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To Imprecate or Not: Psalm 137 and its Appropriation in Music
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Psalm 137 opens with lament and closes with one of the most strident imprecations in the Psalter. Read against the backdrop of the Babylonian exile, the imprecation incorporates both Edom and Babylon, concluding with the words "Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock."[1]

The closing verses have proven to be problematic for commentators. The tension is well expressed by R. Clifford, who states "Psalm 137 has the distinction of having one of the most beloved opening lines and the most horrifying closing line of any psalm. If the psalm ended at verse 6, it would be in the top ten."[2]

This psalm has been set to music on numerous occasions, both within the realms of liturgical music, and also within popular music. Boney M's catchy 'By the Rivers of Babylon' and the wistful round popularised on Don McLean's *American Pie* album demonstrate well Clifford's assertion about the top ten potential of Ps 137. In both versions the lyrics are drawn only from the first four verses of the psalm, and one wonders if they would have gained popularity had the full text been used.

The current paper explores two musical settings of Ps 137, taking into consideration the role of the composer as interpreter of the text, and the impact of the decisions made by the composer with regard to our own reading of the psalm. The central argument is that the inclusion of the closing imprecation, and the wording of that imprecation, has a significant impact on the musical aesthetics of the resultant composition, and on the subsequent reading of the psalm by its new readers/ hearers.

Most commentaries on Ps 137 struggle with the ethical implications of the curses. According to Risse, there are a number of common responses to the imprecation within the literature.[3] The curse has often been allegorised – a practice which dates back to the church fathers. For example, we read in the writings of Augustine

> What are the little ones of Babylon? Evil desires at their birth. For there are, who have to fight with inveterate lusts. When lust is born, before evil habit giveth it strength against thee, when lust is little, by no means let it gain the strength of evil habit; when it is little, dash it. But thou fearest, lest though dashed it die not; "Dash it against the Rock; and that Rock is Christ."[4]

Babylon is understood as an allegory for sinful thought which must be expelled. A wonderful modern example of this can be found in the writing of C. S. Lewis, who states

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[1] All biblical quotes taken from the NRSV.
[2] R. J. Clifford, *Psalms 75-150,* Nashville: Abingdon, 2003, p. 275.
[3] S. Risse, '"Wohl dem, der deine kleinen Kinder packt und sie am Felsen zerschmettert": zur Auslegungsgeschichte von Ps *137*,9.' *Biblical Interpretation* 14 (2006), pp. 364-384.
[4] Augustine of Hippo, 'Exposition on the Psalms' in *New Advent* [database online; article at <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/1801137.htm> accessed Sept 30, 2008].

I can use even the horrible passage in 137 about dashing the Babylonia babies against the stones. I know things in the inner world which are like babies; the infantile beginnings of small indulgences, small resentments, which may one day become dipsomania or settled hatred, but which woo us and wheedle us with special pleadings and seem so tiny, so helpless, that in resisting them we feel that we are being cruel to animals.... Against all such pretty infants (the dears have such winning ways) the advice of the Psalm is the best. Knock the little bastards' brains out. And "blessed" he who can, for it's easier said than done.[5]

Where the lines are allowed their literal meaning, attempts have been made to explain them away, or to neutralise them; they are a prophetic foretelling of Babylon's downfall; a reflection of the "primitive" concept of *lex talionis* or a less developed religious sensibility; or they are simply a reflection of the reality of ancient warfare.[6]

Within contemporary commentaries, a degree of hesitation exists as to the appropriateness of using the closing lines of Ps 137 within a praying community. It is frequently argued that the final verses should be omitted or if used, only with great reservation or critical application.[7]

Against this backdrop, the use of Ps 137 within two musical compositions can be considered. Studies which explore the interrelationship between text and music are becoming more prevalent in theological literature.[8] Included within this literature are reflections on the role of the composer as exegete. As exegete, the composer can choose between different translations, may alter words, omit words, add new words.[9] Leneman, who suggests that music is a form of midrash, argues that the composer retells a text by creating a particular feeling or mood musically. Music breathes life into the text through its use of devices such as tone, rhythm, phrasing, versification etc. In setting a particular text to music, the resultant product is different in its interpretation than are the words on their own. The composer also has control over the musical aesthetics to which the words are set, and with each choice made, they shape the resultant "new" text with which future audiences will engage.[10]

