

## Exploring the theology of resilience: Lessons from the Psalter for the South African context

Jacob Mokhutso  
University of the Free State  
MokhutsoJ@ufs.ac.za

### Abstract

This article is a reflection on the theology of resilience using the book of Psalms, reading specifically from Psalm 137. The Psalmist seems to be addressing a few challenges, with which the Israelites were struggling at that time. First, there is the issue of anomie, where everything was crumbling around them, and disorder was the order of the day. Secondly, the Israelites were bothered by the historical memory of their past – as they remembered Jerusalem. Thirdly, the Israelites wondered how they could sing a song of the Lord in a strange place that was seemingly hostile and ungodly. Thus, the article uses these three challenges to reflect on the current situation within the South African context, by using the Psalter. To further engage this psalm, form-critical method, derived from a German word *Formgeschichte* which means “form-history” is used as a methodology. The article concludes with some challenges taken from the Psalter for the South African populace.

### Keywords

*Exploring; theology of resilience; Psalter; South African; context*

## Introduction

Barker and Kohlenberger (1994:790) give a helpful background to understand the book of psalms that undergirds this article, in stating that the English word ‘psalm’ is a direct translation from the Greek *psalmos*. *Psalmos* means songs sung with musical accompaniment, which is also a translation from the Hebrew word *mizmor*, which is a song accompanied by musical worship and enhanced by poetic form and musical accompaniment. Desmond (2020:6) proffers that psalms were part and parcel of Israel’s

communal life. Craigie (1983:25) mentions that, long before the existence of the book of psalms, there was a tradition of psalmody in ancient Israel which can be traced from the poetic texts contained in the prose narrative concerning Israel's initial period. Furthermore, it should be noted that Israel's poetry has been greatly influenced by the environment to which it has been exposed, such as the environment of the Canaanites, whose forms of worship were firmly established (Desmond 2020:8). Toombs (1971:254) posits that lyric poetry and sacred dance were always used to worship God in Near Eastern society. This tradition was greatly influenced by the sacred literature of the Tigris-Euphrates valley. This ancient poetic art was expressed during festivals, where epic poems were recited while the king, priests, and people dramatically enacted the events described in the poems (Toombs 1971:254).

This practice gave rise to intoned poems of prayer and praise. Having said this, Old Testament scholars, for example Eaton (1967:13), argue that it is difficult to fully understand the historical background of the collection of psalms that is currently contained in the Bible. However, scholars speculate that their compilation may have taken place during the time of the Davidic dynasty (c. 1000–586 BC). Furthermore, it is believed that their composition may be linked to a liturgical usage, or that they belonged to a guild of the temple musicians or resembled each other in theme or wording. Toombs (1971:259) submits that the psalms were composed by leaders of temple choirs and men renowned for their musical skills. The temple choirs consisted of Levites, who had collections of psalms which were sung in a distinctive style.

It is assumed that these different groupings may have played a role in contributing to the current structure of the psalms. It should also be noted that the composition and singing of psalms was a skill performed by the Temple personnel (Eaton 1967:13). In the temple, there were guilds and orders of sacred ministers (priests, prophets, scribes, etc.), including those who were specialists in psalmody and music. Kings would, at times, also do this work, composing royal prayers and hymns, but members of the specialist orders would, at times, do the work for them (Eaton 1967:13).

## Types of psalms

Eaton (1967:17) shares nine types of psalms, namely:

- Hymns
- Laments of the community
- Royal psalms
- Laments of the individual
- Thanksgiving of the individual
- Pilgrimage songs
- Thanksgiving of the community
- Wisdom poems
- Liturgies

According to Allen (1983:237), Psalm 137 has multiple personalities: “it begins as if it were a communal complaint, continues like a hymn and ends as a curse”. Mare (2020:118) mentions that the psalm is a communal lament. According to Barker and Kohlenberger III (1994:927), this psalm is a communal lament, a song of Zion, and a curse.

## Methodology

To further engage this psalm, form-critical method will be used as a methodology. This term is derived from a German word, *Formgeschichte*, which means ‘form-history’. Adjei-Boadi (2013:31) avers that this method emerged in response to a lack of historical authenticity of the gospel stories. The primary goal of this methodology is to try and recover a full living history of ancient literature. According to Adjei-Boadi (2013:31), “Its other goal is to operate as a tool of exegesis to help grasp the meaning of texts”. This method is the brainchild of Hermann Gunkel, who believed that liturgical forms emerge from the interpretation of settings to this psalter (deClaisse-Walford, Jacobson & Tanner 2014:14). Gunkel believed that different settings produced various liturgical forms to address occasions in life and needs. Therefore, to fully comprehend the genre or form of a particular psalm, one must first understand the settings or “get behind”

the texts of the psalms to understand the “life settings” that produced the forms.

