

On (Not) Bashing Babies

Psalm 137

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I make my living teaching the Old Testament. Contrary to popular opinion, let me assure you that it's not always easy! One very real problem I face in my line of work is the bad rap the Old Testament often gets. As you might know, a lot of people don't like the Old Testament, and I'm talking about good, well-meaning Christian folks—seminary students even—and so I often have to fight uphill in, say, a sermon, or an adult education class, or just at a dinner party when the problem of the Old Testament comes up. “What do you do for a living, Brent?” “Me? Oh, I teach Old Testament.” And then the ear dump!

Yes, a lot of people have problems with the Old Testament. Even if they don't know chapter and verse (and I feel compelled to point out that they *rarely* do!), they are nevertheless aware of the big issues, the big problems that live in the Old Testament. Things like God waking up on the wrong side of the bed, for like, well...it seems like *forever*.

Since this is a real occupational hazard, I've decided to address it directly, taking these difficult texts head on, in order to see what might be done with them. I just decided that the other day! And so here we are, with my newfound resolve, and here we come to one of the most famous of the difficult parts of the Old Testament—it may even be president of the club: Psalm 137.

Alongside Babylon's streams, there we sat down,
crying because we remembered Zion.
We hung our lyres up in the trees there
because that's where our captors asked us to sing;
our tormentors requested songs of joy:
“Sing us a song about Zion!” they said.
But how could we possibly sing the LORD's song on foreign soil?
Jerusalem! If I forget you, let my right hand wither!
Let my tongue stick to the roof of my mouth if I don't remember you,
if I don't make Jerusalem my greatest joy.

LORD, remember what the Edomites did on Jerusalem's dark day:
“Rip it down, rip it down! All the way to its foundations!” they yelled.
Daughter Babylon, you destroyer,
a blessing be on the one who pays you back the very deed you did to us!
A blessing be on the one who seizes your children
and smashes them against the rock! (CEB adjusted*)

Psalm 137 (especially verses 1-6): Famous

Upon reading that text in worship, it is customary to say, “The Word of God for the People of God. Thanks be to God.” And I believe Psalm 137 really *is* the Word

of God for the People of God, but it's not an easy word, is it? The real Word of God rarely is. It would take time to say all that needs to be said to get this psalm said right—more time than I have right now.

Still, to begin with, we might note that, contrary to what someone might expect, this is actually a very famous psalm. Psalm 137 has inspired many hymns, poems, and songs. Well, the first six verses of the psalm, to be precise. These verses are quite famous. They are the ones that are full of grief over destroyed Jerusalem, full of distress over the exile to Babylon, because that's where the psalmist is, "alongside Babylon's streams," sitting there, weeping there, refusing to sing for the Babylonian sergeant who can't wait to hear another tune about good ole' Zion—the Zion that he and his platoon left a smoldering pile of rubble.

Yes, Psalm 137 is a famous psalm, if for no other reason than the fact that it affords unique insight into the experience of 587 BC, the destruction of Jerusalem. In fact, it may be the only psalm in the entire Psalter that we can date with any degree of certainty, because it mentions that event explicitly. But let's be clear about something: Psalm 137 isn't a history lesson; it's a lesson *in prayer*. It's not found now, in the Psalter, to teach us about 587; it's here, now, in the Psalter, to teach us *how to pray*.

Psalm 137 (especially vv. 7-9): Infamous

The prayer part of the psalm begins in earnest in v. 7, when God is directly addressed: "Remember, O LORD," how the Edomites cheered Babylon on. "Tear Jerusalem down, all the way down to bedrock!" is what they shouted. And mentioning that destruction leads the psalmist directly to Babylon and to that brutal verse about bashing babies against rocks.

These last three verses, the prayer part proper, are why Psalm 137 is not only famous but *infamous*. I mean, it is one thing to argue with God, as so many psalms do, but this sort of talk about the psalmist's enemies is on a completely different level. It seems downright barbaric, uncivilized, un-Christian. If we are honest, it sounds like hate speech.

Just listen to v. 9 again: "A blessing [be] on the one who seizes your children and smashes them against the rock!" That's one doozy of a last line. For many people it encapsulates what they deem wrong with the Old Testament if not the entire Bible: in a word, violence—especially of the divine, religious, or sacred variety. "How could Holy Scripture encourage people to bash babies' heads against rocks?" some people ask and you might have asked the very same thing!

