



Coptic Orthodox Diocese of the Southern United States



# The Holy Book of Psalms

Psalm 137

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# Introduction

- This Psalm has no title, therefore, there is no direct indication to the author, or to the occasion on which it was composed
- Some translations add David's name to the title as the author
- And another translation calls it David's, concerning Jeremiah
- However, some scholars say that Jeremiah was not carried into Babylon, but, after some short stay in or near Jerusalem, was forced away into Egypt; and could neither be the writer nor subject of this Psalm: and though it might be written by David under a spirit of prophecy
- Yet some think that the author may have been a Levite, who had taken part in the Temple music, and returned to Jerusalem

# Introduction



- And others say that the author was probably one who had witnessed and shared the sufferings of the exiles there, and who had also a lively recollection of the wrongs done to Jerusalem when it was attacked and destroyed by its enemies
- There can be no doubt as to the circumstances in which it was written
- The Psalm was about a captivity, and the treatment the Jews met with there; either as foreseen, or as now endured
- Some think it was sung when they returned from Babylon; others, say it was sung while they were there





# Introduction

- It is a mournful Psalm, a lamentation
- The Psalm reveals the sufferings of the people who probably experienced at first hand the grievous days of the destruction of Jerusalem and who shared the burden of the Babylonian captivity after their return to their homeland
- It is a national hymn of sorrow and longing for what has been lost
- The Psalm's style resemble David's, and in tone the writings resemble Jeremiah



# Introduction

- The captivity of Babylon represents the condition of sin and rebellion against God compared to the city of peace where God is worshiped and obeyed
- The Psalm is a cry-out of every sinner who is Satan's captive which caused him to lose the enjoyment of the divine sanctuaries
- The believer laments his condition, and seeks from the Lord to liberate His children from the captivation of sin
- It can also represent the people of God's condition in the world as sojourners longing to the heavenly Jerusalem
- This Psalm is one of the 12<sup>th</sup> Hour prayer in the Book of Agpeya



# Introduction

## Psalm Outline

- Mourning by Babylon's Rivers 137:1-3
- Loving Jerusalem 137:4-6
- Denouncing Judgments Against their Enemies 137:7-9



# Mourning by Babylon's Rivers

## 137:1-3



- The psalmist begins the Psalm with a brief reflection about sitting *By the rivers in Babylon* which were mighty rivers, likely the Euphrates which has numerous canals
- The description of them as sitting is quite interesting and it gives us a reason for their gathering
- In their captivity, it was customary for the Jews to hold their religious meetings on the banks of rivers
- As we read in Acts 16:13, “*And on the Sabbath day we went out of the city to the riverside, where prayer was customarily made; and we sat down and spoke to the women who met there.*”

# Mourning by Babylon's Rivers

## 137:1-3



- According to St. Augustine the rivers of Babylon is the world and its pleasures
- He says, "The waters of Babylon' are all things which here are loved, and pass away."
- *There we sat down*, also is the usual posture of mourners, Ezra 9:4; Job 2:12; Isaiah 47:1,5
- The rivers were beautiful and sufficient, but they were the rivers of Babylon, strange land
- The ground on which the sons of Israel sat was foreign land, and therefore they wept



# Mourning by Babylon's Rivers

## 137:1-3



- They unite to lament and grieve
- Everything reminded them of their exile from the holy city, and therefore her sons and daughters sat down in sorrow
- *Zion* refers to God's dwelling place
- They wept for their sins, which brought them there; and it increased their sorrow, when they called to mind what privileges they had enjoyed in Zion
- The psalmist may mean that they wept for Zion's present desolation
- This may also be the cry of mourning from a repentant person
- Weeping is an essential element in the Christian life

# Mourning by Babylon's Rivers

## 137:1-3



- St. Gregory the Theologian, said “there are many things that many different people cannot do. One person, for example, may not be able to help the poor, because he has no money and is poor himself. Another person may not be able to worship God in the Christian community in the Church, because he’s far from a Christian gathering or is ill at home...but there are certain things that everyone can do, no matter what, and two of them are these: Everyone, no matter what, can pray, can remember God...You don’t have to be healthy. You do not have to be in a church. You don’t have to have anything, except to be conscious...So one of the things that *everyone* is called to do is to remember God, never to forget Zion, never to forget Jerusalem.”

