

Remembrance, Nonidentity, and Lament: A Reading of Psalm 137 for Liberation from the Unfinished Suffering of Colonization

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I. Introduction

The year 2010 was the centennial anniversary of the forced annexation of *Joseon* [Korea] by the Japanese. From 1910, the Koreans suffered under the colonial rule of the Japanese imperial government for thirty-six years. Although Korea gained independence from Japan on August 15, 1945, in Korea there are still many who suffer with the memory of colonization. Then, how can Koreans be completely liberated from such lingering suffering and conflict?

To find an answer to this question, I will inquire into Psalm 137, which describes the Israelites' painful experience of the ruin of their country and subsequent exilic life, with a focus on memory. Firstly, I will engage in a hermeneutical reading of Psalm 137 from the perspective of memory. Then, I will examine the liberating power of the psalm for Koreans and the Korean diaspora. To accomplish this purpose, I will examine the psalm in the three worlds of the text: (1) The world behind the text: reading the psalm in its historical context of the Babylon exile, (2) The world of the text: analyzing the structure and dynamic using the literary approach, and (3) The world before the text: appropriating the psalm for Koreans and the Korean diaspora.

Through this process, I will contend that Psalm 137 can be well understood through its inner movement, the dialectic of remembering and forgetting. In the center of the inner dynamic of the psalm, there exists the experience of nonidentity and the struggle for identity. As a communal lament the psalm gives a new language of prayer to express and overcome suffering. The imprecation in verses 7-9 is an act of *remembering* their painful calamity in the memory of God. In such a lament, one can *forget* the trauma of

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suffering, and true forgiveness eventually arises. Koreans and the Korean diaspora have a common ground with Psalm 137. Therefore, I believe that to read Psalm 137 from the perspective of memory will be helpful in emancipating Koreans from their painful past and promoting a reconciliation with Japan. Also, it can help the Korean diaspora in their struggle to find and maintain their identity.

II. Preparation for Reading: Historical Setting and Date

In this section, I will briefly summarize the arguments on the dating and setting of Psalm 137 in order to understand the psalm in its historical background.¹⁾ According to Walter Brueggemann, Psalm 137 is “one of the few psalms which contain a certain and explicit historical reference.”²⁾ Obviously, the poetic speaker refers to a specific place, time, and historical event: “By the rivers of Babylon” (v. 1) and “the day of Jerusalem’s fall” (v. 7, NRSV). Thus, many scholars think that this psalm was with certainty composed shortly after the Judeans’ deportation to Babylon in 586/587 B.C.E. They contend that it reflects the painful experience and emotions of the captives who witnessed the massacre by the Edomites and Babylonians in Jerusalem, and who were dislocated from their home country to a foreign land.

However, there is another group of researchers who consider the psalm as post-exilic. They argue that the repeated usage of both perfect verbs and the demonstrative adverb שם , “there,” show that the exile was over, and the psalmists are not “there” i.e. Babylon.³⁾ In this sense, James L. Mays, a commentator, contends, “The psalm seems to be the voice of exiles who have returned to live in the ruins of a Jerusalem not yet rebuilt.”⁴⁾ According

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- 1) The arguments on the dating of Psalm 137 are sketched out in Leslie C. Allen’s commentary on Psalms and John Ahn’s article, “Psalm 137: Complex Communal Laments.” Leslie C. Allen, *Psalms 101-150, Revised*, rev. ed., vol. 21 of *Word Biblical Commentary* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2002), 304; John Ahn, “Psalm 137: Complex Communal Laments,” *Journal of Biblical Literature* 127, no. 2(2008), 270-271.
 - 2) Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms* (Minneapolis, MN: Fortress Press, 1984), 74.
 - 3) Graham S. Ogden, “Prophetic Oracles against Foreign Nations and Psalms of Communal Lament: The Relationship of Psalm 137 to Jeremiah 49:7-22 and Obadiah,” *Journal for the Study of the Old Testament* 24(1982/10), 89; Mitchell Dahood, *Psalms III: 101-150*, vol. 17A of *The Anchor Bible* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1970), 269.
 - 4) James Luther Mays, *Psalms, Interpretation: A Biblical Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox, 1994), 421.

to the scholars in this group, because the returned exiles saw the ruined Jerusalem, their anger, enmity, and sorrow was still vivid.