For Gunkel, a genre or “form” implies a specific life setting out of which it evolved and from which it could not be abstracted. In Gunkel’s view, in order to properly understand a liturgical text, one has to imagine the cultic life setting that created it and to interpret it in that setting (deClaissé-Walford, Jacobson & Tanner 2014:14).

Lastly, Kalawole (2022:28) argues that this method allows interpreters to gain insights into a text, based on what they can discover about its formal characteristics, that can offer ideas about its probable social settings and functions.

## **Historical background**

Farisani (2004; 2008) has done extensive work studying the Israelites who were taken to exile as well as those who were left behind. Simango (2018:217) submits that this psalm is a record of the sufferings and traumatic experiences of those who were exiled in Babylon. It recalls their experience during the days of the conquest and the destruction of Jerusalem in 587 BCE, sharing this after their return to their homeland. Desmond (2020:52) argues that if the psalm was written by the exilic community that returned from Babylon, it could have been composed in 538 BCE, the year when Cyrus, King of Persia, allowed the Israelites to return to Jerusalem (2 Chron. 36:22–23; Ez. 1:1–4).

Goulder (1998:224) brings another aspect to the readers of this psalm in saying that the words, “There we sat ... there they that led us captive required us” prove that it was not in Jerusalem; again, the psalm says Jerusalem, may I not forget you, “the singer has arrived recently in Diaspora, but he had remembered Zion in Babylon” (Goulder 1998:224).

Farisani (2008:69) asserts that Babylon became a superpower in about the year 601 B.C. The rise to power of Babylon led to the capture of Judah in 597 B.C., after King Jehoiakim refused to pay the annual tribute to Babylon. At the time, the Babylonian regime included Babylonians, Ammonites, Edomites, and Moabites who were allies, and together they captured Jerusalem (Farisani 2008:71). An important point to note is that

not everyone was taken to exile. Those who were taken to exile included the leading class, craftsmen, state officials, priests, army officers, and the most educated Israelites (Farisani 2004:380). The poor, less skilled and small landowners and the landless lower classes remained behind in Judah. The Babylonian deportation policy was to take only the influential people. It is believed that this approach was meant to leave the conquered nations ungovernable without leaders. Alstola (2018:14) adds that the deportation was also meant to punish Judah, again to prevent future unrest, increase agricultural output, and provide the state with taxes and a work force for Babylon. Desmond (2020:49) mentions that in this psalm, King Zedekiah (2 Kgs. 25:1–12; Jer. 52:10–11) was also among the captives taken to Babylon and that this was the third deportation to Babylon. The first deportation was during the reign of Jehoiakim in 606 BCE, when Daniel was taken, as recorded in Daniel 1:1–7. The second one was during the reign of Jehoiakim in the year 597 BCE, when prophet Ezekiel was taken to Babylon, as recorded in 2 Kings 24:10–16. Psalm 137 refers to a third deportation which is said to have been the most catastrophic of the three because it involved the destruction of Jerusalem (Desmond 2020:49).

Farisani (2004:381) further gives a more detailed context of the group of the Israelites who were taken to Babylon, as this “meant a deep social uprooting”. They lost their homes, land and social status, and were removed from their clans and families. The temple had been destroyed, and the altar and vessels of worship were taken to Babylon (Farisani 2008:81). The temple was burnt; its bronze pillars and furniture were smashed (Farisani 2008:81). Farisani (2008:82) further states that the destruction of the temple left the Israelites in a spiritual crisis because of the role the temple played in their worship. The Israelites believed that it was in the temple where God dwelled; no worship was possible without the temple (Farisani 2008:82). Skinner (2013:274) elaborates on this point when referring to 2 Chr. 7:14–15, where God declares:

If my people, which are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land. Now mine eyes shall be open, and mine ears attend unto the prayer that is made in this place.

Therefore, for the Israelites, a temple was God’s dwelling place, a place of fervent prayer, a place where God himself would answer God’s people and where God dwells among his people (Skinner 2013:274). For this reason, the Hebrew word *heikhal* was used to refer to the Jerusalem temple and could be translated as “palace” (1 Kgs. 21:11; 2 Kgs. 20:18). Furthermore, the word *heikhal* is said to be borrowed from the earlier Sumerian word *e-gal* “large house, palace, the residence of the ‘big man’ or king” (Skinner 2013:275). Another crisis was the destruction of Jerusalem, a place the Israelites understood as Zion, the city of God. According to Mare (2010:120), the Israelites understood Zion as the dwelling place of God; they believed that they would always experience prosperity, safety, and security in Zion. They believed that, even if other nations attacked them, Zion would remain standing forever. For them, Zion was a symbol of refuge and protection, as well as a source of joy. Skinner (2013:276) again posits that, in Deuteronomy 16:16, “[t]hree times in the year every male of yours will see the Lord your God in the place that he will choose”. For the Israelites, seeing the face of the Lord was no inconsequential concept in ancient Israel. Its importance seems to have been lost in some passages or, at the very least, downplayed over time. However, it was deeply entrenched in their faith (Skinner 2013:276).

