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# By the Rivers of Babylon: Foundations for a Vincentian Response to the Challenge of Refugees and Displaced People[1]

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***Abstract***

The global displacement crisis has escalated, with over 100 million individuals uprooted by conflict and persecution, as reported by the UNHCR. This article examines Psalm 137, a biblical lament reflecting the anguish of exiled Israelites in Babylon, and explores its relevance to contemporary displacement experiences. The psalm's vivid portrayal of sorrow and longing resonates with the hardships faced by modern refugees, such as those from Ukraine and Myanmar. By analyzing the psalm's structure and themes, the article highlights its dual role: denouncing injustice and offering hope. A Vincentian perspective is applied, emphasizing the necessity for compassionate action and advocacy for displaced individuals. The discussion underscores the importance of empathy, solidarity, and proactive support in addressing the ongoing challenges of global displacement.

La crise mondiale du déplacement s'est aggravée, avec plus de 100 millions de personnes déracinées par les conflits et les persécutions, comme le rapporte le HCR. Cet article examine le Psaume 137, une complainte biblique reflétant l'angoisse des Israélites exilés à Babylone, et explore sa pertinence pour les expériences de déplacement contemporaines. La description vivante du chagrin et de la nostalgie du psaume résonne avec les difficultés rencontrées par les réfugiés modernes, tels que ceux d'Ukraine et du Myanmar. En analysant la structure et les thèmes du psaume, l'article met en évidence son double rôle : dénoncer l'injustice et offrir de l'espoir. Une perspective vincentienne est appliquée, soulignant la nécessité d'une action compatissante et d'un plaidoyer pour les personnes déplacées. La discussion souligne l'importance de l'empathie, de la solidarité et d'un soutien proactif pour relever les défis actuels des déplacements de population dans le monde.

La crisis mundial del desplazamiento se ha agravado, con más de 100 millones de personas desarraigadas por conflictos y persecuciones, según informa ACNUR. Este artículo examina el Salmo 137, un lamento bíblico que refleja la angustia de los israelitas exiliados en Babilonia, y explora su relevancia para las experiencias contemporáneas de desplazamiento. La vívida representación del dolor y la nostalgia que hace el salmo resuena con las dificultades a las que se enfrentan los refugiados modernos, como los de Ucrania y Myanmar. Al analizar la estructura y los temas del salmo, el artículo destaca su doble función: denunciar la injusticia y ofrecer esperanza. Se aplica una perspectiva vicenciana, haciendo hincapié en la necesidad de una acción compasiva y de defensa de las personas desplazadas. El debate subraya la importancia de la

[1] This article partially reproduces a paper by the same author submitted in April 2023 during his doctoral studies at the Catholic Theological Union at Chicago.

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empatía, la solidaridad y el apoyo proactivo para hacer frente a los retos actuales del desplazamiento global.

***Keywords*:** Displaced people, Refugees, Vulnerability, Hope

According to UNHCR, the UN Agency for Refugees, the number of people displaced worldwide due to war, violence, persecution, and human rights violations has increased significantly in recent decades. If in 2021 the figure of displaced people was estimated at a rough 89.3 million, today that figure exceeds 100 million. Although there are some positive notes, such as the improvement of certain conditions that favor the return of displaced persons, UNHCR's 2022 Mid-Year Trends[2], which analyzes changes and trends in forced displacement during the first six months of 2022, offers devastating data that paint a bleak present for the world.

Immediately after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, by mid-2022 there were already 5.4 million refugees outside the country, and another 6.3 million internally displaced. One year after the invasion, the number of refugees outside the country is likely to exceed 8 million. The tragic situation in Venezuela has caused the displacement of 935,000 people in the first half of 2022 alone. In the same semester, violence provoked by insurgent groups in Burkina Faso caused the internal displacement of 322,000 people. The military coup in Myanmar in early 2021 was the cause of more than half a million displacements in the first half of 2022 due to increased violence. Although the majority of the world's refugees come from 60 fragile states, the shocking data released in this report leaves few countries outside the refugee drama, either as senders or recipients of these humanitarian disasters.