In my view, however, the intense emotions of the collective speakers and the firm resolution to remember Jerusalem (vv. 5-6) suggest that this psalm was originally composed during the painful exilic times, in a foreign land. Generally, remembering something means “to have a picture or idea in [one’s] mind of people, events, places etc from the past.”⁵⁾ Therefore, the remembrance of Jerusalem is a proper act of those who are away from the city, rather than those who are in the city. Also, the past verbs and the demonstrative adverb, “there,” probably indicate that the event narrated in verses 1-4 had happened before the psalmists composed the psalm and that the place of composition of the psalm was different from the place of the event, “by the rivers of Babylon,” though they still lived in Babylon. Additionally, Robert Alter provides another plausible interpretation of this matter. According to him, “*sham*, ‘there,’ is twice repeated, expressing the alienation of the collective speakers from the place they find themselves, which, logically, should be ‘here’ rather than ‘there.’”⁶⁾ If Alter is right in his assumption, *sham* hints that the speakers experienced nonidentity and could not find root in the foreign land. The point is that in both opinions on the dating and setting of Psalm 137, the suffering of the poetic speakers is an unfinished and vivid reality.

In addition, Erhard S. Gerstenberger, a commentator, thinks that Psalm 137 may be attributed to the special worship services to commemorate the fall of Jerusalem, although he does not confine the psalm only to the event.⁷⁾ However, as Robert Alter argues, “there is no persuasive evidence for [a cultic setting] in the text, and such a view underestimates the use of the psalm form as a vehicle for the expression of spontaneous emotion—in this case, collective emotion.”⁸⁾ In my opinion, the psalm might have been used in a liturgical setting, but it was probably composed within a life setting, expressing the speakers’ uncontrolled emotions. This suggests that Psalm 137 is rooted deeply in the realities of the exilic life, specifically the exiles’ crisis of identity. In this psalm, what integrates and weaves all the realities

5) *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English Online*, s.v. “remember,” <http://www.ldoceonline.com/dictionary/remember> (accessed December 1, 2011).

6) Robert Alter, *The Book of Psalms: A Translation with Commentary* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2007), 473.

7) Erhard S. Gerstenberger, *Psalms, Part 2, and Lamentations*, vol. 15 of *The Forms of the Old Testament Literature* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 2001), 395.

8) Robert Alter, *The Book of Psalms* (2007), 473.

is memory. Then, how can we read the psalm from the perspective of memory?

III. A Hermeneutical Reading of Psalm 137 from the Perspective of Memory

In this section, I will examine the psalm's structure/movement, inner dynamic, and genre in terms of the three hermeneutical keys: (1) Remembering and forgetting; (2) Narrative and experience of nonidentity; and (3) Lament as a song of captives.

1. The Dialectic of Remembering and Forgetting

Although Psalm 137 has a metrical or symmetrical structure,⁹⁾ it can be appropriately understood through its inner movement, remembering and forgetting. The centrality of remembrance or memory in this psalm has been repeatedly noted by many commentators and researchers. In *The New Interpreter's Bible*, the commentators analyze the structure of Psalm 137 with a focus on the crucial activity of remembering: (1) The exiles' remembrance of Jerusalem (vv. 1-4), (2) Resolving to remember Jerusalem (vv. 5-6), and (3) Requesting the Lord to remember Jerusalem (vv. 7-9). Then, they write that "the importance of memory is pervasive, both literarily and conceptually."¹⁰⁾ On the basis of such analysis, I will describe the movement of the psalm's dialectic of remembering and forgetting in the experience of nonidentity.

The psalm begins with the poetic speakers' remembrance of Zion by the rivers of Babylon (v. 1). Their hard life in a foreign land—having been deported by the colonial policy of the Babylon Empire—made them tearfully remember Jerusalem, not only because it was their geographical hometown but also because it was the spiritual root of their identity. Such remembrance is the intrinsic orientation of the collective speaker, the captives.

9) Some scholars divide the psalm's structure based on the number of syllables. David N. Freedman, "The Structure of Psalm 137," in *Near Eastern Studies in Honor of William Foxwell Albright*, ed. Hans Goedicke (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University, 1971), 187-205; Morris Halle and John J. McCarthy, "The Metrical Structure of Psalm 137," *Journal of Biblical Literature* 100, no 2(1981/6), 161-167.

10) Rober Doran et al., *1 & 2 Maccabees, Job, Psalms*, vol. 4 of *The New Interpreter's Bible: General Articles & Introduction, Commentary, & Reflections for Each Book of the Bible, Including the Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books* (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1994), 1227.

