting of *hll* summonses to the exclusion of other imperatives (→ Psalm 146). There is an explosion of hallelujah singing toward the end of the Psalter (cf. Brueggemann, *Psalms,* 189-213; listing at Additional Bibliography, section C).

Psalm 135 is placed in the midst of non-*hll* psalms (Psalms 119–145) presenting itself only at the beginning (vv. 1-3) as a solitary example of the category in question among wisdom and complaint genres. It ends up with a hymnic summons of the *brk* type (vv. 19-21) and is followed by a solid thanksgiving song introduced by *ydh,* Hiphil, plural imperatives ("give thanks," 136:1-3) and later by an individual thanksgiving (Psalm 138). The opening of our psalm consequently, in spite of seeming dislocation, fits into the general array of hymnic elements (see "Introduction to Cultic Poetry," section D).

But some details are noteworthy. V. 1 looks like an almost exact copy of 113:1 with only the sequence of cola changed around. V. 2a has its parallel in 134:1d, but the continuation in v. 2b is surprisingly different, resembling 92:14 (RSV 13); 116:19a. Fragments of v. 3 seem to be echoed in 54:8 (RSV 6); 66:2, 4; 68:5 (RSV 4); 133:1; 136:1. It would be misleading, however, to think in terms of literary dependencies from one psalm to the other, one "author" to the next. Individual authorship in the modern sense should not be made a criterion in psalm analysis. Liturgical language is always very traditional, time and again using proven as well as approved formulas and texts. Unless there are errors or interests of copyists involved in those text similarities, we have to assume communal worship to be the fertile ground of such usage. One item, however, does call for special attention in vv. 1-3. All of a sudden a first-person plural suffix appears in the midst of a summons to praise (v. 2b: "house of our God"). Similar ruptures happen in 18:32 (RSV 31); 50:3; 92:14 (RSV 13), the last passage

also mentioning the temple in connection with "our God." The isolated expression "house of our God" outside the Psalter is heavily concentrated in Ezra 8:17-33 and Neh 10:33-40 (RSV 32-39). What does this evidence mean to us? The formulation "our God" may have been formulaic and used with frequency, sneaking in perhaps at times when "God" was spoken about. Still, the occurrence of a "we" form in the middle of plural summons to praise and once more in v. 5b (*'ădōnênû,* "our Lord") definitely points to communal usage, strange as it may seem when considering a summons of one liturgical leader directed to the worshiping congregation. A possible explanation is this: the leader calling the congregation to praise Yahweh may use first-person plural forms integrating him- or herself with the audience. In v. 5a the "I" giving testimony to the greatness of Yahweh apparently, too, is part of the "we" group of v. 5b; this time the individual may be the member of community closing ranks with the group.

Two lines, each one headed by the particle *kî,* follow the summons to praise (vv. 4-5). In hymnic contexts the likelihood that *kî* introduces not a motive clause but, as an exclamatory particle, the hymn proper (cf. Crüsemann, *Studien,* 32-35; listing at "Introduction to Cultic Poetry": "Yes . . .") is strong indeed. It may well apply in our case, too, and in a double way at that. The *kî* lines at hand are quite different in liturgical respects. We have first a confessional shout of the community, lauding Yahweh's choice of Jacob/Israel (v. 4). Now, this combination of the two names of the community's ancestor is an honorific self-appellation. Early Jewish faith preferred to anchor Jewish identity with this remote antecedent, according to Genesis tradition, the grandson of Abraham (cf. Pss 14:7; 53:7 [RSV 6]; 78:5, 21, 71; 105:10, 23; 147:19; also in the Dtr tradition: Römer, *Väter;* listing at Additional Bibliography, section B). The topic, poetic formulation, and theological outlook of v. 4 would make it an ideal communal hymn to be shouted by the community, notwithstanding its neutral wording (no "we" discourse; cf. election vocabulary, esp. *sĕgullāh,* "property," in Exod 19:5; Deut 7:6; 14:2; 26:18). While v. 4 thus may be an "objective" praising line for the congregation, v. 5 refers explicitly to the members of the worshiping assembly, and, interestingly enough, both in singular and plural first persons. This line assumes a confessional stance: "Yes, I know that Yahweh is great, our Lord is superior to all gods!" The combination of singular and plural, in fact, is an excellent example of the contemporary structure of the community: early Jewish associations practiced a spiritual group life in which the individual was responsible for his and her credal stand. The worshiping assembly consisted of (as it does in Jewish-Christian tradition to this very day) persons forming a cohesive group. As far as v. 5 is concerned, it may have served as a second hymnic line, probably for all people gathered. Two hymnic affirmations to be sung by the congregation, without intermediary summons, may seem strange, but is surely possible under the assumption that all these *kî* lines were first intoned by a liturgical leader (cf. Exod 15:21; Ps 118:2-4) and then repeated again and again by the crowd.

This liturgical system may have worked also with more extensive hymnic texts, whenever they were sung not by choirs but by the people. General knowledge of the liturgical agenda cannot be presupposed, nor the existence of hym-

nals for popular use in the precincts of the temple. Consequently, we may imagine a leader pronouncing a hymn line by line, and the congregation responding. This may well be true for vv. 6-12, which enumerate standard eulogies of Yahweh, telling in a loose sequence some of his mighty manifestations. Indeed, the disparity of articulation (adjective, participles, verbs in the perfect tense, verbs in the perfect with prefixed relative particle *šĕ-*) as well as fragmentary contents (considering the wealth of traditions in the OT) call for our attention. First, there is a general affirmation of Yahweh's superior power to perform anything he likes (v. 6), which is expressed in so many words also of royal potentates (Qoh 8:3b). When speaking about Yahweh such statements seem kerygmatic or confessional in character (cf. Isa 55:11; Joel 1:14). There are many other ways to pronounce the sovereignty of God and deride other powers as inferior (cf. Isa 40:22-26; 46:5-10: the latter passage ends: "everything to my liking I perform"; Job 38–41; Psalms 29; 82; 96; 97; 104; etc.). The special manner of emphasizing that the supreme authority is able to execute any project is a theologoumenon by itself that plays a vital role in subsequent discussions about the omnipotence of God. Formally, v. 6 falls into three parts (oversize line? prosaic diction?), because the composer took pains to delineate the universal realm of Yahweh's reign, and because he or she uses a three-word complex to specify the grammatical object: "Everything he likes" *(kōl 'ăšer ḥāpēṣ)* instead of speaking in tight poetic language (cf., e.g., 95:3-5, where a few small words have possibly inflated a text still more terse). Yahweh governs in heaven and on earth (v. 6b), which is a comprehensive formula of universal rule (cf. 134:3b). Possibly, some transmitter has added, rather redundantly, "over the seas and all the (chaotic) depths" (v. 6c).

