

## By the rivers . . .



"By the waters of Babylon", 1882-1883, A Pre-Raphaelite oil painting  
Artist - Evelyn de Morgan - Public domain

By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept when we remembered Zion. Psalm 137 verse 1.

Knowing the historical context of Psalm 137 helps to understand the poignancy of the opening sentence. This is especially if we put the open verses of the psalm aside the popular song of the 1970's.

It is a Rastafari song written and recorded by Brent Dowe and Trevor McNaughton of the Jamaican reggae group The Melodians in 1970. Some of us will probably remember the 1978 version by Boney M.

The word 'Babylon' is associated within what was seen as an oppressive western society, and "Rivers of Babylon" became something of a Rasta anthem reflecting the stories of exile, slavery among the descendants of African slaves.

The song became a form of protest song but hopefully also opened Psalm 137 to a wider interpretation.

### Historical some background facts

In the 6<sup>th</sup> century BC, King Nebuchadnezzar Captured Jerusalem. In 597 BC the Judahite King Jehoiachin was taken into captivity and exiled to Babylon along with his family, members of the army and ten thousand captives, and all the craftsmen and smiths. Only the poorest people were left behind. (2 Kings 24:12-16).

There were two further deportations one in 586 BC with another in 586 BC.

The prophet Jerimiah (Jer.52:28-30) claims 4,600 Judahites were displaced during this exile.

Source: Biblical Archaeological Society  
<https://www.biblicalarchaeology.org/daily/ancient-cultures/ancient-near-eastern-world/how-bad-was-the-babylonian-exile/>

It was a journey of roughly 500 miles (800km)

The exile lasted around 70 years.

The rivers are the Euphrates and the Tigris. The ancient city of Babylon was situated on the lower Euphrates river in modern day Iraq.

This is the river seen from the west, you see the southern part of the river and much of the coastal woodlands.

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Certainly, today we could read words from Psalm 137 and the song Rivers of Babylon and both have a resonance to events today and closer to home.

First let us listen to Rivers of Babylon. A choice of two versions.

First an a cappella version Linda Ronstadt sung in a live concert version from 1975.

 **YouTube** <https://youtu.be/u60fXbTsMDg?si=32EESpVU8lqHJMvv>

The second option is to listen to the version we may be familiar with sung by Boney M.

 **YouTube** <https://youtu.be/GHDVERAq19A?si=scK0Ik-CplDJeMzm&t=22>

I wonder how many people sit and feel they are in a strange land and remember their homeland. We are all too familiar with the issues around illegal immigrants, and economic immigration and people trafficking. I am once again reminded of the words of Henri Nouwen, the Dutch theologian who wrote 'One of the most tragic events of our time is that we know more than ever before about the pains and sufferings of the world and yet are less and less able to respond to them'. (Henri Nouwen Compassion, A Reflection on the Christian Life, 1982). I would wish to add to 'respond to them' with the words 'responsibly and compassionately'.

People are still dying in the cold waters of the English Channel or at risk of suffocating in the back of lorries, young people are trafficked for sex and people exploited for economic gain by employers. How shall they sing their Lord's song when they are exploited in such inhumane ways?

The closing words of the Psalm come out of anger and pain, the type of anger and pain that comes when you see no solution or change. You wish retribution no matter what.

I struggle with these words:

O daughter of Babylon, who are to be destroyed, happy the one who repays you as you have served us! Happy the one who takes and dashes your little ones against the rock! (Psalm 137:8-9)

but have empathy with the powerlessness, desperation and anger the psalmist was having to live with. When people are pushed to the limits they can react with drastic measures.



Josef von Fuhrich  
Austrian artist –

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The psalms provide some beautiful poetry, inspiring, comforting and offering encouragement. The book of Psalms does, however, have some psalms that are raw and disturbing Psalm 137 is one such psalm. We cannot brush over it or attempt to sanitise it. It is what the psalm is that catches the pain and suffering of a cruel exile of millennia ago and a stark reminder that similar cruelty still effects many people across the world.

In our time of reflection let us hold before God those who are trafficked, exploited and long for a safe place to call home.

*Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart  
Be acceptable in Your sight,  
O LORD, my strength and my Redeemer.  
(Psalm 19:14 NKJV)*

Words from Psalm 137 and  
the song Rivers of Babylon

**Psalm 137** (New Living Translation)

- <sup>1</sup> Beside the rivers of Babylon, we sat and wept as we thought of Jerusalem.  
<sup>2</sup> We put away our harps, hanging them on the branches of poplar trees.  
<sup>3</sup> For our captors demanded a song from us. Our tormentors insisted on a joyful hymn: "Sing us one of those songs of Jerusalem!"  
<sup>4</sup> But how can we sing the songs of the LORD while in a pagan land?  
<sup>5</sup> If I forget you, O Jerusalem, let my right hand forget how to play the harp.  
<sup>6</sup> May my tongue stick to the roof of my mouth if I fail to remember you, if I don't make Jerusalem my greatest joy.

**River of Babylon**

**By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down**

**Yeah, we wept, when we remembered Zion**

By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down  
Yeah, we wept, when we remembered Zion

**There the wicked  
Carried us away in captivity**

Required from us a song  
**Now how shall we sing the Lord's song  
in a strange land?**

...

Let the words of our mouth and the  
meditation of our heart  
Be acceptable in thy sight here tonight .  
Based on Psalm 19

Songwriters: Brent Gayford Dowe / Frank Farian /  
George Reyam / James Augustus McNaughton



**Time to pause**



**Slowly pour out a glass of water**

**Hear the water as it flows into the  
glass.**

**Find your favourite space for this  
time of prayerful reflection**

**Place the glass of water on a table  
and light a candle.**

**Slow down, breathe calmly, be  
comfortable  
and relax.**



Be still and know that I am God. (Click the link to

listen)



<https://youtu.be/dbBImzfVv94?si=HVRf1hNJ9IQNRWwv&t=3>

The words of the hymn appear on the screen via the YouTube link.

Slowly read Psalm 137: 1-6

Read again the words of torment and goading by the captors in verses 3-4.

### Let us pause and reflect on

We listen to Worldview149 singing Rivers of Babylon

 **YouTube** <https://youtu.be/wmGju-M-pso?si=JQT6qVFCjkH2uWFP>

### Prayer

Heavenly Father, we pray for women, children and men who have been tricked or coerced into slavery; suffering physical, emotional and sexual abuse. We know that nothing is hidden from You, and we cry out to You for justice, freedom and mercy. Amen.

Lord, equip and strengthen all police officers; that they would spot the signs of all kinds of trafficking. Lead Police Commanders, Chief Constables and Police and Crime Commissioners to make investigating these crimes a priority. Grant them success!

Father, we lift to You survivors of trafficking and modern slavery as they try to recover from their ordeals and rebuild their lives. We pray especially for children now in the care of local authorities to receive the support they need and be kept safe from the influence and reach of their traffickers and others who would harm them.

Prayer from CARE.org.uk

We close with the Lord's Prayer:

Our Father, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name;  
Thy kingdom come; Thy will be done;  
on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us this day our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses  
as we forgive those who trespass against us.  
And lead us not into temptation;  
but deliver us from evil. Amen

Fr Derek Akker

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(Derek is a retired Anglican Parish Priest and a member of the congregations of All Saints & St James. Prior to his ordination he was accredited as a Methodist Preacher in 1968 and served within the Methodist Church until returning to the Anglican Church in the mid 1980's)

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**Image - Impact of a drop of water.** Featured picture, Picture of the year, Picture of the day  
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