## **Anomie – breakdown**

Verses 1–4: “By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion. There on the poplars we hung our harps, for there our captors asked us for songs, our tormentors demanded songs of joy; they said, ‘Sing us one of the songs of Zion! How can we sing the songs of the Lord while in a foreign land?’” (NIV).

The “rivers of Babylon” refers to the Tigris and the Euphrates, their tributaries, and a network of irrigation canals (Mare 2020:119). The first verse of this psalm displays the emotional state of the Israelites, “we sat and wept”, and also their brokenness when they remembered Jerusalem their home. deClaisse-Walford, Jacobson and Tanner (2014:953) locate this psalm among the psalms known as community lament or imprecatory psalms. The word ‘imprecatory’ refers to the psalms which evoke God’s wrath upon their enemies. According to Goulder (1998:225), the traditional posture

of mourning was sitting on the ground. This was the practice, whether individual or corporate, as recorded in Isaiah 47:1, Lamentations 1:1, and Ezra 9:4. Goulder (1998:225) also points out that liturgical weeping in Israel was traditionally symbolised by water. In 1 Samuel 7:6, Samuel poured out water before the Lord. Gathering by the rivers is purposeful and is used for ritual washing. The mention of harps also gives the impression of the communal chanting of lament (Goulder 1998:225). “The first three verses indicate a date for the psalm: These are the words of exiles ...” (Wilcock 2001: 252).

In verse 3, the psalmist uses the words, “our captors and our tormentors”. The word “captor” is derived from the Hebrew verbal root *saba*, meaning “captured in the course of battle”. Again, the word “tormentors” comes from a Hebrew root word *talal*, meaning “to mock” or “to trifle”. The request in verse 3, “Sing us one of the songs of Zion!” was equivalent to mocking: “Where is your God?”. It is interesting that the captors or tormentors requested the songs of Zion, whereas in verse 4, the response mentions the Lord’s song. “How can we sing the songs of the Lord while in a foreign land?” (NIV). Mare (2020:120) asserts that the Israelites’ captors were mocking not only Israel, but also Israel’s God: “The motivation for this request was not to glorify Yahweh, but to make a caricature of Him and his people.” The reason for this is that, for the Israelites, Zion was a dwelling place of God (deClaisse-Walford, Jacobson & Tanner 2014:953). Desmond (2020:50) argues that, for the Israelites, their “identity is rooted in Zion”.

It would perhaps be interesting to take a brief look at the history of Zion. The first time the name “Zion” is mentioned in the Bible is during the time when David defeated the Jebusites who resided in Jerusalem. The name “Zion” was formerly a name of a fortress of the Jebusites which was renamed “the city of David” (2 Sam. 5:7). The ark of the covenant was brought to Zion (2 Sam. 6:12), and later Solomon constructed the Lord’s temple there (1 Kgs 8:1). Zion was not only the city of David, but also Yahweh’s dwelling place; it symbolised the presence of Yahweh, and Israel’s centre of worship (Desmond 2020:50).

The Israelites' theology of resilience emanated from the fact that their understanding that God was greater than their trials. According to Toombs (1971:255), the deity worshipped in Jerusalem was:

“God most High”. He was revered as the king of the gods, the God above gods, and his sovereignty expressed itself particularly in his creative activity. Faith in God as a creator was not a crucial part of Israel's covenant religion, which focused instead on God's saving acts of history and in particular in the events of the Exodus.

Despite having witnessed the Jerusalem Temple being destroyed, and being in a foreign land, the Israelites' God was not deserving of being mocked by foreigners, in this case the Babylonians. As much as it seemed that their lives were over, they remained resilient because of their theology. Simango (2018:217) captures this so succinctly when saying:

At the sight of the ruined city and the temple, the psalmist vents with passionate intensity his deep love for Zion as he recalls the distress of alienation from their sanctuary. Therefore, this psalm touches the raw nerve of Israel's faith.

