

# PSALM 137

## INTRODUCTION TO PSALM 137

The occasion of this psalm was the captivity of the Jews in Babylon, and the treatment they met with there; either as foreseen, or as now endured. Aben Ezra ascribes this psalm to David; and so the Syriac version, which calls it,

“a psalm of David; the words of the saints, who were carried captive into Babylon.”

The Septuagint, Vulgate Latin, and Ethiopic versions, make it to be David’s, and yet add the name of Jeremiah; and the Arabic version calls it David’s, concerning Jeremiah: but, as Theodoret observes, Jeremiah was not carried into Babylon, but, after some short stay in or near Jerusalem, was forced away into Egypt; and could neither be the writer nor subject of this psalm: and though it might be written by David under a spirit of prophecy; who thereby might foresee and foretell the Babylonish captivity, and what the Jews would suffer in it; as the prophets Isaiah and Jeremiah did, many years before it came to pass; yet it seems rather to have been written by one of the captivity, either while in it, or immediately after it.

**Ver. 1.** *By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down*, etc.] If by Babylon is meant the country, then the rivers of it are Chebar, Ulai, Tigris, Euphrates, and others; (see <sup><300></sup>Ezekiel 1:1 <sup><782></sup>Daniel 8:2); but if the city itself, then only Euphrates, which ran through it; and is expressed by rivers, because of the largeness of it, and because of the several canals cut out of it, for the service of the city; hence Babylon is said to dwell upon many waters, (<sup><2513></sup>Jeremiah 51:13); upon the banks whereof the captive Jews were; either through choice, where they could be alone, and mourn their fate, indulge their sorrows, and give vent to their grief; or by the order of these who carried them captive, there to be employed, either in taking goods from ships here unloaded, or to repair and maintain the banks of the rivers, or to do some servile work or another; see (<sup><2400></sup>Ezekiel 1:1); and where they would sometimes “sit down” pensive, as mourners used to do, and lament their case, (<sup><300></sup>Job 2:8,13). Or this phrase may express their residence here,

and the continuance and length of their captivity, which was seventy years: yea, Babylon itself may be meant by the waters of it; just as Thebes, in Pindar<sup>f1817</sup> is called the Dircaean waters, near to which it was;

*yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion*; they imitated the flowing stream by which they sat, and swelled it with their tears; they wept for their sins, which brought them thither; and it increased their sorrow, when they called to mind what privileges they had enjoyed in Zion, the city of their solemnities; where they had often seen the tribes of Israel bowing before and worshipping the God of Israel; the daily sacrifices and others offered up; the solemn feasts kept; the songs of Zion, sung by the Levites in delightful harmony; and, above all, the beauty of the Lord their God, his power and glory, while they were inquiring in his sanctuary: and also when they reflected upon the sad condition and melancholy circumstances in which Zion now was; the city, temple, and altar, lying in heaps of rubbish; no worship and service performed; no sacrifices offered, nor songs sung; nor any that came to her solemn feasts; (see <sup><2302></sup>Lamentations 1:2,4,7,16 <sup><0923></sup>Psalm 42:3,4).

**Ver. 2.** *We hanged our harps upon the willows in the midst thereof.*]

These were musical instruments, used in the temple service by the Levites, who seem to be the persons here speaking; who took care of them, and preserved them from the plunder of the enemy; and carried them with them to Babylon, in hope of returning with them to use them as before, or to solace themselves and others in captivity; though now they had no heart to make use of them, their sorrow was so great, and therefore hung them upon the willows as useless things: these willows grew upon the banks of the rivers where they were, as such trees usually do; hence called willows of the brook<sup>f1818</sup>, and willows by water courses, (<sup><0234></sup>Leviticus 23:40 <sup><2344></sup>Isaiah 44:4); and particularly upon the banks of the river Euphrates, which ran through the midst of Babylon, with which the phrase here agrees; and therefore Babylon itself is thought to be called “the brook”, or “valley, of the willows”, (<sup><2350></sup>Isaiah 15:7). And, according to Ovid<sup>f1819</sup>, not only reeds and poplars, but willows, grew on the banks of the Euphrates. Now the state of these people was an emblem of the case of the backsliding children of God; who, through the prevalence of corruption, the force of temptation, and the snares of the world, are brought into a kind of captivity to the law of sin and death, though not willingly; nor is it pleasing to them when sensible of it, (<sup><0172></sup>Romans 7:23,24); who, though they are called out of the world, and are not of it; yet sometimes are so overcome with it, and