On the opposite side, there is the movement of forgetting, the orientation of the oppressors who destroyed Jerusalem and deported the Israelites to a foreign land in order to uproot their identity. The two conflicting orientations clash in verses 2-3, when the oppressors ask the speakers to sing one of the songs of Zion: "... for our captors asked us there for songs, our tormentors, for amusement, 'Sing us one of the songs of Zion.'"¹¹) For the exiles, singing a song of Zion for the gentile people's amusement meant forgetting their identity as a people of God. Therefore, the request of the oppressor was dangerous for the captives, not only because it ridiculed them but also because it made them forget, or at least confuse, their true identity. Furthermore, the shouting of the Edomites on the day of the destruction of Jerusalem, "raise [raze] it, raise [raze] it (ΕΚΚΕΒΟΥΤΕ ΕΚΚΕΒΟΥΤΕ), even to its foundations" (v. 7b, LXX),¹² can also be understood in this sense. The meaning of the Greek imperative verb "ΕΚΚΕΒΟΥΤΕ" is "empty" or "expel," hence Brenton translates it as "raze," which has the figurative meaning, to "erase person's name from remembrance."¹³ Thus, this suggests that the Edomites probably intended to completely erase Israel's identity from remembrance, or, at least, the Israelites accepted the destruction of Jerusalem by the gentile nations as a crucial crisis of their identity.

The collective speakers' responses to the orientation of the oppressors, which tries to drive them to forget their identity, appear in two ways. First, to the request to sing a song of Zion, they refuse to sing the song or to play harps (vv. 2-4), and resolve to remember Jerusalem in the form of the self-curse (vv. 5-6). Second, for the destruction of Jerusalem by the gentile nations, they ask God to remember the vileness of the enemies on the day of Jerusalem (v. 7a). In the first case, the speakers can resist the oppressor's orientation to forget, not only by remembering Jerusalem but also by refusing to sing. However, in the second case, their remembrance of the day of Jerusalem's fall is not enough to resist the gentile nations' destructive power. Therefore, the speakers also request the Lord to remember the catastrophe caused by the enemies because they believe that God has the power to

11) *JPS Hebrew-English Tanakh: The Traditional Hebrew Text and the New JPS Translation*, 2nd ed. (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society, 1999), 1584.

12) Lancelot C. L. Brenton, Sir., *The Septuagint with Apocrypha: Greek and English* (1851; repr., Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1987), 781.

13) I refer to an old English dictionary, first published in the 1800s, to find the contemporary meaning of the word by Brenton who translated the Septuagint into mid 19th century English. *The Concise Oxford Dictionary of Current English*, 5th ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1917), s.v. "raze."

incapacitate the force of forgetting.

Consequently, the inner movement of Psalm 137 is properly described as the dialectic of remembering and forgetting (see Table 1). It must be noted that the summit of the dialectic is the “problematic” blessings in verses 8-9, which have been considered as the most difficult part of the psalm as well as of the Psalter.¹⁴⁾ However, before examining this final part of the psalm, I must address the second hermeneutical key, the experience of nonidentity.

Table 1. The Dialectic between remembering and forgetting in Psalm 137

Oppressors			Collective Speakers
Forgetting: Erasing or uprooting the Israelites' identity	Orientation		Remembering: Finding and keeping the Israelites' identity
Capture and deportation (v. 1)	→	←	Remembrance of Zion (v. 1)
Asking to sing a song of Zion (v. 3)	→	←	Refusing and resolving to remember (vv. 5-6)
Destruction of Jerusalem (vv. 7-9)	→	←	Asking God to remember and imprecation (vv. 7-9)

2. Narrative and Experience of Nonidentity

Psalm 137 reflects the narrative of the destruction of Jerusalem and the Israelites' exilic life in Babylon. What the narrative transmits, in J. B. Metz's terms, is the “memory of suffering” and the “experience of nonidentity.” According to Metz, the experience of nonidentity is “the experience of division, the experience that everything just isn't as good as it is and appears to be. The agonizingly painful experience of nonidentity brought on by violence and oppression is a part of historical life, as well as the experience of nonidentity that happens in guilt, in being fated to finitude and death.”¹⁵⁾

14) According to Erich Zenger, because of the cruel imprecation in verses 8-9, Psalm 137 has been regarded “as the ‘psalm of violence’ par excellence, and, at least in its full text, to be rejected by Christians.” Erich Zenger, *A God of Vengeance?: Understanding the Psalms of Divine Wrath*, tr. by Linda M. Maloney (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996), 47.

15) Johann Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society: Toward a Practical Fundamental Theology*, tr. by Matthew Ashley (New York: Cross Publishing, 2007), 192.

Nonidentity is a conflict or contradiction between oneself and the outer world. As noted above, what exists in the center of the psalm is the issue of identity. The collective speakers experience the contradiction between the inherited identity and the identity addressed by the oppressors. In a sociological sense, one's identity is constructed through a twofold identification by oneself and others.¹⁶⁾ Therefore, in the psalm, the deconstructive power of the oppressors perhaps drove the captives to face the crucial crisis of identity. The experience of nonidentity between themselves and the outer world, their inherited identity from their ancestors and their addressed or forced identity by the outer world—such an experience of nonidentity is narrated in Psalm 137 with the memory of suffering.