# Mourning by Babylon's Rivers

## 137:1-3



- St. John of the Ladder (Climacus), said in his book, *The Ladder of Divine Ascent*, “when the Lord comes in glory to judge us, and we stand before Him, or when our life departs from our flesh when we die, we will stand before God, and the Lord will not ask us why we were not theologians. He will not ask us why we were not miracle-workers. He will not ask us why we were not prophets and teachers. He will not ask us why we were not mystics. But he *will* ask us why we have not ceaselessly wept, why we have not mourned over *our* sin and the sin of the world, why we have not lamented our exile.”



# Mourning by Babylon's Rivers

## 137:1-3



- According to St. John Chrysostom God allowed their humiliation, to lead them to that feeling of longing
- He says, “Great is the men desire for the city, great their longing for return. I mean, as long as they held good things in their hands, they continued dissembling and committing sins, but when they lost them, then it was they were possessed with longing.”
- Large willow trees grew on the shores of the great river, and because there were no songs left in these captives, they *hung* their *harps* on those willow trees

# Mourning by Babylon's Rivers

## 137:1-3



- When *willows* are mentioned, this means the appeal of the banks, which were planted with willows, is for serenity and tranquility
- But the Psalmist says that these *willows*, however delightful, could not eliminate a grief which was too deep
- As they sat upon the banks of the rivers covered with the shadows of the trees, this was just the place where they might have been tempted to take up their harps, and soothe their griefs with song
- But the Psalmist says that their minds were too heavily wounded with a sense of the displeasure and cannot deceive themselves with such vain sources of comfort

# Mourning by Babylon's Rivers

## 137:1-3



- The imagery of them hanging up their harps was reflective of the fact that God could only be praised at a Temple in Israel
- These are probably the words of some Levites, who had been accustomed to music, both vocal and instrumental, in the service of the temple
- This verse might be understood figuratively, signifying that they abandoned all signs and means of comfort
- According to St. Augustine Willows are unfruitful trees and represent here men who are spiritually barren in good works and without any spiritual fruit



# Mourning by Babylon's Rivers

## 137:1-3



- The oppressors interrupt the gathering of their captives, and asked of them a song
- This was a cruel demand; they demand roughly and rudely to be entertained with their music
- They refuses to sing because the Babylonians where trying to ridiculed them by asking them to sing songs about the Lord delivering them amidst their captivity
- They were asking them to sing songs of praise while in exile
- This was a form of humiliation
- Not only was a song wanted but a joyous song, *mirth* one

# Mourning by Babylon's Rivers

## 137:1-3



- They asked for one of the *songs of Zion*
- The ones who *plundered* the people of God now wanted them to entertain them
- Yet there was no song left in them; their harps had been hung in the trees
- St. Augustine says, “But who led us captive?...If we are redeemed, we once were captives. Who has redeemed us? Christ. From whom has He redeemed us? From the devil. The devil then and his angels led us captive: and they would not lead us, unless we consented.



# Loving Jerusalem 137:4-6

- With one voice they refuse, but the refusal is humbly stated in the form of a question, *How shall we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?*
- They counted it offensive of those who carried them away to require that from them
- Those sacred songs are appropriated to the worship of the true God in His temple, and are appointed by Him to be sung only to His honor and in His service; and not in *a foreign land*, in a defiled land
- *"Do not give what is holy to the dogs; nor cast your pearls before swine,"* (Matthew 7:6)





# Loving Jerusalem 137:4-6

- They had laid by their harps, and would not pick them up again, no, not to please those at whose mercy they lay
- How could they sing songs of joy when God, by punishing them for their sins, called to mourning and weeping?
- St. John Chrysostom observes the improvement such tribulation effected in the Jews, who previously mocked even put to death, some of the prophets; but now that they were captives in a foreign land, they would not attempt to expose their sacred hymns to the mockery of the Gentiles



# Loving Jerusalem 137:4-6

- The question *How shall we?* comes of a tender conscience and indicates an inability to sin
- If the men of Babylon were wicked enough to suggest the defiling of holy things for the gratification of curiosity, or for amusement, the men of Zion had not so hardened their hearts as to be willing to please them at such a fearful cost
- There are many things the ungodly could do, but the godly men cannot even think about doing
- St. Jerome says, "Man cannot praise God if he is unfaithful. It is befitting of the sinner to grieve on his sins, rather than to praise God."