As I move into a discussion of specific compositions, I need to preface the fact that I approach these compositions as a biblical scholar, and that this necessarily shapes my understanding of the music under discussion.[11] My tendency is to centre discussion

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[5] C. S. Lewis, *Reflections on the Psalms,* London and Glasgow: Collins, 1967, pp. 113-114.

[6] Risse, '"Wohl dem, der deine kleinen Kinder packt"', pp. 364-378.

[7] See, for example, J. Eaton, *The Psalms: A Historical and Spiritual Commentary*, London: T&T Clark, 2003, pp. 455-6; Clifford, *Psalms 75-150*, pp. 275-6; H. J. Kraus, *Psalms 60-150: A Commentary*. Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1989, p. 504.

[8] See, for example, V. R. Sirota, 'An Exploration of Music as Theology', *Theological Education* XXXI (1994), pp. 165-173; D. M. Parsons, 'Text, Tone, and Context: A Methodological Prolegomenon for a Theology of Liturgical Song', *Worship* 79 (2005), pp. 54-69; R. Viladesau, *Theology and the Arts: Encountering God through Music, Art and Rhetoric*, New York: Paulist, 2000;

[9] W. Porter, 'The Composer of Sacred Music as an Interpreter of the Bible', in M. O'Kane (ed.), *Borders, Boundaries, and the Bible*, London: Sheffield, 2002. pp. 126-153.

[10] H. Leneman, 'Revisioning a Biblical Story through Libretto and Music: Debora e Jaele by Ilebrando Pizzetti', *Biblical Interpretation* 15 (2007), pp. 428-63.

[11] H. Leneman, "Re-visioning a Biblical Story through Libretto and Music: Debora e Jaele by Ildebrando Pizzetti." *Biblical Interpretation* 15 (2007): 428-63.

on text and the appropriateness of music as a medium for relating text – that is, from a logo-centric perspective. This approach assumes that the music is subservient to the words, and that meaning is conveyed through the propositional content of words alone. There are, however, alternative lenses through which to approach the relationship between text and music, as is suggested by Parsons, a liturgical musicologist.[12] One approach is to focus on the phenomenology of the sound itself, which shifts the focus from the words to the potential of the music to bear meaning in and of itself. [13] Alternatively, a composition can be approached from what Parsons refers to as a performative-convergent perspective which places words and music in a relationship in which one does not 'conform to the other semantically, but rather both converge on a common function in a specific performative context.' [14]

The settings under consideration are both by Australian composers, but have very different audiences and purposes in mind. Both settings include the imprecation (Ps. 137:7-9), but reflect different decisions by the composers, which in turn result in different interpretations.

The first setting is by the Australian group the Sons of Korah. In a description of their project, Sons of Korah identify the purpose of setting the psalms to music as putting "the Word of God and music together in a dynamic and captivating way in order to lead their listeners into an impacting encounter with the heart of the bible."[15] Explicit here is the identification of the psalms as an expression of both biblical and contemporary spirituality.

In introducing Ps 137, singer and composer Matthew Jacoby states 'Psalm 137 is a psalm that I personally have struggled with more than any. The Lyrics shocked me and I found the ferocity of the emotions portrayed in it hard to deal with, particularly the last line. I also found it hard to see how I could sing this and see any relevance in it for me.'[16] Within the introductory discussion the psalm is initially read against the historical context of the Babylonian exile, explaining the curses against the backdrop of the covenantal promise of Genesis 12:3. As the relevance of the psalm is discussed from a current

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[12] Parsons, 'Text, Tone, and Context.'