That's a very good question, but a wrong-headed one in this specific case, because Holy Scripture does nothing of the sort here. To read the Bible well requires reading it with the greatest of care, and while the final three verses of Psalm 137 *are* disturbing, they most definitely do *not* tell people to go bash babies. There is no command here, no imperative, just a sentiment—a very strong sentiment, to be sure, but just a sentiment nevertheless—a sentiment uttered against those ultimately responsible for the trauma of exile, for the destruction of Jerusalem, and for the death of so many of the psalmist's loved-ones: Babylon, here called "the Destroyer." Edom's role in 587 was bad enough, but Babylon was the master architect of the psalmist's pain, and so he escalates his rhetoric accordingly. But what he definitely does *not* do is command anyone to bash Babylonian babies. The psalm says only that if (or when) such a thing might happen, that action would be blessed.

Well, that's bad enough isn't it? "Blessed" sounds like religious language, after all—"have a blessed day!" But that impression is more apparent than real. For one thing, the psalmist nowhere mentions God in this final, brutal verse. God is not said to be the one who will bash Babylonian babies. Neither does the psalm indicate that the agent of this gruesome vengeance will be blessed *by God*. The psalmist could have said those things, but the psalmist *didn't* say those things. That's important. Instead, there is only a rather impersonal construction, "blessed is the one" who performs the payback. Another reason why "blessed" in this verse isn't necessarily religious language is because that's neither the only nor even the best translation of the underlying Hebrew term.¹

But if Psalm 137 isn't a history lesson, neither is it an exercise in translation theory. It's an exercise in prayer—hard, gritty prayer. And here's the ultimate point: if we read slowly, carefully, theologically, existentially—pausing long enough to put an end to our defense mechanisms—if we can do that, I think we begin to see that Psalm 137, no less than any other psalm, is how the saints pray sometimes.

Psalm 137 and/as Prayer

That's what this psalm is, after all: just a prayer. Not Torah from Mt. Sinai, not moral exhortation from St. Paul, not a terrorist how-to manual. Just a grief-stricken, trauma-induced, sorrow-wracked prayer to God. And we can understand that, can't we? We know similar grief, we are acquainted with similar trauma. It may not be as large-scale as Jerusalem's decimation or Judah's forced resettlement, but we know how we feel about the atrocities that happen every single day in our world, in our own neighborhoods, on our television sets (sometimes live), even in our own churches. The psalmist is so distraught by all she has experienced that she wishes a curse on herself if she forgets any of it. Which means, of course, that she intends to never, ever forget even a bit of it. When we remember our own grief, our own trauma, we get that, don't we?

And so we also can understand how a psalmist who refuses to forget her beloved Jerusalem also cannot forget its devastation. The psalmist cursed herself should she forget any of that, but now prays to God about those responsible for it. "Remember *them*...and remember *that*! Don't forget *that*, Lord!" Which means, of course, that the psalmist wants God to *do* something about it, preferably immediately.

We understand that, too, don't we? All of us have had dark days. And we know people who have had even darker ones—people who cannot forget, people who mustn't forget, people who are praying hard, gritty prayers for things to get set straight again. We may not always like how such people pray, how strongly their sentiments run, but then again, here is Psalm 137, part of God's Holy Word, telling us that such feelings, such prayers, are not unknown among God's saints. In truth, such feelings and prayers are *widespread*, even among God's saints.

Proof of that isn't found only in Psalm 137 but all over the Psalter. And Job. And elsewhere. In the New Testament, it's even found *in heaven*. In Revelation 6, when the fifth seal is opened, all the martyrs cry from under God's altar in heaven. These are the ones who had been slaughtered on account of the word of God and the witness they had given. They cried out with a loud voice, "Holy and true Master, how long will you wait before you pass judgment? How long before you require justice for our blood, which was shed by those who live on earth?" (Rev 6:9b-10; CEB)

Did you hear that? Those are the saints—the very martyrs themselves!—praying for the very same thing the psalmist prays for in Psalm 137: for justice. *God's justice* against *God's enemies* who have wronged *God's people*. Two wrongs don't make a right, sure, but praying for God's justice is never wrong. According to Scripture, justice is among the most sublime of our Lord's qualities.