immersed in the things of it, that they are as it were in Babylon. An emblem of this world, of the confusion in it, as its name signifies; of the fading glories of it, and the wickedness and idolatry it abounds with: and here they sit by the rivers of carnal pleasures in it for a while, till brought to themselves; and then they weep over their sins, and lament them; especially when they remember what opportunities they have formerly had in Zion, and what a low condition she is now in through the conduct of themselves and others: these make use of their harps when Zion is in good and prosperous circumstances, (~~641~~ Revelation 14:1-3 15:1-3); but when there are corruptions in doctrine, neglect or abuse of ordinances, animosities and divisions prevail, declensions in the life and power of religion, and the lives of professors disagreeable; then they hang their harps on willows, and drop their notes.

**Ver. 3.** *For there they that carried us away captive required of us a song,* etc.] Or, “words of a song”<sup>f1820</sup>. To repeat the words of one of the songs of Zion, as it is afterwards expressed: this the Babylonians did, as the Targum; who were they that carried the Jews into captivity; and this is given as a reason why they hung their harps on willows, and were so sorrowful, because such a request as this was made;

*and they that wasted us [required of us] mirth:* the Chaldeans, who plundered them of their substance, and reduced their city and temple to heaps of rubbish, as the word<sup>f1821</sup> used signifies; or who heaped reproaches upon them, as Jarchi: these insisted not only on having the words of a song repeated to them, but that they should be set to some tune and sung in a manner expressing mirth, or would provoke unto it: or “our lamentations”, according to Kimchi; that is, the authors of them<sup>f1822</sup>, so barbarous were they;

*[saying], sing us [one] of the songs of Zion;* which used to be sung in Zion in the temple, called the songs of the temple, (~~388~~ Amos 8:3); this demand they made either out of curiosity, that they might know something of the temple songs and music they had heard of; or rather as jeering at and insulting the poor Jews in their miserable and melancholy circumstances; as if they had said, now sing your songs if you can: or in order to make themselves sport and diversion with them, as the Philistines with Samson. The spiritual songs of Zion are the songs of electing, redeeming, calling, pardoning, and justifying grace; which natural men neither understand, nor can learn, but scoff at and despise.

**Ver. 4.** *How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?*] This is the answer returned by the Jews to the above request or demand; it may be, particularly, by the Levites, whose business it was to sing these songs: so the Targum,

“immediately the Levites said, how shall we sing the hymns of the Lord in a strange land?”

This they said, not merely on account of their unsuitable circumstances, being in distress and affliction, and so not disposed for such work; nor as if unlawful to them, being forbidden: for, though sacrifices were not to be offered but at Jerusalem, yet songs of praise might be sung elsewhere, on proper occasions, as David did, (~~Psalm~~ Psalm 18:49 57:4,8 63:1-3); but as wondering at their insolence, and complaining of their cruelty and inhumanity, thus to insult them and jeer at them: or rather, because it was “the Lord's song” they required, and so sacred, and not to be sung in any place, or at any time, and in any company; which would be but casting pearls before swine, and giving that which was holy to dogs, (~~Matthew~~ Matthew 7:6); or it may be they required this to be done in one of their temples, and to their idols, just as these songs were sung in the temple at Jerusalem, and to the honour of Jehovah; and therefore they refused to do it: for it may be rendered, or however interpreted, “in the land of a strange god”<sup>f1823</sup>; as it is by Aben Ezra, Kimchi, and Ben Melech: they required them to sing with mirth and joy, which they could not do in their present case; (see ~~Psalm~~ Psalm 137:2).

