

PSALM 137  **GOD, MY EXCEEDING JOY**
A JOYFUL JOURNEY THRU THE PSALMS

Zion Not Forgotten

Jan. 21, 2024

I. IMPACT

- A. On the Christian:** God’s people find **satisfaction** knowing that the Righteous Judge will judge the wrongs committed against His committed people and will complete His kingdom plan.
- B. In Judaism:** often recited on the 9th of Av, the day commemorating the destruction of the Temple.
- C. In Church History**
 - 1. Traditionally scheduled in assigned readings in liturgical churches
 - 2. Modern liturgies in the West tend to remove them, viewing them as sub-Christian!
- D. Today:** Ps 137 is difficult for some to accept as sacred Scripture, but our **discomfort** should not be the arbiter of divine revelation.

II. GENRE: Song of Lament with Imprecations

- A. Not structured as typical lament**
 - 1. Laments usually cry for help from some pressing trial. Often promises to bring a thank offering when the danger is passed.
 - 2. But Ps 137 recalls past pains, not new threats. There is no pledge of a thank offering, but the middle prayer (5-6), which calls down a curse on the psalmist if he is forgetful, functions as a **vow** of commitment.
- B. Sometimes called a Song Zion.** Though vv. 2-3 mention Songs of Zion, this psalm is not one itself.

<p>PSALM 137 © M. Scott Bashour 2024</p>		
<p>LAMENT OVER PAINFUL MEMORIES: REMEMBRANCES OF BEING SHAMED IN BABYLON vv. 1-4</p> <p>Painful Memories of Shame During Their Captivity vv. 1-2</p> <p>Weeping over Zion in the Riparian Camps v. 1</p> <p>Hanging up Their Harps in Shame v. 2</p> <p>Painful Memory of Their Taunting Captors vv. 3-4</p> <p>Taunting Requests for the Songs of Zion v. 3</p> <p>Reticence to Sing Zion Songs While in Captivity v. 4</p>	<p>VOW OF COMMITMENT TO JERUSALEM: IMPRECATIONS ON THE PSALMIST IF HE FORGETS vv. 5-6</p> <p>First Personal Pledge to not Forget Jerusalem v. 5</p> <p>Phrased as a Conditional about Forgetting Zion v. 5a</p> <p>Self-Imprecation: Forgetting How to Play (the Harp) v. 5b</p> <p>Second Personal Pledge to not Forget Jerusalem v. 6</p> <p>Self-Imprecation: Being Unable to Sing v. 6a</p> <p>Phrased as Conditionals about Forgetting Zion and Delighting in Her v. 6b</p>	<p>PRAVERS AGAINST JERUSALEM'S ENEMIES: IMPRECATIONS ON THOSE WHO RUINED ZION vv. 7-9</p> <p>Imprecation against Edom v. 7</p> <p>Petition for God to Remember Edom's Betrayal v. 7a</p> <p>Recollection of Edom's Cheering for Jerusalem's Destruction v. 7bc</p> <p>Imprecation against Babylon vv. 8-9</p> <p>Rhetorical Address to Doomed Babylon v. 8a</p> <p>Grim Beatitudes for the Destroyers of Babylon vv. 8b-9</p> <p><i>Babylon to be Destroyed as was Jerusalem</i> v. 8b</p> <p><i>Babylon's Children to be Thrashed as in Jerusalem</i> v. 9</p>
<p>Type: Corporate Lament with Imprecations Author: Unknown Date: After the return from Babylonian exile, c. 536 BC Notes: The imprecations are not spiteful but expressions of confidence in Yahweh's reciprocal judgment.</p>		

III. SETTING

A. AUTHOR & BACKGROUND

1. Anonymous, an “orphan psalm”
2. Written after both Babylon’s destruction of Jerusalem (586 BC), and at least the first return from exile (536 BC).
 - a. “**There**” (1, 3) suggests they were no longer in Babylon.
 - b. The returnees were still dealing with the aftermath of Zion’s destruction, as most of it took a long time to rebuild.

B. PLACEMENT

1. Pss 135-137 were all composed after return from exile.
2. Very different than the 2 praise songs before it but connects to the “**low estate**” suffered in the exile (136:23-24).

III. COMMENTS & OBSERVATIONS

- A. An Emotional Poem:** The song grows more excited and expressive as it moves along. There’s a mournful quality to vv. 1-4 with nine Heb. words ending with “nu” sounds. The end of the song uses words with many deep gutturals and “s” sounds.
- B. Key Term—Remember:** Vv. 1, 6, 7 all refer to remembering what Zion used to be, what Zion meant to them, and what enemies had done to Zion.
- C. Shall We Gather at the River:** The scene in v. 1 suggests Jews have gathered at the river or canal. In later tradition, Jews without a local synagogue would gather by riversides for prayer (Acts 17). Perhaps the psalmist remembers gathering for prayer and praise when the Babylonians crashed the **service**.
- D. Hanging up Their Harps:** The trees mentioned in v. 2 are actually Euphrates poplars, common riparian trees. They resemble willows but have branches that would facilitate hanging things up.

- E. Double Apostrophe:** In literature, the term “apostrophe” (lit, turning aside) means the speaker turns aside to speak to someone not present. In vv. 5-6, the psalmist speaks to Jerusalem, and in vv. 8-9 he speaks to Babylon.
- F. Painful Imprecations:** The ps contains 3 prayers (or at least wishes) for **judgment**. These are inspired Scripture but challenging for Christians to appreciate properly. (Cf. others 139:19; 140:9-11; 145:5-6).
 - 1. Self-Imprecation:** In vv. 5-6, the psalmist prays judgment on himself if he doesn’t maintain his devotion to Zion, the city of his God. This self-imprecation any accusation of self-righteousness in the other prayers for judgment he makes.
 - 2. Imprecation on Zion’s Enemies:** In vv. 7-9, the psalmist prays (or at least wishes) judgment on the Edomites and Babylonians for their part in Jerusalem’s destruction 70+ years before.
 - a. Paralleling Prophecies:** These prayers are in line with words of doom announced by Israel’s prophets. **Lam 4:21**; **Ezk 25:12-14**; **Jer 50:15**; 51:24, 35, 36, 49.
 - b. Leaving Vengeance to God:** The psalmist is powerless and unauthorized to do anything to these enemies. He leaves them entirely in God’s hands.
- G. A Different Kind of Beatitude:** Vv. 8-9 speak of “how blessed” the defeaters of Babylon will be when they slaughter the city.
 - 1.** The term “blessed” doesn’t always mean approved by God. Sometimes it refers simply to happiness or fortunate. In this case, the conquerors of Babylon will thoroughly enjoy their slaughter of the great city as they fulfill biblical prophecy.
 - 2.** What’s done to Babylon’s little ones is exactly what Babylon did to the people it conquered. What they sowed, that they’ll reap.
 - 3.** The psalmist finds satisfaction in knowing that divine justice cannot be thwarted.
 - 4.** But Babylonians could still be saved. Cf. **Ps 87:4, a song of Zion**.