



## Psalm 137 - Lament over the Destruction of Jerusalem

### Introduction

This community lament remembers the Babylonian captivity, and provides words by which the returned exiles can express their loyalty to Jerusalem and pray that God would pay out his just punishment on those who gloat over its destruction.

This psalm is notable for the ferocity of its final wish. This is a vivid application of the principle of *talion*, the principle that punishment should match the crime: <<*Whoever sheds the blood of a human, by a human shall that person's blood be shed; for in his own image God made humankind*>> (Genesis 9:6), and: <<*If any harm follows, then you shall give life for life, eye for eye, tooth for tooth, hand for hand, foot for foot*>> (Exodus 21:23-24). It is a prayer that the Babylonians, who had smashed Israelite infants, should be punished appropriately.

Three additional comments may be made. First, even though Babylon was the Lord's tool for disciplining his people, they apparently went about their work with cruel glee: <<*I was angry with my people, I profaned my heritage; I gave them into your hand, you showed them no mercy; on the aged you made your yoke exceedingly heavy*>> (Isaiah 47:6). Second, the vile practice of destroying the infants of a conquered people is well-attested in the ancient world, e.g. 2 Kings 8:12, Hosea 10:14 and 13:16, Nahum 3:10, and Homer's Iliad 22.63, and was therefore foretold of the fall of Babylon: <<*Their infants will be dashed to pieces before their eyes; their houses will be plundered, and their wives ravished*>> (Isaiah 13:16). Further, the Babylonians had apparently done this to the Judæans as the connection with v.8 suggests, and the prophets led the people to await God's justice; refer to Isaiah 47:1-9 and Jeremiah 51:24. In this light, the psalm is not endorsing the action in itself but is instead seeing the conquerors of Babylon as carrying out God's just sentence, even if they did so unwittingly.

Neither Israelites nor Christians are permitted to indulge personal hatred and vengeance: <<*You shall not hate in your heart anyone of your kin; you shall reprove your neighbour, or you will incur guilt yourself. You shall not take vengeance or bear a grudge against any of your people, but you shall love your neighbour as yourself: I am the Lord*>> (Leviticus 19:17-18), <<*But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be children of your Father in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the righteous and on the unrighteous*>> (Matthew 5:44-45); generally speaking, the repentance of those who hate God's people is preferred, and yet, failing that, any prayer for God's justice and for Christ's return will involve punishment for those who have oppressed his people: <<*When he opened the fifth seal, I saw under the altar the souls of those who had been slaughtered for the word of God and for the testimony they had given; they cried out with a loud voice, 'Sovereign Lord, holy and true, how long will it be before you judge and avenge our blood on the inhabitants of the earth?'*>> (Revelation 6:9-10).

### Psalm 137:1-3 - Our Sadness as Captives in Babylon.

The opening section recalls the captivity by the waters of Babylon, a reference to the Euphrates River, several streams and canals, where the Babylonian captors had required them to sing songs. The songs of Zion would be sacred songs such as the psalms, and apparently the captors wanted the Judæans to sing them for entertainment rather than for worship.

<sup>1</sup> By the rivers of Babylon —  
there we sat down and there we wept  
when we remembered Zion.

### Psalm 137:1

By the rivers of Babylon. This song of the exile places the Israelites on the shore of one of Babylon's mighty rivers, likely the Euphrates, or one of its other many waterways. Judæa and the whole of Israel had no mighty river comparable to the Euphrates, so it would certainly make an impression upon the forced refugee from Judæa to Babylonia. Because this is a remembrance of Babylon, many commentators believe Psalm 137 was written after the return from exile. It may also have been written many years into the exile.

Adam Clarke commented, "These might have been the Tigris and Euphrates, or their branches, or streams that flowed into them. In their captivity and dispersion, it was customary for the Jews to hold their religious meetings on the banks of rivers. Mention is made of this Acts 16:13, where we find the Jews of Philippi resorting to a river side, where prayer was wont to be made."

