

Psalm 137

The Message

137 ¹⁻³ Alongside Babylon's rivers
we sat on the banks; we cried and cried,
remembering the good old days in Zion.

Alongside the quaking aspens
we stacked our unplayed harps;
That's where our captors demanded songs,
sarcastic and mocking:
"Sing us a happy Zion song!"

⁴⁻⁶ Oh, how could we ever sing GOD's song
in this wasteland?
If I ever forget you, Jerusalem,
let my fingers wither and fall off like leaves.
Let my tongue swell and turn black
if I fail to remember you,
If I fail, O dear Jerusalem,
to honor you as my greatest.

⁷⁻⁹ GOD, remember those Edomites,
and remember the ruin of Jerusalem,
That day they yelled out,
"Wreck it, smash it to bits!"
And you, Babylonians—ravagers!
A reward to whoever gets back at you
for all you've done to us;
Yes, a reward to the one who grabs your babies
and smashes their heads on the rocks!

The Message (MSG)

In terms of music, maybe think Walton's Belshazzar's Feast and Money M's By the Waters of Babylon.

Think Edom, think Jacob's brother Esau – the reputed ancestor of the Jew's sometimes hostile neighbour Edom – alleged to have taken advantage of the Babylonian invasion to do a bit of plundering. Herod the Great was half Edomite.

Exile (though maybe written after return from exile)! Both the experience of "Home Land" and the significance of "Home Land" are very different for different people at different times. "Where do you come from?" hurts some people, and leaves other people uncertain both about what the question means and how to answer it. A friend who moved to the Isle of Wight met an elderly gentleman who had never left the island. A young friend was completely thrown by meeting (in Cornwall) a boy his own age who said "I'm not English; I'm Cornish!" Abraham in the Bible represents all those many people down the ages who are nomads – having no place they can call "their place". "Gypsies"/Travelling People take their home with them; their children flit from school to school. A few St George's people have two "homes". A lot of St George's people move/retire elsewhere. If you or your spouse is in the services, for example, you move frequently. I worked with the daughter of Diplomatic Service parents who had lived in seven countries by the time she was seven years old. Moving by choice is one thing. Moving by force/compulsion usually underpins Exile. Exile might mean leaving behind familiar language, familiar religion, familiar culture, and familiar people. In imperial systems, like the Babylonian or Roman systems, the leaders wanted people to feel at home in the Empire, rather than just in their own bit of the Empire. Feelings about colonialism, migration, the Rwanda "solution" – a "solution" sometimes supported by politicians who are immigrants themselves?

Moving people around was an imperial thing – promoting imperial unity. The captive Jewish exiles apparently really resented being asked to sing their home songs, perhaps understandably. But these were people transplanted to earn their living in a different country, not like the Second World War concentration camp musicians entertaining their Nazi captors. (With both the Babylonians and the Nazis, it was rather "nice" that the captors valued the music of the captives. And note that the musicians had been allowed to take their musical instruments with them into captivity!!! Not all Western colonialists actually valued "native" culture! It was sometimes more like "Sing our tunes in our language, or keep quiet!" Any parallel with "negro spirituals"?)

The "Ugh!" part of Psalm 137 is the hate message: "Let's see your children die to compensate for us being alive in exile!" ("Let's see your babies burn to compensate for what their grandparents did to us in 1948." "Let's see your babies buried in the ruins because our babies.....") The C of E allows us to leave this bit out; but C S Lewis deserves credit for suggesting we think about the nasty babies as the little tendencies in our own characters that we ought to smash before they grow.