The general eulogy is followed by hymnic affirmations about Yahweh differently formulated and apparently taken from different traditions (there may be a chance that the composers already used Hebrew Scripture). One verse in three parts again (tricola? prosaic style?) deals with creational topics like clouds, rain, lightnings, winds (v. 7; cf. Psalm 104) — traditional fields of activities for ancient Near Eastern weather-gods like Baal and Hadad (cf. Smith, *History;* listing at Additional Bibliography, section B). The next two lines enter the field of salvation history, but very cautiously so, being dedicated exclusively to the liberation from Egypt (vv. 8-9; cf. the richness of salvation history in Psalms 78; 105; 136). Both v. 8 and v. 10 begin with that aramaizing manner of prefixing a relative pronoun to a verbal form, *šĕhikkāh,* "he who smote"; perhaps these two lines, which also preserve a compact poetical form, were the nucleus of this hymn. V. 9, in contrast, seems overstretched in an effort to describe exactly who were the recipients of Yahweh's miraculous signs in Exodus 5–12: the Egyptians, Pharaoh, and his officials (v. 9bc). Thus vv. 8-9 now form a pair, with one line referring to Exod 12:29 and the other possibly to Exod 11:9 or, more likely, to Dtr reflections and preaching about the exodus theme (cf. Deut 4:34; 6:22; 7:19; 13:2; 26:8; 28:46; 29:2; 34:11; see also Neh 9:10). The next thematic unit comprises three lines (vv. 10-12; v. 11 was apparently also augmented by an enumerating explanation) dealing with victories in the East Jordan area (cf. Num 21:21-31; for the enemy kings Sihon and Og see also Ps 136:19-20; Deut 1:4; 2:24, 26, 30-32; etc.) and the gift of the homeland. Signif-

icantly, the same matter in the same sequence of events and with the same vocabulary is also treated in → Ps 136:17-22. If there has been a "literary" connection between the two adjacent passages, priority of composition may go to Psalm 136, because it looks to be the more complete and uniform text. Psalm 135, on the other hand, may have borrowed considerably also from Psalm 115, since v. 6 of our present psalm does have some affinity with 115:3, and vv. 15-20 look almost like a copy of 115:4-8. The giving of the land in v. 12 (136:21a, 22a) in particular carries much weight; the words in both versions are almost identical, only the very last lexeme differing slightly, perhaps due to scribal error in one or the other direction: *'ammô,* "his people," in v. 12; *'abdô,* "his servant," in 136:22a. The affirmation runs: "He gave [them] their [i.e., the enemies'] land as inheritance, an inheritance for Israel his people" (v. 12), a chiastic, concise, and well-built saying with three words to each colon (in Hebrew; cf. more elaborate, prosaic but substantially equal formulations: Deut 4:38; 15:4; 19:10; 20:16; 21:23; 24:4; 25:19; 26:1; 29:7, the last passage even presupposes explicitly the East Jordan conquest). As already stated in other cases of apparent borrowings (→ Psalms 31 and 71, or 57; 60; and 108; etc.), we have to think about liturgical backgrounds and worship-oriented text production when interpreting these resemblances.

The "objective" hymnic part closes with v. 12, and the psalm for a short while turns to adoration in the form of prayer (v. 13). Crüsemann calls this "direct-address discourse" (> Psalm 8). In our case the name of Yahweh is eulogized, perhaps an indication of the late origin of the psalm (cf. Exod 3:15). The divine "name" (Heb. *šēm*) gradually assumed the hypostatical qualities of Yahweh himself. Our verse already attributes age-long persistence to that proper name (cf. 44:9 [RSV 8]; 52:11 [RSV 9]; 72:17 [the king's name]; 83:19 [RSV 18]). V. 13 may have been spoken in a worship liturgy by the official leading the service. But in v. 14 another line introduced by *kî* (cf. vv. 4-5) comes up. It is neutral in language and conceptualization, asserting Yahweh's juridical authority over his people (not over all the nations). The expectancy is to have in Yahweh a merciful judge and a just one, as far as the defense of Israel against dominant groups is concerned. The *kî* at the beginning of the line could be prompting the congregation to join in the ritual again. If this is true, we would have three lines (vv. 4-5, 14) of explicit congregational hymn singing in Psalm 135.

POLEMICS against other gods and a final SUMMONS to worship (vv. 15-20) occur in slightly changed parameters over against → Psalm 115. The difference between the two psalms is that Psalm 115 makes conflict and incompatibility between gods and Yahweh the main theme (cf. the overarching "plot" description in 115:2-3), while Psalm 135 is much more reserved in tackling these problems explicitly. But vv. 4-5 (at least in retrospect from vv. 15-18) also pose a main issue: Yahweh has elected Israel, and he is superior to all the other gods (cf. esp. v. 5b). By way of extolling the unlimited power of Yahweh (v. 6) and lauding him for his works and acts (vv. 7-12), the deities of the contemporary (Babylonian or Persian) imperium are challenged, and all of a sudden they are also denounced and ridiculed (vv. 15-18). That this kind of attack is comparable with polemic passages of Second Isaiah has been observed earlier

(→ Psalm 115). That one polemical line of 115:4-8, i.e., 115:7, is missing in Psalm 135 has also been mentioned in commenting on Psalm 115. Has our song preserved an older and shorter version of the diatribe against other gods? Or was the line about dysfunctional "hands" and "feet" of idols (115:7) deemed unnecessary after strong affirmations about the deities' mouths, eyes, ears, and noses (vv. 15-18)? The final SUMMONS TO BLESS (vv. 19-20) is not so close in its formulation to similar affirmations of Psalm 115. Still, the affinity of mind and interests between the two passages is clearly visible (cf. vv. 19-20 with their counterpart 115:9-11). We may note that the summons to praise here is articulated by the verb *brk,* Piel, "to bless" (cf. hymns with *brk* introductions, e.g., 67:2 [RSV 1]; 96:2; 103:1-2; 104:1, 134:1-2), which stands in a certain tension with the *hll* opening of our psalm. To close a psalm by a renewed summons to praise is a regular characteristic of hymns. But as a rule the same verbs occur at the beginning and end of such a hymn (cf. 103:1-2, 20-22; 104:1, 35). The final shout of v. 21, "hallelujah," may be redactional (cf. LXX, linking it to the following psalm); MT scribal tradition detaches it from the body of the text.

