

Psalm 137

This is a psalm about Jews in the exile, but Aben Ezra and the Septuagint ascribe it to David, who perhaps under a spirit of prophecy foresaw the Babylonian captivity, and what the Jews would suffer in it.

It is recited annually on the Fast of Ab, commemorating the destruction of Jerusalem.

It is also an "imprecatory psalm" - an outpouring of rage from the heart of those under extreme duress.

Psalm 137:1 - "By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion."

The Tigris and Euphrates represent Babylon, like the Nile serves as an icon for Egypt.

"there we sat down" - to sit down was an act of mourning and grief (**Job 2:8**) and the position of lamentation.

"we wept" - in grief but also in repentance for their sins which brought about the catastrophe.

Like the prodigal son, who remembered how he had feasted at his father's table, but was now eating pig food (**Luke 15:11-32**).

Psalm 137:2-4 - "We hanged our harps upon the willows in the midst thereof. For there they that carried us away captive required of us a song; and they that wasted us required of us mirth, saying, Sing us one of the songs of Zion. How shall we sing the LORD'S song in a strange land?"

Their captors demanded they sing happy songs - a cruel mockery of their desperate situation.

The exiles were not only far from home, they were feeling their spiritual distance from God, which would all combine to bring them to repentance.

But there is a stirring in their hearts:

Psalm 137:5-6 - "If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning. If I do not remember thee, let my tongue cleave to the roof of my mouth; if I prefer not Jerusalem above my chief joy."

Rashi - "if I do not bring up Jerusalem at the beginning of my joy"

For this reason many Jews leave a wall of their house unfinished to remember Jerusalem that lies waste. And at weddings, they first smash a glass, to remember

Jerusalem destroyed.

Not only is Jerusalem lying "smashed," but the whole world of the exiles has been broken.

Psalm 137:7 -- "Remember, O LORD, the children of Edom in the day of Jerusalem; who said, Rase it, rase it, even to the foundation thereof."

- **Obadiah 1:10-11** - "For thy violence against thy brother Jacob shame shall cover thee, and thou shalt be cut off for ever. In the day that thou stoodest on the other side, in the day that the strangers carried away captive his forces, and foreigners entered into his gates, and cast lots upon Jerusalem, even thou wast as one of them."

Edom/Esau represents the flesh, which is an implacable enemy of the Spirit.

(Edom's actions did not long go unpunished. Five years after the taking of Jerusalem, Nebuchadnezzar humbled all the states around Judea, and particularly Idumea/Edom - **Jeremiah 25:15-26; Malachi 1:3-4**).

"Raze it" - The same phrase is used to describe how Babylon will be overthrown in **Habakkuk 3:13**.

Psalm 137:8-9 - "O daughter of Babylon, who art to be destroyed; happy shall he be, that rewardeth thee as thou hast served us. Happy shall he be, that taketh and dasheth thy little ones against the stones."

It had been prophesied this would happen to Israel for their rebellion: **Hosea 10:14** - "Therefore shall a tumult arise among thy people, and all thy fortresses shall be spoiled, as Shalman spoiled Betharbel in the day of battle: the mother was dashed in pieces upon her children."

This was also prophesied by Isaiah concerning Babylon as recompense, when it would be overthrown by the Medes and Persians:

- **Isaiah 13:16** - "Their children also shall be dashed to pieces before their eyes; their houses shall be spoiled, and their wives ravished."

But wait - don't the scriptures condemn this kind of revenge?

"Do not rejoice when your enemies fall, and do not let your heart be glad when they stumble, or else the LORD will see it and be displeased, and turn away his anger from them." (**Proverb 24:17-18**)

And of course Jesus declares, "But I say unto you, That ye resist not evil: but whosoever shall smite thee on thy right cheek, turn to him the other also." (**Matthew 5:39**)

And, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing" (**Luke 23:34**).

So what's going on? Why is this here?

Many Jewish liturgies simply leave out this verse, because of its violent imagery. But the image was fresh in the exiles' mind, after seeing the Babylonians do that very thing to their own children. Some have noted that the exiles were not saying they wanted to actually do this themselves, only hoping to see some recompense on their cruel captors, perhaps by an act of God. Other suggest that they only want divine justice rather than revenge.

At any rate, the psalm does not validate this kind of cruelty, but it reveals to us the deep hurt and emotional extremes the exiles were suffering.

Taken at face value, this is an incitement to murder. Look under the surface, and it's a denunciation of sin.

C. S. Lewis sees this through spiritual eyes, interpreting Babylon as the New Testament does - as the Great Whore representing the way of the world at large (**Revelation 18:6**) and the evil inclination within each of us:

"I know things in the inner world which are like babies; the infantile beginnings of small indulgences, small resentments... which woo us and wheedle us with special pleadings and seem so tiny, so helpless that in resisting them we feel we are being cruel to animals.... Against all such pretty infants (the dears have such winning ways) the advice of the Psalm is the best. Knock the little bastards brains out." - *Reflections on the Psalms*

Or, as Paul explains: "...bringing every thought into captivity to the obedience of Christ, And having in a readiness to revenge all disobedience, when your obedience is fulfilled." (**2 Corinthians 10:6**)

Bottom Line: Only the cross can transform our desire for revenge into forgiveness, and turn the focus our zeal away from fellow human beings and instead toward the evil that dwells in our own hearts.

There are more than 25 "imprecatory" psalms like this, in which enemies are cursed. This is the only way to look at these psalms that makes any spiritual sense.