Because it is a disaster, a tragedy; because behind the numbers are human faces, real stories of people who have lost their homes, families, parents, children, husbands, wives, way of living, past, and maybe even future. Like the story of Kateryna,[3] her husband, and their three children aged 11, 7, and 2. When Russia invaded Ukraine on February 24, 2022, they decided to wait and see what happened. A few days later, they fled when they saw the explosions near their home. It was a hasty flee to Poland, with only one suitcase for the whole family. Since then, the family has been living in one room with 30 other people. The husband has managed to find work, but the future remains uncertain. Like the story of Yusra Mardini, a young Syrian refugee whose life has inspired the Netflix movie, *The Swimmers*. Born and raised in Damascus, Yusra loved swimming. Due to the conflict in his country, she and her older sibling, Sara, embarked on a dramatic journey to Europe in 2015. The raft was precarious and many fell into the Aegean Sea's dark waters. Yusra saved their lives by jumping into the water and pulling them back into the boat. Yusra, Sara, and her companions were lucky. Not so the hundreds of thousands who have drowned crossing the Mediterranean Sea in their attempt to reach the European coast.

Millions of stories like these show certain similarities. In all of them, there is a sort of homesickness and a contained cry for what was left behind, along with a strong determination to survive in a foreign land, to keep on going under harsh conditions. The tragedy of displacement sometimes unites beyond blood ties and creates solidarity among

[2] In https://www.unhcr.org/statistics/unhcrstats/635a578f4/mid-year-trends-2022.

[3] The following short non-fiction stories, and many more, can be found on the UN Refugee Agency's website, under News and Stories/Stories.

those who suffer it, but above all, it raises questions that cannot remain unanswered. When will this stop? How long will the stay away from the homeland last? When will it be possible to return home? How to go on with life? Is it possible to be happy? Such questions speak of displacement, homelessness, and despair as of hope for a different future. The Bible is stranger neither to such tragedy nor to those questions.

This article focuses on Psalm 137, one of the few psalms in the Psalter whose historical context can be accurately determined. Whether read as the lament of the exiles in Babylon or the song of those repatriated to Jerusalem, the experiences of people displaced by war or human greed can resonate in this psalm. The drama of the Ukrainian refugees, the misery of past and present slaves sold in Asia or Africa, or the plight of migrants waiting at the border of the United States, to name a few, are humanitarian emergencies that echo in Psalm 137, along with a message of hope.

## *1. Psalm 137, a Protest Song*

I came across Psalm 137 in my early teens, albeit I did know at that time not what I was singing nor that it was one of the most suggesting compositions of the book of Psalms. 'By the rivers of Babylon' was just a pop song by the group Boney-M that was played over the speakers in the bumper cars at the fair that marked the end of the summer in the town I grew up. It was fun to get in the fastest car, gain speed on the ring, and crash into another car to the rhythm of that song. For me, it was and still is a song that relates to fun, town fairs, and laughter with family and friends, far from the feelings and emotions of the people of Israel that Psalm 137 hints at.

"By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down. Yeah, we wept when we remembered Zion." This is how the song begins, with an almost literal quotation of the first verse of the psalm. Before the pop rhythm of Boney-M, that refrain was sung and danced in the purest Jamaican reggae style, a musical and cultural expression of the black people who were brought to the island centuries ago. Because Psalm 137 speaks directly to this experience, the experience of those black lives taken from their African homes, sold into slavery and transported to the Americas with no hope of return. Read through this interpretative lens, Psalm 137 "speaks to the sense of displacement, homelessness, and 'not-belonging' in the land in which one was born… also speaks to 'protest' as the location of one's homeland: literally the place where one must live to survive. In this way, the psalm speaks to protest as a response to any oppression."[4]

In the last years of General Franco's regime (1970-1975) and the first years of the democratic restoration (1975-1978), Spain experienced a musical phenomenon never seen before, the protest song. The lyrics of the songs denounced an unsustainable social and political situation while encouraging the people's resistance in the hope of a different future. Psalm 137 fits perfectly into this musical style. It can well be said that "Psalm 137 is an imprecatory psalm in response to an outrageous request,"[5] a protest song against the 'tormentors' that demanded songs of joy. And as a protest song, it will resonate with all those who suffer displacement because of war, violence, and persecution.

Not all displacement experiences are the same. The United States is a country of emigrants that has seen several migratory flows throughout its brief history, the strongest being the one at the end of the XIX century. The National Museum of Immigration at

[4] Bridgeman. "'A Long Ways from Home': Displacement, Lament, and Singing Protest in Psalm 137." 215.
[5] Ibid. 216.