Looking back at the structure of our song, we cannot help recognizing its diversities of forms and content, meter and poetic style. Also, frequent intertextual ties seem to link Psalm 135 with other psalms and the Pentateuch. Most commentators admit, however, a "skillful" (Allen, 226) work of composition. From a liturgical point of view, at least, the apparent discrepancies are not so grave. We can imagine alternating voices shouting and singing, intoning and reciting parts of the text (Seybold, 503: "cantata"). Even the oversize lines (vv. 6-7, 9, 11; note, however, that, e.g., Mowinckel [*Tricola,* 29, 54; see listing at "Introduction to Psalms"] deletes and reorganizes words, to come up with regular bicola) may not be just literary in character but recitable liturgical affirmations. In this fashion the liturgist may have sung vv. 1-3, 19-21, and intoned, with the congregation repeating after him, vv. 4-5, 6-12, 13-14, 15-18. Other attributions are possible and are widely proposed, but the basic liturgical model of cantor and audience alternating seems quite plausible in this psalm.

Genre

The category of HYMNS is a large one, comprising a great variety of contents and occasions to acclaim God's actions, essence, and attributes (see "Introduction to Cultic Poetry," section D). Psalm 135 concentrates on Yahweh's deeds for Israel (vv. 8-14), to the exclusion, even ridicule, of any other deities (vv. 15-18). "Yahweh will judge his people, he will have compassion on his servants" (v. 14) corresponds literally to Deut 32:36, and in both passages the affirmation is an accentuated assertion of trust, hope, and praise, in consequence of the preceding extolment. Therefore we may call the song a HYMN TO YAHWEH alone, apparently in the wake of exilic Dtr theology (on "exclusiveness" of God see J. J. Scullion, *ABD* II, 1041-48). Derision of foreign gods, i.e., those of the politically dominant nations, constitutes the other side of the coin. Ancient people (who knows, even modern ones) would live in binary, mutually exclusive systems, requiring condemnations of evildoers and unjust ones (→ Psalms 109;

115). Chances are that the composers and transmitters of Psalm 135 already used extant sacred pentateuchal and psalmic texts in arranging this piece of liturgy (cf. Newman, *Praying;* listing at Additional Bibliography, section B).

Setting

The historical situation to be deduced from the psalm's outlook and theological interests is that of a multireligious society with competing religious and political systems. Israel seems to be struggling to maintain her identity as a Yahweh community. The temple functions (v. 2) as a sacred place where Yahweh's people adore his name in prayer and commemoration (cf. 1 Kgs 8:22-53; Isa 56:7: "house of prayer"; no trace of sacrifices in Psalm 135). Perhaps the reference to the "house of our God" may be understood as a symbolic reference to the distant Jerusalem center, too. In that case the psalm could have been recited in the diaspora as well. Prayer services of Jewish congregational assemblies, in any case, are the particular background of Psalm 135.

Recent discussions have emphasized the contextual meaning of our liturgy in the Psalter. Close affinities exist with Psalms 134 and 136; the latter is often called a "twin" of Psalm 135. Zenger reviews theories about the composition of the fifth book of Psalms, and puts up his own vision: Psalms 135 and 136 are climactically attached to the Psalms of Ascent (120–134), meant to bring in the praise of all the nations in a universal eulogy of the overall Lord ("Composition," 92-93; see listing at Psalm 107). Apparently, wishful theological thinking orients this interpretation, because the "ones standing in the temple courts" (v. 2b) are certainly not "heathen" foreigners, but exclusively faithful Judahites (cf. vv. 2a, 19-20).

Intention

Wrestling with the problems of religious plurality in a politically and economically "globalized" empire, the leaders of the congregation (scribes, priests, officiants) and perhaps the members, too, wanted to promote and guarantee exclusive veneration of Yahweh as a means of preserving Israelite identity. They emphasize the unique power of Israel's God and his marvelous concern for his people. Defeating legendary kings and handing over their territory to the Israelites (vv. 10-12; cf. the Dtr tradition history of Sihon and Og: Josh 2:10; 9:10; 12:2-6; 13:10-12, 21, 27, 30; Judg 11:19-21; Neh 9:22) for the contemporary community is the most trustworthy signal of Yahweh's support and benevolence, which, apparently, needs to be demonstrated again and again. Preservation of land, temple, and community over against pressures from other gods and aligned nations is the goal of this hymn.

Bibliography

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Psalm 136: Communal Thanksgiving

Structure

	MT	NRSV
I. Summons to give thanks	1-3	1-3
II. Thanks for creation	4-9	4-9
III. Thanks for liberation	10-15	10-15
IV. Thanks for protection	16-22	16-22
V. Thanks for sustenance	23-25	23-25
VI. Summons to give thanks	26	26

One of the psalms without a SUPERSCRIPTION (→ Psalms 33; 71; 93), our song begins immediately with a threefold SUMMONS TO GIVE THANKS (vv. 1-3). The verb used is typical: Hiphil plural imperative *ydh,* "to thank" (cf. 30:5 [RSV 4]; 33:2; 97:12; 100:4; 105:1; 106:1; 107:1). In particular, Psalm 118 will prove to be a close parallel to our psalm (cf. for the time being 118:1, 29). Leaving aside, at this point, the stereotyped second colon of each line (*kî lĕʿôlām ḥasdô,* "his solidarity forever!"), we notice that the three summonses of vv. 1a, 2a, and 3a call for a eulogy of Yahweh, the supreme Lord; only the first colon differs a little from the two others in adding an exclamation (or motive clause?) *kî ṭôb,* "yes, good (he is)." The expression is formulaic (cf. 34:9 [RSV 8]; 52:11 [RSV 9]; 54:8 [RSV 6]; 63:4 [RSV 3]; 84:11 [RSV 10]); indeed, it seems to belong intimately to the longer hymnic affirmation "good he is, indeed, his solidarity forever!" (cf. 69:17 [RSV 16]; 100:5; 106:1; 107:1; 118:1, 29). Pondering all these examples of attributing goodness to Yahweh himself (cf. also Jer 33:11, a clear quotation of this liturgical expression; Nah 1:7), we realize a certain ambiguity of the formula in terms of its functions. *kî ṭôb* has some motivational force, but it may certainly serve as a cultic shout, even as a clear-cut interjection, in some contexts (cf. Pss 52:11 [RSV 9]; 54:8 [RSV 6]; 69:17 [RSV 16]; etc.). For our passage, therefore, we may claim that exclamatory function, too. Since the congregation apparently responded with *kî lĕʿôlām ḥasdô,* it is an open question whether *kî ṭob* was shouted by the officiant, by the people, or by both. The whole psalm obviously — MT separates every single summons from the congregational response by a wide lacuna, dividing the text into two columns — is a liturgical interplay between officiant and community.

