

Psalm 137: Lament, and seeking revenge



Psalm 137 (136) (Mode 4. 3....4 / 2...171)

This is one of the finest lyric poems of the Psalter. It is a lament or elegy. Psalms 44 and 74 have elements of lament in them, but, unlike Psalm 137, they end in a prayer of petition. It is a resistance song for those in exile who refused to give up hope of returning to Jerusalem.

By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept
remembering Zion.

‘The elders of daughter Zion sit on the ground in silence; they have thrown dust on their heads and put on sackcloth; the young girls of Jerusalem have bowed their heads to the ground. My eyes are spent with weeping; my stomach churns; my bile is poured out on the ground because of the destruction of my people, because infants and babes faint in the streets of the city’(Lamentations 2:10-11).

On the willows
we hung up our harps.

There is no comparison between Babylon and home.

‘There is a river whose streams make glad the city of
God, the holy habitation of the Most High’(Psalm 46:4).

‘Look on Zion, the city of our appointed festivals! Your eyes will see Jerusalem, a quiet habitation, an immovable tent, whose stakes will never be pulled up, and none of whose ropes will be broken. But there the Lord in majesty will be for us a place of broad rivers and streams, where no galley with oars can go, nor stately ship can pass’(Isaiah 33:20-21).

‘I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert’(Isaiah 43:19).

Our captors called for happy songs:

‘Sing us a song of Zion!’

How could we sing a song of the Lord
on alien soil?

‘All who pass along the way clap their hands at you;
they hiss and wag their heads at daughter Jerusalem:
“Is this the city that was called the perfection of
beauty, the joy of all the earth?”’”(Lamentations 2:15)

If I forget you, O Jerusalem,
let my right hand wither!
If I fail to remember you,
let my tongue cleave to my mouth!
if I do not set Jerusalem
above my highest joy.

‘As for you, mortal human being, cords shall be placed on you, and you shall be bound with them, so that you cannot go out among the people; and I will make your tongue cling to the roof of your mouth, so that you shall be speechless and unable to reprove them; for they are a rebellious house’(Ezekiel 3:25-26).

The following eight lines are not in the liturgy

Remember, Lord, the Edomites
on the day of Jerusalem's fall,
how they said, 'Tear it down!
Tear it down!'

Babylon! O the joy of those who repay you
for what you have done to us!
Happy will they be who take your children
and dash them against the rock!

Obadiah 11-14

‘On the day that you stood aside, on the day that strangers carried off his wealth, and foreigners entered his gates and cast lots for Jerusalem, you too were like one of them. But you should not have gloated over your brother on the day of his misfortune; you should not have rejoiced over the people of Judah on the day of their ruin; you should not have boasted on the day of distress.’

Obadiah 11-14

‘You should not have entered the gate of my people on the day of their calamity; you should not have joined in the gloating over Judah’s disaster on the day of his calamity; you should not have looted his goods on the day of his calamity. You should not have stood at the crossings to cut off his fugitives; you should not have handed over his survivors on the day of distress.’

Ezekiel 25:12-14

‘Thus says the Lord God: Because Edom acted revengefully against the house of Judah and has grievously offended in taking vengeance upon them, therefore thus says the Lord God, I will stretch out my hand against Edom, and cut off from it humans and animals, and I will make it desolate; from Teman even to Dedan they shall fall by the sword. I will lay my vengeance upon Edom by the hand of my people Israel; and they shall act in Edom according to my anger and according to my wrath; and they shall know my vengeance, says the Lord God.’

Ezekiel 35:5-6

‘Because you cherished an ancient enmity, and gave over the people of Israel to the power of the sword at the time of their calamity, at the time of their final punishment; therefore, as I live, says the Lord God, I will prepare you for blood, and blood shall pursue you; since you did not hate bloodshed, bloodshed shall pursue you.’

The Book of Lamentations also looks to God to vindicate his people (Lamentations 1:22; 3:64; 4:22).

The psalmist longs for revenge against Babylon .

See also Isaiah 14,21,47 and Jeremiah 50-51.

‘I know the evil that you will do to the people of Israel; you will set their fortresses on fire, you will kill their young men with the sword, dash in pieces their little ones, and rip up their pregnant women.’

(2Kings 8:12)

‘Their infants will be dashed to pieces before their eyes; their houses will be plundered, and their wives ravished’(Isaiah 13:16).

‘She became an exile, she went into captivity; even her infants were dashed in pieces at the head of every street; lots were cast for her nobles, all her dignitaries were bound in fetters’(Nahum 3:10).

A poem by John of the Cross

1. By the river of Babylon

I sat down weeping there on the ground.

2. I remembered you, O Zion whom I love,
and in that sweet memory, I wept the more.

3. I removed my festive garments,
and put on my working clothes.

I hung on the green willows the music which gave me joy.

4. I put it aside in hope for that which I hoped for in you.
There love wounded me and took away my heart.

5. I begged love to kill me, since it had wounded me so.
I cast myself into its fire, knowing that it burned,

6. removing the guilt of the young bird
that would die in its flame.
I was dying in myself, and breathing in you alone.

7. I died within myself for you, and for you I came back to life,
because the memory of you gave life and took it away.

8. The strangers rejoiced among whom I was a captive.
They asked me for the songs which I sang in Zion:
'Sing us a song from Zion; let us hear how it sounds'.

9. I said: How in a strange land where I weep for Zion
can I sing of the happiness which was mine in Zion?
I would be forgetting her if I rejoiced in an alien land.
10. May the tongue with which I speak cling to my palate,
if ever I forget you, in this land where I dwell.
11. Zion, by the green branches which Babylon
holds out to me,
may my right hand be forgotten
(that I used with such love when home in you)

12. if I do not remember you, my greatest joy,
or if I celebrate one day of festival,
or feast at all without you.

13. O daughter of Babylon, miserable and wretched!
Blessed is He in whom I have placed my trust.
He will punish you for what I have received
from your hand,

14. and He will gather his little ones,
and me, who wept because of you,
to the rock who is Christ, for whom I abandoned you.