PSALM 137: PERSPECTIVES ON THE (NEURO-) PSYCHOLOGY OF LOSS

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ABSTRACT
The neuro-psychological imperative first implies the formation of neural networks through exposure to the external environment, both physically and ideologically, giving us our ‘selves’. It in turn implies the projection of this internal world onto the outer to achieve neuro-environmental consonance. Situations like bereavement, immigration or exile break down this consonance and are accompanied by strong negative emotions. When viewing Psalm 137 through the lens of the neuro-psychological imperative, its intense experience of the loss of land (and ‘self’) becomes transparent as this psalm vividly recalls the devastating experience of the Babylonian exile. The shocking end of the psalm, detailing the desire for the brutal annihilation of enemy infants, expresses the understandable ideological drive of the exiles to, ironically, retrieve their lost ‘selves.’ Although understandable as an upholding of the established internal world, the manner in which this is to be achieved is not to be emulated by modern civilised societies.

INTRODUCTION
In 1959, Eva Hoffman, a Polish girl and her parents voluntarily immigrated to Vancouver, Canada. She articulated the overwhelming nostalgia for her lost home as follows:

‘… the country of my childhood lives within me with a primacy that is a form of love … It has fed me language, perceptions, sounds, the human kind. It has given me colors and the furrows of reality, my first loves. The absoluteness of those loves can never be recaptured. No geometry of the landscape, no haze in the air, will live in us as intensely as the landscapes that we saw as the first, and to which we gave ourselves wholly, without reservations.’

(Wexler 2006:175)

Approximately 2500 years earlier, the poet of Psalm 137 expressed something similar: ‘By the rivers of Babylon we sat and we wept when we remembered Zion …’. Likewise, this psalm also overflows with intense emotion (Gemser 1968:199) and captures the shocking emotional experience of immigration. In this case, however, immigration takes the form of a forced exile by the Judeans’ enemy of the time, the Babylonians. Immigration is quite similar to the experience of bereavement and accordingly takes time and effort to overcome and to become fully adapted to the new surroundings (Wexler 2006:6–7; Cezar Garza-Guerrero 1974:418).

The emotionality of Psalm 137 involves not only a few superficial feelings that come and go which we can control as we please; it has a much deeper base. Psalm 137 elicits intense and tenacious feelings which can be explained by a neurobiological foundation responsible for the sensation of being captivated by feelings wherein we feel that our feelings control us and not the other way around. In 2006, the neuroscientist cum-psychiatrist Bruce Wexler wrote an illuminating book, Brain and Culture: Neurobiology, Ideology, and Social Change and his insights predominantly inspired this contribution. In this book he lays bare what he calls the neurobiological imperative, upholding our mental worlds (consciousness) and the latter, in turn, confirming and keeping alive the neurobiological imperative. The brain-mind, called thus to indicate the complex functional interaction between its physicality and mentality, is so intricately linked with its sensory environment and our biology so fundamentally social, that ‘… to speak of a relation between the two suggests an unwarranted distinction. It is our nature to nurture and be nurtured’ (Wexler 2006:13; Pyysäinnen 2001:215). Kuberski (2000:11) aptly formulates this concept in a similar vein: ‘a brain without a world to cognize is not a brain’. Our neurobiology is constantly shaped by the outer world (during childhood) and it in turn shapes the outer world (during adulthood) to maintain internal-external or neuro-environmental consonance (Wexler 2006:18). Neuro-environmental consonance is what gives us comfort, a feeling of belongingness and identity confirmation. The neurobiological imperative also aptly provides a deep-seated reason why we embrace our ideologies and values to the extent that we do, even defending them through physical violence (e.g. Ps 137:7–9). Through our established neurological schemata we become ‘wired’ to do so and, to a certain extent, do not give us much choice. However, at the same time we are not prisoners of our neurobiology. Through our consciousness we are more than our physiology; we are also able to‘re-wire’ our neurobiology to prompt us into new behaviours.

