



Christ and Babylon

From a literary point of view Psalm 137 is often extolled, but its use in praise sometimes causes difficulty because of the note struck in the last sentence: *"How blessed will be the one who seizes and dashes your little ones against the rock"*.

To some there is no difficulty because they do not have an adequate conception of God's revelation. Thus, Dr Millar Patrick writes in the *Introduction to Handbook to the Church Hymnary* (Oxford, 1927) as follows: *"The ideas in many of them (the psalms) our Lord made obsolete; the temper in some is quite definitely unchristian; there are whole psalms, and there are portions of others, which Christian lips should never utter in the presence of God."*

Some Christians, with more respect for God's word, do not go as far as Dr Patrick although they avoid the use of psalms such as 137 in public worship. However, surely we must allow Scripture to determine what is or is not appropriate in worship. We accept the whole Psalter as the *Songs of the Covenant* and valid until the end of time. Whilst we are not going to sing Psalm 137 every week, our understanding and practice of worship must have room for it.

It is the purpose of this article to outline what I believe to be the correct understanding of Psalm 137, and to show that far from being unfit for Christian lips it enshrines truth of the most vital nature.

Background

In the beginning God made man a king. He exercised his royal privileges as ruler of creation under God as an heir of life according to God's promise. Adam transgressed the covenant (cf. Hosea 6:7) resulting in his losing his kingship and becoming a slave and an heir of death.

God in his mercy visited man and made a covenant which comes to its clearest expression in the covenant of circumcision made with Abraham. In that covenant the Lord undertook to

- make a great nation out of Abraham's descendants,
- bring them into a special land and
- to be their God.

He also promised that through this activity he would bring about a like redemptive blessing to the whole world (Galatians 3:14; Romans 4:13).

In due course the nation of Israel is formed and in a sense man's place as a king is restored since Israel (meaning: Prince with God) is a royal priesthood and a holy nation (Exodus 19:6). But within 250 years of David's death (970 B.C.) things have come to such a pass that possession of the Promised Land has been whittled down to the southern part consisting of Judah and little Benjamin. In 586 B.C. after two years of siege, Nebuchadnezzar succeeded in capturing Jerusalem, and razed it to the ground. He took large numbers of people to Babylon where they joined others, such as Ezekiel, who had been taken some years before. The people of God were now ruled by the people of the world.

It was during the time of Exile that Psalm 137 was written. We could date it around 560 B.C. For all their troubles God's true people were not without hope. They were sure of their ultimate destiny by virtue of the Abrahamic covenant, but they were also certain that Babylon would be destroyed since they had Isaiah's prophecy to that effect, a prophecy given more than a century before. Furthermore, Jeremiah had foretold the duration of the Exile as 70 years in 605 B.C. (Jeremiah 25:11).

Exposition

Coming now to the psalm we find that it divides into three sections each of three verses. Turn to the place in your Bible.

Reproach (verses 1-3)

All the power of Babylon depended upon the rivers Euphrates and Tigris and the canals connected with them. Our Psalmist does not seem to have been among those who lived in the city of Babylon itself but toiled for his masters by the waterways. At any rate, the general principle reflected in the situation is the trial of the people of God when worldliness gains ascendancy. In Old Testament times this normally involved domination by heathen nations. In New Testament times "*the holy nation*" is established among all nations, hence the worldly ascendancy arises chiefly from worldly individuals whether or not in political combination. Make no mistake, the church of the New Testament period has its Babylonian captivities too. The words before us have their primary application to the captivity of God's people 2,500 years ago but the principle is still the same today.

The judgment of the Exile on Israel was due to the sin of the majority, but the godly and the good (such as the Psalmist) were not exempted from sharing in the trial. So it is still. When the church is by and large unbelieving, trouble and reproach come her way, and the faithful cannot escape its effects. Denominational walls are not proof against this reproach upon the church at large, whilst no denomination can be insensitive to the reproach which comes upon the name of Christ because so many professing his name are disobedient.

Reaffirmation (verses 4-6)

What should be our attitude in the face of reproach and prevailing worldliness? Why, the same attitude as is taken by the Psalmist. The Psalmist could not sing the Lord's song in the context in which he was placed. He could not turn God's instituted worship into entertainment for his mockers and thereby concede the validity of their viewpoint. Rather, if he proves unfaithful to his primary obligation he desires that his ability to play and sing be taken from him.

When we are derided there is always the temptation to accommodate oneself to those who reproach us so that life is made a little easier. But the Psalmist was not prepared to be in any way unfaithful or disloyal to his Lord. Now we have not come to Jerusalem which is in Palestine but to Jerusalem which is above. The difficulties we experience are no excuse for us to be anything but entirely loyal. No man who puts his hand to the plough and looks back is fit for the kingdom of heaven. In face of the allurements of the world we must say, "*Jesus is Lord*".