[13] Parsons, 'Text, Tone, and Context', pp. 59-60. This model is referred to be Parsons as a symbolic-assimilative model. Within this model, the emphasis shifts from the meaning in the propositional content of the words to the theological significance and value of the music. Parsons argues that music "expands the realm of human communication beyond the limits of verbal language to include symbolism", and has the "symbolic potential to bear sacred meaning" in and of itself

[14] Parsons, 'Text, Tone, and Context', p. 63. This model explores how music functions within ritual, and draws on elements of speech-act theory. Parsons argues that "music is significant first and foremost through its functionality within a performative context (illocutionary aspect), and secondarily through its semantic content (locutionary aspect), or expressiveness (perlocutionary aspect)." (p. 66). Although the music being considered is not necessarily intended for use in ritual, this model offers some insight for the discussion.

[15] M. Jacoby, 'About Us', [on-line posting at http://www.sonsofkorah.com/index.html?page=aboutus.html accessed April 22, 2008].

[16] M. Jacoby, 'Psalm 137: Babylon', [on-line posting at http://www.sonsofkorah.com/index.html?page=studies.html accessed April 22, 2008].

Christian perspective, the Babylonians are associated with the forces of evil and the curse the call for God "to cut off the memory of the evil one from the earth."[17]

This setting paraphrases the full text, although I would argue that it does so in a way which functions to dilute the impact of the imprecation. The music itself is in minor key, as would be expected for a lament. Verses 1-3 constitute the first section, sung in solo voice and accompanied only by the guitar. The content of the biblical text is essentially adhered to, with some rearrangement emphasising the remembrance of Zion.

Moving into verse 4, the instrumentation and tempo increase. This change in the nature of the music forms an initial crescendo, a high point which arguably is present in the original text of the psalm. A key change occurs with the self-curses that apply should the psalmist forget Jerusalem (vv. 5-6) and a backup vocalist is introduced, singing "if I do not remember you" followed by "if you are not my highest joy."

The theme of remembrance continues with the call for the Lord to remember Edom's actions in relation to the destruction of Jerusalem. The line 'O daughter Babylon, doomed to destruction, Happy is the one who will repay you' is repeated, followed by the reason 'for all the things you have done.' Interestingly, the sense of personal imprecation is decreased through the textual 'to us' (v. 8) being removed. Babylon takes on an impersonal representative function symbolic of evil, moving towards the allegorising discussed earlier.

A short acoustic guitar riff introduces the imprecation of v. 9. 'blessed is he' is repeated twice. This final imprecation is worded 'Blessed is he who destroys your progeny' sung in association with an increased tempo, the reintroduction of drums and a final crescendo. This gives an arguably triumphant ring to the curse, with the change of acoustic quality having the perhaps unintended effect of muffling the words. The vocal accompaniment is reintroduced immediately, returning to the introductory lament 'by the rivers there we wept.' The phrase 'your progeny' is repeated amidst the repetition of the opening lament.

The choice of wording for the curse is in itself interesting. The confronting reference to dashing the infants heads against rock, has been changed to destroy your progeny. This functions to dilute the impact of the imprecation, and lessen the confronting, personal nature of the curse. While the music is certainly strong and has power to it, the end product emphasises the lament far more than the emotions associated with the imprecation.

The second setting is by the Australian liturgical composer Christopher Willcock sj. This setting is text centred, using the ICEL text, altered only through some repetition.[19]

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[17] Ibid.
[18] Used with permission of Matthew Jacoby.

The psalm is composed for 4 voices (soprano, alto, tenor and bass) and is in a minor key. The voices are accompanied only by piano. The accompaniment consists primarily of minor cords predominantly in the bass clef with only short sections in the treble. The music itself has a sombre, heavy feel to it, giving a relentless forward movement which accompanies well the harshness of the words.