There we sat down and there we wept. The past tense distances the singers from these events, which favours the conclusion that the psalm comes from after the exile.

The immense rivers of Babylon said to the exiled one, you are not home any more. As they remembered Zion they wept.

- They wept for the death of so many loved ones.
- They wept for the loss of almost everything they owned.
- They wept for the destroyed city of Jerusalem and its great temple.
- They wept for the agony of a forced march from Judæa to Babylon.
- They wept for the cruelty of their captors.
- They wept for the loss of such a pleasant and blessed past.
- They wept for the forced captivity of their present.
- They wept for the bleak nature of their future.
- They wept for their sin that invited such judgement from God.
- They wept as they believed God had abandoned them and it was due to their own apostasy.

When we remembered Zion. Charles Spurgeon commented, “They did not weep when they remembered the cruelties of Babylon; the memory of fierce oppression dried their tears and made their hearts burn with wrath: but when the beloved city of their solemnities came into their minds they could not refrain from floods of tears.”

- <sup>2</sup> On the willows there  
we hung up our harps.
- <sup>3</sup> For there our captors  
asked us for songs,  
and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying,  
‘Sing us one of the songs of Zion!’

### Psalm 137:2-3

On the willows there. This tree grows and flourishes beside flowing water.

On the willows there we hung up our harps. The singer used poetic liberty to present a striking scene. On the shores of the great river were large willow trees, and because there was no song left in these captives, they hung their harps on those willow trees. Clarke observed, “The *arabim* or willows were very plentiful in Babylon. The great quantity of them that were on the banks of the Euphrates caused Isaiah, Isaiah 15:7, to call it the brook or river of willows.”

Sing us one of the songs of Zion! This was the cruel demand of those who carried the Israelites away as captives. They asked for one of the famous songs of Zion. The ones who plundered the people of God now wanted them to entertain them. Yet there was no song left in them; their harps had been hung in the trees. Alexander Maclaren commented, "So, like tipsy revellers, they called out 'Sing!' The request drove the iron deeper into sad hearts, for it came from those who had made the misery. They had led away the captives, and now they bid them make sport." Derek Kidner added, "A relief from Sennacherib's palace at Nineveh, in the neighbouring land of Assyria, portrays a situation not unlike this, with three prisoners of war playing lyres as they are marched along by an armed soldier."

#### Psalm 137:4-6 - May We Never Forget Jerusalem.

To a pious Judæan, the request of v.3 would be like asking him to forget Jerusalem, which would be an act of treachery against God, his covenant, and his people. His prayer is that if he should consent to such treachery, the very right hand that would play the lyre would instead forget its skill, and the tongue that might sing would instead stick to the roof of the mouth: <<*the voices of princes were hushed, and their tongues stuck to the roof of their mouths*>> (Job 29:10), <<*The tongue of the infant sticks to the roof of its mouth for thirst; the children beg for food, but no one gives them anything*>> (Lamentations 4:4), <<*and I will make your tongue cling to the roof of your mouth, so that you shall be speechless and unable to reprove them; for they are a rebellious house*>> (Ezekiel 3:26).

- 4 How could we sing the Lord's song  
in a foreign land?
- 5 If I forget you, O Jerusalem,  
let my right hand wither!
- 6 Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth,  
if I do not remember you,  
if I do not set Jerusalem  
above my highest joy.

#### Psalm 137:4-6

How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land? Although their conquerors wanted them to sing for their own amusement, the song simply was not there. The songs of God's people were more than performances; they came from their relationship with God. It would take a long time to sing those songs in a foreign land, where they were captives and not free.

If I forget you, O Jerusalem. The singer vowed that he would never forget God's holy city, and even gave a curse upon himself if he did. If he did forget, then his right hand could lose its skill to play the harp. If he failed to remember, then his tongue would lose its ability to sing.