In what follows, Wexler’s insights on the establishment of the neurobiological (neuro-psychological) imperative will be highlighted and its assertion onto the outer world will be laid bare. Psalm 137 will then be viewed through the lens of the neuro-psychological imperative to explore the depth and tenacity of this psalm’s emotional experience of the exile.

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THE FORMATION OF THE NEURO-Psychological IMPERATIVE

Wexler (2006:19–36) provides a concise and reader-friendly summary of the complexities of the brain-mind. The human brain consists of approximately 100 billion neurons or nerve cells. Each of these neurons has thousands of chemical docking stations on its outer surface (i.e. dendritic branches) where neurotransmitters (chemicals) ‘dock’. These evoke electrical impulses running through the dendritic axons and in turn exit the neuron chemically to continue the information transfer process to its neighboring neurons. All of these thousands of electro-chemically ‘firing’ messages happen within milliseconds. The messages received are interpreted mentally, that is, cognitively ('knowing'), emotionally ('feeling') and through memory ('recalling'), enabling us to react in appropriate ways according to whatever the message might be. Mental functions are not mediated by single neurons, but rather by larger groups or assemblies of neurons that become structured functionally with complicated communicative pathways. Each individual’s neural networks differ, even in siblings, so that we each have a remarkable, unique and meaningful representation of the ‘world’. These neural networks manifest common age-related behaviors. So remarkable is the functional complexity of the brain that neuronal activity is inhibited in one area, neighboring neuronal networks can take over functions in a limited way:

... in young children who have had the entire left side of their brain surgically removed for treatment of otherwise untreatable seizures, all functions become localized in the remaining right hemisphere. Even the language function ... (Wexler 2006:26)

Mammalian brains evolved a limbic structure and system around the ‘reptilian core’ and it is this limbic structure that is very much the centre for familial and social behaviors. In addition, humans have developed their very large frontal and parietal lobes creating “… an unprecedented opportunity for environmental shaping of uniquely human aspects of brain function” (Wexler 2006:36). This process of environmental input continues up until approximately 25 years of age.3

For the brain to develop normally and to function properly, it needs constant sensory stimulation. This is not a choice but a necessity (Wexler 2006:90). The stage between early childhood and early adulthood (puberty or adolescence) is critical in the formation of brain structures and functions and is described by Wexler as the time of neuronal plasticity (2006:118). This is the period wherein neural network growth takes place in order to become established, while still being quite susceptible to changes, both physically and culturally. We know for example how young children adamantly defend their convictions, seeing everything in black and white, but we are also aware how quickly their views can change. Once adulthood sets in, the neuro-plasticity of the brain-mind becomes less as adults become very established in their habits and convictions. Views are only reluctantly changed during adulthood. If a lack in sufficient sensory stimulation exists during the pre-adult period, neurons die, become smaller, less synaptic connections are generated and the individual becomes deprived of the functions these networks should have provided. For example, people who have suffered from congenital cataracts since childhood and have had these problems rectified in adulthood, still have visual dysfunctions in spite of the eyes or eyes functioning mechanically in a normal way. The neural networks that should have been there but are not, lead to problems with depth perception, impaired visual working memory (i.e. patients cannot remember what they saw), impaired visual recognition and differentiation of objects (e.g. to keep on mistaking the same size cat for the dog and vice versa), etcetera. The same kinds of impairments due to sensory deprivation have also been noted in several animal studies. Sensory deprivation also has psychological effects:

When ... in conditions of sensory deprivation, people seek stimulation and soon become depressed and anxious. Moreover, their brains no longer work as effectively; they have illusory sensory experiences, altered perceptual thresholds, and difficulty with certain types of problem solving. (Wexler 2006:83)