The body of the hymn (HYMNIC AFFIRMATIONS or THANKSGIVINGS; cf. J. Limburg, *ABD* V, 522-36; Brueggemann, *Psalms,* 112-32, 189-213; see Additional Bibliography, section C) has 22 verses corresponding to 22 poetic lines, a conspicuous number: the total of letters in the Hebrew alphabet (cf. Psalms 25; 34; 119; 145, with slight irregularities in some texts). Thematically, there are two blocks of six (vv. 4-9, 10-15) and one of seven (vv. 16-22), as well as an appendix of three (vv. 23-25) lines.

The name of Yahweh has been accentuated so strongly in the opening part that it does not need to be repeated any more in vv. 4-25. The imperative summonses of vv. 1-3 are valid at least for vv. 4-22, so that the officiant or choir has only to formulate the praising colon: "to the one who alone does wonders" (v. 4a; the Hebrew text of Sirach 51 repeats the imperative "Give thanks" in every single line), and the congregation will sing the antiphone, v. 4b. All these praises are oriented quite naturally, in a liturgical sequence, to the one deity named at the beginning. The summons at the end of the psalm (v. 26) does not repeat the name of Yahweh either but chooses a new, summarizing title for him ("God of heavens").

Stylistically and liturgically all the eulogies are tuned to Yahweh, who is referred to in hymnic participles (cf. Gunkel, Westermann, Crüsemann, et al.) usually augmented by a prefixed *lĕ,* "to" (vv. 4-7, 10, 13, 16-17). Thus the summons to give thanks is followed by a long string of specifications: "To the one who wisely created the heavens" (v. 5a), "to the one who killed the Egyptian firstborn" (v. 10), "to the one who led his people in the wilderness" (v. 16), etc. This participial construction is typically hymnic (cf. "Introduction to Cultic Poetry," section 4D), and it constitutes the backbone of Psalm 136. All in all, as already indicated, we find eight of these expressions (vv. 4-7, 10, 13, 16-17), and one line commences with a plain participle without the preposition *lĕ* (v. 25); two lines are nothing but appositions (accusative objects) to participial phrases (vv. 8-9). This makes a total of 11 out of 22 lines composed in the manner of a participle hymn. The rest of the hymnic lines exhibit various verbal forms: consecutive imperfects (vv. 11, 18, 24), copulative perfects (vv. 14-15, 21), plain perfect (v. 23). Some other lines are fully dependent on one of these syntactic forms (vv. 12, 19-20, 22). Thus the first thematic block, eulogies on Yahweh the creator (vv. 4-9), is made up (not using a formalistic yardstick) completely of the participle type, God being the subject of all sentences.

The second block, liberation from Egypt, has two leading lines with participles (vv. 10, 13), but narrative and explicative verbal forms intervene. The third block, Yahweh's victorious leadership in the desert, puts two participles in front (vv. 16-17), but tells stories afterward. The last, the smallest subunit, has apparently lost track of the initial summons and the participle-with-*lĕ* construction, continuing the preceding hymnic affirmations with a relative clause (v. 23), referring to the salvation story (v. 24) and ending with a simple participle (v. 25). The grammatical subject remains throughout Yahweh, who is applauded all the time. Taking a purist view on style and form one might be tempted to conclude that our thanksgiving hymn developed from a pure participial construction into some degenerated form of mixed hymn. But this conclusion, I am certain, is unwarranted. While there may have been a preponder-

ance of participial constructions in ancient hymn compositions as far as eulogizing Yahweh's qualities and performances was concerned, it is hard to believe that other modes of expressing thanks and praises were completely ruled out in hymnic attributions (cf. Psalms 8; 33; 104). Absolute uniformity of expression would be disastrous also in evensong liturgies. Since the specifying laudatory cola in Psalm 136 were likely sung or shouted by an individual voice, there was no eminent need for uniformity of wording. Another argument in our case concerns the shape and substance of the participial phrases themselves, which are not of perfect guise linguistically or structurally, as a closer look at the individual blocks of material will reveal.

The half-lines in vv. 4-9 are dedicated to the theme of creation. Three times a line opens with *lĕʿōśēh*, "to the one who made" (vv. 4, 5, 7), which seems rather awkward, considering the wealth of creation vocabulary (e.g., verbs like *br'*, "create"; *kûn*, "establish"; *yṣr*, "fashion"; etc.; cf. the respective articles in *TDOT* or *THAT*). The composers could easily have employed a diversity of verbs and images in this unit, which also limits creation to the making of cosmological entities. V. 4a, as it were, still poses as a broad general statement: "to do wondrous things" may mean anything on earth and in heaven Yahweh has accomplished (cf. in the Psalms: 40:6 [RSV 5]; 72:18; 75:2 [RSV 1]; 78:4, 11; 96:3; 98:1; 105:5; 106:7, 22; 107:8, 15, 21, 24, 31. Outside the Psalter: Exod 34:10; Josh 3:5; Job 5:9; 9:10; 37:5, 14; 42:3). Perhaps it served as an introduction for the whole range of laudations. But vv. 5-9 mention only creation of heaven, earth, and celestial bodies, in simple straightforward language. Are these factual, nonpoetic statements (cf. for contrast the language of Psalm 104; Job 38–41) dependent on Genesis 1, as many commentators suggest? The answer is impossible to find, because the mere enumeration of Yahweh's making the universe is not sufficient proof of literary dependence on the Priestly creation story. On the other hand, the detailed description of the "large lights, sun . . . moon, and stars, governing the night" does have a noteworthy affinity to Gen 1:16, only the latter text is more logical: "God made the two big lights: the larger one to govern the day, and the smaller one to govern the night, and [he made] the stars." MT's psalmic version does not keep separate the stars from the big lights (editors of *BHS* therefore want to delete the word). The argumentation could be, therefore, that vv. 7-9 are a somewhat clumsy condensation of Gen 1:16. We have to remember, however, that liturgical practice does not always allow for the finest possible language.