Ellis Island (New York) is a must-see to learn about the history of migration to the United States. But as hard as the stories of those migrants from Germany, Poland, Ireland, or Italy were, their stories cannot be equated to the drama of the Hebrews walking to exile, or as Bo H. Lim adds referring to current situations, "to the plight of undocumented Latino/a populations in the U.S. or to the global Syrian refugee crisis."[6] Lim warns that equating those experiences would be intellectually dishonest and "an unwillingness to listen to the distinct message of particular texts and a disregard for the unique ways people are impacted by migration."[7]

Psalm 137 is the protest song that channels the pain of the Native Americans who were deprived of their birthland by the white man who occupied their territories by military force in their westward expansion.[8] Sitting in their circles of peace, they will weep for the grasslands they lost, the rivers they no longer have, and the bison the white man exterminated in meaningless hunts. They will cry as those Hebrews in Babylon wept with nostalgia for Zion.

Psalm 137 is also the protest song that publicly expresses the rage of the Ukrainian population forcibly deported to Russia. Since the beginning of the Russian invasion of the country, Ukraine has denounced that between 1 and 1.5 million Ukrainians, including 300,000 children, have been deported to different regions of Russia and deprived of their passports to keep them far from their own homeland. Far from their homeland, they will struggle to maintain their identity and culture, traditions, religion, and above all, the hope of their return. If the Hebrews wept by the rivers of Babylon when they remembered Zion, the same "nostalgia for Zion" runs through the veins of the Ukrainians held captives in Russia.[9]

Psalm 137 can also connect with the sorrows and hopes of the 800,000 Rohingyas in Kutupalong (Bangladesh), the world's largest refugee camp. Having fled the violence that erupted in Myanmar in 2017, the Rohingyas still have not found a peace that seems to elude them. Harsh living conditions, limited space, lack of job opportunities, poor sanitation, and the constant threat of monsoons that destroy their unstable homes, make daily life an endless question mark. All they have left is the subversive power of memories. Psalm 137, while giving voice to their protest against their living conditions, inflames/fills their hearts with hope.

With Psalm 137, slaves brought to the Americas, Native Americans, Ukrainian refugees, or Rohingyas among many others, can express "pain over terrible loss, over the deaths of loved ones and thousands of others, and over the ruin [*of their homes*]… They need to remember; they can never forget who they are or where they have come from."[10] And in doing so, the light of hope will shine upon them. A light that may guide them back home… someday.

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[6] Lim. "Exile and Migration: Toward a Biblical Theology of Immigration and Displacement." 7.
[7] Ibid.
[8] A visit to the Chicago History Museum reveals how many times the white man betrayed the agreements signed with the Indian nations in his quest for westward expansion, dispossessing the Native Americans of lands that were rightfully theirs. Such phenomenon is called "derivative forced migration" and is the results from geopolitical rearrangement. Cf. Lim. "Exile and Migration: Toward a Biblical Theology of Immigration and Displacement." 7.
[9] Such phenomenon is called "purposive forced migration" and it "refers to people being forced to relocate physically at the hands of a dominant power. Cf. Lim. "Exile and Migration: Toward a Biblical Theology of Immigration and Displacement." 8.
[10] Carrol. "The Bible and Borders : Hearing God's Word on Immigration." 34. Italics are mine.

## *2. Psalm 137: Building a Vincentian Response*

Number 137 is one of the most beautiful Psalms in the Psalter. Although for many years it was thought that the psalm had been "composed in Babylon during the first half of the sixth century BCE [*echoing*] vividly the experience and emotions of those who were taken captive,"[11] there is a common agreement among scholars that it has been "composed after the exiles returned to Jerusalem (as the city continued to exist in ruins)."[12] It is therefore the song of the repatriates who remember their past in Babylon and the mockery of their captors on returning to their homeland after long years away. Along with the memory of a tragic past in Babylon, there is also the confession of love for Jerusalem and a strange and violent final desire.