## **Historical memory**

Secondly, the historical memory of the past bothered the Israelites. “Although the psalm refers to a historical event, there's still no adequate evidence for where and when it was composed. It could have been written in Babylon during the exile or in Jerusalem after the return from exile” (Desmond 2020:52). In verses 5 and 6, the community takes an oath to the Lord. Verses 6–9 contain imprecatory words aimed at the community's enemies (deClaisse-Walford, Jacobson & Tanner 2014:955, 956). Verses 3–6 emphasise the fact that:

... our tormentors demanded songs of joy; they said, “Sing us one of the songs of Zion!” ... If I forget you, O Jerusalem, may my right hand forget its skill. May my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth if I do not remember you If I do not consider Jerusalem my highest joy.

The Israelites find themselves in Babylon, and Jerusalem and the temple are destroyed; there is no king and no court. The word ‘there’ in verses



1 and 3 emphasises the location of this psalm and is “pointing a verbal finger” (deClaisse-Walford, Jacobson & Tanner 2014:954). One can sense the disassociation with Babylon as a place foreign to them. Mare (2020:122) states that for the Israelites to forget Jerusalem was equivalent to forgetting God. They could not forget the *heikhal* (“palace”) (2 Kgs. 21:11; 2 Kgs. 20:18).

## South African context

“By the rivers of Babylon, we sat and wept when we remembered Zion. There on the poplars we hung our harps, for there our captors asked us for songs, our tormentors demanded songs of joy ...” (verse 1–3).

South Africa is also weeping. As a country, there are captors and tormentors just like the Israelites of old. South Africans are in exile. Although South Africa is a country of birth to many, currently it is unrecognisable. It is foreign, and strange. To elaborate further, four key issues experienced by South Africans are explored to elaborate further on this point, without turning a blind eye to many other issues with which the country is battling.

## Economy

Rodrik (2008:669) avers that, since the beginning of the democratic dispensation, the government of the African National Congress has put remarkable reforms in place. The government’s sole purpose was to level the playing field of the South African economy, which was dominated by the White minority, with the Black majority side-lined, in order to address the disparities of the past as well as open the economy to international trade and capital flows (Rodrik 2008:669). A decade after the democratically elected government took power, the economy of South Africa had not grown as anticipated; instead per capita GDP grew at an average 1.2 per cent per annum, compared to that of sub-Saharan Africa at 1.1 per cent and Latin America at 0.8 per cent: considerably lower than that of East Asia at 3.7 per cent (Rodrik 2008:770). This has resulted in a very abnormal level of unemployment in South Africa, which is not comparable to anywhere in the world.

South Africa's job crisis stems ultimately from comparatively weak long-term growth and rising capital intensity. Almost two million jobs have been lost over the past two decades as a result of investment being channelled increasingly into capital-intensive sectors and technologies. South African manufacturing is now far more capital-intensive than in middle income countries like Brazil, Mexico, Korea, and Malaysia. Labour-intensive sectors have declined relative to more capital-intensive sectors, and there has been an economy-wide trend away from labour-intensive techniques. Unemployment is now a major determinant of poverty and inequality (Nattrass 1998:1).

## **Crime**

Buttner (2022:1) posits that South Africa is known for persistently high levels of crime, especially violent crime. Buttner (2022:1) qualifies this by stating that, in 2019, the South African Police Service reported a total of 21,325 murders, corresponding to 58 murders being committed daily. This puts South Africa with the highest murder rate worldwide (Buttner 2022:1). Buttner (2022:2) again mentions that the economists and sociologists link this high level of crime to inequality. StatsSA (2022) notes that crime has risen in South Africa to such an extent that nearly all citizens, irrespective of their economic status or where they reside, have experienced crime.

Obviously, crime in South Africa is not restricted to murder. There is generally a high level of violent crime in South Africa. Sexual offences are another pandemic with which South Africa is wrestling. In 2019, 53,000 cases of sexual offences were reported. Out of the 53,000, 43,000 cases were of rape. This means that 188 cases of rape are being reported daily (Buttner 2022:8). In terms of the effects of crime, Buttner (2022:9) argues:

This is illustrated by results from the Victims of Crime Survey (VOCS) 2019/2020, in which 58 per cent of adults aged 16 years or older reported feeling unsafe when walking alone in their area of residence at night (StatsSA 2020); 31 per cent reported to have taken physical protection measures (for example, burglar doors); 7 per cent invested in private security (for example, paid armed response), and

2.5 per cent carried a gun to protect themselves from criminals, as recorded by the VOCS 2018/2019 (StatsSA 2019b).

These statistics have led to research being conducted on the impact of these staggering crime statistics. Eagle (2015:87) argues that 76 per cent of adults have reported being exposed to a traumatic experience. Among the respondents reported by the Social and Health Survey (SASH), almost 50 per cent of the adults they interviewed stated that they had personally experienced more than one traumatic experience, some as many as seven experiences (Eagle 2015:87). Corruption is another factor that has brought pain in South Africa.

