

# Psalm 137

## *How Shall We Sing the LORD's Song?*

### 1. Setting of the Psalm

#### (a) Historical setting

The Babylonian exile; Jerusalem has been torn down (587 BC); Edmonites stood on the sidelines while Nebuchadnezzar razed the city, slaughtered, and deported: "Lay it bare, lay it bare, down to its foundations!" The Jewish people were crushed by the experience of exile: the destruction of Jerusalem; the deaths of so many; expulsion and deportation.

#### (b) Literary setting

Psalm 136 celebrates the steadfast love of God. Psalm 137 opens with the words, "I give you thanks, O LORD, with my whole heart...and give thanks to your name for your steadfast love and your faithfulness." The experience of exile depicted in Psalm 137 is set in the context of the loyalty and dependability of God.

#### (c) Prophetic setting

Verses 8-9 are troubling. They sound vindictive and bloodthirsty. But it helps to see that the Psalmist has employed echoes of prophecies about the exile.

Isaiah 13 concerns the destruction of Babylon. "Their infants will be dashed in pieces before their eyes; their houses will be plundered and their wives ravished."

Jeremiah 51 predicts the destruction that will overtake Babylon. "A destroyer has come upon her, upon Babylon; her warriors are taken; their bows are broken in pieces, for the LORD is a God of recompense; he will surely repay." The words "destroyer", "recompense" and "repay" are each taken up in Psalm 137:8.

### 2. Style of the Psalm

Psalms 46, 48, 76, and 87 are Zion Songs. Psalm 137 an inverted Zion Song. Jerusalem is devastated – Babylon is triumphant. The demand to "sing us one of the Zion Songs" is meant to torment. The question, "How shall we sing the LORD's song in a foreign land?" is filled with pain.

But Psalm 137 is also a taunt song. A taunt song is sung as an expression of rejection and disgust. So through the taunt in Psalm 137, the exile community expresses its commitment to Jerusalem – and therefore its faith in and commitment to God – and its utter rejection of Babylon.

### 3. Shape of the Psalm

Three sections move us from pain, through protest to prayer.

#### (a) The pain of captivity (vv. 1-4)

The place of captivity ("Upon the rivers of Babylon...upon foreign soil") forms brackets on this section. In the middle are the captors and tormentors. The impression is given that there is no escape for the exiles.

The whole scenario emphasises their distance from God. Even "we sat" suggests this – it means "we stayed there." The people wept, hanging up their lyres because lyres are for mirth and mirth was out of place.

#### (b) A protest of commitment (vv. 5-6)

The demand for a Zion Song was answered by a protest song.

The danger of sitting down and hanging up your lyre = assimilation.

The psalmist protests a fierce commitment to Jerusalem. "I will not sing you a merely religious song, but I will sing you a song of defiance, a promise that I will never forget my homeland, and that there will one day be a reckoning for what you have done" (John Goldingay).

#### (c) A prayer of conviction (vv. 7-9)

The psalmist speaks of Jerusalem's destruction, and Babylon's future destruction.

Jerusalem's destruction is compared a woman being stripped bare. The psalmist asks God to remember it. He is content to trust God to do what is right.

Babylon is also compared to a woman – "Lady Babylon". The psalmist closes his taunt song by declaring his conviction that she shall be destroyed.

Where does his conviction come from? Not from blood lust and a desire for revenge. The psalmist knows what God has pronounced against Babylon through the prophets (see section 1(c)). Babylon's destruction is not the psalmist's task. He merely asserts his conviction that God will do as he has said.

### 4. The Sound of the Psalm in the 21<sup>st</sup> century

#### (a) Reject the world as the sphere in which we look for security and joy

Only two spiritual poles: Zion and Babylon. Babylon is doomed to destruction (Revelation 18). We must leave Babylon. Psalm 137 gives us words to do so.

#### (b) Commit wholly to God

Our experience is that of exiles. But we know the promise of God: the exile is only for a limited time. So when our neighbours ask us to sing is one of the songs of Zion, we answer them, not with a taunt song, but with gentleness and respect.

#### (c) "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."

It was in Jerusalem that people cried out against the incarnate Son of God, "Lay him bare, lay him bare! Crucify him, crucify him!" It was on the Cross that Jesus prayed, "Father forgive them, for they do not know what they are doing."

So we do not have the right to pray for the death of our opponents. Jesus commands, "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven" (Matt. 5:44-45).

#### (d) Vindication

But that doesn't mean that we take the raw edge off the Psalm. God is a jealous God who will vindicate his justice and avenge his people (Rev. 6:9-11; 18:20).