

June 14, 2020

Psalm 137

A Prayer for Revenge
New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

The Book of Psalms is the prayer book of the Bible. Eugene says that it provides us with the language for prayer: our responding to the God who speaks to us. "Prayer is not just what good people do and say when they're doing their best. It's the language by which we become honest, true, and personal in our response to God. It is the means by which we get everything in our lives out in the open before God."

Psalm 137 is a brutally honest prayer, attributed to Jeremiah by Rabbinical sources. It is unique in the Bible. The only one out of 150 psalms to be set in a particular time and place, it relates to the Babylonian Exile—the period between 587-586 B.C. in Israel's history, when Jews were taken captive in Babylon and the Jerusalem temple was destroyed.

Its nine verses paint a scene of captives mourning "by the rivers of Babylon," mocked by their captors. It expresses a vow to remember Jerusalem even in exile, and closes with fantasies of vengeance against the oppressors. The Babylonian exile served as a crucible, forcing the Israelites to rethink their relationship to Yahweh, reassess their standing as a chosen people and rewrite their history.

The exile story, which echoes through the Bible, is central to the major prophets, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Lamentations, and Isaiah. And the aftermath of exile, when Cyrus the Great conquered Babylon and allowed the Judeans to return to Israel, is narrated in books of Ezra and Nehemiah. Bible scholar Rainer Albertz estimates that "about 70 percent of the Hebrew Bible tackles the questions of how the catastrophe of exile was possible and what Israel can learn from it."

The psalm is a regular part of Jewish & Christian Liturgies, but for many years major church traditions (including our own) removed the last three verses of the psalm from liturgical books because of their cruelty perceived to be incompatible with the gospel message.

Curiously, minority groups saw the Psalm in a polar opposite way. On the anniversary of America's independence, the abolitionist leader Frederick Douglass made a biblical Psalm—Psalm 137—best known for its opening line, "By the Rivers of Babylon," a centerpiece of his most famous speech, "What to the Slave Is the Fourth of July?"

Not only did it inspire the famous abolitionist, this 2,500-year-old Hebrew psalm has long served as an uplifting historical analogy for a variety of oppressed and subjugated groups, including African Americans.

¹ **BY THE RIVERS OF BABYLON—**

there we sat down and there we wept
when we remembered **ZION**.

² On the willows there

we hung up our harps.

³ For there our captors

asked us for songs,

and our tormentors asked for mirth, saying,

"Sing us one of the songs of Zion!"

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.

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!"

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!

BY THE RIVERS OF BABYLON | After Nebuchadnezzar II's successful siege of Jerusalem in 597 BC, and subsequent campaigns, inhabitants of the Kingdom of Judah were deported to Babylonia, where they were held captive until some time after the Fall of Babylon (539 BC). The rivers of Babylon are the Euphrates river, its tributaries, and the Tigris river.

EDOMITES | The Hebrew word Edom means "red", and the Hebrew Bible relates it to the name of its founder, Esau, the elder son of the Hebrew patriarch Isaac, because he was born "red all over". As a young adult, he sold his birthright to his brother Jacob for "red pottage". The Tanakh [Jewish Bible] describes the Edomites as descendants of Esau.

The Edomites (also known under the Greek name of the Idumeans) settled the land to the south and east of Judah, along the border of the Dead Sea. They were thought to be a vassal state to Judah following their defeat by King Saul, and later King David.

In the time of Nebuchadnezzar II the Edomites may have helped plunder Jerusalem and slaughter the Judeans. For this reason the prophets denounced Edom. Evidence also suggests that Edom may have engaged in a treaty betrayal of Judah.

Hence Edom and Edomites serve as a synonym and metaphor for traitor, betrayer and false-friend throughout the Bible, in particular here in Psalm 137.

the day of Jerusalem's fall | In 597 BC Nebuchadnezzar II, king of Babylon, lay siege to Jerusalem and defeated it. Babylon had conquered Judah in 605 BC, subjugating King Jehoiakim of Judah, but Jehoiakim rebelled believing that with the Egyptians, they could route the Babylonians. He died during the siege of the city and was replaced by the new king Jeconiah, who was either 8 or 18. When Jerusalem fell, Nebuchadnezzar II was merciless, pillaging the city and its Temple, deporting the king, his court and other prominent citizens and craftsmen, and much of the Jewish population of Judah (numbering approximately 10,000) to Babylon. They also took all the treasurers and furnishings of the Temple, including golden vessels dedicated by King Solomon (2 Kings 24:13-14). A biblical text reports, "None remained except the poorest people of the land". It was an utter and total defeat, characterized by massive death and loss.

Happy | in Hebrew **אֶשֶׁר** [eshet]: meaning happiness, blessedness. It evokes the idea of blessedness of those who follow the Ways of God (Psalm 1:1), are blessed with what is considered a blessing (family, love, security, knowledge of God), and used to describe the blessedness of 1 Kings 10:8 & 32. It's an intense exclamation of happiness. Eugene Peterson, in the Message translation renders this final verse in this way: "*May the Lord bless everyone who beats your children against the rocks!*"



QUESTIONS FOR THE PRACTICE OF EXAMEN & CONTEMPLATION

- What part of today's texts grab you?
- How do you struggle with seeing God at work in our world today in a hopeful way?
- How do you struggle with thoughts, prayers, desires for vengeance? What does that mean?
- The Babylonian exile served as a crucible, forcing the Israelites to rethink their relationship to Yahweh, reassess their standing as a chosen people and rewrite their history. If they were God's chosen people, how could they be defeated? How could God be silent in the face of their pain? How does the worldview-challenging language of this psalm empower you to reflect upon your faith, to respond to the God who speaks faith into being? How does the societal and cultural transformation pointed to in the Psalm resonate with what we are living today in the pandemics of COVID-19, and the lifting up of injustice in public health, criminal and societal systems summed up in the phrase Black Lives Matter?
- How do you struggle to identify, and to speak, of God's purposeful presence in our world, and our lives, today? Talk with God about what you need, want, and long for.