Then, how do the poetic speakers draw reconciliation in the conflict? They do not make a theoretical or abstract reconciliation between their inherited identity and forced identity. Rather, they narrate the memory of suffering, as it is. They do not offer an ahistorical interpretation of the outer world from their conceptual perspective but expose the nonidentity in contradiction and conflict. According to Metz, such exposure in the form of narrative is a more desirable way to real redemption than a sublation of the human history of suffering into a theological dialectic of Trinitarian soteriology.¹⁷⁾ The imprecation on their enemies in the final part of the psalm can be properly understood on this basis, in consideration of the psalm's form—a communal lament.

3. Lament as a Song of Captives

Although Psalm 137 lacks some typical elements of lament, for example, the invocation and initial plea, confession of trust, and vow of praise,¹⁸⁾ many scholars denominate the psalm as communal lament or complaint. Specifically, Gerstenberger considers that Psalm 137 was altered and adapted to different community structures from its earlier complaint patterns.¹⁹⁾ Indeed,

16) Peter L. Berger, and Thomas Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1966), 132.

17) Johann Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society* (2007), 127.

18) Claus Westermann contends that there is a fixed sequence of elements which is a mark of the psalms of lament. According to him, "The structure of the psalm of lament is address, lamentation, a turning to God (confession of trust), petition, vow of praise." Claus Westermann, "The Role of the Lament in the Theology of the Old Testament," *Interpretation* 28, no 1(1974/1), 26.

19) Erhard S. Gerstenberger, *Psalms, Part 2, and Lamentations* (2001), 394.

the psalm is a cry of affliction and the speakers' appeal to the one who can remove their suffering.

As this point, we must focus on the fact that the poetic speakers are asked to sing a song of the songs of Zion which praise God or Zion.²⁰⁾ Therefore, for the captives it is clear that to sing a song of Zion would put them in more agony over the nonidentity between the triumphant God/Zion described in the song, and the silent God/destroyed Zion experienced in their actual life. Thus, as Gerstenberger points out, the exilic community in Babylon needed a new or adapted medium to express their new experience of suffering. In this sense, the collective speakers of the psalm adapt the early form of lament and use it to express their experience of nonidentity in their painful exilic life. In other words, for the captives, Psalm 137 as an adapted communal lament, is a "new language of prayer,"²¹⁾ which enables them to speak their suffering and implicit hope for liberation, when singing a song of Zion is impossible.

As noted above, the speakers request the Lord to remember the destruction of Jerusalem and cruelty by enemies, and to bless the one who repays the atrocities (vv. 8-9). There have been some attempts to defend the imprecatory psalms from the suspicion of immorality. Some researchers interpret maledictions in the psalms as executions of God's justice or prophetic oracles.²²⁾ In the case of Psalm 137, some scholars argue that the speakers do not take action, and that it is a prayer or an overflow of feeling.²³⁾ Further, Zenger reads the imprecatory part of Psalm 137 as an attempt to keep one's historical identity and suppress human lust for violence:

Psalm 137 is not the song of people who have the power to effect a violent change in their situation of suffering, nor is it the battle cry of terrorists. Instead, it is an attempt to cling to one's historical identity even when

20) According to Fr. Luke, the songs of Zion, as a literary category of the Psalter, praise (1) Zion, the city of God, (2) Yahweh, the God of Zion, and (3) Yahweh's victory over chaos. Fr. Luke, "The Songs of Zion as a Literary Category of the Psalter," *Indian Journal of Theology* 14, no 2(1965/4), 84-87.

21) Erich Zenger, *A God of Vengeance?* (1996), 94.

22) Johannes G. Vos, "The Ethical Problem of the Imprecatory Psalms," *Westminster Theological Journal* 4, no 2(1942/5), 123-138; W. Gary Crampton, "What about the Imprecatory Psalms?," *The Trinity Review* 282(2009/3), 1-3; Graham S. Ogden, "Prophetic Oracles against Foreign Nations and Psalms of Communal Lament" (1982), 89.

23) Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms* (1984), 77; Konrad Schaefer, *Psalms*, Berbit Olam: Studies in Hebrew Narrative & Poetry (Collegeville, MN, Liturgical Press, 2001), 323.

everything is against it. Still more, it is an attempt, in the face of the most profound humiliation and helplessness, to suppress the primitive human lust for violence in one's own heart, by surrendering *everything* to God.²⁴⁾

On the basis of such arguments, verses 7-9 can be understood not as an act of retribution but as an act of remembering their painful calamity in God's memory. While in other individual laments, for example, Psalm 31 and 86, lament suddenly shifts to praise because of the belief in God's *hessed* (חסד),²⁵⁾ in Psalm 137 the collective petitioner's belief in God is expressed in their requesting God to remember. Metz writes that in Augustine, "remembering wins ... the status of a hermeneutical category for interpreting one's life story in God's presence." In other words, in memory "the soul becomes transparent to itself in the light of a divine illumination and has its own life path laid out before its eyes."²⁶⁾ In this sense, for the collective speakers of Psalm 137, remembering is a way of interpreting their suffering and searching for the route they should travel in God's memory. Thus, they not only vow to remember but also request that God remember as well. Such remembering is part of the speakers' struggle to overcome the nonidentity between their inherited identity and forced identity, as well as between the God/Zion in the song of Zion and the God/Zion in their actual experience. Their strategy for the struggle, in short, is *remembering their historical suffering within the Lord's remembrance*.