The distribution of Psalm 137 that I offer in here follows the division into three distinct stanzas proposed by Savran in '*How Can We Sing a Song of the Lord?' The Strategy of Lament in Psalm 137*. Verses 1-4 "describe the setting and context of lament for Jerusalem, coupled with a refusal to cooperate with a Babylonian demand to sing a song of »Zion/The Lord«. This section ends with a question which is at once real and rhetorical, asserting the impossibility of a positive response… [*Verses 5-6*] consist of an individual oath in which the psalmist reverses his previous position and vows to recall Jerusalem continually… [*And verses 7-9*] are a plea to God for revenge on the Babylonians and the Edomites for the destruction of the Temple."[13]

Let us look at the psalm verses and how they can resonate in today's world. Just as God heard the cry of Israel and decided to do something about it (Exodus 3:7-10), so the Vincentian must hear the cry of so many brothers and sisters who are displaced due to war, violence, persecution and hatred and do something about it. A Vincentian cannot remain impassive to the plight of the poor.

### 2.1. First Stanza (Verses 1-4), a Story of Vulnerability

> *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?*

"The poem commences with the melancholy recollection of the destruction of the temple and Jerusalem which caused the Israelite captives to mourn and stop playing their musical instruments."[14] Deported to Babylon, the Israelites miss their homeland. It is not difficult to imagine their mood. Distressed, confused, without prophets or priests, restless, ashamed, and abandoned by God because they did not know how to keep the covenant, they remember Zion, "the symbol of God's presence in their midst,"[15] and mourn. They wept for their loved ones killed by the sword or starvation during the long siege, for seeing their homes reduced to rubble by the violence of the victors. They wept at the memory of the long and agonizing walks, on foot, as slaves, until they arrived in Babylon, surrounded

[11] Ahn. "Psalm 137: Complex Communal Laments." 270.
[12] Ibid. 271.
[13] Savran. "'How Can We Sing a Song of the Lord?' The Strategy of Lament in Psalm 137." 43. Italics are mine.
[14] Simango. "A Comprehensive Reading of Psalm 137." 217.
[15] Ibid. 222.

by the mockery and cruelty of their captors. They wept in anguish, not knowing when it would all end, if they could ever return to their land, home, and lives.

The memory of Jerusalem and its temple in ruins are thorns that pierce their souls and deprive them of joy. There can be no singing, no place for celebration. The mute harps, hanging from the poplars, are a very expressive image. *How can we sing to God in a foreign land when we have been unfaithful to Him in our land?* It could well be the hammering question they ask themselves day after day. Commenting on these first verses of Psalm 137, Simango writes, "the psalmist and his fellow musicians set aside their instruments and did not play them again because of their sad memory of the destruction of Jerusalem… the hanging up of the lyres corresponds to the passiveness (sit) and sadness of the psalmist and his companions. The figure of hanging the lyre on the trees is metaphorical and means that the owners set aside their instruments and did not play them again. It also shows that the musicians had given up praise publicly. The psalmist and his fellow musicians are probably used synecdochically for the entire Judean exile community, who were deprived of the joyous YHWH worship in the temple."[16] Besides, the request to sing was a complete mockery since the songs of Zion were more than just jingles; they were sacred songs, the songs of the Lord. As Simango rightly points out, that request was not only a mockery of the people of Israel that was meant to make them think that their God had forsaken them, but "also an indirect attack on the character of YHWH, because the songs of Zion celebrated the majesty and protection of YHWH over his people."[17] To sing a song of the Lord just for fun would be an unforgivable profanation, an insult to Yahweh. Moreover, it would be the recognition of the sovereignty of the pagan gods over the God of Israel, so "weak, powerless [*that*] could not deliver his people in their time of trouble."[18]

To say that even today, captives of a victorious army, there are still deportees to foreign lands is to take the argument of those displaced by war beyond its limits. Nevertheless, the fact is that wars, whether among different countries or within the same country (civil wars), continue to cause hundreds of thousands of displacements. Each bomb that falls results in the flight of the most vulnerable. Elderly, women and children are running by the hundreds of thousands to an uncertain future in a foreign land. In the sadness and helplessness of the Israelites in Babylon, it is easy to recognize the mood of those who have fled their homes because of war and violence. Huddled in refugee camps, their dull gazes reveal the same sadness and helplessness, the sadness of having seen their loved ones die or their lives fall apart, and the helplessness of knowing that their future no longer depends on them but on the actions of third parties who often look elsewhere.