Narrowing the focus from general stimulation of the brain-mind to that of the social environment, specifically, the mother, parents, family and cultural environment become indispensable for the proper formation of the young pre-adult human. This also confirms the view that our fellow humans beings attract our attention far more than anything else (Guthrie 1993). Wexler refers to the mother-infant relationship as an integrated dyadic unit (2006:2, following the famous Russian psychologist Vygotzky). Whereas in animals communication with infants is very much olfactory,6 communication becomes very visual and auditory for humans. Exposure to exaggerated facial expressions and vocal displays of basic emotions, present cross-culturally (Ekman 2008:95–123), activates the limbic system (orbitofrontal cortices, amygdale, etc.)7 the basis or ‘centre’ for family and social behavior. Very young infants are sharply focused on their mother’s face and voice. There is a loss of neurobiological structure in the infants of both nonhuman mammals and humans deprived of natural parenting. Wexler (2006:100) states succinctly: ‘Linked with their parents in dyadic and family systems, infants develop physiological patterning that is influenced by and often similar to the patterns of their parents.’ Children’s ‘circuity’ is shaped by what adults are interested in and hold as important, both from their own childhood experiences as well as the culture they form part of. As an example, in a certain sense, parents equip their children with the rational capacity of their frontal lobes in matters of problem solving and in making important decisions and this is probably why even senior adults often claim to do things the way their parents have done and taught them8 Children learn through imitation9; language, for instance, a cultural phenomenon for which we have evolved an innate capacity, is learned through imitation (Wexler 2006:121). The neuro-plasticity of the young brain-mind remarkably comes to the fore in the learning of a new language, whilst the adult finds this rather difficult. Apart from language, children also internalize the values and

3. Kubiak, writing on the intricacies of consciousness, makes the point that a single neuron is infinitely more complex than anyone would ever have imagined. It has a ... mind of its own ... (2000:12 citing Scott).

4. The ‘theory of mind’ mental tool (ToM), for instance, which enables us to ‘mind read’ others (their probable goals, motivations, desires, etc.), is not developed in children younger than more or less five; older people have stronger mind-reading capabilities than younger people. For a more detailed account on ToM, see Barrett (2004:31–44). In order to also explain the differences between cultures in spite of the same brain-minds that humans share cross-culturally. Leavitt (1996:524) says: ‘A biological base is not, however, only responsible for similarities: it is what provides for variation as well ... however, variation is not infinite ...’

5. Other than the human species, we are all aware of how quickly the offspring of non-human mammals mature in order to survive independently.

6. Wexler (2006:56–57) explains the importance of N-methyl-D-aspartate (NMDA) receptors for neural growth. The neurotransmitter glutamate, released by sensory relay neurons from the brainstem, activates cortical neurons by attaching to the NMDA receptors on these neurons. Researchers believe that NMDA receptors directly activate the growth mechanisms and the experience may double in immature animals than in adults. This confirms the malleability of the immature brain, equipped to grow and develop optimally.

7. The ‘social neuropeptide Oxytocin, unique to mammals, plays an important role in rats to suppress the mother’s aversion to the odor of her new borns. It also facilitates hair bonding between males and females, although it is found in other brain regions where its receptors are situated (Wexler 2006:86–88, 96).


9. How true is the expression ‘a chip off the old block,’ when also viewed from a neuro-psychological perspective?

10. ‘Mirror neurons’ that facilitate imitation have been demonstrated in human infants even as young as two weeks old as they imitate the sticking out of tongues and other imitative behaviors, that is reciprocal vocalisation between mothers and their 3-month-old infants (Wexler 2006:114).
ideologies of their immediate social and cultural environment and are more than often very conservative in their convictions. To embrace such ideologies and constituted reality and elevations and elevate them above criticism is part and parcel of adult life (McCutcheon 2000:207). Children learn through play,¹¹ which is actually more of a cognitive process than a motor activity and of which formal schooling is an extension. Wexler (2006) summarises the shaped young adolescent as follows:

Adolescents ... are occupied with ... integrating internal structures derived from multiple sources into a functionally coherent whole, and articulating a personal ideology that leads to a niche in the general social matrix that is consistent with the internal structures. (Wexler 2006:136–137)

Therefore the young adult requires an identity or a self and a neuro-psychological makeup that determines the way they will conceptualise their reality, feel, make decisions and generally live their life.

