
PSALM 137: 1 By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down. Yes, we wept, when we remembered Zion.

The desolate and afflicted state of the captives in Babylon, Psa 137:1, Psa 137:2. How they were insulted by their enemies, Psa 137:3, Psa 137:4. Their attachment to their country, Psa 137:5, Psa 137:6. Judgments denounced against their enemies, Psa 137:7-9.

The Vulgate, Septuagint, Ethiopic, and Arabic, say, ridiculously enough, a Psalm of David for Jeremiah. Anachronisms with those who wrote the titles to the Psalms were matters of no importance. Jeremiah never was at Babylon; and therefore could have no part in a Psalm that was sung on the banks of its rivers by the Israelitish captives. Neither the Hebrew nor Chaldee has any title; the Syriac attributes it to David. Some think it was sung when they returned from Babylon; others, while they were there. It is a matter of little importance. It was evidently composed during or at the close of the captivity.

Verse 1

By the rivers of Babylon - 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 Act 16:13, where we find the Jews of Philippi resorting to a river side, where prayer was wont to be made. And sometimes they built their synagogues here, when they were expelled from the cities.

PSALM 137: 2 On the willows in its midst, we hung up our harps.

Verse 2

We hanged our harps upon the willows - The ערבים arabim or willows were very plentiful in Babylon. The great quantity of them that were on the banks of the Euphrates caused Isaiah, Isa 15:7, to call it the brook or river of willows. This is a most affecting picture. Perhaps resting themselves after toil, and wishing to spend their time religiously, they took their harps, and were about to sing one of the songs of Zion; but, reflecting on their own country, they became so filled with distress, that they unstrung their harps with one consent, and hung them on the willow bushes, and gave a general loose to their grief. Some of the Babylonians, who probably attended such meetings for the sake of the music, being present at the time here specified, desired them to sing one of Zion's songs: this is affectingly told.

PSALM 137: 3 For there, those who led us captive asked us for songs. Those who tormented us demanded songs of joy: "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"

Verse 3

They that carried us away captive required of us a song - This was as unreasonable as it was insulting. How could they who had reduced us to slavery, and dragged us in chains from our own beautiful land and privileges, expect us to sing a sacred ode to please them, who were enemies both to us and to our God? And how could those who wasted us expect mirth from people in captivity, deprived of all their possessions, and in the most abject state of poverty and oppression?

PSALM 137: 4 How can we sing the LORD's song in a foreign land?

Verse 4

How shall we sing the Lord's song - איך נשיר eich! nashir; O, we sing! Who does not hear the deep sigh in the strongly guttural sound of the original איך eich! wrung, as it were, from the bottom of the heart? Can We, in this state of slavery, - We, exiles, from our country, We, stripped of all our property, - We, reduced to contempt by our strong enemy, - We, deprived of our religious privileges, - We, insulted by our oppressors, - We, in the land of heathens, - We sing, or be mirthful in these circumstances? No: God does not expect it; man should not wish it; and it is base in our enemies to require it.

PSALM 137: 5 If I forget you, Jerusalem, let my right hand forget its skill.

Verse 5

If I forget thee, O Jerusalem - Such conduct would be, in effect, a renunciation of our land a tacit acknowledgment that we were reconciled to our bondage; a concession that we were pleased with our captivity, and could profane holy ordinances by using them as means of sport or pastime to the heathen. No: Jerusalem! we remember thee and thy Divine ordinances: and especially thy King and our God, whose indignation we must bear, because we have sinned against him.

Let my right hand forget - Let me forget the use of my right hand. Let me forget that which is dearest and most profitable to me; and let me lose my skill in the management of my harp, if I ever prostitute it to please the ungodly multitude or the enemies of my Creator!

PSALM 137: 6 Let my tongue stick to the roof of my mouth if I don't remember you; if I don't prefer Jerusalem above my chief joy.