**Ver. 5.** *If I forget thee, O Jerusalem,* etc.] This was said by one or everyone of the Levites; or singers, as Aben Ezra and Kimchi; or by the congregation of Israel, as Jarchi; by one of them, in the name of the rest; or by the composer of the psalm. The Targum is,

“the voice of the Spirit of God answered and said, “if I forget”, etc.”

that is, to weep over the calamities of Jerusalem; which might be thought, if the songs of Zion were sung; or to pray for the restoration of her prosperity and peace; as the church of Christ may be said to be forgotten, when men forget to mourn over its breaches, and show no concern for the reparation of them; or at the death of principal persons, which they lay not to heart; or at the great decay of religion in those that survive; or at the sins of professors, and their disregard to the word and ordinances: also

when they forget to pray for her happiness in general; for the good of her members in particular; and especially for her ministers, that they may have assistance and success; and for a blessing on the word and ordinances, and for the conversion of sinners; and when they forget the worship of the Lord in it, and forsake the assembling of themselves together;

*let my right hand forget [her cunning]*; her skill in music, particularly in playing on the harp; (see <sup><9166></sup>1 Samuel 16:16,18); the harp was held in the left hand, and struck with the right; and that more softly or hardly, as the note required, in which was the skill or cunning of using it. Or let this befall me, should I so far forget Jerusalem as to strike the harp to one of the songs of Zion in a strange land: or let it forget any of its works; let it be disabled from working at all; let it be dry and withered, which, Aben Ezra says, is the sense of the word according to some; and Schultens <sup>f1824</sup>, from the use of it in Arabic, renders it, let it be “disjointed”, or the nerve loosened; see (<sup><1812></sup>Job 31:22). Or the sense is, let everything that is as dear as my right hand be taken from me: or, as it may be rendered, “my right hand [is] forgotten” <sup>f1825</sup>; that is, should I forget Jerusalem, it would; for that is as my right hand; so Arama. Some choose to translate the words thus, “may thou (O God) forget my right hand” <sup>f1826</sup>; that is, to be at my right hand; to be a present help to me in time of need; to hold me by it, and to be the shade of it.

**Ver. 6.** *If I do not remember thee*, etc.] In prayer, in discourse, in conversation; this is the same as before, to forget, repeated for the confirmation of it;

*let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth*; as is the case of a person in a fever, or in a violent thirst, which is to be in great distress, (<sup><9106></sup>Psalm 18:6 <sup><9104></sup>Lamentations 4:4); the sense is, let me have no use of my tongue; let me be dumb and speechless, and never sing a song or speak a word more, should I be so forgetful of the deplorable state of Jerusalem as to sing songs at such a season, and in an enemy’s country;

*if I prefer not Jerusalem above my chief joy*; meaning not God his exceeding joy, (<sup><9104></sup>Psalm 43:4); as his Creator, preserver, and benefactor, and much less as his covenant God and Father; as having loved him with an everlasting love; as the God of all grace unto him, and as his portion and exceeding great reward: nor Christ, the object of joy unspeakable and full of glory; joy in the greatness, glory, and fulness of his person; in the blessings and promises of his grace; in what he has done and suffered; as