South Africa scored 45 points out of 100 on the 2016 Corruption Perceptions Index reported by Transparency International. Corruption Index in South Africa averaged 46.97 points from 1996 until 2016, reaching an all-time high of 56.80 points in 1996 and a record low of 41 points in 2011. A tenderpreneur is common corruption in South Africa (Georgieva 2017:49).

In terms of the corruption level, the WJP Rule of Law Index noted in 2017 that, based on 102 countries, South Africa was ranked 36th, on par with countries such as Hungary and Croatia, and far below Denmark, Norway, and Sweden. South Africa is further ranked below Botswana and Ghana, countries ranked 31st and 34th in the world (Georgieva 2017:50).

## **Loadshedding**

Loadshedding has become a constant reminder that all is not well in South Africa. It has become a constant disrupter of the lives of the South African populace. It has been reported that loadshedding costs the South African economy R899 million per day (Naidoo 2023). Botha (2019:12) mentions quite a number of challenges that result from loadshedding, such as its effects on businesses that cannot operate optimally or at all. Loadshedding intensifies the level of crime, as criminals take advantage of the loadshedding period. An increase in cable theft further exacerbates the stress South Africans are facing and costs the country even more for replacing these cables. This further leads to vandalism of government buildings and businesses, especially those without power generators, during

loadshedding. Botha (2019:12) further refers to the damage to electrical appliances, adding to the burden many South Africans are carrying.

## **Social cohesion**

Tshawane (2009:55–56) recalls Desmond Tutu’s vision of a rainbow nation during the dawn of democracy. According to Tshawane (2009:59), a rainbow is a sign of remembrance after the storm; it is a sign of a promise made by God that there will never be floods again that will destroy all flesh, as recorded in Genesis 10. The notion of a rainbow nation as coined by Tutu meant:

God’s dream is that all human beings created in his own image and likeness live together as one big family. Here members of a family have a gentle caring and compassion for one another (Tutu 2004:23). However, for Tutu members of one family agree to disagree. According to Tutu, “we are not expected at all times to be unanimous or to have a consensus on every conceivable subject. What is needed is to respect one another’s points of view (Tutu 2004:22) (in Tshawane 2009:124).

Geldenhuis and Kelly-Louw (2020:2) indicate that, despite the fact that South Africa went through a period of transition, a considerable number of cases of hate speech-related racism reflect that as a country, there’s still a long way to go for social cohesion to materialise.

## **Drawing parallels from Psalm 137 within a South African context**

Mare (2020:116) argues that “the experience of exile is not confined to the pages of the Bible dealing with the Babylonian exile. Exile still happens in our midst”. Mare (2020:117 citing Walter Brueggemann 1997:115) further argues that the Jewish people were geographically displaced, which led to them losing a structured, reliable world with meaning for them. Therefore, exile is not necessarily only a geographical issue; it is a social, moral, cultural, liturgical, and spiritual issue; an understanding that one is in a hostile and alien situation.

Brueggemann therefore proposes that this loss of a structured, consistent and dependable world where cherished symbols of meaning are ridiculed and ejected and where value systems are diminished is an important point of contact between the ancient texts and contemporary experience. The loss of the reliable and known world results in many people living in a strange and unfamiliar situation that does not seem like home but creates a deep sense of being in exile (Mare 2020:117).

Living in South Africa is like living in exile, just like the Israelites of old did. As much as they were surrounded by beautiful rivers, vegetation, and poplar trees, all beauty, they were still weeping. South Africa as well is surrounded by beauty such as, among many other examples, the misty mountains of the Magoebaskloof; God's window in Mpumalanga; Sabie waterfalls in Mpumalanga; Camdeboo National Park; Clarens; and the Kruger National Park. Again, South is also surrounded by wealth in terms of minerals, different languages, and many racial and cultural groups. However, despite the beauty South Africa has to offer, one can almost smell the stench of poverty, unemployment, and frustration that many South Africans face on a daily basis. South Africa is weeping, as women, children, people living with disability, and members of the LGBTIQ+ community are killed senselessly. Crime has left many with scars of losing their belongings and their loved ones. Racially motivated attacks and hate speech are reported in the media year after year.

However, being in this foreign land, our captors, and our tormentors demand songs of joy; they say, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion" in verse 2 already but, "How can we sing the songs of the Lord while in a foreign land?" (verse 4). Simango (2018:224) argues that refusing to sing the Lord's song is not giving up: rather it is defiance, for "[i]t was impossible for the Israelite captives to sing a song intended to praise YHWH for the amusement of their masters". According to Simango (2018:217), the Israelites' captives refused to participate in mockery. The Israelites' theology of resilience was embedded in their love and devotion to their God.

