

PSALMS 136 AND 137

3. There are several triads in this psalm, three names, three stages of crossing the Red Sea; three reminiscences. Discuss the latter.
4. Once again this psalm is linked with a Hezekiah and Sennacherib. How?

PSALM 137

DESCRIPTIVE TITLE

A Returned Levite's Memories of Babylon, Apostrophe to Jerusalem, and Imprecations on Edom and on Babylon.

ANALYSIS

Stanza I., vers. 1-3, A Returned Captive's Record of the Declinature of Himself and Brethren to Sing Songs of Zion on Foreign Soil. Stanza II., vers. 4-6, To his Brethren, he excuses the Refusal and Apostrophises Jerusalem. Stanza III., ver. 7, He prays for the Punishment of Edom's Perfidy. Stanza IV., vers. 8, 9, He Bitterly Apostrophises Babylon.

(Nm.)

- 1 By the streams of Babylon
there we sat down yea we wept—
when we remembered Zion.
- 2 On¹ the poplars² in the midst thereof
we hung up our lyres.
- 3 For there asked our captors of us—
words of song!
And our spoilers—³
of gladness!⁴
"Sing to us of the Songs of Zion."
- 4 How could we sing the songs of Jehovah—
on a foreign soil?—

1. Or: "by." So Br.

2. So O.G. "*arab*, as is now established by botanists, denotes the *Populus Euphratica*, very young specimens of which with their narrow leaves may easily be confounded with willow underwood, upon a superficial inspection"—Delitzsch.

3. So *Gt.*; and so ("prob.") Dr.

4. Cp. ver. 6, same word. Here prob. "words" that is "of gladness" shd. again be understood from previous line.

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- 5 "If I forget thee, O Jerusalem
let my right hand play me false!"⁵
- 6 let my tongue cleave to my palate—
If I lift not up Jerusalem above mine own crowning
gladness."⁶
- 7 Remember O Jehovah, to the sons of Edom—
the day of Jerusalem!
Who kept saying "Lay bare!" "Lay bare!"
"as far as the foundation within her!"
- 8 O despoiling⁷ daughter of Babylon!—
how happy he who shall repay thee
the dealing which thou didst deal out to us!
- 9 how happy he who shall snatch away—
and dash to pieces—thy children—against the crag!
(Nm.)

PARAPHRASE

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Weeping, we sat beside the rivers of Babylon thinking of Jerusalem.

2 We have put away our lyres, hanging them upon the branches of the willow trees,

3, 4 For how can we sing? Yet our captors, our tormentors, demand that we sing for them the happy songs of Zion!

5, 6 If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her skill upon the harp. If I fail to love her more than my highest joy, let me never sing again.

7 O Jehovah, do not forget what these Edomites did on that day when the armies of Babylon captured Jerusalem. "Raze her to the ground!" they yelled.

8 O Babylon, evil beast, you shall be destroyed. Blessed is the man who destroys you as you have destroyed us.

9 Blessed is the man who takes your babies and smashes them against the rocks!¹

5. So *Gt.* (ml.) "fail" or "deceive." M.T.: "forget."

6. Same word as in ver. 3; and shd. by all means be rendered both times alike.

7. So *Gt.* "Targ., Pesh. and many moderns, read (with different vowels), *thou waster*"—Dr. M.T.: "that hast been despoiled."

1. Perhaps this could be paraphrased, "Blessed is he who invades and sacks your city."

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EXPOSITION

Is this the voice of a returned captive, or of one still in Babylon? If the former, as appears the natural conclusion from the references to a past time and a distant place—*there we sat down*,—then the further question arises, whether this sounds like the voice of an aged man who has dwelt nearly a lifetime in captivity, and who is therefore old and feeble, whose hand and tongue now falter from playing and singing the songs of Zion as once they did; or of one who has been permitted to return with vigour and delight to the crowning joys of home and the still higher joy of Levite work in Jerusalem? To this question also it will be easy to give the obvious answer, once we realise the strength of the position taken up by Thirtle, when he reminds us of the devastation of many cities of Judah by the Assyrians in the days of King Hezekiah before Jerusalem was approached; of the fact that the kings of Assyria were also kings of Babylon; and of the likelihood that dwellers in the cities of Judah would actually be deported to Babylon, long before the great Exile in the days of Nebuchadnezzar. For certainly it is the obvious answer—to say, that the poet who writes this vigorous psalm has manifestly been a captive only long enough to realise the bitterness of exile and to return to the joys of home and the exhilaration of renewed Levitical functions in Jerusalem. Everything, down to the minutest shade of language and feeling, agrees with such an outlook.

Before verifying this, we may quote from Delitzsch his beautiful picture of the mourners by Babel's streams. "The psalm is evidently a song not written during the time of the Exile, but in recollection of it. The banks of rivers, like the shores of the sea, are a favorite haunt of such as deep grief drives away from the tumult of men into solitude: the boundary line of the river gives to solitude a secure background; the monotonous splashing of the waves nourishes the dull, melancholy alternation of thoughts and feelings; and at the same time the sight of the cool, fresh water exercises a soothing influence upon the consuming fever in the heart. The rivers of Babylon are the Tigris and Euphrates along with the tributary streams that feed them and the canals that connect them . . . As soon as they sat down in the loneliness of the river's banks they immediately began to weep, inasmuch as, at the sight of the so totally different nature around them, the remembrance of Zion only forced itself upon them all the more strongly, and their sorrow at being cut

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off from their native land indulged itself all the more freely, where no hostilely observant eyes repressed it."

