

By The Waters of Babylon
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Psalm 137 provides several insights about the experience of some individuals brought to Babylon in the first deportation (597 BC)—though largely negative in perspective. Key themes are italicized in the following citation from verses 1–6:

By the *waters* of Babylon, there we sat down and wept, when we *remembered* Zion.
On the willows there we hung up our lyres. For there our *captors* required of us songs,
and our *tormentors*, mirth, saying, “Sing us one of the songs of Zion!” How shall we sing
the Lord's song in a *foreign land*? If I *forget* you, O *Jerusalem*, let my right hand forget
its skill! Let my tongue stick to the roof of my mouth, if I do not *remember* you, if I do
not *set Jerusalem above my highest joy*!

These exiles enjoyed time for leisure, cultural expression, freedom of assembly, and personal security. In this case, they were likely former temple musicians who were able to bring their instruments. A scholar notes a cruel paradox, however: “Ironically, those who were formerly in political, social, and religious control of Judah, that is, the royal officials and the members of the temple, were now reduced to *corvée*. In this reversal of power, the once high and mighty were stripped of status and forced to labor for Babylonian economic gain.”

In verse 1, “waters” probably refer to irrigation canals that the exiles dwelled beside in ethnic settlements and were obligated to maintain. Two antagonists are identified in verse 3: “captors” (Babylonians) and “tormentors” (likely other captive ethnicities living nearby). This incident depicted in this psalm presumes a pluralistic setting: proximity to and friction with persons of other cultures, religions, and ethnic identities. Apparently, the Jews were sometimes mocked for their predicament.

In their misery and disorientation, some of the deportees struggled to internalize Jeremiah’s positive perspective of the exile, expressed in his letter to them (29:4–20). They could not imagine serving God apart from the enabling infrastructure of the Israelite state (monarchy, temple, land). Perhaps they did not listen attentively to the Lord or suffered from double-mindedness: “For they have not listened to my words,” declares the LORD, “words that I sent to them again and again by my servants the prophets. And you exiles have not listened either” (Jer 29:19, NIV). Perhaps they idolized the temple and Zion ideology—“the pride of your power, the delight of your eyes, and the yearning of your soul” (Ezek 24:21). Or as one commentator suggests, they did not discern this critical lesson: “Holy sites do not enable Yahweh’s presence among his people, but holy people do (Jer 7:3–11; 26:1–6).”

On the positive side, Psalm 137 presupposes a decision and an essential spiritual priority. Verses 5–6 contain three conditional clauses with the word “if”:

If I forget you, O Jerusalem
If I do not remember you
If I do not set Jerusalem above my highest joy

The explicit options are to forget or remember Jerusalem. Forgetting means a repudiation of the covenant and calling. The implicit option is to embrace Babylon. This indicates religious

and cultural assimilation. The verbs “remember” and “set” are linked. The latter term indicates a single-minded preference for Zion. “Remember” presumes a mental and motivational prioritization to distinguish between foreign and Hebrew priorities and to maintain them at all costs, as indicated by the writer’s self-deprecation in verses 5–6.

From a negative perspective, the dejected singers in Psalm 137 provide a discordant path to follow in the midst of cultural disorientation. The musicians were unable to imagine blessing and service apart from their former temple setting and their accustomed lifestyle in Canaan. Their mental state resembles a scene in Book 7 of the *Chronicles of Narnia*. A group of exceedingly closed-minded dwarfs stubbornly refused to perceive or partake of the blessings set before them. They preferred what they had before, even though that was no longer available to them. They willingly deceived themselves, embracing a false perception of reality. They did not proceed into land of prosperity prepared for them by Aslan.

The musicians in Psalm 137 had unwillingly transitioned from a mono-cultural to a pluralistic setting. They lost social, religious, and economic capital. In a very real sense, they were impoverished and their manner of thinking was adversely impacted. They did not discern how their view of reality or themselves was conditioned by power and its loss. As a result, they did not perceive their opportunity or responsibility. They did not seek the common good for the glory of God, as Jeremiah counseled (29:4–7). They did not declare God’s name as exiles in their pluralistic context.

This kind of thinking and behavior resembles many North American evangelicals. The United States has been associated closely with the Promised Land of ancient Israel. North Americans, it is often thought, comprise a special community akin to the covenanted peoples of the Old and New Testaments. Now that evangelicals have most likely lost the culture war, the ensuing disorientation feels like internal exile. Many, it seems, refuse to embrace the opportunities and responsibilities inherent in the new setting. Inordinate longing for the cultural domination of the past and related forms of thinking, however, is not spiritually healthy, nor intellectually pious.

Clearly, then, the lessons of Jeremiah 29 and Psalm 137 are still relevant. In the midst of exile, we must *never* forget our worldview priorities. But we must also “seek the peace” of “Babylon” in our day. (See the previous blog, “Jeremiah’s Letter”).

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