Further, remembering the historical atrocities of the enemies, without making an abstract reconciliation of the nonidentity, is a way of forgetting the *pain* of the suffering, but not the *memory* of suffering. Tod Breyfogle, a professor at the University of Denver, contends, "Forgiveness is ultimately not an act of forgetting, but rather an even more intense remembering—a remembering of truth transformed in love in which the demands of justice give way to mercy."²⁷⁾ True forgiveness cannot arise without such remembering. In this sense, an imprecation in a lament as a form of a song or prayer is a proper exit from suffering and enmity. Therefore, "in the psalm, hope—not despair—is resilient and persuasive."²⁸⁾

24) Erich Zenger, *A God of Vengeance?* (1996), 48.

25) 이성훈, "탄원에서 구원의 찬양으로: 시편 31편을 중심으로" [From lamentation to the joy of salvation in Ps. 31], 『한국기독교신학논총』 34(2004/7), 70.

26) Johann Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society* (2007), 173.

27) Todd Breyfogle, "Forgiveness and Justice in a Secular Polity," *Reviews in Religion & Theology* 6, no 2(1999/5), 134.

28) Walter Brueggemann, *The Message of the Psalms* (1984), 75.

IV. The Liberating Power of Psalm 137 for Koreans and the Korean Diaspora

In this final section, I will examine a common ground between the collective speakers of Psalm 137 and Koreans/Korean diaspora in terms of memory of suffering. Then, I will find through this psalm some implications for the liberation of Koreans/Korean diaspora from their unfinished suffering of colonization.

1. Common Ground 1: Unfinished Suffering and the Experience of Nonidentity

The twentieth century history of Korea is stained with severe sufferings, which still remain in the hearts of contemporary Koreans: The colonial rule of Japanese imperialism (1910-45); the Korean War and division of the country (1950-53); and political confusion and military dictatorship (1950s-1980s). Specifically, in colonial times, Koreans were forced by the colonial government to abstain from the Korean language in schools and to change their names into Japanese ones. In other words, Koreans were made to forget their identities as Koreans and live as the objects of exploitation by and amusement for the Japanese. Such experiences are transmitted to today's Koreans through painful memories. Even more, in Korea there are those still alive who directly suffered under the colonial rule and are suffering with the memories, like the so-called "comfort women," who were forced into prostitution for the Japanese army during World War II.²⁹⁾ Thus, the suffering under colonization is unfinished.

Also, the modern history of the Korean diaspora started at the end of the nineteenth century. Some left their home country in search of food or education, some were escaping oppression by the "unwelcome neighbors," and many were forcibly drafted to Japan, Russia, and other parts of Asia where Japan was conducting wars. In particular, the first Korean diaspora community in the United States was established in 1903 by the many immigrants who came to work on Hawaiian sugar plantations.³⁰⁾ Although

29) In particular, the surviving comfort women are still struggling with the Japanese government. Every Wednesday, they demonstrate in front of the Japanese embassy in Seoul for the establishment of the truth on the comfort women and for the Japanese government's apology. However, to date, the Japanese government has neither admitted the forced prostitution nor officially apologized.

they came to America motivated by “a peculiar ‘gospel’ of the United States as ‘heaven on earth’ and the ‘land flowing with milk and honey,’”³¹⁾ they were treated by plantation owners and supervisors “not as human beings but as a means of production.”³²⁾ They were exploited and beaten by the owners, but could offer no resistance against this inhumanity for fear of getting fired. Lee Hong-Ki, one of the early Korean immigrants to Hawaii in 1903, witnesses that, “We carried our number all the time as an identification card, and we were never called by name, but number.”³³⁾ Therefore, the early Korean immigrants to the United States, as well as to Japan and China, suffered not only physical problems but also the experience of nonidentity. Today, despite the improvements in their physical conditions, the new generations of Korean Americans, who were born or raised in the United States, still suffer an identity problem due to the nonidentity between their ethnic identification and the social culture.³⁴⁾ In sum, the history of the Korean diaspora has been stained with tears due to their experience of nonidentity in foreign lands and the struggle to find their identity. Such experiences and struggle still remain in the contemporary Korean diaspora.³⁵⁾

30) Although there had been a few individual Koreans who had arrived in the United States since the late 1880s, many researchers consider that with the 1903 immigration, the Korean “exile community” was begun in earnest. From 1903 to 1924, when the Immigration Act that prohibited the entrance of Asian immigrants was passed, more than ten thousand – laborers, picture brides, students, intellectuals, and political refugees who had been involved with the Korean independence movement – came into the United States. Su Yon Pak, et al., *Singing the Lord’s Song in a New Land: Korean American Practices of Faith* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2005), 3-5.