The second subunit (vv. 10-15) concentrates on the exodus story (cf. Exodus 12–15), presenting itself as eclectic, like the creation hymn of vv. 4-9. The psalm mentions the killing of the firstborn in Egypt (v. 10; cf. Exodus 11–12), omitting, in contrast to Ps 105:28-34, and in accordance with Ps 135:8, the preceding nine plagues. Then, after stating the exodus in a rather D manner (vv. 11-12; cf. Deut 4:34, 5:15; 7:19; 9:29; 26:8), the passage focuses on the division of the Reed Sea and the victory over Pharaoh (vv. 13-15). While the last line seems to be formulated in contact with Exod 14:27, the expression of v. 13 is unique in the context of the exodus story: Yahweh "cuts apart" the Sea of Reeds as if it were a piece of wood (cf. 2 Kgs 6:4). One is reminded of Marduk's cutting asunder the body of Tiamat after his victory over this chaos

power (cf. *ANET*, 67 = *Enuma elish*, end of tablet IV). Perhaps there are mythological concepts behind our passage. On the whole, we have a formidable selection of exodus motifs in vv. 10-15, but not by a long shot the whole story. Other psalms are more elaborate, but also more mythological, about this very important event in Israel's salvation history (cf. 77:17-21 [RSV 16-20]; 106:8-11; 114:1-4; Exod 15:1-10).

Our third segment (vv. 16-22) has more general opening lines about Yahweh's leadership in the wilderness (v. 16; cf. Deut 8:2; 29:4; Jer 2:6; Am 2:10) and his slaying "great kings" (v. 17; cf. Ps 135:10: "mighty kings"). Generalizing reports or legends about victories over many kings have been brought together by the Deuteronomist in Joshua 10–12. There we find similar statements to our psalm: "All the kings he [i.e., Joshua] captured, and he smote them and killed them" (Josh 11:17b). "These are the kings of the land, whom the Israelites killed, and whose territories they occupied" (12:1a), "altogether they were 31 kings" (12:24b). Sihon, king of Heshbon, and Og, king of Bashan (cf. Rendtorff; J. C. Slayton, *ABD* VI, 22), play a role in these lists of defeated legendary adversaries (12:2-6; cf. Rendtorff), although their annihilation was past history already at the time of Joshua (cf. Num 21:21-34). But these two enemies who denied Israel free passage through their territories and had to suffer the consequences in the theological and homiletical tradition of old served as examples for the multitude of other local kings (cf. Deut 1:4; 2:26–3:11; 29:6; 31:4; Judg 11:19-21). This is exactly what happens also in vv. 18-20 of our psalm. The legendary, even mythological figures (cf. their designation as "giants" in Josh 13:12) have been made into exemplary prototypes of enemies, no doubt also with an eye on the great kings of Babylonia and Persia. The ancient potentates were defeated by Yahweh and the Israelites, and their lands were given to the people of Yahweh (vv. 21-22), a theme that is also the main concern of the book of Joshua (cf. Josh 10:42; 11:16, 23; 12:1; 13:1-33) as well as that of other Dtr material (cf. Num 21:31, 35; Deut 2:31).

On all counts the ultimate and much smaller unit (vv. 23-25) is something peculiar in this hymn. Stylistically the unit employs the only relative clause and, due to a different word order (preceding infinitive clause), the only plain perfect tense in our psalm (v. 23a). In addition, there is that singular unprefixed participle already mentioned (v. 25a). In terms of speaker reference vv. 23-24 are the only lines in the whole liturgy that reveal a first person plural, i.e., a communal voice intoning the song. Furthermore, thematically and theologically the three cola under scrutiny are not dealing with historical situations; they are apparently portraying their own, i.e., postexilic, times. Contemporary debasement and lowliness, as well as contemporary salvation experiences of the Yahweh community, are intimated in vv. 23-24, while v. 25 is a surprising outlook on Yahweh's universal benevolence in the spirit of Psalm 104. Thus the concluding colon of the array of 22 lines is the only one to open up this universal horizon. We may say that all the thanksgiving and praising done in the hymn leads up to this climax of contemporary, i.e., early Jewish, congregational praise. The enveloping summons to give thanks (v. 26) remembers and echoes the initial cluster of hymnic stimulations.

So far we have analyzed only the first cola of all the extant lines. Stereo-

typed *kî lĕʿôlām ḥasdô,* "yes, his solidarity forever," which accompanies the text from beginning to end, being clearly marked by MT as a separate column, remains to be discussed. The introductory *kî,* "yes," should mark the hymnic response of a choir group or the whole congregation. We already referred to a number of psalm texts that prove a widespread use of this liturgical stereotype, which we may call a SELF-ASSURANCE FORMULA (cf. Pss 106:1; 107:1; 118:1-4; Jer 33:11). Asserting line by line the steadfast loyalty of Yahweh with his people, the liturgical litany presented here is the essential part of our psalm. In Ps 118:1-4 the response is demonstrably put into the mouths of parts of the congregation. In our present text we do not find that group differentiation. Therefore we may assume that the formula was chanted by all members assembled in worship. "Solidarity" of Yahweh with his community (often translated as "steadfast love," "grace," etc.) was the most essential guarantee of survival for all believers (cf. N. Glueck, *Hesed in the Bible* [ed. E. Epstein; tr. A. Gottschalk; Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1967]; H.-J. Zobel, *TWAT* III, 48-71, esp. 63-64). The concept plays a large role in cultic texts, also in relation to covenant theology (without being fixed to them; cf. L. Perlitt, *Bundestheologie* [Neukirchen-Vluyn: Neukirchener Verlag, 1969]). Its ultimate rootage is probably family relationships and responsibilities. Remarkable poetic and linguistic analyses include those of Alonso Schökel and Auffret; the geometric vision of Bazak (e.g., "vv. 1-9 are a 'big triangle composed of three small triangles containing three verses each,'" p. 130), which he represents in a diagram, hardly works in ritual proceedings.