"Those in today's world who are enduring forced migration are undoubtedly disheartened and shattered, confused and in turmoil, not knowing what to believe or whom to trust."[19] Innocent victims of the selfishness and greed of warlords, this vulnerable population sees no end to their hardships in the countries where they find refuge. Refugee camps are often no man's land under the UN flag. Resources are scarce and the legal status of residents is ambiguous. Applying for refugee status does not guarantee it will be granted. While waiting, they are easy prey for unscrupulous people who take advantage of their vulnerability to offer 3D jobs (dirty, dangerous, and

[16] Ibid.
[17] Ibid. 223.
[18] Ibid. Italics are mine.
[19] Bergant, Dianne. "Ruth: the Migrant Who Saved the People." In Migration, Religious Experience, and Globalization, ed. GioacchinoCampese, Pietro Ciallella, Dianne Bergant, and Robert J. Schreiter (Center for Migration Studies, 2003), 57.

demeaning), or for mafias who sexually exploit women and children, the most vulnerable of the vulnerable. For those who do manage to find a place to live outside the refugee camps, their luck is not much different. On many occasions and just because they are foreigners, they have to face discrimination, exclusion, racism, xenophobia, job insecurity, limited access to health care or education, etc. In these living conditions, the question that closes this first stanza of Psalm 137 is not at all strange; there is spirit for neither partying nor singing.

We, as Vincentians, are called to restore the joy of life to the displaced, wherever they are, raising awareness of the origin of conflicts and their consequences on the poor, campaigning for dignified living conditions for displaced people, and underscoring the fundamental respect for their dignity as human beings, Imago Dei/Imago Christi. Recognizing in the displaced person the image of God, the Vincentian commitment to solidarity will have "an identifiable repertoire of ways of effectively appealing to dignity. One type of appeal invokes the material requirements for living a minimally flourishing life: the baseline conditions for a life of dignity."[20] Like Barbieri, I also maintain that the essential element of such repertoire will be promoting and defending peace and social justice, a commitment that may take different forms in different circumstances but will make it possible to live and travel in dignified conditions.

A Vincentian commitment needs to raise awareness among the population of the vulnerability and precariousness of the displaced/refugees/migrants to force alliances of solidarity that can result in concrete aid. As Barbieri rightly maintains, we, as Vincentians, must have the courage to denounce the violation of human rights that imply an infringement of human dignity, such as human trafficking, sexual abuse –especially of women and unaccompanied minors–, the demeaning or humiliating treatment refugees/migrants frequently have to endure along with nasty attempts to dehumanize them with campaigns of xenophobic nationalism, and any form of discrimination upon arrival at the receiving country.[21] Indeed, "the conception of the dignity of human persons requires not just hospitality but equal respect for all, including migrants and aliens, as beings whose existence has divine origins and who have a place in God's orderly creation"[22] concludes Barbieri.

If someone believes that these actions of solidarity are impossible to fulfill, beyond one's depth, one can always pray for the displaced, victims of hatred and war. No glass of water, no matter how small, given to those in need just out of love, will go unrewarded (cf. Mathew 10:42).

### 2.2. Second Stanza (Verses 5-6), from Vulnerability to Resilience

*If I forget you, 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.*

Back to the present, the psalmist contemplates Jerusalem, the land so often remembered and longed for during the years of captivity in Babylon. With a heart full of emotion, perhaps with a broken voice, "the psalmist expresses his deep commitment and

[20] Barbieri Jr, William A. "The Migrant Imago. Migration and the Ethics of Human Dignity." In Christian Theology in the Age of Migration : Implications for World Christianity, ed. Peter C. Phan (Lexington Books, 2020), 172.
[21] Cf. Ibid. 178-179.
[22] Ibid. 180.

devotion to Jerusalem and therefore, towards YHWH."[23] The structure of these two verses is an extended parallelism that highlights "the psalmist's self-imprecation and faithfulness towards Jerusalem. If he forgets Jerusalem (which is disloyalty to YHWH), he will be calling a curse on himself –he will lose the skill of playing musical instruments with his right hand and the ability to sing songs of Zion with his mouth. This implies that remembering Zion or Jerusalem leads to a renewed devotion to the Lord."[24]

If in Babylon it was a sacrilege to sing the Lord's songs, in Jerusalem it is a sin not to do so since that would mean not loving God with all one's heart, soul, and strength (cf. Deuteronomy 6:5). For a pious Jew, love for Jerusalem and love for God are "intertwined because of the temple. The Israelite captives could not forget Jerusalem and everything it stood for: the covenant, the temple, the presence and the kingship of YHWH, atonement, forgiveness and reconciliation. The pious Israelite community vowed never to forget God's promises and to persevere and wait for YHWH's redemption."[25] How touching the strength and intensity of the psalmist's love for the city of God which makes Jerusalem the greatest of his/her joys.