A few remarks need to be added about the role of emotions, especially in the confirmation and protection of the young adult’s acquired ego identity, shaped as we have just seen, in order to also understand the depth of the emotions experienced in Psalm 137. The young child is not able to articulate particular feelings accurately, but is very well equipped to experience them. Adults’ skewed faces and gurgling sounds are soon properly articulated, guiding and providing their maturing child with the same emotional experiences, of things either harmful or beneficial that fill their environment and are of interest to them, for example, sounds, foods, places, etcetera. Described by Manstead as psychological states,¹² emotions are therefore always object oriented in contrast to moods that are not (e.g. irritation, boredom; Manstead 2008:xxxi). Love, joy, surprise, anger, sadness and fear are usually identified as basic emotions.¹³ Emotions are also markedly social and shared with others (Manstead 2008:xxiii) and have come a long way since our evolutionary past to enhance our species’ adaptivity (Ekman 2008:96–97). We become emotional about things important to our evolutionary past to enhance our species’ adaptivity (Ekman 2008). Emotions are also markedly social and shared with others (Manstead 2008:xxiii). We become emotional about things important to us in terms of values and goals to which we are committed to and embody our identity. Vengeance for instance, borne out of anger, ‘… is a way of repairing damage to one’s demeaned … ego identity’ (Lazarus 2008:45; 63; Cesar Garza-Guerrero 1974:418, Leavitt 1996:528; Ps 137).

THE ASSERTION OF THE NEURO-Psychological imperative

As a child moves into adulthood the neuro-plasticity of the brain decreases. In contrast to this malleable, rather passive pre-adult that is being influenced by the outer reality in order to form their inner reality, the adult has an established and stable internal world that determines how the external world is perceived and treated. The neuro-psychological circuitry that has now been established not only gives rise to the concept ‘self’, but becomes an imperative in how to impact on and shape the external world. The neuro-psychological circuitry that has now been established not only gives rise to the concept ‘self’, but becomes an imperative in how to impact on and shape the external world. What is lost during immigration? Wexler again states: ‘...The objects and activities of everyday life are most profoundly lost. And therefore “part of oneself has died” (Wexler 2006:173). Apart from all the emotions during mourning, the “reviving” or remembrance of the deceased through imitation, “assuming his...”’ (Wexler 2006:173), becomes a desperate retrieving also of the self. It requires ‘grief work’ (Freud) of more or less a year to overcome the grief, an undoing of the familiar (e.g. spouse-orientated) and the consequential bodily effect is tellingly exemplified by Wexler (2006:173). Immigration brings with it a large extent implies the loss of one’s identity (Leavitt 1996:526). Whether immigration is voluntary or forced (e.g. the Babylonian exile) will determine the intensity of the emotional experiences is remarkably similar. What is lost when the death of a loved one occurs, for instance a spouse? Wexler (2006) lucidly encapsulates the answer to this question: ‘...it is seeing, hearing, smelling, touching, and being touched by the other person. In other words, a large part of the interpersonal sensory environment that had become a large part of the internal representation of the external world is now gone...’ (Wexler 2006:172)

It is also the feedback of the same worldview, values and ideologies, confirming the remaining partner’s ego identity that is lost. And therefore ‘...part of oneself has died’ (Wexler 2006:173). Apart from all the emotions during mourning, the ‘reviving’ or remembrance of the deceased through imitation, “assuming his...” (1970), becomes a desperate retrieving also of the self. It requires ‘grief work’ (Freud) of more or less a year to overcome the grief, an undoing of the familiar (e.g. spouse-orientated) and the consequential bodily effect is tellingly exemplified by Wexler (2006:173). Immigration brings with it a large extent implies the loss of one’s identity (Leavitt 1996:526). Whether immigration is voluntary or forced (e.g. the Babylonian exile) will determine the intensity of the emotional experiences is remarkably similar. What is lost when the death of a loved one occurs, for instance a spouse? Wexler (2006) lucidly encapsulates the answer to this question:

The learned internal structures filter, select and evaluate sensory input that is consistent with them (Wexler 2006:154–155) – we ‘see’ what we want to see, or perhaps, what we are forced to see. People are so strongly committed to their idiosyncrasies that their own view will be physically forced onto others if deemed necessary. In order to avoid such extremes, people seek out like-minded others to associate with. This is aptly illustrated in sports fans who might disagree on many things, but bond unconditionally and agree completely that their team should be successful. They wear the same clothes as their teams as token of their loyalty and even develop the same hormonal levels as the players they are watching and identifying with.¹⁴ Internal-external consonance is also achieved by spontaneously seeking out the familiar which is experienced as pleasurable (Zajonc 1970),¹⁵ irrespective of the objective qualities of that which is familiar (Wexler 2006:155), whether it be a face, music, food, building, landscape, et cetera. The blind allegiance to a political party on own soil, because it was the lifelong party of the parents (family), is well-known. Even if the particular political party fares badly at the polls and this information creates dissatisfaction within internal convictions, it is nevertheless defended without question. The opposition’s victory is usually discredited, ignored, re-interpreted or forgotten (Wexler 2006:160, 169) to alleviate the feeling of dissonance. A sudden switch to the new party becomes near impossible as the internal representations reject it. The latter has to change first and this, as has been pointed out, does not come easy or inexpensively in adulthood.

There are, however, situations where seeking out like-mindedness and the familiar is not possible and a disjunction or misfit within internal structures becomes severe and tenuous. This is very applicable to what we read in Psalm 137. Wexler names bereavement and immigration as two such situations where the emotional experiences are remarkably similar. What is lost when the death of a loved one occurs, for instance a spouse? Wexler (2006) lucidly encapsulates the answer to this question:

¹¹. Reptiles do not play with their young, but mammals do (Wexler 2006:132).

¹². Manstead (2008:xxxi), provides the following working definition of emotions: ‘Emotions can be defined as psychological states that comprise thoughts and feelings, physiological changes, expressive behaviors, and inclinations to act. The precise combination of these elements varies from emotion to emotion, and emotions may or may not be accompanied by overt behaviors. This complex of states and behaviors is triggered by an event that is either experienced or recalled.’ Emotions are both bodily (e.g. C. Darwin, W. James) and culturally (e.g. C. Geertz) derived. Leavitt (1996) gives as follows: ‘emotions are felt in bodily experience, not just known or thought or appraised’; see also Elman (2008:106).

¹³. Psychologists differ on the number of emotions, as well as so-called ‘families’ of emotions and the characteristics of emotions (e.g. Manstead 2008:xxxi; Elman 2008; Lazarus 2008).

¹⁴. The fascinating psychological bond that exists between sports fans and their teams and the consequential bodily effect is tellingly exemplified by Wexler (2006:147). He points out that the testosterone levels of Brazilian soccer fans rose by 28% after winning the 1994 World Cup, while those of Italy dropped by 27%, with no instrumental contact between fans and players.

¹⁵. See the striking title of R. Zajonc’s article, ‘Brainwash: Familiarity breeds comfort’ and the defense of his basic proposition in the more recent exposure of an unfamiliar stimulus is enough to increase one’s attraction to that stimulus. Repeated exposure makes words more positive, food more appetizing, strangers more acceptable (1970:33). Our exposure to and enjoyment of novel experiences are limited because our internal networks demand what is tried and tested.

http://www.ve.org.za
Vol. 31 No. 1 Page 3 of 7
Verbem et Ecclesia

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order to retain something of an internal-external consonance, immigrants usually create a microcopy of the familiar things ‘back home’, such as food, social customs, music and so on. This is a non-violent way of the neuro-psychological imperative asserting itself and of denying the other culture. A total rejection of the other culture and all it represents in terms of its values, ideologies and symbols, can easily translate into a violent extermination thereof, of which we have a sad history since times immemorial (Wexler 2006:183–231). On the other hand, the new culture can in time (as is the case with bereavement) become appreciated, embraced and internalised to become part of old and newly formed internal neural networks as the immigrant develops a ‘third individuality’. When these are activated there is a matching reverberation between inner and outer, creating a feeling of belongingness and acknowledgement. 