The tone of this setting is discordant throughout. Male voices sing the opening line which is then repeated with all four voices. Another repetition occurs on the word 'festival' (v. 3) a jarring note given the contrast between what should be a joyful occasion and the harshness of the music. A crescendo is reached as the singers repeat the captor's command to sing the songs of Zion. The lament 'How can we sing the song of the Lord in a foreign land' in the following line is much quieter, and unaccompanied, suggesting a sense of longing and pathos which contrasts to the harshness of the Babylonian command. The self imprecations of verses 5 and 6 have crescendos on the curse elements ('whither my hand' and 'silence my voice'), accentuating the curse. Yet another highpoint is reached in with reference to Jerusalem being the singer's highest joy (v. 6). The discordant tone gives a sense of cacophony, and the tension between words (joy) and music again serves to highlight the plight of the singer and the suffering inherent in the psalm.

Within the verses concerning Edom and Babylon (vv. 7-9), the rise and fall of the music serves to highlight the emotive language of the text. The words of Edom 'Strip! Smash her to the ground' are sung forte. 'Doomed Babylon be cursed' is sung on an ascending scale and repeated twice, with the second repetition followed by a crashing piano chord and a rest, highlighting the curse and increasing the tension which has steadily been mounting. The final curse is sung quietly and is largely unaccompanied, emphasizing the gravity of the imprecation. The curse is repeated 3 times, fading away as it ends.

==Insert Christopher Willcock Psalm 137 here[20]==

There is a strong correspondence between text and music. The decisions made by the composer give a stark and grating quality to the setting, and the result is that we, as listeners, experience Ps 137 in a profoundly disturbing way. There is no escaping from the uncomfortable reality of the psalm. The pain of the singers, the cruelty of the Babylonians and the Edomites, and the stridency of the cursing elements, not only in the self-imprecation but particularly in the imprecation against Babylon is strongly evident. The musical aesthetics function to accentuate the harsh reality, and for me, as a reader familiar with the text, evoke an emotive response that I had not previously experienced.

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[19] The International Commission on English in the Liturgy, The Psalter: A Faithful and Inclusive Rendering from the Hebrew into Contemporary English. Chicago: LTP, 1995.

[20] Used with permission of Christopher Willcock. This recording was made at the Slattery Lecture, held at the University of Notre Dame Australia, held in Fremantle in 2006.

As a means of further exploring the impact of these two very different settings of Ps 137, these compositions were used as the basis of a small group devotional reflection. The reflection moved from reading the NRSV text of Ps 137 to listening to the sung versions. The Sons of Korah setting was relatively well received – the comment was made that the imprecation was difficult to understand, but there was no real discomfort expressed. This was markedly different to the response to Willcock's setting. All found the setting confronting. One woman simply reacted on a gut level, rejecting the piece outright. Another felt that the composition had an 'evil' tone to it, and she was clearly uncomfortable with this. I was surprised by the association with 'evil' – my own response is that the music evokes a harsh and grating sense of pain and anger. I am moved and unsettled by this – but evil is not a descriptor I would have used. The varied responses drove home the fact that as an audience 'reads' this new text, the music itself takes on a life of its own. The reception of the text is influenced by far more that the intent of the words and the music, and is essentially beyond the control of the composer.

Although based on the same psalm, the impact of these two settings of Ps 137 is vastly different, with both texts shaping the listening experience in very different ways. Each composer has given shape to the final product through the decisions made in regard to both words and music. In both, the interaction between text and music shapes the reception of the composition. The aesthetic quality of the Sons of Korah setting evokes a almost triumphant quality which serves to dilute the harsh quality of the initial text of the psalm. The change in wording of the text moves towards an allegorising of the psalm, and the interaction with the music, it could be argued, makes this rendering amenable to more popular consumption (note that this recording is available commercially). The same cannot be said for the second setting, which evokes strong, and arguably negative emotions, emotions which are, perhaps, much closer to the lived reality of the original psalm.

The analysis of the musical setting of these specific psalms highlights the role of the composer as exegete. The composer has control over the wording of the text and over the musical aesthetics, and in this way is able to bring or emphasise particular aspects. In this way the composer moves beyond simply transmitting the text to interpreting the text. even where there is little or no significant change made in the wording of the text, as was seen in Willcock's setting, in the interaction between text and music new layers of meaning are added. As listeners of the music, we become readers of a new text, which in turn transforms and shapes subsequent readings of the text.