However, not all is joy in Jerusalem. The people who have spent a long time in exile have to face the problems associated with returning to their homeland. Unlike their brethren in the Northern Kingdom, this new group of deportees "did not assimilate into the stronger and rather sophisticated Babylonian society; rather, they kept alive expectations for a return to Judah."[26]And just as no one can bathe twice in the same river, neither can one return to the same land. Time has not passed in vain for anyone and nothing went smoothly. "Going back to the land was a return to the same place, but the returnees and even that place called 'home' had changed."[27]

Following the edict of Cyrus, king of the Persians, authorizing the exiled Jews to return to their land and rebuild the Temple, "42,690 Judeans, not including women and children, returned, braving the difficulties of being uprooted again and facing a long journey, to begin a new life in an impoverished Judea."[28] This important group, gathered in assembly, appointed Zerubabbel, a member of the old royal family, and Joshua, the high priest, as their leaders. Upon their arrival to the Southern Kingdom, it did not take long for problems and questions to arise, for instance, regarding land and houses ("who had the right to the property after the long absence?), or regarding leadership and authority (Who is in power, the leaders and priests who remained in Jerusalem or the newly arrived leaders?). There must have been some sort of clash between the returnees and those who remained since the construction of the temple had to be stopped. In short, the desire to return to the homeland is strong, but there is no guarantee that it will be an easy return.

All these hardships made Israel stronger and helped them reshape their identity around the temple and the covenant. In today's words, their vulnerability in exile made them resilient, able to face even the harshest discomforts without losing courage or hope. The same is true today for the hundreds of thousands who have been forced to leave their homeland and for those fortunate enough who can return at last.

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[23]Simango. "A Comprehensive Reading of Psalm 137." 224.
[24] Ibid. 225.
[25] Ibid.
[26]Bakon. "Exile and Return." 102.
[27] Carroll. "The Bible and Borders." 40
[28] Bakon. "Exile and Return." 105.

The desire to return is a constant for refugees/displaced persons, and today "improved conditions… in some regions of the world have enhanced the prospect for the return of refugees. Significant numbers have already returned home recently through repatriation programs organized by the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees."[29] Data from the UNHCR's 2022 Mid-Year Trends show a weak but promising outlook as there has been an increase in the number of refugees returning home.[30] Nevertheless, not everything is joyful and nothing is easy for returnees. Sage collects some of the numerous issues that returnees have to deal with upon arrival: "assuring physical security in countries ravaged by years of war and conflict, establishing long-term food production programs, providing for the special needs of children and women, building programs that promote peace and reconciliation as well as human rights awareness, providing the resources necessary for the restoration of the countries' infrastructure, promoting the reintegration of those who are returning as well those who have been internally displaced, and planning for reconstruction and rehabilitation of the economy, a need of any society that has experienced war and, in many instances, natural disasters."[31]

Vincentians cannot contemplate the plight of refugees and displaced people and then simply show an affective love that is not able to be embodied in the transforming actions of effective love. Vincent de Paul, when he continually asked himself if it was enough to feel inflamed by the reality he was contemplating, answered categorically NO, that it was necessary to move on to resolutions. Like the Good Samaritan, Vincentians must see reality with eyes of mercy, feel as their own the pain of their neighbor and do the impossible to put an end to it. It is a matter of justice. "To be Christian and to see our brother or sister suffering without weeping with them, without being sick with them! That is to be lacking in charity; it is being a caricature of a Christian; it is inhuman; it is to be worse than animals,"[32] said Vincent de Paul. There is no evil in this world of which we can say that it does not concern us. Vincentians who out of comfort, fear or indifference are impervious to the pain of others, are no more than a corpse.