Retribution (verses 7-9)

There are two groups mentioned in this section: the sons of Edom and the daughter of Babylon. Edom was another name for Esau, Jacob's brother, but the sons of Edom gloated over the destruction of Jerusalem, lacking even brotherly concern (cf. Obadiah 10-14). The description "*daughter of Babylon*" is just the Hebrew way of saying "the people of Babylon". They are described as doomed to destruction, a fact the Psalmist knew from Isaiah 13, as well as other passages.

Notice that the curse takes the form of a blessing upon the one who pays back Babylon for her atrocities. Notice too that the Psalmist does not suggest that *he* will be involved in the taking of vengeance. In fact he did not need to worry himself on that score since he already knew who was going to be the instrument of God's judgment upon Babylon. It was not going to be just anyone but it was going to be one called Messiah! Yes, Isaiah had spoken to the Medes as the instrument of God's judgment (13:17) and Cyrus, the king of the Medes, had been named beforehand as the individual who would deliver Israel from bondage. Although he did not know the Lord he was in this respect to prefigure the work of Christ, hence the messianic designation is applied to him (Isaiah 45:1-7; "his anointed" = "his messiah").

Long after Isaiah was dead the word which God had spoken through him was fulfilled. We know the story of the writing on the wall during Belshazzar's feast, and how he was killed the same night, Darius the Mede (probably Cyrus under another name) becoming king. We remember too how Cyrus soon after issued a decree permitting the return of the Jews and providing for the rebuilding of the Temple (Ezra 1).

The conquest of Babylon was a relatively straightforward affair as Daniel's narrative suggests and as secular accounts confirm. There was not much fighting and the city was not destroyed but continued as a kind of second capital. It gradually declined in importance. In Roman times there was a town there but it was eventually abandoned. The ruins of the once proud city were excavated prior to 1920 and can be visited today.

At this point, if we have read the prophecies against Babylon, we may feel a little ill at ease. The predictions fall short of the mark if we are to see the events of 539 B.C. as their complete fulfilment. Babylon was certainly not overthrown like Sodom, although that was the prediction (Isaiah 13:9). Yet God's word cannot fail in the slightest particular. What then?

What we have to recognise is that the Scripture views Babylon as a reflection of the anti-God spirit which God will ultimately utterly destroy in "*the day of the Lord*" (Isaiah 13:9). You have only to read Isaiah 13:1 to 14:27, or even Jeremiah 50-51, to see that the descriptions pass beyond the immediate to the ultimate judgment. When ancient Babylon was conquered the prophecies were not exhausted but continued to witness to God's determination to manifest his righteousness against the ungodly.

We can see, therefore, that the New Testament is perfectly in order when it takes up the theme of Babylon once again. Paul applies Old Testament passages referring to the Babylonian captivity to Christians infected by idolatry (2 Corinthians 6:17, cf. Isaiah 52:11, Jeremiah 51:6), but it is John in Revelation who employs the imagery of Babylon with special reference to the judgment of unbelief (cf. Revelations 16:17 to 19:10). We may have some difficulties in understanding the exact significance of Revelation at this point, but the general thrust is clear enough.

In singing the last section of Psalm 137 we are speaking of realities yet to be accomplished. It is not that we will be taking vengeance into our own hands. Certainly not! Just as Cyrus executed the Lord's vengeance (Jeremiah 50:15, 25; 51:10, 56, etc.), so Jesus, the true Messiah, will judge the world in righteousness. He will deal in strict justice, and he will break the babes of Babylon on stone in the sense that he will utterly eliminate forever the generation of the godless. The means of this destruction will be partly by the effectual proclamation of the gospel — and here Psalm 87:4 is worth thinking about — but will include that final and ultimate judgment upon the unrepentant of mankind. When men fought their enemies they would sometimes destroy the children too, so preventing a fresh generation arising. When God destroys Babylon her smoke will go up forever (Revelations 19:3). She will never make a reappearance.

Conclusion

Perhaps some might think that it is a little barbaric to clothe our longing for the revelation of divine righteousness in warlike garb. Have such forgotten that we are called to fight the good fight of the faith? Both Testaments employ these soldierly similes and military metaphors. They give a vivid sense of reality to our expectation. Spiritual truth must not be spiritualised away! The New Testament no less than the Old calls upon God's people to rejoice over the destruction of Babylon because God has promised judgment for them against her (Revelations 18:21). He will avenge the blood of prophets and saints and all who have been slain upon the earth. Hallelujah! (Revelations 19:2; 18:24).

The kingdom which has come in Jesus but which is still to come in glory, will come. The prayer of the church will be answered. Let us not be so impressed by the world's insistence on human rights that we forget God's insistence on human righteousness. In face of reproach let us not hesitate to reaffirm our 100 per cent devotion to the Lord Christ, and our assurance of his ultimate and righteous victory. Blest indeed is the One who will judge the world in righteousness, vindicate his oppressed and give them the earth as their inheritance, so that as kings they will reign with him and share his glory in the redeemed cosmos. Paradise more than restored!

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