31) *Ibid.*, 3.

32) Bong-Youn Choi, *Koreans in America* (Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1979), 95.

33) 서광운, 『미주한인칠십년사』[A seventy-year history of Koreans in America] (서울: 해외교포문제연구소, 1973), 27-30.

34) For a detailed discussions on the identity of the second generation Korean American see Philip Kyung Sik Park, “Korean Identity in North America,” in *Korean American Christian Identity and Calling: Study Packet*, ed. Colleen Chun (Berkeley, CA: Pacific and Asian American Center for Theology and Strategies, 1977), 19-26; Rebecca Kim, “Second-Generation Korean American Evangelicals on the College Campus: Constructing Ethnic Boundaries,” in *Religion and Spirituality in Korean America*, ed. David K. Yoo and Ruth H. Chung (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 172-192.

35) The issue of suffering and identity of Korean diaspora is too complicated to sketch out in this short essay. Therefore, it will be enough to simply mention the problem in this paper.

2. Common Ground 2: Lament as a Song of Korean/Korean Diaspora

In such experiences of suffering, for Koreans and the Korean diaspora, lament has been an important medium for the expression and sublimation of their deep suffering. For example, *Arirang*, the most popular Korean folk song, is a lament over various sufferings in their hard life. Generally, the verses of the song can be easily adapted by a person, according to one's specific life experience, and the refrain then sung collectively. According to Jin Yong-Seon, Director of *JeongseonArirang* Research Institute, "We presume the sound coming out from the deepest heart of Koreans was something like *Arirang*. Koreans try to resolve their mental stresses through the passage of time rather than finding ways to relieve them as soon as possible."³⁶⁾

Hence, there are more than one hundred variations of *Arirang*. In particular, *KyeonggiArirang*, the most famous variation among Koreans and the Korean diaspora, is a lament of being deserted by one's lover. It contains an imprecation against one's lover, who has caused him/her painful suffering:

Arirang, Arirang, Arariyo
 (He/She) goes over the *Arirang* hill.
 My lover, who abandoned and left me,
 will have trouble with his feet even for ten *li*.³⁷⁾

This song is sung to express and sublimate various sufferings, as well as the pain of having being deserted. Indeed, *Arirang* has played an important role for Koreans and the Korean diaspora in overcoming suffering and maintaining identity.³⁸⁾

Furthermore, during colonial times, national and individual laments were expressed in the form of the confession of sin, because Koreans were strictly forbidden to lament their own country's ruin or to criticize the Japanese colonists. For the Korean Great Revival Movement of the early twentieth century, led by Reverend Gil, Seon-Ju, one of the first seven Korean pastors, the confession of sins was its most characteristic feature. According to Claus

36) Jin Yong-Seon, "*JeongseonArirang*," http://www.arirang.re.kr/arboard/read.cgi?board=ar_s1&y_number=7&nnew=2 (accessed December 1, 2011).

37) The first verse of *KyeonggiArirang*. Translation is my own. "*Arirang*" and "*Arariyo*" is an ancient Korean word and the meaning is uncertain. Ten *li* is about 2.5 miles.

38) Jin Yong-Seon contends that *Arirang* has played an important role in the scattering and identity of Koreans in Russia. See chapter 7 of 진용선, 『러시아고려인아리랑연구』 [A research on Russia Korean *Arirang*] (경선: 정선아리랑문화재단, 2009).

Westermann, “Confession of sin can be a constituent part of the lament psalms, whether in the lament of the nation or of the individual.”³⁹⁾ In addition, some Koreans wrote poems and other literary works which implicitly express despair, sorrow, complaint and hope. One example is the “Eight Blessings: Matthew 5:3-12” by Yoon Dong-Ju, a most beloved Korean poet, who lived most of his life out of Korea during colonial times. In the poem, he laments the national despair under colonial rule with some paradoxical expressions. Therefore, lament is a quite familiar genre for Koreans and the Korean diaspora, although Korean lament does not coincide with the characteristics of biblical lament. Then, in what way do Koreans and the Korean diaspora have to read Psalm 137 to be liberated from their unfinished suffering?