risen, ascended, exalted, and who will come a second time: nor the joy of the Holy Ghost in a way of believing, and in hope of the glory of God; but all worldly joy, or matter of it; and this not in things sinful, nor merely such as worldlings have in the increase of their substance; but a lawful joy, such as in the health, happiness, and prosperity of a man's family, wife, and children, and his own; which is the greatest outward joy a man can have; and yet the church of God and interest of Christ are preferred by a good man to these; see (<sup><004B></sup>1 Samuel 4:19,21,22); which appears when all a man has that is matter of joy is sacrificed for the public good and interest of religion; when he can take no comfort in any outward enjoyment because of the sad case of Zion, (<sup><301B></sup>Malachi 2:3); when joy for its good is uppermost, and is first in his thoughts and words; when this is the "head" or "beginning"<sup>f1827</sup> of his joy, as it may be rendered. So Pindar<sup>f1828</sup> calls the chief, principal, and greatest part of joy, *αγλαίας αρχα*, the beginning of joy, the top and perfection of it.

**Ver. 7.** *Remember, O Lord, the children of Edom in the day of Jerusalem,* etc.] Of her visitation, calamity, and destruction, how they behaved then, and them for it; who, though the children of Esau and brethren of the Jews, as well as their neighbours, yet hated them; the old grudge of their father, because of the birthright and blessing, as well as the old enmity of the serpent, continuing in them; and who rejoiced at their ruin, helped forward their affliction, and were assistants to the Babylonians in the plunder and destruction of them, (Obadiah 1:11-14). The Targum is,

“Michael, the prince of Jerusalem, said, remember, O Lord, the people of Edom who destroyed Jerusalem.”

Many Jewish writers, as Aben Ezra observes, interpret this of the destruction of Jerusalem by the Romans:

*who said, rase [it], rase [it even] to the foundation thereof:* or “make [it] naked” or “bare<sup>f1829</sup> to the foundation”; pull down its walls, lay them level with the ground; root up the very foundation of them, and let nothing be left or seen but the bare naked ground; so spiteful and malicious were they.

**Ver. 8.** *O daughter of Babylon, who art to be destroyed,* etc.] By the determinate counsel and decree of God, and according to divine predictions; (see <sup><250B></sup>Jeremiah 50:1-51:64); so mystical Babylon, antichrist, and the man of sin, who therefore is called the son of perdition, (<sup><501B></sup>2 Thessalonians 2:3); because appointed to destruction, and shall certainly go

into it, (<sup>6678</sup>Revelation 17:8); or “O thou destroyer”, as the Targum, which paraphrases it thus,

“Gabriel, the prince of Zion, said to the Babylonish nation that spoileth or destroyeth;”

which is true of literal Babylon, called the destroying mountain, (<sup>25125</sup>Jeremiah 51:25); and of mystical Babylon, the destroyer both of the bodies and souls of men, (<sup>66118</sup>Revelation 11:18);

*happy [shall he be] that rewardeth thee as thou hast served us*; meaning Darius the Mede, as Kimchi; or rather, or however who must be added, Cyrus the Persian, as R. Obadiah; who were ordered by the Lord to retaliate her, and do as she had done to others, (<sup>2615</sup>Jeremiah 50:15,29); and in so doing pronounced happy, being the Lord’s shepherd, raised up in righteousness to perform his pleasure, (<sup>2408</sup>Isaiah 44:28 45:13); and here wished success by the godly Jews. In like manner the Christian princes will reward mystical Babylon, and be the happy instruments of her ruin, (<sup>66816</sup>Revelation 18:6).

**Ver. 9.** *Happy [shall he be] that taketh and dasheth thy little ones against the stones.*] That takes the infants from their mothers’ breasts, or out of their arms, and dashes out their brains against a “rock”, as the word <sup>f1830</sup> signifies; which, though it may seem a piece of cruelty, was but a just retaliation; the Babylonians having done the same to the Jewish children, and is foretold elsewhere should be done to theirs, (<sup>2316</sup>Isaiah 13:16). Nor is this desired from a spirit of revenge, but for the glory of divine justice, and that such a generation of cruel creatures might be rooted out of the earth; (see <sup>66112</sup>Revelation 2:2,3). Some allegorically understand this of crushing and mortifying the first motions of sin in the heart; but such a sense seems to have no place here.