VIEWING PSALM 137 THROUGH THE LENS OF THE NEURO-Psychological IMPERATIVE

After this rather lengthy introduction to the neuro-psychological imperative it is now time to turn to Psalm 137 and to view it through this lens. General consensus exists amongst commentators on both the formal poetic beauty of Psalm 137 as well as its effective and affective articulation of the terrible loss due to the exile experience; this is so in spite of the horrible end, the call for the brutal extermination of the enemy infants. It is a poem consisting of three clearly demarcated stanzas comprising two, one and two strophes respectively (Stanza I: vv. 1–4 [2 strophes: vv. 1–2, vv. 3–4]; Stanza II: vv. 5–6 [1 strophe: vv. 5–6]; Stanza III: vv. 7–9 [2 strophes: vv. 7; vv. 8–9]). Psalm 137 also exhibits a concentric structure with the beginning and end forming an inclusio (e.g. reference to Babel in vv. 1 and 8; see Allen 1983:240) with a strong focus on the centre stanza (vv. 5–6). Commentators refer to this centre stanza as a Zion hymn of a strange kind, which formally also exhibits a chiasic structure. In the centre lies its main thrust of a passionate longing for (i.e. a restored) Zion (Clifford 2003:274, 276; Brueggemann 1984:74). It is compiled of three Gattungen overlapping with the three stanzas: it opens with a communal lament, proceeds to the special kind of Zion hymn presented in the form of a self-imprecation or oath and ends with an imprecation against Judah’s archrivals. Prinsloo (2000:286) therefore describes the whole of the psalm as a Misschattung. In spite of its different sections, there is a consensus that the psalm forms a coherent and persuasive unity with probably only vv. 1 and 2 as a rather redactional addition (Prinsloo 2000:288). The first stanza represents a looking back at the time in Babel, probably from Jerusalem, still in ruins, before the rebuilding of the temple (537–515 BCE), 10 so as to make sense of the strong imprecation against the responsible perpetrators, especially Edom and Babylon. It is likely that the poet could have been a Levitical temple singer (vv. 5–6) (Ahn 2008:282; Anderson 1974:897).

Cesar Garza-Guerrero (1974) provides a neat link between the despair of Psalm 137 and culture shock. Culture shock is usually marked by three phases: immigrants or exiles go through, namely cultural encounter, reorganisation and a new identity (as is the case for mourners). 19 The shock of the initial cultural encounter is described as follows:

Subjectively the experience is one of puzzlement … an admixture of feelings of … anxiety, sadness, hostility, desperation, a yearning to recover, a strong urge to lose … reminiscent of the mourning related to the death of a loved object … Hand in hand … a growing sensation of discontinuity of identity emerges. It is as if out of his usual habitat, the newcomer no longer has the necessary corroborative environmental feedback for his ego identity.

(Cesar Garza-Guerrero 1974:418)

Psalm 137 remains predominantly within the first phase of shock, perhaps with a little reorganisation but certainly not a new identity. Its ideology remains staunchly Zionist! Brueggemann (1984:51–121) correctly regards the psalm as one of disorientation and a psalm overflowing with emotions, ‘… van de schoonheid door zijn sterke emoties … van duur-woensdags hitterwissing tot nationaal-religieus trotz en dan tot tonen en grimmige waarschuwing’ (Genser 1968:199). 

