



## The Psalms

### Psalm 137 By the waters of Babylon

3 March 2019

Adrian Poole

*Isaiah 13: 17–end    Matthew 5: 38–end*

Everyone remembers the first line of this psalm. The last line is a different matter. Indeed the last three verses are, as we like to say, 'challenging'. When I chose this psalm, I said to the Dean of Chapel that we should probably ask the choir to stop at the end of verse 6. He told me not to be so soft-hearted, or even soft-minded. If I had had my wits about me I might have pointed out that the Second Vatican Council had removed them from Catholic liturgical books, in the 1960s. I doubt that this would have impressed him. And I gradually came round to the view that we *should* hear these 'shocking' words.

The fact that I am going to talk about them is important. It would be different if they stood on their own, sung by the choir, without further comment. You can listen on YouTube to the choirs of two other Cambridge colleges singing this psalm. One stops at verse six; the other sings all nine. But in both cases they go promptly on to sing the Gloria. And this suggests another way we can deal with the challenge. Not that a Gloria promptly dispels the shockingness but it begins to absorb it into an ongoing whole. As does this address, to which you are listening.

So we can try to dull the shock of these words by putting them into a context. We can say that this psalm dramatizes the effect of deprivation, humiliation and despair on its victims. Of course their thoughts turn towards vengeance, or retribution, or justice: the only hope they have is to imagine a future in which their oppressors will be punished and suffer in turn. As the Babylonians had razed Jerusalem to the ground, so would their great city in turn be destroyed by the Persians. We know this now, as the psalm singer did not.

Babylon stood proud on the banks of the river Euphrates for over a millennium. But all bad things come to an end. Tragic drama from the Greeks to Shakespeare and beyond is full of such promises. It is also full of raw truths about the desire for revenge, the threats and imprecations that give relief to victims at the end of their tether.

However we are here together for a church service; we are not spectators watching Shakespeare's *Macbeth* or Euripides' *Hecuba*. It is true that if we are absolutely untouched by the beliefs that animate this service as a whole, we can listen to this psalm with the detachment we bring to a performance in the theatre. Or try to. That would be a solution.

There are other strategies for defusing the shockingness of these last three verses, and the other 'imprecatory' psalms that invoke judgment on the singer's enemies or those perceived as the enemies of their God. There's an instructive web-site at which you can find some responses to the challenge of these final verses.<sup>1</sup> They include such claims as this, that

the Psalmist is not saying that *he* will be attacking the Babylonian children or that *he* will be happy over their destruction. He is saying that the pagan nation [...] that will eventually bring down the brutal and tyrannical Babylonian Empire will take just as much pleasure in slaughtering the Babylonians as the Babylonians did in slaughtering the Jews.

So that's all right, as long as the agency is outsourced (like 'extraordinary rendition').

You can also read it as an allegory:

the Babylonian captivity [...] symbolizes a psychological condition: that where our passions and bad inclinations overpower and enslave our good and holy dispositions. Hence verse 9 is really saying: 'oh ye my evil thoughts that enslave me, you would be better off killing your offspring' (that is, killing or aborting thoughts born from bad passions).

So that's all right, too. For myself, I find it refreshing to turn to a different kind of 'defence', that goes like this:

Of course it is violent. It is from a bronze age tribal story book. What else would you expect it to be, given the other stories it contains. God killing everyone, absolutely everyone, on the planet except for one family who built a boat. [...] I mean, what do you expect?

This brings me back to the attraction of the psalm's first line: 'By the waters (or rivers) of Babylon we sat down and wept'. Babylon has proved so popular because, apart from the archaeologists, very few of us think of it as a real place. It belongs to *pre*-history, with other semi-legendary places and eras, such as Mycenaean Greece and pre-Roman Britain. The very paucity of its remains means that Babylon can more readily 'stand for' a state of being than can ancient Rome or Athens or indeed Jerusalem.