3. Implications for the Liberation of Koreans/Korean Diaspora from their Unfinished Suffering of Colonization through the Reading of Psalm 137

In my view, reading Psalm 137 from the perspective of memory can be a helpful means for Koreans and the Korean diaspora to be liberated from the unfinished suffering of colonization. The first requirement for liberation is for Koreans and the Korean diaspora to face the memory of suffering and narrate it. Psalm 137 starts with the narrative of suffering in a foreign land. The collective speakers of the psalm do not suppress their anger, despair, or even enmity. Rather they narrate their experience of nonidentity and express their deep feelings. Thus, Psalm 137 exposes Koreans and Korean diaspora to the need to boldly narrate the memory of suffering that they have tried to forget. Since the political liberation from Japan, Koreans have seldom paid sincere attention to “the past suffering,” on the one hand, in order to accomplish economic survival and success, and on the other hand, to perpetuate the “privilightsia” who had power during colonial times. However, Theodor W. Adorno insists, “The need to lend a voice to suffering is a condition of all truth,” because “suffering is objectivity that weighs upon the subject.”⁴⁰⁾ To face the memory of suffering and narrate it is certainly painful, but without it, human beings cannot be completely free from the suffering; the suffering and oppressors of the past can reappear or be perpetuated in the present or future in another form. Psalm 137 not

39) Claus Westermann, “The Role of the Lament in the Theology of the Old Testament” (1974), 32.

40) Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, tr. by E. B. Ashton (New York: Routledge, 1990), 17-18.

only narrates the speakers' suffering but also challenges its readers courageously to remember and narrate their own suffering and experience of nonidentity. Indeed, the psalm encourages Koreans, especially the Korean diaspora, not to forgive in their ongoing struggle to find and maintain identity by remembering and narrating.

Secondly, the remembering and narrating suffering should be practiced *in God's memory*. As noted above, the speakers of Psalm 137 request God to remember because only in God's remembrance can their memory be a *form of hope*,⁴¹⁾ even in the deepest darkness. It should be noted that the memory of God does not provide an abstract or ahistorical tranquilizer for the suffering. Rather, God remembers human beings' *practical* suffering and *historical* atrocities. However, in many Korean and Korean diaspora churches, neither narrating nor listening to the memory of the collective suffering has received much attention by preachers and song writers.⁴²⁾ This inclination has kept Koreans and the Korean diaspora from remembering and narrating the unfinished suffering of colonization in the memory of God, in a practical or historical sense. As a consequence, in South Korea, the struggles to overcome the historical and collective suffering occur mainly outside of church. Therefore, Psalm 137 challenges Korean and Korean diaspora churches to engage in the memory of the collective suffering of nonidentity in God's practical and historical memory.

Thirdly, Psalm 137 opens up for the victims the possibility of true forgiveness. As written above, in today's Korea, there are still many people alive who suffer with the memory of colonization. Many Koreans — including younger generations who have not directly experienced the colonial rule but have learned the history of the suffering — have deeply-rooted anti-Japanese sentiments, not only because of the past but also because of current issues.⁴³⁾ Many victims think that forgiveness must be preceded by the attackers' sincere apology. However, Margie Tolstoy, a professor at the University of Cambridge, says, "The work of forgiveness takes place as a disposition of love on the part of the injured person and is offered in proportion to the wrong incurred, not in relation to the repentance expressed."⁴⁴⁾ Moreover,

41) For Metz, the dangerous memory, the memory of suffering, is the "liberating memory as a specific form of hope." Johann Baptist Metz, *Faith in History and Society* (2007), 181.

42) Su Yon Pak, et al., *Singing the Lord's Song in a New Land* (2005), 32-33.

43) Between Korea and Japan there are many seen or unseen conflicts on divisive issues, for example, the interpretation of colonial history, the fisheries agreement, and sovereignty over Dokdo, Korea's most eastern island. Thus, generally sports matches between Korea and Japan have been very important in affecting both peoples' pride.

in Psalm 137, the speakers' remembering their suffering and the atrocities of the enemies in the Lord provides them with the possibility of moving from suffering to forgiveness. Therefore, even without the attackers' apology, the victims can be liberated from their suffering and offer forgiveness by remembering the suffering in God's memory.⁴⁵⁾

V. Conclusion

Then, how did the early Korean Christians who lived in the Japanese Colonial Period read Psalm 137? A hint is found in *Sin-hak-ji-nam*, a theological journal issued by the first Presbyterian Theological Seminary in Pyongyang. There is a translation of Psalm 137 in the March 1934 issue of the journal with the title of “流謫의 怨恨” [Resentment of exile] in a form of poetry among theological essays and manuscripts of sermons.⁴⁶⁾ There is no additional comment or exposition, but its expression is more emotional than that of the latest Korean translations of the Bible. Perhaps, even without any comment or exposition, the readers of the time could easily identify themselves with the captives and understand the psalm not only with their mind but also with their heart. I believe that for the early Korean Christians as well as for today's Koreans and Korean diaspora, one of the best hermeneutical keys of Psalm 137 is the readers' experience of suffering and nonidentity.

