

Psalm 137

by Lynn Andrew

Psalm 137 is a poem of the exiled Jew. Notice in the superscription that it is not directed to the choirmaster or to the chief musician. It mentions song, but it is not a psalm to be sung.

As I begin to read Psalm 137, I notice that it is not about what the words are about: "*We hang our harps on the poplars*" is not an expression of the indignity of captivity; the song they refused to sing is that. Neither is it remorse for failing Yahweh—there is no remorse, only sorrow on behalf of Jerusalem.

No, the whole meaning is in the middle verse: "*If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget her skill.*" In other words, it is about the psalmist's apprehension about his duty to live in Jerusalem—not that he would cease to love Jerusalem, for one never forgets to pray for her peace: it was fear that he would lose his commitment to live there.

The history in Kings and Chronicles tells us that Babylon had razed Jerusalem and burned the sacred temple, and during that process the city had been besieged. No doubt mothers were driven to eat their babies as predicted by Moses in Deuteronomy 28. Earlier surrender would have spared no infant, for standard military operating procedure in that day included dashing babies against rocks. So I am not surprised that the psalmist used such language as he foresaw a conqueror coming against Babylon, obliquely expressing his hope, "*Blessed be he that takes and dashes your lit-*

tle ones against the rock," as he looked forward to a day of emancipation. He might as well have said, "Blessed is he whose army comes and burns the temple of Marduk to the ground as they did to God's house." It would have meant the same thing.

An interesting question is why were these Jews so attached to Jerusalem? Certainly there were better places to live, as many of them had discovered, for they were not all put to hard labor in captivity; indeed most of them blended into the Babylonian economy and prospered, and relatively few returned to Jerusalem when the hoped-for day came and this psalmist's prayer was granted.

"O daughter of Babylon that are to be destroyed." The nameless author represents a remnant minority who looked forward to that day by faith even though it presented great risk and likely would not be of material benefit.

But again why was the remnant so possessive of Jerusalem? Indeed why is it that several of David's psalms put forth the notion that Israel's God intends to possess Jerusalem and rule the world from that location?

In that light a reasonable conclusion is that God reserves Jerusalem for himself and uses the Jewish nation to possess it for him. It seems the Creator placed something in Jacob's DNA that makes it difficult for a Jew to forget Jerusalem. But the desire was not enough: they were not always able to hold it. When they needed outside help it took the likes of Cyrus of Persia and now the USA to keep Israel in the land and keep nations that do not honor the God of Israel from possessing Jerusalem.

If we lift our eyes above mundane matters and contemplate the great purpose of God to redeem the entire creation, this would be the ultimate reason why the USA became the superpower that it is, with demonstrated ability to defeat the intentions of nations—and that it is narrowly being kept from being dominated by anti-Zionism. It was and is all about reserving Jerusalem to be the indisputable capital of the kingdom of God on earth.

(Curiously Psalm 137 consists of nine verses with the middle verse bearing its meaning while JerUSAlem consists of nine letters with USA being at its center and holding the ends together.)

Standard exposition of this psalm tags it as being imprecational because of its last two verses. As is so often the case when the application-oriented Bible teacher takes on a text from the Old Testament, the original meaning is sidelined or intentionally discarded. For a straightforward interpretation within the original context is substituted some arbitrary New-Testament interpretation. Thus we have Christian moral duty clucking at the psalmist's uncharitable attitude toward his enemy. But this is so far from the significance of the poem that one has to ask what it is about the original context that they are afraid of. The answer, of course, is the Jew. Christian commentators commonly read the Bible backwards and read Israel out of it insofar as having any enduring relevance beyond the first century AD. The tradition that has them doing that is longstanding, they point out, but they are not so willing to admit that its roots are devilishly ugly.

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