The only weapon they had was their words, words addressed to Yahweh, whereby they verbalised their experiences of powerlessness and humiliation, their feelings of anger and retribution. This

rhetoric of violence is uttered by people who do not have the means or ability to take vengeance into their own hands; therefore, they commit it into the hands of Yahweh, to whom vengeance belongs (Mare 2020:125).

In other words, even though the Israelites were in exile in a foreign land, they remained resilient, and their theology of resilience was based on their belief in God. Desmond (2020:56) mentions that “[t]he psalmist, instead of taking revenge by himself, submits his anger to YHWH ...”. What is resilience? Herrman *et al.* (2011:258) define resilience as a “positive adaptation, or the ability to maintain or regain mental health, despite experiencing adversity”. Danes (1997:1) gives five characteristics of resilience:

- Positive – One does not become overwhelmed by dangers and threats.
- Focused – One determines where one is headed and sticks to those goals despite the barriers.
- Flexible – People look at other options when faced with diversity.
- Organised – People develop structures, approaches to manage uncertainty.
- Proactive – They work with change rather than fight it (Danes 1997:2).

According to Simango (2018:225), the Israelites’ love for Zion is not separate from the love for God. For the exiled community of Israelites, love for God and Jerusalem was intertwined because of the temple. Verses 5–6 do not necessarily reflect the words of people who are clinging to the past, to what was; but instead, it is a record of seeing people who are clinging to what is dear to them. This is so profound that:

[t]he psalmist shows his passionate love for Jerusalem, the central place of worship. His devotion takes the form of a solemn vow invoking upon himself the penalty of total or partial paralysis. Should he forget where his loyalty lies, namely Jerusalem, he would lose control of the most important organs of a musician – his hands and tongue (Simango 2018:226).

These words for the psalmist are not words of clinging to what was, but instead they are a song of loyalty to both Jerusalem and God. For this reason, Simango (2018:228) avers that the “psalmist deems it impossible

or unthinkable that he would forget Jerusalem and not exalt her”. The psalmist’s theology of resilience is embedded in love, love for God.

Those who were abducted to Babylon in 586 B.C. after the fall of Jerusalem, were faced with the choice of either conforming to the way of life and customs of the local inhabitants (and thereby losing their own identity and being absorbed by the others) or of rejecting the heathen customs at all cost[s] and living in a separate community. The majority chose the latter path and preserved their own traditions; they clung to their religion, particularly the law (tora) (Van Zyl et al. 1979:217).

Even if all seemed to be crumbling before them, they could not afford to make a mockery of their faith in God. Jackelen (2019:19) highlights what the theology of resilience does:

A theology of resilience will enable us to make sense of the struggle of women and men for the health, wellbeing, and future of their children. We will be able again and again to draw God’s mercy into this world with our words and actions, whether words of prayer and words of advocacy for human rights, equality, peace, justice, and reconciliation, whether humanitarian help and support for development. With a theology of resilience, we will be able to confront the trends and powers that hamper our constructive engagement with the greatest challenges of our time.

## **Challenges from the Psalter for the South African populace**

### **Permanent victims**

Kumalo (2018:2 & 14) reflects on an organisation called the Black Methodist Consultation, which was formed in the Methodist Church of Southern Africa and founded during 21–23 September 1976. This organisation was founded to do the following:

... the MCSA was run by white bishops; having racially discriminated circuits; preaching a Eurocentric theology; structured in racially separated circuits; having extremely poor churches on the one hand and extremely rich churches; and having whites in every

structure with no black representation. That is no longer the case. Today, out of the 12 bishops of our church, only two of them are white (one of them is already exiting) and the rest are black.

Having said this, Kumalo (2018:14) avers that the existence of the BMC within the MCSA should be revised because “You cannot be permanent victims, when the call to be free already materialized and the chains of imprisonment have been removed, at least legislatively.” This article therefore borrows Kumalo’s sentiments that, after twenty-seven years of democracy, South Africans should not take the stance of being permanent victims; instead, they should reclaim their voice in changing their current exilic experience. To take back the power that democracy gives. To stand up, dust themselves off, take up their lyres, and make music that would sound good to them again.