Genre

COMMUNAL THANKSGIVING LITURGY would be a fair title of Psalm 136. It is the most elaborate responsorial psalm text we have in the Hebrew Bible. Sirach 51 is another piece like it in the apocryphal literature. The *hôdû* ("give thanks") summons is characteristic of this psalm type. Although thanksgiving is a genre of its own, growing out of particular situations of concrete gratitude (see "Introduction to Cultic Poetry," section 4C), every thanksgiving has a hymnic quality. This is particularly obvious with communal thanks to God. While individual thanksgivings have a more or less elaborate element, the "account of trouble and salvation," the communal branch of the genre likes to tell of historical instances of salvation, and may add some hints of contemporary divine deeds of liberation or atonement (cf. v. 24a). But, as a rule, this element does not play a larger role in these songs of gratitude. The general summons to give thanks assumes virtually completely the function of calling for eulogy and praise.

Setting

Speculations have revolved around the possible feast or worship service in the course of which our psalm may have been sung. The four thematic units in this psalm discussed above are no unambiguous indication of a special occasion or

feast opportune for this liturgy. For example, we are hardly able to pinpoint the Passover celebrations as the exclusive setting, because remembrance of the exodus and the killing of the firstborn may have been considered appropriate also at other assemblies and worships of the year, especially in a thematic cluster of the type of Psalm 136. Therefore we better not try to localize a fixed place in the festive cycle, but think of regular services of parishioners who wanted to express their general gratitude to the benign overlord Yahweh, who granted land, security, and help to his followers. Psalm 136 does have a certain affinity with Psalm 135, but both texts show their own profile, more so than we would expect from a "twin" composition. Psalm 135 focuses on overcoming and degrading Israel's enemies. Psalm 136, for its part, sticks closer to canonical salvation history, dwells more intensely on Yahweh's rescuing his people, and more openly admits congregational participation in the liturgy.

Intention

Articulating this sense of general gratitude for the whole creation, the special acts of salvation that the people of Yahweh experienced in the past, and finally, but importantly so, giving thanks because of contemporary experiences of being rescued by God's intervention, the hymnic song wants to confirm the congregation's deep sense of dependency and joy. Yahweh's solidarity endures for sure, into a long and dark future, and this hope and certainty carry the whole congregation.

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Psalm 137: Communal Complaint

Structure

	MT	NRSV
I. Complaint	1-4	1-4
A. Account of trouble	1-2	1-2
B. Taunt of enemies	3	3
C. Plaintive answer	4	4
II. Vow	5-6	5-6
III. Imprecations	7-9	7-9
A. Implicit curse against Edom	7	7
B. Implicit curse against Babylon	8-9	8-9

In the last third of the Psalter, songs without a redactional heading (SUPERSCRIPTION) are not rare (cf. Psalms 104; 105; 107; 114; 115; 116; 118; 119; etc.; → Psalms 71; 93). What is more disconcerting is the lack of an adequate opening of the song. If it is supposed to be a communal complaint, we should expect at least some kind of INVOCATION or INITIAL PLEA or perhaps INITIAL COMPLAINT (see "Introduction to Cultic Poetry," section 4B). Nothing of this kind is visible in the text. Instead, we find a narrational opening in the first person plural, telling in a moving way about the despair of those who had been deported to Babylon, apparently after the defeats of Judah and Jerusalem at the hands of Nebuchadnezzar in 597 and 587 B.C.E. The preponderance of first person plurals in this section is remarkable: in five poetic lines we find nine "we/us" references, a very high concentration indeed (cf. Psalms 90; 124; 126). Of course, there is no detailed or historiographic ACCOUNT OF TROUBLE, but only a highly schematized and condensed extract of the Babylonian situation (vv. 1-2): the rivers or canals are significant (v. 1a), with their unusual willow trees, barely known in the hills of Judah (v. 2a). The author mentions the longing for Zion and the deep sadness of being so far away, causing the strongest feelings of homesickness (v. 1bc); the captives have musical instruments (*kînnôr,* "harp") and like to sing nostalgic songs (v. 2b). All this evokes a rather folkloristic air, as if the psalm was offering a popular song about the ill-fated exiled Judahites. Every culture probably knows equivalent tearful texts of past suffering and heroism; the Portuguese *fado* comes to mind or elegiac African songs. The impression of dealing with popular poetry and not with liturgical elements is strengthened by vv. 3-4, where a little dramatic plot evolves from the preceding static situation. "Our captors" (*šôbênû:* Qal plural participle of

šbh, with first-person plural suffix) "demand from us!" (v. 3ab). The expression "captor" is rare in Hebrew Scripture; the exact form of our passage, with first-person plural suffix, occurs but once. The only other suffix is that of the third person masculine plural ("their captors"; cf. Ps 106:46; Isa 14:2; Jer 50:33; 2 Chr 30:9). The expression is represented more frequently in Solomon's prayer at the dedication of the temple, a great piece of Dtr literature (1 Kgs 8:46; 2 Chr 6:36; "if they plead with you in the land of their captors, . . . grant them compassion in the sight of their captors," 1 Kgs 8:47, 50). Everywhere the context suggests that captivity is a state of hardship and injustice, violence and shame, and that the captors are dominant and cruel lords of their subjugated people who may, however, be moved to clemency by Yahweh himself (Ps 106:46; 2 Chr 30:9). In our little scene (vv. 3-4: liturgical unit, because of first person plural; against Mowinckel, et al.) the victors are apparently thought to mock the depressed slaves, challenging them sadistically to sing a "song of Zion" for them. The answer is plainly negative. "How can we sing that Yahweh song on foreign soil?" (v. 4). This response of the community sounds, first, as if the "Zion song" solicited by the captors had a special quality of a Yahweh-oriented and Yahweh-symbolizing cult song that — this is a second problem — cannot be performed outside Yahweh's territory (cf. the same problem in 2 Kings 5). Typically, the PLAINTIVE ANSWER of the community is introduced by the lament particle *'êk,* "how" (v. 4a), which has the ring of doubt, protest, and dirge about it (cf. Gen 44:8; Judg 16:15; 2 Sam 1:19; Pss 11:1; 73:19, also the longer form *'êkāh* in Lam 1:1; 2:1; 4:1-2).

All in all, the introductory part of Psalm 137 is peculiar, indeed, as an element of a communal complaint. Apart from this generic difficulty, however, the psalm is lucidly structured. The narrational and dramatic introduction in vv. 1-4 forcefully and diligently poses the problems (a) of the Jewish captivity and suffering under foreign domination, and (b) of the Jewish relationship to Zion and Yahweh. The last issue is taken up by the following subunit, vv. 5-6, while the problem of suffering is saved for vv. 7-9.