# Loving Jerusalem 137:4-6

- Verses 5 & 6 reveal the psalmist's abiding loyalty and unconditional love for Jerusalem
- To sing Zion's songs for the pleasure of Zion's enemies, would be to forget the Holy City and means they were unmindful of its sorrows, and cared not that it was desolate
- Singing in *a foreign land*, among those who had committed such wrongs things; appearing to be happy, cheerful, and joyous there; would be understood to imply that he had ceased to remember *Jerusalem*
- The psalmist vowed that he would never forget God's holy city, and even gave a curse upon himself if he did





# Loving Jerusalem 137:4-6

- If he did *forget*, then his *right hand* could lose its skill to play the harp
- If he failed to *remember*, then his *tongue* would lose its ability to sing
- To *forget* the city would mean permanent silence, that is, death
- The psalmist's loyalty to Jerusalem is a measure of his loyalty to God since the city symbolizes the Divine presence
- The happiness which is found in *Jerusalem* is superior to that found in every other source of enjoyment and is preferred to every other



# Loving Jerusalem 137:4-6

- If either is to be sacrificed - the joy of *Jerusalem*, or the pleasure derived from the idle world; it will be the world and not *Jerusalem*
- *Let my right hand forget its skill...Let my tongue cling to the roof of my mouth*; the thoughts and affections of true repentant, both in prosperity and adversity, are fixed upon their heavenly country and city
- They had rather be deprived of their powers and faculties than of the will to use them correctly
- *my chief joy*, ought to be joy in the greatness and glory of God; in the blessings and promises of His grace; in what He has done



# Loving Jerusalem 137:4-6

- St. John Chrysostom says, “Let us all hear this, and be instructed: just as they were expelled from it and then sought for it, so too many of us will experience this on that dread day when expelled from the Jerusalem above. Whereas they had hope of return after being expelled, however, it is not possible for us on exclusion to return in due course. ‘Their worm will not die,’ Scripture says, remember, ‘nor their fire be quenched.’ Hence it is necessary to pay attention to our affairs and conduct our present life in such a fashion as not become captives or exiles, or estranged from that mother city.”



# Denouncing Judgments Against their Enemies 137:7-9



- *The day of Jerusalem*, is the day of her fall, when Edom took part with her enemies, and rejoiced at her destruction
- The prophecy of Obadiah gives the best comment on this verse:  
*“For violence against your brother Jacob, Shame shall cover you, And you shall be cut off forever. In the day that you stood on the other side— In the day that strangers carried captive his forces, When foreigners entered his gates And cast lots for Jerusalem— Even you were as one of them. ‘But you should not have gazed on the day of your brother. In the day of his captivity; Nor should you have rejoiced over the children of Judah In the day of their destruction; Nor should you have spoken proudly In the day of distress.”*(Obadiah 1:10-12)

# Denouncing Judgments Against their Enemies 137:7-9



- The psalmist prays God to *remember* this to *Edom*, and retaliate
- *Edom* who, though the children of Esau and brethren of the Jews, as well as their neighbors, yet hated them
- According to St. Jerome, the speaker here is Adam, who, by the envy of the devil, was expelled from paradise; and Edom, being a symbol of the devil, Adam asks God to punish him on his envy, and for dragging him to Babylon among the Assyrians!
- St. Augustine says, “Esau signifies all the carnal, Jacob all the spiritual...All carnal persons are enemies to spiritual persons, for all such, desiring present things, persecute those whom they see to long for things eternal.”



# Denouncing Judgments Against their Enemies 137:7-9



- The Edomites wished to see total destruction of Jerusalem and the Jewish state
- They wished that no stone left standing in it and desired that nothing remain
- St. John Chrysostom says, “This is the expression of those who stirred up about the city. Now, what they mean is this: Require an account of those who were not prepared to stop at captivity nor satisfied with its overthrow, but pressed on, saying, ‘Raze it while a foundation stands in it.’ their desire you see, was that not even a base be left for the city, and instead its foundations be plucked up.”