How easily grafts itself into this picture the persuasion that these captives were Levites; and so, as practised singers, wedded to their lyres, had them with them in the land of their banishment; and were prone to use them, if only by stealth; sometimes in snatches of Temple-songs of joy, when secure in their homes, or otherwise, and indeed oft, for improvising dirges suited to their sorrow. They were skilled musicians, with melodious *tongues* and skilful *right-hands*, wherewith to lift the song and sweep the strings. Their furtive exercises in their favourite work had revealed their musical accomplishments to their heathen neighbours; who, following them to their lonely water-side haunts, begged of them to let them hear some of those ravishing strains of sacred joy which they had occasionally overheard. The request was pointed: not wailings by the water-side, was the kind of song requested; but genuine *songs of Zion*, which the harpists well knew meant the sacred *songs of Jehovah's joyful praise*.

This was a form of request with which compliance was not possible: the only answer was, with respectful but mournful gesture, to *hang up* their *lyres* on the neighbouring trees, as emphasising decisively the impossibility of granting that pointed request. The connecting *For* which opens the third verse of the psalm sufficiently indicates that such decisive action was the only reply then given; and, indeed, it is not easy to see how the words of the fourth verse could have been then spoken without needlessly provoking *captor-spoilers*; far less would prudent captives there and then indulge in the patriotic outbursts of vers. 5 and 6; which, indeed, could not but have seemed to the ears of foreign masters to breathe defiance. How unspeakably more natural to postpone the apostrophe to Jerusalem to a point of time after the accomplished return; and, with that transfer, to regard the preceding question also as spoken to the sympathetic ears of brethren at home, causing it to mean: "The feeling, that compliance would have been profanation, as you brethren can at once appreciate, is why no other answer to our captors was possible but to hang up our lyres on the neighbouring poplars."

It serves as an independent confirmation of this exegesis to rescue from dislocation the two connected occurrences of the word *gladness* as found in both ver. 3 and ver. 6. It is an exegetical sin against continuity of thought to render the original

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word first as *mirth* and then as *joy*. It was not mere secular "mirth" that was requested in ver. 3; but, as the parallelism shows, the sacred *gladness* audible in *the songs of Zion*, which were at the same time *the songs of Jehovah*. Every sensitive mind instinctively feels that, second only to the joy of regained Temple worship, would be, to the psalmist, the *crowning joy* of his recovered home; and that it is something worth saying to aver that the supreme joy of sacred service towered above even domestic blessedness.

This song has been described as "blended of tears and fire." We are easily touched by the "tears"; but the "fire" finds us less sympathetic. Nevertheless a strong appeal is made to our respectful considerateness, both by the prayer against Edom, and by the apostrophe to Babylon. Edom, the near neighbour and blood relation of Israel, brought on herself the bitter resentment of the prophets, as their piled-up reproaches attest (Amos 1:11, Obad. 10ff, Joel 3:19, Jer. 49:7ff, Lam. 4:21f, Eze. 25:2ff, 35:12ff, Isa. 34, 63:1f), and Babylon had already begun those cruelties in Israel and Judah (Jer. 50-51, Hab. 1:5-11 and others), which were yet to serve further as Jehovah's chastising rod on his faithless people. "The barbarous customs of Oriental warfare spared neither women nor children in a war of extermination. Cp. Isa. 13:16, Hos. 10:14, 13:16, Nah. 3:10, 2 Kings 8:12, Hom. II. 22:63. The stern law of retaliation demanded that Babylon should be treated as she had treated Jerusalem"—Kp. We cannot wonder that the demand of "blood for blood" had not then been hushed, when we consider how often even now, in cases of excited racial hatred, it still makes itself heard. The people of Jehovah had not then been led up to those difficult heights from which alone can come the prayer, "Father! forgive them; they know not what they do!" But Israel's Messiah has already led the way.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

1. There is quite a discussion as to the historical setting of this psalm. Just when was it written? Why?
2. The captive who wrote this psalm has certain distinct characteristics. Discuss two of them.
3. It would seem the shores of a river is a good place to mourn. Why? Why not sing—or even refuse to sing?

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4. Is the condemnation of Edom just? cf. Amos 1:11; Obadiah 10:11; Joel 3:19.
5. How was the law of retaliation applied to Babylon?

PSALM 138

DESCRIPTIVE TITLE

A King's Public Thanks for Advancement in Royal Dignity.

ANALYSIS

Stanza I., vers. 1-3, Public Thanks for Unexpected Advancement and for the Lofty Feeling thereby imparted. Stanza II., vers. 4-6, Anticipations of the Homage of Other Kings to Jehovah, which is Traced to its Moral Cause. Stanza III., vers. 7-8, Assurance of the Coming Completion of Jehovah's Promises.

(Lm.) By David.

- 1 I will thank thee¹ with my whole heart,
before messengers divine² will I make melody unto thee:
- 2 I will bow down towards thy holy temple,³
and thank thy name for thy kindness and for thy
faithfulness;
for thou hast magnified above all thy name thy promise:⁴
- 3 In the day that I called thou didst answer me,
didst embolden me in my soul with strength.⁵
- 4 All the kings of the earth will thank thee Jehovah,
when⁶ they have heard the sayings of thy mouth;
- 5 And will sing of the ways of Jehovah,
because great is the glory of Jehovah:
- 6 Though lofty is Jehovah yet the lowly he regardeth,
but the haughty afar off doth he acknowledge.

1. Some cod. (w. Aram., Sep., Vul.) add: "Jehovah"—Gn.

2. Cp. 8:5, 29:1, 89:6-9.

3. Cp. 5:7.

4. So Del.; and cp. 119 (Table) for "promise." Well explained: "The fulfillment of Thy promise surpasses the renown of all Thy former mercies."
—Dr.

5. "Didst inspire me with courage—a lofty feeling permeated my soul"
—Del.

6. Or: "because."