The experience of suffering is a school for true compassion. The reading of Psalm 137 from the perspective of memory encourages Koreans and the

44) Margie Tolstory, “Woman as Witness in a Post-Holocaust Perspective,” in *A Shadow of Glory: Reading the New Testament after the Holocaust*, ed. Tod Linafelt (New York: Routledge, 2002), 120.

45) John Patton, a renowned pastoral theologian, insists on the importance of pastoral care in dealing with human rage, for example the collective rage in Psalm 137. He writes that “God knows and accepts our rage and helps us contain it, but it cannot be overcome simply by being expressed, even in prayer. Rage must be restrained, prevented from leading to destructive action, and gradually overcome by a relationship that diminishes the feeling of being degraded or ultimately unimportant.” I believe that pastoral care or spiritual direction can be a great help for Koreans in dealing with their enmity and negative sentiments against the Japanese. However, those are not “the requisites” for healing and forgetting the pain, because the Holy Spirit cannot be confined in human aids. John Patton, “Pastoral Ministry in a Fractured World,” *Journal of Pastoral Care* 42, no 1(1988/Spring), 30.

46) 신학지남, “流謫의 怨恨: 시편제 137” [Resentment of exile: Psalm 137], 「신학지남」 16, no 2(1934/3), 40-41.

Korean diaspora to accept the danger in the psalm and to be attentive to the tears of the world with open eyes. According to Theodor W. Adorno, through his or her own experience of suffering, one can learn to see others' suffering and to see the world from the perspective of others.⁴⁷⁾ Currently, there are over seven million Koreans, one-sixth of the population, in one hundred seventy-six countries.⁴⁸⁾ I believe that if the Korean diaspora communities all over the world paid careful attention to their neighbors' tears, they could contribute to the establishment of world peace and justice. To achieve this high goal, what is needed is to sing new songs: "It is time to sing new songs that may help [Korean and] Korean Americans heal their wounded collective psyche and move them toward forgiveness...[and] that give power to move beyond their divisions and toward reconciliation."⁴⁹⁾ Paradoxically, the new songs that Koreans and Korean diaspora need to sing are laments. For them, laments are new songs in the sense that through laments, they remember and narrate the communal memory of suffering which has often been forgotten in contemporary Korean churches. I think it is a first step for the liberation of Koreans and Korean diaspora from their unfinished suffering.

| Key Words |

Psalm 137, memory, nonidentity, suffering, narrative

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47) 이종하, 『아도르노: 고통의 해석학』[Adorno: Hermeneutics of suffering] (과주: 살림, 2007), 16-17.

48) 재외동포재단, "재외동포현황," <http://www.korean.net/portal/PortalView.do> (accessed December 1, 2011).

49) Su Yon Pak, et al., *Singing the Lord's Song in a New Land* (2005), 33.

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한글초록

이 연구는 국내와 해외에 거주하는 한국인들이 아직도 남아 있는 일제 식민의 고통과 분노로부터 해방되는 데에 시편 137편이 어떻게 기여할 수 있는지를 탐구한다. 이를 위해 본 연구자는 역사적, 문학적, 문화적 접근법을 통해 본문을 읽는다. 시편 137편은 이스라엘 백성들이 바벨론 포로생활을 할 때에 쓰여진 집단 비탄시로서, 나라를 잃고 타국에 끌려간 이들의 고통과 비정체성의 경험, 그리고 그것의 극복을 위한 투쟁을 서사적으로 표현하고 있다. 이 시편에는 그들의 정체성을 위협하는 ‘망각’과 정체성을 지키려는 ‘기억’의 역동이 교차하며, 집단적인 시적화자들은 하나님의 기억 안에서 원수를 저주하는 것을 통해 고통과 정체성의 위협을 이겨내기를 시도한다. 한국인과 해외동포들은 역사적으로 식민지배와 그에 따른 해외이주로 인해 비정체성의 고통을 경험하였다. 또한 그러한 고통을 아리랑을 비롯한 여러 종류의 비탄을 통해서 극복해내려고 했다는 점에서 시편 137편의 시적화자들과 공통분모를 갖는다. 그러므로 시편 137편은 오늘날 아직도 식민의 상처로 고통 받는 한국인들과 재외동포들에게 해방으로 가는 하나의 길이 되어준다. 그 길은 고통을 망각하거나 비역사적으로 승화시키는 것이 아니라, 하나님 안에서 생생한 고통의 기억을 함께 이야기하는 것이다. 그리고 역설적으로 이 이야기를 담은 우리의 노래는 ‘비탄’이다.