In the first stanza (vv. 1–4) the exiles find themselves in ‘ondersteboeland’ (Burden 1991:124) where their neural networks cannot work properly because they were formed and ‘conditioned’ in Jerusalem. The physical Jerusalem where they could savour its towers, its ramparts and its citadels (Davidson 1998:440), where they could celebrate its festivals in the temple with accompanying smells of daily offerings, hear familiar voices of priests and fellow citizens speaking their language and feel warmed inside by the familiar and loved sounds of temple musicians and choirs as they perform Zion songs, is no more. Only bittersweet memories 20 remain as the exiles deliberately recall (“21) 21 Zion or Jerusalem while they sit weeping. Their inner worlds have no match here in the strange and foreign land of Babel (v. 4) 22 with its flat surfaces and covered with canals from the Euphrates and Tigris rivers, lined with Euphrates poplars (Eaton 2005:454). The only sounds they hear are sad ones, those of their fellow mourners (v. 1), or the agitating voices of their captors, 23 mocking them in a foreign tongue. The emotional reaction to the loss of the opening verses is that of utter sadness. 24 This is also one of the typical first reactions during

19 Allen (1983:241) captures the interacting of memories and emotions with the expression of ‘bittersweet memories’, as emotions are evoked, not only through direct experience but also through recall; see again Manstead (2008:xxxix and footnote 12). As is the case with emotion, memory is a complex phenomenon. The term memory is an inclusive one that deals with our ability to acquire and retain information (encode), to recall it when needed (retrieve), and to recognize its familiarity when we see it or hear it again (recognize). Wingfield and Byles (1981:4) also state that memory cannot be seen and has never been seen and is a process, it is located in the brain (the point is the same which is located in the body). The debate is ongoing whether memory should be theoretically viewed through the systems or structure approach (implies different memory ‘storehouses’/structures: short term memory - e.g. procedural memory, perceptual representation system, working memory; long term memory - e.g. semantic and episodic memory), or the process approach (the processing of memory layers from shallow to deep), or a ‘principles of memory’ approach similar to empirically testable body regularities (the cue-driven principle, encoding-retrieval principle, cue overload principle, reconstruction principle, impurity principle, relative distinctiveness principle and specificity principle, all define memory) (see Suprenant & Neath 2009:1–25).

20 Voluntary or wilful memory in all three stanzas of Ps 137 (v. 1 - remembering Zion; v. 5 - not forgetting Jerusalem; v. 7 – appeal to Yahweh to keep alive the memory of the terrible ‘day of Jerusalem’) is the opposite of involuntary memories which are cue-triggered and uncontrollable, they just appear (see Mace 2007).

21 Ahn (2008:283) points out an inclusio between the beginning of v. 1, 2, 3 and end of v. 4, 5, 6. The inclusio not only binds stanza I together but also emphasizes the strangerness of this land.

22 Ahn (2008:281–282) argues that there could have been other corvée labourers working side by side with the Judeans (Anatolians, Syrians, Phoenicians, Egyptians, Tyrians), confirmed by the second hapax legomenon in v. 3, ἠλευθερούσαι (our tormentors), whilst the first hapax legomenon, refers to the Babylonian. Could the poet perhaps be so sophisticated that he uses these two hapax legomena to subtly emphasize the ‘strangeness’ of Babel?

23 Brueggemann (1984:75) refers to the elongated emotional suffering of the exiles as a ‘long haul’ as if it would never end. Experiencing long-term emotions are rather short, they last for a few seconds or minutes but are repeatedly evoked so that they are experienced as never ending.
What is represented is the inner nature, belief systems, and neurocognitive structures of the human creators of the icons, and it is the direct consequence of the internal and the external that is celebrated and reassuring.

(Wexler 2006:226)

This fixation on the symbol or icon Jerusalem, the provider of identity and security as God’s dwelling place and her consequent, ultimate elevation therefore makes sense neuro-psychologically. She reconfirms the exiles’ internal world and inner selves and provides her adherents with a counterculture stance (Brueggemann 1984:76) against hateful Babylonia to which the psalm finally proceeds.