### **Resilience has a source**

Reflecting on Psalm 137 clearly shows that resilience is not something like manna that falls from heaven, it comes from somewhere. Herrman *et al.* (2011:260) name a few sources from which resilience comes. Only two sources are noted, namely personal and environmental factors. For personal factors, Danes (1997:260) refers to social relationships and demographic factors. In other words, the community to which one belongs can be a source of one’s resilience. Environmental factors include factors such as social support, which include secure attachments such as family stability, or generally secure relationships, and so forth (Danes 1997:260). For the Israelites, their resilience was based on their community, like Africans say “Motho ke motho ka batho, Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu” (translation: A person is a person through others), for them as a group, and their theology. However, this raises questions as to how South Africans would develop resilience whilst fragmented by race, class, sexual orientation, denominationalism, and ethnicity. How would the country remain resilient if its citizens are tearing each other apart? How would the South African populace remain resilient and withstand their captors whilst tearing and wounding each other with racist, ethnic, homophobic, and xenophobic language and actions? A big lesson from this psalter is that unity is the greatest source of resilience.



## **Patriotism**

Having reflected on Ps. 137, one of the critical points is the fact that Jerusalem or Zion was not simply a place where the Israelites resided, or in which they were born; it was a place deep in their hearts. South Africans need to have a similar understanding, as beautifully noted in the Constitution of South Africa in the following manner:

[w]e, the people of South Africa, recognize the injustices of our past; honour those who suffered for justice and freedom in our land; respect those who have worked to build and develop our country; and believe that South Africa belongs to all who live in it, united in our diversity ... (Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996).

“South Africa belongs to all who live in it”: these are not merely words written down in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa. Corruption and the circus taking place in parliament will continue. This is another source of resilience which will equip the South African populace to say to themselves when something wrong happens, “I should do something because this is my land too”. However, how can all be well when 27 years after democracy, South Africans are still sitting down, lyres hanging on the poplar trees and weeping? Reflecting on recovering the prophetic voice of the church, Baron and Masenya (2020:2) mention that, during the apartheid times, we had the Allan Boesaks and the Tutus, who were prophets. They (Baron and Masenya 2020:2) argue that, at present, “[a] significant percentage of church members do not see ‘prophetic’ as a disposition of God for all members of the church but rather an extended ‘function’ bestowed on a selected ecclesial leader corps”. The same may be said about South Africans, waiting for someone to come and change the challenges they are facing twenty-seven years into democracy.

## **Conclusion**

This article has addressed the theology of resilience by reflecting on Ps. 137, where the Israelites were captives in Babylon, a foreign land. The article juxtaposes the context of this psalm with the situation in South Africa and submits that South Africa has become a foreign land. The article further has explored that exile does not necessarily speak about a geographical

location but rather refers to a social, moral, cultural, liturgical, and spiritual issue; an understanding that one is in a hostile and alien situation. Mare (2020:126) defines exile as “humanitarian crises, sickness, mistreatment of ethnic minorities, political upheaval, economic crises, and the horror of violent crime” as “expressions of exile in today’s world”. To demonstrate this, the article has drawn parallels between the current South African context and that of Psalm 137, showing how South Africa has become foreign due to a factor such as a dwindling economy, which has been made worse by loadshedding, uncontrollable crime statistics, and worst of all, unstable social cohesion. The article submits that despite the fact that the Israelites in Psalm 137 were without weapons, they were armed with a deep love for Israel, to a point where they refused to partake in the mockery of their land by singing songs of Zion in a foreign land. Instead, their theology of resilience anchored their faith in God and kept their identity intact despite being in a foreign land. The Israelites refused to give in to their circumstances or to trade their faith in God and their love for Zion, their land. This article proposes that South Africans can learn from this psalm and be challenged to turn things around by being patriotic, as well as by refusing to be permanent victims, and instead hanging on to a theology that has made them resilient.

## Bibliography

- Adjei-Boadi, S. 2013. *The historical-critical method and its assessment of Jesus as a historical being or a mythical figure*. Unpublished master’s thesis, Kwame Nkrumah University of Science and Technology, Kumasi, Ghana.
- Allen, L.C. (ed.) 1983. *Word biblical commentary: Psalms 101–150*. Texas: Word Books.
- Alstola, T. 2018. *Judeans in Babylonia: A study of deportees in the sixth and fifth centuries BCE*. Unpublished master’s thesis, University of Helsinki, Helsinki, Finland.
- Botha, T. 2019. *The impact of “load-shedding” within the Nelson Mandela Bay restaurant industry*. Unpublished Honours research report, The Independent Institute of Education, Sandton.