Psalm 137:7-9 - May the Lord Repay Those Who Destroyed Jerusalem.

The recollection of these hurtful taunts leads to a prayer that God will remember the deeds of his people's enemies; the psalmist selects the Edomites, a conventional representative of all those who hate God's people as in Obadiah, as well as the daughter of Babylon, the personified city. The Edomites took great delight in destroying Jerusalem utterly (refer to Obadiah 11-14), while the Babylonians had carried out excessive violence against the helpless in Jerusalem.

7 Remember, O Lord, against the Edomites  
the day of Jerusalem's fall,  
how they said, 'Tear it down! Tear it down!  
Down to its foundations!'

Psalm 137:7

Remember, O Lord, against the Edomites. The psalmist directed his words to God, asking him to remember the people of Edom, a land to the south-east of Israel, for their conduct during the conquest of Jerusalem. In this case, the call to remember was a call to oppose and to judge. Clarke commented, "It appears from Jeremiah 12:6; 25:14; Lamentations 4:21-22; Ezekiel 25:12; Obadiah 1:11-14; that the Idumæans joined the army of Nebuchadnezzar against their brethren the Jews; and that they were main instruments in raising the walls of Jerusalem even to the ground."

**The small book of Obadiah is a prophetic pronouncement against the Edomites for their part in the conquest of Judæa: <<But you should not have gloated over your brother on the day of his misfortune; you should not have rejoiced over the people of Judah on the day of their ruin; you should not have boasted on the day of distress>> (Obadiah 12).**

Tear it down! Tear it down! Down to its foundations! The Edomites were a sister-nation to Israel, having descended from Esau, the brother of Jacob, i.e. Israel. They should have supported and sympathised with Jerusalem when the Babylonians came against it. Instead, they enjoyed Jerusalem's agony and wished that the city be completely destroyed. Spurgeon noted, "It is horrible for neighbours to be enemies, worse for them to show their enmity in times of great affliction, worst of all for neighbours to egg others on to malicious deeds."

- 8 O daughter Babylon, you devastator!  
Happy shall they be who pay you back  
what you have done to us!
- 9 Happy shall they be who take your little ones  
and dash them against the rock!

### Psalm 137:8-9

O daughter Babylon, you devastator! The psalmist directed his words to future generations of the Babylonian empire, giving them notice that they themselves would be destroyed in God's judgement. It is interesting that the psalmist did not make this a prayer to God as he did regarding Edom in v.7. Perhaps he regarded the judgement of Babylon to be so certain that it did not need his prayer, only his pronouncement, especially in light of other prophecies.

Happy shall they be who pay you back what you have done to us! This is a blessing on the one who brings judgement against the Babylonians, and a judgement corresponding to what the Babylonians served unto Jerusalem and Judæa. Kidner added, "There is ample evidence that 'to dash in pieces their little ones' was a common enough sequel to a heathen victory, and that Babylon had been in no mood for restraint at the fall of Jerusalem (2 Kings 25:7; Lamentations 5:11f.)."

Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock! This awful blessing is understood in light of the previous line. No doubt the singer had seen this done to the little ones of Jerusalem, and the horrible image was seared upon his mind. He prayed that the Babylonians would receive just as they had given: <<*For with the judgement you make you will be judged, and the measure you give will be the measure you get*>> (Matthew 7:2). Although not a command for the killing of children, this is surely an approval of it. The NT calls Christians to a higher standard for their response should be to pray for reconciliation, not judgement. Yet they can sympathise with the impulse of the psalmist.

Spurgeon commented, "Let those find fault with it who have never seen their temple burned, their city ruined, their wives ravished, and their children slain; they might not, perhaps, be quite so velvet-mouthed if they had suffered after this fashion."

The psalmist also may have known of Isaiah's prophecy that announced that just this would happen: <<*Their infants will be dashed to pieces before their eyes*>> (Isaiah 13:16a).