When the foreign culture, however, is so different that it cannot be accommodated in the own culture, where its presence is a constant agitation so that the ‘… elimination of … the offensive presence of difference’ (Wexler 2006:211) comes rather naturally, we see the neuro-psychological imperative at work. It is this imperative that fuels the emotion of anger which leads to the call for the extermination of Judah’s arch-enemies, Edom and Babylonia, in Stanza III, vv. 7–9. Ethnic cleansing, even in the brutal way of shattering infants’ heads against rocks as proposed here in Psalm 137, is not a peculiar Old Testament or ancient Mediterranean pre-civilised way of solving conflict (see 2 Ki 8:12; Is 13:16; Hos 14:1; Nah 3:10). It is a universal human phenomenon where the brutal clashes of cultures confirm the irreconcilability of inner worlds and external realities and explains why, also in modern times, we had a Holocaust during World War II and towards the end of the twentieth century a Rwanda, a former Yugoslavia and probably more to come in the twenty-first century. The anger driven extermination of the hateful enemy ironically confirms and reestablishes the beloved enemy or self. Neuro-psychological antagonism might not be the only reason for these deadly ideological battles as social, political, historical and economic factors also form part of the motivations for conflict (Wexler 2006:231), but is an inner demanding force that cannot be ignored.

Exile and bereavement are very similar in terms of the experience of loss. Here the neural pathways become confused and frustrated and the emotion of deep-seated anger comes to the fore quite naturally. Attend to Janet Eells’ (1977) perceptions on anger during mourning:

Other emotions crowd in. There is anger - anger at the doctors who failed to save the loved one, anger at others who still have their mates or children, anger at God for permitting such a thing to happen, anger at anyone who is around for anything at all.

(Eells 1977:117)

The imperative for Yahweh to ‘remember’ Edom in v. 7 is the retaliation for the repeated imperatives, יִרְשָׁד אדום, of this ‘brother’ - enemy of Judah who incited Jerusalem’s destruction in 586 BCE, on her ‘day’ (Lam 4:21; Ezek 25:12; 36:5; Obad 10-14; see Schaefer 2001:321). This is a befitting example of episodic memory (also present in the first two stanzas) where a past experience is recalled in detail in its specific context in time and place. In this case, it comprises all the gruesome deeds committed against the Judeans on Jerusalem’s ‘day’ and the obvious accompanying anger it evoked then and through recall later on. Emotion-laden events are more likely to be remembered than neutral everyday events as if ingrained in victims’ minds.

24. Dahood (1970:270) captures the atmosphere of death as follows: ‘The moral inability of the Israelites to sing hymns of praise in Babylonia put them in a class with the denizens of the nether world whose keenest sorrow was their inability to sing Yahweh’s praises’ (see also Eaton 2005:455; Weiser 1962:794).

25. See again footnote 12 where it is pointed out that emotions are also experienced bodily.

26. Zenger (1996:49, following Hartberger) offers another interpretation than the commonly accepted one. In oath swearing the right hand is on the throat and will automatically strangle the oath taker if not serious, the paroxysm of that, however, the losing of the playing and singing abilities of the speaker makes better sense.
Viviers (2005:799–808), however, points out that God, who can be many things, is not an internal-external match. Only afterwards can we live fulfilled lives as we maintain neuro-environmental consonance (Wexler 2006:18). We are ‘driven’ to continuously match the internal and the external. Emotions provide us with strong driving forces to uphold this consonance and can even inspire physical violence to defend and maintain our internalised ideologies and convictions, our and our group’s ‘selves’. Part of our neuro-psychological make-up, to a certain extent, ‘dies’ when the internal and external match breaks down, as, for instance, in situations of bereavement and immigration. Our neural networks become deprived of the necessary stimulation and this explains the intensity of our emotional disarray in times of loss. It requires hard work to ‘cultivate’ a new internal world through new neural networks to match a newly external world.

The tenacity and intensity of the loss of their home countries in stories like that of the Polish immigrant Eva Hoffmann and of the Judean exiles in Psalm 137, become quite transparent when viewed through the lens of the neuro-psychological imperative. The loss of their homeland is not only similar to the death of a loved one, it is their ‘own death,’ that of their internal worlds that explains the utter pathos of their situations. Therefore, when anger creeps in towards the end of Psalm 137, it should not be seen as something unnatural or unexpected. One of the pressing issues faced by humans today is that anger is not the problem here, but rather the canalising thereof.

REFERENCES