The VOW of vv. 5-6, a fitting element for COMPLAINT songs, takes on the form of an oath, that is, a conditional self-damnation (see glossary: OATH FORMULA; G. Giesen, *NBL* I, 488-89). Three times the text begins with "If I do (not) do . . . ," twice pronouncing the consequences of the specified failure. Actions and attitudes sworn to and thus guaranteed by the firmest commitment center on Jerusalem, the name of the Holy City being solemnly exhibited in the first and last line of the oath. The speaker — here we have an individual voice in sharp contrast to the dominant communal orientation of vv. 1-4 naming Zion as the symbol of identification — pledges allegiance to the city of Yahweh's presence. As the long history of tradition through the ages of islamization, crusades, imperialism, Zionism, decolonization, and founding of the new state of Israel amply and painfully demonstrates, allegiance to Jerusalem has stayed a very powerful sentiment in various conflicting groups (cf. the history of Zionism; and A. Elon, *Jerusalem* [Boston: Little, Brown, 1989]; E. Otto, *Jerusalem* [Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 1980]). What did it mean at the time our psalm was first recited? Do we have to deal with a private emotion, a political statement, or a religious confession to keep spiritually and perhaps physically close to

God's holy place? Postexilic evidence suggests that the city had become preeminent in the minds of deported Jews (cf. Neh 1:3-4; 2:3), and the Nehemiah memoirs (Nehemiah 1–7) witness to the zeal for the city's reconstruction in the face of many difficulties. Also, the → book of Lamentations testifies to the shock of seeing Jerusalem and Zion destroyed and humiliated. Within the Psalter the ZION HYMNS are strong evidence of a living faith in the presence of God on that sacred mount, which probably has pre-Israelite roots (cf. Isaiah 24–27; 29; 36–37; 60–62; etc.; Stolz, *Strukturen;* listing at "Introduction to Cultic Poetry"). We may conclude from all these assorted texts that Jerusalem, after having been a Jebusite holy site for some centuries and the capital of the Davidic dynasty for about four hundred years, became the Holy City and a highly important symbol of Jewish identity in exilic/postexilic times. Granted that this may be the basis to start from, we also are able to deduce that vv. 5-6 cannot represent merely private sentiments of a chance suppliant. Comparable to the desire to go on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem and the house of Yahweh (cf. Psalms 84; 87; 132), the oath of allegiance to the Holy City must have some communitarian and confessional implications. The individual speaking in vv. 5-6, after all, is a member of the Yahweh community (though Yahweh's name does not appear in our passage).

Vows function, within the pleading discourse of COMPLAINTS, as a kind of offering to the Deity. The individual member of the congregation pledges allegiance, in direct address, to Jerusalem (→ Psalm 122). This pledge includes veneration and orientation to Yahweh's city and temple.

The name of Yahweh is present again in the last, cursing, section of the psalm (vv. 7-9: IMPRECATIONS). In the ancient Near East, cursing was a widespread phenomenon (see Glossary: CURSE). The direct condemnation of enemies and evildoers is rare in the Psalter (→ Psalm 109); there is no direct-address curse of the pattern: "Cursed be you" (cf. 2 Sam 16:5-10, Shimei curses David, but the exact cursing words are not transmitted). Only in Deuteronomy 27 and 28 do we find some authentic curse formulations, uttered in a ritual way, against some potential trespasser (27:15-26) and even directly against an audience (cf. 28:16-19: "Cursed shall you be" or "cursed are you": *'ārûr 'attāh*). Mostly, the complaint psalms do not talk that bluntly. According to ritual procedure they prefer indirect ways of counteracting evil influences, choosing among various options to destroy the opponents: by formulating ill-wishes against enemies, by inciting Yahweh to punish them, or by praising anyone who might avenge harm done to the suppliant. This is the case also with v. 7. There is a strong bid to Yahweh to "remember" what the Edomites did on a certain "day of Jerusalem" (v. 7ab; cf. Kellermann, Hartberger). A quotation of their hateful war cries is to support the plea revealing their barbarism (v. 7cd). Yahweh is called on to remember this dark day when, it seems, Edomites sacked Jerusalem (the historical event is unknown; speculations are that the Edomite onslaught occurred in connection with the Babylonian wars at the beginning of the sixth century B.C.E.; cf. U. Kellermann, *Israel und Edom* [diss., Münster, 1975]; → Lam 4:21). Now, this imprecation uses direct-address speech to Yahweh, employing the imperative masculine singular: "Remember!" (v. 7a). Going only that far and not adding any details of what punishment

or revenge the people want, it proves a certain automatism of "recalling": Yahweh, only being reminded of the sacrilege against his Holy City, will certainly punish the adversaries severely. Asking for that kind of remembrance (cf. the verb *zkr* used in *malam partem:* Neh 6:14; 13:29; Jer 14:10; Hos 7:2; 8:13; 9:9; and in *bonam partem:* Neh 5:19; 13:14, 22, 31; → Ps 132:1) makes the curse an implicit matter.

The second imprecation (vv. 8-9) is against Babylon, the capital of the world power, and *pars pro toto* for the whole empire. This time, the implicit curse is hidden in a direct word against Babylon, but this saying is formally a positive beatitude (*'ašrê,* vv. 8b, 9a; cf. 1:1; 119:1-2; 128:1-2). Only its contents are disastrous: "Happy is the one who takes your young children, smashing them on the rocks" (v. 9), one of the most cruel, vengeful ill-wishes in the Bible. No matter how bestial were the sackings of the Edomites, this wish for the annihilation of children is a deplorable example of deep-rooted ethnic hatred, as shocking as those massacres among antagonistic cultural and religious groups we have to witness in our days.

The two different forms of hidden curse stand side by side. The sayings against Babylon seem late and clumsy: in two "beatitudes" we find three relative clauses of a younger type (the relative particle *'ăšer* is shortened to *šĕ-* and prefixed to the verb: vv. 8b, 8c, 9a). Especially v. 8 appears to be overloaded with words and very prosaic in its diction, including a lone and stealthy "to us" (only first person plural in vv. 5-9). The direct address of Babylon in an "objective" speech form (felicitation, beatitude) also calls for explication. This form is apparently used in a secondary, nonauthentic way. The Edom saying, on the other hand, poses as a plea to Yahweh plus an incentive for him to take action (v. 7); it is terse and poetic in style, not concerned with the virtual opponent but with God's reaction. For all these reasons, some scholars think that the Babylon saying may be a later addition or a secondary attribution, and that the original ill-wish and cursing text referred to Edom only (cf., e.g., Kellermann). The present setup of the text, however, presupposes the Babylonian background (vv. 1-4). If the psalm had undergone a longer compositional molding with different elements glued together from a late perspective on captivity and longing for Jerusalem, which is possible, it would still be hard to make plausible.