- Barker, K.L. & Kohlenberger III, J.R. 1994. *The expositor's Bible commentary – Abridged edition*. Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan.
- Baron, E. & Maponya, M.S. 2020. The recovery of the prophetic voice of the church: The adoption of a “missional church” imagination. *Verbum et Ecclesia*, 41(1): 1–9. [Online]. Available: <http://dx.doi.org/10.4102/ve.v41i1.2077>
- Buttner, N. 2022. Local inequality and crime: New evidence from South Africa. *Volkswirtschaftliche Reihe*, V, pp. 89–22. [Online]. Available: <http://hdl.handle.net/10419/251968>
- Craigie, P.C. (ed.) 1983. *Word biblical commentary Psalms 1–50*. Texas: Word Books.
- deClaissé-Walford, N., Jacobson, R.A. & Tanner, B.L. 2014. *The new international commentary on the Old Testament: The Book of Psalms*. Grand Rapids, Michigan. William B. Eerdmans Publishing Company.
- Danes, S.M. 1997. *Understanding and building resilience*. University of Minnesota: Extension.
- Desmond, C.K.L. 2020. *A comprehensive analysis of Psalm 137. A communal lament*. Unpublished master's thesis, Dallas International University, Dallas.
- Eagle, G. 2015. Crime, fear, and continuous traumatic stress in South Africa: What place social cohesion? *Psychology in Society* 49, pp. 83–98. [Online]. Available <http://dx.doi.org/10.17159/2309-8708/2015/n49a7>
- Eaton, J.H. 1967. *Psalms*. London: SCM Press Ltd.
- Farisani, E. 2004. A sociological analysis of Israelites in Babylonian exile. *OTE*, 17(3):380–388.
- Farisani, E. 2008. The Israelites in Palestine during the Babylonian exile. *OTE*, 21(1): 69–88.
- Geldenhuis, J. & Kelley-Louw, M., 2020. Hate speech and racist slurs in South African context: Where to start? *PER/PELJ* 23: 1–46. [Online]. Available: <http://dx.doi.org/10.17159/1727-3781/2020/v23i0a7043>

- Georgieva, N.H.K. 2017. Corruption in South Africa: Genesis and outlook. *Journal of Process Management – New Technologies, International*, 5(4):49–54. [Online]. Available: doi:10.5937/jouproman5-15160
- Goulder, M.D. 1998. *The Psalms of the return (Book V, Psalms 107–150)*. Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press.
- Herrman, H., Steward, D.E., Diaz-Granados, N., Berger, E.L., Jackson, B. & Yuen, T. 2011. What is resilience? *La Revue canadienne de Psychiatrie*, 56(5):258–265.
- Jackelen, A. 2019. The need for a theology of resilience, coexistence, and hope. *The Ecumenical Review*, 71(1):14–20.
- Kalawole, O.P. 2022. An exploration of tools for modern critical studies of the New Testament. *International Journal of Research in Humanities and Social Studies*, 9(1):23–35.
- Kumalo, S.R. 2018. Reverend Linda Mandindi and the quest for Black Methodist Consultation: Muted voices are enabled to speak. *Studia Historiae Ecclesiasticae*, 44(3):1–18. [Online]. Available: <https://doi.org/10.25159/2412-4265/2980>
- Mare, L.P. 2020. Psalm 137: Exile – Not the time for singing the Lord’s song. *O TE*, 23(1):116–128.
- Naidoo, P. 2023. Loadshedding may cost SA R899 million a day, SARB says. *Moneyweb*. [Online]. Available: <https://www.moneyweb.co.za/news/south-africa/load-shedding-may>
- Rodrik, D. 2008. Understanding South Africa’s economic puzzles. *Economic of Transition*, 16(4):769–797.
- Simango, D. 2018. A comprehensive reading of Psalm 137. *O TE*, 31(1):217–242.
- Skinner, A.C., 2013. Seeing God in his temple: A significant theme in Israel’s Psalms. Religious Studies Center. [Online]. Available: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/facpub/3497>

- Statistics South Africa (StatsSA), (2022). *Experience of crime in SA increased over the 2021/2022 period*. [Online] Availabl: <https://www.statssa.gov.za/?p=15700> [Accessed: 04 February 2023].
- Wilcock, M. (ed.) 2001. *The message of Psalms 73–150*. Nottingham: Inter-  
varsity Press.
- Toombs, L.E. 1971. The Psalms. In Laymon, C.M. 1971. *The interpreters' one volume commentary on the Bible*. Nashville, Tennessee: Abingdon Press.
- Tshawane, N.J. 2009. *The rainbow nation: A critical analysis of the notions of community in the thinking of Desmond Tutu*. Unpublished PhD Dissertation, University of South Africa, Pretoria.
- Tutu, D. 2004. *God has a dream: A vision of hope for our time*. Johannesburg: Rider.
- Van Zyl, A.H., Eybers, H., Le Roux, J.H., Prinsloo, W.S., Swanepoel, F.A. & Vosloo, W. 1979. *Israel and her neighbours*. Durban: Butterworths.