That's why the saints—both Old and New Testament varieties, both back then and right up to this very day—pray for payback. If we are honest, we understand that or at least can begin to get our minds around it. Now don't hear me wrong: that doesn't answer every question we have about Psalm 137, but it helps us begin to grasp why it is in our Bibles and why it *should* be in our Bibles. It *should* be in our Bibles because *it teaches us how to pray*.

Psalm 137, no less than Psalm 22 or 23 or any other, is how God's people pray sometimes. They pray in pain. They pray in anger. They pray weeping. They pray traumatized. They pray because... well, really, what else could they possibly do? They pray to God because no one else in this world can help. They pray to God because no one else in this world *will* help. They pray to God because only God has the stomach to hear these sorts of grief-stricken, curse-filled prayers.

And because Psalm 137 prays this way, we have license to do the same—when we are in pain, in anger, hopeless without a prayer in the world. What do you know? At that very moment, it turns out that we *do* have hope, after all, because it turns out we *do* have a prayer in the world: we have Psalm 137 and so many others like it.

In the end, that's all this psalm is: a prayer. Just a prayer. A troubling, pathos-filled, inspired, and oh-so-understandable prayer. A prayer that gives us a script to recite when we are so sick on pain that we can't think straight. A prayer that gives us a way to let go of all of our anger against all those responsible—and aim it full bore, double-barrel, point-blank, not at them, but at God, who has ears big enough to hear it, who has eyes big enough to see it, and whose body is large enough to absorb every last bit of it, so our enemies' bodies don't have to.

It's not going too far, then, I don't think, to say that in prayers like Psalm 137, we are praying *for* our enemies.² We are praying *for* them because we are praying *about* them—we are praying them into God's own hands. But who knows what God will do with them, once we've handed them over? God may decide to be merciful to them! "Revenge is my business," says the Lord (Deut 32:35), which means, of course, that payback is God's job, not ours (Rom 12:19; cf. Heb 12:30). Our job is to *pray* about these enemies—pray our painful, angry prayers about our enemies. But pray them *to God!* Oftentimes, that seems like all we can do; no one else will listen. But when we finally do that, we sometimes find that praying like this transforms us. In the process of letting our anger go to God, while at the same time holding it back so it doesn't go public, doesn't go viral, doesn't go ballistic (quite literally)—in that type of praying God might just teach us some things about our enemies, about our sorrow, about our Lord. In Revelation 6, after the holy martyrs beg for payback, "[e]ach of them was given a white robe, and they were told to wait a little while longer" (Rev 6:11a; CEB adjusted). Sometimes the saints learn, after their prayers, if not also in the very midst of praying them, that God's sense of justice—not to mention its timetable— isn't always synched with ours.

Violence, Redeemed

That's not an easy word. The real Word of God rarely is. And the psalm, the pain, the anger, the praying, the waiting—none of any of that is easy. Well, what did you expect? Look at that altar over there. What is that supper set for us there if not redeemed violence—God's body absorbing the worst of human anger and aggression, and somehow giving it back to us cleaned up, fixed up, redeemed? That's not simple stuff. It is not simple at the Lord's Table, and it is not simple in the Lord's Psalm number one hundred and thirty-seven. But what did you expect? Did you think everything was going to make sense right away? Pain is not that simple. Life is not that simple. God, for heaven's sake, is not that simple! Important things—*truly* important things—are never simple, never easy. But so what? Our job is to keep doing what we are supposed to do. Pray. Wait. *Keep* praying. *Keep* waiting. Keep coming to God's Holy Word and to God's Holy Word made flesh, broken, and somehow given back to us. I suggest we get to work.

Notes

1. Other possibilities include "truly happy," "fortunate," and "enviable"—even if those translations are as hard to get our heads around as "blessed."
2. For what follows, see Brent A. Strawn, "Imprecation," in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry and Writings*, eds. Tremper Longman III and Peter Enns (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2008), 314-20. And the literature cited there, especially that by Ellen F. Davis, Walter Brueggemann, and Patrick D. Miller, whose ideas are reflected here.