In the face of injustice, the resilience that many migrants, refugees and displaced people show in the midst of their trials and hardships should lead every Vincentian to stand up and advocate for their rights. There is job to do. First, we need to understand the issue and learn about the challenges refugees and displaced people face on a daily basis, the reasons they flee their countries and the legal framework concerning refugee protection. Then, we need to work on our empathy, for instance, by listening to refugees' stories and understanding their perspectives. They are more than numbers and statistics on a chart. And finally, we need to challenge biases or misconceptions we and others may have about refugees and displaced people. If we truly advocate for the oppressed and marginalized, we must encourage our communities to be empathetic, welcoming, and inclusive of refugees.

### 2.3. Third Stanza (Verses 7-9), an Unexpected Ending

*Remember, Lord, what the Edomites did on the day Jerusalem fell. "Tear it down," they cried, "tear it down to its foundations!" Daughter Babylon,*

[29] Sage. "Homecoming Challenges: Exiles and Refugees Can Go Home Again, but Never Easily." 104.
[30] The report is available online at https://www.unhcr.org/statistics/unhcrstats/635a578f4/mid-year-trends-2022
[31] Sage. "Homecoming Challenges." 105.
[32] CCD:XII:222.

*doomed to destruction, happy is the one who repays you according to what you have done to us. Happy is the one who seizes your infants and dashes them against the rocks. (NIV)*

This final stanza is shocking to modern ears, and that is why it has disappeared from the official recitation of this psalm in the liturgy of the hours of the Roman Catholic Church. The psalmist prays for God to punish the Babylonians and their Edomite allies who razed Jerusalem and reduced the temple to ruins, to take vengeance on all those who mocked Israel during the time of captivity. "He wants Babylon to experience the same treatment that they gave Judah... A blessing lies on anyone who is used in bringing down Babylon."[33]

It is a stanza that overflows with violence, for even the psalmist dares to call for someone to smash against the rocks even the small children of the oppressing people. It is still a primary visceral reaction, logical even from the point of view of the oppressed people and it should not be seen as anything more than that, an outlet for the deep sense of injustice that Israel experienced during the destruction of Jerusalem and the subsequent exile in Babylon. After all, who has not had an outburst of anger at a flagrant injustice, or at something much banaler like the nuisance of traffic while driving?

Although the destruction of Jerusalem and the temple had been etched in the conscience of Israel to the point that the psalmist longs for cruel vengeance, the truth is that the conditions of the exile in Babylon were far from those of a modern concentration camp. The Israelites enjoyed a certain degree of freedom to the point that even some members of the community climbed the social ladder and occupied important positions in the administration of the Empire. Even the prophet Jeremiah exhorted them to adapt to the new situation. In the letter found in Jeremiah 29, the prophet encouraged the people to settle in, accommodate, and build a new life in that foreign land. "They must not see themselves as victims but instead as builders of a new future under the sovereign hand of God."[34]

To those who are torn between the invitation to adapt to the new situation and the desire for revenge, even if it only takes the form of an outburst of rage, there is only one response: to strive to become a peacemaker and lay the foundations for reconciliation. If in a Catholic reading of this psalm one can say that Jerusalem is the symbol of the Reign of God, Babylon is the opposite, the personification of all evil and injustice that oppress humanity. In this sense, the ultimate goal is to destroy Babylon, that is, denouncing and fighting against all kinds of injustice, abuse, oppression, and discrimination that threaten or want to destroy the desire of humanity to live in peace and harmony with each other. The world needs far more peacemakers and agents of reconciliation.

## 3. Conclusion

Psalm 137 is a complex poem that expresses diverse emotions ranging from nostalgia for a lost paradise to a call for vengeance against an oppressive nation. Among its verses, different issues emerge that demand deep consideration and committed action by the Congregation of the Mission: forced displacement due to violence, racist

[33] Simango. "A Comprehensive Reading of Psalm 137." 226.
[34] Carroll. "The Bible and Borders." 35.

discrimination, religious insult, the problems of adaptation to a foreign land, the difficulties of returning to one's land, the need to build peace, and the challenge of reconciliation. Emigration, especially forced emigration due to violence and war, is a tremendous pastoral challenge for any human being. This psalm can and should be the protest song that the world needs to wake up from its lethargy and commit itself to eradicate the injustices of oppression and violence as well as to promote hospitality.

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