Verse 6

Let my tongue cleave - Let me lose my voice, and all its powers of melody; my tongue, and all its faculty of speech; my ear, and its discernment of sounds; if I do not prefer my country, my people, and the ordinances of my God, beyond all these, and whatever may constitute the chiefest joy I can possess in aught else beside. This is truly patriotic, truly noble and dignified. Such sentiments can only be found in the hearts and mouths of those slaves whom the grace of God has made free.

PSALM 137: 7 Remember, LORD, against the children of Edom, the day of Jerusalem; who said, "Raze it! Raze it even to its foundation!"

Verse 7

Remember - the children of Edom - It appears from Jer 12:6; Jer 25:14; Lam 4:21, Lam 4:22; Eze 25:12; Oba 1:11-14; that the Idumeans joined the army of Nebuchadnezzar against their brethren the Jews; and that they were main instruments in rasing the walls of Jerusalem even to the ground.

PSALM 137: 8 Daughter of Babylon, doomed to destruction, he will be happy who rewards you, as you have served us.

Verse 8

O daughter of Babylon, who art to be destroyed - Or, O thou daughter of Babylon the destroyer, or, who art to be ruined. In being reduced under the empire of the Persians, Babylon was already greatly humbled and brought low from what it was in the days of Nebuchadnezzar; but it was afterwards so totally ruined that not a vestige of it remains. After its capture by Cyrus, A.M. 3468, it could never be considered a capital city; but it appeared to follow the fortunes of its various conquerors till it was, as a city, finally destroyed.

Rewardeth thee as thou hast served us - This was Cyrus, who was chosen of God to do this work, and is therefore called happy, as being God's agent in its destruction. Greater desolations were afterwards brought upon it by Darius Hystaspes, who took this city after it had revolted, and slaughtered the inhabitants, men and women, in a barbarous manner. Herod. lib. iii.

PSALM 137: 9 Happy shall he be, who takes and dashes your little ones against the rock.

Verse 9

Happy - that taketh and dasheth thy little ones - That is, So oppressive hast thou been to all under thy domination, as to become universally hated and detested; so that those who may have the last hand in thy destruction, and the total extermination of thy inhabitants, shall be reputed happy - shall be celebrated and extolled as those who have rid the world of a curse so grievous. These prophetic declarations contain no excitement to any person or persons to commit acts of cruelty and barbarity; but are simply declarative of what would take place in the order of the retributive providence and justice of God, and the general opinion that should in consequence be expressed on the subject; therefore praying for the destruction of our enemies is totally out of the question. It should not be omitted that the Chaldee considers this Psalm a dialogue, which it thus divides: - The three first verses are supposed to have been spoken by the psalmist, By the rivers, etc. The Levites answer from the porch of the temple, in Psa 137:4, How shall we sing, etc. The voice of the Holy Spirit responds in Psa 137:5, Psa 137:6, If I forget thee, etc. Michael, the prince of Jerusalem,

answers in Psa 137:7, Remember, O Lord, etc. Gabriel, the prince of Zion, then addresses the destroyer of the Babylonish nation, in Psa 137:8, Psa 137:9, Happy shall be he that rewardeth thee, etc. To slay all when a city was sacked, both male and female, old and young, was a common practice in ancient times. Homer describes this in words almost similar to those of the psalmist: -
Υίας τ' ολλυμενους, ἔλκυσθειςας τε θυγατρας, και θαλαμους κεραΐζομενους, και νηπια τεκνα
Βαλλομενα προτι γαιη εν αινη δηϊοτητι, Ἐλκομενας τε νυους ολοης ὑπο χερσιν Αχαιων.

Il. lib. xxii., ver. 62.

My heroes slain, my bridal bed o'erturned;

My daughters ravished, and my city burned:

My bleeding infants dashed against the floor;

These I have yet to see; perhaps yet more.

Pope.

These excesses were common in all barbarous nations, and are only prophetically declared here. He shall be reputed happy, prosperous, and highly commendable, who shall destroy Babylon.