Hartberger extensively compares Jeremiah 51, a long diatribe against Babylon, with our psalm (pp. 73-100). Vocabulary and outlook do surprisingly correspond. Babylon is directly addressed and threatened, e.g., Jer 51:13-14, 20-23. The last-mentioned four verses, furthermore, dwell on the verb "smash" (*nps,* Piel: 9 occurrences, plus participle/noun = "smasher" = "hammer," Jer 51:20a; note the wordplay. This verb occurs a total of only 21 times in the OT. Cf. the only other occurrence in the Psalter: Ps 2:9). Military and civilian people are "smashed" in Jer 51:20-23, although not "babes" as in Ps 137:9. There is some talk about "rocks," too, in Jer 51:25-26, supposedly the foundation of the city of Babylon (which does not fit geographically, but seems to be a standard concept for high-ranking, powerful cities). There are more affinities between Jeremiah 51 and Psalm 137, but what do they teach us? Literary dependence of one text on the other being dubious, the best answer may be: both passages come from a common pool of sentiments and liturgical action. Both

were probably recited or enacted in public worship. We may also draw on frequent Edom sayings witnessing to the same phenomenon (Obad 11-14; Lam 4:17-22; Jer 49:7-22). Ogden, on the basis of Hayes, wants to draw together prophetic oracles and communal laments, the first ones being the divine answer to complaints and petitions of the congregation.

The structure traced above presupposes some kind of liturgical presentation of the text. Most exegetes, in fact, favor a worship setting of Psalm 137. Yet there are analyses of the text from poetic and literary points of view (cf., e.g., Freedman; Halle and McCarthy; etc.). Discovery of a concentric setup (Freedman, 203: "envelope construction") or an even syllable count in all subsections probably applies less to liturgically enacted texts than to written testimony already used for private edification, and considered inspired by God. Such an attitude and practice in regard to the Psalter may be assumed only in a very late period of canonization, at the beginning of the Christian era, not in the formative phase of the Psalm collections.

Genre

The denomination of Psalm 137 as COMMUNAL COMPLAINT is haphazard, to be sure. We have to take account of the elements and vestiges of complaints that the text presents, and those that it lacks. Modifications of standard forms also have to be recognized. As already pointed out, the invocation and initial plea are missing; the psalm does not have an adequate introduction to make it useful in complaint liturgies. Even worse: the complaint itself is formulated in a strange narrative style (vv. 1-4); instead of affirmations of confidence we have a vow of allegiance (not a vow to give thanks! vv. 5-6), and instead of a proper petition we get only imprecations against two different national groups (vv. 7-9). The ill-wishing element is part of the complaint ritual, to be sure, but it is usually only one of two complementary forms, the other being positive petition for help, salvation, blessing, etc. Here it remains solitary; petition for one's own sake is missing.

We cannot help but conclude that earlier complaint patterns (see "Introduction to Cultic Poetry," section 4B) have been decisively altered, probably being adapted to different community structures. Remembrance of sadness and longing (vv. 1-4) has possibly been gleaned from a popular song from outside liturgical agendas. The vow of allegiance to Jerusalem (vv. 5-6) could have been part of diaspora gatherings; conjured castigations ("drying" up of right hand; tying up of tongue; cf. Ezek 3:26; Job 29:10) do not suggest a sacral background. This is true even for the third section of the psalm (vv. 7-9). Turning to Yahweh does not make a full liturgical text yet; using the form of beatitude does not tie the text to ritual procedure. What may have been the origin, composition, and use of Psalm 137?

To mention other attempts at genre classification: interpreters have alternately stressed the folkloristic, lyrical, hymnic, imprecational, and literary aspects, and made one of them the determining quality. Since the psalm seems to contain its own genre names ("Zion song," v. 3; "Yahweh song," v. 4), and vv.

5-6 in fact being a direct-address Zion hymn, some experts propose a genre attribution to "Zion songs" (e.g., Kellermann; Allen, 238, 241). But → Psalms 46; 48; 122 differ in their structure, and are much more removed from the basic complaint disposition.

Setting

The spirit of Psalm 137 is communitarian, laicistic, melancholic, emotional, zealous, etc. We best think of a congregation of people under pressure from majority groups (captors, taunters) and trying to fight back. In this situation people remember oppression and despair in the exilic environment, and use it either as a memory of misery or symbolically in place of their own suffering. Jewish communities of the fifth century B.C.E. did take for themselves the liberty of composing new songs of complaint, not adhering strictly to the schemes of old. They composed, e.g., complaints on the basis of a standard sequence (complaint-allegiance-imprecation) but in a new language. Recited together with other psalms, perhaps not every one of them needed a proper invocation, etc. The setting of our song, then, may have been a more elaborate worship service, in which it was intoned to express revulsion against continuing oppression and a desire for change. Dreaming of Zion and Jerusalem is tantamount to working for liberation (cf. Gutiérrez). Since we know of special worship services to commemorate the fall of Jerusalem (Zech 7:3-6; Lamentations; cf. Kraus, 1083-84; Kellermann, 52, 54, 55), our psalm may be attributed to this event, which took place on the ninth day of the month Ab (= July/August). Nonetheless, the popularity of the song may have stimulated a much wider use.

Intention

The community, singing that new song of Jewish frustration and suffering under imperial rule, wants to rally all her members around the hope for Yahweh's reign at Jerusalem. The Holy City at the time of our psalm had acquired a supreme value in the spiritual life of dispersed Judah. Perhaps the oath of allegiance to Yahweh's place on earth (vv. 5-6) was even used in a special public ritual to stabilize members and make them more confident. Narrational and suggestive diction, heavy emphasis on personal dedication and self-controlled participation, indicate that the individual member of the congregation was addressed and challenged. Along these lines we take the individual pledge for Jerusalem as the principal purpose of Psalm 137.

Feelings of hatred and revenge over against historical enemies have unfortunately always played a large role in the psychology and religion of God-fearing people; the history of humankind has always been a dramatical test field of how to overcome such sentiments in order to bring desperately needed peace to the nations.

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