# Denouncing Judgments Against their Enemies 137:7-9



- *Remember, O Lord* them, says the psalmist, which is an appeal to His justice against them
- It is important to note here that the psalmist never says that he wants to actually perform these actions
- He tries to capture the pain and hurt that the exiled Israelites felt as a result of the brutality and humiliation that they were subjected to
- *O daughter of Babylon*, The psalmist directed his words to future generations of the Babylonian empire, giving them notice that they themselves would *be destroyed* in God's judgment

# Denouncing Judgments Against their Enemies 137:7-9



- The psalmist prays for the destruction of Babylon
- The destroyer would be destroyed and the psalmist saw her as already destroyed
- He wants Babylon to experience the same treatment that they gave the Israelites
- A blessing lies on anyone who is used in bringing down Babylon
- *Happy* as being God's instrument to execute His just judgment
- According to St. John Chrysostom, the psalmist proclaims that they will get what they deserve according to their deeds; they will fall under that firm verdict

# Denouncing Judgments Against their Enemies 137:7-9



- The 'daughter of Babylon' is the symbol of the kingdom of the devil, *"Babylon the great is fallen, is fallen, and has become a dwelling place of demons, a prison for every foul spirit, and a cage for every unclean and hated bird!"*<sup>3</sup> *For all the nations have drunk of the wine of the wrath of her fornication.*" (Revelation 18:2-3)
- 'Daughter of Zion' is a symbol of the spiritual kingdom of Christ, *"Come out of her, my people, lest you share in her sins, and lest you receive of her plagues...Render to her just as she rendered to you, and repay her double according to her works; in the cup which she has mixed, mix double for her."* (Revelation 18:4,6)



# Denouncing Judgments Against their Enemies 137:7-9



- In order to be with God, to be in the heavenly Jerusalem, to be in God's city, in God's kingdom, *Babylon* has to be destroyed
- The psalmist thus prays in verse 9 that God would issue on Babylon the cruelties they themselves had committed
- In this way, she would taste the bitterness of such utter defeat, helplessness and defenselessness that they would not be able to defend even their infants
- St. John Chrysostom says, "Even if these words signify intense anger and heavy punishment and retribution, nevertheless they are the expression of the captives' feelings in demanding heavy retribution."

# Denouncing Judgments Against their Enemies 137:7-9



- Some believe that this request is not the heart-desire of the psalmist, as much as it is a prophecy of what is actually going to happen
- As, according to what came in Isaiah: *“Their children also will be dashed to pieces before their eyes; Their houses will be plundered And their wives ravished.”* (Isaiah 13:16)
- The church Fathers say to us that in our spiritual warfare, if we don’t defeat our sins and our passions when they’re small, when they’re infants, when they’re babies, *they will grow up and destroy us*

# Denouncing Judgments Against their Enemies 137:7-9



- You have to kill the sin when it's little
- You have to be faithful in little, and let not the littlest evil live, because if it does, it will grow big and strong, and it will *kill you*
- So when the psalmist cries out, "*Happy the one who takes and dashes Your little ones against the rock!*" it means that the enemies of God must be killed when they are little
- *Every* sin, *every* evil passion, every crime, every ungodliness, every sin has to be smashed when it is little
- Then the Psalm says it has to be *dashes* against the *rock*, so these who knows the Scripture, knows what the *rock* is Christ



# Denouncing Judgments Against their Enemies 137:7-9



- It's the rock that God Himself is
- Many times in the Psalms God is called *my rock*
- When the people were saved out of Egypt and needed water from that rock, the Apostle Paul says that rock was Christ
- The church Fathers tell us also that this Psalm, like all of the Psalms, has to be seen in the light of Christ
- It is Christ who will destroy all the enemies of God



# Discussion

- What did the psalmist remember about his exile?
- What caused him to mourn?
- Why did the Israelites refuse to sing their worship songs?
- How did the psalmist demonstrate his commitment to Jerusalem?



# Discussion

- Why does Edom want to see the destruction of the people of God?
- Why did the psalmist believe his enemies deserved the Lord's punishment?
- What can we learn about mourning from the psalmist's example?
- Why was Israel taken to Babylon? Why did a loving God allow them to be taken captives? What crimes did they do to warrant this?