So there is an asymmetry to this psalm, as it reaches us across the millennia. This is at once a source of comfort and trouble. The psalmist sings of an absolute contrast between Babylon, the oppressive city of exile doomed to extinction, and Jerusalem the golden, the beloved lamented home that retains the promise of future return, salvation, vindication. Babylon: with its hanging gardens, the fable of Belshazzar's Feast, its role as the great Whore in the Book of Revelations, Babylon has dissolved into legend. But Jerusalem, with its enduring and deeply conflicted history, has not. The children there are real, right here and now, living and dying, whether they are being dashed against the stones or throwing them, or their modern explosive equivalents.

The comfort of this psalm is in its opening verses and the trouble all in its last ones. 'By the waters (or rivers) of Babylon I sat down and wept': tears and water, grief soothed by elemental nature, even in the city of exile. No wonder that it is *this* that artists have drawn on and been inspired by. They have endlessly re-contextualised it: in the visual arts;

---

<sup>1</sup> [www.quora.com/What-does-the-Psalm-137-9-verse-mean-in-the-Bible-that-says-happy-is-the-one-who-seizes-your-infants-and-dashes-them-against-the-rocks](http://www.quora.com/What-does-the-Psalm-137-9-verse-mean-in-the-Bible-that-says-happy-is-the-one-who-seizes-your-infants-and-dashes-them-against-the-rocks)

in music (Verdi's famous slave chorus from *Nabucco*); in literary titles – a 1937 story by Stephen Vincent Benét and a 2005 drama by Robert Schenkkan, both called *By the Waters of Babylon*. There is a well-known line in T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*: 'By the waters of Lemman I sat down and wept'.

And the psalm as a whole, at least verses 1–5, has featured richly in other artistic contexts, especially in music, such as Dvorak's setting in his Biblical songs, William Walton's *Belshazzar's Feast*, and John Tavener's *Lament for Jerusalem*. Byron did a poetic reworking, frequently set to music. Novelists from Samuel Richardson to Dostoevsky and William Faulkner have alluded to it. The psalm can be easily raided for sound-bites or re-purposed to reverberate in a new context. Take these two examples. In 1271 Teobaldo Visconti was crusading in Palestine when he was summoned back to become Pope Gregory X. Before setting sail for Italy he is supposed to have remarked: 'If I forget thee, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her cunning.' It's a long way from 13<sup>th</sup>-century Palestine to a New York night club in the 1960s, but devotees of the great TV series *Mad Men* will remember the scene in series 1 (episode 6) when a trio sing the first verse of Psalm 137 to strangely moving effect.

I have talked about the challenge presented by the psalm's ending, but I want to end on its middle verses. The psalm begins in the past tense: 'we sat down and wept'. The singer remembers the lost home, and weeps for it. But he, she, they also remember hanging up their harps on the willows. It is not immediately obvious why they do so. Then we learn that this is the victims' response to the humiliation inflicted by their captors, taunting them to perform, to entertain, to provide their oppressors with 'mirth'. As one imagines black slaves being taunted by their white plantation owners to sing a song of Africa. So we understand the hanging up of the harps as an act of defiance. And it is at this point that the drama shifts to the here and now to express this terrible predicament: the impossibility of singing the Lord's song in a strange land, and yet the absolute imperative of *remembering* that song, and how to sing it: of holding on to the precious memory of a home in the heart, the very heart of hope in the thick of despair.

It is easy to deplore the violence anticipated in the final verses. As civilized beings we are above such barbarity, are we not? We wouldn't go bombing other people's kids, would we? And it is easy to 'forget' these verses, by simply omitting to read or perform them. Too easy? A good alternative to forgetting them would be to remember some other words that present a different and perhaps greater kind of difficulty: Christ's injunction to turn the other cheek, to love our enemies, to be perfect even as our Father in heaven is perfect. Words that are, in their different way, no less challenging than those with which Psalm 137 concludes.

To hear these words from the Old Testament and the New alongside each other, to move between them, is to remember that we are always still in the thick of it, this side of extinction, not yet concluded: somewhere between Babylon and Jerusalem and all that they represent, all that they were and are and shall be, in fable, in legend, and all too living reality.